YOUTH CAN

THE MANY STATES OF ACTIVISM

THE GLOBAL YOUTHCAN ACTIVISM SURVEY

ISD | Powering solutions to extremism and polarisation

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SUMMARY

Over the past four years, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) has supported young activists around the globe to respond to hate, polarisation and extremism. Built on principles of 'networked activism',[1] the Youth Civil Activism Network (YouthCAN) has been supporting, enhancing and co-ordinating the efforts of a young cohort of activists preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) globally. YouthCAN's model has evolved over the years, iteratively adapting to the rapid development of technology, while honing its efforts on supporting and leveraging the localised responses of young activists, and connecting them to a larger, global network.

> ## Youth P/CVE in practice has become a 'cottage industry' with, at times, more form than function.

Harnessing the collective agency of youth to address hate, polarisation and extremism – in what is traditionally referred to as P/CVE programming[2] – is a relatively new practice for international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local civil society organisations (CSOs) and, more recently, national governments. However, in that short amount of time, the imperative to involve young people has propelled youth P/CVE programming well beyond the research that supports it. As a result, it has become a 'cottage industry'[3] with, at times, more form than function.

Scholars and development practitioners have long called for a robust evidence base for youth programming, as there is a considerable risk that without it programmes and resources intended to support and include young, aspiring P/CVE activists could be at odds with the needs of the audiences they are meant to represent.[4] This gap threatens the well-being of young people operating in dangerous environments while simultaneously undermining their inclusion as stakeholders in peacebuilding processes. Ultimately, insights into the experience of young P/CVE activists cannot be understood without the voices of these young people themselves.

To help address the need for a more robust and youth-inclusive evidence base, ISD conducted a survey that was completed by **728 young activists globally** to find out which barriers and opportunities had been most significant to their activism journey, as well as which skills they valued most. To complement the findings of the survey, ISD led **12 in-depth interviews** with young activists living and working in different contexts around the world. The survey was available online in English and French and was disseminated through ISD's networks and social media via Facebook and Twitter.

ISD received survey responses from activists in **83 countries** who are living and working in vastly different contexts and who have had very different experiences with conflict and violence. To better understand how this experience has impacted their activism, this report used the Global Conflict Risk Index – developed by the European Commission – to relay the experiences of P/CVE activists from countries with high or moderate levels of violence, as well as non-violent countries, to explore and compare the similarities and differences in their experiences.

While this effort is by no means comprehensive, it goes beyond previous research efforts in and around the field of youth and P/CVE by directly engaging a cohort of dedicated activists, and by defining the issues, challenges and opportunities they see within a range of conflict settings. Understanding conflict and the drivers of conflict – and specifically how conflict drives polarisation, extremism and terrorism – requires an understanding of history, culture and politics, all of which are fervently intertwined in the personal experiences of young people themselves.

In addition to sharing the outcomes from YouthCAN's global activism survey, this report describes the background of youth and P/CVE as the field has evolved over the last decade and explores the concept of activism as it pertains to P/CVE specifically. Finally, it presents actionable recommendations for individuals, NGOs and government institutions whose staff are working to design, develop and deploy P/CVE programming by and for young people. These top-line findings provide the field of P/CVE with a number of tangible recommendations for the design, development and delivery of programming intended to support young activists in difficult contexts.

KEY FINDINGS

Young activists from violent and highly violent countries reported a higher belief in the power of activism as a means of combatting violent extremism than their counterparts in non-violent countries. 20% of activists across violent and highly violent countries noted that a belief that activism could make an impact in P/CVE was an integral part of their initial involvement. Only 12% of respondents from non-violent countries said the same.

Respondents from violent and highly violent countries were more likely to be actively engaged in P/CVE activism. Current involvement in P/CVE among respondents increased along with their exposure to violence. This is likely to be a result of their proximity to violence, and the proliferation of P/CVE programmes in violent and highly violent countries.

Youth activists from all three contexts (highly violent, violent and non-violent countries) face the same critical barrier: a lack of funding and opportunities. The two key barriers to activism were lack of funding (44%) and lack of opportunities to participate in P/CVE activities (31%).

Youth activists from violent and highly violent countries consider poverty to be a significant barrier to P/CVE engagement. Around 40% of respondents from violent countries, and 44% of respondents from highly violent countries considered poor personal finances to be a key barrier to P/CVE activism. Roughly 35% of respondents from non-violent countries felt the same.

Respondents from violent countries feared negative consequences from governments or other officials far less than their counterparts in highly violent and non-violent countries. 21% of respondents from non-violent and violent countries said they fear pushback from government officials for P/CVE activism, compared with 14% of respondents from violent countries.

Youth activists from violent and highly violent countries are far more likely to experience personal risk as a barrier to P/CVE activism than those from non-violent countries. Twice as many respondents in violent and highly violent countries named personal risk as a significant barrier to P/CVE activism. Despite this, respondents from all three contexts uniformly ranked risk mitigation as the skill they needed the least, with only 5% listing it as a priority.

Activists from non-violent countries were much more likely to consider a lack of skills and knowledge to be a barrier to them participating in P/CVE and valued training significantly higher than the activists in violent or highly violent countries. Activists living in places where violence is widespread are likely to have more knowledge of extremist groups, extremism and counter-extremism programming than in non-violent contexts. However, it is not possible to know the baseline knowledge of respondents and there are many factors, including over-confidence and limited aversion to risk, that could influence how activists prioritise training.

Training for social media platforms and tools was not a priority for activists. An average of less than 5% of all respondents indicated that a greater understanding of social media platforms and tools would enhance their activism. This is a contrast with the emphasis of many P/CVE training programmes for youth, which prioritise social media and online campaigning.

Regardless of context, young activists' greatest training priority was learning how to secure funding and write proposals. 41% of activists from highly violent, violent and non-violent countries named this the training opportunity that would most enhance their P/CVE activism.

Activists in highly violent, violent and non-violent countries want more training in monitoring and evaluation. 31% of all respondents included monitoring and evaluation as a training need, making it the second-highest required skill named in the survey.

