Forum: SPC 1-Education

Issue: Addressing radicalization efforts by extremist organizations in schools and institutes of higher education

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Introduction

Radicalization efforts by extremist organizations in schools and institutions of higher education is a serious issue that involves the spread and influence of extremist ideologies among students, leading to radicalization and violent actions. This issue creates an unsafe education environment, fear and divisions among students. The internet and social media platforms are the most effective tools used by extremist groups and/or organizations to target vulnerable individuals through propaganda and recruitment efforts. There are multiple factors which might contribute to the susceptibility of young people to these ideologies such as social isolation, identity crises, personal and/or community grievances and pervasive exposure to extremist content online. Violent extremism in schools is a very serious issue that has consequences for both individuals and communities. As multiple examples around the world have occurred, the radicalization of young people in educational settings is a real and growing problem. The seriousness of this issue can be seen by several recent incidents. For example, the increase in school shootings and other forms of school-based violence often linked to extremist beliefs shows the potential consequences. We will take a look at a detailed explanation of the seriousness of the issue and how to delicately address this issue in the following sections. It is important to understand that early intervention and prevention are key.

Definition of Key Terms

Violent extremism:

"Violent extremism is the beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals. This includes terrorism and other forms of politically motivated and communal violence". (Australian Government).

Radicalization:

Radicalization is the action or process by which an individual or a group adopts increasingly radical views in opposition to a political, social, or religious status quo. To radicalize someone is to shift a person or group's opinions toward either end of the spectrum.

Counter-radicalization:

Counter-radicalization is strategies and measures aimed at preventing individuals from becoming radicalized.

Recruitment:

Recruitment is the process of enlisting individuals into extremist groups or ideologies. This can be done through direct recruitment (face-to-face interaction), online recruitment (via social media) and peer influence.

Designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs):

Designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) are groups identified by the U.S. Department of State as foreign entities that engage in terrorist activities and pose a threat to U.S. national security or the safety of U.S. citizens. These organizations engage in terrorist activities or retain the capability and intent to do so. Some examples can be Al-Qaeda and ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria).

Grievances:

Grievances can be defined as complaints or resentments arising from perceived or actual wrongs or injustices. Grievances related to discrimination, bullying or personal issues can be used by extremists to recruit and radicalize students.

Terrorist activities:

All activities by sub-national organizations or underground individuals involve planned, politically motivated violence against non-combatant targets and are considered terrorist activities. Bombings, assassinations, kidnappings and other forms of violence intended to create fear and achieve political, religious, or ideological goals are terrorist activities.

Propaganda:

Propaganda is all kinds of information, especially biased or misleading, used to promote a political cause or point of view. This can be done through social media, videos, pamphlets, online forums and also face-to-face. Students may encounter propaganda designed to radicalize them or reinforce extremist beliefs.

Rampage shooting:

Rampage shooting is a type of school shooting which attracts the most public attention. These are non-targeted attacks on school institutions to express anger and create fear.

Background Information

"The frequency of school shootings has been rising since the 1940s and they have spiked in the 1990s. About 20% of the 160 school shootings since 1900 have occurred during the last four years" (Dumitriu). "There were 109 public mass shootings in the United States and 35 public mass shootings in 35 other

economically and politically comparative countries between 2000 and 2022.4 The United States makes up 33 percent of the combined population of these 36 countries; however, it also accounts for 76 percent of public mass shooting incidents and 70 percent of victim fatalities in these countries. In other words, the rate of incidents and fatalities in the United States is especially high when compared to similar countries" (Silva).

Radicalization methods:

There are many methods used by extremist organizations to radicalize young individuals within educational settings. Online propaganda is the most commonly used one. The primary platform for spreading extremist content is the internet, especially social media sites. These platforms give extremist organizations a place to spread articles, films and any other content aimed at attracting and indoctrinating young people. Indoctrination is "the process of repeating an idea or belief to someone until they accept it without criticism or question" (Cambridge Dictionary).

