Report on factors driving violent extremism leading to terrorism

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Rapport sur les facteurs à l'origine de l'extrémisme violent menant au terrorisme

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Executive summary

This report synthesises the evidence base on what drives violent extremism leading to terrorism. After looking at four sets of factors with possible impact, the report comes to the following overall conclusions that have direct policy relevance.

1. There is no single driver of violent extremism and no uniform profile of those who engage in it. Prevention requires addressing structural grievances, strengthening community resilience and supporting individuals at risk. Evidence highlights the value of early, tailored interventions and multisector partnerships.

2. Violent extremism tends to thrive where political, economic and social systems fail to meet citizens' needs. Addressing these systemic drivers requires sustained measures: strengthening inclusive governance and the rule of law, reducing socio-economic exclusion through employment and education, protecting minority rights, fostering intercultural dialogue and countering polarising rhetoric. Regulation of online platforms, combined with investments in digital literacy, helps reduce the spread of extremist content. Building community cohesion and trust in institutions further inoculates societies against extremist narratives.

3. While no environment is inherently radicalising, certain physical and virtual spaces can become fertile ground when individual vulnerabilities intersect with permissive social dynamics and ideological exposure. Effective prevention therefore extends beyond removing content or prosecuting individuals. Policy makers should promote critical thinking, resilience and media literacy; provide inclusive moral narratives; support healthy attachments – such as through youth mentoring; and strengthen both formal and informal mechanisms of social control in physical and digital spaces.

4. Recruitment into violent extremist groups is selective and strategic. Recruiters deliberately target individuals who are susceptible to ideological appeals, possess valuable skills, hold influential social roles or inhabit environments conducive to radicalisation. Early intervention programmes must therefore engage the same demographics and spaces, offering alternative pathways and support. Monitoring recruitment patterns can enable pre-emptive action. Providing support during life transitions, such as migration, bereavement or job loss, can reduce vulnerability. Personalised interventions that address specific grievances and aspirations are crucial to counter tailored recruitment messaging.

5. At the individual level, multiple clusters of risk factors correlate with violent extremism. None alone is predictive; rather, combinations of vulnerabilities and situational triggers increase the likelihood of engagement. Interventions must account for this cumulative risk, offering youth development opportunities, employment support, mental health services, trauma-informed care and substance abuse treatment. Community-based initiatives can foster prosocial networks and offer alternative identities and missions. Tailored responses should also reflect gender, age, cultural background and the nature of involvement – whether direct violence or supporting roles.

Introduction

This report provides an overview of the drivers of violent extremism. It draws on the latest research to inform risk assessment, prevention strategies and case management approaches in line with the Council of Europe's Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2023-2027) with a particular focus on *a.* enhancing early detection and prevention, *b.* promoting evidence-based and rights-compliant interventions, *c.* strengthening multi-agency and cross-border co-operation, *d.* supporting tailored responses to diverse forms of violent extremism, and *e.* capacity building for member states.

The report synthesises the current evidence base on drivers of violent extremism and looks to identify the situational, contextual, personal, psychological and social factors most commonly associated with those who engage in terrorism. The report considered only studies published in peer-reviewed outlets and those covering violent extremism leading to terrorism across the ideological spectrum, to the extent that existing research allowed for it. While the terrorist threat is evolving in terms of the range and diversity of ideological motivations, it is important that any response needs to be evidence-based and protect communities and individuals while safeguarding freedom of speech, thought and movement. By synthesising the evidence base, the report helps evidence-informed counter-terrorism responses. This approach moves away from oversimplified narratives and challenges problematic "single-cause" explanations that ideology, or mental illness, or online exposure to radicalising materials are solely responsible for violent extremism.

The report emphasises that the best science in the field demonstrates that violent extremism is typically the end outcome of a crystallisation of multiple drivers. It is complex. Complexity necessitates multifaceted responses. The results underscore the importance of early action to halt trajectories into violent extremism. By showing which drivers contribute to violent extremism, the report enables better-informed and proportionate decisions about when and how to act (and who should act). The range and diversity of drivers also underscore the importance of multistakeholder collaboration involving law enforcement, mental health, education, social services, national human rights institutions and civil society. A clear, shared understanding of the functional roles of drivers enables more effective co-operation.

The report examines the drivers of violent extremism through a series of distinct, but interlinked, units of analysis. First, it takes into account systemic-level drivers (for example the political, economic and cultural contexts) that help drive violent extremism. Second, it analyses the settings and places in which people may be more likely to become exposed to violent extremists and their radicalising materials. Third, it points to the emergent evidence base on what recruiters generally tend to look for in would-be recruits (for example the selection effects that drive violent extremism). Fourth, it examines the risk factors for individuals behaviourally engaging in violent extremism or becoming attitudinally aligned with violent extremist beliefs and attitudes.

Systemic-level drivers of violent extremism

Violent extremism does not emerge in a vacuum. It is the product of an intricate interplay between structural conditions, social dynamics and individual vulnerabilities, shaped over time by historical legacies, political systems and technological change. While popular discourse often seeks a single "root cause", research consistently shows that violent extremism flourishes when multiple reinforcing factors converge, eroding public trust, deepening grievances and offering fertile ground for radical ideologies. Understanding these drivers in their complexity is essential for designing effective prevention and intervention strategies.

At its core, violent extremism feeds on the breakdown of legitimacy. When political systems fail to govern inclusively, deliver justice or respond to the needs of their citizens, they create openings for alternative power structures – often extremist in nature – to claim credibility. Weak governance, repression and corruption undermine state authority, generating a sense of abandonment or betrayal that violent extremist actors exploit. In such contexts, violence is often framed as a legitimate or even necessary means of redress.

Yet political failures rarely exist in isolation. Socio-economic inequality and systemic marginalisation can entrench feelings of exclusion, particularly among youth and minority groups. Blocked opportunities, persistent unemployment and discriminatory barriers combine to erode the sense of belonging and upward mobility. Extremist narratives are adept at recasting these material frustrations into identity-based struggles, offering adherents both a personal mission and a collective cause. In this way, structural inequalities do not merely coexist with political exclusion – they amplify its impact.

Violent extremism is also shaped by the wider geopolitical environment. Ongoing conflicts, foreign military interventions and occupations create instability that not only radicalises those directly affected but also generates "global grievances". These narratives, often couched in terms of collective victimhood or moral outrage, transcend borders and inspire solidarity with distant causes. Violent extremist movements from a broad variety of ideological influences use such grievances to mobilise supporters, portraying local struggles as part of a global battle between good and evil.

Cultural identity threats form another potent driver. In periods of rapid social change, migration or perceived cultural dilution, "us versus them" world-views gain traction. When debates over integration and diversity become polarised, social cohesion fractures, leaving individuals more receptive to exclusionary and extremist ideologies. These perceptions are often reinforced by media framing and political rhetoric, transforming cultural anxieties into catalysts for radicalisation.

In recent years, digital platforms have magnified these dynamics. The reach, speed and persuasive power of online ecosystems enable violent extremist actors to bypass traditional gatekeepers, spreading propaganda, forging communities and coordinating actions across continents. Emerging technologies such as deepfakes and AI-driven recruitment tools lower the barriers to influence, allowing violent extremist world-views to proliferate with minimal oversight or regulation.

Finally, the weakening of social cohesion and moral norms strips societies of their resilience. When trust in institutions and in one another erodes, individuals lose the social anchors that constrain violence. In such environments, violent extremist narratives find less resistance and greater appeal.

Taken together, these interwoven drivers (political, economic, cultural, technological and social) form an environment in which violent extremism can take root and thrive. The following sections examine each in turn, highlighting how they operate both independently and in combination to shape the contemporary violent extremist landscape.

Governance failure and political exclusion

Weak governance, political repression, corruption and unresponsive institutions erode public trust and legitimacy and serve as drivers of violent extremism (UNODC 2018). Specifically, delegitimisation fosters distrust and alienation that extremist actors exploit by presenting themselves as alternatives to failed or unjust systems (Bouhana 2019). Relatedly, low state capacity and weak rule of law can drive violent extremism, particularly where institutions are fragile, not least by often providing the physical location for extremist groups (LaFree et al. 2018). Over time, institutional decay undermines the normative structures that deter violence, enabling deviant (including violent extremist) moral world-views to take hold (Bouhana 2019).

Socio-economic inequality and marginalisation

High unemployment, poverty, low or blocked social mobility and systemic exclusion (particularly among young and minority groups) exacerbate grievances, feeding into and increasing the appeal of extremist narratives (UNODC 2018). Specifically, socio-economic inequality can foster a sense of frustration when intersecting with experiences of discrimination or marginalisation, underpinning a search for meaning and agency (Allan et al. 2015). Extremist narratives are purposefully constructed as redresses to these needs, promoting violent extremism. Further, socio-economic inequality often leads to social exclusion, where people are unable to participate in society due to a lack of material resources. Exclusion contributes not only to grievances but also to identity crises, often framed through narratives of humiliation and blocked significance (Obaidi et al. 2025). When such inequality becomes institutionalised, violent extremist narratives that promise redress become more appealing.

Conflict, foreign intervention and global grievances

Conflict, military interventions and foreign occupation can contribute to macro environments conducive to extremism (UNODC 2018). Sustained regional instability serves as both a direct radicalisation site and a reference point for extremists promoting transnational mobilisation to violence (ibid.). Global grievances emerge from these conflicts due to narratives of collective victimhood and injustice, which extremists manipulate to legitimise violence. Such global grievances can activate moral outrage and solidarity with perceived in-groups (including extremist groups), particularly when compounded by experiences of marginalisation (Obaidi et al. 2025). For example, foreign intervention may feed into global grievances and be used to mobilise violence. A further consequence of foreign conflicts can be so-called "conflict spillovers". For instance, refugee flows to European countries are manipulated by (far-right) extremist groups to exacerbate existing grievances, playing into "us and them" dynamics and extending the impact of conflict, globally. This global framing of grievances creates resonance of violent extremist narratives, giving individuals a sense of participating in a broader moral or political cause.