Women were far less likely to respond to the survey in more violent contexts. The divide between male and female responses grew 9% on average as the level of violence increased. Responses from non-violent countries were evenly split between male and female activists; yet there was a divide of 69/30* in favour of male respondents in highly violent countries.

* 1% selected 'other'.

COMING OF AGE

YOUTH AND ACTIVISM IN P/CVE

YOUTH PROGRAMMING IN P/CVE

To understand the current landscape for young people within P/CVE, it is important to track how the field has been transformed in the last four years. While young people have long been engaged in activities to promote peace, their status as 'peacebuilders' was largely eclipsed by the predominant narrative of youth as the primary perpetrators of violence.[5] As a result, there were limited frameworks for supporting and mobilising young people as actors within P/CVE.

In 2015, the conception of young people in P/CVE began to change. A new imperative emerged: to engage with youth as allies and actively incorporate them into national and international efforts to improve peace and security and challenge extremism. The year began with the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism and the UN Security Council Open Debate on Youth and CVE, where a direct link was drawn between attempts to counter extremism and international youth, peace and security agendas. Co-ordination between these two agendas continued throughout 2015, most notably at the Amman Youth Declaration in August and the Global Youth Summit Against Violent Extremism in September. All these efforts culminated in December with the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2250, the first UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution on youth, peace and security.

UNSC Resolution 2250 formally acknowledged that 'young people play an important and positive role in the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security'.[6] It encouraged all UN Member States to actively engage young people in politics and to build the political and institutional architecture necessary to allow them to participate meaningfully in peace processes and local, national and international decisionmaking.[7] The resolution also helped pave the way for youth engagement programmes by introducing 'a comprehensive framework to address the specific needs and opportunities' of young people[8] and identifying five pillars of action: participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and disengagement and reintegration.[9]

Since the adoption of Resolution 2250 there has been a proliferation of programmes directly targeting young people;[10] however, the resolution still faces significant challenges. At a state level, the appetite for implementing Resolution 2250 has varied greatly between governments, leading to unequal levels of adoption and, in some cases, backpedalling as a result of 'policy panic' where states double down on old approaches in the face of rising violence globally.[11] Even in nations embracing greater youth inclusion, the input of young people has been largely relegated to initiatives that use preventative approaches[12] While preventative projects are well suited to young actors, they typically receive limited funding compared with more security-focused alternatives,[13] and the imbalance in favour of hard power creates additional challenges as P/CVE actors of all ages have to navigate the fallout from securitised approaches.[14]

Similarly, in the programmatic sphere, institutions and NGOs alike have struggled to embrace young people as partners and empower them as leaders. Although there has been a sharp rise in the number of civil society programmes dedicated to empowering young people as positive actors, very few incorporate them into the planning or implementation of activities[15] and youth-led CSOs face intense challenges.[16] Instead of being offered true opportunities to lead, young people are typically relegated to programme beneficiaries, mostly of training initiatives, or in some cases included 'tokenistically' as a means of enhancing a programme's credibility.[17]

This gap between the promise of leadership and reality undercuts the value that young people bring to P/CVE and risks disempowering and demotivating genuine youth-led attempts to attain peace and security.[18]

The leadership gap is not merely the result of a lack of will; rather it stems in part from a lack of understanding about the role of young people in P/CVE and their experience as actors within the field. While studies on the impact of youth activism on P/CVE have generally been positive, nearly all the research has focused on proving the value of young people as positive actors and the risks of excluding them, rather than exploring the tangible requirements necessary to create or enable activism.

A review of the available literature on youth in counter-extremism revealed there is very little publicly available research centred on the experience of young people that could be used to inform the development or implementation of youth P/CVE projects. This gap was also noted in the 2018 UN Progress Study on Resolution 2250, which explicitly calls for 'qualitative and quantitative research and data collection on youth, peace and security at the national, regional and global levels'[19] and in Marc Sommer's 2019 report *Youth and the Field of Countering Violent Extremism*.[20]

This dearth of research is significant for a number of reasons.

First, **research is crucial for developing effective programmes that maximise impact.** By incorporating research into a programme's design, one can adapt delivery to a particular context and draw from existing local structures, incorporate proven best practices, bypass challenges and tailor engagement to participating activists' needs. Lacking that foundation, projects may be detached from or irrelevant to young people. One activist from Pakistan who was interviewed for this report lamented a lack of localised research as he experienced it. Frustrated, he warned national and international practitioners alike that 'without tapping into the local sensitivities of the people it is very hard to really reach the heart and make meaningful impact'.

Second, **research is central to identifying new young actors beyond traditional networks affiliated with government, CSOs and other formal entities.** While empowering experienced young activists is important, activating and enabling new activists is essential for sustained and inclusive engagement. One activist from South Sudan interviewed for this report noted a serious shortcoming of many of the projects run by international NGOs and institutions:

"They tend to target the youth that are already in the limelight. I would say, without mincing words, that maybe the people who are getting help are the people who don't need that kind of help at all – and also that helping them doesn't have a lot of impact on the ground."

While largely universal, this problem is more significant in conflict-stricken areas where outreach is often more difficult.

Third, **research is imperative to a do-no-harm approach, as it is key to mitigating risk for the programme, its staff and its participants.** P/CVE activism inherently carries some degree of risk. Depending on where and how they operate, young people in this field may be exposed to physical and psychological dangers from different actors, including physical violence, threats, harassment and the doxing of activists' personal information.[21] Therefore, it is of crucial importance that youth programmes and policies build effective, locally driven risk assessment into their planning and teach their young participants how to do the same. All recommendations, training and support offered to activists must be contextually relevant and be built on a thorough understanding of the consequences activism of any kind could hold for them socially, politically, psychologically and physically.

This report is attempting to help advance this first point and we hope to help readers develop more effective programmes that can maximise impact for young activists. However, these findings are intended merely as guidance and it is crucial that each programme incorporates its own research to better tailor deliverables to the context and participants and make them more inclusive and safe.

