

Dehumanization, Propaganda, and Gun Violence

The message for every child of
color

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Contents

Executive Summary	2
Part I: The Science of Dehumanization	3
What Dehumanization Means	3
How the Brain Responds to Dehumanizing Language	4
Dehumanization Enables "Greater Good" Violence	5
The Historical Record Is Unmistakable	6
Part II: Authoritarian Rhetoric, Conspiracy Theories, and "Alternative Facts"	7
How Authoritarians Use Dehumanization	7
Conspiracy Theories Amplify the Violence Risk	9
"Alternative Facts" Corrode the Immune System of Democracy	10
Part III: The Direct Harm to Children	11
Children Are Being Killed at Historic Rates ...	11

Dehumanizing Rhetoric Directly Inspires Mass Shooters 12

Children Exposed to Violence Become More Violent..... 14

Online Radicalization: The New Recruitment Pipeline 15

Part IV: The Feedback Loop — How These Forces Reinforce Each Other..... 16

Part V: What We Can Do — A Prevention Agenda 18

Recognize the Language 18

Protect Children Through Education and Inclusion..... 19

Support Community Violence Intervention (CVI) 20

Counter Disinformation with Empathy-Building..... 20

Demand Accountability from Leaders and Platforms..... 21

Conclusion: Words Have Consequences 22

Executive Summary

Gun violence does not begin with a trigger pull. It begins with words. A robust body of research in psychology,

social neuroscience, and political science shows that when leaders, media, and online platforms systematically portray groups of people as animals, invaders, vermin, or existential threats, ordinary people become measurably more willing to tolerate and endorse violence against those groups. This dehumanizing language, fused with conspiracy theories and "alternative facts," creates the cultural and psychological conditions in which gun violence — from mass shootings to everyday community violence — flourishes. Children are the most vulnerable to these forces, both as direct victims of gun violence and as targets of the radicalization pipeline that feeds it.

Part I: The Science of Dehumanization

What Dehumanization Means

Dehumanization is the psychological and social process of denying attributes that define individuals or groups as fully human — stripping away empathy, individuality, and moral status. It manifests in two forms: blatant dehumanization (calling people "animals," "cockroaches," or "vermin") and subtle dehumanization (applying language that simply omits the humanizing descriptors we use for people we care about).

Nick Haslam, a professor of psychology at the University of Melbourne, summarizes the evidence plainly: "Hated, despised and distrusted groups are often described in dehumanizing ways... People who dehumanise others are certainly more likely to treat them badly."

How the Brain Responds to Dehumanizing Language

Social neuroscience reveals that dehumanization has measurable cognitive correlates. When people

associate others with animals or objects, brain regions implicated in normal social cognition — the same regions that generate empathy — fail to activate. Research from Princeton found that participants who viewed dehumanized groups showed activation in brain regions associated with disgust, attention, and cognitive control rather than the networks we ordinarily use to understand other people's minds and emotions.

In plain terms: dehumanizing language literally short-circuits our natural human empathy.

Dehumanization Enables "Greater Good" Violence

A landmark five-experiment study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* clarified exactly how dehumanization promotes violence. The researchers found that dehumanization *increases instrumental violence* — harm justified as achieving a larger goal — by dampening victims'

perceived capacity for thought, feeling, and suffering. Participants who were exposed to dehumanizing language about strangers showed significantly higher willingness to harm those strangers for money or political gain. This is the mechanism behind "the ends justify the means" reasoning that authoritarian movements invoke to justify atrocities.

Critically, when victims are stripped of full humanity, perpetrators and bystanders lose their moral inhibitions — not because they think violence is right, but because they no longer fully register that anyone is being hurt.

The Historical Record Is Unmistakable

A 2022 linguistic analysis of Nazi propaganda in PLOS ONE found that Jews were progressively denied the capacity for human mental experience in the years leading up to the Holocaust — and that this escalating dehumanization tracked directly with

the escalation of violence. The same pattern appears in the Rwandan genocide, where Tutsi were repeatedly referred to on state radio as "inyenzi" (cockroaches). Researchers from the Danish Institute for International Studies note that while the causal relationship between dehumanizing propaganda and mass violence is complex, dehumanizing discourse reliably *paves the way* for violence to occur by granting legitimacy to violent "solutions" and normalizing extreme perspectives.

