

Australia at 'crossroads' as police warn of 'tsunami' of youth radicalisation online

Story by political reporter Holly Tregenza
21 Oct • 3 min read • Updated 14h ago

👍 48 💬 72 📄 ⋮



Police have told a parliamentary inquiry Australia is facing a 'tsunami' of radicalisation. (ABC News: Dave Sciasci)

Australia is at a "crossroads" and facing a "tsunami of youth crime", with police warning vulnerable children as young as 11 are being radicalised online at unprecedented speed, including a boy who allegedly planned a school shooting.

Acting Australian Federal Police (AFP) Deputy Commissioner Sandra Booth told a parliamentary inquiry the radicalisation of young people, which used to take "months or years", was now happening "within days".

She described an online world in which children were being targeted by "sadistic" predators, pointing to the case of a 13-year-old boy charged after police allegedly found a notebook at his home outlining plans to shoot classmates.

"This was not in the US. This was in Australia," Deputy Commissioner Booth said.

In another case, police charged an Australian teenager over child abuse material offences after alleging he joined a sadistic online network and requested his handle be written on a baby's face while the infant was forced to vape.

Speaking to the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Intelligence and Security (JPCIS), the AFP attributed the rapid escalation to artificial intelligence, a growing grievance generation, and "young people searching for purpose and belonging, and the sophistication of these online networks".

She said predators often turned "desperate victims into perpetrators".

"For example, youth are recording or live streaming animal crushing, physically or sexually assaulting their siblings to escape the hold their blackmailers have over them," she said.

"They think if they do what they are being asked, they will no longer be targeted".

Since 2020, counter-terrorism authorities have targeted 65 children aged between 12 and 17, with 35 of those investigations resulting in charges.

ASIO boss Mike Burgess has repeatedly said Australia faces an "unprecedented" threat environment, saying that while the national terrorism threat level remained at "probable", the overall security landscape justified describing the threat as unprecedented.

ASIO Deputy Director-General Claire McGinnis said the agency's counter-terrorism caseload was getting younger, with Home Affairs later confirming an 11-year-old child had taken part in a de-radicalisation program.

Children use AI bots to plan attacks

The inquiry heard potential offenders were using AI chatbots to research and plan attacks.

Ms McGinnis said while there was no single factor that made young people susceptible to extremism, the fact many were digital natives made them more susceptible.

"[An AI chatbot] can bypass hours of work, for example, making attack planning more efficient," Ms McGinnis said.

Encrypted apps were also an "enduring challenge" for ASIO, she said, because they "enabled anonymity".

"Privacy is obviously very important but should not be absolute when we're dealing with significant threats," she said.

Police want powers to disrupt online chat rooms

Acting Deputy Commissioner Sandra Booth said the AFP was considering proposing an expansion of its powers to allow officers to more actively disrupt harmful online chat groups, including by posting messages which alert users that police are present.

Ms Booth said police were keen to explore ways to move beyond merely monitoring extremist content online.

"We do want to scope out how we can move forward from just covertly accepting violent extremist communications to more overtly interrupting chat groups and websites where youth are being radicalised," she said.

The inquiry also heard concerns that some young people who completed behaviour-change and de-radicalisation programs later returned to extremist ideologies.

Representatives from the Department of Home Affairs said most referrals to de-radicalisation programs come from law enforcement agencies.

"I think that tells us we are picking too many people up too late in the piece," Home Affairs counter-terrorism coordinator Brendan Dowling said.

"What we look to in the future is to have people identified earlier in the process by parents, by educators, by bystanders."

He said young people entering de-radicalisation programs often did not fit traditional perceptions of violent extremists.

"Radicalised young people often do not look like what our community imagines," he said.