



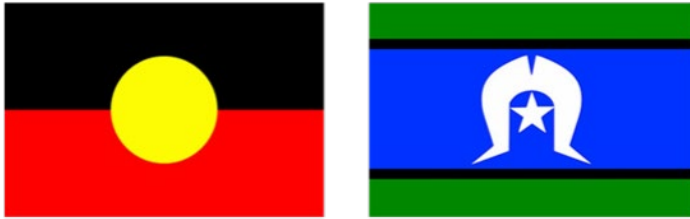
# **SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS REFERENCES COMMITTEE**

**Inquiry into right-wing extremist  
movements in Australia**

Professor Ramón Spaaij  
Associate Professor Mario Peucker  
Professor Debra Smith  
Professor Natalie Pyszora  
Professor Zainab Al-Attar

April 2024

## Acknowledgement of Country



Victoria University acknowledges, recognises and respects the Ancestors, Elders and families of the Bunurong/Boonwurrung, Wadawurrung and Wurundjeri/Woiwurrung of the Kulin who are the traditional owners of University land in Victoria, the Gadigal and Guring-gai of the Eora Nation who are the traditional owners of University land in Sydney, and the Yulara/YUgarapul people and Turrbal people living in Meanjin (Brisbane).

### **Suggested citation:**

Spaaij, R., Peucker, M., Smith, D., Pyszora, N., & Al-Attar, Z. (2024). *Submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee: Inquiry into right-wing extremist movements in Australia*. Melbourne: Victoria University.

# Introduction

Victoria University appreciates this opportunity to contribute to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee's inquiry into right-wing extremism in Australia. This is a joint submission by researchers across Victoria University who bring together vast scientific expertise and experience in studying violent extremism. Two of our members – Adjunct Professors Zainab Al-Attar and Natalie Pyszora, are also leading clinical practitioners in the field of violent extremism and forensic mental health.

Consistent with the terms of reference, our submission focuses on right-wing extremism. The submission addresses the following aspects of the inquiry:

- a. the nature and extent of right-wing extremist movements in Australia, with a particular focus on:
  - the threat posed by right-wing extremist movements;
  - links between global and domestic developments and movements;
- b. measures to counter violent extremism in Australia;
- c. other related matters, in particular how neurodiversity may link to vulnerability, risk, and resilience in violent extremism.

The submission presents insights into the re-emergence of right-wing extremist movements in Australia, the threat these movements pose to Australia, and the international context and linkages enabling right-wing extremist movements.<sup>1</sup> Following on from this discussion, we outline some of the steps that can be taken in response. In the final section of our submission, we discuss how facets of neurodiversity can contextualise risk and resilience to violent extremism.

We recognise that any detailed discussion of right-wing extremism in Australia should begin with an acknowledgement of the racist violence perpetrated against Indigenous Australians including massacres perpetrated by settlers and state authorities.<sup>2</sup> Many of these atrocities

---

<sup>1</sup> Large parts of these sections of our submission are based on the joint submission by Victoria University and the Board of Imams Victoria to the Legal and Social Issues Committee, Parliament of Victoria, for its inquiry into extremism in Victoria, <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/inquiry-into-extremism-in-victoria>

<sup>2</sup> "The Killing Times: A Massacre Map of Australia's Frontier Wars," *The Guardian*, 16 March 2022, <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/ng-interactive/2019/mar/04/massacre-map-australia-the-killing-times-frontier-wars>.

were carried out on the land upon which we live and work, as was the broader process of violent dispossession.<sup>3</sup> We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we conduct our work, and that sovereignty has never been ceded.

## The nature and extent of movements holding extremist right-wing views in Australia

### The re-emergence of right-wing extremist movements in Australia

This section outlines the re-emergence of right-wing extremist (RWE) movements across Australia. It refers to the *re-emergence* rather than the *rise* of RWE, because the extreme right has a long history in Australia.<sup>4</sup> Many Australian RWE movements were active throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, developing in ways that reflected the domestic context in which they operated, such as by having a strong anti-communist focus in the early Cold War decades and a virulent hostility to Asian immigration in later decades.<sup>5</sup> Australian RWE movements routinely echoed the ideas and approaches of international RWE movements while also drawing on domestic traditions of racism such as the White Australia Policy.<sup>6</sup> Periodically, Australian RWE groups and individuals have turned to the use of violence to further their political cause.<sup>7</sup> Some of this violence reached a level where it amounted to terrorism, although Australia had no specific criminal offence of terrorism before 2002. In 1990, when sentencing the leader of the Australian Nationalist Movement (ANM) for violent actions including assaults, fire-bombings

---

<sup>3</sup> Cowie, T., & Jackson, G. (2021). 'A Major Killing Field': Victoria's Brutal History to Be Uncovered at Indigenous Truth-Telling Commission. *The Age*, March 12, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/a-major-killing-field-victoria-s-brutalhistory-to-be-uncovered-at-indigenous-truth-telling-commission-20210310-p579ez.html>.

<sup>4</sup> For example, in the 1930s the rise of fascism in Europe inspired movements in Australia such as the New Guard and Australia First Movement. The aftermath of the Second World War saw the emergence of new RWE movements such as the Australian League of Rights. Moore, A. (1995). *The Right Road? A History of Right-Wing Politics in Australia*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Moore, *The Right Road?*; Henderson, P. C. (2002). A History of the Australian Extreme Right since 1950. PhD thesis, University of Western Sydney, <https://researchdirect.westernsydney.edu.au/islandora/object/uws%3A504/>; Campion, K. (2019). A 'Lunatic Fringe'? The Persistence of Right Wing Extremism in Australia. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 13(1), 2–20.

<sup>6</sup> Henderson, A History of the Australian Extreme Right since 1950.

