

06/10/2021

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN VoT WG meeting 'Supporting the voices of young victims/survivors of terrorism'
18 June 2021, Digital meeting

Supporting the voices of young victims/survivors of terrorism

Introduction

While young women and men already face several challenges in the transition to adulthood, such as economic insecurity, social changes and the need to adapt to new life environments, surviving a terrorist attack can increase the burden of having to navigate big life-changing events while also needing to cope with trauma. Indeed, there is a growing need to make victim support and other support services, that are often tailored to older generations, more accessible and responsive to the needs of young people. At the same time, young victims/survivors of terrorism can play a valuable role in the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) because they represent a credible voice, especially to their peers, and their story can also serve as an inspiring example of resilience.

The RAN Victims/survivors of Terrorism Working Group meeting on 18 June discussed how to support young victims/survivors of terrorism in making their voices heard. The meeting brought together young victims/survivors and first-line practitioners and organisations working with them such as youth workers, educational professionals, social workers and psychologists. Because sustainable support for young victims/survivors and meaningful P/CVE programmes go hand in hand, they discussed how best to support young victims/survivors wanting to play a role in P/CVE and how to provide tailored support in their healing process that addresses the diversity of challenges young people face. Indeed, support should be based on a youth-sensitive needs assessment as the voices of young victims/survivors cannot be separated from their needs. To lessen the risk of retraumatisation due to project limitations or risk-related interventions, support needs to be organised in a sustainable fashion. There are many interrelated challenges; support structures often do not take the specific needs of young victims/survivors into account, for example when they have to deal with major life events coming up, such as moving to a different city to start higher education, navigating the labour market or institutions and so on. They are or soon will be in a transitional phase, moving to self-sustained adulthood, and they need the right support to guide them through this.

Supporting young victims/survivors in a meaningful way means addressing needs and interests ranging from psychological well-being, their educational environment, their families and supporting environment and the relationship with their peers. Helping them making their voices heard requires a sensible approach that avoids re-traumatisation and ensures that the needs of victims/survivors inform the P/CVE efforts and not the other way around. This conclusion paper reflects the discussions of the Working Group meeting of 18 June and includes recommendations and lessons learned in relation to working with and supporting young victims/survivors of terrorism and identifies gaps that need to be further explored.

General support and (trauma-informed) interventions

Young individuals who have been affected by a terror attack require support in the immediate aftermath of an attack. This includes immediate psychosocial and health care, help to access victim support services or being connected with victim organisations, and in many cases social and economic support. Although many (but not all) of the challenges they encounter are similar to those of adult victims/survivors, the way they experience them is very different. Young victims/survivors may not yet have the tools to deal with these challenges, for instance when it comes to navigating institutional demands, requirements and expectations of society, making it harder to ask for support in the right places. Below are some recommendations and insights concerning professional and peer support to young victims/survivors of terrorism.

Support from practitioners

- The needs of each young victim/survivor differ, and any intervention should be **tailored to these individual needs**. A tailored approach must take into account (1) the severity of the trauma; (2) the young victim/survivor's family situation and broader supporting environment; (3) their age and stage of (emotional) development and (4) their cultural background. Moreover, it should be recognised that these needs can change over time.
- Having a **solid support base** helps young victims/survivors' healing, so it is beneficial to strengthen those surrounding the young victim/survivor. This includes—among others—providing support to their family or caregivers and involving the school and giving them tools on how to deal with the trauma.
- In addition to emotional support, the young victim/survivor and their environment should also receive (1) economic support; (2) social support and (3) educational support.
- Practitioners providing support should have experience with or be specialised in trauma-informed approaches and awareness of PTSD. Equally important is the bond of **trust between the practitioner and young victim/survivor**. For trust to be established, continuity is paramount; switching between care workers can be detrimental to the healing process.
- **Support should be offered directly to the young victim/survivor**, but especially with younger victims/survivors, first contact should be in the presence of a parent or caregiver.
- There should be room to **address issues that are not related to the terrorist attack and its traumatic impact**; young victims/survivors should have the space to address other challenges and issues in their current life that may be a burden to them.
- Each country should provide a **national information point** with accessible language where young victims/survivors can be connected with supporting institutions or persons in an age-sensitive manner.
- Usually, the most extensive support is needed in the period after the attack, but **renewed support might be necessary** at pivotal moments. Young victims/survivors will go through many life-changing events after the attack and they might not have the life skills yet to deal with such situations by themselves. Additionally, after a trial, they might require support again as well to familiarise themselves with the new situation and, for instance, a possible increase of media attention and questions from friends and family.
- Practitioners should need to **look beyond the 'victim' label** and also consider the person behind the trauma. The physical or mental health needs of a person may not, or only indirectly, be linked to their experience as a victim/survivor. To avoid re-victimisation, practitioners need to take into account the multi-layered life experiences and life courses of a young person.
- Young victims/survivors have the **right to receive all available information** regarding the attack or the perpetrator, but the sharing of information should be in an age-sensitive manner.
- Young individuals might experience more pressure (from peers or the media) to assume a certain role, as they have not fully shaped their identity yet. Practitioners should support young victims/survivors to remain

