

# INTERVIEWING THE FAMILIES OF YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE JOINED OR ATTEMPTED TO JOIN VIOLENT CONFLICT

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**Research Report**



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## Introduction

The focus of this research is on the families of Australian young people living in Melbourne, Victoria who have joined or attempted to join violent extremist foreign conflict. Understanding the experiences of family members will enable us to develop resources to support families in similar highly complex and traumatic situations. No Australian research has been undertaken to date on the experiences of family members of foreign fighters. Media reports featuring families who have lost family members to involvement in foreign conflict, however, suggest that the phenomenon is devastating for families, as well as very difficult to discuss openly because of the social stigma associated with this form of violence.

This data collection for this study occurred in the first half of 2017, when concern about losing young Australians to foreign violent extremist conflict was at its peak. This concern followed the emergence of Islamic State (IS) in 2014 and the 110+ Australians known to have travelled to foreign conflict zones in Syria and Iraq since then, as well as others who attempted but failed for various reasons to join overseas conflict. The dynamics associated with such conflict have shifted over the past year as IS territorial control in Syria and Iraq has been wound back by military interventions, and as the Australian government has introduced a series of measures to reduce or prevent overseas travel for the purpose of joining violent foreign conflict. An increasing danger is thus now the appeal to young people of domestic violent extremism as a more achievable avenue than involvement in foreign conflict. To account for this shift, the focus of our research for this project reflects the rise in young people joining domestic violent conflict and includes interviews with family members of young people who radicalised to violent extremism locally, and then plotted violent extremist acts in Australia.

This project presents us with an opportunity to understand how, from the perspectives of their families, young people have become involved in joining violent conflict and the impacts of their involvement upon family members. The research findings here have been used by our community research partner, Victorian Arabic Social Services, to develop community-based education and awareness resources (see 'Considerations for the Future' below) to support families in helping mitigate both young people's involvement in violent extremist activity and the ability of families to access appropriate support and intervention in such circumstances.

## Acknowledgements

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We are also very grateful to the families who gave so generously of their experience and insights, despite the often painful and sensitive subject matter under discussion, to help the project develop its findings and community resources.

## Chapter 1: Young people who join violent conflict

The process of radicalising to violent extremism and joining a foreign conflict is complex and occurs due to a range of factors. The key behavioural factors implicated in this process are socialisation and social networks, ideology and action orientation (Barelle 2016). Over the past few years, the demographic of people joining overseas conflict has grown younger. It is now more common than previously for adolescents as young as the early teen years to 'radicalise' to violent extremism, gravitating toward groups that lead them to join or attempt to join foreign conflict. The quantum and availability of violent extremist narratives and propaganda now available through social media and the internet, as well as social networking using digital technologies, has had a strong impact on pathways of radicalisation to violent extremism for young people. Some of the key reasons for this include the relationship between social influence and social media (Klausen 2015), and the ways in which this implicates increased and uninterrupted exposure to pressure from peers and thus riskier decision making (Barrelle 2016). Social media has replaced traditional media and other online media in providing a platform for jihadists and aspiring foreign fighters to promote their insurgency.

Having observed and analysed the social environment of individuals who had travelled abroad and were involved in terrorism cases under trial in Denmark, Ann-Sophie Hemmingsen (2014) proposes that we view jihadism as a form of counterculture that can give young people **a sense of identity, 'a subculture'** and a **'rebellion against restricting traditions and norms'**. She argues that viewing jihadism from this perspective enables us to better grasp other (political and religious) aspects of involvement with foreign conflicts. She explores the factors that attract young people to join foreign conflict, and finds that the choice to become involved tends to be made rationally, and not necessarily simply forced upon individuals in unfortunate circumstances. Hemmingsen (2014) contrasts this insight with 'push' factors (Cottee 2011) that can lead young people to join foreign conflict.

Researching the justifications of foreign fighters from Belgium and the Netherlands, Marion Van San (2015) writes of an increase in young people travelling to Syria to fight against the Syrian government led by Bashar al-Assad. In spite of this increase, Van San (2015) finds that the number of young people who actually leave to fight abroad are a minority in comparison to the number who profess their willingness to join foreign conflict. Among her participants, there was widespread admiration for a culture of martyrdom, though few actually went on to become martyrs. Few could see ways to join the conflict physically, but many promoted joining the Jihad cause by inviting others to join Islam (*da'wa*). **Humiliation** and **anger** in response to the actions of Western governments were prevalent emotions amongst the participants of Van San's study.

Van San cites Venhaus's (2015) study of over 2000 potential Al Qaeda recruits, which divided these recruits into four categories. These are *revenge seekers*, who typically have inflated self-worth and arrogance; *status seekers*, including a desire to be heroes (Berardi 2016) and remediate unfulfilled expectations they will be successful, gain the recognition of their communities and prove their value; *identity seekers*, who want to be part of something that provides structure, rules and sense of belonging; and *thrill seekers*, who seek to prove their masculinity by accomplishing arduous tasks or surviving harrowing adventures. The largest percentage of foreign fighters belong to the category of *identity seekers* (Van San 2015; Roose 2016).

Based on content analysis of conversations between a group of 50 young Muslims (aged 16-30), the videos and texts they had posted on Facebook, and offline interviews with 18 young Muslims who had engaged in online discussions, Van San provides insight into why so many flirt with martyrdom but do not go on to become foreign fighters or engage in violent action.

Most engagement with violent extremism happens for social, rather than ideological, reasons. For those that do engage in such action, most eventually leave. Akin to the participants of Van San's study, Barelle's 2014 study of why people leave violent extremist organisation reveals that participants joined the groups to be part of something. Disengagement from the groups occurred when there was engagement or a sense of belonging elsewhere:

Just as the dominance of a single social identity over other social identities and over a person's personal identity is characteristic of the radicalisation process, the experiences of these 22 participants make it clear that a core aspect of disengagement is a realignment of personal and social identity as they reconnect with society. (Barelle 2014)

The interviews with family members conducted for this project reveal similar patterns, and suggest further avenues for research and community engagement to prevent radicalisation to violent extremism.

### Sampling and demographic profiles of family members interviewed

The initial sampling target for this project was 10 families with young people who had succeeded in travelling overseas, and 10 families with young people who had attempted to travel but who, for various reasons, had either been persuaded or compelled not to travel (n=20). Participant recruitment was facilitated through the project's community research partner, Victorian Arabic Social Services.

Some prospective participants who had initially expressed willingness to be interviewed for the project subsequently changed their minds, most likely due to fear of unwanted consequences. This was particularly likely in cases where a young person had attempted to travel but had not succeeded in doing so. In such cases, the families in question may not be known to the authorities, and may have feared that even though participation in this project is completely confidential, their participation could potentially attract the attention of government authorities and have legal ramifications. The final sample size thus comprised 11 in-depth interviews with 12 participants (including two participants from the same family) (n=12). The final sample also included families with young people who had been involved in domestic as well as overseas violent conflict (n=2).

Below we provide an aggregated, de-identified summary of the demographic background of participants relating to cultural identity, languages, family composition and family employment and support, as well as the relationship of study participants to the young person radicalising to violence and the security of the families' housing status. We also asked interviewees to choose 3 words they felt best described their family from their own perspectives.

Participant family members were in nine of 11 cases born in Australia, and all resided in Melbourne. The gender distribution of interviewees was two-thirds female (n=8) to one-third male (n=4). All participants were over 18 years of age. Parents of these families were in nine out of eleven cases born overseas. The cultural background of the majority of families (8/11) was Lebanese Muslim. Islam was the religion most commonly practised by participants (10/11). Nine of 11 families spoke both Arabic and English in the home. Ten of 11 families had between three and twelve children whose ages ranged from 2-41. Nine of 11 participants had family members in full-time employment. All family members had extended family living in the same city yet, of this sample, only just over half the 11 families reported having family support networks they felt they could turn to in times of need. Eight of 11 families had secure housing. The relationship of study participants to young people who travelled were siblings (n=4), mothers (n=3), friends or cousins (n=3), and wives (n=2) (total n=12).

