

This report was compiled by Joseph Street , Turing Scheme trainee at the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV) from the University of East Anglia (UEA). The report is based on information gathered from online research. This is a preliminary study to gather information about the role of social outreach projects and volunteers in addressing loneliness and preventing radicalisation.

How social outreach projects, and the volunteers that uphold them, prevent radicalisation by combatting loneliness:

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Index

Introduction	2
The Role of Volunteering	3
The role of Social Media	3
Approaches to combatting extremism	4
Prevent Scheme (United Kingdom)	4
International (UN 'Youth Engagement and Empowerment Programme')	6
Topical (Lonely not alone.org)	7
Local (Buddywerking Brussels)	7
Recommendations & Conclusions	8

Introduction

Far right rhetoric has undergone a resurgence alongside populism in mainstream politics across the West in the last decade (Coi, 2024), setting a dangerous trend regarding the actions and statements of top-level politicians, and enabling misinformed and inappropriate responses to situations of an unprecedented severity (BBC, 2021), (Washington Post, 2020). This undermining of expected behaviour from elected officials has led to an increasingly volatile and hyper-partisan political discourse, enabling extremist ideas to spread with a vigour equal to the opposing progressive agenda prominent in the West.

Young people are susceptible to misinformation and, desperate to belong, could be swayed by the 'acceptance' posed by countercultures, especially online. As stated by Van Dijk's theory of a 'Network Society' (1991): 'Technology allows for a better distribution of knowledge. Its complexity and costs, however, may serve to intensify existing social inequalities, or even create large groups of misfits – people who do not fit in with the information society.'

By integrating social community work into a currently fractured and isolationist youth culture (YouGov, 2020), (Mental Health Foundation, 2022), the risk of a young person becoming disillusioned or ostracised can be reduced, in turn preventing the growth of extremist allegiance, improving social networks, and increasing young people's stake in their community. Social outreach projects are an integral part of the global volunteering output.

In the age of social media, loneliness has increased rapidly, earning the title of an 'epidemic' in the West (The US Surgeon General's advisory, 2023). A by-product of this loneliness, accentuated during the COVID-19 pandemic, has been the isolation and subsequent deception of vulnerable individuals through misinformation that is often specifically targeting those lacking a sense of community. This is evident in the recent trends in far-right activity and others such as the 'incel' (involuntary celibate) phenomena, as well as the ease at which conspiracy theories spread on global issues such as the handling of the pandemic, or the proposed methods of confronting climate degradation.

The extreme consequences of harbouring a sense of mistrust between the public and established institutions could be seen through the 2020 storming of the USA Capitol building, or more recently through the tumultuous revolts in response to the military insurrection of Gaza, and the far-right riots in 2024 in the UK. Whilst these examples vastly differ in context and legitimacy, the common denominator amongst groups who act against their own state is a sense of alienation, born out of an attrition of trust between the state and its electorate, and leaving them susceptible to misinformation.

The Role of Volunteering

Volunteering, especially where activities include interaction with others, can be mutually beneficial for the mental health of both volunteers and the community members they serve (Wilson & Musick, 2000), increasing a sense of 'fulfilment' through harnessing a sense of belonging and purpose (Wuthnow, 1991). Displayed through this report will be how public service, best encouraged through volunteering programmes, is of vital importance in the battle to dispel extremism, and the prominent threat of a resurgence of far-right rhetoric across Europe and the West.

The Royal Voluntary service (2024), based in the United Kingdom, establishes that the benefits of volunteering centre around an improved sense of self-confidence, mental wellbeing, and attachment to local communities. This is supported by a variety of studies into this relationship (see Musik & Wilson, 2003 and Schwartz and Sendor, 1999); However, as stated by Whillians (2017), this could be a misrepresentation, as people with higher levels of mental wellbeing are also more likely to volunteer in the first place, posing the questions: How do we as a society connect with those who feel alienated? How do we turn antagonism into a positive perspective of one's community?

Both Stukas (2015) and Snyder, Ottomo, and Dwyer (2008), emphasise how volunteerism is of mutual benefit to both the communities served and the individuals volunteering. Based on statistics reported by the United Nations State of World Volunteering in both 2018 and 2022, volunteerism has undergone a meteoric rise from 109 million involved in volunteering worldwide (2018), to over 862 million (2022). The contemporary suggestions of a 'loneliness epidemic', particularly felt by the young and the elderly, indicate that young people would greatly benefit from the 'improved sense of self-confidence and attachment to local communities' that volunteering aims to facilitate.

