Neurodivergence and Violent Extremism
18 International Case Studies

Nadine Salman, Zainab Al-Attar, Natalie Pyszora, Debra Smith & Muhammad Iqbal
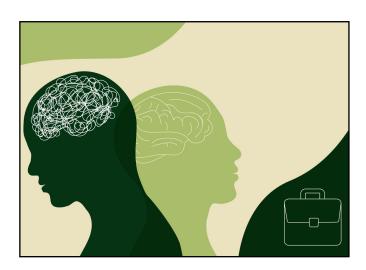
BACKGROUND

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. Understanding these factors may help to inform risk assessment and management, thereby facilitating more positive outcomes for at-risk individuals.

However, the evidence base is currently limited. Existing research examining autism in extremism contexts suffers from the limited availability of data and cases, where a small number of cases are reused. Existing research also primarily focuses on the *presence* or *prevalenc*e of autism and its symptoms, rather than their *relevance*. There is therefore a need to examine new cases and understand the relevance of the individuals' traits and symptoms in the context of their vulnerability, risk, and disengagement.

OBJECTIVES

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.

METHOD

This research adopted a case study analysis approach, analysing a novel dataset of 18 closed-source international cases of individuals with extremism concerns who were diagnosed with, or undergoing diagnosis for, autism. These cases were sourced from closed-source data held by public authorities, including law enforcement, corrective services, forensic mental health services, and fixated threat assessment centres, in the UK and Australia.

Case formulation summaries were provided by practitioners (forensic psychologists, forensic psychiatrists, and autism specialist extremism intervention practitioners) with direct knowledge of the cases. The FARAS was used to structure the case summaries and to provide a conceptual framework for the analysis. This framework includes seven broad facets of autism that may contextualise risk and offending.

The cases were synthesised and aggregated using the FARAS to identify common patterns (as well as any differences) across the cases.

KEY FINDINGS

FACET 1. CIRCUMSCRIBED INTERESTS

The cases analysed showed evidence of specific intense interests that became associated with violent extremism. Such interests served psychological functions for the individuals, providing comfort and a sense of purpose, and often started innocuously (e.g., interests in politics and history), but subsequently took a harmful turn. Online platforms and socio-political events played a role in amplifying these interests. Some individuals' interests (e.g., those related to computers, technology, and weapons) led to the development of technical skills that could be used for illicit purposes (e.g., hacking, bomb-making). Several cases were detected by law enforcement through behaviours related to these interests, such as sharing extreme content or expressing extreme views in school or work settings.

FACET 2. VISUAL FANTASY & IMPAIRED SOCIAL IMAGINATION

The cases analysed experienced intense and vivid fantasies that provided a form of escape, comfort, and pleasure, as well as a sense of power or mastery. The most common fantasies involved violent acts, usually inspired by online content. Some individuals also had fantasies related to their political views or a desire for a different world. These fantasies provided a way for the individuals to cope with feelings of anger, distress, and injustice. In some cases, as the individuals became desensitised to violence, violent fantasies became more extreme and led to an escalation in risky behaviour. These fantasies sometimes became all-consuming, leading individuals to detach from reality, especially during challenging times or periods of isolation.

FACET 3. NEED FOR ORDER, RULES, ROUTINES & PREDICTABILITY

Individuals with autism often have a strong need for order, routines, and predictability. In the cases analysed, the individuals saw the world as chaotic and unpredictable, and relied on daily routines and a sense of order for comfort and stability. Disruptions to this order and routines, and perceived rule violations, heightened feelings of threat, injustice, and vulnerability. For these individuals, online spaces, special interests, and fantasies served as a sanctuary away from the chaos of the outside world and provided a sense of control and purpose. Ideologies that offered clear, black-and-white narratives provided a sense of predictability, rules, and punishment for perceived injustices, increasing their appeal. Conversely, some individuals found comfort in following laws and rules, viewing law enforcement as a source of safety and justice.

FACET 4. OBSESSIONALITY, REPETITION & COLLECTING

The individuals studied developed intense fixations on their interests or perceived injustices. This involved collecting interest-related materials, repetitively engaging with extreme content, and obsessively ruminating on grievances, particularly during times of stress. Individuals meticulously studied and researched their interests, sometimes leading to tunnel vision that

reduced inhibitions towards accessing extreme content. Collections included graphic or extreme content; its possession and distribution provided a sense of status and social affirmation. This collecting behaviour, especially of illicit content, often led to detection by law enforcement. Fixated grievances related to personal or wider injustices sometimes became all-consuming, contributing to the intensity of extremist engagement and violent fantasies.

FACET 5. SOCIAL INTERACTION & COMMUNICATION DIFFICULTIES

The individuals in the sample experienced challenges in social interaction and communication, which led to social rejection and isolation. These difficulties contributed to feelings of being different, resulting in low self-esteem and grievances. Some found it challenging to navigate social demands in the workplace or school, leading to job loss or exclusion from education, reducing prosocial opportunities. Additionally, some engaged in provocative behaviour, either for social reinforcement or to cope with anxiety-provoking situations. Individuals found solace and a sense of belonging in online spaces, where they could communicate with like-minded individuals who reinforced their risky interests and extreme views.

FACET 6. COGNITIVE STYLES (DIFFICULTIES & STRENGTHS)

The cases often displayed an intense focus on details at the expense of considering the broader context, as well as difficulties in shifting their attention between topics or people. Some individuals experienced executive function impairments, affecting their organisational skills, task management, and impulse control. While these cognitive styles can confer strengths in some domains, the individuals in the sample experienced academic difficulties and challenges in social settings, contributing towards isolation and grievances. The intense focus on details was also linked to a fixated immersion in risky interests, and a lack of consideration

of the potential consequences of their actions. Challenges in understanding others' perspectives, behaviours, and intentions were linked to difficulties in forming relationships and comprehending the impact of their actions on others. Some individuals may also have been vulnerable due to their difficulty in recognising ulterior motives in online interactions.

FACET 7. SENSORY HYPER- & HYPO-SENSITIVITY

Individuals with autism often experience sensory difficulties, which can manifest as hypersensitivity (over-sensitivity) or hyposensitivity (under-sensitivity) to sensory stimuli such as sound, light, smells, touch, and taste. Some of the cases reported sensitivities to noise, touch, light, and temperature, which contributed to feelings of distress, especially in environments like school or workplaces. Hyposensitivity was also observed in some cases, associated with an attraction to intense sensory stimuli such as explosions, fire, and violent imagery. Some individuals found pleasure in loud noises associated with explosions, while others were attracted to propaganda imagery, finding it visually stimulating. This sensory attraction may have made risky interests and behaviours more appealing. In some cases, desensitisation to these stimuli led to an escalation in seeking out more extreme content. This was accentuated in cases with comorbid ADHD.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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 Overview 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/*