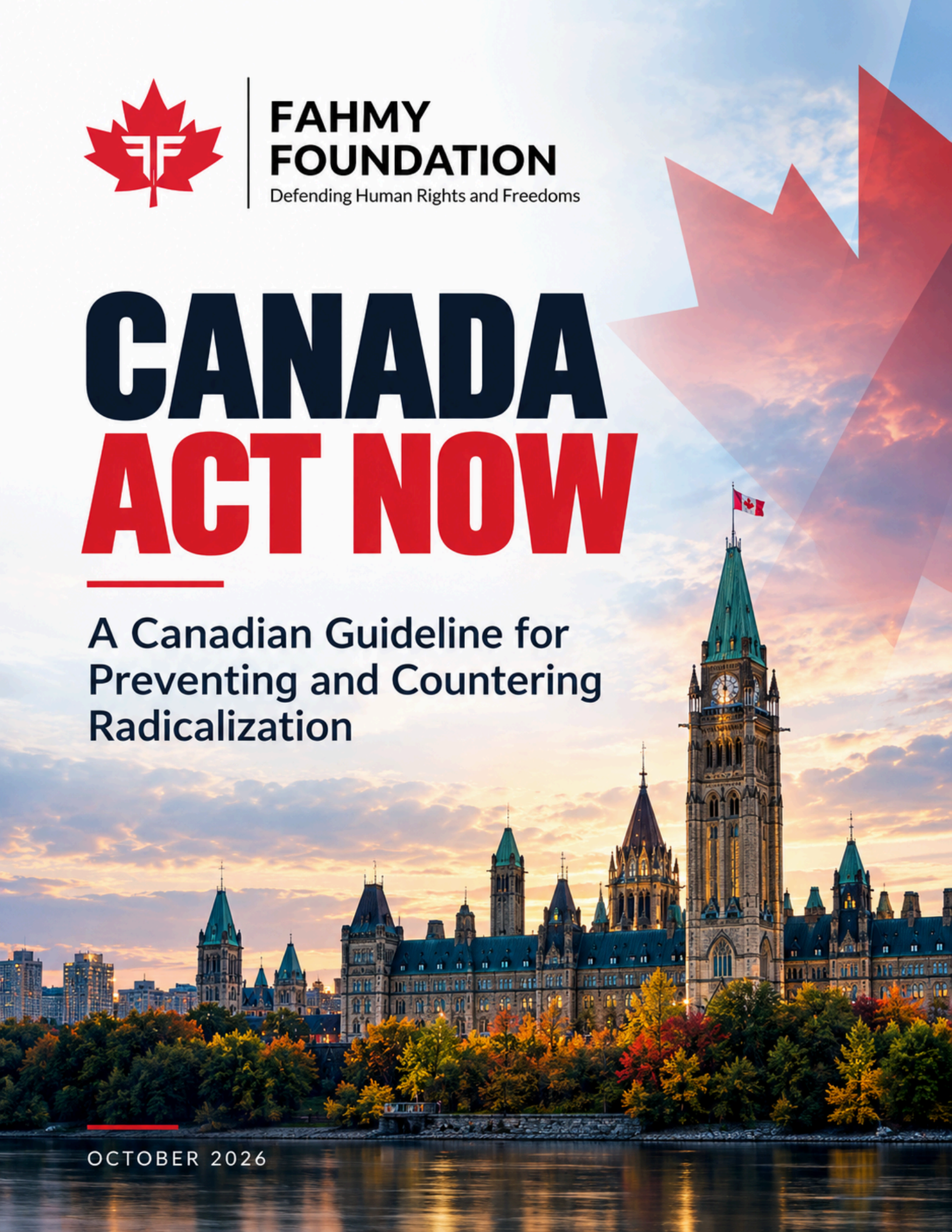
FAHMY FOUNDATION

Defending Human Rights and Freedoms

CANADA ACT NOW

A Canadian Guideline for Preventing and Countering Radicalization



OCTOBER 2026

Introduction

Canada Act Now is a prevention and public-education initiative of the Fahmy Foundation focused on helping Canadians understand radicalization, extremist recruitment and the pathways through which individuals can become vulnerable to extremist influence.

