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More alike than unlike? Comparing characteristics of violent and non-violent extremist offenders

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the characteristics differentiating violent from non-violent extremist offenders, focusing on established risk factors. The sample comprised 163 male offenders convicted of terrorism-related offences or extremist-motivated crimes within His Majesty's Prison Service in England and Wales. Participants were categorised as violent or non-violent based on their index offence, with risk factors coded from ERG22+ reports and related file information. Results indicate that violent extremist offenders were more likely to have histories of previous violence, interpersonal difficulties and pro-violent attitudes, whereas non-violent offenders exhibited a higher prevalence of major mental disorders. Analyses by ideological subtype revealed distinct patterns: violent Islamist offenders were more likely to endorse violent attitudes, while non-violent counterparts showed increased mental health vulnerabilities; among right-wing extremists, violent offenders displayed elevated antisocial behaviour and prior violence. These findings underscore the complex interplay of behavioural histories, attitudes and psychological factors influencing violent extremist behaviour. The study highlights the importance of targeted, nuanced risk assessments and contributes to the limited literature directly comparing violent and non-violent extremist offenders. Understanding these distinctions within the legal context, where preparatory actions can also constitute offences, has important implications for risk management and intervention strategies.

Introduction

Terrorism in the United Kingdom (UK) is legally defined by the Terrorism Act (2000, 2006). This legislation characterises terrorism as the use or threat of action intended to influence government organisations or intimidate the public (CPS, n.d.). This legal definition applies to actions both within and outside the UK. Importantly, this action must be undertaken to advance a political, religious, racial or ideological cause to be deemed a terrorist. The Act

outlines various offences, termed TACT offences, that criminalise a spectrum of activities beyond just the act of committing a terrorist attack. This spectrum covers activities such as planning, assisting or even gathering information for a potential terrorist attack or contributing significantly to a terrorist threat. Consequently, individuals convicted under TACT offences represent a wide range of actions and motivations, including those convicted for directly engaging in violence, indirectly supporting terrorist groups or even those convicted for preventative offences such as collecting information that could be useful for future attacks (Terrorism Act, 2000, 2006). Thus, the UK's approach to defining and prosecuting terrorism is rooted in addressing both the immediate threat of violence and actions that might lead to harm in the future. This approach emphasises the seriousness with which the UK views the potential for harm, aiming to prevent acts of terrorism before they occur.

Although the Terrorism Act provides a clear statutory framework, it has also been the subject of academic criticism. Commentators argue that some provisions, particularly those relating to indirect encouragement or glorification of terrorism, use broad and indeterminate language that may lack sufficient clarity for individuals to understand what conduct is prohibited (Hunt, 2007). Concerns have also been raised about proportionality, as the inclusion of recklessness as a basis for liability and the wide scope of preparatory offences risk capturing behaviour that falls short of clear terrorist intent (Macdonald & Lorenzo-Dus, 2020). Others question the practical effectiveness of such expansive definitions, suggesting that they may criminalise expressive or preparatory acts that are only loosely connected to preventing violence (Walker, 2006). Freedom of expression is frequently highlighted in this regard, with scholars noting that broadly framed speech-related offences may discourage people from expressing lawful political or ideological views (Macdonald & Lorenzo-Dus, 2020; Walker, 2006). These critiques reflect an ongoing debate about how best to balance public protection with the safeguarding of fundamental rights within counterterrorism legislation.

Radicalisation as a multifaceted process

Engagement and involvement in terrorism is typically not a sudden event but a gradual process of ideological and social transformation through which individuals come to adopt increasingly extreme beliefs that may ultimately justify violence as a legitimate means to achieve ideological goals (Horgan, 2009). Radicalisation is influenced by the exposure to and internalisation of extremist narratives that simplify complex issues, often vilifying outgroups and framing their actions as threats that require a violent response. These narratives provide a framework for understanding the world and offer a sense of purpose and belonging, particularly for those who feel alienated (Borum, 2011). Social environments play a crucial role in reinforcing these narratives and normalising the acceptance of violence (Reeve, 2018). The process often occurs within the context of group dynamics, where social pressures, shared experiences and reinforcement of beliefs contribute to the escalation of radical views (Borum, 2011; Horgan, 2008).

