



# Lone Actors as a Challenge for P/CVE

Authored by **Monica Lloyd**, RAN Expert Pool Member  
and **Annelies Pauwels**, RAN External Expert

Radicalisation Awareness Network

**RAN**   
Practitioners

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## Introduction

The increase in lone-actor terrorist attacks in Europe is concerning: lone actors' relative isolation compared to group actors, as well as the near-spontaneous character of their attacks have made it harder for law enforcement to detect and disrupt their plans. The latest Europol terrorist threat assessment highlights that in 2019, all but one of the seven jihadist attacks or failed attacks in the EU were committed by individuals acting alone, while most foiled plots by jihadists involved multiple suspects<sup>1</sup>. Much of our understanding of lone actors has been sourced from data sets spanning the period 1940 to 2015, so as to ensure large enough samples for analysis. Recent efforts focus on creating smaller and richer data sets from 2015 for more contemporary relevance. This paper provides an overview of past research and discusses more recent lone-actor profiling and their psychology as well as the challenge of identifying lone actors.

## Lone actors: an overview

### A growing phenomenon

Lone-actor terrorists who plan, prepare and carry out violent attacks without direction from a wider organisation pose an increasing threat in Europe<sup>2</sup>. Through magazines, social media and propaganda videos, jihadist ideologues have encouraged Western sympathisers to conduct terrorist plots alone, while right-wing ideologues have promoted the concept of 'leaderless resistance'<sup>3</sup>. Other lone-actor terrorists adhere to idiosyncratic, highly personal ideologies<sup>4</sup> or to single issues such as animal rights, anti-abortion and environmentalism, and more recently, to internet-based conspiracy theories.

### No single profile

Research suggests that it is not possible to identify one single, comprehensive profile of 'the lone actor'. Compared to group actors, they tend to be older, with an average age of 30: violent Islamist extremist (VIE) lone actors are usually younger than violent right-wing extremist (VRWE) actors<sup>5</sup>. Lone actors may have attained relatively high levels of schooling, with many completing secondary or higher education, although often they are not employed at a grade commensurate with their level of education<sup>6</sup>. It is also evident that their needs are more complex – psychologically – than those of group actors<sup>7</sup>.

### Operational characteristics

Terrorist attacks by lone actors can vary significantly. Few conform to the stereotype of a stealthy and highly capable 'lone wolf'<sup>8</sup>. More often, lone-actor attacks fail or are less lethal in their impact than group-based attacks, due in part to their limited resources. A recent study of 120 European lone-actor attacks between 2000 and 2014 found that only one in four plots, and one in three attacks, were fatal<sup>9</sup>.

### Why do lone actors act alone?

**Lack of social competence.** A group may reject individuals because of their mental health and/or personality traits (e.g. volatility or dominance) and the security threat they pose. Conversely, some lone actors may reject a group because they fail to find their place within it, and decide instead to operate alone.

<sup>1</sup> Europol, EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2020, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Nesser, Single actor terrorism; Feldman, Comparative lone wolf terrorism; Khazaeli Jah & Khoshnood, Profiling lone-actor terrorists.

<sup>3</sup> Kaplan, Leaderless resistance.

<sup>4</sup> Pantucci et al., Lone-actor terrorism. Literature review, pp. 5-6.

<sup>5</sup> De Roy van Zuijdewijn & Bakker, Analysing personal characteristics of lone-actor terrorists, p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> Liem et al., European lone actor terrorists versus 'common' homicide offenders, p. 63.

<sup>7</sup> Gill, Horgan & Deckert, Bombing alone.

<sup>8</sup> Schuurman et al., End of the lone wolf.

<sup>9</sup> Palombi & Gomis, Lone-actor terrorism. Policy Paper 2: Attack methodology and logistics, p. 2.

**Readiness to attack.** Some lone actors decide to act autonomously if they judge that fellow group members are not sufficiently committed to carrying out an attack, particularly if their attack is also an act of martyrdom.

**Ideological autonomy.** While some lone actors share the same ideology as a group, others may construct idiosyncratic narratives or focus on a single issue not shared with a group.