Cultural identity threats and social polarisation

Perceived erosion of religious, cultural or national identity fuels "us and them" ideologies, legitimising extremist narratives (Obaidi et al. 2025). Societal debates over integration, immigration and multiculturalism can become heavily polarised, eroding social cohesion and deepening "us and them" dynamics (ibid.). In such environments, violent extremist ideologies can provide belonging and purpose to individuals feeling existentially threatened. Perceptions of systemic exclusion from national identity are often reinforced by media narratives and public discourse, which collectively contribute to alienation and radicalisation (Vergani et al. 2020). Cultural grievances often intersect with structural conditions such as discrimination and exclusion – a combination that increases susceptibility to violent extremism.

Digital ecosystems and technological advancements

Digital platforms have the capacity to fulfil a person's basic psychological needs such as success, freedom, entertainment and belonging (Hutmacher and Appel 2023). The rise of unregulated digital platforms has amplified the reach and intensity of extremist messaging (Bouhana 2019). Further, advancements in technology create new and unpredictable opportunities for extremists to reach global audiences, at speed, in more convincing ways. Deepfakes used to manipulate global grievances, AI-generated propaganda to target and recruit vulnerable people, and chatbots who echo extremist world-views are just some of the ways technology contributes to an ecosystem conducive to violent extremism. The failure of institutions

to regulate harmful digital content allows for the eroding of normative boundaries that constrain violence, creating an environment where violence is acceptable and justified, particularly when violent extremist narratives offer simple, emotionally compelling alternatives to complex grievances (ibid.).

Social cohesion and moral norms

When community ties and shared moral values deteriorate, societies become more vulnerable to extremism (Bouhana 2019). A lack of strong social networks, trusted civic institutions and collective norms diminishes societal resilience. Where these protective mechanisms are underdeveloped, individuals become more susceptible to violent extremist narratives, particularly when isolated or with increasing exposure to violent extremism. As these protective structures break down, violence can become not only conceivable, but morally justified (ibid.).

Settings-level drivers of violent extremism

People learn values and behaviours from the environments they inhabit. These environments can be physical (for example physical communities, schools, workplaces, neighbourhoods) or entirely virtual, such as social media platforms, gaming communities or online forums. No single environment is inherently radicalising, however some environments become conducive to extremism when intersecting with personal vulnerabilities (for example a susceptible individual), social dynamics (for example a systemic context that reinforces grievances) and ideological exposure (Bouhana 2019).

If certain risk factors converge, settings such as prisons and schools can provide the conditions that make individuals more susceptible to radicalisation. However, although certain situations such as overcrowding can amplify enabling conditions, there is no consistent evidence to suggest radicalisation in prisons is widespread (Bouhana 2019; Hamm 2013). Sometimes recruiters strategically exploit prison environments (Silke 2014), in the same way that most religious spaces are not radicalising, but a few may be misused by violent extremists and their informal networks. There is also no strong or consistent evidence that educational institutions foster radicalisation. Higher education such as universities may facilitate political and ideological exploration, including exposure to extremist views (O'Donnell 2016). However, radicalisation mainly occurs in higher education when linked to informal groups or networks, not the institution itself (McGlynn and McDaid 2019). Likewise community settings can become so-called "radicalisation hotspots" when violent extremist groups gain a firm foothold. One study of failed suicide terrorists found 77.1% of the 35 interviewed participants had described their group as being highly active in the community they grew up in (Pritchett and Moeller 2022).

> Families of terrorists who were wounded, killed or captured enjoyed a great deal of economic aid and attention. And that strengthened popular support for the attacks. Perpetrators of armed attacks were seen as heroes, their families got a great deal of material assistance, including the construction of new homes to replace those destroyed by the Israeli authorities as punishment for terrorist acts. (ibid.)

While difficult to disentangle the offline and online factors in the process, there is growing concern about the level of radicalisation happening online (Europol 2024). Online forums and social media groups can act as incubators for extremist narratives, providing social support and validation for radical views (Conway 2016). Further, social media algorithms can specifically amplify certain content, leading to echo chambers in which users are exposed primarily to content that reinforces their existing beliefs (Bakshy et al. 2015). This form of reinforced disinformation can normalise violent rhetoric and cause it to be seen as acceptable or even expected behaviour (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010). The softening of extremist content through gaming platforms and memes is a particular concern for young people (Europol 2024).

For Bouhana (2019), certain settings can drive violent extremism through one of four means: cognitive, moral, attachment factors and social control. Each mechanism has a role in shaping how people think, what they believe is morally acceptable, who they trust and how behaviour is regulated. Understanding these mechanisms can help policy makers design more effective interventions. Efforts to counter violent extremism must look beyond simply removing harmful content or arresting individuals or cracking down on radicalising settings. They should also *a.* strengthen community resilience and critical thinking skills, *b.* promote inclusive moral narratives that offer positive alternatives to violent extremist values, *c.* support healthy, prosocial attachments, particularly for vulnerable individuals, and *d.* reinforce both formal and informal mechanisms of social control in physical and digital spaces. By addressing these enabling conditions together, rather than in isolation, it becomes possible to reduce the appeal and influence of violent extremist environments, both online and offline. The following section explores each of the four mechanisms.

Cognitive mechanisms: shaping how people think and feel

Settings that enable violent extremism often have features that make people more receptive to new ideas, especially ideas tied to strong emotions or moral beliefs. They capture attention, encourage focus on certain messages and weaken the person's commitment to their existing values. A number of emotional and psychological states make individuals more open to adopting new moral systems including *a*. feeling powerless in the face of political, economic or personal challenges, *b*. believing one's life has little value or impact, *c*. feeling threatened, whether by physical danger, social change or perceived enemies, *d*. believing one has been treated unfairly, *e*. feeling socially or politically excluded or disconnected from wider society, and *f*. seeing one's position in society decline compared to others. These experiences can undermine confidence in one's own moral "rulebook" and make violent extremist alternatives seem worth considering.

Importantly, cognitive influence does not always rely on negative feelings. Extremist settings can also make their messages easier to accept by presenting information in familiar formats, with simple explanations and without intellectual challenge. Online settings use addictive design features to keep people coming back repeatedly, while others actively limit exposure to opposing views. Over time, repeated, unchallenged exposure strengthens violent extremist ideas and reduces openness to alternative perspectives.

Moral mechanisms change what people believe is right or wrong

Extremism-enabling spaces expose people to moral codes that support extremist thinking and behaviour. They allow these ideas to be shared, discussed and reinforced, often framing extremist actions as morally justified or even necessary. A common approach is to present extremist moral systems as superior to all others, portraying them as the only true or righteous guide for action. These ideas are often delivered through powerful narratives that *a*. are transcendental, touching on deep questions about life, purpose and meaning, *b*. are categorical, framing the world in "black-and-white" terms, with no middle ground, and/or *c*. are prescriptive, telling people not only what to believe but also what actions to take. This prescriptive element can be particularly effective in drawing people deeper into violent extremist movements. It gives them a sense of purpose, a clear path forward and the feeling that they are part of a meaningful struggle.

Repeated exposure to such messages can lead to normalisation when extremist moral commitments, once considered far outside social norms, start to feel acceptable or even expected. Online platforms can speed up this process through algorithms that create "filter bubbles", repeatedly showing users content that confirms and reinforces extremist beliefs while filtering out contradictory information.

Attachment mechanisms build emotional bonds that reinforce extremism

Social influence is strongest when it comes from people who are cared about and trusted. For most individuals, the earliest and most powerful socialising agents are family members, particularly parents or guardians. The strength of these early influences depends largely on the quality of the attachment between the individual and the caregiver. Over time, people form other close attachments with a wider network of friends. These relationships can strongly shape values and behaviours, often more than formal education or media exposure.

Extremism-enabling spaces are especially effective when they foster emotional connections with individuals who already hold extremist beliefs. Once these relationships form, the extremist world-view is not just an abstract set of ideas, it is part of a trusted relationship. This makes it far more persuasive and harder to reject.

Such attachment can develop in both physical and virtual environments. In online violent extremist communities, members often support each other emotionally, celebrate shared identities and reinforce each other's commitment to the cause. This sense of belonging can be especially appealing to people who feel excluded or isolated in their offline lives.

Social control mechanisms weaken or replace rules and oversight

Settings that allow violent extremism to flourish often lack effective social controls (for example the rules, norms and enforcement mechanisms that discourage harmful behaviour). This can happen when those in authority lack the ability or willingness to enforce pro-legal norms, or when violent extremist actors themselves take control of the space and set their own rules. In such environments, both formal systems (like laws and regulations) and informal systems (like peer pressure and community expectations) may support extremist norms rather than oppose them. The result is a self-reinforcing moral environment where violent extremist speech and behaviour go unchallenged.

Online spaces can be especially vulnerable. Some digital platforms and encrypted communication tools are difficult for governments to monitor or regulate. In these spaces, violent extremist actors can operate with little fear of enforcement. At the same time, private citizens may stop challenging violent extremist content, either because they feel unsafe doing so or because the space's culture discourages it. The combination of technological affordances, lack of formal oversight and erosion of informal social norms can allow violent extremist discourse to spread and become normalised more quickly than in traditional offline settings.

Selection effects and drivers of violent extremism

Violent extremist recruitment is rarely random. While extremist narratives are often framed as universal appeals in practice (for example defending "all members" of a religion, ethnicity or ideology), recruiters make strategic decisions about who to approach, when and how. This process produces "selection effects", which shape the demographics, psychology and skill composition of violent extremist movements. Understanding these selection effects is crucial for designing effective prevention strategies, as it highlights the specific vulnerabilities and assets that recruiters look for when identifying potential members.

In the context of violent extremism, recruitment is an active filtering process where violent extremist actors prioritise certain profiles over others. There is a bias in who gets approached by violent extremist recruiters. These biases arise from the group's objectives, resources and operational needs. Recruiters may seek individuals who *a.* are more likely to accept violent extremist ideology, *b.* are situated in environments that facilitate recruitment (for example prisons, conflict zones, online subcultures), or *c.* possess useful skills or social positions. On the latter part, these individual skills could include military or combat training, technical expertise in fields as diverse as engineering, cybersecurity or propaganda production, and access to sensitive environments (for example airport staff, potential insider risks).

