

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP: CRIMINAL JUSTICE APPROACHES  
FOR PREVENTING MASS ATROCITIES

**MODULE 2: Prevention: Identifying Risk Factors,  
Warning Signs, and Triggers**



UNITED STATES  
**HOLOCAUST**  
MEMORIAL  
**MUSEUM**



## MODULE 2: PREVENTION: IDENTIFYING RISK FACTORS, WARNING SIGNS, AND TRIGGERS

This module introduces common macro-level risk factors, warning signs, and triggers for mass atrocities.

Participants are introduced to foundational mass atrocity prevention concepts based on the macro-level risk factors, warning signs, and triggers identified in Scott Straus’s *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention*. Participants are also introduced to the Holocaust through an exercise in which they apply these concepts while viewing chapter 1 of *The Path to Nazi Genocide* film. This module provides basic literacy in mass atrocity prevention concepts, which participants will use in Module 4 when discussing the specific role of criminal justice professionals in prevention. It also provides basic literacy in Holocaust history that will serve as a foundation for the deeper discussion in Module 3 of the role of criminal justice professionals during the Holocaust—and in mass atrocity prevention today.

### Guiding questions for this module

- What is mass atrocity prevention, and why do it?
- What are the risk factors, warning signs, and triggers of genocide and other mass atrocities?

### Module objectives

- Participants gain a basic understanding of the risk factors, warning signs, and triggers for mass atrocities and are able to identify examples in each of these categories.
- Participants are introduced to the Holocaust and can apply a mass atrocity prevention lens to analyze events that led to the Nazi rise to power.

### Module length: 45 minutes

SEGMENT	LENGTH
Introduction—Background on Mass Atrocity Prevention	5 minutes
Video and Discussion: Prevention: Identifying Risk Factors, Warning Signs, and Triggers	15 minutes
<i>The Path to Nazi Genocide</i> —Chapter 1 Film Exercise	20 minutes
Conclusion	5 minutes

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### Required materials

- Module #2 PowerPoint
- Module #2 Handout
- Video: “[Prevention: Identifying Risk Factors, Warning Signs, and Triggers](#)”
- [The Path to Nazi Genocide, Chapter 1](#) (Note: This film is available with subtitles in French, Spanish, Arabic, Hungarian, Polish, and a number of additional languages. Versions in other languages can be accessed using the left-hand bar on [this page](#)).

### Further reading

- Key Resource: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, [Guide to Criminal Justice and Preventing Mass Atrocities](#) (2023), Chapters 1 and 2
- Freedom House, [Freedom in the World Report](#)
- [Global Action Against Mass Atrocity Crimes](#)
- Green, Ashley L. and Ashad Sentongo. “[Assessing National Mechanisms for Atrocity Prevention in Africa’s Great Lakes Region](#).” *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 14, no. 2 (2019): 193-205.
- Protection Approaches, [Queering Atrocity Prevention](#) (2022)
- Report of the UN Secretary-General, [Prioritizing Prevention and Strengthening Response: Women and the Responsibility to Protect](#) (2020)
- Straus, Scott. [Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention](#), Chapter 2, “Risk Factors,” and Chapter 3, “Triggers and Escalation.” Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2016.
- United Nations, [Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes: A Tool for Prevention](#) (2014)
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, [Early Warning Project](#)
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, [Statistical Risk Assessment](#)
- United States Department of State, [Atrocity Risk Assessment Framework](#) (2022)

## LESSON PLAN

### Introduction (5 minutes)

*Slides 1–2*

**Explain:** “In the last module, we focused on definitions and examples of four types of mass atrocities—genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and ethnic cleansing. This session will provide an overview of risk factors, warning signs, and triggers for mass atrocities, and how identifying atrocity risk early can help prevent mass atrocities from occurring.

“The concepts introduced in this session will provide a foundation for better understanding the conditions that make mass atrocities possible. Subsequent modules in this course will build on these concepts while discussing the role of the criminal justice system in mass atrocity prevention.

“In this session, we will cover the following topics:

- What is mass atrocity prevention and why do it?
- How to prevent: Knowing the risk factors, warning signs, and triggers of mass atrocities”

*Slide 3*

“Before we dive into the risk factors, warning signs, and triggers, I would like to briefly introduce the policy framework premised in international law that is foundational to the current thinking and practice around mass atrocity prevention.

“After the mass atrocities of World War II, the United Nations (UN) was established to prevent future wars, and the 1948 Genocide Convention became the first human rights treaty adopted by the UN General Assembly. Today 152 states are party to the Convention, which means they have a binding obligation to prevent and punish the crime of genocide.

“Additionally, born out of the events that occurred in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) seeks to ensure collective state responsibility to protect populations from mass atrocities. Through the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document, UN member states unanimously endorsed the principle that each state has the responsibility to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. Under R2P each state has a responsibility to prevent such crimes through “appropriate and necessary means.” If the state fails (either willfully or because it is unable to do so), then other states have a responsibility to take steps to protect against mass atrocities in accordance with the UN Charter. (Responsibility to Protect, 2005 World Summit Outcome Document, paras. 138–139).

### Slide 4

“Ideally, prevention happens early and at the local level to achieve maximum impact. Prevention efforts can have benefits beyond mass atrocity prevention specifically—for example, access to justice initiatives or nondiscrimination policies can increase public trust in institutions and protect vulnerable groups.

