YOUNG CANADIANS' EXPOSURE TO AUTHENTIC VIOLENT & GORE CONTENT ONLINE

June 2026

DIGITALLY INFORMED YOUTH

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

DIY: DIGITAL SAFETY: DIY is a team of leading Canadian scholars on technology-facilitated violence. Team members involved in this report include Dr. Kaitlynn Mendes, Dr. Alexa Dodge, Dr. Christopher Dietzel, and Dr. Charlotte Nau. The DIY team has significant experience mobilizing knowledge through academic and non-academic communities, including creating numerous public reports, fact sheets, and infographics on digital safety issues and supports. Their publications are based on qualitative, quantitative, and legal research about young Canadians' experiences with technology-facilitated violence and other online harms.

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR CHILD PROTECTION: The Canadian Centre for Child Protection (C3P) is a national charity dedicated to the personal safety of all children. C3P team members involved in this report include Jacques Marcoux and Dr. Katelin Neufeld. C3P's goal is to reduce the sexual abuse and exploitation of children. C3P operates: Cybertip.ca, Canada's tipline to report child sexual abuse and exploitation on the internet; Project Arachnid®, a victim-centric set of tools to combat the growing proliferation of child sexual abuse material on the internet; and NeedHelpNow.ca, which supports those who are worried a nude of them under the age of 18 is being shared online, or are experiencing other forms of online sexual violence.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

International research has found that young people are regularly exposed to photos and videos of authentic violence and gore online. These are real depictions of violence, death, and injury that are not from fictional sources (Classification Office 2025; eSafety Commissioner, 2025; Human Digital et al., 2025). Examples include photos and videos of self-harm (Stänicke et al., 2025), suicide (Ofcom, 2024), fist fights and stabbings (Youth Endowment Fund, 2024), mass shootings (Classification Office, 2025), animal abuse (Reyes Molleda et al., 2026), sexual violence (Dodge, 2016), and more (Ofcom, 2024). This content is now available in everyday online spaces, including on social media platforms and in search engine results (Broderick, 2025; Classification Office, 2025, 4). This content is insufficiently moderated (Gillespie, 2018), and at times algorithmically amplified (Saurwein & Spencer-Smith, 2021), by many popular social media and messaging platforms (eSafety Commissioner, 2025).

While countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom have been trailblazers in researching and responding to this issue (Classification Office 2025; eSafety Commissioner, 2025; Human Digital et al., 2025), insufficient research in Canada has left policy makers, educators, and advocates without the evidence needed to make data-driven regulations and interventions. This report responds to this research gap by reporting the findings of a national survey on young Canadians' (aged 13–18) exposure to authentic violence and gore online.

KEY FINDINGS ON RATES OF EXPOSURE, TYPES OF CONTENT VIEWED, & REASONS FOR VIEWING:

- **Teens were exposed to this content at high rates:** 85% of young people surveyed had seen at least one form of authentic violence or gore online.
- **Teens were exposed to a variety of violent and gore content, including physical fights, murder, dead bodies, and abuse:** 73% had seen videos of physical fights, 65% had seen videos of police violence, 52% had seen someone being injured or killed in a war, 50% had seen someone being injured or killed in a car accident, 50% had seen the video of Charlie Kirk being shot, 43% had seen images or videos of dead bodies, 39% had seen a video of someone being murdered, 33% had seen videos of mass shootings or school shootings, 13% had seen videos of adults being sexually abused, and 10% had seen a child or teen being sexually abused.
- **Teens were most likely to see this content on YouTube and TikTok, but exposure occurred on a variety of platforms:** This content was often seen on YouTube (44%), TikTok (42%), Instagram (31%), and Facebook (28%). It was less commonly seen on Discord (10%), gaming sites or apps (9%), and messaging apps, such as WhatsApp (9%), Facebook Messenger (6%), Telegram (6%), and iMessage/FaceTime (4%).
- **Teens mostly encounter this content because it is posted by strangers and/or recommended by social media algorithms; few teens are intentionally seeking it out:** Only 7% of teens stated that they had searched for this content. Most teens encountered this content because a stranger had posted it

(39%) or because an app, game, or website had shown or recommended it to them (33%). Accidentally encountering violent content posted by strangers was, therefore, more common than receiving it from someone the teens knew (29%) or seeing it posted by someone they knew (17%).

- **Teens often don't intend to engage with this content; it mostly "shows up" via posts from strangers and algorithmic recommendations:** When asked about why they had viewed the violent content, nearly half (45%) of the participants stated that it "just showed up" on the app or website they were looking at. Others said that someone had sent it to them (12%). While these findings support the idea that teens are largely exposed to violent content unintentionally, a minority of teens reported actively seeking it out (7%) due to, for instance, curiosity about the content or a desire to learn about the issue being depicted.

KEY FINDINGS ON TEENS' RESPONSES & REACTIONS TO AUTHENTIC GORE & VIOLENCE

- **After seeing violent or gore content, most teens either do nothing or they block, remove, or mute the account that posted the content:** 39% of teens respond by doing nothing. When action is taken, the most frequent action was unfollowing, blocking, removing, or muting the account that shared the content (27%), followed by changing the app or platform's settings so that it would show less of this content (13%). Only 11% had used a reporting tool to notify the app or platform about the content. Reporting the content to the police was rare (2%). Some participants went to a trusted individual for support (11%).
- **Reporting this content to apps or platforms is rare and often ineffective:** In the rare instances when teens reported violent or gore content to the app or platform (11%), this reporting often did not result in the content being removed. Among those who reported, just over half (52%) stated that the app or platform removed the content.
- **There are significant barriers to reporting this content; many teens said they didn't know how to report, were unable to report, or didn't think it would help:** For those who had encountered violent or gore content and had not notified the app or platform, there were various reasons for not reporting. Most frequently, teens stated that they didn't think the content needed to be reported (37%), they didn't know how to report the content (32%), or they had chosen not to report because they didn't think the app or platform would help (24%).
- **Most teens react negatively to authentic violent and gore content and want to see it less:** Most survey participants reported a negative reaction to exposure to this content. 59% stated that they felt "negative emotions," 19% noted a lasting negative impact, and 10% indicated that they felt guilty or wanted to do something to help. In addition, 37% expressed being shocked or surprised. Notably fewer teens felt curious (8%), neutral (8%), like they learned something (4%), felt positive emotions (1%), or were sexually aroused by the content (1%).
- **Many teens think this content should be better regulated and support banning this content or providing content warnings:** When participants were asked what, if anything, they think should be done to respond to this content, the most common suggestion was to ban it. The next most common suggestion was to provide warnings before showing this content or to blur/censor the content.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDED RESPONSE FOR ONLINE SERVICE PROVIDERS

- Take steps to reduce young people's exposure to authentic violence and gore online.
- Ensure algorithms do not amplify or promote violent and gore content to youth.
- Provide youth with easy-to-understand community guidelines and reporting mechanisms that are responsive and easy to access.

RECOMMENDED RESPONSE FOR GOVERNMENT

- Online harms legislation should regulate more forms of authentic gore and violence.
- Online harms legislation should apply to a broad range of online service providers.
- Online harms legislation should require online service providers to provide transparency reports about the amount and types of authentic gore and violence they are aware of on their platforms.
- Online harms legislation should require companies to not only provide clear and more uniform content guidelines for users related to violence and gore material, but also to enforce them consistently.

RECOMMENDED RESPONSE FOR FRONTLINE SUPPORTERS

- Provide non-judgmental supports and resources.
- Provide digital media literacy education.
- Learn about digital harms and model a healthy digital diet.

INTRODUCTION

Young people are regularly encountering photos and videos of authentic violence and gore (i.e., real depictions of violence, death, or injury that are not from fictional sources) on prominent online platforms. This includes photos and videos of self-harm (Stänicke et al., 2025), suicide (Ofcom, 2024), fist fights and stabbings (Youth Endowment Fund, 2024), sexual violence and abuse (Dodge, 2016), mass shootings (Classification Office, 2025), extreme cruelty toward animals (Reyes Molleda et al., 2026), and more (Ofcom, 2024). In some instances, this content is originally disseminated by international actors, as in the case of beheadings shared by terrorist organizations (Human Digital et al., 2025; Classification Office, 2025), but it can also originate much closer to home, as seen in footage of the fatal stabbing of a 16-year-old Halifax boy that circulated among Nova Scotian teens in 2024 (Ettinger, 2024).

Content that once remained in the dark corners of the web – such as on gore/violence sites like LiveLeak where ISIS beheading videos were disseminated – is now surfacing in everyday online spaces through messaging apps, social media algorithms, and search engine results (See: Broderick, 2025; Classification Office, 2025, 4). This content is insufficiently moderated (Gillespie, 2018), or at times even algorithmically amplified (Saurwein & Spencer-Smith, 2021), by many popular social media and messaging platforms (eSafety Commissioner, 2025). This results in some of this content being seemingly "unavoidable" (Ofcom, 2024). Exposure to this content can have psychological impacts and can influence "attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours" (Classification Office, 2025, 4). In severe cases, this content can be used as part of a pathway to self-harm, abuse toward people and animals, or even extremist actions (Classification Office, 2025).

While countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom have been trailblazers in researching and responding to this issue (see Classification Office 2025; eSafety Commissioner, 2025; Human Digital et al., 2025), insufficient research in Canada has left policy makers, educators, and advocates without the evidence needed to make data-driven regulations and interventions.

This report responds to this research gap by reporting the findings of a national survey on young Canadians' (aged 13–18) exposure to authentic violence and gore online. Survey findings reveal that exposure to authentic violence and gore is incredibly common, that prominent online service providers are failing to adequately moderate this content and/or are algorithmically serving this content to teens, and that most teens have negative feelings about seeing this content and believe it should be better regulated. These findings are essential for understanding and responding to the issue of young people's exposure to authentic violent and gore content in Canada.

