RESEARCH ARTICLE

Profiles of Individual Radicalisation in Australia (PIRA):
Introducing an Australian Open-Source Extremist Database

Emma Belton,* Adrian Cherney and Renee Zahnow

The Profiles of Individual Radicalisation in Australia (PIRA) database captures information on individuals, residing in Australia, who have radicalised to extremism and engaged in a variety of violent and nonviolent ideologically motivated behaviours. Using open-source data, PIRA comprises demographical, individual background, and contextual information and closely replicates the Profiles of Individual Radicalisation in the United States (PIRUS) database. PIRA aims to support research on pathways towards violent extremism and identify background characteristics and risk factors associated with radicalisation. This article seeks to introduce PIRA and provide an overview of its development and coding method, provides a snapshot of the backgrounds, profiles, and risk factors associated with individual radicalisation within the PIRA sample, and briefly compares these findings to existing research. Finally, future research and applications of PIRA are discussed.

Keywords: radicalisation, violent extremism, open-source data, Australia, risk factors

*Corresponding author: Emma Belton, University of Queensland, email: e.belton@uq.edu.au

Introduction

Like many countries, Australia has recorded an increase in 'homegrown' radicalisation with threats emerging across the ideological spectrum.[1] As a result, police, intelligence agencies, and government entities have pushed for a central focus on identifying individuals at risk of radicalisation and who may escalate to violence.[2] Further empirical research is required to gain a better understanding of risk factors for terrorism in order to assess and manage the risks posed by individuals who have been radicalised.

The low base rates and restrictions on access to terrorist offenders pose considerable problems for researchers.[3] To overcome these limitations, terrorism scholars have developed secondary-source data sets on terrorist incidents (e.g. Global Terrorism Database – GTD) and extremist individuals (e.g. Profiles of Individual Radicalisation in the United States database and The European Database of Terrorist Offenders).[4] These data sets have provided opportunities to empirically investigate terrorism patterns and verify existing theories that can explain radicalisation.[5] Research drawing on open-source data has expanded knowledge on the diversity of behaviours that constitute involvement in terrorism[6] risk factors and pathways for radicalisation and violent extremism,[7] and distinguishing between various radicalisation outcomes.[8]

The Profiles of Individual Radicalisation in Australia (PIRA) database is an open-source data set capturing information on individuals who have radicalised to extremism. PIRA is modelled upon the Profiles of Individual Radicalisation in the United States (PIRUS) database[9] and contains information on the developmental, individual, and contextual factors for radicalisation and violent extremism. The database captures individuals of various backgrounds and who participate in a range of extremist behaviours across the ideological spectrum, as well those who have displayed different levels of commitment and motivations.

There are three primary aims of this article. First is to outline the development and methodology underpinning the PIRA database. This contains the inclusions criteria used, data collection process, coding guidelines, and methods of assuring data quality. The aim here is to also provide guidance and insights for similar efforts to develop open-source data sets, with work underway to replicate PIRUS in other parts of the world (e.g. Asia, Canada, and Europe). We then provide an overview of individual profiles of Australian extremists with descriptive statistics relating to background characteristics and risk factors across the sample. Due to space limitations a full overview and analysis of the PIRA data cannot be provided. Instead, we provide some general observations relating to key trends found across the sample and outline future research opportunities.

Profiles of Individual Radicalisation in Australia (PIRA)

As previously stated, PIRA is a replication of an existing US extremist database developed by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) (see Note[10] for in-depth review). The PIRUS database has provided empirical insights into individual and group radicalisation in the United States.[11] It is one of the largest data sets of its kind, capturing individual-level information on more than 2,200 extremists between 1948–2018. Rep-

licating PIRUS in the Australian context builds on an established model and approach allowing for cross-national comparisons to be made.

PIRA collects data from 1985[12] onwards on individuals residing in Australia who have radicalised to extremism across various ideologies—i.e. Islamist, far-right, far-left, and single-issue. Data are collected on a total of 122 variables. This includes information regarding ideology, sociodemographic profiles, family dynamics, plot details (if applicable), criminal history, violent and nonviolent radical behaviour, history of violence, recruitment details, group affiliation and social networks, radical associates, radical beliefs and behaviours, social media use, and radicalisation catalysts. To accommodate for context, PIRA underwent modifications on some variables relating to definitions and parameters specific to the Australian context—i.e. the term misdemeanour used in US criminal proceedings is equivalent to a summary offence in Australia. Several variables were added to increase the depth of information collected for each profile. This included information pertaining to recruitment, associations, history of social isolation, and violent behaviour.

