



CRIS

Centre for Resilient
and Inclusive Societies

**Submission by the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS)
to the Victorian Parliament Legal and Social Issues Committee
Inquiry into Extremism in Victoria**

This Submission has been prepared by members of the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS). CRIS is a research and program-based think tank consortium of eight Australian and international academic, community and industry partners – Deakin University, Western Sydney University, Victoria University, the Resilience Research Centre-Dalhousie University (Canada), the Australian Multicultural Foundation (AMF), the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY), RAND Australia, and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) (UK). CRIS was established in October 2018 through a program grant from the State Government of Victoria to deliver research, programs and inform policies that advance and enrich our local, national, and international community cohesion and resilience.

CRIS works on a range of related issues including:

- Social polarisation and disengagement from the public sphere.
- The rise of social exclusivist identities based on ethnicity, religion, or culture.
- The influence of global conflicts and tensions on local environments and actors.
- The social harms created when grievances and alienation translate into violent action against specific groups or society at large.

For more information about CRIS and its activities, please see: <https://www.crisconsortium.org/>

General introductory remarks

On behalf of the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS), we thank the Victorian Parliament for the opportunity to make a submission to the Legal and Social Issues Committee's inquiry into far-right extremism in Victoria. With this inquiry, the Parliament demonstrates its acknowledgment that far-right extremism is a complex, multifaceted socio-political issue that affects many Victorians and needs to be addressed with a high level of urgency.

In January 2019, an article in *The Age* (Colangelo, 2019) argued that 'Victoria has become the noisiest, most active battleground for far right-wing groups in Australia'. The article was published the day after a large far-right rally in St Kilda – which turned out to be the last significant public protest organised by the far-right in Victoria as of May 2022. While Victoria may have seen a particularly high level of far-right rallies between 2015 and 2019, that does not necessarily mean far-right ideologies are more widespread in Victoria. To the contrary, there is evidence that many Victorians are particularly supportive of multiculturalism and progressive policies (e.g. same sex marriage).

The rise of the far-right extremism is a national – even a global – problem, but there are also significant differences between how far-right networks and individual operate in different parts of the country, which makes this Victorian-specific inquiry so important. And the inquiry is also very timely: More than two years after the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Victoria, the far-right landscape has become more complex than ever, not least due to the increasing influence of misinformation, conspiratorial agendas and growing anti-government sentiments and mistrust. Noting that far-right extremist movements, like other extremist movements with different ideological coordinates, have never been static, this is a crucial time to seek to better understand new and old complexities of far-right extremism, how they manifest in Victoria, and how we can best respond to these challenges. An evidence-based understanding is the foundation for the development and implementation of effective prevention and intervention measures, involving a range of stakeholders from government and law enforcement to community organisations, groups and individuals.

This submission focuses on the following Terms of Reference (TORs):

- a) The rise of the far-right extremist movements in Victoria in the context of
 - ii) racist scapegoating and
 - iv) the distrust of governments and politicians
- b) Methods of recruitment and communication

- d) Risks that far-right extremist actions pose to Victoria and especially to Victoria's multicultural communities
- f) Links between far-right extremist groups, other forms of extremism, and populist radical right and anti-vaccine misinformation groups
- g) Steps to be taken in Victoria to counter these far-right extremist groups and their influence, including:
 - i) the role of early intervention measures to diminish the recruitment and mobilisation prospects of far-right extremist groups, and
 - ii) the role of social cohesion, greater civil engagement and empowerment, and community building programs

We would like to draw the Inquiry's attention to the fact that in this submission we refrain from naming far-right extreme groups or individuals in Victoria to avoid contributing inadvertently to promoting them or broadening their exposure. The authors of this submission can provide names and further details upon request from the Committee.

a) The rise of the far-right extremist movements in Victoria

Far-right extremism can be understood as 'a loose movement, characterized by a racially, ethnically and sexually defined nationalism. This nationalism is often framed in terms of white power and is grounded in xenophobic and exclusionary understandings of the perceived threats posed by such groups as people of colour, Jews, immigrants, the LGBTQ community and feminists' (Perry and Scrivens, 2015, 5). Australian and Victorian specific research on far-right extremism has applied a similar conceptual framework (Simmons et al., [2021](#); Guerin et al., [2021](#); Guerin et al., [2020](#); Peucker et al., 2018, Peucker et al., 2020).

While far-right extremist movements, in Victoria and more generally, are highly heterogenous and fragmented, there are several core ideological markers that have been used in academia to define far-right extremism. According to a recent analysis, Carter (2018: 168) identified six key attributes: 'strong state or authoritarianism, nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy, and populism or anti-establishment rhetoric.' She further differentiates between defining and accompanying attributes, arguing that 'authoritarianism, anti-democracy, and an exclusionary and/or a holistic kind of nationalism are defining properties of right-wing extremism/radicalism, [while] xenophobia, racism, and populism are accompanying characteristics of the concept'

(Carter, 2018: 174). Anti-establishment and anti-democracy ideologies often manifest in high level of distrust toward political institutions (Bartlett et al., 2011) and cumulate in assertions of illegitimacy of established governments or regimes of power (Lauder, 2002).

If we seek to understand the **rise of far-right extremist movements in Victoria**, it is important to acknowledge that none of these ideological attributes – from racism to anti-democratic sentiments – necessarily determines whether or not someone is a far-right extremist. Far-right extremist movements create, and operate within, parallel ideologically shaped communities in radical and antagonistic opposition to the political mainstream. These communities generally reject basic principles of political deliberation. Yet those who identify with these far-right networks create alternative communities that promote a sense of belonging and connectedness with likeminded others, forming sustained in-group identities and bonds and enacting their ideological sentiments through verbal, physical, online and offline exchanges and activities.

The prevalence of certain ideological views or attitudes such as racism, homo/transphobia or authoritarianism and anti-government sentiments increases someone’s vulnerability to far-right radicalisation (Goodwin et al., [2016](#)) but they are not in themselves evidence for the rise of far-right extremism. Similarly, social isolation and possibly growing economic insecurities may, under certain conditions, increase one’s susceptibility to far-right narratives, but these are complex processes that interplay with, among many other factors, individuals’ sense of marginalization, perceived lack of control, and desire for recognition, status and social connectedness.

In considering the rise of far-right extremism, therefore, we do not refer primarily to the potential increase in the prevalence of certain ideologies or socioeconomic circumstances (although these factors may contribute to increased vulnerability), but rather examine factors that can indicate the growth of online and offline far-right communities and networks.

CRIS research focusing in particular on the situation in Victoria (Simmons et al., [2021](#); Guerin et al., [2021](#); Guerin et al., [2020](#)), for example, found an exponential **increase in the popularity of far-right online spaces**. This indicates that the far-right is not only becoming more radicalized, as research had previously noted (Peucker et al., 2018), and bolder in their public display of their exclusivist agendas - far-right movements also appear to be quantitatively expanding.

One example is the far-right alt-tech social media platform Gab, where the ‘subgroup “Australia” saw a drastic increase in new members after Christchurch, from around 4,500 in mid-March 2019 to over 11,000 in June 2019, and has since continuously grown to over 45,000 members as of March 2021’ (Guerin et al., 2021: 7). Mainly fueled by anti-lockdown and anti-vax narratives, this number has since increased to close to 74,000 as of May 2022. Certainly not all of these 74,000

individuals are Australian citizens, given the international nature of these online spaces, but several factors suggest that many of them are located in Australia.

There has also been a large increase in followers of prominent Victorian far-right actors on Telegram, reaching over 15,000, over the past few years, especially during the heights of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many contextual factors may have contributed to this increase, but what seems to have played an important role are certain ideological (e.g. anti-government views) and personal overlaps between anti-lockdown and antivax movements and far-right milieux.