BACKGROUND

EXISTING RESEARCH

Despite the dearth of Canadian research on this topic, jurisdictions such as Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom have been frontrunners in understanding and responding to young people's exposure to authentic violent and gore content online. For instance, data gathered by Australia's eSafety Commissioner provides illuminating statistics, noting that 37% of young people aged 14–17 report being exposed to authentic gory and violent images (eSafety Commissioner, 2025). Ofcom, who samples over 7,000 internet users in the UK per year, found that 59% of 13- to 17-year-olds report exposure to content such as suicide, self-harm, abuse, violence, and dangerous stunts every month (Ofcom, 2025). A survey by the Youth Endowment Fund in England and Wales found an even higher level of exposure, with 70% of people aged 13–17 having encountered real-world violence online in the past 12 months, including fist fights and stabbings involving young people (Youth Endowment Fund, 2024). Similarly, a survey by England's Children's Commissioner found that authentic violent and gore content was one of the most common forms of harmful content that young people were exposed to (Children's Commissioner, 2022).

UK and Australian-based surveys also found important demographic differences in rates of exposure. For instance, the Youth Endowment Fund in England and Wales found that Black boys (78%) and Black girls (77%) were more likely to have been exposed to this content than their White (69%) or Asian (66%) counterparts (Youth Endowment Fund, 2024). Internet Matters, a UK-based non-profit, uncovered a gender divide in exposure to content featuring violent animal abuse and dangerous stunts, with boys encountering this content more than girls (Internet Matters, 2024). Conversely, Australia's eSafety Commissioner found that girls (23%) were more likely than boys (16%) to have been exposed to content about taking their own life (eSafety Commissioner, 2022). England's Children's Commissioner also found that children with lower socioeconomic status were more likely to have seen violent imagery and self-harm content online (Children's Commissioner, 2022).

The impact of exposure to this content is not yet fully understood, but it is recognized in the few available studies that exposure can have a diversity of impacts depending on how it is interpreted and processed. There is reason to believe this viewing could be connected to issues of political radicalization and polarization (Human Digital et al., 2025), engagement in self-harm (Stänicke et al., 2025), feelings of fear or insecurity (Youth Endowment Fund, 2024), cycles of violence (Youth Endowment Fund, 2024), or the normalization of violence (Dodge, 2016; Classification Office, 2025; Human Digital et al. 2025; Ofcom, 2024; Revealing Reality, 2023). Notably, young people consulted on this topic by New Zealand's Classification Office reported they felt emotional or psychological impacts from exposure, ranging from "short-term shock to long-term mental health issues" (5). However, it is also important to consider how some forms of viewing could have positive or ambiguous impacts. For instance, there is evidence that in some instances viewing self-harm content could both encourage or discourage self-harm behaviours (Stänicke et al., 2025), and viewing images of war or suffering has historically acted as a form of "bearing witness" (Tait, 2008) that deepens empathy and inspires righteous political action (e.g., images of the Vietnam "napalm girl" fueled anti-war sentiment) (Duncombe, 2020; Sontag, 2005). Even when viewed for potentially constructive reasons, there are still risks of causing new anxieties, overwhelm, and upset, especially when videos of

war or violence are algorithmically served to young people with no warning or context (Internet Matters, 2025; Reyes et al., 2026). Despite the lack of clarity on impacts, there are growing indicators that when this content does have negative impacts, they can be severe. For example, a ruling by the UK coroner in October 2022 "identified Instagram as 'likely contributing' to a young person's death, due to the high level of self-harm material recommended on her Instagram feed in the months before she died" (Regehr et al., 2024, 6). The Youth Endowment Fund (2024) also found that seeing violent content online makes young people feel less safe in their community and less likely to go out.

A variety of reasons for young people accessing this content have been found, including curiosity, entertainment, the desire to shock others, humour, religious recruitment, or to raise awareness around world events (Classification Office, 2025; Human Digital et al., 2025). While they may have a variety of reasons for encountering this content, there is growing evidence that many young people are not seeing this content by choice and are troubled by exposure to this content. The Youth Endowment Fund (2024) found that 25% of teenagers who see real-life violence on social media are being algorithmically served this content, and that young people were only rarely intentionally seeking out this content (6%). Likewise, the New Zealand Classification Office (2025) found, through consultations with young people, that exposure to this content is often unintentional, as it simply appears in social media feeds or is shared by others. They also found that young people feel platforms are not doing enough to protect them from exposure. Technology companies have been found to be both amplifying this content (Saurwein & Spencer-Smith, 2021) and failing to respond to removal requests (Internet Matters, 2025). The New Zealand Classification Office (2025) found that young people "lack confidence and trust in social media platforms' ability to moderate this content, take effective action, and ensure the safety of users" and that those young people who "took active steps to report content" found it to be "only somewhat effective, if at all" (7).

CONTENT GUIDELINES OF POPULAR ONLINE SERVICE PROVIDERS

The above reviewed research makes clear that young people in many countries are seeing various forms of authentic violence and gore on online platforms. This is the reality in practice even though many major platforms have rules, often called "community guidelines", that set some limits on the types of violence and gore that users can publish on the platform. Platforms vary in what kinds of violence and gore they prohibit users to publish, and policies often contain vague language or permit broad exceptions, making it often difficult to establish what gore and violent content is allowed on a particular platform. It is also worth noting that community guidelines generally focus on the user's actions and, therefore, do not necessarily reflect a company's internal moderation practices.

To illustrate how complex and varying community guidelines can be, consider the following examples from the general community guidelines (as at April 15, 2026) for YouTube, TikTok, Meta (the parent company of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp), and Telegram:

- Telegram (n.d.) has a very sparse user content policy. It does not outright name any form of violent or gore content that users cannot post on its service. That said, it does note that users cannot "engage in activities that are recognized as illegal in the majority of countries" such as "child abuse", which would include posting child sexual abuse material.
- In contrast, Google, TikTok, and Meta have more robust (but variable) policies against users posting depictions of authentic violence and gore. In

terms of commonalities, all three explicitly state users cannot post child sexual abuse material (Google, 2026a; Meta, 2025a; TikTok, 2025), which is illegal in most countries (International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, 2023). Community guidelines from YouTube, TikTok, and Meta also consistently bar users from posting graphic images or videos of self-harm or suicide (Google, 2026b; Meta, 2025b; TikTok, 2025) and sexual abuse and exploitation of adults (Google, 2026a; Meta, 2026a; TikTok, 2025). On both YouTube (Google, 2026c) and TikTok (2025), users are not to post content depicting animal abuse or exploitation. On platforms offered by Meta (2026b), users can post depictions of animal abuse and exploitation, but the company may include warning screens or age gate the content. For other forms of authentic violent and gore content, though, there is even more variability, both within and across these three companies.

- While YouTube outright prohibits the above-mentioned types of violent content, some other types of violent content are only prohibited depending on the intentions of the uploader. For instance, YouTube (2026a) explicitly prohibits content depicting "road accidents, terrorist attack aftermath, street fights, physical attacks, immolation, torture, corpses, robberies", but only if the uploader's intention is to "shock or disgust viewers" or "encourage others to commit violent acts" (although no details about how intention is determined are provided). TikTok's (2025b) "shocking and graphic content" guidelines state that the platform prohibits the publication of "extremely gory, disturbing, or violent content", such as real-world depictions of "torture, the moment of someone's death, or the shooting of an individual or mutilation". However, "some content that's less graphic or shared in the public interest may be allowed, but it may be viewable only for users 18 and older or ineligible for the [feed with algorithmically-suggested content]". Meta's "violent and graphic content" policy (Meta, 2026b) states users cannot publish videos of non-medical content involving "dismemberment; visible innards…; burning or charred persons; or throat-slitting" or "live-streams of capital punishments". Users of Meta's platforms can, however, upload still images of this content.

While by no means exhaustive, the above review illustrates that popular online service providers vary greatly in the depictions of authentic violence and gore their users are allowed to post on their service. In addition to varying in the types of content allowed, policies also vary in terms of whether they consider an uploader's intention, the level of graphicness or gore, public interest, medical context, local laws, and so on. To complicate matters further, online service providers can also vary in their enforcement of community guidelines and may have different policies for user accounts in different countries or of different registered ages. For these reasons, it may be difficult for users to understand the type of content they may encounter when using a service, the recourse options available to them, and what can reasonably be expected in terms of action by the service provider if content is reported.

METHOD & DEMOGRAPHICS

METHOD

In January 2026, we surveyed 1,007 young people in Canada aged 13–18 through a general-population survey using the Leger survey panel. The survey was anonymous. Because teens cannot be members of the Leger survey panel, we recruited participants through their caregivers. Parents or guardians with teenage children were invited to the survey and provided a letter of information with details about the study. Caregivers were then asked to provide consent for their teen's participation and let their teen complete the survey without their supervision. The teens received a modified version of the study letter (i.e., written in youth-accessible language) and their own consent form. The study underwent ethics review and received approval from the research ethics board at Saint Mary's University. We established survey quotas to ensure representation across different demographic groups, including gender, race, and geographic location.[1] Developmentally appropriate survey questions were crafted to be consistent with best practices in measurement science (i.e., psychometrics; Furr, 2022). Participants completed demographic screening questions followed by a survey that lasted approximately seven minutes and included both closed-ended questions (e.g., questions to determine rates and types of exposure to authentic gore and violence online) and open-ended questions (e.g., questions asking them to describe the worst image they have seen or to share what responses they think would be helpful). Due to the sensitive nature of this topic, participants were provided with a list of free support services they could access following the survey if desired.