Procedure
Case Inclusion and Exclusion

To date, a total of 254 profiles of individuals are included in the data set. These individuals are included in PIRA for either 1) committing ideologically motivated illegal violent or nonviolent acts, 2) being killed as a result of his/her ideologies, 3) joining a designated terrorist organisation, or 4) associating with an extremist group/organisation/leader. The four inclusion criteria are the same as the parameters set in PIRUS. An individual can be arrested, charged, or indicted for a crime that was ideologically motivated (i.e. stockpiling weapons for the purpose of a terrorist attack). This broad inclusion criteria offers several benefits. Firstly, it allows the data to capture a sample of radicalised individuals in Australia that reflects the heterogeneity in the population and supports a holistic assessment of factors associated with radicalisation risk across a range of behavioural outcomes.[13] It also allows for comparison across a diverse set of individuals to identify similarities and differences and helps to understand processes leading to violence.[14]

Each individual in PIRA must also have been radicalised within Australia[15] and show evidence of espousing ideological motivations, and there must be clear links between their ideological motives and behaviours. Individuals were excluded if they did not meet these criteria (e.g. if their initial radicalisation occurred outside of Australia or prior to 1985, if there is insufficient evidence, if radicalisation was speculative, or if there is an absence of clear evidence that behaviours were ideologically motivated). Following the development of similar databases, individuals are excluded based on a lack of evidence or limited access to sources.[16]

Between 2018–2022, across two exclusion phases, 78 cases were deemed unsuitable for inclusion. Of the excluded cases, 62 (79.5 percent) were removed due to lack of evidence or limited access to sources. For these cases, 75.5 percent (*n*=47) were removed because there was insuf-

ficient evidence to confirm behaviours were ideologically motivated, and the remainder were removed due to limited access to information available in open-source data.

Data Sources

To identify individuals for inclusion, publicly available sources were searched, including court documents, coronial inquest reports[17], journal articles, research reports, online news articles, terrorist blogs, newspaper archives, open-source non-government reports, terrorist monitoring research institutes or organisations (e.g. Middle East Media Research Institute) and terrorist attack databases (i.e. the Global Terrorism Database). First, to compile a list of individuals suitable for inclusion, the authors triangulated data sources. This is an important strategy when dealing with open sources, as relying on a single data source may miss many terrorist events, privilege certain attacks deemed more newsworthy[18], or lead to bias in the selection of highly connected actors. Hence this method is well suited to the scope of the inclusion criteria (i.e. not just terrorist offenders), and allowed the authors to identify individuals across different networks.[19] For instance, in Australia an individual released on a control order[20] can be subject to a range of restrictions relating to associations and contacts. Such names listed in control orders are also explored for possible inclusion for ideologically motivated individuals and behaviours.

To develop and identify information for profiles, multiple data sources were consulted. First, public access search engines including Austlii, Lexis Advance, and WestLaw AU were used to identify court records. Court documents include criminal complaints, affidavits, bail conditions, indictments, sentencing memoranda, extended supervision orders, control orders, and plea agreements. These were the greatest source of information for the individual database and out of 254 cases, 146 (57.5 percent) had an accessible court transcript(s) for data extraction. Secondly, data were collected via academic, grey literature, and books (i.e. autobiographies) that detail terrorist profiles and behaviours such as case studies and qualitative studies.[21] Finally, journalist data were collected on extremists via news search engines such as Lexis Nexus and Google News.

Where accounts conflicted, a hierarchy of data was used in which official court transcripts were considered most reliable, followed by affidavits, then metropolitan journalism, followed by national journalism.[22] Most criminal proceedings in Australia are open access, compared to other countries where access to legal documentation is more restricted (e.g. the UK), heightening reliability amongst sources used to generate profiles. There were also efforts to gather information across a wide range of sources, then revisit profiles to include more reliable information. For instance, if court documents were released after completion of a profile, they were revisited and updated using the most authoritative information. Journalistic data were included with caution, and information was required to be cited in a more reliable source or mentioned over several news sources. Court transcripts were considered the most reliable source of information and a single source was considered adequate for data inclusion. Journalistic information including news articles was considered less reliable and, in the absence of court data, four separate journalistic sources were required to verify the information before it could be included in the PIRA data. On average, each profile was compiled using 17 independent sources.[23]