Models of radicalisation (the term that has been used to describe this process) use metaphors such as a pyramid (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008) or a staircase (Moghaddam, 2005) to illustrate the escalation of beliefs and behaviours. The pyramid of radicalisation is a model that describes the stages of increasing extremism, with the smallest number of

individuals at the top engaging in terrorism. The base of the pyramid represents a larger population that sympathises with the cause. As individuals move up the pyramid, they demonstrate greater commitment to the cause, adopt increasingly radical beliefs, and become more willing to engage in violence (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). The staircase of radicalisation model illustrates the progression towards terrorism as a series of steps. Individuals begin on the 'ground floor' with feelings of injustice and relative deprivation. As they ascend, they encounter increasingly limited options and become more entrenched in extremist ideologies and behaviours. This model emphasises the role of perceived injustice, the appeal of extremist narratives and the influence of group dynamics in driving individuals towards violence (Moghaddam, 2005). Reeve (2018) observed that the models often assume a linear trajectory, whereas radicalisation is inherently complex and non-linear, shaped by a range of factors with differing relevance and impact across individuals (Horgan, 2008). There is a range of factors that can contribute to an individual's susceptibility to violent extremism, and these factors can be broadly categorised as *push* and *pull* factors. Although many models of radicalisation emphasise individual psychology and immediate social environments, broader structural and historical influences also play an important role. Research has highlighted how experiences of systemic discrimination, socioeconomic marginalisation and intergenerational trauma can contribute to a sense of grievance or exclusion, which may heighten susceptibility to extremist narratives (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; King & Taylor, 2011). In this context, perceived injustice does not arise in a vacuum but may reflect genuine experiences of inequality or disadvantage (Reeve, 2018). Recognising these wider influences helps to situate individual pathways within the broader contexts in which they occur and underscores the complex, multifaceted nature of radicalisation.

Push and pull factors

The framework of 'push' and 'pull' factors, first used to understand defection from neo-Nazism by Aho in 1988, offers a valuable lens to analyse the complex process of radicalisation. Aho theorised that individuals are pushed away from groups by factors such as disillusionment with the group, negative experiences or poor leadership, while factors such as strong personal relationships or a desire for a better life pull them away (James, 1988). Horgan (2009) and Borum (2011) later applied this model to the study of the radicalisation process, although both authors do not consistently use the 'push-pull' terminology, but rather they emphasise the interaction of situational, social and psychological influences that drive radicalisation. However, the pull–push framework has been used by various organisations (including HMPPS) to better understand how individual factors interact with other social and political circumstances during the engagement process (HMPPS, 2011). Broadly speaking, push factors are internal forces driving individuals towards extremism. They often arise from social and personal grievances such as feelings of injustice, discrimination, and alienation. When individuals perceive that they are being treated unfairly or denied opportunities because of their identity, beliefs or social status, they may feel anger, frustration and resentment. Such emotions can foster a sense of disillusionment with established systems, increasing susceptibility to extremist narratives. In this context, the

combination of negative emotional states and a desire for change can lead individuals to view violence as a legitimate and necessary method to achieve the required goals (Borum, 2011; Horgan, 2009).

Pull factors are external forces that attract individuals to extremist groups by offering appealing rewards. They operate by providing a sense of belonging, purpose, and significance, fulfilling deeply rooted psychological needs (and these incentives can be particularly potent for individuals feeling lost, alienated or directionless). Extremist groups often present themselves as tightly-knit communities, offering camaraderie and acceptance. They may also exploit transitional periods in individuals' lives, such as adolescence, when identity formation is salient, to lure recruits. By offering a rigid worldview with simple solutions to complex problems, extremist groups create an illusion of control and certainty (Hogg, 2012; Kruglanski et al., 2014; Webber et al., 2018). The presence of charismatic individuals who resonate with personal needs and issues can also be a significant pull factor (Borum, 2011; Horgan, 2009). Thus, overall push factors can be viewed as the negative circumstances that make individuals vulnerable to radicalisation, whereas pull factors are the positive incentives that extremist groups can offer, which draw individuals in. Recent empirical research has continued to examine these dynamics and provides further support for the relevance of push and pull factors in contemporary extremist recruitment. Studies indicate that grievances linked to marginalisation, identity threat and perceived injustice function as important push factors, while group belonging, ideological validation and the promise of personal significance operate as key pull mechanisms (Kruglanski et al., 2014; Vergani et al., 2020). Large-scale analyses further demonstrate that violent extremist behaviour is rarely explained by single factors, instead reflecting the co-occurrence of grievances, identity-based motivations and contextual influences across ideological groups (Jasko et al., 2022).

