Countering Violent Extremism

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Caveats

▶ Although there is a substantial body of international literature, there is not a great deal of primary research, or methodological robustness.

▶ There is a lack of primary research in the correctional context.

▶ Very little research in the New Zealand context generally.

▶ A further challenge in the study of terrorism is that attacks are relatively rare events, despite the potentially significant consequences (e.g., in 2014, thirteen times as many people were killed globally by homicide than died in terrorist attacks).

▶ The literature has predominantly focused on men.

What is terrorism?

- Terrorism involves the use, or threat of use, of violence as a means of attempting to achieve some social or political effect (Horgan, 2014).

- It is a complex phenomenon driven by diverse causes.

- Violent extremists demonstrate a common willingness to engage in different types of unlawful violence in order to inspire fear.

- Terrorist groups vary considerably: motivations, size, capacity, resources, demographics, organisational structure, type of violence used.

- It is therefore hard to categorise terrorism, even within specific groups across time.

Recent international trends

- Extremist violence has grown on a global scale over the last 15 years or so.

- The events of 11 September 2001 ("9/11") signalled a massive shift in the scale of targeted terrorism.

- Terrorist activity increased by 80% in 2014 to its highest recorded level.

- Deaths from terrorism decreased by 27 percent from 2016 to 2017. Conflict and political terror are the primary drivers of terrorist activity in countries with lower levels of economic development.

- In countries with high levels of economic development, social cohesion, alienation and involvement in external conflict are more likely to be drivers of terrorist activity.

- In Western Europe, individuals with a history of criminality are especially susceptible to recruitment.

- Lone actor attackers have been the main perpetrators of terrorist activity in the West.

- In 2014, 80% of lone actors attacks were driven by right wing extremism, nationalism, anti-Government sentiment, and political extremism.

NZ context

- NZ enacted the Terrorism Suppression Act (TSA) in 2002, subsequent to the 9/11 attacks on the United States.

- In June 2016, two men were convicted and sentenced for the possession (and, in one case, distribution) of objectionable material related to extremist violence.

- On 15 March 2019, one man is alleged to have engaged in a terrorist attack in Christchurch that caused significant loss of life and injury.

- In light of these recent events and the increasing global threat of terrorism, there is no reason to think that NZ is, or will continue to be, exempt from terrorism concerns.

- Although NZ intelligence services believe the terrorist threat to NZ to be low, there are a number of individuals with links to overseas organisations that are committed to acts of violence.

- The NZ intelligence community believes that the greatest threat of a terrorist act in NZ comes from "home-grown" radicalisation or a lone actor attack.

Useful definitions

- Radicalisation:
  - The social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist ideology. May not necessarily lead to violence.

- Violent radicalisation:
  - The social and psychological process of *increased* and *focused* radicalisation through involvement with a violent group or movement.

- Disengagement:
  - The process whereby an individual experiences a change in role or function that is usually associated with a reduction of violent activity (i.e., behavioural change).

- De-radicalisation:
  - The social and psychological process of decreasing commitment to, and involvement in, violent radicalisation such that an individual is no longer at risk of engaging in violent activity (i.e., cognitive change).

Behavioural indicators of extremism

- Extremist material
  - Collecting or attempting to collect information or material of an extremist nature e.g., manifestos, IED construction
  - Sustained interest in weaponry and paramilitary methods
  - Tattoos depicting extremist symbols/messages
- Relationships
  - Contact with people in the community involved with, or suspected of involvement with extremist activity, including visitors, telephone contacts, letters
  - Contact with other people in our care in custody who are convicted of extremist offences, or where there are concerns about radicalisation
  - Assisting with or admiring/glorifying terrorist or extremist behaviour
  - Withdrawal from prosocial/non-extremist peers – becoming increasingly engaged with extremist peers/ideology/behaviours

- Problematic behaviours of concern
  - Abusing communications or legal privilege to communicate extremist messages
  - Applying to be in a position of influence in custody
  - Instigating or participating in group complaints, protests, or disorder with an extremist element
  - Taking security precautions e.g., using covert language
  - Attending or instigating unauthorised prayer meetings
  - Challenges at communal prayers, disrespect to authorised chaplains
  - Targeting or attempting to groom new, susceptible, or vulnerable people in our care by attempting to encourage social or material dependency
  - Pressuring or bullying other people in our care to convert to follow an extreme version of their beliefs, acting either alone or in a group

- Use of violence (including orchestrating or arranging others to do so)
  - Threatening or using violence towards staff for extremist purposes
  - Threatening or using violence to get others to align themselves with an extremist view
  - Threatening or using violence against others who do not appear to accept extreme beliefs

The psychology of terrorism

First generation research (late 1960s to mid 1980s)

- Pathologising of terrorism as a product of psychological and behavioural deviance.

