

Understanding Radicalisation Vulnerability in a Prevent Channel Panel Cohort: A Mixed-Methods Study of 137 Individuals Known to Mental Health Services

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Abstract

Research examining individuals vulnerable to violent extremism before terrorist offending occurs remains limited, with much existing evidence derived from convicted offenders, imprisoned extremists, or retrospective analyses of completed attacks. This study addresses that gap through a mixed-methods analysis of 137 individuals known to a United Kingdom National Health Service mental health trust who were discussed within Prevent Channel Panels between February 2022 and August 2024. No singular profile of radicalisation vulnerability emerged. Instead, vulnerability reflected the convergence of youth, masculinity, neurodevelopmental needs, mental health difficulties, psychosocial adversity, social isolation, and extensive online engagement. Many participants presented with mixed, unclear, or unstable ideological positions, highlighting the complexity of contemporary vulnerability pathways. Across the cohort, recurring themes included belonging, identity, significance, recognition, certainty, purpose, and social connection. The findings support contemporary scholarship that conceptualises radicalisation as a multifactorial process shaped by interactions between individual experiences, social relationships, and ideological narratives. By providing rare empirical evidence from a pre-criminal prevention population, the study reinforces the importance of a functional understanding of radicalisation and the need for trauma-informed, neurodiversity-informed, relational, and person-centred approaches to prevention and safeguarding practice.

Article History

Received Jul 13, 2026

Accepted Sep 07, 2026

Published Sep 25, 2026

Keywords: Radicalisation, Deradicalisation, Disengagement, Prevent, Channel, Violent Extremism, Safeguarding, Mental Health, Identity, Belonging

Introduction

Preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) remains a significant challenge for contemporary security, safeguarding, health, social care, and community systems. Despite more than two decades of research, there remains no singular explanation for why some individuals become vulnerable to extremist influence whilst others exposed to similar social

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environments and life circumstances do not. Increasingly, radicalisation is understood as a complex, dynamic, and multifactorial process shaped through interactions between individual vulnerabilities, social relationships, developmental experiences, environmental influences, and ideological narratives rather than any singular pathway or profile (Horgan, 2008; Neumann, 2013; Webber & Kruglanski, 2017; Kruglanski et al., 2019). Contemporary scholarship therefore emphasises complexity, context, and interaction over linear explanations of extremist involvement.

Alongside developments in radicalisation theory, contemporary deradicalisation and disengagement research has increasingly moved beyond narrow conceptions of ideological change. While ideology remains important in shaping beliefs, identities, and justifications for violence, growing evidence suggests that extremist involvement is frequently sustained through broader social, psychological, and relational processes (Koehler, 2016; Marsden, 2017; Khalil et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2021; Khalil et al., 2023). Programmes across Europe, North America, and elsewhere increasingly incorporate mentoring, psychosocial support, identity-focused interventions, family work, education, employment assistance, mental health provision, and social reintegration alongside ideological engagement. Contemporary approaches therefore typically recognise that disengagement and deradicalisation involve behavioural, social, emotional, and relational dimensions as well as ideological considerations.

Related scholarship has increasingly examined the functions extremist narratives, identities, and communities may serve within individuals' lives. Significance Quest Theory, for example, proposes that experiences of humiliation, exclusion, uncertainty, crisis, or diminished personal significance may create vulnerability to extremist narratives offering purpose, certainty, belonging, status, or recognition (Kruglanski et al., 2019; Bélanger et al., 2019). Other scholars have similarly highlighted the importance of identity formation, social belonging, masculinity, recognition, meaning, and community within radicalisation processes (Kimmel, 2018; Pearson, 2023; Miller-Idriss, 2025). From this perspective, extremist involvement is rarely reducible to ideology alone. Rather, ideology often interacts with wider developmental, psychological, and social experiences that shape how individuals understand themselves and their place within society.

These debates have particular relevance for contemporary prevention systems. Within the United Kingdom, the statutory Prevent Duty that forms part of the national counter-terrorism strategy to identify and support individuals considered susceptible to being drawn into terrorism before criminal offending occurs (Home Office, 2024). Individuals identified as presenting significant concerns may subsequently be discussed within Prevent Channel Panel, a multi-agency safeguarding programme that develops tailored support packages intended to reduce vulnerability and strengthen protective factors. Interventions may include mentoring, educational support, family intervention, mental health provision, social care involvement, safeguarding support, and ideological mentoring where appropriate (Home Office, 2024). Consequently, Prevent multi-agency Channel Panels provide a valuable context for examining how radicalisation vulnerability is understood and operationalised within contemporary multidisciplinary prevention systems.