Ideological support versus violent action

Individuals may be drawn to violent extremism for a variety of reasons, evident in differing paths to radicalisation. However, holding radical beliefs does not necessarily equate to active engagement in violence (Borum, 2011; Horgan, 2008). The transition from radical thought to violent action often involves a process of moral disengagement, originally conceptualised by Bandura (1990) as a mechanism through which individuals selectively disengage from ethical standards. In the context of extremism, this process allows individuals to overcome societal and internal constraints against violence (Bartlett & Miller, 2012; Horgan, 2008; Kruglanski et al., 2017; Moghaddam, 2005). This can be facilitated through strategies such as dehumanising perceived enemies, minimising harm and diffusing responsibility for violent acts (Bartlett & Miller, 2012; Kruglanski et al., 2017; Moghaddam, 2005).

Some scholars have argued that there is an important distinction between individuals who engage in violent terrorist acts and those who merely express ideological support for extremism. This distinction is typically framed in terms of demonstrated intent and capability to carry out violence, rather than the mere presence of radical beliefs. For example, Kenyon et al. (2023) highlighted that not all radicalised individuals directly participate in acts of violence. Their classification of extremist offending by offence role, such as 'attacker', 'facilitator', 'financer' or 'traveller', illustrates that some individuals contribute

to supportive or logistical capacities without engaging in violent behaviour themselves. Shortland et al. (2022) similarly consider this potential distinction, drawing on Borum's differentiation between the process of radicalisation and the pathways leading to violent action. Using data from the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) database, they distinguish between 'violent' and 'non-violent' extremist offenders, with the former involving participation in or planning of violent acts, and the latter confined to non-violent activity. The development of the Prioritization and Intervention for Violent Extremists Tool (PIVET; Shortland et al., 2022) reflects a growing interest in identifying which individuals are more likely to progress to violence, pointing to the relevance of factors such as prior offending and access to extremist networks. However, while some empirical evidence supports this distinction, it remains the subject of academic debate (Bartlett & Miller, 2012; Knight et al., 2017; Seaward et al., 2025). The relationship between ideological commitment, intent and behavioural outcomes is complex, and the boundaries between violent and non-violent extremism are not always clear-cut.

Current study

The aim of the current research is to contribute to the empirical knowledge base on understanding the characteristics of terrorism by examining whether there are measurable differences between those who commit violent and non-violent extremist offences across factors known to be associated with violence. In this context, the violent group refers to individuals whose index offence involved a clear intent to cause harm to others through violent means, whereas the non-violent group comprises those who hold extremist beliefs and express a willingness to cause harm, but without engaging in violence themselves. By exploring how these groups differ across recognised indicators of risk, the study seeks to enhance understanding of the conditions under which extremist beliefs may translate into violent behaviour.

Methods

Sample

The sample comprises 163 individuals who were convicted of the Terrorism Act offences (TACT) or for those convicted of other offences where the motivation was extremist (TACT-connected). They all served a custodial sentence within His Majesty's Prison Service (HMPPS) in England and Wales. While only males were considered, the sample was not based on any specific ideology. Detailed demographic information (e.g. age and ethnicity) is not reported due to security and confidentiality restrictions associated with custodial counterterrorism data.

Information was gathered from already existing electronic files. To be included, the individual had to have at least one ERG22+[1] report completed. The assessment needed to be completed collaboratively with the individual so that their views were also acknowledged. As such, if the ERG22+ assessment was carried out based on file information only, the case would be excluded. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the reports were composed at different stages in the progression of the prison sentence. The authors

of the reports were either Registered Psychologists or qualified Probation Officers who undertook and passed a specialist training. Additional official information, such as the Judges' Remarks or the OASys[2] reports, was also considered.

Procedure and analysis

The study obtained approval from the National Research Committee (NRC) in January 2022, as required for research involving data pertaining to convicted individuals incarcerated in England and Wales. The NRC serves as the regulatory body responsible for reviewing and authorising research applications involving staff and/or offenders across prison establishments, the Probation Service and HMPPS Headquarters.