Radicalization is a process, not an identity. It can develop through a combination of personal vulnerabilities, grievances, social isolation, a search for belonging or purpose, exposure to extremist narratives and influence from individuals or networks. Effective prevention therefore requires understanding the individual and the circumstances surrounding their radicalization, rather than relying on a single behaviour or assumption.

This guideline draws on research, practitioner experience and the firsthand experiences of Fahmy Foundation founder Mohamed Fahmy and the Foundation's Head of Research, Dr. Theo Padnos.

During his humanitarian mission with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Lebanon, Fahmy visited prisons and conducted confidential interviews with hundreds of detainees, including Islamist prisoners and individuals associated with militant groups. These conversations provided rare firsthand insight into their pathways toward radicalization, including accounts of how veteran Islamists influenced their beliefs, exploited grievances and facilitated recruitment into extremist networks.

Dr. Theo Padnos, a scholar, author and the Foundation's Head of Research, brings a different but equally significant perspective. He was held captive for approximately two years by al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, during which he witnessed the organization's ideology, internal dynamics and methods of control firsthand. His experience offers insight into the mindset and behaviour of extremist actors, complementing the Foundation's research into radicalization, recruitment and prevention.

The guideline also draws on firsthand experience documenting and observing community-based prevention work in the United Kingdom, offering a complementary perspective on how individuals vulnerable to extremist influence can be reached through early intervention, trusted relationships and constructive alternatives.

Together, these experiences inform a central principle: **understanding how individuals become radicalized, how extremist organizations operate and how individuals can disengage is essential to effective prevention.**

Prevention cannot rely solely on security or law-enforcement responses after a threat has emerged. Early recognition, trusted relationships, critical thinking, meaningful alternatives and coordinated intervention can create opportunities to change an individual's trajectory before radicalization develops into violence.

The approach presented here is intended as a practical framework for families, educators, community organizations, professionals and policymakers. It is not a diagnostic tool, and no single behaviour, belief or characteristic should be treated as proof of radicalization.

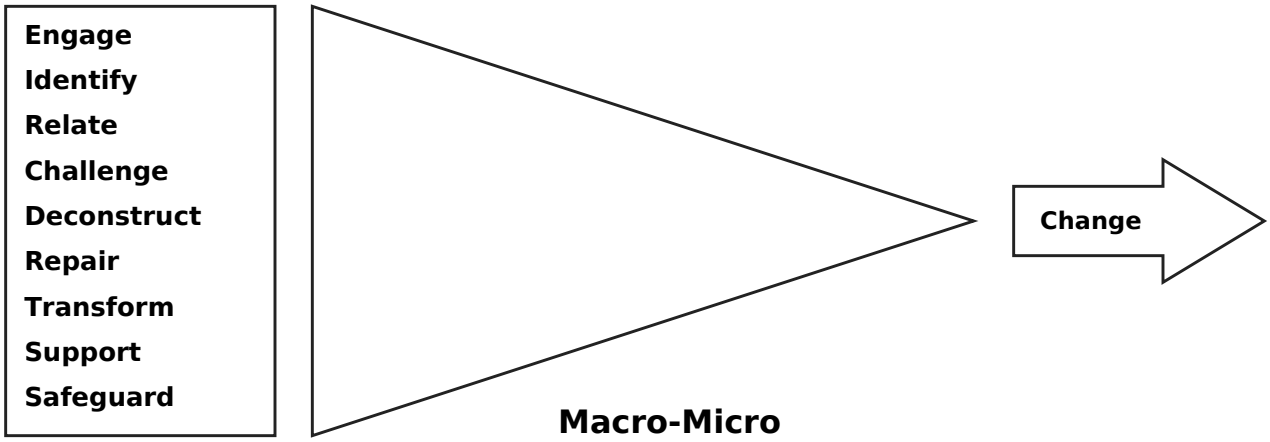
The objective is straightforward: **identify genuine vulnerability early, understand the individual, disrupt extremist recruitment and create credible pathways toward belonging, purpose and constructive participation.**

The purpose is not to label people.

