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Assessing Youth Radicalisation with the VERA 2R: Implications for Intervention and Case Management

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Abstract
The field of violent extremism risk assessment is underdeveloped regarding implementation with youth. This is notable given the increasing number of youths referred to countering violent extremism (CVE) programs and the role of risk assessment in informing decisions around case management and intervention. This paper reports results from a study using primary data that applied the Violent Extremism Risk Assessment – Version 2 Revised (VERA-2R) tool to a sample of at-risk and radicalised Australian youth below the age of 18 years. The study had two aims: first, to examine the practical utility of the VERA 2R when field tested with a youth cohort, and second, to identify implications for violent extremism risk assessment and associated case management and intervention planning. An experienced practitioner (first author) trained in the VERA-2R undertook the assessments of 16 youth referred to CVE services in one Australian state. The findings indicate that while most risk indicators in the VERA-2R are broadly applicable to youth, the tool did have limitations. These findings are considered alongside several observed implementation challenges regarding interventions with youth and their case management needs.

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Introduction

A range of specialist violent extremism threat and risk assessment tools have been developed on the premise that standardised assessment measures fail to account for contextual factors and risk indicators relevant to radicalisation and violent extremism (Lloyd, 2019). This includes such tools as the TRAP-18 (Meloy, 2018), ERG-22R (Kenyon et al., 2025) and the VERA-2R (Pressman et al., 2018). These tools are being implemented across a variety of jurisdictions to support the establishment of risk formulation, case and risk management, and intervention frameworks (Logan, Borum & Gill, 2023). This includes programs and initiatives

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that are designed to prevent and counter violent extremism with at-risk and radicalised individuals including youth (Barracosa & March, 2022; Brouliette-Alarie et al., 2025).

However, scholarship on violent extremism risk assessment remains underdeveloped (Knudsen, 2020; Brouliette-Alarie et al., 2025). The need for violent extremism risk assessment tools to capture nuances in contextual and risk factors across different cohorts has been identified (Monahan, 2012; Gonzalez-Alvarez et al., 2022). This is particularly the case with youth. A key argument is that the existing suite of tools fail to adequately account for the developmental, cognitive, psychological and emotional immaturity of youth (Borum, 2025). This includes life-course factors and experiences that are unique to the process of youth radicalisation (Barracosa & Cherney, 2025; Borum, 2025). This observation is particularly noteworthy given one aim of risk assessment practice is to guide decision-making around how to mitigate risk through appropriate case management support and intervention.

Youth CVE practice is identified as requiring tailored, holistic, intensive and developmentally informed approaches (Barracosa & Cherney, 2025; Lewis et al., 2025). If a tool does not have utility with a specific cohort such as youth, then this potentially means interventions arising from an assessment may fail to address their specific risks and needs. One way to understand if this is the case is to examine the application of an instrument to a youth cohort. This creates an opportunity to identify gaps in the tool's application and subsequent implications for intervention design and case management support. This is what we set out to accomplish with this paper. The risk assessment instrument we field-test is the Violent Extremism Risk Assessment – Version 2 Revised (Pressman et al., 2018).

This study draws on primary case file data from a sample of 16 at-risk and radicalised youth referred to CVE services in one Australian state. We first outline the data and procedure used in the application of the VERA-2R to the youth cohort. Results are then reported for each VERA-2R domain, which includes summary observations of the most prominent indicators. This is then followed by observations related to the application of the VERA-2R to our sample and implementation challenges that were confronted. The findings of the study are then considered in relation to implications for decisions around case management support and intervention.

It needs to be emphasised we have not set out to test for validity and reliability of the VERA-2R tool relating to inter-rater reliability or predictive validity (see however Duits &

Kempes, 2023; Cherney & Belton 2024). Rather than offering a formal validation assessment, this paper adopts a practice-informed perspective grounded in applied CVE experience. Drawing on the first author's professional background as a CVE practitioner, the analysis foregrounds end-user engagement with the VERA-2R and the operational contexts in which it is deployed. The recommendations advanced should therefore be read as practitioner-derived feedback, highlighting potential usability, interpretive and contextual challenges that may not be captured through standardised validation approaches. This framing allows the paper to contribute empirically grounded insights into how such tools function in practice, and how their design and application might be refined to better align with frontline CVE work with at-risk and radicalised youth. The choice of the VERA-2R is influenced by its widespread adoption across Australia and its use in the CVE program the first author manages. Our sample is small and we have not set out to compare the risk assessments amongst the sample with a control group of non-radicalised youth. Given the paucity of primary source studies on youth radicalisation and intervening with this cohort (Cubitt & Wolbers, 2022; Rose & Vale, 2023), the paper addresses a gap in existing research.

The VERA-2R and its relevance to youth

Much of the youth risk assessment literature focuses on forensic applications in criminal justice settings, emphasising the value of structured tools for identifying dynamic risks, needs and protective factors to support developmentally appropriate interventions (Andrews, 1989; Baird, 2009). Youth offenders are widely recognised as a complex, high-needs cohort requiring responses that address welfare and vulnerability alongside risk (Richards, 2011). Although this cohort presents inherent vulnerabilities, recent evidence indicates that radicalised youth can pose risks of extremist violence comparable to those of radicalised adults (Five Eyes, 2024).

