

The Pathway to Radicalized Violence: An Analysis of Animal Cruelty and Mental Instability in the Case of Payton S. Gendron

Executive Summary

On May 14, 2022, 18-year-old Payton S. Gendron carried out a racially motivated mass shooting at a Tops Friendly Market in Buffalo, New York, killing ten Black individuals and injuring three others. This act of domestic terrorism was not a spontaneous eruption of violence but the culmination of a discernible developmental trajectory marked by clear and alarming precursors. This report deconstructs Gendron's pathway to violence, focusing on the critical roles of animal cruelty and mental and behavioral instability. The analysis is grounded in the established criminological framework known as "The Link," which posits a strong correlation between cruelty to animals and violence toward humans.

The investigation reveals that Gendron's final act was the product of a synergistic convergence of three primary factors: profound psychological vulnerability rooted in social isolation; a significant behavioral escalation demonstrated by a premeditated and brutal act of animal torture; and the adoption of a virulent white supremacist ideology that provided justification and purpose for his violent impulses. His social alienation, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, made him susceptible to the extremist narratives he discovered in unmoderated online spaces like 4chan. These platforms offered him a pre-packaged terrorist identity, complete with a "Great Replacement" ideology, tactical instructions, and a community of like-minded individuals.

A pivotal moment occurred in June 2021, when a threat of "murder-suicide" made at his high school resulted in a brief psychiatric evaluation. This encounter represents a catastrophic systemic failure. Due to the "generalized" nature of the threat, it did not trigger New York's red flag laws or an involuntary commitment. Gendron successfully manipulated the evaluation, which he later described as a "bluff," and the experience

emboldened him, reinforcing his belief that he could outwit authorities.

Furthermore, this report analyzes a detailed account from Gendron's private diary of torturing, killing, and decapitating a feral cat. This act of extreme, "up close and personal" cruelty served as a crucial psychological and practical rehearsal for his subsequent massacre of humans. It demonstrated a profound lack of empathy and a capacity for remorseless violence, aligning perfectly with the most severe indicators identified by the FBI and academic research as predictors of future violence.

A comparative analysis with Parkland shooter Nikolas Cruz highlights both commonalities and critical distinctions in perpetrator pathways. While both exhibited histories of animal cruelty, disturbing online presences, and were known to authorities prior to their attacks, their developmental trajectories differed. Cruz's case is characterized by lifelong, overt psychopathology and constant but ineffective interventions, whereas Gendron's represents a more rapid radicalization fueled by acute social isolation and a single, definitive systemic failure of detection.

The report concludes with evidence-based recommendations for intervention. These include mandating comprehensive training for law enforcement on "The Link," reforming red flag laws to incorporate holistic threat assessments that consider the combination of risk factors, legislating mandatory cross-reporting between animal welfare and social service agencies, and implementing federal reforms to hold online platforms accountable for hosting and promoting extremist content that facilitates terrorist violence. The case of Payton Gendron serves as a stark illustration that preventing future tragedies requires an integrated, multi-disciplinary approach capable of identifying and disrupting the violent trajectory at the intersection of animal cruelty, mental instability, and ideological radicalization.

Introduction to the Case of Payton S. Gendron

The mass shooting in Buffalo, New York, on May 14, 2022, stands as a stark example of racially motivated domestic terrorism. The attack, meticulously planned and executed, was not an aberration but the culmination of a discernible developmental process. An examination of the perpetrator's history reveals a constellation of warning signs—including profound social isolation, a documented history of severe animal cruelty, and a rapid descent into extremist ideology—that collectively illuminate his

pathway to violence.

Factual Overview of the Attack

On the afternoon of May 14, 2022, 18-year-old Payton S. Gendron, a white male, traveled approximately 200 miles from his predominantly white hometown of Conklin, New York, to a Tops Friendly Market located in a predominantly Black neighborhood of Buffalo.¹ Dressed in tactical gear, including body armor and a military-style helmet, and armed with a Bushmaster XM-15 AR-15–style rifle that had been illegally modified to accept high-capacity magazines, Gendron began his assault in the supermarket's parking lot before moving inside.¹

The attack was swift and brutal. Gendron shot thirteen people, killing ten.¹ The racial targeting was explicit and intentional: eleven of the thirteen victims shot were Black.⁴ The entire massacre was livestreamed on the social media platform Twitch via a camera mounted on his helmet, a performative element designed to maximize terror and inspire copycats. The livestream was shut down by the platform in under two minutes, but by then the violence had been broadcast and captured for wider dissemination.¹ After the rampage, Gendron surrendered to Buffalo police officers at the scene.¹

Legal Outcome and Established Motive

The motive for the attack is not in question. Payton Gendron pleaded guilty in state court to a series of charges, including first-degree murder, domestic terrorism motivated by hate, and attempted murder. In February 2023, he was sentenced to multiple concurrent life sentences without the possibility of parole.¹ He also faces a 27-count federal indictment, including hate crimes resulting in death and firearms charges, for which the U.S. Department of Justice has announced its intention to seek the death penalty.⁷

