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THE DIGITAL CRUCIBLE:

Understanding and
Preventing Youth
Recruitment to Terror,
Hate, and Cartel
Organizations Online

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THE DIGITAL CRUCIBLE: UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING YOUTH RECRUITMENT TO TERROR, HATE, AND CARTEL ORGANIZATIONS ONLINE

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This report reviews recent literature on youth recruitment to criminal, terror, and hate organizations to help understand the dynamics of youth recruitment into Tier 1 DOIs and provide actionable insights for platforms' efforts to enforce against content and actors involved in DOI recruitment. A case study from each DOI category is provided to highlight the recruitment processes at stake; these are the Islamic State, 764, and cartels. Finally, recommendations for on-platform prevention campaigns and approaches are provided.

Introduction

Youth recruitment to criminal, terror, and hate organizations continues to be a significant concern for scholars, governments, and communities alike. Yet it is still the case that relatively little research systematically focuses on recruitment tactics or efficacy, undoubtedly due to methodological difficulties in doing so. Some authors use alternate terminology (such as “mobilization”), or focus on behavioral and associational shifts rather than relying on the framework of recruitment per se. Others use the terminology of “radicalization,” yet are clearly evaluating cases where one or more individuals have crossed important behavioral or social thresholds such that they can be considered successful recruits to some problematic entity. While unarticulated in most of these pieces, these framing decisions are likely due to the opacity of the recruitment process. That is, it remains difficult to delineate precisely when someone is recruited to many organizations, especially online, and it is difficult to accurately trace each in the recruitment process for individuals whose online and offline histories are not later recorded in criminal justice system or similar accounts following detection and arrest of their actions.

This review considers literature from 2022 to the present that evaluates or informs youth recruitment to DOIs, regardless of precise terminology. The literature relevant to criminal organizations is much smaller than the literature covering terror and hate organizations, which tend to be aggregated as a single type of entity (typically referred to as “extremist”). The exception is radical Islamic groups, which are typically clearly delineated as “terror” organizations within the existing literature. With these constraints in mind, all three types of organizations are presented as having largely common causes and needed interventions. Descriptions below should be considered as applicable across criminal, terror, and hate organizations unless further specifications are indicated.

Recruitment Tactics

Youth recruitment to DOIs is complex regardless of where it occurs, and there is no single pathway for DOI recruitment. While all organizations continue to use both on and offline routes of recruitment, hate groups appear to recruit largely online, criminal organizations appear to recruit largely offline, and there is disagreement in the literature about the relative importance of online versus offline recruitment for terror organizations.

Online Recruitment

The internet has dramatically expanded the recruitment repertoire of bad actors, shifting the key focus for many of them from traditional, face-to-face channels to digital spaces where individuals can remain anonymous and easily facilitate the spread of their organizational materials and ideas. Most platforms provide low barriers to access and broad reach to potential users. This combination likely means that children targeted for recruitment by at least some DOIs are younger than offline recruitment alone permits, with children as young as ten years old being incited to share propaganda and encourage violence on some platforms.¹ Other research explains how digital access has meant that audiences have

¹ Campion, Kristy, and Emma Colvin. 2024a. “Foreign and Familiar: Recruitment Pathways of Young People Engaged with Extremism in Australia.” ICCT. <https://pt.icct.nl/article/foreign-and-familiar-recruitment-pathways-young-people-engaged-extremism-australia>.

been expanded for Jihadist groups, specifically, to include more women and “westernized” backgrounds who would otherwise be unreachable.² Some criminal organizations, specifically cartels, may be using social media in a similar manner to recruit US youth and others for engagement in drug smuggling.³

Social media and other platforms also likely amplify personal susceptibility in unique ways, particularly with regard to youth identity development.⁴ Online environments can provide a sense of community and belonging that can otherwise be absent in some youths’ offline lives at a vulnerable time in human cognitive and social development.

Recent investigations of online dynamics have tended to focus on how, exactly, the virtual environment contributes to recruitment. Studies highlight how social media and online gaming platforms are pivotal in spreading DOI’s ideas and ideologies that increase recruitment possibilities.⁵ Some also have limited monitoring or internal regulation, all of which facilitates DOI recruitment.⁶

Recent research agrees with earlier findings that it is easier to access and quickly disseminate materials like manifestos or core texts online rather than through in-person channels. Other work references the impact and salience of videos shared by these groups, though the typical example of this tactic in the recent literature is Daesh campaigns from 2014-2018.⁷ Individuals acting independently can often access at least some of this content without direct engagement with existing members of terror and hate groups in particular; these independent actors are increasingly being referred to as cases of “autonomous” or “post-organizational” radicalization and recruitment rather than the traditional “lone wolf” label.⁸

² Parvez, Saimum. 2022. “How Do Terrorists Use the Internet for Recruitment?” In *The Politics of Terrorism and Counterterrorism in Bangladesh*. Routledge.; Kerr, Henry, Michèle St-Amant, and John McCoy. 2024. “Break the Hate: A Survey of Youth Experiences with Hate and Violent Extremism Online.” *Canadian Journal of Family and Youth / Le Journal Canadien de Famille et de La Jeunesse* 16 (3): 57–75. <https://doi.org/10.29173/cjfy30069>.

³ Kasmar, Chad. 2023. “Blog Post: Cartels Exploiting Young Americans and Migrants - Law Enforcement Immigration Task Force.” Law Enforcement Immigration Task Force. <https://leitf.org/2023/10/cartels-exploiting-young-americans-and-migrants/>; Solis, Gustavo. 2024. “Cartels Increasingly Use Young US Citizens for Fentanyl Smuggling.” KPBS Public Media. <https://www.kpbs.org/news/border-immigration/2024/09/17/cartels-increasingly-use-young-us-citizens-for-fentanyl-smuggling>.

⁴ Jones, Isabel, Jakob Guhl, Jacob Davey, and Moustafa Ayad. 2023. “Young Guns: Understanding a New Generation of Extremist Radicalization in the United States.” ISD. https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Young-guns_Understandings-a-new-generation-of-extremist-radicalization-in-the-United-States.pdf.

⁵ Scheuble, Sophie, and Fehime Oezmen. 2022. “Extremists’ Targeting of Young.” European Commission. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-03/ad_hoc_young_women_social_media_Lessons-p-cve_022022_en.pdf; Jones, Isabel, Jakob Guhl, Jacob Davey, and Moustafa Ayad. 2023. “Young Guns: Understanding a New Generation of Extremist Radicalization in the United States.” ISD. https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Young-guns_Understandings-a-new-generation-of-extremist-radicalization-in-the-United-States.pdf.

⁶ Scheuble, Sophie, and Fehime Oezmen. 2022. “Extremists’ Targeting of Young.” European Commission. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-03/ad_hoc_young_women_social_media_Lessons-p-cve_022022_en.pdf.

⁷ Scheuble, Sophie, and Fehime Oezmen. 2022. “Extremists’ Targeting of Young.” European Commission. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-03/ad_hoc_young_women_social_media_Lessons-p-cve_022022_en.pdf; Kerr, Henry, Michèle St-Amant, and John McCoy. 2024. “Break the Hate: A Survey of Youth Experiences with Hate and Violent Extremism Online.” *Canadian Journal of Family and Youth / Le Journal Canadien de Famille et de La Jeunesse* 16 (3): 57–75. <https://doi.org/10.29173/cjfy30069>; Yeo, Kenneth. 2024. “Youth and Adolescent Online Radicalisation: Critical Cases From Singapore.” *GNET*. <https://gnet-research.org/2024/11/18/youth-adolescent-and-online-radicalisation-in-singapore/>.

⁸ FBI. 2025. “Beyond Belief: Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in America.” File. Federal Bureau of Investigation. 2025. <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/beyond-belief-preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism-in-america.pdf/view>.

Strong online personalities, including influencers, may also promote DOI ideological and behavioral uptake in various online spaces. Social science has long shown that charismatic individuals can hold large persuasive potential for audiences in a variety of contexts, and some recent research on online youth recruitment suggests that individuals are more likely to adopt radical ideas when presented by charismatic online figures, especially if those figures are seen as relatable or aspirational. Influencers in particular can provide both the ideological justification for extremist perspectives and a model for acting on those ideas by glamorizing violence and intolerance.⁹ They may be particularly effective if engaging one-on-one with potential recruits in situations where there is an imbalance of power and youths feel their agency is limited.¹⁰

At the same time, some growing online spaces feature strong personalities that challenge this interpretation. Rather than charisma, these figures thrive on derision and open manipulation. In these spaces, violence is pursued for its own sake.¹¹ As the FBI recently reported, in a growing number of spaces, there are perpetrators for whom “the need to justify the desire to self-harm or harm others may be among the primary drivers” or participation in and recruitment to these spaces, rather than any traditional ideology.¹²

Offline Recruitment

Some recent literature continues to assert that offline contexts are more important than online spaces for recruitment. However, it must be noted that this claim seems most supported for criminal organizations around which there is comparatively little analysis on youth-specific recruitment. In cases offline youth recruitment to criminal organizations is considered, promises of financial rewards, a stable job, or physical protection (sometimes from the organization itself) may provide key incentives for some youths to join.¹³ For particularly young recruits, toys and video games may be offered rather than money, and rewards for teens may be designed to enhance feelings of masculine achievement or success.¹⁴

Literature on criminal organizations also details the escalating processes that can be at work in recruitment to these DOIs with new recruits being assigned, first, to roles like look-outs before expectations for their engagement in organizational activities gradually increases to activities like direct

; Jones, Isabel, Jakob Guhl, Jacob Davey, and Moustafa Ayad. 2023. “Young Guns: Understanding a New Generation of Extremist Radicalization in the United States.” ISD.

https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Young-guns_Understandings-a-new-generation-of-extremist-radicalization-in-the-United-States.pdf.

⁹ Marwick, Alice, Benjamin Clancy, and Katherine Furl. 2022. “Far-Right Online Radicalization: A Review of the Literature.” *The Bulletin of Technology & Public Life*, May. <https://doi.org/10.21428/bfcb0bff.e9492a11>.

¹⁰ Campion, Kristy, and Emma Colvin. 2024a. “Foreign and Familiar: Recruitment Pathways of Young People Engaged with Extremism in Australia.” ICCT.

<https://pt.icct.nl/article/foreign-and-familiar-recruitment-pathways-young-people-engaged-extremism-australia>.

¹¹ Ware, Jacob. 2023. “The Third Generation of Online Radicalization.” Program on Extremism.

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/third-generation-online-radicalization>.

¹² FBI. 2025. “Beyond Belief: Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in America.” File. Federal Bureau of Investigation. 2025.

<https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/beyond-belief-preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism-in-america.pdf/view>.

¹³ “Social Media Teen Recruitment: Gang Life.” 2025. The White Hatter.

<https://thewhitehatter.ca/blog/the-utilization-of-social-media-by-gangs-in-teen-recruitment-what-parents-need-to-know/>; Campion, Kristy, and Emma Colvin. 2024a. “Foreign and Familiar: Recruitment Pathways of Young People Engaged with Extremism in Australia.” ICCT.

<https://pt.icct.nl/article/foreign-and-familiar-recruitment-pathways-young-people-engaged-extremism-australia>.