One tool adopted for the assessment and intervention of extremist individuals and offenders is the VERA-2R (Barracosa & March, 2022; Pressman et al., 2018). The VERA-2R adopts the structured professional judgement (SPJ) approach which is widely endorsed across the field of violent extremism risk assessment (Monahan, 2012; Borum, 2023). The VERA-2R consists of 34 items across five domains (see figure 1 below). The tool also contains an

additional 11 indicators that capture background factors that may impact the risk of a person being radicalised to engage in an act of extremist violence. The VERA-2R has been subject to some critique. This includes suggestions that the tool is better suited to assessing radicalisation rather than violent extremism risk (see Corner & Taylor, 2020), challenges regarding risk specification (Cherney & Mulholland, 2025) and a lack of clarity within some VERA-2R risk indicator domains (Cherney & Belton, 2024; Cherney & Mulholland, 2025). The inability for independent researchers to access and study the VERA-2R has also been identified as an issue (Cubitt & Wolbers, 2022; Hart & Vargen, 2023).

The authors of the VERA-2R state that the tool is suitable for use with youth (Pressman et al., 2018). This assertion remains largely untested (Borum, 2023). It does however appear that risk indictors within the VERA-2R domains broadly align with findings from meta-analyses examining risk for violent extremism amongst youth (see Emmelkamp et al., 2020; Jahnke et al., 2022). These studies found significant relationships between political violence and factors such as real or perceived group threat, relative group deprivation, dissatisfaction with political institutions and authorities, negative attitudes toward democracy and an associated sense of injustice (Emmelkamp et al., 2020; Jahnke et al., 2022). These findings align with VERA-2R risk indicators relating to extreme ideological motivation and justification, narratives related to grievance and rejection of democratic norms (see figure 1 below). Overall, both meta-analyses converge on the conclusion that violent extremism risk amongst youth is cumulative, dynamic and arises from the interaction of grievances, identity, emotional processes and behavioural pathways over time (Emmelkamp et al., 2020; Jahnke et al., 2022). This provides some support for the SPJ approach of the VERA 2R, and its emphasis on assessing interacting and changeable risk factors.

While these findings are useful in addressing questions about the relevance of the VERA-2R to youth radicalisation and violent extremism, they may not fully align with what practitioners encounter in operational settings. This is particularly the case given practitioners' need to account for contextual, transient and idiosyncratic factors that may not be well captured in the empirical literature. Further, academics and practitioners have questioned a lack of a clear theoretical framework underpinning the VERA-2R that links the assessment of risk indicators to case formulation and the development of risk management and intervention strategies (Borum, 2023; Cherney, Mulholland & Belton, 2025; Hart &

Vargen, 2023). Moreover, many risk assessment tools have emerged in response to immediate practitioner needs, despite the continuing lack of empirical research and validation across the field (Gill & Rottweiler, 2023; Brouillette-Alarie et al., 2025). There have also been calls for more developmentally informed approaches to assessing risk amongst radicalised youth (Borum, 2025; Kenyon & Simpson, 2025). Taken together, this points to a clear need for further development and systematic testing, particularly to support implementation of tools such as the VERA-2R with increasingly younger cohorts.

Figure 1: VERA-2R indicators (Pressman et al., 2018)

Domain: Beliefs, Attitudes and Ideology	
BA1	Commitment to ideology that justifies the use of violence
BA2	Perceived grievance and/or perceived injustice
BA3	Dehumanization or designated targets associated with injustice
BA4	Rejection of democratic society and values
BA5	Expressed emotions in response to perceived injustice
BA6	Hostility to national identity
BA7	Lack of empathy and understanding for those outside one's own group
Domain: Social Context and Intention	
SCI1	Seeker, user or developer of violent extremist materials
SCI2	Target for attack identified (person, group, location)
SCI3	Personal contact with violent extremists (informal or social context)
SCI4	Expressed intention to commit acts of violent extremism
SCI5	Expressed willingness and/or preparation to die for a cause or belief
SCI6	Planning, preparation of acts of violent extremism
SCI7	Susceptibility to influence, control, indoctrination
Domain: History, Action and Capacity	
HAC1	Early exposure to pro-violence, militant ideology
HAC2	Network of family and friends involved in violent extremism
HAC3	Previous criminal violence

HAC4	Strategic, paramilitary and/or explosives training
HAC5	Training in extremist ideology in own country or abroad
HAC6	Organisational skills, access to funding and sources of help
	Domain: Commitment and Motivation
CM1	Motivated by perceived religious obligation and/or glorification
CM2	Motivated by criminal opportunism
CM3	Motivated by camaraderie, group belonging
CM4	Motivated by moral obligation, moral superiority
CM5	Motivated by excitement and adventure
CM6	Forced participation in violent extremism
CM7	Motivated by acquisition of status
CM8	Motivated by a search for meaning and significance in life
	Domain: Protection and Risk Mitigating Factors
P1	Reinterpretation of the ideology
P2	Rejection of violence as a means to achieve goals
P3	Change in concept of the enemy
P4	Participant in programmes against violent extremism
P5	Support from the community for non-violence
P6	Support from family members, other important persons for non-violence
	Additional Indicators: Criminal History
CH1	Client of the juvenile justice system/convicted for non-violent offences
CH2	Non-compliance with conditions or supervision
	Additional Indicators: Personal History
PH1	Violence in family
PH2	Problematic upbringing and/or placed in juvenile care
PH3	Problems with school and work
	Additional Indicators: Mental Disorders
MD1	Personality disorder
MD2	Depressive disorder and/or suicide attempts
MD3	Psychotic and schizophrenic disorder

