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# Countering Radicalization to Violence in Ontario and Quebec

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**CANADA'S FIRST ONLINE-OFFLINE INTERVENTIONS MODEL**

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**MAY 2023**

**MOONSHOTTEAM.COM**

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## **Disclaimer**

This pilot was funded by the Community Resilience Fund and supported by the Canada Centre for Community Engagement and Prevention of Violence at Public Safety Canada. Please note that the opinions expressed in this document represent the views of Moonshot and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Government of Canada.



## **Content Warning**

This report contains references to violent extremist ideology and content that readers may find distressing.



## Executive summary

Over a one year period from April 2021 - March 2022, Moonshot partnered with three violence prevention organizations to deliver an online interventions pilot in two Canadian provinces. The pilot advertised psychosocial support services to individuals engaging with extremist content online. Access to these services was voluntary, confidential, and anonymous by design. Our goal was to offer a secure pathway for at-risk individuals to contact a trained therapist or social worker.

We built this approach around offering integrated care. Together with our intervention partners, we crafted our advertising messages and service websites to emphasize the confidential, non-judgemental support that callers would receive. Individuals who reached out were connected to an interdisciplinary team, which included a therapist, youth engagement workers, a psychiatrist, and other intervention staff who could offer services like counseling, employment support, addiction support, or simply a space to talk.

Our partners were the Estimated Time of Arrival (ETA) team in Ontario, and Recherche et Action sur les Polarisation Sociales (RAPS) in Quebec. The Canadian Practitioners Network for the Prevention of Radicalization and Extremist Violence (CPN-PREV) acted as a convening and best practice provider, and supported our pilot evaluation. A description of each organization is at the end of this report.

Moonshot's intervention campaigns ran for a total of six months, and reached individuals consuming incel and violent far-right extremist content on Google Search and YouTube. Our online interventions focused on meeting individuals' psychosocial needs, and appealed to vulnerabilities and grievances, such as anger, frustration, exhaustion, and isolation.

## Key outcomes

- **Moonshot redirected 786 at-risk individuals to our intervention partners' websites. 22 initiated a conversation with a counselor.**
- **Four individuals formally registered and engaged with a service provider for several months**, in addition to those who accessed virtual counselling without going through the registration process. At least one person who initially shared violent impulses has been able to find positive, hopeful alternatives for the future.
- **Moonshot's ads reached users engaging with harmful content on Google and YouTube 44,508 times.** Among the hundreds of users redirected to ETA and RAPS' websites, 26 were watching influential incel YouTube channels and 39 had searched Google for high-risk keywords related to incel and violent far-right ideology ("looksmax org"; "1488 tattoos").
- **Moonshot, ETA, RAPS, and CPN-PREV established an effective multi-sectoral partnership.** During our pilot program, we co-designed support pathways and risk escalation procedures for each service area, built teams' capacity to deliver online interventions safely and effectively, and engaged at-risk audiences online.
- **This pilot provides a blueprint for future interventions to reach and engage at-risk internet users.** New iterations of this work can reach larger audiences by expanding advertising beyond the pilot platforms, strengthening and expanding cross-sectoral partnerships, and testing new ways to reach often-isolated internet users.



## Program design

### Background and rationale

Violent incel and violent far-right (VFR) extremism are ongoing public safety threats in Canada.<sup>1</sup> Both were aggravated by increasing social polarization throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic gave grievance-driven actors an opportunity to mobilize and recruit new followers, and for vulnerable individuals to fall victim to online radicalization - a phenomenon which can result in real-world violence.<sup>2</sup> Many Canadians facing economic and political uncertainty also contended with new or exacerbated mental health issues, such as heightened levels of anxiety, stress, depression, and loneliness,<sup>3</sup> which, in some situations, can increase their vulnerability to extremist narratives.


