

# Practitioner Perspectives on Counterterrorism and Neurodiversity

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## INTRODUCTION

Existing research does not indicate that there is a direct causal link between neurodivergence and engagement in criminality or violent extremism in the general population. However, while estimates vary, a proportion of individuals within violent extremist populations are also neurodivergent. Within these individuals, specific symptoms of neurodivergent conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may contextualise vulnerability to such engagement, as well as resilience and disengagement, that may differ from their neurotypical counterparts.

Practitioners working in counterterrorism contexts have gained valuable insights through working directly with neurodivergent individuals in at-risk populations. This study therefore aims to gather knowledge from practitioners, examining:

1. How neurodivergence (particularly ASD) can contextualise violent extremism vulnerability, risk, and resilience;
2. Other factors that can increase or decrease risk;
3. Approaches and strategies to mitigate risk amongst neurodivergent extremist populations;
4. Training needs to support practitioners working with these populations.

These four aims were examined through an analysis of 10 focus groups with a total of 38 practitioners with



experience of working with neurodivergent individuals in violent extremism contexts. Most practitioners worked in pre-crime assessment, prevention, and intervention contexts.

Relevant neurodivergent features discussed by practitioners included restricted interests, particularly when terrorism-related; collecting behaviours; sensory needs and sensation seeking; social and communication difficulties; and cognitive rigidity and a need for structure.

The findings suggest that neurodivergent features alone do not directly cause vulnerability or risk to extremism; rather, they can combine with or exacerbate other vulnerabilities, such as those associated with social isolation and rejection; comorbidities and complex needs; difficulties in transitional periods; a lack of support from support systems; and socio-environmental factors such as the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the time spent online.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES ON COUNTERTERRORISM AND NEURODIVERSITY

Practitioners emphasised the importance of tailored interventions, particularly those that harness potential protective factors associated with neurodivergence, and neurodivergent-friendly and systems-based approaches. Finally, they recommended improvements for training, highlighting that they would benefit from more in-depth and practical training to guide them through understanding neurodivergent needs in these contexts, as well as appropriate tailored interventions.

Overall, these findings highlight the importance of neurodivergence-informed approaches in practice, bearing important considerations for the management of neurodivergent populations within extremism contexts.

### ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This is the Executive Summary from the Practice Consolidation and Assessment project. You can find all the outputs from this project at: [www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/practice-consolidation-and-assessment/](http://www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/practice-consolidation-and-assessment/)

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