DEMOGRAPHICS

The participants were on average 15.1 years old at the time of data collection. Slightly more participants identified as boys/men than as girls/women, and small numbers identified as non-binary/agender/gender diverse, Two-Spirit, another gender, or transgender. All Canadian provinces were represented in the survey, but we were unable to reach participants from the territories. Around two thirds of the respondents identified as white/European, and the remainder represented a broad range of racial identities. The questionnaire also captured if the participants had a physical disability or chronic condition (4%), a learning disability or were neurodivergent (16%), or had depression, anxiety or other mental health condition (13%). All demographic data is presented in Table 1.

1 The survey quotas were designed based on recent Canadian census data to ensure that the demographic profile would match that of Canadian young people in the relevant age range as closely as possible. Data weighting to achieve national representativeness was not performed.

Table 1: Participant Overview (Demographics)

DEMOGRAPHIC MARKER	QUESTIONNAIRE ITEM	COUNT (N)	PERCENT (%)
Age	13	196	19.5
	14	172	17.1
	15	216	21.4
	16	199	19.8
	17	194	19.3
	18	30	3.0
Gender	Girl/woman	477	47.4
	Boy/man	524	52.0
	Non-binary, agender, or gender diverse	3	0.3
	Two-Spirit	2	0.2
	Another gender	1	0.1
Transgender	Yes	16	1.6
	No	983	97.6
	Unsure/ questioning	3	0.3
Sexual orientation	Straight	914	90.8
	Gay/lesbian	20	2.0
	Bisexual	19	1.9
	Queer	4	0.4
	Asexual	4	0.4
	Unsure/ questioning	19	1.9
	Other	5	0.5
Province	Alberta	124	12.3
	British Columbia	109	10.8
	Manitoba	44	4.4
	New Brunswick	22	2.2
	Newfoundland and Labrador	15	1.5
	Nova Scotia	24	2.4
	Ontario	378	37.5
	Prince Edward Island	3	0.3
	Quebec	255	25.3
	Saskatchewan	33	3.3
Racial identity	Black/African/ West Indian	54	5.4
	First Nations, Métis, Inuk, or Indigenous/ Aboriginal	54	5.4
	East Asian	76	7.5
	South/Latin American	32	3.2
	Middle Eastern	39	3.9
	South Asian	79	7.8
	Southeast Asian	35	3.5
	White/ European	677	67.2
	Other	28	2.8
Physical disability or chronic condition	Yes	38	3.8
	No	950	94.3
	Unsure/Prefer not to say	19	1.9
Learning disability or neurodivergence	Yes	160	15.9
	No	808	80.2
	Unsure/Prefer not to say	39	3.9
Depression, anxiety or other mental health condition	Yes	133	13.2
	No	813	80.7
	Unsure/Prefer not to say	61	6.1
Total		**1,007**	**100.0**

FINDINGS

RATE OF EXPOSURE

85% of teens in Canada have seen at least one type of real violence or gore online

The overwhelming majority of the survey participants (85%) indicated that they had seen at least one form of authentic violent or gore content online (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Share of participants exposed to authentic gore or violence online

85% Have seen at least one type of authentic gore or violence online

15% Have seen no authentic gore or violence online

Note: N = 1,007

There were no statistically significant relationships between exposure to violent and gore content and most demographic variables. However, neurodivergent participants were more likely to have seen at least one form of violent or gore content (91%, n = 146) than neurotypical participants (84%, n = 677).

TYPES OF AUTHENTIC GORE & VIOLENCE SEEN

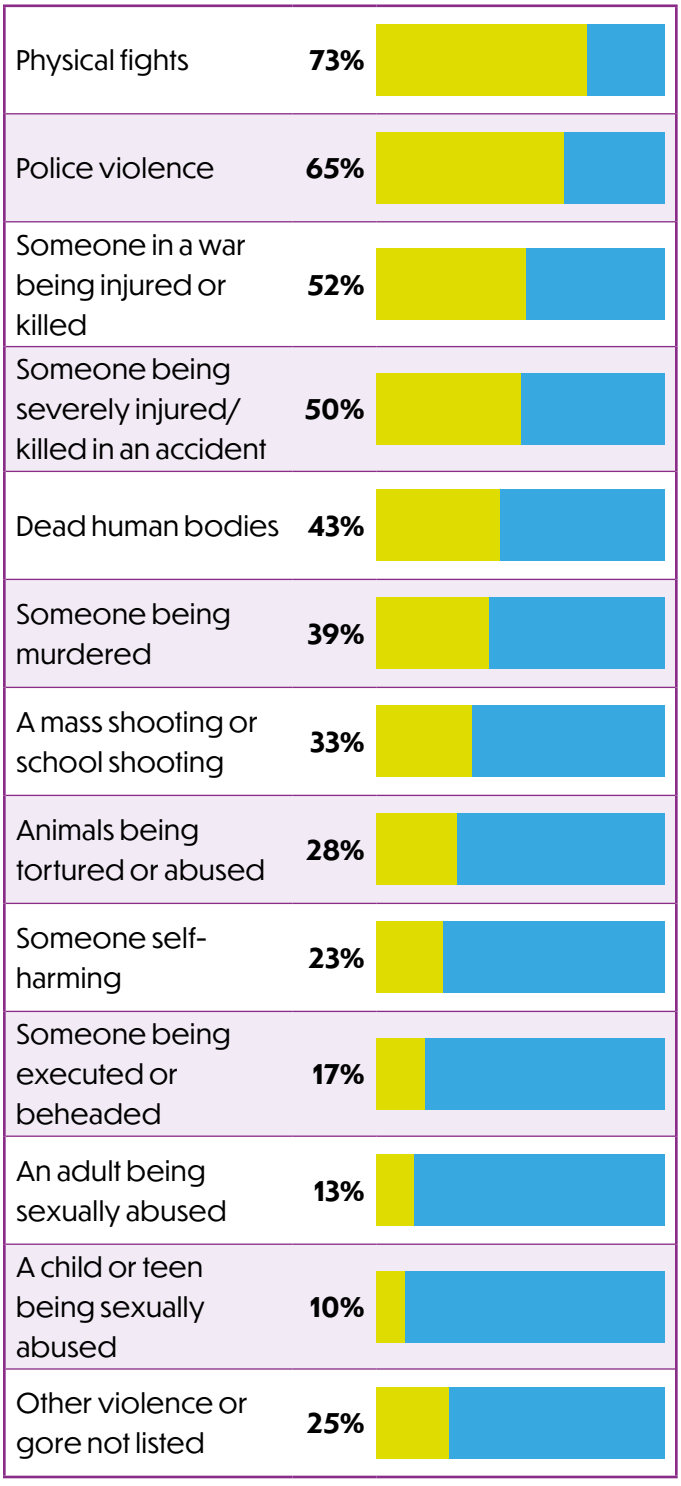
2 out of 3 Canadian teens (65%) have seen police violence online

1 in 2 Canadian teens (52%) have seen someone being killed or injured in a war online

1 in 10 Canadian teens (10%) have seen child sexual abuse material online

The most common form of violence or gore the teens had encountered was physical fights (73%), followed by police violence (65%), someone being injured or killed in a war (52%), and someone being injured or killed in a car accident (50%). Significant numbers of participants were also exposed to pictures or videos of dead human bodies (43%), someone being murdered (39%), and mass shootings or school shootings (33%). Lower, yet still significant, numbers of teens had seen images or videos of someone self-harming (23%), someone being executed or beheaded (17%), or a child or teen being sexually abused (10%). Additional content types are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Types of authentic gore or violence encountered online



Note: Multi-select question, percentages for individual responses do not add up to 100%. N = 1,007.

WORST CONTENT SEEN

Participants were asked to tell us about the worst photo or video of authentic violence or gore they have seen online. The following 15 categories of content are presented in order of most to least often mentioned.

1. **Videos of fights and beatings** were most often identified as the worst video seen (86 mentions). Examples included videos of adults engaging in fist fights, young people known to the participant engaging in fights at school, and adults or young people being severely beaten by an individual or group of people. Fights ranged in perceived severity from what one participant described as "just a fist fight" to what another described as someone potentially beaten to death. Specific examples of such videos described by young people include:

> ***"Just a fist fight between 2 boys at my school"***

> ***"[people] fighting each other and [it] became very bad"***

> ***"A kid getting beaten to what almost looked like death"***

2. **Videos of violence/use of force by police or ICE agents** was the second most identified worst video seen (82 mentions). Examples included more general descriptions of police/ICE shootings or violent arrests, as well as specific references to well-known incidents of civilian deaths by police/ICE such as the videos of the deaths of George Floyd and Renée Good. Specific examples of such videos described by young people include:

"George Floyd choked to death"

"Police shooting a man on the ground many times"

"The worst gore video I saw recently was the woman was shot dead by the ICE agency in USA"

3. **Photos and videos of war, genocide, and international political violence** were the third most described worst images seen (72 mentions). This most often included descriptions of death and destruction in Palestine and Ukraine, as well as mentions of political violence in the Middle East generally. Young people often described seeing videos of bombings and images of dead and wounded bodies in the streets. Specific examples of such videos described by young people include:

"Kids that have been shredded due to Israel bombing buildings full of people. Dead people run over by bulldozers/tanks in Gaza"

"It was a video of the war in Ukraine, lots of people hurt or dead"

"Bombing of kids in Palestine"

4. **Videos of murder or attempted murder** were the fourth most mentioned worst images seen (61 mentions). This included videos of shootings, stabbings, or general descriptions that they saw "someone getting murdered" or "someone killing a person". Specific examples of such videos described by young people include:

"I saw someone get shot in the head [...]. Not cool"

"The woman on the subway that was stabbed by the man behind her for no reason. I saw her slumped and blood on the ground"

"Someone being shot and they obviously died"

