



## **COUNTERING THE THREAT FROM RADICALISING INFLUENCES AND FOCUSING ON PROTECTING VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES**

**Date:** November 23, 2022

*Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.*

### **KEY EVENTS**

On November 23, 2022, Andrew Hayes, Chief Inspector (CI) of the South Wales territorial police force presented on *Countering the Threat from Radicalizing Influences and Focusing on Protecting Vulnerable Communities*. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS-Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were current trends in extremist recruitment and policy enactment compared to the preceding year, and counteracting extremist content showcased over decentralised platforms containing end-to-end encryption.

### **NATURE OF DISCUSSION**

#### **Presentation**

Chief Inspector (CI) Hayes' presentation on autistic individuals and their vulnerability to extremism focused on his pilot study that involved a person-centred approach to managing counter-terrorism risk within the context of neurodivergent conditions along with an evaluation of his results. In evaluating the Counter Terrorism (CT) risk presented with autism, CI Hayes suggested a 3-step process that involved an initial assessment, direct assessment, and a supported intervention. CI Hayes noted that while there has been progress in decreasing extremism in individuals, supported interventions should place more emphasis on managing vulnerabilities in autistic individuals to prevent their re-entry into the criminal justice system.

## Question & Answer Period

CI Hayes elucidated on the current trend in extremist recruitment and policy implementation, the efficacy of using positive outlets for autistic individuals vulnerable to radicalization, and the recent phenomenon of extremists resorting to end-to-end encryption channels to conceal detection of their discussions and content. To meet these new challenges policy scope has widened along with surveillance techniques and technology usage. Expanding on the intervention process, CI Hayes touched upon another trend involving extremist use of social networking applications that offer greater privacy and security to evade detection by authorities, such as Telegram.

## BACKGROUND

### Presentation

Children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) differ from neurotypical children, chiefly in terms of their adolescent development and position within Wing & Gould's triad of impairments. Compared to neurotypical children, autistic children tend to develop an advanced cognitive capacity, relative to their social-emotional traits at a young age. The reversed neurodevelopment compels them to have divergent interests from their peers, and also creates impairments along lines of social communication, interaction, and imagination. Autistic individuals often have difficulty in social situations and tend to hyperfixate on one subject. They exhibit difficulties in organising and prioritising issues and are more likely to have trouble understanding the consequences of their actions. Cumulatively, this can lead to central coherence challenges, which subsequently can lead to difficulty placing situations in context and increased fixation on their interests.

Owing to hyperfocus, ASD individuals are at a higher risk of developing interests in dysfunctional areas, and CI Hayes asserts that it is necessary to manage the condition with procedural interventions designed to limit their chances of offending and redirecting interest towards healthier alternatives. It is necessary to understand the potential risk factors, such as isolation, a need to belong, an intense interest in technology or weapons, and failure to understand ulterior motives. In the adult population, the potential factors can push an individual towards lone actor behaviour and make them vulnerable to elements of extremism. This trajectory was represented in three cases managed by PREVENT and involved autistic offenders who were considered vulnerable to radicalization, sharing qualities of impaired social imagination, social

interaction/communication, and difficulties around certain interests. The cases also raised questions on how to support such individuals and the correct services to provide them.

A pilot study utilising a person-centred approach was launched in collaboration with Outside—a company specialising in autism training—enabling researchers to focus on an individual’s unique personality characteristics and risk factors towards radicalization for the purpose of rehabilitating them from extremism. The study involved risk assessments to see whether there was an escalation of behaviour and what mitigations needed to be set in place to limit such risks. It involved developing a profile of the individual to determine the most requisite techniques that should be utilised. CI Hayes cited the example of “Jay”, a subject from one of the previous cases discussed. The first step to the intervention was understanding Jay’s autism condition. By understanding his areas of agreement and disagreement, hardships, and lifestyle, clinicians and interventionists were able to address trigger factors that would lead to unhealthy online behaviour. One way of diverting his attention was through retro gaming, allowing him to develop his creative interests, eventually leading to him enrolling in creative film and building a network of support. Furthermore, contextual trigger factors were found to be linked to his online interests – for instance, his desire to learn more about Nazism was largely because of his fascination with the imagery and performative nature of the rhetoric. As a result, the team conducted discussions with him on identity aspects such as sexuality and race to further curtail his interest. Additionally, the team introduced him to chess, an activity in which he excelled at, as a means of satisfying his desire to be intellectually recognised

CI Hayes concluded that directed intervention had been successful, and could mitigate the CT risk, but at the same time autism could also coexist with other mental health conditions. It is important to have a robust behavioural assessment that is person-centred and involves a support component that links back to the assessment. Behavioural assessments should focus on the individual’s needs in order to best support the person’s recovery when distress occurs. The plan should also highlight review periods, roles, and responsibilities so that progress and accountability can be monitored. In terms of limitations, the oversight committee concluded that more training was needed around ASD. One ethical consideration could have involved the possibility of using a control group to enhance understanding as to why a direct intervention worked on one group, as opposed to another; however, this design would’ve likely heightened the risks involved. CI Hayes believed that the study could have improved through a more robust, and standardised data collection plan, larger sample size pre- and post-measures,

prolonged duration, and a re-engagement of the subjects to note instances of recidivism.

### **Question & Answer Period**

CI Hayes noted that there has been an increase in extremist recruitment and radicalization over the past two years in terms of their mechanisms for attracting and retaining recruits, constituting a need to implement CT policies that reflect new challenges and address the recent trend towards social networking applications that offer end-to-end communication encryption and gate-keeping features. Various ideological groups, such as Qanon are now appealing to broader audiences which necessitates a need to adapt to these changes. Such groups have also opted to use applications such as Telegram to conceal their activities from law enforcement. The difficulties this presents has become a principal focus of security officials and researchers. CI Hayes explained that intervention must focus on healthy interests. In the context of a person-centred approach, this means that the interests must be unique to the individual and specific to other areas in their lives. To determine this, an interventionist must have a full and open discussion with the individual in an attempt to identify the appropriate forums and communities that would most benefit them. Diversionary techniques are more likely to succeed when they are specific to the individual's needs.

## **KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION**

### **Presentation**

- Reversed neurodevelopment compels autistic individuals to have a greater fascination in history and politics over other adolescent interests, but it also creates impairments along lines of social communication, interaction, and imagination. This can lead to hyper focusing on unhealthy interests such as radical ideologies.
- In adult populations of autistic offenders, significant risk factors such as isolation, a need to belong, and an intense interest in weapons and/or tech can push individuals towards lone actor behaviour.
- A pilot study, conducted by PREVENT workers, utilised a person-centred approach along with appropriate risk assessments to recognize escalation of behaviours and ways to mitigate it
- The study further built on the risk assessments by developing a unique profile of the individual in order to identify triggers that led him to pursue unhealthy interests. Diversion was used as a strategy to divert the person's

attention away from their unhealthy interest and towards healthier outcomes.

- Directed intervention was found to be a successful approach that could mitigate the CT risk. However, the presence of autism with other mental health conditions raises the importance of having a robust behavioural assessment that is person-centred and involves a support component that can be linked back to the assessment

### Question & Answer Period

- There has been an increase in extremist recruitment in the past two years. Various extremist groups are appealing to broader audiences now than ever before.
- There is ongoing discussion between agencies to address the recent trend in movement by extremist groups towards alternative technology that offer greater privacy, in lieu of the deplatforming and content removal that is currently present over major social networking platforms.
- A successful support intervention in an autistic individual's case should involve identifying and diverting them towards healthy interests that are unique to them, while also being specific to other interests in their lives.



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