“Early prevention can also cut costs in the long run—financial costs, costs to national sovereignty and local control, and costs in human lives lost (potential victims as well as those involved in security).

“Effective prevention often involves changes in the politics and institutions of a country. Domestic actors are best positioned to successfully promote and institute such changes (Straus, p. 134). Local-level changes are more likely to be sustainable. Once mass atrocities are underway, the opportunity for domestic action often diminishes. As a result, domestic actors play an essential, frontline role in prevention.

“Finally, prevention measures also build resilience. The prevention measures we will discuss in this course are meant to counter weaknesses that make society vulnerable to mass atrocity crimes, and prevention measures build on strengths, or the conditions that somehow are stopping society from sliding into mass violence. These measures can build resilience in institutions and communities that are best positioned to counter the risks that can lead to mass atrocities.

“Our goal in pursuing mass atrocity prevention is not just to avoid something terrible. We support atrocity prevention because we want to promote something good. Prevention work addresses tensions and divisions in the community and sometimes in the law. It can help identify and address root causes of conflict and tensions. It can be hard to persuade leadership to spend time and money on preventative measures, but they are never wasted. Prevention, in action, seeks to avoid the dangerous conditions that can lead to devastating human-made catastrophes like the Holocaust or the genocides in Cambodia or Rwanda.”

### **Video and Discussion: Prevention: Identifying Risk Factors, Warning Signs, and Triggers (15 minutes)**

*Slides 5–6; slides 11–14 may be used for reference during the debrief from the video if needed.*

Explain to participants that you will be viewing a short video that introduces common risk factors, warning signs, and triggers for mass atrocities.

**Say:** “The video references the risk factors, warning signs, and triggers for mass atrocities discussed in Scott Straus’s *Fundamentals of Genocide Prevention* and the *Guide to Criminal Justice and Preventing Mass Atrocities*. You can follow along with your handout. While this handout consolidates the concepts into an easier reference list, it is not exhaustive, and your own communities may present risk factors and warning signs that are not on these lists, or that perhaps look different from how they are characterized here.”

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At the conclusion of the video, the instructor facilitates a group discussion based on the following questions:

**Ask:** “What stood out to you as you learned about the risk factors, warning signs, and triggers for mass atrocities?”

Possible responses: Open-ended—participants may share personal experiences with any of the risk factors, warning signs, or triggers or highlight those that seem most relevant to atrocity prevention in their view.

**Ask:** “Almost every state has some of these conditions. Have you observed any of these risk factors, warning signs, and triggers in your own context? Do you think naming them is helpful for mass atrocity prevention? Why or why not?”

Possible responses: Open-ended—participants may share experiences from their own context or new information they learned from the video. Instructor may wish to highlight how warning signs intersect with work participants are already doing in other areas—for example, combating gender-based violence, which can increase during conflict and can play a role during mass atrocities.<sup>1</sup>

### **Exercise: *The Path to Nazi Genocide*—Chapter 1 Analysis (20 minutes)**

*Slide 7*

Explain to participants that you will now apply the concepts learned to an analysis of the Nazi rise to power.

**Say:** “Now we will watch the first part of a film produced by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *The Path to Nazi Genocide*. The film provides an overview of the events in Germany leading up to the rise of the Nazi Party and the Second World War, during which six million Jews were murdered in the genocide now known as the Holocaust. The Nazis and their collaborators persecuted and killed millions more in mass atrocities that targeted Roma, the disabled, gay men, Communists, and other political opponents. We will watch the first 12 minutes, but the rest of the film is available online should you wish to watch it.

“As you watch the film, look for risk factors and warning signs—what did these look like in this particular context? You can check them off on your handout if you like or make notes of where you observe them in the film.”

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<sup>1</sup> See US Atrocity Risk Assessment Framework (2022), “Impact of Gender,” <https://www.state.gov/u-s-atrocity-risk-assessment-framework/>.

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### *Slide 8*

After viewing chapter 1 of the film, the instructor can use the remaining time to debrief using the following questions:

**Ask:** “What risk factors, warning signs, and triggers did you observe in the film? What did these factors look like in action in this particular situation?”

Possible answers: Participants may note any of the risk factors, warning signs, or triggers they observed in the film—some examples might include large-scale instability (economic depression and paramilitary units clashing in the streets) or emergency legislation (Reichstag Fire Decree).

### **Conclusion (5 minutes)**

**Say:** “These risk factors, warning signs, and triggers remind us that mass atrocities rarely emerge out of nowhere—nor are they inevitable. In the case of the Holocaust, risk factors existed in Germany well before the Nazis came to power. Once in power, the Nazi regime oversaw the implementation of laws and policies that imposed restrictions on Jews while fostering an exclusionary culture that defined who belonged in their national community and who didn’t. While this depended on a political regime that provided an exclusionary ideology, the political regime needed the support of professionals and ordinary Germans to make the ideology a reality. In Module 3, we will continue to examine the case study of the Holocaust in order to take a closer look at this evolution of exclusion and rising violence. Attention will focus on the role played by German criminal justice professionals (e.g., police officers, prosecutors, judges) as the Nazi regime consolidated power and magnified the risk of genocide.”

*Cover:* A young man reads a sign that says, “Jews are not welcome here.”  
*US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Margaret Chelnick*