There is also evidence that far-right actors have deliberately and strategically tried to recruit members by co-opting the anti-lockdown/anti-vax movements. Australian white nationalist groups on Telegram, for example, refer to anti-lockdown Telegram groups as ‘normie channels’ that can be used to for recruitment purposes (‘good to reach other Aussies’). A number of Victorian-based white supremacy figureheads have sought to fuel grievances and anti-government sentiments within the ant-lockdown/anti-vax groups and attempted to co-opt them for their own ideological propaganda and recruitment. The leader of a white nationalist group in Victoria, for example, expressed his support and praise for anti-vax protesters but encouraged them to engage with his ideological proposition regarding white nationalism to achieve ‘long term success’ that moved beyond the immediate focus of anti-vax dissent.

ii. Racism and far-right extremism

Manifestations of racism are not limited to the fringes of society. Islamophobia as a form of anti-Muslim racism, sometimes referred to as cultural racism or what Barker (1981) once called ‘new racism’, for example, continues to be widespread (albeit declining to some extent) in Australia (Markus, [2021](#)) and discrimination against First Nations people and migrant/ethno-religious communities has been high. Not everyone who harbors racist/racially exclusivist views (or even acts in a racist way), is a far-right extremist, but most far-right extremists hold ethno-nationalist attitudes that are rooted in racism and a racially or culturally based form of white superiority/supremacy. Racist scapegoating is common within far-right spaces. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, CRIS research found that Australian far-right online spaces (both mainstream social media such as Facebook and Twitter and alt-tech predominantly far-right platforms such as Gab) were commonly used to blame Muslims for the spread of the virus, spread anti-Chinese hatred and antisemitic conspiracy narratives (Simmons et al., [2021](#); Guerin et al., [2021](#); Guerin et al., [2020](#)).

While racism may not be a reliable indicator for far-right extremism, it is both a central part of far-right messaging and their bifurcated in/outgroup messaging and also a risk factor that can **increase a person’s susceptibility to far-right mobilisation** and recruitment, as previous research

has demonstrated (Goodwin et al., [2016](#)). For example, Islamophobic attitudes have played a key role in drawing individuals into far-right spaces and conspiracy-based communities, as a recent Victorian research study illustrated: A group of Victorian far-right activists interviewed for this study stated: ‘When we first came together it was just about Islam, but it is about so much more now’ (Peucker, [2021a](#)).

Where and how does the articulation of racism pinpoint far-right extremist ideologies? Recent Victorian-based research identified three factors (Peucker et al., 2020):

1. *Racism as part of a larger meta-narrative*: Within far-right extremist ideologies and community spaces racism is not ‘only’ a personal attitude but it is often functionally embedded in a larger ideological meta-narrative, built on conspiratorial thinking about a secretive global plot aimed at destroying Australian society and culture. Agitating against ethnic or religious minorities is commonplace, but this is often linked to a bigger fight against an alleged enemy such as the government and its institution or the UN who are accused of using immigration and multiculturalism as a weapon against ‘white people’ or to undermine Western civilization.

2. *Racism as part of far-right political action*: Far-right extremists are usually keen to become active in pursuit of their political-ideological agenda. They usually don’t shy away from acting upon their racist attitudes in one way or another and see themselves as being on a political mission. Jamin (2013: 46) referred to this behavioural dimension as ‘a “total” way of acting to give shape to the nationalist project in support of the acknowledgement of inequality.’

3. *Language and ‘collective identity’*: Expressions of racism as a central non-negotiable aspect of a collective mindset within a certain community, online or offline, can be an indicator of far-right extremism. Within such fringe communities, people tend to use specific language, expressions and symbols to demonstrate their insider status and group belonging and articulate their racist and otherwise exclusivist ideological mindsets. Simi and Windisch (2020: 4) refer to this as ‘identity talk’: ‘a discursive practice to demonstrate that an individual’s identity is consistent with the perceived collective identity of the movement.’

iv. Decline of trust and rise of extremism

The decline of trust and increase in trust inequality is directly linked to radicalisation and extremism trends identified by ASIO. The Australian Director-General of Security’s 2021 Annual Threat Assessment stated:

It’s fair to say that threats to our safety and security didn’t go away with the onset of COVID. In many areas, they evolved; in some they intensified.... For those intent on

violence, more time at home online meant more time in the echo chamber of the internet on the pathway to radicalisation. They were able to access hate-filled manifestos and attack instructions, without some of the usual circuit breakers that contact with community provides.¹

It is clear that when people do not trust the information from government or the evidence of experts, they will turn to other sources. This includes extremist messaging. It is not the case that, for instance, all anti-vaxxers are right wing extremists. However, it is true that those recruiting for religious and racial exclusivist causes are seeking to exploit this decline of trust and have found some willing to listen to their version of reality.

Far-right extremism has thus grown in part because of a void left by the decline of trust in the institutions that form civil society and in the broad economic and policy settings that have been in place in Australia since the 1980s.

This is not unique to Australia. The OECD found that in 2019 only 45% of citizens trusted their government. It stated that ‘trust in government is deteriorating in many OECD countries. Lack of trust compromises the willingness of citizens and business to respond to public policies and contribute to a sustainable economic recovery.’ The OECD also noted that the ‘breadth and depth of the COVID-19 crisis make it incumbent on the public sector to challenge existing models for measuring trust.’²

The dynamics of eroding trust during the early part of the pandemic illustrates how strongly connected it is to the good working of society. Initially, as the strains of ‘we are all in this together’ echoed around the world, trust in government soared. This was particularly the case in Australia, where the Edelman Trust Barometer in 2020 measured all-time highs for trust in institutions. This proved, however, to be a ‘false dawn’ and across the world the decline of trust in governments continued its previous downward path.³

Linked to this social phenomenon is a decline of trust in public information – the infodemic – that has been particularly amplified by the pandemic. The Edelman Trust Barometer (2022) concluded that ‘we find a world ensnared in a vicious cycle of distrust, fueled by a growing lack of faith in media and government. Through disinformation and division, these two institutions are feeding the cycle and exploiting it for commercial and political gain.’

¹ <https://www.asio.gov.au/publications/speeches-and-statements/director-generals-annual-threat-assessment-2021.html>

² <https://www.oecd.org/gov/trust-in-government.htm>

³ <https://www.edelman.com.au/australias-false-dawn>

Trust is distributed across different communities in different ways. The Edelman Trust Barometer differentiates between ‘two different trust realities’ – high for the well-off and the more highly educated, and low for the economically and educationally disadvantaged. Trust inequality in Australia is among the worst in the world. This has brought, according to the Edelman Trust Barometer analysis, ‘an additional layer of complexity as [institutions] try to share information and communicate effectively with two distinct audiences: one that trusts, and one that doesn’t.’⁴

In Australia this has meant that ‘distrust’ is now often the default. A key finding of the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer in Australia is that ‘a majority of Australians (55%) say their default tendency is to distrust something until they see evidence it is trustworthy. Another 61% say it has gotten to a point where Australians are incapable of having constructive and civil debates about issues they disagree on – a foundational trait of a functioning and productive society, especially in democratic nations’.⁵

This decline is also linked to the move to a ‘risk society’ which has resulted in the experience of risk being individualised, rather than acknowledging the structural features and dynamics of how risk is experienced and navigated. These changes in societal structure ‘have dissolved the bonds of collective experience, leading to atomised forms of existence’ (Mythen, 2004: 28).

The economic and policy settings around globalisation and economic efficiency in particular are seen as having led to a decline in the availability of secure employment, further eroding trust in public institutions and government bodies responsible for social and economic wellbeing. These trends have been exploited by extreme actors who have sought to demonise foreigners and immigrants as part of the problem, as exemplified by, amongst other international trends, the vote for ‘Brexit’ in the UK, the ‘MAGA’ rhetoric in the USA and the rise of populism in countries including Hungary and Brazil.

In Victoria, we have seen similar amplification of populist sentiment by segments of political, media and social influencers, which have further legitimised and normalised a public discourse environment in which such ‘post-truth’ claims are increasingly difficult to challenge and refute. This post-truth uncertainty in turn fuels the ways in which misinformation and mistrust have been leveraged by far-right extremists to sow doubt and discord in relation to Victorian, and Australian, community cohesion.

⁴ [https://www.edelman.com.au/australias-false-dawn#:~:text=Edelman's%20most%20recent%20Australian%20survey,and%20business%20\(%2D4%20points\).](https://www.edelman.com.au/australias-false-dawn#:~:text=Edelman's%20most%20recent%20Australian%20survey,and%20business%20(%2D4%20points).)