It is to change trajectories.

How Extremist Recruiters Radicalize Youth

Extremist recruiters often follow a systematic, step-by-step process designed to isolate, influence, and reshape a young person's beliefs, identity, and social ties. The process typically moves from broad ideological messaging to deeply personal psychological control.



Common stages of recruitment include:

Engagement & Profiling

Recruiters build rapport while assessing a target's intellect, emotions, cultural background, values, beliefs, vulnerabilities, and skills. This phase is used to identify personal insecurities, grievances, or unmet needs.

Building Common Ground

Through ongoing conversation, shared ideas, and selective agreement, recruiters establish trust, credibility, and emotional connection, creating a sense of belonging and validation.

Challenging Existing Beliefs

Once trust is secured, recruiters begin questioning and undermining the individual's worldview, often using emotionally charged narratives

Recruitment targeted messages are designed to provoke guilt, anger, or moral urgency:

Deconstruction of Identity & Values

The recruiter gradually erodes existing beliefs, reframing personal, cultural, or religious values to align with extremist narratives.

Reconstruction & Indoctrination

New belief systems, loyalties, and identities are introduced and reinforced until the individual becomes fully psychologically committed to the ideology.

Transformation

The individual begins to reinterpret their life, relationships, and purpose through the extremist framework, often abandoning prior norms, goals, and moral reference points.

Isolation from Family & Community

Recruiters frequently pressure individuals to disengage from friends, family, and mainstream society, promoting the idea that separation is necessary to remain “pure” or “faithful.”

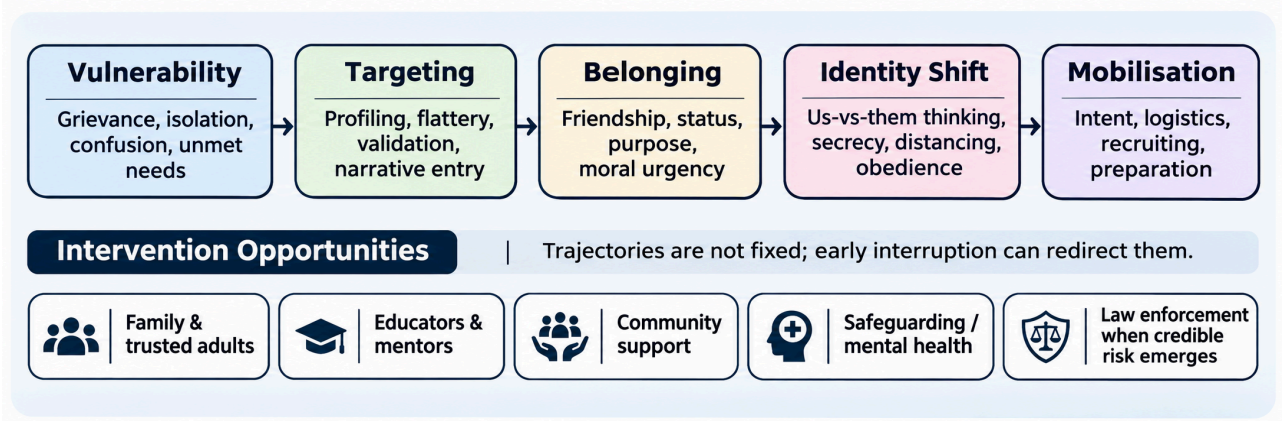
Network Dependence & Control

To prevent disengagement, recruiters may arrange relationships or marriages within their network and provide employment, housing, or financial support, increasing dependence and reducing the likelihood of exit.