**Tactical choice.** Lone actors may be inspired by terrorist propaganda, or may be directed by the group hierarchy to carry out an attack alone. Terrorist groups of various ideologies (including VIE, VRWE and single issue-focused groups) have encouraged individuals to attack alone, to evade detection by law enforcement and security services.

A sample study of lone-actor attacks in western Europe between 1999 and 2018 confirms that more recently, lone actors have used less sophisticated and more readily available weapons such as knives, vehicles and arson, rather than firearms. This has resulted in fewer fatalities, with the exception of vehicle attacks which have proved the deadliest<sup>10</sup>. Overall, lone actors are characterised by lower capability compared to group actors, limited attention to operational security, and online and offline leakage of their motivation and intent. Such leakage occurred in nearly half of all cases of the 120 lone attacks referred to above: in 44% of leakage instances, perpetrators disclosed some indication of their intent to act; in 21%, they shared at least some details of their planned attack<sup>11</sup>.

### The role of the internet in lone-actor terrorism?

1. **Radicalisation.** The internet provides access to online material and social interaction without (physical) links to a group. Online extremist content can inspire lone actors to commit acts of violence by providing direct encouragement and/or justification for this violence. But radicalisation of lone actors rarely takes place in front of a computer screen alone – more often, it involves the interplay of both offline and online influences<sup>12</sup>.
2. **Tactical support.** Lone actors predominantly use the internet for the planning and preparation of their attacks, including for basic reconnaissance and access to tactical instructions. Often, though, these are low quality, resulting in a lower 'success' rate and lethality<sup>13</sup>.
3. **Networking.** Social media plays an important role in facilitating communication between like-minded individuals; it can provide a source of inspiration and allow them to share extremist propaganda and create connections<sup>14</sup>. Some lone actors post details of their plots, from a few days to a few hours prior to launching or livestreaming their attacks<sup>15</sup>. They also make use of social media platforms to express extremist rhetoric, thereby exposing their intentions and/or plans<sup>16</sup>.

### Connections to like-minded individuals and groups

Lone-actor terrorists are less visible than group actors, as they are not part of known networks. Nevertheless, despite not integrating into extremist groups, lone actors are often connected to them in some shape or form.

<sup>10</sup> Pauwels, Prevention of gun-, knife-, bomb-, and arson-based killings by single terrorists.

<sup>11</sup> Ellis et al., Lone-actor terrorism. Final Report, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Pantucci et al., Lone-actor terrorism. Literature review, p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Smith et al., Lone-actor terrorism. Policy Paper 3: Motivations, political engagement and online activity, p. 6; Clifford, Exploring pro-Islamic state instructional material on Telegram.

<sup>14</sup> Shehabat, Mitew & Alzoubi, Encrypted jihad.

<sup>15</sup> Smith et al., Lone-actor terrorism. Policy Paper 3: Motivations, political engagement and online activity, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Ellis & Pantucci, Lone-actor terrorism. 'Leakage' and interaction with authorities, p. 4.

*“There is a continuum of connections to likeminded extremists and most lone actors display varying levels of communication and affiliation with others who share their worldview”* <sup>17</sup>.

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Many lone actors are inspired by or networked to extremist organisations. A study found that ties to online and offline radical milieus are critical to lone actors’ motivation to carry out attacks, and that 78% of lone actors received encouragement or justification from such milieus for their use of violence <sup>18</sup>. Others are enabled (or even directed) by extremist individuals or organisations through social media to plan or implement an attack, with virtual ‘planners’ guiding the attacker by means of encrypted communications. For example, Mehdi Nemmouche, who attacked the Jewish museum in Brussels in 2014, acted alone but was trained, funded and logistically supported by Daesh <sup>19</sup>.

## Social isolation

Studies indicate that between a quarter and half of lone actors are socially isolated, and of these, almost two thirds have mental health problems.<sup>20</sup> But as researchers have pointed out, it is possible to be connected to like-minded individuals online at the same time as appearing to be socially isolated <sup>21</sup>. The concept of psychological isolation is discussed further below.

