

# TERRORISM FREQUENCY BRIEFING ON EXTREME RIGHT WING

## Briefing

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In the wake of the massacre of 50 people by a white supremacist in Christchurch on 15 March, and rising levels of violence by right-wing extremists worldwide, Pool Re, on behalf of its Members, undertook research into the threat posed by right-wing extremism to the UK, and the likely frequency and severity of attacks perpetrated by its adherents.

While Islamist extremism remains the primary terror threat to the United Kingdom (UK), the threat from extreme right-wing (XRW) terrorism has both evolved and increased in recent years. XRW terrorists have been responsible for roughly a third of successful attack and a quarter of disrupted plots since 2017. The growth in XRW activity has put further pressure on counter-terrorism resources, and reciprocal violence between XRW and Islamist extremists is a possibility which could exacerbate an already complicated threat landscape. The current capabilities of XRW terrorists in Britain are relatively low, and unsophisticated attacks are most likely. However, attacks involving explosives or firearms are a realistic probability. XRW terrorists could significantly augment their capabilities through the recruitment of serving or former members of the armed forces, or through connections with more sophisticated overseas groups. Mass casualty attacks by capable and determined lone actors are also possible, as seen with the 2019 Christchurch and 2011 Norway attacks. However, strict gun control in the UK makes such attacks in Britain less likely. Some XRW actors have

displayed the intent to cause indiscriminate attacks against the public; however, targeted attacks are assessed as more likely. While XRW targeting of property (vandalism, arson etc.) is not uncommon, these incidents are typically investigated as hate crimes rather than acts of terrorism. While the latter have the potential to cause significant property damage, particularly where explosives are involved, the primary intent will be the targeting of people. Therefore, XRW attacks are likely to cause greater intangible losses than material damage. Targets will likely be selected for their symbolic value, specifically their association with groups or individuals to which the XRW are hostile; locations affiliated with ethnic, religious or sexual minorities are particularly at risk.

## Background

Prior to 2014, XRW activity in the UK was largely confined to small, well-established groups, typically with older memberships, which presented a very low risk to national security. There were infrequent attacks by lone actors influenced by XRW ideology, but in recent years, the threat from XRW has both evolved and increased. In June 2016, Jo Cox MP was murdered by ultra-nationalist Thomas Mair, and in December that year, an XRW group, National Action (NA), was listed as a proscribed organisation by the Home Office for the first time since 1940. The Islamist extremist attacks of 2017 played to XRW narratives, and exacerbated the threat posed by XRW terrorism. This reciprocal dynamic was manifested in Darren Osbourne's attack on Muslims in Finsbury Park in July 2017. Since, there has been another attack by XRW terrorists, with a further four plots disrupted.

**Scale of the threat**

Three of the eight successful attacks in Great Britain since 2016 have been carried out by XRW terrorists (37%), and of the 18 plots foiled since March 2017, four have involved XRW actors (23%). These figures illustrate that while XRW terrorism poses a significant threat, particularly to specific targets, it is not currently on the same scale as Islamist extremism. Nonetheless, the proscription of NA represented the first time that XRW actors were organised in a way that could constitute a national security threat. Exact figures on the number of individuals involved in or sympathetic to XRW terrorism are not available. However, the number of individuals in custody for terrorism-related offences holding XRW views increased over five-fold between 2014 and 2018. Furthermore, there were significant increases in the number of individuals being referred to Prevent (the Government’s counter-extremism programme) and in the number of reported hate crimes. Neither of these is a reliable guide to levels of extremism, but they do suggest that events since 2016 have increased ethnic tensions in the UK and created a more permissive environment for xenophobic or nationalist sentiment. Such conditions are likely conducive to the spread of XRW ideologies and the radicalisation and mobilisation of sympathetic individuals.

