

PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

Legal and Social Issues Committee



Inquiry into extremism in Victoria

Parliament of Victoria
Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee

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About the Committee

Functions

The functions of the Legal and Social Issues Committee are to inquire into and report on any proposal, matter or thing concerned with community services, education, gaming, health, and law and justice.

The Legal and Social Issues Committee may inquire into, hold public hearings, consider and report on any matter, including on any Bills or draft Bills, annual reports, estimates of expenditure or other documents laid before the Legislative Council in accordance with an Act, provided these are relevant to its functions.

Government Departments allocated for oversight:

- Department of Families, Fairness and Housing
- Department of Health
- Department of Justice and Community Safety.

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This report is available on the Committee's website.

Contents

Preliminaries

Committee membership	ii
About the Committee	iii
Terms of reference	viii
Chair’s foreword	ix
Findings and recommendations	xi
What happens next?	xix

1	Introduction	1
1.1	About this report	1
1.2	About the Inquiry	2
1.2.1	Submissions	2
1.2.2	Public hearings	3
1.3	Language considerations	3
1.4	What is far-right extremism?	4
1.5	Why ‘far-right’ extremism?	5
1.6	Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security’s Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism	6
2	Extremism is a global issue	9
2.1	Introduction	9
2.2	Global risk factors	9
2.2.1	Globalisation	10
2.2.2	Populism	11
2.2.3	Environmental concerns	12
2.3	The transnational nature of extremism	13
2.4	The global impact of terror attacks	15
3	Risk factors for far-right extremism in Victoria	17
3.1	Introduction	17
3.2	Historical prevalence of extremism in Australia	17
3.3	Risk factors for radicalisation	19
3.4	Social isolation and economic insecurity	21
3.5	Distrust of governments and politicians	22

3.6	The role of mainstream media	24
3.6.1	Declining trust in mainstream media	24
3.6.2	Potential negative impacts of mainstream media reporting	25
3.6.3	Mainstream media reporting of terrorist attacks	27
3.6.4	Potential positive impacts of mainstream media reporting	30
3.7	Youth as a risk factor for radicalisation	30
4	The threat of far-right extremism in Victoria	35
4.1	Introduction	35
4.2	Violent and non-violent threats	35
4.3	The terrorism threat	36
4.3.1	Group actors	36
4.3.2	Lone actors	37
4.4	Threats to democracy	38
4.5	Risks to politicians and public figures	39
4.6	Risks to Victoria’s multicultural and faith communities	41
4.7	Gendered risks	43
4.8	Risks to the LGBTQIA+ community	45
4.9	Extremism and hate crime	46
5	Extremist recruitment and communication	49
5.1	Introduction	49
5.2	Relationship between social media, extremism and other online platforms	49
5.2.1	Use of encrypted apps and private channels	56
5.3	Far-right recruitment strategies	58
5.3.1	Far-right recruitment in the Victorian context	59
6	The impact of COVID-19 on extremism in Victoria	63
6.1	Introduction	63
6.2	How the COVID-19 pandemic made people more vulnerable to extremism	63
6.2.1	Social isolation and online spaces	66
6.2.2	Grievances and the erosion of trust in the Government	67
6.3	The impact of conspiracy theories and disinformation during the pandemic	70
6.4	Protests and threats against public office holders, government officials and minorities during the pandemic	74
6.4.1	Street protests	74
6.4.2	Threats against public office holders, government officials and minorities	75

6.5	Differentiating between extremist and non-extremist groups and the extent to which the protests could be characterised as ‘far right’	77
6.5.1	The extent to which the protests could be characterised as ‘far right’	78
6.6	How COVID-19 has affected the growth of far-right extremist groups in Victoria	80
7	Countering extremism	83
7.1	Introduction	83
7.2	Prevention and diversion	83
7.2.1	Prevention	84
7.2.2	Diversion	85
7.3	Social cohesion and community building	87
7.4	Education	92
7.4.1	Anti-racism education	92
7.4.2	Digital and critical literacy skills	94
7.5	Supports for young people at risk of radicalisation	96
7.6	Combating extremism online	98
7.7	Bringing together extremism expertise	100
7.8	Limiting access to firearms	102
7.8.1	Illegal firearms	103
7.8.2	Access to firearms through employment	103
7.8.3	Regulation of legal firearms	104
7.9	Proscription of terrorist organisations	106
	Appendices	
A	About the Inquiry	109
B	The Victorian Government’s role in countering violent extremism	113
C	Christchurch Call	121
	Minority report	127

Terms of reference

Inquiry into extremism in Victoria

On 7 February 2022, the Committee self-referred the following motion:

That the Committee inquire into and report, by 31 May 2022*, on the following—

- a. the rise of the far-right extremist movements in Victoria in the context of—
 - i. social isolation and growing economic insecurity;
 - ii. racist scapegoating;
 - iii. the role of mainstream and social media;
 - iv. the distrust of governments and politicians;
- b. their methods of recruitment and communication;
- c. how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the growth of far-right extremism in the Victorian context;
- d. the risks their plans and actions pose to Victoria and especially to Victoria’s multicultural communities;
- e. the violent potential of these movements, including the potential for targeted violence against politicians and public figures;
- f. the links between far-right extremist groups, other forms of extremism, and populist radical right and anti-vaccine misinformation groups;
- g. what steps need to be taken in Victoria to counter these far-right extremist groups and their influence, including, but not limited to consideration of—
 - i. the role of early intervention measures to diminish the recruitment and mobilisation prospects of far-right extremist groups;
 - ii. the role of social cohesion, greater civil engagement and empowerment, and community building programs;
 - iii. the submissions made to and, when tabled, the report by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security’s Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia; and
- h. any other related matters.

* The reporting date for this inquiry was extended to 30 August 2022.

Chair's foreword

Extremism is not a subject that is usually considered by a state jurisdiction. It is certainly not a subject that I have been involved in investigating before the Committee was given this Inquiry.

Extremism is a complex global problem for which there are no easy solutions. The extremist groups and individual actors that operate in Victoria do not exist in a vacuum. They have connections nationally and transnationally.

However I believe that consideration of extremism is relevant at every level of government, and there is much that the state government can do.

Rather than simply a law enforcement issue, combating extremism requires the whole of society. Key to our approach is to encourage government to support community building and social cohesion measures.

We ourselves as Members of Parliament are not exempt from responsibility, and we have recommended an integrity charter to help build public trust in the Parliament.

This report, its findings and recommendations are not the complete answer to the problems caused by extremism nor all the answers to combatting it. They should be seen as a starting point. More work is required to understand extremism and further ways to prevent it.

I believe that limitations on access to firearms is one protective factor we have in Victoria and Australia and we must maintain those limits. We have recommended that the Victorian Government review whether the *Firearms Act 1996* should be amended to expand the fit and proper person test to include people who are members of violent extremist groups. Also that the Victorian Government through National Cabinet advocate for the introduction of a national, cross-jurisdictional database of registered firearms and firearms licence holders.

I acknowledge the witnesses who participated in this Inquiry and thank them for their generous contribution to developing our understanding of the issues. Many of them have been targeted for their efforts to combat extremism, hate and racism in Australia. In some cases, witnesses were targeted online for their participation in the Inquiry itself. I am very grateful to them for participating despite those threats, and for continuing to pursue the ideal of a safe community free from prejudice.

My thanks to the Committee Secretariat for their work on this Inquiry. Thank you also to my colleagues on the Committee for your hard work and collegiality. I would particularly like to thank my colleague Dr Samantha Ratnam who initiated this Inquiry. This is our twelfth report for this Parliament.

Chair's foreword

I am sorry to say that racism, dispossession, marginalisation and violence have caused significant harm to First Nations people throughout Victoria's history and although it was not the subject of this report directly it is something that I cannot leave unspoken. We must all work towards a society that acknowledges Aboriginal people and their primacy.

I encourage Members of Parliament to read this report to ensure they have a good understanding of the issues involved, and the measures that can be taken to ensure that extremism does not escalate as an issue in this state.

I commend the report to the House

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Fiona Patten', with a large, stylized initial 'F'.

Ms Fiona Patten MLC
Chair

Findings and recommendations

1 Introduction

FINDING 1: The language used to describe any form of extremism is important and should be considered carefully. 4

FINDING 2: The present threat of violence from far-left extremism is not equivalent to the present threat of violence from far-right extremism, but the domestic violent extremism threat landscape is continually evolving and changing. 6

FINDING 3: Extremist movements have been identified as a significant issue in Australia. Findings from any future Commonwealth inquiry into these matters would be beneficial in increasing understanding of the issue at a national level. 7

2 Extremism is a global issue

FINDING 4: The relationship between global, national and state economic policies can contribute to an environment where anti-immigration and anti-government sentiments grow, increasing the appeal of far-right extremist groups which claim to address these issues. 10

FINDING 5: Global and domestic populist movements, particularly the mainstreaming of anti-immigration and anti-democratic ideas, are risk factors for legitimising the rhetoric of extremist movements. 12

FINDING 6: The disruption from ongoing environmental deterioration and climate change should be considered a risk factor for increasing the threat of both far-left and far-right extremist groups. 13

FINDING 7: The transnational elements of extremist movements must be considered alongside their domestic manifestations because of the borderless and leaderless nature of some violent extremist movements. 15

FINDING 8: The impacts of and responses to violent extremism can be experienced globally, not just locally, with information about both extremist events, and government and community approaches in response to them, being accessible by a global audience. 16

3 Risk factors for far-right extremism in Victoria

FINDING 9: Far-right extremism is not new in Australia or Victoria, but there has been a re-emergence of far-right extremism, most notably from 2015 and 2016 onwards. 18

FINDING 10: Social isolation, economic insecurity and inequality are risk factors that may play a part in increasing susceptibility to extremist narratives. Addressing these issues is important for wellbeing and social cohesion and may reduce the appeal of extremist narratives. 22

FINDING 11: Evidence from stakeholders to the Inquiry and recent investigations suggest that trust in government and politicians has declined in Victoria, and in other jurisdictions globally, and this has been further exacerbated by the global COVID-19 pandemic. 24

RECOMMENDATION 1: That the Victorian Government and Members of Parliament seek ways to build public trust in the Parliament, including developing measures to improve transparency. This should include investigating the potential benefits of introducing an integrity charter. 24

FINDING 12: Mainstream media has a critical role to play in the dissemination of accurate information during crises, as well as in reporting responsibly on the activities of far-right extremist groups and individuals, and not creating negative stereotypes of specific communities. 29

FINDING 13: Reporting of extremist activities, groups and individuals should be subject to strong media guidelines to minimise amplification of extremist propaganda that benefits or platforms extremist movements. 30

FINDING 14: An increasing focus on young people as a target of radicalisation and recruitment by the extreme far-right is of significant concern. 33

FINDING 15: The Committee is concerned that the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) reported that in 2021 minors made up 15% of new counter-terrorism investigations (up from 2–3% in recent years) and, on average, comprised more than half of ASIO’s highest priority investigations per week. Young people who experience feelings of social isolation, disengagement and alienation may be more vulnerable to radicalisation, and are among key targets of extremist propaganda and recruitment.

34

FINDING 16: In formulating intervention and prevention measures aimed at countering youth radicalisation to extremism, it is imperative that alienating, criminalising or discriminating against young people is avoided as far as possible.

34

4 The threat of far-right extremism in Victoria

FINDING 17: Both groups and individuals are capable of carrying out ideologically motivated terrorism, however, the risk from an individual acting alone is currently considered by authorities to be the more likely scenario.

37

FINDING 18: Far-right extremism poses a threat to democracy. Strengthening democratic processes and increasing transparency by providing information to the public about political processes and practices is an important part of mitigating this threat.

39

FINDING 19: Responses to extremism need to avoid measures that curtail civil liberties in a disproportionate manner.

39

FINDING 20: Violent extremism poses a risk to politicians and public figures in Victoria, who may be targeted by groups or individuals motivated by ideological, religious or single-issue grievances.

41

FINDING 21: Left-wing aligned (or perceived to be left-wing aligned) politicians and public figures have been targeted by far-right extremist groups and individuals.

41

FINDING 22: Racism and racist scapegoating, Islamophobia and antisemitism are common elements of far-right extremist ideologies, messaging and activities.

42

FINDING 23: When public and elected figures accept racist rhetoric and action this blurs the lines between what is acceptable and what is not in the community and leads to risks that multicultural communities will be targeted.

42

FINDING 24: Evidence from stakeholders suggests that far-right extremism can be gendered, and that misogyny and anti-feminist sentiment are common but not necessarily well understood features of far-right extremist movements. 45

RECOMMENDATION 2: That the Government consider funding research investigating the links between extremism and family violence, anti-women or anti-feminist sentiment, and masculinity to identify further opportunities for counter-extremism measures. 45

FINDING 25: Both real and perceived threats from far-right extremist groups cause harm to the LGBTQIA+ community in Victoria. Government measures to support these communities are important. 46

FINDING 26: Improved collection and analysis of hate incident data is needed to inform prevention of hate crimes, and responses to hate, as well as to better understand the extent of far-right and other forms of extremism in Victoria. 48

RECOMMENDATION 3: That the Victorian Government continue to implement the recommendations from the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee's report on the Inquiry into anti-vilification protections, in particular recommendations 33 and 34. 48

5 Extremist recruitment and communication

FINDING 27: Public trust in mainstream media has declined, while social media as a primary source of information has increased. 54

FINDING 28: The increasing use of social media and other online platforms by the wider public has enabled the increased ability of extremists to disseminate their ideology and attract people to their cause. 54

FINDING 29: Regulatory frameworks that govern the use of encrypted online communication platforms should be formulated to be able to effectively respond to and keep pace with developments in technology and behaviour. 57

6 The impact of COVID-19 on extremism in Victoria

FINDING 30: The factors that increase susceptibility and engagement with far-right extremism were heightened by the social and economic disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. This included the public health restrictions enacted by the Victorian Government in response to the pandemic alongside those of other states and the Commonwealth Government. The Committee notes that these restrictions were enacted to protect public health.

70

FINDING 31: Conspiracy theories and disinformation were attractive to some who felt disenfranchised by public health measures enacted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Far-right extremist groups and individuals capitalised on this by promoting conspiracy theories and disinformation to generate support for their ideologies.

72

RECOMMENDATION 4: That in future public health emergencies, the Victorian Government build on its outreach and communication efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that there is an emphasis on public information that is in plain language, timely, accessible and easy to interpret.

73

FINDING 32: Vile threats and abuse were made during the pandemic against public office holders, government officials and minorities. This kind of discourse has no place in an open, plural and multicultural democracy such as Victoria and should be condemned in the strongest terms.

77

FINDING 33: A small number of far-right extremist groups and individuals attended protests against the Victorian Government's COVID-19 restrictions and vaccine mandates in 2021, however, extremist ideology was not the primary motivating factor for the majority of those attending. Rather, a range of personal grievances relating to the impacts of the Victorian Government's COVID-19 restrictions and vaccine mandates were the primary motivators, despite the restrictions being implemented to protect public health.

80

FINDING 34: There has been a growth in exposure to far-right extremist ideology in Victoria since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the extent to which this exposure has translated to significant long-term growth in the far-right extremist movement remains unknown. The Committee found that personal grievances relating to COVID-19 restrictions and vaccine mandates were the primary motivation for protests seen in Melbourne in late 2021. Nevertheless, it is important for the Victorian Government to remain vigilant against the threat of far-right radicalisation in this context.

82

7 Countering extremism

FINDING 35: Countering extremism is a whole-of-society issue. Governments and law enforcement can and should play a proactive role in the process of countering extremism, however, communities need to be supported with resources to ensure they have the capacity to effectively participate. **85**

FINDING 36: Individual, needs-based interventions that look at a person holistically and work with them over a long period of time to build their strengths will be more effective for countering extremism in people already engaged in extremist behaviours. **87**

RECOMMENDATION 5: That the Victorian Government ensure all of Victoria’s countering violent extremism programs, including but not limited to the community integration support program (CISP), continue to be reviewed externally on a regular basis to ensure that they are effective and adapting to the evolving extremism landscape. **87**

FINDING 37: Community-led and grassroots initiatives to promote social cohesion and community building are an important measure for countering extremism and have been demonstrated as effective in Victoria. **91**

RECOMMENDATION 6: That the Victorian Government develop a strategy to support community-driven social cohesion initiatives aimed at building connections and trust amongst community members and between community members and civic institutions. **91**

FINDING 38: Anti-racism public education campaigns and education programs that teach respect and appreciation for multiculturalism are important for improving social cohesion in Victoria. **93**

FINDING 39: Education about the Holocaust is particularly important for understanding some of the consequences of racism and vilification throughout history and should have ongoing inclusion in the Victorian school curriculum. **93**

RECOMMENDATION 7: That the Victorian Government support the ongoing provision of existing anti-racism education programs and actively seek to improve and increase the provision of such programs in the community. **94**

FINDING 40: Digital and critical literacy are essential skills for young people to navigate the internet safely, to develop resistance to the influence of extremist messaging and to analyse the quality of information they are exposed to. 95

RECOMMENDATION 8: The Victorian Government should review the digital and critical literacy skills taught via the primary and secondary school curriculum to identify opportunities for improvement and expansion. 95

FINDING 41: Youth workers play a critical role in the delivery of effective support measures that work to both increase social cohesion and mitigate the risks of radicalisation to extremism. 97

RECOMMENDATION 9: That the Victorian Government ensure youth workers are adequately and appropriately resourced to provide effective service delivery of youth supports and programs aimed at strengthening trust and social connectedness and mitigating the risks of radicalisation. Further, that youth workers are proactively engaged and consulted in the development and implementation of the Government's youth policies and strategies. 97

FINDING 42: While online content regulation sits beyond the purview of state governments, the Committee reiterates the value of the *Christchurch Call* and the measures it outlines with regard to violent extremist and terrorist content. 99

FINDING 43: Multidisciplinary and cross-jurisdictional research into extremism offers valuable insights into emerging problems and prevention strategies. Norway's Center for Research on Extremism would be a good model on which to base an Australian body working on developing empirical and theoretical knowledge on extremism in Australia and collaborating with domestic and international stakeholders to further information and understanding in this area. 101

FINDING 44: Access to firearms obtained legally or illegally by members of far-right extremist groups poses potential risks to the community and is of significant concern. 102

FINDING 45: Acquisition and use of firearms by far-right extremists, not all of whom may be easily identifiable, leads to a critical gap in counter-terrorism strategy that could be assisted by a coherent, national framework on firearm regulation. 105

RECOMMENDATION 10: That the Victorian Government review whether the *Firearms Act 1996* should be amended to expand the fit and proper person test to include people who are members of violent extremist groups. **105**

RECOMMENDATION 11: That the Victorian Government through National Cabinet advocate for the introduction of a national, cross-jurisdictional database of registered firearms and firearms licence holders. **106**

FINDING 46: Proscription of terrorist organisations can be a useful tool for deterring the activities of far-right extremist groups which advocate for violence, but there is a balance to be met between keeping communities safe and potentially increasing the profile of these groups. **107**

RECOMMENDATION 12: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government for the proscription of extremist organisations active in Victoria which clearly meet the legal tests for engaging in preparing, planning, assisting or fostering the doing of a terrorist act, or advocating the doing of a terrorist act. **108**

What happens next?

There are several stages to a parliamentary inquiry.

The Committee conducts the Inquiry

This report on the Inquiry into extremism in Victoria is the result of extensive research and consultation by the Legislative Council's Legal and Social Issues Committee at the Parliament of Victoria.

We received written submissions, spoke with people at public hearings, reviewed research evidence and deliberated over a number of meetings. Experts, government representatives and individuals expressed their views directly to us as Members of Parliament.

A Parliamentary Committee is not part of the Government. Our Committee is a group of members of different political parties (including independent members). Parliament has asked us to look closely at an issue and report back. This process helps Parliament do its work by encouraging public debate and involvement in issues. We also examine government policies and the actions of the public service.

You can learn more about the Committee's work, including all of its current and past inquiries, at: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/lpic-lc>.

The report is presented to Parliament

This report was presented to Parliament and can be found at: <https://parliament.vic.gov.au/lpic-lc/article/4894>.

A response from the Government

The Government has six months to respond in writing to any recommendations we have made. The response is public and put on the inquiry page of Parliament's website when it is received at: <https://parliament.vic.gov.au/lpic-lc/article/4895>.

In its response, the Government indicates whether it supports the Committee's recommendations. It can also outline actions it may take.

This Inquiry was tasked with investigating the rise of far-right extremist movements in Victoria. The Committee acknowledges that many of the witnesses who participated in this Inquiry have been targeted for their identity and/or for their efforts to combat extremism, hate and racism in Australia. In some cases, witnesses were targeted online for their participation in the Inquiry itself, and the Committee expresses its gratitude to these witnesses for their courage in coming forward to assist the Inquiry.

The Committee also recognises that racism has a long history in Australia. In investigating a form of extremism which often encompasses nationalist and racist violence, it must be acknowledged that racism, dispossession, marginalisation and violence have caused significant harm to First Nations people throughout Victoria's history and continue to do so to this day.

1.1 About this report

Extremism is a complex global problem and there are no easy solutions. Different factors, particularly different combinations of factors, can contribute to an individual engaging with extremism. There is no formula that can reliably predict who will become a violent extremist. However, throughout this Inquiry, multiple factors were suggested by stakeholders as having the potential to increase a person's risk of radicalisation or their susceptibility to far-right extremist narratives, including:

- social isolation
- racism, Islamophobia, antisemitism, homophobia and misogyny
- economic insecurity
- distrust of governments, politicians and institutions
- exposure to misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories
- inadequate support for vulnerable children and young people
- mental health issues
- the normalisation of anti-immigration, anti-multicultural, homophobic and transphobic rhetoric, including in public discourse and via mainstream media and social media
- the prevalence of hate and extremist content online
- the amplification of extremist narratives via mainstream and social media
- broader global challenges, such as populist movements, climate change and international economic systems.

Far-right extremists may deliberately exploit some of these factors in their messaging and recruitment strategies, and this has been observed during the COVID-19 pandemic. As discussed in Chapter 6, the pandemic itself is also considered to have exacerbated many of the risk factors listed above.

At the conclusion of this Inquiry the Committee found that the State Government does have an important role to play in combating extremism in Victoria. The findings and recommendations presented throughout this report include guidance to the Government, but they do not form a complete answer to the problems posed by extremism. They should be seen as a starting point. More work is required beyond this Inquiry to gain a comprehensive understanding of the problem posed by extremism in Victoria and further ways to counter it.

Finally, in attempting to combat any form of extremism—including far-right extremism—it was emphasised to the Committee that heavy-handed measures that infringe disproportionately on Victorians’ civil liberties are not the answer. Liberty Victoria stated in their submission that:

Extremism is a symptom that something in society is not right. It is not the illness itself. Finding ways to silence right-wing extremism, or indeed any other form of extremism, will not cure the problem, it will mask it until a new form of extremism arises.¹

1.2 About the Inquiry

The Inquiry into extremism in Victoria was self-referenced by the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee on 7 February 2022, with an initial reporting date of 31 May 2022. The Committee agreed to extend the reporting date to 4 August 2022, and subsequently to 30 August 2022.

1.2.1 Submissions

The Committee called for submissions to the Inquiry through the Parliament of Victoria website and via press release. Individual stakeholders were also invited to contribute to the Inquiry based on their work in the field. Some stakeholders, who had previously made a submission to the Commonwealth Parliament’s Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security (PJCIS) Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism, were also invited to submit. Stakeholders included government departments and law enforcement; multicultural, faith and youth organisations; academics in fields including law, social cohesion, security, violent extremism and terrorism; journalists; community leaders; hate prevention charities; and civil liberties organisations.

The Committee received and accepted a total of 21 submissions, with one submission granted confidentiality by the Committee. Confidential submissions inform the

¹ Liberty Victoria, *Submission 12*, p. 15.

Committee’s understanding but are not made public on the Committee’s website. Two submissions were published with only the organisation names identified. This request was granted by the Committee for the protection of the individual submission authors.

A list of submissions is included in Appendix A.

1.2.2 Public hearings

The Committee held hearings remotely via Zoom for security reasons, as well as to facilitate the participation of witnesses who were located interstate and overseas. The hearings took place on the following dates:

- 8 June 2022
- 14 June 2022
- 15 June 2022.

Due to the sensitive nature of the Inquiry, all witnesses were offered options with regard to their participation in hearings, including identity protection and confidentiality. While the majority of witnesses did choose to appear publicly, some were granted closed or in-camera hearings, in some cases because of the sensitive nature of the discussion. As a result, some transcripts have been published with redactions as an identity protection measure or because the content referred to matters before the courts.

1.3 Language considerations

the names and labels we use are important. Words matter. They can be very powerful in how they frame an issue and how people think about it.²

In 2021 the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) changed the way it describes violent extremism. ASIO now uses two broad umbrella terms to categorise it:

- ‘ideologically motivated violent extremism’
- ‘religiously motivated violent extremism’.

These categories replaced language that described extremism as ‘Islamic’, ‘right-wing’ and ‘left-wing’, and put more focus on the threat of violence from individuals and organisations rather than their political views or ideology.

Another reason for the updated terminology is to recognise that some extremists are motivated by specific issues or grievances which do not fit on a left–right spectrum.³ This language change was noted by or incorporated into several of the submissions

² Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, *Describing violent extremism - why words matter*, 2022, <<https://www.asio.gov.au/resources/need-know/violent-extremism-terminology>> accessed 30 June 2022.

³ Ibid.

received by the Committee for this Inquiry. However, the role of ideology in extremism is complex, including the relationship between religion and ideology.

ASIO also said:

it is important to note that these are umbrella terms to describe the threat categories. There may be times where ASIO needs to describe a specific threat that sits beneath them.

Some sub-categories for ideologically motivated violent extremism include nationalist and racist violent extremists, anarchist and revolutionary violent extremists, and specific issue violent extremists. Religiously motivated violent extremism sub-categories include but are not limited to Sunni and Shia violent extremists.⁴

The terms of reference for this Inquiry asked for a focus particularly on far-right extremism in Victoria to allow for an investigation into the specific characteristics and threats posed by it. Some of the witnesses and submissions addressing these terms of reference particularly identified nationalist and racist violent extremism as a matter of concern in Victoria, in line with the subcategory defined by ASIO. However, a range of terminology (including ‘far-right’, ‘right-wing’, ‘ideologically motivated’ and ‘nationalist and racist violent’ extremism) was used throughout this Inquiry by stakeholders, and the report reflects that the debate on terminology and language remains fluid and worthy of continued discussion.

FINDING 1: The language used to describe any form of extremism is important and should be considered carefully.

1.4 What is far-right extremism?

In discussing far-right extremism, and noting the importance of language, it is important to first define what is meant by this term, especially given there is ‘no unanimously agreed definition of the far-right’.⁵ Distinct from ‘right-wing’ in the sense of conservative politics, or the ‘radical right’, which works within democratic processes and practices rather than advocating violence to achieve its aims, ‘far-right extremism’ for the purpose of this report refers to people or organisations who:

- oppose democratic principles and processes⁶
- favour authoritarianism⁷

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jacob Davey, Cecile Simmons, Mario Peucker, *The Far-Left and Far-Right in Australia: Equivalent Threats?: Key findings and policy implications*, Briefing, no. 4, Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, Deakin University, Melbourne, 2022, p. 16.

⁶ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Dr Kristy Campion*, p. 8.

⁷ Ibid.

- favour exclusionary nationalism, which ‘openly advocates against the principle of egalitarianism’⁸ and ‘advances a selective, often ethnically/racially/sexually/religious restrictive view of the citizen’⁹
- consider violence to be a legitimate way to achieve ideological goals (regardless of whether followers are specifically instructed to engage in violence).¹⁰

The last point is particularly important, because certain ideological views or attitudes, such as racism or anti-government sentiment, do not on their own make someone an ‘extremist’.¹¹ Rather, it is the behaviour that accompanies them. From a law enforcement perspective, for example, it is the threat of violence which is the primary concern, and therefore a further distinction must also be made between ‘extremism’ and ‘violent extremism’.¹² Some organisations and authorities have adopted the term ‘nationalist and racist violent extremism’ (NRVE) to speak about violent individuals and groups which adhere to nationalist and racist belief systems, including Neo-Nazism, white supremacism and fascism.¹³

It should also be noted that ideology is a complex factor in violent extremism. In some cases, people may shift from one ideology to another (even at opposite ends of the political spectrum). They may mix elements of different ideologies together or focus on a specific grievance or issue that does not fit on a political spectrum at all.

1.5 Why ‘far-right’ extremism?

The Committee received several submissions, correspondence and public commentary asking why the Inquiry was focused on ‘far-right extremism’ and not ‘far-left extremism’.

While extremism exists at both ends of the political spectrum, as does the potential for future escalations of any kind of extremist violence in response to global and domestic challenges and events, research and evidence indicate that the current domestic threat of violence posed by far-right and far-left extremists is not equivalent, and it would be inaccurate to describe it as such.

Recent social media analysis by the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies found:

very limited evidence of calls for violence from the far-left, but found a significant level of explicit calls for violence and harassment against marginalised communities and political opponents from far-right actors.¹⁴

⁸ Jacob Davey et al., *The Far-Left and Far-Right in Australia: Equivalent Threats?*, p. 16.

⁹ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Dr Kristy Campion*, p. 8.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, p. 4.

¹² Michael Hermans, Assistant Commissioner, Victoria Police, Closed hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 34.

¹³ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 3.

¹⁴ Jacob Davey et al., *The Far-Left and Far-Right in Australia: Equivalent Threats?*, p. 7.

In the COVID-19 context, a study by Campion, Ferrill and Milligan found that the pandemic had ‘complicated the national security threatscape’ but that the primary threats came from violent Salafi-jihadism and the extreme right, with ‘insufficient data’ found on the extreme far left to establish it as a major threat.¹⁵

The ASIO submission to the PJCIS Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism also noted that:

Left-wing extremism is not currently prominent in Australia, although there are several overseas groups who attract individuals adhering to an extreme left-wing ideology.¹⁶

The Committee acknowledges that all forms of violent extremism are a risk to society. The work of this Inquiry to focus on a particular category of extremism should not be seen as a barrier to future investigations of any other form of extremism that poses a risk to Victorians.

FINDING 2: The present threat of violence from far-left extremism is not equivalent to the present threat of violence from far-right extremism, but the domestic violent extremism threat landscape is continually evolving and changing.

1.6 Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security’s Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism

The PJCIS began its Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia in December 2020. The terms of reference, referred to by then Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, included the threat posed by extremist movements and persons holding extremist views in Australia; their geographic spread and links to international extremist organisations; terrorist organisation listing laws; *Australia’s Counter-Terrorism Strategy*; the role and influence of radical and extremist groups; reinforcing social cohesion and countering violent extremism; and the role of online environments in extremist communication and organisation.¹⁷

The PJCIS Inquiry held public hearings on 29 and 30 April 2021 and heard from law enforcement bodies; federal government departments; media and internet regulatory authorities; organisations focusing on law, cybersecurity, criminology and addressing violent extremism; and several mainstream social media platforms.¹⁸

¹⁵ Kristy Campion, Jamie Ferrill, Kristy Milligan, ‘Extremist Exploitation of the Context Created by COVID-19 and the Implications for Australian Security’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 15, no. 6, 2021, p. 23.

¹⁶ Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, *Submission*, submission to Parliament of Australia, Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security, Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia, 2021, p. 4.

¹⁷ Hon Peter Dutton MP, *Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia: Terms of Reference*, 9 December 2020, <https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Intelligence_and_Security/ExtremistMovements/Terms_of_Reference> accessed 30 June 2022.

¹⁸ Ibid.

The PJCIS tabled a two-page interim report on 1 April 2022. The report notes that some evidence remains confidential and that careful consideration was given to the evidence it did decide to publish. PJCIS advised that it was unable to complete its Inquiry before the dissolution of the 46th Parliament and recommended that it be referred to the PJCIS committee of the 47th Parliament.¹⁹ The Legal and Social Issues Committee believes that further work should be conducted by the Commonwealth Parliament on the threat of extremism to Australia, and supports the PJCIS recommendation to the Parliament.

The submissions and evidence published by the PJCIS Inquiry have assisted this Committee's work on its Inquiry into extremism in Victoria by helping to inform an understanding of the broad range of issues nationally, as well as to identify a number of stakeholders. Whilst acknowledging that extremism is a national and global issue, it was important to the Legal and Social Issues Committee to hold its own inquiry to investigate extremism in the Victorian context. This allowed the Committee to identify opportunities to prevent violent extremism and improve social cohesion locally.

FINDING 3: Extremist movements have been identified as a significant issue in Australia. Findings from any future Commonwealth inquiry into these matters would be beneficial in increasing understanding of the issue at a national level.

¹⁹ Parliament of Australia, Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security, *Inquiry into Extremist Movements and Radicalism in Australia*, March 2022.