Extremists might also physically infiltrate educational institutions, posing as students, staff, guest speakers, etc. They often engage in direct (face-to-face) recruitment by identifying and approaching vulnerable individuals by offering them a sense of belonging and purpose. Extremist recruiters usually take advantage of social and political issues, using them as entry points for the introduction and defense of extremist ideologies. Issues such as discrimination, unfair treatment, and personal trauma are used to attract individuals.

Peer influence is also very effective and commonly used. Radicalized students can influence their peers and spread extremist ideologies through social interactions and group dynamics. This peer-to-peer recruitment can create a network of radicalized individuals within a school or college. "Data on school shooters provided by official reports refer only to former' and current' students" (Dumitriu).

Factors that make a target vulnerable:

"There are six categories of factors that are common to perpetrators who fit profile 1 or profile 2. They refer to: (a) some family related issues; (b) some health related issues, which include- but are not limited to- issues related to mental health; (c) some religious beliefs and social and political views; (d) easy access to guns; (e) some ties to various organizations, and; (f) some cultural influences. Even though these school shooters share six common features, a unique profile of the school shooter in this group ("Group A") does not exist. Of the 163 school shooters, 71 (43.56 %) fit profile 1 (The "Lost in the Downward Spiral" student) and 22 (13.49%) fit profile 2 (The "Perfect Student")" (Dumitriu).

Adolescence and early adulthood are important times for identity development for people. The search for identity, meaning and belonging is what defines this time. These existential questions can have clear answers from extremist ideologies. Students who have a sense of alienation from their classmates, families or community are more likely to look for other groups which offer a feeling of purpose and belonging.
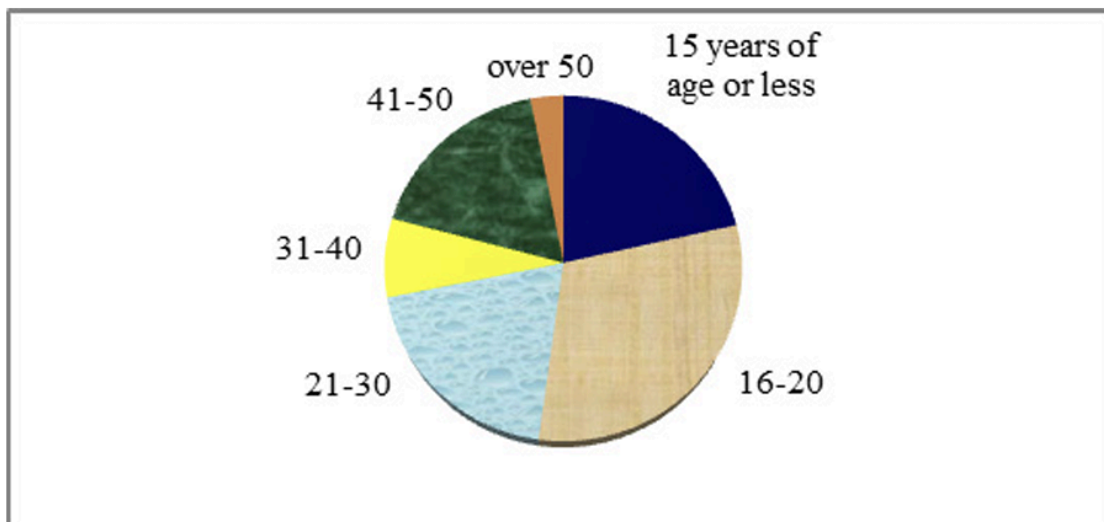

Figure 1: Distribution of school shooters by age group

Grievances, injustices and identity crises can also be contributing factors. Deeply rooted grudges can result from experiences of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion or socioeconomic status. Extremist groups take advantage of these feelings of unfairness by offering their ideas as a solution to these issues. Poverty, lack of opportunities and social inequities can make extremist views that promise change and empowerment attractive. Extremist organizations that provide a clear and strong sense of identity and purpose may attract young people who are struggling with issues related to their national, religious or cultural identity. Students may be drawn to extreme beliefs by the need to belong to a group or be perceived as a part of a specific movement, particularly if these groups seem to offer a strong identity.