## What motivates lone-actor violence?

Although lone-actor violence often appears near-spontaneous, researchers characterise the targeted violence of lone actors as grievance-fuelled and planned over time. The aim is to exact revenge for perceived injustice and to achieve notoriety <sup>22</sup>. Ideologically motivated lone actors target strangers who represent or symbolise their persecutors, and they attack these victims in public spaces as an act of theatre. Those adhering to single issue ideologies, such as anti-abortionists or animal rights activists, may target known, specific individuals directly – but still publicly, for maximum impact. Lone actors with completely idiosyncratic grievances will still seek out a public arena in which to mount their attack and achieve the notoriety they seek <sup>23</sup>.

## Clusters based on behaviour: level of stability, organisational capability and criminal background

Despite the lack of a clear lone-actor terrorist profile, EU-focused research has identified clusters of characteristics that correspond broadly with patterns of attack planning <sup>24</sup>. One study contrasted a stable autonomous cluster of lone actors who shared their ideology (and had an intermittent connection with others) with an unstable volatile cluster having few links to either ideology or group. Both groups had a history of violence, but more members of the volatile group had a background in serious crime; a history of having tried and failed to join a terrorist group or start their own; and minimal attack planning and poor attention to operational security, often changing the target of their attack. VIEs were over-represented in this volatile cluster. By contrast, VRWEs were over-represented in the autonomous cluster, whose members were older, with long-term loyalty to their cause and a longer period of attack planning. These findings are consistent with a more recent study of 36 lone actors in 2015 and 2016 in western Europe, which noted that 41% held a previous criminal record and that criminals were at a higher risk of jihadi violence <sup>25</sup>. This finding of greater volatility and serious criminality in VIEs is picked up in the discussion of complex needs in lone-actor psychology, below.

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<sup>17</sup> Mullins, Lone-actor vs. remote-controlled jihadi terrorism.

<sup>18</sup> Schuurman et al., Lone actor terrorist attack planning and preparation, p. 1195.

<sup>19</sup> Mullins, Lone-actor vs. remote-controlled jihadi terrorism.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Khazaeli Jah & Khoshnood, Profiling lone-actor terrorists, p. 40; De Roy van Zuijdewijn & Bakker, Analysing personal characteristics of lone-actor terrorists, pp. 43-44.

<sup>21</sup> Liem et al., European lone actor terrorists versus ‘common’ homicide offenders, pp. 62-63.

<sup>22</sup> Liem et al., European lone actor terrorists versus ‘common’ homicide offenders, p. 47.

<sup>23</sup> Richardson, What terrorists want, p. 95.

<sup>24</sup> Lindekilde, O’Connor & Schuurman, Radicalization patterns and modes of attack planning and preparation among lone-actor terrorists; Clemmow, Bouhana & Gill, Analyzing person-exposure patterns in lone-actor terrorism.

<sup>25</sup> Khazaeli Jah & Khoshnood, Profiling lone-actor terrorists, pp. 33-36.

## Two main clusters of lone-actor terrorists

**Stable autonomous cluster.** Sharing of ideology. Intermittent connections with others. Less history of serious violence. Long-term loyalty to the cause. Long-term attack planning (VRWEs over-represented).

**Unstable volatile cluster.** Loose links to either ideology or group. Criminal background involving serious crime. Attempts and failures to join terrorist groups. Minimal attack planning and poor attention to operational security (VIEs over-represented).

## Clusters based on social competence and ideological autonomy

In 2015, an American government task force classified lone actors into four subgroups based on two dimensions: ‘**ideological autonomy**’ (the extent to which individuals share an ideology with others), and ‘**social competence**’ (the social and psychological difficulties that contribute to their isolation). These subgroups are Loner, Lone follower, Lone vanguard and Lone soldier<sup>26</sup>. It is important to stress that these classifications are not clear-cut, not least because each individual is placed at a point along two dimensions which actually produces more of a scatter gram than four clusters. However, Table 1 below is an attempt to map the findings from European research onto the American lone-actor typology. The three data sets include European and US cases, expanded in one study (to provide more breadth of analysis) and reduced in the other to a subgroup of those representing the peripheral and embedded subtypes (to provide more depth). This is an attempt to capture what several decades of data tell us about the characteristics and attack patterns of lone actors across a wide span of our shared history. However, it should be noted that none of these data sets includes lone-actor attacks after 2015, when Daesh encouraged their followers to carry out terrorist attacks in the West instead of migrating to Syria<sup>27</sup>. This challenge was taken up by a number of Europeans with criminal backgrounds<sup>28</sup> in contrast to previous lone-attackers that research confirmed were largely drawn from the well-educated middle class<sup>29</sup>. These more recent cases are therefore absent from Table 1 below.