2.1 Introduction

As stated by the Migration Council Australia in its submission to the Inquiry:

this is not a Victoria-only issue. Policymakers and legislators should be made aware that the far-right in the state does not exist in a vacuum. Individuals and groups of the far-right exchange ideas, inform theories, and build networks and connections across Australia and transnationally. This understanding must inform countermeasures.¹

In understanding the prevalence of extremism in Victoria, it is important to first acknowledge that extremism is a global issue. Ideologies and activities in one part of the world influence and affect what is happening in another part of the world. Not only that, broader issues like globalisation, climate change and the rise of populist movements can contribute to or exacerbate underlying causes of extremism, including economic insecurity and distrust of governments and public institutions.

Extremist movements have a global reach, particularly with the accessibility of online forums and social media platforms to build communities, spread propaganda, recruit, communicate and share expertise. Terror attacks that take place in one country can have repercussions for communities and law enforcement operations in other countries, and in several cases attacks have been claimed to have been inspired by events elsewhere.

This chapter examines extremism in the global context, based on evidence provided by witnesses at hearings and in submissions, before the specific Victorian extremism environment is discussed in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4.

2.2 Global risk factors

Globalisation, climate change and the rise of populist movements are risk factors that can contribute to the underlying causes of extremism. Therefore the way these international issues affect the domestic landscape should be taken into consideration in any discussion of how to respond to extremism. Global pandemics, for example, create risk factors for far-right extremism. The impact of COVID-19 on extremism in Victoria will be addressed in Chapter 6. Globalisation and populism are discussed below in Sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.2.

¹ Migration Council Australia, *Submission 23*, p. 5.

2.2.1 Globalisation

In examining far-right extremist movements in Victoria in the context of growing economic insecurity, there are factors that impact policymaking opportunities at both the state and national levels. These include characteristics of the global economy, including increasing levels of precarious work, casualisation and outsourcing. However, there remain opportunities for all levels of government to respond to and reduce the rise of far-right extremist movements through policies that address factors such as rising inequality.

The Committee heard from stakeholders that globalisation has led to an increased ability for companies to ‘structure their operations to minimise local taxation, move operations to low-wage jurisdictions and work to undermine the power of workers to bargain collectively’.² Globalisation is seen by some as having advantages for economies and societies, but it is also considered to have led to more people in advanced economies ‘experiencing levels of economic inequality previously more common to export-capital oriented economies in the developing world’.³ According to evidence given by a member of the Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism (AVERT) Research Network, with the rise of global inequality there is an inability:

of the major political parties within democratic systems to grapple with that inequality. So what we have seen is a lot of people feeling left behind or unaccounted for by mainstream political parties within democracies.⁴

The influence of international events and other factors on domestic economies can be exploited by far-right extremists to justify anti-immigration rhetoric (such as narratives around immigrants ‘stealing’ jobs). Stakeholders told the Committee that they can also be exploited as an opportunity to push anti-government narratives, blaming state and federal governments for economic issues and events that have global aspects and are not solely within the control of those governments. As AVERT noted, as a result there can be:

a pull of alternative parties, particularly within the far-right and extremist movements, who have alternative solutions, particularly non-democratic solutions ...⁵

FINDING 4: The relationship between global, national and state economic policies can contribute to an environment where anti-immigration and anti-government sentiments grow, increasing the appeal of far-right extremist groups which claim to address these issues.

² Research Group on International Law and the Challenge of Populism, *Submission 14*, p. 6.

³ Ibid.

⁴ AVERT Research Network, Public hearing, Melbourne, 8 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

2.2.2 Populism

Broadly, populism can be seen as a political approach that appeals to ‘ordinary people’ grounded in a belief that their concerns are overlooked by elites.

According to research by Dr Richard Joyce and other members of a group examining international law and populism:

right-wing populism and its extremist variants are the wrong answer to some important questions, especially about the fairness of the global and domestic economies. But rather than actually dealing with these questions, right-wing populism thrives on and intensifies social division, racism and inequality and distracts from the real causes of discontent which feed into it.⁶

As with ‘far-right extremism’, there is no unanimously agreed definition of ‘populism’, but some of the characteristics it is often said to include are ‘a distrust of elites (including governments, experts, and parts of the media), and a hostility toward people who are “different”’.⁷ ‘Different’ can refer to race, class, gender and other factors. Populism and extremism are not the same thing and cannot be considered as inevitably aligned. However, the emphasis on sovereignty and nationalist rhetoric in mainstream populist movements can be seen by extremists as legitimising their activities, particularly when it comes to racist scapegoating.

Populist movements claim to address issues that they perceive are not being addressed by governments, such as security and the economy, but the way in which such movements seek to address these issues tends to be simplistic. Examples of this include the ‘build the wall’ or ‘Britain first’ slogans seen in the United States and United Kingdom respectively.⁸ However, not only are populist movements ill-equipped to address these complex problems, they can also undermine democracy itself. One recent example of this was the storming of the United States Capitol building in Washington, DC on 6 January 2021, which took place amid a campaign by populist former US President Donald Trump ‘aimed at overturning the results of the 2020 presidential election and blocking the transfer of power’ through claims of widespread voter fraud, despite receiving information and advice that these claims were false.⁹

⁶ Dr Richard Joyce, Faculty of Law, Monash University Australian Research Council Discovery Project: International Law and the Challenge of Populism, Public hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

⁷ Research Group on International Law and the Challenge of Populism, *Submission 14*, p. 4.

⁸ Dr Richard Joyce, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 29.

⁹ Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol, *Thompson and Cheney Opening Remarks at Select Committee Hearing: As Delivered*, media release, United States House of Representatives, 28 June 2022, <<https://january6th.house.gov/news/press-releases/thompson-and-cheney-opening-remarks-select-committee-hearing>> accessed 5 July 2022.

The January 6 Capitol riot in the United States and its relationship to extremism were referred to in many submissions and hearings for this Inquiry, including:

- similarities between the Capitol riots and events which have taken place in Victoria, such as the Bendigo anti-mosque protests¹⁰ and the use of gallows at anti-lockdown protests in Melbourne¹¹
- the use of white supremacist language by some participants in the Capitol riots to explain the reasons for their participation¹²
- an Australian far-right extremist group condoning the Capitol riots on social media, accompanied by antisemitic, racist and white supremacist commentary.¹³

Populism, like extremism, is transnational, and ideas can easily cross borders. Therefore elements of a populist movement from one country can affect other countries as local actors adopt beliefs and fit them to the local context. As summarised in the submission by the research group on international law and populism:

The rise of right-wing extremism is one aspect of a broader political phenomenon linked to the rise of populist politics in Australia and in many other parts of the world. Not all right-wing populists are extremists. But a political environment which accommodates right-wing populism provides fertile ground for such extremism.¹⁴

FINDING 5: Global and domestic populist movements, particularly the mainstreaming of anti-immigration and anti-democratic ideas, are risk factors for legitimising the rhetoric of extremist movements.

2.2.3 Environmental concerns

In discussing the relationship between the environment and extremism, a representative from AVERT gave evidence that:

Another type of structural factor... is the climate crisis—environmental degradation. We have started to see this as something that has become more and more of a theme among right-wing extremist movements and the rise of ecofascism, because again they do not see institutional and mainstream parties addressing this. They view protection of the environment only for their enclosed group, however they define it.¹⁵

Another risk factor that may contribute to the appeal of far-right extremist movements is disruption or perceived disruption from environmental degradation. Concerns about the environment are often considered the domain of ‘left-wing’ movements,

¹⁰ Margot Spalding, Public hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

¹¹ Research Group on International Law and the Challenge of Populism, *Submission 14*, p. 12.

¹² AVERT Research Network, *Submission 17, Attachment 3*, p. 4.

¹³ Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council, *Submission 19*, p. 9.

¹⁴ Research Group on International Law and the Challenge of Populism, *Submission 14*, p. 3.

¹⁵ Witness 2, Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism (AVERT) Research Network, Closed hearing, Melbourne, 8 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 5-6; AVERT Research Network, *Submission 17*, p. 4.

but 'Ecology has long been a genuine concern for far-right groups and conservative nationalists'¹⁶. This concern may be manifested in anti-immigration views and concepts of blood purity connected to specific territory.

Several terror attacks have been perpetrated by self-identified ecofascists, including Brenton Tarrant.¹⁷ AVERT's evidence noted that the logic of ecofascism can be related back to Nazism:

which was also deeply concerned in its discourse with the natural world, with ideas about bodily and environmental purity, which was a complete obsession for them.¹⁸

Those who may be considered 'ecofascists' are not concerned with global environmentalism but with what they consider to be their 'territory'. They believe multiculturalism and immigration are disruptive to the ecosystem¹⁹, along with others outside their 'imagined community', such as homosexuals and Jewish people.²⁰ Adherents to this worldview may claim they are justified in 'expelling or destroying people they deem unnatural or disruptive to the ecosystem'²¹ in their so-called territory. Therefore, domestic environmental issues, including those caused by or exacerbated by global issues like climate change, can be risk factors for increasing the appeal of far-right extremist groups. Further, climate change is already causing significant movements of people, with immigration becoming a touch point to be exploited by far-right groups.

More broadly, natural disasters like bushfires and flooding are also risk factors for increasing anti-government sentiment and economic insecurity, meaning the ongoing effects of climate change may be exploited by extremist groups that claim to be able to address these issues more effectively than governments and mainstream political parties.

FINDING 6: The disruption from ongoing environmental deterioration and climate change should be considered a risk factor for increasing the threat of both far-left and far-right extremist groups.

2.3 The transnational nature of extremism

Far-right extremism does not stop at state borders: it is national and international in its connections, and its ideology is both transferrable and tailored to specific contexts.²²

¹⁶ Graham Macklin, 'The Extreme Right, Climate Change and Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 34, no. 5, 2022, p. 979.

¹⁷ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Professor Mark Nolan*, p. 31.

¹⁸ Witness 1, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁹ Kristy Campion, 'Defining Ecofascism: Historical Foundations and Contemporary Interpretations in the Extreme Right', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2021, p. 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

²² Associate Professor Christine Agius, Dr Belinda Barnet, Associate Professor Lucy Nicholas, Janice Woolley, Professor Kay Cook, *Submission 13*, p. 14.

In considering the global context of extremism, the international transmission of ideas themselves must also be considered. One particular idea that has increased in prominence is the ‘great replacement’ conspiracy theory, which claims that ‘the white race and white culture are under imminent existential threat due to immigration or minority birthrates’.²³ This conspiracy theory has not only spread through the manifestos of terrorists like the Christchurch and Buffalo attack perpetrators²⁴ but has been popularised and legitimised by mainstream media commentators and far-right online influencers.²⁵ Online forums, social media platforms, video-sharing websites and encrypted apps have also become instrumental in the sharing of ideology globally. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

Exchanges between Victorians and other domestic and transnational individuals and movements must be expected, as they often perceive themselves to be part of an embattled and imperilled worldwide community.²⁶

A further transnational element of extremism is the expression of identity. Like the ‘great replacement’ theory, which is not specific to a particular country, the articulation of a European identity rather than an Australian identity was a feature of Brenton Tarrant’s manifesto and ‘enabled a much wider cohort of sympathisers and emulators to embrace Tarrant’s ideas’.²⁷ This was seen in attacks committed by perpetrators in the United States and Germany, who claimed to have been influenced by him.²⁸

Extremist movements can also be ‘imported’ from another country and adapted to the local context. An example of this is the anti-government ‘sovereign citizen’ movement, which has its roots in a conspiracy theory regarding United States laws²⁹ but has also been observed in Australia, most recently in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. ‘Sovereign citizens believe they are not under the jurisdiction of the federal government and consider themselves exempt from laws’,³⁰ and this has recently expanded to include opposition to public health orders like vaccine and mask mandates, and stay-at-home restrictions.

The QAnon conspiracy theory, an antisemitic³¹ and ‘divisive social movement advocating resistance to so-called ‘global elites’,³² also began in the United States, with a false claim about a ‘secret war’ taking place led by former US President Donald Trump. The QAnon movement has spread internationally, including to Australia.³³

²³ Dr Colin Rubenstein, Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council, Public hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

²⁴ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Dr Kristy Champion*, p. 10.

²⁵ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Dr Levi West*, p. 21.

²⁶ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Dr Kristy Champion*, p. 10.

²⁷ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Dr Levi West*, p. 21.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁹ Southern Poverty Law Centre, *Sovereign Citizens Movement*, 2022, <<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/sovereign-citizens-movement>> accessed 6 July 2022.

³⁰ Professor Kristina Murphy, *Submission 9*, p. 8.

³¹ Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council, *Submission 19*, p. 10.

³² Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, pp. 18–19.

³³ Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council, *Submission 19*, pp. 9–10.

The transnational nature of terrorist groups themselves is also noteworthy. The Base, a US-based group with an accelerationist ideology³⁴—meaning they believe societal collapse can be expedited through violence³⁵—is known to have made attempts to recruit Australians directly. Like many violent extremist organisations, whether religiously or ideologically motivated, The Base utilises a ‘leaderless resistance model’, which was popular in the 1990s in the United States and has seen a resurgence in the last decade through online forums and platforms.³⁶ The borderless and leaderless nature of many violent extremist movements presents additional challenges for local law enforcement and counter-terrorism operations, requiring co-operation across state, national and international jurisdictions.

FINDING 7: The transnational elements of extremist movements must be considered alongside their domestic manifestations because of the borderless and leaderless nature of some violent extremist movements.

2.4 The global impact of terror attacks

In their joint submission to the Inquiry, the Board of Imams Victoria and Victoria University’s Applied Security Science Partnership pointed out that:

The Christchurch massacre tragically demonstrates how far-right extremist events outside of Victoria can nonetheless have grave impacts on Victorians, including Victoria’s multicultural communities. Terrorism, by definition, spreads fear into audiences beyond the immediate victims.³⁷

In his statement on the Christchurch massacre, Sheikh Moustapha Sarakibi explains further how terror attacks can have a far-reaching impact, regardless of the location of the incident itself:

In the wake of the massacre, exposure to Islamophobic sentiments expressed in public and online spaces further increased feelings of alienation for Muslims from the mainstream Australian community. Many Australian Muslims feared that copy-cat attacks would occur in mosques and Islamic centres around Australia.³⁸

Overall, it is difficult to underestimate the impact of the Christchurch massacre on the psyche of Australian Muslims as it felt like a targeted attack on Muslims everywhere.³⁹

It is therefore important to ensure that appropriate support is offered to communities who may be impacted by incidents like these, regardless of where the incident has taken place.

³⁴ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Professor Mark Nolan*, p. 34.

³⁵ Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council, *Submission 19*, p. 5.

³⁶ Board of Imams Victoria and Victoria University’s Applied Security Science Partnership, *Submission 16*, pp. 12–13.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Along with the far-reaching impact on targeted communities, violent attacks can also inspire or be inspired by attacks that have taken place elsewhere. The perpetrator of the Christchurch attack has been claimed to have influenced further attacks in 2019, including in Poway, California; El Paso, Texas; and Halle, Germany.⁴⁰ Shortly after the submission closing date for this Inquiry, 10 people were killed in an attack targeting primarily African-Americans at a supermarket in Buffalo, New York by a perpetrator who also claimed to have been inspired by Tarrant, using similar tactics and referencing the same ideologies.⁴¹

When violent extremists target particular communities, their aim is to spread a message that these communities are not safe or welcome. However, just as an attack can have an impact beyond its immediate targets, so too can the community response to an attack. Sheikh Sarakibi explained in his statement how the response of New Zealand's prime minister in showing solidarity with Muslims in Christchurch was helpful to Muslims worldwide⁴² as well as the importance of local gestures, such as non-Muslim Australians attending mosques to guard worshippers while they prayed.⁴³

FINDING 8: The impacts of and responses to violent extremism can be experienced globally, not just locally, with information about both extremist events, and government and community approaches in response to them, being accessible by a global audience.

40 Ibid., p. 13.

41 Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Dr Levi West*, p. 21.

42 Board of Imams Victoria and Victoria University's Applied Security Science Partnership, *Submission 16*, p. 3.

43 Ibid.

3

Risk factors for far-right extremism in Victoria

3.1 Introduction

Extremism is a global issue, but it is important to understand how it manifests locally, as well as the risk factors in Victoria that may increase the appeal of far-right extremist groups or be seen as legitimising their activities. Rather than simply a law enforcement issue, combating extremism requires a whole-of-society approach.

What we need to do, in Liberty Victoria's view, is address the drivers as to why some people are attracted to extremist ideology in the first place, and that involves addressing issues of social isolation, economic insecurity and matters that are preyed upon by those who want to expand their ranks in terms of extremist groups, including far-right extremism. We need to repair and build faith in institutions, government and the media so that people cannot be so easily preyed upon by these actors who are acting with what would appear to be malevolent intent.¹

It is also important to understand that while many of the submissions and witnesses to this Inquiry considered far-right extremism in Victoria and in Australia more generally to have increased, they also emphasised that this is not a new issue. This chapter examines the historical prevalence of extremism in Australia before looking at the relationship between far-right extremism and social isolation; economic insecurity; distrust of government and politicians; the mainstream media; and youth as a risk factor for radicalisation.

3.2 Historical prevalence of extremism in Australia

As described in the Board of Imams Victoria and Victoria University's Applied Security Science Partnership joint submission:

Many Australian far-right extremist movements were active throughout the 20th century, developing in ways that reflected the domestic context in which they operated, such as by having a strong anti-communist focus in the early Cold War decades and a virulent hostility to Asian immigration in later decades. Australian extreme right movements routinely echoed the ideas and approaches of international extreme right movements while also drawing on domestic traditions of racism such as the White Australia Policy. Periodically, Australian far-right extremist groups and individuals have turned to the use of violence to further their political cause.²

¹ Michael Stanton, Liberty Victoria, Public hearing, Melbourne, 14 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

² Board of Imams Victoria and Victoria University's Applied Security Science Partnership, *Submission 16*, p. 4 (with sources).

While the terms of reference for this Inquiry asked for an investigation into the rise of far-right extremist movements in Victoria, several submissions and Inquiry witnesses noted the historical prevalence of far-right extremist movements in Australia. Stakeholders argued that the events of recent years would be more accurately described as a 're-emergence' rather than a 'rise' of far-right extremism,³ noting several incidents spanning the past two decades. For example, the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001, as well as subsequent attacks in Bali, Madrid and London, have frequently been exploited by far-right extremist groups, including in Australia, to justify Islamophobia and racism.⁴ The 2005 Cronulla race riots⁵ and 2015 'Reclaim Australia' rallies (including in St Kilda)⁶ are notable examples of racist and nationalist incidents.

In the Victorian context, a dataset provided by Dr Kristy Champion from the Charles Sturt University Threats to Australian Domestic Security research group lists a range of politically motivated incidents dating back to 1972. These include incendiary attacks, assaults and murders, with left-wing organisations, Jewish people and synagogues, Muslims, Asians and gay people among those targeted.⁷ This dataset, which contains incidents from all Australian States and Territories, demonstrates the prevalence of politically motivated violence in Australia over several decades, including by perpetrators who were part of Neo-Nazi, skinhead and other white pride groups.

The Committee was also informed by several witnesses and submissions that Victoria was the first jurisdiction in Australia to have applied terrorism laws under the Commonwealth *Criminal Code*. This occurred in a trial against a far-right extremist who was imprisoned for planning a terrorist attack in 2016 that targeted left-wing and trade organisations.⁸ Also notable in 2016 was a statement by then Australian Security Intelligence Organisation Director-General Duncan Lewis 'that the extreme right threat had grown after previously being at a "very low base"'.⁹

The Committee notes therefore that in considering the 'rise' or 're-emergence' of far-right extremism in Victoria, it is important to recognise the history of racist, homophobic, antisemitic and Islamophobic extremist violence in Victoria and Australia.

FINDING 9: Far-right extremism is not new in Australia or Victoria, but there has been a re-emergence of far-right extremism, most notably from 2015 and 2016 onwards.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 4–5.

⁵ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Dr Kristy Champion, Appendix A*, pp. 46–47.

⁶ Online Hate Prevention Institute, *Submission 15*, p. 15.

⁷ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Dr Kristy Champion, Appendix A*, pp. 38–54.

⁸ Board of Imams Victoria and Victoria University's Applied Security Science Partnership, *Submission 16*, p. 5; Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, p. 15.

⁹ Board of Imams Victoria and Victoria University's Applied Security Science Partnership, *Submission 16*, pp. 5–6.

3.3 Risk factors for radicalisation

Risk factors for radicalisation must form part of any informed discussion of strategies utilised by far-right groups to attract people to their causes. This section provides a brief overview of radicalisation and risk factors for radicalisation.

Radicalisation is the process whereby a person's thinking, beliefs and behaviour diverge significantly from how most other people in their society and community view social issues and participate politically. As a person radicalises, they may begin to seek major changes in the nature of society and government.¹⁰

Overall, a relatively small number of people from a diverse range of backgrounds ever become radicalised. The radicalisation process is unique to each person who undergoes it. In exceptional circumstances a radicalised person may commit a serious or lethal act of violence: this is violent extremism. People who radicalise to this extent may display threatening behaviour, incite hatred or promote the use of violence for their cause.¹¹

Common predisposing risk factors for radicalisation to violent extremism can apply across various genders and age groups and include:

- personal experiences of real or perceived victimhood or threat to one's in-group (a group with a shared identity)
- a feeling of detachment or alienation from wider society
- identification with a cause linked to a perceived victimised community (which may be local or geographically distant)
- searching for a sense of purpose or a more exciting 'mission' in order to create a feeling of belonging and agency
- socialisation through family, friends or associates
- ideological messages that resonate with an individual's own experiences or pre-existing perceptions.¹²

In its evidence to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security's Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia, the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies noted that understanding of what drives people to become radicalised to violent extremism had become more sophisticated over the last decade. It submitted that, despite ongoing debate about the antecedents and drivers of radicalisation to violence, some things are now reasonably clear:

- there is no singular profile; violent extremists come from a wide range of backgrounds

¹⁰ Australian Government, *Living Safe Together: What is radicalisation?*, (n.d.), <<https://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au/Documents/what-is-radicalisation.PDF>> accessed 14 July 2022.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² AVERT Research Network, *Submission 17, Attachment 4*, pp. 4–6.

- there is no single path or cause, rather, it involves a complex interplay between push/pull factors that vary with every individual
- ideology can be an important focus for a sense of grievance against those with power or other groups in society, but is not solely determinative; relationships and social networks generally precede the adoption of an extremist ideology
- the process of radicalisation combines emotional and cognitive processes
- contrary to common assumptions, there are few apparent links between poverty and violent extremism
- feeling alienated from, and the sense of being disconnected, ignored and estranged by, the broader community.¹³

At a closed hearing for this Inquiry, a representative of the Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism (AVERT) Research Network expanded on the appeal of far-right groups to people at risk of radicalisation:

based on other research that has been done and interviews that I and a few others have done as well within the academic community, with right-wing extremists, particularly former extremists, they talk about things like the appeal of a sense of community ... the desire for having some sort of community and extremist groups fulfilling that need. There is a sense of action orientation that these groups provide them. There is also the thrill of the confrontation that is personally appealing to people who get involved in these movements ... But the way that I like to think about it is that there are structural factors, there are personal appeals, there are particular personal needs that involvement in these networks fulfils and there are particular narratives that are particularly appealing as well to those people, and so it is always, as usual, a combination of a variety of those different factors.¹⁴

Understanding the emotional connection that certain forms of radicalisation and extremism fill for people who are isolated or angry about specific issues was a key finding from Swinburne University's 2020 project to map right-wing extremism in Victoria:

For example, men's rights groups often fulfil an emotional gap for vulnerable men who feel the 'system' does not represent them or is skewed against them. They find acknowledgement and belonging in these groups which reinforce their views. These communities are not simply about extremist beliefs but are emotional communities and sources of support.¹⁵

The Committee also notes that many of the factors known to create fertile ground for recruitment—dislocation from work; social isolation; the prevalence and propagation of misinformation and conspiracy theories; people spending much more time on the

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Witness 2, Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism (AVERT) Research Network, Closed hearing, Melbourne, 8 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

¹⁵ Associate Professor Christine Agius, Dr Belinda Barnet, Associate Professor Lucy Nicholas, Janice Woolley, Professor Kay Cook, *Submission 13*, pp. 11–12.

internet because of stay-at-home restrictions and others—have been exacerbated over the past 2½ years by virtue of Victoria’s experience with the COVID-19 pandemic. This issue is discussed in Chapter 6.

3.4 Social isolation and economic insecurity

In its submission to the Inquiry, Liberty Victoria noted:

Social isolation and economic insecurity negatively impact an individual’s sense of identity, making individuals feel dislocated, alienated and more susceptible to rightwing extremist narratives.¹⁶

As discussed in Chapter 2, globalisation and international systems have contributed to increasing levels of economic insecurity. The COVID-19 global pandemic has compounded an increase in feelings of economic insecurity and social isolation for people around the world, including Victorians.

To comprehend the prevalence of far-right extremist movements in Victoria, it is important to understand how they claim to address issues of social isolation and economic insecurity by exploiting individuals’ feelings of insecurity and desire to lay blame for their personal circumstances. This may involve blaming multicultural communities, including ‘using fear of different cultures and hatred of different races as a strawman to explain economic and social deprivation’.¹⁷ As the Online Hate Prevention Institute explained:

social isolation and economic insecurity leave people feeling vulnerable and looking for someone to blame. Extremist groups offer a sense of belonging, addressing the isolation, and a scapegoat to blame for the economic insecurity.¹⁸

However, it is also important to understand that economic insecurity and social isolation are potential contributing factors, not necessarily causative factors, in the context of growing far-right extremism. As noted in the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies submission to this Inquiry:

social isolation and possibly growing economic insecurities may, under certain conditions, increase one’s susceptibility to far-right narratives, but these are complex processes that interplay with, among many other factors, individuals’ sense of marginalization, perceived lack of control, and desire for recognition, status and social connectedness.¹⁹

Addressing these risk factors will have a benefit to society as a whole, as economic security and social inclusion are central to wellbeing. The Centre for Resilient and

¹⁶ Liberty Victoria, *Submission 12*, p. 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁸ Online Hate Prevention Institute, *Submission 15*, p. 6.

¹⁹ Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, p. 4.

Inclusive Societies also noted the importance of taking the needs of regional and rural Victorians into account, stating in its submission that:

the state needs to ensure that social services addressing the needs of people experiencing disadvantage—in contexts of employment, mental health, social isolation and sense of belonging (including sense of being ‘left behind’) are both easily available and consistently meaningful for those who draw on them. This is particularly important in regional and rural areas, and consideration should be given to a ‘whole of Victoria’ mapping of resource distribution that moves beyond privileging urban/metropolitan resource concentration, especially given both the rise of far-right extremism and compounding economic and social disadvantage in various regional and rural areas relative to metropolitan centres.²⁰

FINDING 10: Social isolation, economic insecurity and inequality are risk factors that may play a part in increasing susceptibility to extremist narratives. Addressing these issues is important for wellbeing and social cohesion and may reduce the appeal of extremist narratives.

3.5 Distrust of governments and politicians

While anti-government sentiment is not in itself evidence of extremism, distrust of governments and politicians is considered a defining attribute of far-right extremist movements, both in Victoria and more generally.²¹ As described by Dr Kristy Campion from Charles Sturt University’s Threats to Australian Domestic Security research group:

Distrust of government is a common attribute of extreme right wing ideologies, due to their disagreement with democratic principles and democratic processes of governance. By extension, they typically oppose elected officials on diverse grounds. This can range from narratives that the government is tyrannical or oppressive, an activity reserved for privileged elites, dominated by media or foreign interests, or having been ‘purchased’ by foreign or domestic religious or cultural movements.²²

A representative from the AVERT Research Network noted the nature of some of the negative perceptions held about politicians, stating:

We have seen for a prolonged period of time a distrust in politicians, a sense that they are not listened to and that politicians are effectively in it for inherent self-interest.²³

Professor Sundhya Pahuja, from the research group on international law and the challenge of populism, discussed the importance of the ability to disagree respectfully and of the way political debate is conducted:

²⁰ Ibid., p. 22.

²¹ Ibid., p. 3.

²² Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22*, Dr Kristy Campion, p. 10.

²³ Witness 3, Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism (AVERT) Research Network, Closed hearing, Melbourne, 8 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7.

the best thing about having different views is the idea of what is produced through disagreement and the most depressing thing about politics for most people I think is a kind of negativity in politics where people criticise each other for the wrong reasons.²⁴

Trust in governments, politicians (including Members of Parliament) and institutions is essential for social cohesion, but it becomes even more important during crises, such as pandemics. The Victorian Government in their submission noted the impact of COVID-19 locally, stating that:

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions increased distrust of governments and politicians among the Victorian community, many of whom believe the State Government's actions during the pandemic constitute government overreach or oppression.²⁵

Liberty Victoria noted that 'people are susceptible to believe what they read on extremist social media and websites when they do not trust other sources of information', and therefore 'rebuilding trust in government is fundamental' in addressing that.²⁶ In their submission Liberty Victoria also pointed to research indicating that 'a contributing factor to vaccine hesitation is an observed, persistent decline in public trust in government institutions'.²⁷ The prevalence of conspiracy theories, misinformation and disinformation, including those propagated by extremist groups, can also increase distrust of government and authorities, which was particularly observed during the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁸ The use of conspiracy theories during the pandemic to disseminate far-right extremist content is discussed further in Chapter 6.

Many stakeholders told the Committee that there has been a significant decline in relation to trust in government, politicians and the Parliament. Consideration of how to improve the relationship between government, politicians and the public is critical. The Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies recommended in its submission that the Government 'think about how to consistently demonstrate its trustworthiness and transparency' and suggested that in this regard 'an Integrity Charter for the Victorian government, similar in nature to Victoria's Human Rights Charter, could be a helpful tool'.²⁹ According to one representative from CRIS:

integrity is core to trust, and trust or its absence is absolutely core to the attractiveness of alternative extremist movements that promise to meet all the needs and to demonstrate the integrity that is being perceived as lacking in the mainstream.³⁰

²⁴ Professor Sundhya Pahuja, Melbourne Law School, Australian Research Council Discovery Project: International Law and the Challenge of Populism, Public hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 31.

²⁵ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 6.

²⁶ Liberty Victoria, *Submission 12*, p. 13.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁸ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22*, Dr Kristy Champion, p. 11.

²⁹ Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, p. 24.

³⁰ Witness 1, Centre for Inclusive and Resilient Societies, Closed hearing, Melbourne, 8 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

Operation Watts, an investigation into ‘how branch stacking resulted in the alleged misuse of public funds for party-political purposes, and subversion of parliamentary standards and processes’³¹ was conducted by the Victorian Ombudsman and Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission. It released its special report in July 2022, not long after this Inquiry completed its public hearings. The Ombudsman and Commissioner stated in their foreword to the report that ‘Trust in our politicians is declining and will decline further if real action is not taken’.³²

The Committee notes the important matters raised in the Operation Watts report about creating a culture of parliamentary integrity³³ and considers implementing the report’s suggested reforms to be an important part of building community trust in governments, Parliament and politicians. The Committee acknowledges the State Government’s positive response to the report and undertaking to implement all recommendations.

FINDING 11: Evidence from stakeholders to the Inquiry and recent investigations suggest that trust in government and politicians has declined in Victoria, and in other jurisdictions globally, and this has been further exacerbated by the global COVID-19 pandemic.

RECOMMENDATION 1: That the Victorian Government and Members of Parliament seek ways to build public trust in the Parliament, including developing measures to improve transparency. This should include investigating the potential benefits of introducing an integrity charter.

3.6 The role of mainstream media

3.6.1 Declining trust in mainstream media

As with distrust in governments and the political process, the Committee also heard that declining trust in the media is a contributing factor to the increasing influence of extremist movements. Liberty Victoria noted:

there has not only been a steady decline in the trust that Australians have in government and in politicians more broadly, but also a consistent erosion of public trust in the ‘mainstream’ media as a whole.³⁴

³¹ Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission and Victorian Ombudsman, *Operation Watts: Investigation into allegations of misuse of electorate office and ministerial office staff and resources for branch stacking and other party-related activities*, report for Victorian Government, Melbourne, 2022, p. 4.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 191-192.

³⁴ Liberty Victoria, *Submission 12*, p. 7.

They also referred in their submission to Edelman Trust Barometer findings, which stated that during the pandemic:

Only 43% of people trusted the media and only 26% viewed the media as a unifying force in society. Further, 65% of people believed that the media is trying to purposely mislead people by saying things that are known to be false or gross exaggerations.³⁵

During the COVID-19 pandemic, both mainstream media and social media played a significant role in exacerbating this loss of trust. Dr Kristy Champion noted:

Misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic, emitting from both the mainstream media and social media, is likely to have fostered greater distrust in government during a critical period in which government reach was more noticeable within the lives of citizens.³⁶

The role of social media in spreading misinformation during the pandemic is discussed further in Chapter 6.

The erosion of trust in mainstream media was also described by Agius et al. in their submission, noting that it has led to increasing numbers of Australians using social media as their primary source of news.³⁷ The importance of social media and other online platforms to the proliferation and propagation of far-right extremism is discussed further in Chapter 5.

