

Nihilistic Violent Extremism and Youth CVE Practice: Emerging Challenges for Assessment, Intervention and Service Delivery

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Abstract

This paper examines the emergence of nihilistic violent extremism (NVE) and its implications for contemporary countering violent extremism (CVE) frameworks. Drawing on evolving case evidence, the paper characterises NVE as a form of violence marked by fragmented motivations, misanthropic and dystopian narratives, and an emphasis on spectacle, affect, and notoriety in the absence of coherent extreme ideological commitments. Mainly involving young people, these cases are shaped by online subcultures and ecosystems, trauma, and developmental vulnerabilities, with violence functioning as a means of identity formation or expression rather than aimed to political change. The paper argues that NVE challenges core assumptions underpinning CVE systems, particularly those grounded in ideology-based thresholds for assessment, intervention, and service delivery. Through a practice-informed analysis, it identifies four key areas of strain: referral pathways, service provision complexity, clinical and risk assessment, and practitioner wellbeing. Existing tools and models are shown to be only partially fit for purpose, given their limited capacity to capture behavioural, developmental, and socio-digital drivers of violence associated with NVE. The paper concludes that responding effectively to NVE requires an increased focus on trauma-informed, developmentally grounded, systemic, and behaviourally focused approaches, alongside greater integration across services and enhanced support for frontline practitioners.

Article History

Received Aug 31, 2026

Accepted Sep 20, 2026

Published Sep 25, 2026

Keywords: Nihilistic Violent Extremism, Radicalisation, Youth, Countering Violent Extremism, Deradicalisation

Introduction

Security agencies across Western democracies are confronting a growing number of violent acts that challenge traditional terrorism frameworks (Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2025; Neumann, 2026). These incidents frequently involve young perpetrators, online radicalisation, grievances, targeted threats, and symbolic or performative violence, yet lack a coherent political, religious, or ideological motive (Argentino, 2025a, 2025b; Argentino & Hart, 2026; Baldino, 2026; ASIO, 2025; Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2026; Soufan Centre, 2025;

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Tibby, 2026; Whoriskey, 2025; Zoschak & Kenelly, 2025). In response, many Western countries have increasingly applied the label *nihilistic violent extremism* (NVE) (Argentino, 2025a; Argentino & Hart, 2026; FBI, 2026; Rai & Zoschak, 2025; Zoschak & Kenelly, 2025).

Varied definitions have been proposed. For example, Smith, Cadenhead and Broekaert (2026) broadly defined NVE as “a set of attitudes or beliefs involving disillusionment with or rejection of society; the glorification of violence, both interpersonal and self-directed, and the desire to bring about or accelerate social instability, chaos, or collapse” (p.1). Argentino and Lindsay (2026a) argue that NVE is “best understood as a victim-driven, youth-centred online ecosystem in which status, belonging, and identity are earned through the production, circulation, and escalation of harm” (p.36). A myriad of online NVE individuals, groups and movements have emerged. They exist and extend across a fluid online ecosystem including the Terrorgram Collective, the Com Network and its offshoots 764, No Lives Matter, and Maniac Murder Cult (Argentino & Lindsay, 2026a; Argentino & Hart, 2026; Hart, 2026; Smith et al., 2026; Zdjelar, 2026). This threat landscape is characterised by the active participation of young people, the rejection of conventional social norms, the rapid dissemination and consumption of objectionable online content, links to traditional violent extremist movements and ideologies, and the emergence of hybrid forms of violence that blur the boundaries between extremist, criminal, and exploitative behaviours (Argentino & Lindsay, 2026b; Thorn, 2026; Zdjelar, 2026).

For contemporary countering violent extremism (CVE) policy and practice, NVE presents distinct challenges (Rousseau et al., 2025; Rousseau, Miconi & Desmarais, 2026). NVE cases frequently lack clear ideological alignment and are often characterised by young people displaying profound vulnerability, with exposure to online subcultures, ecosystems, and other extreme content such as gore or exploitative material serving to normalise, promote, or coerce engagement with violence (Argentino, 2025a; Argentino, Barrett & Tyler, 2024; Argentino & Lindsay, 2026b; Barracosa & Cherney, 2025; Rai & Zoschak, 2025; Rousseau, Miconi & Desmarais, 2026; Silver & Katti 2026; Taylor, Quayle & Horgan, 2026; Whoriskey, 2025; Zdjelar, 2026). The duality of young people as both victims and perpetrators appear particularly pronounced (Argentino & Lindsay, 2026a; Argentino & Lindsay, 2026b; Rousseau et al., 2025). Targeted threats, including towards school settings, and varied types of violence risks also permeate NVE profiles and impact the nature of policy

and practice responses (Marone, 2026). The aim of this paper is to address these challenges and implications that have largely been neglected in the emerging literature on NVE.