The effort to include more young people in P/CVE has progressed rapidly in the last five years; however, as the will for meaningful engagement has raced ahead, effective process has lagged behind. Research is a crucial part of closing this gap, but can only be undertaken effectively when the young people a project is meant to serve are directly involved in the research effort, both as subjects and in helping to shape its design and delivery.
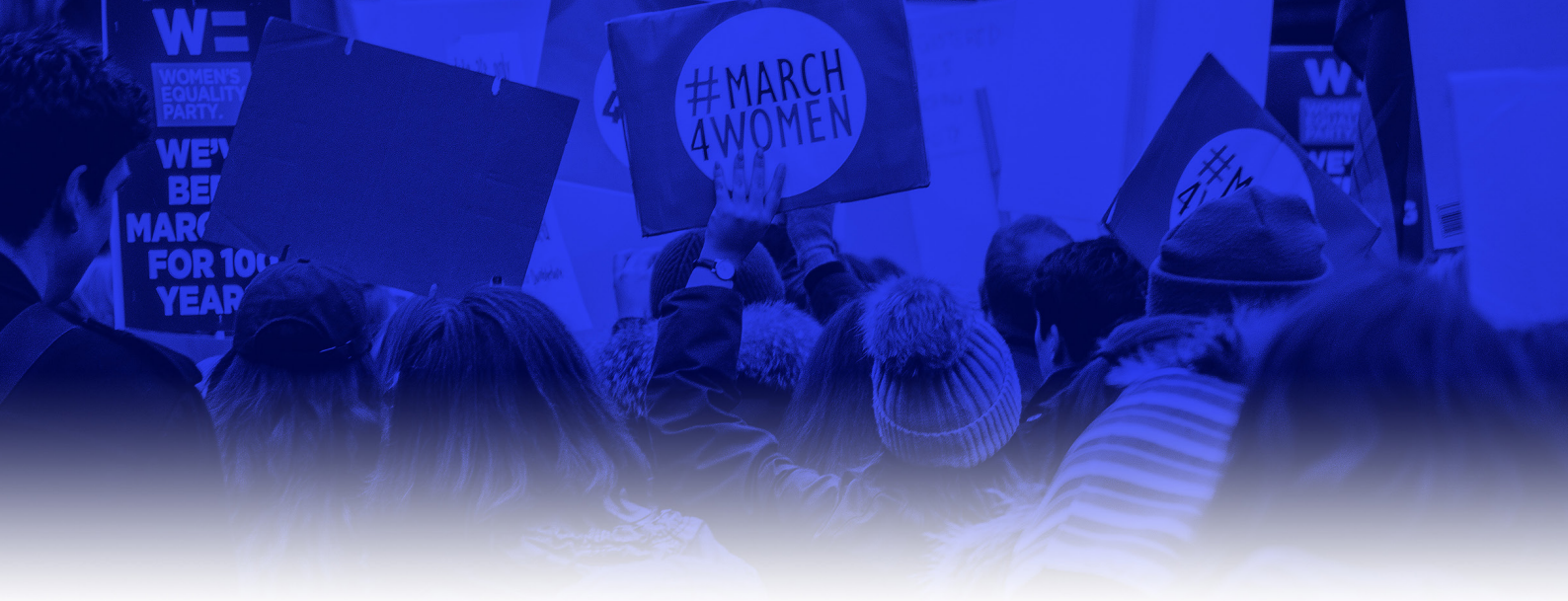
ACTIVISM
IN P/CVE

What is an Activist?

The term 'activist' is used inconsistently in P/CVE, such that it is more commonly defined by what it is not. The term will often be found within lists of actors that include academics, government officials, experts, clerics and development workers.[22] A particularly telling example appears on the website of the Regional Cooperation Council, where one can find a glossary of extremism-related terminology curated for 'CT [counter-terrorism] and P/CVE experts, professionals and activists' that does not contain a definition for activism and offers no clarification between those three actors.[23] Contrast this with the use of 'activist' on the website of Extremely Together to describe the ten individuals involved in the project,[24] most of whom founded and run their own organisations and would qualify as both professionals and experts. The loose use of the word activist within P/CVE to describe young actors has contributed to the confusion and insecurity surrounding their role as contributors.

If activists are not professionals, should they be paid for their work? Is a person an activist if they are associated with an organisation? If they are distinguishable from experts, can they be afforded the same respect or entrusted with the same responsibilities? What kind of activities even qualify as activism within the context of P/CVE? Lacking sources within the P/CVE literature, YouthCAN turned to the wider literature on social change and drew from extensive experience with youth P/CVE to construct a definition that would be suitable for P/CVE activists across contexts.

While definitions of activism vary, they all centre around the basic concept of acting proactively and diligently in pursuit of attaining certain social, political or economic changes. Among such broad conceptions of activism as 'generating the future of societies'[25] or 'individual participation in movement activity',[26] one of the most detailed definitions can be found in Sharp's Dictionary of Power and Struggle: Language of Civil Resistance in Conflicts: 'An activist is a person who diligently and repeatedly tries to achieve some social, economic, or political objective, especially by participation in protest, pressure, organising, or resistance.'[27]

Most modern definitions of activism rally around a common understanding of the types of goals pursued and are rooted in an exploration of means across ideologies and contexts. However, within this broader consensus about what activism is for, there are two distinct schools of thought on the types of activities that qualify as activism; some take a more restrictive, traditionalist view, others a broader, more inclusive approach.

The first conceives of activism as direct action that includes publicised non-procedural actions, such as marches, sit-ins, hunger strikes, divestment, targeted vandalism, and so on, with varying degrees of obedience to public order and even legality.[28] The sole focus on direct action differentiates activism from procedural actions such as elections or legal action, and from 'insider' tools such as lobbying, all of which rely on the actor believing that policymakers, judges and politicians will work in their interest.[29]

The second school of thought takes a more dynamic approach, which combines direct action with other tactics, each serving specific purposes towards a larger aim.[30] This conception of activism is focused more on the intended outcomes, rather than the type of action, and may therefore include some 'insider' tactics as part of their game book.[31] Heinrich Zoller speaks to the important role of such tactics, noting that 'activists seek to build sources of legitimacy, power and urgency to increase their likelihood of being heard'.[32]

Social Media Activism

This debate surrounding the means of activism has been extended to the use of media and, more recently, social media as mechanisms for influence.[33] Following the so-called 'Twitter revolution' of 2011, the rise of social media and digital platforms for social action has added a new dynamic to the debate. Observers worldwide were able to follow large-scale protests like the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street through Twitter, and social media helped participants mobilise, communicate and broadcast police responses.[34]

But is the role of social media in activism merely 'technical' support for offline activities,[35] or can it offer a means of activism in and of itself?