- Very few empirical studies.

- These psychodynamic theories offer little predictive value but have continued to be promulgated:
  - Psychoanalytic theory
  - Narcissism
  - Early typologies e.g.,
    - the crusaders, the criminals, and the 'crazies'
    - The anarchic-ideologue vs the nationalist-secessionist

Contemporary research

Terrorism and psychopathology

▶ Psychopathology only a modest risk factor for general violence.

▶ Hard to study the presence (or absence) of psychopathology or problematic personality traits in terrorist populations.

▶ Various literature reviews have concluded that there is a lack of reliable, robust, and systematic evidence of higher rates of diagnosable serious psychopathology among known terrorists.

▶ Psychopathology has therefore not been considered a useful perspective for understanding or predicting terrorist behaviour (Borum, 2004).

The terrorist personality?

▶ Weak evidence for this concept.

▶ Lacks specificity.

  ▶ Even if there were shared characteristics, it would not imply that anyone who presented with these were bound to become terrorists.

  ▶ Fails to account for the different 'personalities' associated with different roles in a terrorist organisation (e.g., financier, strategist, administrator, assassin, suicide bomber).

▶ Profiles or formulations that focus on behavioural analysis and developmental processes may be more productive than profiles that focus on the possession of trait or state qualities (Horgan, 2014).

The role of ideology

▶ Ideology can be defined as a common and avidly-embraced set of rules and ideals to which an individual subscribes and which motivate them to act in specific ways.

▶ Beck (2002) applied a cognitive model to terrorist ideologies and concluded that the thinking patterns of terrorists showed the same kind of cognitive distortions observed in others who engage in violent acts (individual or group-based):

  ▶ Overgeneralisation

  ▶ Dichotomous thinking

  ▶ Tunnel vision

▶ Important to recognise that even among those who subscribe to a destruction-orientated ideology, not all will personally engage in extremist violence.

Motives and vulnerabilities

▶ Motivation is often considered to be the cause or ideology of the terrorist group.

▶ Review of the literature reveals three prominent and consistent motivational themes:

  ▶ Injustice/grievance

  ▶ Identity

  ▶ Belonging

▶ Vulnerabilities for embarking on a terrorist pathway should not be confused with a 'terrorist personality'. May be more useful to consider vulnerability as the various factors that result in some individuals having a greater openness to engaging in terrorism.

Pathways to radicalisation and terrorism

- The psychology of terrorism cannot be considered in isolation from political, historical, social, familial, individual, and even coincidental or accidental factors (Borum, 2004).

- Not the product of a single decision, but the end result of gradual exposure and socialisation.

- Unlikely to be a single pathway that would apply to all types of terrorist groups or individuals.

- Many sociological and psychological models have been used to explain terrorism.

  - They fail to account for why millions of people may be exposed to the same social circumstances but do not engage in terrorism.

Contemporary models of radicalisation and terrorism

- Tend to be phase models that explain how an individual may become radicalised and escalate to involvement in terrorist activity:
  - Joint Military Information Support Centre Framework
  - Moghaddam's Staircase to Terrorism
  - Five-Step Identity Model of the Development of Collective Hate
  - Pyramid Model
  - Sinai's model of prison radicalisation ('Prislam')

- All contain common themes and 'stages' of radicalisation, with social identity and influence by others playing a key role
  - Personal crisis
  - Need for protection
  - Sense of grievance/injustice
  - Identification with the in-group
  - indoctrination

The role of the Internet

- Many of the socialisation theories of group-actor terrorist behaviour involve the direct influence of others – family, friends, charismatic leaders.

- The Internet provides a form of surrogate community and features heavily in the literature on lone-actor terrorism.

- In the context of large-scale counter-terrorism responses to extremist groups, such groups operate more and more by acting as ideological suppliers and promoters of leaderless resistance.

- The Internet is a significant tool to advance this strategy.

