

A Systematic Review of Neurodivergence, Vulnerability, and Risk in the Context of Violent Extremism

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INTRODUCTION

Existing research does not indicate that there is a direct causal link between neurodivergence and engagement in criminality or violent extremism in the general population. However, while estimates vary, a proportion of individuals within violent extremist populations are also neurodivergent. Within these individuals, specific symptoms of neurodivergent conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may contextualise vulnerability to such engagement, as well as resilience and disengagement, that may differ from their neurotypical counterparts.

This systematic review therefore aimed to investigate:

1. The functional role of ASD and ADHD in the context of vulnerability and/or resilience to radicalisation, terrorism, and mass violence.
2. Risk management of individuals in these contexts.
3. Recommendations for professional training, skill, and effectiveness in these contexts.
4. The quality, extent, and gaps of the existing research in this field.

We identified 58 publications from a variety of different fields and publication sources. The findings were synthesised using a qualitative thematic analysis of the included documents. Nine key themes emerged from the review:



1. **Prevalence** of ASD/ADHD in extremist/mass murderer populations.
2. **Social and Relationship Difficulties** which may lead to isolation, grievances, and engagement with extreme ideologies and actors online.
3. **Hyperfixation, Obsessionality, and Circumscribed Interests** including interests in mass murder, weapons, and extreme ideologies.
4. **Cognitive Styles** including rigid thinking; a need for predictability, rules, and routines; impulsivity; and associated difficulties at work or school.
5. **Sensory Issues** including difficulties associated with over-sensitivity, under-sensitivity, and sensation-seeking behaviours.
6. **Vivid Fantasies and Ideation** which may include violent ideation or narratives of grandiosity.
7. **Emotional Dysregulation** contributing to frustration, anxiety, and grievance.

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8. **Complex Needs, Comorbidities, and Trauma** which may interact with or exacerbate difficulties and grievances.
9. **Enhancing Resilience and Considerations for Practice** including integrating these considerations into threat/risk assessment and management.

The review indicated that in neurodivergent individuals within at-risk populations, a multitude of different factors can contribute to violent extremism and mass violence risk – often involving the presence and combination of different diagnoses, traits, environmental factors, and stressors that uniquely combine in individuals. Within populations of concern, risk assessment approaches may benefit from considering how neurodivergent traits and symptoms can contextualise risk, vulnerability, and resilience; and their interaction with external and convergent factors. Considering the push and pull factors to mass violence and violent extremism through the lens of neurodivergence may also be relevant for supporting disengagement.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This is the Executive Summary taken from the full Systematic Review. You can find all the outputs from this project at: www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/practice-consolidation-and-assessment/

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