Despite substantial advances in theory and practice, important empirical gaps remain. Much of the radicalisation literature continues to rely upon studies of convicted terrorists, imprisoned extremists, post hoc analyses of completed attacks, criminal justice populations, or retrospective accounts of radicalisation trajectories. While such research has generated important insights into extremist involvement, comparatively little attention has been directed towards individuals identified within pre-criminal prevention systems before any terrorist offending has occurred (Corner & Gill, 2022; Cottee, 2023). This is an important limitation because contemporary P/CVE strategies are primarily concerned with identifying and supporting vulnerability at earlier stages of radicalisation, before engagement in terrorist violence.

The need for research within pre-criminal populations may be especially important within health and safeguarding settings. Increasingly, practitioners encounter individuals presenting with overlapping experiences of mental ill health, neurodevelopmental differences, trauma, adverse childhood experiences, social isolation, family instability, identity concerns, online immersion, grievance formation, and extremist vulnerability simultaneously. While growing attention has been directed towards these factors individually, fewer studies have examined how they intersect within real-world prevention pathways or how they are understood within multidisciplinary safeguarding systems. As a result, there remains limited

empirical evidence regarding the characteristics, vulnerabilities, and needs of individuals entering contemporary Prevent and Channel processes.

This study addresses that gap through a mixed-methods analysis of 137 individuals known to Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust who were discussed within Prevent multi-agency Channel Panels between February 2022 and August 2024. Unlike much existing research, the study focuses on individuals situated within the pre-criminal safeguarding space rather than convicted offenders or individuals who have committed terrorist acts. The article therefore contributes rare empirical evidence from a large prevention cohort and provides insight into how vulnerability is identified and conceptualised within contemporary safeguarding systems.

The study does not seek to propose a novel model of deradicalisation or to challenge contemporary disengagement scholarship. Rather, its purpose is to examine how developmental, psychological, social, and environmental vulnerabilities manifest within a pre-criminal prevention population and to consider their implications for existing approaches to prevention, disengagement, and deradicalisation. Particular attention is given to the apparent functions extremist engagement may serve within participants' lives, including belonging, identity, recognition, significance, certainty, social connection, and purpose. In doing so, the study contributes empirical evidence that supports and extends contemporary understandings of radicalisation as an interaction between needs, narratives, relationships, and social context. The article makes three contributions. First, it provides rare empirical evidence from a large cohort of individuals discussed within Prevent Channel Panels before any terrorist offending has occurred. Second, it contributes to emerging debates regarding vulnerability, identity, belonging, and mixed or unstable ideological presentations within contemporary extremist pathways. Third, it considers what these findings reveal about assessment, safeguarding, intervention planning, and multidisciplinary prevention practice. Collectively, the findings support growing calls for trauma-informed, neurodiversity-informed, relational, and person-centred approaches that view radicalisation vulnerability within its broader developmental and social context rather than through isolated risk factors or ideological categories alone.

Literature Review

Contemporary Deradicalisation and Disengagement Practice

Contemporary deradicalisation and disengagement scholarship has increasingly moved beyond early assumptions that ideological challenge alone can facilitate sustainable exit from violent extremism. Research examining intervention programmes across Europe, North America, and the Middle East consistently demonstrates the importance of multidisciplinary, individualised, and holistic approaches that address psychological, social, educational, vocational, relational, and ideological dimensions simultaneously (Koehler, 2016; Marsden, 2017; Khalil et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2021; Khalil et al., 2023).

The Attitudes-Behaviours Corrective (ABC) Model proposed by Khalil et al. (2019) emphasises the distinction between beliefs and behaviours and highlights the importance of tailoring intervention strategies to individual needs. Similarly, Marsden (2017) argues that successful reintegration and disengagement frequently involve identity transformation, social support, opportunity structures, and alternative pathways capable of replacing functions previously fulfilled through extremist involvement. Systematic reviews of deradicalisation and disengagement programmes likewise identify mentoring, family interventions, education, employment assistance, psychological support, social reintegration, and relationship building as recurring features of effective practice (Morrison et al., 2021; Khalil et al., 2023).

Importantly, contemporary evidence increasingly suggests that entry into extremism, continued involvement, and disengagement may involve distinct mechanisms and influences. Initial engagement may emerge through experiences of grievance, uncertainty, exclusion, significance loss, trauma, or identity concerns, while disengagement may be shaped by factors such as disillusionment, burnout, changing relationships, perceived hypocrisy, competing identities, or alternative opportunities (Koehler, 2016; Marsden, 2017; Morrison et al., 2021). Understanding these distinctions remains important when considering the implications of radicalisation research for prevention and intervention practice.

Radicalisation remains a contested concept within terrorism studies, with disagreement over its definition and causes (Neumann, 2013; Schmid, 2013). Contemporary research views it as a dynamic, multifactorial process shaped by individual vulnerabilities, social contexts,

identity formation, and exposure to ideological narratives (Horgan, 2008; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011; Jensen et al., 2020). As a result, P/CVE approaches have increasingly moved beyond security-focused responses to address factors that increase vulnerability to extremist influence.