Recruiters use both broad outreach and targeted engagement. Selection effects often occur at the point of intensified contact after initial exposure to radicalising materials. Recruitment strategies include *a.* observation: recruiters monitor online behaviour, attend community events or gather intelligence in social spaces to identify receptive individuals, *b.* commitment tests: recruiters gradually escalate the ideological and behavioural demands to see who remains engaged, *c.* personalisation: recruiters tailor narratives to match the recruit's grievances, identity or aspirations, and *d.* isolation: recruiters steer targets away from counter-narratives and towards controlled environments where the violent extremist world-view dominates.

Research from security agencies, case studies and academia consistently shows that recruitment is selective, strategic and adapted to context. Evidence suggests that recruiters have often targeted individuals with perceived grievances or those experiencing marginalisation because such individuals may already be seeking explanations or solutions to their discontent. Recruiters provide narratives that connect personal frustration to a collective struggle, reframing individual suffering as part of a larger injustice. Evidence also suggests that recruiters are more likely to target younger people, especially those in transitional life stages because of their higher openness to identity experimentation, desire for belonging and adventure and lower stability in personal and professional life.

Corner et al. (2016) undertook interviews with violent extremist recruiters specifically asking them about selection effects. The following quotes provide additional richness in terms of factors such as the following.

- Age: "So we'd look for single men, ages 18-25 preferably. Anyone over age 45 would generally not be recruitable, because they'd probably be older … and not obedient."
- Local knowledge: "[The decision for suitability was] nearly always arrived at by local people who would have known them ... in that rural area, people are going to know his grandparents, his parents and his cousins, they are going to have known him at school, they are going to have watched him playing football or rugby or whatever ... if you happened to be a lad that played football by saying 'I'm terribly sorry I didn't mean to hurt you', he's probably not cut out for it. So mostly they didn't make any errors on that, there was nothing sophisticated about it."
- Personality: "If they weren't trustworthy or if they didn't have a good reputation for keeping secrets ... we weren't interested in bringing in drama, we didn't want people that would go and tell other people what was happening at meetings, that would have been a red flag."

- Ideology: "if they pushed back ideologically, we wouldn't waste our time".
- Underlying risk factors: "We would look for kids ... or young people who had issues, because it was easier to promise them paradise ... a lot about looking for low-hanging fruit, because it was about numbers, it wasn't necessarily about quality, we were trying to build an army. So it was about finding anybody who would adhere to your ideology easily."
- "It was really about finding a young person who was going through a rough period, either ... trauma at home ... So I would find those people ... It was trying to find the people on the fringes, people that ... felt alienated and marginalised, and had a grievance of some sort."
- "I think that they look for people capable of putting reason and logic aside, like fooling them into believing a different reason or logic to go do things, so I think that they look for vulnerable people ... I mean, we really tried to find broken people essentially ... I mean dealing with identity crises ... abuse, drug addiction, alcoholism, family poverty ... those types of things ... we were looking to draw them into our family."

The next section now turns to the evidence base on the prevalence of these risk factors and the degree to which they drive violent extremism.

Individual drivers of violent extremism

Individual drivers are likely to have been the most empirically examined factors over the past few years. This is the result of both a changing threat environment (especially with the rise of lone-actor terrorism) and a changing policy environment (where upstream intervention services required an evidence base on what risk factors should be assessed and managed). This section draws on the results of over 125 published empirical studies. Of these, 69 were published between 2020 and 2025, 26 between 2016 and 2019, 17 between 2012 and 2015 and the remaining 13 between 2000 and 2011. Over 25 different types of factors measured in some way across the literature have been identified.

For clarity, these factors have been grouped into several types of domains: socio-demographic, parallel behaviours and experiences, beliefs and attitudes, socialising influences, destabilising influences, terrorism indicators and protective factors. The evidence base for each factor is synthesised across a number of issues including whether *a.* their prevalence rates have been measured, *b.* whether some form of official or self-report data have been used to investigate it, *c.* results have been found in more than one national context, *d.* results have been found in more than one ideological context, *e.* whether comparative designs have investigated this factor against different terrorist outcomes, *f.* whether control group designs have investigated this factor, and *g.* whether the factors functional relevance to the end outcome has been explored. The evidence of the relationship is clear (green), mixed or found in a single study (yellow), or unproven to date (red), as represented in the following table.

Table – Drivers evidence map

Factor	Prevalence	Official/ self-report	Multiple nations	Multiple ideology	Comparative	Control	Functional relevance
Age	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢
Children	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟡	🟢	🟢	🔴
Education	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🔴	🟢	🟢
Employment	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢
Gender	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🔴	🟡	🟡
Relationship status	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢
Socio-economic	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🔴	🟢	🟢
Non-violent activism	🟢	🟢	🔴	🔴	🔴	🔴	🔴
Cognitive susceptibility	🟢	🟢	🔴	🟡	🟢	🔴	🔴
Criminality	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢
Personal grievance	🟢	🟡	🟡	🟡	🟢	🔴	🔴
Military experience	🟢	🟡	🟡	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢
Attitudes	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟡	🟢	🟢	🟢
Emotions	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟡	🔴	🔴	🟢
Religiosity	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟡	🔴	🟢	🟢
Motivation	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟡	🔴	🟢

Social networks	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Housing	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Physical health	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Unspecified stressors	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Substance abuse	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Personality	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Mental health/ neurodevelopmental disorders	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Adverse childhood experience	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

● clear evidence ● evidence mixed or found in a single study ● evidence unproven to date

These factors are important to consider especially in the broader context where studies have shown they are increasing in their base rates within the general population. For example, studies have shown recent "unprecedented drop in performances" in educational outcomes across the OECD, elevated levels of youth unemployment in some countries and regions across the EU, weakened social ties and household structures, increased economic deprivation and poverty risk, increased serious crime and gang violence, declines in institutional trust alongside increases in life dissatisfaction and political polarisation, large increases in anxiety, depression and unmet mental health needs among children and young adults, increased polysubstance abuse and widespread experiences of adverse childhood experiences (Eurofound 2025; European Parliament 2023; Eurostat 2025a, 2025b; *Financial Times* 2024; Kumar et al. 2024; OECD 2023; Our World in Data 2025). Simply put, a greater number of risk factors experienced within the population will drive an increase in the number of potential violent extremists who require resource, monitoring, interventions and the full toolkit of counter-terrorism responses.

In the coming pages, each individual driver has been summarised in turn.

Socio-demographic drivers

Socio-demographic characteristics provide a crucial lens for understanding the pathways into violent extremism, offering insights into both individual vulnerabilities and broader structural conditions. Factors such as age, gender, education, employment status, relationship circumstances and socio-economic position not only shape life opportunities but also intersect with personal grievances, social networks and ideological exposure. These characteristics can influence when and how individuals become receptive to violent extremist narratives, the roles they take within violent extremist groups and the persistence or decline of their involvement over time. While no single demographic profile predicts violent extremism, patterns observed across diverse contexts and ideologies reveal recurring trends (such as overrepresentation of young men, elevated rates of unemployment and signs of economic disadvantage) that help inform prevention and intervention strategies. Examining these socio-demographic drivers in detail allows policy makers, practitioners and researchers to identify points of vulnerability and resilience, and to design targeted measures that address both immediate risk factors and the deeper social conditions that violent extremist movements seek to exploit. The next section addresses the evidence on each factor.

Age

Age plays a significant role in the pathways to violent extremism, with research measuring it most often at the time an individual either committed a terrorist offence or was convicted. Across 39 research samples, the average age ranged from 17 to 43 years old, with the youngest groups often consisting of adolescent offenders and the oldest involving terrorism material support cases. The overall average age across all samples was 28.5, though lone actors tended to be older, averaging 32.3 in two studies. Many studies reported that large proportions of individuals joined violent extremist groups at younger ages. Official data from 15 samples showed a younger average (25.4) compared to open-source studies (29.7), suggesting possible differences in sample composition or case availability. Among 24 al-Qaeda/ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) (Daesh)-inspired samples, the average age was 27.3; three violent extreme right-wing samples averaged 30.3; one violent extreme left-wing sample averaged 28.4; and one sample of dissident Irish Republicans averaged 32.2.

Comparative research shows that minors engaged in violent extremism differ from adults in several ways: they were more likely to be female, single, without children and to have a history of self-harm prior to radicalisation; but they were less likely to have radicalised peers, to try to radicalise others or to have evidence of physical influences on their radicalisation. A UK study found that younger offenders were 2.67 times more likely to have been radicalised through a combination of online and offline influences. In another comparison, younger violent extremists were significantly more likely to participate in violent acts than their older counterparts. Control group analysis of UK al-Qaeda-influenced terrorists showed they were substantially younger (average 26 years) than the average resident Muslim population (average 32 years). First-hand accounts also reveal how individuals themselves perceive age as a key factor in their involvement, describing youth as a time of vitality, intense identification with a cause and readiness to act – captured in statements such as: "You're 19 years old and ready to go take on the world."

Children

The presence or absence of children among individuals involved in violent extremism has been examined in 12 samples covering 1 169 cases, with an overall finding that 28.2% had children. Rates varied widely across individual studies, ranging from as low as 7.1% to as high as 76.1%.

Education

Educational attainment among individuals involved in violent extremism has been assessed across multiple studies, revealing a diverse range of outcomes rather than a single, consistent pattern. Some individuals possess limited or interrupted formal education, while others have completed higher education, indicating that violent extremist engagement spans the educational spectrum. Across 16 samples (n = 5 944), 22.2% of the cases had at least some experience of university settings. Across eight samples (n = 815), 8.3% had attained a university degree. One study noted a common feature of the educational provision within a sample of German al-Qaeda/ISIL(Daesh)-inspired terrorists was a large number of interruptions during their education (Moeller and Scheithauer 2024). The data show that 35% had recently dropped out of school or employment (Knight et al. 2017); 9.5% had suffered educational problems/expulsion (Porter and Kebbell 2011); and one-third of Dutch foreign fighters had a history of school problems (Thijs et al. 2023).

