



05/01/2021

## CONCLUSIONS PAPER

29-30 September 2020

Online meeting

# Lone Actors, Police and P/CVE

## Key outcomes

---

This paper is written for police to increase their understanding about lone actors and possible ways for police to prevent them from becoming violent. The document stresses a need for the use and development of proper analysis of past lone-actor terrorist incidents and to improve the likelihood of police being informed of leakage signals. This can be done by extensive training of all parties involved, by increasing trust between parties, and by establishing cooperation and networks with mental health workers.

## Highlights of the discussion

### Analysis of a lone actor: Trends and profiles

There are many definitions for lone actors: lone wolf, loner, lone wolf pack, lone attacker, solo terrorist, etc. The definitions reflect the differences between the degree of connection, contacts, affiliation with groups in the preparation and execution of a terrorist attack.

It is difficult to define one single profile of the lone actor, as the motivations to act can be different. Overall what can be observed is that someone becomes a lone actor based on a mixture of personal, political and/or religious opinions, and that often he has a low level of expertise and planning on execution and choice of weapons. This relatively low level of organisation and (often) improvisation offers opportunities for police to step in. Taking inspiration from predecessors is also a recurring element, and targets can be well known individuals (e.g. politicians) or unknown.

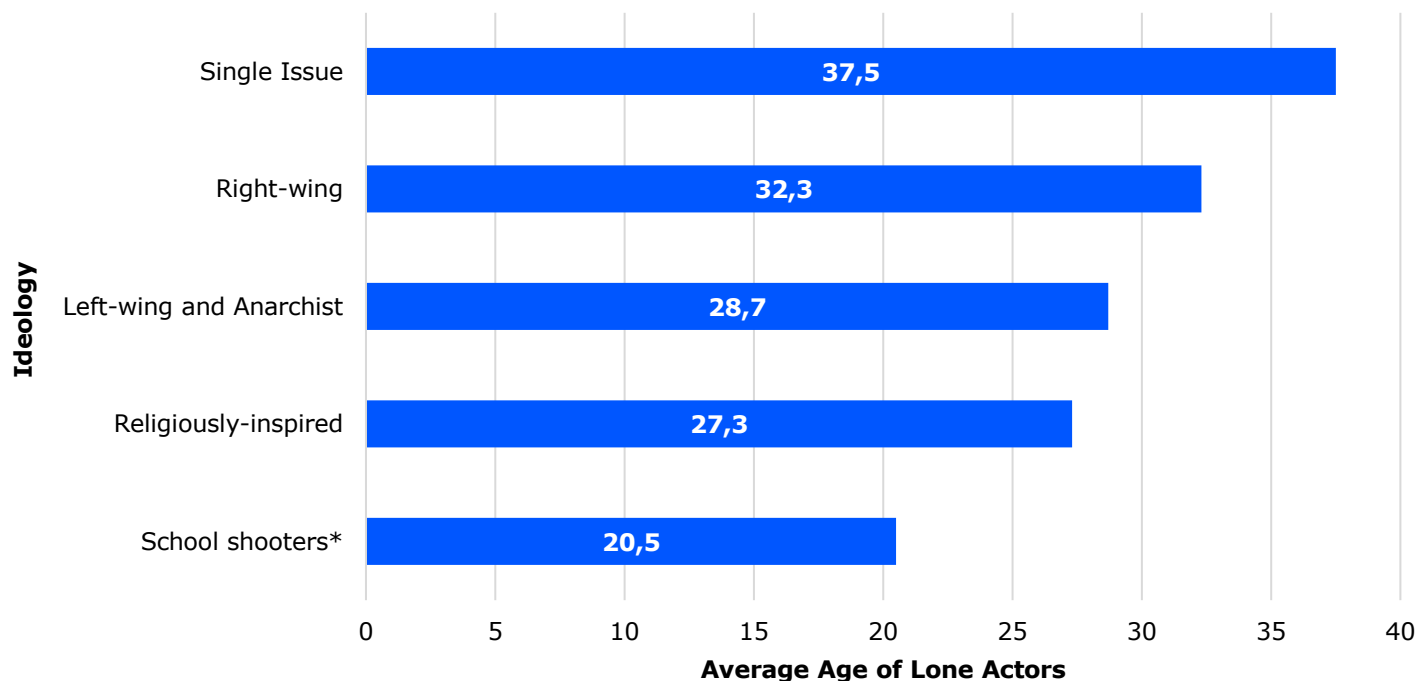
#### Profile of a lone actor – CLAT research

The Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism (CLAT) project researched personal characteristics of lone actors from 2000 to 2014. They investigated data from 120 cases, of which 75 % were right-wing extremists and jihadists. Their research showed some key characteristics of lone actors:

- **The average age of a lone actor is 29.7 years old.** However, this differs for each subgroup. For example, amongst right-wing lone actors, the average age is 32.3 while that number for religiously-inspired extremists is 27.3. This has implications for protection plans. During the meeting, it was discussed that one tends to connect radicalisation to “youngsters”. This finding clearly shows that many of them are adults, and preventing violent extremism for adults is even more challenging.
- **There is a high level of social isolation amongst young lone actors.** Thirty-six per cent of the lone actors who were younger than 25 years old were lonely. Again, there are differences for different subgroups. Religiously inspired lone actors were more lonely than right-wing extremists. Also, a very high percentage of lone actors do not fall in this category.
- **Approximately one third of the lone actors dealt with mental health issues.** This shows a sharp contrast to the idea that “lone actors are always mentally ill”, as the percentage is almost in line with the average adult population in the EU affected by mental health issues. Nevertheless, comparison data is difficult to obtain, and mental health problems become a bigger problem when combined with social isolation.

Related to this, only 6 % of lone actors have a clinical diagnosis of mental health issues. Although this finding is based on open-source data, it shows that this percentage is very low. Therefore, we have to be careful with the assumption that there is always a link between a disorder and a tendency to use violence. Sometimes this might be linked, whereas in other cases the disorder might be completely not linked to the violent act.

It should be taken into account that these findings are from research that collected data until 2017, and lone-actor terrorism has increased significantly since then.



**Source:** CLAT presentation J. De Roy van Zuijdewijn, RAN POL meeting 29&30 September 2021

During the meeting, it was discussed that first-line practitioners are in favour and need of a simple, concrete, clear and common definition. Police do not benefit from having multiple definitions — rather, they are in need of gaining a greater *understanding* of lone actors, to be better equipped in their daily work for preventing the phenomenon and reporting on it.

Debriefing after an attack is an excellent tool for increasing understanding of lone actors, as it allows for deeper analysis not just of the *modus operandi*, but also of the pathway towards radicalisation of the individual (an aspect not always explored enough). Such analysis can help to answer the question on “why” an individual becomes radicalised, and “what” (which causes and risk factors) led to a situation where an individual became radicalised and committed a violent action.

Only a **complete diagnosis of what, how and why it happened** allows for the formulation of goals for preventive actions. A careful analysis will also show the possibilities for police to step in and in which stages. This, in turn, facilitates interdisciplinary work and clearly defines the contribution that individual practitioners – including police – must make to deal with a specific case.

A key element has been stressed during the meeting: when looking at several cases of lone actors, research shows that **there are almost always signs of leakage**. There is almost always somebody who has useful information about a potential lone actor. In the El Paso (USA) case, the shooting in the Walmart, for example, it turned out that the attacker’s mother had concerns and had contacted the police with concerns about her son owning an attack rifle. The shooter also posted a manifesto online in 8Chan before his attack<sup>1</sup>. In the Hanau case (DE), the terrorist wrote threatening texts on the walls<sup>2</sup> in his neighbourhood, also published a

<sup>1</sup> See: CNN, 2019: [El Paso suspect's mother called police concerned about gun](#)

<sup>2</sup> See: BBC, 2020: [Hanau: Germany boosts security amid far-right threat](#)

manifesto online and even was in contact with the authorities with worrying messages about “a big secret service organisation tapping into people’s brain”<sup>3</sup>.

## Main challenges

During the meeting, some challenges with regard to lone-actor terrorism were discussed. Many fall under the umbrella of “sharing and gathering information”, and some of the most relevant seem to be the following:

- There is the **challenge of overload of information**, and how to detect – especially at an early stage – which information is relevant or of great concern. Monitoring what is happening online is crucial, but at the same time it is challenging, as the amount of information is huge, and the speed of developments online is difficult to keep up with. This is not only about less accessible places on the internet (such as darknet), but also more open channels such as Facebook and other social media.
- In addition, it is **difficult to make sure information circulates between different platforms** — e.g. to connect “dots” from the local level with the “dots” from higher levels (for example the national security agency).
- Information sharing is difficult as it is often about (protected) **sensitive data**.
- Tools for assessing **high-risk individuals** are resource-intensive and cannot be applied to assess the much bigger group of **low-risk individuals**.
- Assessing a person as high-risk is one thing, but **organising follow-up interventions** is difficult and puts pressure on police to mobilise intervention partners.
- Lastly, information about worrying signals on a potential lone actor should also (and in some cases should mainly) come from parties outside of the police, such as friends and family surrounding the individual, colleagues, communities, the shooting club where the individual is a member, civil society organisations and so on. **Building up trust with these partners is essential, but takes time and efforts, and cannot be forced**. Furthermore, **making sure that all these potential “sensors” are able to recognise possible signs of risk/radicalisation is crucial**, and on this police can play an important role, as well as on making sure those people know where to turn in case they want to report a concern.
- Awareness raising and introducing a shared assessment tool across different sectors, like the Belgium police is doing with Kompas, is one way to do this. Kompas is, like the Canadian Behaviour Barometer<sup>4</sup> a tool for structured professional judgement between professionals.