When asked by the research team to choose three words to describe their respective families, participants said:

**Table 1: Three words chosen by participants to describe family**

<b>QK6UMICo</b>	love	soft people	very social / collective
<b>BJ7oXM2F</b>	broken	loving	caring
<b>TEMQFZNY</b>	ugly	nice	too difficult / challenging
<b>TXY19RFQ</b>	humble	modest	happy
<b>VUC1ZIH2</b>	fragmented	unsettled	...
<b>K752HI2Q</b>	intellectual	Both hard-working and lazy	independent
<b>EA723SRY</b>	caring	supporting	stressful
<b>F2YUPX4A</b>	outdoorsy	fun	outgoing
<b>RZUUDLQG</b>	angry	confused	sad
<b>W958DHNG</b>	love	loyalty	stressful
<b>o41X7DKE</b>	blended	unique	dynamic

## Methods

The data for this report is drawn from in-depth qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with the family members of young people who radicalised to violent extremism. Twelve participants from eleven families of young people who had either travelled overseas for the purpose of pursuing violent extremist conflict, or who had been involved in domestic violent extremist activities, were interviewed in face to face individual interviews in the first half of 2017. Some of these interviews took place in university settings, others in public or community organisation settings, depending on the preference of individual participants. The interviews took place over a 5-month period (set out in Table 2 below). In partnership with Victorian Arabic Social Services (VASS), the objective was to draw on the experiences of families who have witnessed a family member radicalise to violence in order to develop resources that can support other families in similar circumstances.

Participants for this project were recruited through VASS, after families who had experienced a young person joining conflict approached the organisation wishing to instigate the project. VASS is located in Broadmeadows, an area of Melbourne with a higher than average proportion of young people. The research team was also approached separately through word-of-mouth by some participants who

were ultimately interviewed for the project. All participants were aged 18 and over. A majority of participants were female (8/12), while all the young family members who joined or attempted to join conflict were male (11/11). The conflicts joined were predominantly recent and linked to IS, but there were also several participants who had joined conflict up to 10 years earlier. In reflection of the recent shift towards violent extremist organisations encouraging their followers to deploy violence locally, rather than travelling, we used two interview schedules relevant to whether the young person was involved in foreign or domestic activity: one that asked questions regarding travel to join violent conflict, and the other on joining violent conflict without reference to foreign travel.

Each interview took approximately two hours and was undertaken by two research team members. In compliance with the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee protocol, to protect participants' anonymity, each interviewee was assigned a random string identifier and interviews were transcribed either verbatim or through detailed notes, rather than recorded. The research team analysed these interviews against a backdrop of recent scholarly literature on radicalisation to violent extremism. Each interview was openly coded, which enables recognition of patterns in the interview material as well as theoretical sensitivity to relevant emerging themes in the data and in the literature (Holton, 2010).

**TABLE 2. Participant interview schedule**

1 Female	16 January 2017
1 Female	25 January 2017
1 Female	27 January 2017
1 Female	2 February 2017
1 Male	2 February 2017
1 Female	8 February 2017
2 Males	8 February 2017
1 Female	4 March 2017
1 Female	3 April 2017
1 Female	10 May 2017
1 Male	25 May 2017

## Chapter 2: Social influences for young people radicalising to violence

Participants reported a range of influences that they observed in their family members' radicalisation to violent extremism. These include religion, overcoming substance abuse and social networks. Key vulnerabilities or 'push' factors that families felt were influential in young people's involvement in violent extremism included simplistic thinking; experiences of discrimination and exclusion that were heightened further by extremist propaganda designed to enhance sense of vulnerability; a history of family violence; feeling neglected and unloved; significant grief or loss such as the death of a parent; feelings of humiliation and being targeted as a Muslim; ignorance of Islam, which made young people more easily led toward IS's distorted version of Islam; social isolation, lack of support and connection, and poor communication with family. In different ways, and with varying degrees of emphasis, these push factors were seen by participating families as key elements characterising the experiences of those who joined violent conflict.

Against this backdrop, family members reported online propaganda; gaming; YouTube and social media; adventure; sense of achievement; sense of belonging; excitement; glamour; peers; relatives; sense of purpose and joining a cause to '*do what's right*' as key pull factors in their young family member's process of radicalisation. These factors are discussed further below.

### Push factors: What motivates young people to join violent conflict?

While there is no one clear set of indicators known to drive a young person to radicalise to violent extremism, an environment conducive to radicalisation is likely to involve a number of 'push factors'. Such factors have been identified and debated in the scholarly literature (see, for example: Khosrokhavar 2015; Koomen and Van del Pligt 2016; Malet 2013); many were echoed by the participants interviewed. These factors are explored below and were substantiated by engagement with the perspectives of participants as they emerged during in-depth interviews.

**Anger** was identified as a motivating factor for young people. Viewing in particular the killing of Muslims abroad induces in many a desire to take action to remedy this injustice:

This is what made all our kids angry – the extensive killing of Muslims overseas had made all our kids angry – I think that is what has motivated many of them to radicalise. Sometimes they go crazy – they lose their mind – they want to help. They are so angry seeing kids being killed – the helplessness and anger. They want to take action. Through my analysis of the situation, he'd seen too much killing/bombing. The anger, not rational thinking, drove him. (Female participant)

Another common trait among young people who radicalise to violence that participants noted is **black and white, fixed or obsessive thinking**:

He's very simple. Very simple-minded. He can only focus on one thing and when he focuses in one thing his energy goes in to that thing... I felt my brother was weak-minded. He was an easy target. And so maybe I take back that I didn't have a clue. All of us felt it but we didn't want to



admit it. When he was leaving... and we were at the airport my dad said to him: 'Don't do anything stupid'. (Female participant)

Fixity of focus or black and white thinking is common to those who radicalise to violence; an inability to think in complex and nuanced ways is a hallmark of ideological thinking that underpins many forms of violent extremism. The literature notes that black and white thinkers are overrepresented in those who radicalise to both Islamist and right-wing violence (Gambetta and Hertog 2016).

Likewise, a young person's identification with Islam was viewed by family members in the context of his tendency to fixate on things:

My [relative] always flipped from obsessing about one thing to another thing. He was a teenager and was looking for identity. He'd go from obsessing about one sport or hobby to another. So while the religion part was unusual, his fastening onto and obsessing about things wasn't. (Female participant)

Combined with this simplistic thinking, young people joining conflict were described by another female participant as 'lost' and lacking 'a sense of direction'. Some participants thought the desire to help other people gave their young people a sense of direction and empowerment, granting their lives meaning. In addition, the notion of being a hero 'fed their egos.' In these respects, young people with limited critical capacity became 'easy targets' in the eyes of family members: 'People who question things are a lot harder to penetrate' (female participant).

**Discrimination** against Muslims coupled with populist distortions of Islam were also cited by participants as enabling violent extremist recruiters to **fabricate the sense of a lack of belonging** that produced a need in an otherwise well-adjusted young person to be part of a group marketing itself as offering 'true Islam'. This strategy was seen by family members to succeed in part through delegitimizing a young person's existing sense of belonging as false or unworthy:

When he was approached by extremist influencers challenging his ideas about what is the 'real Islam', he started to feel less and less like he belonged. They reframed his identity and made him feel he belonged less and less. It was just a narrative of difference. Social media puts out so much negativity about Islam that it's easy for influencers to construct these narratives of not really belonging. It's easy for people to say, 'These people don't really want me here, why am I here?' (Male participant)

Histories of **family breakdown and violence** were reported by several participants:

Kids don't give up unless they're facing family breakdown at home. They become easy targets when they're vulnerable – easy to recruit. Looking at my family circles and friends who lost kids, they've all had family breakdown crises. (Female participant)

In one female participant's family, her son was involved with the family business and was 'recruited.' In this participant's view, her son gave up his life 'to save the kids overseas because he couldn't save the kids at home in his family.' In another female participant's experience, her children witnessed family

violence towards her and were on the receiving end of abusive behaviour from other family members from a young age:

They were not allowed to walk [around] in the house, had to keep their washing in their rooms – separate. [The female family member] treated them like animals when they were 9 and 10 years old. [She] twisted my son's arm once and [he was] then knocked on the floor. That's why they came up to me. They didn't stick to the rules – the CSA (Child Support Agency) and Family Court said they had to stay with their father but they came back to me within a few months. They had a bad life. They would always see their father hitting me. But I was always on their side...This story has been going on for years and it still hurts me. (Female participant)

Associated **feelings of neglect and being unloved** led to a sense of rejection and alienation that can also make young people vulnerable to the need to belong and feel supported, with lack of affection from immediate family cited by one participant as a possible influence.