P/CVE literature distinguishes between prevention, disengagement, and deradicalisation (Koehler, 2016; Baaken et al., 2021). Prevention aims to reduce susceptibility before involvement occurs; disengagement refers to behavioural withdrawal from extremist activity, while deradicalisation involves cognitive or ideological change (Feddes, 2015; Koehler, 2016). Evidence suggests that disengagement can occur without full ideological transformation, highlighting the importance of addressing social, psychological, and relational factors alongside beliefs (Koehler, 2016; Baaken et al., 2021). Rather than challenging contemporary deradicalisation scholarship, the present study seeks to contribute empirical evidence from a rare pre-criminal cohort that may help illustrate how psychosocial vulnerabilities are manifested within individuals currently entering prevention pathways.

The Functional Role of Extremist Engagement

An influential contemporary explanation of radicalisation is Significance Quest Theory, which proposes that experiences of humiliation, exclusion, uncertainty, marginalisation, personal crisis, or diminished self-worth may increase receptivity to extremist narratives that offer opportunities for significance, purpose, recognition, status, and belonging (Kruglanski et al., 2019; Bélanger et al., 2019). Radicalisation, from this perspective, is understood not simply as ideological persuasion but as the interaction between unmet needs, extremist narratives, and social networks.

Related scholarship similarly emphasises the social and psychological functions that extremist groups, identities, and communities may fulfil. Research has highlighted how extremist involvement may provide belonging, certainty, identity, social connection, validation, meaning, status, protection, and opportunities for personal recognition, particularly during periods of uncertainty, transition, exclusion, or crisis (Kimmel, 2018; Vidino, 2020; Pearson, 2023; Miller-Idriss, 2025).

These observations resonate with Horgan's (2008) longstanding argument that explanations of terrorism should move beyond simplistic causal accounts towards understanding the processes and experiences underpinning involvement. More recently, Koehler (2020, 2022) has similarly argued for greater consideration of trauma, psychological adaptation, and underlying psychosocial processes within both radicalisation and deradicalisation. From this perspective, extremist engagement may sometimes function as an adaptive response to unmet emotional, relational, or psychological needs, even where ideological content remains important in shaping meaning and justification.

Such perspectives have influenced contemporary prevention and intervention frameworks, which increasingly seek to understand not only what individuals believe but also what extremist involvement may provide within their lives (Khalil et al., 2019; Khalil et al., 2023; Morrison et al., 2021). However, relatively little empirical evidence exists regarding how these dynamics present within individuals discussed in contemporary Prevent Channel Panel systems.

Vulnerability, Psychosocial Adversity and Radicalisation

A substantial body of scholarship suggests that radicalisation is best understood through interactions between multiple vulnerabilities rather than through singular causal explanations. Research has repeatedly identified recurring themes including adverse childhood experiences, trauma, victimisation, loneliness, social isolation, uncertainty, exclusion, psychological distress, identity disruption, and grievance formation (Hassan et al., 2021; Labato et al., 2023; Marchment et al., 2025).

Contemporary theoretical models emphasise the interaction between personal needs, extremist narratives, and social networks (Webber & Kruglanski, 2017; Kruglanski et al., 2019). Experiences of exclusion, interpersonal loss, disrupted attachment, victimisation, family instability, social rejection, or marginalisation may create conditions in which extremist narratives offer explanations, certainty, recognition, or pathways towards renewed significance. These vulnerabilities should not be interpreted as deterministic causes of radicalisation. Rather, they form part of a wider ecology of susceptibility that may increase vulnerability under particular circumstances.

Recent research examining adverse childhood experiences has strengthened interest in cumulative psychosocial adversity. Marchment et al. (2025) identified associations between adverse childhood experiences and susceptibility to violent extremism, while related scholarship has explored the possible roles of trauma, neglect, violence exposure, disrupted family relationships, and victimisation (Hughes et al., 2017; Matei, 2023). These findings have led to increasing calls for trauma-informed prevention approaches capable of understanding extremist vulnerability within broader developmental and life-course contexts.

Mental Health, Neurodiversity and Prevention Practice

The relationship between mental health and violent extremism remains contested and frequently misunderstood (Corner & Gill, 2015; Corner & Gill, 2022; Gill et al., 2021). Contemporary evidence consistently rejects the existence of a distinct terrorist personality and does not support a simple causal relationship between mental illness and extremist violence. Nevertheless, elevated levels of psychological distress, crisis, emotional dysregulation, isolation, and vulnerability have been identified within certain extremist populations, particularly among lone actors and individuals operating within the pre-criminal space (Corner & Gill, 2015; Gill & Corner, 2017).

