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UNDERSTANDING LONE-ACTOR TERRORISTS: THE GLOBAL CONTEXT AND HOW IT CAN BE APPLIED TO NEW ZEALAND

Josinta Tillett¹

While the Christchurch mosque attacks on 15 March 2019 were asserted to have changed New Zealand's national security context, arguably the possibility of such an attack was foreseen, and, internationally, there was evidence of increasing risk of such attacks occurring. This paper explores the current state of international lone-actor research, and looks at how this can be applied in an endeavour to prevent future attacks in New Zealand. This paper combines an overview of the international lone-actor phenomenon, with New Zealand's historical and contemporary terrorism context, and explores the extent that international research may have a bearing on current and future lone-actor terrorism risk here. It argues careful attention to identifiable indicators and protective factors, as well as local context, as essential in the contemplation of current and future attempts to pre-emptively identify and prevent potential lone-actor terrorism in New Zealand.

Keywords: Lone-Actor Terrorist, Terrorism, New Zealand, al- Qaeda, Islamic State, Right Wing Extremism, Risk Indicators, Protective Factors

Introduction

The day of the 2019 terrorist attacks in Christchurch is considered by some, both within and outside of New Zealand's Government, to be the day New Zealand's national security context changed. While this may be so, it can also be argued that such an attack, by a lone-actor terrorist, was already considered possible, if not likely, in New Zealand. Indeed, researchers and world leaders had already highlighted the growth and higher-risk of lone-actor terrorism to the West¹, and it had been cited as the most significant

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terrorism risk to New Zealand². This paper seeks to answer the question: what is the current state of international lone-actor research, and how can this help New Zealand in its endeavour to prevent future attacks? This paper will overview the development of the lone-actor phenomenon internationally, briefly outline New Zealand's historical and contemporary terrorism context as well as explore the extent of international research and the bearing it may have on New Zealand's current and future lone-actor terrorism risk. It argues careful attention to identifiable indicators and protective factors, as well as local context, as essential in the contemplation of current and future attempts to pre-emptively identify and prevent potential lone-actor terrorism in New Zealand.

In part, the high risk of lone-actor terrorism is due to it being difficult to prevent. Difficulties arise from the solitary nature of related attack planning, hindering identification of attackers prior to terrorism events.³ Identification is difficult because lone-actors mostly work alone, are less likely to communicate with others, and planning is less obvious to security agencies.⁴ In addition, security agencies are unable to apply a lone-actor typology that would assist with identification, as academic research has not been able to prescribe one⁵. Developing a typology is difficult because of behavioural and characteristic variations of lone-actors, inaccurate information provided by friends and family on successful attackers, and inaccurate reporting by media and authorities.⁶ In New Zealand, the absence of historical attacks, as well as a lack of attention paid to the domestic terrorism context by successive governments, also complicates this.⁷

Despite the reported high-risk of lone-actor terrorism and difficulties in preventing it, New Zealand security agencies need to ensure as much as possible they are enabled to counter this risk. These agencies, particularly Police, the Security Intelligence Service and Customs, must not only respond to such attacks, but must also seek to detect potential lone-actors before possible attacks occur. These agencies currently identify, triage, and prioritise possible lone-actors. Early detection is important to prevent plans from forming and to identify rehabilitation options for potential lone-actors. However, in the general absence of a specific lone-actor profile, New Zealand agencies would benefit from an evidence-based approach to undertake these prevention tasks, particularly to support the heightened security requirements following the Christchurch attacks.⁸

This paper seeks to fill this gap, by providing New Zealand security agencies with insight to current international research on lone-actor terrorists, particularly their characteristics, and suggests how this research might be applied to New Zealand. This has been achieved by considering the relevant international studies on lone-actor terrorism, analysing them for thematic consistencies and differences, and drawing out the main established identifying factors attributed to lone-actor terrorists. These characteristics are then compared to known case studies of New Zealand lone-actors, which in turn are assessed against a random control sample of routine criminal offenders using anonymised data. This was done to test the efficacy of an indicator-based approach to assessing the risks of potential lone-actor suspects. This paper identifies a number of

characteristics which are common among lone-actor terrorists, with further data that relates more specifically to New Zealand circumstances. This paper reveals the possibility of developing an assessment criteria relevant to a New Zealand context.

Two issues need further explanation before proceeding. Firstly, there is no universally accepted definition of terrorism itself, and when it comes to specific types of terrorism definitions also vary. The definition of 'lone-actor terrorism' used in this research was developed at a 2015 Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism workshop in The Hague:

The threat or use of violence by a single perpetrator (or small cell), not acting out of purely personal-material reasons, with the aim of influencing a wider audience, and who acts without any direct support in the planning, preparation and execution of the attack, and whose decision to act is not directed by any group or other individuals (although possibly inspired by others).⁹

This definition aligns with those used by other researchers in the field, including Ramon Spaaj (2012) and Gabriel Weimann (2012), discussed below. The term 'lone-actor' is used here instead of 'lone-wolf' to avoid misconceptions that the latter term raises, including perceived levels of cunning and lethality.¹⁰ Secondly, New Zealand has historically lacked specific terrorism-related legislation. Its first enactment in 1987 – the International Terrorism (Emergency Powers) Act – dealt only with specific powers in an 'international terrorist event' and has never been evoked. It was not until the Terrorism Suppression Act (TSA) 2002 that a 'terrorist act' became an offence, and even then in 2007 the complexity of the Act's wording rendered it practically unusable unless applied after the fact. Until Brenton Tarrant pleaded guilty in 2020 for the Christchurch mosque attacks, *legally speaking* New Zealand had never had a terrorist. Academic attention on terrorism in New Zealand has also been lacking, until John Battersby more recently authored a number of articles focused on the issue. Battersby argues that despite the legal deficiency, New Zealand has experienced terrorism, and certain acts committed here – if committed in most other countries – would have been regarded as terrorism.¹¹ Therefore, the New Zealand cases discussed in this article are those that, in the assessment of the author, meet the definition outlined above and, if not 'legally' regarded as terrorism in New Zealand, they are nevertheless relevant to a discussion about it.