⁵ <https://www.edelman.com.au/trust-barometer-2022-australia>

(b) Methods of recruitment and communication

As a current study now being undertaken by CRIS has shown,⁶ the research literature on extremist and terrorist recruitment indicates that recruitment to right-wing extremism, as for other forms of extremist recruitment, can manifest simultaneously as a ‘top-down’, ‘bottom-up’ and ‘horizontal’ process (Grossman et al., 2021). This means extremist recruitment is sometimes driven by organisational needs and objectives (top down), sometimes by the needs and desires of those who wish to join a movement (bottom up), and sometimes through ‘horizontal’ networks of friends, peers and kin. In all these scenarios, however, those who are recruited are not simply passive ‘victims’ without agency, but active participants in recruitment processes and dynamics. Similarly, those who recruit should not be regarded as powerful agents able to unproblematically manipulate those they target. Instead, recruitment to right-wing extremism constitutes a complex process of ‘co-production’ that meets the psychosocial, political and sometimes economic needs of both recruiter and recruited.

As Simi et al. (2016) found in the US context, recruitment is a ‘gradual and dynamic process where some individuals are formally marketed to and recruited, others are self-starters who then allow themselves to be ‘enlisted’ and ‘recruitment occurs in a variety of social spaces such as music shows, schools, house parties, neighbourhoods, and online (Simi et al., 2016). Similarly, in the Australian and more specifically the Victorian context, evidence indicates that far-right recruitment activities ‘sit along a continuum that range from active and deliberate top-down strategies to attract and incorporate new members by a radical-right group, on the one hand, to passive forms of recruitment that rely much more on self-recruitment’ (Peucker, 2021b).

This more nuanced understanding acknowledges the complexity of recruitment processes has implications for the way in which prevention and interventions measures are developed and implemented, taking into account different recruitment pathways and the agency of all actors. In the following, we explore three dimensions of far-right recruitment in more detail: (1) targeted recruitment, (2) Recruitment through social networks and social influence, and (3) online recruitment.

1. Targeted recruitment

Recruitment to far-right extremism can be centrally conceived and organisationally driven from the top down. For example, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) (2020) has documented how the neo-Nazi organisation ‘The Base’ organisationally manages recruitment through an active and deliberate process of using both offline and online methodologies to attract new members with a specific profile or skill set, followed by an internal application process. A BBC investigation (De

⁶ ‘Contact Zones: Understanding Recruitment Processes to Violent Extremism in Comparative Domains’, <https://www.crisconsortium.org/building-resilience-social-harms/contact-zones>

Simone and Winston, 2020) into the 'The Base' found senior members undertaking online interviewing (via conference call on an encrypted App) of prospective 'young applicants' who divulged that they had been radicalised by 'online videos and propaganda'. The article details how interviewers asked about applicants' personal history, their 'radicalisation journey' (including what books they had read whilst also being encouraged to familiarise themselves with the groups white supremacist ideology) their experience with weapons, and their ethnicity. Interviews were conducted by the group leader as well as a panel of senior Base members. After applicants left the call, senior members discussed their potential for membership prior to arranging to vet them in person at a later date.

A number of Victorian far-right groups, include white nationalist networks, use a similar targeted top-down approach to recruit new members, including specific vetting procedures (e.g. a dedicated vetting channel on Telegram, followed by a personal conversation/interview either online or offline with the potential recruitee). In some instances, such vetting processes seem to be seen as redundant as the ideological commitment of the person to a white nationalist agenda has been demonstrated otherwise. A Victorian-based extreme far-right group, for example, reached out to Brenton Tarrant (who would later commit terrorist attacks killing 51 Muslims in Christchurch) and invited him to join their group – an invitation Tarrant declined (Peucker, 2021b).

These groups frequently call on individuals to reach out to them and/or engage with their online content but also to join their network as a new member. Online and offline recruiting strategies can also intersect through mechanisms such as public flyer drops, graffiti and stickering/postering blitzes, a common tactic of Victorian far-right groups to attract attention among potential recruitees. As Berger et al. (2020: 123) have noted,

There is no clear line of demarcation between online extremism and the current generation of flyer drops and ephemeral propaganda. Extremist flyers point readers to online destinations, but they also emanate from online destinations, and after they have been deployed, they are amplified again online.

International research from Germany and the USA has found that some far-right extremist groups target young people through recruitment within educational institutions and/or members of law enforcement agencies and armed forces (Braunthal, 2010; Counter Extremism Project, 2020; Flade, 2021; Simi et al., 2016; ADL, 2020; McGowan, 2014). A particularly common operational recruitment tactic is through leafletting and postering in schools, music concerts and other public areas (Berger et al., 2020; Simi et al., 2016). This has also been common in the Victorian context, where numerous public sites, including universities, have been targeted by white nationalist

groups' stickering or postering blitzes. The public stunts are then often filmed or photographed and uploaded on their online social media sites.

Various types of subcultural contexts such as music venues/concerts and private house parties have also been found to be important environments in which right-wing movement ideologies may be introduced and social bonds facilitated in order to recruit sympathisers (especially among younger people) towards more substantial involvement (Kruglanski, et al., 2020; Scrivens and Perry, 2017). Exposure to far-right propaganda in youth clubs, soccer teams, or even simply through casual encounters with vocal neo-Nazis is also prevalent. Other radicalising spaces such as larger scale public rallies and protest events are used to provide an entry point for new recruits.

Some far-right groups also target *individuals* with particular vulnerabilities (Brown, R. A. et al., 2021: 86). There are different ways in which far-right groups seek to identify or determine vulnerabilities and, accordingly, adjust their recruitment strategies. Some specifically target alienated, disenchanted young people who are seen as having psychological and social grievances, while a study on recruitment to far-right extremism in the US identifies three groups of individuals who are targeted: '(1) frustrated and angry youth looking for solutions to their problems; (2) individuals looking for intimate relationships outside of their families and (3) younger adolescents who typically lacked maturity and may have been unable to fully comprehend the ramifications of a group's radical ideology' (Simi et al., 2016: 60).

Other studies argue that recruitment also takes into account individuals' socioeconomic grievances and hardship; this is reflected in how some groups use spatially based tactics to explicitly target certain geographical areas where such grievances are expected to be more prevalent (Blazak, 2001). Kimmel and Ferber's (2000) analysis of US militia movements, for example, found that some groups focused on rural areas where they saw an 'opportunity to increase their political base by recruiting economically troubled farmers into their ranks.' The increased resonance of far-right ideologies in economically struggling areas is confirmed by Youngblood's (2020: 1) contagion-based analysis of the spread of far-right ideologies in the US, which confirms that 'endemic factors, such as poverty, that increase the probability of radicalization in particular regions.' Similarly, Simi et al. (2016: 50) found that many of those who have joined far-right group had grown up in 'tough neighbourhoods' with high levels of street gang violence and bullying – and the far-right groups offered protection against these threats.

Grievances are not the only vulnerability factor. Some research indicates that pre-existing ideological mindsets play a role in the decision of far-right groups to target certain individuals. A study on recruitment to right-wing organisations in Germany study, for example, found that right-

wing groups have sought to recruit new members through conservative right-wing student fraternities or, in high school, by targeting fellow students who already hold racist or antisemitic views and ‘who find little support in the school and at home’ (Braunthal, 2010); similarly, ‘The Base’ has deliberately tried to attract new members that already had right-wing ideological beliefs or specific skill sets (ADL, 2020).

Some extreme far-right (white nationalist) groups in Australia, and in particular in Victoria, pursue an ideologically unambiguous agenda, making no secret of their ideological worldviews and targeting in particular people who are ideologically predisposed or at least open to their white supremacist worldviews. A prominent far-right leader in Victoria ‘used his Telegram channel call on “White men with Blood and Honour” in Australia, committed to the “racial struggle” for the survival of the “our race”, to send an email to his organisation’ (Peucker, 2021b).

2. Recruitment through social networks and social influence

Recruitment does not only unfold in a ‘top-down’ fashion between individuals who are unknown to each other; it also occurs within existing social networks where individuals trust each other and share similar experiences and connections.

International research has found evidence that friends, peer groups (e.g. at schools), and sometimes families often play a central role in individuals’ pathways into far-right extremism (Kruglanski et al., 2020; Blazak, 2001). A study on the Italian far-right group CasaPound (Parker and Veugelers, 2021: 3) found that some activists had become involved through their politicisation in social networks that created a new social ‘home’ in which they were immersed. Forming social ties and entering supportive networks provides the ‘structural pull’ from pre-involvement to recruitment. Importantly, this process was aided by CasaPound relying upon a wide range of organisational practices, particularly public events (book presentations, sporting events and training sessions; cultural events, political events including but not limited to protests) to drive recruitment, emphasising the importance of face-to-face interaction to support recruitment efforts.

