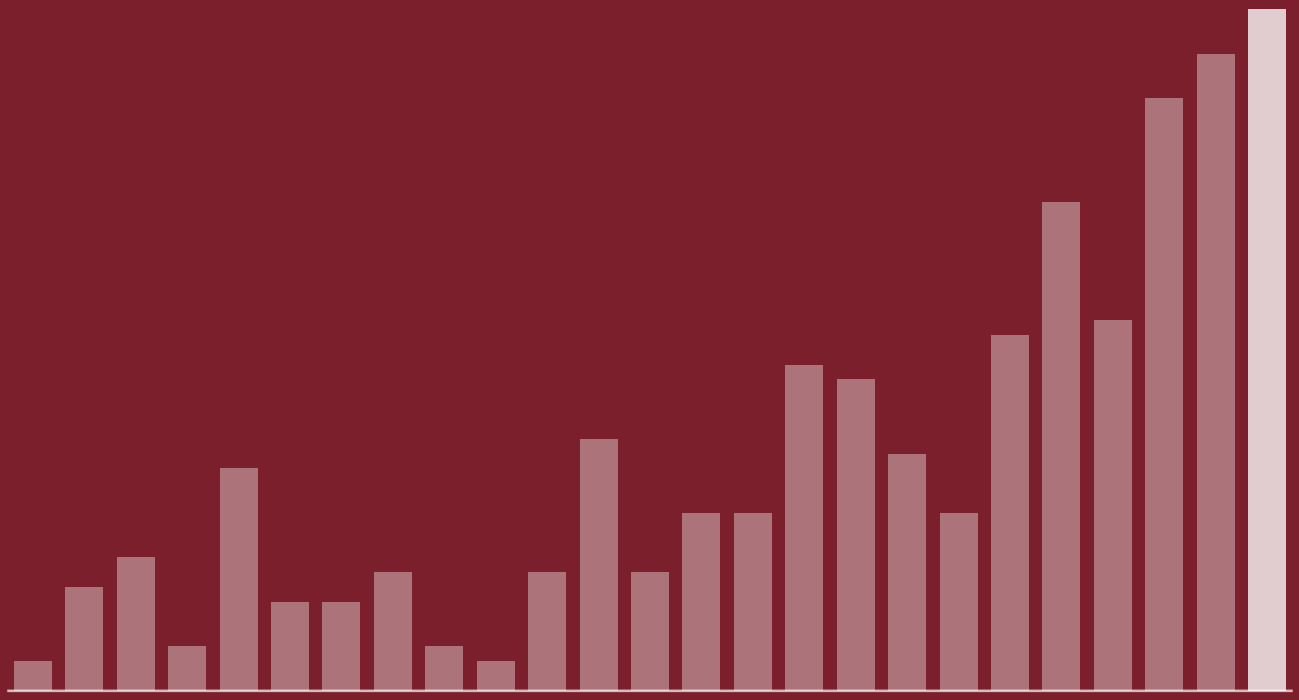
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The Online Radicalisation of Minors

Evidence from Europe and Britain, and the UAE's Child Digital Safety Rules, to November 2026

EPIC Research Team

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Abstract

Children and teenagers now appear in terrorism casework in Europe at a scale that police agencies describe as a structural change. Europol's 2026 terrorism report records 486 arrests for terrorism-related offences in the European Union in 2025, of whom 130 were aged 18 or younger; the youngest was 12 (Europol 2026a, 22). In Great Britain, 46 people aged 17 and under were arrested for terrorism-related activity in the year to June 2026, the highest figure for any year to June since records began in 2001 (Home Office 2026a). Referrals to the Prevent programme in England and Wales reached 10,293 in the year to September 2025, and children aged 11 to 15 made up the largest single age group, at 36% (Home Office 2026b).

Both agencies place the online environment at the centre of this trend. Europol reports that young suspects often have "only a superficial understanding of established ideologies" and that extremist actors imitate game design, including "competition, rankings, challenges and reward mechanisms" (Europol 2026a, 9).