The evidence appears mixed in control group designs. A 2011 study on UK al-Qaeda-inspired terrorists shows that they received on average 1.5 years extra education compared to the average for all UK Muslims (Altunbas and Thornton 2011). French cases performed higher than a control group on intelligence tests (Bronsard et al. 2022). In a separate study, terrorists did not differ on educational attainment compared to their siblings (Rodermond and Weerman 2021). German foreign fighters tend to perform below average in the German education system (Rodermond and Thijs 2023). An imprisoned terrorist cohort in Austria showed a somewhat lower but still similar overall level of education compared to the Austrian population of the same age (Porter and Kebbell 2011). Imprisoned Dutch al-Qaeda/ISIL(Daesh)-inspired terrorists are almost twice as likely to have a university qualification compared to other Dutch detainees (Thijssen et al. 2023a). While the link between education and violent extremism is complex, the evidence suggests that educational experiences (both positive and negative) can influence the timing, nature and intensity of radicalisation. In various quotes, terrorists have expressed how education impacted their involvement in violent extremism:

> Young people ... I mean those who went to school with me or who looked like they'd be going on to university … I guess they would have had their political ideas, just like anybody else. But in any rate, they pretty much kept them to themselves, they didn't go out of their way to get involved in things. Then you had the ones like me who had been working since they were 16. And then there were those who didn't want to finish their studies, only they didn't want to go out and get a job, either. So then, it was like this automatic thing. If you didn't get involved in something political, you turned into a druggie. It was as simple as that. (Reynolds and Hafez 2017)

> I was very interested in continuing my education and going to college; but, I was forced to drop out of school, because my parents got sick. (Karimi et al. 2023)

> My family really prevented me from continuing my education and it was more my brothers' fault. Because they had gotten married, had their own job, had left the family and made a lot of money; but, they didn't feel any responsibility to their parents and their younger brother who was still studying. They could both help me and my family, but they didn't. I never wish to come back to my childhood. As I got older, I enjoyed life better. (ibid.)

Employment

Employment status has been widely examined as a factor in violent extremism, with research consistently showing that engagement spans both employed and unemployed individuals, although unemployment is often overrepresented in certain samples. Across 17 samples (n = 4 183), 55.2% of the cases were unemployed

at the time of their terrorism offence; 35% had recently dropped out of school or employment (Knight et al. 2017); 13% had suffered a job loss within the past year and 10.9% of lone-actor terrorists had lost their jobs within six months of their offence (Gill et al. 2014). In one study, those engaged in violent activities within terrorist groups were significantly more likely to be unemployed than those engaged in non-violent activities (Perliger et al. 2016). Conversely individuals with higher organisational status within a group are significantly more likely to be employed (ibid.), showing the functional impact of unemployment on the types of activities individuals engage in. Terrorist suspects were significantly less likely to have an income than the general population (Rodermond and Weerman 2021). Becoming unemployed occurred more often among the terrorist suspects than criminal suspects and the general population control (11.5% v. 6.1% and 2.2%) (ibid.). In various quotes, terrorists have expressed how employment impacted their involvement in violent extremism:

> And I was out of work just then. And anyway, I wasn't feeling too good about myself in a lot of ways and I sort of said to myself: right now I haven't got too much going for me here so I might as well see what happens there, do you see? (Reynolds and Hafez 2017)

Gender

Gender is a prominent characteristic in the study of violent extremism, with males making up the overwhelming majority of identified cases. Across 39 samples (n = 9 742), men accounted for 87.2% of all cases. When excluding one unusually large sample containing a disproportionately high number of female participants, the male proportion rises to 90.2% (n = 7 472). While no systematic comparative studies have been conducted to examine gender differences in violent extremist involvement, it is evident that men are significantly overrepresented in these populations compared to the general public. Functional relevance analyses show that when women do join, their pathways can differ; for instance, in the Basque separatist organisation ETA, women frequently joined due to personal relationships with male members already embedded in the organisation (Reynolds and Hafez 2017).

Relationship status

Relationship status has been examined in 32 studies, covering 7 452 cases, with findings indicating that 24.5% of individuals were married or in a significant relationship at the point of measurement. This proportion was substantially higher among al-Qaeda/ISIL(Daesh)-inspired sub-samples, where 41.6% (n = 1 969) were partnered. Beyond marital status, some studies have looked at relationship difficulties: one found such difficulties in 21.8% of cases, while another reported that 31.1% experienced problems in close personal relationships, with a third of these cases beginning within six months of the terrorist offence.

Comparative analyses suggest that individuals with higher organisational status are more likely to be married, probably reflecting age differences. Control group comparisons show mixed patterns: one UK study reported that marriage rates among violent extremists were lower than those of the general Muslim UK population of similar ages; a Dutch study found terrorist suspects were less often single than general offenders and the broader population, yet were also less likely to live with a partner than their siblings. First-hand accounts highlight how relationship status can influence involvement. One former ETA member described the emotional toll of having no love life due to the risks of arrest: "I couldn't make any plans for having a family or a girlfriend, because they might get me from one day to the next." Another reflected on how starting a relationship and later marrying coincided with moving away from active involvement: "If I had had a family, I would have participated … in some whole other way. Politically, most probably."

Socio-economic status

Socio-economic status has been investigated as a factor in violent extremism across multiple studies, with findings consistently pointing to a notable presence of economic disadvantage among extremist populations. In six samples (n = 1 038), individuals were collectively characterised as belonging to the "lower class" within their country of residence. Two samples (n = 350) reported that 27.1% of individuals were receiving social benefits. Other studies have identified financial strain in the period leading up to involvement, such as one case where "the financial situation of several suspects clearly deteriorated in the months prior to their support for violent extremist groups", and another finding that 22% of Dutch foreign fighters were in debt. Control group analysis in the Netherlands found that families of terrorist suspects generally had a lower socio-economic position than those in the general population. Terrorist suspects were 2.08 times more likely to be on social benefits and 2.74 times more likely to have been raised in social housing. First-hand accounts illustrate the functional relevance of socio-economic hardship in recruitment pathways. One individual described fleeing home after a forced marriage, struggling economically in Istanbul and ultimately joining

an organisation on the suggestion of friends. Another explained: "Our family was in financial trouble. One of my friends … told me that if I joined the organisation I would no longer worry about money – I would be free from such concerns."

Parallel behaviours as drivers

Parallel behaviours refer to actions and experiences that, while not directly constituting violent extremism, share overlapping risk factors, skills or patterns of engagement that can facilitate a shift towards violent extremist involvement. These behaviours (such as criminal activity, gang membership, substance abuse, participation in violent protest or engagement with extremist-aligned but non-violent activism) can normalise illegality, reinforce anti-social attitudes and strengthen connections to networks that tolerate or promote violence. In many cases, they provide individuals with operational skills (for example in violence, logistics or evasion) and psychological readiness (for example desensitisation to harm, acceptance of high-risk activity) that violent extremist groups can exploit. They may also reflect underlying vulnerabilities, such as weak social bonds, emotional dysregulation or exposure to adverse life experiences, which increase receptivity to radicalising narratives. Analysing these parallel behaviours helps to identify pathways where prevention and disengagement efforts can intervene earlier, before violent extremist commitments solidify, by addressing the social, psychological and situational factors that sustain these high-risk patterns. Attention now turns to the evidence on such factors.

Non-violent activism

Non-violent activism, defined as participation in lawful political or social change efforts such as campaigning, demonstrations or protests, has been examined in a limited number of studies in relation to individuals later convicted of terrorism-related offences. One study of homegrown German convicts involved in al-Qaeda/ISIL(Daesh) terrorism found that 26.6% had participated in Quran distribution campaigns, while 11.1% had taken part in confrontational demonstrations. These findings, drawn from court file analysis, suggest that for some individuals, early engagement in legal activism can precede or exist alongside involvement in extremist activity. While the data do not imply that non-violent activism necessarily leads to violent extremism, such participation may offer exposure to ideologically aligned networks, reinforce identity-based narratives and familiarise individuals with mobilising structures. Far-left and far-right terrorist organisations use legally formed associations, foundations and other such platforms to find, radicalise and collect donations from those susceptible to their ideology. The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) terrorist organisation continues to use so-called Kurdish Democratic Centres to organise demonstrations, events and facilitate recruitment (Europol 2025).

Cognitive susceptibility

Cognitive susceptibility, understood as an individual's vulnerability to influence, control or indoctrination, has been identified in a notable proportion of terrorism-related cases. Two studies examining al-Qaeda/ISIL(Daesh) offenders found that 36.4% and 50.9% of individuals showed clear evidence of being sensitive to external direction, persuasion or ideological conditioning. Both studies were based on judicial data, offering detailed insight into offender histories and behavioural patterns. Comparative analysis between those who committed homicide for an al-Qaeda/ISIL(Daesh) cause and those involved in non-violent activities found no significant differences in levels of susceptibility, suggesting that this characteristic is present across a spectrum of violent extremist roles.

Criminality

Criminality, encompassing prior arrests, convictions, imprisonment or violent acts, is a well-established predictor of future offending and is often linked to the presence of anti-social attitudes that can facilitate violent extremist involvement. Across multiple studies, prior offending was found to be common among individuals involved in terrorism. Data show that 33.0% had a history of arrest (11 studies, n = 2 045), 37.3% had a history of conviction (14 studies, n = 833), 58.6% had a general offending history without reported outcomes (17 studies, n = 3 928), 20.8% had been previously imprisoned (11 studies, n = 840) and 36.3% had a history of violent behaviour (24 studies, n = 4 025).

Comparative findings indicate that violent extremists are 24% more likely to have a criminal history than non-violent extremists, and significantly more likely to have engaged in violent crime (54.4% v. 36.6%) or property crime (57.9% v. 39.0%). Control group studies further highlight the elevated prevalence of criminality among

violent extremists: Swedish registry data show lone-actor terrorists were far more likely than their male siblings to be suspected of criminal activity (87% v. 29%) or violent crime (60% v. 21%). Dutch data found terrorists more likely than siblings to have been suspected of a crime in the past year (27.7% v. 10.7%) and more likely to have served prison time (12.6% v. 0.6%).