Social media activism has many critics. The authors of a 2011 conference paper, 'From Slacktivism to Activism: Participatory Culture in the Age of Social Media', term social media activism as 'slacktivism': 'low-risk, low-cost activity… whose purpose is to raise awareness, produce change, or grant satisfaction to the person engaged in the activity'. The authors contrast this with what they call 'practical activism' or 'the use of a direct, proactive and often confrontational action towards attaining a societal change'.[36]

Malcom Gladwell echoed this focus on risk as a core tenet of 'traditional' activism in a New Yorker article on the topic, in which he characterises online activism as consisting of weak ties and low risk. This is important, because although one can mobilise greater participation through social media, one does so by lowering the bar for what participation entails. In this way, Gladwell explains, social media affects scale, not motivation. Since the relationship between participants is weaker online than it would be offline, people are ultimately less likely to come through with the big commitment that is needed for big social change if they only engage online. An online campaign may get more people to express interest, but it lacks the strength to do much more than that.[37] Or, as Merlyna Lim has quipped, 'many clicks, but little sticks'.[38]

However, despite its shortcomings, social media is a powerful force as both a tool and a location for social activism. In addition to its value in supporting offline activities, it has made activism more accessible to more people, regardless of geography or resources. And perhaps more importantly, it is a crucial part of how young people communicate with each other and the world around them. In her paper 'Digital Natives', Angelina Maesy delivers a powerful message to the activism traditionalists, arguing that activism must be allowed to change with the times to better reflect the experiences of a new generation of activists: [39]

" The way young people today are reimagining social change and movements reiterates that political and social engagement should be conceived in the plural. Instead of 'activism' there should be 'activisms' in various forms; this is not a new form replacing the older, but all co-existing and with the potential to complement each other.[6] "

The recognition of social media activism as a 'true' form of activism is important for the context of P/CVE. Major social media platforms, including Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, have shared an uncomfortable spotlight in the field of P/CVE[40] and volumes have been written on the potential for online recruitment and radicalisation.[41] Social media also offers important opportunities for activists to understand extremist narratives and movements, target highly segmented audiences, reach and organise large groups of supporters, connect through creative media, minimise risk through distance and anonymised campaigns, and manage costs while maximising scale. While the efficacy of social media activism alone is hotly debated, it offers valuable tools and an invaluable platform for P/CVE activists. Therefore, YouthCAN has advocated for its inclusion in P/CVE-oriented conceptions of activism.

In light of the diverse and dynamic range of tactics that P/CVE activists use both online and offline, YouthCAN has developed an inclusive definition of activism:

The use of direct and public methods to try to bring about social and political change. Activists are people who get involved in political, social or economic processes for the sake of promoting, impeding or raising awareness about a certain issue or set of issues. Activism typically involves engagement beyond merely supporting an issue, be it through protests, demonstrations, campaigning, community organising or other means and may take place online or offline.

THE GLOBAL YOUTHCAN
ACTIVISM SURVEY

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The big obstacle in working with young people, especially around activism, is assuming that you know what they need.

(Young activist and facilitator in the UK)

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Through YouthCAN, ISD manages a community of over 1,500 young P/CVE activists and has worked directly with nearly 1,000 young people through training, workshops and campaign development and support. ISD has worked with inspiring young activists in a huge range of countries and contexts, and in doing so has had the privilege to experience both their passion and their frustration first-hand. From this experience, ISD has sought to understand what it is exactly that young activists need to thrive and how we can be better partners for them. As a first step, ISD conducted research with young P/CVE activists* centred on three primary questions:

■ **Which barriers do they face?**

■ **Which opportunities are most valuable?**

■ **Which skills do they need?**

We engaged in designing a data collection framework that used a quantitative approach as delivered through bespoke surveys developed in English and French, complemented by interviews with 12 youth activists from highly violent, violent and non-violent countries.

The barriers and opportunities presented to survey respondents spanned different facets of activism, including access, knowledge and skills, risk, support and motivation and inspiration. To establish a baseline understanding of the barriers, challenges and opportunities of young activists, ISD drew from its previous engagement with youth populations in a range of contexts supplemented by focus groups and one-to-one discussions with a range of civil society stakeholders. In order to explore how youth activists have been impacted by their experience with conflict, survey responses were coded by country into to three levels of violence and risk according to the Global Conflict Risk Index: highly violent, moderately violent, not violent.

Overall, through interviews and online surveying, YouthCAN engaged 728 young counter-extremism activists from 83 countries globally. These young people have had numerous experiences, represent many cultures and exist in various contexts; all of them can offer unique insights into how to better support and enable youth-led activism in preventing and countering extremism.