The attack is unequivocally established as a racially motivated act of domestic terrorism, a conclusion supported by Gendron's own extensive writings.¹ He authored a 180-page manifesto and kept a detailed private diary on the chat platform Discord,

in which he laid out his white supremacist ideology and his meticulous plans for the assault.¹ In these documents, Gendron explicitly stated his motive was to "kill as many blacks as possible".¹⁵ His actions were animated by his belief in the "Great Replacement," a racist conspiracy theory that posits a deliberate plot to replace white populations with non-white people.¹ His rifle was found inscribed with racial slurs, the names of other white supremacist mass murderers, and the phrase "Here's your reparations!".¹

Report's Thesis

This report will deconstruct Payton Gendron's pathway to violence, arguing that his final act of terrorism was not a sudden or inexplicable event but the predictable result of a synergistic convergence of observable precursors. These include profound social isolation, a documented incident of severe and intimate animal cruelty, a pivotal but failed mental health intervention, and a subsequent, rapid radicalization within unmoderated online ecosystems. These factors were not independent variables but were deeply interconnected, each amplifying the others and propelling him along a trajectory of violent mobilization. By examining these elements through established criminological and psychological frameworks, this analysis seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the developmental process that culminates in such acts of extremist violence.

The Link Between Animal Cruelty and Human Violence: A Criminological Framework

To comprehend the developmental trajectory of perpetrators like Payton Gendron, it is essential to first establish the robust criminological framework that connects cruelty to animals with violence against humans. Historically viewed as an isolated and minor offense, animal cruelty is now recognized by leading law enforcement and psychological experts as a significant predictor of violent crime. This understanding, often referred to as "The Link," provides a critical lens for analyzing the warning signs exhibited by individuals who escalate to mass violence.

The FBI's Recognition of "The Link"

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has formally acknowledged the well-documented connection between animal cruelty and interpersonal violence, categorizing it as a predictive or co-occurring crime alongside violence against intimate partners, children, and elders.¹⁸ This represents a profound shift from the past, when such acts were often dismissed or handled separately from other criminal investigations.¹⁸

This institutional recognition was solidified on January 1, 2016, when the FBI, in a landmark policy change, reclassified animal cruelty as a Group A felony offense within its National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS). This decision places animal cruelty in the same high-priority category as arson, assault, burglary, and homicide. The move allows for the collection of detailed, incident-based data, capturing specifics about offenders, victims (animal and human), locations, and co-occurring crimes.¹⁸ The impetus for this change came from extensive research and strong advocacy from law enforcement organizations, including the National Sheriffs' Association, which highlighted the high prevalence of animal abuse in the backgrounds of notorious serial killers like Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer, as well as its strong correlation with domestic violence and child abuse.²⁰ The NIBRS system now tracks four distinct categories of cruelty: simple/gross neglect, intentional abuse and torture, organized abuse (like dogfighting), and animal sexual abuse.¹⁸ This data is intended to provide a much clearer picture of who commits these acts and how they intersect with other forms of violence, thereby improving resource allocation and prevention strategies.²⁰

Psychological Underpinnings of "The Link"

The connection between animal and human violence is rooted in several core psychological dynamics that erode the barriers to inflicting harm.

Callous-Unemotional (CU) Traits and Empathy Deficits

At the heart of this connection lies a profound lack of empathy. Academic studies consistently demonstrate a strong negative correlation between empathy and the mistreatment of animals.²¹ This is closely related to the presence of Callous-Unemotional (CU) traits, which are characterized by a lack of guilt, a shallow affect, and a disregard for the feelings of others. Research indicates that CU traits are often a more powerful and direct predictor of cruelty than measures of low empathy alone.²¹ One study of children aged 7-12 found that CU traits were a significant predictor of hurting an animal.²¹ This fundamental deficit in the ability to vicariously experience or be distressed by the suffering of another living being is a prerequisite for committing acts of intentional, gratuitous violence.

Desensitization and Violent Rehearsal

Acts of cruelty against animals can function as a form of "rehearsal" for future violence against humans.²² Each act serves to desensitize the perpetrator to the sight of blood, the sounds of pain, and the act of killing, progressively lowering their inhibition to commit more severe violence. This concept of "experimental aggression" is taken so seriously that the National Counterterrorism Center, the Department of Homeland Security, and the FBI consider premeditated animal cruelty a key indicator of an accelerated and increased risk of an individual committing acts of mass violence or terrorism.²³ The animal becomes a practice target, allowing the individual to test and hone their capacity for violence in a low-risk setting before escalating to human victims.