We begin first by outlining what is currently known about NVE and key risks and characteristics evident across recorded cases. This is important to help contextualise the four areas we highlight as warranting attention: CVE referral pathways; service provision complexity; clinical and risk assessment; and staff support and wellbeing. This paper is not an empirical evaluation, systematic review, or formal case study analysis. Rather, it is a practice-informed conceptual discussion informed by: (1) the emerging academic and practitioner literature on NVE; (2) the professional experience of the second and third authors delivering specialist youth CVE services; and (3) illustrative case material drawn from public-domain reporting. The objective is not to establish causal claims or to be exhaustive in our examination, but to identify emerging challenges for contemporary youth CVE systems. Such an approach is particularly relevant given the nascent state of the NVE evidence base and the limited availability of validated assessment and intervention models. Although field-based reflections are not a substitute for empirical evaluation, they provide an important source of practice knowledge that can assist in identifying emerging trends, testing the applicability of existing CVE assumptions, and informing future research agendas.

Cases and Emerging Empirical Insights

Recent scholarship increasingly views NVE as a form of violence that operates both between and beyond traditional ideological conceptions of terrorism (Argentino & Hart, 2026; Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2025; Neumann, 2026). While extremist ideas are often present, ideology typically plays a secondary role, with NVE reflecting a fragmented mix of ideas and beliefs rather than a coherent ideological framework (Argentino & Hart, 2026; Smith et al., 2026). Research highlights a range of common vulnerabilities among NVE actors, including identity deficits, mental health and developmental challenges, victimisation, and engagement with violent or objectionable online content (Smith et al., 2026). Additional characteristics include self-loathing, depression, trauma, suicidal ideation, psychosocial instability, and grievances linked to social, family or school environments (Argentino & Lindsay, 2026a; Rousseau et al., 2025; Ewing & Speckhard, 2026; Hart, 2026). Young people appear

particularly vulnerable within these online ecosystems and are more likely than adults to engage in NVE-related violence (Argentino & Lindsay, 2026a; Rousseau et al., 2025; Thorn, 2026). NVE is also associated with the hybridisation of harms, encompassing child sexual exploitation material, self-harm and suicide content, animal cruelty, coercion and exploitation, the glorification of mass violence, and, in some cases, the commission of violent attacks (Argentino, 2025; Argentino & Lindsay, 2026a; Argentino & Lindsay, Argentino & Hart, 2026; 2026b; Baldino, 2026; Zdjelar, 2026).

The existing literature has conceptualised NVE through a set of recurring and interrelated features:

- Violence precedes or overrides a unifying belief.
- Meaning collapse and hostility towards humanity – there is no coherent worldview that replaces existing norms fuelled by misanthropy.
- Identity formation through harm – violence provides identity, status, and belonging.
- Affective intensity over ideology – emotions (rage, nihilism, thrill) dominate.
- Visible signalling – persistent threats, manifestos, and online posts are performative rather than strategic.
- Profound vulnerability alongside credible threat – individuals engaged in NVE can often show trauma, suicidal ideation, mental health issues, or social isolation.
- Engagement with extreme content – including violent and extremist imagery and, in some cases, exploitative material.
- Online amplification and coercive communities – through for example Com Network style environments.
- Trauma as a recruitment mechanism – coercion, humiliation, and harm used to bind participants to online communities of influence.

Recent examples illustrate how these dynamics manifest in practice, with the case of Bradley Cadenhead providing an illustrative case study. As a minor, Bradley Cadenhead founded the online NVE network 764. Drawing the name from parts of his local postcode, 764 has established a global footprint in which child sexual exploitation, coercion, self-harm, sadism, and status-seeking are central activities to varied forms of extreme violence enacted or influenced by both young people and adults (Guerrero, 2025; Vasquez, 2026). He was

charged and convicted for the possession with intent to promote child pornography. Table 1 below illustrates how the following features of NVE listed above manifested in this case and is taken from the existing reporting available in the public domain (Guerrero, 2025; State of Texas v. Bradley Chance Cadenhead; Vasquez, 2026). The purpose of Table 1 is not to validate a typology of NVE but to demonstrate how commonly cited NVE characteristics have been interpreted within one well-documented case. Cadenhead was selected because it is among the most extensively documented NVE cases currently available through court documents, media reporting and public records. The categories applied in the table were derived from recurring themes identified in the emerging NVE literature and the table is intended as an illustrative mapping exercise rather than a formal qualitative coding analysis.

Table 1 - NVE related features in the Cadenhead case

Concept	Evidence from the Cadenhead Case
Violence detached from belief	Bradley's involvement in harmful online activity appears driven by attention, status, notoriety, and belonging rather than any coherent ideological doctrine. He described becoming "obsessed with all the attention" and feeling good about himself because others knew who he was. The case file suggests that recognition, identity, and social status, rather than ideological commitment, were central drivers of his engagement.
Meaning collapse and hostility towards humanity	Bradley reported associating popularity with "not caring about others" and being willing to hurt people. His progression from consuming gore content to distributing child sexual exploitation material and participating in exploitative online communities suggests a deterioration of normative restraints without evidence of a coherent alternative worldview. His attraction to shock value, harm, and transgression appears more salient than any overarching belief system.
Identity formation through harm	Bradley experienced longstanding social rejection, bullying, isolation, and feelings of being an outsider. Within online communities he found recognition and status, reporting that for the first time he felt superior to others because people knew who he was and talked about him. Harmful behaviour appears to have become a pathway to identity, belonging, and social validation.
Affective intensity over ideology	Bradley's behaviour is characterised by emotional drivers including loneliness, rejection, desire for attention, sensation-seeking, and the "adrenaline-like rush" he experienced from gore content. His offending appears linked to emotional gratification, excitement, and validation rather than to ideological conviction.

