



Written testimony of

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Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention

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Homeland Security Subcommittee

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## **Introduction**

Chairwoman Roybal-Allard, Ranking Member Fleischmann, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify on the Office of Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention’s grant program today. I am Tyler Cote, Co-Founder and Director of the nonprofit organization, Operation250 and I am honored to appear before you today.

Operation250 (Op250) is a preventative educational organization headquartered in Massachusetts that works with students and educators with the ultimate goal of keeping youth safe from threatening materials and individuals online. Our work is through a series of educational workshops and trainings with students ranging from the ages of 9 to 18 and with educators from elementary, middle, and high schools. The pillars of our programming are focused on using online safety, anti-hate and anti-extremism, and problem-solving education to impact the threat malevolent online materials and individuals can pose to youth.

With widespread access to, and subsequent engagement with hate-based and terrorist related content online, the need for prevention efforts thwarting this threat is clear. It is agreed upon that longtime exposure to hateful and extremist content can be costly. Such exposure has been seen to reinforce discriminatory views and attitudes against vulnerable groups<sup>1</sup>; and in studies focusing on youths’ exposure to hate online, it has shown that visiting hate sites is

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham H. Foxman and Christopher Wolf, *Virtual Hate: Containing its spread on the internet*. (Macmillan, 2013).

associated with serious violent behavior<sup>2</sup>. Research has been finding that 57% of students are coming across hate messages in the previous two months<sup>3</sup>. In addition to this, data from the ongoing research evaluating Operation250's student workshop program has shown that youth are experiencing, on average, 2.7 harmful events online in just the previous month.

This research is particularly troubling when considering just 23% of educators feel "very prepared" to teach about hate speech in a classroom<sup>4</sup>, and just 17% report feeling "confident they know enough about online safety to speak about it"<sup>5</sup>. Considering this, in developing strategies to prevent extremism, a focus on preventative skills and knowledge to address underlying risks associated with online exposure to hateful and extremist content, and the subsequent behaviors that can keep youth safe from such materials and individuals is key in the day-to-day effort to protect from targeted violence, terrorism and extremism online.

### **Operation250's program and goals**

Starting in 2016 as part of the Department of Homeland Security's Peer-to-Peer: Challenging Extremism (P2P) innovation program, myself and my colleagues developed the organization, Operation250. Upon the completion of the P2P competition, at which we finished third in the country, we formed a partnership with the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health to begin the process of evaluating our educational curriculum. Then, starting in 2019, the University of Massachusetts Lowell, Georgia State University, the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, and Op250 received funding from the National Institute of Justice to evaluate the Operation250 student workshop model's efficacy.

The student workshop model being evaluated is made-up of two skills acquisition lessons and one skills application activity for students to engage with over the course of two-to-three hours. These workshops are original, research-based lessons that offer students the opportunity of acquiring skills about recognizing unsafe online behaviors, the psychology of online decision making, enhancing their understanding about hate and hostile out-group attitudes, and identifying risks and threats when online. These skills are later applied by the students in an activity which is aimed at identifying how the issues discussed throughout the workshop might impact their community and allow for the students to develop ideas for potential solutions they can all participate in.

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<sup>2</sup> Michele L. Ybarra, Kimberly J. Mitchell, and Josephine D. Korchmaros, "National trends in exposure to and experiences of violence on the internet among children", *Pediatrics* 128, no. 6 (2011), <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/128/6/e1376.full.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Nigel Harriman et al. "Youth exposure to hate in the online space: An exploratory analysis", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17, 8531 (2020).

<sup>4</sup> "The state of k-12 cyberethics, cybersafety, and cybersecurity curriculum in the United States". National Cyber Security Alliance. May 2011. <https://staysafeonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/State-K-12-Cyberethics-resource.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> "Be internet awesome: Online safety & teachers". Google Survey. December 2018. [https://services.google.com/fh/files/blogs/parent\\_teacher\\_survey\\_us.pdf](https://services.google.com/fh/files/blogs/parent_teacher_survey_us.pdf)

Over the course of these evaluations, we have found that our student workshop programming has shown significant improvements in students' ability to identify online disinhibited behaviors and its effects, which is a key element of our online safety education; online disinhibition is the phenomenon of when an individual "loosens up, feels less restrained, and expresses themselves more openly" online, leading to benign disinhibition (e.g. being more willing to seek for help online), and toxic disinhibition (e.g. taking more risks; being more hostile toward others)<sup>6</sup>. In addition to this, the evaluation has also shown an approaching significance in students' ability to correctly identify risks when online. Organizationally, we find the importance of measuring and fully understanding the impact our educational programming has being critical in our efforts.

Our educational program has been built, developed, and undergone evaluation to measure the overall goals of improving online behavior in students. This is reflective of our commitment to prevention, aiming at improving youth online self-regulation, perspective taking, and overall problem-solving skills. In focusing on the preventative skills of improving youth online behavior to remain safe online, Op250 has situated itself to be an impactful player in the whole-of-community effort at preventing targeted violence and terrorism.

### **Impact of OTVTP grant program**

In 2020, Op250 was awarded funding from the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention (OTVTP) to replicate the student workshop, student lecture, and educator training programs. This funding offers us the opportunity to replicate this programming throughout Massachusetts and to extend into school systems in New Hampshire. The funding will allow us to reach an estimated 930 students through our workshops, and another 1000 through our student lecture series, as well as being able to deliver teacher trainings to an approximate 632 educators, administrators, and school counselors. In addition to expanding our reach to school systems and communities around the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the State of New Hampshire, this also grants us the opportunity to train more educational program trainers, who once are trained, will be able to deliver the variety of program offerings we make available to schools and communities for the organization.

Since 2017, Operation250 has delivered programming to approximately 1,139 students and 1,029 educators in Massachusetts via our student workshops, lectures, and teacher trainings. With the funds granted by the OTVTP, our organization has the opportunity of potentially doubling our reach and ultimately expanding our impact to new communities and schools.

### **Conclusion**

With our focus of online safety, we are able to offer prevention education to communities. As a nonprofit in the space, this funding grants us the opportunity to work with,

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<sup>6</sup> John Suler, "The online disinhibition effect". *Cyberpsychology & behavior* 7, no.3 (2004): 321-326.

and be flexible to communities and schools to ensure our programming uniquely suits the audience it is working with and at being a preventative tool in the ongoing efforts against terrorism and extremism, and specifically that of white supremacy and hate online. Prevention is about readiness, preparation, and acting ahead before something becomes a problem. This grant program offers organizations like Op250 the opportunity of being a preventative solution to extremism and terrorism. In striving to improve youths' online safety and digital literacy skills, and educators' confidence and understanding in the teaching strategies aimed at improving youth online behavior, youth will be better equipped to critically think, analyze, and ultimately be protected from extremists' influences while online.

Thank you for affording me the opportunity to speak about the mission and work of Operation250, and the impact the Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention grant program will have on our organization moving forward. I look forward to any questions the subcommittee may have.