5. **The video of Charlie Kirk being shot and killed** was the next most common worst video seen (41 mentions). While most young people simply described this by saying "Charlie Kirk video" or "Charlie Kirk being shot and died", some young people also described their feelings about it:

"I watched the actual shooting of Charlie Kirk before it was taken down and it was very disturbing"

6. **Mass shootings** were the next most common worst video seen (38 mentions). This was often described by young people who simply said "mass shooting" or "school shooting", while others described specific videos/incidents of school shootings or mass shootings. Specific examples of such videos described by young people include:

"The mass shooting in Australian beach last month was the worst for me"

"Mass shooting of innocent people including young children. Blood splattered everywhere"

7. **Animal abuse** was the next most common (37 mentions). This category ranged from images of animals being hit (e.g., "someone hitting their dog hard") to animals being brutally tortured or killed. Some young people detailed disturbing gore videos of this content or shared that the content was so disturbing that they couldn't bring themselves to describe it:

"For me [the worst videos are] animal torture and I don't want to think about it or talk about it anymore it upsets me"

"Saw a kitten put in a blender"

"An animal being tortured"

8. **Accidents** were the next most common (33 mentions). This category includes descriptions of gory or deadly car accidents as well as other severe or deadly accidents, such as a person falling in front of a subway/train, being crushed, or falling from a building to their death:

"I saw a guy die in a car crash. It was really bloody"

"Someone being run over"

9. **Videos of beheadings and public hangings** were the next most common (28 mentions). Many young people simply described this as "someone being beheaded", while others provided more detail or mentioned how disturbing this was to see:

"When the talaban [sic] beheaded one of their captives it was awful"

"A beheaded man's head rolling"

10. The next most common category was **sexual content or images of sexual abuse** (21 mentions). This category ranged from exposure to sexual content that the young person did not wish to see or found troubling (e.g. "someone naked" or "pornography") to mentions of sexual assault or bestiality. Examples include:

"girl have sex with dog"

"Rape of a teenager"

11. **Images of dead bodies** were the next most common (20 mentions). Some young people simply described this as "dead bodies" while others described seeing lots of blood or injuries on the bodies. Specific examples include:

"Dead body hanging in woods"

"it was a severed and mangled body"

12. **Images of self-harm** were the next most common (14 mentions). Many young people simply described what they saw as ranging from "someone hurting themselves" to "suicide". More specific descriptions of this content include:

"I saw a man on a stream shoot himself in the head and kill himself"

"A person attempting cut their wrist to sever an arterie"

13. The next most common worst image or video seen was of **child abuse** (12 mentions). This included children or babies being beaten or even killed by adults. Specific examples include:

"Someone was abusing their child and the video showed the wounds and the parent being arrested"

"An old man abusing a young girl"

14. **Gang violence** was mentioned more rarely (6 mentions). This content was most often described simply as "gang violence", but a few young people provided further detail:

"Cartel guys killing each other"

"Gang shootings in the streets"

15. The least common type of video mentioned can be described as **identity-based violence** (3 mentions). Each of the three videos in this category seem to capture someone being attacked or killed due to their identity:

"I saw a video of a girl getting burned by her brother for having an affair with a guy who is not in her religion"

"I saw a man being shot at by racists"

"Kid with autism being hit and bullied"

16. Finally, it is worth mentioning that some young people (9 mentions) shared that they found the content so disturbing that they do not wish to think about it enough to describe it in the survey:

"I prefer not to think about it"

"It was horrible and difficult to describe"

"It breaks my heart to put this in my mind so I don't want to talk to it"

"It was really shocking and disturbing. I couldn't believe it was real, and it made me feel scared, uncomfortable, and kind of sick. I didn't want to keep watching"

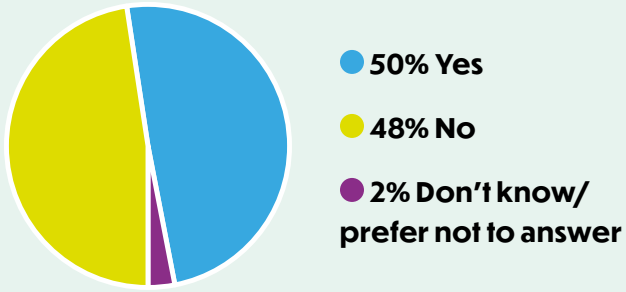
"I cant repeat it without shaking and throwing up"

"i have seen a few photos/videos and i dont like to think about what showed up on my screen"

SHOOTING OF CHARLIE KIRK

In September 2025, Charlie Kirk, a right-wing American commentator and social media influencer, was fatally shot in the neck while speaking at a public event on a university campus in the U.S. (The Associated Press, 2025). Graphic videos of the assassination quickly spread online, with media coverage suggesting many young people had seen the videos (e.g., Seminera, Gecker, & The Associated Press, 2025; Stechyson, 2025; The Associated Press, 2025). As this survey occurred a few months after the assassination, young people were asked if they had seen videos online of Charlie Kirk being shot. A notable 50% of young Canadians had seen this video (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Share of participants who had seen a video of Charlie Kirk being shot online



Note: N = 1,007.
Numbers rounded for clarity, exact percentages are 49.6, 47.9, & 2.5.

Immediately after Charlie Kirk was killed, explicit close-up videos of the assassination spread rapidly online. Footage appeared within minutes on online services like TikTok, Instagram, Facebook and X – with reports of child, youth, and adult users alike unintentionally encountering the murder video through algorithmic recommendations or by virtue of autoplay functions.

Reporting by *Wired* (Goode, 2025) found a single video of the shooting published on Instagram had been viewed more than 15.3 million times within 48 hours of the incident. *Wired* also spoke with a Europe-based researcher who identified a single video of the shooting on TikTok that was viewed 17 million times within 24 hours. Other journalists from *The Washington Post* (Hunter & Oremus, 2025) reported easily surfacing videos of the murder days later by relying on platform-recommended keyword search terms while searching for variations of the name "Charlie Kirk".

This widespread distribution happened despite platform content guidelines that generally prohibit such content or impose context- or age-based restriction. For instance, in response to questioning by *The Washington Post* (Hunter & Oremus, 2025), some platforms such as TikTok stated their commitment to taking additional steps to remove videos consistent with their content guidelines, without explicitly stating the videos in question violated their guidelines. Others, like Bluesky, stated they would only remove the more graphic, close-up versions of the videos. In contrast, a Meta spokesperson told reporters that the company was "removing content that glorifies or supports this tragic incident or the perpetrator, while applying warning screens over videos of the incident and restricting their view to people 18 and over." Yet, the day after the shooting, The Washington Post reported that tests conducted by other U.S.-based researchers using an Instagram Teen account surfaced many graphic videos of the killing.

Young people were asked, in an open-ended question, to share where they saw the video of Charlie Kirk being shot, with the following results:

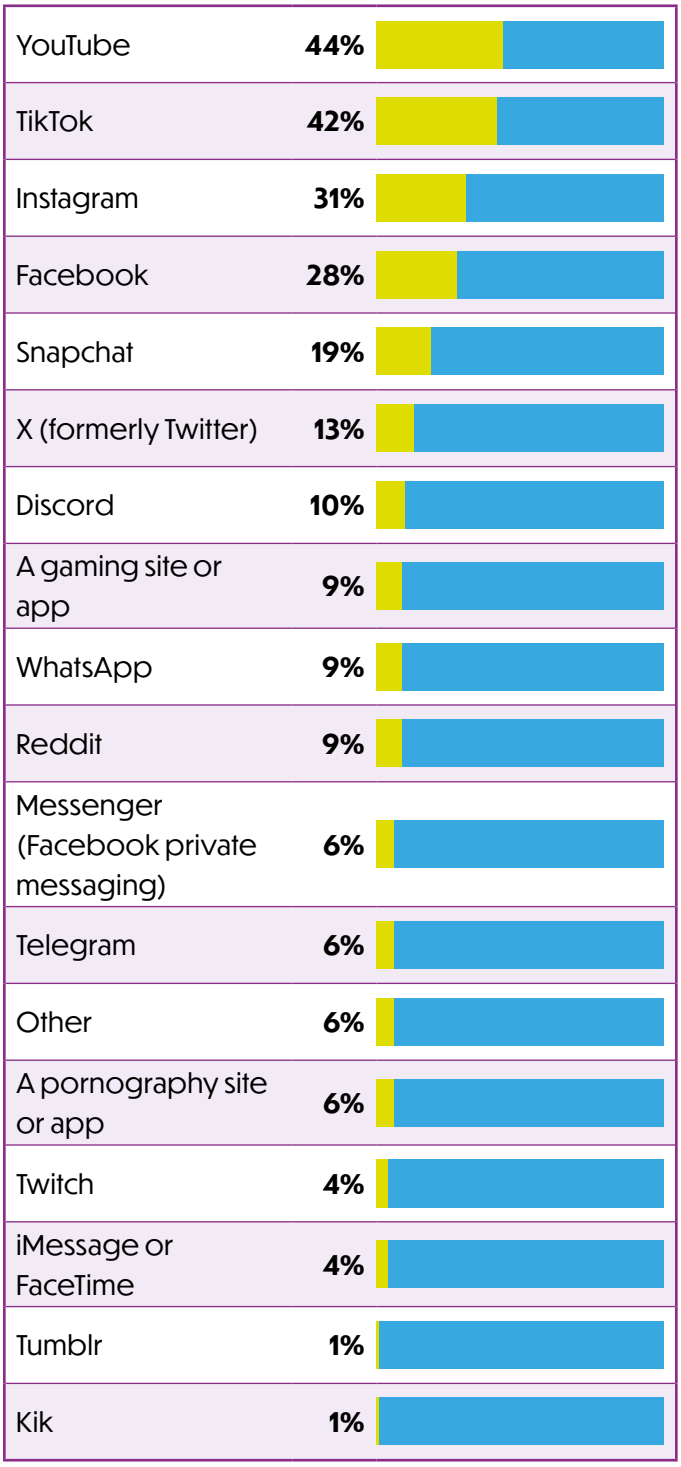
1. TikTok was the most common platform where young people encountered this video (45 mentions).
2. YouTube and "on the news" tied for the second most common place young people saw this video (32 mentions each).
3. Facebook was the third most common platform mentioned (27 mentions).
4. The fourth most common way this video was seen was because a friend sent it to them directly (e.g., "friend sent it on WhatsApp", "someone sent it to the group chat") or showed it to them on their device (e.g., "Someone showed it at school") (21 mentions).
5. Instagram was the next most common (19 mentions).
6. Some young people just shared they saw it on "social media" generally. In most cases, this was because they saw it across several platforms (e.g., "The [videos] were all over all the socials", "That was posted across all platforms, I seen that video multiple times from different places unwillingly", "Every social platform really") (15 mentions). Many young people shared that they could not remember where they saw it (25 mentions), which could also be due to its widespread availability across multiple platforms.
7. X was the next most common platform mentioned (13 mentions).
8. Snapchat or within a search engine tied for the next most common (e.g., "google", "i searched for it") (6 mentions each).
9. Reddit was mentioned rarely (4 mentions).
10. A few young people mentioned seeing the video on a family member's device (e.g., "My mom was on facebook and I saw it on her computer", "dad's cell", "on my brother's instagram feed") (3 mentions).
11. One young person mentioned seeing the video on Discord and one young person mentioned accessing the video on a Russian news site.