  - A vehicle for messages of a terrorist nature

  - An instrument for the recruitment of sympathisers and a context for radicalisation

  - A technical tool for advancing knowledge of how to commit terrorist attacks

Criminal pathway

- UK research undertaken with offenders convicted under terrorist legislation found that some cases were not consistent with the socialisation theories of extremism.

- Several of the Al Qaeda influenced offenders had a history of violent offending, seemingly weak identification with Al Qaeda ideology, and lower levels of religiosity.

- Instead, they held criminal attitudes supportive of violence and their engagement in terrorism seemed opportunistic and self-serving. Seemed motivated by power and control, rather than any 'noble cause'.

- Offenders who were primarily ideologically motivated were often disparaging of the 'criminal' terrorists (Lloyd & Dean, 2015).

Psychological approaches to terrorism risk assessment

Issues in assessing risk for terrorism

- Hazard identification
- Frequency of the hazard
- The problem of low base rates
- The problem of validation
- Types of risk factors
- Context and purpose of risk assessment

So, where does all this leave us?

► A clinical, open-ended, and unstructured risk assessment approach would be of little use.

  ► Potential for biases, limitations in professional judgement, lack of transparency, and inconsistency.

► An actuarial approach would be impractical.

  ► Given the very low base rate, quantitative estimates of probability in individual cases would be highly unstable and unreliable.

► Structured professional judgement may be a more useful approach.

  ► Some risk factors have been empirically identified, but thus far little systematic study of the specific relationship between these factors and aspects of terrorism have been undertaken.

- Assessment of terrorism-related risks requires an approach that:
  - Integrates knowledge of the empirical literature and case-specific knowledge into an individualised formulation that outlines the individual's pathway or trajectory into terrorism involvement and/or engagement
    - What are the incentives and disincentives for that individual to engage in terrorism?
    - What is the nature of the personal meaning that the individual attributes to his or her activities at a given point in time?
    - What factors might promote disengagement?

Borum's (2015) individualised risk assessment and formulation approach

- Borum suggests that risk and protective factors might be grouped into clusters.
  - Not independent categories and factors within each cluster
  - The clusters themselves may interact
- Provides an individualised and integrated picture of terrorism-related risk than the use of a tally or accumulation of risk factors.
- Proposes eight possible clusters using the acronym ABC BASIC.

ABC BASIC

- Affect/emotions
- Behaviour
- Cognitive style
- Beliefs/ideology
- Attitudes
- Social factors
- Identities
- Capacity

Case examples

USING ABC BASIC

Mr A

- Convicted of preparing/planning for an act of terrorism – Islamic extremism
- Pro-social, ideologically driven pathway
- Searching for sense of purpose/meaning
- Converted to Islam – increasing exposure to extremist rhetoric and extremist peers
- Sense of injustice, grievance, moral stance – need to protect other Muslims from 'the West'
- Identification with 'brotherhood' – belonging
- 'Them and Us' – violence is justified
- Capability – range of skills/personality factors

Mr B

- Convicted of general violence – concerns about right wing affiliations

- Anti-social, opportunistic pathway

- Young age

- History of involvement in organised football violence

- Father and some peer group held right wing ideology

- Susceptible to influence

- Enjoyed violence – excitement and belonging, sense of purpose

- Few life goals

Mr C

- Convicted of incitement of a terrorist offence – Islamic extremism, lone actor

- Anti-social, opportunistic pathway

- Early trauma – abandonment/mistrust

- History of gang involvement and violence

- Glorification of violence and extremist behaviour

- Function of violence/extremist rhetoric and behaviour – status with peers, thrill seeking

- Extremist rhetoric – superficial ideology

- Reckless and impulsive

Risk formulation

- Behavioural history

- Motivational analysis

- Vulnerability analysis

- Consider any discrepancies between the individual's expectations of becoming involved in terrorism and the outcomes actually experienced.

Risk analysis

- Four possible risk scenarios to consider.
- Flat trajectory
  - Individual is hypothesised to repeat their behaviour in a similar way and for similar reasons.
- Better case scenario
  - The individual no longer engages in (or perhaps avoids) risk behaviours that have presented in the past, or at least lessens the severity of those behaviours.
- Worst case scenario
  - The individual becomes more involved, or engages in more serious direct action, than previously.
- Sideways trajectory
  - The individual continues involvement, but in a different way than previously (e.g., change in role, methods, or nature of the activity).
- For each scenario, develop a plan to manage or reduce risk.