The UAE has legislated for children's online safety on a different footing. Federal Decree-Law No. 26 of 2025 on Child Digital Safety took effect on 1 January 2026, and Cabinet Resolution No. 106 of 2026 set a minimum age of 15 for social media accounts from 30 June 2026 (UAE Legislation 2025; WAM 2026b). The Decree-Law's definition of harmful content does not name extremist or terrorist material. This paper reviews the European and British data and the evidence on online pathways, and asks where the UAE framework could carry a counter-radicalisation function. The Muslim Brotherhood's organisational networks are covered in EPIC papers 014 and 030 and are not repeated here.

Keywords: online radicalisation; minors; children; terrorism arrests; Europol; TE-SAT; Prevent; Terrorism Act 2000; gaming platforms; The Com network; UAE; Federal Decree-Law No. 26 of 2025; Cabinet Resolution No. 106 of 2026; Child Digital Safety Council; age verification

1. Scope, sources and method

The paper uses the latest edition of each source available on 17 November 2026. European figures come from the EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT), which Europol compiles from data supplied by member states; the 2026 edition covers 2025 and the 2025 edition covers 2024 (Europol 2025; 2026a). British figures come from two Home Office series: police powers under the Terrorism Act 2000, which covers Great Britain to June 2026 (Home Office 2026a), and individuals referred to Prevent in England and Wales to September 2025, published as official statistics in development (Home Office 2026b). UAE material comes from the federal legislation portal, the Emirates News Agency (WAM) and the official government portal u.ae.

Arrests, referrals and convictions measure different things. An arrest records a police decision on suspicion. A Prevent referral records a concern raised by a teacher, health worker, police officer or member of the public, and most referrals do not lead to support through the Channel programme (Home Office 2026b). None of these series measures how many children hold extremist views. Where the paper divides one published figure by another, the result is labelled as an EPIC calculation.

The TE-SAT does not use a single age band across editions. The 2025 edition reports suspects aged 12 to 20, with a footnote for those under 18; the 2026 edition reports those aged 18 or younger (Europol 2025, 10; 2026a, 22). Table 1 keeps the published bands and does not convert one into another.

2. Minors in European terrorism casework

TE-SAT 2026 records 486 arrests for terrorism-related offences across 21 member states in 2025, against 449 in 2024 and 426 in 2023 (Europol 2026a). Of the 2025 suspects, 130 were aged 18 or younger. Age was not reported for 23 people, so minors and 18-year-olds made up at least 27% of all arrests and 28% of those whose age was known (EPIC calculation). The youngest person arrested was 12 and was linked to right-wing terrorism (Europol 2026a, 22). In jihadist cases, 108 of 347 suspects were 18 or younger (Europol 2026a), about 31% (EPIC calculation; the report notes that 15 of 344 jihadist arrests in one table did not specify an age).

Table 1. Young terrorism suspects arrested in the EU, as reported by Europol, 2023 to 2025

Year	All arrests	Young suspects reported	Age band used	Source
2023	426	93	13 to 20	Europol 2025, 10 (note 7)
2024	449	133, of whom 70 under 18	12 to 20	Europol 2025, 10
2025	486	130	18 or younger	Europol 2026a, 22

