

Understanding the Pathways to Violence

It is important to understand what the pathways to violence process looks like, in order for families, friends and communities to help prevent acts of violence.

The pathways to violence

There is no single pathway to towards violence, as the process is unique to each person. However, there are some common elements in the experiences of most people who have carried out violent acts, regardless of their beliefs or motivations.

These elements include significant behavioral changes in major areas of a person's life including ideology, social relations and criminal activity. If someone is viewing violence as an option, changes can often occur in all three of these areas.

A person's behavior must also become more intense and extreme over time, when compared with that person's previous or 'normal' behavior. Their circumstances and environment should also be taken into account.

If there is a valid alternative explanation for the changes in behavior, these changes should not be considered a sign of someone planning violence.

If a person comes to the point of promoting, threatening or using violence for any particular cause, the wider community has a responsibility to act.

There are many resources available online for community members, law enforcement, school personnel, public health and other professionals as they work together to create a more resilient, violent resistant community. Visit ptv.unl.edu to learn more.

Ideology

In the pathways to violence, ideology refers to a significant shift in the way a person views the world.

Ideologies are only concerning if they advocate the use of violence or other unlawful activity to promote particular beliefs.

As the pathway to violence progresses, some people will promote an increasingly strict and literal understanding of a given belief or grievance. They may increasingly use ideological language that vilifies or discriminates others.

Religious devoutness

Increasing religious devoutness or commitment to unconventional beliefs does not automatically mean someone is viewing violence as an option.

The use of the internet to view, download and spread material promoting violence is often part of the pathway to violence. Some people may occasionally view such material out of curiosity, but people who are viewing violence as an option tend to collect and share this material with others who hold the same beliefs.

Hateful ideology and anti-social ideas might be disturbing or offensive, but if someone has not committed to using violence or advocating the use of violence, it should not be considered as someone viewing violence as an option.

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Social relations

Many people join militant groups for social reasons. People are most vulnerable to involvement in violent militant groups through the influence of close personal relationships. This is especially true for young people.

As people start to view violence as an option, they will often pull away from normal, mainstream activities and friendship groups. There may be conflict with family and friends over political or ideological views.

At the same time, some people will start to interact more often with smaller, tight-knit networks of people who share their specific beliefs. Some groups may even require a person to go through an initiation or take an oath of allegiance to prove their commitment.

Recruitment into militant groups is most often led by personal face-to-face relationships, but there are some examples of recruitment into these groups over the internet. A person may become part of an online community of people who share their views in a virtual environment.

Criminal activity

For some pathways to violence, a person may start to 'act up' to draw attention to their beliefs or grievance. They may send a message to a specific group. These activities might not cause serious harm, but might still be illegal. They might include actions like vandalism, minor property damage, trespassing, or illegal protesting.

Some individuals might try to influence a government or a section of the community by making threats. If someone begins to support the use of violence to promote a cause, actions of violence by this person becomes a serious concern.

Once a person becomes committed to violent action, an actual violent attack may take place very quickly. If a person considers unlawful and criminal activity to be acceptable, they might also become increasingly suspicious and cautious. This might mean that they become nervous about the activities of governments, security and intelligence agencies or law enforcement.

Identifying someone on a pathway to violence

Most individuals begin their pathway to violence process in one or more of the three key areas—ideology, social relations or criminal activity. This normally means that a person's behavior will noticeably change in one area first, and not across all three areas at the same time, but change in these areas can happen very quickly.

Most people do not go all the way to carrying out a violent act. Something or someone might interrupt the radicalization process, and the person does not get to the point of threatening or using violence, and may even reject their own extreme ideas. When this happens, it is called disengagement. The active involvement of families, friends and the community in this process is very important.