Growing attention has also focused on autism, ADHD, and other neurodevelopmental conditions. Reviews have highlighted apparent overrepresentation of autistic individuals within Prevent Channel Panel cohorts while simultaneously emphasising that autism itself does not cause radicalisation and should not be conceptualised as a risk factor (Hall, 2021; Shawcross, 2023; Druitt et al., 2023; Allely et al., 2024; Salman & Al-Attar, 2026).

Instead, researchers increasingly argue that certain experiences often associated with neurodivergence, including social isolation, cognitive rigidity, intense interests, emotional dysregulation, difficulties navigating social relationships, and extensive online engagement, may interact with wider psychosocial vulnerabilities under specific circumstances (Little et al., 2021; Walter et al., 2021; Milburn et al., 2024). Consequently, formulation-based and person-centred approaches are increasingly advocated within P/CVE settings (Rousseau et al., 2024; Allely et al., 2024; Salman & Al-Attar, 2026).

Gender, Masculinity and Belonging

Gender remains one of the most consistent findings within violent extremism research. Males account for the overwhelming majority of terrorist offenders, extremist group members, and perpetrators of ideologically motivated violence (Bakker, 2006; Nesser, 2021; Pearson, 2023). This has generated increasing interest in the relationship between masculinity, belonging, grievance, identity, and radicalisation.

Research suggests that extremist movements frequently offer recognition, purpose, belonging, status, certainty, and explanations for perceived social frustrations, particularly among adolescent boys and young men (Kimmel, 2018; Pearson, 2023; Miller-Idriss, 2025). Experiences of loneliness, exclusion, educational difficulties, social marginalisation, uncertainty surrounding masculine identity, and perceived status loss have been identified as recurring themes within contemporary extremist pathways (Jensen et al., 2020).

Growing concern over misogynistic extremism, incel communities, and gender-based radicalisation has reinforced arguments that violent extremism is shaped not only by ideology but also by a gendered experience of seeking a sense of belonging, recognition, identity, and social positioning (Bates, 2020; Pearson, 2023; Miller-Idriss, 2025). Across diverse extremist movements, from ISIS to Neo-Nazism, constructions of masculinity often promote ideals of leadership, duty, dominance, and protection of the in-group, framed within patriarchal and misogynistic gender norms (Pearson, 2023). For some males, these narratives can meet unmet emotional needs and provide a sense of belonging, purpose, status, or identity (Kimmel, 2018).

Mixed, Unclear and Unstable Ideological Pathways

Recent scholarship has increasingly questioned traditional assumptions that individuals progress through stable or coherent ideological trajectories. Researchers have documented growing numbers of individuals presenting with fluid, unstable, mixed, or poorly defined ideological identities that do not fit conventional categories such as Islamist or extreme right-wing extremism (Brace et al., 2024; Astley, 2025).

Emerging concepts including Mixed, Unclear and Unstable (MUU) extremism, composite violent extremism, incoherent violent extremism, and "salad bar" pathways have

been developed to describe individuals whose ideological positions are fragmented, fluid, contradictory, or continuously evolving (Brace et al., 2024; Astley, 2025; Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2025; Tibby, 2026). This literature suggests that contemporary vulnerability pathways may increasingly involve attraction to violence, grievance, identity concerns, online subcultures, or psychosocial rewards rather than coherent ideological commitment.

Following concerns about mixed, unclear and unstable ideological presentations, an emerging challenge for Prevent is the rise of what some scholars term nihilistic and misanthropic violence, particularly among young people drawn into online subcultures such as the True Crime Community (TCC), No Lives Matter (NLM) and networks linked to 764, which glorify mass-casualty attackers, violent notoriety and violence for its own sake rather than a coherent ideological cause (ISD, 2025). Recent research suggests that a narrow focus on ideology may obscure broader pathways to violence, with grievance, fixation and personal motivations often proving more significant than identifiable ideological commitments (Brooks & Barry-Walsh, 2022; Corner et al., 2025). The 2024 Southport attack in England highlighted how individuals may present a substantial risk of extreme mass violence while falling outside terrorism legislation because they lack a demonstrable ideological objective (Hall, 2025; Thomas, 2026). Concerns have been reinforced by prosecutions linked to 764 involving the coercion and exploitation of vulnerable young people, illustrating the convergence of violence-fixation, online harm and criminality (U.S. Department of Justice, 2026). Consistent with this trend, Children's Commissioner for England noted that a majority of child Prevent referrals reportedly lack an identifiable ideology, raising concerns about Prevent's capacity to respond to violence-fixated children and prompting further discussion around the development of parallel approaches alongside existing counter-terrorism frameworks (Children's Commissioner for England, 2026).

These developments may have important implications for prevention practice because assessment frameworks built upon traditional ideological classifications may struggle to account for such fluid presentations. Understanding how these pathways present within contemporary Prevent populations remains an important emerging area of inquiry.

Online Environments, Identity and Social Connection

Digital environments have become central to contemporary radicalisation pathways. The internet functions not only as a source of extremist material but also as an important site of identity formation, grievance development, social interaction, community participation, and relationship-building (Gill et al., 2021; Scrivens et al., 2021).