¹⁴ McFee. 2025. “Cradle of Violence: How Criminal Networks Are Winning Ecuador’s Youth and Threatening Latin America’s Future.” Atlantic Council.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/criminal-networks-are-winning-ecuadors-youth-and-threatening-latin-americas-future/>.

drug selling.¹⁵ This escalation is for two purposes, First, to gradually normalize the DOI's activities to this person and second, for some DOIs, it puts younger recruits in positions to receive lower criminal penalties for their visible, organizational roles relative to what older members would experience.¹⁶

Terrorist organizations who use offline recruitment are described in the literature as targeting youths from impoverished communities or from populations displaced due to war, famine, or other disasters. In some cases, youths are recruited from orphanages with stark conditions, after the organization presents itself to them as their only way out.¹⁷ Leafleting, one-on-one or group meetings, and school-based recruitment may also occur; depending on the DOI in question, these may happen either instead of or alongside online interactions on gaming or social media platforms.¹⁸

Criminal organizations may largely use online interactions to generally promote their brands and reputation, reinforcing recruitment narratives that are largely delivered in person. Some literature observes that this kind of online presence also contributes to the DOI's broader cultural footprint, including escalations with rival groups that could enhance their appeal to potential recruits.¹⁹

With regard to terrorist organizations, specifically, some researchers have argued that threats of offline violence have been associated with offline, as opposed to online, recruitment.²⁰ This contrasts with some other findings, such as that examining an Australian cohort of violent Salafi-Jihadist youth.²¹ A paper by Scrivens and Gaudette implies that our collective investigations into youth recruitment into other DOIs may insufficiently consider offline events that push people into problematic online environments as the first real step toward recruitment.²² However, the applicability of this across DOI types and even across different groups within the hate or terror categories is currently unknown. Other literature suggests that online recruitment processes may be more of a concern with right-wing hate

¹⁵ Gerdellaj, Adriana. 2024. "From the Playground to the Streets - Children and Youths' Recruitment into Criminal Gangs in Sweden. A Scoping Review." <https://gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/84400>; Business Wire. 2024. "Gang Recruitment Increasing with Younger Kids."

<https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20240118414302/en/Gang-Recruitment-Increasing-with-Younger-Kids>; European Crime Prevention Network. 2022. "Toolbox on Street Gang Prevention." European Crime Prevention Network. https://eucpn.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2206_Toolbox%20FR_LR.pdf.

¹⁶ Krisis Information. 2024. "Recruitment to Criminal Gangs." Krisis Information. <http://www.krisinformation.se/en/hazards-and-risks/disasters-and-incidents/2023/gang-related-violence/recruitment-to-criminal-gangs>; Al Jazeera. 2024. "Gang Recruitment of Children in Haiti Rises by 70 Percent: UN." Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/11/25/gang-recruitment-of-haitian-children-soars-by-70-percent-un>.

¹⁷ Al Jazeera. 2024. "Gang Recruitment of Children in Haiti Rises by 70 Percent: UN." Al Jazeera.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/11/25/gang-recruitment-of-haitian-children-soars-by-70-percent-un>.

¹⁸ Scrivens, Ryan. 2023. "Examining Online Indicators of Extremism among Violent and Non-Violent Right-Wing Extremists." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 35 (6): 1389–1409. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2022.2042270>; Campion, Kristy, and Emma Colvin. 2024a. "Foreign and Familiar: Recruitment Pathways of Young People Engaged with Extremism in Australia." ICCT.

<https://pt.icct.nl/article/foreign-and-familiar-recruitment-pathways-young-people-engaged-extremism-australia>.

¹⁹ European Crime Prevention Network. 2022. "Toolbox on Street Gang Prevention." European Crime Prevention Network. https://eucpn.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2206_Toolbox%20FR_LR.pdf; "Social Media Teen Recruitment: Gang Life." 2025. The White Hatter.

<https://thewhitehatter.ca/blog/the-utilization-of-social-media-by-gangs-in-teen-recruitment-what-parents-need-to-know/>.

²⁰ Scrivens, Ryan, and Tiana Gaudette. 2024. "Online Terrorism and Violent Extremism." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.013.795>.

²¹ Campion, Kristy, and Emma Colvin. 2024a. "Foreign and Familiar: Recruitment Pathways of Young People Engaged with Extremism in Australia." ICCT.

<https://pt.icct.nl/article/foreign-and-familiar-recruitment-pathways-young-people-engaged-extremism-australia>.

²² Scrivens, Ryan, and Tiana Gaudette. 2024. "Online Terrorism and Violent Extremism." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.013.795>.

and terror organizations than other kinds of DOIs yet acknowledge the potential for the internet to facilitate DOI recruitment across the spectrum.²³

The Scrivens and Gaudette paper also acknowledges that online contexts reach more potential members even if the intensity of a given organization's recruitment is amplified offline.²⁴ Underscoring this point, the reach of DOI material is so vast that surveys in several countries show that at least one-third of youth have encountered DOI content online.²⁵ This mass-reach potential is especially important when some groups are known to use online platforms as a way to vet or groom prospective recruits, then pursue the most promising ones in offline meetings.²⁶ This means that even if offline interactions remain more important to some DOIs, the internet still increases the possible number of individuals who can be contacted and converted to offline activity. The online world, in other words, is not entirely separate from and exists in tandem with offline, personal, social, and other factors that may modulate an individual's recruitment potential.²⁷

Recruitment Vulnerabilities

Much of the recent research argues that young people who experience any number of personal crises are more susceptible to recruitment. Many cases examining recruited youth do reveal they had strained offline social bonds before or as they were becoming vulnerable to DOI recruitment.²⁸ For terror organizations, specifically, some researchers point to the importance of exposure to radical ideologies while at university (though what, exactly, constitutes radical ideology is undefined), or the role of parents and immediate peers engaged with the organization.²⁹

Some research also connects socioeconomic and cultural factors to recruitment vulnerability, saying that young people who feel disconnected from society or face discrimination may be more likely to

²³ Satria, Alif. 2023. "Understanding the Radicalisation Patterns of Indonesian Pro-IS Supporters." S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

<https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/understanding-the-radicalisation-patterns-of-indonesian-pro-is-supporters/>.

²⁴ Scrivens, Ryan, and Tiana Gaudette. 2024. "Online Terrorism and Violent Extremism." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.013.795>.

²⁵ Kerr, Henry, Michèle St-Amant, and John McCoy. 2024. "Break the Hate: A Survey of Youth Experiences with Hate and Violent Extremism Online." *Canadian Journal of Family and Youth / Le Journal Canadien de Famille et de La Jeunesse* 16 (3): 57–75. <https://doi.org/10.29173/cjfy30069>.

²⁶ Lemieux, Anthony. 2023. "Part 4: Recruiting and Vetting Candidates for Membership in The Base." *VoxPol*. <https://voxpoleu/part-4-recruiting-and-vetting-candidates-for-membership-in-the-base/>.

²⁷ Koehler, Daniel, Verena Fiebig, and Irina Jugl. 2023. "From Gaming to Hating: Extreme-Right Ideological Indoctrination and Mobilization for Violence of Children on Online Gaming Platforms." *Political Psychology* 44 (2): 419–34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12855>.

²⁸ Zych, Izabela, and Elena Nasaescu. 2022. "Is Radicalization a Family Issue? A Systematic Review of Family-Related Risk and Protective Factors, Consequences, and Interventions against Radicalization." *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 18 (3). <https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1266>; Aryaeinejad, Kateira, and Thomas Leo Scherer. 2024a. "The Role of Social Networks in Facilitating and Preventing Domestic Radicalization." Office of Justice Programs.

<https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/305795.pdf>; Barracosa, Steven, and James March. 2022. "Dealing With Radicalised Youth Offenders: The Development and Implementation of a Youth-Specific Framework." *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 12 (January). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2021.773545>.

²⁹ Campion, Kristy, and Emma Colvin. 2024b. "Community, More than Conviction: Understanding Radicalisation Factors for Young People in Australia." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2025.2478957>.

search for groups that promise an explanation or solution for their grievances.³⁰ Vulnerability of this kind is enhanced for youths who have faced incarceration or similar treatment and who have difficulties integrating or reintegrating into normative society.³¹ It may also be the case that some groups that practice prolonged grooming and mental abuse of recruits may effectively be instilling in their targets a sense of being removed from normative society that is at least somewhat parallel to the distancing that can be produced through incarceration. ICDE has observed that hate groups and NVE actors are aware of these vulnerabilities in youth and have designed recruitment methods specifically oriented towards individuals who display or acknowledge such vulnerabilities in their past.

In some cases, such as extreme destitution, family members or others may pressure or incentivize youths into DOIs for financial rewards to flow back to the family.³² ICDE has observed an incentive for financial rewards and some NVE networks that integrate on the potential to earn digital currencies (including platform specific currencies such as Robux) and the behavioral requirements to remain within online ecosystems such as perpetrating harms or conducting self-harm from members. This nexus also blurs into other violative behaviors and adverse online cultures (e.g., financial extortion networks, scams and fraud) which have little to no underlying hate or extremist ideology.

A recent report by the Australian Institute of Criminology, underscores how radical groups exploit various youth vulnerabilities by framing their ideologies as a response to perceived societal injustice.³³ A similar consideration examines Adverse Childhood Events (ACEs). When a given individual has multiple

³⁰ NIJ. 2022. "Domestic Radicalization and Deradicalization: Insights from Family and Friends." NIJ. <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/domestic-radicalization-and-deradicalization-insights-family-and-friends>; Jones, Isabel, Jakob Guhl, Jacob Davey, and Moustafa Ayad. 2023. "Young Guns: Understanding a New Generation of Extremist Radicalization in the United States." ISD. https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Young-guns_Understandings-a-new-generation-of-extremist-radicalization-in-the-United-States.pdf; Aryaeinejad, Kateira, and Thomas Leo Scherer. 2024a. "The Role of Social Networks in Facilitating and Preventing Domestic Radicalization." Office of Justice Programs. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/305795.pdf>; "Social Media Teen Recruitment: Gang Life." 2025. The White Hatter. <https://thewhitehatter.ca/blog/the-utilization-of-social-media-by-gangs-in-teen-recruitment-what-parents-need-to-know/>; Gerdellaj, Adriana. 2024. "From the Playground to the Streets - Children and Youths' Recruitment into Criminal Gangs in Sweden. A Scoping Review." <https://gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/84400>; European Crime Prevention Network. 2022. "Toolbox on Street Gang Prevention." European Crime Prevention Network. https://eucpn.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2206_Toolbox%20FR_LR.pdf.

³¹ UNODC. 2023a. "Strengthening Youth Resilience to Crime and Violence." https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/English_Version_Flyer_for_Preventing_Youth_Violence_and_Gang-related_Crimes_1.pdf.

³² Campion, Kristy, and Emma Colvin. 2024a. "Foreign and Familiar: Recruitment Pathways of Young People Engaged with Extremism in Australia." ICCT. <https://pt.icct.nl/article/foreign-and-familiar-recruitment-pathways-young-people-engaged-extremism-australia>.

³³ Malvaso, Catia, Andrew Day, Jesse Cale, Louisa Hackett, Paul Delfabbro, and Stuart Ross. 2022. "Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trauma among Young People in the Youth Justice System." Australian Institute of Criminology. 2022. https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-06/ti651_adverse_childhood_experiences_and_trauma_among_young-people.pdf.

