

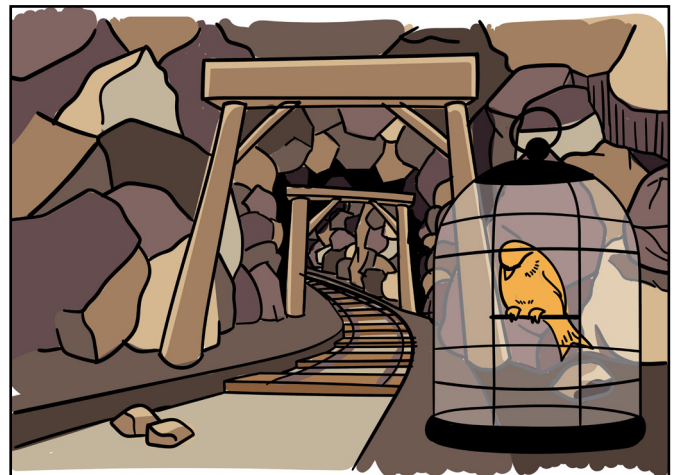
# Assessing the Environmental Risk Factors for Terrorism: Operationalising S5 (ASSESS-5)

Noémie Bouhana & Caitlin Clemmow

Existing processes, methods and tools to identify and evaluate the risk of involvement in terrorism and violent extremism (ITVE) operate largely at the individual level. The Vulnerability Assessment Framework (VAF) used in the context of Channel is the best example of this. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to identifying and evaluating the characteristics of the socio-physical contexts (i.e., environments, settings, places) which may contribute to the emergence of the risk of ITVE, or, conversely, to its suppression. Yet research on crime, arguably a closely related problem space, makes a strong case that many of the causes and enabling conditions of criminal development (of which ITVE maybe an instantiation ) are found in the environment: crime and criminals concentrate in space and time.

This project investigated the feasibility of developing a framework to assess the risk of involvement in terrorism and violent extremism at the level of environment with a view towards – further down the line – possibly designing an assessment tool along the lines of the Vulnerability Assessment Framework, intended to assess environments instead of individuals.

Theoretically the project utilises conceptual ideas in ‘S5’ - a systemic inference framework to inform counter-extremism strategies which integrates Situational Action Theory (SAT) with a broader behavioural and socio-cognitive knowledge-base to refine understanding of person-environment interactions.



To increase the likelihood that project would deliver the desired outcomes and outputs, the Principal Investigator conducted a requirements elicitation workshop at the start of the study with a mix of government units and agencies involved in formulating policies for and making risk assessments of ITVE. The consensus amongst participants favoured the option of exploring whether there exists a knowledge-base to inform the eventual development of a place-based, as opposed to case-based, framework for the assessment of ITVE risk.

This requirement was conducted via a modified e-Delphi exercise with UK front-line practitioners in order to produce a shortlist of indicators that might characterise ITVE risk-promoting and risk-suppressing systems (societies), social ecologies (neighbourhoods) and settings, as well as the risk of individual selection for exposure.

# OVERVIEW

## ASSESSING THE ENVIRONMENTAL RISK FACTORS FOR TERRORISM

The modified eDelphi exercise consisted of three phases:

In *Phase 1*, a systematic literature search was carried out to produce a raw list of environmental risk and protective indicators associated with ITVE. Twenty-eight studies were finally included with the consensus view being that the literature had only yielded a somewhat narrow set of indicators.

In *Phase 2*, the narrow list of indicators generated by the literature search (now supplemented by additional environmental 'place' indicators drawn from the criminological literature) was translated into an online survey, which was administered to a group of ITVE experts for their professional opinion. Participants (n=50) were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with each indicator of a given setting or context being more or less likely to support or facilitate an individual's involvement in violent extremism (compared to a setting or context where this indicator is absent). This survey produced a further reduced list of indicators. In a similar manner a second online survey was then administered (n = 43) to produce a final shortlist of indicators.

Finally in *Phase 3*, a focus group with a small set of ITVE experts (most of whom had not taken part in the survey rounds) was conducted to gather qualitative feedback on the shortlist produced by the two rounds of online surveys, as well as comments on the exercise as a whole and the desirability of going forward with the development of a risk analysis tool.

The resulting final shortlist of indicators is summarised in *Table 1* on the last page (bold denotes a stronger association based on expert level of agreement).

Key conclusions from the modified e-Delphi exercise were:

- By-and-large, neither professional role nor level of experience had a significant effect on respondents' evaluation of indicators.
- The majority of the indicators included in the survey (most of them generated through the literature review ) were not rated as relevant by the survey respondents, though neither did they attract strong levels of disagreement.
- None of the indicators retained garnered a high level of agreement, though a few were agreed upon somewhat more highly than others, all of them risk indicators (as opposed to protective indicators).
- At the system level, no protective indicators passed the threshold for retention.
- At the system level, all of the risk indicators that were retained related to media communication as it impacted society-wide moral contexts.
- The majority of shortlisted risk indicators are found at the social ecological (neighbourhood and community) and selection (individual) levels of analysis.
- Although more respondents reported thinking that online exposure contributes more to ITVE risk than offline exposure, a majority of the higher-rated indicators relate to sites and processes of exposure 'in the real world', reflecting the ambivalence of the broader academic literature on the topic of online versus offline radicalisation.
- Social ecological indicators which received higher levels of agreement all signal the presence of an extremist moral context (presence of extremist groups; public expression and tolerance towards extremist ideas), as do many of the other shortlisted indicators.
- At the social ecological level, many of the shortlisted indicators are markers of processes such as segregation (on the risk side) and collective efficacy (on the protective side), well-evidenced processes commonly used to explain the increase or decrease of crime and disorder in neighbourhoods and communities.
- System moral context, community moral context, community collective efficacy, community segregation, online extremist exposure, offline extremist exposure, and mental health emerge as composite indicators (themes) out of the shortlist.
- As a first exploration of the basis for an operational ITVE environmental risk assessment framework, the project's findings show that much more work

is needed to establish a robust knowledge base for such a framework.