Research increasingly suggests that online spaces may be especially attractive to individuals experiencing loneliness, social exclusion, belonging deficits, uncertainty, or identity concerns because they provide immediate access to communities organised around shared grievances, experiences, interests, or ideological commitments (Mølmen & Ravndal, 2023). Rousseau et al. (2025) similarly note how personal frustrations, emotional difficulties, social vulnerabilities, and violence-supportive narratives may become intertwined within online environments.

Importantly, online communities may provide both ideological explanations and psychosocial rewards simultaneously. This observation resonates with Koehler's (2020, 2022) conceptualisation of radicalisation as involving interactions between trauma, meaning-making, belonging, identity, and social connection. Consequently, contemporary prevention strategies increasingly require understanding not only ideological exposure but also the broader social functions digital communities fulfil.

Research Gap and Study Contribution

Despite substantial advances in radicalisation, disengagement, and deradicalisation research, important empirical gaps remain. Much of the existing evidence derives from convicted offenders, criminal justice populations, retrospective analyses, or post-incident investigations (Corner & Gill, 2022; Cottee, 2023). Comparatively little research has examined individuals identified within pre-criminal prevention systems before terrorist offending occurs.

This gap is particularly evident within healthcare and safeguarding contexts, where practitioners increasingly encounter individuals presenting with overlapping experiences of trauma, neurodevelopmental needs, mental ill health, psychosocial adversity, masculinity-related concerns, social isolation, extensive online engagement, and fluid ideological

presentations. Although contemporary scholarship increasingly acknowledges the importance of these factors, relatively little empirical evidence has examined how they intersect within real-world Prevent Channel Panel populations.

This study addresses that gap through analysis of 137 individuals known to NHS mental health services who were discussed within Prevent Channel Panels. In doing so, it contributes rare empirical evidence from a pre-criminal prevention population and examines what these patterns reveal about vulnerability, assessment, intervention, safeguarding, and contemporary prevention practice. Rather than proposing a new deradicalisation model, the study seeks to contribute empirical insight that informs and extends existing debates concerning the social, developmental, relational, and psychological dimensions of radicalisation vulnerability.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design combining descriptive quantitative analysis with qualitative reflexive thematic analysis to examine the characteristics and vulnerability narratives of individuals known to Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust (SPFT) who were discussed within Prevent Channel Panel processes between February 2022 and August 2024. A mixed-methods approach was selected because contemporary radicalisation scholarship increasingly conceptualises vulnerability as a complex, context-dependent and multifactorial phenomenon that cannot be adequately understood through demographic analysis alone (Horgan, 2008; Jensen et al., 2020; Corner & Gill, 2022).

The study was designed to contribute to the evidence base underpinning prevention and safeguarding practice. While quantitative analysis provided an overview of demographic, clinical and service-related characteristics, qualitative analysis enabled exploration of how developmental, psychological, relational and environmental influences intersected within individual vulnerability narratives. This approach aligns with contemporary scholarship emphasising interactions between needs, narratives and social contexts rather than isolated

risk factors or demographic characteristics (Webber & Kruglanski, 2017; Kruglanski et al., 2019).

Importantly, the study focused on individuals identified within pre-criminal prevention pathways rather than individuals convicted of terrorism offences or known to have committed terrorist acts. Consequently, the study examines vulnerability, susceptibility and safeguarding concerns rather than processes of disengagement, deradicalisation, or intervention effectiveness. Whilst contemporary deradicalisation scholarship informs interpretation of the findings, the study was not designed to evaluate interventions or measure outcomes following Prevent Channel Panel involvement. This distinction is important when considering the implications of the findings for prevention and intervention practice.

Prevent and Channel Context

Prevent is one strand of the United Kingdom's counter-terrorism strategy and aims to identify and support individuals considered susceptible to being drawn into terrorism before criminal offending occurs (Home Office, 2024). Prevent referrals may originate from health professionals, education providers, social care practitioners, police services, family members, community organisations, or other agencies where concerns regarding radicalisation vulnerability arise.

Following referral, concerns are triaged by Counter-Terrorism Police. . In some cases, individuals may subsequently be discussed within the multi-agency Prevent Channel Panel, a voluntary safeguarding programme which seeks to reduce susceptibility to radicalisation through individually tailored support plans. Channel interventions may involve mentoring, educational support, mental health provision, family work, social care involvement, safeguarding interventions, community support, and ideological mentoring where appropriate (Home Office, 2024). All 137 individuals in the cohort were discussed within local multi-agency Prevent Channel Panels.

The present study includes individuals who were discussed within local Prevent Channel Panels during the study period. However, discussion at Channel Panel does not necessarily equate with any active planning terrorist attacks or engaging in criminal activity, and each case was varied in the level of risks. The cohort should be understood as

representing a contemporary prevention population rather than a cohort of confirmed extremists or terrorist offenders.