3.6.2 Potential negative impacts of mainstream media reporting

Although trust in mainstream media has declined, it is still an important part of how the public receives information. Newsworthiness and public interest are primary drivers of the media's coverage of violent extremism.³⁸ However, news coverage of violent extremism carries an inherent risk of platforming and amplifying far-right extremist rhetoric. Numerous ethical concerns consequently arise around responsible reporting by the media.

In framing their stories, journalists and media outlets variously encounter and must manage: dilemmas around what to report or ignore; the moral and legal quandaries of relating with, or amplifying the ideology of, an extremist group; the difficulties of dealing with, and the impact on, victims; and many other challenges. In dealing with these challenges journalists often seek guidance from their professional and ethical codes, which should set out a system of rules that can meet the needs of reporting in the public interest without inadvertently, recklessly or even deliberately compromising public safety.³⁹

³⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

³⁶ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22*, Dr Kristy Champion, p. 11.

³⁷ Agius et al, *Submission 13*, p. 9.

³⁸ Abdullahi Tasiu Abubakar, 'News Values and the Ethical Dilemmas of Covering Violent Extremism', *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, vol. 97, no. 1, 2020.

³⁹ Ibid.

The difficulties of mainstream reporting of extremism are not new. However, the transformation of the information landscape brought about by advances in technology, the internet and the proliferation of social media have significantly compounded the ethical challenges faced by media outlets in covering acts of extremist violence without inadvertently aiding the circulation of the message behind such acts:

journalistic ethics and credibility [have been brought] to the forefront of the news media's contemporary role. The mainstream media today faces novel challenges. Social media has solidified its dominance in the mediascape as a rapid information-sharing vehicle. The ability of every internet user to share information with an indeterminable audience has diminished journalistic authority over that information and raises concerns about voyeuristic dissemination at the expense of ethics and human decency. The use of videos, particularly terrorist-made videos, in the reportage of terrorism in the internet age necessarily carries the risk of inadvertently aiding the circulation of the very message being condemned as vile propaganda.⁴⁰

The difficulty of ensuring responsible media coverage which does not inadvertently amplify the views and propaganda that extremists seek to disseminate was highlighted by the Government in its submission to the Inquiry. It noted that, notwithstanding the mainstream media largely denouncing the actions and behaviour of violent extremists, its coverage had almost certainly increased the public profile of some entities, which consequently increased opportunities for recruitment and the spread of their ideological views:

The mainstream media have covered a range of issues pertinent to NRVE [nationalist and racist violent extremism] since the Christchurch attacks in March 2019. This coverage has created greater awareness of related ideas and motivations, introducing these more generally into the public domain. This includes views that promote discrimination and violence against groups based on culture, race, and sexual orientation.

...

Given the current recruitment objectives of NRVE groups, mainstream media attention (negative or otherwise) will almost certainly continue to be harnessed by these groups to attempt to gain greater support and grow their membership base.⁴¹

Journalist Nick McKenzie explained the importance of considering whether reporting on groups like these could also be a hazard to curtailing their activities. He suggested that it could also potentially create the perception that the organisations are a bigger threat than in reality.⁴²

⁴⁰ Soyeon Lim, 'The Contested Ethics of Mainstream Reporting of Terrorism in the Social Media Age', *Auckland University Law Review*, vol. 9, no. 22, 2016, p. 250.

⁴¹ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 5.

⁴² Nick McKenzie, journalist, Public hearing, Melbourne, 14 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

This challenge is also noted in the Government's submission to the Inquiry:

While the mainstream media have largely denounced the actions and behaviour of NRVEs [nationalist and racist violent extremists], its coverage has almost certainly increased the public profile of some entities, thereby increasing opportunities for recruitment or the spread of their ideological views.⁴³

Another issue for media practitioners to consider is 'media baiting', described in the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies submission as 'the attempt of attracting mainstream media attention through public provocations'.⁴⁴ The Centre submitted that far-right groups often sought out the attention of mainstream media as media reporting, even if critical, was considered to significantly contribute to increasing a group's public profile.⁴⁵ The Online Hate Prevention Institute also argued that mainstream media reporting can give extremist groups a larger platform and increase the 'celebrity status' of far-right leaders.⁴⁶

3.6.3 Mainstream media reporting of terrorist attacks

In 2019 the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) conducted an investigation into coverage of the Christchurch attack by Australian television broadcasters. ACMA found that some material that was broadcast raised 'serious questions' about whether outlets were in compliance with relevant codes of practice.⁴⁷ ACMA's observations, summarised in Box 3.1 below, provide some valuable insights that can better inform responsible media reporting of these subjects.

⁴³ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 5.

⁴⁴ Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, p. 15.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15 (with sources).

⁴⁶ Online Hate Prevention Institute, *Submission 15*, p. 15.

⁴⁷ Australian Communications and Media Authority, *ACMA investigation into coverage by Australian television broadcasters of the Christchurch terrorist attack*, report for Commonwealth of Australia, Melbourne, 2019, p. 12.

BOX 3.1: ACMA findings and observations relating to Australian television broadcast coverage of the Christchurch terrorist attack

Compliance with the regulatory framework

ACMA launched an investigation on 18 March 2019 into coverage of the terrorist attack on Australia's commercial, national and subscription television broadcast services. As a result of the investigation, ACMA found there was some material that raised serious questions about whether there was compliance with industry codes of practice.

Given the level of responsibility shown by the broadcasters and the unique circumstances of this incident, ACMA considered a productive conversation with industry about the adequate framing of its codes to deal with this type of material in the future (particularly perpetrator-generated live streamed extreme violent material) would provide greater regulatory and educative benefits than findings of individual contraventions by various broadcasters.

To this end, ACMA made the following observations arising from its investigation for industry consideration that relate to the subject of this chapter:

- **Material with high impact**

Although there was a clear public interest in audiences being informed about the attack, and broadcast of carefully selected excerpts of footage was appropriate and proportionate to the public interest, extreme care is required when broadcasting explicit footage of a person being killed and other associated images.

Particular concern related to broadcasts, including rolling coverage, that:

- used a high degree of repetition of certain depictions within short time frames
- showed body cam footage taken inside the Al Noor Mosque
- manipulated the audio from body cam footage.

- **Provision of viewer warnings**

The provision of viewer warnings was inconsistent and appeared at times to be insufficient and ad hoc. Further, while most broadcasters provided spoken warnings before their news reports, it was not uncommon for the sort of impactful material contained in those reports to have been used in the opening sequences to news programs, which were not preceded by a warning. This practice did not properly protect viewers from exposure to distressing or harmful content and undermined the objective of the relevant code.

With respect to the rolling coverage provided by some broadcasters, although warnings were provided prior to the initial use of the body cam footage, later warnings were less likely to have been provided. This failed to address the needs of viewers who may have joined the broadcast after the first warnings had been provided.

(Continued)

BOX 3.1: Continued

- **User-generated content**

Broadcasters need to take particular care when selecting and broadcasting user-generated content, particularly given the availability of this type of content is set to increase as more people publish online.

- **Broadcasting and online platforms**

The availability of violent abhorrent material online was addressed quickly following the Christchurch attack, given the widely recognised shortcomings of online platforms in blocking and removing the alleged perpetrator's material in a timely fashion. After the Christchurch attack, sanctions for failure to expeditiously remove such material under the *Criminal Code* were introduced, with provision to claim a defence against the sanctions if the material is used in a bona fide news report.

- **News content produced overseas**

Editorial decisions made overseas resulted in the broadcast of some content, including excerpts from the perpetrator's body cam footage, that exceeded the impact of the strongest footage selected by Australian broadcasters. Highly impactful and distressing material was broadcast, for example, by a subscription narrowcasting English-language Turkish news service, and during a number of SBS *WorldWatch* programs. The editorial stance of these news programs can differ from that taken by Australian counterparts. Overseas-produced news content broadcast by SBS is subject to different requirements under the SBS *Code of Practice* and the selection, review, oversight and identification of *WorldWatch* programs are subject to internal SBS processes. This includes advice to viewers that different standards may apply.

Source: Australian Communications and Media Authority, *ACMA investigation into coverage by Australian television broadcasters of the Christchurch terrorist attack*, Melbourne, 2019, pp. 1, 12–14.

Despite the progress made regarding removal of online terrorist content since the Christchurch attack, Dr Oboler from the Online Hate Prevention Institute told the Committee that it took 13 hours for one instance of online footage of the May 2022 Buffalo, New York terrorist attack to be removed, in that time generating 3.2 million views.⁴⁸ Chapter 7 contains further discussion on combating extremism online.

FINDING 12: Mainstream media has a critical role to play in the dissemination of accurate information during crises, as well as in reporting responsibly on the activities of far-right extremist groups and individuals, and not creating negative stereotypes of specific communities.

⁴⁸ Dr Andre Oboler, Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director, Online Hate Prevention Institute, Public hearing, Melbourne, 14 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

FINDING 13: Reporting of extremist activities, groups and individuals should be subject to strong media guidelines to minimise amplification of extremist propaganda that benefits or platforms extremist movements.

3.6.4 Potential positive impacts of mainstream media reporting

In the context of far-right extremism in Victoria, the media can play both a positive and negative role. An example of the positive role the media can play was in the coverage of the Believe in Bendigo campaign, a regional initiative that sought to challenge Islamophobic incidents and anti-mosque rallies in 2015. Margot Spalding, the campaign founder, noted that she was able to stand up for the Muslim community through the media. She also described how an episode of *Australian Story* about her work had a global impact, with people from diverse backgrounds contacting her to thank her for speaking up or having been inspired by Believe in Bendigo's activities.⁴⁹ The Believe in Bendigo campaign is covered in greater detail in Chapter 7.

Other positive impacts of media coverage have included an increased number of reports to police regarding nationalist and racist violent extremist groups due to greater public awareness of these groups' existence.⁵⁰ Journalist Nick McKenzie, whose reporting for *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* exposed the activities of a Neo-Nazi organisation active in Victoria, suggested that in terms of that organisation:

its online adherents via its Telegram channel dropped after our reporting, and part of that is our reporting showed the group for what it was, which was a disorganised, conspiracy theory driven, very ugly outfit. We cut through its mythology. It is dedicated to propaganda, to making itself appear more effective, more powerful, than it is. We cut through that propaganda by showing it for what it is and what it remains to be. I think that proper exposure, which is not sensationalised and calls out the groups for what they are and also gives a clear message as to exactly what a threat they do pose, is extremely useful. We must be having this debate in our open society to deal with it.⁵¹

3.7 Youth as a risk factor for radicalisation

The Committee received evidence that young people are more vulnerable to recruitment and radicalisation to extremism.

Swinburne University's far-right mapping project noted a key concern that extremist groups are increasingly recruiting young people, with reports that platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Twitter are proving to be fruitful sites.⁵² The Victorian Government submission indicated these sorts of trends had been compounded by

⁴⁹ Margot Spalding, Public hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

⁵⁰ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 5.

⁵¹ Nick McKenzie, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

⁵² Agius et al, *Submission 13*, p. 12.

far-right exploitation of anti-government sentiment related to the COVID-19 pandemic (discussed further in Chapter 6), which had contributed to the increasing radicalisation of young people:

For example, an increase in young people engaging in unsupervised internet usage due to home-based schooling, and limitations in after school activities, has provided an opportunity for extremist groups to expose young people to their ideas. It has been reported that some NRVE [nationalist and racist violent extremist] groups employ radicalisation tactics used by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), through social media recruitment and targeted propaganda, increasingly aimed at attracting younger people. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided NRVEs with unique opportunities to promote their views. As such, extremist ideologies have spread more quickly and widely as Australians, and particularly young Australians, spend more time online with likeminded individuals.⁵³

Factors which might contribute to making a young person more susceptible to radicalisation include feelings of alienation, major life transitions, inadequate parenting, out-of-home care and, particularly, unemployment. The AVERT Research Network submitted that youth unemployment was, for a variety of social and psychological reasons, associated with many of the vulnerabilities to radicalisation.⁵⁴

Soo-Lin Quek from the Centre for Multicultural Youth told the Committee that young people have been forced to deal with issues of social isolation before they are developmentally ready, putting them at greater risk:

what the research has told us is those young people have little real or deep knowledge of the religious or political doctrines that they are supporting, but they get drawn into them because a lot of young people, as we know and from some of what we are hearing back from communities as well, are highly disengaged. They have tried to grapple with a whole range of issues around social isolation, family breakdowns and mental health issues in the context of adolescent development ...⁵⁵

Dr Emma Colvin from Charles Sturt University similarly observed that young people who have difficulty navigating life transitions, such as changing schools, leaving home or relationship breakdowns, are at increased risk of being radicalised or recruited into extremism. Young people with learning disabilities are increasingly being targeted for grooming and radicalisation in the online space. Significantly, children who have experienced out-of-home care are especially vulnerable:

Children in OOHC [out-of-home care] are highly likely to have low attachment, difficulty forming positive social and community bonds and have frequent housing instability. Criminalised care-experienced children may feel isolated, rejected and resentful as a result of the care environment. These factors may make them both more susceptible

⁵³ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 4.

⁵⁴ AVERT Research Network, *Submission 17, Attachment 4*, p. 5.

⁵⁵ Soo-Lin Quek, Executive Manager Knowledge, Advocacy & Service Innovation, Knowledge & Advocacy, Centre for Multicultural Youth, Public hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 43.

to exploitation and also reduce their sense of connection with community and shatter social bonds.⁵⁶

The Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies submitted it was the very feelings of alienation and disengagement experienced by many young people that made them attractive targets for recruitment by some far-right groups. It noted research that had shown ‘frustrated and angry youth looking for solutions to their problems’, and ‘younger adolescents who typically [lack] maturity and may [be] unable to fully comprehend the ramifications of a group’s radical ideology’ were two cohorts in particular that were vulnerable to targeting and recruitment. A third was individuals looking for intimate relationships outside of their families.⁵⁷

Dr Colvin, however, cautioned that when considering and identifying cohorts susceptible to radicalisation, care should be taken against pathologising individual children, as had been done in the recent past in relation to Muslim children. She further noted:

Children with experience of the OOHC system are already criminalised, partly as a result of institutional interventions and perceptions. While it is possible they may be susceptible to radicalisation and subsequent recruitment into extremism, approaches to these challenges must not have the effect of othering and further alienating children.⁵⁸

In his 2022 Annual Threat Assessment, the Director-General of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) outlined the concerning increase in radicalisation of young people in greater detail:

- Increasing radicalisation of young Australians is a continuing trend and was previously noted by ASIO in 2020.
- The number of children being radicalised is growing, and their ages are getting lower: children as young as 13 are embracing both religiously motivated and ideologically motivated violent extremism.
- Most radicalisation of young people occurs online, with some also occurring in person.
- Inconsistent with previous experience, many young people do not come from families where a parent or sibling already holds extreme views.
- In 2021 minors made up 15% of new counter-terrorism investigations (up from 2–3% in recent years) and, on average, comprised more than half of ASIO’s highest priority investigations per week.
- Young people have been observed to be more intense in their extremism: where once they tended to be on the fringe of extremist groups, teenagers are now in leadership positions, directing adults, and willing to take violent action themselves.

⁵⁶ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Dr Emma Colvin*, p. 18 (with sources).

⁵⁷ Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS), *Submission 11*, p. 11 (with sources).

⁵⁸ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Dr Emma Colvin*, p. 19.

- ASIO is aware of minors preying on other minors, seeking to turn them to violent ideology by using grooming techniques similar to those used by paedophiles—
 - targeting has taken place online, and face-to-face in a variety of settings, including schools
 - tactics used in these cases involved a combination of attention, flattery and friendship, which shifted to bullying and manipulation
 - ASIO has observed young ringleaders deliberately desensitising their targets, gradually exposing them to more extreme and more violent propaganda, until extremely graphic material became normalised.⁵⁹

The Committee also notes a recent media report relating to a series of Department of Home Affairs (Cth) briefing papers obtained by the *Brisbane Times* under freedom of information.⁶⁰ One of the documents, a June 2022 briefing for the incoming Federal Government, outlined how security agencies were responding to ‘increasing numbers of young Australians becoming radicalised to violent extremist ideologies’, including:

- engaging with education, health, human services and community sectors to increase awareness of youth radicalisation, and support disengagement
- community-based youth engagement through a countering violent extremism community grants program
- prioritising research into youth radicalisation
- online strategic communications and youth engagement initiatives to improve digital literacy, and to contest and undermine online extremist narratives.⁶¹

Strategies and other measures aimed at countering far-right extremist movements in Victoria are addressed in detail in Chapter 7.

FINDING 14: An increasing focus on young people as a target of radicalisation and recruitment by the extreme far-right is of significant concern.

⁵⁹ Mike Burgess, Director-General of Security, ‘Annual Threat Assessment’, Australian Security Intelligence Organisation delivered at Annual Threat Assessment 2022, 9 February 2022, <<https://www.asio.gov.au/resources/speeches-and-statements/director-generals-annual-threat-assessment-2022>> accessed 15 July 2022.

⁶⁰ Sean Parnell, ‘Home Affairs warns of online movements ‘fracturing’ Australian society’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 August 2022, <<https://www.smh.com.au/national/home-affairs-warns-of-online-movements-fracturing-australian-society-20220801-p5b6a8.html>> accessed 2 August 2022.

⁶¹ Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, *Department of Home Affairs Incoming Government Brief to Minister for Home Affairs, Minister for Immigration, Citizenship & Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Emergency Management, and the Australian Border Force released under Freedom of Information Request, 1 August 2022, reference no. FA 22/06/00105*, briefing paper, Australian Government, Canberra, June 2022, p. 114.

FINDING 15: The Committee is concerned that the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) reported that in 2021 minors made up 15% of new counter-terrorism investigations (up from 2–3% in recent years) and, on average, comprised more than half of ASIO’s highest priority investigations per week. Young people who experience feelings of social isolation, disengagement and alienation may be more vulnerable to radicalisation, and are among key targets of extremist propaganda and recruitment.

FINDING 16: In formulating intervention and prevention measures aimed at countering youth radicalisation to extremism, it is imperative that alienating, criminalising or discriminating against young people is avoided as far as possible.

4 The threat of far-right extremism in Victoria

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the threat of extremist violence in Victoria, including terrorism. It also discusses the nature of violent and non-violent threats of extremism to multicultural and faith communities, women, the LGBTQIA+ community, politicians and public figures. Whether extremism is a threat to democracy in Victoria is also considered.

4.2 Violent and non-violent threats

Far-right extremism poses both violent and non-violent threats to Victoria. Dr Andrew Zammit of Victoria University's Applied Security Science Partnership told the Committee that:

far-right extremism poses two distinct but related threats: the threat of violence, which includes the potential for acts of terrorism within Victoria, although acts outside Victoria can also have an impact of course; and the long-term threat to liberal democracy, including the damage that these movements can cause to social inclusion and multicultural harmony in Victoria. Both threats are harmful to Victoria as a thriving multicultural state.¹

Incidents perpetrated by far-right extremists may target ethnic and religious minorities, women, the LGBTQIA+ community or politicians, particularly left-wing figures and politicians. The risks of far-right extremism to Victorian communities include both violent and non-violent threats. Violent threats may include direct harm, such as assaults or terror attacks, as well as indirect harm, such as vandalism and arson. The Board of Imams Victoria and Victoria University's Applied Security Science Partnership joint submission noted:

The threat of violence also includes other acts such as hate crimes and the purposeful use of violence at protests. These acts do not usually constitute terrorism and are not a matter for counterterrorism authorities, but they do involve criminal actions that threaten public safety and therefore tend to require police attention.²

Non-violent threats may involve far-right extremist groups and operators deploying tactics with the aim of 'subverting, disrupting, or eroding democratic processes

1 Dr Andrew Zammit, Applied Security Science Partnership, Victoria University, Closed hearing, Melbourne, 14 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27.

2 Board of Imams Victoria and Victoria University's Applied Security Science Partnership, *Submission 16*, p. 6.

and principles'.³ This may include infiltrating workers organisations⁴ or exploiting contentious political issues.⁵

The nature of these threats is discussed further in the following sections.

4.3 The terrorism threat

Far-right extremism poses a terrorism threat to Victorian communities. Terrorism is described by the Board of Imams Victoria and Victoria University's Applied Security Science Partnership as:

a tactic used by violent extremists to influence a wider audience than their immediate victims. As a tactic, terrorism can be used to intimidate opponents, to coerce political decision-makers, to provoke authorities, to outbid rivals, to inspire supporters, to polarise people in the middle, and to generate publicity for the cause.⁶

According to the Australian National Security website's current threat summary (as at July 2022), in addition to the persistent threat of religiously motivated violent extremism from Sunni violent extremist groups:

people motivated by other forms of violent extremism—including ideologically motivated violent extremism, and specifically nationalist and racist violent extremism—are also increasingly present in Australia. Nationalist and racist violent extremists are more active than in previous years and pose a serious threat to Australian security.⁷

4.3.1 Group actors

A terrorism threat can come from an individual who decides to act alone, or from a group. Group actors refer to organisations which have a shared ideology and may perpetrate violent or non-violent acts in accordance with that ideology. According to the Victorian Government, there are two dominant nationalist and racist violent extremist (NRVE) organisations currently active in Victoria. These groups adhere to ideology described as 'a modern Australian interpretation of national socialism (i.e., neo-Nazism)'. In its submission, the Victorian Government noted why this is a national security concern:

This ideology is of concern to national security due to the intrinsic role of violence associated with some of its core ideas. This includes a belief in the inevitability of, and need to prepare for, a 'race war' that precedes socio-political revolution and the racial cleansing of society.⁸

³ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22*, Dr Kristy Campion, p. 12.

⁴ Associate Professor Christine Agius, Dr Belinda Barnet, Associate Professor Lucy Nicholas, Janice Woolley, Professor Kay Cook, *Submission 13*, p. 5.

⁵ Board of Imams Victoria and Victoria University's Applied Security Science Partnership, *Submission 16*, p. 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6 (with sources).

⁷ Australian Government, *Australian National Security: National Threat Level, 2022*, <<https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/national-threat-level/current-national-terrorism-threat-level>> accessed 21 July 2022.

⁸ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 8.

The COVID-19 pandemic is thought to have exacerbated ‘race war’ ideology. In May 2020, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) assessed the pandemic as having ‘reinforced an extreme right-wing belief in the inevitability of societal collapse and a “race war”’.⁹ However, the Victorian Government submission to this Inquiry stated that there is ‘no indication on the whole that members of these groups believe in the necessity to accelerate this process through violence’. In fact, in line with ASIO’s 2022 Annual Threat Assessment, Victoria Police supported the view that in Victoria a lone-actor attack is more likely than a group attack:

the most probable terror attack scenario would be a lone actor attack, including those on the periphery of NRVE groups. Lone actor attacks are difficult to detect and potentially occur with little to no warning.¹⁰

4.3.2 Lone actors

Lone actors refer to individuals that act in apparent isolation. However, the Committee heard that these perpetrators may still consider themselves part of a wider movement, or to be acting in furtherance of a shared ideology.

Dr Kristy Campion, lecturer in terrorism studies at Charles Sturt University, told the Committee that lone actors ‘cannot be divorced from their ideological ecosystems, which are validated, legitimised and maintained by extreme right groups and movements domestically and internationally’.¹¹ Dr Campion said that even when acting alone, attackers ‘perceive themselves to be part of a collective’:

This collective, whether real or imagined, spans borders, organisations, movements and groups. It plays a role in their ideological consumption and production, their self-identification, and in their attack rationalisation.¹²

As discussed in Chapter 2, far-right extremism is a global issue. Therefore, the Committee notes the following risks:

1. Victorian extremists could be inspired to act by activities or attacks that have occurred internationally
2. Victorians could commit attacks beyond state and international borders, and
3. Victorian extremists could inspire others located elsewhere to perpetrate extremist violence.

FINDING 17: Both groups and individuals are capable of carrying out ideologically motivated terrorism, however, the risk from an individual acting alone is currently considered by authorities to be the more likely scenario.

⁹ ABC News, *ASIO briefing warns that the far-right is exploiting coronavirus to recruit new members*, 2020, <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-12/asio-briefing-warns-far-right-is-exploiting-coronavirus/12344472>> accessed 22 July 2022.

¹⁰ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 8.

¹¹ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Dr Kristy Campion*, p. 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

4.4 Threats to democracy

In evidence to the Inquiry, a representative from the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies argued that the threat to democracy has been underestimated in Australia.¹³ As discussed in Chapter 2, global and domestic populist movements, particularly the mainstreaming of anti-immigration and anti-democratic ideas, are risk factors for legitimising the rhetoric of extremist movements. As Dr Andrew Zammit from Victoria University's Applied Security Science Partnership argued, the threat to liberal democracy itself can be considered the long game of far-right extremists.¹⁴ He explained that this could manifest in:

a wide range of activities, including harassing and intimidating minority communities and political opponents, infiltration of more mainstream political movements, engagement in media stunts to achieve publicity for extremist causes, exploitation of contentious issues and various other actions which can be perfectly legal but which can also help to shift political boundaries in less inclusive directions ...¹⁵

One of these tactics is known as 'entryism'. Entryism can involve joining a major political party and branch-stacking or obtaining leadership roles in an effort to shift the political party's values and policies.¹⁶ A recent Australian example of this was exposed by an ABC investigation, which found that members of a far-right organisation had infiltrated the New South Wales Young Nationals.¹⁷

Other tactics that groups may use include 'astroturfing' (running misleading campaigns that disguise their true intent) and 'front grouping' (developing a fake group that pretends to be operating separately from the group controlling it).¹⁸

Transparency is important for maintaining a strong democracy. Misleading activities like those described above can erode the public's trust in the way that our institutions and political parties operate. Increasing public access to information about political processes is therefore an important part of improving transparency as well as deterring those types of activities.

The Board of Imams Victoria and Applied Security Science Partnership joint submission noted that it was unclear as to the degree that tactics like the attempted infiltration of mainstream Australian political parties and movements have 'meaningfully undermined liberal democracy in the long term'.¹⁹ However, the submission acknowledged that

¹³ Witness 2, Centre for Inclusive and Resilient Societies, Closed hearing, Melbourne, 8 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

¹⁴ Dr Andrew Zammit, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Dr Kristy Champion*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁷ Kristy Champion, *Infiltrating democracy: non-violent strategies serving violent ideologies*, 2020, <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/infiltrating-democracy-non-violent-strategies-serving-violent-ideologies>> accessed 22 July 2022.

¹⁸ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Dr Kristy Champion*, p. 13.

¹⁹ Board of Imams Victoria and Victoria University's Applied Security Science Partnership, *Submission 16*, p. 10.

‘the dangers need to be given attention and protectors of a respectful, inclusive and multicultural democracy need to respond effectively’.²⁰

There can also be a threat posed to democracy in the way that governments respond to extremism and terrorism. As Michael Stanton, the President of Liberty Victoria, pointed out, ‘The emergence of far-right extremism is real’²¹ but ‘as a community we must be careful that responses to extremism, however well-intentioned, do not become excuses to expand executive power and censorship in a disproportionate manner’.²²

FINDING 18: Far-right extremism poses a threat to democracy. Strengthening democratic processes and increasing transparency by providing information to the public about political processes and practices is an important part of mitigating this threat.

FINDING 19: Responses to extremism need to avoid measures that curtail civil liberties in a disproportionate manner.

4.5 Risks to politicians and public figures

The assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe while taking part in an election campaign event occurred only weeks before this Inquiry was due to table its final report. This incident was a shocking reminder of the very real threat faced by politicians and public figures, even in countries with strong gun control laws and very low rates of gun crime.²³

The Committee heard that threats to politicians and public figures, including Members of Parliament, can come from groups and individuals motivated by many different ideologies or grievances, including far-right extremists. As stated in the Victorian Government submission to this Inquiry:

International examples exist, including in Western liberal democracies, of NRVEs [nationalist and racist violent extremists] targeting politicians, and there is no reason to believe that Australia or Victoria present as unique in terms of their invulnerability to similar acts of violence.²⁴

The murder of British MP Jo Cox is one such example, as the attacker was believed to have been motivated ‘by white beliefs and exclusionary nationalism’.²⁵

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Michael Stanton, President, Liberty Victoria, Public hearing, Melbourne, 14 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

²² Liberty Victoria, *Submission 12*, p. 12.

²³ World Population Review, *Gun Deaths by Country, 2022*, <<https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/gun-deaths-by-country>> accessed 22 July 2022.

²⁴ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 9.

²⁵ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Dr Kristy Champion*, p. 13.

As explained by Dr Kristy Campion from the Charles Sturt University:

Ideologically, the targeting of public figures is often justified by the extreme right via narratives of peril. These narratives suggest that elected politicians are traitors to ‘the people’. This is often ascribed to politicians being insider threats, working in the service of foreign and malevolent powers.²⁶

Research by the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies also found that aside from the threat of harm to political figures, there is an ongoing intimidation that can be felt by those in positions of power:

far-right mobilisation, even if it is not violent, can lead to intimidation of democratically elected politicians at the local, state and possibly also federal level, so through intimidation the far right can exert a high level of power that is not democratically grounded.²⁷

As discussed in Section 4.3.1, the Committee heard that the most likely risk of a terror attack committed by a far-right extremist in Victoria is from an individual acting alone. This is similar to the threat posed to politicians and public figures, with the Online Hate Prevention Institute arguing that:

we believe the real risk to politicians is from those at the edges of the far-right who see the vilification of politicians by Australian groups, then the calls to violence which are more prominent in overseas groups. The transnational nature of the far-right and the ability for individuals to be incited (or self-incited) to violence as a result of online materials poses a threat to politicians and public figures.²⁸

There is also an identified risk to left-wing politicians and public figures, as they tend to be seen as ideological enemies by far-right extremists. Dr Campion argued in her submission that:

The long-standing contention between left and right political philosophies has an impact in the extreme right targeting. Historically in Australia, the extreme right is very combative towards what they perceive as an ‘extreme left’.²⁹

One such example of a far-right extremist who planned to target left-wing organisations is Phillip Galea. As outlined in Box 4.1, Phillip Galea is a Victorian who in 2016 was the first far-right extremist prosecuted in Australia for terrorism offences.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Witness 2, Centre for Inclusive and Resilient Societies, Closed hearing, Melbourne, 8 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

²⁸ Online Hate Prevention Institute, *Submission 15*, p. 18.

²⁹ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Dr Kristy Campion*, p. 13.

BOX 4.1: Phillip Galea

Following an investigation by the Victorian Joint Counter Terrorism Team in 2016, Phillip Galea was charged with one count of doing acts in preparation for, or planning, a terrorist act, and one count of attempting to collect or make a document likely to facilitate a terrorist act under the Commonwealth *Criminal Code*.

According to the case report on the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions website, Mr Galea had engaged in conduct involving the planning of attacks on ‘sites or persons associated with left-wing ideology, including a socialist centre and a trade union hall’. Mr Galea was also found to have attempted to create a document which would ‘contain information about matters such as making and using bombs and other explosive devices, torturing people and waging war against Muslims and ‘lefties’.

While the sentencing judge found that Mr Galea’s planned attacks were more likely to damage buildings than harm people, they also found that the document Galea planned to complete and disseminate ‘contained information which aimed to encourage like-minded people to ‘go out [and] commit violent acts against common enemies’. Mr Galea was also found to have aligned himself with militant factions of extremist groups and had sought to ‘enable other extremists to follow in his footsteps’.

Source: Office of the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions, ‘Phillip Galea jailed for terrorist offences’, <<https://www.cdpp.gov.au/case-reports/phillip-galea-jailed-terrorist-offences>> accessed 21 July 2022.

FINDING 20: Violent extremism poses a risk to politicians and public figures in Victoria, who may be targeted by groups or individuals motivated by ideological, religious or single-issue grievances.

FINDING 21: Left-wing aligned (or perceived to be left-wing aligned) politicians and public figures have been targeted by far-right extremist groups and individuals.

4.6 Risks to Victoria’s multicultural and faith communities

While racism is often seen in the activities and ideologies of far-right extremist groups and individuals, racism and racist scapegoating are not new in Australia, nor are they ‘limited to the fringes of society’.³⁰ The research group on international law and the challenge of populism submission argues that there is a:

long history of racist policy in Australia, from the historical and continuing dispossession, marginalisation and disproportionate incarceration of Indigenous peoples, to the White Australia Policy, offshore processing and mandatory detention of asylum seekers.³¹

³⁰ Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, p. 5.

³¹ Research Group on International Law and the Challenge of Populism, *Submission 14*, p. 8.