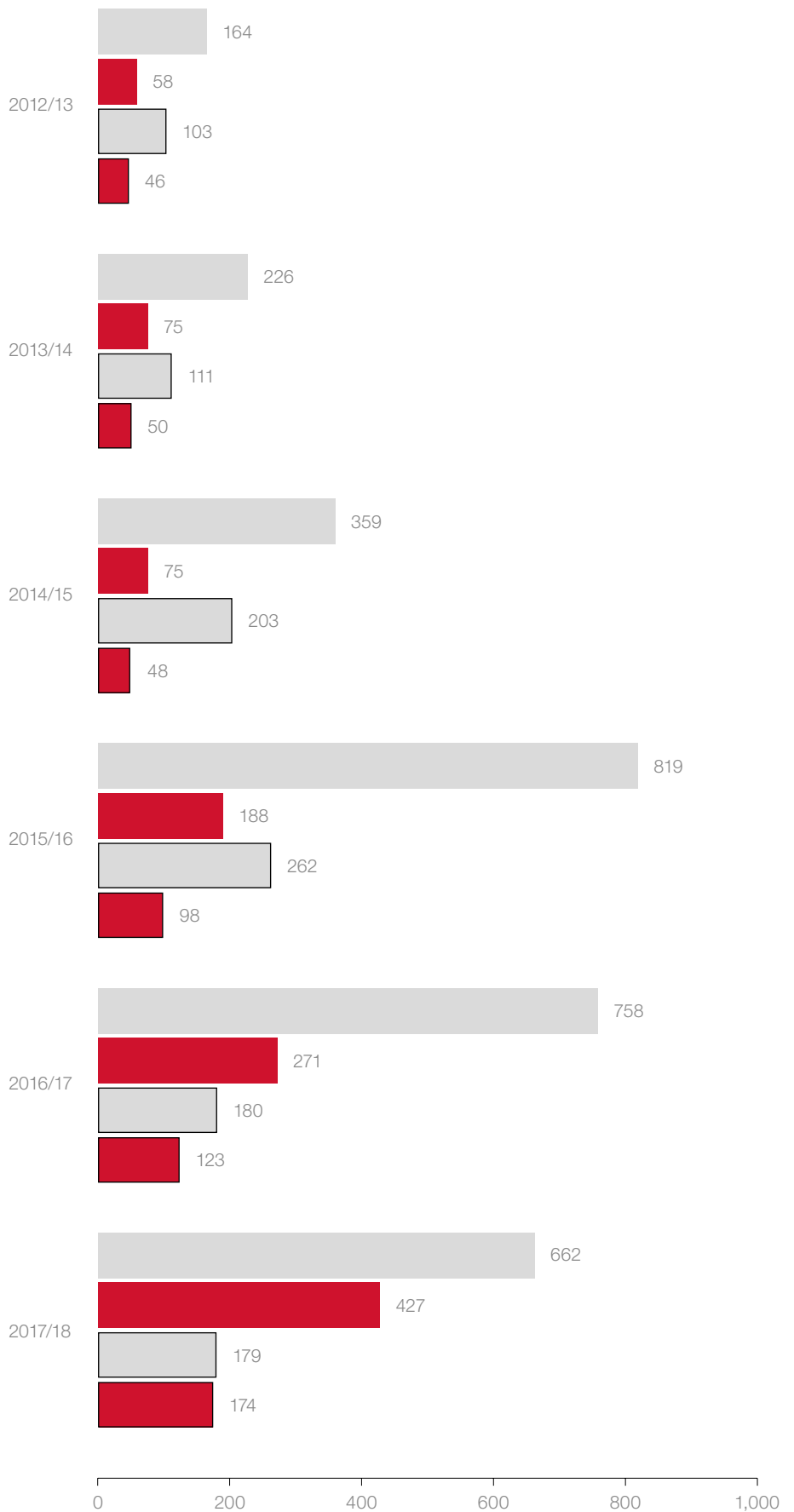
**XRW TERRORISTS HAVE BEEN RESPONSIBLE FOR ROUGHLY A THIRD OF SUCCESSFUL ATTACKS AND A QUARTER OF DISRUPTED PLOTS SINCE 2017**