**Table 1: A proposed typology of lone-actor terrorists**

National Security Critical Issue Task Force, USA (2015) n=98, US only*	Type 1 Loner	Type 2 Lone follower	Type 3 Lone vanguard	Type 4 Lone soldier
	Low social competence; ideological autonomy	Low social competence; shared ideology	High social competence; ideological autonomy	High social competence; shared ideology
Lindekilde et al. (2019), Europe n=33, USA, UK & Europe	Isolated, unstable, peripheral-withdrawn, weak social ties, rejected by group, unstable employment, long-term attack planning	Unstable, peripheral-volatile, violent, weak social ties, rejected by group, drug use, jihadi convert, ad hoc shorter planning, poor operational security, desire for martyrdom	Embedded-supported, ruptured relationship with group, stable, organised long-term attack planning, good operational security, far-right leanings	Embedded-autonomous, stable, organised attack planning, good operational security, occasional low-level criminality

<sup>26</sup> Connor et al., Report: Lone wolf terrorism.

<sup>27</sup> Wignell et al., A mixed methods empirical examination of changes in emphasis and style in the extremist magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*.

<sup>28</sup> Basra, Neumann & Brunner, Criminal pasts, terrorist futures: European jihadists and the new crime-terror nexus.

<sup>29</sup> Sageman, Understanding terror networks, p. 89.

<b>Clemmow et al. (2020) *</b>  n=125, USA, UK, Europe & Israel	Unstable mental health/personality, relationship failure, isolated and unconnected to a network, low level of leakage  <b>Example: Franz Fuchs, Austrian mail bomber</b>	Unstable networks, low stress, high level of violence and criminality, potential leakage  <b>Example: Anis Amri, Berlin Christmas market attack</b>	Solitary but stable, little interaction with others, low level of networking and leakage, and of personal stress  <b>Example: Anders Breivik, Norwegian massacre<sup>30</sup></b>	Stable, but subject to strain and stress, bolstered by networks, potential leakage  <b>Example: Mohammed Bouyeri, Amsterdam murder of Theo van Gogh</b>
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\* US data set 1940–2013; Lindekilde et al. selected subset of Gill data set; Clemmow et al. expanded data set from the Gill data set (1978–2015).

## The psychology of lone actors

### Mental disorder, criminality and complex needs

A study in 2015 identified that about 35% of a sample of European lone actors suffered from a **mental disorder** compared to 27% in the general population <sup>31</sup>. Another study observed that the odds of a lone-actor terrorist having a mental disorder is 13.49 times higher than the odds of a group actor <sup>32</sup>. The disorders associated with lone actors (schizophrenia, delusional disorder, personality disorder and autism spectrum disorder <sup>33</sup>) all include disordered thinking that is deluded, rigid or fixated, which can be readily framed by a belief system or ideology. This same study identified a syndrome of **complex needs** that included many features of **criminality** alongside mental health issues. The profile suggests a pathway of victimisation that begins with childhood trauma and develops into antisocial behaviour, identity issues, thrill-seeking, deviant peers, substance abuse, relationship instability and mental health issues. This complex of needs represents a degree of comorbidity between mental disorder and criminality. It explains the attraction of extremist ideologies that provide a righteous identity, promise redemption and value criminal capability, and it offers early evidence of a jihadi lone-actor criminal pathway.

### Suicidal intent

With the level of stress and distress associated with the lifestyle described above, it is possible to understand lone attacks as acts of **martyrdom**. A study of lone assassins in America found that 22% had suicide as their main goal <sup>34</sup>, and a European study found elevated levels of suicide in lone VRWEs, compared to group VRWEs <sup>35</sup>. An ideology that promises revenge and redemption can appeal to individuals lacking a vision of the future for themselves. In these circumstances, perpetrators may wear fake suicide vests or engineer a siege and shoot-out to ensure their death at the hands of law enforcement or at their own hands in a final act of theatre. A recent study on ideological active shooter attacks in the United States found that arresting ideological shooters required lethal force more often than arresting perpetrators of common homicide <sup>36</sup>.