For other participants, it was experiences of **grief and loss** that they felt left young family members vulnerable to extremist influences. One participant's relative '*first adopted Islamic beliefs a few months after [a parent] died.*' Another participant had also lost a parent when she and her sibling were young:

I think [a parent's] death affected me and my brother the most. After [the parent] passed away it was me and my two siblings. We were friends, companions. My brother was my friend – he was like my son. He was 4 years younger than me. I was like his mother after [the parent] died. He couldn't see his importance to others... When I was angry at him, it's because of my love for him, The more I was pressuring him, the more he was turning away from me. I realised it was futile. Coming in from logic when he was caught up in the emotion of it. (Female participant)

Another push factor that participants identified is **humiliation**, which derives from identification with Muslims who are seen as being attacked both in the West and abroad at the hands of Western foreign intervention. In addition, according to some participants, the **media targeting and stereotyping** of Islam as a variety of 'folk devil' in populist media may lead to young people feeling isolated from the perceived social mainstream and living out the expectation that they will be socially deviant, a theme that has also emerged in other research (Tahiri and Grossman 2013; Grossman, Stephenson and Tahiri 2014):

Now you're seeing – the Muslims got bashed from that. Hijab women being attacked – they want to blow up our country. Now with my generation, you're getting a rebellion coming out. You're this, you're that: 'Ok, I'm gonna be that.' No sense of belonging. They're gonna feel isolated. (Female participant)

Furthermore, participants thought most young people who were recruited by violent extremist influences often displayed **ignorance of Islam**. This ignorance made them susceptible to IS influences that offered them a relatively easy and quick route to validation:

The extremism doesn't come from practicing a religion. The extremism comes from – in terms of a close-minded way of thinking – it comes from ignorance – it comes from whatever fills that

desired path. For a girl, who's looking for that validation of something in their life, she'll go to whatever feeds that desire. A girl doesn't know anything about her religion suddenly starts lecturing me, that I'm a moderate and then wants to criticise my father for being moderate. She found a sense of belonging with that extremism group and that feeds her desire / that ego that she has within her. (Female participant)

**A degree of social isolation** was also observed by most of the family members we interviewed:

At... school, he made an effort not to talk to anyone – isolated himself. (Female participant)

He was not the person to share much information anyway, so we didn't notice much of a change. He was not normally a person who shared his thoughts or feelings with anyone – he was very quiet. (Female participant)

He didn't really have friends [unlike] before he was married. Slowly, the school friends disappeared. (Female participant)

Koomen and Van der Pligt (2016) identify how physical isolation, when coupled with online group environments, enables closing oneself off from unwanted information. At the same time, isolation combined with online group activity can expose young people to material that reinforces particular extreme worldviews. In this manner, the internet has 'made it easier for individuals and groups to isolate themselves from other ideas and preferences' (Koomen and Van der Pligt 2016). A perceived **lack of support** and **limited choices** contributed to this picture of isolation and boredom according to several family members.

Some young family members turned to what they perceived as devout religious practices in order to **mitigate or overcome substance abuse issues**. Several of the young people whose family members we interviewed had experienced issues of **drug dependency** prior to becoming involved in joining conflict. Participants reported that some young men were turning to **extreme devout practices in order to distance themselves from past drug use**. In one case, the young person who travelled to join conflict had been alternating between partying hard and following religion. The male participant we interviewed regarded this as behaviour that was intended to '*do a bit of good and a bit of bad.*' The drug use was attributed to '**boredom**', and was considered a '*big problem*' in the community. Another female participant commented, '*Every second person's probably on drugs these days*' and claimed that there are '*no drug agencies for Arabic boys.*' Links between substance abuse and vulnerability to violent extremism are not established in any causal sense. However, there is research that suggests seeking personal redemption and atonement for previous bad behaviour (RAN 2016) can find expression through adhering to extremist frameworks, and may also factor into a broader 'significance quest' to counter 'significance loss' through previous engagement in socially or culturally unaccepted behaviours (Kruglanski et al. 2014).

Participants also perceived a sense of **righteousness** as a push factor for their young family members, which led to a closing off in some cases of young people who would ignore advice not to become involved in conflict: '*If someone tells them it's not a good idea, they will stop talking to them.*' In these cases, the

participant felt it was '*better to hear what they say, hear their reasons, or they will shut you out.*' (Female participant)

### Pull factors: What attracts young people to violent conflict?

For me it's war propaganda – it's the same way... a paedophile would lure a child in – they use things that a person desires – for a child it might be lollies or affection they are looking for. So the social media puts on this beautiful alluring image where they're gonna get this sort of attention, this sort of rewards if they become a part of the... so it's very seductive – they offer them excitement – that feeling that they are doing something great. A greater purpose than what they are doing here. Daily life here can get boring. You can't work, you get Centrelink. You can't work, you study. You can't finish high school, you get an apprenticeship. Life's pretty easy here. (Female participant)

The perception amongst some of the young family members in this study that life in Australia is dull and even 'easy' was reported by some of the family members interviewed. This was closely intertwined with feelings of '*boredom*' that led some young people to experiment with various risky behaviours, such as drug use. For these young people, online violent extremist influences presented a more exciting picture of what they could do with their lives, offering a much needed **sense of adventure, belonging, dignity** and **purpose** through IS redemptive narratives which served to instill in these vulnerable young people the idea that they can become heroes by joining a violent extremist movement.

Aligning with the scholarly literature on the role of emotion in radicalisation to violent extremism (Smith 2016; 2017), families identified **emotion and excitement** as key pull factors that drew young people in:

They look for excitement – what this war propaganda does is offer them the excitement that they see on the play-station games – it's always these young boys – they're looking for that excitement at that age. So the people that set up propaganda know this and say this is what we'll offer you – come here and you'll get that; they appeal to their sense of desire. They get the emotional attachment. It's all emotions – none of it is reality – none of it is logical – it's just based on emotion. (Female participant)

Bound up with this, the **glamour** of joining foreign conflict was further identified by participants as a key influence:

A lot of girls come up to me and say you get looked after – you get to marry any guy you want... they put such a glamorous image on this--- 20 friends have been seduced. (Female participant)

This demonstrates how new forms of social capital through processes of what Khosrokhavar (2017) terms 'symbolic acculturation' can be positioned to appeal to young people through the internet and social media. Through social media, IS campaigns deploy propaganda designed to target and exploit young people's desires and curiosities. As one female participant put it: '*They look it up and get excited... ISIS is like a forbidden fruit for people.*' According to another female participant, young people radicalising to violence '*think death is glamorous*' as it means that '*you die as a hero.*' The '*mobilisation of symbols*'

(Khosrokhavar 2017) associated with these platforms and culminating in violent acts has assumed prominence in mainstream media accounts, which contributes to the glamorisation of terrorists as negative heroes. Embarking on a trajectory of violent extremism thus becomes a high-profile prospect that affords disenfranchised young people a fearsome identity society cannot ignore.

**Online gaming and desensitisation** were highlighted by some participants as associated factors that facilitated radicalisation to violence. One female participant talked about the violent materials she had accessed whilst watching YouTube: '*You can watch people getting beheaded*'. She connected watching violent YouTube videos with video games played by young people in which '*shooting people becomes nothing*.' Gaming was thus described a key part of enabling young people to orient themselves towards violent action:

How many lives do you have on a game? You don't die – so that huge part of their game – they're applying it to the real world. So a huge part is overstimulation. They really think it's a game. Being faced with death is really scary so no one sees it as that. For them it's just a game. They don't realise the reality of it. (Female participant)

One female participant discovered '*violent games... about shooting*' whilst looking at her son's online computer history, and remarked that he was '*always on the game*'. (Female participant)

Other pull factors mentioned by family members included the **jahalia** life stage, in which young men 'have all these hormones and testosterone.' *Jahalia* was described by two male participants as a stage where '*someone's just letting loose – like sowing their wild oats, finding and losing themselves*.' One male participant described the young person he knew who had travelled as '*coming out of that stage*', and believed the young person was approached by a certain group at that point in his life:

Like me, when I came out of that stage, I hung around with lawyers and those people, I gravitated towards that. I believe he started to go towards this other group and that would have influenced him. Another [family member] used to hang and be like this guy [who radicalised to violence], and now he is all about *haram*, this is good or not, but not to the extent you don't let your wife see your family because she's owned by another family. My [family member] became very conservative and this guy did the same, but even more extreme. (Male participant)

**Peers** were also identified as a critical influence in path of radicalisation to violence in many cases. Young people who had distant or troubled relations with their immediate families were seen as being especially at risk. One young person '*came to a point where he thought his dad didn't care about him at all*' (Male participant). In other cases, young people who turned to religious education ended up being influenced to travel overseas by those in positions of perceived religious authority and influence:

He would go to get a religious lesson and the religious man would bring up what was going on overseas to motivate young people to care about overseas. (Female participant)

This was closely bound up with a sense of **purpose** that derives from **joining a cause** and '**doing what's right**'. One participant spoke of how her brother had expressed a desire to '*fix his life*' by fighting for a

cause: *'he thought he was doing what's right'*. She tried to convince him that *'there's no cause over there that's right'*:

He wanted to experience the life of living in poverty and for me to do this, because the Prophet experienced that life and it was a very simple life. He didn't want any excessive decoration in the house [i.e., he became an ascetic]. (Male participant)

**IS propaganda** played into this young man's desire for justice:

He was brainwashed. Someone put in his head that what he was doing was good, like jihad. I didn't agree with this, of course not. This is not jihad. He left his wife, his son: they didn't know. (Female participant)

For many young people who joined conflict, **redemptive narratives** appeared to offer the possibility of going **'from zero to hero'** and living a life of adventure: *'I was told by my brother – when I said at least you have a roof over your head – 'It's more appealing to me to feel heroic' – all that stuff is boring: the daily grind, the responsibilities don't appeal to them – they want excitement'* (Female participant). In several cases, **relatives** played a role in their young family member's decision to travel to join violent conflict. One participant reported that her brothers-in-law had been drawing him in, saying: *'Come, don't worry about your studies'*. These relatives had relocated abroad, were ostensibly *'building an orphanage'* and had invited this participant's sibling to do *'something valuable'* by joining them:

I spoke to my [relatives] shortly after [our young person] passed away and that was the last time I spoke to them. I still hold a lot of anger towards their family because I think they caused it. [Our young person] was weak-minded and he was easily influenced. I blame them but [my relatives] need to take responsibility too. (Female participant)

In another family's case, there was uncertainty surrounding the young person's trajectory of travel to join violent conflict, but a sense in which the participant's brother (the young person's uncle) may have been responsible: *'I always thought my family member was a bad influence, the drugs etc. I'm not sure what role or influence he had [on my son's radicalisation] because my son kept everything very secret.'* (Female participant)

### The role of social networks

Social media was viewed by participants as a 'stepping stone' that initiated young people who joined conflict into its particular ideological underpinnings. One female participant said that the young person in her neighbourhood *'used to spend hours and hours on the internet.'* His sister picked the problem and reprimanded him but did not disclose the websites he was accessing.

Young people increasingly turn to social media for *'news, facts, weather, everything'*. One younger female participant identified social media as the *'main thing to turn to'* for her generation: *'Once social media confirms it, you take that step... social media can lead people astray because there is often no other*

*option offered.*' Facebook and YouTube played central roles in connecting young people with IS, by enabling them to socialise with genuine or purported members of IS and to watch its propaganda videos:

In terms of platforms, definitely Facebook is one. Nowadays, everything is on FB – everything: news, TV, it's just massive. No one seems to be putting out good communication. When someone like me wants to put out that good communication, it's blocked because it's risky. I want to say 'don't go to ISIS' but I get blocked [by others on FB] because people say you shouldn't say your name or talk about IS. So that whole conversation is risky no matter whether you are arguing for or against – they automatically just make it a no go zone, and no organisation will touch it. It leaves the whole field open to only one kind of influence, the bad kind, and we can't use the same platforms for positive influence as a result. (Male participant)

A male participant reflected on how, simultaneously, the mainstream media has depicted Islam '*as such an unorthodox place that has no real positive place in the world.*' This means that young people of an Islamic faith background are particularly vulnerable to the IS distortions of Islam online. This participant had not seen '*any media influence showing how you divert or disengage.*' Rather, materials that were easily accessible demonstrated how to get involved. This was reinforced by mainstream political rhetoric as reported in media, in his view, insofar as '*the media portrays a very limited sense of choices for these young people – fight or go to prison if you disengage.*' (Male participant)

Families also spoke of the role of social media in enabling secrecy and covert behaviour through social media apps to help avoid detection of planning and logistics for involvement in violent extremist network and foreign travel. In a common narrative from families, the journey of one participant's family member towards travelling to fight overseas occurred '*mostly online*':

We didn't know he had travelled until after he left. ... He had conversations with someone on a phone app. They switched apps. (Female participant)

As did others, this participant's family member had maintained a highly active online presence that took in international as well as more local events, showing considerable knowledge and sophistication about navigating and intervening through the online environment. This participant recalled that her family member became '*very guarded*', even after he was overseas, in terms of who or how he got there. He had also opened a new social media account: '*That was taken down pretty quickly as he was pretty vocal about having a go at people*'. (Female participant)

### Signs a young person is radicalising to violence

He spent a lot of time in his room, or else he'd be picked up by people from the mosque and go. Sometimes he'd walk all the way. (Female participant)

Everyone in the family noticed that he had become very jumpy but we thought it was his work.. (Female participant)

Family members interviewed had varying degrees of awareness of their young family member's intentions to join conflict. In many cases, family members said they had no idea at an early point that their young person was radicalising until a moment of crisis or intervention by police and security agencies. In some instances, family members suspected something was not right, but did not want to acknowledge the reality of what was occurring, while in others overt signs, including display of uncharacteristically devout behaviours (which some families read as an initial positive sign) and being the objects of security surveillance were present. In two cases, family members attempted to reason with the young person who was radicalised by calling into question the legitimacy of the ideology the young person had adopted. Most families did not become aware that their young family member had joined overseas conflict until after they had left Australia.

There was no warning, for example, that the brother of this female participant planned to travel overseas as he was often out of the house, a phenomenon echoed by a number of other participants:

It wasn't too unusual for him to spend the whole day out. He had someone come and pick him up early in the morning. It was the next morning when we realised he hadn't been home - he'd left his phone behind. I don't know why, I guess we had some suspicions but didn't want to believe it, so this rang alarm bells that something wasn't right. ... We hoped that [the authorities] could prevent him from going anywhere but he had gone straight from home to the airport and onto a plane. (Female participant)

Another participant suspected her husband was doing something wrong because they were monitored wherever they went - '*car on the left, on the right, and behind.*' Her husband would '*speed and try to hide.*' This participant knew '*something was wrong*' but '*didn't know what*'. Her husband had attended '*groups*' and '*lectures*', and listened to '*the Qu'ran in the car on a CD*' rather than going online.

Many participants claimed they were unaware of their family member's intentions to join conflict as the young person's behaviour did not appear unusual. One male participant reported that the young family member who joined conflict appeared to be '*his normal self - he didn't isolate anyone from his life - a normal guy doing normal things...*' A female participant also reported that her husband '*looked normal - nothing out of the ordinary.*' And many participants focused on how difficult, ambiguous or open to interpretation some of the signs of change can be for young people, especially in relation to appearance and behaviour:

To be honest, I don't think they knew about any sort of signs... They didn't see anything wrong, took it lightly. I myself saw no signs or changes other than growing a beard, but maybe that was a fashion statement! (Male participant)



Believe me, there was nothing. He grew up his beard, but so what? He started to be more religious than before. But I noticed he didn't pray that much – not 5 x a day for sure... He still hung out with his cousins, everything was normal. But sometimes he watched YouTube, Syria and kids being killed. When he saw this he would get upset, saying why this, why that? But he didn't talk much about it, he is a very quiet kind of person. (Female participant)

Another participant noted that her family's young person who joined conflict changed his behaviour after he became engaged to be married, growing a beard and becoming 'a *bit more religious*.' Yet the female participant who reported this behaviour remarked that this sort of ritual is '*not so unusual*' in her community: '*All the boys go through this and then they come through it, shave their beard.*' It was easy to see why this participant '*thought it was just a phase he was going through.*' Similar, seemingly unremarkable behaviours were evident in the neighbour of one male participant:

With me, I'd see him a lot, he'd talk about his work, what he was up to. He did used to party a lot, and I thought 'good', this is a good thing. He did start speaking to me about haaj and the mosque. I had a cousin who changed like this too and it was all fine. I thought he was giving up his bad boy ways and becoming a bit more devout. I thought he was just maturing, coming out of a phase. (Male participant)

The mother of one family we interviewed kept close watch of her sons' online activity and found nothing suspicious about their behaviour. Everything seemed '*normal*' to her:

I watch them all the time – I go through the history online – I always check his history on his laptop or computer. When [one of my sons] lived with me, I used to check it. [My other son] bought a desktop [computer] and I was using his laptop for a year and I was working on his desktop. Sometimes I would pretend I wanted to finish some work – wanting to check up to see if he's not doing the wrong thing. Just curiosity to make sure he's doing the right thing. I used to work like a detective, going through their schoolbags. (Female participant)

This mother only became aware of her sons' radicalisation after she received a letter from the immigration department requesting a mother's signature because he asked her to sign his passport application and she refused. When she received the letter, she '*hid it for 3 months*', believing that her son was planning to travel to Syria. This son did not succeed in travelling abroad to fight in Syria, but ultimately became involved in plotting domestic violent conflict.