<sup>7</sup> This was particularly prominent during the late 1980s and early 1990s, involving groups like the Australian Nationalists Movement (ANM) in Perth, National Action (NA) in Sydney, along with neo-Nazi skinhead gangs in Melbourne and elsewhere. ASIO's annual report for 1989-90 stated that the "only discernible domestic threat of politically motivated violence comes from the racist right." Moss, I. (1991). *Racist Violence: Report of the National Inquiry into Racist Violence in Australia*, Parliamentary Paper, no. 100 of 1991. Canberra: Australian Govt. Pub. Service.

and the use of explosives, the Judge noted that it was “no overstatement or exaggeration to term your campaign of those months a terrorist campaign.”<sup>8</sup>

RWE in Australia has remained persistent, adapting to new political contexts. Following the events of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, RWE groups have focused heavily on the supposed threat of Islam. Muslim dietary traditions, clothing traditions, and the construction of places of worship, have all been targets of moral panics promoted by the populist right that have often been indulged by parts of the mainstream media and various political figures. The tragic terrorist attacks in New York, Bali, Madrid, London, and elsewhere have been used to legitimise racialised scapegoating of Muslim communities in Australia.<sup>9</sup> RWE movements exploited this situation to mobilise support, including by participating in the 2005 Cronulla riots and playing key roles in the Reclaim Australia rallies. This often required a tactic of hiding core elements of their belief systems and presenting themselves as mere ‘concerned Australians’. This reflected an international shift, as RWE groups in many countries sought to exploit widespread Islamophobia after 9/11.<sup>10</sup> The post-9/11 mainstreaming of Islamophobia paved the way for the resurgence of openly racist variants of RWE.

As we discuss in greater detail in the next section, the violent potential of Australian RWE continued to be evident during the post-9/11 era.<sup>11</sup> For example, in 2004 the leaders of the ANM, now released from jail, attempted to recruit new members and conspired to firebomb Chinese restaurants. In 2010, two people who identified with the UK neo-Nazi group Combat 18 fired a rifle at a mosque in Perth. In 2012, two neo-Nazi skinheads in Melbourne were sentenced for brutally assaulting a Vietnamese student.<sup>12</sup> In 2013, a former soldier and self-described neo-Nazi was jailed for weapons and explosives offences.<sup>13</sup> These incidents gained

---

<sup>8</sup> Moss, *Racist Violence*, 220–21.

<sup>9</sup> Peucker, M., & Smith, D. (2019). Far-Right Movements in Contemporary Australia: An Introduction. In M. Peucker & D. Smith (Eds), *The Far-Right in Contemporary Australia* (pp. 1-17). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8351-9\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8351-9_1).

<sup>10</sup> This was not uncontested within the far right, as other far-right extremists were concerned that prioritising Muslims as the core enemy risked diluting their white supremacist beliefs and undermining the imperative to treat all non-whites as enemies. Moreover, new anti-Muslim groups formed that stridently objected to being characterised as far-right, instead viewing themselves as anti-fascists protecting secular democracy against ‘Islamofascism’, although their far-right influences were clear. Kundnani, A. (2012). Blind Spot? Security Narratives and Far-Right Violence. *Security and Human Rights*, 23, 129–46, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18750230-99900008>; Meleagrou-Hitchens, A., & Brun, H. (2013). *A Neo-Nationalist Network: The English Defence League and Europe’s Counter-Jihad Movement*. London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/ICSR-Report-A-Neo-Nationalist-Network-The-English-Defence-League-and-Europe%E2%80%99s-Counter-Jihad-Movement.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Zammit, A. (2012). The Potential for Far-Right Terrorism in Australia. *The Conversation*, October 11, <http://theconversation.com/the-potential-for-far-right-terrorism-in-australia-10036>.

<sup>12</sup> *R v O’Brien & Hudson*, No. 592 (Supreme Court of Victoria, December 12, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> *DPP v Gray*, No. 422 (County Court of Victoria, April 8, 2013).



relatively little political attention at the time, as successive Australian governments were focused on other forms of violent extremism, primarily the threat posed by supporters of al-Qaeda and later Islamic State, but the RWE threat was steadily growing.

The mid-2010s can be seen as a turning point, where RWE began to re-emerge in Australia on a scale not seen for decades. Several new RWE groups with different ideological outlooks, from anti-Islam to white nationalist and openly neo-Nazi, were formed, and some of them attracted significant numbers of online sympathizers and held a series of street protests between 2015 and 2019.<sup>14</sup> In the context of these far-right movements, in 2016, Commonwealth counter-terrorism legislation was used against a far-right extremist for the first time, when Victorian man Phillip Galea was charged with plotting a terrorist attack against 'leftists'.<sup>15</sup> Several other violent incidents involving RWE occurred in Australia in 2016, including an arson attack and a murder.<sup>16</sup> In October 2016, the then ASIO Director-General Duncan Lewis stated that the extreme right threat had grown after previously being at a 'very low base'.<sup>17</sup> It has since become routine for ASIO Director-Generals to publicly refer to a rising RWE threat.

## The threats posed by right-wing extremist movements

While ASIO lowered the overall national terrorism threat level from 'probable' to 'possible' in November 2022, there was a consensus among security agencies, extremism scholars and practitioners that political violence and terrorism remain a serious concern in Australia. As ASIO emphasised in April 2023 in its submission to Inquiry into the Criminal Code Amendment (Prohibition of Nazi Symbols) Bill 2023, 'it remained entirely plausible there would be a terrorist attack in Australia within twelve months, and that our biggest concern was individuals and small groups who could move to violence without warning.'<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Peucker, M., Smith, D., & Iqbal, M. (2019). "Not a Monolithic Movement: The Diverse and Shifting Messaging of Australia's Far-Right." In M. Peucker & D. Smith (Eds), *The Far-Right in Contemporary Australia* (pp. 73-100). Palgrave Macmillan, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8351-9\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8351-9_4)

<sup>15</sup> CDPP v Galea, No. 750 (Supreme Court of Victoria November 20, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> For instance: *State of New South Wales v White* (Final), No. 1943 (Supreme Court of New South Wales December 14, 2018); Menagh, J. (2018). 'I'll Kill You': White Supremacist Lunges at Co-Accused as Murder Verdict Read Out. ABC News, March 12, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-12/aryan-nations-white-supremacist-couple-guilty-of-murder/9519830>.

<sup>17</sup> "Senate Estimates: Attorney-General's Portfolio: Australian Security Intelligence Organisation," Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee (2016), 185, <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;page=0;query=%22But%20it%20has%20presented,%20really,%20probably%20in%20the%20last%2018%20months%20or%20so.%22;rec=0;resCount=Default>.