Power, Control, and Sensation-Seeking

For many offenders, inflicting violence upon a defenseless animal is an exercise in absolute power and control, providing a potent sense of dominance and gratification.²² This is particularly true for individuals who feel powerless or marginalized in other areas of their lives. This drive for dominance is often intertwined with the personality trait of sensation-seeking—the pursuit of novel, thrilling, and intense experiences. A meta-analysis of 43 studies confirmed that high

sensation-seekers exhibit higher levels of aggression.²¹ For these individuals, animal cruelty is not just about power but also about the thrill and excitement derived from the transgression and the act of violence itself.²¹

Animal Cruelty as a "Red Flag" for Mass Violence

The predictive power of animal cruelty is statistically significant. It is a known precursor to a range of violent offenses, including assault, rape, murder, arson, and domestic violence.¹⁸ The connection is so strong that the FBI notes animal cruelty is a better predictor of future sexual abuse than a prior history of homicide, arson, or weapons convictions.¹⁸

The link to planned mass violence is especially alarming. A 2013 study found that 43% of individuals who perpetrate school massacres had a prior history of committing acts of animal cruelty, typically against cats and dogs.²⁴ This pattern is not theoretical; it has been observed in the histories of numerous high-profile attackers, including the perpetrators of the Columbine High School massacre and the Parkland school shooting.²⁵

The common narrative of a violent offender's development is often the "graduation hypothesis," where an individual begins by harming animals and then escalates to harming humans. One study found this pattern in 16% of offenders.¹⁸ While this model is relevant, it is crucial to recognize that it is not the only pathway. In the context of domestic violence, for example, animal abuse is often a co-occurring crime, used as a tool to terrorize, manipulate, and control human victims.¹⁸ An abuser may harm a family pet to demonstrate their capacity for violence and to silence their partner or children. In these cases, animal and human abuse happen concurrently. However, for a lone-actor terrorist like Payton Gendron, who had no known history of interpersonal violence, the graduation or rehearsal model appears more applicable. His act of animal cruelty was not a tool to control a human victim but a private, internal process of building his own psychological capacity for violence, fitting the profile of "experimental aggression" that counter-terrorism experts identify as a critical warning sign.²³

Furthermore, the specific *method* of cruelty serves as a key diagnostic indicator of the severity of the pathology and the level of future risk. The FBI's detailed NIBRS categorization reflects this understanding.¹⁸ Research into the backgrounds of school

shooters has revealed a disturbing pattern: their acts of cruelty are frequently "up close and personal," involving direct, hands-on contact such as stabbing, beating, or strangulation, as opposed to more remote methods like shooting or poisoning.²⁵ This "intimacy of infliction" is psychologically significant because it requires the perpetrator to directly confront the victim's suffering, indicating a more profound desensitization and a greater potential for uncontrolled violence.²⁶

Ultimately, the systemic failures to intervene in these cases are often rooted in the historical and bureaucratic separation of the agencies tasked with public safety. The traditional view of animal cruelty as a minor, isolated issue created institutional silos between law enforcement, child and adult protective services, and animal welfare organizations.¹⁸ This fragmentation has historically prevented the synthesis of critical information. A report of a student torturing animals filed with an animal control agency might never reach the school's counselors or the local police department's threat assessment unit. The modern push for multidisciplinary task forces, cross-reporting mandates, and integrated data systems is a direct response to this systemic flaw, a flaw that allowed countless red flags to be overlooked in past tragedies.¹⁸

Analysis of Animal Cruelty in Payton Gendron's History

The criminological framework establishing a direct link between animal cruelty and human violence provides an essential lens through which to analyze the actions of Payton Gendron. His documented history includes a particularly disturbing incident of animal torture that, when examined closely, serves as a critical milestone on his path to mass murder. It was not merely an isolated act of brutality but a clear and unambiguous warning sign that aligns with the most severe predictors of future violence.

The Cat Killing Incident: A Case Study in Premeditated Brutality

In the private diary he maintained on the social media platform Discord, Payton Gendron provided a chillingly detailed and dispassionate account of killing a feral cat.

He claimed the act was in retaliation for the cat attacking his family's pet, Paige.⁵ The description reveals an act of prolonged, calculated torture, far removed from an impulsive flash of anger.

According to his own writings, Gendron chased the cat for an hour and a half before catching it. He then proceeded to stab the animal, grab it by the tail, and repeatedly smash its head into a concrete floor. The ordeal culminated in him using a hatchet to hack at the cat's neck until he succeeded in decapitating it.³⁰ His documentation of the event was meticulous and clinical. He noted the specific time when blood first appeared from the cat's mouth and identified the knife he used. After the killing, he took photographs of the mutilated corpse and posted them online, transforming a private act of violence into a public performance.⁵

His reflection on the act is perhaps the most revealing element. He wrote, "Honestly right now I don't feel anything about killing that cat... I thought I would be in pain but I literally just feel blank".³² This statement encapsulates a profound emotional detachment from an act of extreme violence.

Applying the Criminological Framework to Gendron's Actions

When Gendron's actions are analyzed through the established criminological framework, they align perfectly with the most severe and predictive indicators of cruelty.

Intimacy, Premeditation, and Performance

The killing was "up close and personal," a key characteristic of animal abuse committed by future mass violence perpetrators.²⁵ The act required sustained, direct physical contact—stabbing, bludgeoning, decapitating—forcing him to witness the animal's suffering firsthand. This "intimacy of infliction" points to a deeply ingrained pathology and a severe level of desensitization.²⁶ The prolonged nature of the attack, lasting over an hour, underscores its premeditated and sadistic quality. Furthermore, the meticulous documentation and subsequent online posting of photos transformed the act into a performance.²⁹ This desire for an audience and validation from an online

subculture directly mirrors his later, ultimate performance: the livestreamed massacre of human beings.