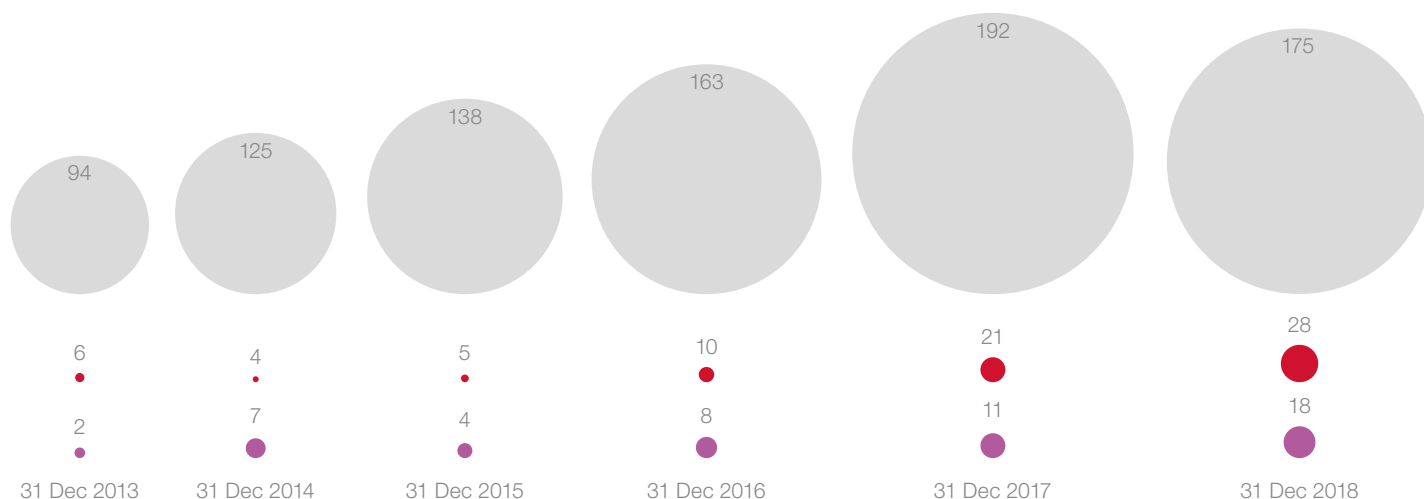
Channel is part of the Prevent strategy. The process is a multi-agency approach to identify and provide support to individuals who are at risk of being drawn into terrorism.

Key	
Islamist	■
Discussed at Panel	■
Received Channel Support	■
Extreme Right Wing	■
Discussed at Panel	■
Received Channel Support	■

**IDEOLOGY OF INDIVIDUALS BY TYPE OF CHANNEL ENGAGEMENT**



## NUMBER OF PERSONS IN CUSTODY FOR TERRORISM-RELATED OFFENCES, BY IDEOLOGY



Key	
Islamist	Grey circle
Extreme Right Wing	Red circle
Other	Purple circle

### Drivers of XRW terrorism

At present, XRW narratives in the UK focus heavily on issues of national identity and hostility towards ethnic, religious and sexual pluralism. Hostility towards the government and public institutions is also a common theme, driven by the perception that these bodies are either indifferent or hostile to right-wing values and concerns. However, there is not a direct correlation between support for hard-right views and engagement in XRW terrorism. As with other offender types, the factors which cause individuals to embrace extremist ideologies and undertake attack planning are varied and include personal grievances, contact with terrorist ‘entrepreneurs’ and domestic and international political developments and mental health problems. As highlighted by the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation in October 2018, a major influence on the mobilisation of XRW actors to begin attack planning is the occurrence of attacks by Islamist extremists. While the number of successful Islamist attacks dropped in 2018, the threat has not abated, and CT policing and MI5 continue to work at capacity. Further successful Islamist attacks are likely, and this would probably escalate the threat posed by XRW terrorism.

### Methodologies

#### Low complexity attacks

XRW terrorists in the UK are most likely to employ low complexity methodologies, involving the use of knives and vehicles as weapons. Such attacks require little training or preparation and are therefore less vulnerable to advanced detection by authorities, especially if mounted by individuals acting alone. Since 2017, there have been two successful attacks and at least two foiled plots involving the use or planned use of low complexity methodologies by XRW terrorists.

Most low complexity attacks result in single-digit casualty figures and minimal property damage (PD). However, the ease with which even unskilled actors can mount attacks of this nature does mean that higher levels of radicalisation and mobilisation of XRW sympathisers could quickly translate into more frequent attacks. Furthermore, even unsophisticated methodologies can cause large numbers of casualties if well executed.