Individuals were assigned to a violent or a non-violent group based on their index offence. The definition was based on the following criteria taken from previous literature, making a distinction between the individuals who hold extremist views and engage in violence and individuals who hold extremist views and are willing to cause harm but without using violence themselves (Kenyon et al., 2023; Shortland et al., 2022). As such, a violent case was operationalised for inclusion where the individual actively participated in ideologically motivated actions that resulted (or if carried out had the potential to result) in causalities or injuries to another or cause serious and significant structural damage with the potential to endanger life. Non-violent, ideologically motivated actions included behaviours that could facilitate violence conducted by others. Receiving 'terrorist' training but not acting on it, inciting others to violence but not taking direct action themselves, threatening violent actions without operational progress towards a plot, possession of illegal weapons without any evidence for operational plans for violence, were all considered non-violent. However, active production of weapons e.g. bomb making, was considered violent. In the current sample, 79 cases were assigned as violent and 84 as non-violent.

A coding framework was developed based on the HCR-20[3] (Douglas et al., 2013) manual, constructed on the premise that a formal HCR-20 interview had not taken place and that relevant information would instead be available within ERG22+ reports or other associated file material. The HCR-20 was selected as the organising framework because it is the primary structured professional judgement tool used within HMPPS for the assessment of general violence risk. Using the HCR-20, therefore, ensured alignment with routine custodial assessment practices and facilitated the systematic extraction of violence-related risk information from case files. A coding manual was developed, including definitions for each variable, to ensure consistency. During the early phase, four psychologists independently coded all variables for a selection of cases. In a manner akin to the procedure used by Kenyon et al. (2025), any apparent inconsistencies were resolved collaboratively and, where necessary, aspects of the coding framework were refined. Although the Extremism Risk Guidance 22+ (ERG22+) assessment formed the primary source of case information, the coding framework was not derived directly from ERG22+ items. ERG22+ is designed to support the formulation of extremist risk and pathways specific to terrorism, whereas the focus of the present study was on examining risk factors associated with violence. The HCR-20 was therefore used as the organising framework, as it provides a well-established structure for identifying and categorising violence-related risk factors that are not specific to terrorism.

Information contained within ERG22+ reports, together with other file material, was used to identify the presence of HCR-20 – aligned violence-related risk factors, ensuring that extremism-specific case formulation informed the coding without constraining the analysis to terrorism-specific constructs. Individual component indicators within each domain were binary coded as present/absent (yes/no). Each domain comprised multiple component indicators, which were summed to create a composite domain score reflecting the number of indicators present for each individual. Overall, the research aimed to capture 10 factors closely aligned to HCR-20 domains, namely previous problems with: H1 violence (excluding the index offence); H2 antisocial behaviour; H3 relationships; H4 employment; H5 substance use; H6 major mental disorder; H7 personality disorder; H8 traumatic experiences; H9 violent attitudes and C4 instability (behavioural and cognitive, treated as a static factor for the purposes of this study).

Results

Analyses were conducted on composite domain scores rather than individual binary indicators; reported means, therefore, reflect the average number of indicators present within each domain. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine differences between violent and non-violent extremists across variables. A significant difference was found for the factor reflecting previous problems with violence (H1). Levene's test indicated unequal variances ($F(1,161) = 11.72$, $p < .001$), so adjusted degrees of freedom were used. Violent individuals ($M = 1.24$, $SD = 1.37$) had significantly more violent behaviours prior to committing the index offence than non-violent individuals ($M = .71$, $SD = 1.02$), $t(144.15) = -2.76$, $p = .006$ (two-tailed). The mean difference was –0.53 (95% CI [−0.90, −0.15]) with a medium effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.44$). When assessing problems with intimate or interpersonal relationships (H3), results also indicated a significant difference, $t(161) = -2.45$, $p = .015$ (two-tailed). Violent individuals ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 1.20$) displayed more such problems compared to non-violent individuals ($M = 1.64$, $SD = 1.06$). The mean difference was –0.43 (95% CI [−0.78, −0.08]), with a small-to-medium effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.38$). A strong effect was observed for problems with violent attitudes (H9). Equal variances were assumed ($F(1,161) = 0.60$, $p = .441$), and results revealed a significant difference, $t(161) = -6.61$, $p < .001$ (two-tailed). Violent extremist offenders held more violent attitudes ($M = .87$, $SD = .63$) in comparison to non-violent extremist offenders ($M = .29$, $SD = .50$), with a mean difference of –0.59 (95% CI [−0.76, −0.41]) and a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.04$).