ACEs, it appears their risk of recruitment by DOIs is heightened.³⁴ When an individual's ACEs include experiences of bullying, social isolation, or other victimization, this risk may be higher.³⁵

However, such claims should be interpreted with caution, as other scholars have clearly demonstrated that poverty cannot be considered a direct causal factor behind youth recruitment.³⁶ What's more, if alienation and experiencing discrimination reliably produced recruitment, we should expect to see much higher proportions of non-white offenders than we actually do within far-right DOIs in particular. Findings asserting the importance of discrimination in recruitment processes should be clear about the limits of generalizability beyond specific samples and should continue to be in dialogue with previous research regarding perceptions of grievance, race-based competition, and relative deprivation to appropriately contextualize these findings.

When perceptions of grievance do exist, DOIs are particularly talented at identifying and amplifying those grievances and broader insecurities to encourage young people to embed in their spaces where, they promise, youth can find supposed solutions for these problems. Online manipulations are facilitated because these conversations largely happen outside the view of parents, teachers, and other adult sources of socialization that have been considered positive, deterrent, gatekeeping forces in pre-internet recruitment; that is, extremists have always benefitted from moments of low, normative supervision, but the internet increases the ease and number of opportunities for this kind of interaction.³⁷

Stressors during and after the COVID-19 pandemic may have exacerbated and perhaps accelerated many of the above grievances surrounding alienation, identity, personal stressors, feelings of missing out, and more. Though mechanisms are largely unspecified by studies that mention COVID as one possible variable of interest in online youth recruitment, logically, more time at home to be online alongside an increase in real, rather than merely perceived grievances, around a variety of socio-economic factors might create a circumstance where more youth are looking online and outside their traditional offline social structures for solutions to these negative feelings.³⁸

³⁴ Malvaso, Catia, Andrew Day, Jesse Cale, Louisa Hackett, Paul Delfabbro, and Stuart Ross. 2022. "Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trauma among Young People in the Youth Justice System." Australian Institute of Criminology. 2022. https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-06/ti651_adverse_childhood_experiences_and_trauma_among_young-people.pdf.

; Mitton, Kieran. 2022. "'A Game of Pain': Youth Marginalisation and the Gangs of Freetown." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 60 (1): 45–64. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X21000410>; Chui, Wing Hong, Paul Vinod Khietani, Minnie Heep Ching She, and Bowie Po Yi Chan. 2023. "A Latent Profile Analysis of Child Maltreatment among At-Risk Youth Gang Members: Associations with Violent Delinquency, Non-Violent Delinquency, and Gang Organizational Structures." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 135 (January). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2022.105989>.

³⁵ Campion, Kristy, and Emma Colvin. 2024b. "Community, More than Conviction: Understanding Radicalisation Factors for Young People in Australia." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2025.2478957>.

³⁶ Marwick, Alice, Benjamin Clancy, and Katherine Furl. 2022. "Far-Right Online Radicalization: A Review of the Literature." *The Bulletin of Technology & Public Life*, May. <https://doi.org/10.21428/bfcb0bffe9492a11>.

³⁷ Jones, Isabel, Jakob Guhl, Jacob Davey, and Moustafa Ayad. 2023. "Young Guns: Understanding a New Generation of Extremist Radicalization in the United States." ISD.

https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Young-guns_Understandings-a-new-generation-of-extremist-radicalization-in-the-United-States.pdf; Ware, Jacob. 2023. "The Third Generation of Online Radicalization." Program on Extremism. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/third-generation-online-radicalization>; Picciolini, Christian. *White American Youth*. Hachette Books, 2017.

³⁸ Ware, Jacob. 2023. "The Third Generation of Online Radicalization." Program on Extremism.

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/third-generation-online-radicalization>; Barracosa, Steven, and James March. 2022. "Dealing With Radicalised Youth Offenders: The Development and Implementation of a Youth-Specific Framework." *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 12 (January). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2021.773545>.

Research has previously found that neurodiverse youth may have particular vulnerabilities to exploitation including recruitment due to tendencies toward a need for structure, intense and focused interest in obscure topics (i.e., the occult or other mysticism that sometimes surround extremist rhetoric). More recent research underscores that we should consider neurodivergent youth as being at risk of victimization by these entities, often because of the social isolation autistics experience, rather than viewing these individuals' neurobiology as some inherent threat.³⁹ ICDE has directly observed DOI actors, specifically hate and NVE, discussing the strategic value of a neurodivergent recruit, citing their supposed lack of empathy and emotional connection as an easy and favorable characteristic to exploit towards violence. This was particularly visible in militant accelerationism networks that sought to create "predators" and lone-actor terrorists in the model of the Christchurch attacker and other Saints Culture terrorists. Given the overlap between militant accelerationism and NVE networks, it is highly likely that similar recruitment patterns will emerge within NVE ecosystems online.

Explanations attributing successful recruitment to vulnerabilities created by mental health concerns like depression and anxiety have largely fallen out of favor in common discourse, yet some research observes that these mental health issues are more prevalent among lone actors relative to other violent extremist action. Other work indicates that individuals with PTSD from previous traumatic experiences may also have enhanced vulnerability to recruitment, while others point to the role of the increasingly controversial diagnoses⁴⁰ of oppositional defiant disorder and conduct disorder.⁴¹ Interviews with a former Atomwaffen Division member conducted by ICDE staff suggest that formally- or self-diagnosed depression was widespread amongst Atomwaffen members. The interviewee suggested that this prevalence was a rational and logical outcome given Atomwaffen's overwhelming focus on perceiving the world as irredeemable and wholly broken. ICDE has also observed how some NVE groups intentionally recruit from online forums centered around depression or other mental illnesses. This collectively suggests room for future investigations into the connections between certain mental health vulnerabilities and recruitment to certain DOIs, specifically the narratives those entities use to first attract potential recruits as well as the views the groups themselves claim to hold about mental illnesses.⁴²

On-Platform Processes and Violative Actions

Research in the last three years still largely focuses on mainstream platforms including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter/X, Reddit, and TikTok. Some work mentions Telegram or considers data

³⁹ Wijekoon, Sachindri, John Robison, Christie Welch, Alexander Westphal, Rachel Loftin, Barbara Perry, Victoria Rombos, et al. 2024. "Neurodivergence and the Rabbit Hole of Extremism: Uncovering Lived Experience." *Autism in Adulthood*, August. <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2023.0192>.

⁴⁰ Both diagnoses are increasingly being seen as the result of ACEs, especially physical or intense emotional abuse, and some practitioners question the utility and ethics of treating them as stand-alone diagnoses. For more, see: <https://www.claritycgc.org/when-traumatic-stress-looks-like-adhd-or-odd-digging-for-the-root-of-behavior/>

⁴¹ European Crime Prevention Network. 2024. "Preventing Youth Recruitment into Organised Crime: Insights from a Multinational Perspective." European Crime Prevention Network.

https://eucpn.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2502_ENG_PAPER_Youth%20recruitment_LR.pdf; Campion, Kristy, and Emma Colvin. 2024a. "Foreign and Familiar: Recruitment Pathways of Young People Engaged with Extremism in Australia." ICCT.

<https://pt.icct.nl/article/foreign-and-familiar-recruitment-pathways-young-people-engaged-extremism-australia;> Campion, Kristy, and Emma Colvin. 2024b. "Community, More than Conviction: Understanding Radicalisation Factors for Young People in Australia." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2025.2478957>; Gurina, Oksana D., and Alfiya F. Remeeva. 2024. "Psychological Mechanisms of Youth Involvement in Extremist and Terrorist Organizations (Using the Example of Social Networks)." *Psychology and Law* 14 (3): 1-12.

⁴² Radicalisation Awareness Network. 2023. "Prevention of Violent Extremism: A Shared Responsibility between Mental Health Care and the Security Domain." https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2024-01/ran_event_shared_responsibility_between_mental_health_care_security_domain_28112023_en.pdf.

points from that platform, but no work included in this review analytically engages with more niche platforms where DOIs thrive.

It is now common knowledge that both mainstream and niche platforms allow DOI recruiters to build online communities, spread propaganda, and identify and engage with potential recruits. But little attention has been given to how the two types of online spaces are systematically leveraged by DOI recruiters to achieve their goals. ICDE researchers have observed and analyzed numerous web forums and ephemeral digital spaces (e.g., attempted migrations to alternative encrypted messaging applications by hate actors). From these observations, ICDE researchers concluded that smaller or medium sized platforms play an integral role in allowing groups and networks to refine, trial or troubleshoot recruitment tactics and techniques in a separated digital space away from more robust monitoring and moderation regimes.

Group-based spaces can serve as places where potential recruits can air grievances, explore identity, and receive acceptance or validation that may be denied to them offline, thereby building a sense of both affirmation and community. Notably, this constructed community is not premised on a single platform's infrastructure. Researchers have also observed how some DOI recruiters create profiles whose personas or stated grievances are keyed to a local area and designed to resonate with youth who are disaffected on some specific issue to enhance their recruitment potential.⁴³ Potential recruit's reaction to images of gore or violence may be especially critical tests for some DOIs.⁴⁴

In addition to engagement in group channels, recruiters actively engage with online posts of potential recruits, using narratives intended to appeal to given users and typically referencing conspiracy-based, out-group hostility while encouraging conflict or violence as a solution.⁴⁵ With terror organizations, specifically, narratives that include stories of successful skirmishes or attacks may be shared for inspiration or to instill a sense of mission.⁴⁶ Existing literature largely focuses on examples of these narratives from ISIS and similar organizations, but this kind of propaganda is also present in the "saints culture" of other terroristic entities who heavily rely on digital recruitment.⁴⁷ Narratives, regardless of precise topic, and other communications generally include in-group slang, emojis, or coded language that serve to facilitate in-group belonging and help evade moderation.⁴⁸

⁴³ "Social Media Teen Recruitment: Gang Life." 2025. The White Hatter.

<https://thewhitehatter.ca/blog/the-utilization-of-social-media-by-gangs-in-teen-recruitment-what-parents-need-to-know/>; Rose, Hannah, and AC. 2022. "Youth-on-Youth Extreme-Right Recruitment on Mainstream Social Media Platforms." GNET.

<https://gnet-research.org/2022/01/10/youth-on-youth-extreme-right-recruitment-on-mainstream-social-media-platforms/>.

⁴⁴ Campion, Kristy, and Emma Colvin. 2024a. "Foreign and Familiar: Recruitment Pathways of Young People Engaged with Extremism in Australia." ICCT.

<https://pt.icct.nl/article/foreign-and-familiar-recruitment-pathways-young-people-engaged-extremism-australia>.

⁴⁵ Williams, Thomas James Vaughan, and Calli Tzani. 2024. "How Does Language Influence the Radicalisation Process? A Systematic Review of Research Exploring Online Extremist Communication and Discussion." *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 16 (3): 310–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2022.2104910>.

⁴⁶ Williams, Thomas James Vaughan, and Calli Tzani. 2024. "How Does Language Influence the Radicalisation Process? A Systematic Review of Research Exploring Online Extremist Communication and Discussion." *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 16 (3): 310–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2022.2104910>.

⁴⁷ Macklin, Graham. 2024. "Terrorgram: Saints Culture." ARC. 2024.