in agency. Moreover, they should encourage them to decide upon the identity they want to have, and help them understand that their identity is not solely based on their trauma. Psychosocial approaches that **support the transition of young victims/survivors** while at the same time allowing space for their 'victimhood' are crucial.

- As media exposure cannot always be prevented, it can be beneficial for young victims/survivors to **receive media training**.

Peer support

- Young individuals that have been affected by a terror attack find understanding in peers with similar experiences. Although **peer support should always be complementary to psychological support**, its value cannot be overestimated.
- Young victims/survivors often prefer meeting in bigger groups and can benefit from meeting **peers from different backgrounds**. Seeing how others from different countries or cultural backgrounds deal with similar circumstances can help reflect on their own experiences and possible traumas.
- Young victims/survivors often do not want to talk about their trauma with their parents present, for instance, to spare their parents' feelings. If parents are indeed not present, programmes bringing young victims/survivors together should **aim at young individuals aged 14 and up**, as the discussed topics can be emotionally intense.
- Peer support formats should provide for informal settings that allow for natural conversations. This can be achieved through sports activities or allowing space for informal talks, which often works better than official group interventions.
- Participants in a peer support group or intervention should **refrain from comparing their stories**.
- Support groups are very valuable but **remaining in the group should not be a requirement**.

Making their voices heard

Young victims/survivors can play a valuable role in the prevention and countering of violent extremism as they are a credible and powerful voice, especially when talking about their experiences with their peers. Their stories can thus be inspirational to others. But making their voices heard is not just limited to the realm of P/CVE; it can also provide support for others in similar situations who don't feel comfortable speaking up (yet). Below are some insights into the value of including young victims/survivors in P/CVE and beyond, and recommendations on how best to involve them in a safe manner that benefits them as well.

The power of young victims/survivors sharing their stories

- Young victims/survivors have their own stories and voice to share. In fact, **their experiences and messages may reach a younger audience** and help to sensitise them, as young victims/survivors know when and how a message can be relevant to their peers and which sources they use to get their information from.
- Young victims/survivors, if they choose to do so, can be an **inspiration for others in working towards non-violence, reconciliation and peaceful societies**. This is especially the case in situations where there is or has been an ongoing conflict, transcending generations, such as in (Northern) Ireland or the Basque Country.
- Making the voices heard of young victims/survivors plays an important role in **strengthening inter-generational remembrance and reconciliation**. Strong voices of young people can project **hope in societies that have been affected by terrorism**, helping to reinstate societies' faith in humanity, unity and shared experiences as a community of people.

- Young victims/survivors, if they are ready and decide to do so, can act as **role models for other youngsters** in dealing with trauma.