The Fahmy Foundation works to redirect youth at risk by challenging how religious texts and concepts are distorted and weaponized by extremist networks, prioritizing prevention in hearts and minds rather than relying on surveillance alone.

Understanding Recruitment Pathways

Extremist recruitment rarely begins with an explicit call to violence. It more often starts with attention, validation and a carefully managed relationship that exploits grievance, loneliness, confusion or a search for meaning. Recognizing that process early helps families, educators and practitioners interrupt it before intent and capability develop.



Typical stages of recruitment

1. Vulnerability. A person may be experiencing social isolation, humiliation, anger, trauma, identity confusion or a perceived injustice.

2. Targeting and profiling. A recruiter or network identifies the person's emotional needs, values, frustrations and social connections.

3. Belonging and validation. The individual is offered status, friendship, certainty and a sense of being understood or chosen.

4. Narrative capture. Complex events are reframed through emotionally powerful stories of victimhood, duty and moral urgency.

5. Identity shift and isolation. The person is encouraged to distrust previous influences, withdraw from dissenting voices and become more dependent on the new network.

6. Intent and mobilisation. Some trajectories move toward facilitation, recruitment, travel, financing, operational planning or support for violence.

Recognizing Warning Signs in Context

No single behaviour proves radicalization. Assessment should focus on patterns, context, trajectory and whether beliefs are moving toward the justification or support of violence. The purpose of noticing warning signs is to open a path to support and further assessment — not to stigmatize identity, faith or lawful political opinion.

Potential warning signs	Not evidence of radicalization on their own
• Sudden dependence on a new ideological or social network • Repeated use of grievance framed through absolutist or conspiratorial narratives • Increasing secrecy, deception or efforts to hide online activity or new associates • Withdrawal from family, education, work or longstanding friendships • Open admiration for violent actors, attacks or martyrdom • Dehumanizing language directed at out-groups or dissenters • Attempts to recruit peers, spread propaganda or police others' behaviour • Discussion of travel, training, acquisition or logistics linked to extremist causes	• Wearing religious clothing or growing a beard • Praying regularly or following religious rules • Criticizing foreign policy or government decisions • Holding conservative or unpopular views without endorsing violence • Experiencing anger, frustration or identity questions • Seeking community, purpose or spiritual guidance through lawful channels **Escalate concern when there is credible movement toward intent or capability** • Specific threats, target selection or tactical research • Contact with extremist facilitators or operational networks • Access-seeking for weapons, money, travel or secure communications

Good practice: ask what has changed, what evidence supports the concern, who the person trusts, and which relationships can still be strengthened. Early conversation and support are usually more effective than alarmist or punitive responses.