Compared to the general population, terrorists were 8.61 times more likely to have been suspected of an offence in the previous year. Interestingly, imprisoned terrorists were less likely to have prior criminal records than other prisoners (53.7% v. 65.0%). Functionally, a history of offending, particularly violent offending, was 2.55 times more likely to co-occur with face-to-face recruitment compared to online recruitment. As one individual described, his turn to violent extremism followed a conscious attempt to leave crime behind:

> I wanted to distance myself from my previous lifestyle involving drugs and a criminal lifestyle so I started to visit the nearby mosque. I was approached by others who informed me about a correct way to behave according to religious guidelines.

Personal grievance

Personal grievance, referring to individual-level grievances that exist alongside broader ideological motivations, has been identified in over half of the cases examined in relevant studies. Across three studies involving 147 individuals, 56.4% were found to hold personal grievances in addition to political or religious ones. Comparative analysis suggests that personal grievances are significantly less common among terrorists than among mass murderers, indicating that while such grievances are present, they may not be as central to terrorist offending as they are to other forms of targeted violence.

Military experience

Military experience has been identified as a relevant background factor for a minority of individuals involved in violent extremism. Across 10 samples (n = 2 816), 13.1% had some form of military history. Comparative findings indicate that compared to terrorists without military experience, those with such backgrounds are significantly more likely to have experienced trauma (4.7 times), diminished social standing prior to radicalisation (3.5 times), difficulty in maintaining romantic relationships (2.5 times) and experiences of social, cultural, religious or political ostracism and marginalisation (3.2 times).

In at least one context, the prevalence of military backgrounds among terrorists is considerably higher than in the general population. Accounts from offenders suggest that military service can shape radicalisation pathways in at least two ways. The first occurs when individuals are involuntarily discharged or fail to advance into specialist roles, disrupting their military identity, producing personal frustration and reframing perceived failure into anger towards an "unjust system". The second involves feelings of under-recognition after returning to civilian life, where the gap between an individual's high self-identity as a former service member and the lack of perceived societal appreciation generates social stress, potentially making violent extremist narratives more appealing.

Beliefs and attitudes as drivers

Beliefs and attitudes play a central role in the progression towards violent extremism, shaping how individuals interpret the world, assess grievances and justify the use of violence. Unlike static demographic traits, beliefs and attitudes are dynamic and can be influenced by ideology, social networks, personal experiences and exposure to persuasive narratives. They encompass a wide range of cognitive and moral positions, from acceptance of violence as a legitimate means of change, to rigid world-views, conspiracy thinking or deep-seated prejudices. These orientations not only guide decision making but also influence how individuals respond to social pressures, recruitment efforts and opportunities for disengagement. Examining beliefs and attitudes allows for a deeper understanding of the psychological and ideological mechanisms that underpin violent extremist involvement, providing critical insights for designing prevention, intervention and rehabilitation strategies that address not just behaviours, but the underlying mindsets that sustain them.

Attitudes

Attitudes associated with violent extremism encompass a range of cognitive and emotional orientations, including perceived grievances and injustices, feelings of threat, rejection of alternative viewpoints, distrust in political systems, dehumanisation of perceived enemies and a lack of empathy towards those outside one's own group. Across four studies, 15 specific attitudes were measured. Attachment to an ideology justifying violence was present in over half of one Dutch al-Qaeda/ISIL(Daesh)-inspired sample (52.9%).

Among al-Qaeda/ISIL(Daesh) members, levels of dehumanisation varied, from 9.9% in a Dutch sample to 23.8% among those involved in homicide. Expressions of emotion in response to perceived injustice were significantly higher among violent al-Qaeda/ISIL(Daesh) advocates (52.3%) compared to those engaged in non-violent activities (16.6%). Hostility towards national identity ranged from 16.5% to 23.8%, while lack of empathy was observed in up to 47.6% of violent al-Qaeda/ISIL(Daesh) advocates. Perceived grievances were common, affecting 33.3% to 52.3% of al-Qaeda/ISIL(Daesh) samples, alongside rejection of democratic society and values (23.1% to 40.0%). Other notable findings included high rates of perceived religious threat (68.7%), unwillingness to accept other religions (51.7%) and overwhelming perceptions of external threat or persecution in mixed-ideology samples (near or at 100%).

A study of radicalised versus non-radicalised Muslim prisoners found that the former were significantly more likely to endorse conspiracy theories, cite extremist stereotypes, focus on political grievances, express solidarity with Muslim suffering and report heightened collective victimhood. Functionally, prisoners with a history of radicalisation were also more likely to seek a sense of significance through a high need for closure – a cognitive style that mediates the relationship between perceived cultural threats and violent extremist outcomes. First-hand accounts highlight how these attitudes can drive engagement. One former member of a violent far-right group described losing faith in the police and judiciary after being treated as the aggressor in a violent incident in which he saw himself as the victim, calling it "a great dysfunctioning of the Belgian judicial system" that motivated him to join the group. A violent far-left activist explained that seeing global inequality and climate injustice (despite coming from a relatively privileged background) spurred their political engagement. These examples show how deeply personal interpretations of injustice and inequality can serve as powerful motivators for violent extremist involvement.

Emotions

Emotional state, including recent shifts in thinking and feeling, has been documented as a significant factor in the lead-up to violent extremist activity. Across four studies using various methodologies, heightened emotional responses (particularly frustration and anger) were found to be common among offenders. In interviews with 141 al-Shabaab members, nearly all reported high frustration levels: 48% rated their frustration between 5 and 7 on a 10-point scale, while another 48% rated it between 8 and 10; only 4% reported low frustration (1-4). Analysis of closed-source data on lone actors' attacks in Israel revealed that 35.4% displayed clear signs of extreme anger in the period preceding their attacks. Judicial data on 80 al-Qaeda/ISIL(Daesh) terrorists in Germany showed documented changes in thinking and emotion before their offences, while a 2022 study of UK-based lone-actor terrorists found that 61.2% had been described as angry individuals. All of these findings derive from official data sources. Accounts from offenders suggest that strong emotions can play a critical role in radicalisation and mobilisation. One individual described how grief, guilt and self-blame after friends left for Syria to join ISIL profoundly altered his emotional state:

> After my friends went to Syria for jihad, I'm not in the mood to talk to anybody. I usually stay at home, preoccupied with old memories of my friends, or I just read Quran. I often blame myself for being so weak in faith that I couldn't accompany my friends. I prefer love for my children over love for God (at this moment, he starts crying).

This illustrates how personal emotional turmoil (whether rooted in perceived failure, loss or frustration) can deepen ideological commitment and potentially increase susceptibility to violent action.

Religiosity

Religiosity, encompassing the depth of an individual's religious belief and practice, as well as factors such as conversion or reversion, intolerance towards other faiths and attempts to impose religious views, emerges as a relevant characteristic in a substantial number of terrorism cases. Across 14 samples (n = 822), 23.1% of individuals had converted to a new religion at some point in their lives, with one study of Australian convicted terrorists finding an even higher proportion of reverts at 47.6%. An open-source analysis of US and UK homegrown al-Qaeda/ISIL(Daesh) advocates (n = 117) found that 48.1% endorsed a legalistic interpretation of Islam, 17.0% displayed low tolerance for theological deviance and 15.3% had attempted to impose their religious beliefs on others. Nearly one-third perceived a sharp schism between Islam and the West, and the same proportion trusted only a narrow circle of religious authorities. Two studies documented notable increases in religiosity in the months prior to terrorist attacks, while another found that 13.2% of cases actively sought out religious teachings online. One German investigation found that converts represented 20% of their al-Qaeda/ISIL(Daesh) sample – 20 times higher than the 1% conversion rate in the general population.

In the prison context, extremist Muslim inmates scored higher on measures of religious rigidity than non-extremist Muslim prisoners and emphasised the performance of correct religious duties more often.

Functionally, religiosity may serve as a coping strategy, with one study noting that spirituality was the most frequently used approach to handle life difficulties. Personal accounts further illustrate this pathway. One offender described how a family bereavement triggered a personal search for religious understanding:

> After my uncle died I wanted to learn more about life and the afterlife. Because my mother and sisters did not live in accordance with Islamic guidelines and were not able to provide answers to my questions, I started to search online. The first search I conducted was about how to live like a proper Muslim. This search led me to a group called "sisters". Pretty soon, I joined their Facebook and WhatsApp groups, where we exchanged various forms of information regarding religion and the oppression of the Ummah. I came to the conclusion that I could only become a better Muslim if I went to an Islamic state such as the one in Shaam, in order for me to help my brothers and sisters in need.

This example underscores how personal loss, spiritual searching, lack of easily or readily accessible and correct religious information, and exposure to ideologically driven networks can converge to reinforce violent extremist trajectories.

Motivation

Motivation for engaging in terrorism is multifaceted, spanning both intrinsic and extrinsic drivers that shape why individuals join, support or commit acts of violent extremism. Fourteen studies have explored this factor, with most producing qualitative insights rather than purely numerical data. Motivations can be divided broadly into intrinsic motivations (those rooted in internal satisfaction or personal fulfilment) and extrinsic motivations, which are tied to external rewards or pressures. Intrinsic motivations identified in the research include learning-oriented drivers (gaining knowledge, honing skills, problem-solving), attitudinal goals (changing how others think, advancing political or ideological causes, hacktivism or protest behaviours) and achievement-based aims (pursuing a mission, gaining revenge, boosting self-concept or asserting power). Other intrinsic motivations include creative expression (unconventional thinking, "breaking and creating") and physiological motivations such as excitement, entertainment or even sexual gratification. Extrinsic motivations span tangible and social rewards, such as monetary gain, involvement in criminal enterprises (extortion, blackmail, exploitation), and social prestige (status, media attention and recognition). They also include peer-related factors (group belonging, camaraderie, recruitment through friends or family), religious obligation or glorification, and moral duty.

Where quantitative data exist, they provide more precise patterns. A study of imprisoned terrorists in Iraq found motivations distributed across national benefit (35%), group benefit (32%) and personal benefit (20%). Another study of Dutch al-Qaeda/ISIL(Daesh) advocates using VERA-2R risk assessments (Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security n.d.) reported that the following motivations were present to at least a moderate degree: noble cause/religious obligation (38.8%), criminal opportunism (16.5%), camaraderie (33.0%), moral duty (28.1%), excitement/adventure (11.6%), forced participation (1.6%), status gain (20.7%) and a search for meaning (20.7%). Violent al-Qaeda/ISIL(Daesh) advocates were found to more readily cite motivations tied to religious obligation or glorification than their non-violent counterparts.