Profound Callousness and Lack of Empathy

Gendron's self-reported feeling of being "blank" is a textbook manifestation of the Callous-Unemotional (CU) traits and profound empathy deficits identified as central to "The Link".²¹ He experienced no remorse, guilt, or emotional pain from committing a torturous killing. This emotional void is precisely what enables individuals to commit such acts. He killed the animal not for sustenance or mercy, but as a brutal and disproportionate response to a perceived slight, and the act itself was clearly a psychologically significant, if not rewarding, experience for him.³²

A Critical Rehearsal for Mass Murder

This incident was a crucial step in Gendron's "mobilization to violence".³³ It served as both a practical and psychological rehearsal for mass murder. By torturing and killing a living creature and feeling "blank," he was testing and confirming his own capacity to inflict lethal violence without being crippled by emotional or moral distress. This was a necessary psychological hurdle he had to clear before he could confidently proceed with his plan to murder human beings. The act was, as animal welfare organizations like PETA warned in the aftermath, a clear and unambiguous sign of "more carnage to come".³⁰

The justification Gendron provided for this act of cruelty—framing it as a righteous act of "retaliation" for the feral cat attacking his own pet—reveals a distorted moral logic that is a microcosm of his terrorist ideology.⁵ The creation of a moral pretext, however flimsy, is a classic cognitive distortion employed by violent offenders to rationalize their actions. The extreme, torturous nature of the killing was utterly disproportionate to the alleged offense, exposing a mindset capable of justifying horrific violence as a necessary and appropriate response to a perceived wrong. This is the exact same moral architecture he would later apply on a grand scale in his manifesto, where he framed the mass murder of innocent Black civilians as a necessary act of "defense" to "protect" the white race from the "threat" of replacement.¹⁵ The cat killing was a

small-scale rehearsal of the large-scale ideological violence he was planning.

Furthermore, the stark contrast between his brutal cruelty toward one cat and his expressed affection for his own cat, Paige, is not a contradiction but a powerful demonstration of the psychological mechanism of "othering" that is fundamental to extremist violence.³² This ability to compartmentalize—to form a bond with one animal while remorselessly torturing another—shows that his violence was not born of a generalized hatred of all animals. Rather, it was a targeted application of violence against an "other" that he had placed outside his circle of moral concern. This is the core psychological process of racism and extremist ideology. He could feel affection for "his" cat (the in-group) while feeling nothing for the feral cat (the out-group), just as he could later express a desire to protect the white race (his in-group) while planning the extermination of Black "replacers" (the out-group).

Finally, the act of meticulously documenting the killing and sharing evidence of it online is profoundly significant.²⁹ It transforms a private transgression into a public (or semi-public) performance. This behavior is a clear precursor to his ultimate goal of livestreaming the Buffalo massacre on Twitch.¹ In both instances, the act of violence is inextricably linked to its dissemination and consumption by an online audience. He was actively seeking status, validation, and notoriety within the extremist online subcultures he inhabited. For the modern, internet-radicalized terrorist, the performance and broadcasting of violence are as integral to the act as the violence itself.

Documented Mental and Behavioral Instability

Beyond the specific act of animal cruelty, Payton Gendron's history is marked by clear signs of mental and behavioral instability, primarily characterized by profound social isolation and a pivotal but ultimately failed intervention by the mental health and law enforcement systems. These factors created a fertile ground for the extremist ideology he would later adopt, providing a narrative that gave meaning to his alienation and a target for his rage.

A Portrait of Profound Isolation

Accounts from those who knew Payton Gendron paint a consistent picture of a deeply isolated young man. Former classmates repeatedly described him as quiet, a loner, socially awkward, and someone who generally kept to himself.³ His behavior was often idiosyncratic and served to further alienate him from his peers. In a particularly telling example, after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, he attended school wearing a full hazmat suit, a stunt that his classmates found bizarre and off-putting.¹

Gendron was not oblivious to his social standing; he was acutely aware and pained by it. He confided in at least one classmate, Matthew Casado, that he was lonely, disliked school because he had no friends, and felt rejected.³ His social desperation was so pronounced that at one point, his mother, Pamela Gendron, contacted Casado's mother with a plea: she asked if Matthew could call Payton because he was completely friendless and needed someone to talk to.³ This illustrates a level of isolation that goes beyond typical teenage awkwardness, pointing to a significant deficit in social functioning.

The June 2021 Threat: A Critical Systemic Failure

In June 2021, less than a year before the massacre, a critical event occurred that should have served as a major intervention point. For an economics class project conducted via a virtual learning program, students were asked about their plans for retirement. Gendron, then 17, typed the response "murder-suicide".² Other accounts from law enforcement officials suggest he also made a more generalized threat to commit a shooting at his high school, Susquehanna Valley High School, around the time of graduation.¹

This alarming response triggered an official intervention. The school notified the authorities, and New York State Police were called to investigate. Gendron was taken into custody and transported to a hospital for a psychiatric evaluation under a state mental health law, where he was held for a day and a half.¹