<https://www.accresearch.org/accreports/terrorgram-saints-culture>.

⁴⁸ Europol. 2024. "The Recruitment of Young Perpetrators for Criminal Networks." Europol.

<https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/publications/recruitment-of-young-perpetrators-for-criminal-networks>.

Criminal organizations may, in a parallel manner, glamorize gang life, focusing on portrayals of wealth or power supposedly garnered by DOI membership.⁴⁹ Other electronic conversations may rely more on memes or visual imagery that are designed to capture violence, or the identity, tactics, or messaging of a given DOI.⁵⁰ All such interactions are often intended to groom potential recruits into accepting increasingly problematic material as well as to generally test their responses to acceptance of DOI ideology and tactics.⁵¹

When gaming spaces or other private or semi-private spaces, such as forums, encrypted messaging apps, or other closed groups, are exploited by DOIs, they can often operate while avoiding reports for violating platforms' terms of service.⁵² When users are identified and suspended or banned from a given platform, they often create new accounts and immediately continue recruitment efforts on the same platform or another.⁵³ ICDE researchers have nonetheless observed and analyzed numerous web forums and ephemeral digital spaces that have been attempted migrations to alternative encrypted messaging applications by hate actors. Discussions in these off-platform spaces routinely fixate on the frustrations that users experience when their on-platform activities are persistently and aggressively moderated. These findings suggest that, on a platform-by-platform basis, deplatforming or moderating to the point of forcing an exit from a given platform's ecosystem is a highly successful approach to reducing those actors' abilities to conduct recruitment and harms in that individual company's purview. Platforms of all kinds that offer private or user-moderated spaces have added vulnerabilities due to the lower degree of monitoring the platforms themselves typically provide.⁵⁴

Some users on the path to recruitment also seek out or, to some extent, stumble into spaces that allow them to engage with increasing quantities and intensity of DOI content while interacting with like-minded individuals, fostering an echo chamber effect that then further reinforces the beliefs in these communities. This content funneling process can happen somewhat gradually over time, if a user joins a space, is exposed to some material, expresses acceptance or interest, and then is invited to other

⁴⁹ Reardon, Sarah. 2023. "Cutting Cartel Recruitment Could Be the Only Way to Reduce Mexico's Violence." <https://www.science.org/content/article/cutting-cartel-recruitment-could-be-only-way-reduce-mexico-s-violence>; Annan, Louis Gladstone, Nadia Gaoua, Katya Mileva, and Mario Borges. 2022. "What Makes Young People Get Involved with Street Gangs in London? A Study of the Perceived Risk Factors." *Journal of Community Psychology* 50 (5): 2198–2213. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22767>; Hochstetler, Lisa. 2023. "Protecting Youth from Mexican Drug Cartel Recruitment: The Prospects of Educational Interventions." *Lux et Fides: A Journal for Undergraduate Christian Scholars* 1 (1). <https://pillars.taylor.edu/luxetfidesjournal/vol1/iss1/1>.

⁵⁰ Kerr, Henry, Michèle St-Amant, and John McCoy. 2024. "Break the Hate: A Survey of Youth Experiences with Hate and Violent Extremism Online." *Canadian Journal of Family and Youth / Le Journal Canadien de Famille et de La Jeunesse* 16 (3): 57–75. <https://doi.org/10.29173/cjfy30069>.

⁵¹ Campion, Kristy, and Emma Colvin. 2024a. "Foreign and Familiar: Recruitment Pathways of Young People Engaged with Extremism in Australia." ICCT. <https://pt.icct.nl/article/foreign-and-familiar-recruitment-pathways-young-people-engaged-extremism-australia>.

⁵² Scheuble, Sophie, and Fehime Oezmen. 2022. "Extremists' Targeting of Young." European Commission. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-03/ad_hoc_young_women_social_media_lessons-p-cve_022022_en.pdf; Schlegel, Linda. 2024. "The Gamification of Violent Extremism & Lessons for P/CVE." European Commission. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-03/ran_ad-hoc_pap_gamification_20210215_en.pdf; Global Programme on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Special Projects and Innovation Branch. 2022. "Examining the Intersection Between Gaming and Violent Extremism." United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism. https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/221005_research_launch_on_gaming_ve.pdf.

⁵³ Rose, Hannah, and AC. 2022. "Youth-on-Youth Extreme-Right Recruitment on Mainstream Social Media Platforms." GNET. <https://gnet-research.org/2022/01/10/youth-on-youth-extreme-right-recruitment-on-mainstream-social-media-platforms/>.

⁵⁴ Jones, Isabel, Jakob Guhl, Jacob Davey, and Moustafa Ayad. 2023. "Young Guns: Understanding a New Generation of Extremist Radicalization in the United States." ISD. https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Young-guns_Understandings-a-new-generation-of-extremist-radicalization-in-the-United-States.pdf.

spaces that are more overtly or exclusively focused on DOI content.⁵⁵ These private spaces often direct individuals away from more mainstream platforms and onto more private ones like Telegram where more explicit DOI material more easily evades moderation.⁵⁶ Some researchers remind us that this process may begin without conscious intent to be recruited or even uptake DOI material because of the nature of this gradual increase in intensity.⁵⁷

ICDE has observed that recruitment does not always rely on the same plane of activity to attract an individual into a given DOI's ultimate strategic or ideological stream of activity. For example, some hate groups may utilize 9/11 conspiracy memes as an opening towards an escalating pathway that traverses antisemitic conspiracy theories and ultimately leads their target to a neo-Nazi worldview. Other pathways for a given user may be fragmented rather than strictly linear, involving pushing or prodding a targeted user along a string of hateful belief systems until they are more aligned with the DOI entity's strategic or ideological goals. Numerous other pathways can be identified and analyzed as part of the process of adopting increasingly antagonistic worldviews which ultimately justify offline violence or illicit other harmful behaviors. The dynamics of any given user journey are highly varied and individualized, making standardized patterns of flow difficult, but not impossible, to identify.

In other cases, features both shared across and unique to different platforms may also contribute to youth recruitment to DOIs. Social media algorithms designed to maximize engagement, for example, can lead individuals to additional or increasingly extreme material, thus potentially deepening their ideological commitment and exposure to DOI communities.⁵⁸ Gaming platforms typically function somewhat differently. They share the echo chamber potential but may also be relevant for more direct recruitment efforts. Live, in-game interactions, including voice engagement on some platforms, facilitate both subtle grooming and direct conversations about DOI ideas and the purported benefits of belonging to those communities. The anonymity and sense of immersion provided by both types of platforms make them particularly appealing to vulnerable young people.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Scheuble, Sophie, and Fehime Oezmen. 2022. "Extremists' Targeting of Young." European Commission. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-03/ad_hoc_young_women_social_media_Lessons-p-cve_022022_en.pdf; Ragandang, Primitivo III Cabanes. 2024. "Young People Challenging Violent Extremism Online: Insights from Asia." GNET.

https://gnet-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/GNET-45-Young-People-Challenging-Extremism_web.pdf; Turner, Noah, Thomas J. Holt, Russell Brewer, Jesse Cale, and Andrew Goldsmith. 2023. "Exploring the Relationship between Opportunity and Self-Control in Youth Exposure to and Sharing of Online Hate Content." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 35 (7): 1604–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2022.2066526>.

⁵⁶ Rose, Hannah, and AC. 2022. "Youth-on-Youth Extreme-Right Recruitment on Mainstream Social Media Platforms." GNET. <https://gnet-research.org/2022/01/10/youth-on-youth-extreme-right-recruitment-on-mainstream-social-media-platforms/>.

⁵⁷ Kerr, Henry, Michèle St-Amant, and John McCoy. 2024. "Break the Hate: A Survey of Youth Experiences with Hate and Violent Extremism Online." *Canadian Journal of Family and Youth / Le Journal Canadien de Famille et de La Jeunesse* 16 (3): 57–75. <https://doi.org/10.29173/cjfy30069>.

⁵⁸ Ragandang, Primitivo III Cabanes. 2024. "Young People Challenging Violent Extremism Online: Insights from Asia." GNET. https://gnet-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/GNET-45-Young-People-Challenging-Extremism_web.pdf; Scheuble, Sophie, and Fehime Oezmen. 2022. "Extremists' Targeting of Young." European Commission. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-03/ad_hoc_young_women_social_media_Lessons-p-cve_022022_en.pdf.

⁵⁹ Aryaeinejad, Kateira, and Thomas Leo Scherer. 2024a. "The Role of Social Networks in Facilitating and Preventing Domestic Radicalization." Office of Justice Programs. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/305795.pdf>.

Key Points

- Hate groups may rely more exclusively on online recruitment than terror or criminal groups.
- Groups that largely recruit offline still use online activities to boost their reputation and attractiveness and may use platforms to identify or groom individuals for offline recruitment efforts.
- Digital platforms increase all DOI's recruitment potential, and this may be especially true for terror groups for whom digital access has been crucial for recruiting women and western audiences.
- Offline family and peer involvement in the organization may be more beneficial to terror and criminal organizations' recruitment strategies than to hate organizations' strategies.
- Terror and hate organizations rely on persuasive narratives that glorify successful attacks and promise some kind of fame or martyrdom, drawing on moralistic or esoteric themes.
- Criminal organizations rely on persuasive narratives that promise immediate rewards like money or physical protection, drawing on themes related to more fundamental human needs.
- All DOI types exploit common on-platform processes or outcomes including:
 - Exploiting algorithmic bonuses to increase reach and engagement,
 - Amplifying grievances to cultivate identity,
 - Using coded language and propaganda (including memes or imagery) to create echo chambers and enhance in-group belonging and outgroup targeting,
 - Grooming targets into escalating behavior,
 - Testing loyalty to the group and its principles,
 - Exploiting private or semi-private spaces to communicate violative content and avoid moderation,
 - Employing a cross-platform approach and funneling or redirecting vulnerable recruitment targets to increasingly private or unmoderated spaces.

Case Studies

Case studies from each of the key DOI types (criminal, terror, and hate groups) exemplify key pathways as well as complexities of youth recruitment that are evaluated in the existing literature.

Islamic State

Islamic State (IS)-affiliated online ecosystems have further decentralized since the collapse of the group's pseudo-state project in Iraq and Syria in May 2019. "Official" channels continue to operate on Telegram, and a resilient core ecosystem produces propaganda and communicates internally in closed spaces on platforms including Rocketchat, Element Messenger, SimpleX, Threema, and WhatsApp. This ecosystem also continues to use a broad range of file sharing and video-sharing services for content hosting, sharing links to this content across platforms to evade automated detection by moderation teams. Links to channels and groups within this ecosystem are often shared on mainstream platforms to attract new recruits. Specifically, wider links to content and profiles on gaming platforms, especially Steam, as well as regular IS-related experiences created on Roblox and related gaming videos are disseminated on YouTube, Instagram and TikTok.

IS networks intent on the recruitment of children and young people operate more on open, mainstream platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. These services host large and increasingly decentralized ecosystems of pro-IS networks that are maintained by individuals and small cells based around the world. Reflecting the geographic spread of the group in recent years, IS content appears on these platforms in an array of global languages including English, Arabic, Amharic, Bengali, Somalia, Pashto,

Urdu, Indonesian, Filipino, and Hindi. Pro-IS material on mainstream platforms consists of a mixture of edited and unedited official output, and original content produced by supporter networks.