Part II: Authoritarian Rhetoric, Conspiracy Theories, and "Alternative Facts"

How Authoritarians Use Dehumanization

Authoritarian leaders consolidate power by using propaganda to form an image of target groups as harmful, traitorous, and an existential threat — making violence against them feel not only justified but morally necessary. Three mechanisms described by social psychologist Herbert Kelman explain how ordinary people become participants:

- **Authorization**: People identify with a powerful authority (a leader, party, or movement) and believe their actions are legitimate because they follow that authority's lead
- **Routinization**: Violent or discriminatory acts become bureaucratic, mechanical routines that diffuse personal responsibility
- **Dehumanization**: Victims are stripped of identity and individual humanity, becoming mere objects or statistics

Ruth Ben-Ghiat, a New York University historian and expert on authoritarianism, argues that

authoritarian leaders purposely use dehumanizing language to desensitize followers and prepare them for harsher actions. When a president or political figure labels migrants "animals," "rapists," or "invaders" — terms used more than 500 times at political rallies in one analysis — that language does not exist in a vacuum.

Conspiracy Theories Amplify the Violence Risk

A 2024 study from the Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center examined 44 conspiracy theories and found that belief in conspiracy theories was positively and statistically significantly correlated with support for political violence in 42 of 44 cases. Even more alarming: the correlation between attitudinal support for political violence and a general tendency to believe in conspiracies tripled in magnitude between 2012 and 2022.

The mechanism is straightforward: conspiracy theories cast perceived

enemies as not just wrong, but as deliberately malevolent actors engaged in a secret war against "real" Americans. When combined with dehumanizing language, this transforms ordinary policy disagreements into existential conflicts — the kind of narrative that has preceded nearly every mass atrocity in modern history.

"Alternative Facts" Corrode the Immune System of Democracy

When political leaders label scientists, doctors, and journalists as "enemies of the people," they do not merely discredit individuals — they destroy the shared factual foundation on which democratic deliberation depends. Research from the Harvard Misinformation Review found that exposure to misinformation was associated with a 5% decrease in media trust, and this erosion happened across all levels of political ideology.

The American Psychological Association explains that mistrust of media becomes a powerful tool for "motivated reasoning" — allowing followers to dismiss inconvenient evidence with a single stroke by attributing it to bias or conspiracy. Once the public can no longer agree on basic facts — about child gun deaths, about the effectiveness of safety laws, about the demographics of violent crime — meaningful gun violence prevention becomes nearly impossible to enact.

Part III: The Direct Harm to Children

Children Are Being Killed at Historic Rates

The connection between inflammatory rhetoric and gun violence is not abstract — its most devastating victims are children. Firearms became the leading cause of death for Americans

under 18 in 2020 and have remained so every year since. Over the period 2020–2022, almost 10,500 children and teens were killed by gun violence — more than the number killed in motor vehicle accidents during the same period. Firearm death rates among children increased 46% from 2019 to 2021. In 2024, gun violence was still the leading cause of death for American children ages 1 to 17 for the fifth year in a row — one out of every 16 children under 18 who died that year was killed by a gun.

Dehumanizing Rhetoric Directly Inspires Mass Shooters

The link between mainstream dehumanizing language and real-world mass violence is documented in specific, traceable cases:

- The **El Paso shooter** (2019) wrote in his manifesto that his attack "is a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas" — language that directly

echoed over 2,000 political advertisements and 500+ rally speeches using terms like "invasion," "animals," and "killers" to describe immigrants. Christine Reyna, a psychology professor at DePaul University who researches white nationalist extremism, said dehumanizing rhetoric from authority figures "can inspire violence in isolated, vulnerable young people undergoing radicalization online".

- The **Christchurch mosque shooter** (2019) published a manifesto titled "The Great Replacement," drawing on the same dehumanizing invasion rhetoric to justify killing 51 Muslims at prayer — including a 3-year-old child.
- The **Pittsburgh synagogue shooter** (2018) posted that Jews were helping "invaders" before killing 11 worshippers.

The Southern Poverty Law Center documented 1,430 active hate and

anti-government extremist groups in the United States as of 2023, with white nationalist groups growing 50% from 2022 to 2023 — reaching a historic high of 165 groups.

Children Exposed to Violence Become More Violent

Beyond direct deaths, children who grow up surrounded by gun violence — including the culture of dehumanizing rhetoric — suffer compounding harms. A University of Michigan study tracking youth over 10 years found that childhood exposure to gun violence, whether real-life or in media, significantly increased the likelihood that those children would use guns themselves as adults. The Child Welfare League of America reports that more than 25% of children witnessed an act of violence in their home, school, or community in the prior year.

Children exposed to chronic gun violence experience inhibited brain

development, emotional dysregulation, post-traumatic stress, depression, and difficulty with nonviolent conflict resolution. A peer-reviewed study found that childhood trauma, including exposure to domestic and community violence, is "likely an important antecedent to engagement in gun violence" — creating a generational cycle.