Involving young victims/survivors in P/CVE work—do's and don'ts

- Sharing their story can play a pivotal role in a young victim's/survivor's healing process but they also need to be **protected from stigmatisation and revictimisation** when doing so. Making use of tools such as testimonials should always be **beneficial to both the audience and the young victim/survivor** themselves.
- **People and processes matter** over project goals. Practitioners can and should consider working with young victims/survivors as their voices are of great importance. Yet, project outlines must be informed by the voice and experiences of these (potentially traumatised) young victims/survivors and not vice versa.
- As younger individuals might not be able to oversee long-term consequences, they need to be made aware that **their decision to share their story publicly can have unintended impacts**, like the uncontrolled spread of their name and story via social media.
- **Emotional support should be offered pro-actively** throughout the process and not just when the young victim/survivor asks for it, as it could make them feel like a burden to the project.
- Sharing your story in public is already a big step, but wanting to incorporate a P/CVE message, or framing it as a part of a P/CVE project, adds another challenge. In those cases, even more support is necessary, and it should be kept in mind that P/CVE work may not be the right thing for everyone. Working in dialogue and reconciliation or education can be equally important.
- Young victims/survivors that are included in a project need to have **agency as co-developers**. This is beneficial for both the young victim/survivor as well as the audience, which will receive a presentation more tailored to their interests and based on the genuine experience of the victim/survivor.
- Let youngsters **take small steps towards sharing their stories publicly**. First let them get acquainted with storytelling in general, helping them to put ideas and thoughts into words. Then let them share with people they know, and when starting to share publicly, start with a small group and slowly make the audiences bigger. This ensures a do-no-harm approach.
- A **recorded testimonial** can even be shown with the young victim/survivor present, after which they can answer questions. This way they can engage with the audience without having the emotional burden of telling their story.
- Keep in mind that **not everything can be controlled** and make the young victim/survivor aware of this.
- The audience needs to be prepared before hearing a victims'/survivors' story. They should receive some background information on the person sharing their testimonial and should be informed that there is going to be an **exchange** with them. Setting ground rules for the conversation can be helpful in some cases.
- The use of testimonials in schools can be a powerful tool, as students will hear a credible voice from a peer sharing their experience. However, **teachers do need to be well prepared** and the testimonials should be part of a broader curriculum on (victims/survivors of) terrorism.
- Projects that want to involve (young) victims/survivors should acknowledge that they are searching for a very specific experience and expertise. This means that funds should be allocated to **compensate young victims/survivors for the work they do** proactively.

Anonymity

- **The media have a responsibility** not to put pressure on young victims/survivors and to respect their anonymity. They should be aware that publishing young individuals' names against their will has a tremendous impact on these peoples' lives. The right of a victim/survivor not to publicise his or her story should be respected.

- Some young victims/survivors might want to play a role in P/CVE while preferring to stay anonymous. Especially because this happened so early in their lives, some might not want the attack to define them. Providing them to share their **testimonial via an audio recording or in writing** ensures this anonymity.

Relevant practices

- The **Young Ambassadors Programme (YAP)** from Strength to Strength (**US**) brings together young victims/survivors of terrorism from all over the world. Their programme is focused on 14- to 20-year-olds and consists of a week-long trip to New York City, combining therapeutical and peer support. The key focus is supporting young victims/survivors of terrorism, assisting them in learning about their trauma and how to deal with it in a **safe space** with peers. The YAP is also an **empowerment programme**, aiming to build leadership in these young individuals.
- After the Atocha attacks in Madrid (2004), an extensive support programme was set up in **Spain** for the young victims/survivors of the attack, including those who had lost a parent or caregiver. Every affected family was **coupled with a social worker and a psychologist** for at least five years. The approach was comprehensive, focusing on family intervention, academic support, and interventions focusing on the victims'/survivors' support network.
- The **Omagh Support & Self Help Group (UK)** organises several projects for young victims/survivors of terrorism, to help them express themselves and **make sense of what happened to them**. The Omagh community centre brings together victims/survivors from all over (Northern) Ireland and beyond, organising art projects, storytelling through testimonials and other, softer, approaches for individuals that find it difficult to talk about their experience.
- The **Manchester Survivors Choir (UK)** is a choir made up of individuals of different ages that were present at the Manchester Arena during the 2017 attack. Many of its members are teenagers and young adults. The choir provides a **positive way of bringing victims/survivors together**, providing support without constantly focusing on the attack.

Follow up

There is very little research into the impact of terror attacks on young individuals affected by it, the effectiveness of national and peer support programmes and how the needs of young victims/survivors change over time. Organisations providing support often lack the resources to do this research or to extensively evaluate their programmes. The support of young victims/survivors would greatly benefit from research into these topics.

Additionally, practitioners wanting to include young victims/survivors of terrorism in P/CVE work would benefit from guidelines on how best to do this. It would be preferable to work towards a European standard with regards to working with young victims/survivors in P/CVE in a safe way that also benefits their healing process.

Lastly, different cultural backgrounds ask for different types of interventions. In more family-oriented, collectivist, cultures, the family is often expected to provide help, and the authorities or institutions less so. How can practitioners best deal with this?

Further reading

- RAN VoT and RAN C&N '[How to involve victims of terrorism in a prevention campaign](#)'
- RAN RVT '[Checklist – Shaping your testimonial as a Victim of Terrorism](#)'
- RAN RVT '[Delivering Effective Testimonials](#)'
- RAN Issue paper '[Enhancing the resilience of victims after terrorist attacks](#)'
- The [EU Handbook on Victims of Terrorism](#) focuses, among other things, on the particular needs of young victims/survivors.