A significant difference was also observed when capturing previous problems with major mental disorders (H6). Levene's test indicated unequal variances ($F(1, 161) = 7.14$, $p = .008$), so adjusted degrees of freedom were used. Violent individuals ($M = .44$, $SD = .61$) showed less problems in that area than non-violent individuals ($M = .68$, $SD = .76$), $t(157.36) = 2.18$, $p = .031$ (two-tailed). The mean difference was 0.24 (95% CI [0.02, 0.45]), with a small-to-medium effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.34$). All other group comparisons, including H2, H4, H5, H7, H8 and C4 did not yield statistically significant differences (ps > .05; see Table 1).

The total sample comprised 163 individuals. One individual was categorised as holding an unstable or mixed ideological position and was therefore included in the overall analyses but excluded from subgroup analyses comparing Islamist and right-wing extremist

Table 1. T-test results comparing violent and non-violent extremist offenders on factors derived from the HCR-20.

	Group						
	Violent			Non-violent			
Outcome	n	M	SD	n	M	SD	t
H1	79	**1.24**	**1.37**	84	**.71**	**1.02**	**−2.76****
H2	79	.86	.89	84	.71	.95	ns
H3	79	**2.08**	**1.20**	84	**1.64**	**1.06**	**−2.45****
H4	79	.54	.66	84	52	.61	ns
H5	79	.49	.71	84	.48	.67	ns
H6	79	**.44**	**.61**	84	**.68**	**.76**	**−2.79***
H7	79	.27	.59	84	.23	.49	ns
H8	79	1.23	1.24	84	1.21	1.23	ns
H9	79	**.87**	**.63**	84	**.29**	**.50**	**−6.61*****
C4	79	1.54	1.15	84	1.46	1.11	ns

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Bold values indicate statistically significant results ($p < .05$).

offenders. Further analysis indicated some differences when examining subtypes of extremist offending. Levene's test for equality of variances was used to assess the assumption of homogeneity of variance, with adjusted degrees of freedom reported where this assumption was violated.

A significant difference was found between groups on the major mental disorder scale (H6) for those convicted of Islamist terrorism. The non-violent group ($M = .46$, $SD = .66$) scored significantly higher than the violent group ($M = .20$, $SD = .48$). The effect size was Cohen's $d = 0.45$, indicating a medium effect. This suggests that individuals in the non-violent group were more likely to have a history of major mental disorder compared to those in the violent group. Those convicted of Violent Islamist extremist offences, in turn, held more violent attitudes ($M = .94$, $SD = .68$) in comparison with those convicted of non-violent extremist offences ($M = .4$, $SD = .6$), $t(54.04) = 2.03$, $p = .047$. The effect size was Cohen's $d = 1.00$, indicating a large effect. This finding highlights the strong association between violent offending and pro-violence attitudinal endorsement.

Perpetrators of violent right-wing extremist offences were observed to have more previous problems with violence (item H1; $M = 1.83$, $SD = 1.37$), scoring significantly higher than non-violent individuals ($M = .65$, $SD = .90$), $t(31.28) = −3.74$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.81, −0.53]. A significant difference was found for problems with antisocial behaviour (H2), with higher scores in the violent group ($M = 1.09$, $SD = .79$) than the non-violent group ($M = .61$, $SD = .89$), $t(70) = −2.19$, $p = .032$, 95% CI [−0.91, −0.04], approaching a medium effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.55$). The effect size was large, Cohen's $d = 0.98$. A similar pattern was found for previous violent attitudes (H9), where violent individuals ($M = 1.00$, $SD = .74$) again scored higher than non-violent individuals ($M = .27$, $SD = .49$), $t(31.44) = −4.34$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.08, −0.39], with a large effect size, Cohen's $d = 1.13$. No other historical or clinical factors showed statistically significant differences between violent and non-violent individuals ($ps > .05$; see Table 2).

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the characteristics that differentiate those convicted of violent from non-violent extremist offences, with a specific focus on known risk factors.

Table 2. T-test results comparing those convicted of violent and non-violent extremist offences on factors derived from the HCR-20 for Islamist and right-wing extremists.