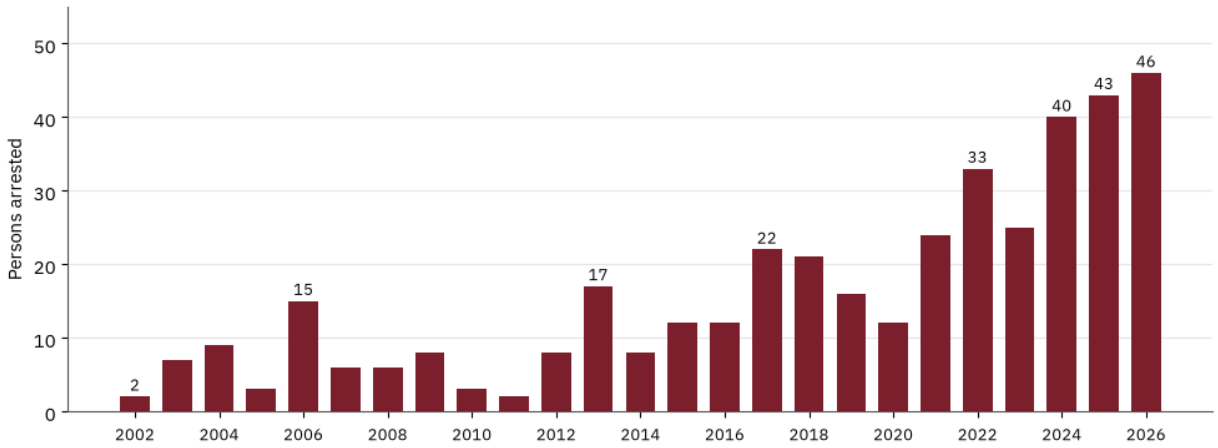
The 2025 edition described the profile of these suspects in some detail. Of the 133 aged 12 to 20 in 2024, 114 were linked to jihadist terrorism and 12 to right-wing terrorism and violent extremism. They "most often underwent a process of self-radicalisation online" and acted "alone or within small cells of peers", and the report named "psychological vulnerabilities, social isolation and digital dependency" as drivers (Europol 2025, 10). Terrorist organisations spread propaganda "especially on those social media platforms that are particularly popular among younger users", and gaming platforms and the metaverse were "used for grooming and recruitment of young perpetrators" (Europol 2025, 10 to 11).

The 2026 edition adds an emphasis on mixed and unstable motives. Young radicalised individuals "often displayed only a superficial understanding of established ideologies, making them susceptible to a fluid mix of unstable, fragmented and ambiguous ideas" (Europol 2026a, 9). The report gives a section to The Com network, which it describes as a "decentralised online ecosystem" of overlapping groups, one branch of which grooms and extorts mostly underage victims (Europol 2026a, 8). Europol's release for the report says that young people "become both victims of manipulation and perpetrators of violence" (Europol 2026b).

3. Great Britain: arrests and Prevent referrals

The British arrest series is the longest consistent age record available. Arrests of people aged 17 and under for terrorism-related activity rose from 12 in the year to June 2015 to 46 in the year to June 2026 (Home Office 2026a, Table A.10; Figure 1). The year to June 2026 figure is the highest for any year to June since 2001, and the second highest for any 12-month period after the 54 arrests recorded in the year to September 2025 (Home Office 2026a). The series records 400 arrests of under-18s in the years to June 2002 to 2026 (EPIC calculation from Table A.10).

Figure 1. Arrests of people aged 17 and under for terrorism-related activity, Great Britain, years to June 2002 to 2026