Empirical research on the English Defence League (EDL) (Busher, 2016) also evidences the importance of social ties to the way in which individuals become involved in far-right groups. Those introducing new recruits to the EDL were often part of their social circles and existing social ties facilitated ‘bonds of solidarity and intra-group trust’ (Busher, 2016: 43). Again, as with CasaPound, the EDL organised a constant supply of political and social events (including street protests, organisational meetings and briefings, ‘social’ get togethers), to drive mobilisation *and* recruitment. New attendees at an EDL demonstration were personally welcomed and invited to be Facebook friends with more established members and then quickly being made to feel part of

their community. Indeed, Facebook played an important role as an organising, mobilising and outreach vehicle (Busher, 2016: 43-4).

Recruitment can also occur through a process of cultivating potential joiners through social influence and the dissemination of extremist propaganda in online and offline contexts. An analysis of the lead up to the El Paso terrorist attack in the US documented the way in which online users radicalise and 'recruit' each other in a 'self-referential continuum of extreme right terrorism' in which anonymous users on online message boards collectively venerate 'saints' and 'martyrs' responsible for previous atrocities and exhort others to join the 'pantheon of heroes' by perpetuating acts of violence 'in exchange for celebrity and respect' (Macklin, 2019). In the Australian context, an analysis of online extremism in New South Wales explores a similar process of social influence through 'red pilling' – 'the preaching, recruitment and mobilisation among the wider public' by those promoting extreme right-wing narratives (Ballsun-Stanton et al., 2020).

With a focus on the Victorian context, Peucker (2021) found that 'many radical-right actors in Australia ... hardly go beyond posting ideological content more or less frequently online, often letting the algorithms of social media platforms do their job of channelling people towards their accounts.' This can create fairly ideologically homogenous online communities where members share a sense of in-group identity and social connections. Victorian research has further demonstrated how certain 'social media-based groups have built a loyal online community over time by posting primarily on one particular single issue, such as opposition to gender diversity or Islam' (Peucker, 2021b).

Some of these online communities subsequently expand the thematic scope of their posting and move into 'politically and ideologically charged space where far-right narratives circulate' (Peucker et al., 2020: 35). Such shifts are often driven by conspiratorial framing of these themes, creating an internally seemingly coherent meta-narrative. As Peucker notes, 'These ideological shifts may be a reflection of the account administrators' changing ideological mindset, but they can also be part of a recruitment strategy to gradually pull individuals into radical-right ideological spaces' (Peucker, 2021b).

3. *Online recruitment*

As the terrorism scholar Marc Sageman has observed (2008), the online environment allows for a more distributive organisational structure which has implications for our understanding of online recruitment, one in which a lack or loosening of formal networks, hierarchies and roles online can muddy the distinction between recruiters and recruits, particularly when anonymity is a feature of these interactions (Crosset et al., 2019). Torok (2013) argues that 'the shift towards online forms of recruitment and training has resulted in a corresponding shift ... towards ... a

more 'leaderless' structure of terrorist recruitment through embracing digitally rather than spatially located forms of institutional' and social power.

Yet the interactive, communal spaces of the violent extremist digital age are, like their spatial counterparts (Neumann and Rogers, 2007), also 'places of congregation' and 'places of vulnerability' with their own virtual geographies, ranging across platforms, chat forums and channels in which recruitment is not necessarily facilitated by one person, but by multiple voices and influences; for example, the online phenomenon in which potential recruits are 'swarmed' by many group members who respond, provoke, ask and answer questions and share their movement's version of 'truth' (Torok, 2013).

Ponder and Matusitz's (2017) study of online extremist recruitment supports this, using relational development theory to explain how online recruitment achieves its goals through 'initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding' through interactive online dialogue. Research has also revealed the ways in which the internet can facilitate trust building between individuals, leading to an increase in reciprocation and intimate disclosures (Windsor, 2018).

Aside from playing a role in immersing potential recruits within narratives, ideas and psychosocial support networks, online platforms and the interactive formats they enable are also digital places where recruiters can identify receptive participants in virtual forums and both target and recruit by drawing on various logistical online capacities relevant to recruitment efforts, such as online registry protocols, directories, FAQ sections and interactive services (Bowman-Grieve, 2013).

None of this is to say, however, that the online environment and its affordances have either replaced or even displaced the importance of offline, face-to-face contact and interactions in recruitment. On the contrary, it is the frequently interactive relationship between online and offline recruitment relationships and dynamics that has led CRIS researchers to create the term 'crossline' (Grossman et al., 2021) to connote the interpenetrative nature of these relationships and the places and spaces they can involve.

It is thus particularly important to understand the online environment in relation to recruitment to right-wing extremism, and how this operates in conjunction with offline interaction, particularly in relation to social identity- and community-building. Extremist online spaces are not merely used to disseminate propaganda, but also play a critical social and community building function that draws in recruits seeking belonging, approval and identity stabilisation.

A recent analysis of various recruitment strategies in the Australian far-right (Peucker, 2021b) also points to interplay between online and offline actions pursuing the interwoven aims of (a)

disseminating ideological messages (propaganda) and (b) recruitment. Several far-right groups in Victoria and other parts of the country seek to raise their public profile through offline action, such as stickering or leafletting (leaflets often include contact details), holding rallies or other public stunts. This is seen as vehicle to make more people aware of their group and encourage them to follow them online or get in contact with the group directly. Closely related to this recruitment approach is the attempt of attracting mainstream media attention through public provocations; such a deliberate strategy of ‘media baiting’ is regarded a central recruitment tool as media reporting about the group – even if reported critically – significantly helps increase the group’s public profile (Peucker, 2021b).

Leafletting and flyer drop activities are readily observable in Victoria and point to the ubiquitous uptake of these strategies to pursue multiple, interacting channels of influence and propaganda for the purpose of recruitment and mobilisation.

d) Risks to Victoria and especially to Victoria’s multicultural communities

This section offers a brief discussion of different far-right threats and risks to Victoria, covering three sections: political violence, threats to community safety, and threats to democratic principles and processes.

Political violence and hate crimes

Far-right extremism poses a significant threat of political violence in many countries around the world, including Australia. The Institute for Economics & Peace *Global Terrorism Index 2020* concluded that ‘in North America, Western Europe, and Oceania, far-right attacks have increased by 250 per cent since 2014, with deaths increasing by 709 per cent over the same period [2014-2019]. There were 89 deaths attributed to far-right terrorists in 2019 [alone]’ (IEP, 2020). Fifty-one of these 89 were killed by an Australian far-right terrorist in the Christchurch mosque attacks in New Zealand – a man who had been active on several Facebook pages of a number of Victorian far-right groups, and who had been invited by one Victorian far-right group to join (an invitation the Christchurch perpetrator declined).

Victoria is also the state where Australia’s anti-terror laws were applied by a court for the first time in a trial against a far-right extremist: Philip Galea was sentenced in late 2019 to 12 years imprisonment for preparing for a terrorist act that would have seen attacks on a socialist centre and a trade union hall in Melbourne, and ‘for attempting to collect or make a document likely to facilitate a terrorist act’ (The Patriot’s Cookbook) with the intention of waging ‘a war against Muslims and leftists’. Galea was associated with several far-right groups active in Victoria in the second half of the 2010s, including one nationalist group established in Melbourne’s west.

This demonstrates that far-right violence and terrorism also pose a significant threat in Victoria. The actual scope of far-right violence is difficult to assess. Given the high legal threshold for classifying an act of violence as a form of terrorism, politically motivated violence is often not recorded under the terrorism category. Far-right hatred and violence towards certain ethno-religious minorities, gender-diverse groups or others considered ‘political enemies’ may fall under the label of hate crimes. As Mills and colleagues (2015) argued, far-right extremist violence and hate crimes are ‘more akin to close cousins than distant relatives.’ The lines between both are often blurry and hard to draw. Victoria Police records hate crimes as ‘prejudice-motivated crimes’; however, it is widely acknowledged that, for various reasons, hate crimes are severely underreported and under-recorded. This suggests that violent crimes, targeting certain parts of Victoria’s community and committed (partially or fully) motivated by a hateful far-right ideology, may often not be recorded as such, which means the scope of far-right violence appears to be significantly underestimated. In Victoria, several far-right extremist figures have engaged in violent conduct in recent times, but the potentially or likely political motivational dimensions of these acts seemed to not have been fully considered and acknowledged.