WHERE TEENS ENCOUNTER AUTHENTIC GORE & VIOLENCE ONLINE

Teens were most likely to see violent content on YouTube and TikTok

The survey participants had seen authentic violence or gore on a wide range of digital platforms and apps (see Figure 4). Most frequently, this content was seen on YouTube (44%) and TikTok (42%), two social media platforms popular among teens. About one in three participants had encountered it on Instagram (31%) or Facebook (28%). It was less common—but still somewhat likely—for teens to see authentic violence or gore on Discord (10%), gaming sites or apps (9%), and various direct messenger apps, such as WhatsApp (9%), Facebook Messenger (6%), Telegram (6%), and iMessage/FaceTime (4%).

Figure 4: Digital platforms and apps where teens encounter violent and gore content



Note: Multi-select question, percentages for individual responses do not add up to 100%. Percentages are based on respondents who saw violence/gore online (n = 859).

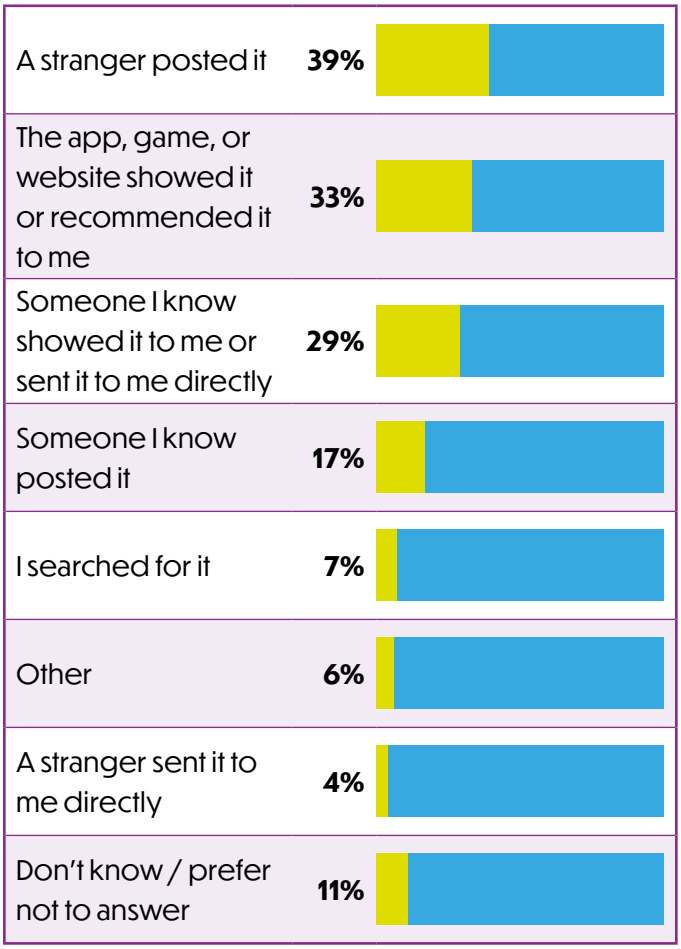
WAYS TEENS ENCOUNTER VIOLENT & GORE CONTENT ONLINE

Teens mostly encounter violence and gore through content posted by strangers and/or recommended by social media algorithms.

Teens often don't intend to engage with authentic violent or gore content online; it mostly "shows up" via posts from strangers and algorithmic recommendations.

In most cases, the teens who had seen authentic violent or gore content did not actively seek it out (see Figure 5). Indeed, only 7% stated that they had searched for it. This content was most commonly seen by teens because a stranger had posted it (39%) or because the app, game, or website had shown or recommended it to them (33%). Accidentally encountering violent or gore content posted by strangers or promoted by algorithms was, therefore, more common than receiving it directly from someone the teen knew (29%) or seeing it posted by someone they knew (17%). This finding raises questions about the role of social media algorithms, particularly on video-centred platforms like YouTube and TikTok, in serving violent and gore content to users who are not actively seeking it out and may not want to see it.

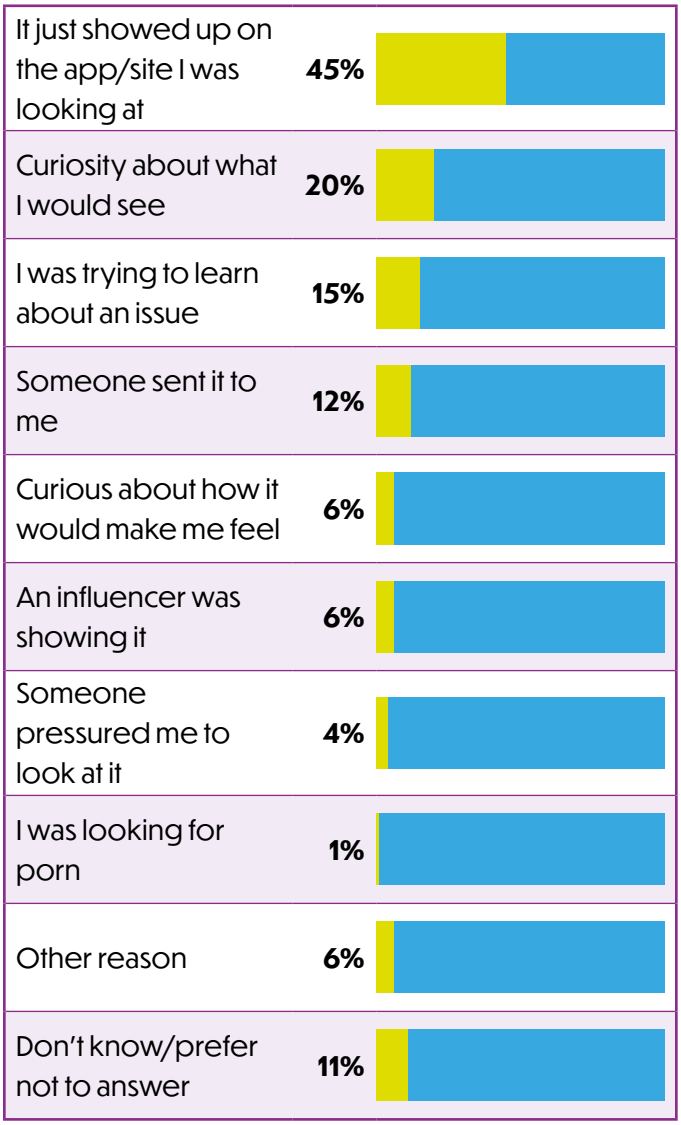
Figure 5: Ways teens encounter violent and gore content online



Note: Multi-select question, percentages for individual responses do not add up to 100%. Percentages are based on respondents who saw violence/gore online (n = 859).

When asked about why they had viewed the content, nearly half (45%) of the participants stated that it "just showed up" on the app or website they were looking at (see Figure 6). Some also said that they viewed it because someone had sent it to them (12%). While these findings support the idea that teens mostly become exposed to violent and gore content without actively seeking it out, smaller but notable shares of participants also named curiosity as a factor for looking at it. Specifically, they mentioned curiosity about what they would see (20%), about how it would make them feel (6%), and eagerness to learn about an issue (15%).

Figure 6: Reasons for looking at violent or gore content online



Note: Multi-select question, percentages for individual responses do not add up to 100%. Percentages are based on respondents who saw violence/gore online (n = 859).

HOW TEENS RESPOND TO AUTHENTIC VIOLENT & GORE CONTENT

After seeing violent or gore content, the most common response was to do nothing (39%). When action was taken, the most common action was to limit their exposure by removing the account that had posted it or changing app or platform settings. Only 11% reported the content to the platform.