DEMOGRAPHY OF
SURVEY RESPONDENTS

The geographies of respondents were categorised by violence-level, according to the **Global Conflict Risk Index**, an index by the European Commission, of statistical risk of ongoing violence and the potential of violent conflict within four years.[42] These groupings were created in order to assess whether the level of violence in a country affects the challenges and needs of youth activists present there.
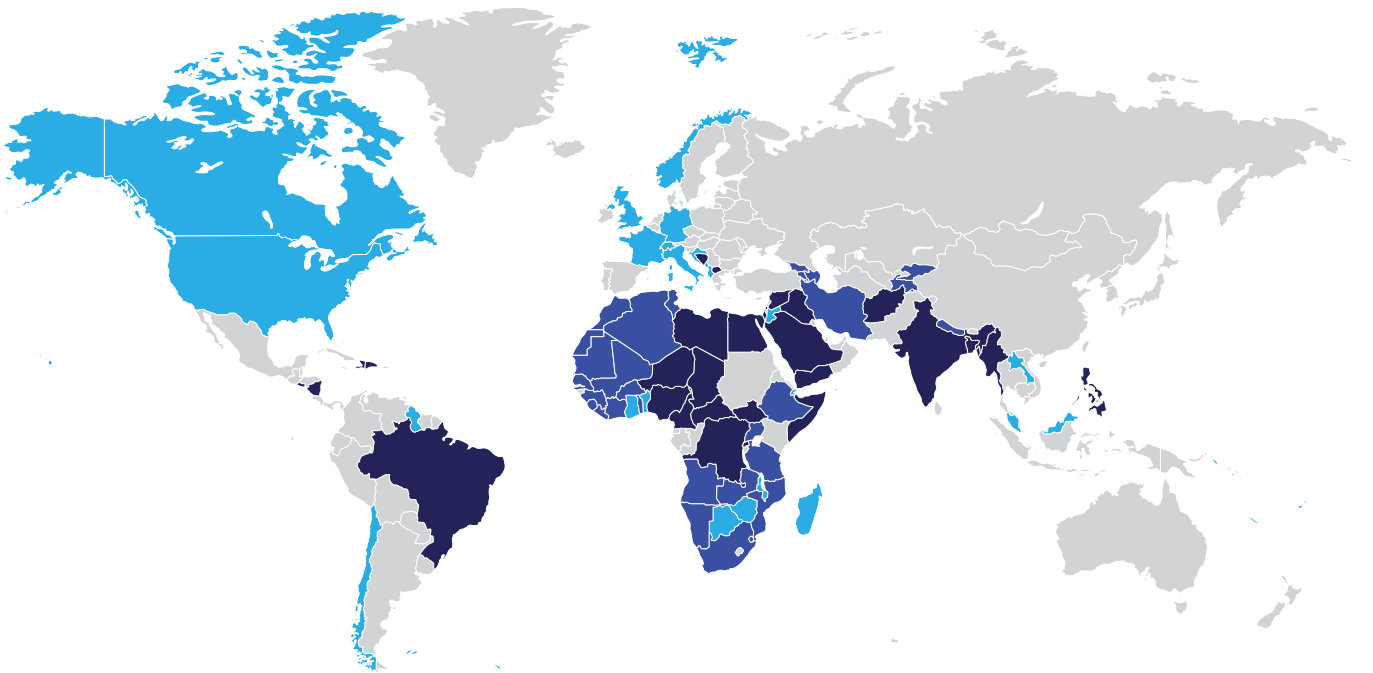
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* For this report, ISD has adopted the definition for 'youth' from UN Resolution 2250 as persons aged 18–29.

Highly Violent   Violent   Non-Violent   No Response

Respondents from highly-violent countries were:

Number or respondents: **250**

69% Male
30% Female
1% Other

An average of **24** years old

A small majority of **Muslim** background, followed by **Christian**

6% Post-grad
50% Bachelor
23% High School

Respondents from violent countries were:

Number or respondents: **361**

60% Male
39% Female
1% Other

An average of **24** years old

Mostly of **Christian** background, followed by **Muslim** and **Hindu**

10% Post-grad
48% Bachelor
24% High School

Respondents from non-violent countries were:

Number or respondents: **117**

50% Male
50% Female
0% Other

An average of **24** years old

Mostly of **Christian** background, followed by **Muslim** and **Buddhist**

16% Post-grad
49% Bachelor
26% High School

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

YOUNG PEOPLE NEED MORE DIRECT SUPPORT FOR THEIR ACTIVISM

Young activists across the globe and from diverse contexts share the same primary barriers: funding for counter-extremism activities, limited personal finances and a lack of opportunities for involvement in P/CVE. However, these barriers may have different impacts on activists, depending on the level of violence that exists in their country.

On average, 6% more activists in non-violent countries listed opportunities for involvement in P/CVE activities as the crucial link for enabling their activism than their counterparts in more violent contexts. Activists in violent and highly violent countries named poor personal finances as a key barrier, 5% and 9% more respectively when compared with activists in non-violent countries. This suggests that poverty may play a greater role in limiting an activist's potential as their exposure to violence increases. Unlike funding, which limits activists' ability to pursue their own projects, a young person's financial situation also limits their ability to participate in P/CVE activities more broadly, since they would be less likely to volunteer large amounts of time or cover even basic costs like transportation, regardless of how strongly they believe in the cause.

The difficulty that youth activists face in finding funding featured prominently in Graeme Simpson's The Missing Peace, an independent progress study on youth, peace and security commissioned by the UN in 2018 to touch base with youth activists after the passage of SCR 2250.[43] As part of this study, the authors interviewed 399 'youth-led peacebuilding organizations' and found that 'limited funding' was the second most significant constraint these organisations faced. The first was a lack of trust, which directly impacted their ability to secure funding. The results of this are telling: only 11% of the 399 organisations had annual budgets exceeding $100,000 per year and half operated on less than $5,000 per year. Furthermore, volunteers comprised 97% of their staffs, a situation that they said restricted their reach and potential for impact.[44]

This financial barrier is crucial for enabling participation and leadership among youth in P/CVE, especially in places where young people are less likely to be financially stable. Because

> **When they have the skillset, young people often don't have the resources to start them off.**
> – *Male interviewee, South Sudan.*

ultimately, when the only options for counter-extremism activism are voluntary or even require some material investment, activism will be restricted to those who can afford it.

> **I'm not going to say that this [activism] is not the preserve of the privileged… it is a huge privilege to have this time and energy to invest in this.**
> – *Female interviewee, Pakistan.*

This financial barrier is crucial for enabling participation and leadership among youth in P/CVE, especially in places where young people are less likely to be financially stable. Because ultimately, when the only options for counter-extremism activism are voluntary or even require some material investment, activism will be restricted to those who can afford it.

Resolving the support gap will require a new approach to funding P/CVE activities that creates more space for young actors and ensures greater inclusion of young people living in poverty. The Missing Peace points to 'various institutional and capacity-based obstacles to receiving, managing and accounting for external funds' that restricts most youth-led organisations to locally sourced funding.[45] Staff in burgeoning young organisations may lack the infrastructure and experience to manage large grants, an obstacle that is not insignificant for funders. However, it is not effective to rely on youth and youth-led organisations to overcome this obstacle on their own; instead there must be more funding opportunities specifically for youth that can account for young activists' limitations and honour their strengths.