CRIS research on far-right communities and messaging on Facebook, Twitter and Gab has found high direct calls for violence as well as high levels of what Simi and Windisch (2020) refer to as ‘violent talk’: ‘messaging that cultivates, normalizes and reinforce hatred, dehumanization and aggressive hostility toward minority groups and the “political enemy”’ (Peucker, 2021). According to Simi and Windisch (2020: 2), ‘the effects of violent talk are indeterminate’. They argue that, on the one hand, it may be a verbal substitute for violent behaviour, but, on the other hand,

Violent talk helps enculturate individuals through socialization processes by communicating values and norms. In turn, these values and norms are part of a process where in-group and out-group boundaries are established, potential targets for violence are identified and dehumanized, violent tactics are shared, and violent individuals and groups are designated as sacred.... In short, violent talk clearly plays an important role in terms of fomenting actual violence. (Simi and Windisch, 2020: 11)

Community safety and cohesion

‘Violent talk’ within far-right milieux can affect the everyday lives of many Victorians. It can promote and encourage actual violence against communities and groups that are commonly portrayed and targeted by the far-right as their enemies – from ethnic or religious minority groups (e.g. members of the Muslim or Jewish community; people of colour) and people with gender-diverse identities to government representatives or other politicians. But far-right messaging and actions tends to also negatively impact on many communities in Victoria even where these actions are not (yet) violent. Many in these targeted communities experience the

threat of violence which can affect their sense of safety, sense of belonging as well as community relations, trust and cohesion. The president of the Islamic Council of Victoria, Adel Salman, recently expressed community concerns about far-right ideologies and hatred: 'Muslims feel threatened. We don't have to look back to the very tragic events in Christchurch to see what the results of that hatred can be' (Zwartz, 2021). This is confirmed by the findings of a large-scale survey among Muslims according to which 93% of Muslim respondents express concerns about right-wing extremism (Rane et al., 2020).

Even non-violent far-right actions can affect perceptions of community safety and, as a result, everyday life of people from targeted communities, as a Victoria University study found (Peucker et al., 2021). During the Bendigo mosque conflict (even before the largescale protests involving several far-right groups), for example, some members of the local Muslim community felt so unsafe that they would no longer leave the house alone or after dark.

These severe safety concerns among many members of targeted communities are often ignored in the public debate about, and official threat assessment of, far-right extremism in Victoria and Australia more broadly. What adds to this community safety threat is the ability of far-right actors and networks to 'exert disproportioned levels of agenda-setting power' in the public debate (Grossman et al., 2016: 27), which is often helped by media reporting on far-right groups, actions and narratives, in effect platforming and unintentionally amplifying far-right tropes. Bail (2012: 856), for example, found in his US study that anti-Muslim fringe organisations 'not only permeated the mainstream but also forged vast social networks that consolidated their capacity to create cultural change.'

The mainstreaming of far-right tropes that had previously been largely confined to extreme ideological fringes has also occurred in Australia. Some of the examples are the discussion around banning Muslim immigration (e.g. Sonia Kruger's on-air comments and subsequent opinion polls), the white supremacy slogan 'It's okay to be white' (traveling from white supremacy forums via Lauren Southern into the Australian Senate), or the debate around prioritizing visa for white South African farmers. Such mainstreaming contributes to shifting social norms of legitimate discourse, with the likely potential of fueling social division, legitimising and increasing the appeal of far-right narratives (and subsequently recruitment opportunities), and further diminishing community safety in particular among Victoria's multicultural and multifaith communities.

Threats to democracy

Finally, the far-right also poses a threat to democracy – a threat that is often overlooked in the Australian discussion about extremism. There are several interconnected ideological, behavioral and social dimensions to this threat.

First, as outlined above, an explicit anti-democratic agenda is an inherent part of many extreme far-right **ideologies**; the ultimate goal of many far-right extremist groups and networks is to overthrow a democratic system (or accelerate processes leading to its collapse) and replace it by an authoritarian ethno-nationalist regime. Second, and related to this, far-right extremist groups, including in Victoria, position themselves in explicit opposition to liberal democratic principle of equality and egalitarianism. A recent Macquarie University (Ballsun-Stanton et al., 2020: 2) study argues that far-right extremism ‘challenge[s] the fundamentals of pluralist liberal democracy through exclusivist appeals to race, ethnicity, nation, and gender’. Third, the threat to democracy goes beyond the far-right extremists’ opposition to democratic principles as concrete far-right **actions** that can also pose a threat to democratic processes. A recent Victoria University study (Peucker et al., 2020) concluded that far-right mobilisation in the local context can intimidate democratically elected representatives in government and thus illegitimately influence democratic decision-making processes. Fourth, far-right milieus and networks create ideologically defined **in-group** spaces that offer members a sense of community and connectedness, both online and offline. Those within these far-right spaces not only express opposition to democratic principles, they also fundamentally reject democratic processes, displaying ‘a level of hostility to democratic conventions and institutions that in general exceeds ... even the most permissive notion of an “agonistic” public sphere’ (Davis, 2021: 144). In the process, they become ‘anti-publics’ (Davis, 2019) environments in which critical democratic engagement and deliberation is invalidated.

f) Links between far-right extremist groups, other forms of extremism, and populist radical right and anti-vaccine misinformation groups

In addition to ushering in an era of increased internet dominance, the pandemic has deepened existing inequalities, and with them vulnerabilities to novel kinds of social influence in an environment of heightened sense of grievance. Combined with the multimodal affordances of internet platforms, this has hastened the targeted ‘sale’ of different brands of social division (Dexter et al., 2021). Their appeal rests in offering simple solutions to a highly complex set of problems or in identifying a ready-made scapegoat. They have also appealed to the need for belonging in ways that, rather than promoting solidarity across different groups experiencing common challenges, have instead focused on creating and profiting from antagonistic communities.

Perceptions in some sectors of the Victorian population, as elsewhere, that public health measures implemented in response to the pandemic are authoritarian have been accompanied by a parallel growth in conspiracy-oriented ideologies, which have infiltrated unexpected demographics (Kelly, 2020). In particular, the introduction of the QAnon conspiracy – a divisive

social movement advocating resistance to so-called 'global elites', seen as manipulating populations for their own ends – into wellness communities through prominent lifestyle influencers has led some to radicalise on 'conspiritual' (i.e., the intersection of conspiracy and spirituality) trajectories of militancy (Beres et al., 2020; Khalil, 2020), including recruitment into violent extremism.

In this sense, the COVID-19 pandemic has enabled extremist actors to mobilise and recruit (Grossman, 2021a) within diverse demographics. As in other democracies that have imposed vaccine mandates, recent demonstrations in Australia, including Victoria, have included anti-democratic extremists seeking to capitalise on pandemic-induced grievances, with government and public health officials' lives threatened (Hunter, 2021; McKenzie and Lucas, 2021; Mason, 2021; Roose, 2021). Healthcare workers, vaccination centres and ordinary citizens complying with public health orders also became targets of hate (Kelly, 2021; Karvelas, 2021).

Such incidents highlight the deleterious social consequences of the turn toward militancy on the part of a cohort of conspiritual, far-right and wellness activists. While the targeted violence displayed in their behaviour is specific to the context of the pandemic, it is not unique in its antagonistic impulse to define, attack and remove an enemy, an impulse shared by all exclusivist violent groups, and one that threatens democracy.

That the activists themselves claim to be dissenting in defence of their freedoms is critical (Beres 2021). Their claim highlights deeply felt grievances that result from coronavirus-driven restrictions. Within the Australian context, this conducive environment of grievances arguably peaked during Melbourne's third extended lockdown in 2021. It was described by many as the city's breaking point. Unlike the rest of Australia, Melbourne had a uniquely long lockdown in 2020 that lasted from July until October of that year. Whilst this lockdown proved damaging to mental health and livelihoods, it nevertheless produced the desired outcome of zero COVID cases, freeing the city to reopen once the lockdown had ended. During the 2021 lockdown, by contrast, many in the community were already at breaking point both financially and psychologically without the economic support experienced for closed businesses in the form of the Australian Commonwealth government's Jobkeeper and Jobseeker schemes that protected livelihoods and people from poverty in 2020.