<sup>18</sup> Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (2023) Submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee Inquiry into the Criminal Code Amendment (Prohibition of Nazi Symbols) Bill 2023. April 2023. Available at:

ASIO has repeatedly highlighted that, given its mandate, it is only interested in political violence or violent extremism and does not focus its attention on 'extremist views'. However, there has been an increasing recognition that the threats that in particular RWE poses include but also significantly extend beyond the risk of escalation into political violence. Applying such a holistic perspective to understanding the threat of RWE in Australia, many academics, practitioners and government experts have concluded that the threat from RWE has been either escalating or, at the very least, becoming more complex and thus more challenging to respond to and intervene in recent times.

The academic, public and political debate around RWE increasingly acknowledges the threats that RWE actors and movements pose in Australia are manifold, including the following interconnected threats:

**Violence:** The most obvious threat that RWE poses in Australia and beyond is political violence and terrorism. As noted earlier, the threat of violence has been a prominent part of the re-emergence of far-right extremism in Australia since 2016. For example, on 6 August 2016, a far-right extremist in Victoria was arrested and later charged with terrorism offences for plotting to bomb left-wing activists. He was convicted in November 2020.<sup>19</sup> In the most serious and tragic incident, on 15 March 2019 an Australian far-right extremist murdered 51 Muslim worshippers at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand.<sup>20</sup> Perpetrators of subsequent RWE terrorist attacks in the United States, Germany, Norway, and elsewhere have cited the Christchurch massacre as an inspiration. Beyond these proven terrorist plots, there is considerable evidence of the violent potential of far-right extremism in Australia. Police and intelligence services have warned of the threat of violence. Examples include:

- ASIO's 2020-2021 annual report stated that investigations into "ideologically motivated violent extremists, such as racist and nationalist violent extremists" had approached 50 per cent of the organisation's "onshore priority counter-terrorism caseload".<sup>21</sup>

---

[https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Legal\\_and\\_Constitutional\\_Affairs/SymbolProhibition2023/Submissions](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Legal_and_Constitutional_Affairs/SymbolProhibition2023/Submissions)

<sup>19</sup> CDPP v Galea.

<sup>20</sup> Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Attack on Christchurch Mosques on 15 March 2019 (2020). *Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Masjidain on 15 March 2019*. New Zealand, <https://dpmc.govt.nz/our-programmes/national-security/royal-commission-inquiry-terrorist-attack-christchurch-masjidain>.

<sup>21</sup> Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (2021). *ASIO Annual Report 2020-21*. Canberra: ASIO, p. 4, <https://www.asio.gov.au/asio-report-parliament.html>.

- In October 2021, it was reported that the Australian Federal Police's counter-terrorism caseload had a growing focus on “nationalist and racist violent extremism”. It now accounted for 15% of the caseload, whereas two years earlier it accounted for 2%.<sup>22</sup>

These statements, and the incidents above, demonstrate the heightened threat of violence posed by RWE in Australia since 2016. However, this is only one of the threats. As discussed below, another concern is the long-term threat to liberal democracy.

In addition to these incidents involving RWE actors' (alleged) criminal behaviour, it is important to note the challenges of determining when exactly the violence threshold is reached. According to the Australian Living Safe Together program, violent extremism refers to ‘a person or group who is willing to use violence; or advocates the use of violence by others, to achieve a political, ideological or religious goal.’<sup>23</sup> This suggests that RWE violence encompasses more than physical acts of violence and includes expressions that indicate a willingness to use violence or advocate for it. As research has consistently demonstrated, RWE online spaces – also in Australia<sup>24</sup> – contain high levels of what Simi and Windisch describe as ‘violent talk’, highlighting the link between online speech and action<sup>25</sup>:

Violent talk helps enculturate individuals through socialization processes by communicating values and norms. In turn, these values and norms are part of a process where in-group and out-group boundaries are established, potential targets for violence are identified and dehumanized, violent tactics are shared, and violent individuals and groups are designated as sacred.... In short, violent talk clearly plays an important role in terms of fomenting actual violence.

---

<sup>22</sup> Zwartz, H. (2022). Australian Far-Right Terrorism Investigations Have Increased by 750 per Cent in 18 Months, *SBS News*, October 8, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/australian-far-right-terrorism-investigations-have-increased-by-750-per-cent-in-18-months/rsowz6fnt>. There could be various reasons for the difference between ASIO's 50% figure and the AFP's 15% figure. For example, the AFP figure might include offshore investigations, the main focus of which would presumably be the large number of Australians who travelled to Syria or Iraq to join Islamic State. However, a key reason could also be the different mandates of the two organisations. With ASIO's role being security intelligence and the AFP's role being criminal investigations, the AFP may have a higher threshold for how serious the activity must be to form part of their counter-terrorism caseload.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au/get-the-facts>

<sup>24</sup> Guerin, C., Peucker, M., Fisher, T. J. and Davey, J. (2021) *A Snapshot of far-right activity on Gab in Australia*. Melbourne: Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, [https://vuir.vu.edu.au/42091/1/A%2BSnapshot%2Bof%2B%2BFar-Right%2BActivity%2B%2Bon%2BGab%2Bin%2BAustralia\\_final.pdf](https://vuir.vu.edu.au/42091/1/A%2BSnapshot%2Bof%2B%2BFar-Right%2BActivity%2B%2Bon%2BGab%2Bin%2BAustralia_final.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Simi, P. and Windisch, S. (2020) The Culture of Violent Talk: An Interpretive Approach. *Social Sciences*, 9(7), 1-16.



**Threats to democratic principles and institutions:** The Australian government's Living Safe Together program highlights that the threats of violent extremism, including RWE, go beyond actual violence and 'public safety' risks and also include threats to 'Australia's core values and principles, including human rights, the rule of law, democracy, equal opportunity and freedom'.<sup>26</sup> These threats to democracy have ideological, behavioural and social dimensions.

First, RWE is defined by, among other *ideological markers*, its opposition to basic liberal-democratic principles. The explicit rejection of the basic principle of equal human dignity and egalitarianism illustrates this assessment. Many RWE groups seek to, directly or indirectly, undermine and ultimately overthrow the democratic system to usher in an authoritarian ethno-nationalist regime. A 2020 Macquarie University study maintained that RWE 'challenge[s] the fundamentals of pluralist liberal democracy through exclusivist appeals to race, ethnicity, nation, and gender'.<sup>27</sup>

Second, the RWE threats to democracy do not only lie in the ideological outlook of RWE but can also manifest in certain *actions*. A recent Victoria University study concluded that far-right mobilisation in the local context can intimidate democratically elected representatives in government and thus illegitimately influence democratic decision-making processes.<sup>28</sup> There have also been concerns about the risk of RWE actors trying to infiltrate mainstream political parties.