The role of Social Media

The rise of social media has inherently altered the social communication of entire generations. Research by Vogels and Anderson (2020) highlights the obsessive behaviours of young people in their use of social media to check up on their peers or romantic partners. Garcia, Gonzalez and Cerezo (2023) suggest something similar, analysing the relationship between young women, body image and social media. Sugiura (2021), speaking on the aforementioned 'incel' phenomena, profiles the movement as 'the sharing of the common attitudes and interests that have brought together many who are lonely, vulnerable and seeking solidarity, as well as an explanation for their problems'. Like much of the online world, these perceived 'benefits' of an online community are fleeting, and, in most cases, founded upon misinformation or untrustworthy interaction. Among all of these studies, however, the common emotion distinguished is a consistent presence of anxiety among young people regarding their social status among their peers, exacerbated by a lack of face to face interaction.

On top of this, studies have shown that 'newly established [online] communities are more toxic and misogynist than their predecessors, and that the language used is becoming progressively more

sexually explicit, violent, racist, and homophobic’ (Horta Ribiero et al, 2020) in reference to the spread of ‘alt-right’ hate groups online, and aligning with the progression of the far right in the political mainstream.

Research by Goel (2023) demonstrates how once a post of an extreme nature circulates, a ‘cascading’ of further extreme language and imagery ensues in the subsequent interactions, suggesting that social media sites unconsciously aid the growth of extremism.

With these findings in mind, the current infrastructure surrounding the protection of young people from harm is insufficient. Young people, particularly those between the ages of 13-16, are some of the most frequent users of social media sites (statista, 2023), despite loosely applied ‘rules’ regarding age restrictions. With the pre-established trends regarding the content regularly displayed on these sites, it is easier to understand the channels via which many vulnerable people can become indoctrinated.

It must be noted however that these tendencies are not exclusive to the younger generations. Studies regarding Covid-19 conspiracy theories varied in results regarding the age and uptake of such beliefs (Mulukom et al, 2022). In addition, during the infancy of hyper-partisanship in the West, the targeted site for the Cambridge Analytica misinformation scandal in the mid 2010s was Facebook, which is predominantly used by the elder age brackets compared to other social media sites, suggesting that media navigation and deception is prevalent amongst all demographics of social network users.

Case Studies

Approaches to combatting extremism

Whilst often reported as a predominantly US/UK problem, there are significant representatives of many flagship far-right notions in Europe. Furthermore, recent events, such as major successes in recent elections in Hungary, Poland, Switzerland, Germany and Italy in the last 5 years, and more recently in the EU parliament elections of 2024, demonstrate how they have saturated mainstream politics to a far greater extent across Europe than other western regions. Therefore, across these case studies, displaying the variety in the respective approaches and contexts across the Western field of counter terrorism will be prioritised.

Prevent Scheme (United Kingdom)

The prevent scheme defines itself as a police-led scheme primarily aimed at the ‘prevention of vulnerable people being drawn into extremism’ (Counter Terrorism Policing, 2024). Originally, the scheme was designed to utilise local community partners such as schools, universities, or religious institutions to identify and address expressions of an overtly terrorist narrative; by this description, the scheme is, in theory, detached from any criminality procedures.

In 2023, the UK government conducted an overview of the scheme, deciding to ‘streamline’ it to work on the more pressing issues such as ‘Islamist terrorism’ and ‘tackling the ideological drivers of terrorism’ whilst ‘remaining vigilant against other threats, including the extreme right’ (GOV.UK, 2023). The West has long neglected the threat of far-right extremism, predominantly because its demographic is more reflective of the populace (Zand, 2022), (Crispin, 2020), and tackling it would lead to an uncomfortable confrontation that many centre right candidates want to avoid, as doing so would split their support base.

The reforms reshaped the prevent scheme into something more atomistic, more focused on the agency of the individuals involved, in order to remove blame from the institutional factors that often alienate certain groups and put them on the path towards violence (Abbas, 2012), (Chomsky, 2012). Reforms such as these have produced ‘accusations of snooping and a surveillance society’ (Gardner, 2021), burdening civic workers with a role they are ill-equipped for.

European Commission Radicalisation Awareness Network - RAN - (EU):

The RAN draws similarities to the Prevent Scheme, creating a network of frontline practitioners within the fields of social engagement and counter terrorism, to avert threats of extremism across EU member states.