MD4	Autism spectrum disorder
MD5	Post-traumatic stress disorder
MD6	Substance use disorder

Methods

This paper is drawn from a broader Australian study of risk and contextual factors for the process of youth radicalisation. It draws on primary data from a sample of 16 at-risk and radicalised Australian youth referred to CVE programs in one Australian State. That is, they were referred for support due to extremism concerns before the age of 18 years.

Sample and data

Data were derived from multiple sources, including multidisciplinary and multiagency case file records, semi-structured interviews with a subset of youth and comprehensive written case studies prepared for all youth in the sample. The case studies were developed using a structured coding scheme focused on identifying key developmental phases and experiences across varied life-course domains (see Barracosa & Cherney, 2025). This combined dataset formed the evidentiary basis for the completion of the VERA-2R assessments reported in this paper.

The selection of the cases for this study was drawn from two separate CVE services – one was the specialist youth CVE unit the first author managed in the criminal justice system (see Barracosa & March, 2022), and the other was a government run community-based CVE program that works with at-risk individuals including youth. It should be noted that the first author's professional background raised some ethical considerations. This was due to the first author having had prior practitioner-based contact with some youth in the sample in the context of CVE program engagement. This practitioner-based contact was no longer ongoing at the time of completing the research. An arms-length approach to recruitment was implemented to overcome these considerations. This occurred through third-party advocates facilitating participant selection and recruitment.

Ethics approval for this project was received by the University of Queensland Committee B (approval number is 2020/HE002402). The project followed informed consent and data access procedures as per the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research relating to youth under the age of 18 years. A waiver of consent was provided for access to case file information for youth in the sample. The sample was selected based on inclusion criteria relating to whether the individuals were under the age of 18 years at the time of referral to CVE services. The inclusion criteria included youth convicted for terrorism offences, youth convicted for non-terrorism criminal offences that displayed extremism concerns, and youth in the community not charged for criminal offences but were identified at-risk of radicalisation or violent extremism. First nations youth were excluded from the study. This yielded a sample size of 16 individuals.

Comprehensive case file holdings were maintained by both CVE services and were compiled primarily by practitioners (e.g., psychologists, caseworkers and case managers) responsible for assessing and managing clients within that service. These files comprised information relating to assessment, case management interventions and supervision. These included observations recorded by multidisciplinary practitioners from varied agencies such as child protection, youth criminal justice and mental health systems. In additional to CVE case management support, youth in the sample were referred to a range of external services spanning psychological, psychiatric, educational, vocational, leisure programs, mentoring, theology and human services. The case files themselves comprised documented assessments and case management notes including background content that captured life-course factors, environmental influences, developmental and clinical considerations, as well as extremist concerns relating to the applicable individual. From the 16 case file holdings a small number of youths were approach for an interview. This occurred only when there were gaps in available case file information. Five individuals consented to participate in a semi-structured interview that focused on their developmental experiences and radicalising behaviours.

Overall, the sample comprised males (N=14) and females (N=2) across different extremist ideologies. This included religious extremism in the form of Islamist beliefs (N=10), right-wing extremism (N=3), misogynistic extremism (N=1), ethno-nationalist extremism (N=1) and youth who engaged in extremism across a mix of ideologies (N=1). This study also captured a spectrum of engagement which encompassed violent radicalised

youth (N=9) including those convicted for terrorism offences, youth who had radicalised but where categorised as non-violent (N=3 - i.e., they displayed cognitive radicalisation aligned with a specific ideology, but did not advocate or commit violence), and a sample of at-risk youth that were categorised as only users and consumers of extremist content and rhetoric despite not being committed to a specific extremist ideology (N=4). The sample was spread across youth referred to or engaged in CVE programs in both custodial and community supervision settings.

Coding VERA-2R indicators

VERA-2R assessments were completed by the first author for all 16 cases in the sample. The VERA-2R was chosen for this study as it is being used across different Australian State, Territory and Commonwealth agencies and professionals to assess the risks posed by at-risk and radicalised individuals including youth (Barracosa & March, 2022; Cherney & Mulholland, 2025). A suite of violent extremism threat and risk assessment tools is available to Australian CVE professionals (Barracosa, 2024). However, the VERA-2R appears to have historically assumed a prominent role within Australian CVE practice (Barracosa & March, 2022; Cherney & Mulholland, 2025). It is noted that the use and implementation of the VERA-2R for this study was supported by the author's professional background as a certified user and trainer of several violent extremism risk assessment tools including the VERA-2R, and extensive experience as a psychologist and CVE practitioner.