Another female participant spoke of the ways in which young people who are in the process of succumbing to violent extremist influences tend to meet outside of community spaces such as a mosque or masjid where violent radical ideas are not acceptable. Secretly congregating in cafes, without the permission of their parents, '*they'll... gather likeminded people and isolate themselves*' in order to express their ideas. This participant viewed such segregation as '*quite toxic*':

They're filled with testosterone at that age. They don't know or they've been reported dead. They never tell their parents. The parents get angry and try to blame this or that mosque. (Female participant)

Such isolation, many participants observed, reinforced a sense of righteousness, a point emphasised by those who noticed that previously harmonious family interactions became strained as the young family member *'became more stubborn'* and failed to *'listen to anyone.'* Moreover, there was an uncompromising intention by the young people that they *'needed to go overseas.'* In one case, the young person had claimed to the female family member that *'it was his business and no one should know that was his plan for life.'* The young person in question *'wanted to leave Australia permanently.'*

Another female participant's father-in-law had become aware that his son *'was becoming extremist and had told him not to go to the mosque anymore or meet with those kids at the mosque.'* From her point of view, even though she was concerned about her husband, she still regarded going to the mosque as a good thing, even though her father-in-law thought it wasn't helping. This participant had continued to support her husband going to the mosque because she felt it would help fix his attitude towards marriage. She failed to connect his behaviours to radicalisation to violence. On her husband's day off, *'he'd go five times a day to the mosque.'*

## Chapter 3: What families did to address the issue

Most participants only found out about their young family member's radicalisation to violent extremism after the family member had travelled overseas. Others observed that their family member was engaging in unusual behaviours and attempted to speak with the young person to find out what was going on. Before describing some of the ways in which participants responded to the issue, this section reveals the ways in which families became aware of the challenges they and their young people faced.

### Discovery of family member's involvement in violent extremist activity or networks

He was still in touch with me after he went to Syria. The first time we heard from him was a phone call, that was in [month] and he called and said he was going on a suicide mission in the morning and he was just calling to say goodbye. He called back when we were all at the house and we all got to speak to him. (Female participant)

Family members reported unusual pathways of young people auctioning their plan to travel overseas, ranging from their disappearance to false claims regarding destinations. One female participant reported that her sibling had expressed the intention of travelling to a region nowhere near a conflict zone to pursue part of his university course. Another male participant, the neighbour and friend of the family of a young person who travelled to Syria, said the young person who joined conflict *'hadn't been seen for a while'*. The family *'found out about a week... after he left'* and *'didn't want us to know.'* This neighbour made efforts to connect with the family by calling and attempting to visit but the family *'locked everyone out'*, reflecting the layers of social isolation that such developments can impose for families in similar circumstances.

Another female participant said her son, during Ramadan, had eaten dinner with her at home before breaking the news that he was travelling interstate for *'two weeks'*. This participant found it peculiar that her son asked her not to call him as he claimed there was *'no [mobile phone] reception'*:

Come on, how could there be no reception in Australia? Find another area, you have to try hard to call me. He said ok mum, I'll try, and that was it. He was gone...He gave us no warning about his plans. He didn't even let us know his holiday was outside Australia – no warning signs at all. (Female participant)

One female participant who was the neighbour of a family whose son joined foreign conflict reported that their young family member contacted *them 'from the Turkey point and said his holiday was in Turkey'*, convincing his parents he was on holiday in that country. The parents thus *'still believed he was on holiday'* and futilely awaited his return.

In families where young people exhibited signs of radicalisation through extreme devout practices, **family members attempted to discuss religion** with the young person in question. This often proved to be difficult:

There was no argument I could ever make because it was 'in the Koran'. There's no arguing, you can't have another point of view because any other point of view is invalid. I tried lots of times. His view was that everyone was the enemy including other Muslims unless they were part of IS – they were the enemy and they deserved everything they got and it was all justified. (Female participant)

In this instance, there was '*nothing you could say to change his mind.*' From Syria, this young person had continued to speak with his family members in Melbourne:

He had an answer for everything. In the end... I asked him not to contact me again because it was just too hard and incredibly upsetting for me when he would contact me. He'd say – some of his beliefs were just really horrible. He was completely different and that's why it was so hard. I didn't recognise him anymore. I felt he'd been brainwashed, though he was sure that he hadn't and I was the brainwashed one who didn't understand the truth. (Female participant)

While this participant had previously enjoyed a close and loving family relationship with the young person, '*he changed.*' This manifested most obviously in attempts to start a dialogue with him: '*If I tried to tell him something, he would jump. He tried to make me upset. He argued more with me.*'

Another female participant told us that her **family members advised their young family member to move away**: '*Dad said, "Just stick to your family... get away from that group."*'

One female participant sought extra **counselling support** for her grief, in addition to already receiving such support for '*divorce issues*'. As were other family members, this participant was devastated by the loss of her brother:

I sacrificed for him – I was like his mother. They can't understand. For the boys that left they can't understand what the mother would be feeling. The mother is just stuck with why – mothers and family members get stuck with that grieving process.

This participant also tried to manage on her own, and revealed that a friend had come to her crying after the woman's own two sons left Australia to join foreign conflict. This participant felt that grief counselling would have enabled them to '*learn that it's part of grieving: that way you don't get so caught up in the 'why?'*'

You need to learn to accept it for how it is. Grief is very tricky – I didn't grieve for my mum until 3 years after she died – I went silent. I always thought she was coming back. And then someone said: 'You know she's not coming back', and then it hit me. No one person grieves the same. You get angry, you take things out on everyone around you – you're just grieving. (Female participant)

### Family reactions to their young person's involvement in violent conflict

Families commonly went into '*crisis mode*' upon discovering their young family member had joined conflict. Most had '*never been involved in anything like this before*' and found themselves in a '*completely new world.*' (Female participant) Many said they simply had '*no idea*' what to do or how to cope with such

a confronting and unfamiliar situation. Family members spoke of finding themselves under unprecedented levels of stress: *'When they found out he was taken in for two [criminal sentencing] terms – my mum broke down.'* (Female participant) Another mother of a son who was imprisoned on terrorism charges *'aged a lot that three years he was [incarcerated] due to stress.'* (Female participant)

**Grief and shock** were common reactions to the loss of young people experienced by the family members we interviewed. A female participant who had worked with a lot of community members in a voluntary capacity spoke of her experiences *being 'exposed to different stories all the time'* and *knowing 'a lot of people who have also had their family members go overseas.'* This participant felt that *'9 times out of 10, it's comes as a shock: it's unexpected and they didn't take it very well either.'*

Echoing this, one male participant described the family he knew who lost a young person to violent conflict as *'shattered'* when they were told their family member had died at the age of 24 or 25: *'They didn't want to talk about it.'* The rest of the community was in disbelief and offered support. The family found out through the media and *were 'just devastated'*.

Similarly, other family members we interviewed described feeling shocked and also angry:

I started to get really angry with my partner – I thought why am I angry? Nothing's changed. I spoke to good friend saying, 'I don't want to live anymore' and she said, 'You're probably grieving'. I was going on about my husband this, my kids that, but really I miss my brother. I was only missing my brother and all the other stuff was just a distraction. Then I was able to move on a bit. Grieving can take a long time and people need to be aware of that. (Female participant)

In cases where families had had little information on the whereabouts of the young person who'd travelled, which often included not knowing whether their family member was alive, the feeling of *'just waiting in limbo'* was hard to manage. In other cases, this experience of *'waiting'* occurred when a young family member was sent to prison and eventually acquitted: *'My daughter was devastated because her husband was taken in. Everyone was in shock – it wasn't easy to absorb at that time.'* (Female participant)

In the face of such uncertainty, some family members underwent a period of **denial**, believing their young family member to be still alive even after confirmation that they had died:

I was waiting for him to call... Someone sent us photos of his death, but I sometimes think he is still alive. I have no way of confirming other than those photos of the dead image. (Female participant)

For this participant, her denial was fortified by the absence of a death certificate, which was necessary to draw on the superannuation account of her son: *'They need a death certificate but where can I get it from?'*

In dealing with these emotions and circumstances, the **absence of support** was reported by the majority of family members we interviewed. Few professionals approached by those families who did seek support were appropriately trained to deal with the complex issues surrounding the loss of a young person to violent conflict:

I was sent to a solicitor – a community lawyer. He said, 'Nothing we can do for you'. I felt very alone. I had no support. I just sat and waited. (Female participant)

Nor was this lack of support or knowledge of how to help confined to professional service providers. Instead of being supported by those around them in a time of great shock and distress, several female participants were **blamed by other family and community members** for their young family member's involvement in violent extremism. Where support was forthcoming, this tended to be provided more by female than male family and community members:

The males in the family, I didn't see anything from them – my dad and brothers. They were upset a bit – but no support at all. They were just blaming me and blaming my sons. (Female participant)

Men are unsupportive. I don't think my boys... they don't want to be around with my brothers and father cause of the way they speak to them. I don't like it whenever they're around. I withdraw, I don't like to speak to my dad for a long time – 10 minutes at most. When he starts talking about my kids, I withdraw. The same with my brothers when they try to talk to me about my kids. (Female participant)

One female participant reported that '*no one in the community reached out*' to her. Scared of what was happening, and unwilling to be involved, her friends '*stayed away*'. Likewise, she reported her understanding that imams were '*not allowed to visit*' her.