Online Radicalization: The New Recruitment Pipeline

Children and adolescents are now the primary targets of extremist recruitment. Between January 2020 and December 2024, Australian Federal Police investigations identified 37 individuals under age 17 involved in violent extremism — the youngest being 12 years old. A dataset from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue found a **413% rise** in the internet playing the primary role in youth radicalization since 2020, as platforms like Discord, TikTok, and Telegram amplify propaganda that begins with

dehumanizing content and escalates toward explicit calls for violence.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry warns that recruiters for extremist groups preferentially target adolescents through video gaming and social media, often starting with slurs or radical statements before forwarding links to propaganda. The gamification of extremist violence — framing real-world harm as a kind of challenge — deepens the dehumanizing process and creates self-perpetuating cycles of radicalization.

Part IV: The Feedback Loop — How These Forces Reinforce Each Other

The relationship between dehumanizing rhetoric, conspiracy theories, and gun violence is not a straight line — it is a *feedback loop*:

1. **Political leaders use dehumanizing language** ("animals," "invaders," "vermin") about outgroups, framing them as existential threats
2. **Conspiracy theories fill in the narrative**, explaining why the outgroup is so dangerous and why "normal" institutions (media, science, government) cannot be trusted to tell the truth
3. **"Alternative facts" corrode shared reality**, making it impossible to assess real risks or evaluate evidence-based solutions
4. **Empathy erodes** as the targeted groups cease to be perceived as full human beings worthy of moral consideration
5. **Vulnerable individuals** — particularly isolated young people — absorb this narrative and move from attitudinal support for violence to actual violence
6. **Each act of violence** is then used to justify more fear, more dehumanization, and more

restrictions on the civil liberties of the targeted group, restarting the cycle

Social psychologist Aliza Luft summarizes: "Dehumanizing discourse can pave the way for violence to occur... Extreme perspectives can become normalized when dehumanization becomes central to political discourse."

Part V: What We Can Do — A Prevention Agenda

Recognize the Language

The most important first step is learning to identify dehumanizing language when we encounter it — in political speeches, social media, news commentary, and casual conversation. Terms like "invasion," "infestation," "animals," "vermin," "parasites," "predators," and "criminals" applied

broadly to ethnic, religious, or immigrant groups are not merely rhetorical flourishes. They are the documented precursors to violence.

Protect Children Through Education and Inclusion

Programs that build social-emotional skills, empathy, and critical thinking are proven to reduce violence. Sandy Hook Promise's **Know the Signs** programs have trained over one million youth and adults in all 50 states. Their research shows that students who receive the training are better able to recognize warning signs, take them seriously, and get help — while also holding better attitudes about their schools and developing stronger relationships with trusted adults. The organization has averted more than 285 acts of violence with a weapon through these programs.

The United Nations recommends educational responses to dehumanizing language that include training on respectful digital citizenship, social-

emotional learning, intercultural dialogue, and whole-school approaches that model inclusion and diversity. |

Support Community Violence Intervention (CVI)

Community violence intervention programs work by applying localized, community-driven approaches — particularly in communities disproportionately impacted by gun violence due to systemic disinvestment. Evidence shows CVI programs reduce shootings and homicides, improve access to education and jobs, promote healing through trauma-informed care, and foster trust between residents and institutions. |

Counter Disinformation with Empathy-Building

Storytelling is among the most powerful tools for rebuilding the human connections that dehumanizing rhetoric destroys. Research and journalism initiatives that put human faces and

personal narratives on gun violence victims — rather than treating them as statistics — have been shown to increase viewer empathy and willingness to act. The goal is to close what advocates call "the empathy gap" — the cultural tendency to treat gun violence as something that happens to other people.

Demand Accountability from Leaders and Platforms

Civic organizations can advocate for:

- Elected officials at all levels to model humanizing language and explicitly repudiate dehumanizing rhetoric
- Social media platforms to enforce consistent policies against content that dehumanizes ethnic, religious, or immigrant groups
- Schools to adopt proven violence prevention curricula that include media literacy and critical thinking
- Researchers and public health institutions to continue treating

gun violence as the public health crisis it demonstrably is

Conclusion: Words Have Consequences

The United States loses more than 4,000 children and teenagers to gun violence every year. Gun violence remains the leading cause of death for American children — a distinction no other wealthy democracy shares. The research reviewed here makes a compelling case that this is not merely a gun regulation problem or a mental health problem. It is also a *language problem* and a *culture problem*.

When leaders — at any level — refer to people as animals, when conspiracy theories replace shared facts, and when "alternative facts" make it impossible to trust scientists or journalists, they are not just engaging in political rhetoric. They are dismantling the psychological

infrastructure of empathy and shared humanity that keeps ordinary people from endorsing or tolerating extraordinary violence.

Gun violence prevention clubs like ours have a vital role to play: naming this dynamic clearly, educating our communities about it, and insisting on a political and media culture that treats every human being — especially every child — as fully, irreducibly human.

Sources for this article include peer-reviewed research from the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, PLOS ONE, PMC/NIH, the Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review, the American Psychological Association, and data from the CDC, Giffords Law Center, Everytown Research, Sandy Hook Promise, and the Southern Poverty Law Center.