The Lone-actor Phenomenon

Over the past 30 years, there has been a noticeable growth internationally in lone-actor terrorism with the number of such attacks increasing every decade.¹² Lone-actor terrorism is particularly prevalent in the US, with rates there being much higher than those of all other countries.¹³ From 1970-2010 lone-actor attacks in the US rose by 45 percent per decade (22-32 attacks per decade),¹⁴ and the number of individuals killed increased from four per decade in the 1960s, to 115 in the 2010s.¹⁵ Rates in the US

continued to rise, with a 2020 report stating that at least 30 attacks and 20 deaths were recorded across the US and Canada every year since 2014¹⁶. Increases have also occurred elsewhere. From 1970-2010, lone-actor attacks in Europe rose by 412 percent (8-41 attacks per decade)¹⁷, with further increases seen to at least 2018.¹⁸ Despite the significant proportionate increase, overall numbers of lone-actor attacks remain relatively low when compared to terrorist attacks generally.¹⁹ The broader community impact of these attacks is nevertheless significant when they occur. The 2019 Christchurch mosque attacks led to 51 deaths, a public out-pouring of grief, a formal review of Government processes,²⁰ increased and sustained fears within the Muslim community,²¹ and rapid changes to firearms legislation.²² Attacks in France and Austria in 2020 prompted community-wide concerns in Europe, an increase in the Terrorism Threat Level in the UK and international tension over the French President's reaction to the attacks.

Along with the increase in lone-actor attacks has come a change in ideological motivations. US lone-actor terrorism (as with group-based terrorism) was earlier dominated by left-wing attackers in the 1970s, with extreme right-wing ideologies emerging as an influence in the 1980s, and becoming more prominent in the final decade of the twentieth century. Right-wing extremists were responsible for 73 percent of lone-actor attacks in the US to 2016²³, and 87 percent of attacks in 2019.²⁴ The prevalence of right-wing attacks is, in part, due to the domestic political context in the US, something starkly obvious during the last days of the Trump presidency in January 2021.²⁵ Right wing attackers tend to prefer firearms (often semi-automatic weapons)²⁶ and the open accessibility of such weapons in the US is one factor virtually without parallel elsewhere in the world and, when added to the domestic political context, creates a uniquely American phenomenon.

High US rates of lone-actor terrorism have possibly impacted the perception that lone-actor terrorism, particularly that of the right-wing, has increased world-wide.²⁷ Spaaj (2018) reported that high rates of right-wing attacks in the US contrasted to lower levels in Europe, and EU member states reported five, one and six right-wing extremist attacks in 2017, 2018 and 2019 respectively.²⁸ However, failed and foiled attacks are not always publicised, and this may mask increases in right-wing extremism in the EU.²⁹ Indeed, the UN Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee reported a 320 percent increase in right-wing terrorism globally in the five years to 2020³⁰.

With lower rates of right-wing extremism in the EU come higher rates of Islamic, left-wing and other ideological types. Significant ethno-nationalist influences are evident across the EU,³¹ while neo-Nazism is strong in Germany, and Islamophobia is evident in the Netherlands.³² These clear differences again reflect the importance of domestic political contexts on terrorism rates and types, with many instances in the EU being linked to dissident Republican groups in Northern Ireland, and separatist terrorist groups in Spain³³.

Islamic lone-actor extremists have also been prominent internationally in the past 20 years. From the late 2000s, al-Qaeda strongly encouraged this method of terrorism, and Islamic State (IS) did the same from the 2010s,³⁴ with numbers of related attacks more than doubling in the US in the past decade,³⁵ with a peak of 53 deaths in the US in 2016.³⁶ Increases were also seen in Europe where all terrorist fatalities in 2018 and 2019 were from Islamic-extremist attacks.³⁷ France in particular has experienced multiple Islamist inspired terror attacks – from small groups and lone-actors – since 2012, reaching a high point in 2014-2015 with lone-actor attacks continuing each year up to and including 2021.

With the decline of al-Qaeda's global influence following Osama bin-Laden's death and the latter decline of IS,³⁸ Islamic-extremist attacks appeared to decrease.³⁹ The lack of overt power held by al-Qaeda and IS lowered their ability to encourage lone-actor attacks internationally. In 2018, IS only claimed one attack in Australia, and did not claim any in the US.⁴⁰ In 2019, four deaths in the US were attributed to Islamic extremists.⁴¹ This decline may revert as other groups seek to fill the power-vacuum left by IS,⁴² if al-Qaeda again rises to power following a period of regrouping, or if IS continues to gain strength via its global provinces and affiliates.⁴³ Both groups are considered to still pose a threat to the West.⁴⁴ A rapidly occurring, albeit short, resurgence in Islamist attacks was prompted in October 2020 by a history teacher showing a cartoon image of the Prophet Mohammed, which underscores the latent risk that continues from this source.⁴⁵

Battersby has explained New Zealand's terrorism context as nuanced and quite different to that of other countries.⁴⁶ "Terrorism here has been generally less frequent and less severe than elsewhere, at times emulating overseas trends and at other times germinating its own particular causes."⁴⁷ Battersby notes the impact of the era of modern terrorism was experienced with several bomb threats, bombings, and fire bombings in the early 1970s, and again during the controversial Springbok Tour in 1981. These were, however, the only two occasions when any genuine sequentially planned bombings occurred. Otherwise, New Zealand's experience of such violence was more in the form of occasional, unconnected events almost entirely undertaken by lone-actors. While the rest of the world has seen a perceptible increase in lone-actor perpetrators, for New Zealand this mode has been its norm.⁴⁸

There has been a lack of awareness of terrorism risk in New Zealand due to perceptions that its frequency and severity has been less, and that the country was protected from international influences by its size and geographical isolation.⁴⁹ This attitude is reflected in a general lack of attention by successive governments on the subject.⁵⁰ Until February 2020 New Zealand lacked a formal counter-terrorism strategy, and the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Mosques (RCOI) observed a clear lack of centralised leadership in the nation's approach to countering terrorism.⁵¹ The only open-source Government report that dealt with terrorism generally prior to