It is acknowledged that there are limitations in using open-source material, specifically the use of media-based sources which present potential problems such as factual accuracy, privileging large-scale newsworthy incidents (i.e. those involving violence)[24] and the underreporting of foiled terrorist attacks.[25] It also creates the problem of missing data.[26] Hence this produces an issue of incomplete profiles, specifically if an individual's offending was not highly publicised or the individual did not have contact with the criminal justice system (i.e. there is an absence of court transcripts). However, due to the lower prevalence of terrorist-related attacks and extremist movements in Australia[27], a large portion of cases are highly publicised, often resulting in arrests or indictments (though not always convictions), whereby court proceedings can be easily accessed. In the case of the PIRA data, utilising a combination of journalistic accounts and court documents, mitigates some of the limitations associated with over-reliance on a single source of open data.

Data Collection and PIRA Codebook

Data collection began in 2018, and profiles in the current database were finalised in May of 2022.[28] Data collection and coding from open sources was conducted in two phases: (1) compiling qualitative profiles and (2) conversion into numerical data. To ensure validity and accuracy during the data collection phases a codebook was developed. Data are coded in accordance with the PIRA codebook. The codebook outlines inclusion criteria, variable information including in-depth descriptions, coding guidelines, and instructions. An excerpt from the codebook is provided in Figure 1. A version of the codebook can be accessed online.[29]

Figure 1: Example Extract of PIRA Codebook

Recruitment Details

30. *Variable name*: **active_recruitment**
    Variable label: Actively Recruited
    Variable type: Dichotomous
    Source: PIRUS
    Description: Was the individual actively recruited into an extremist movement?

    0 = No
    1 = Yes
    -99 = Unknown

31. *Variable name*: **recruiter**
    Variable label: Recruiters
    Variable type: Categorical, Multiple Entry
    Source: Adapted from PIRUS
    Description: If the individual was actively recruited, enter who actively recruited the individual.
    Note: If the individual was recruited but the name of the recruiter or type of association is not known enter '4' for other.

    1 = Associate(s) or member(s) of a terrorist or violent extremist group
    2 = Family Member
    3 = Friend
    4 = Other
    -99 = Unknown
    -88 = Not Applicable (individual was not actively recruited)

In stage one, qualitative data on each individual profile were collected across all variables, capturing descriptive and text-based information. Profiles were assigned to research assistants in batches. Consensus between coders was routinely checked to ensure inter-rater consistency. At the completion of profile batches, group meetings were held with research assistants and the coinvestigator (first author) to discuss general coding challenges or queries for individual cases and clarification of variable coding. To further ensure consistency across coders and reliability of case notes, every case coded by a single coder was then examined by the first author.

This was done by cross-checking the entered information for consistency, to ensure all profiles shared similar levels of detail, and that coding parameters were followed across coders. In the instance where the first coder highlighted a need for clarity to ascertain the appropriate coding for a particular variable the first author gave their input. If an agreement could not be made, this was referred to the second author for a final decision. Such consensus-based approaches to coding have been used in similar research, including developing terrorist profiles from open sources.[30] A final 'master check' was conducted of all profiles, where coders were allotted a portion of profiles and followed a coding checklist (written by the first author) that outlined common discrepancies and coding issues that were raised during the coding phases. Source checks, editing, and referencing were also addressed in this final phase.

In stage two, qualitative text-based information was converted into numeric data to allow for quantitative analysis. Data were converted into either dichotomous, categorical, ordinal, or numeric data. Again, this process was cross-checked by the first author for consistency, and coding issues were also raised in group meetings between coders and the first author. In the instance of discrepancies, following the procedure in stage one, the principal investigator (second author) was referred to for a final decision.