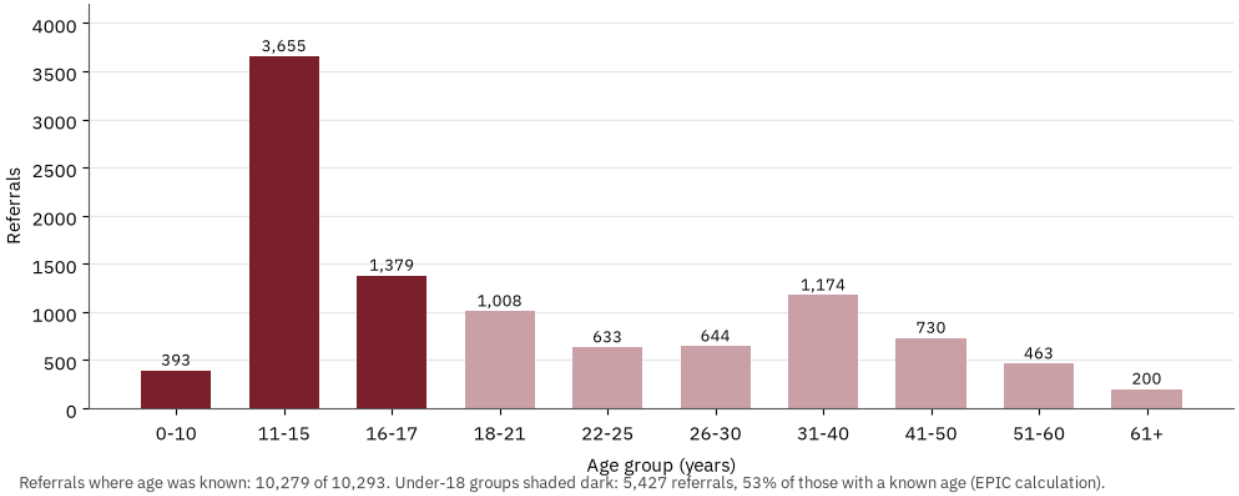
Year to June 2002 includes arrests from 11 September 2001. Arrests are not convictions. The year to June 2026 total of all arrests (3,867) is dominated by 3,630 arrests linked to supporting Palestine Action; only one of those was aged 17 or under. Source: Home Office 2026a, Table A.10.

Figure 1. Arrests of people aged 17 and under for terrorism-related activity, Great Britain, years to June 2002 to 2026

The headline total for the latest year needs care. Of 3,867 terrorism-related arrests in the year to June 2026, 3,630 were linked to supporting Palestine Action after its proscription on 5 July 2025, and only one of the 46 under-18s was in that group (Home Office 2026a). Under-18s were 1% of all arrests where age was known, against 18% in the previous year (Home Office 2026a). Excluding the Palestine Action arrests, 45 of the remaining 237 arrests involved under-18s, about 19% (EPIC calculation). On that basis the share of minors in conventional terrorism casework in Britain is close to the European figure.

Prevent referrals show the wider pool of concern. In the year to September 2025 there were 10,293 referrals, 39% more than the previous year and the most in any year since the series began in April 2015 (Home Office 2026b). Where age was known, 3,655 referrals (36%) concerned children aged 11 to 15, 1,379 concerned those aged 16 to 17 and 393 concerned children aged 10 or under (Home Office 2026b, Table 4; Figure 2). Together, under-18s accounted for 5,427 referrals, 53% of those with a known age (EPIC calculation). The education sector made 34% of all referrals.

Figure 2. Referrals to Prevent by age group, England and Wales, year to September 2025



Referrals where age was known: 10,279 of 10,293. Under-18 groups shaded dark: 5,427 referrals, 53% of those with a known age (EPIC calculation).

Referrals record a concern raised and are not findings of radicalisation. Source: Home Office 2026b, Table 4 (year to September 2025).

Figure 2. Referrals to Prevent by age group, England and Wales, year to September 2025

The type of concern recorded in referrals has also shifted. Where a concern was specified, 56% of referrals fell into the "no ideology" categories, 20% concerned the extreme right wing and 8% concerned Islamist extremism (Home Office 2026b). Referrals for "fascination with extreme violence or mass casualty attacks" peaked at 286 in April to June 2025 (Home Office 2026b). This is consistent with Europol's description of fluid motives, although the British categories record a referrer's concern and are not findings about the individual.

4. What the evidence says about the online pathway

The two agencies agree on the direction of the evidence. Europol states that social media, encrypted messaging services, gaming platforms and decentralised online communities "now serve as ecosystems where propaganda, radicalisation, recruitment, and planning of offline actions reinforce one another" (Europol 2026b). The 2025 TE-SAT identifies algorithm-driven content as reinforcing radical ideas through repeated exposure to violent material (Europol 2025, 11).

The evidence has limits that matter for policy. The TE-SAT is a law enforcement report built from member state submissions, and the categories and completeness of those submissions vary; age was missing for 23 suspects in 2025 (Europol 2026a, 22). It describes patterns found in casework and does not estimate how many young people are exposed to extremist content without acting on it. The British arrest and referral counts are also shaped by policing choices and referral practice, and the 39% rise in referrals may partly reflect greater awareness among teachers. The 2026 Home Office release was the last quarterly edition of the police powers series, so future British data will be less frequent (Home Office 2026a).