March 2019 was the 2016 Cullen and Reddy review of intelligence and security.⁵² While this review reported that New Zealand was not immune to extremist activity, it did not assess the risk of terrorism, much less the risk of lone-actor terrorism, the capability or intent of at-risk individuals, or what influenced individuals' engagement in terrorism.⁵³

A number of instances in recent years highlight the risk (and indeed the 15 March 2019 attacks demonstrated the reality of it) that there is an on-going realistic possibility of lone-actor attacks occurring in New Zealand.⁵⁴ In 1981, Christopher Lewis made an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate Queen Elizabeth II who was visiting New Zealand. In 1982, Neil Roberts conducted a suicide bomb attack against the Wanganui Police computer centre. Threats made in 2003 to poison public utilities during the America's Cup regatta and the Tiger Woods visit may have been the work of a lone-actor or actors (albeit as threats rather than acts). The 2014 threat to contaminate baby formula which prompted unprecedented security precautions was the work of a single individual acting alone. He was convicted and sentenced to eight years imprisonment for criminal blackmail, his actions not meeting thresholds in the Terrorism Suppression Act, despite them being described as terrorism, or akin to it, by various observers.⁵⁵

The emergence of al-Qaeda did not appear to resonate in New Zealand, but the emergence of IS and its dissemination of propaganda on social media platforms did inspire a response from New Zealanders. A few travelled to war-zones, the most well-known of whom, Mark Taylor, posted a YouTube video calling for sympathisers in New Zealand to attack 2015 ANZAC Day commemorations. In 2016, Imran Patel was the first person in New Zealand to be charged for possession and distribution of objectionable material displaying extreme violence, material produced by IS that had been banned under the Film, Video and Publications Classification Act.⁵⁶ Patel's three-year nine-month sentence was in addition to a previous sentence he served for threatening to kill a taxi driver in the name of Allah.⁵⁷ He acted alone and did not appear to have any formal links to IS.⁵⁸ On the same day Patel was sentenced, Niroshan Nawarajan received five months home detention for possession of objectionable material, displaying extreme violence.⁵⁹ Nawarajan had walked into a US Consulate wearing an IS t-shirt asking if the building was bomb-proof, while in possession of a hard-drive containing extremist content.⁶⁰

In July 2017, a Christchurch teenager previously engaging with online IS content threatened to kill people in a Christchurch mall while brandishing a stolen metal pole. His initial intent reportedly was to obtain a motor vehicle and drive it into a crowd of people. He faced charges of robbery, assault, possession of offensive weapon, threats to kill, disorderly behaviour and intentional damage.⁶¹ He was reportedly suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Overseas studies have noted the common occurrence of mental health problems among lone-actor terrorists.⁶² In early 2018, Jordayne Madams received six months community detention for possessing IS propaganda and child sex abuse material.⁶³ Media articles noted that he suffered from Asperger syndrome.⁶⁴

Although not reported publicly at the time, in February 2019 (a month before the Christchurch attacks), police apprehended a teen who had acquired firearms, constructed improvised explosive devices and posted intentions on-line to commit a mass killing at a South Island school. No details were provided regarding what, if any, particular ideology motivated the teen, but he had described himself as a 'terrorist', selected a target for his attack and had undertaken planning for it.⁶⁵ No statement regarding his mental health was released.

More recently, a 15 year old from Porirua was identified by the FBI after engaging online making disparaging remarks about Muslims and Arabs, and discussing with another user about his planned mass shooting attack. He reportedly stated that his purpose was to "recruit people and to complete....the mission" commenced by Tarrant. Following his arrest, and on first engaging with the Youth Court the youth was noted as being 'very anxious' but no other information concerning mental health was revealed.⁶⁶

On 15 March 2019, Tarrant attacked two Christchurch mosques, resulting in the deaths of 51 people. Tarrant's background is typical of a lone-actor, being marked by social isolation, ideological adherence and trauma. His background includes: his parents' separation, an abusive step-father, his father's suicide, his own racist ideas and ideological beliefs, few friends and social anxiety, bullying, heavy internet use and online gaming, and few protective factors. His attacks were well-planned and, due to his social isolation, there was little opportunity for leakage.⁶⁷ No formal mental health diagnosis has been published but Tarrant stated to his sister he thought he was autistic and a sociopath. In addition, Tarrant travelled extensively,⁶⁸ did not seek higher education,⁶⁹ and donated funds to white identitarian organisations⁷⁰.

As a result of Tarrant's attacks, New Zealand's National Terrorism Threat Level was elevated to 'high', and then lowered to 'medium' in April 2019.⁷¹ Prior to this, the level had been at 'very low' or 'low' for a number of years.⁷² This threat level is assessed by the Combined Threat Agency Group (CTAG) based on a considered analysis of a range of factors, including 'watch-lists' of suspects, maintained by New Zealand's security agencies.⁷³ Prior to March 2019, the bulk of these individuals were considered radicalised (or at risk of being radicalised) by IS-inspired ideology.⁷⁴ Following the Christchurch attacks, however, security agencies significantly increased the number of those they were 'watching' to include more who were considered to have Right Wing Extremist, Neo Nazi or white supremacist views.⁷⁵ This expanded the overall number of individuals being monitored. Previously, security agencies may have been able to more readily identify, triage and prioritise suspects due to low numbers of suspects being considered. However, with the changed threat level, increase in the number of watchlist suspects and the diversification of threat type, a much more systematic, consistently deliberate, and evidence-based approach will now be required.

With the new global attention on lone-actor terrorism, and the clear and obvious increase in it as a mode by which terrorist organisations, groups, loose associations and individuals carry out their operations, there has been a growing interest among academics and counter-terrorism practitioners in this type of terrorism. Of particular note has been a number of academic studies of lone-actors to see what common traits they have previously exhibited in an endeavour to discover if such traits are observable or discoverable prior to their attack. With watchlists globally increasing, the value of such endeavours is obvious. New Zealand has an intermittent but lengthy history of lone-actors and, as covered above, the present and future risk they pose has not abated.