The outcome of this intervention represents a catastrophic systemic failure. Gendron was released without being criminally charged or involuntarily committed. Officials concluded that his threat was "generalized" and not directed at a specific person, place, or time. Because it lacked specificity, it did not meet the stringent legal

threshold required to invoke New York's Extreme Risk Protection Order (ERPO) statute, commonly known as a "red flag" law. An ERPO could have resulted in the temporary seizure of any firearms he possessed and would have prevented him from legally purchasing new ones.¹

Gendron's own writings, discovered after the massacre, reveal his conscious manipulation of this evaluation. In his Discord diary, he described the incident as a "well-executed bluff." He claimed he successfully convinced police and mental health professionals that his comment was merely a dark joke made to get out of class. He explicitly wrote that he believed this successful deception was "the reason I am still able to purchase guns".¹ In a chilling admission, he added, "It was not a joke, I wrote that down because that's what I was planning to do".²⁹ Far from being a deterrent or a moment for therapeutic breakthrough, Gendron viewed the experience as a negative and adversarial encounter that paradoxically gave him "encouragement to take action".¹

Self-Perception, Denial, and Online Radicalization

In his manifesto, Gendron made a point to declare his own sanity, stating, "I was never diagnosed with a mental disability or disorder, and I believe to be perfectly sane".³ This denial of mental illness is a common rhetorical strategy among ideologically motivated terrorists who seek to frame their violence not as the product of a disordered mind, but as a rational and necessary political act. By claiming sanity, Gendron was attempting to legitimize his massacre as the work of a clear-thinking "soldier" fighting for his race, thereby enhancing its potential to inspire copycats.

He documented that his radicalization process began in earnest during the COVID-19 lockdowns in the spring of 2020. He described a state of "boredom" that led him to explore the internet, where his initial interest in firearms eventually led him to 4chan's weapons forum (/k/) and then to its politics forum (/pol/).² It was there that he was first exposed to the Great Replacement Theory, an extremist ideology that provided a powerful external narrative to explain his internal feelings of alienation, loneliness, and despair.

His private Discord diary, which contained over 600 messages, served as a meticulous log of his descent. In it, he detailed his attack plans, espoused his racist and antisemitic beliefs, and even posted taunts directed at federal authorities, expressing

surprise that the FBI had not yet discovered his activities.²⁹

The failure of the 2021 mental health evaluation was a systemic breakdown rooted in definitional rigidity. The system was designed to respond to *specific* and *imminent* threats. Gendron's "generalized" threat of "murder-suicide" did not meet the narrow legal and clinical criteria for an ERPO or involuntary commitment.¹ This reveals a catastrophic loophole in threat assessment protocols, which are often ill-equipped to address individuals in an earlier, less specific stage of violent ideation. Gendron learned the system's rules from this single encounter and successfully manipulated them. The intervention did not deter him; it taught him how to operate without triggering further alarms and, in his own mind, validated his ability to outwit the authorities, thereby emboldening him.

It is also clear that Gendron's profound real-world social isolation was the fertile ground in which the seeds of online radicalization took root and flourished.³ The COVID-19 lockdowns acted as a powerful accelerant, deepening his isolation and pushing him further into these digital ecosystems.² For a young man with no friends and a desperate need for belonging, extremist online forums offered a potent substitute. Platforms like 4chan and Discord did not just provide him with an ideology; they provided him with a sense of identity, purpose, and a virtual peer group that validated his darkest impulses. The radicalization was therefore not merely an intellectual exercise but a deeply social process that filled the void left by his real-world failures. This dynamic suggests that addressing youth social isolation and fostering real-world community connection are critical, albeit indirect, counter-terrorism strategies.

Finally, Gendron's self-assessment of being "perfectly sane" must be analyzed as a component of his adopted terrorist identity, not as an objective clinical statement.³ By rejecting a mental illness narrative, he was consciously framing his actions as political and ideological. He wanted his massacre to be seen as the work of a rational actor, a "soldier" fighting for his race, not the product of a "disordered" mind, which he might have felt would diminish its political impact and its power to inspire others. This is a deliberate rhetorical strategy, borrowed from other terrorists like Brenton Tarrant, designed to lend his violence ideological legitimacy. This strategic claim of sanity stands in stark contrast to the case of Parkland shooter Nikolas Cruz, where the defense's central argument was that his actions were the direct result of a lifelong, severe, and well-documented history of mental illness and brain damage.³⁸

A Synthesis of Pathologies: The Convergence of Cruelty, Instability, and Ideology

Payton Gendron's racially motivated massacre in Buffalo was not the result of a single cause but the product of a fatal synergy between his psychological state, his behavioral rehearsals of violence, and the extremist ideological framework he adopted. These elements did not exist in isolation; they were deeply interconnected, creating a feedback loop that accelerated his mobilization to violence. Understanding this convergence is essential to comprehending how a quiet, isolated teenager from a seemingly stable background transformed into a domestic terrorist.