VERA-2R scoring was facilitated through careful reading and re-reading of the available case file and qualitative interview data as well as the comprehensive written case studies. This included considering all available data whilst accounting for the relevance of the information as it pertained to each indicator and appropriateness of the information for rating each indicator. The tool was implemented by following the administration and scoring criteria detailed in the VERA-2R manual and official VERA-2R training (Pressman et al., 2018). This involved scoring each VERA-2R indicator on a three-point scale of 0=low, 1=moderate or 2=high. As per the VERA-2R manual a score of low was recorded if an indicator was not present, moderate if an indicator was present to a specified level, and high if an indicator was clearly present or present to a high level. The additional VERA-2R indicators are scored on a two-point scale of yes (present) or no (absent). The VERA-2R manual details that the final

risk judgment is also scored on a three-point scale of low, moderate or high (Pressman et al., 2018). However, the official VERA-2R training instructs that final risk judgements can also be scored on a five-point scale of low, low-moderate, moderate, moderate-high or high. This approach was implemented for the final risk judgements. The scoring procedure and evidence was systematically captured using a template developed specifically for this study. The template included dedicated sections for analytic notes on the application of an indicator and reflections on scoring challenges.

It is noted that this study did deviate from the VERA-2R manual by coding indicators low rather than omitting when data was missing, unavailable or incomplete. This is consistent with existing research to minimise assessment bias and the presence of missing data for analysis (De Bruin et al., 2022; Cherney & Belton, 2024). The indicators in the protective factor domain were omitted from this study, as the aim was to assess risk levels rather than to evaluate the effectiveness of specific interventions the youth had received or any resulting shifts in ideological convictions, which is the intended purpose of the protective factor domain.

Intra- and inter-rater reliability

This study was supplemented by approaches for measuring intra- and inter-rater reliability for administration of the VERA-2R. Intra-rater reliability relates to the extent to which a single assessor using the same tool assigns identical ratings over time for the same data set (Belur et al., 2021). While inter-rater reliability relates to the degree to which two or more assessors independently score data the same on a given measure (Multon & Coleman, 2018). To test intra-rater reliability, the VERA-2R was re-administered by the first author on three previously scored cases and was completed blind, in that the previous scoring was not consulted. This occurred at two separate intervals approximately four months apart (time 1 and time 2). Coding agreement checks were conducted to measure consistency in the author's application of the tool. The assessed level of intra-rater agreement across the time 1 and time 2 coding of the same three cases was 97.5%.

Brief inter-rater reliability checks involved a forensic psychologist external to the study. He was provided two cases to assess. The N of two cases was chosen to reduce time demands on this forensic psychologist and to minimise assessor fatigue. The forensic

psychologist had extensive experience working with at-risk and radicalised youth and was an accredited user and trainer in violent extremism risk assessment tools, including the VERA-2R. They were permitted to access the de-identified data due to their professional employment. The assessed level of overall inter-rater agreement of the indicators and final risk judgements was 89.4% across the first author's and forensic psychologist's assessments for these same two cases. A percentage outcome of at least 75-80% is recommended for inter-rater agreement, noting that full agreement is unlikely to be achieved (Saldana, 2009; Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2014).

Results

VERA-2R risk indicator domains

Results showing the distribution of VERA-2R risk indicators scored for the youth cohort are reported below in table 1. They are supplemented by qualitative reflections detailing notable findings across the VERA-2R domains.

Table 1: Distribution of scores for VERA-2R risk indicator domains (N=16)

Risk Indicator	Low	Moderate	High
BA1	7	1	8
BA2	3	6	7
BA3	12	3	1
BA4	2	13	1
BA5	3	7	6
BA6	6	7	3
BA7	4	10	2
SCI1	3	5	8
SCI2	7	4	5
SCI3	5	5	6
SCI4	8	2	6
SCI5	12	3	1

SCI6	9	0	7
SCI7	1	5	10
HAC1	2	7	7
HAC2	8	2	6
HAC3	1	7	8
HAC4	10	4	2
HAC5	3	9	4
HAC6	5	6	5
CM1	9	3	4
CM2	14	2	0
CM3	8	4	4
CM4	7	3	6
CM5	16	0	0
CM6	16	0	0
CM7	11	4	1
CM8	7	9	0

Beliefs, Attitudes and Ideology

The most common risk factor in this domain was indicator BA1 (Commitment to ideology that justifies the use of violence) in which half (N=8) of the sample received a rating of high. BA1 was rated as low for all youth who were categorised as having radicalised to non-violent extremism, and those who were users and consumers of extremist content and rhetoric, since this indicator only captures violent radicalisation. All high scores for BA2 (Perceived grievance and/or perceived injustice) (N=7) and BA5 (Expressed emotions in response to perceived injustice) (N=6) also only related to youth who had radicalised to violence. Their level of grievance and emotional expression in response was significant.

Most youth were scored moderate for BA4 (Rejection of democratic society and values) (N=13) and BA7 (Lack of empathy and understanding for those outside one's own group) (N=10). This highlights that some rejection of democratic and pluralistic values or norms, and a lack of empathy or understanding for perceived outgroups was common across

the sample. These risk factors were present across violent and non-violent radicalised youth, as well as those categorised as only users and consumers of extremism and does reflect what has been found in the research literature (Emmelkamp et al., 2020; Jahnke et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2025).