Setting and Sample

The study examined a cohort of 137 individuals known to Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust who were discussed within Prevent Channel Panels across Sussex between February 2022 and August 2024. The sample included individuals aged between 11 and 62 years and incorporated both child and adult mental health services.

Inclusion required two criteria:

- The individual was currently or historically known to SPFT.
- The individual had been discussed within local multi-agency Prevent Channel Panel processes during the study period.

The cohort should not be interpreted as comprising individuals convicted of terrorism offences, nor individuals necessarily progressing towards violent action. Rather, all individuals had been identified within safeguarding systems as presenting concerns relating to vulnerability or susceptibility to radicalisation and had therefore entered a preventative multi-agency pathway.

This pre-criminal population provides a valuable opportunity to examine how vulnerability is understood, assessed and operationalised within contemporary safeguarding and prevention systems. While studies examining convicted offenders contribute important insights into extremist trajectories, they provide more limited understanding of the earlier stages of vulnerability that contemporary prevention programmes seek to identify and address (Horgan, 2008; Cottee, 2023; Corner & Gill, 2022).

Data Collection

Data were extracted from SPFT electronic clinical records. No information was obtained from police intelligence systems, Counter Terrorism Policing databases, Prevent case management systems, or documents classified as Official Sensitive. All data analysed within the study originated from routine healthcare, safeguarding and multidisciplinary clinical records maintained within SPFT NHS systems.

The quantitative dataset included:

- age;
- sex;
- ethnicity;
- ideology or presenting extremism concern;
- mental health diagnoses;
- neurodevelopmental diagnoses;
- learning disability status;
- care experience;
- service involvement.

The purpose of this component was descriptive rather than predictive. Consistent with contemporary critiques of profiling approaches within extremism research, the study did not seek to identify causal risk factors, construct extremist profiles, or develop predictive models (Pressman & Flockton, 2012; Sarma, 2017; Corner & Gill, 2022). Instead, the analysis sought to identify recurring characteristics and vulnerabilities within this specific prevention cohort. Alongside demographic data, a qualitative vulnerability narrative was constructed for each individual through review of multidisciplinary clinical documentation, safeguarding records, risk assessments and professional formulations. These narratives contained information relating to trauma, adverse childhood experiences, family relationships, educational experiences, social isolation, online activity, identity concerns, grievance formation, mental health, neurodevelopmental needs, experiences of violence and other psychosocial factors identified within routine practice documentation.

A notable limitation concerns the absence of systematic intervention and outcome data. The dataset was not designed to evaluate specific Prevent Channel Panel interventions, measure intervention effectiveness, or examine progression following referral. Consequently, although the findings have implications for prevention and intervention practice, the study cannot determine whether particular forms of support were effective nor establish causal relationships between identified vulnerabilities and subsequent outcomes.

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques. Frequencies, percentages, means and demographic distributions were calculated to provide an overview of the cohort and aid interpretation of qualitative findings. Analysis focused on characteristics commonly discussed within contemporary radicalisation literature, including age, sex, ideology, mental health, neurodevelopmental conditions, care experience and ethnicity (Gill et al., 2021; Allely et al., 2024; Salman & Al-Attar, 2026).

No inferential statistical testing was undertaken because the study was not designed to identify predictors of extremist behaviour. No comparator group was available and findings cannot be interpreted as evidence of causality, prevalence, or risk beyond the cohort examined.

To improve transparency and accessibility, key demographic and clinical characteristics are presented in tabular format within the findings section.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis. This approach was selected because it is well suited to exploring complex social phenomena characterised by ambiguity, interaction and contextual influence. Radicalisation vulnerability is increasingly recognised as multidimensional and therefore lends itself to qualitative approaches capable of capturing complexity rather than reducing experience to predefined categories.

Analysis proceeded through six iterative stages:

1. Familiarisation with vulnerability narratives.
2. Generation of initial codes.
3. Identification of recurring patterns and candidate themes.
4. Review and refinement of thematic structures.
5. Definition and naming of themes.
6. Interpretation in relation to contemporary radicalisation, prevention and deradicalisation scholarship.

Rather than seeking linear pathways into extremism, the analysis focused on understanding how developmental, relational, social and psychological influences intersected across cases. Particular attention was paid to recurring themes relating to belonging, identity, social connection, adversity, uncertainty, online engagement, grievance formation, neurodevelopmental needs and experiences of exclusion.