The scheme was founded in 2011, gathering the collective ideas of ‘civil society representatives’ such as ‘social workers, youth workers, teachers, healthcare professionals, local authority representatives, police officers and prison officers’, the RAN organises thematic working groups and produces regular publications in order to prevent terrorism before it becomes active. As the official page states: ‘Preventing and countering violent extremism involves more than surveillance and security. The influencing efforts of terrorists and violent extremists do not stop at national borders; neither should our efforts to undermine the radicalisation and recruitment of future terrorists.’ (European Commission, 2024)

The RAN performs the less glamorised aspects of the counter-terrorism process, working within institutions to prevent the growth of extremism and ensure those involved are supported, rather than shunned, through their transition away from radicalisation.

As a European Commission programme, the RAN is active throughout EU member states, cementing itself as the predominant counter terrorism programme in the West. It received mixed reactions initially, even from within its own circles; as Melhuish & Heath-Kelly (2021) allude to: ‘One of RAN’s founding institutions – the Committee of the Regions, the primary European institutional representative of municipalities – has been rather vocal in this regard. In a dedicated 2016 Opinion document, the CoR “Underlines the need for an EU network to be developed to help achieve stronger EU local and regional collaboration on combatting radicalisation and violent extremism and terrorism.”

This scrutiny was compounded in the wake of significant terrorist attacks across Europe in 2017, manifested in the creation of a ‘High Level Commission Expert Group on Radicalisation

(HLCEG-R)' (European Commission, 2017). This seemingly confirmed murmurs that the RAN was too 'soft' in the face of a noteworthy terrorist threat; however, persistence and substantial reform have enabled the existence of the RAN into the modern day, demonstrating how counter-terrorism at a grassroots level is essential.

Volunteer Engagement Approaches

Centre for European Volunteering:

As previously mentioned, discussions associated with loneliness and alienation have aligned with the isolating restrictions put in place to slow the spread of Covid-19. The Centre for European Volunteering (CEV) recognised this through the European Solidarity Corps project "Combatting Loneliness & Isolation with Volunteers in Europe" (CLIVE) (CEV, 2022), which aimed to 'Positively affect the lives of the target groups, in their mental health as well as their social cohesion, and lead to target groups experiencing new connections and forming positive social relationships.' The CLIVE project, according to interviews with participants publicly available online, enabled members to re-gain confidence in their skills and professions, something that had been eroded as a result of the pandemic.

This issue has been revisited, adapted to fit the transition away from the post pandemic structure, in the Erasmus Plus 'Stop Loneliness, Start Volunteering' project (CEV, 2024). The project acknowledges the stunting of development, noted by beneficiaries of the CLIVE initiative, that were caused by the pandemic.

International (UN 'Youth Engagement and Empowerment Programme')

The UN's youth engagement and empowerment programme advertises a wholesale approach to youth engagement, targeting the big issues in politics and establishing the vitality of the younger perspective. The UN aims to engage young people in policy making at all levels, stressing the importance of the issues of the younger generation being accounted for in the legislative or decision-making process (UN, 2023). The brief referenced focuses on the current gap between the impact of young people in identifying new solutions and driving innovation, and how their presence is often underrepresented, particularly when interlinked with more recognised imbalances in gender, race or sexuality.

According to the United Nations Development Programme 'This is done by promoting fully inclusive governance, increasing youth participation in decision-making, ramping up youth employment, engaging youth in peacebuilding and gender equality programmes' (UNDP, 2018). The UN's programme represents a higher level of involvement than others outlined in this brief, focusing on the involvement of young people not only in their local communities or multi-national broader issues, but directly in the policy they will be governed by.

The scheme is positivist in its representation of young people, describing them as ‘better positioned to promote a culture of tolerance and peace amongst their peers.’ It is exemplary in that it promotes the enhanced responsibility and importance of the younger generation. Local-based programmes often focus on building a sense of intergenerational community within the area they are operating, the UNDP and the UN’s youth engagement and empowerment programme focus on the individual, aiming to improve one’s confidence by representing a recognised institution and further employability skills.

Topical (Lonely not alone.org)

Whilst not a scheme that encourages activity, “the lonely not alone” campaign reminds young people of their place and purpose in the world in spite of chaotic day-to-day experiences; for this reason it will be used to cross reference more labour intensive or contact based programmes, analysing whether engagement alone is a justifiable solution to the issues of youth engagement and loneliness.