In one participant's account dealing with a neighbour's son who travelled to join foreign conflict, the traumatic shock of this young man's death proved to be a warning to other young people in the neighborhood:

He was buried there and that was the biggest trauma as they couldn't say goodbye to the body. The whole neighbourhood was affected emotionally and the [local] boys were traumatised as they could not say goodbye. The mother wanted to bury the body – that she could not do so is going to be a sore point in her life forever... All the boys who played sporting activities with the boy who died were very depressed. They were all crying at his funeral [an unusual display of emotion for young men in this community, according to the participant]. I feel my son learned a lesson from that experience – the shock may have deterred other kids from being recruited. The boys, including my son, had exposure to the incident and were able to reflect on the situation and learn that that is not the way to do jihad. An awakening situation. (Female participant)

The loss of the son to violent extremism in this instance had had such a severe impact on the family that, according to the participant, the young man's father had a heart attack and died. This meant that the family was doubly traumatised, as was the neighbourhood.

## Support by and for families

One person, my cousin, helped me. She kept visiting me and supporting me emotionally, inviting me to her house. That was the only person who was there for me at that time. My children were supportive of me too. (Female participant)

The issue of support, both for the young family member becoming involved in violent extremism, and also for those families impacted by their family member's involvement, was discussed by many participants. Strong family support networks made a big difference in these circumstances when they are available; one female participant said she did not '*feel vulnerable*' as she was able to '*ask questions of my husband or talk to other family members directly and that helped.*'

In a number of cases where a family member was incarcerated on terrorism-related charges, other family members sought to visit their young person every week. One female participant's husband and brother were both charged with planning an attack. It was important to her as a wife and sister to support them. She did this by '*visiting and listening.*' Later on, the family found counsellors or doctors to talk to them. One participant coped with the trauma of losing a young family member through seeking support from other family members around her. She moved back in with her parents and was close to her in-laws. Having a child to look after motivated her to '*move on and do it.*'

Another female participant reported that the wife of a young person who travelled to join conflict wanted to go and search for her husband to '*bring him back [to Australia].*' She was stopped by authorities in [country]. This participant reported that the police knew of her movements because she was at her parents' house:

She told her mum one morning: 'I'm going, I'll message you later.' The mother called her other daughters and said this isn't right. Her mum was worried because of a previous suicide attempt. [Her daughter] left at 6am and she didn't come back at night. They panicked and called me. I said go straight to police and tell them. They found her and stopped her in [country]. She was trying to get to Turkey. (Female participant)

Attempts to support family members were also disrupted in some cases by authorities' suspicions, which were raised in the event of further plots becoming known to them:

My daughter-in-law came to visit and normally stayed with me. Then there was the [name of operation] plot, it was cousins of my son. The wife was friends with the sister of the boy who was imprisoned for the [name of operation] thing. So while she was here she went to visit the sister at the mother of that boy's house. Then the [police] said to her, why did you go there? and linked her to terrorism. She was in breach of a control order, she is not allowed to come to Melbourne, and she is seeing a psychiatrist who reports that every time she comes to Melbourne she is depressed. (Female participant)

Some family members also intervened to provide practical support that would prevent further harm or damage by a radicalising young person within the family. After sharing with other family members her son's attempt to secure a passport, one female participant was supported by her family in denying her son's ability to obtain a passport: *'They all said the same thing – "Don't let him get a passport"'*. (Female participant)

Given the amount of **stigma** associated with young people radicalising to violent extremism and joining foreign conflict, a number of families have struggled to openly address the issue. Several reported experiencing *'collective punishment for individual crimes'* and developed a *'bad reputation'* in their communities. These families also felt they were subjected to a presumption of guilt rather than innocence for being Muslim, due to media stereotyping of Islam and widespread ignorance of the religion. In addition, most family members of young people who joined violent conflict became alienated from their communities because of community-based fears about repercussions for the community as a whole with one of its members being linked to IS.

Within some communities, family members *'sought comfort within themselves'* and did not seek external support. One male participant claimed that this is *'a pretty common reaction'* for some ethnocultural groups. In spite of family efforts not to disclose the loss of a young person to violent extremism, *'within [this ethnocultural] community... everything gets around... You can't keep these things quiet no matter how hard you try.'* The need to talk about what happened for some family members, however, ultimately led to community members finding out about the young family member's involvement in violent conflict: *'Obviously some of them needed to talk, otherwise my sister would not have found out.'* These experiences highlight the dilemmas and negotiations that families must deal with to both limit shame and reputational damage on the one hand, and seek support from people around them for their grief and sense of loss on the other.

### What family members would do differently now in the same situation

Many participants reflected poignantly on what they had learned since losing a family member to violent extremist conflict, and the difference between how they handled things then, and how they would do so now. High on the list was being more proactive in intervening directly with the young person and being more sensitive to early signs that something wasn't right:

I wish I'd talked to my nephew about it more directly at the time and forced the issue a bit more. He kept avoiding me a few months before he left. I wish I'd made him talk to me. I think my sister feels also that she wished she'd done more. They had lots of discussions about religion and politics as a shared interest, but for my nephew, they were very intellectual discussions. I don't think my sister realised how emotionally invested her son was. She wishes she'd taken more notice. (Female participant)

Another female participant would have taken *'more direct responsibility'* for teaching her children about Islam in ways that provided clarity around its core values of peacefulness and compassion. This kind of religious education, she felt, could mitigate extremist influences who exploited the religion for political gain:



I would be more aware. I would explain more to my kids what the religion really is. I'd have better home-based religious teaching so they are not recruited by wrong religious leaders outside. I wish I had given my kids a religious education because I could have been raising them as moderate well-balanced thinkers. I left it to externals and God knows what they put in my son's head. Islam is not about extremism. They got the wrong message from others. (Female participant)

This participant recommended that curiosity about religion be nurtured by religious education in schools, where programmes including '*the right kind*' of peaceful religious teaching could be offered:

When we see religious interest in our children, we should nurture it but show them the right way. I failed my son in that way by not giving him reinforcement of that friendly, moderate peaceful way... I pushed my kids away from religion and they rebelled and went towards religion. State schools can moderate this by incorporating peaceful religious teaching that harmonises their understanding and reduce susceptibility to radical messaging. (Female participant)

Many of the family members interviewed identified a need to engage older and younger generations and to promote greater intergenerational interaction in order to engage young people more in family gatherings. Finally, a female participant wished she had been able to better monitor the signs her brother was radicalising to violent extremism via **better tracking of those on pathways to violent action**, despite generalised anxiety about increased surveillance by authorities:

Maybe they can do better tracking, because he was buying lots of religious textbooks, chemicals for bombs, he had a whole bag of metal fragment bits. In and of themselves, maybe not suspicious but add them up and they are. Online he was saying things that should have served as triggers. And he was worried enough that he would get authorities' attention that he stopped following bomb-making things... Even before he left he was determined to become a suicide bomber either overseas or at home in some way. (Female participant)

## Chapter 4: The role of government and service providers in supporting families

I'm not against the terrorism law. We need to protect our country. But I've discovered that the government betrayed me because they monitored my son and interviewed him at the airport and didn't advise me – they betrayed me. They should prevent the young men from going further down the wrong path, or they should involve the family to do this work. They betrayed the young person and they betrayed the family and those who loved him. (Female participant)