The common finding is narrower and still significant. In both jurisdictions minors now appear in terrorism casework in numbers that were rare a decade ago, and European investigators report that most young suspects radicalised online without a coherent ideological position.

5. The UAE legal framework

The framework as a whole, including the compliance window to 2027 and the comparison with Australia, is set out in EPIC paper 044 (child-digital-safety). This section covers only the provisions that bear on radicalisation risk.

Federal Decree-Law No. 26 of 2025 on Child Digital Safety was issued on 1 October 2025, published in the Official Gazette on 14 October 2025 and entered into force on 1 January 2026 (UAE Legislation 2025). Its scope is wide. Article 3 covers platforms that operate in the UAE or are directed at users in the country, and lists social media, "messaging applications" and "Electronic gaming platforms" among the services covered (UAE Legislation 2025, art. 3). Platforms must apply "effective and reasonable age-verification mechanisms" (art. 8), and the law sets duties on platforms to protect children (art. 10). Article 4 establishes a Child Digital Safety Council chaired by the Minister of Family; Article 5 gives it tasks that include setting national indicators and evaluating the effectiveness of policies (art. 5(4) and 5(6)). Penalties are left to a Cabinet regulation (art. 16), and existing platforms have a one-year period to regularise their position, which may be extended (art. 18).

Cabinet Resolution No. 106 of 2026 applied the law to social media. It was issued on 17 June 2026 and took effect on 30 June 2026 (UAE Legislation 2026). According to WAM, it covers platforms that allow users to publish or share content, or "that rely on algorithmic systems to display, rank, or recommend content" (WAM 2026b). Children under 15 may not hold accounts, and those under 15 may not join "public groups, open channels, or any large-scale interactive spaces". Children aged 15 but not yet 16 receive enhanced protections that include disabling interaction with unknown users (UAE Legislation 2026, art. 3). "Self-declaration of age shall not be accepted", "parental consent shall not constitute a valid exemption", and verification is to use digital identity or biometric means approved by the Council (WAM 2026b). The government portal states the minimum age of 15 and notes that the resolution is available in Arabic (u.ae 2026); the UAE Legislation platform also carries an English translation and states that the Arabic text prevails (UAE Legislation 2026).

The Council held its first meeting on 12 February 2026 and agreed to develop a national classification system that would assess platforms by risk level, content and suitability for different ages; social media was named as the first priority track (WAM 2026a). In April 2026 it held a workshop on "developing a risk-based classification system for digital platforms" (WAM 2026c). Its listed members include the Telecommunications and Digital Government Regulatory Authority, the Ministry of Interior and the Federal Public Prosecution (WAM 2026a). A legal briefing notes that the Telecommunications and Digital Government Regulatory Authority oversees enforcement (Baker McKenzie 2026). No classification system had been published by 17 November 2026 on the sources reviewed for this paper.

6. Where the UAE framework meets the radicalisation evidence

Parts of the UAE framework match the risks described in the European and British data. The scope covers messaging and gaming platforms, which Europol identifies as recruitment spaces, and the bar on under-15s joining public groups and open channels reaches the large interactive spaces where extremist content circulates. The algorithmic test in the Cabinet resolution also brings recommendation systems within scope; the TE-SAT links these systems to the reinforcement of radical ideas.

The framework was not drafted as a counter-terrorism instrument, and its definitions show this. Article 1 defines harmful content as material that "may adversely affect the moral, psychological, or social values of Children or society, and contravenes Media Content Standards" (UAE Legislation 2025, art. 1). The text

reviewed for this paper does not mention extremism or terrorism. Extremist material would probably fall within the general definition, but the law does not say so, and the classification system has not yet set out the categories it will use.