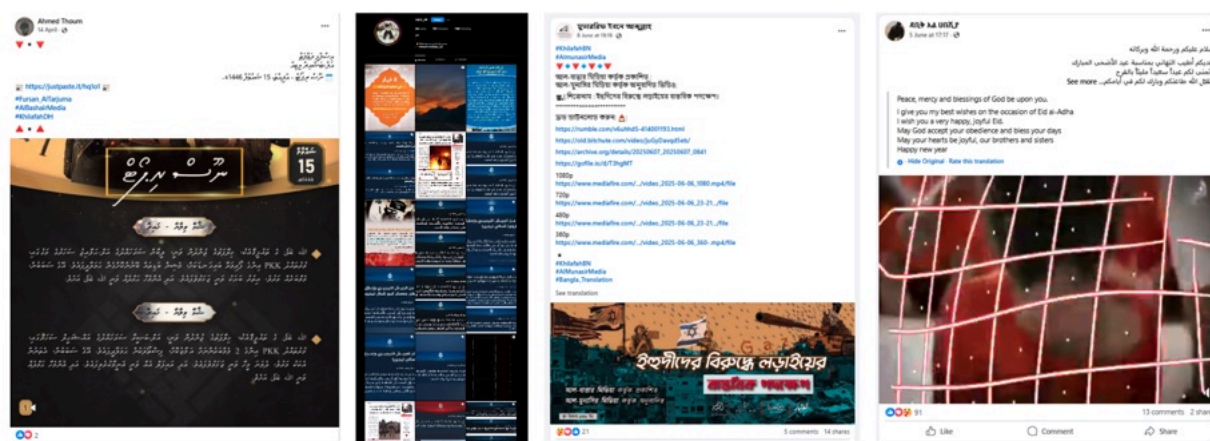


Image 1: Examples of IS content recently posted on Meta platforms (Facebook and Instagram) by Ansar networks.⁶⁰

Children and young people are likely to be particularly susceptible to a nascent online subculture within pro-IS and other Salafi-Jihadi networks that has been referred to as “Alt Jihad.”⁶¹ These networks are supportive of IS and other similar groups but move away from the aesthetics and cultivated theological concepts in these groups’ official messaging. Instead, they borrow from mainstream internet subcultures and the online far-right to produce easily digestible, attention-grabbing content such as video edits and memes on platforms where it is likely to reach a broad recruitment pool. These networks use in-group slang, hashtags and emojis such as 🚩 and 🧑 as in-group identifiers, but also tag their content with trending or mainstream hashtags, such as #MuslimNews or #Gaza, to exploit algorithmic recommender systems and reach broad audiences. This is a tactic that has been employed by IS networks since at least 2014.⁶²

“Alt Jihad” networks also ideate lone attackers in a way that is comparable to the right-wing militant accelerationist movement,⁶³ such as by referring to the “high scores” achieved in particular attacks. While it is difficult to ascertain the intent of Alt-Jihad networks to recruit children specifically, a succession of recent attacks and plots in Europe indicate that these very networks involve children who are actively producing and disseminating pro-IS content.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Original links to these images have been removed but could originally be found here: https://www.instagram.com/sajm_s6; <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61559184932025>; <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=10008117134861>; <https://www.facebook.com/vvgx8ibp10>.

⁶¹ Ayad, Moustafa. 2021. “An ‘Alt-Jihad’ Is Rising On Social Media.” *Wired*. 2021.

<https://www.wired.com/story/alt-jihad-rising-social-media/>.

⁶² Irshaid, Faisal. 2014. “How Isis Is Spreading Its Message Online.” *BBC*. June 19, 2014.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27912569>.

⁶³ Cooter, Amy. 2025. “When the Means are the End: Evaluating Militant Accelerationism as a Social Movement. *ARC*. <https://www.accresearch.org/accreports/when-the-means-are-the-end-evaluating-militant-accelerationism-as-a-social-movement>.

⁶⁴ “Swiss Police Arrests Three Minors with Alleged Links to Jihadist Extremism.” 2024. *Swiss Info*. March 16, 2024. <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/foreign-affairs/swiss-police-arrests-three-minors-with-alleged-links-to-jihadist-extremism/73792894>; Peterhans, Anielle, and David Sarasin. 2024. “How Jihadists Recruit Teenagers with Manga and Memes.” *Tages-Anzeiger*. March 25, 2024.



Image 2: Posts from TikTok and Instagram glorifying the perpetrators of IS-claimed attacks in Russia and Sri Lanka, respectively, including “high score” references to the number of casualties in each attack.⁶⁵

In terms of gaming-related recruitment approaches from IS and IS-affiliated groups, there remains a strong presence of propagandistic content related to games. IS was an early adopter of gaming imagery in its content, emulating Grand Theft Auto clips in recruitment videos as early as 2014. Later, in 2019, it disseminated instructions via Telegram networks on how to recruit new members using gaming sites.⁶⁶ IS seems to have seen some success on this front and has directly created at least one game. That title, released in 2016, is a standalone Android game distributed via .apk installers on filesharing sites after being removed from the Google Play Store. It is an Arabic alphabet learning game with pictures of military-style weapons for each letter and songs with lyrics promoting terrorism.⁶⁷ The title remains available on Archive.org.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Original links to these images have been removed but include [Instagram.com/saintzahranhashim](https://www.instagram.com/saintzahranhashim).

⁶⁶ Miron Lakomy, "Let's Play a Video Game: Jihadi Propaganda in the World of Electronic Entertainment," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 41, no. 5 (May 2018): 383–406, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1385903>; Firas Mahmoud, *The Gamification of Jihad: Playing with Religion* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2021), <https://research.diiis.dk/en/publications/the-gamification-of-jihad-playing-with-religion>

⁶⁷ Thompson, Emily, and Galen Lamphere-Englund, *30 Years of Trends in Terrorist and Extremist Games*, Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET) and the Extremism and Gaming Research Network (EGRN), London, November 2024, <https://gnet-research.org/2024/11/01/30-years-of-trends-in-terrorist-and-extremist-games/>

⁶⁸ The link to the emulator is here <https://archive.org/details/isisabcapp>.



Image 3: Left - Screenshot from the IS alphabet game released for Android. Right - Screenshot from the IS content created in Roblox that led to the arrests of two teenagers in Singapore.

More recently, two children in Singapore were arrested after recreating IS training camps and battles in Roblox while pledging to the caliphate.⁶⁹ Separately, the Australian Federal Police has reported at least 37 instances of children referred to counter-terrorism police due to conduct on Discord or Roblox.⁷⁰ Where police reports are available on these or similar cases in Europe and the UK, the socialization appears to be primarily driven by “multidirectional social-networking processes which were also initiated by the potential recruits” rather than a concerted radicalization effort by a single recruiter.⁷¹ User reports of attack planning or threats carried out on Roblox are also relatively common. A recently disclosed FBI arrest in 2025 of a Jihadist-motivated individual planning to carry out attacks against “Christian targets” in Texas, USA, was intercepted due to a Roblox user reporting the accused perpetrator after overhearing his threats on a server.⁷²

⁶⁹ Ministry of Home Affairs (Singapore), *Issuance of Orders Under the Internal Security Act Against Two Self-Radicalised Singaporean Youths*, Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore, 27 January 2023, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/mediaroom/press-releases/issuance-of-orders-under-the-internal-security-act-against-two-self-radicalised-singaporean-youths/>.

⁷⁰ Jenkins, Olivia, *Growing Number of Teen Terrorists Plotting Mass Shootings, Race Wars Online*, *Herald Sun*, 20 December 2024, <https://www.heraldsun.com.au/truecrimeaustralia/police-courts-victoria/growing-number-of-teen-terrorists-plotting-mass-shootings-race-wars-online/news-story>.

⁷¹ Koehler, Daniel, Verena Fiebig, and Irina Jugl, *From Gaming to Hating: Extreme-Right Ideological Indoctrination and Mobilization for Violence of Children on Online Gaming Platforms*, *Political Psychology*, vol. 44, 2023, pp. 419–434, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12855>.

⁷² Gault, Matthew. 2025. “‘Martyrdom or Bust!’ Texas Man Caught Plotting Terror Attack Through Roblox Chats.” 404 Media. June 20, 2025. <https://www.404media.co/martyrdom-or-bust-texas-man-caught-plotting-terror-attack-through-roblox-chats/>.



Image 4: Roblox screenshots from the FBI Criminal Complaint in Texas (2025).⁷³

This self-led seeking of IS content also takes place inside of other gaming fora: Islamic State modifications (mods) for the military simulation first-person shooter (FPS), Arma 3, remain popular on Steam despite users regularly pledging allegiance to the caliphate (often in Arabic, to avoid moderation efforts) in comments and related user communities. Mods such as “Dawn of ISIS” and “Islamic State” allow players to put themselves in the shoes of IS fighters – which often spill into potential spaces for radicalization and recruitment.⁷⁴ Gameplay videos reposted to YouTube of those mods depict live streamers playing as IS while killing US and Coalition troops; the comments on the video blend Pro-Palestinian sentiment with hadiths and religious content.⁷⁵

Affiliated Discord channels provide a direct path for users and viewers to engage. One popular Iraqi Arma 3 livestreamer, for example, has nearly 1 million followers, and a 16,000 member Discord server).⁷⁶

While not present in this particular Discord server, that socialization pathway—from game, to livestream, to Discord, and onward to encrypted spaces including Telegram, Threema, or Element—has been well documented in youth recruitment cases. For example, two of the accused perpetrators of a Jihadist plot to bomb the headquarters of the French Directorate-General of Internal Security (DGSI) in 2024 originally met on Discord as teenagers and subsequently moved to plan their attacks on Telegram.⁷⁷

⁷³ Images may be found here: gov.uscourts.txwd.1172850957.1.0.pdf

⁷⁴ Examples may be found here: <https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=891755320> ; <https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=899977490>

⁷⁵ An example may be found here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yX-K8FwVV7g>

⁷⁶ Example: <https://discord.com/invite/GpctfJGuHd>.

⁷⁷ Pham-Le, Jeremie. 2024. “They wanted to ‘create an Islamic state in France’: the secrets of the attack plan of the three radicalized students.” leparisien.fr. December 10, 2024.

<https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/ils-voulaient-creer-un-etat-islamique-en-france-les-secrets-du-projet-dattentat-des-3-etudiants-radicalises-10-12-2024-ALMPJEMD4VFWLIXKTISEASGRQE.php>.