Personal testimonies illustrate how diverse and sometimes overlapping these motivations can be. For some, social acceptance and belonging were decisive:

> Recruits were treated with great respect. A youngster who belonged to Hamas or Fatah was regarded more highly than one who didn't belong to a group, and got better treatment than unaffiliated kids. Anyone who didn't enlist during that period (intifada) would have been ostracized. (Post et al. 2003)

For others, status and recognition were key drivers:

> It wasn't really the ideology at least not at first … A lot of it for me was just making a name for myself … At some point … I realized … what I wanted to do was basically end up getting into it with somebody. Hopefully I'd end up dying … I was just depressed … If I die, I don't give a shit. (Stemmler et al. 2021)

Some accounts reflect thrill-seeking or combat appeal: "What mattered to me was that I would get a chance to participate in a real fight and kill the enemy … War … It's like a drug" (Thijs et al. 2022). Others describe a desire for distinctiveness and identity construction: "I always wanted to be different from others in the way I dressed, the way I talked, everything" (Karimi et al. 2023). Loyalty and solidarity also feature prominently: "We are a community, we have to stick together, because the other countries are all watching, nobody helps." (Moeller et al. 2022) and "What I was looking for in the end was … brotherhood, loyalty, that's what I needed" (ibid.).

These findings show that motivations for terrorism are rarely singular; instead, they reflect a complex interplay of ideological, social, emotional and opportunistic drivers, each of which can be leveraged by recruiters and violent extremist networks in ways that resonate with an individual's personal circumstances and needs.

Social networks

Social networks play a critical role in shaping an individual's path towards violent extremism. Across nine samples (n = 3 446), 19.3% of cases had family members involved in extremist movements, a figure that rises to 31.5% when one large outlier sample is excluded. Friends often play an even more prominent role: across six samples (n = 1 434), 55.2% of individuals had friends linked to extremist activity. When looking at the combined influence of friends or family, five samples (n = 803) showed that 30.1% had at least one close associate engaged in extremism. Some cases are tied to online influence, with two samples (n = 102) revealing that 39.2% were heavily dependent on virtual communities for their social networks. In more extreme situations, individuals' connections also intersected with the criminal justice system. For example, one study of French would-be foreign fighters found that 16% had at least one close friend in prison. Conversely, a notable proportion of cases involved social disconnection rather than integration into radical networks. Across eight measurements (n = 502), 32.8% of individuals had experienced dismissal from social groups, rejection by significant others, exclusion from certain communities or general social marginalisation and isolation. These conditions can leave individuals more receptive to violent extremist recruiters offering belonging and purpose.

Control group research suggests that adolescent terrorists differ from other justice-involved youth by scoring lower on peer attachment, having a reduced tendency to seek social support and possessing weaker coping skills. This suggests that both the presence of radicalised peers and the absence of healthy social ties can be significant drivers.

First-hand accounts illustrate these dynamics vividly. One individual described how his Muslim friends and colleagues became "the first people I felt that genuinely cared about me". This acceptance filled what he saw as a void in his life, one intensified by alcohol misuse and divorce, prompting him to question his purpose and values. Another recalled the influence of a family member:

> When there were school holidays, he came home and often explained the importance of establishing an Islamic state in Indonesia. Yes … at that time I wanted to be like him … to be known as militant.

These examples underscore how social networks can provide ideological exposure, emotional support and identity reinforcement – factors that can make involvement in violent extremism both appealing and sustainable.

Exposure to radicalising propaganda

Exposure to radicalising propaganda (whether through the consumption, sharing or creation of extremist materials) is a significant factor in the pathway towards violent extremism. Across seven samples, rates of involvement with such content varied depending on how exposure was defined and measured. Studies show that between 42.1% (Thijssen et al. 2023a) and 57.1% (Alberda et al. 2022) of individuals had sought, used or developed violent extremist materials, with one privileged-source dataset showing a notably higher rate of 86.6% (ibid.). Direct involvement in the online violent extremist ecosystem was also evidenced in more specific behaviours: 7.6% had created profiles on extremist websites (Horgan et al. 2016), while extremist materials were physically found among 29.7% of right-wing offenders and 26.0% of left-wing offenders (Gruenewald et al. 2013). More general exposure included 12.5% who had viewed videos or websites dedicated to extremist content (Bakker 2006).

Where privileged materials such as seized digital evidence and judicial records were used, the rates of exposure were substantially higher than in studies relying on open sources, indicating that less visible online activity may be underrepresented in publicly available accounts. No comparative or control group studies currently exist for this factor, leaving unanswered questions about how these rates differ from non-extremist offender or general population samples.

Case material highlights how exposure can act as an immediate catalyst for violent action. In a detailed case study of the fatal 2011 Frankfurt Airport attack on US soldiers, the perpetrator described spending the night before his attack browsing Islam-related websites, a habitual activity for him. That evening, he came across two videos: one depicting the dead faces of "Islamic martyrs" and another portraying female Muslims harmed by US soldiers. Unbeknown to him, the latter was actually a staged rape scene taken from a Hollywood film. The imagery disturbed him to the point that he could not return to his normal routine – he stayed awake all night, unable to stop replaying the scene in his mind. By the following morning, after going through ordinary activities such as showering, watching TV and eating breakfast, the images remained vivid. In his

own words, he realised he "had to do something" (Böckler et al. 2015). This case illustrates how exposure to graphic and emotive propaganda (particularly when it aligns with pre-existing grievances or beliefs) can intensify emotional arousal, narrow perceived options for action and contribute to a decision to commit violence in the short term.

Destabilising influences as drivers

Personal, social and situational stressors can undermine an individual's stability and increase their vulnerability to radicalisation and violent extremism. These influences often create periods of heightened emotional strain, social disconnection or identity uncertainty, which can in turn make violent extremist narratives and networks more appealing. Unlike purely ideological or structural drivers, destabilising influences tend to operate through disruption and shaking an individual's sense of security, belonging or purpose. They can take many forms, including acute personal crises, chronic disadvantage or exposure to destabilising environments. Such factors do not act in isolation; rather, they interact with pre-existing vulnerabilities and other risk conditions, potentially accelerating the shift from grievance or disaffection into active engagement with violent extremist causes. This section reviews the empirical evidence for these influences, exploring how they manifest in offender populations, their relationship with violent extremist behaviour and, where available, offender accounts that shed light on their functional relevance.

Housing

Housing instability, while not among the most frequently measured factors in terrorism research, appears in several studies as a noteworthy destabilising influence. Across eight measurements, indicators of housing precarity varied in severity and scope. In four measurements (n = 273), 4.3% of individuals were homeless at the point of engaging in terrorism. Two further measurements (n = 139) found that 10% of individuals had no stable residence. Transience also emerged as a potential marker of instability: one study found that 22.6% of lone-actor terrorists had changed addresses within six months of their offence. At the more acute end of the spectrum, one analysis reported that 26.5% of cases were living in conditions "not suited for permanent habitation", facing unaffordable rent or mortgage payments, imminent eviction or the threat of homelessness (Grimbergen and Fassaert 2022). While the relationship between housing instability and violent extremism has not been explicitly tested for functional relevance, the broader criminological literature suggests that insecure housing can exacerbate social isolation, reduce access to stabilising influences and increase susceptibility to risky or exploitative networks, all of which could plausibly heighten vulnerability to violent extremist recruitment or engagement.

Physical health

Physical health issues have been explored only sparingly in the context of violent extremism, with evidence drawn from three small-scale studies focused exclusively on al-Qaeda/ISIL(Daesh) offenders. A French study of potential ISIL foreign fighters found that 18.6% had identifiable physical health problems (Campelo et al. 2018), while a German study of convicted al-Qaeda/ISIL(Daesh) terrorists reported that 13.3% suffered from chronic illness (Moeller and Scheithauer 2024). In a Dutch sample of 34 individuals suspected of violent extremism, only "a few" reported such problems, suggesting that while present, chronic illness may not be widespread among these populations. There are no comparative or control group analyses to determine whether rates of poor physical health differ from other offender populations or the general public, and functional relevance (whether and how health problems might influence pathways into violent extremism) has yet to be directly explored. Nevertheless, in broader criminological and radicalisation frameworks, physical health challenges can contribute to vulnerability by compounding social isolation, limiting employment opportunities and creating dependency on others, conditions that, if combined with exposure to violent extremist networks, could potentially heighten susceptibility to recruitment.

Unspecified stressors

Unspecified stressors – both acute and long term – appear as a recurring feature in the lives of many individuals involved in violent extremism, although the nature of these stressors is often left undefined in the research. Evidence from four studies indicates that long-term or chronic stress can be substantial: one study found 31.1% of cases showed signs of acute, enduring stress (Capellan and Anisin 2018), another reported over 90% had experienced a personal crisis, traumatic event or marked disillusionment (Klausen et al. 2016), and a further study recorded long-term sources of stress in 57.1% of individuals (Gill et al. 2022). Psychological

distress prior to engagement in terrorism was noted in 23.3% of cases (Corner and Gill 2020). When examining stressors occurring in the period immediately before extremist involvement, the rates remain high.

Across four studies, the average proportion of individuals experiencing a proximate stressor was 39.2%. Specific measures included: a precipitating crisis event (58.3%; Lankford 2013), a "tipping point" experience (46.7%; Peschak 2023) and evidence of elevated stress levels prior to engagement (32.7%; Gill et al. 2014), (40.8%; Gill et al. 2022). Functionally, stress and strain can serve as catalysts for behavioural change, potentially lowering resilience to extremist narratives. One study found that for a quarter of those experiencing psychological distress prior to their engagement, their distress was less evident once they were active in extremist movements (Corner and Gill 2020). This finding hints at how extremist involvement itself can sometimes be perceived as a coping mechanism or escape from prior stress.