A 22-Factor Vulnerability and Risk Framework

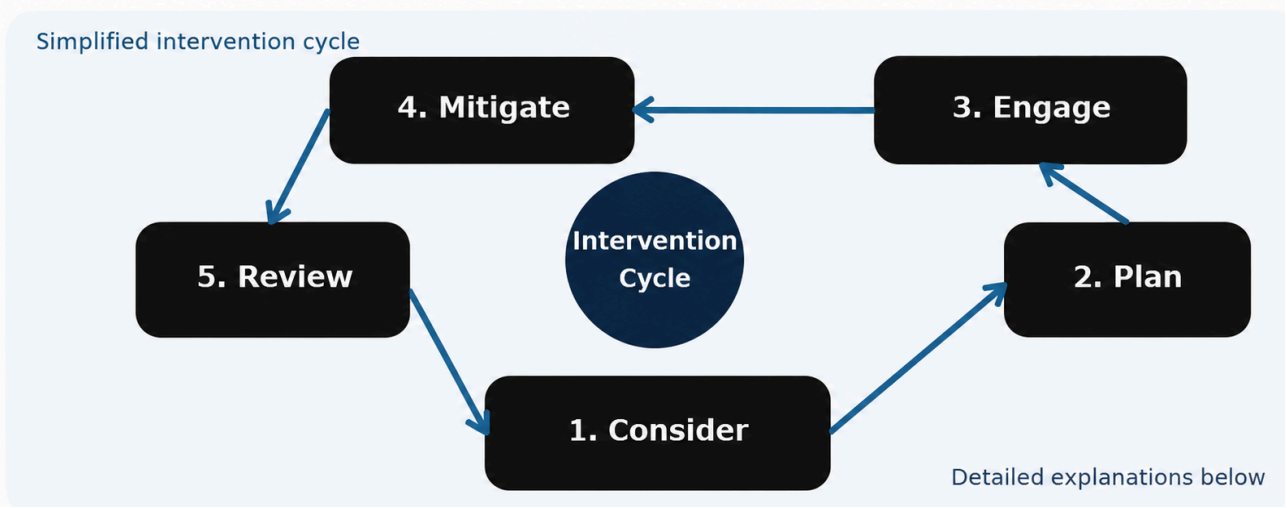
This framework is a practical aid for structured professional thinking. It is not a diagnostic checklist and should not be used mechanically. The most important question is not how many indicators exist, but whether there is a meaningful trajectory from vulnerability to engagement, and from engagement toward intent or capability.

Engagement indicators	Intent indicators	Capability indicators
• 1. Identity confusion or crisis • 2. Social isolation or exclusion • 3. Personal grievance, humiliation or trauma • 4. Sudden immersion in extremist content • 5. Dependence on a new ideological peer group • 6. Us-versus-them narratives becoming central • 7. Rejection of previous relationships or influences • 8. Secrecy, deception or hidden online activity	• 9. Moral approval of violence or terrorism • 10. Glorification of attackers or martyrs • 11. Desire to support, travel or join a cause • 12. Pressure to sever ties with critics or family • 13. Attempts to recruit or influence others • 14. Fixation on perceived duty, revenge or urgency • 15. Discussion of potential targets or scenarios	• 16. Contact with facilitators or operational networks • 17. Research into tactics, weapons or bomb-making • 18. Efforts to obtain money, transport or equipment • 19. Use of secure communications or concealment methods • 20. Access to vulnerable locations or targets • 21. History of violence, criminality or coercive behaviour • 22. Practical planning, rehearsal or role allocation

Interpretation: engagement indicators may justify support and closer assessment; intent indicators require heightened concern; capability indicators demand proportionate safeguarding and, where necessary, law-enforcement involvement. Responses should always remain evidence-led, lawful and rights-respecting.

Intervention and Disruption Model

Effective prevention is not a single conversation or referral. It is a cycle of understanding, planning, engagement, risk reduction and review. The goal is to change trajectories by strengthening protective relationships, challenging harmful narratives and reducing the conditions that make recruitment easier.



1. Consider. Clarify what has changed, identify vulnerabilities and protective factors, and distinguish exposure from credible risk.

2. Plan. Choose proportionate objectives, identify who is best placed to act, and coordinate with relevant partners.

3. Engage. Use trusted relationships, critical thinking, mentoring, family support and constructive alternatives to challenge the trajectory.

4. Mitigate. Where risk is credible, reduce access to harmful networks, opportunities, money, travel, propaganda or means of violence.

5. Review and govern. Monitor outcomes, document decisions, adjust the approach and ensure accountability, oversight and legal safeguards.

Core principles: proportionate action; preserved relationships whenever possible; multi-agency coordination; credible messengers; practical alternatives; and clear separation between prevention, safeguarding and punishment.

Lessons for Canadian Prevention Programmes

International experience shows that prevention works best when it is practical, local and trusted. Programmes are more effective when they combine public safety with safeguarding, create routes for early intervention and avoid treating identity as evidence of risk.

1. Build trust before crisis. Schools, community groups and institutions need relationships in place before a concern escalates.