Social Context and Intention

The most common risk factor across this domain was indicator SCI7 (Susceptibility to influence, control, indoctrination). Almost all youth in the sample scored either high (N=10) or moderate (N=5). These findings reflect the degree of youth vulnerability to influence in-person and online. SCI1 (Seeker, user, or developer of violent extremist materials) was also prominent with most youth scoring high (N=8) or moderate (N=5). It is noted that two youth who scored high were not radicalised to a specific extremist ideology. Hence possessing, consuming, developing and disseminating extremist content may not be contingent on youth forming a clear ideological commitment.

There were also notable findings for youth categorised as violent extremists. Youth from this cohort were the only ones scored high for indicators SCI6 (Planning, preparation of acts of violent extremism) (N=7), SCI2 (Target for attack identified (person, group, location) (N=5), SCI4 (Expressed intention to commit acts of violent extremism) (N=6), and SCI3 (Personal contact with violent extremists (informal or social context) (N=6). The sample was characterised by a low presence of youth willing to be martyred.

History, Action, and Capacity

Several risk indicators in this domain were prevalent across the sample. Almost all youth scored high (N=8) or moderate (M=7) for HAC3 (Previous criminal violence). A similar distribution was observed for high (N=7) and moderate (N=7) scores for HAC1 (Early exposure to pro-violent, militant ideology). A majority of youth were scored high (N=4) or moderate (N=9) for HAC5 (Training in extremist ideology in own country or abroad). This was because most youth had consumed extremist content through social media or other online platforms, which can constitute a form of training under the VERA-2R. Most youth also scored high (N=8) or moderate (N=2) for HAC2 (Network of family and friends involved in

violent extremism). Few youths in the sample had received paramilitary, weapons or explosives training.

Commitment and Motivation

Only youth categorised as violent radicalised individuals regularly scored high or moderate for indicators in this domain. The most common motivation for this cohort included frequent high (N=6) or moderate (N=3) scores for CM4 (Motivated by moral obligation, moral superiority). Many in the sample scored moderate (N=9) for CM8 (Motivated by a search for meaning and significance in life) suggesting that this was a partial motivating factor for violence. Half of the sample scored either high (N=4) or moderate (N=4) for CM3 (Motivated by camaraderie, group belonging). A similar distribution was observed for CM1 (Motivated by perceived religious obligation and/or glorification). This is related to the fact that many individuals in the sample had radicalised to violent Islamism. Excitement, adventure and forced participation in violent extremism were not relevant to youth in this research sample.

Additional Indicators

The results for the additional indicators for the youth cohort are displayed in table 2 below. The presence of most additional indicators highlights the relevance of varied negative experiences and vulnerabilities across the sample. This includes in the home, school and mental health domains.

Table 2 Distribution of scores for VERA-2R additional indicator domain (N=16)

Additional Indicator	No	Yes
CH1	9	7
CH2	9	7
PH1	7	9
PH2	7	9
PH3	0	16

MD1	5	11
MD2	4	12
MD3	14	2
MD4	11	5
MD5	6	9
MD6	13	3

Additional indicator PH3 (Problems with school and work) was most common across the sample and present for all youth (N=16). Additional indicators PH1 (Violence in the family home) (N=9) and PH2 (Problematic upbringing and/or placed in care) (N=9) were also common. Many youths in the sample suffered, expressed or had been formally diagnosed with some type of mental health problem or disorder. This was highlighted through the presence of MD2 (Depressive disorder and/or suicide attempts) (N=12), MD1 (Personality disorder) (N=11), MD5 (Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (N=9), and MD4 (Autism spectrum disorder) (N=5). Psychotic, schizophrenic or substance use disorders were not common.

Final Risk Ratings

A final summary risk rating was scored for each individual. The final risk rating represents a "risk estimation" for violent extremism, derived from an overall summation of each individual case (Pressman et al., 2018, p.28). This is not derived from a mathematical or statistical calculation but rather relies on an overall case formulation completed by the assessor as instructed in the VERA-2R training. Of those youth that received an overall risk rating of high (N=4) or moderate-high (N=3), all had radicalised to violent extremism. Only one individual received a rating of moderate. This person's engagement in violence was assessed as conditional and opportunistic in nature. Youths that received a final risk rating of low-moderate (N=2) or low (N=6), had all radicalised to non-violent extremism or were only users and consumers of extremist content and rhetoric. Overall, the results indicate some differentiation between final summary risk ratings for violent and non-violent youth in the sample.

Testing observations and implementation challenges

Qualitative observations relating to the application of the VERA-2R are clustered below in terms of challenges and themes that emerged from the implementation of the tool with the youth cohort. These findings warrant consideration given it raises questions about the relevance of the VERA-2R for the assessment, case management and intervention of youth.