Concept	Evidence from the Cadenhead Case
Visible signalling	Bradley's offending included distributing child sexual exploitation material within online communities to gain notoriety and attract attention. His own description of being motivated by recognition and visibility suggests that online activity functioned partly as a performative display designed to increase status and reputation among peers.
Profound vulnerability alongside credible threat	Bradley experienced a range of adverse early experiences including parental separation, family dysfunction, exposure to substance misuse, bullying, childhood sexual victimisation, and school disengagement. Simultaneously, he made threats towards his school, received suspensions for making a terrorist threat, and created harmful online networks resulting in charges and conviction for serious criminal offending.
Engagement with extreme content	Bradley reported exposure to gore content from age 10 and described finding it exciting and stimulating. His online behaviour escalated to the distribution of child sexual exploitation material and participation in exploitative online communities, demonstrating sustained engagement with increasingly severe and extreme material.
Online amplification and coercive communities	Following his withdrawal from school and social life, Bradley spent approximately one year largely isolated in his mother's apartment. Online environments subsequently became a major source of identity, belonging, status, and reinforcement. His involvement with 764 demonstrates how online communities amplified harmful attitudes and rewarded escalating exploitative behaviour through attention and peer recognition.
Trauma as a recruitment mechanism	Bradley entered these online spaces with a history of bullying, rejection, childhood sexual abuse, family instability, self-harm, suicidality, and profound unmet needs for acceptance. His trajectory illustrates how psychosocial vulnerabilities can increase receptiveness to online communities that offer belonging, status, and validation. While Bradley assumed an influential leadership role in these online networks, his case strongly demonstrates how trauma and social adversity created vulnerabilities that increased the appeal of these communities.

In summary Bradley Cadenhead's developmental history reflects the accumulation of multiple adverse childhood experiences, psychosocial vulnerabilities, and behavioural risk factors that appear relevant to understanding his later offending (Guerrero, 2025; *State of Texas v. Bradley Chance Cadenhead*; Vasquez, 2026). The case highlights important challenges for risk assessment and service provision. Although Bradley's treating therapist

later testified that she did not consider him an imminent risk to others, she was reportedly unaware of the full extent of his online offending, and no formal violence risk assessment had been conducted. This underscores the complexity of cases in which developmental adversity, mental health difficulties, social isolation, online exploitation, and extreme violence-related behaviours co-occur.

Other noted cases are that of Nikita Casap (Wisconsin, 2025) who allegedly murdered his parents, remained with the bodies for weeks, and later travelled interstate with weapons. Investigators explicitly described him as a “nihilistic violent extremist,” (FBI, 2026; Whoriskey, 2025). While fragments of ideological content (including references to white supremacist accelerationism) were present, investigators emphasised that violence and misanthropy were primary drivers. Similarly, the case of Robin Westman who perpetrated the Annunciation Catholic Church shooting in Minneapolis USA (August, 2025) has been interpreted as NVE-aligned. Analysts pointed to the perpetrator’s online activity, engagement with violent subcultures, and lack of consistent ideological messaging, suggesting motivations rooted in nihilistic expression (NCITE Briefing, 2025). Beyond these individual cases other developments include coordinated “swatting” campaigns linked to online NVE communities and school stabbings and disrupted plots including in Sweden, Finland, Poland, and Italy (Marone, 2026; Argentino, 2025b; Slater, 2023).

Despite its usefulness, the NVE category does remain contested. In several U.S. cases - including the Westman and Casap cases cited above - the label has been applied after the fact to explain violence that does not fit existing categories. However, this often does not resolve the underlying analytical problem: whether the violence is genuinely non-ideological, ideologically hybrid, or simply poorly articulated. Scholars and practitioners caution that NVE risks becoming a conceptual dumping ground for analytically inconvenient cases. There is a particular concern that it may obscure far right or other ideological motivations, especially when ideological elements are present but incoherent or mixed (Rai & Zoschak, 2025). This concern is borne out in cases where initially “nihilistic” attacks were later reassessed as ideologically driven upon closer analysis.

Also, recent scholarship has challenged strong claims regarding the absence of ideology within NVE. That is the relationship between ideology and NVE is likely more complex than a simple distinction between ideological and non-ideological violence.

Emerging scholarship suggests that, in many cases, affective orientations such as misanthropy, antagonism, alienation, and hostility toward society may precede the development of more coherent belief systems. Hart (2026) identifies recurring ideological themes within NVE manifestos. Baldino (2026), for example, argues that affective and perceptual dynamics shape how individuals experience and interpret the world before ideological narratives become consolidated, with ideology often functioning as a means of articulating, justifying, and stabilising pre-existing emotional and perceptual orientations.