### The role of police and security agencies

Participants reported mixed experiences when dealing with law enforcement and government security agencies concerning their young family member's involvement in either foreign conflict or domestic violent extremism. Several family members recounted feeling disrespected by police and other agencies. One felt violated and had *'no idea what was going on'*, saying it was the *'first time'* she had experienced *'anything like that.'* This participant was shocked by how *'blunt'* and *'rude'* she felt the authorities were with her family. She remarked that there was *'no family liaison officer.'* Another felt insulted by a government agency representative for not speaking English, and felt that more cultural sensitivity is needed during interactions between authorities and family members. Another female participant said in her view the government security agency did not behave transparently or helpfully, in spite of her efforts to assist them with their investigation. This participant recommended legal support be offered to families facing similar circumstances:

The only thing that I should have done differently – I shouldn't have talked to [the government security agency] – I shouldn't have answered any questions. I should have gotten legal advice before anything because obviously they twisted words and they're doing it their own way. (Female participant)

One female participant felt abandoned and *'betrayed'* by law enforcement, who she felt *'used'* her son as a means to procure greater intelligence by allowing him to travel overseas:

My son might have gone to the wrong group and been monitored. He was a clean and educated boy who fell in with bad influences. The police used my son as a bait to see the bigger picture on terrorism. He was used by both the traitors in IS and also by the government. I am a victim of IS recruiters and of the federal police. As a parent, I don't forgive anyone. If they interviewed him on the way out on the airport, didn't they think he has a wife and child and parents who love him whose lives will be destroyed? (Female participant)

To prevent this happening to others in future, this participant called for police *'to work with an agency to prevent this happening at an early stage'*. She also felt it important to monitor *'religious men...very closely, what they say to kids'* and *'focus on the recruiters'*:

They are not taking a hard enough line on the religious leaders. I want immediate action in relation to accreditation of religious leaders and no unannounced lectures at any venue. No

religious lectures in secret locations – [they need to be held] in public where everyone can observe in open spaces. (Female participant)

Yet the same participant also noted that religious leaders can be critical to the dissemination of peaceful messages, and she felt that media could also play a more positive role, especially if there was a critical media strategy as part of prevention efforts during moments of political or foreign crisis:

As soon as something is shown on TV around violence in Syria or against Muslims, the religious leader should channel this into positive actions for peacebuilding rather than violent jihad. I am not seeing enough responsible leaders doing this. We need to develop a critical response strategy that happens immediately as this is being broadcast on TV. The local response must be immediate – this is happening and we can do peacebuilding in Australia... This would give young people a chance to channel their energy and feelings into local ways of helping. (Female participant)

In the account of one female participant whose family made the initial contact with a government security agency when they realised their son had travelled overseas, the agency was '*really friendly*' and '*nice*' at first. According to this participant, the family were in constant liaison with this agency and a policing service, who monitored their phones and lives to gain further information about the young person who had joined violent conflict overseas. This participant said the family had initially felt like '*[police and government] were helping us*'. During this period, the family was also hopeful that '*they could do something overseas to bring [her son] back*', not realising '*how limited they were*' in terms of being able to help her son return to Australia:

While he was gone it was frustrating talking to [the security agency], as after a while it was evident that they couldn't do anything to help; they refused to even say if the info we were providing was useful to people on the ground in [country]. They couldn't give us anything at all... It would've been nice to feel that when they called everyone together to talk about this and that, [when we] reported every time he contacted us – it would've been nice to know that that was useful and worthwhile. It would've also been good if they'd had someone who was part of all this, affiliated with the security agency or who at least knew the story, who we could talk to. Someone who wasn't going to be shocked, who could help us deal with how we were feeling. That would really help. (Female participant)

This participant also said she reached out to the security agency for counselling support following the death of her son, but that the agency declined her request for a referral to support services:

I called [the government security agency] and asked if they could refer me to someone because of the nature of it, I didn't want to just dump this on any random psych[ologist]. Could they recommend anyone with experience? They said no, they can't offer anything like that. (Female participant)

She then sought the services of a local psychologist on her own, but experienced the initial encounter as voyeuristic because of the nature of her concerns, and she did not return for further visits.

The experiences of this participant highlight vividly the need for **appropriately trained psychologists** to be available to families who are confronting a young family member's radicalisation to violent extremism, and/or their death as a result of such involvement.

### The role of community-based social services

Indeed, **counselling support specifically tailored to the needs of families in such circumstances** was identified as critical by a number of female participants. While such services may exist, many families are unaware of how to find or connect with them:

I feel they are aware of the networks but they don't know how to connect with those networks. Those networks don't make them feel like they can access them. An example would be, say, counselling. They know there is counselling out there but no one has told them where to go. They know in the abstract but don't have the networks to help them take that next concrete step. (Female participant]

One female participant described this as an ongoing need that would be crucial *'after you're starting to heal'*:

Someone to explain the stages of grief and touch base with you during the first year cause I think that year's really hard cause you think you've finished reading but then something comes along and you need someone to give you a hug and put their hand on your leg. (Female participant)

Beyond specific comments around counselling needs, participants said it was important for **service providers** to provide families with tools to help them better understand the severity and impacts of the issue. **'Educating families about the risks and signs'** was felt to be critically important by many during interviews. One male participant suggested employing *'a Muslim individual'* and training them *'to deliver the knowledge to the rest of the community and families.'* Programmes could be implemented in **Islamic schools** to give people insight into *'the essentials as to how you can notice these signs, because that's where it all stems from.'* (Male participant)

### The role of local communities

**Connection with local community members such as neighbours and friends** was also seen as vital to family members' recovery from the trauma of losing a young person to violent conflict. A female participant spoke of the need for *'support even for small things'* such as *'people cooking for you'*:

I just wanted to sit in my room and cry and cry and cry and think about my brother – someone to come and cook for you for the first 2 weeks. A support worker to check on you every few days. Having someone you can talk to about [the person who has died] and not interrupt. (Female participant)

Another female participant stressed the importance of talking to someone familiar with the issues and landscape around the challenges of violent extremism, which she felt was a better option than talking to people outside who *'don't know how to react.'* This participant said she had been appalled by some comments made towards her when people found out someone in her family had radicalised to violence:

You'd be shocked what you hear from people who are uneducated: 'What have you done wrong? – God must be punishing you', 'You're doing the wrong thing – you're doing bad things.' Silly, the way they react.

Another participant described receiving limited support from authorities and mixed support from friends, pointing to how uneven and unreliable the support environment can be for families in this situation:

[Some] friends have been supportive. I've got two Christian friends. One stopped calling me since it was on the news. The other one calls me every single day. She said: 'I'll be there for you if you need to go to court. I'll be there – anything you need.'

Participants also had views on the perceived **lack of support from community leaders**, which they felt could likely re-traumatise some family members who '*knew everyone was talking*' but dealt with community leaders who carried on as though nothing had happened. This attitude was seen to both fail to validate their experience and also to inhibit their ability to deal openly with the challenges and grief that it brought to family members.

In cases where participants spoke little English, accessing support proved challenging. These participants felt they could best be supported by **improved communication networks, including services in languages other than English** designed specifically for this purpose. Families also identified a number of other ways in which they might be better **supported by government**. Several participants saw a need for government to **employ more Muslims and enhance cultural awareness amongst government personnel** in whom they can confide and trust. As one male participant put it:

I think the government should employ Muslims to tackle the situation. You can't expect someone whose mindset is 'white people are bad' to take their advice. Employ someone to whom they're not immediately hostile because of their current views. Someone they can actually talk to and confide in. How many of the Muslim security or police officers step up to the plate and say come and talk to me? (Male participant)

In a climate of general distrust of government for many within Muslim communities, confidential support provided by community-based social services that did not directly disclose family identities to government authorities was also suggested by one male participant.

## Chapter 5: Community engagement measures to support prevention strategies

Family members identified a number of strategies that could be deployed to enhance existing prevention strategies and to design new community engagement measures. Among the strategies recommended were education for resilience; sharing concerns and seeking support for young people at risk; constructive use of media including promoting understanding of Islam, and improvement of communication networks.

As we've already seen, suggested community engagement measures that might be specifically designed to support families in similar situations included the following: The provision of counselling services tailored to family members who have lost a young person to violent conflict; culturally sensitive responses from government authorities towards families dealing with a young person's radicalisation to violence; community support services such as a helpline for families with concerns; support workers assigned to families who are grieving the loss of a young person to violent conflict, and public acknowledgement and validation of the impacts for families of losing a young person in such circumstances in order to break down stigma and promote more open dialogue.