When vaccine mandates were introduced by the Victorian government in the middle of this third long lockdown, the conducive environment of grievances peaked. The absence of supports and increased strain on the community increased the vulnerability of some to the influence of alternative health and far right influences who appeared to be listening to community concerns about the impact of long lockdowns and vaccine mandates, producing an intersection of social

influence and grievance that led many to join encrypted messaging applications where they could find solace in likeminded cohorts around the world and priming some of the city's inhabitants for civil unrest.

Combined with the closure of particular industries (such as construction) exempted from some restrictions during earlier stages of the pandemic, and the introduction of vaccine mandates, there was little to keep the anger of some of the city's inhabitants off the streets. Represented in the media as 'Neo-Nazi' demonstrations aligned with the far-right, these demonstrations served as recruitment grounds for disgruntled members of the community, putting many in touch, for the first time, with far-right agendas and organisations. The fact that much of the media reported the demonstrations as being uniformly sympathetic to Neo-Nazi ideology only served to enhance far right groups' notoriety and prominence within the mainstream (Brown, K. et al., 2021; Thomas, 2021) and red pill 'pipeline' from vaccine hesitancy and anger over lockdowns to sympathy for or adherence to conspiracy and militancy.

Since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, a host of Victorians from a diverse range of backgrounds, have adopted conspiracy thinking and mobilised to profit from anti-authoritarian views that encourage rejection of public health responses. More recently, the polarisation of people into pro- and anti-vax camps has served to further divide communities at a critical time of pandemic recovery (Doige, 2021). The assumption that those against vaccine mandates are all anti-vaxxers (Gibson and Perera, 2021) or alt-right extremists obscures the nuances of who avoids COVID vaccines and why (Tufekci, 2021). At worst, this notion risks pushing the vaccine-hesitant toward bad-faith actors and far-right extremist recruiters who welcome their legitimate concerns as an opportunity for political traction (Karp and Martin, 2021).

g) Countering far-right extremist groups and their influence in Victoria

i. Early intervention measures to diminish the recruitment and mobilisation prospects of far-right extremist groups

The role of early intervention measures to diminish the recruitment and mobilisation prospects of far-right extremist groups is critical. These early intervention measures need to be developed and implemented at both state and community levels. 'Early intervention' is often understood as equivalent to *prevention* of or *resilience to* violent extremism (Grossman, 2021b; Grossman et al., 2020; Ellis and Abdi, 2017), but in fact it can embrace one or both of two stages in radicalisation trajectories: *prevention* of the uptake of violent extremism, and *diversion* of those who have already begun to travel some distance down a radicalised pathway.

At the **prevention** stage, the following elements are important considerations for both state and communities. **The state** needs to have clearly articulated and well-designed resources spanning communication, education and social service supports that can reach those who are vulnerable to far-right messaging and recruitment. These resources need to include both ‘for’ and ‘against’ messaging and supports. Fostering the ability to help people navigate toward the resources they need to thrive when facing various forms of adversity – a key hallmark of resilience (Ungar, 2010; Grossman, 2021b) – is essential in prevention work that focuses on building resilience to the social harms of far-right extremist narratives that seek to promote victimhood and grievance rather than coping and thriving skills in a disenchanting and/or disadvantaged population cohort. **Communities** also need to develop local resources, including education, awareness and support networks that can reach into local councils, schools, recreational organisations, families and social networks to influence and connect people to positive resilience resources on the ground.

At the **diversion** stage, **the state and communities** need to partner to develop *clear, meaningful and sustainable* referral and disengagement mechanisms for those who may already be mobilising to far-right extremism. Diversion pathways may include, but should definitely not be limited to, the role of law enforcement programs; the role of social support systems including social work and mental health providers should be vigorously encouraged and resourced to develop disengagement and referral expertise at local community level through partnerships with government. Diversion (as part of ‘early intervention’) should ideally occur at the pre-criminal threshold, meaning the role of law enforcement would ideally be limited at this point.

Both the state and communities need to develop or build on a suite of what may be called ‘**for**’ (**pro-social**) and ‘**against**’ (**challenge-based**) resources to help combat recruitment and mobilisation to far-right extremism. These resources are discussed in further detail below.

‘For’ resources by the state and communities

‘For’ resources include positive messaging and education campaigns and materials that promote acceptance, engagement and meaningful exchange with people from different racial, ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. Such engagement and exchange cannot merely be messaged about, however: structural opportunities supported by the state, in particular at grassroots community level (e.g. through local councils, sporting clubs, cultural events and community organisations and networks) are vital if the messaging is to be effectively supported. Given the prevalence of online engagement and interaction, the state needs to think creatively about how to leverage social media and digital products that are locally produced by communities; while states may resource these, research has shown that direct government-based CVE counter-messaging can have limited effectiveness and indeed can provide a focal point of resistance and subversion for far-right and other violent extremist groups (Waldman and Verga, 2016).

In relation to education, schools already have strong ‘for’ resources embedded in the Victorian curriculum. However, there is an important role for extra-curricular community education and awareness resources that reinforce this learning for both young people and others in Victorian communities. Much of what is promoted in schools can be undermined, contested or undone beyond school environments through alternative social networks. Closing the loop between formal educational strategies and community-based education and awareness resources is therefore vital.

In this regard, the AMF’s Building Community Resilience Training and subsequent Community Awareness Training eLearning Module (<https://amf.net.au/entry/community-awareness-training-manual-elearning-module/>) is one example of such a resource. These resources, and the program logic that underpins them, aim to build resilience in communities against all kinds of anti-social behaviour and promote social cohesion through education and community awareness. The AMF model is not specific to any one particular national, political, religious or ideological group and applies regardless of ideology or motivation to radicalisation. The Building Community Resilience Training was designed to deliver knowledge, understanding and skills, to a targeted audience of community, government and religious leaders about recognising anti-social behaviours, including criminality, and processes that can lead to violent extremism, along with prevention strategies and where to go for support. The subsequent eLearning module was developed from these training experiences to provide open access to the broader community to generate awareness of possible changes in the behaviour of family members, friends, colleagues and others in the community.

Finally, the state needs to ensure that social services addressing the needs of people experiencing disadvantage – in contexts of employment, mental health, social isolation and sense of belonging (including sense of being ‘left behind’) are both easily available and consistently meaningful for those who draw on them. This is particularly important in regional and rural areas, and consideration should be given to a ‘whole of Victoria’ mapping of resource distribution that moves beyond privileging urban/metropolitan resource concentration, especially given both the rise of far-right extremism and compounding economic and social disadvantage in various regional and rural areas relative to metropolitan centres.

For **communities**, the focus needs to be on taking the lead, through grassroots networks and organisations, in promoting local awareness around the ways in which far-right extremist groups and narratives seek to recruit and mobilise those who may be vulnerable to their messaging and ideology. Far-right extremist recruitment can be insidious, targeting those who need to belong, feel a sense of social approval, are struggling with identity and who feel relatively powerless to

effect positive change in their lives. This is particularly the case for young people who may lack access to or understanding of resources that would help them cope and thrive.

As noted above, far-right extremists recruit both online and offline, fostering sense of grievance and victimisation. Communities have a critical role to play in countering these narratives, both through structural and social support, but also through directly voicing their opposition to such narratives. They also have a vital role to play in developing awareness mechanisms and networks that can identify early signs of radicalisation to far-right extremist ideology, and in setting up local channels for referral and support to enhance early intervention. These mechanisms – voicing opposition, identifying early indicators of radicalisation, and referrals for support and intervention – have often been seen as the purview of government alone. This occludes the very substantial knowledge and input that can be harnessed amongst local community actors, and every effort should be made to work with communities to lead on, rather than merely follow, government templates for how to identify and respond to emerging cases of radicalisation to far-right extremism.