The Triad of Precursors

Gendron's pathway to violence was fueled by the convergence of three distinct but mutually reinforcing factors:

1. **Psychological Vulnerability:** This was defined by his severe social isolation, profound loneliness, and a desperate, unmet need for identity, community, and purpose. Classmates and even his own family recognized his extreme social awkwardness and lack of friends, which left him vulnerable to alternative sources of belonging.³
2. **Behavioral Escalation:** This manifested most clearly in his premeditated and torturous killing of a cat. This "up close and personal" act of cruelty served as a critical behavioral rehearsal. It desensitized him to the act of inflicting violence and bloodshed, and, by his own account, proved to himself that he was psychologically capable of killing without remorse.³⁰
3. **Ideological Justification:** This was supplied by the virulent white supremacist and accelerationist doctrines he consumed on unmoderated online platforms, most notably 4chan. This ideology provided a coherent, all-encompassing narrative that legitimized his violent impulses, gave a target to his feelings of alienation and rage, and offered him a virtual "community" and a sense of purpose as a "soldier" for the white race.¹⁵

The Causal Chain of Radicalization

These three factors interacted in a clear causal sequence that propelled Gendron from ideation to action:

The process began with the COVID-19 pandemic, which acted as an accelerant, exacerbating his pre-existing social isolation and creating a state of "boredom" and alienation that drove him deeper into the online world.² This isolation led him to online forums, initially out of an interest in firearms, where he discovered a sense of community he lacked in his physical life.³³ On the anonymous imageboard 4chan, he was exposed to the Great Replacement Theory, which provided a powerful, all-encompassing explanation for his personal feelings of despair and a clearly defined enemy—non-white people and the Jewish people he believed were orchestrating their "replacement" of the white race.¹⁵

Concurrently with this ideological immersion, his act of extreme animal cruelty served as a "proof of concept." It hardened him psychologically, confirming his capacity for remorseless violence and lowering his inhibitions to kill.³¹ This behavioral rehearsal was a necessary step to bridge the gap between violent fantasy and violent action. Following this, his single, failed encounter with the mental health and law enforcement system in June 2021 became a pivotal turning point. It reinforced his contempt for authorities, validated his belief that he could outwit them, and, in his own words, gave him "encouragement to take action," solidifying his commitment to his plan.¹

In this lethal synthesis, the ideology provided the "**why**" (to fight a racial war and prevent "white genocide"). The act of animal cruelty provided the "**how**" (the psychological capacity and desensitization required to commit violence). And his profound social isolation provided the "**where**" (the online world, an echo chamber where his plan could be nurtured and validated, free from the checks and balances of real-world social interaction).

The "Plug-and-Play" Terrorist

A defining feature of Gendron's case is the degree to which his terrorist identity was constructed from pre-existing materials. His 180-page manifesto was not an original work of ideology but a collage, with large sections plagiarized directly from the

manifesto of Brenton Tarrant, the Christchurch mosque shooter whom Gendron idolized.¹⁵ The document was further padded with a vast collection of racist and antisemitic memes, infographics, and talking points taken directly from 4chan.¹⁶ A study by researchers at Montclair State University found that over 80% of the rationale sections and 95% of the images in his manifesto were copied from extremist online spaces.⁴¹

This demonstrates that Gendron was not an ideological innovator but an assembler of a pre-packaged terrorist identity. The use of internet memes is particularly significant. Memes serve to "whitewash" extreme violence with a veneer of dark, ironic humor, making the underlying hateful ideology more palatable and shareable. This facilitates the "memetic replication" of extremist violence, allowing ideologies and attack methodologies to spread rapidly across a global, digitally connected network of lone actors.¹⁶

Gendron's case thus exemplifies a new and dangerous archetype: the "plug-and-play" terrorist. Extremist online communities now offer a complete "kit" for radicalization and mobilization. This kit includes a ready-made ideology, a justification for violence, tactical advice on weapons and planning, and even a template for a "manifesto." A vulnerable, isolated, and angry individual like Gendron no longer needs to develop an original ideology or be recruited by a formal organization; they can simply find these communities online, download the pre-packaged identity, and adopt it as their own. This self-directed, digitally-enabled model makes the radicalization process faster, more accessible, and significantly harder for law enforcement and intelligence agencies to detect and disrupt compared to traditional, group-based terrorist recruitment.

This reality underscores that the failure to stop Gendron was a systemic breakdown in threat assessment, one that was unable to address the *synthesis* of his risk factors. Current systems are largely siloed. Law enforcement agencies are structured to look for specific, chargeable criminal threats.¹ The mental health system is designed to identify and treat diagnosable, committable illnesses.³⁵ School systems focus on disciplinary infractions and educational support. No single agency was positioned or equipped to assess the

combined risk posed by an individual who simultaneously exhibited profound social isolation, expressed violent ideation, consumed extremist content online, *and* committed severe acts of animal cruelty. Gendron's case is a tragic testament to the fact that the true danger lies at the *intersection* of these domains. A holistic, multi-disciplinary threat assessment model is urgently needed—one capable of

integrating disparate data points from all these areas to identify individuals on a violent trajectory, even when no single data point meets the high threshold for intervention within its own institutional silo.