Third, the RWE milieu in Australia has also created online and offline echo chambers and parallel communities where individuals develop a sense of connection and social belonging. Given the ideological nature of RWE, these parallel fringe communities – or what Mark Davis calls 'anti-publics' – not only oppose basic liberal-democratic principles, they also fundamentally reject democratic *processes* of engagement and deliberation and cultivate 'a level of hostility to democratic conventions and institutions that in general exceeds ... even

---

<sup>26</sup> Australian Government – Living Safe Together (n.d.) *What is violent extremism?*  
<https://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au/Documents/what-is-violent-extremism.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> Macquarie University (2020). *Mapping Networks and Narratives of Online Right-Wing Extremists in New South Wales* (Executive Summary), p. 2.  
[https://researchers.mq.edu.au/files/141544840/Publisher\\_version.pdf](https://researchers.mq.edu.au/files/141544840/Publisher_version.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> Peucker, M., Spaaij, R., Smith, D. and Patton S. (2021). *Dissenting citizenship? Understanding vulnerabilities to right-wing extremism on the local level*. Victoria University.  
[https://vuir.vu.edu.au/41501/1/Dissenting%20Citizenship\\_VU%20final%20report%202020.pdf](https://vuir.vu.edu.au/41501/1/Dissenting%20Citizenship_VU%20final%20report%202020.pdf)

the most permissive notion of an “agonistic” public sphere’.<sup>29</sup> A recent study by Peucker and Spaaij further highlights the deeply conspiratorial alternative epistemology within these parallel counter-hegemonic communities, which puts them at odds with democratic processes and expressions of dissent.<sup>30</sup>

**Community safety:** The third type of threat that RWE poses is difficult to quantify and seems to not have received a lot of attention in the public and political debate. Public stunts, protests and other actions of RWE groups create significant concerns around public and community safety as many people feel intimidated and/or threatened by such actions and the public display of far-right, neo-Nazi or white supremacy ideologies, agendas and symbols. This applies not only but in particular to those who identify with a community that is targeted by RWE groups, such as the LGBTIQ+, Jewish and Muslim communities, and other people of colour, where RWE threats are often perceived as a much more immediate threat to their physical safety than among those from an Anglo, white background. A 2020 large-scale survey among Muslims, for example, found that 93% of Muslim respondents express concerns about right-wing extremism.<sup>31</sup> According to the aforementioned 2021 study by Victoria University, the local anti-mosque mobilisation in the regional town of Bendigo in the mid-2010s (which at a later stage also included RWE actors) had a serious negative impact on the sense of safety among the local Muslim community, with some of them feeling too unsafe to leave their homes alone or at night.<sup>32</sup> These locally specific concerns have been further exacerbated by the murderous 2019 Christchurch terror attacks, which continue to weigh heavily on the sense of safety among many Australian Muslims. In a recent report by the Australian Human Rights Commission, the vast majority of Australian Muslims (80%) surveyed reported ‘that this act of terror made them more afraid for their community. Some noted the long-term effects of the attack, describing the emotional and mental toll the attack took on their everyday life.’<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Davis, M. (2021). The online anti-public sphere. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24(1), 143-159, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420902799>

<sup>30</sup> Peucker, M., & Spaaij, R. (2023). Alternative Epistemology in Far-Right Anti-Publics: A Qualitative Study of Australian Activists. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-023-09456-z>

<sup>31</sup> Halim, R. et al. (2020) Islam in Australia: A National Survey of Muslim Australian Citizens and Permanent Residents, *Religions*, 11(8), 419. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11080419>

<sup>32</sup> Peucker, M., Spaaij, R., Smith, D., & Patton S. (2021). *Dissenting citizenship? Understanding vulnerabilities to right-wing extremism on the local level*. Victoria University. [https://vuir.vu.edu.au/41501/1/Dissenting%20Citizenship\\_VU%20final%20report%202020.pdf](https://vuir.vu.edu.au/41501/1/Dissenting%20Citizenship_VU%20final%20report%202020.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (2021). Sharing the Stories of Australian Muslims, p. 26 <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/race-discrimination/publications/sharing-stories-australian-muslims-2021>

## Links between global and domestic developments and movements

The relationship between the extreme right and the populist right is context-dependent and complex. RWE groups may be empowered by the rise of the populist right and identify new opportunities for mobilisation. Yet, they may also be resentful of the populist right seizing the limelight and diluting the cause. RWE movements can perceive setbacks for the populist right as obstacles, but also as opportunities to purify the movement or as evidence that mainstream political action is futile and that more militant activity, including violence, is necessary.

To illustrate this complex relationship, this section outlines the transition between two relevant global developments: the 2016 global upsurge of right-wing populism and the 2019 global escalation of right-wing terrorism. Australia was relatively peripheral to the first development yet, due to the Christchurch massacre, tragically played a prominent part in the second development.

The 2016 global upsurge of right-wing populism was evident in Donald Trump's electoral success and, more ambiguously, the Brexit referendum.<sup>34</sup> This populism had been gaining strength in the preceding years, as a result of both 'slow structural transformations' and 'quick political shocks' including 'the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the Great Recession, and the so-called refugee crisis', but 2016 marked a breakthrough moment.<sup>35</sup>

The 2019 global escalation of extreme right terrorism was demonstrated by mass casualty attacks and plots in Europe, the United States, and New Zealand. Again, these sorts of attacks had a long history and the threat had been steadily growing. However, in 2019 these attack incidents increased in frequency and deadliness, with the Christchurch massacre playing a pivotal role.

Four factors help to explain the transition from the 2016 global upsurge in right-wing populism to the 2019 global escalation in RWE terrorism: the empowerment of the extreme right in the context of the mainstreaming of the populist right; the urgency perceived by far-right

---

<sup>34</sup> Mudde, C. (2022). The Far-Right Threat in the United States: A European Perspective. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 699(1), 101–15, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162211070060>; Iakhnis, E. et al. (2018). Populist Referendum: Was 'Brexit' an Expression of Nativist and Anti-Elitist Sentiment? *Research & Politics*, 5(2): 2053168018773964, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168018773964>.