Their submission claims that ‘Australia’s migration system has long been a site of racist scapegoating’, which has been ‘used for electoral advantage by politicians and broader social movements’.³² The submission goes on to explain that this:

creates opportunities for right-wing populist and extremist actors to present their views as consistent with mainstream positions, and blurs the lines of what kind of rhetoric and action is acceptable in relation to race and migration, contributing to risks for multicultural communities.³³

This issue of the mainstreaming of racist discourse (particularly in federal politics) was also considered in the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network’s submission to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia, which argued that clear, decisive action must be taken in ‘eradicating any trends towards the normalisation of racism, discrimination, prejudice and hate speech’.³⁴

While holding racist views or engaging in racist behaviour are not necessarily indicators of far-right extremism, the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies pointed out that ‘most far-right extremists hold ethno-nationalist attitudes that are rooted in racism and a racially or culturally based form of white superiority/supremacy’.³⁵ CRIS explained in their submission that although racism cannot be relied on to indicate engagement with far-right extremism, it is a central part of the messaging used and may be ‘a risk factor that can increase a person’s susceptibility to far-right mobilisation and recruitment’.³⁶

The COVID-19 pandemic has also been exploited by far-right actors, including online, with Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies research indicating that:

Australian far-right online spaces (both mainstream social media such as Facebook and Twitter and alt-tech predominantly far-right platforms such as Gab) were commonly used to blame Muslims for the spread of the virus, spread anti-Chinese hatred and antisemitic conspiracy narratives.³⁷

FINDING 22: Racism and racist scapegoating, Islamophobia and antisemitism are common elements of far-right extremist ideologies, messaging and activities.

FINDING 23: When public and elected figures accept racist rhetoric and action this blurs the lines between what is acceptable and what is not in the community and leads to risks that multicultural communities will be targeted.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network, *Submission to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia*, February 2021, p. 10. (This submission was not made public by the PJCS as part of its Inquiry).

³⁵ Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, p. 5.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 5 (with sources).

4.7 Gendered risks

Another significant aspect of far-right extremism is the role of gender. Rana Ebrahimi, national manager of the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network, gave evidence to the Inquiry that both age and gender are critical when it comes to looking at violent extremism. While increasing numbers of young women are becoming radicalised, ‘most violent extremists are young men who are becoming radicalised in their teens or twenties’.³⁸

Associate Professor Christine Agius from Swinburne University also noted that those engaged in religious or ideological extremist violence are overwhelmingly male, but added that a history of domestic violence was also increasingly apparent in those engaged in extremist violence.³⁹ In research conducted by Associate Professor Agius and her colleagues, frontline workers in this field had expressed concerns that some men who use domestic violence believed ‘gender equality and feminism have “gone too far”’ and held grievances against governments and institutions that promote gender equality values.⁴⁰

In their submission to the Inquiry, Agius et al. noted that factors found in far-right ideology around hierarchy, order and tradition can often be connected to resentment towards women in areas including employment, child care and parenting.⁴¹ This resentment of the gains made by women was also discussed in evidence given to the Inquiry by a representative of the AVERT Research Network:

There is definitely a level of resentment and anger amongst men in terms of the freedoms won by women and the protections won by women in the workforce. There is a sense that that job for life, that idea of the company man, no longer exists—that you can basically go to university and get a job and feed a family, and that was your right. So that sense of entitlement ... is now being challenged. So I would say that is a really important dimension here, because what we see is this sense of flux, this sense of ‘Minorities are taking over, women are taking over’, so we have to look at the deeper seated level of anti-minority sentiment in the community and the deeper sense of anti-women sentiment in the community.⁴²

Attitudes towards women, including misogyny and hostility towards gender equality, have been found in research to be ‘a uniting ideology of many far-right groups’.⁴³ This may include overlaps with specific ideologies that target women, such as the so-called involuntary celibate (incel) movement, ‘a radical misogynistic movement that

³⁸ Rana Ebrahimi, National Manager, Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network Australia, Public hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 43.

³⁹ Associate Professor Christine Agius, Swinburne University, Public hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Agius et al, *Submission 13*, p. 4..

⁴² Witness 1, AVERT Research Network, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 7–8.

⁴³ Associate Professor Christine Agius, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

originated online but [has] since been linked with at least fifteen mass casualty attacks internationally since 2014'.⁴⁴ Agius et al. describe the 'incel' movement as:

an online subculture which fosters male resentment against women who they feel deny men the sexual gratification that they are entitled to, [and] holds similar sentiments that we find in far-right ideology. These include things like the desire for power accompanied with violence, hierarchical relations and an extreme antipathy towards women.⁴⁵

These hierarchical relations are also found in far-right movements which, as Agius et al. further explain, rest on notions of male primacy and tradition:

Far-right ideology often exhibits a preference for hierarchy, order and tradition. These ideological orientations are inherently gendered in that women's rights and equality are seen to challenge traditional ideas of male primacy and social order. When combined with antisystem views, there is a tendency to blame social, political, and economic problems on an imbalance within this system, which is perceived to favour women and minority groups.⁴⁶

Research conducted by Associate Professor Agius and colleagues for a 2020 report *Mapping right-wing extremism in Victoria: applying a gender lens to develop prevention and deradicalisation approaches* outlined some of these 'overlaps and pathways between far-right and anti-feminist networks and sentiments'.⁴⁷ A sense of grievance was found to be common in both far-right and anti-feminist sentiment, such as perceptions that courts and institutions work 'against men in favour of women',⁴⁸ for example, in the family court system with regard to custody issues.⁴⁹

Associate Professor Agius expressed the view that there is a gender blind spot when it comes to understanding far-right extremism,⁵⁰ and views like hostility to feminism and gender equality may act as 'gateways to more extreme ideologies'.⁵¹

The Committee notes the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee delivered its final report of the Inquiry into anti-vilification protections in Victoria in March 2021, which recommended:

That the Victorian Government extend anti-vilification provisions (in both civil and criminal laws) to cover the attributes of:

- a. race and religion
- b. gender and/or sex

44 Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 11.

45 Associate Professor Christine Agius, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

46 Agius et al, *Submission 13*, p. 7.

47 Ibid.

48 Dr Christine Agius, Associate Professor Kay Cook, Associate Professor Lucy Nicholas, Dr Hamza bin Jehangir, Dr Ashir Ahmed, Noorie Safa, Taylor Hardwick and Dr Sally Clark, *Mapping right-wing extremism in Victoria: Applying a gender lens to develop prevention and deradicalisation approaches*, report prepared by Department of Justice and Community Safety: Countering Violent Extremism Unit and Swinburne University of Technology, report for Victorian Government, Melbourne, 2020, p. 14.

49 Agius et al, *Submission 13*, p. 7.

50 Associate Professor Christine Agius, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

51 Ibid., p. 18.

- c. sexual orientation
- d. gender identity and/or gender expression
- e. sex characteristics and/or intersex status
- f. disability
- g. HIV/AIDS status
- h. personal association.⁵²

The Committee supports ongoing efforts to implement this recommendation for the protection of all Victorians.

FINDING 24: Evidence from stakeholders suggests that far-right extremism can be gendered, and that misogyny and anti-feminist sentiment are common but not necessarily well understood features of far-right extremist movements.

RECOMMENDATION 2: That the Government consider funding research investigating the links between extremism and family violence, anti-women or anti-feminist sentiment, and masculinity to identify further opportunities for counter-extremism measures.

4.8 Risks to the LGBTQIA+ community

The Committee heard from several stakeholders who said that far-right extremism poses a threat to the LGBTQIA+ community. Such threats can take the form of:

- violence against LGBTQIA+ community members,⁵³ including hate crime, hate speech and hate incidents
- the exploitation of mainstream public discourse, such as taking advantage of the divisive debate around the legalisation of same-sex marriage to legitimise their own narratives.⁵⁴

The Board of Imams Victoria and Victoria University's Applied Security Science Partnership described the Safe Schools program and same-sex marriage debates as having been 'seized on by far-right extremists in Victoria to present themselves as the "silent majority"'.⁵⁵ It is therefore important to understand that these debates are not only harmful to the LGBTQIA+ community in themselves⁵⁶ but that there is also the

⁵² Parliament of Victoria, Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee, *Inquiry into anti-vilification protections*, March 2021, p. 58.

⁵³ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Dr Kristy Champion*, p. 34.

⁵⁴ Board of Imams Victoria and Victoria University's Applied Security Science Partnership, *Submission 16*, p. 13 (with sources).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Marcus Strom, *Study shows same-sex marriage vote damaged LGBT mental health: But exposure to social support associated with reduced distress* 2019, <<https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2019/01/24/study-shows-same-sex-marriage-vote-damaged-lgbt-mental-health.html>> accessed 22 July 2022.

potential for far-right extremist groups to see the mainstreaming of homophobic and transphobic sentiments in public discourse as legitimising the targeting of LGBTQIA+ Victorians.

The Victorian Government has implemented several initiatives and policies in recognition of the need to support LGBTQIA+ communities in Victoria, such as the establishment of the Victorian Pride Centre in St Kilda and the introduction of legislation to prohibit change or suppression practices (also known as conversion therapy).

FINDING 25: Both real and perceived threats from far-right extremist groups cause harm to the LGBTQIA+ community in Victoria. Government measures to support these communities are important.

4.9 Extremism and hate crime

The Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS) explained that the lines between far-right extremist violence and hate crime are ‘often blurry and hard to draw’, and that this creates difficulties in determining the scope of far-right violence. Therefore ‘Far-right hatred and violence towards certain ethnoreligious minorities, gender-diverse groups or others considered ‘political enemies’ may fall under the label of hate crimes’.⁵⁷ As CRIS explained further in their submission:

Victoria Police records hate crimes as ‘prejudice-motivated crimes’; however, it is widely acknowledged that, for various reasons, hate crimes are severely underreported and under-recorded. This suggests that violent crimes, targeting certain parts of Victoria’s community and committed (partially or fully) motivated by a hateful far-right ideology, may often not be recorded as such, which means the scope of far-right violence appears to be significantly underestimated.

CRIS went on to say that the under-reporting of hate crimes may lead to the political nature of these acts not being fully considered or acknowledged:

In Victoria, several far-right extremist figures have engaged in violent conduct in recent times, but the potentially or likely political motivational dimensions of these acts seemed to not have been fully considered and acknowledged.⁵⁸

Victoria Police Assistant Commissioner Michael Hermans acknowledged the difficulties with hate crime data collection, explaining to the Committee at an Inquiry hearing that one of the factors preventing collection of accurate data stemmed from it not always being possible to determine the motivation for a crime, particularly if it remains unsolved.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, p. 16.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Michael Hermans, Assistant Commissioner, Victoria Police, Closed hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 40.

In some cases, targeted communities are collecting their own data. The Committee heard from Sheikh Moustapha Sarakibi from the Board of Imams Victoria that they have access to anecdotal data on incidents targeting the Muslim community, including via an Islamophobia hotline.⁶⁰ The Executive Council of Australian Jewry also maintains data on antisemitism, producing annual reports on antisemitic incidents in Australia.⁶¹ In the online space, the Online Hate Prevention Institute works to identify, categorise and remove instances of online hate and extremism.

Several stakeholders to this Inquiry spoke about the need for improved hate crime data collection. The Jewish Community Council of Victoria,⁶² Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council⁶³ and Online Hate Prevention Institute⁶⁴ all stressed the importance of implementing measures to effectively monitor the prevalence of hate crimes in Victoria. The Jewish Community Council of Victoria supported the implementation of the recommendations made by the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee in their report on its Inquiry into anti-vilification protections, particularly recommendations 33 and 34:

RECOMMENDATION 33: That the Victorian Government implement third party (community-led) reporting mechanisms in trusted community organisations as an additional avenue to report vilification and hate crimes to relevant authorities—the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission and Victoria Police.⁶⁵

RECOMMENDATION 34: That the Victorian Government work with agencies—including the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, Victoria Police, Victorian Crime Statistics Agency and the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal—to develop a strategy to collect, monitor and regularly report government data on vilification conduct and prejudice-motivated crime. Data should refer to outcome measures and indicators to monitor the effectiveness of legislation, programs and services in reducing vilification.⁶⁶

In a submission to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia published by the Australian Hate Crime Network, the importance of hate crime data to law enforcement and policymakers was emphasised. This included its usefulness in determining the scope of religiously or ideologically motivated extremism.

Hate crime data is integral to any analysis of the nature and extent of threats posed by extremist movements. It is the go-to dataset for policymakers to guide decision-making. Official crime data is also regularly used by police and security agencies to track

⁶⁰ Sheikh Moustapha Sarakibi, Board of Imams Victoria, Closed hearing, Melbourne, 14 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27.

⁶¹ Julie Nathan, *Report on antisemitism in Australia*, report prepared by Executive Council of Australian Jewry, Executive Council of Australian Jewry, New South Wales, 2021.

⁶² Jewish Community Council of Victoria, *Submission 18*, p. 8.

⁶³ Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council, *Submission 19*, p. 3.

⁶⁴ Online Hate Prevention Institute, *Submission 15*, p. 12.

⁶⁵ Parliament of Victoria, Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee, *Inquiry into anti-vilification protections*, March 2021, p. 215.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

suspects on a micro-level, and criminal trends, hotspots and movements on a macro-level. Official crime data reveals how often crimes with bias or hate motivations are being reported to police. It also would reveal the type of bias or hate manifested by the person of interest, including religious or right-wing extremist motivations. This dataset would provide law enforcement and intelligence agencies with valuable, real-time data on the nature and extent of the threats posed in Australia. It would also minimise oversights and selective discrimination within government agencies to ensure all extremists are being monitored irrespective of their motivation, while assisting social services agencies to develop targeted crime prevention strategies.⁶⁷

Research has demonstrated that ‘hate speech can normalise negative sentiment towards certain cultural and faith groups, undermine the safety of those groups, and impact the overall physical and mental health of those groups’.⁶⁸ Even when the actions of far-right groups and individuals towards these targeted communities are not explicitly violent, experiencing the threat of violence can ‘affect their sense of safety, sense of belonging as well as community relations, trust and cohesion’.⁶⁹ The impacts of racism, Islamophobia, antisemitism and homophobia on affected communities in Victoria are whole-of-society issues. Tackling the vilification of minorities is therefore not just an important part of countering extremism but critical for the safety and wellbeing of Victoria’s multicultural and gender-diverse communities.⁷⁰

FINDING 26: Improved collection and analysis of hate incident data is needed to inform prevention of hate crimes, and responses to hate, as well as to better understand the extent of far-right and other forms of extremism in Victoria.

RECOMMENDATION 3: That the Victorian Government continue to implement the recommendations from the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee’s report on the Inquiry into anti-vilification protections, in particular recommendations 33 and 34.

⁶⁷ Australian Hate Crime Network, *Submission to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security’s Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia*, February 2021, p. 6. (This submission was not made public by the PJCS as part of its Inquiry).

⁶⁸ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 8.

⁶⁹ Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, pp. 16–17.

⁷⁰ Online Hate Prevention Institute, *Submission 15*, p. 7.

5

Extremist recruitment and communication

5.1 Introduction

Online forums, social media platforms, video-sharing websites and encrypted apps have become instrumental in the sharing of extremist ideology globally. Recruitment is often regarded as the goal behind an extremist group's propaganda: dissemination of ideological content aimed at attracting more people to the group, or to its belief system or wider political movement.¹

Extremist groups and individuals are known to utilise various social media applications to disseminate propaganda. Groups known to Victoria Police have a wideranging online presence across several prominent social media and encrypted communications channels.²

There is no doubt that propaganda and recruitment are interconnected, however, recruitment is more complex than simply luring people into a movement with far-right propaganda. There can be a mix of online and offline communication and community building.

This chapter provides an overview of how various online platforms and communication methods can facilitate, and be exploited by, extremists to contact each other, disseminate ideological materials and propaganda, and how far-right extremist actors undertake to radicalise and recruit people to their movements.

5.2 Relationship between social media, extremism and other online platforms

As noted in Chapter 3, public trust in mainstream and traditional media as a source of news and information has declined. Increasingly, Australians now use alternative social media as their primary source of news—more than one-third of Australians get their news from Facebook alone—and far-right groups are no exception.³

The connection between the mainstream media and the social media landscape is more complex than simple reporting and broadcasting of social media content. Online

1 Mario Peucker, 'Radical-Right Recruitment: A Proposal to Enhance Conceptual Clarity', *Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies*, <<https://www.crisconsortium.org/blog/radical-right-recruitment-a-proposal-to-enhance-conceptual-clarity>> accessed 14 July 2022.

2 Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 7.

3 Associate Professor Christine Agius, Dr Belinda Barnet, Associate Professor Lucy Nicholas, Janice Woolley, Professor Kay Cook, *Submission 13*, pp. 9–10 (with sources).

dissemination of information and online communities are crucial to the way that extremism operates as a global phenomenon. The ‘complex ecology’ of how media and social media feeds extremism was addressed by Agius et al. in their submission:

Online communities play an important role in far-right movements. Here, the connection with media and the online environment is crucial to explore. It is best to understand the media and social media context that feeds extremism as a complex ecology rather than two unique parts. Traditional media play a role in igniting far-right sentiment or shaping narratives through their reporting, and this then feeds into discussion on different social media platforms and messaging apps. On platforms like Telegram and Gab for example, discussion of mainstream news is interspersed with links to conspiracist content and cherry-picked quotes and figures from traditional reporting are mobilised as memes. Social media platforms serve as a vital form of recruitment for far-right groups.⁴

Online forums, social media platforms, video-sharing websites and encrypted apps are instrumental in the global propagation of extremist ideology. They provide significant utility for extremist groups to target and radicalise people who engage with them.

Far-right extremist organisations use social media and other online platforms to recruit, disseminate ideological messages, deliver threats, release instructional materials to facilitate the actions of others, as well as to plan and coordinate violent extremist attacks. The internet is a major tool of extremist groups to facilitate contact and planning with their supporters and potential recruits:

social media platforms are not only a source of news and information but provide a real-time connection among like-minded participants, and therefore can amplify and manufacture misogynist, racist and other extremist discourse. The livestreaming of the Christchurch attack of March 2019 by an Australian white supremacist who killed 51 people after posting his manifesto on social media platforms such as 8chan and Twitter has brought the connection between extremist ideology and violence to the fore.⁵

Extremist material on the internet has also directly facilitated attempts to, or inspired the perpetration of, violent extremist attacks.⁶ Terrorist acts and their perpetrators, such as the 2019 Christchurch attack, are celebrated in chat rooms and online forums, which are used to distribute material endorsing similar terrorist action. Dr Levi West from Charles Sturt University pointed to ‘an incredibly steep acceleration in [extreme right wing] activity’ following the Christchurch attack in 2019.⁷ Dr Colin Rubenstein AM, Executive Director of the Australia/Israel and Jewish Affairs Council, told the Committee:

The first point I would like to make is that when it comes to the security threat Australians are very lucky not to have experienced the racially motivated mass casualty violence conducted by self-radicalised lone-wolf attackers that we have seen recently

⁴ Ibid., pp. 8–9.

⁵ Ibid., p. 9 (with sources).

⁶ Neil Shortland et al., ‘A Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory of Violent Extremist Propaganda: The Motivational Pathways Underlying Movement Toward and Away From Violent Extremist Action’, *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 13, May 2022, pp. 1–2, doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.858392.

⁷ Dr Levi West, Threats to Australian Domestic Security, Charles Sturt University, Public hearing, Melbourne, 14 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 36.

in the United States, in 2019 in New Zealand of course, in 2011 in Norway and elsewhere. Now, while there have been several such attacks over decades, it was the terrorist mass shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March 2019 that spawned a transnational wave of copycat attacks specifically referencing the shooter's ideology and manifesto.⁸

Dr Rubenstein went on to explain that many such attackers were:

radicalised on various social media networks and other digital platforms as part of a toxic online ecosystem that encourages users to conduct such attacks by spreading footage and manifestos from previous shooters and engaging in the quasi-religious sanctification of attackers. This is a leaderless, horizontal ecosystem, making it virtually impossible to disrupt attacks, and it is here where Victorian security agencies, in conjunction with federal agencies of course, must remain most vigilant and invest resources for monitoring.⁹

In the Victorian context, since the Reclaim Australia rallies in 2015, the far right has predominantly grown online, using social media platforms to form communities and spread messages to many people. For example, one page, which is run by a noted Australian far-right figure and posts anti-Islam content, has more than 100,000 followers.¹⁰

Dissemination of extremist propaganda over the internet, also known as online agitation, is the most common and widespread activity undertaken by extremists. Victoria Police defines an online agitator as someone who posts and shares offensive and inciteful content online to provoke a negative reaction from the public and to intensify ideological fervour within an ideological community.¹¹

The types of outcomes from online interaction with extremist ideology can vary depending on the platform used. A Swinburne University project undertaken in 2020 to map far-right extremism in Victoria has shown that the nature of engagement with far-right extremism tends to vary across different social media channels:

Twitter tends to be a platform where greater 'pushback' against specific (far-right) views can be found, yet YouTube appears to homogenise viewpoints rather than encourage dissent. In the YouTube channels we investigated as part of our Mapping report, we found very little disagreement of far-right/anti-feminist sentiment in the user comments sections. Moreover, YouTube, owned by Google, is driven by 'recommender algorithms'. These make recommendations for viewers to watch more extreme content; this, combined with 'fake news', misinformation and the promotion of divisive material, has great potential for radicalisation and extremism.¹²

⁸ Dr Colin Rubenstein, Executive Director, Australia Israel & Jewish Affairs Council, Public hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 9–10.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Agius et al, *Submission 13*, pp. 9–10 (with sources).

¹¹ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 5.

¹² Agius et al, *Submission 13*, pp. 9–10 (with sources).

Widespread participation in online extremist activity predominantly occurs via access to material on social media as well as encrypted and private messaging applications. Victoria Police notes these avenues of expression and communication present a lower risk to users in comparison to face-to-face contact due to the challenges of online identification. As with the process by which a person can become radicalised (covered in Chapter 3), the motives of people who engage in this type of activity are multifaceted and unique to each individual. The most common motives include:

- establishing new social networks and collective identity
- engaging in rebellious and ‘edgy’ behaviour
- seeking attention and validation from like-minded users
- expressing a legitimate interest in history, as well as local and global politics.¹³

An understanding of how social media works to facilitate the rise of far-right extremism first requires acknowledgement of its connection to wider societal concerns. This includes but is not limited to how people consume information and the highly effective use of social media as a proliferator of misinformation, disinformation and ‘fake news’. At a closed hearing for this Inquiry, a representative of the AVERT Research Network told the Committee:

Another major factor I think that we cannot discount that has led to declines in democracy and the rise of extremism is growing disinformation aided by technology as well. That has been a very big driving factor in exposing not only the narratives of extreme-right movements to many other different people who would not have been exposed to them without internet and digital technology but also the way that technology itself, as one well-known extremism researcher, JM Berger, discusses, has fractured our consensus reality.¹⁴

It was further stated that, in relation to research into online radicalisation and the role of social media:

there is an emerging consensus there that it has definitely aided networking, recruitment and financing as well. It is not to say, though, that you just look at extremist content and all of a sudden you become radicalised. There has to be something else going on, and all of the things that we were discussing earlier are related to all of that, but those are just kind of some very basic things around there. And I think when we take a look at the role of social media and extremism we have to understand how it is connected to much broader and deeper things in our society as well in terms of how we consume information, how it has polarised us, how it has affected our brains and how these platforms that operate on an attention economy are impacting all sorts of things and not just the rise of extremism, of which that is only a very small part. It is maybe the pointy end of it, but it is related to all of these other deeper concerns.¹⁵

¹³ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, pp. 5–6.

¹⁴ Witness 2, *Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism (AVERT) Research Network*, Closed hearing, Melbourne, 8 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

It is important to note here that interaction on social media platforms and other online forums is not necessarily indicative of an escalation in an individual's radicalisation trajectory. Applications such as Discord, Instagram and Reddit, popular among young people, are commonly used for benign purposes including general communication, gaming and content sharing. But there exists the potential of exposure to far-right extremist content and discourse.¹⁶ As noted in the Victorian Government's submission:

The proliferation of ideas and views on social media has the potential to create an echo-chamber for others within the movement, serving to further entrench individuals in the movement and become further radicalised as a result.¹⁷

This 'echo chamber' effect can lead people to potentially extreme material that serves to reinforce and validate their perceptions. Algorithms used by online platforms are designed to provide users with content that is reflective of their preferences, exposing people 'to more of what they know, and less of what is unfamiliar to them'.¹⁸ These algorithms entrap people, spreading disinformation and encouraging a shift towards extreme ideas by recommending content of like-minded people and groups. This creates a conducive environment for recruitment into extremist organisations.¹⁹

Much of the online content published by far-right extremists contains overtly vulgar, offensive and racist commentary, while 'shitposting'—intentionally posting content to distract or draw people deeper into extremist culture—and more obscure racist and sexist content couched as jokes and memes are also common.²⁰

As noted by another member of the AVERT group, jokes and meme-ification of ideological content are designed to foster a 'toxic joyfulness' in people who engage with online far-right extremism, which poses a particular challenge:

One of the things that it is hard for us to get our heads around but I think is a really relevant point—and I am thinking of far-right extremism in particular here—is social media is a fun place to be if you are a far-right extremist, right? It is fun. It is full of memes, it is full of jokes, it is full of—sorry to use the term, but I will because it is a commonly used term—shitposting, as we are familiar with.

...

they do pose another kind of challenge, which is that there is a kind of what I would call 'toxic joyfulness' to a lot of what happens in online far-right extremist spaces, and the bonds of sociality and community that the having-fun-together part creates are a real challenge, because we do not really have much at the moment to offer to replace that. That is just something for us to think about, again, in terms of intervention programming

¹⁶ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 6.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ AVERT Research Network, *Submission 17, Attachment 4*, p. 29 (with sources).

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 29.

²⁰ See Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 6; Jane Coaston, 'The New Zealand shooter's manifest shows how white nationalist rhetoric spreads', *Vox*, 18 March 2019, <<https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/3/15/18267163/new-zealand-shooting-christchurch-white-nationalism-racism-language>> accessed 19 July 2022.

and perhaps some more creative ideas about what it is that we need to do in those online spaces.²¹

Significantly, once people start engaging with extremist ideologies online, they can be drawn further into more targeted engagement chat forums and one-on-one dialogue:

This means that social media is not just an enormous space where lots and lots of people get together in communities, it is also a very intimate space, a very, very intimate space, with intensive one-on-one engagement. We probably underestimate the importance of the intimate spaces of the internet when we think about extremist trajectories and also when we think about extremist interventions and how we might do that.²²

This becomes a particularly important tool in relation to targeting and recruitment strategies employed by far-right extremists (discussed in Section 5.3 below).

Notwithstanding the importance of social media platforms for far-right extremist groups to communicate with and recruit new members, there is an increasing migration to apps such as Telegram. These can enable the distribution of extremist and potentially dangerous content as these apps are encrypted and individually untraceable. This is discussed in Section 5.2.1 below.

FINDING 27: Public trust in mainstream media has declined, while social media as a primary source of information has increased.

FINDING 28: The increasing use of social media and other online platforms by the wider public has enabled the increased ability of extremists to disseminate their ideology and attract people to their cause.

White nationalist ideology underpins much of the extreme far right as a global movement and can be spread by extremists to great effect via online platforms. An overview of the nature of white nationalist ideology that underpins far-right extremist online communication and propaganda appears in Box 5.1 below.

BOX 5.1: White nationalist ideology underpinning far-right extremist online communication and propaganda

White nationalist ideology has its roots in selective and misappropriated representations of European historical narratives that promote a white supremacist view of history. These narratives are leveraged to give credence to modern concepts of violent white masculinity and white nationalism.

(Continued)

²¹ Witness 1, Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism (AVERT) Research Network, Closed hearing, Melbourne, 8 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

BOX 5.1: Continued

In a paper provided as an attachment to the AVERT Research Network's submission, members of Macquarie and Deakin Universities explained that many extremists hold 'intense emotional attachments' to the idea of European medieval history as a site of racial and religious identity. This understanding informs their beliefs and how these ideas are shared in online forums and written manifestos and through the use of visual imagery. It was further submitted that research on far-right extremism shows a heavy emphasis is placed on the importance of 'hero' narratives for recruitment purposes:

Medieval European history provides FREs [far-right extremists] with many such hero narratives from Christian Crusaders, to Norse mythology and Viking warriors, and the Frankish leader Charles Martel, who defeated Muslim forces on French soil in 732. Medievalism helps FREs position present-day tensions as part of an ongoing historical conflict and suggest connections between hero narratives and extremist violence.

Writings by the perpetrator of the Christchurch attack indicate he had been deeply influenced by the white nationalist ideas underpinning much of the extremist violence and attempted violence in the United States and elsewhere. In interviews, some far-right protesters who invaded the US Capitol building in 2021 used the same language of white supremacy and the decline of Western civilisation as is used in the Christchurch manifesto.

This brand of European medievalism is a highly effective online recruitment tool of the far right, which exploits genuine interest in and discussion of European medieval history and culture online to bring everyday people into contact with extreme far-right perspectives and ideologies:

FREs are adept in online environments. They sometimes establish a presence in areas that attract popular support and interest before introducing FRE messages. Popular culture representations of the European Middle Ages can inform, shape, and enable medievalist FRE narratives.

Crusader crosses, Nordic runes and other medievalist symbols feature significantly in FRE meme culture, and medievalist historical narratives are rife in FRE internet communications, including on social media.

The Macquarie/Deakin University attachment to the AVERT submission sets out several steps that could be taken at the State level to combat the use of European medievalism by the far-right:

- improve understanding through greater interdisciplinary research in preventing/ countering violent extremism
- improve historical and subcultural literacy (of frontline workers in particular) of the use of ideological histories by FREs in radicalisation and recruitment processes
- collaboration with digital platforms and content providers, such as YouTube, to track and manage how algorithms move viewers from mainstream to extremist historical materials.

Source: AVERT Research Network, *Submission 17, Attachment 3*, pp. 3-7 (with sources).

5.2.1 Use of encrypted apps and private channels

Notwithstanding the importance of social media platforms for far-right extremist groups to communicate with and recruit new members, there is an increasing migration to apps such as Telegram that enable the distribution of extremist and potentially dangerous content by virtue of being encrypted and individually untraceable. Agius et al. submitted:

Consequently, encrypted messaging apps are a central tool for right-wing extremists. Together with social media, extremists use these apps to recruit new followers, to promote activities, and to distribute misinformation. Discussions themselves can be private or public, just as they are on platforms like Facebook: the ‘public’ channels on Telegram are used primarily to broadcast messages to followers (followers cannot interact with each other), and private ‘groups’ are used for interaction and more sensitive planning. Group participants can also share links and messages with each other: for example, links to buy weapons or requests for a private chat. Crucially, these groups are both unmoderated and their discussions encrypted.²³

The Committee heard that, in many cases, migration of far-right groups and individual users to apps such as Telegram has proliferated as mainstream social media companies have moved to impose bans and remove problematic content from their platforms.²⁴ This is largely due to progress in countering extremist accounts and content with the development of new algorithmic tools, and the introduction of greater legislative control by governments. While not perfect, these controls have still led far-right groups and individuals to seek out more accommodating platforms, making it important for both law enforcement and government to recognise this migration is occurring and to ensure new legislation is therefore also tailored to these new environments.²⁵

In its submission, the Victorian Government advised that, recently, individuals in the nationalist and racist violent extremism (NRVE) landscape who undertake online agitation ‘have been observed operating under a pseudonym and have later been found to be using encrypted technologies, almost certainly enabling their identity to be concealed online or erasing any established online footprint which may exist on other platforms’.²⁶

Most law enforcement work on violent extremism does not reach the required warrant threshold that would enable access to protected platforms. As a result, so much of the activity in the extremism space, even that with the potential to reach the threshold of violent extremism, operates within a shield of anonymity across the internet. Telegram, Gab and 4chan are utilised because they offer anonymity.²⁷ The Government submitted:

²³ Agius et al, *Submission 13*, p. 12 (with sources).

²⁴ Julie Nathan, Research Director, Executive Council of Australia Jewry, Public hearing, Melbourne, 14 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22.

²⁵ Agius et al, *Submission 13*, pp. 12–13 (with sources).

²⁶ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 6.

²⁷ Michael Hermans, Assistant Commissioner, Victoria Police, Closed hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 36.

The online security awareness exhibited by NRVEs is indicative of an advanced understanding of online security and presents an ongoing challenge to law enforcement. In addition to facilitating the dissemination of extremist propaganda, social media has almost certainly enabled groups to collectively mobilise and recruit with greater ease. As mentioned above, social media applications and communication applications alike have enabled likeminded users to interact and share ideological views.²⁸

Other stakeholders spoke to the impetus for greater regulation to better address the proliferation of extremism on encrypted and private applications. A representative from the AVERT Research Network argued:

Yes, just on social media, I think given the context we have got to label the problem, and it is corporations and groups like Telegram. This is an encrypted messaging app that is entirely beyond the reach of government to censor and to hold to account at this point. We know that it only started in 2013-14 with, you know, a couple of hundred pilot users, and all of a sudden it has now got over 600 million users globally ... these are highly profitable enterprises that really pay little tax in Australia, do not contribute anything of note to the citizenship question about what it is to be a citizen in Australia and do not contribute anything particularly productive to public discourse or political discourse. And there is this stasis—this is at a federal level, it is at a state level, but it is also at an international level. We know that a lot of extremists in this country are getting their ideas and being influenced by material coming through these channels, and if we continue to fail to act it is going to continue to be a problem.²⁹

Journalist Nick McKenzie, who investigated a far-right extremist group active in Victoria, told the Committee:

It is also an obvious fact that the internet is a key incubator of radicalisation. Encrypted communications are the biggest form of communication by these groups. Our undercover operative was directed to use multiple encrypted channels, especially those belonging to companies overseas that do not care if they become hubs for extremism. While holding tech companies to account is perhaps primarily a commonwealth responsibility, Victoria should be urging much more action in this space, and it should be said as well that our success as a nation in holding tech companies that host these platforms to account is fairly hopeless to date.³⁰

Strategies and other measures aimed at countering far-right extremist movements in Victoria, including online, are addressed in detail in Chapter 7.

