

LONE ACTOR TERRORISM: WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT RISKS AND THREATS?

By Dr Jonathan Kenyon, National Specialist Lead within the Interventions Services Counter-Terrorism Team for Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS)

Dr Jens Binder, Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Nottingham Trent University

Dr Christopher Baker-Beall, Senior Lecturer in Crisis and Disaster Management at Bournemouth University's Disaster Management Centre

PERCEIVED THREAT AND SOURCES OF EVIDENCE

The actions of radicalised extremists have been recognised as a major threat to societies and have been linked to highly visible acts of violence and terrorism. A major point of debate has been the role of social connectedness in determining the level of threat posed by those who commit acts of terrorism. While networks and extremist organisations can supply resources and contribute to attack planning, so-called lone actors pose a different kind of threat due to the difficulties in detecting them and the potential for self-radicalisation via the Internet.

Intense media attention has been paid to lone actor attacks in the Western world. Past cases include the murder of 77 people on the island of Utøya by Anders Breivik in 2011, whose plans also involved planting a home-made fertiliser bomb at the government headquarters in Oslo. Another example is Salman Abedi, described as a lone actor in some quarters due to his role as a single suicide-bomber, who detonated an improvised explosive device packed with shrapnel in a crowded foyer in the

Manchester Arena in 2017. Incidents such as these have brought lone actor terrorism to the forefront of political debate, with counter-terrorism increasingly focused on uncovering how lone actors have been 'radicalised' and understanding their 'pathways' into terrorism to develop measures designed to prevent terrorist incidents from occurring. The modus operandi of terrorist attacks is known to have diversified and simplified over recent years, particularly with Daesh having employed its considerable online propaganda effort to inspire, rather than to direct, acts of terrorism in Western Europe.

Our own recent work has been concerned with the empirical basis for claims and concepts surrounding lone actors and radicalisation. This includes a comprehensive systematic review of data-driven literature focusing on pathways into lone actor terrorism (Kenyon, Baker-Beall, & Binder, 2021), which locates and discusses more than 100 sources. We have further conducted an in-depth analysis of

closed-source data on 235 convicted extremists in England and Wales (Kenyon, Binder, & Baker-Beall, 2021). Our main argument is that the same dynamics that give rise to lone actor terrorism may also impose constraints on the effectiveness of resulting actions. Self-radicalisation on the Internet can and does occur, and for those taking this pathway, it is often accompanied by poor social connections offline. At the same time, only a minority of convicted extremists in our data set had followed this pathway to radicalisation, and they were less likely to have taken on an active role such as an attacker or to have engaged in violent offences.

RELEVANCE OF THE INTERNET TO LONE ACTOR RADICALISATION PATHWAYS

One of the key themes that emerged from our review of the literature on pathways to lone actor terrorism was the increasingly prominent role of the Internet. The Internet serves many functions and plays a complex role, analogous to the pervasive and varied online engagement within society. It is being used to support ideological or extremist debate, to advance the radicalisation process and as a means for engaging in operational and attack planning. There is some indication that lone actor terrorists are more likely to engage in online learning than their group-based counterparts, but in addition the Internet can provide a substitute network for lone actors, redefining what constitutes a social community given the general absence of face-to-face contacts.

It has been suggested that the spate of lone actor terrorist incidents across Europe and the U.S. since 2011 can be partly explained by use of various online platforms for disseminating lone actor tactics. However, terrorist groups also reach out to potential lone actors by seducing, teaching and encouraging them to launch attacks within online forums, chatrooms and social media applications. As such, online behaviours are potential key signals for law enforcement agencies and security services that an individual is on a pathway to committing an act of lone actor terrorism.

Our analysis of closed-source data on convicted extremists provided further support for the important role of the Internet in lone actor radicalisation pathways. Within this study, the radicalisation pathway for each case was determined from detailed risk assessment reports. Cases were categorised based on whether individuals had predominantly radicalised online, offline or via a hybrid process combining sources of influence. Further comparisons led to the emergence of characteristic offender profiles within each radicalisation pathway group. When investigating the degree of social connectivity to extremists offline across pathway groups, a substantial proportion of lone actors was found for those who primarily radicalised online, whereas a strong majority of group-based actors were found for the other two pathway groups. It is worth noting, however, that from among 235 convicted extremists only 29 satisfied a strict definition of online radicalisation. This points to the relative scarcity of Internet-only and lone actor cases.

ANALYSIS OF PAST OFFENCES COMMITTED AND ROLE TAKEN

From reviewing the empirical literature, some marked differences between lone actors and other types of terrorists can be reported. Lone actor terrorists have a significantly longer life span as terrorists than group-based actors, from their first preparatory behaviour to the time of their arrest. Lone actor terrorists are also found to generally select civilian or 'soft' targets, as opposed to government or military targets, due to their relative weakness compared to terrorist groups or organisations. The chances of a successful attack appear heightened when lower value targets and members of the public are chosen. Further, the relative weakness of lone actor terrorists is in part related to their choice of weapons. Globally, firearms are frequently chosen, followed closely by explosives. Several studies have suggested that lone actor weapon choice is largely governed by the tools they have at hand, which helps to explain the increase in vehicle and knife attacks in recent years,

particularly in the UK and across Europe. When considering target location, this is generally at the intersection of the lone actor's daily routines, with the frequency of attacks decreasing as the distance from their home location increases. Regarding lethality, lone actor attacks are generally cruder, smaller scale and less lethal compared with group actors, although there are of course exceptions.