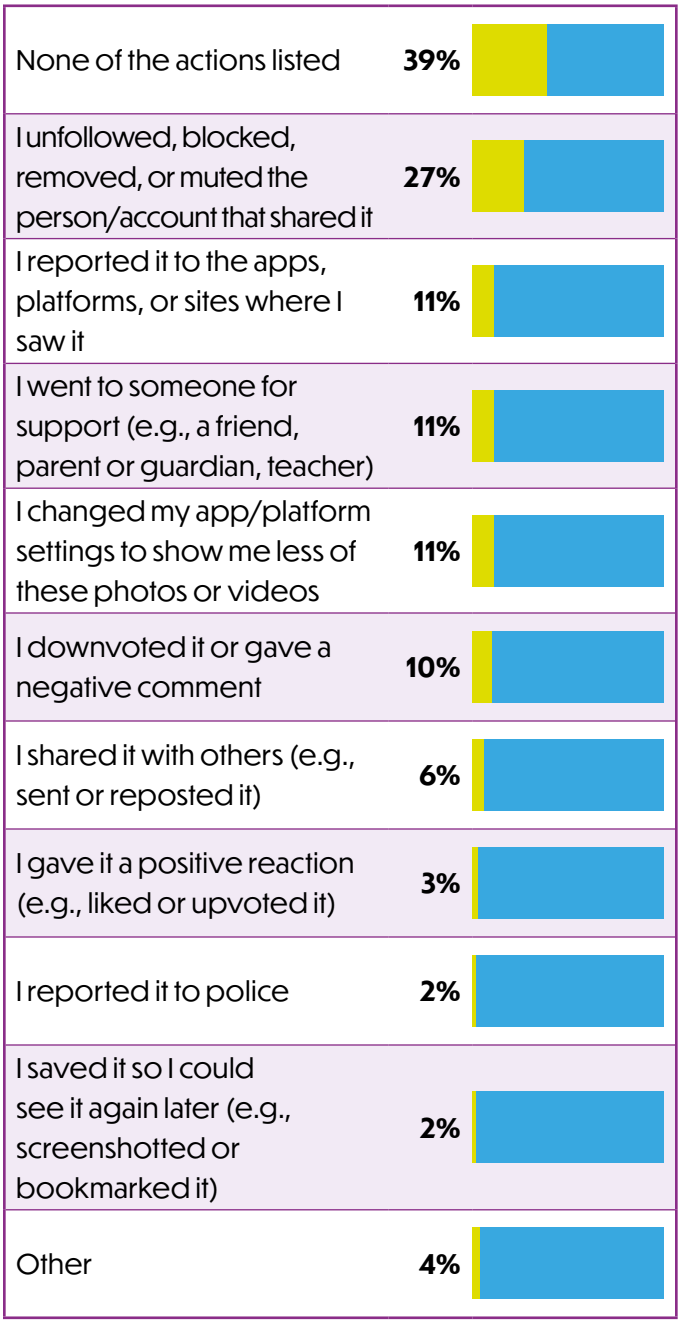
Reporting violent and gore content to an app or platform was rare and often ineffective.

There are significant barriers to reporting this content. Many teens said they didn't know how to report, were unable to report, or didn't think it would help.

In response to encountering gory or violent content online, a large share of the participants (39%) took none of the actions listed in the survey (see Figure 7). The most frequent action, taken by close to a third of the participants (27%), was unfollowing, blocking, removing, or muting the account that had shared the violent or gory material. The second most common action was changing the app or platform's settings so that it would show less content of this sort (13%). Only 11% had used a reporting tool to notify the app or platform about the content, and reporting the content

to the police was rare (2%). Some participants went to a trusted individual for support (11%). Providing a reaction on the app or platform (e.g., through voting, liking, commenting) was reported by a similar number of participants—this included mostly negative reactions (10%) and, in rare cases, positive ones (3%).

Figure 7: Actions after seeing violent or gore content online

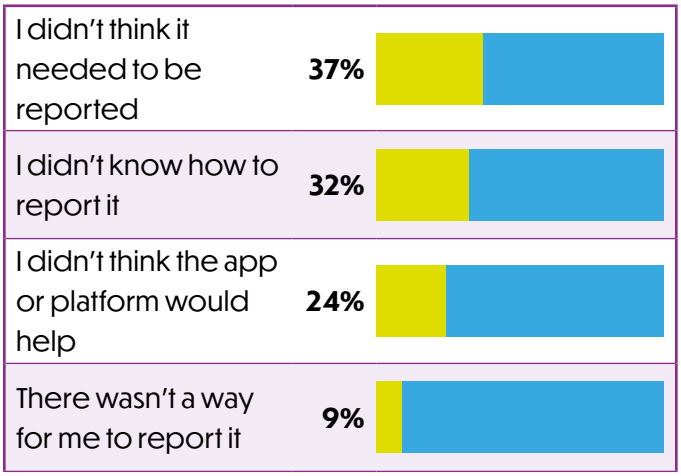


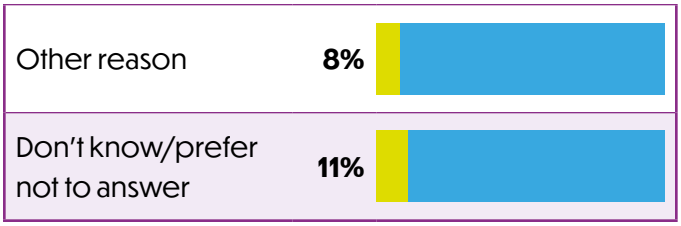
Note: Multi-select question, percentages for individual responses do not add up to 100%. Percentages are based on respondents who saw violence/gore online (n = 859).

In cases where teens reported content to the app or platform where they had seen it, this reporting often did not result in the content being removed. In the survey, we asked the teens about specific instances of reporting content they had seen on particular apps and platforms, with 82 respondents answering additional questions about such an instance. Among those, one in two (52%) stated that the app or platform removed the violent content, and one in three (33%) said that the account that had shared the violent content had been suspended. However, 43% indicated that nothing had happened as a result of their report, and 34% were unsure.

Among those participants who had encountered violent or gore content and not notified the app or platform, there were various reasons or not reporting (see Figure 8). Most frequently, teens stated that they didn't think the content needed to be reported (37%). This is a noteworthy finding given that the community guidelines of many mainstream social media platforms ban or set restrictions on at least some forms of graphic violence and gore, suggesting that community guidelines may not be sufficiently accessible to teens. One in three teens (32%) also stated that they didn't know how to report the content, with one in ten (9%) saying that there was no way to report it—indicating the need for reporting tools that are easy to find and use. Further, one in four (24%) participants had chosen not to report because they didn't think the app or platform would help.

Figure 8: Reasons for not reporting





Note: Multi-select question, percentages for individual responses do not add up to 100%. Percentages are based on respondents who saw violence or gore online and did not report it to an app/platform (n = 761).

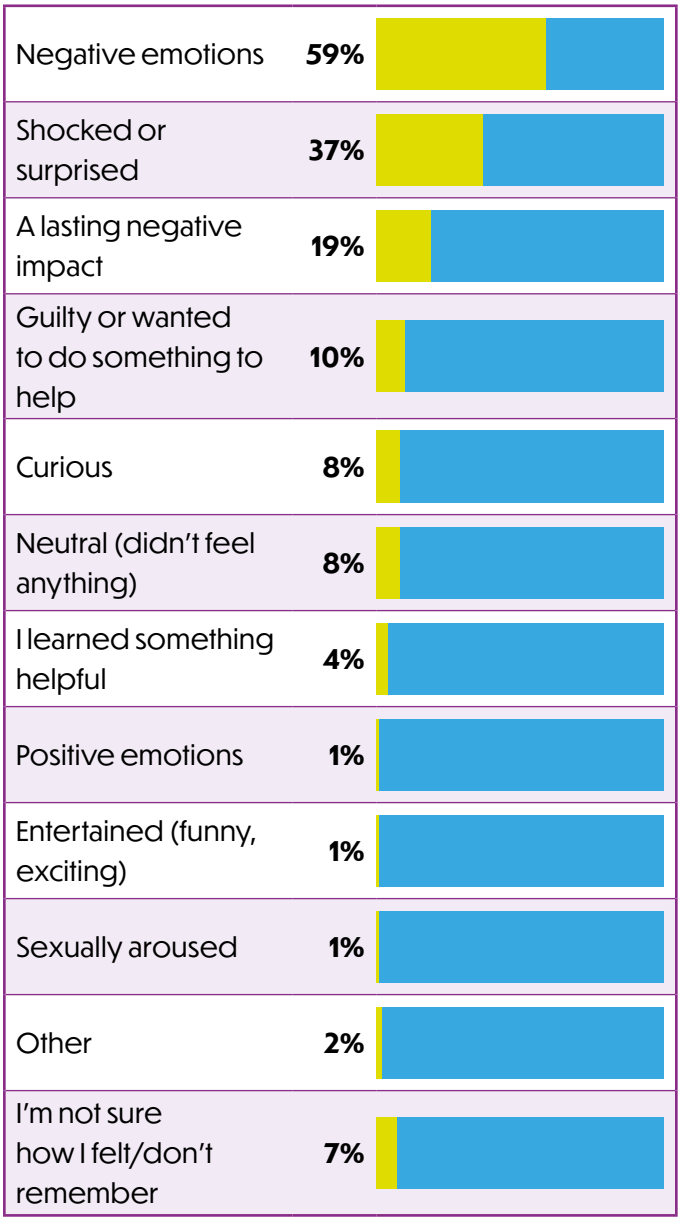
HOW TEENS FEEL ABOUT SEEING AUTHENTIC VIOLENT & GORE CONTENT

Most teens react negatively to authentic violent and gore content.

69% of teens say they want to see this content less than they do now.

Most survey participants reported a negative reaction to being exposed to authentic violent or gore content (see Figure 9). Nearly two thirds (59%) stated that they felt "negative emotions," one in five (19%) noted a lasting negative impact, and one in ten (10%) indicated that they felt guilty or wanted to do something to help after seeing this content. In addition, 37% expressed being shocked or surprised. Notably fewer teens felt curious (8%), neutral (8%), like they learned something (4%), felt positive emotions (1%), or were sexually aroused by the content (1%).