Reflexivity and Trustworthiness

Both authors possess extensive professional experience within safeguarding, mental health and Prevent-related practice. This provided valuable contextual understanding of radicalisation concerns, multidisciplinary working, safeguarding systems and prevention pathways. At the same time, the researchers recognised that professional experience may influence interpretation and therefore adopted a reflexive approach throughout the study.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through ongoing reflexive discussion, peer challenge and consultation with experts working across safeguarding, forensic child and adolescent mental health services, neurodevelopmental services and looked-after children. External consultation was undertaken with Professor Clare Allely and Professor Paul Gill, both internationally recognised scholars in violent extremism, neurodiversity and terrorism research. These discussions functioned as a form of peer debriefing and supported critical reflection on emerging interpretations.

Ethics, Governance and Data Protection

The study was undertaken as a service evaluation within Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust and complied with relevant organisational governance procedures. A Data Protection Impact Assessment was approved before data collection commenced. All data were anonymised prior to analysis and stored within secure password-protected systems accessible only to the research team. Approval to seek publication was subsequently granted by SPFT. Given the sensitivity of the subject area, particular attention was paid to minimising stigma and avoiding pathologising interpretations. The study does not propose a profile of radicalisation, nor does it suggest that mental illness, neurodevelopmental conditions, care experience, trauma, gender, or any other characteristic causes extremist engagement.

Instead, consistent with contemporary prevention, disengagement, and deradicalisation scholarship, the study seeks to contribute to understanding how multiple vulnerabilities may intersect within particular social and developmental contexts (Koehler, 2016; Baaken et al., 2021; Weston & Mythen, 2025). By examining a large cohort of individuals identified within pre-criminal prevention pathways, the research aims to inform more nuanced, evidence-informed, and person-centred P/CVE practice.

Findings

Cohort Characteristics and Converging Vulnerabilities

Analysis of 137 individuals discussed within local Prevent multi-agency Channel Panels identified substantial diversity across demographic, clinical, and psychosocial characteristics. No singular profile of radicalisation vulnerability emerged. Participants ranged in age from 11 to 62 years, with a mean age of 22 years and a modal age of 15 years. The cohort was predominantly male (93%; $n=127$), reflecting broader trends observed within violent extremism research. Far-right concerns comprised the largest ideological category (56.2%; $n = 77$), followed by Mixed, Unclear and Unstable (MUU) presentations (19.7%; $n = 27$), Islamist-related concerns (16.1%; $n = 22$), and presentations where a coherent ideology could not be determined (8.0%; $n = 11$). The prevalence of MUU presentations (19.7%; $n = 27$) is notable. Nearly one in five referrals involved mixed, unclear or unstable ideological concerns, reflecting emerging evidence that contemporary vulnerability pathways may increasingly involve ideological fluidity, hybrid grievances and unstable extremist identities.

Table 1. Demographic and Clinical Characteristics of the Cohort (N=137)

Characteristic	n	%
Sex		
Male	127	93.0
Female	10	7.0
Neurodevelopmental Characteristics		
Autism diagnosis	40	29.2
Undergoing autism assessment	27	19.7
ADHD diagnosis	29	21.2
Social Characteristics		
Care experienced	29	21.2
Ideology		
Far Right	77	56.2
Mixed, Unclear and Unstable (MUU)	27	19.7
Islamist	22	16.1
Not Known / Unclear	11	8.0
Age		
Mean age	22 years	–
Modal age	15 years	–

The cohort demonstrated high levels of complexity and co-occurring needs. Twenty-nine per cent ($n=40$) had a confirmed autism diagnosis, a further 19.7% ($n=27$) were undergoing neurodevelopmental assessment and an additional 10% ($n=14$) were described within records as displaying autistic traits. ADHD was recorded in 21.2% ($n=29$) of cases. Histories of trauma, adverse childhood experiences, educational difficulties, family instability, victimisation, emotional distress, and social isolation were frequently documented. Mental

health presentations included anxiety disorders, psychotic disorders, trauma-related difficulties, emotional dysregulation, substance misuse, suicidal ideation, and behavioural challenges. Adults were more likely to receive a formal mental health diagnosis, whereas children were more often described through narrative accounts of their presentation rather than assigned a classified psychiatric diagnosis. Individuals with an intellectual disability were not overrepresented in this cohort.

Just over one-fifth of the cohort was identified as care experienced, including both children currently in local authority care and adults with previous care experience. However, limitations in how care status was recorded within the SPFT NHS system meant that care experience could not be determined for approximately 60% of the cohort. As a result, the true prevalence of care experience may be higher. These findings should be interpreted with a degree of caution and within the context of a specialist secondary mental health NHS population.

Qualitative analysis suggested that these characteristics rarely occurred in isolation. Rather, vulnerability narratives commonly reflected interactions between developmental, psychological, relational, and social influences. Experiences of family disruption, trauma, loneliness, educational difficulties, neurodevelopmental needs, and identity concerns frequently occurred together within the same cases. This pattern supports contemporary understandings of radicalisation vulnerability as emerging through the convergence of multiple influences rather than through isolated risk factors.