### Personality traits

Although mental disorder and criminality may explain the personal and social dysfunction of a significant proportion of lone actors, it does not account for all lone-actor offending. Personality aspects also play a role. A study reviewing the social and psychological evidence for five models of radicalisation concluded that

<sup>30</sup> Although Breivik's ideology is characterised as far right, it also has idiosyncratic features that set it apart from mainstream far right ideology. He was more extreme than most of the far right organisations he attempted to link with, and side-lined by most of them. In his isolation he curated a singular ideology that was anti-Muslim, anti-communist and pro-Nordic, that included personal fantasies of himself as the First Prince Regent of Norway, a member of the Knights Templar and with an army behind him that did not in fact exist, placing him towards the autonomous end of the ideological dimension.

<sup>31</sup> De Roy van Zuijdewijn & Bakker, Analysing personal characteristics of lone-actor terrorists, p. 44.

<sup>32</sup> Corner & Gill, A false dichotomy ?, p. 23.

<sup>33</sup> Corner, Gill & Mason, Mental health disorders and the terrorist.

<sup>34</sup> Fein & Vossekul, Preventing assassination: Secret service exceptional case study project, p. 18

<sup>35</sup> Gruenewald et al., Distinguishing 'loner' attacks from other domestic extremist violence, p. 50

<sup>36</sup> Capellan, Lone wolf terrorist or deranged shooter? A study of ideological active shooter events in the United States, 1970–2014.



**personality traits** such as aggression, narcissism, sensation-seeking and social dominance helped to explain why only a fraction of those exposed to radicalising influences were indeed radicalised<sup>37</sup>.

*“The most plausible model for radicalization would be one that considers an interaction between personality traits and situational factors”<sup>38</sup>.*

**Narcissism** has been widely cited in early research as a principal explanation for terrorism<sup>39</sup>. This is understandable, given that extremist narratives promise supremacy, and that some prominent lone terrorist attackers are characterised by moral superiority and self-righteousness. Anders Breivik, for example, who was diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder, referred to himself as ‘the future Prince Regent of Norway’; in a similar vein, Timothy McVeigh promoted himself as the ‘first hero of the second American Revolution’. A large meta-analysis of 57 terrorism studies identified **authoritarian/fundamentalist attitudes** as strongly predictive of radical behaviour, alongside **in-group superiority** (narcissism)<sup>40</sup>. **Pathological fixation** can be delusional, obsessive or associated with an extreme overvalued belief<sup>41</sup>. The first two are mental health diagnoses, but the third is more aligned with personality and associated with autonomous, organised and lethal lone actors such as Breivik and McVeigh.

## Identifying lone actors

### Threat assessment by professionals

Not everyone who engages with extremist views will act on them. Assessing the risk of lone-actor violence before it takes place involves identifying the presence or absence of threshold behaviours that mark the point at which an individual mobilises for attack. Figure 1, below, illustrates a theoretical **lone-actor pathway**<sup>42</sup>. The commonalities in push and pull factors that engage both group and lone actors are shown, as is the point at which their pathways diverge when the lone actor fails to find a place within a group (for a number of reasons, as identified in Table 1). Assessment of risk in the P/CVE space needs to determine how well protected the individual is by family, friends, work and future goals. Those who have found a niche and can envision a future for themselves are protected from the extremist narratives that allow them to blame failings in their lives on a persecuting out-group<sup>43</sup>. Research indicates that those at risk of becoming lone actors are more psychologically disturbed than group actors, hailing from broken homes with a history of trauma and violence that create complex disorders across both criminality and mental health<sup>44</sup>.

Progression on a radicalisation pathway is not inevitable: individuals may be diverted at any point by P/CVE interventions that address risk factors and boost protective influences in their lives, but once isolated they place themselves beyond reach, and are more likely to decide that an attack is the only option remaining to them. A crucial aspect in identifying risk in lone actors is their **mindset of intent**: individuals who develop an intent to attack undergo a shift from a victim to a perpetrator mindset. This may be accompanied by a range of threshold behaviours<sup>45</sup> including stridency of belief, fixation on a final solution, identification as a warrior, pathway planning and last resort behaviours, and potentially, leakage, as captured in the TRAP-18 risk assessment tool<sup>46</sup> and evidenced in several recent studies<sup>47</sup>. The TRAP-18 is informed by the clinical experience of its originator, and is designed to capture the psychology and motivation of the lone actor. This

<sup>37</sup> King & Taylor, The radicalization of homegrown jihadists, p. 615.