Interventions that build protective factors against violent extremist recruitment and focus on at-risk individuals' immediate psychosocial needs are particularly useful in reducing the risk of radicalization to violence online. Our pilot addressed known risk factors for individuals who engage with ideologically motivated violent extremist groups, such as social isolation, a desire for significance, a lack of belonging, self confidence, anxiety, identity, and uncertainty about the future. Its advertising campaigns helped address the additional vulnerabilities created by the pandemic and the fact that many Canadians are unable or unwilling to seek in-person support for a host of reasons.

### Objectives of the pilot program

This program provided a unique opportunity to bridge the gap between technology and practice, and offer and evaluate online interventions in the Canadian context.<sup>4</sup> Together with RAPS, ETA, and CPN-Prev, we adapted existing programs for at-risk individuals in Ontario and Quebec, and made their services more accessible to this specific cohort of internet users. Over six months, Moonshot used its expertise in reaching audiences engaging with extremist content, and connected them to our Canadian service providers through bespoke referral pathways.

The pilot's theory of change was that connecting our target audience to local psychosocial service providers would increase the number of individuals seeking disengagement and reintegration assistance online, and in turn reduce the risk of their engagement with violent incel and violent far-right ideology. Its primary objective was to facilitate these voluntary connections by building a targeted, safe, and effective online referral pathway from potentially harmful Google and YouTube content to ETA and RAPS' websites.

In addition to enabling conversations between at-risk individuals and interventions teams through online referrals, our secondary objectives were:

-  Disrupting potential online radicalization by promoting intervention services to users seeking harmful incel or VFR content online.

1. Canada experienced multiple acts of incel- and VFR-related violence in recent years; notably the 2021 vehicular attack on a Muslim family in London, Ontario, and incel-related attacks in Toronto in April 2018 and February 2020, and in Sudbury in [June 2019](#).
2. Online radicalization may have played a role in the attacks mentioned in Footnote 1. In the 2018 Toronto attack, the perpetrator admitted that he had been at-risk online through participation in the online incel ecosystem. In the 2021 London attack, police identified that the perpetrator had engaged with neo-Nazi websites and other hate-based material online.
3. The Canadian Mental Health Association reported a deterioration in mental health amongst the general public in both [Wave 1](#) and [Wave 2](#).
4. Moonshot has previously advertised psychosocial intervention programs in the United States, Albania, and Bangladesh. This pilot marks the first deployment of Moonshot's online interventions methodology in Canada.



- ↘ Raising awareness among at-risk users that help is available from a credible and non-judgmental service provider, building familiarity with that provider and increasing the likelihood of future engagement with a program (or related services).
- ↘ Building the capacity of ETA and RAPS to effectively, safely, and sustainably challenge incel and VFR-related radicalization, risk factors and violence in Canada.

## ↘ Project methodology

There were three core components of this pilot's methodology: designing online self-referral pathways on multiple platforms; creating campaign messaging and partner websites; and advertising the referral pathways to at-risk users online.

### **The Redirect Method**

Our pilot used the Redirect Method,<sup>5</sup> an approach to countering online radicalization and violence developed by Moonshot in partnership with Jigsaw in 2016. The original iteration of the Redirect Method was deployed on Google Search, and involved sending at-risk users searching for violent extremist content to YouTube playlists with credible and alternative counter-content. It has since been expanded to function across multiple platforms, and to provide at-risk users with in-person support (such as access to psychosocial services).

When an individual performs a search on Google or YouTube that indicates engagement with or support for a harmful topic or narrative, their search results include an ad presenting an alternative message or pathway. This helps to safeguard at-risk audiences by offering contextually relevant, trustworthy information and access to a service or counter-narrative. Our open source methodology respects users' privacy and self-determination, while allowing Moonshot to curate messaging that aligns with their original behavior. While it is not possible to attribute an individual's intent on the basis of a Google search, risk-based targeting ensures we reach a defined audience who encounter extremist content online.

Audiences for Redirect campaigns are defined solely by their behaviors, such as a Google search for incel or violent far-right content, and never by their demographic characteristics, such as age, race, gender, or location. All data collected is publicly available and anonymous, and this methodology is fully compliant with the European General Data Protection Regulation as well as applicable Canadian law.