As a final consistency check, following the general standard for social science research[31], inter-rater reliability tests were conducted with a random sample of profiles. A total of 25 profiles (20 percent of the total sample) were double-coded blind across all quantitative variables (120) by the coinvestigator and a group of research assistants. This equates to 3,000 observations. Following a similar approach conducted for PIRUS,[32] a Krippendorff's alpha was calculated. The Krippendorff's alpha for the 3,000 observations was $\alpha = 0.872$, scoring well above the standard for acceptability ($\alpha > .70$).[33]

Dealing with Missing Data

In the initial data collection phase of the project, researchers adopted a systematic approach to handling missing data. Whenever information for a particular variable was not present in data sources, coders were instructed to treat the information as missing, even if strong logical arguments could be made for treating the values as 'No' or '0'—i.e. not present and having no role in individual radicalisation. This is most notable in relation to attitudinal variables where open-source information can often lack detail, such as personal aspirations, opinions, or emotions. In these cases, coders assigned a missing value code of '-99'.[34] While this approach protects against the possibility of erroneously coding values as absent, it also produces high rates of missing data for many variables.[35] High percentages of missing values can make statistical

tests more difficult and is an ongoing issue in the use of open-source terrorist data sets.[36] Thus, when developing PIRA some degree of missing data was expected.

The authors did, however, employ several techniques to reduce the high number of missing values common amongst open-source data sets. The codebook included clear parameters and stipulations for several dichotomous variables that allowed for the coding as '0' (i.e. not present or no), instead of '-99' (i.e. missing or unknown). For instance, an argument can be made for treating unknown values for mental illness as evidence that the individual did not suffer from mental illness.[37] Comparable reasoning can be made for criminal histories, drug use, and victims of abuse. This rationale is particularly salient due to the nature of open sources, as it is unlikely for sources to report what an individual did not do, or did not experience (i.e. the individual was *not* a victim of abuse).[38] Other non-dichotomous variables followed a similar rational for coding, whereby a "defaulting" code was specified to ensure known information was not excluded due to the strict nature of some variable categories (i.e. if fatalities were mentioned or expected as part of a violent plot, default to '1' equating to "some fatalities" [from 1 to 20]). Similar techniques have been used in the collection of other dichotomous variables in open-source terrorist databases[39] and when dealing with missing values from open-source data for analysis purposes.[40] This significantly reduced the occurrence of missing data and was considered an appropriate strategy given the sources used for data collection.

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics presented here are intended to provide an overview of individuals included in PIRA. Profiles and characteristics of individuals who have radicalised to extremism in Australia are examined through sociodemographic information, ideological alignment, and extremist behaviours, as well as specific risk factors and vulnerabilities. Here a range of descriptors relating to background characteristics, both psychological and behavioural, and social networks evident across the entire sample are outlined, and which are identified to be common within the literature as presenting risk of radicalisation and engagement in extremist violence.[41] No missing data imputation was conducted on these descriptives. Across the 19 variables examined, 11 contained missing data (57.9 percent) with a total of 10.9 percent missing values.

Background Characteristics

The sociodemographic profiles of the PIRA sample are provided in Table 1. Demographic data are captured based on the information available at an individual's time of exposure.[42] Within the PIRA sample, individuals are predominately male (91.7 percent) with an average age of 27 years (*SD*=8.5). Almost half of the PIRA sample never married (44.9 percent), and one-fifth did not complete high school (23.2 percent) (excluding those where educational attainment was unknown, 30.7 percent). More individuals in the PIRA sample came from lower-class families (21.7 percent) than any other category. Prior to their radicalisation, rates of employment were relatively low, with 30.7 percent having some form of stable employment.

Ideological Alignment and Extremist Behaviours

Demographic profiles (i.e. age, gender, et al.) are measured in accordance with time of exposure (see Note 46 for definition). Across the entire PIRA sample, individuals' time of exposure mostly occurred between 2011–2015 (45.3 percent), followed by 2016–2020 (34.3 percent), 2000–2005 (11.8 percent), 2006–2010 (5.9 percent), and 1985–1999 (2.8 percent). Most individuals within PIRA aligned with Islamist or Jihadist ideologies (83 percent), followed by far-right (9.6 percent), far-left (3.9 percent), and single-issue ideologies (3.5 percent). Individuals who espoused Islamist ideologies are overrepresented in the sample.

In PIRA, violent motivations are captured by two categories of documented behaviour, either violent or nonviolent. In this instance, individuals who were actively participating in behaviour with the intention to cause injury or death (whether or not successfully achieved) were coded as violent. Nonviolent behaviour involves behaviour that was not associated with aiming for, or causing, human injury or casualties. Of the entire sample, 65.4 percent were considered to have engaged in violent extremist behaviour, and 34.7 percent participated in nonviolent extremist behaviour. Just over half (53 percent) of the PIRA sample were officially charged with a terrorist-related offence, the remainder were arrested without charge, placed under surveillance, charged with a non-terrorist-related offence (e.g. assault or arson), or cautioned without charge. Upon closer inspection of the data, a large portion of the PIRA sample was identified as foreign fighters (45.7 percent), whereby they attempted, planned, or succeeded in travelling to an overseas conflict zone (in this instance mostly to Iraq or Syria) to join or support a terrorist organisation.