Substance abuse

Substance abuse (ranging from regular alcohol or drug consumption to full addiction) emerges as a notable factor in the backgrounds of some individuals engaged in violent extremism. Across 12 samples (n = 1 189), 21.4% of cases displayed some form of substance abuse problem, including drug addiction, alcohol misuse or other habitual consumption patterns. One study observed that formal treatment for these problems was typically absent, even in cases where substance abuse was clear (Grimbergen and Fassaert 2022). Individual accounts highlight how substance abuse can create vulnerabilities that violent extremist networks exploit. One individual described how, before converting to Islam, "I would frequently write myself off", noting that his drinking binges and "hard nights" drew concern from Indonesian Muslim friends and colleagues, who questioned his continued self-harm (Aly and Striegher 2012). Another described wanting to distance himself from a lifestyle involving drugs and crime, leading him to visit a mosque where new acquaintances encouraged him to "live like a proper Muslim". Over time, these individuals became his primary social circle, isolating him from family and exposing him to radical propaganda, including videos of suffering in Syria and messages from radical preachers advocating travel to conflict zones (Webber et al. 2018). These narratives suggest that substance abuse can be both a personal strain and an entry point for violent extremist recruitment, where the promise of discipline, belonging and moral purpose replaces previous self-destructive behaviours, but ultimately channels the individual towards violent causes.

Personality

Personality traits have been examined only in a very limited way in relation to violent extremism, with findings largely based on small, open-source samples and lacking systematic measurement. One such study, involving 40 terrorists, identified the following traits: obsessive tendencies in 65.0%, fantasist/narcissistic features in 7.5% and paranoid or grandiose traits in 5.0% each (Knight et al. 2017). While these figures provide an initial indication that certain personality characteristics may be present among some violent extremists, the small sample size and the indirect method of assessment mean the results should be treated cautiously. Functionally, some interviews suggest that certain individuals possess a personality disposition "attracted to extremes", which may predispose them towards adopting radical political or religious identities (Sikkens et al. 2017). Interestingly, among members of al-Qaeda/ISIL(Daesh)-aligned groups, higher scores on emotionality and openness were associated with lower violent intentions Obaidi et al. 2023), hinting at the complex, non-linear ways personality can interact with extremist engagement. Overall, while personality may shape how individuals respond to ideology, grievances or social networks, its role remains one of the least empirically developed areas in the study of violent extremism.

Mental health and neurodiversity

This factor focuses on whether the individual is experiencing or has experienced problems stemming from mental health or neurodevelopmental disorders that may impact the radicalisation process. Twenty-five studies measured rates of mental health problems across 28 violent extremist samples. The prevalence rates are heterogenous and range from 0% to 57%. This is perhaps because the studies differ in numerous ways. They measure different constructs of mental health problems. Nineteen studies reported confirmed diagnosed mental disorders. Seven studies reported mental health problems typically noted as any adverse psychological process experienced. The latter presumably has less stringent inclusion than a formal diagnosis. Pooling the results of those samples (n = 19) purely focused upon confirmed diagnoses where sample sizes are known (n = 1 705 subjects) suggests a rate of 14.4% with a confirmed diagnosis.

Other mental health problems are also apparent within various studies. For example, Oppetit et al. (2019) examined the case files of 150 French individuals who sought to join ISIS. Of these 12.7% spent time in

psychiatric wards before their offence. Additionally, 29.3% had self-harmed prior to being radicalised. Several other studies similarly note suicidal ideation and/or suicide attempts (Bouzar and Martin 2016; Corner et al. 2019; Ilardi 2013). In Simi et al.'s (2016) self-report study of 46 violent white supremacist groups' members, the figure was as high as 57%.

Mental health disorders differ significantly from one another. Fewer studies provided detailed information on the types of disorders diagnosed within their samples. Some group-level studies note single instances of depression (Bakker 2006), Asperger's syndrome, schizophrenia (Knight et al. 2017), attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), psychotic disorder, borderline personality disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (van Leyenhorst and Andreas 2017). Leygraf (2014) conducted court-ordered expert opinion on 29 individuals convicted of al-Qaeda-related crimes. Three individuals had schizophrenic psychosis while two had a primary dissocial problem. Weenink (2015) studied police files of 140 Dutch individuals who became foreign fighters. Disorders included psychotic, narcissistic, attention-deficit/hyperactivity (ADD/HD), schizophrenia, autism spectrum and post-traumatic stress disorders. In Corner et al.'s (2016) sample of 153 lone-actor terrorists, 1.3% experienced traumatic brain injury, 0.7% drug dependence, 8.5% schizophrenia, 0.7% schizo-affective disorder, 2.0% delusional disorder, 0.7% psychotic disorder, 7.2% depression, 3.9% bipolar disorder, 1.3% unspecified anxiety disorder, 0.7% dissociative disorder, 1.3% obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), 3.3% PTSD, 0.7% unspecified sleep disorder, 6.5% unspecified personality disorder and 3.3% autism spectrum disorder.

There is a clear difference in the prevalence of confirmed diagnosis dependent upon data source. Where clinical examinations occur (n = 236 subjects), diagnoses were present 33.47% of the time. Where studies relied upon wholly, or in some form, upon privileged access to police or judicial data, actual diagnoses occurred 16.96% of the time (n = 283 subjects). Studies based on open sources (n = 1 089 subjects) reported diagnoses 9.82% of the time.

Four studies compared the rates of mental disorders in lone actors to matched samples of group actors. Gruenewald et al. (2013) compared far-right lone and group offenders, finding the former significantly more likely to have a reported history of mental illness (40.4% v. 7.6%). Hewitt's (2003) sample of lone actors from an array of ideological backgrounds found similar results (22% v. 8.1%) although the prevalence rate was almost half the rate in Gruenewald et al.'s study. Corner and Gill (2015) compared 119 lone-actor terrorists with 428 group-based actors. Lone-actor terrorists were 13.5 times more likely to have a history of mental illness than group-based actors. Corner et al. (2016) examined these results further and documented a negative correlation between the level of co-offending and the rate of mental disorder prevalence. Whereas Corner and colleagues' sample of lone-actor terrorists included over 40% with a history of mental disorders, the figure for solo-terrorists (for example those who carried out their attack alone but received support from a wider terrorist group) was around 20%; for dyads it was just over 5%, and for group-based actors it was less than 3%.

Two studies demonstrated lower rates of psychiatric illness (Lyons and Harbinson 1986) and conduct disorders (Dhumad et al. 2020) among violent extremists compared to non-ideologically inspired murderers.

Merari and colleagues carried out various psychological tests on a sample of suicide bombers and compared the results with various comparison groups (for example other terrorists and non-political criminals) (Merari et al. 2009a and 2009b; Merari 2010). These studies employed a range of techniques including clinical interviews, personality tests, the Thematic Apperception Test and the House-Tree-Person drawing test. Compared to the control group, the suicide bomber group received significantly more diagnoses of avoidant-dependent personality disorder (60% v. 17%), depressive symptoms (53% v. 8%) and more readily displayed suicidal tendencies (40% v. 0%). On the other hand, the control group was more likely to include members with psychopathic tendencies (25% v. 0%) and impulsive-unstable tendencies (67% v. 27%). Suicide bomber organisers scored higher in ego strength, impulsivity and emotional instability than would-be suicide bombers.

Compared to the general population, among Dutch foreign fighters, Weenink (2015) found elevated levels of schizophrenia and psychosis compared with the general population. In a greatly expanded dataset, Weenink (2019) additionally found elevated levels of psychotic disorders and PTSD among lone-actor terrorists. Corner et al. (2016) found elevated levels of schizophrenia, autism and delusional disorder compared to the base rate. In a registry-based study in Sweden, a study found lone-actor terrorists were significantly more likely to have been an inpatient and outpatient because of a major mental disorder than their male siblings as well as other male violent extremists.

Allely and Faccini (2017) outlined a series of short case studies demonstrating the functional links of autism and supporting or engaging in terrorism. They demonstrate how different autism-related deficits can contribute differently (for example increased social naivety, over-rigid adherence to rules, not understanding social situations, aggressiveness and obsessional interests). Inderberg et al. (2019) offer three vignettes based on primary materials of the impact of autism and psychosis and how they engender a collapse of cognitive functioning and impulse control, and the ability to gauge the dangerousness/offensiveness of a situation. Post (2000) outlines his expert witness account of a trial in which the accused bomber had suffered from depression and PTSD prior to the offence and their functional role.

Group-level studies further demonstrate that mental health problems do not only increase individual vulnerabilities. They may, in certain circumstances, have other impacts. For example, sequence analyses of lone-actor terrorist data demonstrate that during radicalisation "mental health problems appear to be a precursor to, and consequence of, criminal behaviours, which are themselves markers of lack of commitment to prosocial moral rules (moral susceptibility) and/or markers of selection into criminogenic settings, some of which may be radicalising (including prison)" (Corner et al. 2019).

Propaganda provided extremists with an explanation for their negative personal experiences including experiences of trauma and mental health problems. Mental health problems (or markers thereof), in certain circumstances, may also be attractive to particular recruiters for particular tasks and functions within an extremist network (Bubolz and Simi 2019).

A 2023 study using ERG22+ risk assessment (UK Ministry of Justice 2023) data demonstrated a significant relationship between presence of mental illness/personality disorder and primary method of radicalisation. Where mental illness/personality disorder was assessed as strongly present, online radicalisation was significantly associated compared to hybrid or face-to-face forms of radicalisation. Those primarily radicalised online were 6.27 times more likely to have a presence of mental illness/personality disorder than those who primarily radicalised offline, and they were 4.43 times more likely to have a presence of mental illness/personality disorder than those radicalised through both online and offline influences.

A single case study, based on clinical interviews and psychometric testing, of an individual with autism who engaged in multiple acts of terrorism through online activity demonstrated these vulnerabilities appeared to lead to a negative reinforcement cycle that perpetuated the radicalisation process.

Adverse childhood experiences

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) emerge as a recurring and significant theme in the backgrounds of many individuals involved in violent extremism, often forming a deep-rooted layer of vulnerability that predates their radicalisation. Significant negative life experiences were measured within a German cohort of convicted al-Qaeda/ISIL(Daesh) advocates. The results showed these experiences were 2.22 times more likely to have occurred during childhood than any other developmental phase (Moeller and Scheithauer 2024). Studies have further shown prevalence rates between:

- 17.6% and 71.4% who experienced physical abuse;
- 23% and 28.5% sexual abuse;
- 16.35% and 85.3% neglect or psychological abuse;
- 36% and 82% parental abandonment;
- 18.6% and 64% domestic or neighbourhood violence.