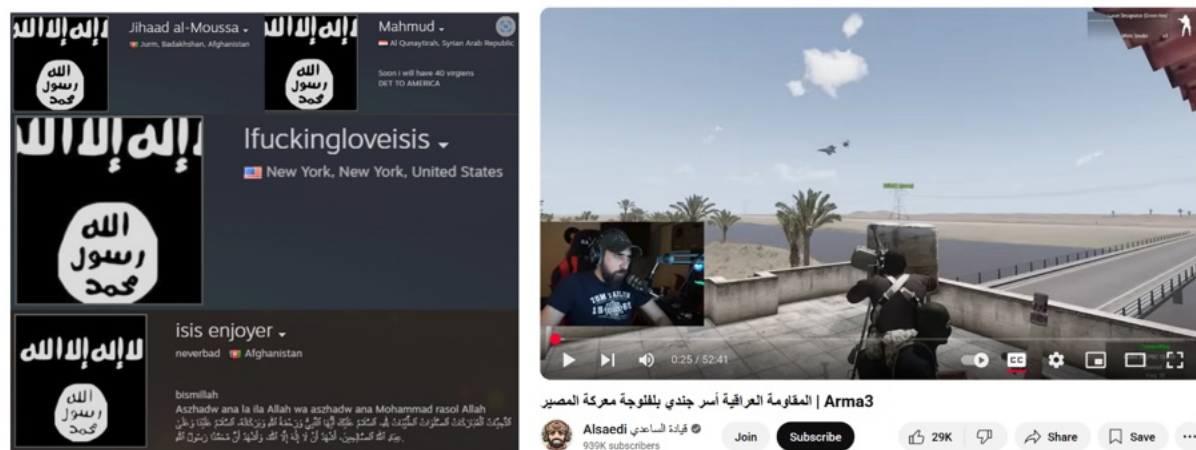


Image 5: Left, User accounts on Steam with the IS flag and allegiance pledges (from ADL, 2024). Right, IS mods in Arma 3 livestream recordings on YouTube.

NVE and the Com Network

Nihilistic violent extremist (NVE) networks congregate mostly in closed, invite-only groups or servers on platforms like Telegram and Discord, access to which is typically controlled by administrators. However, more established participants of the network are continually forcing newer recruits to seek out and engage potential new victims on an ongoing basis. This is part of a multi-stage process of grooming, blackmail, and (s)extortion, some of which takes place via public advertising, although much of the grooming takes place via direct messages. The stages of the process are as follows:⁷⁸

1. Identify and engage victim.
2. Groom victim until they share compromising imagery, often CSAM or CSE content.
3. Extort victim and escalate: blackmail victim to engage in increasingly harmful behavior and share footage and imagery as evidence.
4. Use victims' content in "lorebooks," a form of social currency within the network. Lorebooks are essentially archives of compromising material.

According to guides produced by 764 leaders in 2024, recruiters are particularly encouraged to target digital spaces where they are most likely to find vulnerable children, such as child-friendly games on Roblox, spaces associated with the LGBTQ+ community, and mental health or self-harm-related groups. A Department of Justice press release said 764 member Richard Densmore, for example, had "orchestrated a community" to target children "through gaming sites" and used "extortion and blackmail" to force his child victims to "record themselves committing acts of self-harm and violence." Densmore was an administrator of a Discord server called "Sewer," which he promoted by advertising livestreams he had extorted from children, in which they had engaged in sexual activity or self-mutilation.⁷⁹ According to the DoJ, Densmore had also utilized the Discord currency, Nitro, to "pay" another Discord user to obtain CSAM from a child.

⁷⁸ "From Sexual Exploitation to Terror Tactics: 764's Sadistic Leadership Under Trippy and War." 2025. From The Depths. May 13, 2025.

<https://www.maargentino.com/from-sexual-exploitation-to-terror-tactics-764s-sadistic-leadership-under-trippy-and-war/>.

⁷⁹ DOJ. 2024. "Office of Public Affairs | Member Of Violent 764 Terror Network Sentenced to 30 Years in Prison For Sexually Exploiting a Child | United States Department of Justice." Archives DOJ. November 7, 2024.

<https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/member-violent-764-terror-network-sentenced-30-years-prison-sexually-exploiting-child>.

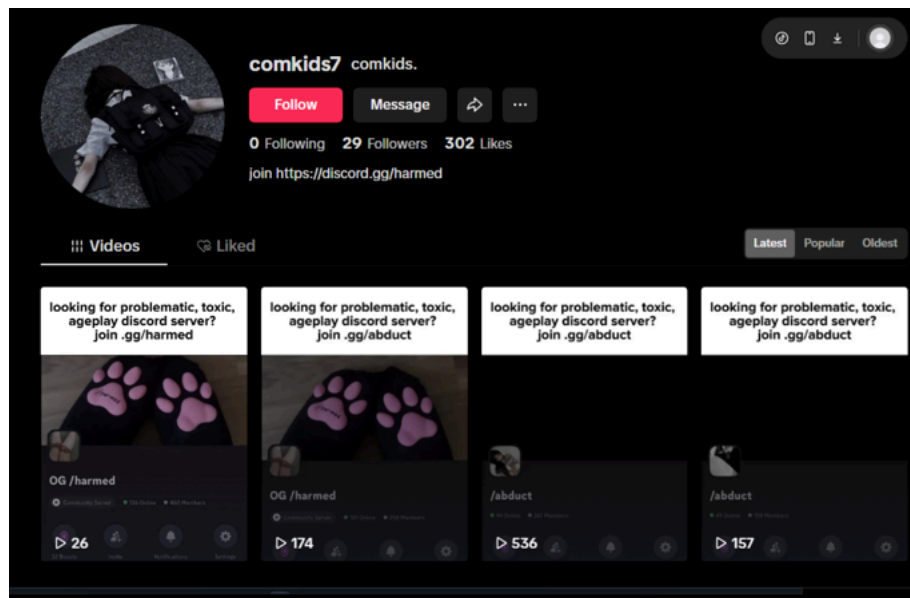


Image 6: TikTok videos promoting Discord servers, including hashtags indicating an affiliation with 764.

NVE recruitment activity is increasingly overlapping with the school shooter and school massacre sub-community of the True Crime Community (TCC). Identifiable aspects of this overlap include url-based outlinks to school massacre games and mods (a colloquial reference to unofficial modifications of video games). These games and mods, at least twelve of which remain readily accessible online as standalone games or fully featured mods, allow players to recreate real-world shootings such as those that occurred at Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Sandy Hook. They also allow for creation and participation in other fictional school shootings.⁸⁰ Relatedly, a wide community of users on Roblox called “Active Shooter Studios” create maps in Roblox that simulate similar mass shootings from Uvalde to Parkland, as well as terrorist and violent extremist-related attacks such as Christchurch.⁸¹ TikTok has also been instrumental to the spread of A.S.S.’s content,” with numerous accounts sharing gameplay footage along with links to the group’s Discord servers.⁸² ISD has also documented similar video content on TikTok, X, and Snapchat.⁸³

⁸⁰ Thompson, Emily, and Galen Lamphere-Englund. 2024. “30 Years of Trends in Terrorist and Extremist Games.” GNET. 2024. https://gnet-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/GNET-47-Extremist-Games_web.pdf.

⁸¹ Zwiezen, Zack. 2025. “Roblox Has A Community Of Players Who Recreate School Shootings.” Yahoo News. April 21, 2025. <https://www.yahoo.com/news/roblox-community-players-recreate-school-220000639.html>.

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ Ayad, Moustafa. 2024. “Minors Exposed to Mass Shooter Glorification across Mainstream Social Media Platforms.” ISD. 2024.

https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/minors-exposed-to-mass-shooter-glorification-across-mainstream-social-media-platforms/.



Image 7: Roblox Active Shooter Studios recreation of the Columbine shooting with the two perpetrators depicted.⁸⁴

The real-world impacts of such content are tangible. At least five attempted and implemented school attacks since 2019 have featured the use of gaming platforms or gamified elements, such as livestreaming, during the attack, demonstrating the utility of this approach as a recruitment tactic. These include:

- August 9, 2021, Källeberg School in Eslöv, Sweden: a stabbing was livestreamed on Twitch with references to popular livestreamer PewDiePie and to the perpetrator of the Christchurch attack.⁸⁵
- January 10, 2022, NTI Gymnasiet in Kristianstad, Sweden: an attack was conducted by a close friend of the Eslöv attacker; they had met via Roblox and planned their attacks online.⁸⁶
- January 4, 2024, Perry High School in Gilbert, Arizona: a shooting was livestreamed with no ideological motive noted.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ ADL. 2025. "The Dark Side of Roblox: 'Active Shooter Studios' Create Maps Based on Real-Life Mass Shootings." ADL. 2025. <https://www.adl.org/resources/article/dark-side-roblox-active-shooter-studios-create-maps-based-real-life-mass>.

⁸⁵ Euronews. 16:16:53 +02:00. "Teenage Suspect Arrested in Sweden after Stabbing at Eslöv School." Euronews. 16:16:53 +02:00. <https://www.euronews.com/2021/08/19/teenage-suspect-arrested-in-sweden-after-stabbing-at-eslov-school>.

⁸⁶ Sallbert, Maria. 2022. "This Is What We Know about the School Attack at NTI High School." Kristianstadsbladet. January 11, 2022. <https://www.kristianstadsbladet.se/2022-01-11/detta-vet-vi-om-skolattacken-pa-nti-gymnasiet/>.

⁸⁷ Keicher, Natasha. 2024. "Deadly Perry School Shooting Was 'Significantly' Planned, Report Finds." Who13.Com. October 17, 2024. <https://who13.com/news/iowa-news/dallas-county-attorney-releases-perry-school-shooting-report/>.

- January 22, 2025, Antioch High School in Antioch, Tennessee: a school shooter electronically released his hybrid manifesto with white supremacist and neo-Nazi praise and partially livestreamed the attack on Kick.⁸⁸
- May 15, 2025, Evergreen Institute of Excellence in Cottonwood, California: a shooting was planned on a gaming chat and was averted when another player notified the police.⁸⁹
- May 20, 2025, Vahajarvi School in Pirkkala, Finland: three female students were injured by a knife attack from a fellow student. A short manifesto noted the perpetrator's gameplay choices and his self-reported use of ChatGPT, while his video content appeared to show the attack and was uploaded immediately following the incident.⁹⁰

Of these, three had expressly racially motivated or white supremacist aims expressed by the perpetrators, all of whom were under 18 years of age.

Cartels

Cartels have received increased media attention in recent years for their use of various platforms to recruit youth, including international youth, to participate in drug and human trafficking.

In 2021, for example, authorities discovered that individuals apparently connected to the Sinaloa Cartel, the Jalisco Cartel New Generation, and contemporary offshoots of the Zetas were recruiting youth through online games. These incidents include a case where three children (ages 11–14) in Oaxaca were enticed via the mobile game Free Fire.⁹¹ These victims were convinced to run away from home to work for a cartel-affiliated human trafficking ring by a trafficker who posed as a 13-year-old boy in the game and promised to pay them if they came to play the game at his house.⁹² Another case saw a cartel operative set up a recruitment drive inside Grand Theft Auto V online, inviting players to join what appeared to be an in-game event but then sending players an invitation to an “open recruitment” event for a cartel.⁹³

These incidents show that gaming spaces can be used to identify vulnerable adolescents and lure them with promises of money, status, or excitement, much as gangs do offline, leading Mexican security services to issue recent warnings about the use of mobile gaming platforms by criminal groups.⁹⁴

⁸⁸ Penteado, Ricardo Cabral. 2025. “Digital Pathways to Violence: The Tech Ecosystem Behind the Antioch Shooting.” GNET. March 18, 2025.

<https://gnet-research.org/2025/03/18/digital-pathways-to-violence-the-tech-ecosystem-behind-the-antioch-shooting/>.

⁸⁹ “Teens Arrested after Tennessee Gamer Reports Hearing Plot to Attack CA School in Online Chat.” 2025. ABC7 Los Angeles. May 16, 2025.