From this perspective, NVE may be better understood as existing along a continuum. At one end are individuals whose engagement with violence is characterised by diffuse grievances, meaning collapse, fascination with violence, and weakly articulated or highly fragmented ideological commitments. At the other end are actors whose nihilistic orientations become increasingly organised into more coherent worldviews centred on misanthropy, social collapse, the devaluation of human life, or the veneration of violence. In such cases, nihilism may be understood less as the absence of ideology than as an emerging ideological or quasi-ideological framework that provides its own system of meaning and orientation (Koehler, 2025).

Also, it would be inaccurate to simply understand adolescent pathways into NVE through the lens of exploitation and coercion. Evidence indicates that some youth can actively create and engage with violent exploitative content as way of seeking meaning and motivation, without being coerced or groomed by others (Barracosa & Cherney, 2025). We do believe NVE is a useful concept as it captures forms of violent engagement that are not easily explained through coherent ideological frameworks; however, caution is warranted in its application, particularly given the risk of prematurely dismissing the role of violent extremist content or ideas, the potential impact of underlying ideological drivers, or minimising the agency of those involved. Beyond contested definitions, NVE cases involving youth highlight substantial challenges in CVE policy and practice.

Implications for CVE practice

Taking account of the issues raised above we now consider implications for CVE assessment, case management and support when it comes to intervening with young people aligned with

NVE. We focus on four key areas: referral pathways; service provision complexity; clinical and risk assessment, and staff support/wellbeing. We acknowledge many of the issues discussed below are not unique to NVE. Trauma, psychosocial vulnerability, online influences, practitioner wellbeing, and non-ideological drivers have long featured within radicalisation and CVE scholarship. Our argument is not that NVE introduces entirely new challenges, but that it alters their configuration, salience, and operational significance within youth-focused CVE practice.

1: Referral Pathways and the Problem of Ideological Thresholds

NVE sits uneasily within conventional CVE referral criteria. Many CVE frameworks still implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, privilege evidence of radicalisation towards a recognised extremist ideology when determining whether intervention thresholds have been met (Cherney, 2024; Lewis et al., 2024). However, emerging scholarship suggests that the challenge is not necessarily the absence of ideology in NVE cases, but rather the presence of ideological commitments that are fragmented, weakly articulated, highly personalised, or embedded within broader affective and perceptual orientations (Baldino, 2026; Koehler, 2025). Contemporary NVE cases frequently involve grievances, threats, fascination with violence, and hostile worldviews that do not align neatly with established ideological categories, making them difficult to identify through referral processes designed around conventional ideological taxonomies (Rousseau et al., 2026; Taylor, Quayle & Horgan, 2026; Whoriskey, 2025).

As acknowledged in the previous section, NVE may be better understood as existing along a continuum ranging from diffuse and poorly articulated beliefs through to more coherent nihilistic worldviews organised around violence, destruction, or the devaluation of human life. The practical difficulty for referral systems is that such orientations may not initially resemble traditional forms of radicalisation despite being highly relevant to pathways toward violence.

This challenge was highlighted in the 2024 United Kingdom Southport attack perpetrated by 17-year-old Axel Rudakubana. The subsequent inquiry found that despite being referred to Prevent on three occasions, he was not referred to the Channel programme because assessors concluded that he did not display a discernible terrorist ideology (UK Home

Office, 2025; Southport Inquiry, 2026). Yet Rudakubana demonstrated a range of concerning behavioural, psychosocial, and clinical indicators. He had a history of violence and targeted threats, including threats within school settings, consumed violent and extremist material, possessed an al-Qaeda training manual, and searched online for information relating to terrorist attacks and school shootings (Dearden, 2025; Syal, 2026). While authorities were unable to identify a coherent ideological grievance underpinning his behaviour, the case illustrates how an emphasis on readily identifiable ideological commitments can create difficulties when confronted with individuals whose pathways toward violence are organised around violence itself, fragmented meaning systems, or evolving ideological orientations rather than established ideological narratives.

These observations in practice can produce what may be termed referral ambiguity. Cases appear violent without being ideological, extremist in affect but not belief, or political in consequence but not intent. As a consequence, they may be diverted into law enforcement, mental health, child protection, or broader safeguarding systems. While such referrals may be entirely appropriate given the nature of the presenting concerns, they also raise important questions regarding whether these systems possess the necessary expertise to assess and manage the complex convergence of violence risk, online extremist influences, identity vulnerabilities, and harmful subcultures that can characterise NVE pathways. In this context, responsibility for the assessment and coordination of longer-term risk management should not be viewed as residing solely within any single service system. Rather, NVE cases highlight the need for stronger integration between CVE, mental health, child protection, education, and youth justice services. CVE practitioners remain uniquely positioned to assess the interplay between violent extremist content, emerging ideological formations, behavioural indicators, and broader psychosocial vulnerabilities, while coordinating multidisciplinary responses to identified risks.