Existing Lone-actor Research

Eight significant international studies analyse a range of lone-actor terrorist characteristics or indicators and bring considerable depth to the endeavour of understanding lone-actor terrorism. Other research in this aspect of the lone-actor field tends to be a literature review re-summarising these eight studies, or focuses on single behavioural dimensions limiting detection of behavioural patterns.⁷⁶ The variety of indicators and study methodologies complicates comparisons between the eight studies,⁷⁷ and identification of significant indicators.⁷⁸

The eight studies all draw their samples from Europe, the US, or both, with a heavy emphasis on the US. Depending on collection methodology, dates included fall anywhere between 1940 and 2018, and sample sizes range from 98 to 461. Spaaj and Haam's sample is based on US attacks only, and the collection date commenced at 1940. They identified 38 lone-actor attacks prior to 2001, and the majority of these occurred from 1958 onwards. Overall, they considered 123 lone-actor terrorists, and collected information from a wide variety of sources. Schuurman et al's (2018) sample is based on the US and Europe from 1978-2015, but only considered 55 lone-actor terrorists. Their collections were based on a much narrower range of sources. Gruenewald et al's (2015) sample is based on incidents from 1980 onwards, due to collection methodologies of the American Terrorism Study (ATS), created with the FBI. While methodologies are routinely explained in published research, it is sometimes unclear why some data was included or excluded. Collection methodologies of the Empirical Assessment of Domestic Radicalization (EADR) project are not outlined. The project achieved a large sample size, based solely on US terrorists - 1,473 overall, including 461 lone-actor terrorists, from 1940 onwards. Despite the unclear methodology, the results mirrored those of other studies. There is also some cross-pollination between studies, with the US National Institute of Justice (NIJ) sponsoring research by Gill, Horgan and Deckert (2014), and Meloy (2016).⁷⁹

While Gill, Horgan and Deckert (2014) considered most relevant indicators, they relied on media reporting. They considered multiple indicators across 119 individuals, from the US and Europe, from 1990-2013. Gill stands out as a preeminent researcher of

lone-actor terrorism indicators⁸⁰ - he was an early researcher of lone-actors, utilises his own database and codebook, has published numerous studies, and is often quoted in other research.⁸¹ He continues to publish yearly, often with a slightly different focus. Indeed, various research limitations complicate accurate identification of lone-actor terrorism indicators. Some research, such as that by Gallagher (2017), conflates indicators affecting both general and lone-actor terrorists. The age of data in some studies does not reflect recent changes in the lone-actor terrorism context, and this limitation must be noted in current research. Indeed, while lone-actor terrorism is no longer considered an under-researched topic internationally,⁸² more studies employing current empirical data are required.

Despite the variety of indicators and methodologies used in the eight studies, analysis determined that similar conclusions were drawn in each study. In addition, all studies considered distal characteristics and proximate behaviours,⁸³ which are relevant in lone-actor assessments. Distal characteristics are chronic aspects of an individual which may prompt monitoring, while proximate behaviours are patterns rather than discrete variables, and encourage active risk management of an individual.⁸⁴ Overall, the similarities in indicators across these studies allowed for closer analysis of their relevance. Indicators that featured consistently across studies are plotted in Table One below for comparison purposes, and to further analyse the significance of each in identification of lone-actor terrorists. Some indicators were able to be combined for this analysis. Gaps indicate that an indicator was not considered by the study.

Table One: Database comparison of lone-actor indicators.⁸⁵ (Percentages indicate the prevalence of the indicator detected in the study's lone-actor sample.)

Indicator	Summary	Meloy	CLAT Project	Gill, Horgan, Deckert	Spaaj & Hamm	Gruenewald	Schuurman	Smith	EADR/PIRUS
DISTAL									
Gender	Male			Male	Male	Male		Male	Male
Age	30s		29.7	Over 30	31	30s			20s-30s
Ideology	100%	100%	100%	100%			100%		100%
Personal grievance	Yes	78%	43%		Yes			80%	
Online dependence	Yes	49%		68%	Yes				
Social isolation	Yes		29%	53%		Yes	Yes	51%	
Sexual/intimate issues	Yes	84%		50%	80%	Yes		80%	44%
Mental health	Highly-likely	41%	35%	31%	40%		Yes	Yes	31%
Education	Normal to high			Even	Varied	High		Higher	UNK
Unemployment/issues	Yes	55%		40-63%	73%			38-71%	
Prior criminal	Highly-likely	30%	33%	41%	60%		46%	55%	50%
Drug/alcohol abuse	Possible			23%					20%
PROXIMATE									
Leakage/broadcasting	Yes	85%	46%	64%	70%		86%	76%	
Directly communicated	Likely	22%		22%	Yes				
Unfreezing/crisis	Likely			32%	73%		44%		

Key findings of Table One are that lone-actor terrorists from Europe and the US:

- are overwhelmingly male
- are usually aged in their 30s
- always hold a radical ideology
- probably suffer a personal grievance
- are dependent on the internet
- are socially isolated
- usually have intimacy issues
- often have mental health problems
- have average to high education levels⁸⁶
- often suffer employment problems
- often have a prior criminal history
- probably do not have drug and alcohol problems
- will likely experience an event that ‘triggers’ their intent to commit an attack,
- are highly-likely to ‘leak’ their intent.

This table highlights that the above indicators (except for drug and alcohol use) were found to be consistently relevant and prominent across studies. It is note-worthy that some typically-cited indicators, such as mental health and social isolation, can be less common in lone-actors than other factors, such as having a personal grievance or intimacy issues.

The New Zealand Context Compared

Seven of the New Zealand cases noted above align with the definition of terrorism and provide sufficient detail to allow for deeper analysis. By placing these cases adjacent to findings from the international comparison table (Table One), their characteristics can be compared. The results are presented in Table Two, overleaf.

Key findings of Table Two are:

- the sample is younger on average than Table One would suggest
- all have a radical ideology
- internet influence was less than expected
- social isolation was less than expected
- mental health problems were higher than expected,
- leakage was either unknown or less than expected.