<sup>35</sup> Mudde, The Far-Right Threat in the United States, 104.

extremists after experiencing multiple setbacks; the revival of 'leaderless resistance' ideas that valorised lone-actor terrorism; and the new momentum generated by the attacks themselves.

The first factor was the empowerment of the extreme right in the context of the mainstreaming of the populist right. This was evident in mainstream media, with prominent outlets legitimising variants of the 'Great Replacement' theory, and also evident in social media.<sup>36</sup> By one estimate, the Twitter presence of the 'Alt-Right' grew from around 25,000 accounts in 2016 to around 100,000 accounts in 2018.<sup>37</sup> The online presence of Identitarianism, a European strand of the extreme right that cross-fertilised with the 'Alt-Right', similarly grew rapidly. In other words, political shifts that occurred in 2016 (but were in process beforehand) helped to facilitate the transnational growth of a far-right extremist ecosystem, both online and offline.

The second factor was the urgency perceived by RWEs in the face of setbacks, which partly resulted from the reality that achieving greater mainstream influence after 2016 did not mean that there was a short-term prospect of overturning decades of social change. In the United States, the Trump administration faced judicial, legislative and popular opposition to many of its radical measures. The rise of the QAnon movement reflected that some Trump supporters were reaching for conspiracy theories to explain why he was not delivering what they sought.<sup>38</sup> Outside the United States, the defeat of Marine le Pen in the 2017 French Presidential election showed that Trump's election did not foreshadow an inevitable wave of electoral success for populist and nativist forces worldwide. Moreover, the post-2016 growth of far-right extremism on social media also faced sustained opposition, as the major platforms (Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter) increased their content moderation efforts to varying degrees, becoming gradually less hospitable to RWEs. This resulted in a shift to much smaller platforms that specifically catered to RWEs, such as 8chan and Gab.<sup>39</sup> The

---

<sup>36</sup> Yousef, O. (2022). The 'Great Replacement' Conspiracy Theory Isn't Fringe Anymore, It's Mainstream. *NPR*, May 17, <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/17/1099233034/the-great-replacement-conspiracy-theory-isnt-fringe-anymore-its-mainstream>; Davey, J., & Ebner, J. (2019). *'The Great Replacement': The Violent Consequences of Mainstreamed Extremism*. Institute for Strategic Dialogue, <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/the-great-replacement-the-violent-consequences-of-mainstreamed-extremism/>.

<sup>37</sup> Conway, M., Scrivens, R., & Macnair, L. (2019). Right-Wing Extremists' Persistent Online Presence: History and Contemporary Trends. The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, p. 6, <https://www.icct.nl/publication/right-wing-extremists-persistent-online-presence-history-and-contemporary-trends>.

<sup>38</sup> Amarasingam, A., & Argentino, M.-A. (2020). The QAnon Conspiracy Theory: A Security Threat in the Making? *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, 13(7), 37–44.

<sup>39</sup> Gab was established in 2016 after the major platforms had expelled multiple high-profile far-right figures such as Tommy Robinson and Richard Spencer, while 8chan was established in 2013 and

extreme right's online difficulties were compounded by the obstacles experienced in their offline mobilisations, as their street rallies were routinely impeded by counter-protesters and did not result in increased unity among the many fractious movements that participated. By 2019 the idea of Trump's right-wing populism presenting the path to success would have diminished severely, particularly among the many RWEs who had never embraced Trump and merely saw his rise as offering opportunities.<sup>40</sup>

The third factor was the revival of 'leaderless resistance' ideas among violent right-wing extremists online. The concept of 'leaderless resistance', which called for white supremacists to wage a terrorist campaign through 'lone actors and small, self-organized groups that could take action at their own initiative', had been popular among far-right extremists in the United States in the 1990s.<sup>41</sup> By the early 2000s, this idea had fallen out of favour, with prominent RWE figures declaring it a failed strategy.<sup>42</sup> However, the mid-2010s saw a revival of 'leaderless resistance' thinking, actively promoted by new far-right extremist organisations such as Atomwaffen Division, Sonnenkrieg Division, Feuerkrieg Division, The Base, and their many incarnations and successors, using online forums such as IronMarch and Fascist Forge or fringe platforms such as 8chan and Gab.<sup>43</sup>

The fourth factor was the new momentum generated by the attacks themselves. This was particularly evident in the impact of the 2019 Christchurch massacre and the efforts of subsequent terrorists to emulate the atrocity. The attack, and how the perpetrator publicised it (posting his manifesto on 8chan, livestreaming the attack through Facebook, portraying his

---

had become a haven for former 4chan participants after the latter banned discussions of "GamerGate". Gab, 8chan, and other fringe platforms gained more participants as the major platforms boosted their content moderation after the August 2017 Charlottesville "Unite the Right" rally, which resulted in the killing of counter-protester Heather Heyer, and later the October 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue attack. Conway, Scrivens, and Macnair, "Right-Wing Extremists' Persistent Online Presence," 9–14; Donovan, J., Lewis, B., & Friedberg, B. (2018). Parallel Ports. Sociotechnical Change from the Alt-Right to Alt-Tech: Online Actions and Offline Consequences in Europe and the US. In *Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right*, pp. 49–66, <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446706-004>.

<sup>40</sup> Moreover, Trump's rebellious appeal diminished among many of the Internet subcultures that had supported him, and many members of the "Alt-Right" had long been resentful of the prominence of "Alt-Lite" figures like Milo Yiannopoulos, who they saw as seeking to dilute their movement to make it more publicly palatable. Neiwert, D. A. (2017). *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump*. New York: Verso.

<sup>41</sup> Spaaij, R. (2012). *Understanding Lone Wolf Terrorism*. New York: Springer.