Scoring criteria

The scoring criteria detailed in the VERA-2R manual posed challenges. For example, for HAC1 (Early exposure to pro-violence, militant ideology) the VERA-2R manual instructs an assessor to consider exposure to "pro-violence militant ideology as a child or adolescent" (Pressman et al., 2018, p.77). However, direct in-person exposure to militancy, conflict and/or war was rare for youth in the sample. All youth were raised in a Western democratic context with early exposure mainly limited to engagement with extremist messaging, propaganda and influential figures online. Further, militant ideology may not be the most representative term for inclusion. For example, this sample included an individual radicalised to violent misogynistic extremism which was not militant in nature.

Risk indicator HAC3 (Previous criminal violence) focuses on violent convictions. The application of HAC3 fails to adequately capture patterns of interpersonal violence that do not incur criminal convictions. This consideration is important for youth where their young age and developmental vulnerabilities can increase the likelihood of diversion from the youth criminal justice system with no criminal convictions recorded despite evidence of having committed violent acts (Soothill, Ackerley & Francis, 2008; Wilson & Hoge, 2013). The utility of HAC3 for implementation with youth may therefore be improved by focusing on patterns of interpersonal violence, which was present for many youths in the sample.

In relation to HAC5 (Training in extremist ideology in own country or abroad), the VERA-2R defines both exposure to an extremist leader and acting as an influential figure as forms of "training," with moderate or high scores distinguished on this basis. However, this distinction is difficult to apply given the nuances in the sample. Some youths had incidental contact with extremist leaders who exerted little influence, while others developed close, influential relationships that were central to their risk profiles. One individual radicalised to

non-violent extremism scored high on HAC5 solely because they hosted right-wing extremist chat and debate forums and were therefore assessed as an "influential figure" (Pressman et al., 2018, p. 85). These cases highlight that "exposure" varies widely and does not always equate to training, that influence and leadership can take non-traditional online forms, and that the threshold between moderate and high scores is ambiguous. Moreover, HAC5 does not incorporate developmental or psychosocial considerations relevant to how youth understand or experience "training."

The scoring criteria detailed for risk indicator SCI7 (Susceptibility to influence, control, indoctrination) also posed some challenges. SCI7 is focused on vulnerability to "influence or control by a leader or person that advocates acts of violent extremism" (Pressman et al., 2018, p.71). This does not appear to adequately capture youth vulnerability to be influenced online which was pronounced across the sample. For some youth, influence solely arose from online content and materials that advocated violent extremism in the absence of in-person exposure or interactions. This appears to be a particularly important consideration for the process of youth radicalisation (Barracosa & Cherney, 2025).

Social function and networks

The social functioning of the youth cohort presented challenges for scoring some risk indicators. For example, to be assessed accurately for BA7 (Lack of empathy and understanding for those outside one's own group) evidence is required of both in-group membership and expressions that show a lack of empathy for perceived out-groups. In some cases, youth in the sample were radicalised in the absence of any clear in-group commitment. This occurred for some individuals that were socially isolated and radicalised online. The lack of a clear in group engagement and commitment in some youth cases likely poses enduring challenges for scoring BA7 due to the increasingly fluid nature of extremist ideas, content and movements online.

In relation to risk indicator HAC2 (Network of family and friends involved in violent extremism), the VERA-2R manual asks users to consider the presence of extremist social networks. Over-estimating risk and incorrectly identifying intervention needs through HAC2 is possible for youth that have radicalised family members despite not being in close contact with them. This was the case for several youth in the sample for whom extremist extended

family members exerted no influence on their radicalisation. Conversely, under-estimating risk through HAC2 is a concern for youth that maintain only one extremist peer association that is highly influential in terms of impacting their own radicalisation. HAC2 could therefore be evolved for implementation with youth to better capture the level of influence from extremist family members and friends.

As an extension to the above findings, risk indicator SCI3 (Personal contact with violent extremists - informal or social context) captures the frequency of contact with violent extremist individuals only. This presents some challenges when implemented with youth who maintain non-violent, but influential extremist associations. Some youth scored low for SCI3 despite non-violent extremist associations forming a substantial part of their risk profile. This included their vulnerability to ongoing exposure to extremist narratives that increased their risk of transitioning to violence. Similarly for risk indicator BA1, the VERA-2R appears to miss an opportunity to capture the impact of non-violent influences who may play a role in youth transitioning to violence.

Clinical disorders and emotional expressions

The impact of certain clinical disorders on emotional expression warrants consideration when scoring BA5 (Expressed emotions in response to perceived injustice). As noted earlier, five youths in the sample had a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). One such individual demonstrated a deep and dogmatic ideological commitment to right-wing beliefs and scored high on BA2 (Perceived grievance and/or perceived injustice) due to significant grievances toward the government and particular cultural groups. However, consistent with patterns commonly observed among youth with ASD, they did not display strong emotions such as moral outrage or hatred and therefore received only a moderate score for BA5. This likely reflects the influence of their neurodevelopmental condition on emotional expression rather than reduced ideological conviction. These findings suggest that BA5 may require further refinement for use with neurodiverse and clinically complex youth, who represent an increasingly prominent subgroup within younger samples of at-risk and radicalised individuals (Salman, Al-Attar & Mckenzie, 2023; Barracosa, 2024).