Recent concerns relating to mass casualty fixation, accelerationist subcultures, school-based threats, and other forms of grievance-driven violence are beginning to sharpen questions around referral pathways and thresholds (Allely, Scheithauer & Langman, 2025; Ewing & Speckhard, 2026; Kriner, 2024; Slater, 2023). These cases suggest that intent, target selection, behavioural fixation, and engagement with violence can, in some circumstances, be as important as ideological coherence in determining CVE relevance, particularly among

young people. This suggests that referral processes may need to move beyond a narrow focus on identifiable ideological labels toward a broader consideration of how individuals make sense of violence, grievance, belonging, and social reality. Consistent with Baldino (2026), affective factors such as alienation, antagonism, fascination with destruction, and threat-saturated perceptions of the world may warrant attention alongside more traditional indicators of ideological commitment. Likewise, Koehler's (2025) work suggests that practitioners should attend to how individuals define social problems, identify solutions, and imagine desired futures, even when these beliefs are not expressed through coherent ideological doctrines.

The implication is not that ideology should be abandoned as a referral criterion, but that it should be understood more broadly than traditional doctrinal or group-based formulations. Referral systems overly reliant on established ideological categories may under-detect young people whose risk trajectories are shaped by nihilistic orientations, harmful online subcultures, mass violence fascination, or emerging ideological worldviews that have yet to crystallise into coherent forms. Explicit policy guidance is therefore required to clarify that referral into youth CVE systems need not depend exclusively on demonstrated adherence to recognised extremist ideologies. Forms of violence-oriented meaning-making characterised by nihilism, misanthropy, mass harm fascination, persistent violent fixation, or engagement with online ecosystems that normalise violence may constitute legitimate CVE concerns, particularly when combined with behavioural indicators suggesting an elevated risk of harm.

2: Service Provision Complexity

Nihilistic violent extremism dramatically complicates intervention delivery because it collapses categories that CVE services are not necessarily structurally designed to address - particularly in youth cases (Rousseau et al., 2025). This relates to the observation that in the NVE context practitioners are increasingly encountering young people who in some cases are *simultaneously* victims of neglect, abuse, exploitation, or trauma, engaged in credible behaviours revolving around threat-making or violent rehearsal and embedded in online spaces that normalise self-harm, sexual violence, and mass casualty scenarios, including but not limited to targeted school violence, violent extremism and terrorism (Barracosa &

Cherney, 2025; Ewing & Speckhard, 2026; Taylor, Quayle & Horgan, 2026; Silver & Kaati, 2026). This victim-perpetrator convergence creates several operational tensions.

While many contemporary CVE approaches to youth increasingly incorporate developmental and trauma-informed principles (Ewing & Speckhard, 2026; Koehler, 2020; Oberg, Adams & Stahl, 2023), NVE cases often place these concerns at the centre rather than the periphery of intervention planning. Sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, self-harm, and complex developmental trauma can often be treated as background factors rather than primary intervention domains. In NVE cases, these harms are not merely contextual - they can actively structure violent fixation, engagement, and the meanings it affords as an outlet for emotional distress. However, the significance of NVE does not lie solely in the presence of trauma, abuse, or adversity, as these experiences are common across many categories of youth offending (Farrington, Ttofi & Piquero 2026; Fox et al., 2015; Herrenkohl et al., 2000; Malvaso et al., 2022). Importantly, these factors alone do not adequately explain engagement in NVE. A more useful framework is to understand how disrupted attachment relationships, chronic social exclusion, and identity deficits may increase susceptibility to online communities that offer belonging, recognition, status, and purpose (Amarasingam, 2024; De Koster & Houtman, 2008; Renström, Bäck & Knapton, 2020; Stänicke, Hermansen & Halvorsen, 2024; Stänicke et al., 2024). For vulnerable young people, online NVE networks can function as alternative attachment systems, providing social validation, status, and identity formation opportunities that are absent in their offline lives (Holt, Freilich & Chermak, 2017). In this way, trauma and adversity may be less important as direct causes of offending and more significant as factors that heighten vulnerability to recruitment, manipulation, and exploitation by harmful online actors.

At the same time, the clinical implications of NVE extends beyond those typically associated with involvement in traditional extremist groups. The content circulating within NVE ecosystems frequently includes graphic violence, child sexual exploitation, self-harm, suicide, animal cruelty, humiliation, and sadistic abuse. Repeated exposure to such material during critical stages of psychological, emotional, and social development raises concerns about desensitisation, moral disengagement, distorted social learning, and the normalisation of cruelty and harm (Mrug et al., 2015; Mrug, Madan & Windle, 2016; Luo & Bussey, 2023; Smith, Cadenhead & Broekaert, 2026). From a developmental perspective, these

environments may be particularly damaging because they intersect with periods when young people are actively constructing their sense of self, morality, interpersonal relationships, and emotional regulation capacities. Whereas traditional extremist involvement has often been conceptualised in terms of ideological commitment or group-based radicalisation, NVE may exert its influence through sustained exposure to graphic and exploitative material that reshapes perceptions of violence, suffering, and human relationships. Consequently, practitioners must attend not only to the drivers of involvement but also to the cumulative psychological impact of prolonged immersion in these environments. The concern is not simply that vulnerable young people are exposed to harmful content, but that repeated engagement with extreme violence, exploitation, and degradation may fundamentally alter developmental trajectories during some of the most formative periods of adolescence. This poses significant challenges to the intensity and multifaceted nature of long-term clinical interventions where vulnerability and risk are persistently addressed in equal measure.