FINDING 29: Regulatory frameworks that govern the use of encrypted online communication platforms should be formulated to be able to effectively respond to and keep pace with developments in technology and behaviour.

²⁸ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 6.

²⁹ Witness 3, Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism (AVERT) Research Network, Closed hearing, Melbourne, 8 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

³⁰ Nick McKenzie, journalist, Public hearing, Melbourne, 14 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

5.3 Far-right recruitment strategies

Analysis of recruitment strategies utilised by the far-right movement in Australia points to an ‘interplay between online and offline actions’ in pursuit of the connected aims of disseminating ideological messages (propaganda) and recruitment:

Several far-right groups in Victoria and other parts of the country seek to raise their public profile through offline action, such as stickering or leafletting (leaflets often include contact details), holding rallies or other public stunts. This is seen as a vehicle to make more people aware of their group and encourage them to follow them online or get in contact with the group directly.³¹

Extreme far-right recruitment typically comprises three dimensions:

1. targeted recruitment
2. recruitment through social networks and social influence, and
3. online recruitment.³²

Targeted recruitment

Targeted recruitment to far-right extremism can be centrally conceived and organisationally driven from the top down through an active and deliberate process of using both offline and online strategies to attract new members with a specific profile or skill set, followed by an internal application process.³³

A number of Victorian far-right groups use the targeted top-down approach, including specific vetting procedures (such as a dedicated Telegram vetting channel and personal interviews) to recruit new members. These groups frequently encourage individuals to engage with online content and to sign up for membership. Online and offline recruiting strategies can also intersect through public flyer drops, graffiti and stickering/postering blitzes, both common tactics of Victorian far-right groups to attract the interest of potential recruits. As noted by the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies in its submission:

There is no clear line of demarcation between online extremism and the current generation of flyer drops and ephemeral propaganda. Extremist flyers point readers to online destinations, but they also emanate from online destinations, and after they have been deployed, they are amplified again online.³⁴

³¹ Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, pp. 14–15.

³² AVERT Research Network, *Submission 17*, p. 4.

³³ Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, p. 9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10 (with sources).

Recruitment through social networks and social influence

Through shared trust, experiences and connections, friends, peer groups and family members can play a major role in a person's radicalisation to far-right extremism. 'Forming social ties and entering supportive networks provides the "structural pull" from preinvolvement to recruitment.'³⁵ This process may be aided by a wide range of organisational practices, including:

- public events such as book presentations, sporting and cultural events, and political activities including protests
- recruitment drives, emphasising the importance of face-to-face interaction to support recruitment efforts.³⁶

Online recruitment

Recruitment can also occur through a process of cultivating potential joiners through social influence and the dissemination, both online and offline, of extremist propaganda. Social media platforms and encrypted messaging apps like Telegram are used by far-right extremists to organise community events, to promote and share information, and to recruit new members.

Research focusing on the Victorian context has found that many far-right actors do not do much more than post ideological content online and wait for algorithms to channel people towards their accounts. In other cases, some groups build a loyal online community by posting on a particular issue, such as opposition to gender diversity or Islam. These communities subsequently expand the thematic scope of their posting to encompass far-right narratives, which can be part of a recruitment strategy to gradually pull individuals into radical-right ideological spaces.³⁷

5.3.1 Far-right recruitment in the Victorian context

In the Victorian context, evidence indicates that far-right recruitment activities occur on a continuum, ranging from active and deliberate 'top-down' strategies to attract and incorporate new members to a radical group, to more passive forms that rely on self-recruitment.³⁸ As submitted by the AVERT Research Network:

This complexity of recruitment processes has implications for the way in which prevention and intervention measures are developed and implemented, taking into account different recruitment pathways and the agency of all actors. This is similar to right-wing recruitment processes and strategies both elsewhere in Australia and internationally.³⁹

³⁵ Ibid., p. 12.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 12 (with sources).

³⁷ Ibid., p. 13 (with sources).

³⁸ AVERT Research Network, *Submission 17*, p. 4.

³⁹ Ibid.

According to the Victorian Government submission, recruitment methodologies employed by nationalist and racist violent extremist (NRVE) groups in Victoria are currently assessed as ‘involving a multi-step, layered process overseen by trusted group members’. Sequentially, this is assessed to be inclusive of:

- an online application and vetting (primarily through encrypted communications platforms)
- a structured interview over the phone or through Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP)
- in-person vetting through an in-person interview and participation in real-world activity (such as billposting or a group social event).⁴⁰

On occasion, far-right groups may also leverage existing real-world and online associations to selectively recruit some people. In these instances, the individual is likely to be known and trusted by a group member prior to being invited to join activities and meetings.⁴¹

In its submission to this Inquiry, the Government explained how the current state of the NRVE movement in Victoria reflects a trend toward a more isolationist approach that relies on a small cohort of committed members:

More broadly, the NRVE movement has become less cooperative and cohesive. There had previously been some level of movement between groups; however, the degree to which members move from one group to another has changed as membership is now less fluid. The more extreme groups are becoming increasingly isolationist and strict with membership and initiation protocols, primarily to deter those who are not committed, or to prevent infiltration by law enforcement or left-wing entities. Group leaders now expect and strive for greater loyalty and commitment of a few rather than large membership numbers whose dedication to the movement is lacklustre. It is expected that members move from a part-time commitment to a more formal, full-time obligation.⁴²

Since March 2020, in-person meetings of extremist individuals and groups have largely been limited as a result of COVID-19-related travel restrictions, leading to a dominance of online engagement. While engagement through online mediums establishes a working relationship between domestic and international groups, it is limited in its ability to bring groups together for in-person engagement. Apart from the apparent networking aspect, such interactions strengthen the camaraderie between violent NRVE members and enable a potential build-up of capabilities and sharing of activities and strategies.⁴³

⁴⁰ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, pp. 6–7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Agius et al. noted that anti-vaccination and anti-lockdown sentiments had been appropriated by extremist groups as an effective means to reach new audiences.⁴⁴ The Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies similarly submitted:

Australian white nationalist groups on Telegram, for example, refer to anti-lockdown Telegram groups as ‘normie channels’ that can be used for recruitment purposes (‘good to reach other Aussies’). A number of Victorian-based white supremacy figureheads have sought to fuel grievances and antigovernment sentiments within the anti-lockdown/anti-vax groups and attempted to co-opt them for their own ideological propaganda and recruitment. The leader of a white nationalist group in Victoria, for example, expressed his support and praise for anti-vax protesters but encouraged them to engage with his ideological proposition regarding white nationalism to achieve ‘long term success’ that moved beyond the immediate focus of anti-vax dissent.⁴⁵

The Government’s submission also noted that the exploitation of anti-government sentiment related to the COVID-19 pandemic had contributed to a more generally observed and concerning increase in the radicalisation of young people.⁴⁶

The risk of radicalisation of young people is covered in Chapter 3. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on extremist movements in Victoria is discussed in Chapter 6.

⁴⁴ Agius et al, *Submission 13*, p. 11.

⁴⁵ Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, p. 5.

⁴⁶ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 4.

6 The impact of COVID-19 on extremism in Victoria

6.1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and the Victorian Government's public health measures in response heightened and accelerated some of the trends that have contributed to a rise in extremism in recent years. As discussed in Chapter 3, these trends include social isolation, economic insecurity and distrust in government.

One of the impacts of COVID-19 restrictions, and the introduction of vaccine mandates in response to the pandemic, was an increase in potential opportunities for recruitment by far-right extremist groups and individuals. These actors sought to capitalise on the grievances felt by some towards the Government by using social media and conspiracy theories to amplify criticism and sow distrust in the Government. The grievances felt by some toward COVID-19 restrictions and vaccine mandates culminated in protests in late 2021 which brought significant disruption and clashes with police in Melbourne. During this time, threats and instances of abuse were directed towards public office holders, government officials and minority communities.

The extent to which the protests and violence associated with them were motivated by far-right extremist ideology remains contested. Some stakeholders argued that extremist groups or individuals encouraged the protests and used them as an opportunity to recruit. Others told the Committee that while the protests were attended by extremist individuals and groups, the majority of attendees participated because of their own grievances against the Victorian Government's COVID-19 restrictions and vaccine mandates.

The extent to which the far-right extremist movement has grown during the pandemic is unknown. While there was an increase in potential exposure to extremist ideologies, stakeholders reported that this does not necessarily equate to a growth in far-right groups. The end of the latest series of lockdowns in 2021 and the removal of vaccine mandates for many industries have resolved some major sources of grievance. However, it is important that the Victorian Government remains vigilant in relation to growth of the far-right extremist movement following the COVID-19 pandemic.

6.2 How the COVID-19 pandemic made people more vulnerable to extremism

The COVID-19 pandemic has been—and continues to be—one of the most significant events in Victoria since the end of the Second World War. Rarely, if ever, has the Victorian Government asked its citizens to put aside their freedoms to protect the

health of the greater population. Melbourne experienced the longest periods of stay-at-home orders—which came to be known as ‘lockdowns’—of Australia and much of the world throughout 2020–21.¹

Metropolitan Melbourne experienced six lockdowns over a total of 262 days at different points throughout 2020 and 2021.² This included the two longest periods of lockdown:

- 9 July 2020 – 27 October 2020 (112 days);³ and
- 5 August 2021 – 21 October 2021 (78 days).⁴

Regional Victorians also experienced lockdowns throughout the pandemic, with some places experiencing longer periods of restrictions than others.⁵

The public health measures enacted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Victoria were flexible depending on the risk to the public. The Committee does not intend to reproduce an exhaustive list of the COVID-19 restrictions throughout 2020 and 2021.⁶ However, as an example of the public health measures at their most restrictive, a media release from the Premier on 2 August 2020 details the following limits on personal movement in metropolitan Melbourne during the first set of Stage 4⁷ restrictions:

- a curfew between the hours of 8pm to 5am, with exemptions for some workplaces, medical care, caregiving and to visit intimate partners
- a restriction on travel more than 5km from home
- a limit on exercise to one hour per day, with an allowance to exercise with one person from outside your household
- compulsory wearing of masks in outdoor settings when not exercising
- a limit on shopping to one person per household per day.⁸

These measures were in addition to restrictions on shopping and retail, workplaces, schools, entertainment, sport, ceremonies and travel, all of which were prohibited or heavily limited at the time.⁹

1 RMIT ABC Fact Check, *ABC News Online: Josh Frydenberg says Melbourne is the world's most locked down city. Is that correct?*, 2021, <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-10-25/fact-check-is-melbourne-most-locked-down-city/100560172>> accessed 19 July 2022.

2 Parliament of Victoria, Pandemic Declaration Accountability and Oversight Committee, *Review of the Pandemic (Quarantine, Isolation and Testing) Orders*, July 2022, p. 3.

3 Department of Health and Human Services, *Coronavirus update for Victoria: 9 July 2020*, media release, Victorian Government, Melbourne, 9 July 2020.; Hon Daniel Andrews, *Statement From The Premier*, media release, Victorian Government, Melbourne, 18 October 2020.

4 Hon Daniel Andrews, *Seven Day Lockdown To Keep Victorians Safe*, media release, Victorian Government, Melbourne, 5 August 2020.; Hon Daniel Andrews, *Thank you Victoria*, media release, Victorian Government, Melbourne, 28 October 2021.

5 Parliament of Victoria, Pandemic Declaration Accountability and Oversight Committee, *Review of the Pandemic (Quarantine, Isolation and Testing) Orders*, p. 21.

6 For an overview of the public health measures enacted during the pandemic, including a timeline, see: *ibid.*, pp. 1–32.

7 There were a number of stages of COVID-19 restrictions. Stage 4 was the highest.

8 Hon Daniel Andrews, *Premier's statement on changes to Melbourne's restrictions*, media release, Victorian Government, Melbourne, 2 August 2020.

9 Victorian Government, *Summary of Restrictions: Move to Stage 4 6pm 2 August 2020*, PDF, Melbourne, August 2020, pp. 1–4.

COVID-19 restrictions meant that many Victorians were confined to their households and physically separated from family, friends and workplaces. This brought social isolation for many as well as economic hardship for some who, despite Government assistance, saw their livelihoods impacted.¹⁰ The Parliament of Victoria's Pandemic Declaration Accountability and Oversight Committee described the toll of the pandemic in their *Review of the Pandemic (Quarantine, Isolation and Testing) Orders*:

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused extraordinary social and economic disruption in Victoria and placed a significant burden on the community through strict public health measures. These measures are aimed at reducing the risk of COVID-19 and have caused significant interruptions to people's work, education and social life. During periods where cases have surged, Victorians were placed under lockdown, businesses were shut, schools were closed, curfews were implemented and barriers between metropolitan and regional areas introduced. By December 2021, Victorians had spent 262 cumulative days in lockdown.¹¹

Stay-at-home orders and other public health measures were a feature of the response to COVID-19 across the globe. These were seen as necessary public health measures. Nevertheless, the Committee understands the context in which some became aggrieved at the Government due to the public health measures. The Committee heard from stakeholders that aggrievement has become a common motivating factor in extremist movements.¹²

As discussed in Chapter 3, social isolation, economic insecurity and distrust in the government are potential risk factors for susceptibility to extremism. The COVID-19 pandemic and the public health restrictions in response to it have increased both aggrievement and these risk factors.

The AVERT Research Network submission to the Inquiry explained that the COVID-19 restrictions had created a source of grievance amongst some and increased recruitment opportunities for extremist organisations:

The COVID-19 pandemic has engendered many of these grievances. That is not to say that they did not exist beforehand, in the same way that far-right extremism was already accelerating prior to the pandemic, but there is no question that COVID-19 and the last two-and-a-bit years that we have been going through this have provided accelerated opportunities for extremist actors and movements to exploit, to radicalise and to recruit.¹³

¹⁰ Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, p. 19.

¹¹ Parliament of Victoria, Pandemic Declaration Accountability and Oversight Committee, *Review of the Pandemic (Quarantine, Isolation and Testing) Orders*, p. 3.

¹² AVERT Research Network, *Submission 17*, p. 2.

¹³ Witness 1, Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism (AVERT) Research Network, Closed hearing, Melbourne, 8 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

This was echoed in the submission from the Victorian Government who, in the context of discussing specific-issue violent extremism, said the risk of extremism has:

been recently accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has accelerated some of the social, political, and economic drivers of violent extremism and increased the number of individuals motivated by specific issues or personal grievances.¹⁴

The following sections provide information from stakeholders about how the pandemic has been a significant factor in increased trends in social isolation, economic insecurity and distrust in government.

6.2.1 Social isolation and online spaces

The public health restrictions during the pandemic necessitated people to isolate in their homes away from their usual social networks. Liberty Victoria's submission highlighted this issue:

Social isolation increased during the COVID-19 pandemic as a result of the Victorian lockdowns. At the height of government restrictions, individuals could not socialise in any real capacity apart from with those who resided in their household, or go to work without a specialised permit, or travel 5 kilometres from their homes.¹⁵

The Committee heard that during this period there was an increase in time spent online, including on social media. Stakeholders argued that some came into contact with far-right material via social media. The submission from Agius et al. explained:

greater reliance on the internet for work, social engagement and entertainment became a key feature of individual and collective activity from 2020. Increased use of social media during the pandemic and reliance on social media and internet sources for information has fuelled ideological alignment and recruitment practices in the far-right context.¹⁶

This view was also held by Liberty Victoria, who noted that some people who felt disenfranchised by COVID restrictions sought like-minded groups and became exposed to conspiracy theories and disinformation:

more people spent more time on social media, seeking a sense of community, including amongst the perceived disenfranchised. This exposed them to a greatly increased risk of exposure to extreme right-wing propaganda, conspiracy theories and misinformation which undermined the public's confidence in governments through "propagation of conspiracy theories and misinformation".¹⁷

¹⁴ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 10.

¹⁵ Liberty Victoria, *Submission 12*, p. 9.

¹⁶ Associate Professor Christine Agius, Dr Belinda Barnet, Associate Professor Lucy Nicholas, Janice Woolley, Professor Kay Cook, *Submission 13*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁷ Liberty Victoria, *Submission 12*, pp. 9-10.

The submission from the Victorian Government discussed the unprecedented access and speed with which far-right extremist individuals or groups could disseminate their views to people spending more time online:

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided NRVEs [nationalist and racist violent extremists] with unique opportunities to promote their views. As such, extremist ideologies have spread more quickly and widely as Australians, and particularly young Australians, spend more time online with likeminded individuals.¹⁸

The use of COVID-19 conspiracy theories and disinformation to advance far-right ideology is discussed further in Section 6.3.

6.2.2 Grievances and the erosion of trust in the Government

The Committee heard that the lockdowns in Victoria negatively affected people's livelihoods and mental health. Many businesses and individuals had their workplaces impacted. Despite government assistance, some businesses and individuals experienced financial hardship. In addition, grievances expressed by elements of the community regarding government overreach in enacting the lockdowns were reported to the Committee. Alongside these grievances there was an erosion of trust in the Government from some as the pandemic went on.

The submission from the Victorian Government discussed how the conditions of the pandemic brought about economic hardship and mental health instability:

COVID-19 restrictions throughout 2020–2021 exacerbated conditions conducive to radicalisation across the political and ideological spectrum, while limiting protective factors. For example, restrictions resulted in risk factors such as increased isolation, unemployment, financial strain, mental health instability, as well as minimised prosocial contact, including with family.¹⁹

The Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies said that many in the community were at financial and psychological breaking point during the second long lockdown in 2021:

Unlike the rest of Australia, Melbourne had a uniquely long lockdown in 2020 that lasted from July until October of that year. Whilst this lockdown proved damaging to mental health and livelihoods, it nevertheless produced the desired outcome of zero COVID cases, freeing the city to reopen once the lockdown had ended. During the 2021 lockdown, by contrast, many in the community were already at breaking point both financially and psychologically without the economic support experienced for closed businesses in the form of the Australian Commonwealth government's Jobkeeper and Jobseeker schemes that protected livelihoods and people from poverty in 2020.²⁰

¹⁸ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 4.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, p. 19.

A further grievance highlighted to the Committee was the actions of the Victorian Government in ordering the lockdowns. This was noted in the Victorian Government submission, which highlighted that some in the community believed the Government's actions during the pandemic constituted 'government overreach or oppression'.²¹

The Committee notes that those with precarious and casualised work were less insulated by the economic shock of the pandemic.²² The Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies said in their submission that trust in government was lower for the economically disadvantaged,²³ and linked the ongoing liberalisation of Australia's economy with a decline in trust in government:

The economic and policy settings around globalisation and economic efficiency in particular are seen as having led to a decline in the availability of secure employment, further eroding trust in public institutions and government bodies responsible for social and economic wellbeing.²⁴

The Committee heard that there was a decline in trust in government as the restrictions went on. The submission from Professor Kristina Murphy of Griffith University described the results of two national surveys undertaken by her and Griffith University colleagues. The first survey was conducted in April 2020, where 1,595 people participated nationally, including 282 Victorians. The second was conducted in October 2020, with 779 Australians and 368 Victorians.²⁵

The surveys asked questions about trust in institutions and their handling of the pandemic. In relation to general trust in institutions, the survey found that respondents' trust in police and state governments was higher than trust in the Commonwealth Government. However, this trust declined, according to the second survey, as the pandemic went on. This trend is shown in Figure 6.1 below.

21 Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 6.

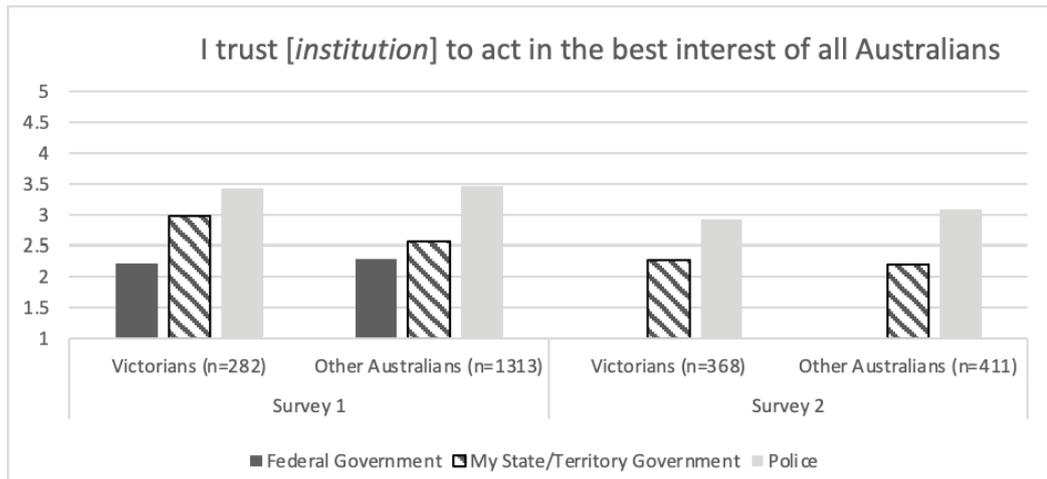
22 Soo-Lin Quek, Executive Manager Knowledge, Advocacy & Service Innovation, Knowledge & Advocacy, Centre for Multicultural Youth, Public hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 45.

23 Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, p. 8.

24 Ibid.

25 Professor Kristina Murphy, *Submission 9*, p. 3.

Figure 6.1 General trust in institutions during the pandemic

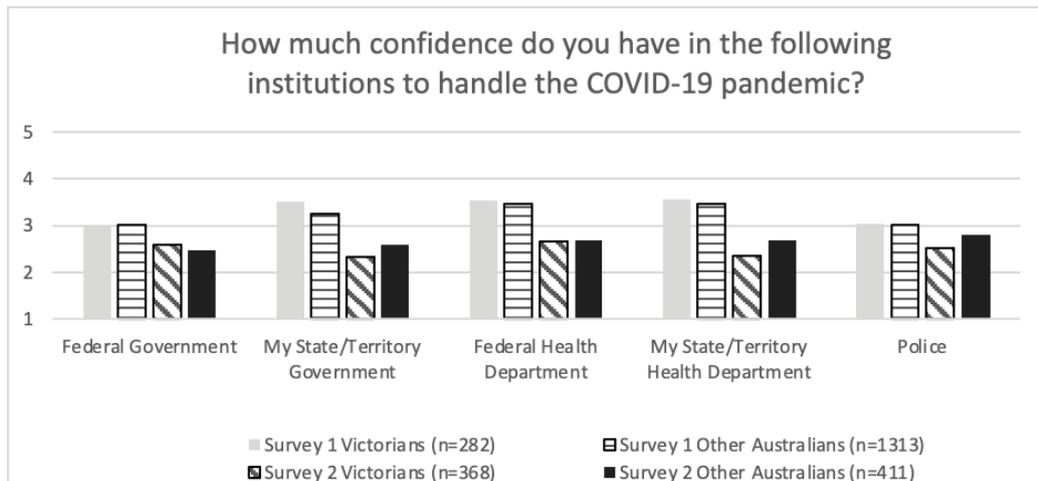


Note: General trust measured on a 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree response scale; higher scores indicate greater trust

Source: Professor Kristina Murphy, *Submission 9*, p. 5.

A second question asked participants to rank their trust in institutions to handle the pandemic. Again, this trust declined as the pandemic went on. Figure 6.2 below illustrates the results.

Figure 6.2 Confidence in Australian institutions to handle the COVID-19 pandemic



Note: Confidence (ie. Specific trust) measured on a 1=no confidence at all to 5=a great deal of confidence response scale; higher scores indicate greater levels of confidence/specific trust in authorities.

Source: Professor Kristina Murphy, *Submission 9*, p. 6.

Professor Murphy noted that as the pandemic progressed, the trust Australians placed in authorities reduced, but it was more pronounced for Victorian’s trust in their State Government.²⁶ She added that ‘The COVID-19 pandemic may therefore have inadvertently

26 Ibid., p. 6.

contributed to the rise of far-right extremism in Victoria (Terms of Reference (c)). In saying this, however, it should be noted that this conclusion should be taken with caution.' Professor Murphy explained this is because 'such findings were obtained using cross-sectional surveys. Hence, the findings can only imply a causal link between the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on increases in far-right extremist views.'²⁷

The Committee was provided with separate research in the submission from Liberty Victoria which also showed poor levels of trust in the Government in 2022:

Trust in government and politicians and the mainstream media declined significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Edelman Trust Barometer states that, in 2022, only 52% of the people surveyed trusted government institutions and only 30% viewed the government as a unifying force in society. 61% of the people surveyed believed that the government is trying to purposely mislead people by saying things that are known to be false or gross exaggerations.²⁸

FINDING 30: The factors that increase susceptibility and engagement with far-right extremism were heightened by the social and economic disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. This included the public health restrictions enacted by the Victorian Government in response to the pandemic alongside those of other states and the Commonwealth Government. The Committee notes that these restrictions were enacted to protect public health.

6.3 The impact of conspiracy theories and disinformation during the pandemic

As has been discussed, the pandemic created an environment where a larger pool of people than usual felt distrust in the Government, were aggrieved and were spending more time in online spaces.

Far-right extremist groups and individuals capitalised on this by using online tools to expose disenfranchised people to extremist content, further fuelling distrust and anger. Agius et al. explained:

While the growth of the far-right had been developing for several years, fuelled by global populism, polarised political views and widening socio-economic gaps, the COVID-19 pandemic presented an opportunity for the far-right to not only capitalise upon, but connect their message with ongoing and new tensions that emerged during this period.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Liberty Victoria, *Submission 12*, p. 9.

²⁹ Agius et al, *Submission 13*, p. 3.

One of the key tools used by extremists to increase distrust in the Government during the pandemic, and more generally, is the dissemination of conspiracy theories and disinformation.

Professor Kristina Murphy said in her submission that conspiracy theories seek to explain events by alleging powerful interests are behind them and claiming that official accounts are an attempt to cover up the truth:

Conspiracy theories attempt to explain significant events and circumstances. They can be distinguished from other accounts of events in two important ways. First, they explain events by referencing the malevolent acts of powerful groups who manage to conceal their role. Second, conspiracy theories tend to be sceptical of any 'official' accounts of events, no matter what the evidence suggests.³⁰

The Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies told the Committee at a closed hearing that often conspiracy theories will have a 'kernel of truth', which in the case of COVID-19 vaccine related conspiracy theories could be based on 'legitimate grievances or legitimate concerns, for example, about the way that pharmaceutical companies operate'.³¹

The Centre also stated that conspiracy theories are attractive to people who may feel disenfranchised because they impart a sense of empowerment and offer social connection amongst like-minded people:

The sense of having superior knowledge is what we consider misinformation, and that sense of having superior knowledge can be quite empowering for people who feel left behind, left outside of the conversation and silenced.

...

they come to a point where they think they have superior knowledge, and that gives them a lot of self-esteem and power and respect that they think they deserve and have not received somewhere else. So there is a psychological and social component, and that is how they build conspiratorial communities where everything makes sense. It gives them a connection and a sense of empowerment.³²

The conspiracy theories and disinformation circulated during the pandemic were often appealing to people with grievances and distrust in the Government. Dr Colin Rubenstein AM, Executive Director of the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council, said that far-right extremist groups and individuals saw an opportunity to use conspiracy theories as a recruitment tool:

Unfortunately the COVID-19 pandemic and associated conspiracy theories have created a political opening for far-right individuals to recruit across the political spectrum from a coalition of conspiracy theorists and those opposed to government-imposed health

³⁰ Professor Kristina Murphy, *Submission 9*, pp. 9–10.

³¹ Witness 1, Centre for Inclusive and Resilient Societies, Closed hearing, Melbourne, 8 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

measures, such as lockdowns and mask and vaccine mandates. For example, one anti-lockdown protest organiser in Victoria ... allegedly intended to slowly but surely mainstream antisemitic conspiracy theories among this conspiratorial coalition.³³

The Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies said that far-right content intersects with conspiracy narratives in a way that implies minority groups are to blame or pose a threat:

Far-right rhetoric intersects with conspiracist narratives in a number of ways that help advance doctrines focused on the supremacy of 'white' ethnic and racial groups and the purported threat to the 'Australian' way of life they claim is posed by minority ethnic and racial groups.³⁴

The Centre also outlined the broader societal implications of conspiracy theories which act to promote division and disrupt social harmony and the functioning of a multicultural pluralist society like Australia:

The consistent extent to which conspiracy theories, misinformation and anti-government sentiment seek to delegitimise government directly erodes social cohesion by sowing doubt about the ability of governments to manage and regulate in the interests of all Australians. From this, it is a relatively short step to creating and enhancing social divisions that pit one group's interests against another's, promoting an environment in which social conflict becomes the norm and not the exception, and with dire consequences for civil harmony and cooperation in a multicultural pluralist society.³⁵

Section 6.6 discusses the extent to which there was a growth in the far-right movement arising from the spread of conspiracy theories and disinformation during the pandemic.

FINDING 31: Conspiracy theories and disinformation were attractive to some who felt disenfranchised by public health measures enacted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Far-right extremist groups and individuals capitalised on this by promoting conspiracy theories and disinformation to generate support for their ideologies.

The Committee is troubled by the extent to which conspiracy theories and disinformation have been disseminated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Jeremy Jones AM, Director of International and Community Affairs at the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council, argued that there has been a shift in public and online discourse so that everything communicated by the Government is open to critical scrutiny and in some cases deliberate misrepresentation.³⁶ He argued that the Government can no longer be complacent about this contest of ideas:

I think there needs to be an understanding at government level that in everything now there is a contest of ideas. We cannot just assume that because something is common

³³ Dr Colin Rubenstein, Executive Director, Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council, Public hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

³⁴ Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, p. 26.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Jeremy Jones, Director of International and Community Affairs, Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council, Public hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 12-13.

sense because members of Parliament and others understand that something is being done for the common good and has been thought out in this carefully developed policy, that is not how it is understood by others. There has to be an understanding that no matter what you say there is a chance that somebody with no interest in honesty or the communal good can put out another view, and you have to be in competition with them in ideas. It is very difficult to reach people who are no longer in the ‘good old days’, you could say, where we had four or five television stations and the news was basically the same. We had a lot of common sources. Now people draw their information from everywhere.³⁷

In an environment such as the COVID-19 pandemic where conspiracy theorists were active, it is important that government communication is clear and accessible. This reduces the opportunity for conspiracy theorists to sow doubt. A paper from Serry et al. at La Trobe University, titled *Improving access to COVID-19 information by ensuring the readability of government websites*, examined the readability of COVID-19 information on the former Department of Health and Human Services website and the Department of Education and Training website, and found problems with the complexity of information. They noted that:

the information communicated challenges the accessibility thresholds of community members. In such circumstances, information may negatively impact trust both in officials and in the validity of the information presented, which may, in turn, negatively impact health-preserving and seeking behaviours. Effective communication is a key to reducing risk and supporting compliance.³⁸

The Victorian Parliament’s Pandemic Declaration Accountability and Oversight Committee in their *Review of the Pandemic (Visitors to Hospitals and Care Facilities) Orders* also considered that the language used in pandemic orders was legalistic and complex, which made them difficult to understand. They found ‘A lack of plain language guidance for the Victorian community risks orders being misinterpreted or misunderstood’.³⁹ The Pandemic Review Committee’s report focused on the hospital context in particular.

The Committee believes it is important in future public health emergencies that the Victorian Government seek to provide information to the public in plain language that is timely, accessible and easy to interpret. This may assist in reducing opportunities for the spread of conspiracy theories and disinformation.

RECOMMENDATION 4: That in future public health emergencies, the Victorian Government build on its outreach and communication efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that there is an emphasis on public information that is in plain language, timely, accessible and easy to interpret.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

³⁸ Tanya Serry, Tonya Stebbins, Andrew Martchenko, Natalie Araujo, Brigid McCarthy, ‘Improving access to COVID-19 information by ensuring the readability of government websites’, *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*, 2022.

³⁹ Parliament of Victoria, Pandemic Declaration Accountability and Oversight Committee, *Review of the Pandemic (Quarantine, Isolation and Testing) Orders*, p. 68.