## Recommendations

A clear outcome of the meeting is that lone actors are not as “mysterious” and “alone” as is often thought. There is always somebody in the environment of the individual who has seen/heard/noticed something, and could provide key information about a potential lone actor. Whether this a colleague, family member, a friend, someone at the local shooting club or even a peer within the right-wing group who picks up severely worrying

<sup>3</sup> See: The Insider, 2020: [The mass shooter who killed 9 in Germany published a racist manifesto where he identified as an incel and accused Trump of stealing his populist slogans](#)

<sup>4</sup> See: [Behaviour Barometer: How to recognize radicalization behaviours leading to violence](#).

signals, this person must be well aware to whom and how he could report, and the police must find the way to reach that person. To do so, the following recommendations were discussed during the meeting.

- With regard to information sharing, it is recommended to strengthen the role of community police officers to achieve an early recognition of risk factors and symptoms of the radicalisation process (graffiti, youth gangs, domestic violence, juvenile delinquency, but also social factors such as poverty, school problems, and unemployment). These police officers can liaise between the local communities and the police officers carrying out operational activities and investigations.
- Raise awareness by providing training about radicalisation in communities themselves, so they know how to recognise and detect possible signs of radicalisation.
- In line with this, make sure concerned professionals and the broader surroundings of an individual know where to turn in case they are concerned. Reporting of these kind of concerns and cases to local authorities should be made easily accessible and clearly structured (e.g. by having hotlines, special places dedicated to reporting, appointing liaisons between the police and local communities, family assistants, anonymous helplines, etc.). It can be helpful to learn from other delicate policy areas where they know how to combine these signals: e.g. domestic violence, child abuse, etc.

With regard to the lone actor profiles :

- **There is a clear need for further research on lone actors**, similarly to the CLAT research that dates back to 2014. Synergies should be created between law enforcement agencies and academics to allow for more detailed analysis based on variables coming from real cases, and avoid academics having to rely solely on information from open sources. Europol can play a role on this, collecting and analysing information from incidents in a structured, uniformed manner. This research should strive for a deeper understanding of the motivations and trigger factors mobilising individuals to action, and would provide useful insights to better prevent the phenomenon.
- **Use existing and future analysis about lone actor profiles to determine strategies with regard to lone-actor terrorism.** Data about differences between subgroups and benchmarking helps to determine strategies.
- To learn from **debriefing** on lone actor cases. Synergy between police, academics and other stakeholders is needed for this. Analysis of cases also helps to learn about underlying causes, specifically for the question why a lone actor turned to violence. Sometimes, the risk of a lone actor turning to violence can be found in a traumatic life experience. To be able to identify that experience in a timely manner can help to steer the preventive intervention in the right direction. These interventions are often not in the police realm and need actions from partners, for instance mental health, education or social workers.

The “Monitoring System and Transfer Platform Radicalization” (MOTRA) project (DE)<sup>5</sup> is a promising approach. It is a research network exchanging available and evolving research insights on processes of radicalisation. The exchange platforms combines expertise from research, policy and practitioners. In

<sup>5</sup> For more information on MOTRA (in German), see [here](#).

that sense is it setting the conditions to optimise the learning about the phenomenon of lone actors from the perspective of practitioners and incidents and the research and analysis of movements and groups in society. The project is an interesting attempt working towards an evidence-based design of policy and research. The project is coordinated by the Terrorism / Extremism Research Center of the Federal Criminal Police Office (Wiesbaden) in cooperation with renowned universities and national scientific research institutes.

With regard to mental health and multi-agency working with mental health organisations, it is recommended to **start from the illness and treatment of the patients and not start from the notion that mental health might be an indicator of lone actor violence**. It is about combining pieces of the puzzle, rather than looking at single variables or characteristics, such as legal gun possession or mental health problems. The best alternative is to look for combinations of behaviour, personal characteristics and contextual factors. One example is the “toxic combination” of being bullied, being a young male with mental health issues and having the possibility to acquire weapons as a member of a shooting club. Such combinations are the ones to look for or be extremely worried about<sup>6</sup>.

**Therefore, it is key to establish a “mental health culture”,** by removing taboos and lowering barriers to mental health, which makes it possible for people to more easily reach out to mental health services. **Furthermore, it is necessary to invest police engagement in multi-agency cooperation networks that include mental health services.** The Counter Terrorism Vulnerability Support Hub in the United Kingdom (UK) shows how multi-agency cooperation can work in this area.