<sup>42</sup> Ravndal, J. A. (2021). From Bombs to Books, and Back Again? Mapping Strategies of Right-Wing Revolutionary Resistance. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 46(11), 2120–2148, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2021.1907897>.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.; Europol (2020). *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2020*. Europol, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-te-sat-2020>

murders as a video game, and making in-jokes for his fellow travellers), contributed to the spread of similar attacks shortly afterwards. On 16 March 2019, the day after the massacre, a UK white supremacist who had downloaded the Christchurch attacker's manifesto stabbed a Bulgarian man.<sup>44</sup> On 27 April 2019, six weeks after the massacre, a man carried out a shooting attack against a synagogue in Poway, California, posting his manifesto to 8chan and describing the Christchurch attack as an inspiration.<sup>45</sup> On 3 August 2019, a terrorist who murdered Hispanic shoppers at a mall in El Paso in August 2019 also cited the Christchurch attack as an inspiration.<sup>46</sup> On 10 August 2019, a man attempted to carry out a mass shooting against a mosque in Norway that month, again claiming inspiration from the Christchurch massacre.<sup>47</sup> On 9 October 2019, a far-right extremist in Halle, Germany, murdered two people after failing in his attempt to carry out a mass shooting at a synagogue, similarly live-streaming the attack and claiming inspiration from the Christchurch attacker.<sup>48</sup> As one scholar noted, 'each act of killing and how it is glorified and gamified through countless memes on forums like 8chan, provides impetus for further violence.'<sup>49</sup> This escalation and 'inspiration effect'<sup>50</sup> of RWE terrorist plots continued into 2020 and onwards, for example the May 2022 massacre in Buffalo, United States.

This transition from the 2016 global upsurge of right-wing populism to the 2019 global escalation of extreme-right terrorism helps to show how the violent potential of RWE has evolved, the complicated role played by populism, and the catalytic role played by the terrorist attack perpetrated in Christchurch by an Australian white supremacist. The four factors noted above were to some degree evident in Australia from 2016 to 2019.

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> "San Diego Synagogue Attack Suspect 'Evil', Says His Family," *BBC News*, April 29, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-48096197>; Bogost, I. (2019). The Meme Terrorists. *The Atlantic*, April 30, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/04/california-synagogue-shooting-worse-you-thought/588352/>.

<sup>46</sup> Macklin, G. (2019). "The El Paso Terrorist Attack: The Chain Reaction of Global Right-Wing Terror," *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*, 12(11), 1–9.

<sup>47</sup> Burke, J. (2019). Norway Mosque Attack Suspect 'Inspired by Christchurch and El Paso Shootings. *The Guardian*, August 11, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/11/norway-mosque-attack-suspect-may-have-been-inspired-by-christchurch-and-el-paso-shootings>.

<sup>48</sup> "Gunman Jailed for Life for German Synagogue Attack," *BBC News*, December 21, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55395682>.

<sup>49</sup> Macklin, The El Paso Terrorist Attack; see also Winter, C., & Spaaij, R. (2021). Lone actor terrorism in 2019 and 2020: trends and implications. In: Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), *Counterterrorism Yearbook 2021* (pp. 23-26). Canberra: ASPI, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/counterterrorism-yearbook-2021>

<sup>50</sup> Hamm, M. S., & Spaaij, R. (2017). *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism*. New York: Columbia University Press.



Research conducted at Victoria University on the networks and narratives of 12 far-right extremist groups in the state of Victoria reveals how these global dynamics played out in the Victorian context.<sup>51</sup> While the mainstreaming of the populist right was less evident in Victoria than in many other contexts, global events and the tenor of national political debates provided discursive opportunities for far-right extremists.<sup>52</sup> Divisive political debates on same-sex marriage, Muslim immigration, the Safe Schools program and 'African gangs' were seized on by far-right extremists in Victoria to present themselves as the 'silent majority'.<sup>53</sup> However, after an initial surge the extreme right in Victoria soon experienced serious setbacks. Decades of social change were far from being overturned. Marriage equality was unequivocally endorsed by the majority of Australians, Victorians discussed toxic masculinity in the face of the findings of the Royal Commission into Domestic Violence, and far-right rallies in Victoria were often overwhelmed by counter-protestors and struggled to gain traction.<sup>54</sup>

The research conducted by Victoria University identified that by 2018 there was a shift in extreme right tactics in Victoria in the face of these setbacks, including a greater interest in violence. Several groups retreated from the strategy of building a broad social movement and turned increasingly towards more action-orientated activities in smaller groups. These activities included media stunts such as disrupting local council meetings and publicly harassing political opponents, while clashes against political opponents were often violent. The project's systematic monitoring of online search behaviour during this period found a significant increase in search terms that indicated a desire to either use violence or join a potentially violent far-right extremist group.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, media reports revealed the interest of some Australians at the time in violent RWE groups such as Atomwaffen Division and The Base.<sup>56</sup> This did not reach the point of acts of RWE terrorism within Victoria. Nonetheless, the global escalation of RWE terrorist attacks, partly catalysed by the March 2019 Christchurch

---

<sup>51</sup> Peucker, M., Smith, D., & Iqbal, M. (2019). Not a Monolithic Movement: The Diverse and Shifting Messaging of Australia's Far-Right. In M. Peucker & D. Smith (Eds), *The Far-Right in Contemporary Australia* (pp. 73-100). Singapore: Springer, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8351-9\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8351-9_4).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Smith, D. (2019). What Does the Research Tell Us about the Impact of Dog-Whistle Politics on Extreme-Right Groups in Australia? *AVERT Commentary*, March 25, <https://www.avert.net.au/blog/what-does-the-research-tell-us-about-the-impact-of-dog-whistle-politics-on-extreme-right-groups-in-australia>.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> "The Base Tapes," *ABC News*, March 25, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-26/the-base-tapes-secret-recordings-australian-recruitment/13255994>; Nathan, J. (2018). Antipodean Resistance: The Rise and Goals of Australia's New Nazis. *ABC*, April 20, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/antipodean-resistance-the-rise-and-goals-of-australias-new-nazis/10094794>.

massacre, and the dynamics seen in Victoria and their resemblance to national and global dynamics, demonstrate the violent potential of RWE.