6.4 Protests and threats against public office holders, government officials and minorities during the pandemic

The grievances and frustrations felt by some in relation to lockdowns and vaccine mandates culminated in the second half of 2021 in a series of protests in Melbourne, some of which resulted in violent clashes with police. Around this time there was also an increase in threats directed at public office holders and government officials, as well as minorities.

6.4.1 Street protests

A series of protests occurred in Melbourne during September 2021 in relation to COVID-19 restrictions and vaccine mandates. Protests flared up again in November and December 2021 as Parliament considered the Public Health and Wellbeing Amendment (Pandemic Management) Bill 2021 (the Pandemic Bill), which sought to make changes to the management of pandemics.⁴⁰

A number of protest events took place, in some cases including violence. Protest events included:

- clashes with police on Barkers Road in Hawthorn⁴¹
- protests outside the CFMMEU offices in the Melbourne CBD⁴²
- a protest march blocking the West Gate Bridge⁴³
- a protest march at the Shrine of Remembrance⁴⁴
- the staging of gallows outside Parliament House.⁴⁵

The protests were attended by thousands. Hundreds were arrested and a number of police were injured.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ *Public Health and Wellbeing Amendment (Pandemic Management) Act 2021 (Vic)* pt 1, s 1.

⁴¹ Tom Cowie, David Estcourt and Ashleigh McMillan, 'Ten police injured, more than 200 arrested in anti-lockdown protest', *The Age*, 18 September 2021, <<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/travel-into-melbourne-blocked-as-police-prepare-for-anti-lockdown-protesters-20210918-p58srx.html>> accessed 20 July 2022.

⁴² Ben Schneiders and Paul Sakkal, 'Construction industry to be shut down for two weeks after clashes at CFMEU', *The Age*, 20 September 2021, <<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/crisis-meetings-after-construction-workers-clash-at-cfmeu-headquarters-20210920-p58t96.html>> accessed 20 July 2022.

⁴³ Kate Rose, Paul Sakkal, Cassandra Morgan and David Estcourt, 'Protesters block West Gate Bridge after construction sector shuttered', *The Age*, 21 September 2021, <<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/absolutely-outrageous-protesters-weren-t-union-says-setka-20210921-p58tde.html>> accessed 20 July 2022.

⁴⁴ Adam Carey, Erin Pearson and Cameron Houston, 'Stand-off at Shrine ends in cloud of tear gas and hail of police rounds', *The Age*, 22 September 2021, <<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/standoff-at-shrine-ends-in-cloud-of-teargas-and-hail-of-bean-rounds-20210922-p58tr6.html>> accessed 20 July 2022.

⁴⁵ Rachael Dexter and Marta Pascual Juanola, 'Thousands take to Melbourne's CBD to protest against new pandemic laws, vaccine mandate', *The Age*, 13 November 2021, <<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/thousands-take-to-melbourne-s-cbd-to-protest-new-pandemic-laws-vaccine-mandate-20211113-p598lu.html>> accessed 20 July 2022.

⁴⁶ Tom Cowie, 'Ten police injured, more than 200 arrested in anti-lockdown protest'.

In their submission, the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies described the series of events and forces that saw public grievances translate into protests in September 2021:

The absence of supports and increased strain on the community increased the vulnerability of some to the influence of alternative health and far right influences who appeared to be listening to community concerns about the impact of long lockdowns and vaccine mandates, producing an intersection of social influence and grievance that led many to join encrypted messaging applications where they could find solace in likeminded cohorts around the world and priming some of the city's inhabitants for civil unrest.

Combined with the closure of particular industries (such as construction) exempted from some restrictions during earlier stages of the pandemic, and the introduction of vaccine mandates, there was little to keep the anger of some of the city's inhabitants off the streets.⁴⁷

The extent to which these protests could be characterised as motivated by far-right extremism will be discussed in Section 6.5.1.

6.4.2 Threats against public office holders, government officials and minorities

Alongside the protests, there was an increasing number of threats against public office holders and government officials. These threats intensified during the passage of the Pandemic Bill through Parliament. Some opponents of the Bill believed it gave the Government additional powers to manage the pandemic that were too extensive. Many of the threats were directed at Members of Parliament to dissuade them from supporting the Bill.

The Committee discloses that its own members were subject to vile threats and abuse during the passage of the Pandemic Bill. These threats affected not only Committee members but their dedicated staff, who fielded abusive calls, emails and letters. This is something no-one should have to tolerate, whether acting in a public capacity or not.

The Victorian Government submission outlined that between 1 July 2020 and 31 March 2022 there were 85 referrals of threats to the Victorian Fixed Threat Assessment Centre from public office holders (Members of Parliament, including Ministers). These referrals were assessed and 19 charges were issued.⁴⁸

At the Commonwealth level, the increase in threats against parliamentarians in the context of the pandemic was noted by the Department of Home Affairs in its Incoming Government Briefing Paper. The paper was released under a freedom of information request from another organisation. It explained:

Significant protest activity in 2022, COVID-19 disinformation and negative social media sentiment, has led to an increase in threats and harassing, nuisance and offensive

⁴⁷ Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, pp. 19–20 (with sources).

⁴⁸ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 9.

behaviour towards Parliamentarians and against protected establishments such as Parliament House.⁴⁹

It was not only Members of Parliament receiving threats. The Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies told the Committee that ‘government and public health officials’ lives [were] threatened. Healthcare workers, vaccination centres and ordinary citizens complying with public health orders also became targets of hate.’⁵⁰

The Committee heard from stakeholders that extremist groups and individuals also sought to scapegoat minorities and criticise them for breaking COVID restrictions. Liberty Victoria explained that extremists disseminated information about the alleged threat posed by minorities:

COVID-19 allowed extremists to spread beliefs about “the alleged peril posed by Asian immigration, globalism, left-wing opponents and Jews.” Further, throughout far-right online spaces studies have shown that there is a large amount of ‘violent talk’, defined by Simi and Windisch as being “messaging that cultivates, normalises and reinforces hatred, dehumanisation and aggressive hostility toward minority groups”. This ‘violent talk’ contributes to significant fear in Victoria’s multicultural community.⁵¹

Dr Kristy Campion from the Threats to Australian Domestic Security Research Group at Charles Sturt University said that the pandemic strengthened far-right extremist beliefs that multicultural communities and others are legitimate targets for violence:

the COVID-19 context really allowed for the expansion of extreme right wing narratives in Australia specifically and obviously in Victoria as an extension of that. While a lot of attention has focused on the diversification of ideology that appeared during that period, we actually think the more dangerous part is the buttressing of existing narratives, because that is the buttressing of existing narratives that suggest that representatives of the government, elements of civil society and multicultural communities and others are legitimate and valid targets for violence. We have seen the threat manifest in a couple of ways, but primarily what we are concerned with here is the violent threat.⁵²

The Online Hate Prevention Institute discussed the scapegoating of minority communities by the media in relation to breaking COVID-19 restrictions, which led to online vilification:

Media coverage of individuals who breached social distancing and other public health regulations resulted in the vilification of these individual’s faith or ethnic communities online, including the Jewish community after an engagement party was held in breach

49 Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, *Department of Home Affairs Incoming Government Brief to Minister for Home Affairs, Minister for Immigration, Citizenship & Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Emergency Management, and the Australian Border Force released under Freedom of Information Request, 1 August 2022, reference no. FA 22/06/00105: Minister for Emergency Management*, briefing paper, Australian Government, Canberra, June 2022.

50 Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, p. 19.

51 Liberty Victoria, *Submission 12*, p. 10 (with sources).

52 Dr Kristy Campion, Threats to Australian Domestic Security, Charles Sturt University, Public hearing, Melbourne, 14 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 34.

of lockdown; the Muslim community subsequent to highly publicised cases of teachers at Islamic schools contracting the virus; and African-Australians following two women of Sudanese background breaking domestic travel regulations. Social media discussion noted a perceived difference in mainstream media coverage of these communities, compared to coverage of individuals from wealthy and predominantly white parts of Melbourne who had been documented breaking public health restrictions (such as the Melbourne woman who brought COVID back from a skiing trip in Colorado, or the Melbourne men who flew to Perth to attend the AFL grand final). Social media posts reflecting on mainstream media stories exacerbated the scapegoating. Scapegoating also occurred in content unrelated to mainstream media which sought to scapegoat specific communities.⁵³

Other issues regarding the mainstream media and extremism are discussed in Chapter 3.

FINDING 32: Vile threats and abuse were made during the pandemic against public office holders, government officials and minorities. This kind of discourse has no place in an open, plural and multicultural democracy such as Victoria and should be condemned in the strongest terms.

6.5 Differentiating between extremist and non-extremist groups and the extent to which the protests could be characterised as ‘far right’

In the lead-up to the protests in late 2021, a broad range of groups and individuals with different interests and beliefs coalesced in opposition to the Government’s COVID-19 restrictions and vaccine mandates.

In this context, it is important to differentiate between extremist and non-extremist groups and individuals. It is wrong to characterise all those who attended the protests as far-right extremists. The right to protest is an essential democratic freedom and the issues in contention were important policy considerations that affected the lives of all Victorians.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the Committee characterised far-right extremist groups as:

- in opposition to democratic principles
- favouring authoritarianism, nationalist and racist perspectives
- those that consider violence to be a legitimate method to achieve their aims.⁵⁴

⁵³ Online Hate Prevention Institute, *Submission 15*, p. 7 (with sources).

⁵⁴ See Chapter 1, Section 1.4.

The Committee does not believe that all groups who attended the protests fit this criteria. However, the Committee was told that far-right extremist groups and individuals supported protests, and a small number attended.⁵⁵

Others who attended the protests ranged from the ‘freedom movement’, who opposed the restrictions on personal freedoms arising from government policies, to elements of the wellness community, who had concerns about the safety or efficacy of vaccines.⁵⁶

The Victorian Government submission explained the differences between the non-extremist elements of the protest movement, and the far-right extremist elements who held far more radical views and implicated violence to achieve their aims:

the difference between the anti-government protest movement and the NRVE [nationalist and racist violent extremism] cohort is most apparent in the intent and methodologies advocated to stimulate change. Within the antigovernment environment, a diverse array of individuals of differing political and ideological views have unified to advocate for change through protest action and the call to ‘reignite democracy’, opposing State Government restrictions for challenging their understanding of freedom as a core Australian value. In contrast, a NRVE position is typified by theories of ethnic replacement and government subversion, with their implications of the role of violence in achieving these outcomes. It is in these differences that those who are participating in lawful protest activity and those who may present a risk to the Victorian security environment are able to be differentiated.⁵⁷

6.5.1 The extent to which the protests could be characterised as ‘far right’

While it is right to differentiate between extremist and non-extremist groups, some stakeholders argued that individuals in non-extremist groups were increasingly susceptible to far-right ideology. This was illustrated in the submission from the Victorian Government, which said ‘Anti-lockdown protest activity has proven to be a gateway for some individuals to engage with NRVE [nationalist and racist violent extremism] ideologies’.⁵⁸

The Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies argued in their submission that the protests put aggrieved members of the community in touch with far-right extremist ideology for the first time and served as recruitment grounds for far-right groups:

Represented in the media as ‘Neo-Nazi’ demonstrations aligned with the far-right, these demonstrations served as recruitment grounds for disgruntled members of the community, putting many in touch, for the first time, with far-right agendas and organisations. The fact that much of the media reported the demonstrations as being

⁵⁵ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, pp. 9–10.

⁵⁶ See Jewish Community Council of Victoria, *Submission 18*, p. 6.; Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, p. 20.

⁵⁷ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 9.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

uniformly sympathetic to Neo-Nazi ideology only served to enhance far right groups' notoriety and prominence within the mainstream and red pill 'pipeline' from vaccine hesitancy and anger over lockdowns to sympathy for or adherence to conspiracy and militancy.⁵⁹

Agius et al. described how far-right extremist groups promoted and attended protests in Melbourne, and that one group offered training to confront police during demonstrations:

Members and supporters of far-right extremist groups ... promoted, supported and attended anti-lockdown demonstrations in Melbourne ... [the groups] were also found to have actively sought to provide recruits and supporters with combat training to confront police during demonstrations at anti-lockdown protests in 2021. Of further concern were neo-Nazi calls to violence in response to lockdowns and vaccination mandates, most prominently against Victorian Premier, Daniel Andrews.⁶⁰

However, the Victorian Government argued, while it was reported that far-right individuals joined the protests, they were largely attended by individuals with specific grievances relating to the COVID-19 restrictions:

On 20 and 21 September 2021, media reported that COVID-19 protests in Melbourne were organised and attended by large cohorts of NRVE [nationalist and racist violent extremist] individuals and groups, however there was no intelligence to support this. While a small number of NRVE individuals may have been present, these protests were largely attended by individuals with specific issues including anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine grievances, and individuals looking to further their own agendas.⁶¹

Assistant Commissioner Michael Hermans of Counter Terrorism Command at Victoria Police informed the Committee that they assessed the 'broad group' of protesters were there for their own reasons and were not coordinated by extremist or far-right elements:

The reality for us is that the protest environment was not a nationalist and racist violent extremist protest environment. This element yesterday was described as being idiots with poor organising skills. So the concept that a demographic like that could, I suppose, for want of a better term, magically coordinate the freedom movement is beyond my comprehension. ASIO and us have been very clear that that protest environment was a unique environment. We are unlikely to see it again, and I certainly hope we do not. It comprised a variety of single-issue motivators that could be loosely connected by a great unifier—that is, the internet. These people historically have been on the fringes of society with unique views—anti vax, anti 5G, conspiracy theories, sovereign citizens—and we ended up with a unique set of circumstances that created an environment where they could collectively protest but feel in their own minds that they were protesting for their own unique purposes. Yes, that did attract some people with nationalist and racist views, but the connection is no stronger than that.⁶²

⁵⁹ Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, p. 20 (with sources).

⁶⁰ Agius et al, *Submission 13*, pp. 4–5 (with sources).

⁶¹ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 10.

⁶² Michael Hermans, Assistant Commissioner, Victoria Police, Closed hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 39.

The Victorian Government also noted that no persons charged were previously known to Victoria Police or were known as national security threats. They argued this suggests that persons were acting based on individual grievances:

No person charged with making threats to Members of Parliament or other Public Office Holders were previously known to Victoria Police Counter Terrorism Command (CTC), had previously been associated with national security matters, or were National Security Persons of Interest (NSPOI). Of those charged, the majority had minor criminal histories in Victoria. These threats are almost certainly a reflection of personal grievances of individuals experiencing negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions.⁶³

The Committee agrees that it is wrong to characterise the protests as ‘far right’ in terms of either motivation or organisation. Rather, the protests were attended by people who were motivated by grievances relating to the Government’s COVID-19 restrictions and vaccine mandates.

FINDING 33: A small number of far-right extremist groups and individuals attended protests against the Victorian Government’s COVID-19 restrictions and vaccine mandates in 2021, however, extremist ideology was not the primary motivating factor for the majority of those attending. Rather, a range of personal grievances relating to the impacts of the Victorian Government’s COVID-19 restrictions and vaccine mandates were the primary motivators, despite the restrictions being implemented to protect public health.

6.6 How COVID-19 has affected the growth of far-right extremist groups in Victoria

As discussed in Sections 6.3 and 6.5, there has been increased potential for exposure to far-right ideology during the pandemic. This includes in online spaces through conspiracy theories as well as at in-person protests. However, the Committee heard that there is little evidence to suggest that this exposure to far-right ideology has resulted in significant growth in far-right extremist movements. This is particularly the case following the end of COVID-19 restrictions in 2021 and the removal of vaccine mandates for many industries.

Nick McKenzie, a journalist at *The Age*, was of the view that there is a persistent threat from the far right, even with the end of restrictions. He told the Committee that the connections formed between far-right groups and disgruntled individuals remain, and there are a number of dedicated extremists who seek to continue recruitment:

I would suspect that if the pandemic and the explosion of online conspiracy theories and encrypted communication hubs were catalysts for these groups recruiting and expanding, they have not gone away. Yes, the call to action—‘Let’s get out on the streets of Melbourne and have a crack at the police or the state government’—those immediate

⁶³ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 9.

things that people can cling to are not so obvious anymore, but the hubs they have formed, the groups they have formed, they have learned about how to recruit, they have learned how to communicate, and that will not be going away. I do suspect there has probably been a drop-off. But the thing to understand and the biggest takeaway for me, having infiltrated through undercover and by dealing with agencies et cetera for a long period of time now, is just how committed some of these extremists are. They are whole-of-life Neo-Nazis. The full whole-of-lifers, there are not hundreds of them, but there are enough of them and they are that dedicated to recruitment to be of constant concern. We will not stop them. How do we stop the huge pools that they recruit from?⁶⁴

The Online Hate Prevention Institute believes that a danger exists from individuals drawn to far-right groups during the pandemic and self-radicalising, resulting in lone-actor attacks:

The real danger, in our view, is that people on the fringes of these groups, who have been drawn in as part of their audience, will be attracted to online resources that lead to self-radicalisation. They will be drawn to online communities, many of them primarily based overseas and involving foreign far-right activists, who encourage such radicalisation and incitement to acts of violence. This may result in lone wolf attacks from individuals not directly being monitored by authorities.⁶⁵

However, the Victorian Government was of the view that the rise in prominence of non-extremist groups who were opposed to COVID-19 restrictions has not translated to a growth in the far-right movement:

While there have been some commonalities identified between the ideological views of NRVEs [nationalist racist violent extremists] and those advocating anti-government conspiracy theories, the significant rise in prominence of the latter does not necessarily equate to a corresponding and equivalent growth in the broader NRVE movement.⁶⁶

The submission also noted that far-right groups have become more fractured and have seen a reduction in membership:

NRVE groups are becoming increasingly fractured and less inclined to unite or rally for a common cause; however, this may be more reflective of a reduced effort to rally in general (given the reduction of the patriot movement whose core activity was rallying, as well as the perception that their rallies are not effecting change). Internal division, the result of infighting, personality, and ideological clashes, has also resulted in reduced member numbers. Many of these individuals, having become discouraged and disillusioned, do not go on to form other groups with some leaving the movement altogether.⁶⁷

The Victorian Government believes that once the likelihood of strict public health orders diminishes, and the personal and financial grievances relating to those orders

⁶⁴ Nick McKenzie, journalist, Public hearing, Melbourne, 14 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

⁶⁵ Online Hate Prevention Institute, *Submission 15*, p. 17.

⁶⁶ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, pp. 7–8.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

are removed, that individuals and anti-lockdown groups are expected to cease street activism and civil disobedience:

Comparatively, the motivations for many individuals that have been involved in conspiratorial 'anti-lockdown' groups are assessed to be wide-ranging. As such, many of those currently involved in conspiratorial 'anti-lockdown' groups are expected to cease participation in street activism and civil disobedience following the end of the pandemic given the various personal and financial grievances associated with the pandemic are likely to be resolved as many return to the workplace and revert to pre-pandemic lifestyles.⁶⁸

They noted that this view has been supported by a reduction in both protest activity and threats against Members of Parliament and government officials following the easing of COVID-19 restrictions.⁶⁹

However, the Victorian Government warned that it is important to remain vigilant about whether the exposure of individuals to far-right ideology has acted as a gateway to joining far-right extremist groups:

The impact of the pandemic, including anti-lockdown groups as a gateway into NRVE [nationalist and racist violent extremist] groups, nonetheless necessitates ongoing evaluation as government mandated restrictions ease and eventually end.⁷⁰

Knowledge relating to the growth or otherwise of extremist groups in Victoria as a result of the pandemic primarily resides with Victoria Police, and Commonwealth intelligence agencies. As a result, the Committee has given particular weight to their assessments, as outlined in the Victorian Government submission.

FINDING 34: There has been a growth in exposure to far-right extremist ideology in Victoria since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the extent to which this exposure has translated to significant long-term growth in the far-right extremist movement remains unknown. The Committee found that personal grievances relating to COVID-19 restrictions and vaccine mandates were the primary motivation for protests seen in Melbourne in late 2021. Nevertheless, it is important for the Victorian Government to remain vigilant against the threat of far-right radicalisation in this context.

68 Ibid., p. 8.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

7 Countering extremism

7.1 Introduction

This report has so far discussed extremism as a global issue, risk factors that may increase the appeal of far-right extremist groups or be seen to legitimise their activities, the threat of extremism in Victoria, the methods used by extremists to recruit and communicate, and the impact of COVID-19 on extremism in Victoria.

The Committee believes that the analysis of these issues in this report is just the first step in what needs to be an ongoing discussion about extremism in this state. Much more work is required to gain a better understanding of the issues and what other measures can assist in tackling these complex problems.

This final chapter contains some findings and recommendations about different aspects of countering extremism that stakeholders brought to the Committee's attention. These include state and community based concerns, such as prevention and diversion measures, social cohesion, education and access to firearms. Broader national perspectives are also discussed, including bringing together extremism expertise, countering extremism in the online environment and proscription of terrorist organisations.

7.2 Prevention and diversion

When it comes to countering extremism, including far-right extremism, different measures may be implemented at different stages depending on an individual's level of engagement. Prevention measures, which have been a primary focus of this report, may relate to reducing susceptibility to, or the attraction of, extremist narratives or recruitment strategies. These measures might include anti-racism education, developing critical and digital literacy, improving mental health and wellbeing, addressing economic insecurity, improving trust in government, and building the resilience and cohesiveness of communities. It might also include family, friends and community members identifying warning signs that an individual is engaging in extremist ideologies and helping them to receive assistance before criminal activity has taken place.

For those who are already involved in extremist violence or have been convicted of crimes related to extremist violence, it is important to understand that there is still an opportunity to assist these individuals, and diversion through intervention or disengagement programs (sometimes referred to as 'deradicalisation') may be implemented, either within the corrections system or in the community.

7.2.1 Prevention

The Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS) noted in their submission to this Inquiry that when it comes to prevention, ‘The state needs to have clearly articulated and well-designed resources spanning communication, education and social service supports that can reach those who are vulnerable to far-right messaging and recruitment’.¹ CRIS further explained that:

These resources need to include both ‘for’ and ‘against’ messaging and supports. Fostering the ability to help people navigate toward the resources they need to thrive when facing various forms of adversity—a key hallmark of resilience—is essential in prevention work that focuses on building resilience to the social harms of far-right extremist narratives that seek to promote victimhood and grievance rather than coping and thriving skills in a disenfranchised and/or disadvantaged population cohort.²

However, the Centre also noted that the responsibility for prevention does not lie only with the Victorian State Government and Victoria Police and that it needs to involve ‘a range of stakeholders from government and law enforcement right through to community organisations, groups and individuals’.³ CRIS spoke to the Committee about the importance of communities and families in prevention:

Communities ... can play, and have, a very important role when it comes to prevention, providing they know what to look for and they have the tools and skills to be able to identify behaviours that may affect a community member or a family member—so to understand those social relations, a change in ideology or their criminal orientation. But in order to do that you need to be resourced and skilled, and at the same time we cannot expect communities to be law enforcement officers, psychologists or counsellors. They play a very simple but a very important role, and therefore it is resourcing communities to upskill themselves to be able to identify antisocial behaviours.⁴

CRIS also emphasised in their evidence to the Committee the importance of community and family members having the resources they need to be part of this process:

But more importantly, once they identify those behaviours, what do you do with them and where do you go for support? And this is where internal community networks and social networks, local community networks and community networks become imperative—that they are resourced so that members feel comfortable enough to go to the local community police officer or the local councillor, the local teacher, the local religious leader in order to say, ‘I have an issue. I have a problem. How do I direct it?’. Simply relying on a hotline or going directly to police headquarters somewhere else is not going to work, because community members, once they do talk about a family member or a community member that they are concerned about, at the same time they

¹ Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, p. 21.

² *Ibid.*, p. 21 (with sources).

³ Witness 1, Centre for Inclusive and Resilient Societies, Closed hearing, Melbourne, 8 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

⁴ Witness 4, Centre for Inclusive and Resilient Societies, Closed hearing, Melbourne, 8 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.

want to have control of where it goes. They want to know. They want to be kept informed. So I think it becomes so important how you use communities in a prevention role.⁵

One such example of a resource which can help to build community awareness of these issues is the Australian Multicultural Foundation’s Building Community Resilience Training and subsequent Community Awareness Training eLearning Module.⁶ As described in the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies submission to the Inquiry:

These resources, and the program logic that underpins them, aim to build resilience in communities against all kinds of anti-social behaviour and promote social cohesion through education and community awareness. The AMF model is not specific to any one particular national, political, religious or ideological group and applies regardless of ideology or motivation to radicalisation. The Building Community Resilience Training was designed to deliver knowledge, understanding and skills, to a targeted audience of community, government and religious leaders about recognising antisocial behaviours, including criminality, and processes that can lead to violent extremism, along with prevention strategies and where to go for support. The subsequent eLearning module was developed from these training experiences to provide open access to the broader community to generate awareness of possible changes in the behaviour of family members, friends, colleagues and others in the community.⁷

FINDING 35: Countering extremism is a whole-of-society issue. Governments and law enforcement can and should play a proactive role in the process of countering extremism, however, communities need to be supported with resources to ensure they have the capacity to effectively participate.

7

7.2.2 Diversion

Where individuals are engaged in violent extremism, there is some debate over the effectiveness of diversion and deradicalisation programs that currently exist. The Committee considered the following report submitted to the Inquiry by stakeholders: *Mapping right-wing extremism in Victoria: Applying a gender lens to develop prevention and deradicalisation approaches*. The report noted that interventions which encourage behaviours and psychological change in order to ‘disengage such individuals from violent extremist networks and guide them away from the path of violent action’⁸ were found in a 2016 study to often be costly and unsuccessful.⁹

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Australian Multicultural Foundation, *Community Awareness Training - eLearning Module 2022*, <<https://amf.net.au/entry/community-awareness-training-manual-elearning-module>> accessed 15 July 2022.

⁷ Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, p. 22.

⁸ Dr Christine Agius, Associate Professor Kay Cook, Associate Professor Lucy Nicholas, Dr Hamza bin Jehangir, Dr Ashir Ahmed, Noorie Safa, Taylor Hardwick and Dr Sally Clark, *Mapping right-wing extremism in Victoria: Applying a gender lens to develop prevention and deradicalisation approaches*, report prepared by Department of Justice and Community Safety: Countering Violent Extremism Unit and Swinburne University of Technology, report for Victorian Government, Melbourne, 2020.

⁹ Associate Professor Christine Agius, Dr Belinda Barnet, Associate Professor Lucy Nicholas, Janice Woolley, Professor Kay Cook, *Submission 13, Attachment 1*, p. 25.

Journalist Nick McKenzie also suggested in his evidence to the Committee that ‘deradicalisation programs are not perceived by many in law enforcement to be actually working’ and that in infiltrating a far-right extremist group as part of his investigative work, he found some extremists believe ‘deradicalisation programs, including those offered in jail, are a joke to be studied and to be exploited’.¹⁰ He urged the Committee to ‘conduct a proper audit of deradicalisation efforts in Victoria implemented by the state government so far to see what is working and what is not’.¹¹

Assistant Commissioner Michael Hermans of Counter Terrorism Command at Victoria Police disputed the claim that Victoria’s countering violent extremism programs are ineffectual, and told the Committee:

the primary CVE [countering violent extremism] disengagement program, known as the community integration support program, has been existent since 2010. It was reviewed in 2013 by Monash University’s Global Terrorism Research Centre, internally by CTC in 2016 and again in 2018 by the Australian Multicultural Foundation, and it is currently under review by the Applied Security Science Partnership with a view to identifying and leveraging off what represents good practice in effective disengagement. All these reviews have been positive in their support for the disengagement pathways, and I can say from strong experience that the programs are crucial to our work and that our actions are most effective when we operate within an environment that provides opportunities for both enforcement and therapeutic intervention depending on the circumstances.¹²

Sheikh Moustapha Sarakibi from the Board of Imams Victoria has also been involved in countering violent extremism efforts, and spoke about his work with the community integration support program (CISP):

We attend the correctional facilities. We work with members of the community as well. It is an intervention program where we work towards integrating them. It is a needs-based approach to intervention. In our experience we have found that there is a great deal of benefit that comes from programs such as the CISP program. We have found that not only are we contributing to social cohesion in general by, in a way, minimising any attacks that might take place—local attacks—we are getting through to some of these individuals earlier before things evolve into something that becomes an offence or something that becomes a level of terrorism. So that has been very, very important.¹³

Associate Professor Christine Agius from Swinburne University agreed that the holistic approach was important, but also noted the need to be prepared to evolve programs in line with changing needs:

¹⁰ Nick McKenzie, journalist, Public hearing, Melbourne, 14 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Michael Hermans, Assistant Commissioner, Victoria Police, Closed hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 35.

¹³ Sheikh Moustapha Sarakibi, Board of Imams Victoria, Closed hearing, Melbourne, 14 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30.

So we have got to take, once again, the holistic approach, whatever that includes and brings in and means, but we also have to be prepared to learn from any errors that we make and adjust accordingly as well, because we have to also recognise that these groups do not stand still—they adapt and change as well.¹⁴

FINDING 36: Individual, needs-based interventions that look at a person holistically and work with them over a long period of time to build their strengths will be more effective for countering extremism in people already engaged in extremist behaviours.

RECOMMENDATION 5: That the Victorian Government ensure all of Victoria’s countering violent extremism programs, including but not limited to the community integration support program (CISP), continue to be reviewed externally on a regular basis to ensure that they are effective and adapting to the evolving extremism landscape.

7.3 Social cohesion and community building

Anti-racism and social cohesion work is a powerful tool in the prevention and countering of far-right extremism and in mitigating threats of violent extremism. Social cohesion in the context of countering violent extremism involves proactively engaging in building tolerance and mutual respect, and forming a cohesive Australian identity. The Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies submitted:

Australia has long recognised the value of efforts to strengthen social cohesion as an essential pillar in its approach to countering violent extremism across all ideological platforms, as well as for the benefit of society more generally. Australian CVE [countering violent extremism] policy has also long drawn a clear distinction between ‘extremism’ and ‘violent extremism’, making clear that the Government does not want to interfere with people’s rights to hold various beliefs, but will intervene if those beliefs support or lead to acts of violence against individuals, communities and society at large or jeopardise national security and community safety and wellbeing.¹⁵

The need to reinforce social cohesion has become even more urgent given the range of threats now posed to social cohesion by far-right extremist ideologies, groups and narratives, the Centre submitted. It pointed to a 2021 survey which showed that racism continued to be a major challenge to social cohesion, with 60% of respondents identifying racism as a ‘very big’ or ‘fairly big’ problem in Australia, up from 40% in 2020.¹⁶

¹⁴ Associate Professor Christine Agius, Swinburne University, Public hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

¹⁵ Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, pp. 24–25 (with sources).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Other recent threats to social cohesion include:

- conspiracy theories
- misinformation
- anti-government sentiment
- far-right extremist online and offline activity.¹⁷
- Further, Agius et al. submitted that past studies of social cohesion and violent extremism had noted the need for research on the gender dimension and the role of ‘heroic’ and violent masculinity in violent extremism.¹⁸

As discussed in Chapter 6, conspiracy theories, misinformation and anti-government sentiment seek to delegitimise government and erode social cohesion by sowing doubt about the ability of governments to manage and regulate in the interests of all Australians. This can quickly lead to new or deepening social divisions that pit one group’s interests against another’s and promote an environment in which social conflict becomes the rule rather than the exception. This can have ‘dire consequences for civil harmony and cooperation in a multicultural pluralist society’.¹⁹

Liberty Victoria told the Committee that there needed to be an examination of the commonalities of different extremism movements: mistrust of government; hyper-conservative ideals of masculinity and gender norms; (perceived) individual or group injustice; ‘us versus them’ mentality; and anxiety about the future.²⁰

Michael Stanton, President of Liberty Victoria, argued:

Faith in institutions, including government, is absolutely fundamental, and the emergence of this concept of fake news and preying upon suspicion in relation to government are used by extremists across the spectrum to attract people to their respective causes. So transparency and building social cohesion are absolutely fundamental. Having faith in institutions, protecting the rule of law, protecting the separation of powers—these are, in our view, fundamental. And in some respects they are conservative principles of our system of government that need to be protected because of the emergence of what is a populist rhetoric that would seek to undermine the integrity of those institutions—so not only Parliament, not only the media, but the judiciary.²¹

Soo-Lin Quek, from the Centre for Multicultural Youth, also cautioned that strategies needed to go beyond hyper-focusing on multicultural groups and young people. She argued it was just as important for people from white communities to have buy-in to social cohesion:

a lot of the time when people talk about social cohesion they go, ‘Oh, let’s target particular multicultural families and communities’, and I think it is an overall Victorian

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁸ Agius et al, *Submission 13*, p. 7.

¹⁹ Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, p. 26.

²⁰ Liberty Victoria, *Submission 12*, p. 15.

²¹ Michael Stanton, President, Liberty Victoria, Public hearing, Melbourne, 14 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

community issue. A lot of the time we target multicultural communities and young people and go, 'All right, let's work with you around how we combat racism' or 'how we increase social cohesion', whereas—and I am still trying to find the right language to use here; we have got very crude language that we all use in public discourse, so excuse my crude language—what do we do with white young people and white families and white communities, because a lot of the time it is them we want to bring along with us on the journey around: what is social cohesion?