Secondly, youth-focused CVE interventions must reconcile child protection and safeguarding obligations with public protection imperatives. In the context of NVE, a young person may require intensive therapeutic support while also posing acute risks to peers, family members, schools, or institutions. In such situations case coordination and intervention plans will need to be accompanied by systematic threat scenario planning and mitigation, prioritising monitoring of behavioural markers for violent escalation. If these emerge and require remedial action, it can in turn disrupt traditional intervention sequencing and consistency. This can also disrupt the therapeutic alliance established between a practitioner and client (Cherney, De Rooy & Williams, 2022; Rousseau et al., 2026). This will be fundamentally dynamic and difficult work. Timely intervention delivery may also be impacted by practitioners/third parties minimising, or not formally reporting to relevant agencies, concerning or offending behaviours to protect a young person from potential criminal justice consequences. While well-intentioned, this approach can have significant unintended effects, including delaying access to specialist intervention services, reinforcing a perception that harmful behaviours carry limited consequences, and siloing risk management approaches. It may also place practitioners in ethically and legally vulnerable positions where reporting obligations, such as mandatory child protection reporting requirements, are not

adequately met. Ultimately, avoiding formal recognition of offending behaviour can undermine both effective risk management and opportunities for timely intervention.

Compounding these problems is that service ecosystems can be poorly integrated for this level of intensity and complexity. In the context of NVE, CVE practitioners may frequently find themselves coordinating across child protection, forensic or adolescent mental health, sexual harm services, education, school counselling and threat management, and law enforcement. This may occur without a shared or suitably detailed understanding of individual needs, threat and risk frameworks, or information thresholds for reporting issues or concerns. The consequence is fragmented or poorly coordinated service provision in which no agency holds the full risk picture, and CVE teams can be left managing risks outside their remit (e.g., sexual offending behaviours or acute suicidality). As a result, service provision can become fragmented, and ethical challenges can arise around confidentiality when information is spread across a range of services.

Further, family engagement is generally recognised as an important feature of best practice in the CVE field, particularly when it comes to young people, with the family environment helping to reinforce intervention goals (Lewis et al., 2025; Barracosa & Cherney, 2026; Stanley, Barracosa, Kitson & Wysocki, 2026). However, an important, but often underappreciated, dimension of NVE is the role of family systems. Take for example the Bradley Cadenhead case cited above. He lived in a home characterised by instability, family conflict, inconsistent caregiving, or limited parental monitoring of his online activities. In such contexts, young people may spend substantial periods of time unsupervised online, increasing their exposure to harmful networks and reducing opportunities for early intervention. Importantly, these family-level vulnerabilities do not simply increase the risk of involvement - they also complicate intervention efforts. Practitioners may encounter caregivers who are unaware of the nature or extent of their child's online activities, lack the capacity to provide effective supervision, or are themselves managing significant psychosocial difficulties. As a result, interventions focused solely on the young person are unlikely to be sufficient, highlighting the need for family-centred approaches that address both online safety and broader family functioning (Barracosa & Cherney, 2025; Stanley et al., 2026).

Our recommendation is that CVE responses to nihilistic extremism must become more trauma-literate, developmentally informed, systemic, and multi-disciplinary by design, rather than ad hoc in nature where intervention occurs in the context of behavioural escalation and when the individual has reached a crisis point e.g., when threats are being made. The findings of Rousseau et al. (2025) suggest that an important challenge for practitioners may be how to engage young people who express pervasive alienation, social withdrawal, misanthropy, and a rejection of society itself. In such circumstances, intervention is not simply a matter of challenging beliefs or promoting alternative narratives. Rather, a more fundamental task will involve rebuilding meaning, purpose, belonging, and social connection. This raises important questions regarding whether contemporary CVE interventions are adequately equipped to address experiences of meaning collapse and existential dislocation that appear characteristic of some NVE presentations. This work is likely to be complex and highly intensive. It places significant demands on CVE services and other providers to deliver interventions that are long-term, robust, developmentally informed, multi-modal and multiagency in orientation.

3: Risk and Clinical Assessment

NVE raises several important challenges for risk assessment, although these challenges should not be interpreted as evidence that existing violent extremism (VE) risk assessment frameworks are inherently unsuitable. Instruments such as the Violent Extremism Risk Assessment Version 2 Revised (VERA-2R) were designed to assess a broad range of risk domains, including ideological commitment, attitudes supportive of violence, social context, capability, intent, and biographical vulnerabilities (Pressman et al., 2018). Many of these domains remain highly relevant to NVE cases. Indeed, features commonly observed in NVE, such as fascination with violence, status-seeking, social isolation, identity disturbance, and exposure to harmful online influences, are often captured indirectly through existing behavioural, social, and contextual indicators. The challenge is therefore less that existing VE assessment tools are incapable of identifying risk in NVE cases and more that they were not developed with contemporary nihilistic online ecosystems and related forms of youth violence in mind.