Comparative Analysis: Payton Gendron and Nikolas Cruz

To distill broader patterns from individual tragedies, a comparative analysis between Payton Gendron and another high-profile mass shooter, Nikolas Cruz (perpetrator of the 2018 Parkland school shooting), is instructive. While both committed horrific acts of mass violence, their developmental pathways, the nature of their underlying pathologies, and the types of systemic failures that allowed them to proceed reveal both striking commonalities and critical differences. A structured, side-by-side comparison allows for a move from narrative to analysis, highlighting shared "red flags" and divergent trajectories that are essential for developing more robust and broadly applicable prevention strategies.

Table 1: Comparative Pre-Attack Indicators in Mass Shooters

Indicator	Payton S. Gendron (Buffalo)	Nikolas J. Cruz (Parkland)	Source Snippets (Gendron)	Source Snippets (Cruz)
Animal Cruelty	Detailed account of torturing and beheading a cat; posting photos online. Act was "up close and personal," premeditated, and performative.	Long history of killing smaller animals (squirrels, chickens, toads); attempting to have his dog attack a neighbor's pigs; bringing dead animals to	5	38

		school; bragging about cruelty.		
Mental/Behavioral State	Described by peers as a lonely, isolated loner. One documented mental health evaluation after a "murder-suicide" threat, but no formal diagnosis was publicly released. Claimed in his own writings to be "perfectly sane."	Lifelong, well-documented behavioral issues from preschool onward. Diagnosed with ADHD, ODD, depression, and autism (though the autism diagnosis was later disputed in court). Subjected to multiple mental health interventions but was never involuntarily committed.	3	45
Failed Interventions	A single, pivotal police and mental health evaluation in June 2021 did not result in a red flag order or commitment; Gendron perceived it as a "bluff" he successfully won, which emboldened him.	Dozens of police calls to his home over many years. The FBI received a detailed tip about his gun ownership, erratic behavior, and desire to kill but failed to investigate it. The school system struggled with his placement and special education needs for years.	1	44

<p>Online Presence/Ideology</p>	<p>Rapidly and deeply radicalized on 4chan; adopted a formal, all-encompassing white supremacist ideology ("Great Replacement"). Wrote a detailed manifesto and diary on Discord. Livestreamed the attack to achieve maximum impact.</p>	<p>Obsessed with guns and violence. Posted general threats on YouTube (e.g., "professional school shooter"). Expressed racist, homophobic, and antisemitic views online. Idolized other school shooters. His ideology was less formal and more an expression of generalized rage.</p>	<p>1</p>	<p>38</p>
<p>Family/Background</p>	<p>Lived with both parents, who are civil engineers, and two younger brothers in a seemingly stable, suburban home. Parents were reportedly unaware of his extremist radicalization, his arsenal of weapons, and his attack plans.</p>	<p>Adopted at birth. His adoptive father died from a heart attack in front of him when he was 5. He had a tumultuous and often violent relationship with his widowed, overwhelmed adoptive mother. He was orphaned three months before the shooting.</p>	<p>2</p>	<p>45</p>

Analysis of Commonalities and Differences

The comparison table reveals several powerful common threads that constitute a pattern of warning signs for mass violence. Both Gendron and Cruz exhibited a clear and disturbing history of animal cruelty as a behavioral precursor to their violence against humans. Both maintained a significant and disturbing online presence where they broadcasted their violent ideations and affinity for violence. Critically, both were known to multiple authorities—including schools, law enforcement, and mental health services—prior to their attacks. In both cases, systemic failures and missed opportunities allowed them to proceed with their plans. Both were socially isolated young men who felt alienated from their peers.

However, the differences between the two cases are equally instructive, as they illuminate at least two distinct archetypal pathways to mass violence. The nature of their pre-attack instability diverges significantly. Cruz's case is defined by a lifelong, overt, and extensively documented history of severe behavioral and mental health disorders. He was a known problem to the system for over a decade, and the failure was one of constant but ineffective intervention.⁴³ In contrast, Gendron's instability was more internal and less overtly disruptive to institutions until the pivotal threat in 2021. His pathology was channeled not into years of school disciplinary issues, but into a rapid and all-consuming online radicalization. Furthermore, their family backgrounds stand in stark contrast. Gendron came from a superficially stable, intact, two-parent home, whereas Cruz's life was defined by early trauma, loss, and a chaotic home environment.⁴⁵ This comparison suggests that one pathway to mass violence is rooted in chronic, overt psychopathology (Cruz), while another can be rooted in acute social isolation that fuels rapid ideological radicalization (Gendron).

This comparative analysis reveals two distinct systemic "failure modes" that can lead to mass violence. The case of Nikolas Cruz represents a "failure of efficacy." The system was heavily involved with him for more than a decade, with hundreds of hours of therapy and dozens of police contacts, but was ultimately ineffective at treating his condition or containing the threat he posed.⁴³ The system engaged, but it failed to produce a safe outcome. The case of Payton Gendron, conversely, represents a "failure of detection and definition." The system had one clear, high-stakes opportunity to intervene after his 2021 threat but failed because his behavior did not fit the narrow legal and clinical definitions required for decisive action like an ERPO or involuntary commitment.¹ The system failed to act because its rules were too rigid to recognize the danger he presented. Understanding these two distinct failure modes—

ineffectiveness despite engagement versus inaction due to definitional gaps—is

critical for designing differentiated prevention and intervention strategies that can address both types of pathways.

