Lethal Subcultures

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INTRODUCTION

Subcultures are groups of people that are in some way represented as non-normative and/or marginal through their particular interests and practices, through what they are, what they do, and where they do it.

(Gelder 2005: 1)

News reporting, legislation, policy, and investigations often contribute to the impression that violent extremists and terrorists are organised, disciplined, and strategic, luring vulnerable young people into distorted worldviews that prize atrocity, hatred, and malevolence.

Despite the overt militancy of violent extremist spaces however, actual terror attacks remain rare, and those that do take place are often poorly planned and unaffiliated, or only partially affiliated, to groups.

Although some terrorist spectaculars have caught headlines and policy attention, many more attacks and plots are largely ineffectual, never matching up to the violent rhetoric common in these spaces.

The short CREST report (*https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/lethal-subcultures/*) that this summary derives from applies subcultural theory to the problem of violent extremist organisation, conceptualising violent extremism as a lethal subculture.

KEY POINTS

- Subcultures are defined as groups of people unified by a deviant perspective. Lethal subcultures are similarly defined, but with the additional criteria that subcultures either produce or endorse lethal violence as part of their aesthetic or behaviours.

- A range of subcultures could plausibly be included in this category including some aspects of Jihadism, the extreme-right, incels, some skinhead scenes, various youth gangs, criminal subcultures, and so-called dark fandoms.

- There is an extensive history of subcultural studies, but in the context of terrorism studies, subculture has been used a way to explain the emergence of Jihadism in Western context, as a form of status frustration (Cottee 2011).

- This early focus on status frustration has since been critiqued, but the broader stylistic role of subcultures within terrorist settings has been emphasised (Pisoiu 2014; Hemmingsen 2015).

- Jihadist internet activism in particular has been identified as an example of subculture focused activism in which Jihadis online were forced to navigate the tension between advocating for Jihad without participating physically (Ramsay 2012; 2020).

- The term lethal subculture is intended to recognise that alongside the strategic goals of any violent extremist or terrorist movement is a wider subculture with its own values and norms, reflected in its specific uses of subcultural material, internal dynamics, and approach to subcultural capital.

- Overall, despite being only too willing to present themselves as overtly violent and extreme, from a strategic perspective, lethal subcultures have the potential to represent a drag on the violent achievements of extremist and terroristic groups.

- Actual violence is conducted by a relatively small subset of actors while the majority pursue their own aims and are perhaps distracted by what else the culture has to offer.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This Executive Summary comes from a short report produced from the *Constraining Violence* project. The project looks at how individual, social, and subcultural factors constrain the potential for extremist violence.

You can find the *report* this summary is derived from (including references) as well as all the other outputs from this project at: *www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/constraining-violence/*