

## CONCLUSION PAPER

*RAN Victims/Survivors of Terrorism Working Group meeting  
13-14 June 2024, Prague, Czechia*

# How to involve victims/survivors of terrorism in preventing and countering conspiracy narratives in schools

## Introduction

Involving victims/survivors of terrorism in countering conspiracy narratives in high schools is a critical aspect of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). This approach not only humanises the abstract concepts of terrorism and extremism but also leverages the powerful personal testimonials of survivors to foster resilience and critical thinking among students.

On 13 and 14 June, victims/survivors of terrorism and practitioners working with them, came together in Prague for the **RAN VoT Working Group meeting on 'How to involve victims/survivors of terrorism in preventing and countering conspiracy narratives in schools'**. During this two-day meeting participants discussed involving victims/survivors in P/CVE interventions in schools and explored how they could also contribute to efforts specifically aimed at preventing and countering conspiracy narratives.

### Key Points

- Victims/survivors must be emotionally ready to share their experiences constructively so as to not suffer retraumatisation.
- Victims'/survivors' testimonials should be part of a larger, structured programme that includes preparation and follow-up activities to maximise impact. All involved should be well-trained and prepared:
  - Teachers and/or facilitators should be trained on how to handle sensitive topics, facilitate discussions, manage group dynamics and support victims/survivors in delivering their testimonials.
  - Training victims/survivors in sharing their testimonials leads to the development of resilience and the ability to deal with unexpected situations or potentially difficult questions from the students.
  - Students should learn about the background of the victims/survivors speaking and about the context of the attacks they are speaking about.
- Victims/survivors can play a valuable role in countering conspiracy narratives, specifically by:
  - sharing their personal experiences, including any encounters with conspiracy narratives related to the attack they suffered or their own victimisation in general;
  - using testimonials to directly address and debunk common conspiracy narratives;
  - highlighting the emotional and social impact of conspiracy narratives on victims/survivors and their communities.

This paper will first focus on the general prerequisites for the involvement of victims/survivors of terrorism in P/CVE approaches aimed at youth in an educational setting. Then, a short introduction on conspiracy narratives and what approaches can be used to prevent and counter them will be presented. Lastly, recommendations, challenges and gaps will be shared on how to involve victims/survivors in countering and preventing conspiracy narratives in schools.

## Involving victims/survivors of terrorism in P/CVE interventions in schools

Victims/survivors of terrorism play a unique and vital role in P/CVE efforts. Their personal stories provide a tangible and relatable perspective on the impact of terrorism, which can be more compelling than abstract concepts or statistical data. Connecting victims/survivors with schools can help students understand the human cost of terrorism and foster empathy and resilience. However, involving victims/survivors in such approaches needs to be done with careful consideration of both the victims'/survivors' wellbeing. In addition, the implementation of victims'/survivors' involvement in a broader curriculum deserves special attention as well.

### Guidelines on how to involve victims/survivors in P/CVE approaches

#### Considerations

- **Initial resistance:** Initially, there might be resistance from educational authorities or schools in involving victims/survivors in P/CVE interventions due to concerns about discussing politically sensitive topics.
- **Emotional readiness:** Victims/survivors must be emotionally ready to share their experiences constructively to avoid retraumatisation. Practitioners that are in close contact with the potential speakers should assess the victims'/survivors' readiness to participate in such a programme.
- **Programme integration:** Victims'/survivors' testimonials should be part of a larger, structured programme that includes preparation and follow-up activities to maximise impact.

#### Preparation

- **Educator training:** Teachers and/or facilitators should be trained on how to handle sensitive topics, facilitate discussions, manage group dynamics and support victims/survivors in delivering their testimonials.
- **Training for victims/survivors:** Victims/survivors should be provided with training and support to ensure they are resilient and well-prepared to handle unexpected situations and potentially difficult questions from students. Although the victims/survivors sharing their testimonials do not need to be experts on conspiracy narratives, they do benefit from introductory training on the topic. This will help them adjust their testimonials to address conspiracy narratives, hence preparing them for the ensuing discussion.
  - Organisations working with victims/survivors of terrorism could consider working with a certification programme that covers communication skills, emotional resilience, adaptability and the capability to deal with negative responses from the audience. As a victim's/survivor's healing process is not linear, it is crucial to continuously assess their current capacity to be involved in these programmes.
- **Preparation meetings:** Preparatory meetings between facilitators, organisers, and victims/survivors can help align the objectives and methods of the workshops. These meetings also provide a platform for victims/survivors to voice potential concerns and receive support before, during and after the intervention.
- **Identification of needs:** Understand the specific needs and concerns of the student population regarding the topic at hand. Facilitators should be aware of the students' backgrounds, beliefs, and potential biases. This knowledge helps adapt the content to be more effective and relevant.

