

Simon Copeland and Sarah Marsden

INTRODUCTION

Risk assessments for violent extremists are an informed estimate of the likelihood an individual will commit an offence in the future and its potential nature and severity.

The challenge for practitioners in custodial, probationary, community or security contexts is to identify and weigh risks before an individual acts. Unlike non-terrorism related offending where previous violent behaviour is considered a reliable predictor of future offences, for many extremists their first engagement in violence will be when carrying out an attack. This poses particular challenges for risk assessment in the ‘pre-crime’ space.

When conducting risk assessments for violent extremists, the objective must be established at the outset. Individuals may engage or re-engage in a wide range of activities, both violent and non-violent, that relate to extremism.

Assessors must be clear what it is they are attempting to predict: be this the risk an individual commits an act of violence, recruits others, or provides organisational, logistical or operational support to an extremist group.

Whilst the motivations and circumstances that surround extremist offending are complex, robust risk assessment allows case management and operational resources to be administered appropriately and supports effective risk management.

KEY POINTS

The evidence base underpinning extremist risk assessments is not yet established. Whilst risk factors associated with criminality have been extensively researched, those relating to extremism require a stronger



empirical foundation. There has been little evaluation of the accuracy of risk assessment instruments specific to extremism, nor are there recognised standards for comparing their effectiveness. Further research is also needed to understand how these frameworks and tools are used in practice.

- Although there is broad consensus on the risk factors associated with violent extremism, in most cases they have not been properly evaluated. Few studies compare the prevalence of risk factors in the general population with extremists or potential terrorists. This makes it difficult to know how reliable the risk factors identified in the literature are.
- Structured Professional Judgment (SPJ) has become the principal method for carrying out extremist risk assessments. SPJ provides assessors with empirically based frameworks and tools to help support and organise their knowledge and inform risk assessment processes, including identifying opportunities for interventions or managing risk. SPJ involves some flexibility and supports, rather than supersedes, professional judgement.
- Risk assessment tools or instruments should not

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be considered complete solutions to the difficulties associated with interpreting risk. However, they can help identify and structure relevant information and make assessments as informed and consistent as possible.

- Even with specialist tools, the knowledge, experience and expertise of assessors remains critical. Whilst some SPJ frameworks contain ‘relevance ratings’ that highlight particularly significant factors, assessors must have the skills to weigh risk factors and put them in context as well as the confidence to apply discretion when using risk assessment instruments.
- Effective staff training is vital. Those conducting risk assessments need to be trained and supported to ensure tools are used accurately and consistently.
- The predictive ability of risk assessment methods has not yet been fully evaluated. The comparatively low number of terrorism offences makes predictive risk assessment difficult.
- Measuring changes in dynamic risk factors, or those that vary over time or in response to treatment, is a complex process. Doing so requires multiple assessments that can be compared over time. Research from non-terrorism related offending highlights that risk assessments should be carried out frequently to strengthen their capacity to accurately predict future risks, something known as predictive validity.
- Further research is needed to understand how risk assessment tools are used in practice and how they can best be integrated and combined in the evaluation and decision-making process. Guidance about how to integrate different tools would help support practitioners and avoid inconsistencies in how assessments are carried out.

in scope, with an emphasis on work undertaken in the United States, the Netherlands and the UK.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This Executive Summary comes from the Full Report from the project *Knowledge Management Across the Four Counter-Terrorism ‘Ps’*. You can find the Full Report [here](#).

The full report is primarily based on academic literature from 2017 onwards. To help address the limitations of this research it draws on some literature from outside this period, grey literature and work from comparable fields, including risk assessments of violent offenders and sex offenders. The research included is international