## Measures to counter violent extremism in Australia

The aforementioned threats posed by RWE require a concerted, multi-level, and inter-sectoral response involving a range of stakeholders. In this submission, we only touch upon some facets that research suggests should be part of a holistic approach to countering violent extremism. We focus specifically on measures to counter the threat of violence. We recognise, however, that a concerted response should also address wider, long-term threats to liberal democracy and the vital role of civil society therein. This is an area that is gradually being acknowledged in Australia and that can draw inspiration from recent research and learnings from other countries.<sup>57</sup> For example, the aforementioned Victoria University study of RWE mobilisation in local contexts offers the following empirically grounded areas for consideration:<sup>58</sup>

**Local civil society plays a key role in tackling RWE dynamics:** Activating civil society is key in challenging the exclusivist agenda of RWE movements and minimising their appeal among local community members. While local civil society has long been recognised and supported as a key player in the struggle against right-wing extremism in some countries (e.g., Germany, Switzerland),<sup>59</sup> this has been an underexplored and underutilised facet in Australia's approaches to tackling RWE. The prospects of mobilising wider segments of the local community against RWE actions depend on various locally specific factors, including the existence of vibrant civil society structures (e.g., many interconnected grassroots and community organisations) and the preparedness of well-connected and respected local community leaders to help organise a community response to RWE dynamics. A key

---

<sup>57</sup> Bergin, A., & Thomas, K. (2017). How communities and governments can come together to counter violent extremism. ASPI, <https://www.aspi.org.au/opinion/how-communities-and-governments-can-come-together-counter-violent-extremism>

<sup>58</sup> Peucker, M., Spaaij, R., Smith, D., & Patton S. (2021). *Dissenting citizenship? Understanding vulnerabilities to right-wing extremism on the local level*. Victoria University. [https://vuir.vu.edu.au/41501/1/Dissenting%20Citizenship\\_VU%20final%20report%202020.pdf](https://vuir.vu.edu.au/41501/1/Dissenting%20Citizenship_VU%20final%20report%202020.pdf)

<sup>59</sup> See for example: Pedahzur, A. (2003). The potential role of 'pro-democratic civil society' in responding to extreme rightwing challenges: The case of Brandenburg. *Contemporary Politics*, 9(1): 63–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1356977032000072468>; Eser Davolio, M., Drilling, M., & Eckmann, M. (2009). Local Communities Facing Right-Wing Extremism: Evaluating Intervention Approaches. In M. A. Niggli (Ed.), *Right-wing Extremism in Switzerland. National and international Perspectives* (pp. 290 – 296). Baden-Baden: Nomos, <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845216621>

advantage of local civil society responses is its usually high level of credibility within the local community. Policymakers across all levels of government can help build vibrant civil society networks through, among others, funding and support programs. P/CVE strategies at the state and federal levels should take into account the important role that civil society can play in the struggle against RWE, without excessively securitising community spaces.

**Safe spaces for dissent:** Disagreements, criticism, and dissent are part and parcel of a modern pluralistic society. Instead of ignoring these tensions and conflicts, stakeholders can work together to deal with these conflicts proactively, constructively, and respectfully. Providing a range of platforms and avenues for residents ('safe spaces') to express critical views, dissent and concerns – and even encouraging them to do so – can help prevent a potential escalation of local grievances, which could then be exploited by RWE groups for their agendas.

## Responding to the threat of violence

Responding to the threat of violence requires the disruption and prosecution of those who cross the criminal threshold. This is a matter for the police and other elements of government, such as the intelligence services, particularly when the threat involves terrorist activity.

The response to the potential terrorist element of the threat of violence can also benefit from enhancing countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts, where appropriate, to divert people away from involvement in far-right violent extremism or help far-right violent extremists in the criminal justice system to disengage. CVE programs form part of a broader counterterrorism strategy, with evidence that holistic CVE support can be an effective way of mitigating potential threats and enduring risk. All Australian jurisdictions have CVE capability, with many working with an RWE cohort. For example, Victoria Police established the Network for Intervention and Tailored Engagement (NITE) program, 'to provide a pathway towards disengagement for individuals who are either actively engaged, or at risk of engaging,' in Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism (IMVE), including RWE.<sup>60</sup> The NITE 'utilises a holistic and multidisciplinary approach towards the disengagement process to address both the violent ideological beliefs, as well as the psychosocial factors, which can influence an individual to engage in IMVE.'<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Victoria Police (2023). *Victoria Police Counter Terrorism Strategy 2022-2025*, Melbourne: Victoria Police, p. 7, <https://www.police.vic.gov.au/victoria-police-counter-terrorism-strategy-2022-2025>

<sup>61</sup> Victoria Police Counter Terrorism Strategy 2022-2025, p 7.

Individuals who are vulnerable to engaging in violent extremism often have a range of vulnerabilities such as social isolation, undiagnosed and untreated mental health problems, unemployment, unstable housing, and other problems that can undermine effective coping with daily life. The provision of a range of services through CVE programs, such as mentoring to counter violent extremist ideology, mental health services to address mental health problems and assistance with housing and employment can help to address a range of vulnerabilities that may increase the risk of engaging in violent extremism. There is also scope for a range of online interventions, as individuals at risk of violent extremism are often part of online communities promoting extreme views and encouraging acts of violent extremism.<sup>62</sup>

However, great care must be taken to ensure that neither counter-terrorism nor countering violent extremism efforts are applied excessively or inappropriately. Counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism are only suitable for specific parts of the problem. Other aspects of the far-right extremist threat of violence, such as many acts of harassment, intimidation, hate crimes, or violence breaking out at protests, can be addressed through different responses. These include ensuring that racist abuses are taken seriously, improving the collection of information on hate crimes, and providing stronger support to victims.<sup>63</sup>

## **Understanding how neurodiversity may link to vulnerability, risk, and resilience in violent extremism**

Australia is seeing a rise in the number of referrals to extremist violence prevention programs that involve individuals with neurodiversity, especially in the youth cohort and in relation to online offending.<sup>64</sup> While estimates vary, practitioners have indicated the prevalence of neurodiversity amongst violent extremism cohorts,<sup>65</sup> highlighting the need to understand the

---

<sup>62</sup> For examples of online interventions see: Malone, I., Blasco, L., & Robinson, K. (2022). *Fighting the Hydra: Combatting Vulnerabilities in Online Leaderless Resistance Networks*. Omaha: National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center (NCITE), <https://stanford.app.box.com/s/aif3te5j1tsnafue6lz5acd6xm4nepuq>.

<sup>63</sup> These responses need not only involve police (and sometimes victims will not desire police involvement), as other parts of government and broader civil society can play important roles, particularly for victim support. See for example: Kamp, A. et al. (2021). "I Don't Think the Police Would Do Much": New Research Shows Racism during COVID Is Rarely Reported." *The Conversation*, April 8, <http://theconversation.com/ident-think-the-police-would-do-much-new-research-shows-racism-during-covid-is-rarely-reported-165312>; Vergani, M. (2020). "Understanding the Full Spectrum of Hate," *The Interpreter*, August 28, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/theinterpreter/understanding-full-spectrum-hate>.