> It is very hard to get CVE funding unless you are well-connected; for a new person, nearly impossible... So maybe they need to give more chances to more people instead of the same people they fund pretty much every year
>
> *– Female interviewee, Tunisia.*

YouthCAN has worked to bridge this gap by offering young activist groups micro-grants that can be renewed over time to help them build up a stable foundation, gain practical experience and establish a proof of concept and a network that they can draw from to create long-term, sustainable programming. Funding is paired with periodic training and constant support that allows the youth group to maintain full creative freedom while taking over more responsibility for managing the grant over time. In this way, YouthCAN emphasizes activists' creativity, knowledge and credibility, while minimising risk and maximising all-around capacity of young activists to work independently and effectively. YouthCAN has awarded over £50,000 worth of grants to youth activists since 2018.

YOUTH
CAN

BACK TO BASICS

TRAINING AND SUPPORT FOR YOUTH ACTIVISM

Respondents across contexts were very closely aligned in their views on which skills would most benefit their activism. These skills have been ranked in Table 1, which gives the percentage of all respondents from non-violent, violent and highly violent countries who named the skill one of their top three.

Table 1: The skills respondents considered would most beneficial their activism, ranked

#	Skill	%	#	Skill	%
1	How to secure funding for your activism, including finding funding and writing proposals	42%	10	Understanding the risk factors and grievances of young people in your community	13%
2	Monitoring and evaluating your activities	32%	11	Research skills and methods	11%
3	Public speaking	29%	12	How to access vulnerable communities	10%
4	How to engage policymakers in your activism	25%	13	Work experience with professionals in counter-extremism	9%
5	Using communications to gain visibility for your activism	22%	14	Understanding hate and extremism	7%
6	How to network effectively with NGOs and CSOs	21%	15	Creating counterspeech and counter-narrative campaigns	6%
7	Creating and managing budgets	19%	16	Creative skills for developing engaging content	5%
8	Writing reports, articles and press release	14%	17	Understanding social media platforms and tools	5%
9	Project management	13%	18	Conducting security and risk assessments	5%

HOT AND NOT

WHAT SHOULD YOUTH P/CVE TRAINING PRIORITISE?

Activists Want More Practical Skills for Creating and Managing Projects

Activists in non-violent, violent and highly violent countries prioritised practical skills that are necessary for creating and managing projects. The first and second ranked skills were finding funding and writing proposals (42%) and monitoring and evaluation (32%). Further down the list but still noteworthy were creating and managing budgets (19%) and project management (13%). Activists recognise the crucial role that these skills play in effective and sustainable activism and training programmes should work to incorporate them into their curriculum.

Activists Value Networking

One-quarter (25%) of young activists named engaging with policymakers as a priority skill, while 21% gave priority to engaging with NGOs and CSOs. Networking is a key ingredient in promoting youth-led P/CVE activism, as it enables young actors to connect with decision-makers and potential allies, and build trust within their community. Young activists recognise the importance of this and want more training in how to create and build fruitful relationships with these key stakeholders.

Networking with peers is also crucial. When ranking opportunities, engaging with like-minded young people was a critical opportunity for an average of 23% of young activists across contexts. However, activists from more violent countries were less likely to face challenges in making those connections and noted them as a barrier far less. There was a statistically significant and even decline between contexts, suggesting that engaging with like-minded young people is less of a barrier the more violent the context.

Young activists recognise the importance of networking as a key mobiliser of P/CVE activism, although the kinds of support they need to build up those crucial networks may vary between contexts. While the need to engage with policymakers and NGOs/CSOs is fairly universal, programmes that seek to build peer networks need to consider carefully how young people network and collaborate in their given context. In non-violent countries, it may be necessary to create accessible networks of youth and help connect like-minded activists. In more violent countries, artificial networks may be unnecessary and practitioners would instead benefit from working within existing, more informal, networks. In any case, youth P/CVE programmes should always take time to map the existing ecosystem of stakeholders – including youth, civil society, policymakers and the private sector – and investigate existing connections and where new ones might be formed.

Activists Want More Skills to Communicate Their Work

Activists across contexts gave priority to skills that will help them communicate their work. Public speaking had the greatest response, with 29% of respondents naming it as a critical skill that would help enhance their activism. Also notable though, 22% of activists gave priority to using communications to gain visibility for their activism and 14% noted a desire for training in writing reports, articles and press releases. These highly transferable skills are critical for youth to gain visibility and support for their work and should be a standard part of training programmes for young P/CVE activists.
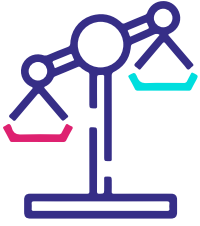
Social Media and Campaign Training Are Less of a Priority

Young P/CVE activists are less interested in training in social media and counter-narrative campaigns. This doesn't mean these topics are unimportant, but they are not a priority when compared with other skills that young people need to enhance their activism. Many young activists are digital natives, and while technology and online trends both change rapidly, young people usually feel comfortable using social media. And despite the amount of time young people spend online, many activists still see greater value in offline initiatives than in online counter-narrative campaigns.

Social media and counter-narrative campaigns are a priority within youth P/CVE programming; however, they are not a priority for the young activists who might benefit from those projects. While it is not necessary to abandon these topics in training altogether, capacity-building programmes should incorporate other skills for a more well-rounded curriculum. For example, social media training can include communications strategies that may help activists promote and gain support for their work. Those running training programmes aimed at helping activists develop campaigns can broaden their approach and cover initiatives that work both offline and online, while teaching the skills that are crucial for managing a full-scale project, like how to monitor and evaluate activities, or how to procure funding.

YouthCAN's Holistic Approach to Capacity Building

YouthCAN's capacity-building programme has undergone a similar transformation over the last two years, expanding its curriculum to encompass skills activists need to run their projects sustainably over time, offline and online. What began as a programme focused on creating online counter-narratives with youth has evolved into a holistic approach that covers everything from researching their challenge and segmenting their audience to creating and managing a budget and pitching their project, both verbally and in written proposals for funding. And by progressing from one-off workshops to giving long-term support and training, YouthCAN now offers specific follow-up training to enhance the skills that activists need to deliver their particular project, like research and moderating focus groups or creative skills like photography and video editing. This extended engagement also ensures that skills like monitoring and evaluation can be taken out of the classroom and built up through practice, by working with activists to create tools for their project and help them process their data in order to demonstrate impact and identify key learnings. YouthCAN always works in partnership with local organisations to connect with and draw from their local ecosystem and build relationships that will propel them to success in the long term.