	Islamist			Right-wing		
	Violent $n = 55$ M (SD)	Non-violent $n = 35$ M (SD)	t	Violent $n = 23$ M (SD)	Non-violent $n = 49$ M (SD)	t
Outcome						
H1	1.00 (1.32)	.80 (1.18)	ns	**1.83 (1.37)**	**.65 (.90)**	−3.74***
H2	.82 (.92)	.86 (1.03)	ns	**1.09 (.79)**	**.61 (.89)**	−1.77*
H3	2.16 (1.20)	1.80 (1.16)	ns	1.87 (1.22)	1.53 (.98)	ns
H4	.56 (.66)	.46 (.61)	ns	.52 (.67)	.57 (.61)	ns
H5	.38 (.71)	.34 (.54)	ns	.78 (.74)	.57 (.73)	ns
H6	**.20 (.48)**	**.46 (.66)**	2.03*	1.04 (.56)	.84 (.80)	ns
H7	.15 (.40)	.06 (.24)	ns	.57 (.84)	.35 (.60)	ns
H8	1.13 (1.19)	1.14 (1.29)	ns	1.52 (1.34)	1.27 (1.20)	ns
H9	**.84 (.57)**	**.31 (.53)**	−4.43***	**1.00 (.74)**	**.27 (.49)**	−5.01***
C4	1.40 (1.10)	1.51 (1.12)	ns	1.87 (1.25)	1.43 (1.12)	ns

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Bold values indicate statistically significant results ($p < .05$).

The findings indicate that perpetrators of violent extremist offences are more likely to have experienced previous problems with violence, interpersonal difficulties and hold pro-violent attitudes, when compared to their non-violent counterparts. These distinctions suggest that behavioural histories and attitudinal predispositions may play a critical role in the escalation from non-violent extremism to violence. Conversely, perpetrators of non-violent offences were more likely to have experienced a major mental disorder, highlighting the possibility that psychological vulnerabilities, rather than violent proclivities, may underpin their offending trajectories. Collectively, these findings point to a constellation of factors that may contribute to the manifestation of violent extremist behaviour and underscore the relevance of targeted assessments in violence risk evaluations. Further analyses revealed variation in risk profiles across different ideological subtypes. Among those convicted of Islamist terrorism, violent individuals were significantly more likely to endorse violent attitudes, whereas non-violent offenders demonstrated a greater likelihood of having experienced major mental disorder. A more pronounced pattern emerged among perpetrators of right-wing terrorism, with those committing violent offending showing elevated levels of prior violence, antisocial behaviour and violent attitudes. These findings suggest that while certain risk factors, such as attitudinal support for violence, may be common across ideologies, the salience and configuration of other factors may vary depending on the ideological context.

Interpreting findings within the broader context of the existing literature remains challenging, in part due to the limited number of studies that have directly compared perpetrators of violent and non-violent extremist offending, as well as inconsistencies in methodological approaches across studies. Although a growing body of research has explored risk factors for extremist offending, relatively few studies have directly compared perpetrators of violent and non-violent extremist offending. Among those that have, the study by Knight et al. (2017) explored a range of psychosocial factors to identify distinguishing characteristics between the two groups. The study examined variables such as depression, suicidal tendencies, personality disorders and other mental health diagnoses, but found that the only significant difference between the groups was that violent extremists were more likely to have been exposed to extreme violence, including violent online content, pointing to the potential role of violent media and environments

in shaping violent trajectories. In terms of broader grievances, perceptions of external threat and persecution were common across both groups, but did not differentiate them meaningfully. However, violent extremists were more likely to have experienced bullying, and identity-related vulnerabilities such as low self-esteem and perceived under-achievement, particularly when academic qualifications failed to lead to meaningful employment, were also more prevalent. Nonetheless, the study's reliance on secondary and open-source data limits the depth of these conclusions, especially in relation to mental health functioning.

Focusing specifically on violent outcomes, Bartlett and Miller (2010) compared jihadi terrorists, radicals and a control group of young Muslims using open-source archival data, including security service reports and trial information, as well as interviews. Their findings indicated that, relative to terrorists, radicals were more likely to have participated in political protests, to have attended university, and to have been employed, suggesting a more outward-facing engagement with sociopolitical structures. Nonetheless, substantial similarities were observed across the groups. In a subsequent study, Bartlett and Miller (2012) identified additional factors contributing to violent radicalisation, including emotional appeal, the pursuit of excitement, status-seeking behaviours and peer influence. However, little is known about the psychological vulnerabilities that may underpin these trajectories. Furthermore, similarly to Knight et al. (2017), studies rely heavily on data derived from open-source materials, which present notable limitations. Chief among these is the lack of direct engagement with those convicted of offences themselves, thereby restricting insights into their subjective experiences and self-perceptions, critical components for understanding the psychological and social pathways to extremist violence.