5. <https://moonshotteam.com/the-redirect-method/>



## ↘ Impact evaluation

The pilot succeeded in engaging hundreds of at-risk Canadians. More than 786 individuals visited an intervention provider's website, 22 of whom reached out to request counseling services. This speaks to the potential benefit of using psychosocial messaging and multiple referral pathways to reach and engage vulnerable individuals online.

### **Did we reach at-risk users?**

- ▶ **Moonshot's campaign on Google Search reached the highest volume of at-risk Internet traffic**, offering psychosocial support ahead of harmful content in 13,800 search results. Searches we reached included:

how to kill black people



how to bring back slavery



how to join oath keepers



The Protocols of the Elders of Zion Pdf



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- ▶ **Moonshot's YouTube campaign reached viewers of 537 videos promoting incel ideology.**
- ▶ **Some of the most effective ads addressed viewers' feelings of isolation.**<sup>6</sup> Targeting viewers of incel content, these ads had an average click-through rate of 2.4% - twice that of other messaging themes.<sup>7</sup> This finding may correspond with the heightened levels of loneliness that incels feel, and the benefit of addressing this specific risk factor through online interventions programming.
- ▶ **YouTube ads that addressed the feeling of being under attack recorded the highest average view rate (16.5%).** These ads assured viewers that they are not alone, and offered a chance to "learn how to avoid violence and move forward".
- ▶ **Compared to our campaign average, viewers of five prominent incel YouTube channels were over twice as likely to watch an ad offering psychosocial support.** The average video view rate was 41.9% - 28.5 percentage points above the average view rate for our YouTube campaign (13.4%).<sup>8</sup> This suggests that psychosocial advertising on incel channels is an effective way to engage vulnerable individuals.

6. As part of the Google Display campaign, Moonshot tried three different messages, crafted in collaboration with ETA and RAPS. The messages focused on anger, isolation, and uncertainty - emotions that would potentially resonate with our audiences' psychosocial needs.

7. While this finding did not reach the threshold of statistical significance, it is based on thousands of user searches and points to the value of testing psychosocial messaging to consumers of extremist content.

8. View rate measures an audience's level of engagement on YouTube. It is calculated by dividing the number of views of an ad by the number of impressions.



## Successful off-ramping

- ▶ **22 at-risk individuals reached out to intervention services.** Seven contacted RAPS and 15 reached out to ETA. The volume of self-referrals significantly increased towards the end of the pilot, with over 80% occurring in the last two months of the campaign in January and February 2022.
- ▶ **Four individuals formally registered and engaged with a service provider for several months,** in addition to those who accessed virtual counseling without going through the registration process. At least one person who initially shared violent impulses has been able to find positive, hopeful alternatives for the future.
- ▶ **The campaigns succeeded in engaging individuals demonstrating proclivity towards far-right extremist conspiracy theories.** Qualitative insights from intervention partners indicated that several users are regularly engaging with far-right extremist websites. The presence of conspiratorial mindset was also identified in several exchanges. Some individuals expressed concerns evocative of the ‘great replacement’ conspiracy theory that is widely circulated by violent far-right groups.

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The clients were exactly what we were expecting.

- RAPS

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- ▶ **Practitioners noted that several users are engaging with incel ideology and extreme misogynist beliefs.** These included claims that men are being discriminated against by modern society and that feminism and left-wing individuals are promoting promiscuity among women. Individuals also shared concerns about their appearance that reflected aspects of incel ideology, such as “looksmaxxing”.<sup>9</sup>
- ▶ **Loneliness was the most frequently identified grievance.** Other aggregated, non-extremism specific vulnerabilities included unemployment, alcohol and drug issues, internet addiction, depression, lack of access to healthcare, and problems with self-esteem. Their variety speaks to the complex needs of individuals who are consuming violent far-right and incel content online.
- ▶ While not everyone who contacted the service could be considered at high risk, **the importance of engaging vulnerable individuals early on was widely cited by practitioners.** In our after action reviews, one of our partners remarked, “there was a real sense of pride among staff that they could intervene early”.
- ▶ **Service users appreciated having a confidential and non-judgmental space to discuss their concerns.** According to practitioners from one organization, many clients thanked their staff for listening to and acknowledging their issues.