- **Customised curriculum:** Design a curriculum that is adapted to different school environments and student demographics. This regards, for example, age group, background of students and potential neurodiversity among the student population. Younger students may need more foundational knowledge, while older students can engage in deeper discussions about the implications of conspiracy narratives. Work with psychologists, educators, and P/CVE experts to develop materials and strategies that support victims/survivors and maximise the impact of their stories.
- **Student preparation:** Students should be given background information about the victims/survivors and the context of their stories to foster understanding and empathy.

## Engagement

- **Storytelling:** Victims/survivors should share their personal stories in narrative form, highlighting their experiences and (road to) healing. They should avoid sharing (controversial) political opinions. This approach keeps the narrative impartial and relatable, emphasising the human aspect of their experiences.
- **Management of emotions:** Emotional vulnerability in testimonials can be powerful, but it is not a prerequisite for an impactful intervention. Authenticity and balance are key here; if a victim/survivor sharing their testimonial becomes too overwhelmed, this might overshadow their message. However, victims/survivors should not be over-coached to the point of losing authenticity. The victim/survivor is also responsible for themselves; if they feel they cannot share their story in a sincere way (anymore, or at that moment), they should refrain from providing a testimonial. This also ensures that they do not become detached from their story.
- **Safe space:** Create a safe and respectful environment where students feel comfortable asking questions and expressing their views. During these sessions, often the rule is that students are allowed to ask anything they want. At the same time, the victims/survivors present are also allowed to refrain from answering certain questions or defer them to the facilitator. The facilitator should be equipped to deal with inappropriate questions, as regards the group dynamics as well as the well-being of the victim/survivor.
- **Interactive sessions:** Workshops should be designed to be interactive, allowing students to engage with victims/survivors directly. This interaction can include Q&A sessions, group discussions, and activities that encourage critical thinking. Facilitate dialogue between victims/survivors and students to provide the opportunity for questions and consequentially, a deeper understanding.
- **Contextualisation:** Discussions should be contextualised within broader societal issues, including the causes and impacts of terrorism. Professional facilitators should be present to guide the discussions, provide factual information, and support victims/survivors in handling challenging questions. These facilitators can also help by filling knowledge gaps and correcting misinformation.
- **Diverse voices:** Include victims/survivors from different backgrounds with varied experiences to provide a broader perspective. This diversity helps debunk the idea that terrorism affects only certain groups and highlights the universal impact of such events.

## Follow-up and evaluation

- **Reflection activities and impact assessments:** Students should engage in activities that help them reflect on what they have learned and how it applies to their own lives, beyond the discussions that take place on the day of the programme. In addition, impact assessments can be made that measure the students' stance and how it has changed over time.
- **Pilot programmes:** Consider organising pilot programmes in trusted schools or with more accessible student populations that are willing to invest in a thorough evaluation. This will allow for necessary adjustments to be made to the programme.
- **Support for victims/survivors:** Continuous support for victims/survivors is crucial. Peer-to-peer support systems, counseling, and regular check-ins can help victims/survivors process their experiences and prevent burnout and retraumatisation.

- **Student follow-up and support:** Schools should have a follow-up plan for students who might be affected by the workshop, both in the short and long term. Providing resources for continued learning and support for those struggling with the topics discussed, ensures that the impact of the workshop will be sustained.

## Conspiracy narratives

Conspiracy narratives can undermine trust in institutions, fuel polarisation, and potentially lead to radicalisation. They often thrive on the foundational elements of distrust, discontent, and the assumption that nothing happens by chance. Additionally, they capitalise on the human tendency to view oneself as a victim and to see malevolent forces behind events, often linking these beliefs to antisemitic undertones. These narratives can hold contradictory beliefs. However, in the view of the believer such beliefs remain cohesive because they fundamentally serve to reinforce a particular worldview, one that is deeply suspicious of government and societal structures. This distrust is fueled by disinformation and represents deliberate attempts to mislead and polarise societies.

Additionally, conspiracy narratives can concern specific terrorist attacks; they often centre around beliefs that an attack either never happened or was a set-up by the government. Such conspiracies diminish victims'/survivors' experiences and can contribute to further damage and trauma.

Conspiracy narratives are particularly harmful because they exploit the echo chambers created by social media algorithms, which isolate users into groups that only see content reinforcing their existing beliefs. This isolation is exacerbated by rapidly evolving social media usage patterns, especially among youth who spend an average of six hours a day on screens, making them prime targets for disinformation. The proliferation of deep fakes – fake audiovisual products that are very hard to distinguish from real videos – and dedicated websites further complicates the landscape, making it harder to distinguish truth from falsehood.