Additional indicators

An important consideration for the VERA-2R additional indicators is whether these items can adequately capture the range of relevant background factors applicable to at-risk and radicalised youth. This speaks directly to the VERA-2R's capacity to incorporate adverse developmental life-course experiences. For example, additional indicator PH1 (Violence in family) was common across the sample. However, the framing of this indicator within the VERA-2R manual is broad. In addition to experiencing or witnessing violence at home, PH1 also captures factors such as abusive parenting, maltreatment, neglect, attachment insecurity, victimisation, sexual abuse and trauma (Pressman et al., 2018, p.126-127). Whether a single indicator framed through the lens of family violence adequately accounts for what is a complex spectrum of family dynamics and experiences warrants consideration. This includes accounting for the prominence of permissive parenting, a lack of prosocial modelling and the impact of negative family dynamics on moral development. These factors were present for some youth in the sample but are not captured by PH1. These vulnerabilities are highly relevant for assessing and intervening with youth in a CVE context. Reframing and expanding PH1 would therefore likely be beneficial for increasing its utility for implementation with youth.

Different challenges were observed for scoring additional indicator PH2 (Problematic upbringing and/or placed in juvenile care). This indicator focuses on parental-caregiver child-rearing, neglect, disruption, attachment issues and placements in care (Pressman et al., 2018, p.129). Some cross-over with PH1 (Violence in family) was observed. It is also noted that few youths in the sample were formally removed from their parent's care. Conversely, almost two-thirds of the sample were subject to child protection reporting at some point during their upbringing despite the majority remaining at home. Hence PH2 fails to make a distinction between child protection reporting and care placements, both of which can have varying outcomes for youth. PH2 appears to conflate several important vulnerabilities that may impact violent extremism for youth as well as subsequent individual and family intervention needs.

Finally, the mental disorders subsection creates an opportunity for assessors to introduce a broad spectrum of content from formal diagnosis to traits linked to clinical disorders. For example, MD5 (Posttraumatic Stress Disorder) allows for traits and symptoms

relating to trauma to be captured. This includes factors such as a lack of concentration and irritability. These factors could however be present because of other clinical conditions including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. This was the most diagnosed mental condition for youth in the sample (N=6). However, this emphasis is absent from the mental disorders subsection, which prioritises conditions such as psychotic, schizophrenic and substance use disorders that appear less applicable to the youth represented in the sample.

Implications for case management and intervention

What implications do the above findings and observations have for the treatment of at-risk and radicalised youth? Firstly, the findings show that youth who were categorised as having radicalised to violent extremism tended to have proportionately higher scores for VERA-2R indicators measuring a commitment to a violent ideology, a perceived grievance or sense of injustice, hostility to a national identity, planning and identifying a target, and expressing an intention to engage in a violent extremist attack. These indicators frame violent extremist intentions (Cherney & Belton, 2024) and the VERA-2R does appear to support their identification. However, the VERA-2R manual could do more to prioritise these indicators within case and risk management interventions. The same can be said for guiding users to supplement this work through a combination of clinical and psychosocial interventions that directly address the vulnerabilities and risk factors identified across youth in the sample. This includes grievances, difficulties with emotional regulation, behavioural control deficits and attitudes that endorse violence (Lewis et al., 2025). In some cases, this may also require ideological interventions such as theological support that critically engages with an individual's religious education, beliefs and identity (Sarakibi et al., 2025).

There were also other common consistent patterns in risk factors across the whole youth cohort, with several VERA-2R risk indicators being present for violent and non-violent radicalised individuals, and youth who only used and consumed extremist content and rhetoric. This included a rejection of democratic society and values, a lack of empathy for perceived out-groups, connections with violent extremist networks, early exposure to violent extremism, seeking and using extremist materials online, and susceptibility to influence. These all represent case management and intervention needs relating to cognitive and

behavioural processes that underpin the development and maintenance of violent extremist beliefs and actions (Campelo et al., 2022; Barracosa & Cherney, 2025; Lewis, et al., 2025). Again, the VERA-2R could do more to support the development of multidisciplinary and multimodal interventions that address factors such as wellbeing, moral values, pluralism, emotional intelligence, healthy relationships, identity, resilience, motivation and meaning derived from youth engaging in harmful content and extremist interactions online (Barracosa & March, 2022; Campelo et al., 2022; Cherney, De Rooy & Williams, 2022; Lewis, et al., 2025).

There were some important considerations the VERA-2R struggled to cover. This included accommodating the nuanced nature of youth radicalisation with a specific focus on the additional indicators. For example, all youth in the sample were characterised by the cumulative impact of instability and adverse experiences across multiple domains. This included disrupted family dynamics and subsequent environmental instability, academic disconnection and educational disengagement, conduct issues, social isolation and a lack of prosocial bonds, mental health and neurodevelopmental conditions. These experiences left youth in the sample vulnerable to radicalisation and highlights the role of early intervention (Lewis, et al., 2025). In particular, these findings point to intensive individual and long-term intervention needs. This includes the importance of strengthening insight and skills within the family environment. Such capacity building is critical to fostering environmental stability, prosocial role modelling, secure attachment relationships, and proactive supervision, all of which are essential to supporting at-risk and radicalised youth to disengage and desist from violent extremist beliefs and behaviours (Campelo et al., 2022; Cherney et al., 2022; Lewis, et al., 2025; Zych & Nasaescu, 2022).