- It is notable, however, that while some of the survey respondents expressed scepticism as to the role of the environment in explaining ITVE, the responses themselves suggest that it may be more an instance of not knowing, rather than disagreeing outright.
- The value of an environmental risk analysis framework for frontline practitioners may not reside so much in providing a list of risk indicators (that could turn out to be insufficiently

discriminatory or whose meaning will vary with context), but rather in providing a set of questions risk assessors may not have thought to ask, and, in turn, bringing to mind levers they may not have thought to pull. In other words, the value of such an instrument could be to structure their professional judgement in such a way as to take environmental factors more systematically into account. Whether this would contribute beneficially to their assessment and/or management activity remains an open empirical question.

|                         | Indicates higher risk   | Indicates lower risk  |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| <b>Systems</b>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traditional media broadcast disinformation or misinformation</li> <li>• <b>Traditional media encourage distrust in legitimate authority</b></li> <li>• <b>Online media content contains conflicting extreme socio-political views</b></li> <li>• <b>Online media content contains disinformation or misinformation</b></li> <li>• <b>Online media content encourage distrust in legitimate authority</b></li> </ul>  |   |
| <b>Settings</b>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public houses known for their association with a radical national identity</li> <li>• University settings where students are exposed to extremist views as part of their extra-curricular activities</li> <li>• <b>Category A prisons</b></li> <li>• <b>Musical events openly associated with extreme views or movements</b></li> <li>• <b>Online gaming environments which are politically charged</b></li> <li>• <b>Online gaming environments which glorify political violence</b></li> </ul>   |   |
| <b>Social Ecologies</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The neighbourhood is segregated by cultural background</li> <li>• The neighbourhood is segregated by ethnicity</li> <li>• The neighbourhood is segregated by religious background</li> <li>• The neighbourhood experiences relatively high levels of hate crime</li> <li>• Specific groups of residents are targets of hate crime in the community</li> <li>• Some residents have ties in countries in a state of conflict</li> <li>• A significant proportion of residents distrust the government</li> <li>• Indifference towards acts of violent extremism is widespread in the community</li> <li>• Sympathy or tolerance for acts of violent extremism is widespread in the community</li> <li>• Groups that could be described as ideological rivals are active in the neighbourhood</li> <li>• Groups or individuals that legitimate the use of violence for any reason express themselves publicly in the neighbourhood</li> <li>• Access to support for issues related to neurodivergence is inadequate in the area</li> <li>• Access to support for issues related to mental illness is inadequate in the area</li> <li>• <b>There are graffiti, stickers or posters promoting radical or extremist views posted in the area</b></li> <li>• <b>Hate groups or organisations are reportedly active in the neighbourhood</b></li> <li>• <b>Extremist groups or organisations with ties to the neighbourhood maintain an active social media presence</b></li> <li>• <b>Individuals promoting extremist groups or ideology in public space</b></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most residents report confidence in the police</li> <li>• Mainstream cultural organisations are active in the community</li> <li>• Day-to-day peaceful intergroup contact occurs in the community</li> <li>• Residents come together regularly to organise community events (e.g., street party)</li> <li>• Hate crime rates are low in the neighbourhood</li> <li>• Social support structures can be accessed in a timely manner in the community</li> <li>• There are positive adult role models in the neighbourhood</li> <li>• The area offers opportunities for youth to associate in healthy, supervised cultural or fitness settings</li> </ul> |

# OVERVIEW

## ASSESSING THE ENVIRONMENTAL RISK FACTORS FOR TERRORISM

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|------------------|--|--|
| <b>Selection</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Living in a household where there is domestic violence</li><li>• Living in a household where there are mental health issues</li><li>• Living in a culturally insular household</li><li>• Being excluded from school or attending school irregularly</li><li>• Relying chiefly or only on non-traditional media for information</li><li>• Spending time in an online gaming environment on a regular basis</li><li>• Most close friendships are online</li><li>• Preferred social media platform is Gab</li><li>• Preferred social media platform is Telegram</li><li>• Preferred social media platform is 8Chan</li><li>• <b>Spending significant time online unsupervised as a youth</b></li><li>• <b>Regular time spent with racist peers</b></li><li>• <b>Serving time in a prison holding extremist offenders</b></li><li>• <b>Spending regular time in public settings where individuals with extremist views are known to congregate</b></li><li>• <b><u>Regular time spent in private settings (e.g., flats) where individuals with extremist views are known to congregate</u></b></li><li>• <b><u>Living with extremist relatives</u></b></li></ul> |  |
|------------------|--|--|

Table 1. Shortlist of ITVE environmental risk indicators (bold denotes a stronger association based on expert level of agreement)

### ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This is the Overview taken from the Full Report available at: [www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/environment-and-interventions/](http://www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/environment-and-interventions/)

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