

Neurodivergence and Violent Extremism

18 International Case Studies

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INTRODUCTION

Although there is no direct link between autism and violent extremism in the general population, some autistic individuals become radicalised and engage in extremist activities. Within these individuals, specific symptoms and features of autism may contextualise vulnerability as well as resilience, disengagement, and risk management in ways that differ from neurotypical populations.

Existing research suffers from the limited availability of data and cases. Through analysing a novel dataset of international cases of individuals with autism and extremism concerns, this research expands the existing evidence base. This study aimed to:

1. Examine specific autistic symptoms, facets, or behaviours that may contextualise extremism vulnerability, risk, or resilience within at-risk populations.
2. Examine the suitability of the Framework for the Assessment of Risk & Protection in Offenders on the Autistic Spectrum (FARAS) when applied to this population.
3. Consider any implications for approaches and strategies for mitigating extremism risk and enhancing protection amongst individuals with autism with extremism concerns.

This research adopted a case study analysis approach, analysing a novel dataset of 18 closed-source international cases of individuals with autism and extremism concerns,



provided by practitioners with direct knowledge of them. We used the FARAS to provide a conceptual framework for the analysis.

The findings indicate that in combination with wider environmental factors, the facets of autism outlined in the FARAS may contextualise the pull and push factors towards violent extremism amongst those who are vulnerable to extremist engagement. These factors are:

1. Circumscribed Interests
2. Visual Fantasy & Impaired Social Imagination
3. Need for Order, Rules, Routines & Predictability
4. Obsessionality, Repetition & Collecting
5. Social Interaction & Communication Difficulties
6. Cognitive Styles (Difficulties & Strengths)
7. Sensory Hyper- & Hypo-Sensitivity

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

NEURODIVERGENCE AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM: 18 INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDIES

Overall, the findings suggest that the FARAS provides an appropriate conceptual framework to analyse the functional links, behaviours, and motivations that may be present amongst autistic individuals in extremism contexts. In particular, the findings highlight how individuals' experiences of different facets of autism, within their wider circumstances, can contextualise pull or push factors towards extremist engagement. These findings provide specific contextual considerations for risk assessment and disengagement, as well as evidence-based practice and guidance for practitioners working with autistic individuals with extremism concerns. Through better understanding how these factors present amongst autistic individuals in these contexts, practitioners may better be able to understand vulnerability and risk in this population, which may subsequently present considerations for tailoring support to these individuals' needs.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This is the Executive Summary from the Full Report 'Neurodivergence and Violent Extremism: Case Studies'. You can find all the outputs from this project at: www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/practice-consolidation-and-assessment/

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