Across 10 studies (n = 330), 45.1% of cases self-reported issues to do with emotional neglect and/or abuse. Across four studies (n = 1 491), 50.2% of cases experienced caregiver loss, the loss of a significant other, were bereaved or experienced a sudden separation. Across four studies (n = 295), 42.7% grew up in a household where a caregiver/parent had alcohol or substance abuse problems.

A study of far-right extremists in the US notes the participants are markedly different from the US general population. The former were almost four times less likely to experience zero ACE exposures (10% v. 39%) and roughly four times more likely to experience four or more ACE exposures (63% v. 16%) than the rates found in other pieces of research. "Together, these findings indicate that our sample includes individuals with elevated rates of childhood risk factors as compared to the US general population and similar rates of childhood risk factors when compared to a 'high-risk' sample" (Santos-Hermoso et al. 2023). The rates of childhood physical and sexual abuse experienced exceed rates previously found within the US general population (Stemmler et al. 2021). A similar study of Dutch cases found the number of ACEs experienced among that sample was roughly double that of the control group cited in the above study (Grimbergen and Fassaert 2022).

A clinical case study of a young radicalised female showed:

> a possible link between violent radicalisation and complex psycho-traumatism with an impact of the reactivation of post-traumatic mechanisms such as (i) the activation of the autonomic nervous system and emotional dysregulation on violent acts, (ii) the activation of dissociation mechanisms (psychic sideration and post-traumatic amnesia) on indoctrination and violent acts, (iii) the activation of control mechanisms on the search for a strict framework of life and a radical ideology and (iv) relational avoidance on the processes of relational rupture and radical socialisation.

The study highlights how radicalisation process can respond to the needs and psychic functioning of psycho-traumatised individuals (channelling tensions, being recognised and active in one's life) (Rostami et al. 2022).

Participants often noted their experience of childhood trauma damaged their sense of childhood innocence, the loss of a sense of self, the bearing of significant responsibility for their adversity through self-blaming techniques, feeling defensive and easily being provoked (Santos-Hermoso et al. 2023).

In quotes, terrorists expressed how experience of ACEs impacted their involvement in violent extremism:

> The insecurities started from my dad not being a part of my life because you don't know why your dad doesn't come to see you … you own that as a kid. You think it's your fault. You take that on yourself … that played a part in the insecurity and not feeling like I belong, and drugs became a coping mechanism. They were my escape from reality because I didn't want to look at myself. It's all escape from taking a look at yourself. When the skinheads came up it became another escape. (ibid.)

> What happened to me as a kid cut me off from who I am. You have this oscillating moment of normality which is boring and gives the appearance of everybody else in their day-to-day life. I mean once you're raped, the boundaries of life change and what is normality for people is like death because you're uncomfortable and not engaged with that part of yourself … you're disconnected but when you go and do things that are dangerous, you're alert, the senses are kicked in … being violent and hurtful towards others, it jolted me. That trigger was necessary. (ibid.)

> The experience of personal humiliation was positively related to Need For Closure, which was then positively related to Islamic extremism. This suggests that experiences of humiliation that occasion a sense of lost significance may shake individuals' self-confidence, motivating them to restore their sense of certainty and closure. This mindset should thereby increase the appeal of extreme ideologies that offer simplistic, certainty-affording worldviews. (Weenink 2015)

> I joined the organisation with the idea that it could be a solution for the problems and despair I experienced in my family. (Pedahzur et al. 2003)

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction – the drivers of violent extremism are complex. They are multiple, they change from case to case, they vary in intensity in the process towards terrorist engagement, and they have different functional roles in different contexts. Because the drivers are complex, our response needs to be complex, multifaceted, individually tailored at times and contextually robust in others. If a recruiter shifts his "pitch" to potential recruits to suit their presenting needs, policy needs to be equally adaptive and possess multiple exit strategies to appeal to different sets of people who each have their own complex set of drivers impacting upon their choices and behaviours.

Violent extremism is best understood as the product of intersecting forces, not the inevitable outcome of any one factor. Across hundreds of cases and more than a hundred studies, the evidence paints a picture of complexity: political exclusion, socio-economic deprivation, cultural threats, digital echo chambers, selective recruitment strategies and personal vulnerabilities combine in varying ways to move individuals from grievance to violent action. No single mechanism dominates entry into violent extremist networks; rather, diverse push-and-pull factors operate simultaneously. Accordingly, simplistic explanations or one-size-fits-all solutions will fail. Effective counter-terrorism must be multi-layered, flexible and grounded in evidence.

Several overarching lessons emerge. First, upstream prevention is critical. Strengthening inclusive governance, reducing inequality and investing in education, employment and community cohesion can address the structural conditions that violent extremists exploit. Digital regulation and counter-messaging should accompany efforts to enhance critical thinking and media literacy, particularly among youth.

Second, early identification and support for at-risk individuals are essential. Recruitment is targeted, focusing on those who are young, disenfranchised or possess particular skills. Providing support during life transitions (for example re-entry from prison, job loss, bereavement), expanding access to mental health and trauma-informed care, and offering alternative social and ideological communities can divert individuals from radical pathways.

Third, multi-agency collaboration must become the norm. Law enforcement alone cannot prevent radicalisation; partnerships with educators, social workers, mental health professionals, community leaders and researchers are necessary to build comprehensive risk assessments and tailored interventions. Evidence from other areas of violence prevention shows that cross-sector co-ordination yields better outcomes and avoids duplication of efforts.

Fourth, protective factors deserve far greater attention. Much of the research has focused on risk factors; yet understanding what buffers individuals from radicalisation is crucial for designing preventive programmes. Social support, meaningful employment, positive identities, civic engagement and restorative justice may mitigate risk, but rigorous studies are needed to confirm and operationalise these protective elements.

Fifth, data quality and analytic frameworks must continue to improve. The field has progressed from anecdotal accounts to systematic research, but more comparative, control-group and longitudinal studies are needed. Robust theories should accompany statistical associations to explain how and why certain factors lead to violent extremism, rather than merely describing correlations. Without explanatory frameworks, policy risks being guided by checklists rather than understanding.

Finally, any response should avoid stigmatising entire communities. While certain demographics are over-represented among offenders, most individuals sharing those characteristics do not engage in violence. Policies must be rights-compliant, proportionate and sensitive to the diverse forms of violent extremism present across the Council of Europe's member states. By combining structural reform, community resilience, individual support and evidence-based practice, governments can reduce the appeal of violent extremism and uphold the values of inclusion, liberty and security that underpin the Council of Europe's mandate.

By breaking down drivers into its constituent parts, it is possible to start identifying level-specific policy implications.

Policy implications

System-level drivers

At the systemic level, policies must address structural weaknesses that create opportunity spaces for radicalisation and impede effective prevention. This includes enhancing cross-agency intelligence sharing; aligning law enforcement, social services and community-based actors around co-ordinated prevention frameworks; and ensuring that intervention programmes are embedded in broader counter-extremism strategies rather than operating in isolation. Justice and security systems should be equipped to handle both pre-criminal and post-criminal stages of radicalisation, with diversion and rehabilitation options accessible at multiple entry points. In parallel, reforms should target gaps that violent extremists exploit, such as failures in rehabilitation pathways, uneven prison-based interventions and the lack of aftercare or reintegration support following incarceration.

Settings-level drivers

Settings in which radicalisation flourishes, whether physical (for example prisons, conflict zones, marginalised neighbourhoods) or digital (for example extremist forums, encrypted messaging channels) require tailored disruption and prevention strategies. This involves both "hardening" high-risk environments through proactive monitoring and targeted outreach, and transforming them into protective spaces by embedding credible, trusted actors who can counter violent extremist narratives and offer alternative support networks. For digital settings, policy makers should prioritise partnerships with tech companies to identify, limit and, where appropriate, redirect engagement with harmful content towards constructive interventions. For community and institutional settings, prevention work should focus on reducing social isolation, addressing grievances constructively and increasing access to legitimate avenues for political and social expression, thereby reducing the comparative appeal of violent extremist networks.

Selection-effect drivers

Selection effects highlight that violent extremist networks often deliberately recruit or attract individuals with particular traits, histories or capacities that suit their operational needs. This means prevention policy must not only focus on stopping individuals from self-radicalising, but also on disrupting the processes by which groups identify, approach and induct potential members. Intelligence and community engagement programmes should work to detect early signs of targeting or grooming, particularly among individuals with skills, knowledge or vulnerabilities that make them valuable to violent extremist organisations (for example military training, technical expertise or pronounced grievances). Efforts should also address how violent extremist groups exploit existing community relationships, institutions and online spaces to identify high-yield recruits, using tailored counter-messaging and resilience-building within these recruitment pools. Crucially, interventions must consider that recruitment is often opportunistic, capitalising on situational crises in individuals' lives, and therefore require rapid-response capacity to intercept before deeper commitment forms.

Individual drivers

Policy responses should recognise that individuals engaging in violent extremism often display a constellation of overlapping vulnerabilities and motivations rather than a single causal factor. This means interventions need to be multi-dimensional, addressing psychosocial needs (for example mental health support, trauma recovery), behavioural risk factors (for example substance abuse, prior criminality) and attitudinal elements (for example grievances, ideological commitment) in tandem. Screening tools and risk assessments should move beyond static profiles, instead incorporating dynamic indicators that can change over time, such as shifts in emotional state, social networks or exposure to radicalising materials. Early interventions should prioritise building resilience through prosocial identity formation, strengthening coping strategies and providing credible alternative pathways for achieving personal significance.

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For over 40 years, the Council of Europe has worked to develop and reinforce key legal standards to prevent and suppress acts of terrorism. By taking a comprehensive approach, the Organisation helps member states fight terrorism more effectively by strengthening and improving their national legislation, thereby facilitating international co-operation. With full respect for human rights and the rule of law, the Council of Europe is continuously striving to bring terrorists to justice and bolster international co-operation.

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