



Conspiracy Theories and Extremism:

The Personality Types that Amplify or Diminish the Relationship Between COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories and Support for Anti-Government Violence



“ **Almost 10% of respondents showed agreement on average across all COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs items** ”

INTRODUCTION

Recent protests against COVID-19 public health measures as well as online and offline incidents of threatening behaviour towards politicians, health professionals and the media demonstrate the potential radicalising effects of COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs.

We tested the impact of COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs on support for anti-government violence and examined whether this relationship was stronger or weaker based on particular personality traits.

In September 2022, we conducted a UK online survey with 800 participants. A representative (based on age, gender and ethnicity) sample was collected via Prolific’s online sampling method. We measured a wide range of personality traits, and asked each participant about the degree to which they agreed with:

1. Eight statements assessing different COVID-19 conspiracy theories
2. Ten statements tapping into different violent extremist behaviours against the government and its institutions

All statements were measured on 7-point Likert scales, where ‘1’ meant ‘I strongly disagree’ and ‘7’ meant ‘I strongly agree’. Items scored as ‘somewhat agree’, ‘agree’ and ‘strongly agree’ (i.e. score of 5, 6 or 7 respectively) were considered to show an ‘agreement’ with the statements. We further estimated mean scores (m), for each item and also calculated an average score for all individual scale items combined where appropriate (e.g., all items measuring covid conspiracy beliefs), ranging from 1 – 7.

COVID-19 CONSPIRACY BELIEFS

COVID-19 Conspiracy Beliefs	
COVID-19 is not worse than the ordinary flu, but the government and scientists deliberately exaggerated the severity of COVID-19 ⁶	16.9% (m = 2.6)
The government has intentionally exaggerated the threat of COVID-19 to impose repressive measures which restrict our civil liberties ⁷	20.9% (m = 2.7)
Support for Anti-Government Violence	
It is justified to use violence against the government or police ⁸	13% (m = 2.5)
It is justified to forcefully enter government or state buildings ⁹	15.6% (m = 2.6)
It is justified to form anti-government militias to protect yourself or members of your group ¹⁰	13.8% (m = 2.5)

9.3% of respondents showed agreement on average across all COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs items (m = 2.62), meaning they scored '5' and above, whereas on average across all anti-government violence items 6.3% (m = 2.57) indicated support for engagement in anti-government violence.

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COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs predict increased support for anti-government violence. However, the strength of this relationship depends upon individual personality types.

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The findings illustrated that stronger COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs predict increased support for anti-government violence. However, the strength of this relationship depends upon individual personality types.

The linear regression results showed that COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs are significantly associated with support for anti-government violence ($\beta = .24, p < .001$). A series of interaction analyses demonstrated that COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs have particularly adverse effects on support for anti-government violence amongst those individuals who demonstrate high levels of:

- Narcissism,¹
- Sadism,² or
- Machiavellianism³

When support for COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs were high, but these three personality types were low or average, there was a much reduced likelihood of support for anti-government violence.

FINDINGS

Additionally, we found that certain 'light' personality traits moderate and dampen the effect of COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs upon anti-government violence. For example, in those participants with average or high levels of altruism⁴ or honesty-humility,⁵ the risk effects of COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs are dampened compared to when altruism and honesty-humility are low.

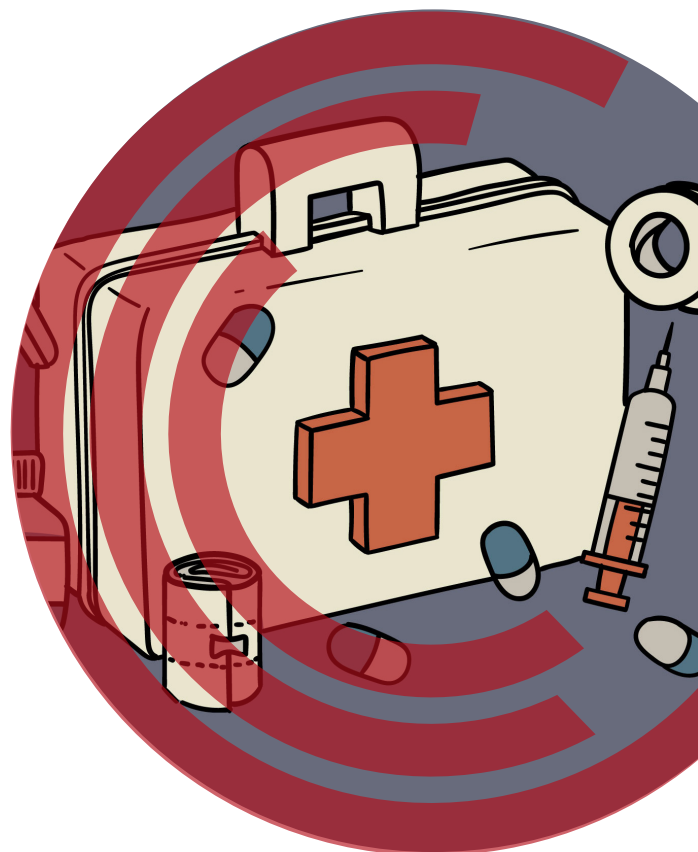
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Combatting the threat from extremism continues to evolve towards a public health approach.

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Our findings begin to establish the functional roles of risk and protective factors and articulate the relevance of those, such as *when* and *for whom* the presence or absence of certain risk and protective factors may be functionally relevant. It is actually in these circumstances, when risk factors are present, that the value of protective factors becomes clear, and this might provide important insights for “preventing and countering violent extremism” (P/CVE) approaches.

In terms of early prevention, combatting the threat from extremism continues to evolve towards a public health approach, which aims to mitigate vulnerability before behaviour escalates. Given the relationship between conspiracy theories and violent extremism, preventative programming aimed at preventing the onset of conspiratorial as well as extremist beliefs as early as possible as well as strengthening protective factors, which in turn may increase resilience, seem to be of substantial benefit.



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About the project

This guide was produced as part of the CREST project, which examines the types of conspiracy theories that are most closely aligned with violent intentions (e.g., belief in QAnon vs. flat-earth) as well as articulating the relevance of conspiracy and extremist beliefs to one another. To read other outputs from this project visit: www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/conspiracy-theories-and-extremism/

Study design, data analysis and findings were completed independently by the research[*er] [team] and should not be taken as representative of views held by those who fund CREST.

ENDNOTES

1. Tendency to have an exaggerated sense of self-importance, need for admiration, entitlement and a lack of empathy.
2. Tendency to be callous and unremorseful and to have a desire to directly or vicariously harm others.
3. Tendency to manipulate others, to behave deceptively to further one's goals, to have a cynical worldview and to lack morality.
4. Tendency to be sympathetic and soft-hearted toward others, to avoid causing harm and to react with generosity towards other people
5. Tendency to avoid manipulating others for personal gain, to feel little temptation to break rules, and to feel no special entitlement to elevated social status.
6. 8.8% answered 'agree' or 'strongly agree'
7. 11.1% answered 'agree' or 'strongly agree'
8. 5.8% answered 'agree' or 'strongly agree'
9. 6.1% answered 'agree' or 'strongly agree'
10. 4.6% answered 'agree' or 'strongly agree'

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