The Lonely not alone campaign differs from others discussed in this report, in that it is exclusively online, and presented in a more targeted, digital format for young people. As seen on the website (Lonelynotalone.org.uk), (The Cooperative, 2024), the campaign is demonstrated via an interactive ‘universe’ metaphorical media, representing ‘lonely’ young people and their stories as stars in a vast solar system, interconnected by the system they exist in, and the energy they emit purely through their existence and achievements. The ‘universe’ enables users to explore the experiences of others in a safe and managed environment, trading stories of loneliness and the support systems or relief methods used by those who feel similarly.

Its initial aim was to destigmatize loneliness, emphasising how it is a common sensation, particularly in the wake of recent world events, and that despite the colossal weight of the feeling, it is not a definitive state of existence. Whilst slightly at odds with the assertions made previously in this report, the legitimacy of less direct approaches like the lonely not alone campaign should not be undermined. With the previously discussed challenges facing young people, acceptance and validation of these feelings of loneliness must be the primary reaction, as a precursor to beginning to take action, otherwise suggestions made to help could become lost in the wider notions which increase pressure.

Local (Buddywerking Brussels)

Buddywerking is an organisation which works across the entire Flanders region. The scheme stresses in its promotion of the programmes benefits for those with psychological difficulties, not only is this an underrepresented issue in the wider problem of loneliness (O’Donnell & Shor, 2022), (Sugiura, 2021) but it is one mentioned consistently in counterterrorism literature when profiling those who are vulnerable to radicalisation.

It largely goes without saying that those with intense psychological difficulties tend to struggle with establishing and maintaining social connections. This can result in a reliance on relationships/interactions predominantly with professional social workers. In the worst of cases, this prolonged isolation can make it substantially difficult to integrate, something previously highlighted as an issue that can lead to vulnerabilities to criminality or a sense of alienation. Buddywerking aims to combat this issue via partnering those with such social difficulties with a 'buddy' who enriches their social lives by taking part in typical social activities.

Like the 'lonelynotalone' campaign, the Buddywerking scheme aims to destigmatize mental health issues, volunteers are willing participants in the relationship, and the organisation ensures that interactions are organised, regular and based in equality. The existence of programmes such as the Buddywerking scheme challenge issues of loneliness without treating the community targeted as something to fix, which is often a barrier that prevents people from seeking out support in terms of mental health.

Recommendations & Conclusions

Based on the wealth of programmes regarding the issue, their respective targets all seem to point towards increased services to combat loneliness through understanding, rather than confrontation which can aggravate pressures that are already felt by the targeted community.

Furthermore, the current changes to programmes such as the UK prevent scheme can do more harm than good, stripping the humanistic aspect of de-radicalisation away to make room for a results-based output, which devalues the lives of those affected by extremist indoctrination. These programmes, championed at a government level, must instead be exemplary and comprehensive to act on such a wide-spanning and intersected issue.

Much of the discourse surrounding criminality, especially repeat offenders, concerns the lack of infrastructure in and the apathy towards the community around them (Gray and Manning, 2017), (Gray and Stevenson, 2019). It can be concluded that more schemes must operate on the principles of humility, empathy and community programmes like 'buddywerking' and 'stop loneliness, start volunteering' represent, as recognising the mutual benefits of volunteering and seeking out help is crucial. The intersectionality between loneliness, alienation and radicalisation has been established through a refined but expansive literature analysis. This has been used as a template to demonstrate some current failings at a governmental levels in attitude towards those vulnerable to the narratives mentioned.

Schemes and programmes at the international and local level show the current focus globally in both the diagnoses and solutions to the consequences of loneliness. It is evident that different groups are unequally vulnerable to isolation and a sense of alienation, largely due to the aforementioned failings. It can be seen how loneliness can act as a catalyst to mental health issues, which have only been exacerbated by the political tumultuousness of recent years and the rise of social media.

Atomising the process of aiding the vulnerable can lead to directly fuelling further disgruntlement towards states and institutions, which in turn can lead to radical practices.

The overlapping of benefits between volunteers and the community impacted can act as a harmonious solution to the issues of loneliness and the consequences of loneliness and isolation. Understanding how loneliness may not be detectable in some cases, and how loneliness can be experienced through many different walks of life is also critical. Compassion from a top-down level must be established and present throughout both the socialising of lonely individuals, but especially through aiding those who are as a result of loneliness are vulnerable to radicalisation.

The process of radicalisation, its causes and links to other issues highlights the necessity of volunteering and other forms of bottom-up engagement as part of the solution, as well as the need for further public investment for organisations of expertise such as CEV or the Buddywerking scheme across Europe, rather than relying on standardised or government - led programmes representing a top down approach.

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