### Education and training for resilience

Several interviewees spoke about the importance of education in enabling young people to develop resilience to violent extremist influences. It was devastating for some participants to have sent their children to learn about the language, culture and religion of their family only to find that some teachers were inappropriately qualified and, indeed, posed a threat to their children in terms of radicalising influences. Several participants called on government to educate parents and **ensure teachers in both state and religious schools are appropriately qualified:**

I sent my kids to learn Arabic – I did not send them to be radicalised. The government should educate parents as to the quality of particular service/religious providers and qualifications. Teachers in schools play a big role in helping kids develop resilience. Teachers have a bigger influence on kids than [parents do]. They play a big role in fostering respect and harmony. The education department is a very important element in building peace in children and enabling them to respect each other. (Female participant)

For these participants, **schools must be inclusive, safe environments in which young people can learn about religion, culture and language** in a way that reflects the reality that *'we are all Australian, united in diversity.'* To this end, one participant who was a parent of a young person who radicalised to violence believed that schools must encourage students to respect difference: *'How do I guarantee that my children are respecting the other?'* (Female participant)

Others suggested that **interculturally sensitive school programmes** could be delivered and then recorded and published on social media as durable community resources. One participant recommended that such resources feature a caption stating: *'I'm here if you need to talk'*, directing them to live sources of support and information such as a hotline or social service outlet. Videos could be used

to reassure the public that *'we are there for them'*, and could provide links to enable them to talk if they have an issue. Such initiatives would need to be supported within an organisational context. One participant advised that online and offline resources should work together to be effective and avoid misinterpretation: *'You can't just put the tools online and leave it at that, or a video and say here you go. But if you go and talk about it then it starts to make sense.'* (Male participant)

In keeping with educational resources designed for schools, a set of community-based training resources could be developed to build youth resilience outside the school setting, including **a constructive media strategy** to influence a large audience that would comprise a variety of platforms on television, radio broadcasting and social media.

What's happening on the ground is a lot of violence shown on TV and killing Muslims around the world. When they see kids being killed, then they go to an imam who says they hate us and they are killing our children. The religious influence matches what they see on TV and then they're off. The young people find a lot of sadness and anger being channelled by these religious leaders. We need to be stronger on saying how we can peacefully stop the killing and packaging forced on religious leaders about how to interpret what is going on in the world. (Female participant)

**Factual information**, supported by a transparent online fact-checking mechanism, could be developed specifically for young people at risk of radicalisation to violent extremism. This information could include a series of youth-specific suggestions for actions that young people might take to address injustices.

Given that many young people join violent conflict out of anger, frustration, sense of humiliation and to find belonging and purpose, this initiative could offer young people genuine alternatives to violent action and provide **links to mentors, internships and paid work** with a variety of social justice initiatives as well as creative organisations set up for this purpose. **A mentorship programme** that connects youth with *'someone like them, from the community they grew up in'* could also be established to provide role models and facilitate connections with youth who may avoid and feel intimidated by authorities.

### Sharing concerns and seeking support for young people at risk

Participating family members also identified a number of ways in which they could be better supported in the traumatic circumstances surrounding a young family member's radicalisation to violence. These include establishing an anonymous **helpline** specifically for the purposes of enabling families to share their concerns that someone they care about may be radicalising to violent extremism and to obtain information on service provision. This would enable families to become aware of and access confidential community mechanisms.

### Considerations for the future

Based on the data and analysis detailed above, the following suggestions are designed to help policymakers and program planners within both communities and government think through new tools and approaches that can assist families who deal with such circumstances in two ways: first, by providing them with tools and support mechanisms that will strengthen their ability to prevent young people in families at risk of radicalising to violence, and second, by providing them with tools and support

mechanisms for dealing with their own support for their own challenges and struggles in dealing with these issues.

- 1) **Build stronger intergenerational ties** between Muslim youth and sheiks and imams as well as with diverse groups in society. According to some participants, **local imams** could be engaged and equipped with resources to support vulnerable families and community members confronting the radicalisation to violent extremism of a family member. Religious leaders were identified by some participants as being critical to the dissemination of peaceful messages.
- 2) **Cultivate openness** about different interpretations of Islam and the issue of radicalisation to violent extremism:

You don't want to make assumptions about people. There's a bit of stigma around the idea of associating the two – Islam and terrorism. People don't really want to think about it because it seems prejudiced. So this closes down any opportunity for dialogue because people don't want to seem biased –but then you can't talk about anything with them on this topic. (Female participant)

- 3) Along similar lines, participants felt **public acknowledgement of the loss of a young person** to violent extremism would also help families in the grieving process and to avoid the sense of blame and censure that can attach to families in the aftermath of a young person's radicalisation to violence, particularly if a public figure seen as important, such as a politician, acknowledged their passing by *'saying publicly that they're really sorry and that it's not [the family's] fault.'* (Female participant)
- 4) **Create 'shared solutions' spaces** in which it is possible to speak confidentially *'without being penalised'* with other families of young people who have radicalised to violence in similar situation, such as through a dedicated **community advice and support centre**.
- 5) Deepen and broaden the support provided to families dealing these challenges. **Culturally sensitive counselling services** are a vital part of supporting family members who are concerned about losing, or who are grieving the loss of, a young person to violent conflict, and participants felt developing such services should be prioritised. In addition, for those whose family members have died as a result of their involvement in violent extremism, it is important to support families by connecting them with psychologists and counsellors **trained in grief and trauma support and knowledgeable about the subject matter of violent extremism**, and providing follow-up services to check in with and provide comfort for those in need via **community outreach** such as a **home visiting service**.

Ideally, such outreach would be delivered not by government but by community-based agencies or organisations. One participant recommended this include cooking and housecleaning to sustain grieving family members. In cases where family members may not have secure housing arrangements, emergency housing could be prioritised.

- 6) **Carefully consider the role and responsibility of policing and security agencies in providing vetted referrals to community-based social and psychological support** when these agencies are



involved with families of those radicalising or radicalised to violence. The ambiguity of law enforcement relationship-building in order to support families versus gathering further intelligence has been highlighted in recent literature (Grossman, 2015; Thomas et al. 2017) and in some ways may be unresolvable in the near term. However, the reality is that law enforcement and security agencies are likely to be the first authorities that families in this situation engage with in any meaningful way. Designating a **family liaison officer** whose primary role is to provide genuine family support as distinguished from obtaining intelligence about young people's involvement in violent conflict was strongly supported by participants:

We have to act like one community, not community against government, government against Muslims. We need shared solutions. We cannot be seen as Muslims who are not Australians. It is about us living in this community together. Our Muslim leaders have also been negligent and failed our families in my experience. They have not done family strengthening work or peacebuilding responses to very angry kids. We have been betrayed by both local Muslim leaders and by government. And we need some further support around parents and religious education of the right kind. (Female participant)

Training intelligence services to strengthen family support options in vulnerable situations would restore family members' trust in government and may lead to better intelligence outcomes for authorities in future.

A package of **community awareness training resources** was developed through the project's findings by the community research partner, Victorian Arabic Social Services. For further information on the training and community awareness delivery program, please contact:



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## Conclusion

This project was a joint partnership between academic researchers (commencing at Victoria University and concluding at Deakin University) and Victorian Arabic Social Services to investigate the support needs of families of young people who are at risk of radicalising to either overseas or domestic acts of extremist violence. Since this project was first developed, due to the loss of IS territory in Syria and a range of preventive counter-measures adopted by both government and communities, fewer young people are now travelling for the purpose of joining conflict abroad. In spite of this, the phenomenon of radicalising to violent extremist action and conflict has not subsided. Young people remain vulnerable to radicalisation to violent extremism but are now more likely to become involved in domestic violent conflict.

The interviews with family members who participated in this project provide valuable insight into the ways in which young people's trajectories of radicalisation to violence manifest. In particular, participants offered insights into the push and pull factors associated with joining violent conflict that extend and refine existing scholarship on what makes people vulnerable to radicalisation to violence. A number of family members described common signs that a young person was radicalising to violent extremism, though just as many saw no clear signs and experienced devastating shock upon learning that their young family member had joined violent conflict.

Family members were generous in their discussion of what they would do differently in the same traumatic situation today, and offered an array of suggestions for supportive prevention strategies that could be implemented by communities, government and service providers. Of these, the most strongly emphasised were education and training to build resilience, media strategies to ensure fair and factual information, and both community and government intervention and support through the provision of counselling, support groups and associated family services.

## A note on the authors

**Dr Vivian Gerrand** is a joint Endeavour Award Research Fellow and Max Weber Research Fellow at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy in 2017-18, where she is undertaking a research program on young people's online image making to build resilience to violent extremism. From 2018-2021 she will be Research Fellow and Coordinator of the AVERT (Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism) Research Network at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University, in Melbourne, Australia. She is the author of a range of publications including *Possible Spaces of Somali Belonging* (Melbourne University Press, 2016).

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