<sup>38</sup> King & Taylor, The radicalization of homegrown jihadists, p. 615.

<sup>39</sup> Pearlstein, The mind of the political terrorist.

<sup>40</sup> Wolfowicz et al., A field-wide systematic review and meta-analysis of putative risk and protective factors for radicalization outcomes, p. 27.

<sup>41</sup> Meloy & Rahman, Cognitive-affective drivers of fixation in threat assessment, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> The above theoretical lone actor pathway is informed by research findings and from professional practice with terrorist offenders.

<sup>43</sup> Bartlett & Miller, The edge of violence.

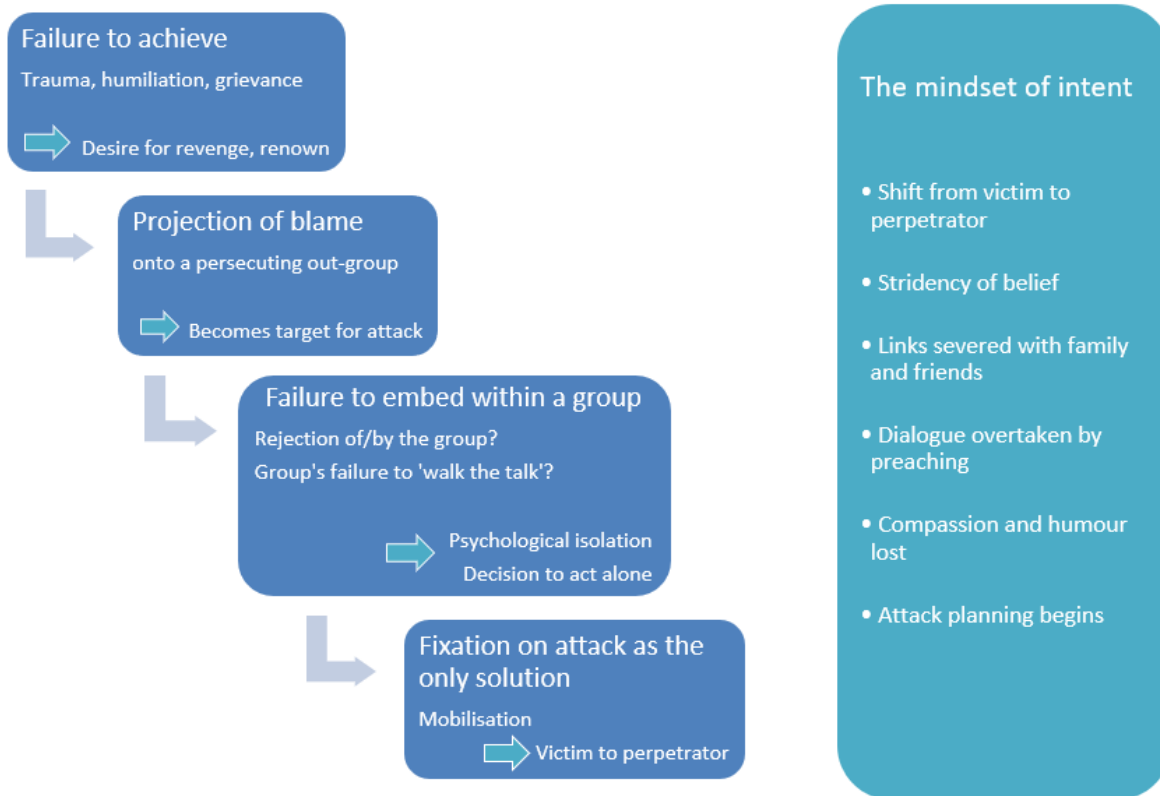
<sup>44</sup> Gill, Horgan & Deckert, Bombing alone.