Importance of the formulation

- Mr D
  - threats to bomb government buildings
  - Borderline traits: function of behaviour was to seek 'care'
- Mr E
  - converted to Islam, association with Muslim gang in prison, including those convicted of terrorism offences
  - Index offence against a Muslim – target of gang
  - Function of behaviour - safety/protection

Risk assessment tools

- Extremism Risk Guidance 22+ (ERG22+; Lloyd & Dean, 2015)

- Identifying Vulnerable People Tool (IVP; Cole, Alison, Cole, & Alison, 2009)

- Violent Extremist Risk Assessment (VERA-2R; Pressman, Duits, Rinne, & Flockton, 2016)

- Multi-level Guidelines (MLG; Cook, Hart, & Kropp, 2013)

- The Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18; Meloy, Roshidi, Giaz-Ocik, & Hoffman, 2015)

Promoting disengagement

INTERVENTIONS AND MANAGEMENT

Understanding the reasons for and the process of disengagement

▶ Research with former violent extremists who have integrated most successfully and who report feeling the most connected with mainstream society are those who have made significant changes in six domains (Barelle, 2015):

  ▶ Social relations

  ▶ Coping

  ▶ Identity

  ▶ Ideology

  ▶ Action orientation

  ▶ Disillusionment

- Additional factors that may influence disengagement from extremist violence are those that are outside external control
  - Aging
  - Experiencing a turning-point event
  - Changing personal priorities

Interventions

- Disengagement and deradicalisation is a relatively recent focus of counter-terrorism studies.

- Difficult to evaluate intervention programmes because there are no established criteria for success and no such standards that apply across cultures.

- Rejection of extremist beliefs is often a core treatment goal, but it is seldom possible to confirm that self-reported change is genuine.

- Scarcity of programme outcome data given the relatively short period of time programmes have been delivered, the small numbers of participants, and various states' willingness to publicise recidivism rates.

Common programme components (Chowdhury Fink & Hearne, 2008)

- Use of motivating factors to encourage disengagement

- Familial engagement

- Financial incentives and support

- Reducing contact with the extremist social network

Do what works

- There is no single model of disengagement that will be universally applicable.

- To be effective, efforts must be highly tailored to the country and culture involved, the individuals participating, and the environment into which offenders are ultimately released.

- Disengagement interventions should be further responsive to populations such as youth or women, including their varying experiences, obstacles, and challenges when disengaging.

- Consider working collaboratively with others, e.g., cultural or religious leaders

- As with any offending behaviour, it is important to develop interventions that are based on a thorough assessment and formulation.

- The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime recommend that a risk-needs-responsivity framework underpins the development of interventions to assist extremist offenders to disengage from violence.

Prison-based management

▶ The potential spread of extremist ideology throughout the prison population is a frequently identified concern.

▶ Prisons are seen as conducive environments for ideologies to spread.

▶ There is no robust evidence for how frequently violent radicalisation among prisoners has occurred.

▶ There is much debate in the literature about unit placement for violent extremist offenders (e.g., separation, concentration, dispersal, integration).

▶ There is no long-term evidence available that suggests one approach is more effective than the other.

Community management

- Generally accepted that the effective management of offenders in the community requires a multi-agency, collaborative approach.

- Not much experience internationally in managing violent extremist (ex)offenders in the community.

- Amongst those jurisdictions that have experience, typical responses include
  - Additional restrictions or conditions (e.g., residency requirements, conditions prohibiting air travel, limited or no access to the internet/mobile phones, financial disclosures)
  - Higher level monitoring (e.g., greater frequency of report-ins, greater frequency of home visits, greater emphasis on involving collateral contacts)
  - Notification of release to community partner agencies (and the public)
  - CAUTION: potential to paradoxically increase risk

Recommendations for the NZ context

▶ Assessment:

   ▶ Individualised, multi-method, multi-modal approach

   ▶ Psychometric assessment could include personality functioning, cognitive functioning, other clinical factors

   ▶ Risk assessment could include assessments for general offending and violence risk, as well as consideration of more specific risk factors for extremist violence

   ▶ Develop a clear understanding of the individual's pathway into involvement and/or engagement in violent extremism