Following our analysis of offences committed by convicted extremists in England and Wales, it was found that online radicalisation had led to non-violent offences in almost 80% of all cases. Individuals following this pathway were also less likely to take on the role of an attacker within the context of their offence compared to those who primarily radicalised offline. This pattern is closely related to the nature of the offence. Those who primarily radicalised online had the highest percentage of individuals who had committed extremist offences solely via the Internet (41%). Examples included being convicted for possession of terrorist materials, dissemination of terrorist materials and encouraging support for a proscribed organisation. Taken together, our own and previous work consistently highlights the role of opportunities. These largely determine the activities of lone actors and can also limit their effectiveness.

FUTURE ASSESSMENTS OF RISK BY PROFESSIONALS

Many claims regarding the pathways taken by lone actor terrorists and in particular regarding the risk posed by these individuals are based on conceptually and methodologically questionable assumptions, largely borne out by a lack of data-driven research within the literature. Lone actors are generally characterised as socially isolated individuals who do not communicate with others before they plan, prepare and execute their acts of violence. Often, they have been portrayed as highly capable, largely undetectable and hard to disrupt. However recent studies have challenged many of these assumptions, with a clearer picture emerging that lone actor attacks are relatively infrequent and less deadly than attacks carried out by groups.

In our study of 235 convicted extremists in England and Wales, it was possible to include expert risk assessments by trained professionals, registered psychologists and qualified probation officers. Comparing these formal assessments across three pathway groups: online radicalisation, offline (in-person) radicalisation, and hybrid radicalisation which is a mixture of both, it was found that online radicalisation was associated with the lowest levels of engagement with an extremist group or cause, indicating that these individuals were typically less involved or identified with an extremist group or cause at the time of offending. Online radicalisation was also associated with the lowest levels of intent and capability to commit violent extremist offences. This contrasted with convicted extremists considered to have been radicalised through a hybrid route of both online and offline influences, who were assessed with the highest level of engagement and intent, and those radicalised primarily offline, assessed with the highest levels of capability to act. These findings highlight the important role played by offline, in-person contact with other extremists in strengthening involvement and deepening a sense of identity with an extremist group or cause, and higher levels of intent and capability of the individual to carry out harmful acts.

CONCLUSIONS DRAWN

We conclude that the same dynamics that give rise to lone actor terrorism, namely the increased prominence of Internet use in extremist offending and online radicalisation, may also impose constraints on the effectiveness of resulting actions. To support this conclusion, the findings from our empirical study suggest that online influences alone do not often result in violent extremist offending. The process of radicalisation leading to violent extremist offending is complex and multi-faceted.

It is important to counter popular notions of lone actor terrorists as main sources of threats to societal security. Neither the literature nor our own analysis provides strong support for this view. At the same time, it would be premature to conclude that lone actors or online radicalisation carry no substantial threat

potential. The few individuals that are classed as violent and high risk in our data set may be disproportionately dangerous. A small number of high-profile cases of lone actor terrorism are known involving serious violent offences as a result of what is considered solitary online radicalisation. One example is the case of Roshonara Choudhry in the UK who stabbed her local MP Stephen Timms, ostensibly in response to his parliamentary vote in favour of the 2003 Iraq war. Focusing on convicted extremists in our analysis also means to exclude those who died during the commission of offences, or those never identified and/or apprehended by the police. It is also important to remember that lone actor terrorism is a global phenomenon. There is likely to be important variation in the types of attacks committed and weapons used depending on geographical region.

What is certain is that the issue of online, offline (in-person) and hybrid forms of radicalisation, leading to both non-violent and violent extremist offending, continues to represent a threat to society. If we are to mount an effective response to this problem, then further study of the pathways taken by those convicted of extremist offences remains essential if further acts of terrorism or violent extremism are to be prevented. ■

REFERENCES

- Kenyon, J., Baker-Beall, C., and Binder, J. (2021). Lone-actor terrorism – A systematic literature review. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2021.1892635>
- Kenyon, J., Binder, J., and Baker-Beall, C. (2021). Exploring the role of the Internet in radicalisation and offending of convicted extremists. Ministry of Justice Analytical Series. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/exploring-the-role-of-the-internet-in-radicalisation-and-offending-of-convicted-extremists>

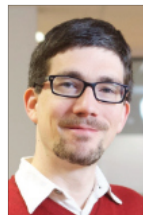
Disclaimer

The opinions expressed within the article are solely those of the authors and do not reflect the opinions and views of HMPPS, Nottingham Trent University or Bournemouth University.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Dr Jonathan Kenyon is a BPS Chartered and HCPC Registered Psychologist. He currently works as a National Specialist Lead within the Interventions Services Counter-Terrorism Team for Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS). In 2020, he completed the Doctorate qualification in Forensic Psychology at Nottingham Trent University. His thesis was entitled *The Role of the Internet in the Radicalisation Process and Offending of Individuals Convicted of Extremist Offences*.



Dr Jens Binder is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Nottingham Trent University. His research focuses on cybersecurity and safety, social media engagement and user wellbeing as well as cognitive factors in online communication. With his work, he pursues the two-fold aim of enabling the users of digital technologies to identify safety and security concerns that come with online activities and to help users develop the online literacy skills needed to have more positive online experiences. He draws on perspectives from cyberpsychology, cognitive psychology and HCI and uses predominantly quantitative methods. His work has been published in high profile journals including *American Psychologist*, *Computers in Human Behavior*, *New Media & Society* and *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. He regularly supervises projects at PhD level and leads on a specialist Postgraduate degree in Cyberpsychology.



Dr Christopher Baker-Beall is Senior Lecturer in Crisis and Disaster Management at Bournemouth University's Disaster Management Centre. His research focuses on contemporary security issues, including counter-terrorism, counter-radicalisation, foreign fighters and border security. His publications include *The European Union's Fight against Terrorism: Discourse, Policies, Identity* (Manchester University Press, 2016).