9. A term used to describe incels’ attempt to improve their physical appearance or sexual attractiveness by conforming to societal beauty standards. Examples include going to the gym, getting plastic surgery or concealing acne.



## ➤ Recommendations for future interventions programming

Below we provide several recommendations that can be integrated and explored as part of future programs targeting incel and VFR at-risk audiences. **Security and ethics must be at the heart of all online interventions programs.** Our primary recommendation is to expand multi-channel online interventions, and combine different forms of outreach and relationship building to increase their visibility and effectiveness.

### Partnerships and capacity building

The pilot included pre-launch training for all intervention partners, covering topics related to online intervention delivery such as digital privacy and security. We collaborated to identify gaps in training and, where possible, provide additional capacity building opportunities. Our post-project debriefings produced two recommendations:

- ▶ **Cross-sector collaboration is fundamental to developing a wraparound online service.** Challenges, opportunities, and risks identified by each partner should be communicated across all project teams to facilitate a collaborative approach to problem-solving.
- ▶ **Flexibility of project design is essential to accommodate and respond to intervention partners' needs.** During the pilot evaluation, practitioners expressed the need for follow-up trainings that are responsive to changes within extremist subcultures and the unexpected challenges arising throughout the project lifecycle. Intervention programs should ensure that partners receive ongoing training on violent extremist ideologies and how to engage at-risk clients online. It is also essential that intervention services understand online advertising methodologies, and co-design the referral pathways for potential clients.

### Data protection

- ▶ **Intervention programs must constantly review and adapt to changes in privacy legislation, and ensure that users' personal information is safeguarded.** Before advertising online referral pathways to at-risk Canadians, Moonshot engaged legal counsel with expertise in federal and provincial privacy legislation, in addition to Europe's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). This review ensured that any collection, retention, and processing of personal data was conducted proportionately within the legitimate legal interests of the project, and with appropriate user consent. As Canadian privacy law advances through legislation like Quebec's Bill 64,<sup>10</sup> programs should continually assess privacy safeguards, individual rights and consent, and transparency obligations, with a view to developing compliant, long term online-offline interventions in Canada.

### Interventions delivery

- ▶ **Canadians who engage with extremist ideologies online can be reached on a multitude of platforms.** Expanding our campaigns to other platforms such as Reddit and 4chan may be feasible with scoping, and in line with technical feasibility, Canadian privacy legislation, and best practice.

10. [Dentons: Bill 64 on modernizing Québec privacy law – Why it matters and how to prepare for it](#)





- ▶ **Improve and increase engagement with Francophone audiences.** Our ads did not reach significant numbers of French-language speakers: this is partly due to the predominance of English-language violent incel and far-right content online, and the fact that ETA does not offer services in French. Future projects must engage these groups, and can do so by conducting more research of local violent far-right and incel movements, and thereby increase advertising to at-risk Francophone internet users.
- ▶ **Extend the geographic reach of intervention programming.** Our online campaigns can be extended to other provinces and territories in Canada through partnerships with qualified frontline service providers.
- ▶ **Optimize messaging to increase engagement with local services.** This project demonstrated that addressing the grievances and psychosocial needs of at-risk internet users can lead to interventions offline. Future programs should test and evaluate other messages and ad formats that can increase audience engagement. In particular, language that builds trust in a service and offers non-judgmental support may be effective at lowering barriers to self-referral.

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Being open about offering a “non-judgmental discussion space” places the client in a position where they know we’re not an equivalent of 911 or any other emergency-related services. That might be why most of our clients, even if they showed signs of distress, were inclined to engage in a conversation related to that distress.