While the small number of New Zealand cases means the above findings are suggestive only, this table highlights initial differences between the New Zealand and international samples. Some of the differences – particularly internet influence and social isolation – could be attributed to the age of three cases (being pre-internet). The high mental

health rates could be attributed to known higher rates of mental health disorder in the general New Zealand population, compared to overseas.⁸⁷ While there are still similarities between the two samples, it is also possible that the New Zealand context is somewhat different to those overseas. Although there are various gaps in the below table that could be enhanced by classified information,⁸⁸ the New Zealand-specific results could aid better understanding of the domestic lone-actor context.

Table Two: New Zealand cases and New Zealand summary, vs summary of international database comparison.

Indicator	Intl. Summary	B. Tarrant	C. Lewis	N. Roberts	J. Madams	I. Patel	N. Nawarajan	Suppressed	NZ Summary
DISTAL									
Gender	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Most
Age	30s	28	17	22	18	26	26	17	17-28
Ideology	100%	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	100%
Personal grievance	Yes	Yes	UNK	Yes	Unlikely	UNK	UNK	UNK	Likely
Online dependence	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	Likely	Unlikely	Unlikely	Yes	Likely
Social isolation	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	UNK	No	No	Yes	Possible
Sexual/intimate issues	Yes	Likely	UNK	No	Yes	UNK	UNK	UNK	Possible
Mental health	Highly-likely	Possible	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	UNK	Yes	Highly-likely
Education	Normal to high	Normal	No	Normal	UNK	UNK	UNK	Low	Unclear
Unemployment/issues	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	UNK	UNK	UNK	UNK	Unclear
Prior criminal	Highly-likely	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	UNK	UNK	Likely
Drug/alcohol abuse	Possible	UNK	UNK	UNK	UNK	UNK	UNK	UNK	UNK
PROXIMATE									
Leakage/broadcasting	Yes	No	UNK	Yes	Yes	Yes	UNK	UNK	Highly-likely
Directly communicated	Likely	No	UNK	UNK	UNK	UNK	UNK	UNK	UNK
Unfreezing/crisis/trigger	Likely	UNK	UNK	UNK	UNK	UNK	UNK	UNK	UNK

Understanding New Zealand’s context can be further enhanced through analysis of Police data relating to a lone-actor cohort. In Table Three (overleaf) permission was obtained to use anonymised Police data of suspected potential lone-actor cases⁸⁹ alongside anonymised data relating to general offenders who had been charged with serious violence offences in the five years to December 2018. The comparison of the two data sets tests that the characteristics identified in the lone-actor cohort are unique. Including such a control group is widely recommended by researchers to enhance study strength⁹⁰.

Analysis of this table highlights several similarities between the two data sets. Rates of overall prior criminal offending are similar, as are the rates of prior violent offending. In addition, a third of both groups have prior drug offending and nearly 10 percent have prior sexual offending. However, a greater proportion of violence offenders have prior dishonesty offending than the lone-actor cohort.⁹¹

On the other hand, there are also notable differences between the two groups. The New Zealand lone-actor cohort has a higher rate of prior firearms alert/offence (31 percent vs 14 percent) and a higher rate of holding firearms licences (17 percent vs 1.2 percent). While the difference is possibly more representative of Police collection methodologies,

it should be considered that possible lone-actors may be more likely to be in possession of a firearm, or to be a standing firearms licence holder. Importantly, firearms licence information is usually held by Police, and can facilitate greater depth of analysis.

Table Three: Characteristics of lone-actor cohort vs serious violence offenders.

	Lone-actor cohort	Serious violence offenders
Prior criminal offending	75%	79%
Prior violence offence or alert	44% ⁹²	41% ⁹³
Prior firearms offence or alert ⁹⁴	31%	14% ⁹⁵
Firearms licence holder ⁹⁶	17%	1.2%
Prior drug offending	37%	35%
Prior dishonesty offending	48%	55%
Prior sexual offence or sex offender alert ⁹⁷	9%	8.5%
Mental health ⁹⁸ and/or suicidal tendencies	29%	19%
Mental health only	14%	7%
Family violence involvement ⁹⁹	66%	92%
Age	25-55	19-35
Female (gender)	3%	18%
Ideology	Yes	N/A

In addition, there is a significant difference in the mental health/suicide figures, with this number being much higher for possible lone-actors. When looking only at mental health, there is still a significant difference, with 14 percent of possible lone-actors suffering mental health problems, compared to only seven percent of serious violence offenders. Despite the differences between data sets, this figure is much lower than international findings. One explanation for this is the preliminary lone-actor data requires further Police assessment. A second possibility is Police recording of mental health problems could be inconsistent and subjective. If the finalised list of subjects underwent a formal assessment, this figure could be much higher, especially given higher rates of mental health disorders observed in New Zealand generally.

There are also key demographic differences between the two sets of offenders. There was a broad age range present for possible lone-actors, but on average they were older, with the majority being aged 25-55 years. This aligns with international research also noting that they are typically older than general terrorists.¹⁰⁰ The serious violence offenders tended to be younger with the majority being aged 19-35 years. There is a visible bell-curve amongst the violence offenders, which peaks at 20-30 years. The gender of the possible lone-actors also aligns with research, which notes that the majority of such individuals are male.

Unfortunately, the Police data cannot be compared to the earlier international database table because it does not include intricate indicators, such as being socially isolated or having employment problems. Indeed, while prior criminal, violence or firearms offending could be an indication that an individual may possibly engage in a lone-actor event, these indicators need to be present alongside other relevant indicators for thorough assessment. Despite this weakness, comparison of the lone-actor cohort and serious violence offenders succeeded in introducing a control group and differentiating characteristics of the two groups. The use of this comparison indicates that, with the application of appropriate methodology, analysts could better differentiate between possible lone-actors, general offenders and other members of the community.

Applicability of International Lone-actor Research to New Zealand

A lone-actor terrorist profile cannot be developed,¹⁰¹ nor can a perfect combination of risk factors be compiled. However, research in this paper could be applied immediately by New Zealand security agencies in developing an evidence-based framework that informs current priorities of identification, prevention and management of possible lone-actor terrorists.