Social media and peer influence are the most powerful tools for spreading extremist ideologies. Teenagers who use the internet regularly may come across radical recruitment campaigns and content. Extremist organizations recruit and brainwash young people using complex propaganda strategies. Videos, posts on social media, online forums and any other digital content might all fall under this category. Attitudes and behaviors are greatly influenced by peer influence. Students are more likely to accept extreme views if they are surrounded by others who do the same. Students who want to fit in with a group may end up adopting radical views, particularly if they think doing so will make them liked and accepted by others.

Additionally, mental health problems play an important role. Students who struggle with mental health conditions such as stress, trauma, anxiety or depression are more vulnerable to radicalization. Extremist ideas can provide people who feel powerless or alienated a sense of empowerment and control. People who have experienced violence, abuse or trauma in the past may be more vulnerable to radical beliefs that serve as a coping mechanism or form of revenge. Poor support systems in schools such as extracurricular activities and counseling can prevent students from being effectively involved which increases their vulnerability to radical recruiting.

Consequences:

Radicalized individuals pose a threat to the safety of students and staff members. Extremist ideologies have been associated with incidents of school shootings, bomb threats and other violent crimes. Extremist beliefs have the potential to cause disruption in the educational setting and make staff and students fearful and insecure. Also, it could cause disagreements and divisions among the student body. Extremism has the potential to stigmatize particular groups, creating an atmosphere of hostility and discrimination that threatens the nature of educational institutions. When higher education institutions are discovered to have radicalization issues their reputations may be damaged which could have an impact on student enrollment and the institution's standing in general.

Most importantly, individuals get injured or might be killed. Since 2018, there have been 198 school shootings in which at least one person got injured or killed. Since 2018, 126 people have been killed and 342 people have been injured in school shootings.
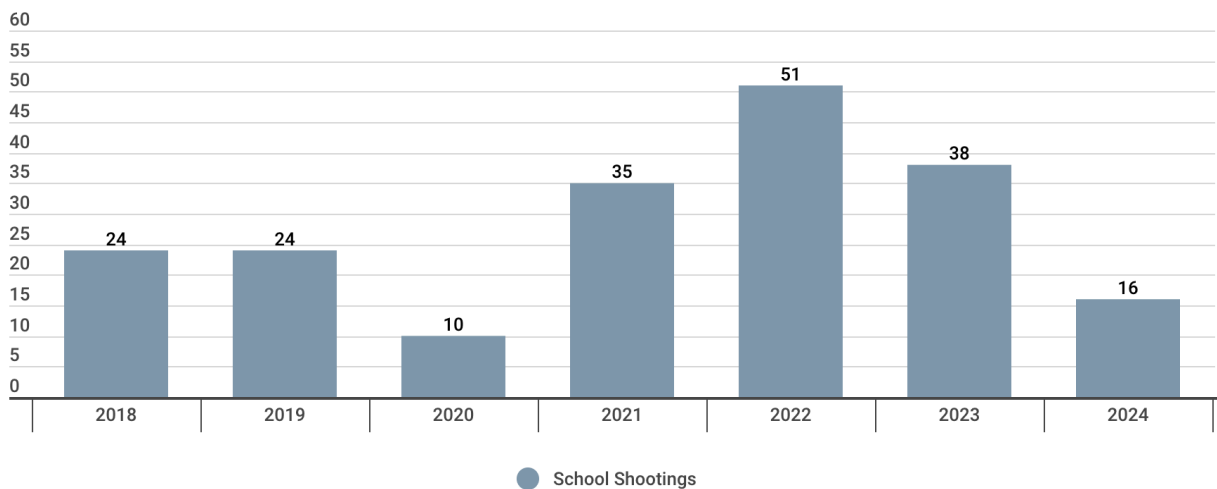