...

A lot of communities, a lot of families, are living in poverty as well. So it is not about skin colour; it is about: how do we think about community as a whole, and how do we think about social cohesion that speaks to everyone and not just a subset of the community?²²

Dr Richard Joyce, a member of a research group on international law and populism, noted that while there is a place for state-based programs and initiatives, he considered that social cohesion strategies needed to span state and national borders to effectively counter the transnational nature of populism and extremism:

If populism and extremism are transnational, then so too needs to be our response. Our research suggests that countering right-wing populism and its transnational racist nationalisms depends on creating anti-racist transnational solidarities. These solidarities are not dependent on national governments speaking for the state or the people. They are fostered within and by the community, but importantly they can be supported by our political institutions. So in terms of early intervention, we think that efforts by the Victorian Parliament to support multicultural community groups to build networks of solidarity across borders could be one important measure to counter the rise of populism and extremism.²³

During the Inquiry, the Committee heard about a particularly successful social cohesion initiative: Believe in Bendigo, a community group that came about in response to anti-Muslim sentiment and objections about the building of a mosque in central Bendigo. A case study of the Believe in Bendigo campaign appears in Box 7.1.

²² Soo-Lin Quek, Executive Manager Knowledge, Advocacy & Service Innovation, Knowledge & Advocacy, Centre for Multicultural Youth, Public hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 45–46.

²³ Dr Richard Joyce, Faculty of Law, Monash University: International Law and the Challenge of Populism, Public hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

BOX 7.1: Case study: Believe in Bendigo

The Believe in Bendigo group was formed in response to significant anti-Muslim sentiment that was stoked in protest of the City of Greater Bendigo's approval for the building of a mosque in the central township. Among other objector actions, this included a large and fraught rally of several hundred protesters (many from outside the region) that took place in Bendigo in 2015.

The intent of Believe in Bendigo was to deliver positive messages about inclusion and diversity within the Bendigo community, and to promote Bendigo as a destination to live, work, play, raise a family and do business. This was achieved through engagement with minority groups as a tangible demonstration of the community's belief in Bendigo as a community of welcoming and inclusion that embraced and encouraged diversity. More particularly, it signalled solidarity with the Muslim community. It brought a diverse range of people with a variety of skills together, including religious leaders, political leaders, business leaders, representatives of the Chinese community, legal leaders, multifaith leaders, community leaders, Muslim leaders, and leaders of the media. It was formed as a community organisation with no connection to the local council or government at any level. Within two weeks of its establishment it had attracted more than 5,000 followers on Facebook.

The guiding principles of the Believe in Bendigo campaign are positivity, respect and non-violence. It operates within this framework to:

- be family orientated and welcoming to all
- avoid skirmish interactions and arguments with people
- never engage in criticism of a person or a particular group of people
- remain cohesive and committed to its reason for existence.

In the words of Believe in Bendigo founder Margot Spalding: 'The brand Believe in Bendigo is about the positive strength of communities. It is about standing up for minorities in our community who are being targeted unfairly—people who are being bullied. It is about welcome, happiness and inclusion.'

Believe in Bendigo undertook a range of activities and education sessions across several sectors of the community. It developed teams (including a dedicated picnic team), communication events, a steering committee (which continues to operate) and marketing to execute its vision.

Key to the success of the Believe in Bendigo campaign has been its extensive involvement with the broader community through initiatives driven by local community leaders, champions and ambassadors who can grow and spread a campaign based on the essential principle: 'from and part of the local community'. Among other things, Believe in Bendigo has:

- engaged with disenfranchised youth

(Continued)

BOX 7.1: Continued

- engaged with and undertook education with service/community organisations, such as Rotary, the Country Women's Association, State Emergency Service, Country Fire Authority and others
- engaged with and educated broad segments of the community including tradesmen and tradeswomen, hairdressers, teachers and nurses
- engaged with large and small business owners/operators
- developed a team of community champions
- advocated for minority groups
- sought to build a better local understanding of Australia as a multicultural society through:
 - focusing on the local economic value of multiculturalism
 - developing better understanding of Islam and different cultures and an appreciation for why people come to live in Australia.

Education sessions have also been developed and conducted (and continue to be conducted) with Bendigo Community Health Services on 'understanding the refugee journey'.

Following extensive media interest in the activities and impact of Believe in Bendigo, the campaign's founder was featured on the ABC program *Australian Story*, which led to significant national and international interest in its success and served to turn the campaign into a model for how other people can approach the development of effective and grassroots-driven social cohesion initiatives in their local communities.

Sources: Margot Spalding, Founder, Believe in Bendigo, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 1–9; Margot Spalding, Founder, Believe in Bendigo, Inquiry into Extremism in Victoria, response to question on notice received 27 June 2022, p. 1.

The Government informed the Committee of a number of social cohesion and community-building programs and initiatives that are conducted as part of Victoria's countering violent extremism strategies. A summary list of these appears in Appendix B.

FINDING 37: Community-led and grassroots initiatives to promote social cohesion and community building are an important measure for countering extremism and have been demonstrated as effective in Victoria.

RECOMMENDATION 6: That the Victorian Government develop a strategy to support community-driven social cohesion initiatives aimed at building connections and trust amongst community members and between community members and civic institutions.

7.4 Education

As a prevention measure for countering extremism, education was highlighted by many stakeholders as vitally important for social cohesion, developing confidence in navigating society, building digital literacy and developing resilience to misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories.

7.4.1 Anti-racism education

Margot Spalding, who led the Believe in Bendigo campaign to counter anti-mosque protests in 2015, highlighted the importance of education in schools to develop an appreciation of multiculturalism:

I think a huge thing is that we need education in schools—really strong programs. Just as we need much better First Nations education, there needs to be education programs about all sorts of cultures and faiths in schools, starting very young. It is fantastic to learn about all these different faiths and cultures, in my opinion.²⁴

The impact of formal education on values was discussed by Jeremy Jones AM, Director of International and Community Affairs at the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council, who told the Committee:

There is formal education within schools, for example, where teaching about respect of each other you could say is fundamental. If somebody is educated to believe that the normal way of seeing another human being is not in any way racialised, genderised or whatever else, if they are seeing them as a human being, they have a big advantage over somebody who might be educated to think of people in different categories.²⁵

The importance of learning about the Holocaust in particular (which is currently required to be taught at the year 9/10 level in all Victorian government schools²⁶) was also raised by several stakeholders, with Jeremy Jones adding that it was seen as ‘one way of helping people sometimes understand the consequences of where their actions might lead’.²⁷ However, Jeremy Jones told the Committee that Holocaust education is not just about teaching history:

I really do not think we are talking history. We are talking about human relationships and what happens, what is the logical conclusion of dividing our society into us and them—people who belong and people who do not belong.²⁸

²⁴ Margot Spalding, Public hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7.

²⁵ Jeremy Jones, Director of International and Community Affairs, Australia Israel & Jewish Affairs Council, Public hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

²⁶ Department of Education and Training, *Holocaust Education: Delivery Requirements, 2022*, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/holocaust-education-delivery-requirements/policy>> accessed 23 July 2022.

²⁷ Jeremy Jones, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Dr Colin Rubenstein AM, Executive Director at the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council, further highlighted the importance of this point while acknowledging the challenges of ‘anchoring education and teaching in the realities of what has transpired historically’²⁹ in order to be able to learn from it:

Finding ways of incorporating these issues in the curriculum, both in secondary school and at the tertiary level, is not straightforward; I certainly concede that point. But the importance of teaching the realities of history, certainly 20th century history and the unique evil of the Holocaust, I think is a central part of education, and the division of us and them, demonisation and vilification of others and racism in general of course as a corollary of the importance of understanding 20th century history, the Second World War and what Nazism really meant. So I am encouraged by efforts of incorporating Holocaust education in particular at different levels of education, but that is part of the broader sensitisation to the evil of racism more generally, the reality of genocide that has occurred and unfortunately still occurs in this world, as being a central component of education, education which tries to convey an accurate and objective understanding of historical realities and does not descend into vilification, generalisations, demonisation and division.³⁰

Stakeholders also emphasised the importance of Victorian Government support for education programs offered by Jewish community organisations, such as the Jewish Community Council of Victoria’s immersion program, Courage to Care’s bystander programs, and Holocaust education through the Melbourne Holocaust Museum³¹, with Naomi Levin, JCCV’s Chief Operating Officer, telling the Committee:

there is a lot of work being undertaken by the Jewish community in this space, and we would urge that external support to continue, because again it comes back to a burden on the Jewish community to fund and resource this education to try and prevent racism in the community from within, which is a huge burden on our community. So the support that we get from government is incredibly important.³²

FINDING 38: Anti-racism public education campaigns and education programs that teach respect and appreciation for multiculturalism are important for improving social cohesion in Victoria.

FINDING 39: Education about the Holocaust is particularly important for understanding some of the consequences of racism and vilification throughout history and should have ongoing inclusion in the Victorian school curriculum.

²⁹ Dr Colin Rubenstein, Executive Director, Australia Israel & Jewish Affairs Council, Public hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Jewish Community Council of Victoria, *Submission 18*, p. 2.

³² Naomi Levin, Chief Operating Officer, Jewish Community Council of Victoria, Public hearing, Melbourne, 14 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

RECOMMENDATION 7: That the Victorian Government support the ongoing provision of existing anti-racism education programs and actively seek to improve and increase the provision of such programs in the community.

However, education is not enough on its own. Associate Professor Christine Agius from Swinburne University pointed out that:

Thinking about broader aspects and structural changes needed within society, education plays a key role in this, but it is probably one part of a bigger puzzle.³³

The submission from the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies spoke about how grassroots community level engagement, including through community organisations, sporting clubs and cultural events, are important. These are avenues through which positive messaging and education about promoting ‘acceptance, engagement and meaningful exchange with people from different racial, ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds’ can be supported.³⁴ The Centre also noted the importance of making sure that lessons taught through the Victorian curriculum can be reinforced outside of the school system:

there is an important role for extra-curricular community education and awareness resources that reinforce this learning for both young people and others in Victorian communities. Much of what is promoted in schools can be undermined, contested or undone beyond school environments through alternative social networks. Closing the loop between formal educational strategies and community-based education and awareness resources is therefore vital.³⁵

7.4.2 Digital and critical literacy skills

Several stakeholders emphasised the need to develop critical thinking skills and digital literacy at a young age, especially as the online environment is now such an important part of everyday life. As Soo-Lin Quek, Executive Manager for Knowledge, Advocacy and Service Innovation at the Centre for Multicultural Youth, told the Committee:

the online space is critical in terms of young people, and young people not just being digital natives but more so than ever in terms of education, finding a job, making friends. The digital space is critical for young people as they find a place in our community. However, we also do know there is a negative aspect of the digital world, which is the lack of regulation.³⁶

³³ Associate Professor Christine Agius, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.

³⁴ Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission 11*, p. 21.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³⁶ Soo-Lin Quek, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 43.

As discussed in Chapter 5, the internet is often used by extremist groups and individuals (regardless of their ideological motivation) for recruitment, communication and to spread propaganda. The internet is also a space where misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories can spread.³⁷ Therefore it is important for young people to develop digital and critical literacy skills that can help them manage these risk factors. Associate Professor Christine Agius discussed this issue:

Digital literacy I think is really important and really crucial—so young people getting online, understanding where the sources of information are coming from, who gives you your information, who is invested in that information. It is really quite crucial.³⁸

In her submission to the Inquiry Dr Emma Colvin, senior lecturer in law and criminology at Charles Sturt University, noted that young people especially can be vulnerable to online recruitment³⁹ and stated that ‘increased digital literacy for children and educating children to be critical thinkers’ could assist to address online grooming of children into extremism.⁴⁰

A representative from the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies told the Committee that critical literacy skills need to be developed early:

Most of the critical literacy stuff starts in secondary school. We actually need to be doing it in primary schools. We need to be doing it with very, very young children, because if we do not start with very young children, they will be playing catch-up at precisely the point that they are starting to be opened up in an autonomous way to some of the influences and the kind of misinformation and disinformation trajectories that we have seen. I think the practical answer to your question is: how do we increase critical literacy? And the need to do that carefully and thoughtfully starts in primary school and should be integrated really explicitly right across the curriculum.⁴¹

FINDING 40: Digital and critical literacy are essential skills for young people to navigate the internet safely, to develop resistance to the influence of extremist messaging and to analyse the quality of information they are exposed to.

RECOMMENDATION 8: The Victorian Government should review the digital and critical literacy skills taught via the primary and secondary school curriculum to identify opportunities for improvement and expansion.

³⁷ Board of Imams Victoria and Victoria University’s Applied Security Science Partnership, *Submission 16*, p. 16.

³⁸ Associate Professor Christine Agius, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

³⁹ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Dr Emma Colvin*, p. 19.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Witness 1, Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

7.5 Supports for young people at risk of radicalisation

As discussed in Section 3.7, young people can be a risk cohort for radicalisation. A large number of submissions advocated for an emphasis on early intervention, with a view to providing young people with the necessary knowledge to guard against risks of exposure to extremism and potential radicalisation. Particular examples include:

- building young people's skills for critical and independent thinking⁴²
- building confidence in young people to access and engage with civic and political institutions, and the justice system, and providing greater opportunities to express themselves⁴³
- making the justice system more youth friendly, particularly for young people from multicultural backgrounds⁴⁴
- creating safe platforms to give voice to and support young people to be able to develop their own views on and understanding of key issues.⁴⁵

Stakeholders noted that for effective youth support to be realised, the roles of community support, peer-to-peer support, youth workers, experts, and governments at all levels are critical. Peer-to-peer supports were considered by many to be particularly effective.

Soo-Lin Quek from the Centre for Multicultural Youth noted that peer-to-peer support and peer-to-peer information were much more effective than authority figures telling young people where to go for help or what to avoid engaging with online.⁴⁶ This was echoed in the submission by Agius et al:

Those at risk of far-right radicalisation and recruitment need to see and hear from people they can relate to and identify with. Youth-centred approaches must be inclusive and representative of Victoria's youth, and attentive to the stigma that may be attached to being identified as 'at risk' or singled out.⁴⁷

Other peer-to-peer support vehicles, such as youth leadership programs, forums for young people to share lived experience, and engaging young people to assist other young people in accessing the justice system were also canvassed.⁴⁸

In its submission the Government outlined a number of programs and initiatives to counter violent extremism (or which included components directed toward that outcome) across various portfolio areas aimed specifically at supporting young people.

⁴² Agius et al, *Submission 13*, p. 15

⁴³ Soo-Lin Quek, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 50.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁴⁵ Rana Ebrahimi, National Manager, Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network Australia, Public hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 50.

⁴⁶ Soo-Lin Quek, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 44.

⁴⁷ Christine Agius, et al., *Submission 13*, p. 15 (with sources).

⁴⁸ Soo-Lin Quek, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 44, 48; Rana Ebrahimi, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 50.

These include Youth Engagement Grants, the Radicalisation and Extremism Awareness Program, and the *Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020–30*.⁴⁹

A full list of Victorian Government programs aimed at countering violent extremism, including others aimed at supporting young people, is included in Appendix B.

The Committee notes youth support programs and measures require well-resourced experts and professionals to be effective. A 2018 report of the Youth Affairs Council Victoria addressed this point, noting that investment in youth workers provided a return in value:

Youth workers are unique professionals who help young people connect, contribute and thrive, for everybody's benefit. Youth workers are already making significant, positive changes to the communities in which they operate. Investment in well-designed, high-quality youth work interventions shows considerable returns to communities and governments in the long term.⁵⁰

Notwithstanding this, the Committee notes that Victorian youth workers face significant resourcing constraints and a lack of recognition of the value of their work by decision-makers in their organisations and the wider community. Further, despite the practice and philosophy of youth work aligning neatly with several key policy documents that guide the work of the Victorian Government, youth workers are hardly ever named as stakeholders in these important strategies.⁵¹

FINDING 41: Youth workers play a critical role in the delivery of effective support measures that work to both increase social cohesion and mitigate the risks of radicalisation to extremism.

RECOMMENDATION 9: That the Victorian Government ensure youth workers are adequately and appropriately resourced to provide effective service delivery of youth supports and programs aimed at strengthening trust and social connectedness and mitigating the risks of radicalisation. Further, that youth workers are proactively engaged and consulted in the development and implementation of the Government's youth policies and strategies.

⁴⁹ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*.

⁵⁰ Jessie Mitchell, *Youth Work Matters to Victoria: Strengthening young people's access to youth workers across Victoria*, report prepared by Youth Affairs Council Victoria, Melbourne, 2018, p. 4.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

7.6 Combating extremism online

As discussed in Chapter 5, internet forums, social media platforms and encrypted communication apps are frequently used by extremists for recruitment and communication, as well as to spread hate and/or propaganda. While much of the responsibility for legislation related to internet content regulation in Australia sits with the Commonwealth Government, many stakeholders made submissions or gave evidence to this Inquiry regarding the relationship between digital spaces and extremism and the need for stronger regulation in the online environment, including that:

- Social media platforms can aid in extremist networking, recruitment and financing.⁵²
- The development of the online environment has assisted with the globalisation of extremist ideas.⁵³
- Extremist groups and individuals now have ‘access to a much larger audience with much lower expenses’ in order to spread extremist messaging.⁵⁴
- Algorithms used by online platforms to recommend content to their viewers may contribute to the amplification of extremist content⁵⁵ and create ‘echo chambers’ within these movements,⁵⁶ but algorithms can also be used to detect extremist content⁵⁷ or even redirect people away from it.⁵⁸

It was also noted that while mainstream media platforms are improving at removing extremist content and extremist accounts (often referred to as ‘deplatforming’), this has resulted in a shift of many of these groups and individuals to encrypted apps and platforms with very little regulation. Dr Belinda Barnet from Swinburne University explained to the Committee:

Extremists are migrating because progress has been made in fighting abhorrent content and accounts on mainstream platforms. So good work is being done by tech companies and also by legislators, and it is harder for them to find an audience. So many extremists find themselves deplatformed from Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, for example, but services like Telegram allow far-right groups to distribute hateful content without fear of moderation, deplatforming or censure. These apps are encrypted and also untraceable, so this also means it is a little bit more difficult for law enforcement. They are also permissive of extremist content.⁵⁹

⁵² Witness 2, Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism (AVERT) Research Network, Closed hearing, Melbourne, 8 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7.

⁵³ Jeremy Jones, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Liberty Victoria, *Submission 12*, p. 7.

⁵⁶ Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 6.

⁵⁷ Agius et al, *Submission 13*, p. 15.

⁵⁸ Christchurch Call, *Christchurch Call: to eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content online*, <<https://www.christchurchcall.com/call.html>> accessed 22 July 2022.

⁵⁹ Dr Belinda Barnet, Swinburne University, Public hearing, Melbourne, 15 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19.

Australia is already a signatory⁶⁰ to *The Christchurch Call to Action to Eliminate Terrorist and Violent Extremist Content Online*, a document which was created in the aftermath of the tragic attacks on two Christchurch mosques in 2015. In relation to use of the internet:

The Call outlines collective, voluntary commitments from Governments and online service providers intended to address the issue of terrorist and violent extremist content online and to prevent the abuse of the internet as occurred in and after the Christchurch attacks.

All action on this issue must be consistent with principles of a free, open and secure internet, without compromising human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression. It must also recognise the internet's ability to act as a force for good, including by promoting innovation and economic development and fostering inclusive societies.⁶¹

Stakeholders considered the *Christchurch Call* to achieve a good balance between recognising the benefits of the internet with the need for better regulation of it. Michael Stanton, the President of Liberty Victoria, told the Committee:

Whilst there is a call for there to be better regulation in relation to extremist material online, there is also a very clear recognition in that document of the need to preserve freedom of expression and of the potential of the internet to be an incredibly helpful, beneficial resource in terms of education and awareness raising. So that just, in our view, shows the delicate balance that must be struck, and it is a quite powerful document in our view.⁶²

The full *Christchurch Call* document is attached to this report as Appendix C.

FINDING 42: While online content regulation sits beyond the purview of state governments, the Committee reiterates the value of the *Christchurch Call* and the measures it outlines with regard to violent extremist and terrorist content.

The Committee notes that the Commonwealth Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security (PJCIS) commenced the Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia in December 2020 and received submissions and evidence from the eSafety Commissioner, Cyber Security Cooperative Research Centre, Twitter, Google and Facebook⁶³ in relation to 'the role of social media, encrypted communications platforms and the dark web in allowing extremists to communicate and organise'.⁶⁴ The PJCIS was unable to complete its Inquiry within the previous term

⁶⁰ Christchurch Call, *Christchurch Call*.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Michael Stanton, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

⁶³ Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security, *Submissions: Submissions received by the Committee*, 2021, <https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Intelligence_and_Security/ExtremistMovements/Submissions> accessed 22 July 2022.

⁶⁴ Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security, *Terms of reference: Submissions received by the Committee*, 2021, <https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Intelligence_and_Security/ExtremistMovements/Terms_of_Reference> accessed 22 July 2022.

of Parliament, but the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee notes the PJCS's recommendation in its interim report to consider establishing a new Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalisation in the 47th Commonwealth Parliament. This Committee supports the recommendation and would be interested in any findings and recommendations a future PJCS Inquiry may offer.

7.7 Bringing together extremism expertise

The rising profile of extremism has resulted in a number of institutions across various disciplines working to identify and research these issues in Australia. However, it is not always clear where and how this work is being shared, and whether greater collaboration across industry sectors could assist in forming an effective, long-term countermeasure.

Dr Kristy Campion, Terrorism Studies Lecturer at Charles Sturt University, told the Committee that she commended Norway's establishment of the Center for Research on Extremism following the 2011 Oslo, Norway terror attack. Dr Campion said such could be replicated in Australia:

I think the stand-out element of the Norwegian example of best practice is that what they recognised after the 2011 attack was that this is an enduring threat and as a consequence requires countermeasures ...

And so honestly, they put a lot of money behind it and they established a centre for researching extremism, which is primarily concerned with right-wing extremist threats in Western Europe, but they have been recently expanding to Eastern Europe, Australia, New Zealand and the United States. What that means is that they are taking the initiative to establish a dataset of right-wing extremist violence around the world, but that is subject to their measures and to their controls and, as a consequence, also subject to EU regulations. I think that that was a fantastic act by them but also one that ultimately could be replicated here, because we do have—and you are speaking to them in this inquiry—a number of different institutions inside and outside of academia focused on this work, but there is no-one to draw them all together. And that is the incredible importance of C-REX [Center for Research on Extremism] in drawing together and channelling that research in a relatively coherent manner towards those priority areas.⁶⁵

Box 7.2 provides further information on the Center for Research on Extremism.

⁶⁵ Dr Kristy Campion, Threats to Australian Domestic Security, Charles Sturt University, Public hearing, Melbourne, 14 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 38–39.

BOX 7.2: Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX)

The Center for Research on Extremism was established in 2016 at the University of Oslo. Funded by the Research Council of Norway, the centre provides for cross-disciplinary and collaborative study of right-wing extremism, political violence and hate crime. Its objectives are:

- To develop cutting-edge empirical and theoretical knowledge on right-wing extremism, violence and hate crime in Norway, Europe and beyond
- To serve as an international hub on multidisciplinary research on right-wing extremism
- To disseminate research-based knowledge to stakeholders, policymakers, the public, civil society organisations, schools and media.

C-REX has six national partners and four international partners, including:

- The Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities (Norway)
- Peace Research Institute Oslo (Norway)
- Hada Center for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (St Andrews University, Scotland)
- Institut für interdisziplinäre Konflikt- und Gewaltforschung (Bielefeld University, Germany).

Source: C-REX Center for Research on Extremism, 'About the center', <<https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/about>> accessed 20 July 2022.

The Committee acknowledges that a number of bodies within Victoria and Australia are undertaking important work in identifying, researching and understanding extremist activity. In fact, a number of these made valuable contributions to this Inquiry.

However, in recognising the real and enduring threat extremism poses, the Committee considers the need for a coordinated and collaborative research centre, perhaps similar to the Center for Research on Extremism model. The mandate of such a centre should not be restricted to far-right extremism and should encompass all forms of radicalisation. Such an investment would indicate an ongoing countermeasure to the extremism problem.

FINDING 43: Multidisciplinary and cross-jurisdictional research into extremism offers valuable insights into emerging problems and prevention strategies. Norway's Center for Research on Extremism would be a good model on which to base an Australian body working on developing empirical and theoretical knowledge on extremism in Australia and collaborating with domestic and international stakeholders to further information and understanding in this area.

7.8 Limiting access to firearms

In terms of the threat of violence posed by militant far-right extremist groups, a number of stakeholders have identified the possession of firearms, either legally or illegally acquired, as a major concern.⁶⁶

According to Dr Ruth Delaforce, Lecturer in Criminology and Policing at Charles Sturt University, law enforcement and security agencies have observed a rise in the number of investigations into the planning of terrorist acts involving firearms. Her submission referred to information from the Australian Federal Police:

Assistant Commissioner Scott Lee indicated that nationally, counter-terrorism cases involving individuals committed to extreme-right wing ideology had increased from 2% to 15% between 2019 and 2020. Of these cases there was a focus upon individuals who ‘either have, or are attempting to acquire, firearms’.⁶⁷

Her submission further noted that in recent years planned violence related to far-right extremism has typically been associated with ‘fringe dwellers and lone actors’ using firearms, which are ‘sometimes obtained legally’. Dr Delaforce stated:

Far right-wing extremists ascribe to violence involving firearms (and livestreaming of same) such as the terrorist act perpetrated in Christchurch, New Zealand. Therefore, access to firearms, either legally or through illegal networks, is a key issue in Australian counter-terrorism strategies.⁶⁸

Nick McKenzie, a journalist who has investigated far-right extremist groups in Australia, gave evidence to the Committee at a public hearing and observed that they do have access to firearms and have expressed an intention to use them:

At the moment there is no doubt that some far-right extremists in Victoria do have access to firearms and do talk, at least online, about using those firearms to ill effect.⁶⁹

FINDING 44: Access to firearms obtained legally or illegally by members of far-right extremist groups poses potential risks to the community and is of significant concern.

⁶⁶ See Nick McKenzie, *Transcript of evidence*; Dr Kristy Campion, *Transcript of evidence*; Dr Ruth Delaforce, Threats to Australian Domestic Security, Charles Sturt University, Public hearing, Melbourne, 14 June 2022, *Transcript of evidence*.

⁶⁷ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Dr Ruth Delaforce*, p. 24 (with sources).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁶⁹ Nick McKenzie, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

7.8.1 Illegal firearms

It is difficult to estimate the number of illegal firearms in Victoria. The most recent report by the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission into illicit firearms in Australia was published in 2016. In it, the Commission ‘conservatively’ estimated that there were around 250,000 longarms and 10,000 handguns in the ‘domestic illicit market’, based on sources including police seizures and estimates from the domestic illicit market.⁷⁰

However, the Intelligence Commission’s report explained that in reality the domestic illicit market was more likely to contain between 300,000 and 600,000 firearms, which is around 10% of the licit firearms market.⁷¹ The report attributed this increase to other factors, including the sizeable ‘grey market’, which contains illegally held firearms that were neither registered nor surrendered by their owners during the 1996 National Firearms Agreement implementation.⁷² The report of the Inquiry into firearms prohibition legislation similarly found that grey market firearms were responsible for ‘the majority of illicit firearms in the Australian market’.⁷³

Dr Delaforce stated that despite continuing seizures of firearms across Australia, there was no official data on how many individuals with far-right extremist views are accessing firearms via the illicit market, although she noted ‘occasional media reporting’ that drew links between ‘neo-Nazi groups and outlaw motorcycle gangs’.⁷⁴

7.8.2 Access to firearms through employment

A primary means for people to obtain a firearms licence and gain legal access to weapons and training is via employment.⁷⁵

Several stakeholders expressed particular concern about employment in the private security sector. For example, Dr Ruth Delaforce discussed the potential for private security firms to inadvertently provide cover for the preparation of violent attacks, stating:

Employment within the private security sector not only facilitates legitimate access to firearms, but also opportunities for surveillance and target selection.⁷⁶

Dr Delaforce noted a media investigation in 2021 which identified a Neo-Nazi group member employed as a security manager at Crown Resorts in Melbourne.⁷⁷

⁷⁰ Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, *Illicit firearms in Australia*, report for Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, p. 7.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., p. 8.

⁷³ Parliament of Victoria, Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee, *Inquiry into firearms prohibition legislation* November 2019, p. 6.

⁷⁴ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Dr Ruth Delaforce*, p. 25.

⁷⁵ See *ibid.*; Nick McKenzie, *Transcript of evidence*.

⁷⁶ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Dr Ruth Delaforce*, p. 25.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Victoria Police is responsible for the issuing of licences to individuals employed in the private security industry, the oversight and regulation of training, and the registration of businesses providing security services.⁷⁸

Victoria Police Assistant Commissioner Michael Hermans was reported in the media as saying that ‘access to firearms and weapons training was seen as advantageous to the most militant of far-right groups and that police were aware these groups looked for such capabilities when recruiting’.⁷⁹

7.8.3 Regulation of legal firearms

Stakeholders were aware of the challenges for Victorian law enforcement agencies to identify far-right extremist members that are ‘not overtly ascribing to violent beliefs or use of violence’.⁸⁰

Some stakeholders suggested there should be tighter restrictions around the issue of gun licences. As Dr Delaforce noted in her evidence to the Committee:

perhaps some of the issues around that might relate to the fit and proper person requirement for access to a licence and also acquiring a firearm ... perhaps that needs a little bit more attention.⁸¹

Journalist Nick McKenzie told the Committee he believed that there should be a mechanism for members of extremist groups to have their gun licences stripped:

Another key troubling issue, as I see it, is some of these groups in Victoria have members with gun licences. I would urge the committee to seek answers about whether we need to make it easier in Victoria to have a gun licence stripped.⁸²

Dr Delaforce also lamented the lack of a national strategy to register and regulate the possession of firearms. She told the Committee that ‘a coherent, national framework on firearm regulation and an updated review of the illicit market’,⁸³ emphasising that this was ‘a whole-of government-across-Australia response’, required urgent consideration.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ See: *Firearms Act 1966* (Vic) s pt 2 div 3 s15(1); Victoria Police, *Private Security Authority Types, Eligibility and Training*, 2022, <<https://www.police.vic.gov.au/eligibility-requirements->> accessed 22 July 2022.

⁷⁹ Nino Bucci, ‘Victoria police reveal active counter-terrorism investigation involving rightwing extremists’, *The Guardian*, 26 March 2021, <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/mar/26/victoria-police-reveal-active-counter-terrorism-investigation-involving-rightwing-extremists>> accessed 20 July 2022.

⁸⁰ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Dr Ruth Delaforce*, p. 25.

⁸¹ Dr Ruth Delaforce, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 38.

⁸² Nick McKenzie, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

⁸³ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22, Dr Ruth Delaforce*, p. 25.

⁸⁴ Dr Ruth Delaforce, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 38.

This reflects the recommendation made by the Commonwealth Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee's report *Inquiry into the Ability of Australian law enforcement authorities to eliminate gun-related violence in the community*.

Recommendation 3 of the report is that:

the National Firearms Agreement be updated to implement nationally consistent regulation in the following areas:

- firearms, firearm parts and firearm accessories;
- ammunition; and
- the storage of firearms.⁸⁵

The Commonwealth Committee stated that the 'shortcomings in the currently available data on illicit firearms should be addressed'⁸⁶ and acknowledged that improving the quality of data was not:

a panacea for eliminating illicit firearms or resolving crime and violence associated with their use, [however] more accurate data is a useful tool for identifying how and where law enforcement authorities should direct their effort and resources.⁸⁷

Similarly the Legal and Social Issues Committee noted in its report *Inquiry into Firearms Prohibition Legislation* that:

In the Committee's view there are numerous benefits to cross-jurisdictional recognition of FPO [Firearm Prohibition Order] schemes, such as:

- Increased capacity for policing access to firearms by high-risk individuals, especially as it relates to organised crime and terrorist groups.⁸⁸

FINDING 45: Acquisition and use of firearms by far-right extremists, not all of whom may be easily identifiable, leads to a critical gap in counter-terrorism strategy that could be assisted by a coherent, national framework on firearm regulation.

RECOMMENDATION 10: That the Victorian Government review whether the *Firearms Act 1996* should be amended to expand the fit and proper person test to include people who are members of violent extremist groups.

⁸⁵ Parliament of Commonwealth of Australia, Legal and Constitutional Affairs Reference Committee, *Inquiry into the Ability of Australian law enforcement authorities to eliminate gun-related violence in the community*, April 2015, p. 90.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Parliament of Victoria, Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee, *Inquiry into firearms prohibition legislation*, p. 69.

RECOMMENDATION 11: That the Victorian Government through National Cabinet advocate for the introduction of a national, cross-jurisdictional database of registered firearms and firearms licence holders.