This distinction is important because, in many NVE cases, ideological commitment may be fragmented, inconsistent, or secondary to other drivers of violence. Rather than

organised ideological adherence or group affiliation, practitioners may encounter individuals whose risk profiles are characterised by behavioural fixation, sensation-seeking, emotional dysregulation, trauma, identity deficits, status-seeking, and immersion in online communities that normalise or reward violence. Existing VE frameworks can often accommodate such dynamics, but practitioners may need to place greater emphasis on the interaction between psychosocial vulnerabilities and exposure to violent online environments. This includes exposure, consumption of and engagement in violent extremist materials and ideas.

At the same time, standard violence risk assessment instruments such as the Historical Clinical Risk Management-20 (HCR-20) and the Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth (SAVRY) offer several important advantages, including strong empirical foundations, common professional language, and demonstrated utility across diverse forms of violence risk (Borum, Bartel & Forth, 2006; Logan, 2014; Campbell et al., 2025; Sheed et al., 2026). However, these tools are generally not designed to assess the influence of violent extremist content, online radicalising environments, extremist associates, or the symbolic and identity-related functions that violence may serve within NVE ecosystems. Consequently, reliance on either VE-specific or general violence assessment tools in isolation may provide only a partial understanding of risk and can limit the identification of potentially relevant intervention targets.

A related consideration is the growing prevalence of targeted school threats, leakage behaviours, online signalling, and other forms of grievance broadcasting within NVE-related cases. These patterns suggest that behavioural threat assessment approaches may provide a particularly valuable complement to existing VE assessment frameworks. Threat assessment models focus on acute indicators such as communication of intent, behavioural fixation, pathway behaviours, leakage, and capacity-building activities, including weapon acquisition (Meloy, 2018). These dimensions often correspond closely with behaviours observed in NVE cases, where violence is frequently signalled, rehearsed, or performed online before an attack occurs. Integrating behavioural threat assessment approaches into VE practice may therefore strengthen practitioners' ability to identify and manage immediate concerns while simultaneously informing longer-term intervention and risk management planning.

NVE therefore highlights the need for a more integrated assessment framework in which short-term threat assessment and longer-term risk management operate concurrently.

Immediate concerns may centre on threats, fixation, violent fantasies, or behavioural escalation, while longer-term risks often involve developmental vulnerabilities, psychosocial instability, trauma histories, family dysfunction, identity disturbance, ongoing immersion in harmful online environments, and residual risk concerns. Effective assessment therefore requires practitioners to address both imminent risk and underlying drivers simultaneously rather than treating crisis management and rehabilitation as separate stages of intervention. Such formulations are likely to be complex and require multidisciplinary input from practitioners with expertise across violence prevention, mental health, child development, and online harms.

Importantly, clinical assessment must also avoid automatically interpreting the absence of a coherent ideology, or the presence of contradictory and fluid belief systems, as evidence of psychotic or obsessional pathology (Rahman & Abugel, 2024). While such presentations may superficially resemble disorganised thinking, they may instead reflect identity diffusion, sensation-seeking, trauma-related vulnerabilities, social alienation, and immersion in online environments characterised by irony, transgression, and performative violence. Violent ideation should therefore be regarded as clinically meaningful regardless of whether it is embedded within a coherent ideological framework, particularly where it is linked to social hatred, or fantasies of destruction – which themselves can act as quasi-ideological world views when they provide solutions to the problems individuals face, even when they may seem incoherent and provide answers underpinned by misanthropic worldviews (Koehler, 2025).

Finally, while existing VE and violence risk assessment tools remain valuable and should continue to inform professional judgement, many were developed before the emergence of algorithmically driven content exposure, highly immersive online subcultures, and forms of identity development increasingly mediated through digital environments (Aris, 2026; Ebner, Kavanagh & Whitehouse, 2024). Consequently, they may not fully capture the cumulative influence of violent media saturation, peer reinforcement within online communities, the gamification of harmful behaviour, or the performance of despair, alienation, and transgression as forms of social identity. Rather than rendering existing frameworks obsolete, these developments point to the need for the adoption of hybrid and dynamic assessment models that combine insights from violent extremism assessment,

behavioural threat assessment, violence risk assessment, and developmental formulations. Future work may also explore the utility of specialised measures examining nihilism, meaning collapse, or related constructs (Baldino, 2026; Champion, 2026; Forsythe & Mongrain, 2023), while ensuring that such approaches remain sensitive to the developmental realities of adolescence and emerging adulthood (Barracosa & Cherney, 2026).

4: CVE Staff Support and Wellbeing

Concerns regarding practitioner wellbeing are not unique to NVE and have been recognised within CVE practice for some time (Oberg, Adams, & Stahl, 2023; Rousseau et al., 2026; Stevenson & Barracosa, 2025). What may differ in NVE cases is the intensity of convergence of sexualised violence, child exploitation, self-harm, suicide content, and diffuse misanthropic narratives within a single case context.