2. Use multi-agency safeguarding. No single institution can address vulnerability, ideology, mental health, family strain and security risk on its own.

3. Support credible local voices. Mentors, educators, faith leaders, youth workers and survivors can often reach individuals that formal systems cannot.

4. Offer meaningful alternatives. Belonging, structure, activism, sport, employment, volunteering and creative work can weaken the pull of extremist networks.

5. Avoid stigma and overreach. Programmes lose legitimacy when they conflate identity with danger or use prevention primarily as punishment.

6. Measure outcomes and learn. Good governance requires clear objectives, evidence of impact, consistent training and mechanisms for review.

These additions strengthen the practical application of Canada Act Now: understand the pathway, recognize meaningful changes, respond early, coordinate wisely and protect both public safety and fundamental rights.

1. Radicalization Is a Process Radicalization does not usually begin with violence. It can develop gradually through a combination of vulnerability, grievance, identity, social isolation, exposure to extremist narratives and relationships with people who reinforce increasingly extreme views.

Prevention is therefore most effective when it identifies changes in trajectory early, before intent and capability develop.

No single indicator proves that someone is radicalizing. Assessment must consider context, behaviour, relationships, intent and the individual's circumstances.

2. Understand the Individual — Not Just the Ideology Effective intervention begins with the person. Practitioners should seek to understand what the individual believes, what they are experiencing, what they value and what they are seeking.

A person may be drawn toward extremist ideas because of a desire for belonging, purpose, justice, recognition, identity or protection. Understanding these underlying needs creates opportunities for intervention.

3. Push and Pull Factors Radicalization can involve both push and pull factors.

Push factors may include isolation, humiliation, discrimination, family conflict, personal failure, social exclusion, trauma or a sense of injustice.

Pull factors may include belonging, friendship, status, purpose, identity, adventure, recognition, ideological certainty or the promise of a meaningful role.

Prevention should seek to reduce vulnerabilities while strengthening positive alternatives.

4. Engagement, Intent and Capability It is important to distinguish between exposure to extremist material, engagement with extremist ideas, intent to act and the capability to carry out an act.

Concern should increase when extremist engagement develops into credible intent and capability. Intervention should therefore be proportionate to the level of risk and based on evidence rather than assumptions.

5. What Should Families, Schools and Communities Look For? Changes in behaviour should be considered in context. Potential concerns may include sudden social withdrawal, increasing dependence on a new ideological or social network, expressions of grievance combined with extremist narratives, rejection of previous relationships, or movement toward violence-justifying beliefs.

None of these, on its own, establishes radicalization. The purpose of recognizing changes is to create an opportunity for conversation, support and further assessment.

6. Critical Thinking Is a Core Prevention Tool Extremist recruitment often relies on emotionally powerful narratives that simplify complex events into absolute categories of good and evil.

Critical thinking helps individuals question claims, recognize manipulation, distinguish evidence from assertion and consider alternative explanations. Strengthening these skills can increase resilience to extremist recruitment.

7. Protect Relationships Relationships can be among the strongest protective factors.

Intervention should avoid unnecessarily severing family, educational or community relationships. Where possible, trusted individuals should remain connected to the person and provide a safe channel for dialogue.

8. Intervene Early The earlier the intervention, the more options there are to change the trajectory.

Early intervention should be proportionate, relationship-based and focused on understanding the individual. Heavy-handed approaches can increase mistrust and isolation, potentially strengthening the very vulnerabilities that prevention is intended to address.

9. Build Positive Alternatives Prevention cannot consist only of telling people what not to believe.

Young people and vulnerable individuals need credible alternatives: education, employment, mentorship, community participation, constructive activism, sport, creative activities and opportunities to contribute.

Positive alternatives can provide belonging, purpose and recognition without extremist networks.

10. Five-Part Prevention Model Canada Act Now proposes a five-part prevention model:

RECOGNIZE — identify meaningful changes and potential vulnerability.

RELATE — establish trust and preserve constructive relationships.