<https://abc7.com/post/evergreen-middle-school-tennessee-gamer-tips-off-authorities-hearing-northern-california-attack-plot-online-gaming-chat/16439421/>.

⁹⁰ Solea, Anda. 2025. “Prompted to Harm: Analysing the Pirkkala School Stabbing and Its Digital Manifesto.” GNET. June 12, 2025.

<https://gnet-research.org/2025/06/12/prompted-to-harm-analysing-the-pirkkala-school-stabbing-and-its-digital-manifesto/>.

⁹¹ Dalby, Chris. 2021. “How Mexico’s Cartels Use Video Games to Recruit Children.” InSight Crime. October 15, 2021.

<http://insightcrime.org/news/mexico-cartels-use-video-games-recruit-new-hitmen/>.

⁹² Matias, Pedro. 2021. “Oaxaca: Three children rescued from being addicted to the ‘Free Fire’ video game; one person arrested.” Proceso. 2021.

<https://www.proceso.com.mx/nacional/estados/2021/10/11/oaxaca-rescatan-tres-ninos-enganchados-mediante-el-video-juego-free-fire-hay-un-detenido-273685.html>.

⁹³ Dalby, Chris. 2021. “How Mexico’s Cartels Use Video Games to Recruit Children.” InSight Crime. October 15, 2021.

<http://insightcrime.org/news/mexico-cartels-use-video-games-recruit-new-hitmen/>; Ramirez, Rafael. 2021. “Cartels Use Video Games to Recruit Children.” El Sol de Mexico. 2021.

<https://oem.com.mx/elsoldemexico/mexico/carteles-utilizan-videojuegos-para-reclutar-a-ninos-16688751>.

⁹⁴ Rojas, Marielbis. 2025. “Mexico: Criminal Groups Recruit Young People through Video Games on Their Cell Phones.” ADN América. 2025.

<https://adnamerica.com/en/mexico/mexico-criminal-groups-recruit-young-people-through-video-games-their-cell-phones>.

Criminal networks might also exploit kids in games for scams (e.g., convincing them to launder money or engage in fraud, as seen in some “online friend” scams).

Cartels have also been observed to use social media platforms like TikTok to recruit youth, often employing specific emojis or other coded language to avoid moderation attempts.⁹⁵ Sometimes, these posts take the form of job advertisements for jobs like day laborers, security guards, or drivers, and victims are pressed into service by cartels or other criminal organizations when they arrive in person to apply for or take the job.⁹⁶ TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat have also been used to advertise in the US for drivers who are then used to smuggle individuals across the border; half of these recruited drivers are believed to be under the age of 27, with 6% of these being teenagers.⁹⁷



Image 8: advertisements from TikTok for cartel recruitment⁹⁸

Prevention

Contemporary approaches to addressing the recruitment of young people in these spaces have struggled to match the adaptability of an electronic environment whose platforms and culture are constantly evolving. Recent literature continues to explore possible strategies to intervene in and prevent recruitment. These strategies can be broadly categorized into technological solutions,

⁹⁵ Rodríguez, Andrés. 2025. “Emojis, Slang, and Hashtags: The Jalisco New Generation and Sinaloa Cartels Attract Young People on TikTok.” EL PAÍS English. April 18, 2025.

<https://english.elpais.com/international/2025-04-18/emojis-slang-and-hashtags-the-jalisco-new-generation-and-sinaloa-cartels-attract-young-people-on-tiktok.html>.

⁹⁶ Ferri, Erika Rosete, Pablo. 2025. “Recruited by Mexican Crime: ‘The Four Letters of Guadalajara Invite You to Work.’” EL PAÍS English. April 13, 2025.

<https://english.elpais.com/international/2025-04-13/recruited-by-mexican-crime-the-four-letters-of-guadalajara-invite-you-to-work.html>.

⁹⁷ Serrano, Alejandro. 2024. “Cartels Turn to Social Media to Lure Americans into Human Smuggling as Texas Enforces Stricter Laws.” The Texas Tribune. December 20, 2024.

<https://www.texastribune.org/2024/12/20/texas-mexico-border-human-smuggling-law-mandatory-minimum-sentence/>.

⁹⁸ Ferri, Erika Rosete, Pablo. 2025. “Recruited by Mexican crime networks: ‘The four letters of Guadalajara invite them to work.’” El País México. April 6, 2025.

<https://elpais.com/mexico/2025-04-06/reclutados-en-redes-por-el-crimen-en-mexico-las-4-letras-de-guadalajara-les-invita-a-trabajar.html>.

educational approaches, and community-based efforts, though these categories are not mutually exclusive.

Most of the recent literature does not focus on earlier researchers' emphasis on content moderation or platform policies to reduce recruitment. Some recent researchers go so far as to argue that platforms' efforts to remove violative content are ineffective at addressing recruitment because the underlying sources of instrumental grievance and radicalization remain unaddressed.⁹⁹ This assertion does correspond to older work that has convincingly argued that deradicalization is not the same as disengagement or disaffiliation, and that removing problematic online communities may not remove the hateful, recruitment-facilitating attitudes they contain.¹⁰⁰

However, parallels exist to this scenario within social movements history that show that restricting public or semi-public expressions of hateful ideas can limit their spread even if some participants' existing attitudes are unchanged. We also know that DOIs are frequently opportunists; They weaponize new technology and seek to exploit platforms that attract younger users such that prevention practitioners struggle to stay apace of these emerging and evolving spaces.¹⁰¹ Some recent efforts prioritize youth-led interventions as one way for practitioners and others to stay better apprised of popular platforms, in addition to monitoring relevant and fast-evolving cultural debates that DOIs might either weaponize or memeify for recruitment.¹⁰² In this vein, GNET recommends that tech support existing youth initiatives rather than reinventing the proverbial wheel.¹⁰³

Other researchers trying to think about the in-the-moment appeal of on-platform DOI recruitment attempts suggest using gamified interventions to match the emotionality and general feel of many online DOI spaces.¹⁰⁴ The particular examples chosen to demonstrate this point ironically fall well short of interventions that would authentically appeal to most youth and inadvertently emphasize the need for researchers and interventions alike to be immersed in youth culture for such efforts to be successful.

⁹⁹ Yeo, Kenneth. 2024. "Youth and Adolescent Online Radicalisation: Critical Cases From Singapore." *GNET*. <https://gnet-research.org/2024/11/18/youth-adolescent-and-online-radicalisation-in-singapore/>.

¹⁰⁰ NIJ. 2022. "Domestic Radicalization and Deradicalization: Insights from Family and Friends." NIJ. [https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/domestic-radicalization-and-deradicalization-insights-family-and-friends/](https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/domestic-radicalization-and-deradicalization-insights-family-and-friends;);

Aryaeinejad, Kateira, and Thomas Leo Scherer. 2024a. "The Role of Social Networks in Facilitating and Preventing Domestic Radicalization." Office of Justice Programs. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/305795.pdf>.

¹⁰¹ Jones, Isabel, Jakob Guhl, Jacob Davey, and Moustafa Ayad. 2023. "Young Guns: Understanding a New Generation of Extremist Radicalization in the United States." ISD.

https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Young-guns_Understandings-a-new-generation-of-extremist-radicalization-in-the-United-States.pdf; Scheuble, Sophie, and Fehime Oezmen. 2022. "Extremists' Targeting of Young." European Commission.

https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-03/ad_hoc_young_women_social_media_Lessons-p-cve_022022_en.pdf.

¹⁰² Kerr, Henry, Michèle St-Amant, and John McCoy. 2024. "Break the Hate: A Survey of Youth Experiences with Hate and Violent Extremism Online." *Canadian Journal of Family and Youth / Le Journal Canadien de Famille et de La Jeunesse* 16 (3): 57-75. <https://doi.org/10.29173/cjfy30069>; Strong Cities Network. 2024. "City-Led Youth Engagement in Addressing Hate, Extremism and Polarisation: Ten Recommendations for Cities." Strong Cities Network. <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/resource/city-led-youth-engagement-in-addressing-hate-extremism-and-polarisation-10-recommendations-for-cities/>; UNODC. 2023b. "Youth-Led Action to Prevent Terrorism and Violent Extremism." United Nations: Office on Drugs and Crime.

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

¹⁰³ Ragandang, Primitivo III Cabanes. 2024. "Young People Challenging Violent Extremism Online: Insights from Asia." *GNET*.

https://gnet-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/GNET-45-Young-People-Challenging-Extremism_web.pdf.

¹⁰⁴ Schlegel, Linda. 2024. "The Gamification of Violent Extremism & Lessons for P/CVE." European Commission. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-03/ran_ad-hoc_pap_gamification_20210215_en.pdf.

Researchers from a few different perspectives do agree that, when youth at risk of recruitment are identified, avoiding responses that seem either punitive or controlling can help prevent unintentionally furthering that individual's recruitment process.¹⁰⁵ Separate social science literature would suggest that avoiding these approaches is especially important for preventing facilitating male youths' recruitment and would imply that avoiding shame-inducing approaches is also advisable.¹⁰⁶ Currently, relatively few concrete suggestions exist for navigating exactly how to pursue this less controlling approach while still effectively and quickly intervening in the recruitment process.¹⁰⁷

Other work suggests that educational initiatives could play a more crucial role in preventing recruitment online. Programs designed to increase digital literacy and critical thinking skills could help young people navigate online spaces more effectively by fostering resilience against DOI ideologies and equipping them to recognize manipulative tactics used by such groups.¹⁰⁸ Although under-articulated in the literature, these options are not mutually exclusive such that online platforms could explore ways to incorporate effective anti-DOI recruitment education into their users' experience.

Community-based interventions may be equally important as any online measure, according to some perspectives, as building stronger social ties and providing alternative sources of belonging may build resilience to both online and offline exploitation. Researchers from the Radicalisation Awareness Network, for example, emphasize the role of mentorship as a way to engage youth in offline communities and prevent DOI recruitment.¹⁰⁹ By providing young people with positive role models and opportunities for constructive social interaction, they argue, these interventions can offer a counter-narrative to the allure of extremist groups. Others, from a similar perspective, encourage exploration and development of job training, job placement, and similar opportunities that both compensate young people for their time and also reduce the amount of leisure time they have to be targeted for recruitment.¹¹⁰

Several studies have called for a more holistic approach to addressing youth recruitment and advocate, alternately, for a "whole school" or "whole society" approach. What this means for the online environment is not entirely clear, as suggestions seem to be more about bolstering individual resilience and social relationships and opportunities offline, even while some of these papers encourage readers

¹⁰⁵ Barracosa, Steven, and James March. 2022. "Dealing With Radicalised Youth Offenders: The Development and Implementation of a Youth-Specific Framework." *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 12 (January):773545. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2021.773545>; NIJ. 2022. "Domestic Radicalization and Deradicalization: Insights from Family and Friends." NIJ. 2022.

<https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/domestic-radicalization-and-deradicalization-insights-family-and-friends>.

¹⁰⁶ Martin, Karin A. 1998. "Becoming a Gendered Body: Practices of Preschools." *American Sociological Review* 63 (4): 494–511. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657264>.