Table 1: Demographic Profiles and Characteristics of Individuals who have Radicalised to Extremism in Australia

Variable	Category	Distribution (%)	N	Missing Values (%)
Gender	Male	91.73%	233	0.0%
	Female	8.27%	21	
Age	<18	10.24%	26	5.12%
	19–25	39.76%	101	
	26–30	19.29%	49	
	31–35	9.84%	25	
	36–40	5.51%	14	
	41+	10.24%	23	
Marital Status	Single	43.31%	110	5.51%
	Married	43.31%	110	
	Divorced/Separated/Widowed	7.87%	20	
Education	Did not complete high school	23.23%	59	30.71%
	Completed high school	20.86%	53	
	Completed vocational training	4.33%	11	
	Some tertiary education	13.39%	34	
	Tertiary education or higher	7.48%	19	
Socioeconomic Status	Lower class	11.81%	30	58.66%
	Low-middle class	9.84%	25	
	Middle class	15.75%	40	
	Middle-upper class	3.54%	9	
	Upper class	0.39%	1	
Employment History	Never employed	13.39%	34	26.38%
	Long-term unemployment	9.06%	23	
	Underemployment	6.30%	16	
	Serially employed	14.17%	36	
	Regularly employed	30.71%	78	
Year of Exposure	1985–1999	2.76%	7	0.0%
	2000–2005	11.81%	30	
	2006–2010	5.91%	15	
	2011–2014	45.28%	115	
	2015–2020	34.25%	87	
Violent Motivations	Violent	65.35%	166	0.0%
	Nonviolent	34.65%	88	
Ideology	Islamist	83.07%	211	0.0%
	Far Right	9.45%	24	
	Far Left	3.94%	10	
	Single-Issue	3.54%	9	

Note: N = 254

Risk Factors and Vulnerabilities

Historical background characteristics capturing behavioural and psychological attributes are important for studying extremist-related behaviours.[43] Results show that indicators of high-risk behaviours and psychological distress were evident across the sample (see Table 2). Radicalised individuals in the sample showed evidence of mental illness (31.1 percent), an arguably high figure compared to other studies based on open-source data (e.g. prevalence of 9.8 percent).[44] While one must be cautious in making direct comparisons given the reliance on secondary sources, it is worth noting that this prevalence of mental illness across the PIRA sample is higher compared to the Australian population (20 percent according to ABS).[45] A history of violent and criminal behaviour has also been linked to violent radicalisation.[46] One quarter of the PIRA sample had a history of violent behaviour which included threats of violence, being charged with a violent crime, or reported incidences of violence. A total of 85 individuals (33.5 percent of the sample) had a criminal history, which includes juvenile offending; this is significantly lower than the prevalence of criminal activity amongst other radicalised populations (54.1 percent) (see Note 24). The misuse of alcohol and illegal substances was found in 26.4 percent of the sample. This result does reflect findings from existing studies and highlights that for some individuals (but not all), previous involvement in deviant behaviour is linked to participation in violent extremism.[47]

Consistent with the broader scholarship on radicalisation risk[48], across the PIRA sample a large proportion of individuals (69.3 percent) expressed some type of grievances—that is, they indicated being under threat (real or imagined) or perceived they had been subject to an injustice. Feelings of social exclusion have also been associated with risk of radicalisation.[49] In the PIRA sample, this is illustrated through the experience of social isolation as shown by keeping to themselves, detaching from friends or family, or having a general absence of social interactions. Preceding their radicalisation, just under a quarter of the sample experienced social isolation (24.8 percent).