REASON — strengthen critical thinking and challenge harmful narratives.

RECONNECT — rebuild positive relationships, belonging and support networks.

REDIRECT — create credible alternatives and, where necessary, connect the individual with appropriate professional or safeguarding support.

11. Prevention Requires Multiple Institutions No single institution can prevent radicalization alone. Families, schools, community organizations, social services, businesses, health and mental-health professionals, researchers and law enforcement may each have different roles.

The objective should be coordinated prevention while respecting appropriate privacy, professional boundaries and legal safeguards.

12. Human Rights and Public Safety Must Work Together Effective prevention must protect both public safety and individual rights.

Intervention should be based on behaviour, credible risk and evidence — not religion, ethnicity, political disagreement, appearance or association alone. Safeguards, proportionality and accountability are essential to maintaining public trust.

13. Risk Mitigation Where credible risk exists, intervention should focus on reducing access to opportunities for violence, disrupting harmful networks, addressing vulnerabilities and strengthening protective relationships. The response should match the level of risk. Prevention and safeguarding should not be confused with punishment.

14. Governance and Accountability Prevention programs require clear objectives, defined responsibilities, appropriate oversight and meaningful evaluation.

Programs should measure whether interventions are actually reducing vulnerability, improving relationships and producing positive outcomes. Lessons should be incorporated into future practice.

15. What Canada Should Avoid Canada should avoid treating identity as evidence of extremism; relying on single indicators; confusing controversial opinions with violent intent; unnecessarily alienating families or communities; using intervention primarily as punishment; and assuming that security measures alone can address radicalization.

The central principle should remain: target behaviour, networks and demonstrable risk — not identity.

16. Practical Canadian Intervention Checklist When concerns arise, ask:

• What has actually changed?

Canada’s Official Prevention Framework

Canada has an established federal approach to countering **radicalization to violence**. It is important to distinguish the federal public-safety mandate from broader public education about ideology, polarization or extremism: holding religious or political views alone is not evidence of violent intent.

National Strategy on Countering Radicalization to Violence

Released in 2018, the federal National Strategy organizes its work around three priorities: **(1) building, sharing and using knowledge; (2) addressing radicalization to violence in the online space; and (3) supporting interventions.** It also distinguishes early prevention, at-risk prevention and disengagement from violent ideologies.

Role of the Canada Centre

The Canada Centre for Community Engagement and Prevention of Violence, established in 2017 within Public Safety Canada, leads the federal approach. It integrates policy guidance, research, engagement with partners and support for prevention and intervention practices. Its work recognizes that local practitioners, schools, community organizations, health professionals and police may have distinct, complementary responsibilities.

How Canada Act Now complements the federal framework

The Fahmy Foundation’s prevention model can complement these existing priorities by translating research into accessible education for families and educators; explaining recruiter manipulation and digital influence; preserving trusted relationships; and encouraging timely referrals when credible risks emerge.

Practical alignment

Knowledge: Share plain-language material on warning signs, protective factors and extremist narratives.
Online space: Strengthen digital literacy and awareness of social-network recruitment without treating ordinary expression as criminal.
Interventions: Encourage proportionate safeguarding, mentoring, family support and collaboration among appropriately trained practitioners.

Important boundary: Public education is not a substitute for clinical assessment, police investigation, or specialized risk evaluation. Intervention decisions should be evidence-based and rights-respecting.

Canadian Intervention Programmes

Public Safety Canada's 2026 evaluation identifies seven frontline services operating across six provinces. These examples demonstrate how prevention can be adapted to different communities and levels of risk. Their inclusion here is descriptive, not an endorsement or proof of effectiveness.