¹⁰⁷ Martin, Michel. 2022. "How Parents Can Spot the Warning Signs of Radicalization in Their Kids." NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/22/1100614913/how-parents-can-spot-the-warning-signs-of-radicalization-in-their-kids>; NIJ. 2022. "Domestic Radicalization and Deradicalization: Insights from Family and Friends." NIJ. <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/domestic-radicalization-and-deradicalization-insights-family-and-friends>.

¹⁰⁸ Wolbers, Heather, Christopher Dowling, Timothy Cubitt, and Chante Kuhn. 2023. "Understanding and Preventing Internet-Facilitated Radicalisation." <https://doi.org/10.52922/ti77024>; Campion, Kristy, and Emma Colvin. 2024b. "Community, More than Conviction: Understanding Radicalisation Factors for Young People in Australia." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2025.2478957>.

¹⁰⁹ Scheuble, Sophie, and Fehime Oezmen. 2022. "Extremists' Targeting of Young." European Commission. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-03/ad_hoc_young_women_social_media_Lessons-p-cve_022022_en.pdf.

¹¹⁰ Strong Cities Network. 2024. "City-Led Youth Engagement in Addressing Hate, Extremism and Polarisation: Ten Recommendations for Cities." Strong Cities Network.; Warraich, Saquib Khan, Abeera Hiader, and Alishba Mukhtar. 2023. "Online Radicalization in Pakistan: A Case Study of Youth in South Punjab." *Journal of Politics and International Studies* 9 (1): 147–57. <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/resource/city-led-youth-engagement-in-addressing-hate-extremism-and-polarisation-10-recommendations-for-cities/>.

to avoid a false dichotomy between the online and offline worlds.¹¹¹ One study does suggest conceptualizing tech moderation as part of the “front line” staff we usually associate with direct, offline practitioner interventions. The success of such an approach is untested and would require substantially more training and resourcing for more human moderators than most platforms currently employ to be able to identify at-risk youth and initiate intervention processes.¹¹² However, other research does emphasize the importance of front line staff generally, particularly with regards to mental health supports and interventions, such as talk therapy for individuals early on the recruitment pathway and more intensive psychological interventions for approaching or already recruited.¹¹³

Specific suggestions aimed at social media and gaming platforms are largely limited to what many platforms are already doing in some capacity. For example, having clear policies against DOIs or their glamorization, allowing user-flagging of content, collaborating and hash sharing across platforms, and internally identifying and actioning slang, turns of phrase, or other ingroup language is something that many platforms do despite how the ever-evolving nature of this communication makes this a constantly moving target. One article does suggest that making platform users more aware of language that is targeted for monitoring may assist in its detection but does not address how that would also assist bad actors in evasion.¹¹⁴ Others suggest greater reliance on machine learning tools to detect DOI content including symbols and other images, but these models would need continual monitoring and updating such that other researchers propose a greater role for subject matter experts in continuous monitoring of these evolving threats.¹¹⁵

Some platforms have at least experimented with suggestions around strategic communications and counter-narratives, including redirects or some version of a context note when users search for a term related to a DOI or otherwise engage with DOI-relevant content.¹¹⁶ Other authors take this a step further and suggest that platforms should proactively expose users to positive content that would foster community and engagement outside of DOI spaces whether online or off. Other than advocating for platforms to host youth-created counter-narrative programming, these papers do not offer specific

¹¹¹ Gereluk, Dianne. 2023. “A Whole-School Approach to Address Youth Radicalization.” *Educational Theory* 73 (3): 434–51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12581>; RCMP. 2024a. “Five-Eyes Insights – Young People and Violent Extremism: A Call for Collective Action.” Royal Canadian Mounted Police. <https://rcmp.ca/en/corporate-information/publications-and-manuals/five-eyes-insights-young-people-and-violent-extremism-call-collective-action>; Whittaker, Joe. 2022. “Rethinking Online Radicalization.” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16 (4): 27–40.

¹¹² Barracosa, Steven, and James March. 2022. “Dealing With Radicalised Youth Offenders: The Development and Implementation of a Youth-Specific Framework.” *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 12 (January). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2021.773545>.

¹¹³ Strong Cities Network. 2024. “City-Led Youth Engagement in Addressing Hate, Extremism and Polarisation: Ten Recommendations for Cities.” Strong Cities Network. <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/resource/city-led-youth-engagement-in-addressing-hate-extremism-and-polarisation-10-recommendations-for-cities/>; Campion, Kristy, and Emma Colvin. 2024b. “Community, More than Conviction: Understanding Radicalisation Factors for Young People in Australia.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2025.2478957>.

¹¹⁴ Williams, Thomas James Vaughan, and Calli Tzani. 2024. “How Does Language Influence the Radicalisation Process? A Systematic Review of Research Exploring Online Extremist Communication and Discussion.” *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 16 (3): 310–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2022.2104910>.

¹¹⁵ Newhouse, Alex, and Rachel Kowert. 2024. “Digital Games as Vehicles for Extremist Recruitment and Mobilization.” In *Gaming and Extremism*, edited by Rachel Kowert and Linda Schlegel. https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/93395/1/external_content.pdf#page=89; USGAO. 2024. “Countering Violent Extremism: FBI and DHS Need Strategies and Goals for Sharing Threat Information with Social Media and Gaming Companies.” Gao.Gov. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/D24/106262.pdf>.

¹¹⁶ Newhouse, Alex, and Rachel Kowert. 2024. “Digital Games as Vehicles for Extremist Recruitment and Mobilization.” In *Gaming and Extremism*, edited by Rachel Kowert and Linda Schlegel. https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/93395/1/external_content.pdf#page=89.

suggestions beyond hosting for what this positive content would look like or how it could be made to appeal to audiences of varying demographics.¹¹⁷

Gaps in the Literature and Future Directions

Youth recruitment to DOIs represents a complex and multifaceted issue that requires a comprehensive approach to address. Reports released on the topic in the last few years largely confirm and reiterate ideas from earlier literature rather than revealing strongly insightful new directions. The internet, with its vast reach and anonymity, remains a powerful tool for spreading DOI ideologies and recruiting young people into radical groups and actions. While effective counter strategies may be found through a combination of technological solutions, educational initiatives, and community-based efforts, these efforts have only been attempted in small scale samples or remain largely at the theoretical level. There is presently little to no grappling in these efforts with the fact that the internet and online communities heavily intersect with numerous aspects of many people's lives, meaning there may be complex and unaddressed pull factors not yet adequately assessed in either prevention efforts or assessment literature.

Additionally, familiar problems remain in the methodological approaches regarding sample selection, sample sizes, and lack of clear delineations of generalizability. The current literature also underexplores online to offline pathways for recruitment and the violence it produces. Especially for criminal organizations, the literature continues to focus much more on adults rather than youth offenders. Further, women and girls remain understudied in this space. Very little recent literature focuses on gender dynamics that might be relevant to the above questions even though a reported 40% of gamers are female and even though the recruitment of women and girls is likely to be a growing concern in coming years.¹¹⁸ Some researchers note this likelihood, but the most recent examination of the gender intersections with these concerns remains a 2022 report that rather superficially examines gender narratives employed across a variety of extremist spaces.¹¹⁹

The literature also indicates that at least some women and girls on DOI recruitment pathways may behave and present differently than what existing research may predict because that research is predominantly reflective of men and boys. For example, there may be differences in the emphasis girls versus boys place on the perceived gap between morality as practiced by secular society and morality as taught in their religion as a reason to act against modern society.¹²⁰ Notably, both these studies focus exclusively on ideas connected to radical Islam, and more work is needed to understand if these or similar claims apply to other kinds of DOIs. However, some of the literature on criminal organizations echoes the notion of gendered pathways. While girls and young women are not the analytic focus of these pieces, they nonetheless note that girls' recruitment pathways may be more likely to include

¹¹⁷ Strong Cities Network. 2024. "City-Led Youth Engagement in Addressing Hate, Extremism and Polarisation: Ten Recommendations for Cities." Strong Cities Network. <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/resource/city-led-youth-engagement-in-addressing-hate-extremism-and-polarisation-10-recommendations-for-cities/>.

¹¹⁸ Global Programme on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Special Projects and Innovation Branch. 2022. "Examining the Intersection Between Gaming and Violent Extremism." United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism. https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/221005_research_launch_on_gaming_ve.pdf.

¹¹⁹ Scheuble, Sophie, and Fehime Oezmen. 2022. "Extremists' Targeting of Young." European Commission. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-03/ad_hoc_young_women_social_media_Lessons-p-cve_022022_en.pdf.

¹²⁰ Robert, Max-Valentin, and Ayhan Kaya. 2024. "Political Drivers of Muslim Youth Radicalisation in France: Religious Radicalism as a Response to Nativism." *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 32 (3): 625–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2023.2193734>.

feigned concern about personal circumstances, cultivated emotional dependency on recruiters, and sexual exploitation, yet some DOIs recruit girls at later ages than boys.¹²¹ In some geographic areas, girls and women who have few options for financial stability and turn to prostitution likely face added risks of recruitment into and coercion by criminal organizations.¹²² All these factors need further investigation to determine their applicability to other DOIs.

Recent reports reinforce our understanding of youth recruitment to DOIs as a persistent and evolving threat. The internet's role as an enabling environment for DOI ideologies remains central, necessitating a multi-pronged approach that integrates technology, education, and community engagement. However, the methodological challenges in obtaining real-world, generalizable samples remain, as to developing generalizable solutions that keep pace with evolving platforms and other technological advancements that facilitate DOI recruitment.

Recommendations for Trust and Safety Teams

ICDE believes that if each social media platform and technology company were to commission reports and targeted research, a far stronger understanding of how each digital space is targeted and exploited by DOI actors for recruitment. Specific factors that should be considered include features, products, and other infrastructural elements of the digital space which provide incentive structures or align with known recruitment tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) for DOI actors. For example, labels intended to categorize member structure and permissions on platform can be co-opted to reflect and advertise various roles within NVE spaces.

ICDE also suggests the following recommendations regarding youth recruitment for all Trust and Safety teams currently re-evaluating their approach to child safety and violent extremism:

- Assess the prevalence of those TTPs on platform compared to off-platform spaces. This research should specifically evaluate and weigh the role of platform features and infrastructure in these processes.
- Conduct a comprehensive mapping of recruitment narratives, scoring them for egregiousness and effectiveness.
- Establish a comprehensive list of cross-platform signals and indicators reflecting coded language, propaganda, actor-specific grooming behaviors, etc.
- Revise internal definition of “young users” to encompass early teenagers and pre-teens given how these groups are heavily targeted by DOIs.
- Action all known accounts of a known, violative user.
- Enhance cross-platform information sharing to limit platform jumping in response to moderation.
- Have stronger barriers to minor accounts accessing servers, pages, groups, etc. focused on self-harm.

¹²¹ Havard, Tirion E. 2022. “Girls in Gangs: How They Are Recruited, Exploited and Trapped.” The Conversation. <http://theconversation.com/girls-in-gangs-how-they-are-recruited-exploited-and-trapped-175369>; European Crime Prevention Network. 2024. “Preventing Youth Recruitment into Organised Crime: Insights from a Multinational Perspective.” European Crime Prevention Network. https://eucpn.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2502_ENG_PAPER_Youth%20recruitment_LR.pdf.

¹²² Mitton, Kieran. 2022. “‘A Game of Pain’: Youth Marginalisation and the Gangs of Freetown.” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 60 (1): 45–64. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X21000410>.

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