

Radicalisation & Neurodivergence

Neurodivergence can raise the situational risk of radicalisation for certain individuals, meaning in some circumstances they may be more susceptible to extremist messaging due to difficulties in navigating complex social dynamics and a preference for more rigid systems of thought. These challenges can be further exploited by recruiters who offer simplified worldviews and structured environments that provide a sense of belonging.

Key Statistics

- One-third of all Prevent referrals (2024-25) involved neurodivergent individuals
- Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) was the most common condition, appearing in 14% of all referrals
- Neurodivergent individuals are significantly over-represented in lone-actor extremist samples
- One study found a tentative 3% autism rate among lone actors - about twice the general population rate (1.5%)
- However, terrorists generally show no distinct mental-health or personality profile
- Lone actors show higher rates of depression, anxiety, personality disorders, and isolation

Key Dynamics



Preference for certainty

A struggle with nuance and ambiguity can make binary, black-and-white extremist narratives feel more logical and appealing by offering clear answers to complex issues.



Social alienation

Challenges in socialising or interpreting neurotypical social cues can create feelings of isolation, making individuals vulnerable to groups offering acceptance.



Deep-dive interests

A tendency toward intense focus and repetitive information-gathering can lead individuals to become quickly immersed in extremist online echo chambers.



Need for structure

A strong desire for predictability and order can draw people toward extremist ideologies that promise a clear, rule-based framework for society.

Important Considerations

- Neurodivergence does NOT cause extremism - it is one of many potential vulnerability factors
- No evidence links autism to violence or extremism overall
- Certain cognitive traits may raise situational risk when combined with social isolation, online immersion, and lack of support
- Effective safeguarding requires neuro-inclusive approaches that understand how neurodivergent individuals process information
- Practitioners should avoid conflating neurodivergence with dangerousness - this stigmatises and harms neurodivergent communities
- Early intervention, social inclusion, and tailored support are key protective factors

For more resources and practitioner guidance on extremism and radicalisation, visit groundswellproject.org