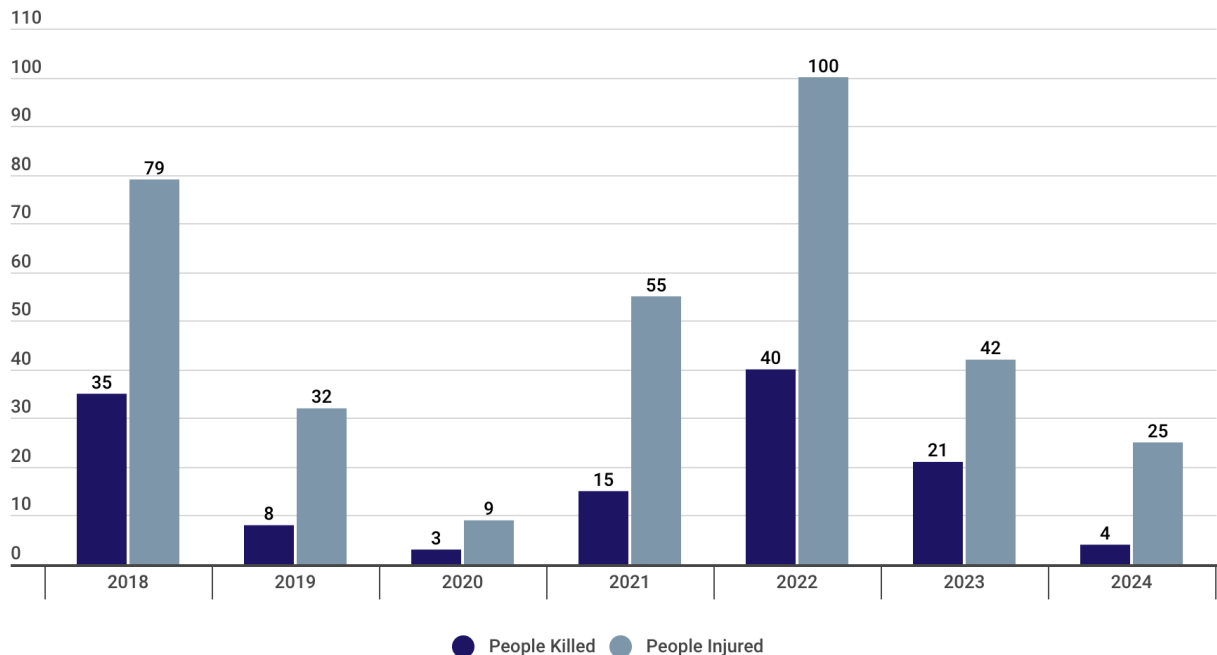*Figure 2: Amount of school shootings per year since 2018*

Figure 3: Amount of people killed and injured in school shootings per year since 2018

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

United States of America

The United States makes up about 76 percent of public mass shootings and 70 percent of victim fatalities. "When keeping with the traditional public mass shooting definition, researchers have found the United States has experienced a higher number of public mass shootings compared to any other nation worldwide—far exceeding its proportionate share based on the size of its population. Regional Gun Violence Research Consortium member Adam Lankford found, for example, that despite making up less than 5 percent of the global population, the United States has experienced 31 percent of global public mass shootings" (Silva). As expected, the United States is actively involved in combating radicalization in educational settings through a multi-faceted approach that involves federal agencies, educational institutions, and community organizations.

The FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) is very involved in monitoring and preventing radicalization within the United States in schools and universities. The FBI organizes community outreach programs to educate communities. The DHS (Department of Homeland Security) implements CVE (Countering Violent Extremism) programs aimed at preventing individuals from being drawn into extremist ideologies. The OTVTP (Office of Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention) provides resources and support for local efforts to prevent radicalization such as training for educators and community leaders. The Department of Education works in cooperation with other government agencies in order to improve school security and raise public awareness of radicalization dangers. They create and distribute resources to help teachers in identifying and addressing kids who present a risk of radicalization.

Many US schools run programs aimed at creating accessible learning environments and reducing social isolation and bullying which are the main two things that lead to radicalization. Critical thinking skills and media literacy are being emphasized in schools more and more to support students in identifying and responding to extremist propaganda. Universities have rules and regulations established to stop radicalization such as keeping an eye on events on campus and offering at-risk students help. Institutions like Harvard, Stanford and the University of Maryland conduct research on radicalization and develop academic programs focused on counterterrorism and homeland security.