The impact of social networks on the process of radicalisation is well established.[50] Results indicate the high prevalence of social networks (both online and offline) across the sample (see Table 2). Online social media is fast becoming a gateway for exposure to radical ideologies. The role of online social media across the PIRA sample was common (i.e. involving—for example—the use of Facebook, Surespot, Twitter, YouTube, and WhatsApp). These data were coded as to whether it had a major or minor role (see Note [51] for definition), and results indicate that online social media use contributed in some way to a person's radicalisation for more than 50 percent of the sample. Results from descriptive analysis of social networks across the sample found the majority had a close friend who was radicalised, and just over a quarter of the sample had a radicalised family member. Further, the number of connections with other known extremists averaged six (SD=5.7) with the number of associations for each individual's radical social network ranging from 0 to 32. These can encompass associations with radical friends, leaders, family members (immediate and extended), and incidental associations.

Table 2: Risk Factors and Vulnerabilities of Individuals who have Radicalised to Extremism in Australia

Variable	Category	Distribution (%)	N	Missing Values %
Presence of Mental Illness	Yes	31.10%	79	0.0%
	No	68.90%	175	
Alcohol and Other Drug Use	Yes	26.38%	67	0.0%
	No	73.62%	187	
Absent Parent	Yes	25.19%	64	29.13%
	No	45.68%	116	
Social Isolation	Yes	24.80%	63	21.65%
	No	53.54%	136	
History of Violence	Yes	24.80%	63	0.0%
	No	75.20%	191	
Criminal History	Previous (nonviolent) minor criminal activity	11.81%	30	0.0%
	Previous (nonviolent) serious criminal activity	4.72%	12	
	Previous violent criminal activity	16.93%	43	
	No criminal history	66.54%	169	
Grievances	Yes	69.29%	176	22.05%
	No	8.66%	22	
Social Networks[a]	Number of radical associates (Numerical)	5.66 (6.54)	248	2.36%
Social Media Influence	No social media influence	29.92%	76	14.96%
	Social media played a minor role in radicalisation	42.52%	108	
	Social media played a major role in radicalisation	12.60%	32	
Radical Peers	Yes	76.38%	194	12.99%
	No	11.42%	29	
Radial Family Member	Yes	28.74%	73	26.77%
	No	44.49%	113	

Notes. N = 254, [a]Mean and standard deviation reported in distribution social networks variable

Discussion and Conclusion

PIRA aims to contribute to emerging efforts to develop open-source terrorist and violent extremist data sets. By including individual and contextual information related to an individual's radicalisation, studies can empirically examine theories and risk factors linked to the process of radicalisation and further develop the knowledge base on factors that lead to terrorist involvement. In this paper we have outlined the development of the PIRA data set and demonstrated the utility of open-source data collection methods for generating knowledge on hard-to-reach populations. We also highlighted characteristics of an Australian sample of radicalised individuals. Below we further examine similarities and differences between the PIRA sample and findings of previous examinations of extremism and conclude by noting the key characteristics of the PIRA sample and compare this with research using PIRUS.

From the overview of the data presented here we see several trends. Sociodemographic characteristics do not appear to define factors common amongst individuals who have radicalised in Australia, as the sample varied across marriage, education, and socioeconomic status, consistent with existing research.[52] Key features amongst the sample are that individuals are most commonly male, with a slight downward trend in age aligning with other research that suggests younger populations are at heightened risk of radicalisation and involvement in violent extremism,[53] although slightly differing from the average of 28–29 years reported in other Australian Islamist populations.[54] While our findings differ from early profiles of Australian terrorist offenders (in which they are described as older, well educated, male, and with strong social bonds via marriage and employment),[55] they align with recent research.[56] This suggests that the cognitive vulnerability of Australian Jihadists decreases with age and education levels, as found in other samples of Australian Jihadists.[57] Comparing our sample to the PIRUS data set also reveals similarities. All background factors show similar patterns across the two national samples, with two exceptions: terrorist offenders in PIRUS tend to have higher levels of educational attainment (43.3 percent had a college degree or higher in PIRUS compared to 7.5 percent in PIRA),[58] and are older, averaging 34 years old.[59] Findings from this study using PIRA indicate pre-existing personal connections as important, reflecting similar patterns observed among Australian terrorist cells.[60] The presence of radical peers was higher compared to radicalised individuals in PIRUS, but those in PIRUS have been found to be almost twice as likely to have a radicalised family member (58.5 percent vs. 28.7 percent) compared to the current PIRA sample. The results reported here suggest a pervasive influence of social networks amongst Australian extremists, with a large proportion of individuals having radicalised peers, as well as prevalent social connections via family and wider associations with extremists, both online and offline.