YouthCAN has had the greatest success in building the capacity of young people by looking beyond a strict focus on training and instead striving to create opportunities for youth to excel. By listening to the needs of activists globally and drawing from incubation practices common in entrepreneurial development, YouthCAN has created a unique hybrid model that combines training, development, funding and long-term support. This approach has enabled us to deliver successful projects across Europe, South Asia, Africa and the MENA region, where we have trained over 600 activists and overseen the creation and delivery of 45 youth-led campaigns, which have engaged with millions of young people around the world.

KEY
RECOMMENDATIONS

Diversify and expand opportunities for P/CVE activists in all contexts to be more holistic and incorporate a greater range of key skills. Capacity-building programmes should look beyond simple one-off training around one given area of P/CVE and aim to instil and develop the tangible skills that activists are clamouring for in all contexts. Developing a toolkit for young P/CVE activists that includes funding, budgeting, monitoring and evaluation, public speaking and networking is critical.

Help young people engage with policymakers around their activism. This was a key missing link for roughly a quarter of the respondents from all contexts. Building links with policymakers does not require creating national level co-ordination, rather it should include local-level government stakeholders who are directly involved in community violence prevention efforts.

Provide young activists with monitoring and evaluation methods and tools that can enhance their activism and programming. While there is belief that P/CVE activism can lead to meaningful change in violent and highly violent contexts, there is a need to help activists showcase this change through impact measurements. The monitoring and evaluation skillsets and tools do not need to be complex, but must be tailored to activists' contexts, and provide them with approaches that can measure non-traditional formats for P/CVE programming effectively.

Address risk and help all activists to manage personal risk. Despite less than 5% of activists noting security and risk assessments as a need, progamming focused on supporting youth through a 'do-no-harm' approach need to ensure that stakeholders are safe and understand all risks to themselves, families, communities and goals. Help activists incorporate risk assessments in their work by developing simple templates that they can use when designing campaigns or initiatives.

Help activists build skills to articulate their activism to new audiences, broadening their scope and reach. Public speaking was considered a top need by activists from all contexts, and the need to produce reports, articles and press releases increased for activists who were operating in contexts with more and more violence. Activists want to increase their reach and scope, and recognise the importance of speaking, writing and communication strategies in doing so. Create tailor-made programmes that can deliver those skillsets, whether through mentored training around these issues or toolkits on visibility and traditional communications.

Poverty hampers activists across the board; developing modes of engagement that can alleviate the financial burdens of activists should be standard protocols for engaging P/CVE activists globally. Young activists struggle to find funding for their P/CVE activism and this financial barrier is compounded when activists face personal financial instability. Policymakers and NGOs should design programming with this in mind and create tailor-made funding schemes for young people that can help increase sustainable, youth-led projects and make P/CVE activism more accessible.

Help activists build the networks they need. While young people across contexts shared the desire to network with NGOs, CSOs and policymakers, peer networks vary. Activists in non-violent contexts are more likely to benefit from the creation of peer networks than those in more violent contexts. Stakeholder mapping should be a standard part of youth P/CVE programmes so youth can build the networks they need to work collaboratively and sustainably.

TECHNICAL APPENDIX

METHODOLOGY

YouthCAN surveyed 728 young activists and conducted 12 interviews. The young people consulted for this study come from different countries, cultures and contexts and can all offer unique insights into how practitioners can better support and enable youth-led activism for preventing and countering extremism.

Survey responses were collected from young people in 83 countries; response rates varied dramatically between these countries. Table 2 shows a breakdown of the number of respondents per country, grouped by violence classification according to the European Commission's Global Conflict Risk Index. In this index, countries are classified according to the statistical risk of ongoing violence and the potential of violent conflict occurring within four years.

The survey was distributed using targeted online advertising through Facebook and to a much lesser degree Twitter. The target population for these adverts was young people between the ages of 18 and 29 with an interest in activism, activist causes and humanitarian organisations. In order to ensure that the right individuals were reached this targeting was further triangulated by including demographic and experiential questions in the survey itself, which allowed inappropriate responses to be excluded from the final data analysis. From the distribution approach adopted, the survey provided YouthCAN with a self-selection sample of 728 individuals who could be considered, to a greater or lesser degree, 'youth activists'. While this sampling technique allowed YouthCAN to survey a high proportion of the target population at limited cost, this methodology suffers from the problems associated with self-selection bias in that the individuals who chose to take part in the survey may well have had different characteristics from those who did not.

While key informant interviews were used to supplement the research, the primary data collection tool employed for this study was a bespoke survey instrument combining a variety of measures designed to gauge different aspects of young people's experience with P/CVE activism. This includes two measures assessing the barriers and opportunities that have prevented or encouraged youth activism in the P/CVE space, and another investigating the skills they found to be most valuable to their activism. These ranking measures consist of three pre-set lists of items. The barriers and opportunities spanned five categories – access, risk, knowledge and skills, motivation and inspiration, and support – and directly paralleled each other. 'Barriers' were formulated in the negative as issues which may prevent young people from engaging in activism, while 'opportunities' were formulated in the positive as things that may encourage young people to take part in activism. For example, 'limited funding for counter-extremism projects' is a barrier, 'easy access to funding for counter-extremism projects' is an opportunity. A full list of the barriers, opportunities and skills included in the survey can be found later in this appendix in Tables 3, 4 and 5.

The selection of items for the pre-set lists of barriers, opportunities and skills was based on a review of the available literature on youth P/CVE activism and built on ISD's years of experience working with youth activists in different contexts. The choices were then reviewed by P/CVE practitioners who work with young people before being included in the survey instrument.

Data collected through the survey instrument was largely broken down by violence classification for the report so that associations could be drawn between the different contexts. While simple descriptive statistics were used to analyse most of the data included in the report, a non-parametric test, Kruskal-Wallis, was employed to check for statistically significant differences between the results in the three contexts. A Kruskal-Wallis test was selected as the appropriate methodology due to the volume of Likert-type scales used in the survey, which produce non-parametric data. Where appropriate, statistically significant differences between items selected in the barriers, opportunities and skills measures are outlined in the main body of the report.