Analysis of the eight international studies, New Zealand Police data on possible lone-actors, similar data on serious violence offenders, and New Zealand case studies has enabled the identification of indicators that could inform a framework supporting lone-actor prevention activities. Despite the absence of a lone-actor profile, research does identify unique characteristics of lone-actors.¹⁰² Indeed, the comparison of the two Police data sets supports this by highlighting differences between what could otherwise be similar cohorts. Importantly, without an ideology, other violence offenders do not undertake the same decision-making process as lone-actors.¹⁰³ For the most part, the incorporation of New Zealand data reinforces international findings, but is weakened by small sample sizes and possibly Police collection methodologies. Therefore, international studies must provide the basis of an evidence-based framework for New Zealand. The following sub-paragraphs describe, in more detail, some of the more prominent indicators that would provide an evidence-base for any framework applied by local security agencies.

Ideology

A key defining characteristic of lone-actor terrorists is that they hold an ideology, even though the ideologies themselves may differ.¹⁰⁴ This is clear from international research and New Zealand case studies, as well as the Police lone-actor cohort. The range of possible ideologies highlights that analysts must be cognisant of an attack being motivated by a range of ideologies.¹⁰⁵ While individual management plans for each ideology could be suggested,¹⁰⁶ this would be overly-complicated, and is not necessary given overall similarities in lone-actor characteristics across ideologies.¹⁰⁷

Importantly, an individual's ideology may be weak, or new. Many lone-actor terrorists are not devoutly religious and are not highly-connected to the community of their ideology.¹⁰⁸ Recent converts posing a lone-actor terrorism risk have been seen in New Zealand, Australia,¹⁰⁹ and elsewhere.¹¹⁰ Of note, in 2012, Spaaj suggested it may be difficult to identify an individual's ideology, despite them being a possible lone-actor. While analysts should be aware of this, to differentiate a possible lone-actor from a regular violence offender, it is possible that increased internet influence since 2012 has encouraged more people to openly espouse their ideology.

Social isolation

More than half of lone-actor terrorists are considered socially isolated, and to have on-line dependence. Despite this, many researchers insist that no one is truly a lone-actor, or socially isolated, particularly with increased internet connectivity. It is acknowledged in other research that truly independent radicalisation to violence is rare.¹¹¹ Many individuals receive ideas, encouragement or training from online peers and material.¹¹² Indeed, the influence of the internet on terrorism has increased dramatically in the past decade, impacting rapid change to the lone-actor terrorism context.¹¹³ However, while appearing to provide a means of connectivity, online dependence can mask true social isolation from family and friends. Furthermore, the internet provides anonymity,¹¹⁴ and is possibly why so much leakage occurs online¹¹⁵.

The definition of 'lone-actor terrorist', followed in this research and by related researchers, notes that lone-actor terrorism can include individuals or small cells. By this definition, the term lone-actor is not limited to truly isolated individuals, such as the deliberately hermitic Unabomber Theodore Kaczynski.¹¹⁶ Rather, social isolation infers that an individual is disconnected from family or peers, and probably spends significant amounts of time online. Consequently, social isolation, the inability to form meaningful relationships, and rejection from mainstream society, can be primary drivers for an individual to feel deprived of what they deserve, develop a personal grievance, and commit an act of violence.¹¹⁷ It can be considered that an individual has a "lack of pro-social influences", emphasising that they do not have positive balancing relationships. This term aligns with psychological analysis. As such, if the majority of an individual's activities are committed alone, and they did not receive meaningful operational support from disconnected groups or individuals, they should be considered a lone-actor.¹¹⁸

Personal grievance

Having a personal grievance is particularly notable in lone-actor terrorists, and is an important attack motivator.¹¹⁹ While only four of the international studies specifically reported on this, lone-actor literature in general considers personal grievance an important characteristic of lone-actors.¹²⁰ Indeed, where known, this also featured highly in the New Zealand case studies. Such a grievance may develop following identification

with a political grievance,¹²¹ or from a perceived personal injustice such as bullying.¹²² Group grievances can morph into personal ones, with lone-actor terrorists often acting in the name of a wider group of people who they want to bring justice to,¹²³ such as anti-abortionist and Atlanta Olympic bomber Eric Rudolph.¹²⁴ These grievances can lead an individual to online dependence, as they may find sympathisers in this space more easily than in their day-to-day life.¹²⁵

Mental health

Mental health disorders can be a key indicator in determining whether an individual poses a risk of lone-actor terrorism. However, mental health disorders must be assessed alongside other relevant indicators, and not by themselves. The effect of mental health disorders on terrorism has been widely researched and debated,¹²⁶ with some international studies finding that 30-40 percent of lone-actors are likely to have mental health disorders.¹²⁷ Schizophrenia, delusional disorder¹²⁸ and Autism spectrum disorders present highly.¹²⁹ In line with this, 29 percent of individuals considered to pose a potential risk of lone-actor terrorism in New Zealand have mental health and suicide problems. Corner and Gill note that lone-actor terrorists are 13.5 times more likely to have a history of mental illness than general terrorists.¹³⁰ Comparatively, only 16 percent of New Zealanders have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder at some time in their lives.¹³¹ Mental health disorders in general are likely linked to violent behaviour,¹³² and this is particularly the case for schizophrenia, which can be exacerbated by alcohol and drug use.¹³³ The relatively high levels of mental health disorders amongst lone-actors suggests that mental health is a viable indicator.

Given the prevalence of mental health disorders in the community however, mental health cannot be a sole determinant of lone-actor terrorism risk. Research indicates mental health is a viable central variable for assessing lone-actor risk due to its common comorbidity with a range of other factors,¹³⁴ such as being socially isolated, having a criminal history, and being influenced by a broader ideological cause.¹³⁵ Analysts should be mindful of such combinations of indicators when conducting analysis. Indeed, a formal diagnosis should not be necessary for incorporation of this indicator at this stage in analysis,¹³⁶ but should be included in latter stages of possible lone-actor management.