As such, it is recommended that it would be useful for practitioners when applying the VERA-2R to youth, to first begin with the additional indicators and to use these as a foundation upon which extremism specific factors are considered. This would increase the prominence of developmental life-course considerations and promote age-appropriate interpretations of risk factors. The VERA-2R authors report that the additional indicators are designed specifically to support an assessment of violent extremism risk (see Duits et al., 2023). The findings of this study suggest that in their current form, the additional indicators are limited in their capacity to achieve this, particularly when considered against CVE

practitioners' reported experiences in operational settings (see also Cherney & Mulholland, 2025, Cherney et al., 2025). It is suggested here that limitations with the additional indicators could be addressed in part by expanding and refining this VERA-2R domain, providing clearer guidance around their use in interpreting risk indicators and case formulation, and prioritising their relevance when it comes to their application to youth. Robust and adequately framed contextual background indicators are imperative to supporting the development of risk formulations that capture the unique nature of youth radicalisation, the interaction between varied non-ideological and extremism specific features, and subsequent individual and family systems intervention needs. The VERA-2R could be improved to achieve this.

Other proposed amendments from the findings of this study include broadening certain risk indicators to better capture the influence of non-violent extremist ideas and associations, recognising the fluid and predominantly online pathways through which youth may be radicalised in the absence of formal extremist group structures, and accounting for the direct impact of extremist peers and family members. They should also focus on the developmental effects of early exposure to different forms of violent extremism, along with the importance of identifying prior patterns of interpersonal violence, regardless of whether these behaviours have resulted in criminal justice involvement. Currently, these areas are poorly captured within the VERA-2R. This creates a risk for key interventions points to be overlooked and that if left unaddressed could result in an individual progressing to violence. For example, a youth case in this sample was identified as having radicalised to right-wing extremism characterised by racist, xenophobic and white supremacist ideas. While his radicalisation was categorised as non-violent, it was impacted by a close relationship that he established with a solitary violent extremist individual online. This youth propagated anti-immigration and white supremacist narratives, possessed replica firearms, and consumed violent extremist content as well as other objectionable and violent non-ideological materials. The VERA-2R had difficult adequately capturing his CVE intervention needs despite significant vulnerabilities identified for him progressing from non-violent radicalisation to extremist violence.

Some of these findings raise questions about whether the implementation of the VERA-2R for youth should be focused on radicalisation rather than solely on violent extremism risk. The VERA-2R, and other violent extremism risk assessment measures, should have the capacity to assess the risk of transitioning to violence if they are to possess

utility for implementation with youth to support CVE interventions. This could promote a broader focus on practice-based outcomes across CVE programs. These points related to the implementation of the VERA-2R draws attention to the need for the adaption and modification of the tool when applied to youth. The same conclusion could be made for other violent extremism risk assessment tools, with this paper pointing to key developmental and implementation considerations that are applicable when assessing youth (see also Borum, 2025).

One final point for consideration is the gap observed in the VERA-2R framework connecting risk and additional indicators to risk formulation and case management needs. This shortcoming is particularly notable given the complex and intensive nature of CVE assessment, case management and interventions for youth (Barracosa & March, 2022; Lewis et al., 2025). The VERA-2R tool would subsequently benefit from being underpinned by a clear theoretical foundation for risk formulation and case management interventions. This includes a stronger grounding in life-course vulnerabilities and environmental influences (Barracosa & Cherney, 2025). This would support the development of risk formulations that take account of the interaction between vulnerabilities, environmental influences and extremism specific risk factors. This would provide guidance for assessors in implementing tailored, targeted and developmentally informed CVE case management interventions that address the needs of at-risk and radicalised youth as well as the family and systems responsible for their care and supervision.

Conclusion

This study has several limitations, including a small sample size (N=16) and its focus on at-risk and radicalised Australian youth, which restricts the generalisability of findings. Formal validation studies are recommended. Comparison or control groups would strengthen claims about this study's applicability to youth, but such approaches remain difficult due to limited access to primary data, particularly for younger cohorts. Females were under-represented (N=2), limiting insights into gender differences and treatment needs. While these constraints reflect broader difficulties in researching youth radicalisation, this field test of the VERA-2R remains exploratory and descriptive. The recommendations for CVE programming are

suggestive and point to pragmatic considerations for support and case management intervention. While our recommendations are likely to be most readily applicable to practitioners and programs that utilise the VERA-2R, the lessons identified nevertheless offer relevant insights for settings in which formalised assessments are absent or alternative tools are employed. For example, this may be achieved by informing professional judgement, case discussion, or program design through the adoption of a broad developmental life-course lens that supports the incorporation of contextual and developmental considerations into the assessment of violent extremism risk among youth.

This paper has set out to explore the practical application of the VERA-2R to a youth cohort, and to identify practice lessons for violent extremism risk assessment and decisions around CVE case management and intervention. While many of the VERA-2R risk indicators were found to be broadly applicable to at-risk and radicalised youth, some implementation challenges were confronted relating to the tools capacity to capture key risk and youth developmental factors. These are important considerations given their relevance for tailored and targeted risk and case management interventions.

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