Table 2: Number of Respondents per Country, Grouped by Violence Classification

Highly Violent Countries	# of survey responses	Violent Countries	# of survey responses	Non-Violent Countries	# of survey responses
Afghanistan	14	Algeria	16	Benin	14
Bangladesh	44	Armenia	3	Bhutan	14
Brazil	1	Bosnia and Herzegovina	2	Botswana	4
Cameroon	31	Burkina Faso	20	Canada	1
Central African Republic	1	Burundi	5	Comoros	2
		Congo	4		
Chad	2	Côte D'Ivoire	13	Croatia	1
Egypt	2	Dominican Republic	1	Djibouti	3
El Salvador	1	Ethiopia	20	Fiji	5
India	7	Gambia	2	France	2
		Georgia	1	Ghana	3
Iraq	1	Guinea	27	Guyana	2
		Haiti	11		
Kenya	27	Iran	1	Italy	3
		Israel	2	Lesotho	2
Libya	6	Kyrgyzstan	1		
		Liberia	23	Madagascar	18
Myanmar	11	North Macedonia	2	Malawi	16
		Mali	1		
Niger	1	Mauritania	1	Malaysia	2
Nigeria	67	Morocco	5	Maldives	1
		Mozambique	2	Mauritius	4
Philippines	1	Namibia	5		
		Nepal	79	Montenegro	1
Rwanda	6	Nicaragua	2	Norway	1
		Palestine	2		
Saudi Arabia	1	Senegal	5	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	1
		Sierra Leone	5		
Somalia	15	South Africa	1	Solomon Islands	1
		Sri Lanka	9	Switzerland	1
South Sudan	5	Eswatini	3	Timor-Leste	1
		Tajikistan	3	Tonga	1
Yemen	8	Tanzania	9	United Kingdom	4
		Togo	2	Zimbabwe	11
Total	250	Tunisia	27		
		Uganda	20	Total	117
		Zambia	27		
		Total	361		

Barriers

To better understand how we can support young P/CVE activists, YouthCAN first endeavoured to understand what were the primary obstacles to P/CVE activism. Participating activists were presented with a list of 18 barriers and asked to select the three most and least important barriers they had faced. The barriers span both personal circumstances and external factors and cover a variety of impediments. Table 3 shows the full list of barriers divided into categories.

Table 3: Barriers to Engaging in P/CVE Activism	
🔑 **ACCESS**	⚠️ **RISK**
Limited opportunities for involvement in counter-extremism activism Limited funding for counter-extremism projects Poor personal finances Limited free time	The personal risks involved A fear of negative consequences from governments or other officials A fear of negative social consequences or a negative reaction from your family A fear of negative consequences from future employers
💡 **KNOWLEDGE & SKILLS**	💭 **MOTIVATION AND INSPIRATION**
A lack of relevant skills and/or knowledge A lack of training opportunities A lack of resources in native language	Difficulty finding specific counter-extremism causes you care about Limited personal motivation The belief that activism is not an effective means of achieving change A lack of inspirational figures on which to model your activism
🤝 **SUPPORT**	
Difficulty engaging with like-minded young people Mistrust in counter-extremism organizations Mistrust in government	

Opportunities

To help complete the picture of what enables a young P/CVE activist, survey respondents were asked to evaluate a list of 17 opportunities and select the three most and three least significant opportunities that have supported, or could support, their involvement in counter-extremism activism. Table 4 shows the full list of opportunities divided into categories.

Table 4: Opportunities that Support P/CVE Activism	
🔑 **ACCESS**	⚠️ **RISK**
Opportunities for involvement in counter-extremism activism	A lack of personal risk
Funding for counter-extremism projects	💥 **MOTIVATION AND INSPIRATION**
Good personal finances	Ease of finding specific counter-extremism causes you care about
Having enough free time	Personal motivation
💡 **KNOWLEDGE & SKILLS**	Inspirational figures on which to model your activism
Access to relevant skills and/or knowledge	The belief that activism can have a positive impact in countering extremism
Access to training opportunities	
Access to resources in your native language	

🤝 SUPPORT
Ease of engaging with like-minded young people
Opportunities presented by governments or other officials
Encouragement and support from friends and/or family
Encouragement and support for colleagues and/or employers
Access to trusted counter-extremism organisation

Skills

To help inform the training programmes designed for young P/CVE activists, survey respondents were finally asked to evaluate a list of 18 skills and select the three most and three least important skills for their activism. These skills can be loosely categorised into five themes: networking; project management; transversal skills; campaigning; and P/CVE thematic knowledge. Table 5 shows the full list of skills divided into these categories.

Table 5: Skills needed for P/CVE Activism

💬 NETWORKING	⚛ TRANSVERSAL SKILLS
How to engage policy makers in your activism How to network effectively with NGOs and CSOs	Public speaking Writing reports, articles and press releases Research skills & methods
🧠 P/CVE – THEMATIC SKILLS	📣 CAMPAIGNING
Work experience with professionals in counter-extremism Understanding hate and extremism How to access vulnerable communities Understanding the risk factors and grievances of young pople in your community	Creating counterspeech/ counter-narrative campaigns Creative skills for developing engaging content Understanding social media platforms and tools

⚙ PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Monitoring & Evaluating your activities

How to secure funding for your activism, including finding funding and writing proposals

Creating and managing budgets

Using communications to gain visibility for your activism

Project management

Conducting security and risk assessments

Limitations of the Research

Limitations of this research include a lack of multilingual surveys that could possibly have highlighted gaps between English-speaking activists and non-English-speaking activists. Similarly, we could not conduct interviews with each of the respondents to gain a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and barriers they face. The research was also limited by the online nature of the survey distribution, which created a self-selection sample of activists and an imbalance in responses from each violence category. This biases results, in that individuals who choose to complete the survey may have different characteristics to those that do not. For example, youth who self-select into the survey will probably be more engaged or have better access to the internet, particularly in more challenging environments.

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