The types of content and behaviours encountered can be qualitatively different from those traditionally associated with ideologically driven extremism. Rather than being framed through political or religious narratives, expressions of NVE can be raw, transgressive, and emotionally intense, often lacking the structures and characteristics that typically help practitioners interpret these attributes within established conceptual and professional frameworks. As a result, practitioners may find themselves engaging with expressions of violence that are more personalised, diffuse, and psychologically confronting, placing new demands on their professional judgement, emotional resilience, and interpretive capacity (Rousseau et al., 2026; Stevenson & Barracosa, 2025). The content and behaviours practitioners will face in working with NVE aligned clients may therefore be difficult to cognitively and emotionally process. Repeated exposure to such material may contribute to emotional exhaustion, burnout, desensitisation, distress, and disruptions to practitioners' sense of meaning, safety, and professional efficacy over time (Oberg, Adams, & Stahl, 2023; Stevenson & Barracosa, 2025).

A second challenge arises from the boundary-spanning role that CVE practitioners often occupy in NVE cases. These practitioners frequently operate at the intersection of mental health, child protection, education, and criminal justice systems, yet may lack access to the specialist supervision frameworks available within those domains. In practice, this can result in youth CVE staff being asked to interpret complex presentations - including

sexualised behaviours, suicidality, developmental trauma responses, identity disturbance, and family systems considerations - without formal clinical training, skills, or support. At the same time, other services may defer threat and risk management back to CVE teams due to the perceived “extremism” dimension, even when the primary concerns fall within other domains. This diffusion of responsibility can leave practitioners managing risks outside their expertise, increasing professional uncertainty and potentially compromising the quality and appropriateness of the interventions they deliver.

In this context, professional supervision emerges as essential protective infrastructure for staff, young people and by extension, the community (Stevenson & Barracosa 2025). Structured, reflective supervision provides a critical space for youth CVE practitioners to process complex material, test interpretations, and maintain ethical and proportionate responses to risk particularly in cases characterised by ambiguity and complexity. The emergence of NVE further highlights that practitioner wellbeing is not separate from system effectiveness but is central to it. Where practitioners are routinely exposed to complex, non-ideological, and psychologically confronting material without adequate supervision, training, and organisational support, there is a heightened risk that responses become reactive rather than reflective - shaped by anxiety, uncertainty, or exposure to distressing content rather than grounded in structured assessment and clinical formulation. This may manifest in either overly securitised responses, where risk is amplified beyond what is warranted, or in avoidance and minimisation, where risk is insufficiently recognised or managed. Both outcomes undermine effective intervention practice.

More broadly, the emergence of NVE highlights the extent to which practitioner wellbeing is integral to system effectiveness (Stevenson & Barracosa, 2025). The sustainability of youth CVE work cannot be understood in isolation from the working conditions of practitioners or the characteristics of the clients they engage with. Where exposure to complex, non-ideological, and psychologically confronting material becomes routine, without corresponding investment in supervision, training, and support, there is a real risk of workforce attrition, reduced capacity, and inconsistent practice. In this sense, practitioner wellbeing should be understood not as a secondary occupational health concern, but as a core component of effective case management and risk mitigation. This requires integrated care planning and practitioner debriefing. Hence addressing NVE therefore requires

not only adaptations in assessment frameworks and intervention models, but also a recalibration of workforce support systems to ensure that practitioners are equipped, supported, and able to engage with these cases in a sustainable and ethically informed manner.

Conclusion

The emergence of NVE presents significant challenges for contemporary youth CVE systems, but these challenges should not be understood as evidence that existing frameworks are fundamentally obsolete. Rather, NVE highlights tensions and limitations within current CVE systems. Taken together, NVE pressures CVE systems at every level: referral logic, intervention design, assessment practice, and workforce sustainability. Several important questions do remain unresolved. Under what conditions should violence associated with harmful online ecosystems be considered a CVE concern? How can practitioners effectively address forms of alienation, misanthropy, and meaning collapse among vulnerable young people? To what extent do existing assessment frameworks adequately capture these pathways, and what forms of workforce support are most effective when responding to increasingly complex presentations? While definitive answers to these questions remain elusive and ongoing, we have aimed to highlight several preliminary lessons.

Ultimately, NVE does not signal the end of ideology-centred approaches to violent extremism, nor does it require a complete redesign of contemporary CVE systems. Instead, it highlights the need to broaden existing frameworks to better account for the interplay between ideology, affect, identity, trauma, online environments, and violence itself. For youth CVE services in particular, this may require a more integrated approach that is violence-focused, trauma-informed, developmentally sensitive, and responsive to the realities of contemporary digital life. As understanding of NVE continues to evolve, so too, must the conceptual, assessment, and intervention frameworks used to prevent harm and support vulnerable young people away from pathways toward violence.

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ISSN: 2363-9849

Editor in Chief: Daniel Koehler