While interpretation of findings within the broader literature is challenging, the findings from the current research carry important implications for assessment and intervention. Specifically, the observed distinctions between perpetrators of violent and non-violent extremist offences are consistent with emerging typological frameworks that propose the existence of subgroups within violent extremist populations who exhibit antisocial traits and may derive a sense of gratification or identity from the violent elements of their involvement in terrorism. Recognising such typologies is critical, as they have important implications for both assessment and intervention. The Extremism Risk Guidelines Revised (ERG-R; Kenyon et al., 2025) tool is particularly well-suited to this context, as it is designed to accommodate a wide range of pathways into extremism and include specific factors relevant to violence-prone individuals, such as thrill-seeking, criminal or personal gain, and grievance-fuelled motivations. The ERG-R's structure supports practitioners in formulating and contextualising violence-supportive attitudes, antisocial tendencies or criminogenic needs identified in the present study alongside ideological commitment, rather than assuming ideology alone as the primary explanation. In the present study, these differences were identified using HCR-20 – aligned violence risk domains, with ERG-R considered at the level of applied formulation rather than as the analytic framework. These insights are essential for informing intervention planning, particularly for those with a history of violence, who may require targeted support to manage interpersonal difficulties and develop effective conflict resolution skills. Incorporating violence reduction as a core component of rehabilitation may be especially important for this subgroup.

Several of the distinguishing factors observed between perpetrators of violent and non-violent extremist offending align with broader typological models and established risk factors that underpin violent offending more generally. These include traits such as antisocial orientation, emotional dysregulation and a propensity to derive gratification from violence. Recognising such patterns is critical, as they can inform the use of structured professional judgement tools. Emerging research focused on offending populations, particularly studies that incorporate the perspectives of individuals involved in terrorism, suggests that assessment frameworks must be capable of accommodating the diverse pathways through which individuals may become involved in terrorism. The ERG-R demonstrates such capacity, as it encompasses not only factors traditionally associated with the risk of violent extremism but also those more indicative of non-violent extremism. For example, item E6 (Thrill-seeking), E7 (Criminal, practical or material gain) and I3 (Antisocial or violence-supportive attitudes) directly reflect mechanisms implicated in violent behaviour beyond ideological motivations. Additional items, such as E4 (Problems with thinking and decision-making), also reflect cognitive vulnerabilities that are well documented in the broader violence literature (Corner et al., 2025; HM Prison and Probation Service, 2025; Horgan, 2008; Kenyon et al., 2025). Therefore, the ERG-R's capacity to capture a wide spectrum of pathways into extremism enhances its utility for both assessment and risk formulation. These insights are particularly valuable for informing intervention planning, as individuals with a history of violence may require focused support in managing interpersonal difficulties, developing problem-solving and emotional regulation skills, and reducing violence-related risk. Incorporating violence reduction as a central component of rehabilitation may be especially important for this subgroup. On the other hand, item E2 (Mental Health and Complex Needs) is particularly relevant for identifying risk-related vulnerabilities in perpetrators of non-violent extremist offending, individuals whose index offences do not indicate violent intent, but who nonetheless express ideological support for extremist causes, including those that endorse or result in violence. Although these individuals may not be willing to engage in or directly cause harm themselves, their support for violent outcomes reflects a complex interplay of psychological, developmental and experiential factors. The subcategories under E2, namely 'Mental Illness', 'Neurodivergence', 'Personality Disorder and Associated Traits' and 'Trauma or Exposure to Violence', allow practitioners to account for these underlying dynamics, even in the absence of personal violent action.