The second gap is evidence. The UAE does not publish an age breakdown of terrorism-related arrests or a referral series comparable to Prevent, and the sources reviewed contain no official count of UAE minors drawn into extremism online. Without such data, the scale of the risk in the UAE and the effect of the new rules cannot yet be measured.

7. Policy implications

The Council's mandate to set national indicators and evaluate effectiveness under Article 5 offers a route to fill the evidence gap. An annual statistical note giving age-banded counts of extremism-related incidents involving minors, recorded by the Ministry of Interior and the Federal Public Prosecution, both of which sit on the Council, would give the UAE a baseline that Europe and Britain already have. It would also allow the effect of the under-15 rule to be assessed once the compliance period ends.

The national classification system can name extremist and terrorist content and violent subcultures explicitly as a risk category, alongside the moral and psychological harms in the current definition. Article 14's duty to train staff to identify the digital abuse or exploitation of children could include the signs of online grooming by extremist networks; Europol's 2026 report discusses such grooming alongside the sexual extortion of minors in The Com network. Both steps sit within the existing law and do not require new legislation.

8. Limitations

The paper relies on official statistics and agency reports and does not use survey data on children's exposure to extremist content. European and British data are not directly comparable because of different age bands, legal definitions and counting rules. The paper takes the provisions of Cabinet Resolution No. 106 of 2026 from the WAM summary and the government portal; EPIC paper 044 checks them against the English translation on the UAE Legislation platform. The Australian eSafety Commissioner and the UK House of Commons Library were consulted but could not be retrieved in full and are not cited.

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Dated source log

Date checked	Key	Route	Status
17 Nov 2026	Europol 2026a	Opened (PDF, 58 pages)	Retrieved; published 13 Jul 2026; PDF md5 matched local copy
17 Nov 2026	Europol 2026b	Opened (rendered page)	Retrieved; dated 13 Jul 2026
17 Nov 2026	Europol 2025	Opened (PDF)	Retrieved; 2025 edition, data to end-2024
17 Nov 2026	Home Office 2026a	Opened (page and ODS tables)	Retrieved; published 8 Oct 2026; Table A.10 read
17 Nov 2026	Home Office 2026b	Opened (page and ODS tables)	Retrieved; published 6 Aug 2026; official statistics in development
17 Nov 2026	UAE Legislation 2025	Opened (rendered page)	Retrieved; plain request returned 403, rendered page read in full
17 Nov 2026	UAE Legislation 2026	Opened (rendered page)	Retrieved; English translation read, art. 3 checked
17 Nov 2026	u.ae 2026	Opened	Retrieved; updated 3 Nov 2026
17 Nov 2026	WAM 2026a	Opened (rendered page)	Retrieved; dated 12 Feb 2026
17 Nov 2026	WAM 2026b	Opened (rendered page)	Retrieved; dated 18 Jun 2026

Date checked	Key	Route	Status
17 Nov 2026	WAM 2026c	Opened (rendered page)	Retrieved; dated 30 Apr 2026
17 Nov 2026	Baker McKenzie 2026	Opened	Retrieved; dated 8 Jan 2026; law firm briefing
17 Nov 2026	House of Commons Library CBP-7613	Attempted	Not retrieved (403); not cited
17 Nov 2026	eSafety Commissioner (Australia)	Attempted	Not retrieved (connection error); not cited

Calculations by EPIC

- EU 2025 share aged 18 or younger: 130 / 486 = 26.7% of all arrests; 130 / (486 - 23) = 28.1% of arrests with age reported.
- EU 2025 jihadist share: 108 / 347 = 31.1%.
- GB under-18 arrests, years to June 2002 to 2026: sum of Table A.10 = 400.
- GB year to June 2026 excluding Palestine Action: 3,867 - 3,630 = 237 arrests; under-18s 46 - 1 = 45; 45 / 237 = 19.0%.
- Prevent under-18 referrals: 393 + 3,655 + 1,379 = 5,427; 5,427 / 10,279 = 52.8%.

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