<sup>45</sup> Meloy et al., The concept of identification in threat assessment.

<sup>46</sup> TRAP-18 (Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol), Meloy™.

<sup>47</sup> Meloy et al., Some TRAP-18 indicators discriminate between terrorist attackers and others subjects of national security concern; Böckler et al., Islamist terrorists in Germany and their warning behaviors; Challacombe & Lucas, Postdicting violence in sovereign citizen actors; Guldman & Meloy, Assessing the threat of lone-actor terrorism: the reliability and validity of the TRAP-18.

can also be achieved through ‘psychological autopsies’ of lone-actor perpetrators, the testimony of forensic professionals who work with lone-actor terrorists, and/or the autobiographies of lone actors themselves. All these sources have informed the psychological and criminological studies reviewed here to produce a fuller understanding of the individual lone actor’s motivation and intent.



**Figure 1: Lone actor pathway**

## Sharing information across practitioners

Information-sharing enables patterns of behaviour to be identified. Taken individually, mental disorder, criminality, online curiosity, legal gun possession or withdrawal from one’s family are not necessarily indicative of risk, but in combination, they may be. The clusters of characteristics listed in Table 1 and the descriptions of the mindset of intent should prompt the sharing of (sensitive) information – within legal and ethical boundaries<sup>48</sup> – between P/CVE colleagues (mental health practitioners, law enforcement officers, intelligence analysts and digital companies, etc.). Despite there being some evidence for typologies, each case needs to be assessed individually by a multidisciplinary team.

*“Threat management can only succeed if an interdisciplinary approach is guaranteed. Police, law enforcement, forensic and general mental health professionals and other experts must join forces”<sup>49</sup>.*

<sup>48</sup> Bakker & de Roy van Zuijdewijn, Lone-actor terrorism. Toolkit Paper 1: Practical guidance for mental health practitioners and social workers, p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> Guldemann & Meloy, Assessing the threat of lone-actor terrorism: the reliability and validity of the TRAP-18, p. 164.

## Risk spotting by family, friends and community

Family, friends, colleagues, and members of the public can play a crucial role in identifying potential lone actors, especially in terms of detecting changes in thinking and behaviour. As noted earlier, many lone actors leak their extreme views or even their intent to take violent action to those around them. According to the 2015 study mentioned earlier<sup>50</sup>, in 79% of lone-actor attacks, others were aware of the individual's commitment to an extremist ideology, in 82% they were aware of the individual's grievance, and in 64% they were aware of the individual's intent to mount a terrorist attack, because the offender had told them as much. Leakage by lone actors should therefore be taken seriously in both offline and/or online networks, and efforts made to build trust with the police so that the public feel able to pass this information on<sup>51</sup>. In 2019, a lone actor employed in the Paris police headquarters killed four colleagues after reports of his suspicious behaviour were not followed up. Reportedly, a 'culture of reticence' prevented the police from investigating radicalisation in their own ranks, driven by concerns about 'appearing racist or anti-Muslim'<sup>52</sup>. Related helplines and hotlines should be readily available and adequately resourced<sup>53</sup>.

## Threat assessment by professionals

Lone actors can be rehabilitated pre-crime or post-crime. If potential lone actors are successfully diverted from their intended pathways before committing an attack, their rehabilitation should include a formal assessment of risk and needs carried out by a specialised team of P/CVE practitioners. Depending on the lone actor's age and how advanced along the pathway they are, the viability of delivering prevention in the community needs to be balanced against the case for prosecution. A full assessment should identify the drivers, but more importantly, should also identify where protection is missing and might be put in place, informing the decision to either rehabilitate in the community or refer the case for prosecution.

In terms of rehabilitation following a long sentence, the challenge of reintegration is postponed, but may be greater for lone actors lacking social competence, preferring their own company, and/or holding a longstanding antagonism towards mainstream society. There is likely to be scepticism from others about their capacity to change, and potentially a reluctance on the part of the individual to do so. In these circumstances, a shift in mindset may neither be possible nor desired by the individual, who may choose to forgo rehabilitation or feign compliance while plotting a different future that includes suicide/martyrdom<sup>54</sup>. Post-crime, P/CVE practitioners need to be alert to this possibility. As each individual's radicalisation pathway is unique, so should their rehabilitation pathway be tailored to individual needs, both in terms of pre-crime and post-crime rehabilitation<sup>55</sup>. P/CVE practitioners and individuals should set realistic goals<sup>56</sup> that take account of age, abilities, mental health, culture, faith and ethnicity, and the plan should include buddying with a mentor and a group of helpers until a new identity crystallises<sup>57</sup>.