#### Explosives

Since 1999, two XRW terrorists, acting alone, have successfully constructed and detonated IEDs. Furthermore, at least one of the four XRW plots foiled since 2017 involved the manufacture of explosives. Instructions for building IEDs are available online and in other media and could likely be easily accessed without attracting the attention of authorities. However, terrorists will likely face greater difficulty in clandestinely sourcing components and constructing a viable device. Nonetheless, two of the seven attacks in the UK since March 2017 have involved Triacetone Peroxide-based IEDs. In both cases, lone actors were able to procure precursor materials and construct devices undetected (although in the case of the Parsons Green attack, the device failed to detonate properly). This suggests the construction and successful deployment of IEDs by XRW terrorists is a realistic possibility.

#### Firearms

The UK’s restrictive gun laws means the country has experienced proportionally fewer firearms attacks than Europe or America. Acquiring any type of firearm on the black-market is difficult without criminal connections in the UK, and research indicates that most illicit firearms are airguns, pistols and shotguns, many of which are unreliable converted or reactivated weapons.

These types of weapon could be used in targeted assassinations or in conjunction with other methodologies but are unsuited to large-scale attacks. Connections with overseas XRW organisations could facilitate the acquisition of military-grade firearms. However, this would also likely increase the risk of detection and would not obviate the difficulty of smuggling the weapons into the UK. Therefore, while the use of firearms (and other legal projectile weapons like crossbows) by XRW terrorists is a realistic possibility – as demonstrated by the assassination of Jo Cox MP in 2016 – marauding firearms attacks with assault weapons, as occurred in Norway in 2011 and New Zealand in 2019, are considered unlikely.

#### CBRN

XRW terrorists could attempt to acquire or manufacture chemical or biological material for use in attacks. Ricin is the most likely biological weapon to be employed; it is derived from castor beans and is easy to manufacture relative to other biotoxins. In 2009, a neo-Nazi was arrested in Durham, having produced significant quantities of Ricin for use in attacks. While the use of biological or chemical agents by XRW terrorists is unlikely to result in widespread loss of life due to the difficulty of effective weaponisation of such material, the psychological effect of the use of biochemical weapons would be considerable, and their use could cause significant losses due to cordons and decontamination costs, as well as loss of attraction.

Blistering or choking agents could also potentially be manufactured by XRW actors; however, given the relative complexity of manufacturing these agents, their use by XRW terrorists is considered unlikely, as is the acquisition of nerve agents or radiological material.

**Capabilities**

**Military connections**

The presence of serving or former members of the armed forces could significantly increase the latent capabilities of XRW actors in two ways. Firstly, martial skills, particularly those relating to firearms and explosives but also planning, reconnaissance and operational security, would likely increase the ability of terrorists to plan and execute more sophisticated attacks. Secondly, connections to armed forces personnel could facilitate the acquisition of military-grade weapons, either through directly misappropriating weapons or through coercing or inducing personnel responsible for inventory management. Inventory controls in the armed forces are assessed to be robust, however, there are several recent examples of serving soldiers illicitly stockpiling military firearms and explosives. The use of military-grade weapons, particularly in trained hands, could result in a significant escalation of the threat.

**Overseas extremist travel**

Extremist travel is a well-established means for Islamist offenders to establish links with overseas terror groups and undertake training. To a much lesser degree, this behaviour has been mirrored by British XRW actors. NA activists have cultivated ties with European and American XRW organisations. Links with overseas groups could facilitate the exchange of tradecraft, members, and potentially (although not likely) weapons. There are documented connections between NA members and XRW paramilitaries in Ukraine. While these are not believed to have resulted in meaningful exchanges of tradecraft or materiel, there is a realistic possibility of British XRW actors being embedded with extremist paramilitaries to gain battlefield experience which could be used in attack planning on their return to the UK.

**Criminal connections**

Another means by which XRW terrorists could acquire sophisticated weaponry is through links to organised criminal groups (OCGs). At present, OCGs in the UK are believed to be broadly unwilling to supply firearms to terrorists, given the potential negative impact of doing so on their business interests. However, there is a risk that terrorists may be able to acquire firearms through criminal networks, and, as demonstrated by the murder of Jo Cox MP, the acquisition of illegal firearms by XRW actors is possible. Furthermore, Europol has raised concerns about the links established between European groups and outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMCGs) involved in the trafficking of firearms. European OMCGs may have an ideological affinity with XRW groups, and British terrorists could potentially exploit this to acquire sophisticated firearms smuggled into the UK.

