



**Does**  
online exposure  
to **extremist**  
**content**  
lead to   
 **violent**  
**radicalization?**



DECISION-MAKER'S PAMPHLET



PREV

# CPN-PREV network

The mission of the **Canadian Practitioners' Network for the Prevention of Radicalization and Extremist Violence** (CPN-PREV) is to support coordinated collaboration, capacity reinforcement and knowledge mobilization among key sectors in the field of prevention and countering of violent radicalization (P/CVE) in Canada through a multidisciplinary approach.

## CPN-PREV'S systematic review: current state of knowledge



The scientific team at CPN-PREV conducted a systematic review of the scientific literature to:

- a. identify studies available on the subject;
- b. assess the scientific quality and reliability of their results;
- c. extract their main conclusions.

**Of the 5,178 scientific articles identified, 11 were selected.** Only these articles assessed the empirical relationship between exposure to extremist content online and violent radicalization. Of these 11 studies, six used quantitative research methods, while five were qualitative in nature. None of the studies employed longitudinal data or control groups. ■

## Summary of the main results



### Adoption of violent radical attitudes and behaviors

- › Exposure to extremist content online (e.g., following the Facebook page and publications of an extremist group, participating in a radical group's online discussion forum) seems to be linked to the adoption of radical attitudes, regardless of the type of media involved (forums, Facebook group, website) or the type of radicalized ideas (neo-Nazi propaganda, radical Islamist, etc.).
- › Exposure to extremist content online appears to be linked to the adoption of extremist behaviors not only in the virtual sphere (e. g., publishing hate content), but also in real life (e. g., planning an attack, joining armed groups).
  - › Individuals who **actively seek extremist material online** seem to be more likely to engage in any form of political violence than individuals who have been passively exposed to it.

### Multiple influences leading to violent radicalization

- › Violent radicalization online cannot be understood in isolation of real-life factors. For instance, personal crises, mental health problems or membership in a radical group should also be considered.
- › Interacting online (e.g., on discussion forums or Facebook groups) with groups sharing homogeneous ideas can exacerbate extreme attitudes.
- › Extreme attitudes and opinions tend to become more radical when individuals are confronted with opposing points of view from people who seek to change their minds or with whom they do not have a trust-based relationship.



## Limitations and gaps in research

- ▶ The data does not identify whether exposure to extremist content online takes place before, during, and/or after a change in attitudes and/or behaviours.
- ▶ In addition to the limited number of existing studies, significant methodological limitations were identified in the consulted studies, thus calling into question the reliability of some of the obtained results.
- ▶ The identified studies are based on varying definitions of the concepts «radicalization», «extremist content», «radical attitudes» and «radical behaviors». The heterogeneous definitions employed makes it difficult to integrate knowledge on the subject and to draw firm conclusions on the relationship between exposure to extremist content online and violent radicalization. ■

### Key messages:

- ▶ **Exposure to extremist content online is associated with the endorsement of extremist/hateful attitudes and violent radical behavior.**
- ▶ **The link between exposure to extremist content online and violent radicalization must continue to be examined in conjunction with other factors in real (offline) life, such as personal crises or peer influence.**
- ▶ **Current empirical data does not therefore allow us to infer a causal link between online exposure to extremist content and violent radicalization.**
- ▶ **Available scientific research is limited in terms of validity and reliability. As a result, caution is required when using these studies to develop social/criminal policies or prevention programs ■**

## Recommendations for decision-makers:



Given the limited evidence on this issue, it is necessary to promote and **fund the implementation of rigorous studies evaluating the effectiveness of programs** to prevent violent radicalization online.

- › These studies should include an examination of what aspects of these programs are effective and, if relevant, how they counter the effects of Internet use and social networks with respect to trajectories of violent radicalization.

In light of the different contexts in which an individual may become radicalized (type of radicalized group, type of online or offline platform, degree of radicalization, etc.), it is important that **practitioners are adequately trained on the issue.**

- › Such training should include various aspects such as the building and maintenance of a therapeutic alliance, an understanding of the issues raised by different extremist groups, the assessment of the risk of committing violence, knowledge of modern web platforms and social networks, and cyber-addiction.

Given the close association between the online and offline worlds for people at risk of violent radicalization, it is essential to support initiatives based on **partnership and collaboration between intervention teams**, with each sector or team having a specific and complementary expertise.

- › These collaborations must be deployed in strict compliance with laws and standards on the protection of privacy and confidentiality. ■

## Conclusion



The recommendations endorsed in this pamphlet require the involvement of political decision-makers and institutional administrators who can ensure their financing, implementation, and coordination.

Coordination efforts are indeed very important in order to provide a framework for collaboration between the various actors involved in preventing online violent radicalization. ■

### Useful links:

CPN-PREV website: [cpnprev.ca](http://cpnprev.ca)

► **Link to the publication (via the journal portal):**

<https://content.iospress.com/articles/international-journal-of-developmental-science/dev170233>

► **Youth and Violent Extremism on Social Media – Mapping the Research:**

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0026/002603/260382e.pdf>

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