‘Against resources’ for the state and communities

Turning to ‘against’ resources, **the state** needs to redouble its efforts in developing and disseminating anti-racism, anti-violence and anti-discrimination messaging. The state needs to be seen to be unequivocal in its support for multiculturalism and for the community strengthening benefits of cultural diversity for both Victoria and the nation. Far-right extremism thrives on vigorous and creative campaigns of opposition, and the state must meet these head-on with equally vigorous opposition campaigns that reject and negate the claims of far-right extremist narratives that seek to divide and sow disharmony. Indispensable to this effort is consistently undermining the grievances promoted by far-right extremists (for example, that immigrants ‘steal’ jobs from mainstream communities) through evidence-based narratives.

However, in the current climate of conspiracy-oriented discourse, in which evidence is quickly or routinely dismissed by conspiracists as part of the ‘global elite’s’ effort to hoodwink the general population, evidence-based rebuttals may not be enough. ‘Against’ resources must therefore also include development of anti-conspiracy narratives that help unpick the holes in conspiracist thinking, but that also offer alternative ways of understanding the dynamics of the society and world we live in and the challenges that we face.

Some research suggests that ‘pre-bunking’ or ‘inoculation’ (Braddock, 2022 [2019]) to promote resistance to persuasion by extremist propaganda, including conspiracist thinking, can be effective; however, in the current environment, such pre-bunking is more likely to work for younger populations whose views have not yet solidified. For adults who are drawn to

conspiracist thinking, direct confrontation or dismissal of their ideas and beliefs is not useful, particularly by the state; instead, government needs to think about how to consistently demonstrate its trustworthiness and transparency. In this regard, an **Integrity Charter** for the Victorian government, similar in nature to Victoria's Human Rights Charter, could be a helpful tool.

The best 'against' resource possessed by **communities** is the ability to exercise positive, prosocial social influence through family, kinship and peer networks, and to step up and call out supremacist, racist, violent and discriminatory narratives and behaviours, both online and offline. Again, supporting communities to lead on developing local resources that empower positive bystander activism is critical. Initiatives and toolkits for positive bystander activism already exist in other contexts (for example, the online active bystander project of Gender Equity Victoria [Online Active Bystander Project | Gender Equity Victoria \(genvic.org.au\)](https://www.genvic.org.au), or the Women's Health Loddon Mallee *Introduction to Bystander Action* program, [Being an Active Bystander – Sunbury and Cobaw Community Health \(sunburycobaw.org.au\)](https://www.sunburycobaw.org.au)) that could usefully be consulted to design positive bystander activism campaigns directed toward far-right extremism.

Taken together, these resources – 'for' and 'against', led and implemented by both the state and communities – address and build on the five factors shown to be meaningful in building resilience to violent extremism, particularly amongst young people (Grossman et al., 2020): cultural identity and connectedness; bridging capital; linking capital; violence-related behaviour, and violence related beliefs.

ii. The role of social cohesion, greater civil engagement, empowerment, and community building programs

Extreme right groups that espouse national socialism, white supremacy and hatred and violence toward ethnically, religiously and/or culturally different 'others' actively seek to denigrate and undermine Australian democratic, egalitarian and multicultural values through their actions and rhetoric, as well as undermine government legitimacy and authority. They advocate for alternative societies and governance structures to replace democracy. They also cultivate a narrow understanding of their 'in group' and denigrate those in their 'out group,' adopting strategies and positions that foster division and confrontation (Berger, 2018).

As a nation Australia has long recognised the value of efforts to strengthen social cohesion as an essential pillar in its approach to countering violent extremism across all ideological platforms, as well as for the benefit of society more generally. Australian CVE policy has also long drawn a clear distinction between 'extremism' and 'violent extremism', making clear that the

Government does not want to interfere with people’s rights to hold various beliefs, but will intervene if those beliefs support or lead to acts of violence against individuals, communities and society at large or jeopardise national security and community safety and wellbeing.⁷

However, we face today new risks to social cohesion that can threaten our long track record of investing in and benefitting from this critical element of national wellbeing and resilience to the social and political harms of radicalised violence. Long-term investment in social cohesion initiatives is crucial in securing national safety and wellbeing: not only because stronger cohesion leads to a stronger sense of belonging and inclusion, making citizens more resilient to the appeals of violent extremist narratives that try to undermine national belonging, but also because it sends a clear message that government is interested in the overall welfare of communities, rather than in focusing simply on addressing the potential risks they may pose to national security (Tahiri and Grossman, 2013; Ellis and Abdi, 2017).

The need to reinforce social cohesion has become even more urgent given the range of threats now posed to social cohesion by far-right extremist ideologies, groups and narratives. Racism continues to be a major challenge to social cohesion, with a ‘surprisingly big shift’ in the number of Australians identifying racism in the 2021 Scanlon Survey as a ‘very big’ or ‘fairly big’ problem in Australia today – at 60% of respondents, this reflects a rise of 20% from the 40% who identified this as an issue in 2020 (Markus, 2021), despite other evidence from the same survey suggesting that ‘proponents of racist and xenophobic views are a shrinking segment of the population’, with decreases in anti-Muslim sentiment also evident (from 40% in 2019 to 32% in mid-2021):

Table 39 ‘Is your personal attitude positive, negative or neutral towards ... [faith group]?’ Response: ‘very negative’ and ‘somewhat negative’, 2017-21 (percentage, LinA)

FAITH GROUP	2017	2018	2019	JUL 2020	NOV 2020	JUL 2021
Buddhist	6	7	6	5	4	4
Jewish	--	--	--	9	9	9
Christian	12	12	14	11	12	13
Hindu	--	--	10	12	12	10
Sikh	--	--	--	13	14	12
Muslim	41	39	40	37	35	32

*Change between November 2020 and July 2021 not significant at p<.05

Source: Markus, A. (2021) Mapping Social Cohesion Report 2021

⁷ <https://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au/get-the-facts>

However, we have also seen new social cohesion threats emerge. Preeminent amongst these is the sharply accelerating rise of **conspiracy theories, misinformation, anti-government sentiment and right-wing extremist online and offline activity**. While all these features have already been present in Australian communities to some degree, particularly in online environments, their escalation and their potential to damage hard-won gains in social cohesion and social capital calls for further action.

Conspiracy theories, including those aligned to right-wing extremist narratives, continue in 2022 to make headway in eroding trust in government institutions, laws and support systems. This has been readily apparent during the COVID pandemic, as we discuss in further detail below, but it is by no means limited to uncertainty or trust issues regarding public health management; it extends to a view that all authorities, institutions, leaders and communication are to be treated as against, rather than for, the interests and benefits of ordinary citizens. This is particularly evident in relation to the rise of the sovereign citizen movement in Australia – frequently though not exclusively allied to far-right extremist frameworks – which ‘rejects the legitimacy of the state’ (Khalil, 2021) and found renewed impetus through the emergency restrictions taken during the Covid lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 to develop alongside far-right and conspiracist groups ‘a level of coordination and coherence by coalescing around the idea of oppressive governments’ (Westendorf, 2021).

The consistent extent to which conspiracy theories, misinformation and anti-government sentiment seek to delegitimise government directly erodes social cohesion by sowing doubt about the ability of governments to manage and regulate in the interests of all Australians. From this, it is a relatively short step to creating and enhancing social divisions that pit one group’s interests against another’s, promoting an environment in which social conflict becomes the norm and not the exception, and with dire consequences for civil harmony and cooperation in a multicultural pluralist society.

Far-right rhetoric intersects with conspiracist narratives in a number of ways that help advance doctrines focused on the supremacy of ‘white’ ethnic and racial groups and the purported threat to the ‘Australian’ way of life they claim is posed by minority ethnic and racial groups. One example of this intersection is the so-called Great Replacement theory, which casts minority population immigration and reproductive rates as a deliberate driver for the elimination of European background peoples, and the demonisation of particular ethnic, religious and cultural groups (including Jews, Muslims, African-Australians, Indigenous Australians and Asian-Australians) as unworthy of citizenship and full participation in a ‘European’-background country like Australia.

The impact of conspiracy-inflected doctrines like the Great Replacement Theory, and the hateful rhetoric through which they are disseminated and promoted, has the potential to severely undermine Australia's social cohesion. It is not enough to dismiss such groups, and the narratives they espouse, as 'fringe' or 'lunatic' elements of society. The motivations driving conspiracy adherents' trajectories of radicalisation are both highly complex and context-dependent, requiring detailed and critically empathetic analysis of the narratives, networks and nuances that inform their pathways into militant radicalisation (Gerrand, 2020; Kruglanski et al., 2019; McAleer, 2019).