7.9 Proscription of terrorist organisations

The Commonwealth Minister for Home Affairs has the power to proscribe terrorist organisations, with decisions reviewed by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security.⁸⁹ Although this power is held by the Commonwealth, the Committee received several submissions from stakeholders expressing concerns that the power to proscribe an organisation as a terrorist group was not being used as extensively as it could be with regard to far-right violent extremist organisations (as well as other violent extremist organisations). The submitters requested that the Victorian State Government advocate to the Commonwealth Minister for Home Affairs that particular extremist groups active in Victoria be proscribed as terrorist organisations. Box 7.3 details the requirements that must be met in order to list an organisation as terrorist.

BOX 7.3: Proscription

The government can list an organisation as a terrorist organisation if the Minister for Home Affairs is satisfied that it:

- is engaged in preparing, planning, assisting or fostering the doing of a terrorist act
- or
- advocates the doing of a terrorist act.

An organisation advocates the doing of a terrorist act if it directly or indirectly:

- counsels, promotes, encourages or urges the doing of a terrorist act
- gives instruction on the doing of a terrorist act
- directly praises the doing of a terrorist act, where there is a substantial risk that this praise might lead someone to engage in a terrorist act.

Source: Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, 'Terrorist Organisations', <<https://www.ag.gov.au/national-security/australias-counter-terrorism-laws/terrorist-organisations>> accessed 22 July 2022.

⁸⁹ Attorney-General's Department, *Terrorist organisations*, 2022, <<https://www.ag.gov.au/national-security/australias-counter-terrorism-laws/terrorist-organisations>> accessed 25 July 2022.

The arguments submitted to this Inquiry regarding proscription of terrorist organisations included but were not limited to:

- That Australia lags behind Five Eyes allies the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom with regard to proscribing terrorist organisations⁹⁰
- That Australia’s current list of proscribed terrorist organisations is comprised overwhelmingly of religiously motivated organisations⁹¹
- That proscribing terrorist organisations reduces the burden on law enforcement, security agencies and prosecutors to prove an organisation is a terrorist group themselves⁹²
- That the legal tests required to be met before a group can be listed as a terrorist organisation are fit for purpose,⁹³ but proscription has been underutilised.

Professor Nick O’Brien, from Charles Sturt University’s Threats to Australian Domestic Security research group, made a further point in his submission that:

Given ... the fact that the Christchurch attacker was Australian, it is surprising that more extreme right-wing groups have not been listed. Canada has reacted relatively quickly to the extreme right-wing threat and Australia should be able to do the same.⁹⁴

However, Agius et al. noted that ‘There is a difficult balance to be considered between enabling glorification and ensuring communities can remain safe’.⁹⁵ They warned that ‘groups and individuals could use such proscription to heighten their appeal to audiences, claim “persecution” or draw attention to their activities’.⁹⁶ Journalist Nick McKenzie, who infiltrated a Neo-Nazi group active in Victoria as part of his investigation into their activities, gave evidence to the Committee that:

Extremist groups are at the moment planning for things like proscription—they being outlawed or banned—and the banning of symbols. I think the application of proscription laws and the banning of things like the swastika are good things, but if groups ... are actively planning on how to adapt to such legislative steps they can only be seen as small or mere tools in one big toolbox.⁹⁷

FINDING 46: Proscription of terrorist organisations can be a useful tool for deterring the activities of far-right extremist groups which advocate for violence, but there is a balance to be met between keeping communities safe and potentially increasing the profile of these groups.

⁹⁰ Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security, *Submission 22*, Associate Professor Nick O’Brien, p. 29.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁹⁵ Agius et al, *Submission 13*, p. 19.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Nick McKenzie, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

RECOMMENDATION 12: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government for the proscription of extremist organisations active in Victoria which clearly meet the legal tests for engaging in preparing, planning, assisting or fostering the doing of a terrorist act, or advocating the doing of a terrorist act.

**Adopted by the Legal and Social Issues Committee
Parliament of Victoria, East Melbourne
10 August 2022**

Appendix A

About the Inquiry

A.1 Submissions

1	Name Withheld
2	John McInnes
3	Name Withheld
4	Dominic Cooney
5	Benjamin Cronshaw
6	Number not used.
7	Number not used.
8	Sandra Donald
9	Professor Kristina Murphy
10	Number not used.
11	Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies
12	Liberty Victoria
13	Associate Professor Christine Agius, Dr Belinda Barnet, Associate Professor Lucy Nicholas, Janice Woolley and Professor Kay Cook
14	Research Group on International Law and the Challenge of Populism
15	Online Hate Prevention Institute
16	Board of Imams Victoria and Victoria University's Applied Security Science Partnership
17	Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism (AVERT) Research Network
18	Jewish Community Council of Victoria
19	Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council
20	Victorian Government
21	Confidential
22	Charles Sturt University - Threats to Australian Domestic Security
23	Migration Council Australia
24	Dr Tehmina Kahn

A.2 Public and Closed Hearings and site visits

Wednesday, 8 June 2022

via videoconference

Organisation
Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism (AVERT) Research Network
Centre for Inclusive and Resilient Societies

Tuesday, 14 June 2022

via videoconference

Name	Title	Organisation
Michael Stanton	President	Liberty Victoria
Nick McKenzie	Journalist	The Age
Dr Andre Oboler	Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director	Online Hate Prevention Institute
Dr Nasya Bahfen	Director	Online Hate Prevention Institute
Naomi Levin	Chief Operating Officer	Jewish Community Council of Victoria
Daniel Aghion	President	Jewish Community Council of Victoria
Julie Nathan	Research Director	Executive Council of Australian Jewry
Professor Debra Smith	-	Victoria University Applied Security Science Partnership
Dr Muhammad Iqbal	-	Victoria University Applied Security Science Partnership
Dr Andrew Zammit	-	Victoria University Applied Security Science Partnership
Sheikh Moustapha Sarakibi	-	Board of Imams Victoria
Dr Kristy Champion	-	Threats to Australian Domestic Security, Charles Sturt University
Dr Levi West	-	Threats to Australian Domestic Security, Charles Sturt University
Dr Ruth Delaforce	-	Threats to Australian Domestic Security, Charles Sturt University
Dr Emma Colvin	-	Threats to Australian Domestic Security, Charles Sturt University
Douglas Allan	-	Threats to Australian Domestic Security, Charles Sturt University
Professor Mark Nolan	-	Threats to Australian Domestic Security, Charles Sturt University

Wednesday, 15 June 2022

via videoconference

Name	Title	Organisation
Margot Spalding	Founder	Believe in Bendigo
Dr Colin Rubenstein AM	Executive Director	Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council
Jeremy Jones AM	Director of International and Community Affairs	Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council
Associate Professor Christine Agius	-	Swinburne University
Dr Belinda Barnet	-	Swinburne University
Dr Richard Joyce	Faculty of Law, Monash University	Research Group on International Law and the Challenge of Populism
Professor Sundhya Pahuja	Melbourne Law School	Research Group on International Law and the Challenge of Populism
Professor James Martel	Department of Political Science, San Francisco State University	Research Group on International Law and the Challenge of Populism
Elisabeth Lopez Desvars	Faculty of Law, Monash University	Research Group on International Law and the Challenge of Populism
Assistant Commissioner Michael Hermans	-	Victoria Police
Rana Ebrahimi	National Manager	Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network Australia (MYAN)
Soo-Lin Quek	Executive Manager Knowledge, Advocacy & Service Innovation, Knowledge & Advocacy	Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY)

Appendix B

The Victorian Government's role in countering violent extremism

In its submission, the Government informed the Committee of the programs, initiatives and other measures it has in place to counter violent extremism in Victoria. Responsibility for these are split across three Ministerial portfolios:

- The Minister for Police has overall responsibility for the Government's countering violent extremism (CVE) response
- The Minister for Crime Prevention has responsibility for the services and programs delivered through the Northern Community Support Group
- The Attorney-General has responsibility for the majority of provisions under the *Terrorism (Community Protection) Act 2003* (Vic), and the establishment of the CVE Multi-Agency Panel and associated case management schemes.

The Department of Justice and Community Safety is responsible for whole-of-government CVE coordination. Each government department has its own CVE initiatives and workplans.¹ These are summarised as follows:

1. Social cohesion and community building programs

Program/Initiative	Summary
COVID-19 supports	
Local Communities Access Grants Program	\$20,000 grants to reduce vaccine misinformation/hesitancy, remove barriers to and support uptake of COVID-19 vaccines among priority groups.
Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Communities Taskforce	Taskforce working in partnership with community organisations, local governments, and the Victorian Multicultural Commission to develop community specific, locally delivered solutions initially to help slow the spread of COVID-19 and now focused on vaccination uptake, and social and economic recovery.
Crime Prevention portfolio	
Crime Prevention Strategy (<i>in particular</i> : Building Safer Communities Program)	Overarching policy driver that addresses the risk factors that drive offending and supports community-led initiatives to address local crime and safety issues and to build community cohesion. The Building Safer Communities Program comprises: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowering Communities Grants for local council to support community-led partnerships to design and deliver activities that address crime and strengthen community safety
(Continued)	

¹ Victorian Government, Submission 20, p. 11.

Program/Initiative	Summary
<p>Crime Prevention Strategy (Continued)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth Engagement Grants for small Aboriginal and multicultural organisations to support young people to make positive life choices and prevent contact with the justice system • Creating Safer Places Grants for Victorian councils to improve the safety and use of public places by a diverse range of community members, and to deter criminal and anti-social behaviour • Crime Prevention Innovation Fund for Victorian councils, not-for-profit community organisations and other specialist organisations for partnership projects that deliver and evaluate innovative community safety and crime prevention initiatives.
Partnerships to address risk factors for offending	<p>A range of initiatives to test key aspects of successful crime prevention approaches to inform the development of the Crime Prevention Strategy. Prototype initiatives include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education prototype: early intervention pilot delivered by the Department of Education and Training in selected primary schools in the Outer Eastern Melbourne and Brimbank-Melton areas in 2021 for speech pathologists and Outreach Family Services support to 18 students and their families • Community Connections prototype: program delivered by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing to build sustainable community connections for care leavers including Aboriginal young people • Employment prototype: <i>Step into Employment</i> program delivered by the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions targeting secondary and post-secondary school students in communities with high levels of unemployment and disengagement • Women's Safety Lighting prototype: funding allocated to Darebin City Council and Arup Lighting to assess how innovative lighting and co-design can improve women's safety.
Education portfolio	
Social Cohesion Through Education Program	A place-based initiative which supports school communities and students by providing engagement opportunities and tailored activities to enhance social cohesion and build resilience to all forms of violent extremism. Activities include mentoring workshops, peer support programs, resilience building modules, youth networking, sports activities, and parental engagement.
Jobs portfolio	
Jobs Victoria inclusion agenda	<p>Jobs Victoria seeks to increase the employment, retention and belonging of people previously isolated or disconnected from many workplaces. Its inclusion work aims to increase economic participation and inclusion in local communities.</p> <p>The Jobs Victoria inclusion agenda encourages employers to consider recruitment practices, workplace adjustments and flexibilities, training, capacity building, building linkages and networking within the workplace, and creating opportunities for career development.</p> <p>Jobs Victoria provides a suite of programs and initiatives with varying levels of support, as well as a number of specialist services for target cohorts.</p>
Youth Justice portfolio	
Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020-2030	Specifically in relation to extremism, the Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020-2030 reinforces Youth Justice's support for Victoria Police efforts in identifying and responding to young people at risk of radicalisation or engaging in violent extremism. Education and intervention programs are delivered to young people in youth justice to assist them to understand the reasons for their violent behaviour and support positive change.
Corrections portfolio	
Ongoing delivery of initiatives to counter violent extremism in the corrections system	Corrections Victoria delivers several initiatives to counter violent extremism, including diversion and disengagement initiatives in the corrections system. Allocated funding supports the development, implementation and ongoing review of the Corrections Victoria Countering Violent Extremism Service Delivery Model that utilises a state-wide, multi-disciplinary approach to address offenders' risk and needs via a range of functions across prisons and Community Correctional Services.

Program/Initiative	Summary
Community engagement and support	
Community Crime Prevention	In 2021–22, the Community Crime Prevention Unit in the Department of Justice and Community Safety engaged 649 community members through capacity building activities which increase community capability to deliver crime prevention initiatives, including Building Safer Communities forums, community capacity building workshops and information sessions.
Mental Health Services	Funding allocations to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> continue work of the Victorian Fixed Threat Assessment Centre (VFTAC), bringing together police and mental health clinicians to monitor high-risk individuals and respond to serious threats of violence establish Social Inclusion Action groups in 10 local government areas to deliver place-based mental health programs.
Multicultural communities	Funding allocations to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> provide legal support for asylum seekers and temporary visa holders continue the Multicultural Community Infrastructure Fund, to build and upgrade community facilities and places of worship support young members of Victoria's African communities with the delivery of targeted education support programs like homework clubs and community liaison officers embedded in schools support multicultural communities with tailored and translated messaging and programs for COVIDSafe behaviours, such as vaccine uptake and testing give multicultural communities the opportunity to celebrate holidays and events of significance support the establishment of a new, whole-of-government Language Services State Purchase Contract to improve access to interpreting services.
Northern Community Support Group	The Northern Community Support Group (NCSG) is an initiative working with Muslim communities in Melbourne's northern suburbs which provides activities and supports for young people and families and connects people with relevant services. NCSG offers comprehensive case management and intervention for clients, including those showing signs of anti-social behaviour including radicalisation to violent extremism.
Victoria Police	Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Victoria Police's Priority and Safer Communities Division engaged consistently and proactively with a range of CALD and faith communities via standing engagement mechanisms such as the Multicultural Priority Reference Group and the Multifaith Council. Specific engagement was initiated with groups, particularly those vulnerable to prejudice-motivated crime attacks related to theories of blame about the national origins of COVID-19 and those deemed to be spreading it or ignoring lockdown directives. This culminated in a community-led Prejudice Motivated Crime Workshop that helped inform Victoria Police's understanding of contemporary issues.

Source: Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, pp. 11–21.

2. Early intervention measures

Program/Initiative	Summary
<p>Whole-of-Government Early Intervention Investment Framework (EIIF)</p>	<p>The EIIF is designed to improve life outcomes for individuals while reducing pressure on acute services and supporting opportunities to reinvest avoided costs back into the broader social system. Examples of recent/current initiatives under the EIIF include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Engaging and Supporting At-risk Young People Package, encompassing funding for six Community Support Groups and the Le Mana Pasifika Project. • providing a pathway to help chronically homeless people exit homelessness sustainably, including active street outreach and tailored case management to address factors driving homelessness such as substance abuse illness, poor physical and mental health and limited social supports • delivering integrated treatment, care, and support to people living with acute mental illness and substance use or addiction • expanding the Navigator Program to provide intensive support for severely disengaged young people to reconnect with education • reducing re-offending by providing a range of supports for repeat offenders and over represented cohorts in the justice system, including employment and family support, targeted support for those with a disability and access to safe and secure accommodation for offenders who would otherwise be at risk of homelessness. <p>The 2022–23 State Budget includes funding allocations for 16 EIIF initiatives across the Department of Education and Training, Department of Justice and Community Safety, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, Department of Health, Department of Transport, and Department of Premier and Cabinet.</p>
<p>Youth Justice Training, assessment, and treatment initiatives funded under the EIIF</p>	<p>Community and custodial Youth Justice staff must complete Radicalisation and Extremism Awareness Program training, which aims to develop an awareness of radicalisation and violent extremism indicators in young people. In addition, validated assessment tools, and input from Senior Practice Advisors, assist case managers to identify young people at risk of extremism.</p> <p>The High Risk Panel (HRP) considers young people identified as being at risk of violent extremism and determines if a formal risk assessment should be completed. An Assessment Review Committee is established to conduct and report on the risk assessment outcome to the HRP, which then oversees the implementation of targeted interventions.</p> <p>The Youth Justice Clinical Oversight and Rehabilitation Team oversees funding to engage young people at risk of extremism or charged with terrorism offences to access relevant interventions and supports, including cultural and religious mentoring, and tailored forensic intervention.</p> <p>A Practice Guideline for Community Youth Justice has been drafted to reflect a clear pathway for youth justice clients to access dis-engagement programs which aim to minimise the likelihood of violent extremism in young people in the youth justice system.</p>
<p>Victoria Police Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Unit</p>	<p>The CVE Unit within Victoria Police's Counter Terrorism Command (CTC) is a multidisciplinary team working in collaboration with other specialist units in Victoria Police, other government entities (state and federal), and third-party providers to develop, coordinate and deliver therapeutic interventions to individuals who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are assessed as being at risk of radicalising towards religiously motivated violent extremism (RMVE) or ideologically motivated violent extremism (IMVE) • voluntarily agree to engage in such interventions. <p>CTC is responsible for advocating for and informing CVE policy and legislative reform, Victoria Police CVE policies and processes, and the delivery of state and federal CVE policy initiatives. The intended objectives of CTC's therapeutic interventions are to support the CTC mission in terms of protecting the community and preventing incidents of terrorism and communal violence, by supporting at-risk individuals to rehabilitate their lives, reintegrate with mainstream society, and disengage from violent extremism.</p> <p>(Continued)</p>

Program/Initiative	Summary
<p>Victoria Police Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Unit (Continued)</p>	<p>CVE Unit offers individuals the opportunity to participate voluntarily (unless court mandated) in either the Community Integration Support Program (CISP) or the Network for Intervention and Tailored Engagement (NITE) which support an individual's diversion from radicalising towards RMVE or IMVE respectively. CVE intervention strategies are delivered through a pro-integration model, facilitating interventions to address an individual's ideology, social relations, coping skills, identity, and/or action orientation.</p> <p><i>Network for Intervention and Tailored Engagement (NITE)</i></p> <p>The NITE program is a pilot initiative developed by Victoria Police in response to the threat of IMVE in Victoria. NITE relies on existing service providers, contracted mentors, and the CVE Unit Case Managers to facilitate intervention support. Like CISP, which tailors intervention for individuals at risk of radicalisation to RMVE, NITE is designed to shift political, religious and/or social beliefs from the potential use or encouragement of violence, harassment, and psychological harm.</p>
<p>Partnerships</p>	<p>Victoria is a signatory to the:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intergovernmental Agreement on Australia's National Counter-Terrorism Arrangements, the purpose of which is to enhance the effectiveness of Australia's counterterrorism efforts through a cooperative partnership between all jurisdictions, together with communities and the private sector, to protect lives as an absolute priority and deal with terrorist acts through the criminal justice system. • Intergovernmental Agreement on Counter-Terrorism Laws (following the referral of powers by Victoria and other jurisdictions to the Commonwealth to ensure comprehensive national application of provisions contained in the Part 5.3 of the <i>Criminal Code Act 1995</i> (Cth), which covers terrorism offences). <p>In 2016, the Commonwealth introduced the High-Risk Terrorist Offender (HRTTO) regime into the <i>Criminal Code Act 1995</i> (Cth), creating Continuing Detention Orders (CDOs) to enable the continuing detention of high-risk terrorist offenders who pose an unacceptable risk of committing a serious terrorism offence at the end of their custodial sentence. Corrections Victoria and Victoria Police have worked closely with the Commonwealth in the development of the HRTTO Regime Implementation Framework (RIF), to account for the specific structures and arrangements in place in Victoria compared to other jurisdictions. The purpose of the RIF is to outline the governance arrangements for the HRTTO regime. Victoria also partners with the Commonwealth to accommodate and manage offenders subject to provisions of the HRTTO regime.</p> <p>Victoria is an active member of the Australia-New Zealand Counter-Terrorism Committee (ANZCTC). The objectives of ANZCTC are to contribute to the security of Australia and New Zealand through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • maintaining the National Counter-Terrorism Strategy, plan, and guidance • providing expert strategic and policy advice to heads of government and other relevant ministers • coordinating an effective nation-wide counter-terrorism capability • maintaining effective arrangements for sharing of relevant intelligence and information between all relevant agencies and jurisdictions • providing advice in relation to the administration of a special fund to maintain and develop the nation-wide capability, administered by the Australian Government based on advice from ANZCTC. <p>The Department of Premier and Cabinet and Victoria Police are the lead representatives on ANZCTC. The Department of Justice and Community Safety is also a member of ANZCTC's CVE Sub-Committee, which was established to ensure national coordination of CVE activities including the sharing of information and the development of activities that are locally appropriate.</p> <p>Victoria Police partners with Forensicare to deliver VFTAC, a state-wide service that works specifically with people who pose threats to others, many of whom have a major mental illness or current mental health needs. VFTAC is jointly staffed by a team of senior forensic mental health clinicians and police officers. The primary purpose is to assess individuals of concern and develop management plans, which may involve engaging or re-engaging with mental health services.</p>

Program/Initiative	Summary
Early intervention pathways to CVE	<p>In the wake of the 2017 Brighton Siege, an Expert Panel on Terrorism and Violent Extremism Prevention and Response Powers was established to examine the effectiveness of Victoria’s counter-terrorism legislation and recommend improvements to assist relevant agencies manage the risks posed by violent extremism. The Expert Panel produced two reports with a total of 42 recommendations for improving capability and capacity to respond to violent extremism. Since 2018, CVE and counter terrorism work across government portfolios has been focused on implementing these recommendations to improve the Government’s response to terrorism and violent extremism.</p> <p>The <i>Terrorism (Community Protection) Amendment Act 2021</i> (Vic) implements several recommendations by creating two therapeutic early intervention pathways – a Voluntary Case Management Scheme and a Support and Engagement Order scheme (SEO) – to provide case management for persons who are at risk of radicalising, or radicalising towards, violent extremism and to connect clients with the supports and community links they need to get their lives back on track.</p> <p>Additionally, the Act establishes a CVE Multi-Agency Panel (CVE MAP) and a standalone information-sharing scheme to facilitate the operation of the early intervention schemes. The CVE MAP will be responsible for assessing and case managing clients on both case management schemes, which provides a multi-agency and coordinated approach and will comprise representatives from relevant departments and agencies. Subject matter experts outside the public sector can also be appointed to the CVE MAP to provide specialist expertise and advice. It is intended that the schemes will commence on 2 September 2022.</p>

Source: Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, pp. 22–28.

3. Custodial programs

Portfolio/policy area	Summary
Youth Justice	<p>Youth Justice operates a range of CVE-related custodial programs and initiatives, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Cherry Creek Youth Justice Centre (opening in 2023), which has a designated Preventative Detention Order Unit to house children aged 14–17 years under the <i>Terrorism (Community Protection) Act 2003</i> (Vic). • A Director’s Instruction on Preventative Detention, which is being developed to support custodial staff in admitting, managing, and supporting young people subject to a Preventative Detention Order. • The High Risk High Harm (HRHH) program, which is an intensive clinical intervention response targeting young people in the youth justice system assessed as uniquely high-risk and/or high-harm. This program involves an augmented approach of the clinician’s expertise with CVE-specific expertise relevant to individual needs.
Corrections	<p>Corrections Victoria oversees the CVE Service Delivery Model. This model provides an end-to-end framework, inclusive of intelligence services, legislation and policies and procedures to support the management of individuals convicted of terrorism offences and those that pose a risk of violent extremism in prisons or subject to a community-based order, including post-sentence Continuing Detention Orders.</p> <p>Corrections Victoria and its intelligence service works closely with Victoria Police, the Australian Federal Police and intelligence and counter-terrorism agencies regarding prisoners and offenders who are identified as a HRT0 or are at risk of violent extremism to manage risk and maintain community safety.</p>

Source: Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, pp. 28–29.

4. Research

Program/Initiative	Summary
<p>Centre for Inclusive and Resilient Societies (CRIS)</p>	<p>CRIS is an independent think-tank, established by the Government in 2018, tasked with addressing the challenges relating to violent extremism, social cohesion, and community resilience.</p> <p>CRIS brings together academics, community groups, government, and industry partners to research, develop, translate, and communicate evidence-based, practical, and up-to-date knowledge and recourses. Its work is organised into four streams with approximately 17 active projects focusing on several emerging issues and innovative programs that are focused on challenging racism and enhancing social belonging, building resilience to social harms including violent extremism, understanding youth diversity and wellness in the digital age, and understanding the dynamics of violent extremism.</p>

Source: Victorian Government, *Submission 20*, p. 29.

Appendix C

Christchurch Call

CHRISTCHURCH CALL



The Christchurch Call to Action

To Eliminate Terrorist and Violent Extremist Content Online

A free, open and secure internet is a powerful tool to promote connectivity, enhance social inclusiveness and foster economic growth.

The internet is, however, not immune from abuse by terrorist and violent extremist actors. This was tragically highlighted by the terrorist attacks of 15 March 2019 on the Muslim community of Christchurch – terrorist attacks that were designed to go viral.

The dissemination of such content online has adverse impacts on the human rights of the victims, on our collective security and on people all over the world.

Significant steps have already been taken to address this issue by, among others: the European Commission with initiatives such as the EU Internet Forum; the G20, and the G7, including work underway during France's G7 Presidency on combating the use of the internet for terrorist and violent extremist purposes; along with the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT); the Global Counterterrorism Forum; Tech Against Terrorism; and the Aqaba Process established by the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

The events of Christchurch highlighted once again the urgent need for action and enhanced cooperation among the wide range of actors with influence over this issue, including governments, civil society, and online service providers, such as social media companies, to eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content online.

The Call outlines collective, voluntary commitments from Governments and online service providers intended to address the issue of terrorist and violent extremist content online and to prevent the abuse of the internet as occurred in and after the Christchurch attacks.

All action on this issue must be consistent with principles

of a free, open and secure internet, without compromising human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression. It must also recognise the internet's ability to act as a force for good, including by promoting innovation and economic development and fostering inclusive societies.

To that end, we, the Governments, commit to:

Counter the drivers of terrorism and violent extremism by strengthening the resilience and inclusiveness of our societies to enable them to resist terrorist and violent extremist ideologies, including through education, building media literacy to help counter distorted terrorist and violent extremist narratives, and the fight against inequality.

Ensure effective enforcement of applicable laws that prohibit the production or dissemination of terrorist and violent extremist content, in a manner consistent with the rule of law and international human rights law, including freedom of expression.

Encourage media outlets to apply ethical standards when depicting terrorist events online, to avoid amplifying terrorist and violent extremist content.

Support frameworks, such as industry standards, to ensure that reporting on terrorist attacks does not amplify terrorist and violent extremist content, without prejudice to responsible coverage of terrorism and violent extremism.

Consider appropriate action to prevent the use of online services to disseminate terrorist and violent extremist content, including through collaborative actions, such as:

- Awareness-raising and capacity-building activities aimed at smaller online service providers;
- Development of industry standards or voluntary frameworks;
- Regulatory or policy measures consistent with a free, open and secure internet and international human rights law.



To that end, we, the online service providers, commit to:

Take transparent, specific measures seeking to prevent the upload of terrorist and violent extremist content and to prevent its dissemination on social media and similar content-sharing services, including its immediate and permanent removal, without prejudice to law enforcement and user appeals requirements, in a manner consistent with human rights and fundamental freedoms. Cooperative measures to achieve these outcomes may include technology development, the expansion and use of shared databases of hashes and URLs, and effective notice and takedown procedures.

Provide greater transparency in the setting of community standards or terms of service, including by:

- Outlining and publishing the consequences of sharing terrorist and violent extremist content;
- Describing policies and putting in place procedures for detecting and removing terrorist and violent extremist content.

Enforce those community standards or terms of service in a manner consistent with human rights and fundamental freedoms, including by:

- Prioritising moderation of terrorist and violent extremist content, however identified;
- Closing accounts where appropriate;
- Providing an efficient complaints and appeals process for those wishing to contest the removal of their content or a decision to decline the upload of their content.

Implement immediate, effective measures to mitigate the specific risk that terrorist and violent extremist content is disseminated through livestreaming, including identification of content for real-time review.

Implement regular and transparent public reporting, in a way that is measurable and supported by clear methodology, on the quantity and nature of terrorist and violent extremist content being detected and removed.

Review the operation of algorithms and other processes that may drive users towards and/or amplify terrorist and violent extremist content to better understand possible intervention points and to implement changes where this occurs. This may include using algorithms and other processes to redirect users from such content or the promotion of credible, positive alternatives or counter-narratives. This may include building appropriate mechanisms for reporting, designed in a multi-stakeholder process and without compromising trade secrets or the effectiveness of service providers' practices through unnecessary disclosure.

Work together to ensure cross-industry efforts are coordinated and robust, for instance by investing in and expanding the GIFCT, and by sharing knowledge and expertise.

To that end, we, Governments and online service providers, commit to work collectively to:

Work with civil society to promote community-led efforts to counter violent extremism in all its forms, including through the development and promotion of positive alternatives and counter-messaging.

Develop effective interventions, based on trusted information sharing about the effects of algorithmic and other processes, to redirect users from terrorist and violent extremist content.

Accelerate research into and development of technical solutions to prevent the upload of and to detect and immediately remove terrorist and violent extremist content online, and share these solutions through open channels, drawing on expertise from academia, researchers, and civil society.

Support research and academic efforts to better understand, prevent and counter terrorist and violent extremist content online, including both the offline and online impacts of this activity.

Ensure appropriate cooperation with and among law enforcement agencies for the purposes of investigating

CHRISTCHURCH CALL

TO ELIMINATE TERRORIST
& VIOLENT EXTREMIST
CONTENT ONLINE



and prosecuting illegal online activity in regard to detected and/or removed terrorist and violent extremist content, in a manner consistent with rule of law and human rights protections.

Support smaller platforms as they build capacity to remove terrorist and violent extremist content, including through sharing technical solutions and relevant databases of hashes or other relevant material, such as the GIFCT shared database.

Collaborate, and support partner countries, in the development and implementation of best practice in preventing the dissemination of terrorist and violent extremist content online, including through operational coordination and trusted information exchanges in accordance with relevant data protection and privacy rules.

Develop processes allowing governments and online service providers to respond rapidly, effectively and in a coordinated manner to the dissemination of terrorist or violent extremist content following a terrorist event. This may require the development of a shared crisis protocol and information-sharing processes, in a manner consistent with human rights protections.

Respect, and for Governments protect, human rights, including by avoiding directly or indirectly contributing to adverse human rights impacts through business activities and addressing such impacts where they occur.

Recognise the important role of civil society in supporting work on the issues and commitments in the Call, including through:

- Offering expert advice on implementing the commitments in this Call in a manner consistent with a free, open and secure internet and with international human rights law;
- Working, including with governments and online service providers, to increase transparency;
- Where necessary, working to support users through company appeals and complaints processes.

Affirm our willingness to continue to work together, in existing fora and relevant organisations, institutions, mechanisms and processes to assist one another and to build momentum and widen support for the Call.

Develop and support a range of practical, non-duplicative initiatives to ensure that this pledge is delivered.

Acknowledge that governments, online service providers, and civil society may wish to take further cooperative action to address a broader range of harmful online content, such as the actions that will be discussed further during the G7 Biarritz Summit, in the G20, the Aqaba Process, the Five Country Ministerial, and a range of other fora.

Minority report

MINORITY REPORT

Victoria has a proud multicultural heritage: one – albeit imperfect – of inclusion and respect. Thus, the vast majority of Victorians find extremism of any kind abhorrent. In our view, this is one of the great strengths of our state.

Indeed, many Victorians specifically came to these shores in order to escape extremism. Last century, huge waves of immigration followed the First and Second World Wars, and the Vietnam War – to cite just three examples. It is with good cause that the famous historian, Eric Hobsbawm, entitled his outstanding history of the 20th century, “The Age of Extremes”.

In this great work he analyses – in particular – fascism, Nazism and Communism. And the overwhelming majority of scholars draw lines of connectivity between different forms of extremism, be they termed (rather loosely and often unhelpfully) “right wing” or “left wing”.

As security analysts agree, these terms – which date back to the French Revolution – have little utility when seeking to understand, and ultimately combat, complex social phenomena today.

For this reason, we are deeply disappointed that this report sought only to examine so-called far-right extremism. It should be noted that the Liberals and Nationals sought to address this issue before Parliament made a reference to the committee. Yet we were unsuccessful.

Narrowing the scope of our inquiry was a significant missed opportunity. More than that, as some witnesses noted, focusing solely on one form of extremism – to the exclusion of others – may serve to further ostracise some members of the community, thereby actually exacerbating the problems that we are seeking to understand, and ultimately eradicate.

Notwithstanding this very serious shortcoming, many witnesses deviated from our terms of reference and presented evidence about extremism – broadly defined. In doing so they were simply being intellectually honest.

We repeatedly heard that there are many similarities between the causes and manifestations of extremism, no matter the particular ideology that underpins it. Thus, despite the inadequate terms of reference, much content in the substantive report is relevant to extremism, regardless of how it is defined.

RECOMMENDATION

That the content, findings and recommendations of the substantive report are read as pertaining to all forms of extremism.



Dr Matthew Bach MP



Ms Cathrine Burnett-Wake MP