- RAPS

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- ▶ **There is a need to develop additional resources and pathways for users who do not meet criteria for one-to-one online engagement.** Members of both ETA and RAPS’ clinical teams emphasized that in order to provide “the right service at the right time” future interventions should aim to differentiate between individuals in acute crisis and those who express tentative interest in a service. They identified a stepped care model as a potential solution for providing online support. This entails offering different interventions to prospective clients, based on an assessment of their needs, and allocating a specific case manager who can provide the most appropriate care and treatment.
- ▶ **Extending support hours is essential for providing timely care.** All our partners cited their responsiveness as one of the most critical factors in engaging vulnerable users who had contacted them. Data from self-referrals suggest that 64% of the individuals who reached out contacted a service provider after working hours or during the weekend. Practitioners from ETA noted that “given the safety risk of this population, having an after-hours response is critical.”

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If all 15 clients texted in today, we wouldn’t have the capacity to support them.

- ETA

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It takes a lot of courage to reach out. People are at the height of their motivation for change. If you wait a week, forget about it.

- ETA

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- ▶ **Increasing funding for local intervention services.** Practitioners from ETA noted that we are “dipping our toes” into engaging vulnerable individuals online. Adequate funding and resources for individualized prevention programs are central to increasing Canada’s ability to meaningfully disengage individuals from violent ideologies, and handle the volume of self-referrals that Moonshot’s campaigns generated towards the end of this pilot. Intervention teams’ capacities are limited, and burnout is a constant risk for staff. In addition to extending program hours, increased support for these practitioners’ professional and mental wellbeing is needed.

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In Canada, there’s an undercurrent of [radicalization] happening online, and we’re just dipping our toes into this [...] how many other people are out there, that we don’t have the capacity to engage?

- ETA

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## ↘ About Us

**Moonshot** is a social impact business working to end online harms by applying evidence, ethics and human rights. Our team of analysts, engineers and project managers use fresh thinking and decades of cross-sector experience to respond to some of the world's toughest problems with effective, scalable solutions. Our work ranges from software development and capacity building to leading global counter-messaging and intervention campaigns. We design new technologies and methodologies that enhance our ability and that of our partners to respond effectively to a variety of emerging threats online.

**Recherche et Action sur les Polarisation Sociales (RAPS)** is an intervention model for extremist individuals in Quebec. RAPS comprises a multiple entry point system, the coordination of local specialized services with expertise in cultural psychiatry and violence risk assessment and management, and a strong coordination with proximity services, including a mentoring program focusing on social integration and life skills. This clinical model is tailored to be flexible and adapt to populations with diverse characteristics and to local resources. The Montreal clinical team, L'Équipe Polarisation, provides services to extremist individuals, their significant others, and to some victims of hate crimes.

**Estimated Time of Arrival (ETA)** is a rapid access service in Ontario that supports people to reconnect with their communities in a pro-social and positive way through engagement, connection to basic needs and social/emotional supports, while bridging to a wide variety of services that help them feel validated and more connected to their communities. It is part of Yorktown Family Services (YFS), a fully accredited community service agency comprised of an infant, child, and youth mental health centre; a women's shelter and community-based violence against women services; and an integrated services site offering rapid access to multiple mental health, primary health, and social service programs for youth and young adults.

**The Canadian Practitioners Network for the Prevention of Radicalization and Extremist Violence (CPN-PREV)** is an evidence-based and practitioner-centred network funded by the Public Safety Canada's Community Resilience Fund (CRF). The goal of CPN-PREV is to bring forward Canadian leadership and develop excellence in countering violent radicalization. It supports best practices and collaborations among intervention teams, through sustained knowledge mobilization between researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and various community sectors.



## Glossary

<i>Term</i>	<i>Definition</i>
<b>At-risk audiences / users</b>	Individuals who exhibit risk online by searching for, or otherwise engaging with, content that is related to violent incel or violent far-right ideology.
<b>Clicks</b>	The number of times an ad was clicked on Google Search, Google Display, or YouTube.
<b>Click-through rate (CTR)</b>	The number of times at-risk individuals clicked on an ad in relation to the number of times an ad was shown, as a percentage.
<b>Search Impressions / Impressions</b>	The number of times an ad was shown to users searching for or engaging with at-risk content on Google Search, Google Display, or YouTube.
<b>Keyword</b>	A search term, word, or phrase that returns content related to violent incel or violent far-right content online.