Figure 9: Feelings in response to seeing authentic violent or gore content online



Note: Multi-select question, percentages for individual responses do not add up to 100%. Percentages are based on respondents who saw violence/gore online (n = 859).

When asked how often they wished to see authentic violence or gore online, the majority (69%) stated that they wanted to see it less than they saw it now, with 13% expressing that they wanted to see it as often as now and only 4% saying they wanted to see it more.

WHAT TEENS THINK SHOULD BE DONE TO ADDRESS AUTHENTIC GORE & VIOLENT CONTENT ONLINE

In response to the question "Is there anything specific you think should be done about the issue of real gore or violence online?", participants shared a variety of perspectives on how this content should be addressed. The following categories summarize these responses, listed in order of frequency:

1. **Ban this content and/or the accounts that post the content** (320 mentions) was by far the most common suggested response. This category included comments such as:

"That stuff shouldn't be online. Especially for young kids"

"Stuff that is really gorey [sic] should not been online for anyone to see. There should be people taking this stuff off the internet right away"

"Should be banned"

"Shouldn't be shown to anyone"

"accounts that post should have lifetime bans"

2. **Blurring graphic content and/or providing a warning before showing content** (52 mentions) was the next most common suggested response. This category included comments such as:

"a warning should be placed before showing the video"

"When it's really graphic, a blurred image that you have to click to see is a good idea"

"warnings of disturbing images or content and asking for permission to view instead of it coming up unexpectedly"

3. **Age restriction for certain content or online spaces** was the next most common suggestion (32 mentions).

"make it so very young kids cannot view it"

"It should be age restricted"

"place restrictions for teens under 18"

4. Perspectives that **nothing should be done** were the next most common (27 mentions). These perspectives were often based on the belief that censorship is wrong, that there is nothing wrong with the content being shown, or that people should have the choice to see it and can choose to ignore it if they don't wish to view it. This category included comments such as:

"I don't think it does anything to anyone. I'm not traumatized or anything"

"It's freedom of expression. It's s slippery slope when you start controlling everything"

"You can just ignore it"

5. Some young people believed we should **leave this content accessible** in many cases, but for a very different reason than those above. These young people (26 mentions) shared that, even though this content can be disturbing, it is necessary for people to see because it reflects the reality of violence that is really happening in the world. These teens felt that we need to see this violence in order to reckon with this reality and/or be inspired to change this reality (e.g., through activism):

"People need to know what's going on so they can try to fix it"

"People need to see. Maybe it will teach others to be more compasionate [sic]"

"it brings attention to things that are happening around the world"

"I think its important to filter or suppress gratuitous violence, but sometimes its things that need to be shown to everyone, like when police abuse power, or what ICE is doing to people"

6. Some young people felt that, regardless of whether something should be done to address this content, **nothing would actually help to regulate these images in practice** (25 mentions). These young people felt the content was simply too widespread and difficult to regulate or that, as a society, we were unlikely to actually organize to do anything about it:

"yes [something should be done], but I don't think there is anything that will be done"

"i'm not sure there's anything you can do about it"

"I honestly don't know. It's everywhere"

"I don't know how it can be stopped or limited because there are so many people who upload and so many sites"

7. Some young people felt that the way to address these images was to better **address offline violence** so that there would be less violence in the world to record (23 mentions). These teens mentioned responses such as better gun laws to prevent violence offline, rather than focusing on technological solutions or regulations:

"strict gun laws"

"more gun control"

"make it less common in real life"

"I think that a lot of the violence online could be solved by simply stopping the violence. Like better gun laws, helping to stop wars, not supporting government policies where violence is involved (ICE organizations)"

8. Some young people suggested that **those who post this content should receive legal consequences**, including fines or jail time (20 mentions):

"should have legal consequences"

"people posting online should be prosecuted and charged for showing this stuff online"

"more police force involved"

"I think it should be blocked and people posting it should be arrested and charged"

9. Some participants suggested **more people should report the content to online service providers** and reporting should be made easier by these providers (18 mentions):

"Better reporting mechanisms"

"There should also be an easier way to report it, because sometimes it's hard to know what to do when you see something like that"

10. Some participants (17 mentions) believed that **parents should play the main role in responding to this content**, by taking steps to protect their children from seeing this content or by being willing to talk to young people about the content that they see:

"Better parent supervision"

"Yes parents need to pay more attention to who their kids friends are and what they watch online"

"My parents warn me not to look for that stuff (like the Charlie Kirk video)"

"my mom tells me to be careful and we talk about it after"

11. A few participants (5 mentions) expressed that individuals can **avoid this content** if they want through tactics such as staying out of certain online spaces or being careful what they click on:

"Haven't searched for it and it does not impact me"

"I am lucky I guess. I haven't come across it. I have no interest in seeing this so I don't click on links or look at friends phones when they try to share it with me"

12. A few participants (5 mentions) discussed the need for **more education about this content**, including how to think critically about this content and how to emotionally process the content:

"Develop critical thinking in young people"

"Talk about it at school more"

"to voice it out that it's not good for our mental health"

FINAL THOUGHTS FROM PARTICIPANTS

Finally, we asked participants whether there was "anything else you think we should know about teens' experiences seeing real gore or violence online, including your own experiences?" This question was left intentionally broad, allowing the teens to share what they felt was important. Their answers reflected the following themes:

1. Many participants used this question to **emphasize their dislike of violent and gore content online** and to express that they did not wish to see it (93 mentions):

"We should not see this at all"

"it's awful, sad and frustrating"

2. In a similar vein, many young people **restated a need to reduce their exposure to violent content,** for instance, through content moderation, online age verification, parental controls, and laws and policies (77 mentions):

"More rules for social media companies to follow, why is it up to teen to solve. Even parents can't do much because ppl show me stuff at school I'm not allowed to access at home. Why is anyone allowed to post illegal stuff like murder. I get YouTube and these companies make a ton of money but they shouldn't be allowed"

3. A frequent sentiment was that **seeing authentic violence and gore online had detrimental psychological effects.** Many described it as scary, traumatic, and as having lasting impacts on their mental health (66 mentions):

"It causes me anxiety"

"It's scary, makes me think this is how the world is now, no harmony and no peace. I don't like to go outside and talk to anyone, as you never know what might and could happen"

"Some of those experience stays longer in our memories than we bargained for and it's usually disturbing"

4. The **omnipresence** of violent content was also frequently mentioned (38 times). Many participants described how this content was "everywhere" online and extremely easy to access (38 mentions):

"it is very easily accessible. adults are naive if they think we can't access it"

"Whenever I watch with my younger siblings it randomly pops up"

"it's everywhere"

5. A number of young people described violent content online as **normal** and stated that many people perceived it to be no big deal or even funny and entertaining (33 mentions):

"It is disturbing but the violence online is everywhere. It somehow normalized."

"Lots of kids think its funny"

"everyone sees it its kinda normal"

6. Some participants stated that frequent exposure to violence might make young people **less sensitive to the cruelty depicted and might even lead to young people imitating the violent acts** they saw online (18 mentions):

"all the violence makes us as youth more violent"

"I think we are becoming numb"

"There's violence everyday and sadly one get use to it"

7. Some young people wrote that they were **able to avoid this content or didn't feel affected** by it (13 mentions):

"I don't use much social media, so other teens might see more than me. I especially avoid porn, so that's probably why I didn't see any rape"

"I've never seen anything like this before but I don't seek it out"

These final thoughts from young people demonstrate that, while there are a mixture of experiences and perceptions of exposure to authentic gore and violence, most young people believe they should be seeing less of this content and are concerned about the impacts of exposure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing young people's exposure to authentic violent and gore content will require coordinated responses from online service providers, governments, and those working frontline with young people.

RECOMMENDED RESPONSE FOR ONLINE SERVICE PROVIDERS

There is increasing recognition of the ways platform design features can either perpetuate or moderate harms to young people online (5RightsFoundation, 2021a; 5RightsFoundation, 2021b; Livingston & Pothong 2023; Nissenbaum, 2005). Despite the push by advocates and researchers toward a safety by design approach to digital platforms and technology (Livingstone & Pothong, 2023), we are in fact seeing the rolling back of moderation practices on prominent digital spaces such as X and Meta in the United States (Booth, 2025). Digital platforms are commercially motivated to design "automated pathways" that lead young people to "graphic images of self-harm, extreme diets, pornography, extremist content and introductions to adult strangers, all ubiquitous in many places and spaces that children inhabit – ranked, recommended and promoted to them at industrial scale" (5RightsFoundation, 2021a, 5). Whistleblowers allege that companies such as Meta and TikTok intentionally allow harmful content, including content related to "terrorism, sexual violence, physical violence, abuse, [and] trafficking", to remain on their platforms because they know that "outrage fuel[s] engagement" which increases the companies' stock price (Spring & Radford, 2026). It is increasingly clear that we must move away from an approach to digital safety that simply blames bad actors for posting authentic violent and gore content and ignores the architecture created by powerful technology companies (Gillett et al., 2022). Recommendations for systems-level technological responses that are grounded in our results include:

- **Take steps to reduce young people's exposure to authentic violence and gore online.** The vast majority of young people surveyed (85%) had seen photos or videos of at least one form of authentic violence or gore online. This included various forms of physical abuse, such as executions and police violence, self-harm content, and the sexual abuse of children, adults, or animals. Most young people who had seen such content online reacted negatively to it and wanted to see less of it. And when asked what they thought should be done about the issue of authentic violence or gore online, the number one thing teens recommended was that the content and/or accounts that post it should be banned. Young people also shared that much of this content is auto-playing, and they wished there was a warning first and that they had to click to play the video. These ideas from young people, along with increased resourcing for moderation, could be considered as steps to minimize young people's exposure to real violence and gore online.