Programme	Location	Documented approach
Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence	Quebec	Education, research and intervention across prevention levels.
Polarization Clinic (CIUSSS West-Central Montreal)	Quebec	Clinical support where ideological commitments or attraction to violence intersect with mental-health needs.
Project ReSet — John Howard Society of Ottawa	Eastern Ontario	Individualized case management for people at risk of or involved in targeted violence, including transitions from custody.
Estimated Time of Arrival (ETA) — Yorktown Family Services	Toronto and other parts of Ontario	Multidisciplinary, rapid-access online and offline support for people at risk of or involved in violent extremism.
Evolve — Organization for the Prevention of Violence	Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba	Mental-health and psychosocial support combined with mentorship.
Calgary ReDirect — Calgary Police Service	Calgary, Alberta	Team involving police, social work and clinical expertise; engages families and other prevention actors.
Shift BC	British Columbia	Civilian-led community hubs providing tailored interventions with local partners.

Lessons for frontline practice

Common elements include individualized assessment, collaboration among services, trusted local partners and tailored support. The Canadian examples also show that police-led, civilian-led and clinical approaches can coexist; the appropriate pathway depends on the individual's circumstances and the evidence of risk.

What the 2026 Federal Evaluation Tells Us

Public Safety Canada's evaluation of the Canada Centre, covering fiscal years 2020–21 to 2025–26, assessed the continuing relevance and effectiveness of Canada's prevention approach. The findings offer practical lessons for Canada Act Now.

Key findings

1. The national priorities remain relevant. The evaluation found that the 2018 strategy's three priorities continued to address current prevention needs, with online radicalization becoming an increasingly central concern.

2. Professional collaboration is valuable. Practitioner networks, training and cross-sector information sharing help strengthen prevention capacity and coordinated responses.

3. Accessible information remains important. Stakeholders identified a need to make technical knowledge easier for parents, educators, communities and frontline professionals to use.

4. Regional access remains uneven. Rural, remote, northern and Indigenous communities were identified as underserved by specialized prevention and intervention services.

5. Long-term evidence remains incomplete. The evaluation noted limits in outcome data, reducing confidence in conclusions about long-term programme impact.

Canada Act Now policy recommendations

Make prevention guidance public-facing: Produce accessible resources on online grooming, recruitment narratives, protective relationships and when to seek expert help.

Strengthen referral pathways: Help families, educators and practitioners understand where specialized services exist and how referrals are made, without creating informal surveillance systems.

Prioritize underserved communities: Adapt outreach and practitioner training to regional needs, including rural, remote, northern and Indigenous communities, with local participation.

Evaluate outcomes: Encourage clear objectives, documented safeguards, voluntary participation where appropriate and meaningful measures of whether interventions reduce vulnerability and increase protective factors.

Protect rights: Apply evidence-based thresholds and distinguish protected expression or religious practice from credible intent to commit violence.

The central objective is to make early prevention more accessible, consistent and accountable while building on existing Canadian institutions rather than duplicating them.

• What evidence supports the concern?

• What are the individual's vulnerabilities and protective factors?

• Is there extremist engagement, credible intent or capability?

• Who does the individual trust?

• What positive relationships can be strengthened?

• What alternatives can provide belonging, purpose or recognition?

• What level of professional or safeguarding support is appropriate?

• How can intervention remain proportionate, lawful and respectful?

• How will the outcome be evaluated?

17. The Canada Act Now Principle Radicalization is not inevitable. Individuals can change direction when they have meaningful relationships, credible alternatives, critical-thinking skills and opportunities to pursue purpose without violence.

Prevention is most effective when it begins before a person reaches the point of no return.

Recognize. Relate. Reason. Reconnect. Redirect.

Conclusion: Prevention Builds a Stronger Canada Canada's response to radicalization should not begin with the question of how to punish an individual after violence has occurred. It should begin much earlier: by understanding vulnerability, strengthening resilience, protecting relationships and creating opportunities for people to choose a different path.

The purpose of Canada Act Now is to help build that capacity — across families, schools, communities, institutions and governments. Prevention is not a single program or intervention. It is a sustained commitment to stronger communities, informed citizens and early action.

Prevention builds a stronger Canada.