High education vs low employment

While poor employment levels can be a strain for many potential lone-actors, many also have normal to high education levels,¹³⁷ and this misalignment can prove a further strain. International research coded unemployment or employment problems as present in 40-70 percent of cases. Despite the differing methodologies used, the relatively high numbers indicate that unemployment is a significant indicator.¹³⁸ Unemployment, frequently moving between jobs, or a recent dismissal, can contribute to an individual feeling alienated and frustrated, and can thus contribute to personal grievances, influ-

enced by an ideology, and a desire to commit an attack.¹³⁹ Furthermore, it is possible that a parent's unemployment status can contribute to a child developing right-wing extremist views.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, Spaaj (2015) suggests that lone-actors holding right-wing and anti-government ideologies are often from lower socio-economic communities, and are less educated.

Prior criminal history

An individual having prior criminal history is a significant indicator for lone-actor terrorism. International research suggests 30-60 percent of individuals will have a prior criminal history, with New Zealand case studies and Police data supporting this. The variation in the international research statistics is again due to differing methodologies. Meloy (2016) specifically looked at criminal violence history, as opposed to criminal history in general, while the CLAT project considered individuals who had convictions. Other studies do not break down to criminality type,¹⁴¹ while Gill, Horgan and Deckert (2014) include people who have committed various offences, from serious violence to graffiti and drunk-driving. Regardless, all the figures are higher than the general population, with estimates that around 25 percent of New Zealand adults have a criminal conviction.¹⁴² Indeed, Jensen and LaFree (2016) suggest that individuals who participate in any kind of criminal offending are more likely to be involved in lone-actor terrorism. This correlates with the New Zealand Police data that suggests 75 percent of possible lone-actors have prior criminal offences. Therefore, it is highly-likely that possible lone-actors in New Zealand will have had prior contact with Police, which will facilitate identification by analysts.

Drugs & alcohol

Drugs and alcohol did not feature highly in international research, with only two studies considering this, placing its prevalence at 20 percent. There was insufficient data in the New Zealand case studies to assess this, however Police data on potential cases recorded prior drug offending at 37 percent. This indicator may be worthy of further New Zealand-specific analysis due to the high rate in Police data compared to little acknowledgement in international research. Jensen and LaFree (2016) specify that prior criminal offending, which can lead to subsequent lone-actor attacks, can include drug offending. However, other research indicates that lone-actor terrorists are unlikely to attack while impaired as this may negatively impact their capability.¹⁴³

Intimate relationship problems

In the international studies, the prevalence of intimate relationship problems ranged from 37 to 84 percent. While differences were due to varying definitions, including individuals simply being single, or having relationship problems, the overall prevalence underscores the significance of this indicator. However, problems with intimate rela-

tionships and sexually deviant behaviour were not sufficiently explored in most studies, and many studies did little more than note that attackers were likely to be single.¹⁴⁴ This is despite failure to form adult attachments being a key predictor of future violence.¹⁴⁵ Indeed, lone-actor terrorists are more likely to have never been married, or to have been divorced or widowed, and to live alone.¹⁴⁶ Spaaj (2017) notes that romantic relationship problems can be the catalyst for publicly violent attacks, and that some political violence can begin with attacks on partners. For example, Omar Mateen battered his wife and Anders Breivik was known to hate women.¹⁴⁷ While most socially isolated individuals will also be single, others may not be socially isolated, but may struggle with intimate relationships.

In New Zealand, some relevant individuals known to Police are heavy consumers of pornography, including Madams, who was in possession of child sex-abuse images.¹⁴⁸ Although this aspect received little attention in international research, Meloy (2016) referred to this in his Terrorism Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18). Meloy (2016) notes that this behaviour may substitute for the absence of a sexual pair bond, and could be rationalised by an individual's ideology. In their sample, Horgan, Gill, Bouhana, Silver and Corner (2016) note that some prior criminal offences included child pornography possession. These findings indicate that pornography use should be incorporated in this broad indicator.

Leakage

Studies strongly suggest that most lone-actor terrorists will leak their attack intent to someone else, with some studies noting that individuals will communicate the threat directly to victims. Most studies state that 64-86 percent of individuals will leak their intent, with only one study putting the number as low as 46 percent. Leakage provides security services with significant identification opportunities. However, Pantucci and Ellis (2016) note that in 35 percent of cases leakage only indicated that an individual was an extremist, not that they wanted to commit an attack. In addition, how and to whom leakage occurs differs depending on ideology.¹⁴⁹ Gill, Horgan and Deckert (2014) on the other hand reported that in 60 percent of cases a letter or public statement would be produced. Even more significantly, in 63 percent of cases the offender would directly tell associates of their attack plans.¹⁵⁰ Indeed, despite the prevalence of social isolation amongst lone-actors, they often maintain some relationships with family members,¹⁵¹ and it is often these family members who are privy to leakage.¹⁵² The New Zealand case studies did not provide sufficient information to enable comparative assessment.

While lone-actor terrorists may be more difficult to identify due to the solitary nature of their activities,¹⁵³ the high likelihood of leakage highlights that detection via associates will often be possible. This also highlights the importance of security services building trust and confidence with various 'communities' to promptly be informed of risk. With the higher prevalence of online connectivity, it is likely that substantial leakage will

occur online, providing a further detection avenue. A motive for lone-actor terrorists to leak their intent is that it provides them with an opportunity to have their grievance heard.¹⁵⁴ Leakage may be intentional or unwitting, may occur due to long lead-in times to attacks,¹⁵⁵ and may be due to unsophisticated operational security measures.¹⁵⁶ Importantly, possible lone-actors will not always have actual intent, even when they leak threats.¹⁵⁷ While empty and real threats can be difficult to differentiate,¹⁵⁸ incorporating other indicators will enable more accurate analysis.