- **Ensure algorithms do not amplify or promote violent and gore content to youth.** A survey by the Youth Endowment Fund in England and Wales found that a quarter of young people who had seen violent images online had had it served to them by algorithmic recommendation features, and that young people were only rarely (6%) intentionally seeking out this content (Youth Endowment Fund, 2024, 7). Our findings show that Canadian young people are also seeing much of this content due to platform algorithms serving them this content: When asked why they had viewed the violent content, nearly half (45%) of participants stated that it "just showed up" on the app or website they were looking at.

Similarly, when asked how they had encountered gore and violent content, the most common response was that a stranger had posted it (39%) or that an app, game, or website had shown or recommended it to them (33%). As such, ensuring that algorithms and recommender systems do not amplify or promote this content could help minimize young people's exposure to it.

- **Provide young people with easy-to-understand community guidelines and reporting mechanisms that are accessible and responsive.** Though we believe online service providers (not users, and certainly not teens) should be the ones who have the ultimate responsibility to ensure that their platforms are safe by design, users can play a role by reporting content they encounter that is against a platform's community guidelines and has not been caught by the platform's automated or human moderators. In order to do this, they need to understand a platform's community guidelines to know what to report, and they also need to know where and how to make a report. Reporting should be easy and accessible, not hidden or embedded deep in a platform. Designing safe systems, then, involves having easy-to-understand community guidelines, reporting mechanisms that are easy to find and use and, of course, providers that are actually responsive to these reports. Unfortunately, our results suggest these design features are not currently the reality for teens in Canada. Our findings show that few young Canadians have reported authentic gore and violence to platforms (11%), and that reporting did not reliably result in the content being removed or actions being taken against those who posted or shared the content. Most participants had never made a report, with the top reasons for this including not thinking that content needed to be reported, not knowing how to make a report, and not knowing that they had the option to make a report. These findings, combined with comments from several young people that this content should be easier to report and more quickly removed, demonstrate the need and desire for more accessible and responsive reporting mechanisms.

RECOMMENDED RESPONSE FOR GOVERNMENT

Online service providers have shown themselves to be unmotivated to sufficiently protect young people from harmful content (Henry & Witt, 2021) and are thus unlikely to meaningfully implement the above-recommended technological responses voluntarily. As Regehr et al. (2024) put it, "Big Tech companies need to be responsible for these harmful algorithmic processes. This means not just focusing on removing individual harmful content or videos, but on the underlying structures and processes that they have developed. Pressure needs to be applied so that big tech companies, like TikTok, address algorithmic harm and prioritize the wellbeing of young people over profit" (34). We believe this pressure must come in the form of government regulation that legally requires online services to address young people's exposure to authentic violence and gore online through approaches such as the following:

- **Digital safety legislation should regulate more forms of authentic violence and gore.** Currently, Canada has no law that explicitly governs online safety standards for online services. However, the federal government has recently tabled a proposed law – Bill C-34, the Safe Social Media Act – that if enacted would help directly address some forms of violence and gore content discussed in this report. For example, under this legal framework, regulated online services would have obligations to make "content that sexually victimizes a child or revictimizes a survivor" and "intimate content communicated without consent" inaccessible in Canada. Other forms of violence and gore discussed in this study, such as scenes of murder or torture, content depicting self-harm, suicide, and acts of terrorism would all be addressed,

at least in part. However, as the definitions being proposed are restrictive and will require individualized assessment, it is unclear at this time how the definitions will play out in context. Digital safety regulations in the UK and Australia require regulated services to take steps to restrict these forms of content, and Bill C-34 contains requirements to mitigate the risk of users being exposed to such content. Given the results of this study, aligning definitions used in Canada with definitions in those countries may be worth exploring.

Bill C-34 also proposes barring users under the age of 16 from holding personal user accounts on certain regulated services. This could have the effect, among others, of limiting younger teens' access to violence and gore on the regulated services subject to the age restriction.

- **Online harms legislation should apply to a broad range of online service providers.** Our results indicate that in order to reduce young people's exposure to authentic violent and gore content, a Canadian online safety regime would also need to apply to a broad range of online services. Young people in Canada have encountered this content not only on social media, but also in other digital environments such as private messaging, gaming, and search services. In the Canadian context, digital safety laws could cover all of these services, as well as emerging online services, such as those enabled by AI. Bill C-34, for example, includes duties for operators of AI Chatbot services to take steps to mitigate the risk that their tools will communicate harmful content to users. The Bill as tabled, however, expressly excludes private messaging services or functions. More generally, we believe platforms should have service-appropriate obligations based on their characteristics and how their design elements either amplify or minimize the exposure of young people to authentic violent and gore content. These laws should ensure that this is done in privacy protecting ways. For instance, private messaging could have obligations to ensure private conversations are not surveilled while also encouraging platform design changes such as turning off autoplay within messages or allowing users to report content within messages.

- **Online harms legislation should require online services to provide transparency reports about the amount and types of authentic violence and gore they are aware of on their platforms.** An online safety regime in Canada could build in accountability measures that require online services to be transparent about the authentic violent and gore material they identify on their services, as well as the steps they take, or fail to take, to address it. Bill C-34, for example, includes provisions that would require regulated services to submit digital safety plans that include moderation details and to make those plans and details publicly available.

- **An online safety framework could also require companies to not only provide clear and more uniform content guidelines for users related to violence and gore material, but also to enforce them consistently.** Bill C-34, for example, includes provisions that would require regulated services to make user guidelines easily accessible, contain expected standards of conduct for users with respect to harmful content, as well as details about measures a service's operator takes to mitigate exposure to harmful content.

These suggestions are not new: they come from online safety regimes in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand. Thus, we have models of what it looks like for governments to invest in a regulatory and research scheme to respond to authentic violence and gore specifically and online harms more broadly. Inspired by the lessons learned from such international regimes, Canada should explore adopting a similar regime that would work for our national context.

RECOMMENDED RESPONSE FOR FRONTLINE SUPPORTERS

Those working frontline with young people (e.g., teachers, helpline staff, counsellors, afterschool program staff) as well as parents/guardians and other supporters, also play a key role in helping young people process and respond to the harmful content they may encounter online. Recommended responses for those working frontline to support young people include:

- **Provide non-judgmental supports and resources.** Research from both New Zealand and Australian regulators find that access to non-judgmental supports is key for helping young people openly discuss and process their exposure to this content (Classification Office, 2025, eSafety Commissioner, 2025). New Zealand's Classification Office found that young people "often lack support when dealing with harmful content and want to receive help without fear of judgment or punishment. They prefer supportive, understanding responses and want to feel empowered to handle situations with adult support available if needed" (Classification Office, 2025, 5). Young people in the New Zealand study made clear that "strong emotional reactions" from adults not only make it harder to speak up, but can result in not seeking any help at all. That study and other research (Dodge et al., 2026) stress the importance of "being able to talk without fear of criticism or punishment" (Classifications Office, 2025, 8), as judgmental or punitive actions could deter future help seeking. The Classification Office provides **Conversation Starters** to help guide supporters in providing non-judgmental support on this issue. The type of response being requested here closely mirrors what Canada's DIY: Digital Safety research team found in terms of the support young Canadians are seeking when they encounter online harms more broadly (See: **help-seeking factsheet**). The Canadian Centre for Child Protection also offers resources that promote supportive, non-judgmental conversations between supporters and youth in schools (**KidsintheKnow.ca**) and at home (**ProtectKidsOnline.ca**), alongside support and reporting services for youth affected by online sexual violence (**NeedHelpNow.ca** and **Cybertip.ca**).
- **Provide digital media literacy education and promote a healthy digital diet.** Frontline supporters and parents can help youth build resilience by providing digital literacy tools to draw upon if and when they encounter this content: "critical digital literacy – or a healthy digital diet approach – is needed to provide young people with key skills to recognize radicalization and think critically about toxic online material" (Regehr et al., 2024, 5). In Canada, **Media Smarts** provides a myriad of educational resources on digital media literacy for teachers and families and healthy digital habits that can be used by teachers and families. Relatedly, the Canadian Centre for Child Protection's Kids in the Know program for schools and **ProtectKidsOnline.ca** resources for parents offer effective age-appropriate digital safety information to help build children's self-confidence and help-seeking abilities.
- **Learn about digital harms and model a healthy digital diet.** Research by Regehr et al. (2024) further encourages adults to learn about such issues and support young people by learning about how "harmful algorithmic processes function" and reflecting on "their own social media addictions" to model a healthy digital diet and demonstrate what it looks like to engage in these spaces in healthy ways (Regehr et al., 2024, 5). Australia's eSafety Commissioner provides a **useful explainer** on how authentic gore and violent content is reaching young people and how to support young people facing this issue. Additionally, the **Mental Health Commission of Canada** provides a useful guide for designing a healthy digital diet , while the Canadian Centre for Child Protection offers informational videos on its **ProtectKidsOnline.ca** website to help support parents with device management, active supervision and other helpful tips.

CONCLUSION

Given mounting pressure to pass an Online Harms Act in Canada—similar to those in the UK and Australia—this report is intended to help policy makers and advocates shape future regulations to ensure online service providers build safer online spaces for young people. Additionally, these results demonstrate the need for governments and frontline supporters to help provide the supports and resources young Canadians need to understand, process, and respond to the harmful content they may be exposed to online. The high rates of exposure to authentic violent and gore content found in this survey, combined with the low rates of actively seeking out this content and largely negative reactions to it, suggest that online service providers should better regulate this content and address its algorithmic amplification. This report has also shown, using teens' own words, that young people largely support regulating this content and wish reporting mechanisms were easier to use and content moderation was better enforced and resourced. We hope this Canadian specific data on the nature and impact of exposure to authentic violent and gore content will strengthen calls from child advocacy and frontline support organizations for the policy change, increased supports and resources, and technological change needed to support young people.

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