Public awareness campaigns are organized by NGOs and government organizations in the US to educate the public on how to get help and recognize the warning signs of radicalization. Building awareness and resistance against extremist ideologies is made possible through educational workshops and seminars for educators, parents and students.
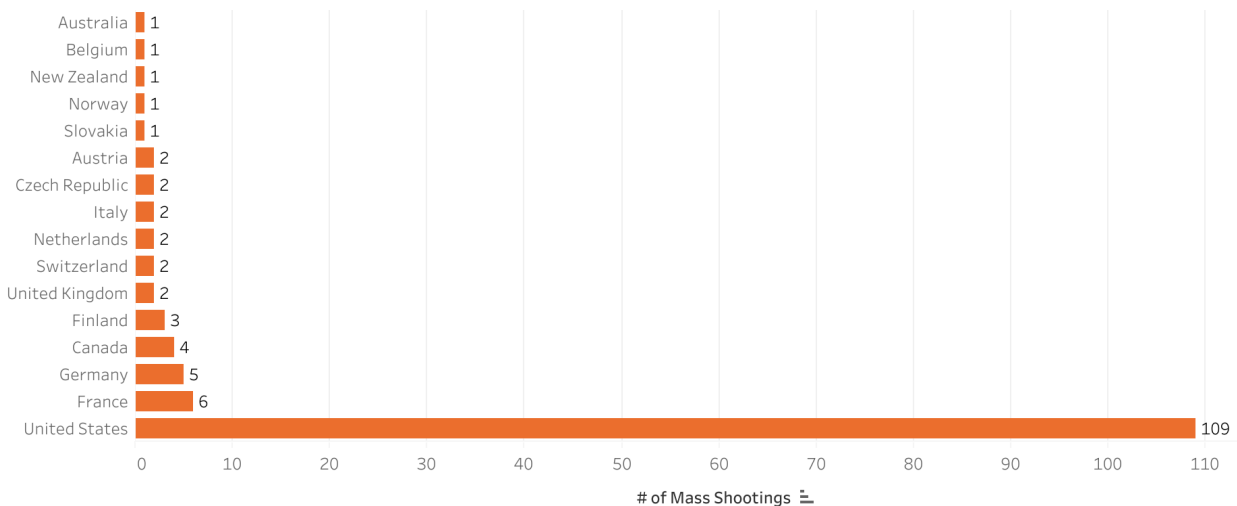
Figure 4: Amount of mass shootings per country

The United Kingdom

The UK established the Prevent Strategy in 2003 and expanded it following the London bombings in 2005 which is an essential part of the United Kingdom's counterterrorism initiatives, focusing on stopping individuals from transforming into terrorists. It entails setting up prevention coordinators in schools and providing training for teachers. As a part of the Prevent Strategy, the Channel Program provides multi-agency support, including referrals from educational institutions to those who are recognized as being at risk of radicalization.

UNESCO (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization)

UNESCO promotes Global Citizenship Education (GCED). The goal of UNESCO's GCED program is to provide students with the values, information and abilities they need to participate as responsible global citizens. Critical thinking, empathy and respect are emphasized in this framework because they are essential in combating extreme ideologies. UNESCO ensures that the curriculum creates a sense of shared humanity and goes against extremist ideologies by collaborating with member states to implement GCED into national education systems. The educational resources created under GCED promote tolerance, non-violence, and the ability to understand and manage complex global issues.

UNESCO promotes MIL (Media and Information Literacy) programs to help students critically analyze media content and recognize extremist propaganda. MIL programs help students to separate fact from false and extreme content by developing their ability to assess information sources. UNESCO encourages digital literacy as part of its educational activities because it recognizes the important part that the internet plays in radicalization. The main goals of the programs are to teach youth how to use the internet securely and recognize the risks that extremist content poses. UNESCO works with internet companies in order to provide strategies and resources that can stop the spread of extremist information online. These collaborations aim to protect students from radicalization activities and provide safer online environments for them.

