

The Role of Extremist Communities in Radicalization

This series summarizes recent research with important implications for targeted violence and terrorism prevention practitioners. Some sections of these briefs were produced with the assistance of generative artificial intelligence, but all content was verified by research staff and authorized by the original authors. The discussion of implications reflects DVERT's analysis of how practitioners may apply the research findings.

Source articles

1. Inger Storm Sandboe and Milan Obaidi Sandboe, "Imagined Extremist Communities: The Paradox of the Community-Driven Lone-Actor Terrorist," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 17, no. 4 (2023): 19–41, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27274057>.
2. Kristy Campion and Emma Colvin, "Community, More Than Conviction: Understanding Radicalisation Factors for Young People in Australia," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (2025): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2025.2478957>.

Key Findings and Implications

- "Lone" does not mean uninvolved in a broader extremist community. Lone actors may be deeply socially or emotionally tied to their extremist communities or movements.
- Social attachment can come before or stand in for ideological commitment. Extremist participation can be driven by unmet needs for belonging, identity, stability, and control.
- Online platforms don't just spread propaganda—they also offer community. Simulated closeness can be enough to sustain a person's identification with a movement, even without online contact.

Why did the researchers conduct these studies?

These two studies examined the role that extremist communities play in radicalization.

In the first study, the authors looked at lone-actor terrorists. These individuals are often understood to be isolated outliers who radicalize on their own, but many behave as if they are part of a community of people who are inspired by the same ideologies, cite the same manifestos, and explicitly reference and admire other extremists. The researchers wanted to determine whether lone actors feel as if they are part of a collective in the absence of an organized group and how feelings of belonging to an extremist community can provide identity, guidance, and scripts for violence.

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In the second study, the authors wanted to understand how extremist communities fit into the everyday lives of young people who radicalize. They aimed to determine whether (and to what extent) extremism is shaped by ideology or unmet needs, instability, and power imbalances in families, peer groups, and online spaces.

Both studies sought to advance the understanding of extremists by improving the understanding of the communities—real and imagined—in which extremists participate.

Methodology

- The authors of **“Imagined Extremist Communities”** used case study analysis of three lone actor terrorists (who carried out the Utoya, Christchurch, and Baerum attacks). The authors drew on court records, psychological reports, manifestos, media coverage, and prior research to trace shared traits, influences, and connections.
- The authors of **“Community, More Than Conviction”** partnered with a countering violent extremism program in New South Wales, Australia. Researchers interviewed frontline staff and analyzed de-identified case files of 17 participants involved with extremism.



Findings

- **Lone actors don’t view themselves as alone.** In many cases, these individuals closely followed other extremists, shared symbols and slogans, and saw themselves as part of a wider community. They acted alone operationally, but they were otherwise tied into an imagined extremist community.
- **Community is key, even for lone actors.** In multiple instances, ideology provided lone actors with a shared story and set of enemies, tying them to a wider extremist community and framing their violence as service to that community’s larger cause.
- **Ideological commitments may be shallow.** Many young people could not clearly explain their ideology, and they often repeated beliefs from adults, peers, and online actors rather than independently choosing an extremist worldview.
- **Extremist communities provide belonging and purpose.** Extremist communities—both real and imagined—offered comradeship, status, meaning, and identity, as well as security and a sense of control in sometimes unstable lives.
- **Online environments are key connectors.** Online platforms link individuals to broader extremist communities, enable manifestos and attack scripts to spread, and provide emotional rewards. Both studies found that online engagement reinforced the feeling of being part of a real extremist community.

How can practitioners working in early-stage intervention and threat assessment use these findings?

- Extremist communities meet strong needs in participants' lives, so effective interventions must offer credible, non extremist ways to meet those same needs.
- Practitioners should not be overly focused on the ideology. They should seek to understand the young person's complete ecosystem, including their family beliefs, exposure to violence, school environment, and peer and online networks.
- Practitioners should consider outside influences and power imbalances when engaging with a young person expressing extremist ideology. Many young people may simply be repeating beliefs learned from adults or older peers. This reality should influence how practitioners understand intent, responsibility, and support needs.
- Threat assessment practitioners should evaluate all actors for community affiliation and support. Though lone actors may lack operational co-conspirators, they may acquire guidance and influence from extremist communities.



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