To counter these narratives, it is crucial to block the spread of disinformation, raise public awareness, and flag or report suspicious content. This effort requires understanding and accepting the perspectives of younger generations, who are often the most affected by these narratives. Increasing resilience to disinformation involves developing critical reading habits, such as spending sufficient time to evaluate an article and engaging in fact-checking. Advanced tools like AI can assist by identifying suspicious content for journalists to investigate, ensuring that fact-checked information is prioritised in social media algorithms.

However, even fact-checking can be manipulated, so it is vital to promote genuine fact-checked content. Addressing cross-platform interactions poses a significant challenge, requiring coordinated efforts to mitigate the spread of disinformation across different social media platforms. By implementing these strategies, society can build a more informed and resilient youth, with a greater capacity to resist the allure of conspiracy narratives.

## Involving victims/survivors in preventing and countering conspiracy narratives in schools

Just as is the case with general P/CVE interventions, victims/survivors of terrorism can play a valuable role in the preventing and countering of conspiracy narratives. Conspiracy narratives are a crucial part of many extremist ideologies. Often, victims/survivors are directly affected by these narratives, as some might pertain to an attack that affected them personally. Conspiracy narratives regarding specific attacks might, for example, fall into the category of an attack supposedly not having taken place or having been set up by the government. Countering such beliefs requires credible voices and impactful storytelling. Victims/survivors of terrorism, through their firsthand accounts of attacks and lived experiences, offer a unique perspective that can help debunk false narratives and promote empathy and understanding.

In addition to the requirements, as set out above, concerning the general involvement of victims/survivors of terrorism in P/CVE interventions, the following should be considered when involving victims/survivors in preventing and countering conspiracy narratives.

#### *Educational workshops*

- **Focus on critical thinking:** Develop students' critical thinking skills to help them evaluate the validity of information and recognise conspiracy narratives.
- **Media literacy:** Teach students how to identify reliable sources of information and understand the role of algorithms in spreading misinformation.
- **Interactive discussions:** Facilitate open discussions where students can explore and question conspiracy narratives.

#### *Victims'/survivors' testimonials*

- **Relatable narratives:** Victims/survivors should share their personal experiences, including any encounters with conspiracy narratives related to their own victimisation or an attack that affected them personally.
- **Debunking myths:** Use testimonials to directly address and debunk common conspiracy narratives.
- **Emotional impact:** Highlight the emotional and social impact of conspiracy narratives on victims/survivors and their communities.

#### *Engaging with digital resilience*

- **Online presence:** Create digital content featuring victims'/survivors' testimonials and educational materials to reach a wider audience.
- **Social media campaigns:** Utilise social media to promote critical thinking and counter misinformation.

#### *Collaboration with influencers*

- **Identify influential figures:** Work with influencers who resonate with youth and can help spread positive messages.
- **Authenticity:** Ensure that influencers genuinely support the cause but at the same time, are not perceived as mere mouthpieces for authorities.

## Relevant practices

1. [Fernando Buesa Foundation](#): The foundation is a non-profit organisation founded on 3 November 2000 in memory and honour of Fernando Buesa, who was assassinated together with his bodyguard by ETA on 22 February 2000. Its goal is to continue Buesa's example of supporting the culture of peace, democracy and social progress. The foundation has conducted several cooperative projects, such as creating comics with testimonials of victims/survivors or an audiovisual glossary where experts speak on specific terms related to terrorism.
2. [Educate Against Hate](#) is a website actualised by the UK government. It provides a collection of different resources to counter extremism and radicalisation in classrooms.

## Follow-up

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Involving victims/survivors of terrorism in the prevention and counteraction of conspiracy narratives in schools is a powerful strategy that requires careful planning and support. By focusing on personal stories, providing proper training, and creating supportive environments, we can leverage the experiences of victims/survivors to educate and inspire young people. This approach not only helps counter harmful narratives but also fosters empathy, resilience, and a deeper understanding of the real impact of terrorism.

Through continuous evaluation and adaptation, this program can become a cornerstone in the fight against misinformation and radicalisation, ultimately contributing to a more informed and empathetic society. To further embed this approach in the repertoire of both victims/survivors of terrorism and the schools wanting to work with them, concrete training activities could be developed.

## Further reading

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Radicalisation Awareness Network (2023). [Dealing with conspiracy narratives in the close social environment; a practical handbook to help the helpers.](#)

Radicalisation Awareness Network (2023). [Toolkit on dealing with conspiracy narratives.](#)

USC Shoah Foundation (2015). [Using visual history testimony in the classroom.](#)