Timeline of Events

2002	The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is established.
2003	The United Kingdom launches the first version of its "Prevent Strategy".
2011	The U.S. government released its first national strategy for countering violent extremism (CVE).
2012	The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy is reviewed and includes a focus on preventing violent extremism through education.

2015	The "UNESCO Guide for Preventing Violent Extremism through Education" is published.
2015	The European Union establishes the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN).
2016	The US Department of Homeland Security established the Office of Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention (OTVTP).
2024	UNESCO, in collaboration with major tech companies, launches a global campaign to enhance digital literacy among students.

Relevant UN Resolutions and Other Documents

- United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy

https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/un-global-counter-terrorism-strategy

- The United Kingdom - Prevention of Terrorism Act 2005 (repealed)

https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/2/contents

- U.S. Department of State - Foreign Terrorist Organizations

https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/

- UNESCO - A Teacher's guide on the prevention of violent extremism

https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000244676

- European Commission - About RAN Practitioners

https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/about-ran_en

- Samantha de Silva - Role of Education in the Prevention of Violent Extremism

https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/448221510079762554/120997-WP-revised-PUBLIC-Role-of-Education-in-Prevention-of-Violence-Extremism-Final.pdf

- United Nations Development Programme - Preventing Violent Extremism through Inclusive Development and the Promotion of Tolerance and Respect for Diversity

https://www.undp.org/publications/preventing-violent-extremism-through-inclusive-development-and-promotion-tolerance-and-respect-diversity

- UNESCO - Preventing violent extremism

https://www.unesco.org/en/preventing-violent-extremism

- UNODC Youth-led action to prevent violent extremism and terrorism

https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2023/December/youth-led-action-to-prevent-terrorism-and-violent-extremism.html

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Attempts by countries and governments:

The United States and The United Kingdom have been the most involved countries in the prevention of violent extremism in schools and other educational institutions. Other countries that have contributed to this cause are France, Germany, Australia and Canada.

The French government launched "Plan de lutte contre la radicalisation" which includes a number of measures to stop radicalization such as improvements to the educational system to encourage secular principles and civic education in the classroom. French schools have incorporated lessons on secularism, critical thinking, and civic responsibility to counter extremist ideologies. The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) in Germany monitors activities carried out by extremists and supports educational initiatives aimed at preventing radicalization. German states have established many initiatives to support integration and fight radicalization in schools. These initiatives usually target young people who are at-risk and immigrant groups. The goal of Australia's CVE Strategy is to prevent radicalization through community participation and educational campaigns. The approach places a strong emphasis on building community unity and resilience. Programs to educate children about the risks of extremism and to develop critical thinking abilities have been implemented by Australian schools. The Canada Centre for Community Engagement and Prevention of Violence provides support for local initiatives aimed at preventing radicalization such as educational projects that encourage diversity and counter extremist ideologies. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) works with educational institutions to provide content and training on preventing radicalization.

Attempts by organizations:

Global Citizenship Education (GCED) is financed by UNESCO to promote tolerance, peace and critical thinking. This project consists of developing curricula, training instructors and producing instructional materials to prevent radicalization. Students who participate in UNESCO's MIL (Media and Information Literacy) programs are better able to critically evaluate media information which reduces their vulnerability to extremist propaganda. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has developed resources and guidelines to support member nations in establishing educational initiatives aimed at preventing violent extremism. For educators and policymakers, the OSCE offers workshops and training sessions on tackling radicalization. The European Commission established the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN). By bringing together professionals from all around Europe, RAN develops strategies to stop radicalization in schools and universities.

Possible Solutions

There are many things which could be done in order to help prevent radicalization efforts by extremist organizations in schools and institutes of higher education. Educating students about violent extremism is a good idea. This can be done through curriculum development and teaching critical thinking skills. Providing educators with training and digital literacy programs is also important. Making sure that the education is inclusive and non-discriminatory is essential. Implementing anti-bullying programs can be useful. International cooperation and collaborative research is another option. Mentorship programs and counseling services should also be presented to at-risk students. Last but not least, implementing legal frameworks that support preventive measures in educational settings is important.

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