Feelings of injustice and experiences of social exclusion are common among the PIRA sample. This aligns with scholarship noting that grievances and experiences of injustice coupled with social isolation can initiate radicalisation pathways and subsequent involvement in terrorism.[61] However, contrary to previous studies, the PIRA sample demonstrates high levels of substance abuse, mental illness, and criminal involvement.[62] When compared with PIRUS, the PIRA sample demonstrates higher rates of mental illness (31.1 percent vs. 8.6 percent) and substance abuse (26.3 percent vs. 7.6 percent).[63]

Meanwhile, criminal histories are more prevalent in the PIRUS sample, with more than half of the sample having a history of criminal activity compared to a third in PIRA. The overall trend towards high-risk behaviours, as reflected in PIRA and other equivalent data sets, suggests that radicalisation may have a strong criminogenic element associated with it.

Results indicate diversity in ideological alignments with the emergence of different political and grievance-fuelled motivations, including far-right and single-issue ideologies. Previous explorations of Australian terrorist populations have been almost exclusively al-Qaeda and Islamist inspired,[64] as these populations were considered to pose the most risk. While the sample remains disproportionally Islamist, PIRA data indicate more heterogeneity of ideological positioning among individuals who are at risk of radicalisation and terrorist involvement. Further, a large portion of individuals in the sample demonstrated violent intent or behaviour, suggestive of violent motivations, and inclusive of this was a significant number of extremists (just under a third of the entire sample) who entered a foreign conflict zone. Yet, over a third of the sample was found to participate in funding and logistical support for terrorist organisations, categorised as nonviolent behaviour. Australian extremists involved in ideologically motivated activities are not always characterised by violence and hence behavioural outcomes associated with radicalisation risk vary.[65]

We have acknowledged above the limitations inherent in PIRA. Challenges associated with the development of open-source data sets include the inherent nature of open-source information resulting in large percentages of missing data, poor inter-rater reliability, and variability of source information. Many of these issues have been addressed in the development of PIRA by triangulating resources, narrowing coding criteria, and conducting reliability tests. Improving the reliability of and transparency in the development of open-source databases is also important for avoiding misleading findings.[66]

Due to space limitations, we have not been exhaustive in the reporting of trends and associations found in the PIRA sample.[67] Our analysis has simply looked at associations without demonstrating causation. Due to the high number of variables used to collect data in the PIRA database and the inclusion of violent and nonviolent offender groups, future analysis of PIRA will include comparisons between different terrorist offenders (violent vs. nonviolent), ideological affiliations (e.g. Islamist vs. far-right), and group memberships (e.g. lone actors vs. group actors). Analysis can include testing current theoretical perspectives within the literature and their capacity to differentiate between violent and nonviolent outcomes of radicalisation.

Finally, PIRA is unique in that it replicates the format of an existing database (PIRUS) allowing for future comparative research on individual radicalisation between Australia and the United States. The replication of large-scale data sets based on open-source data enables future comparative research to explore possible similarities and differences across extremist populations. It also provides the possibility of replication studies given that access to data is more widely available. Thus, the future aim is to also make the PIRA data set openly available for public use.

Emma Belton is a PhD candidate and senior research assistant in the School of Social Science at the University of Queensland. Her PhD focuses on individual radicalisation and violent extremism in Australia and aims to improve our understanding of risk factors associated with violent compared to nonviolent outcomes of extremism. She has worked on research projects in countering violent extremism (CVE), including testing the application of violent extremism risk assessment tools (e.g. VERA-2R), developing integrity guidelines for CVE initiatives, and evaluating custody and community-based CVE programs in Australia.

Adrian Cherney is a Professor in the School of Social Science at the University of Queensland. He has completed evaluations on correctional and community-based programs aimed at countering violent extremism and has undertaken research on the supervision of terrorist offenders who have been released into the community on parole. His current research includes projects on risk factors for radicalisation, violent extremist risk assessment, disengagement, youth radicalisation, and disguised compliance.

Renee Zahnow is a senior lecturer at the School of Social Science at the University of Queensland. Her research focuses on place-based patterns of crime and victimisation; she is particularly interested in understanding the link between the regularities of daily human mobility, social and behavioural norms, and the propensity for crime and deviance. Dr. Zahnow has worked across a range of research projects including program evaluations and random-control trials. She has spatial and longitudinal modelling expertise and experience in working with big data.

Endnotes

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About

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