These distinctions take on further relevance when considering the interplay between ideology and violence. Recent large-scale analyses indicate that while perpetrators of both Islamist and right-wing extremist offending are capable of committing violence at comparable rates in domestic contexts (Jasko et al., 2022), the pathways into violence often differ. For right-wing extremists, risk profiles tend to be more criminogenic in nature, characterised by histories of general violence, antisocial behaviour, substance misuse and early exposure to dysfunctional environments (Copeland & Marsden, 2020). In contrast, perpetrators of violent Islamist offending more often demonstrate strong ideological conviction, commitment to group-based causes and so-called 'devoted actor' dynamics, whereby sacred values and perceived obligations to a collective identity drive violent action (Bartlett & Miller, 2012; Jasko et al., 2022). These differences are not only theoretically important but also have practical implications as they suggest that a one-size-fits-all approach to risk assessment is insufficient. Indeed, recent work applying

machine learning to large datasets of perpetrators of extremist offending has under-scored the value of ideology-specific risk profiles in improving the precision of risk identification and management strategies (Ivaskevics & Haller, 2022). The ERG-R is well-positioned to address this complexity, offering a structured framework that accommo-dates both shared and distinct risk markers across ideological subtypes, due to the wide array of factors it contains. However, from an empirical perspective, assessors still require a stronger evidence base to understand how these risk markers manifest differ-ently across ideological contexts, such as Islamist and right-wing extremism (Clesle et al., 2025).

Horgan et al. (2016) highlighted the complexity of the trajectory into terrorist violence, demonstrating that no single behavioural profile reliably distinguishes those who will go on to commit violence from those who will not. Shortland et al. (2022), drawing on Borum's (2011) distinction between radicalisation of beliefs and action pathways, empha-sise that not all radicalised individuals engage in violent acts. Their work demonstrates that criminological factors, such as antisocial behaviour and opportunities for crime, can effectively differentiate between higher-risk (violent) and lower-risk (non-violent) per-petrators of extremist offending. However, in practice, this distinction is not always clear-cut. This complexity is further compounded by the current legal framework, particularly under the Terrorism Act (2000, 2006), which permits prosecution for preparatory or pre-ventative acts e.g. possession of material deemed useful for terrorism, even in the absence of overt violent behaviour. In this context, the boundary between perpetrators of violent and non-violent offending is especially blurred. While similar ambiguity exists in other offence types, the intelligence-led and pre-emptive nature of counterterrorism responses further complicates clear distinctions between intent and action. These realities reflect the practical challenges faced by clinicians and practitioners assessing risk in this field. The present study's findings contribute valuable insight into violent and non-violent cases within this complex landscape, underscoring the need for continued research and nuanced approaches that account for the fluidity of risk and behaviour.

Study limitations

This study offers important contributions to understanding the distinguishing character-istics of perpetrators of violent and non-violent extremist offending; however, several limitations should be acknowledged. A key limitation relates to the use of existing elec-tronic records and ERG22+ reports as primary data sources. These reports were completed at varying points throughout the individuals' custodial sentences, which may introduce variability in the availability and accuracy of information, as the person concerned might be more guarded at the beginning of their sentence compared to later stages. Additionally, some offenders may have undergone interventions such as the Healthy Identity Intervention (HII) programme, while others did not, potentially influencing the presentation of risk factors over time. The reliance on secondary data also limits control over the depth and consistency of the risk factor assessments. Furthermore, the binary coding scheme applied to the risk factors, while facilitating clear categorisation, may over-simplify complex behavioural and psychological phenomena, potentially obscuring gra-dations in severity or frequency that could be clinically relevant. The cross-sectional nature of the study restricts insight into the temporal sequencing and causality of the

observed associations between risk factors and violent behaviour. Despite these limitations, the study possesses significant strengths. It utilises perpetrator population data, which is rare in terrorism research, and all assessments were completed with direct involvement of the individual concerned, incorporating their perspectives and ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of risk factors. This approach adds depth and validity to the findings, providing valuable insights that can inform both future research and practical risk assessment in forensic and security contexts.

Future directions

Future research should further investigate the specific role that mental health difficulties play in perpetrators of non-violent extremist offending, aiming to clarify how psychological vulnerabilities may influence their terrorism trajectories and potential risks. Additionally, more detailed exploration is needed into how criminogenic factors, such as antisocial behaviour, prior violence, and pro-violent attitudes, interact with different ideological beliefs and narratives across extremist subtypes. Understanding these complex interactions could significantly enhance the accuracy and sensitivity of risk assessment instruments. Furthermore, research should consider the influence of situational and contextual factors, including access to weapons, engagement with extremist networks, and exposure to radicalising environments, as these elements may act as critical catalysts in the progression from non-violent extremism to violent offending. Such insights would be invaluable for developing targeted prevention strategies and improving early identification of individuals at heightened risk of violent behaviour.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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