Moreover, ideology served different psychological functions for each perpetrator, which highlights the need for different types of intervention. For Gendron, the "Great Replacement" theory was a comprehensive, structured ideology he adopted wholesale from online sources. It became the central organizing principle of his life and his attack, giving him a sense of purpose, a community, and a clear target for his rage.¹⁵ For Cruz, his expressions of racism, antisemitism, and homophobia appeared more as symptoms or extensions of a generalized rage and an antisocial personality, rather than a coherent, borrowed political ideology.⁴³ His violence seems to have been more personally motivated by grudges and a desire for infamy, less tied to a specific political "cause." This suggests that while both were driven by hate, the role of a formal, external ideology was far more central to Gendron's mobilization. This distinction has profound implications for prevention. Countering the spread of online radicalization and extremist propaganda was the key to stopping Gendron. For Cruz, the focus would have needed to be on the long-term, intensive management of his severe behavioral and emotional disorders.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Intervention

The analysis of Payton Gendron's pathway to violence demonstrates that his act of domestic terrorism was not a random, inexplicable event. Rather, it was the predictable and preventable outcome of the synergistic interaction between profound social isolation, a behavioral rehearsal of violence through extreme animal cruelty, a pivotal but failed intervention by the mental health and law enforcement systems, and a rapid, all-consuming radicalization in unmoderated online spaces. The case of Gendron, when compared with that of Nikolas Cruz, underscores that while the specific pathways may differ, they are marked by observable warning signs that our current systems are often ill-equipped to address. The tragedies they perpetrated occurred not from a lack of information, but from a failure to connect the dots, to understand the synthesis of risk, and to act decisively. Preventing the next massacre requires moving beyond our siloed responses to build an integrated, intelligent, and proactive system of prevention.

Evidence-Based Recommendations

Based on the evidence presented in this report, the following multi-layered recommendations are proposed to address the systemic vulnerabilities exposed by the Gendron case.

For Law Enforcement and Legal Systems

1. **Mandate Comprehensive Training on "The Link":** All law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and judges must receive mandated and funded training on the established connection between animal cruelty and human violence. This training must emphasize that severe, premeditated, and "up close and personal" acts of animal cruelty are high-risk indicators for future violence that demand immediate, serious investigation and cannot be dismissed as minor offenses.¹⁸
2. **Reform "Red Flag" and Commitment Statutes:** State and federal laws, including Extreme Risk Protection Order (ERPO) statutes, must be reformed to allow for a holistic threat assessment. The current criteria, which often require a specific, imminent threat against a particular person, are too narrow. The statutes must be expanded to allow courts to consider the *combination* of risk factors—such as violent ideation, a history of animal cruelty, consumption of extremist rhetoric, and sudden acquisition of firearms—when making a determination of risk. The failure to issue an ERPO against Gendron after his "murder-suicide" threat is the prime exhibit for this critical legislative and policy flaw.⁴

For Mental Health and Education Systems

1. **Implement Mandatory Cross-Reporting Protocols:** State legislatures should enact and enforce mandatory cross-reporting protocols between animal welfare agencies, schools, mental health providers, and law enforcement. A credible report of serious animal cruelty by a student must automatically trigger a formal, multi-disciplinary threat assessment involving all relevant agencies. This breaks down the institutional silos that prevent a holistic view of a subject's risk profile.¹⁸
2. **Invest in Proactive School-Based Programs:** Educational systems must invest

in and implement programs focused on building empathy, promoting digital literacy and critical thinking skills to counter disinformation, and proactively identifying and supporting socially isolated students. Gendron's profound loneliness was a key vulnerability that made him susceptible to the lure of extremist online communities. Programs that foster connection and belonging can serve as a powerful protective factor.³

For Online Platforms and Federal Policymakers

1. **Address Unmoderated "Fringe" Platforms:** Federal and state authorities must use their investigative and regulatory powers to address the role of unmoderated "fringe" platforms like 4chan, which function as incubators for extremist radicalization and mobilization. The New York Attorney General's report on the Buffalo shooting explicitly identified these platforms as central to Gendron's radicalization and called for greater oversight.¹⁶
2. **Reform Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act:** Congress should enact meaningful legislative reform of Section 230 to create a carve-out that allows for civil liability for online platforms that knowingly host and algorithmically promote content that plans, glorifies, or facilitates terrorist violence. The current broad legal immunity for platforms has enabled the proliferation of dangerous content with little accountability.⁴⁸
3. **Mandate Safety Features for Livestreaming:** Federal legislation should mandate safety features for livestreaming services, such as broadcast delays, to allow for effective moderation and prevent the real-time weaponization of these platforms. The two-minute delay in taking down Gendron's livestream of the massacre was an abject failure that allowed the violent content to be captured and disseminated globally, fulfilling one of his primary objectives.¹

In conclusion, the pathway from personal grievance and psychological vulnerability to mass violence is now a well-trodden and digitally-paved road. The tools of radicalization are readily available, and the warning signs are often visible. Averting future tragedies requires the political will and societal commitment to build a prevention architecture as sophisticated and interconnected as the threats it is designed to counter.

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