<sup>64</sup> This is not limited to Australia. See for example: Grierson, J. (2021). 'Staggeringly high' number of autistic people on UK Prevent scheme. *The Guardian*, July 7, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jul/07/staggeringly-high-number-of-people-with-autism-on-uk-prevent-scheme>

<sup>65</sup> Salman, N., Al-Attar, Z., & McKenzie, G. (2023). *Practitioner Perspectives on*

possible intersections between neurodiversity and RWE. Neurodiversity covers a range of conditions including Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). In this section we focus on ASD as this is where most research has been centred. We recognise that the existing literature has significant limitations,<sup>66</sup> which further highlights the need to better understand how neurodiversity may link to vulnerability, risk, and resilience in violent extremism.

There is no causal link between ASD and violent extremism.<sup>67</sup> The literature encourages caution against over-simplification of how facets of neurodiversity can contextualise risk and resilience to violent extremism.<sup>68</sup>

Yet, for those with ASD who are drawn to violent extremism, facets of ASD can contribute to push and pull factors that shape an individual's pathway to engagement.<sup>69</sup> Specifically, these facets have been identified as: circumscribed interests; rich vivid fantasy amidst a backdrop of impaired social imagination; need for order, rules, rituals, routine, and predictability; obsessionality, repetition and collecting; social interaction and communication difficulties; cognitive styles; and sensory processing.<sup>70</sup> The same features of ASD can contextualise protection and resilience against violent extremism and hence can also contextualise pathways away from violent extremism and to healthy, law-abiding lives. Diversion from violent extremism can be generated by reducing the pull violent extremism has and increasing the pull that safer alternatives may have for that individual, alongside reducing the push factors in their life.

Existing research into online radicalisation does not examine subtle neurocognitive features of ASD and how these interface with the demands of the online space, but there may be a 'pull' that certain online forums, information types and stimuli may have for autistic individuals because of their neurocognitive style including a preference for categorical or detailed

---

*Counterterrorism and Neurodiversity*. CREST. <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/practitioner-perspectives-on-counterterrorism-and-neurodiversity/>

<sup>66</sup> Druitt, F., Smith, D., Spaaij, R., Kernot, D., & Laver, A. (2023). Do autism spectrum disorders (ASD) increase the risk of terrorism engagement? A literature review of the research evidence, theory and interpretation, and a discussion reframing the research-practice debate. *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, 18(3), 307-332. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2022.2158361>

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Al-Attar, Z. (2020). Autism spectrum disorders and terrorism: how different features of autism can contextualise vulnerability and resilience. *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, 31, 926-949, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14789949.2020.1812695>

<sup>69</sup> Al-Attar, Autism spectrum disorders and terrorism.

<sup>70</sup> Al-Attar, Z. (2018). Framework for the Assessment of Risk and Protection in Offenders on the Autistic Spectrum (FARAS). <https://www.nota.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/FARAS-Guidelines-Final-1.pdf>

information, patterns and theories, an overfocus on details and facts at the expense of the bigger picture, context and social and emotional nuances, and a strong preference for visual information.<sup>71</sup> If special interests and skills relating to extremism are validated online, this may be reinforcing, and autistic individuals may feel more connected with those who share their extremist interests.

ASD can be associated with an over-focus on fine detail alongside theory of mind impairment contributing to context blindness.<sup>72</sup> This means that detailed information (facts, images, videos, documents, or paraphernalia) relating to interests may become captivating and have strong motivational and attentional pull, and be collected without focus on its social or legal context and consequences, or focus on the agendas of those who provide this information. This is not the same as not knowing right from wrong or being suggestible and relates to very different neurocognitive features of ASD, which may render autistic individuals more 'susceptible' to being drawn to online materials and forums, rather than being passively suggestible to social or emotional exploitation, as commonly believed. Online imagery may have rich aesthetic value, intricate detail and pattern that could be pleasurable and stimulatory and may offer a range of sensory rewards (including visual, auditory, and motor where typing or device operation are involved). This could add to the 'pull' of online stimuli and the reinforcement of online behaviour. Social belonging and social reinforcement within the online space may well be an important part of the online extremist space for some individuals with ASD.

The Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST) has recently conducted research examining how neurodivergent traits and symptoms (with a focus on ASD and ADHD) may contextualise vulnerability to extremism engagement, as well as resilience and disengagement.<sup>73</sup> This study involved focus groups with practitioners, including Australian practitioners, with experience of working with neurodivergent individuals in violent extremism contexts. The study also analysed a novel dataset of 18 international cases of individuals with ASD and extremism concerns, including cases in Australia.<sup>74</sup> Analysis suggests that

---

<sup>71</sup> Al-Attar, Z. (2019). *Extremism, Radicalisation & Mental Health: Handbook for Practitioners*. Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) Health and Social Care. [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2019-11/ran\\_h-sc\\_handbook-for-practitioners\\_extremism-radicalisation-mental-health\\_112019\\_en.pdf](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2019-11/ran_h-sc_handbook-for-practitioners_extremism-radicalisation-mental-health_112019_en.pdf)

<sup>72</sup> Vermeulen, P. (2015). Context Blindness in Autism Spectrum Disorder: Not Using the Forest to See the Trees as Trees. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 30(3), 182-192. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088357614528799>

<sup>73</sup> Salman, et al., *Practitioner Perspectives on Counterterrorism and Neurodiversity*.

<sup>74</sup> Salman, N., Al-Attar, Z., Pyszora, N., Smith, D. & Iqbal, M. (2023). *Neurodivergence and Violent Extremism: 18 International Case Studies*. CREST.



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.

Practitioners in Australia have emphasised the importance of tailored interventions, particularly those that harness potential protective factors associated with neurodivergence, and neurodivergent-friendly and systems-based approaches. 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.<sup>75</sup> Victoria University has started to deliver neurodiversity training to practitioners across Australia who are working with RWE.

---

[https://crestresearch.ac.uk/site/assets/files/4838/23-059-01\\_neurodivergence\\_and\\_ve\\_case\\_studies\\_overview.pdf](https://crestresearch.ac.uk/site/assets/files/4838/23-059-01_neurodivergence_and_ve_case_studies_overview.pdf)

<sup>75</sup> Salman et al., *Practitioner Perspectives on Counterterrorism and Neurodiversity*.