Regardless of the actual numbers of individuals who are committed adherents to such doctrines, the amplification of such views through social media and also traditional media reportage has the capacity to instil fear, alienation and disengagement by Australian minority communities who are explicitly targeted and attacked by such rhetoric. If such experiences are compounded by perceptions that government and mainstream communities are doing little to robustly counter such narratives and actively promote the social cohesion and inclusiveness on which our national wellbeing depends, a risk then emerges that they will be vulnerable to narratives that emphasise self-reliance and self-defence against such attacks, which can in turn lead a minority to radicalise to their own extreme positions, including positions that advocate the use of violence.

Responses to misinformation and disinformation that empower communities

One response to this is to develop and disseminate alternative narratives that both diminish the recruitment and mobilisation prospects of far-right recruiters, and foster greater social cohesion, civil engagement and empowerment. A recent rapid evidence assessment of alternative narratives undertaken for the AVERT network (Roose et al., [2021](#)) found that such narratives can directly address root causes such as real and perceived grievances as well as the psycho-social needs that may lead to engagement with extremist discourse.

Alternative narratives can acknowledge the 'kernel of truth' in extremist narratives (for example, legitimate grievances or concerns about the exercise of power or perceived injustices) where these exist. They have credible messages and messengers (RAN, 2015: 6), aim to redirect rather than 'deradicalise', are context-specific, stand *for* rather than *against* something, are grassroots rather than top-down, and empower by engaging audiences as active agents. Online, such narratives ideally feature sophisticated multimodal content/representation practices - videos, memes, music, and online posts which can convey alternative messages to those deployed by extremist influences that meet people where they are at (Gerrand, 2022). For this reason, they work at the level of affect and imagination (Appadurai, 1990).

They may be created or co-created with the target audience, promote ambiguity and agonism (good conflict), inspire critical thinking, are tailored to both online and offline settings, and work to shift people's thinking from 'us and them' to 'we' (Gerrand, 2022; Grossman, 2014). Above all, they move audiences from 'either/or' black and white thinking to 'both/and' appreciation of complexity. Such narratives can target 'fence-sitters', are not explicitly C/PVE and complement and contribute to structural change (Gerrand, 2022; Roose et al., 2021).

Whilst these creative, grassroots alternative narrative approaches can be highly effective at engaging with people who are at risk of or have been exposed to extremist content, the conducive environment of push factors including COVID-19 and the algorithmic design of social media platforms present formidable challenges for practitioners to amplify such alternative pro-social narratives. This is in part because social cohesion requires not only bonding and bridging capital (connecting with and supporting those who are like us and those who are different to us), but also *vertical* or *linking* capital – maintaining connection, confidence and trust in authorities and public institutions that have broad social power and capacity to influence and strengthen social wellbeing. The erosion of linking capital through conspiracy theory and anti-government sentiment and rhetoric, and the commensurate fragmentation of social cohesion, provides a ready environment in which vulnerable individuals and groups may feel the need to turn away from government toward alternative sources of support, including that offered by groups that seek to exploit such sentiments for violent extremist recruitment.

In this context, it is especially important to acknowledge that working partnerships between governments and civil society hold the key to preventing the rise of violent extremism in Australia through effective social cohesion efforts. The rise of the far-right, particularly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, has meant the prevention of violent extremism becomes more than just the challenging of racist narratives, combatting hate speech, and the strengthening of respectful attitudes, cultural diversity, and coexistence. The task of preventing far-right extremism can at times require an effort to directly confront and disturb the creation and distribution of misinformation.

These efforts require the leveraging of existing grassroots relationships, the cooperation of tech companies, and improved collaborative efforts between the State, Territory, and Commonwealth governments. The focus of these efforts should be on disrupting, deconstructing, and delegitimising information that lacks credibility and seeks to stoke fear, confusion, or distrust, targeting both low and high-risk social media platforms. This approach aims to disrupt the spread of extremist content and information consumed by mainstream society, decreasing the capacity for widespread sympathy for extremist causes.

The experience of the Australian Multicultural Foundation, a CRIS Consortium partner, with community programs conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the role of misinformation and conspiracy theories in sowing discord and division in community groups, religious and broader. Claims of vaccination side effects, COVID-19 misinformation and other inflammatory rhetoric have been used by conspiracy theorists and far-right extremist groups to further alienate and isolate individuals from various diverse communities. AMF programs designed to counter the spread of misinformation and increase vaccination uptake and community confidence in official health messages played an important role in social cohesion amongst culturally and linguistically diverse communities in Victoria.

Efforts by civil organisations to build cohesive messaging and methods for promoting active information dissemination will serve to reduce the influence of far-right extremist groups currently influencing hesitant or susceptible individuals. These efforts would complement ongoing prevention efforts relating to other forms of harmful extremism and seek to curb further rationale or justification by individuals and organisations to react to the antagonistic presence of the far-right.

During the height of COVID-19 misinformation and anti-government sentiment, fuelled by the far-right, grassroots communications programs, co-designed with the community, aimed to build the bridges of trust between the community and various Australian governments, including the Victorian government. These messaging campaigns involved community and religious leaders, deliberately targeting those who felt otherwise marginalised and isolated by Australian Governments in their COVID-19 messaging. Hearing important messaging from familiar voices on a range of topics from COVID-19 safe behaviours to vaccination information served to promote informed messaging and increase audience retention. Consequently, far-right extremist movements have found it increasingly difficult to gain influence in communities where trust has been restored.

Concluding remarks

Based on the discussion above, policymakers need to consider the following in developing responses to the threats to social cohesion posed in particular by the intersection of conspiracy and its leveraging by far-right extremist groups (Grossman, 2021a; Braddock, 2022):

1. The role that conspiratorial thinking plays in processes of far-right radicalisation
2. The emergence of conspiracist movements as far-right extremist actors, and the exploitation by far-right extremist actors of conspiracist individuals and networks
3. The effectiveness of inoculation and pre-bunking strategies for developing resilience to far-right extremist and conspiracist narratives

Policy settings in this regard also need to address:

1. The post-truth environment in which far-right extremist narratives flourish
2. The economic inequalities that fuel the potency of far-right extremist thinking and propaganda
3. The social divisions that nurture its platforms
4. The technological affordances that drive its dissemination, and the ways in which these can be re-harnessed for pro-social messaging
5. The fabrication of ‘threat’ environments in which minority groups are targeted on the basis of their racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, sexual or religious status
6. The prevalence of far-right extremists’ strategic grievance- and victimhood-led narratives seeking to undermine social cohesion
7. The importance of legitimate channels for bringing forward and addressing genuine grievances and instances of victimisation

These policy considerations also highlight the importance, as noted in the CRIS submission to the PJICIS Inquiry into Extremist Movements and Radicalism in Australia (Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, 2021) of the continued investment by Australia in the connection between *social cohesion* and *community resilience*. Resilience in the context of violent extremism is focused primarily on the capacity to *resist* the appeal of violent extremism promoted by ideological, political or religious groups, as well as the capacity to *recover* from terrorist incidents that cause harm to our communities (Grossman, 2021b; Ellis and Abdi, 2017).

Without sufficient levels of social cohesion, community resilience is significantly weakened, because our capacity to adapt, support, learn, and develop and distribute resources to meaningfully address problems or challenges relating to ideologically motivated violence is reliant on the social cohesion and associated social capital that underpins such efforts. For example, in an environment of weakened social cohesion, particularly in relation to lack of trust in government institutions, we will see lower or untimely reporting to authorities by family members and friends who may have intimate knowledge of someone who is radicalising to violence, losing precious opportunities for meaningful early intervention as a result (Grossman 2015, 2018; Thomas et al. 2020).

Some critics have argued that social cohesion can have only an ‘indirect relationship’ to preventing extremist violence, whereas acts of extremist violence have a ‘measurable impact on social cohesion’ needs to be accounted for in policy and programming contexts (Lauland et al.,

2019: 23). These remain current issues in the contemporary landscape of efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism, and renewed attention must be given to showing that Australian policy and programs are, in practice as well as in name, 'agnostic' in relation both to the ideological spectrum of threats and to the critically important role of both governments and *all* communities in contributing toward efforts to limit the appeal and take-up of socially divisive hateful and violent extremist narratives.

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