## Recommendations

- **Increase communication around mental health** in schools and in the workplace to build awareness and address issues before they risk creating a vulnerability to radicalisation.
- **Maintain vigilance** in school and work environments, youth and social welfare services, and in extremist content online for changes in behaviour or presentation that might be warning signs for radicalisation.

<sup>50</sup> Gill, Horgan & Deckert, *Bombing alone*, p. 429.

<sup>51</sup> Ellis & Pantucci, *Lone-actor terrorism. Toolkit Paper 2: Practical guidance for security practitioners*, p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> Sinai, *Forecasting active threat attacks*, p. 102.

<sup>53</sup> RAN, *Helplines and hotlines in preventing and countering violent extremism*, p. 2.

<sup>54</sup> See the case of Usman Khan, a convicted terrorist offender considered a 'success story' for an educational project, prior to his killing two of its members at London's Fishmongers' Hall in November 2019.

<sup>55</sup> RAN, *Rehabilitation Manual*, p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> RAN, *The diversification of VRWE as challenges for rehabilitation*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>57</sup> RAN, *Rehabilitation Manual*, p. 87.

- **Be aware that lone actors show more evidence of disturbance than group actors**, with complex needs that may include both criminality and mental health issues, and backgrounds characterised by broken homes, trauma and domestic violence.
- **Remain alert** to the possibility that violent criminals may be attracted to extremist martyrdom as a form of redemption when faced with faltering criminal careers and narrowing options.
- **Share information to inform multi-agency decision making.** Build as comprehensive a picture as possible from social services, mental health and forensic professionals, intelligence and law enforcement analysts and digital service providers to identify any psychological characteristics that bear on risk, and any threshold behaviours that may indicate mobilisation for violence.
- **Where concern is growing, undertake a full threat assessment** to identify both risk factors and where protective factors might be strengthened, to inform the decision to either rehabilitate in the community or refer the case for prosecution.
- **Do not assume that if a subject of interest drops off the radar they are no longer active.** If they have previously shown a strong level of identification with ideology and a potential willingness to use violence, they are unlikely to have spontaneously changed their mind. They may be plotting a lone attack.
- **Promote reliable follow-up of reported concerns**, as these are rarely made lightly.
- **Raise public awareness** of the appeal of violent extremism to those harbouring grievances who are seeking a target for their anger. This includes education on how to spot at-risk behaviour (both online and offline) and where to find professional advice and support.
- **Build trust in the police.** A trusted police presence in local communities can help police officers detect worrying behaviour and increase the willingness of community members to share their concerns.
- **Set up fully resourced helplines and hotlines** for friends, family members, professionals or members of the public to share their concerns and receive guidance and support.
- **Take reported leakage seriously** in both offline and online networks.
- **Provide tailor-made rehabilitation plans** with realistic goals that take into account age, abilities, education, mental health, culture, faith and ethnicity, and include buddying with a mentor and a group of helpers until a new identity is established.

## Further reading

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#### About the authors:

**Monica Lloyd** is a professional forensic psychologist who has worked in prisons where she specialised in the management of disruptive prisoners in high security conditions, and as a prison inspector where she carried out thematic reviews of prison service policy and practice. She has contributed to the literature on the mental health effects of solitary confinement, and to understanding the pathways into terrorism of those convicted of terrorist offenders. As an academic she continues to publish on the assessment of extremist violence and to provide consultancy to the UK government's Prevent strategy.

**Annelies Pauwels** is a Research Fellow at the Flemish Peace Institute in Brussels, where she focuses on violent extremism and terrorism. Prior to that, she conducted research on conflict and crime prevention for several international organisations, including the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and the UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI). Her previous research projects have focused, among others, on jihadist and right-wing terrorism, radicalisation in prison settings, and the EU's terrorism prevention initiatives and cooperation.



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