The **Counter Terrorism Vulnerability Support Hub (UK)** started 5 years ago as a pilot by the Metropolitan Police. The project has been an ongoing process of developing and embedding. A key element of the approach is to get the buy-in of mental services and get them on board and develop processes together with the police. Mental health practitioners are thus not *part* of the police, but they work closely together and are co-located in the same office. This co-location is key in building trust. Another key element of the approach is hiring experienced and excellent health staff. The approach is based on a safeguarding perspective: police and mental health professionals are there to try and help to support more vulnerable people by getting them the right mental health treatment.

By working together in a “trusted bubble”, they easily overcome difficult information sharing struggles. Confidentiality is still a core part of their work, but working together has made it easier to distinguish what is worth sharing and what is not. In a case presented on an individual with schizophrenia, information to mental health workers did not track any danger, whereas police information clearly did. Because mental health workers could be informed about this, the individual could receive the right treatment. Without the information from the police, this wouldn’t be possible.

Finland developed **UHKAT** (meaning ‘Threats’). This is a basic model for police units and officers to identify and tackle targeted violent individuals. The starting point was two school shootings in 2007 and 2008 and later incidents of targeted violence. In Finland, they use the term “persons who raise concern of possible threat of violent behaviour”. A national threat assessment centre was founded, and there are protocols and tools to be used. Tools being used are chosen based on the specific case (TRAP-18, VERA-2, PCL-R).

<sup>(6)</sup> de Roy van Zuijdewijn & Bakker, [Lone-Actor Terrorism Policy Paper 1: Personal Characteristics of Lone-Actor Terrorists](#).

The cooperation between police and mental health is about educating mental health about potential risk of violence and at the same time policing willing to be educated about mental health issues.

In the Netherlands, after the attacks committed by Breivik in Norway in 2011 and two separate deadly incidents by other disturbed individuals<sup>7</sup>, the government decided to develop a training on potentially violent lone actors. The focus was not solely on ideology-driven individuals, but also on persons acting out of a grievance or mental unstable conditions. The training was nation-wide given to different first-line practitioners and then further developed for the boards of shooting clubs. The aim was to raise awareness and make board members of shooting clubs contact police if they had doubts and concerns about a member. This could contribute to increasing the likelihood of early detection of dangerous individuals and potential lone actors in possession of firearms.

In more general terms, from the discussions it emerged that, in order to optimise the risks related to gun ownership, checks could be an area for further improvements.

## Follow up

A clear outcome of the meeting was that there is a need for training and awareness programmes about lone actors, including for police. It could help – as a first step – to have an overview of what is already in place in EU Member States.

It could be useful in the future to have a RAN meeting to explore and discuss real cases and case studies of lone actors, and deriving inspiring and learning practices from them.

There was the idea to organise a RAN POL meeting on awareness programmes, training and risk assessment tools to be used by police to boost awareness in local networks and promote capacity building. Interesting examples were mentioned in Belgium, the Netherlands, Finland and Spain.

Based also on experiences developed in some EU Member States, RAN could help to promote common indicators to describe the lone actors in the information systems and debriefings, and to build among EU Member States a common understanding about the phenomenon.

---

<sup>7</sup> A 24-year old man killed six people in a shopping mall in Alphen aan de Rijn and committed suicide, see also [here](#). See also an attempt to ram into a coach carrying the Dutch Queen, where the man ran over and killed six persons, see also [here](#).

## Further reading

Ellis, C., & Pantucci, R. (2016). *Lone-actor terrorism. Policy paper 4: 'Leakage' and interaction with authorities*. Royal United Services Institute.

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2016-02-29-lone-actor-terrorism-leakage-interaction-authorities.pdf>

Ellis, C., Pantucci, R., de Roy van Zuijdewijn, J., Bakker, E., Gomis, B., Palombi, S., & Smith, M. (2016). *Lone-actor terrorism. Analysis paper*. Royal United Services Institute.

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2016-02-29-lone-actor-terrorism-analysis-paper-rusi.pdf>

de Roy van Zuijdewijn, J., & Bakker, E. (2016). *Lone-actor terrorism. Policy paper 1: Personal characteristics of lone-actor terrorists*. Internal Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague.

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2016-02-29-lone-actor-terrorism-policy-paper-personal-characteristics-final.pdf>

Liem, M., van Buuren, J., & Schönberger, H. (2018). *Cut from the same cloth? Lone actor terrorists versus common homicide offenders*. Internal Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague. <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/ICCT-Liem-et-al-Cut-from-the-Same-Cloth-April2018.pdf>

Preventing, interdicting and Mitigating Extremism, PRIME is a EU funded project with data on lone actor extremism events'. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/jill-dando-institute/research/research-groups/terrorism-and-organised-crime/preventing-interdicting-and-mitigating>