**NA ACTIVISTS HAVE CULTIVATED TIES WITH EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN XRW ORGANISATIONS**

**Online instructional material**

Instructional material that can assist in the preparation of attacks remains widely available online and through other media. XRW terrorists have previously used such guides to manufacture IEDs, and several recently prosecuted members of NA were found to be in possession of bomb-making manuals and other guidance on attack planning. While instructional material can significantly increase the tradecraft of terrorist actors, particularly regarding the manufacture of explosives, the extent to which it represents a threat is dependent on the ability of terrorists to successfully follow guidance and acquire explosive precursors or other equipment without being detected.

**Targeting**

**Police, military and Government targets**

In the UK, there has been one successful attack and one known plot against police, military or Government targets by XRW terrorists. Both cases involved the targeting of a female Labour Party MP (Jo Cox and Rosie Cooper respectively), suggesting left-wing politicians are preferred targets for XRW terrorists. There have also been several attacks on left-wing politicians in Europe in recent years (although not all were treated as terrorism by local authorities).

There have been no XRW attacks or known plots against Government facilities in the UK. However, notable overseas examples include the 1995 Oklahoma bombing and the 2011 Oslo bombing. The aspiration to target Government facilities is likely to depend partly on the extent to which the target is perceived to be 'legitimate'. Government personnel or departments engaged in particular activities are more at risk than others. For instance, Government agencies responsible for migration and refugees have been recently targeted in Europe.

While traditional figures of authority like the police are less likely to be targeted by XRW actors, the police's role in counter-extremism could make them possible targets. The armed forces, as a source of national pride, are unlikely to be targeted by XRW actors in the current environment.

**Crowded places**

Crowded places are unlikely to be targeted for indiscriminate mass casualty attacks unless they have some totemic significance. Likely targets include places of worship (as seen with the 2019 Christchurch and 2017 Quebec mosque shootings), and hospitality and entertainment establishments affiliated with sexual minorities (1999 Admiral Duncan bombing and 2017 Barrow plot). Busy areas in ethnic minority-majority neighbourhoods are also likely targets, as seen with the 1999 London nail bombing campaign and the 2017 Finsbury Park attack.

Other possible crowded locations which could be targeted are those hosting demonstrations by the political left (2017 Charlottesville attack) or festivals associated with ethnic or sexual minorities (2015 Jerusalem gay pride parade attack). Attacks against crowded places are unlikely to lead to significant material damage (unless large IEDs were employed), and business interruption costs would vary considerably depending on the time and place of the attack.

**ATTACKS AGAINST CROWDED PLACES ARE UNLIKELY TO LEAD TO SIGNIFICANT MATERIAL DAMAGE (UNLESS LARGE IEDS WERE EMPLOYED), AND BUSINESS INTERRUPTION COSTS WOULD VARY CONSIDERABLY DEPENDING ON THE TIME AND PLACE OF THE ATTACK**

**Property**

XRW actors in Britain have previously targeted property; most incidents have involved the targeting of religious sites or businesses associated with minorities in arson attacks. While further such incidents are probable, they have thus far been investigated by police as hate crimes rather than acts of terrorism. The use of improvised explosive devices by XRW actors with the intent to damage property may be treated as terrorism, but it is assessed as unlikely that XRW actors have the aspiration to cause large-scale material damage without loss of life. Indeed, in Britain, such tactics appear unique to dissident/militant republican groups.

**Individuals**

Individuals have previously been targeted by XRW actors in Britain, notably the 2019 Stanwell attack and the murder of Mohammed Saleem in 2013. Serious violent crime (murder or attempted murder) committed as part of an XRW agenda would normally be investigated as terrorist offences, while lesser offences would likely be classed as hate crimes rather than acts of terrorism. Aside from politicians, journalists, campaigners and community leaders are assessed as the most likely individuals to be targeted by XRW terrorists; however, individuals could also be targeted on their personal characteristics.