Capability

Capability is another difficult factor to analyse,¹⁵⁹ but is the next step after determining an individual is both engaged in a radical ideology and has intent to attack¹⁶⁰. Without appropriate capability, it is unlikely that a lone-actor would succeed in their endeavour. A possible explanation for the difference internationally in the high number of extremists and the conversely low number of lone-actors, as well as the number of failed attacks, is that lone-actors are unable to develop requisite capability levels.¹⁶¹ Becker (2014) highlights that by virtue of operating alone, lone-actors lack shared skills, access, expertise and knowledge, resulting in less-lethal attacks.

However, while a large, coordinated attack would require high capability levels, rudimentary attacks over the past few years have demonstrated that low-capability attacks can still achieve lone-actor terrorist aims.¹⁶² These attacks will often be committed using rudimentary weapons such as knives or vehicles, as far less training and preparation are required.¹⁶³ For example, in 2014 in Canada two military members were killed when Martin Couture-Rouleau hit them with a vehicle¹⁶⁴ and in 2017 in London, Darren Osborne drove a van into a group of Muslims.¹⁶⁵ Such rudimentary attacks allow lone-actors to bridge gaps between high-intent and low-capability levels.¹⁶⁶

While technical capability is a consideration for analysts, they must also consider the psychological resources that enable a lone-actor to attack.¹⁶⁷ Indeed, an individual must overcome natural human resistance to committing extreme violent acts.¹⁶⁸ Such barriers can be overcome through viewing extremist material for desensitisation, internalisation of extremist ideology,¹⁶⁹ or socialisation with relevant associates.¹⁷⁰ Importantly, a weak ideology may not allow them to overcome such barriers as they may determine that the cost of conducting an attack is too high.¹⁷¹ A further complication is that true capability is subjective. While an individual may not appear to have sufficient capability for an attack, a self-perception of high capability could be enough to maintain attack motivation.¹⁷²

Analysts must conduct capability assessments on possible lone-actors to differentiate between individuals who want to conduct an attack, and those who are actually able to do so.¹⁷³ The conclusion may determine whether an individual requires passive or active management by security agencies. Schuurman and Eijkman (2018) emphasise that false

positives of likely attackers can be avoided through adept analysis of both intent and capability. Analysts must consider skills, knowledge, training, and possession of relevant material. Despite its centrality in assessing real threat, capability lacks sufficient attention in related research,¹⁷⁴ likely due to the multiple variables possible, and the indicator's dynamic nature.

Protective Factors

Protective factors are also an important consideration in assessing the threat of a possible lone-actor. Protective factors can counter or balance risk factors, and can encourage an individual to live a more prosocial life.¹⁷⁵ These factors can include individual, peer, and family factors,¹⁷⁶ such as having an intimate relationship, a traditional family, conventional employment, social orientation, and self-control.¹⁷⁷ While some protective factors are the opposite of risk factors, they should not routinely be considered as such.¹⁷⁸

Despite their positive impact and influence on an individual's assessment, protective factors are a relatively new, under-researched concept.¹⁷⁹ Of the significant studies considered for this research, only Gill (2015) mentions protective factors, but even he has not analysed these more than suggesting what might constitute a protective factor. However, as of 2018, the US National Institute of Justice (NIJ) had sponsored research to identify relevant protective factors,¹⁸⁰ and, as of 2019, NIJ was looking to further research in this area.¹⁸¹ Despite the lack of research, it is vital that they are included in analysis because they do influence an individual's actions, and ignoring them could potentially lead to confirmation bias.¹⁸²

Weightings

Weightings or scores should not be applied to indicators in lone-actor terrorism threat assessments.¹⁸³ Perceived benefits of weightings are the guidance provided to less-experienced analysts, differentiation of more serious indicators,¹⁸⁴ and an expedited process of overall prioritisation. However, given that even less research has been conducted on weightings than indicators themselves, and the very low base rate of lone-actor terrorists,¹⁸⁵ any numbers chosen would be close to random and not evidence-based. Furthermore, weightings are unable to account for nuances present in indicators, such as levels of dysfunction within a family or severity of mental health problems.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that international research on lone-actor terrorists can be combined with New Zealand data with a view to establishing an evidence-based approach for the identification of possible lone-actor terrorists in New Zealand, and preventing future attacks. While New Zealand's terrorism context necessitates efficient

and effective identification of individuals who may pose a terrorism risk, security agencies currently conduct this task in the absence of sufficient domestic research. However, despite the apparent limitations of data regarding lone-actors in general, and especially in New Zealand, analysis throughout this research has shown correlation between numerous indicators across empirically based studies at sufficient levels for their use by local security agencies.

Eight relevant, international studies examine multi-factorial indicators of terrorism risk, and employ a variety of methodologies, sample sizes and date ranges to assess these indicators. Despite the variety, there is commonality between the relevance and prevalence of certain indicators. Following incorporation of the most prominent indicators in a comparison table, clarity was gained on which indicators could be used by security agencies.

To ensure closer alignment with the New Zealand context, the characteristics of a possible New Zealand lone-actor cohort, New Zealand serious violence offenders and seven known lone-actors were also compared. The results confirmed expected differences in characteristics between the lone-actor and serious violence offender cohorts, but also suggested differences between international and New Zealand possible lone-actors. There were, however, some similarities between the international and New Zealand groups, and overall it was determined that international findings were applicable to New Zealand.

The findings in this paper can inform current activity by New Zealand security agencies to enhance the tools and guidelines used in the identification of potential lone-actors. With the changed domestic threat level, increase in watchlist suspects and changing threat types, this paper enables security agencies in the development of a more systematic, evidence-based approach. While a lone-actor terrorist profile cannot be developed, this paper enables this approach through a description of distal characteristics and proximate behaviours, as well as protective factors, which would assist security agencies in their analysis.

Given the risk of lone-actor terrorism that New Zealand faces, and the related responsibilities of security agency analysts, this evidence-based approach, drawn from analysis of international and domestic research, will enhance analytical capability and will ultimately aid in the prevention of future terrorist acts.

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- 95 Of the total offender group, 8% had a prior firearms/6800 series charge, as opposed to simply an alert.
- 96 Also, 2.6% of violence offenders had previously held a firearms licence which had, at some stage, been revoked.
- 97 People with a prior offence for sexual offending or an alert for sexual offending.
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