Across the cohort, vulnerability appeared less consistent with singular causal explanations and more reflective of what might be described as an ecology of vulnerability, whereby multiple experiences accumulated and interacted within particular social and developmental contexts. While not formally quantified or analysed in this study, clinical records across ideologies contained several references to child-to-parent violence, particularly adolescent males directing violence towards their mothers, highlighting a gendered dynamic that sometimes reflected misogynistic attitudes.

Mixed, Unclear and Unstable Ideological Presentations

A notable finding concerned the prevalence of Mixed, Unclear and Unstable (MUU) ideological presentations. Whilst traditional ideological categories remained evident, many individuals did not present with coherent, stable, or fully developed ideological commitments. Instead, some participants demonstrated fluid combinations of grievances, violence fixation, conspiracy beliefs, misogynistic attitudes, identity concerns, and attraction to extremist material.

In several cases, individuals moved between ideological themes over time or expressed support for apparently contradictory beliefs. Others demonstrated fascination with violence, notoriety, or mass casualty attacks without clearly articulating an overarching ideological framework. Some participants appeared attracted to extremist content primarily through online communities, grievance-based narratives, or identity-focused subcultures rather than through consistent ideological engagement.

These observations appear consistent with emerging scholarship concerning mixed, composite, conflicted, unclear, and unstable extremist pathways. The findings suggest that contemporary prevention populations may increasingly challenge traditional assumptions regarding coherent ideological categorisation.

Importantly, this does not imply that ideology was absent. Rather, the findings indicate that ideological content frequently intersected with broader experiences of grievance, identity formation, social belonging, online participation, and psychosocial adversity.

Online Environments, Identity Formation and Social Connection

Online engagement emerged as one of the most consistent themes across the dataset. Participants accessed extremist material through social media platforms, websites, online forums, gaming communities, discussion platforms, blogs, and encrypted communication channels. Recorded content included far-right propaganda, Islamist narratives, conspiracy theories, violence-supportive material, misogynistic communities, and discussions concerning mass casualty attacks.

However, qualitative narratives consistently suggested that online environments functioned as more than sites of ideological exposure. Many participants appeared to use

digital spaces for identity exploration, social interaction, relationship formation, community participation, validation, and recognition.

Several narratives described extensive online engagement occurring alongside limited offline friendships, strained family relationships, educational disengagement, social anxiety, or broader experiences of exclusion. This pattern appeared particularly evident among socially isolated adolescents and young adults, including some individuals presenting with neurodevelopmental needs.

Across multiple cases, online environments appeared to function as social ecosystems where grievances, identities, relationships, community participation, and ideological narratives converged. Rather than simply consuming extremist content, participants often engaged with wider online communities that provided membership, shared experiences, recognition, status, and belonging.

These findings suggest that contemporary prevention efforts may benefit from understanding online activity not solely through exposure to extremist material but also through its broader role in social connection and identity development.

Psychosocial Functions Associated with Extremist Engagement

The most significant finding to emerge from the qualitative analysis concerned the recurring psychosocial themes associated with extremist engagement. Across vulnerability narratives, themes of belonging, identity, recognition, significance, certainty, purpose, social connection, grievance formation, and meaning-making appeared repeatedly.

Whilst ideological concerns were evident throughout the cohort, many narratives suggested that engagement with extremist content occurred within wider contexts characterised by loneliness, uncertainty, exclusion, emotional distress, trauma, family instability, identity concerns, or unmet psychosocial needs.

Participants frequently appeared to use extremist narratives as frameworks through which personal frustrations, social grievances, perceived injustices, or questions concerning identity could be interpreted and understood. Across numerous cases, extremist material appeared intertwined with broader searches for belonging, recognition, certainty, meaning, status, or community.

This pattern was particularly evident among adolescents and young adults, whose ideological positions frequently appeared fragmented, exploratory, or subject to change over time. In some cases, attraction to extremist communities appeared to provide social relationships, validation, or identity resources that were otherwise absent within participants' lives.

At the same time, the findings should not be interpreted as suggesting that ideology was unimportant. Ideological narratives remained central to how grievances, aspirations, frustrations, and identities were articulated. Rather than replacing ideology, the findings indicate that ideological content frequently interacted with broader psychosocial and developmental experiences.

The data therefore suggest that vulnerability to extremist engagement may often emerge through interactions between ideological narratives and wider needs relating to belonging, significance, certainty, identity, purpose, social connection, and recognition.

Summary of Findings

Four principal findings emerged from the analysis. First, no singular profile of radicalisation vulnerability was identified. Instead, vulnerability reflected the convergence of multiple developmental, psychological, relational, and social influences.

Second, the cohort demonstrated substantial complexity, with high levels of mental health difficulties, neurodevelopmental needs, psychosocial adversity, trauma, social isolation, and family disruption.

Third, many participants presented with mixed, unclear, unstable, or fluid ideological positions that did not fit neatly within traditional extremist categories. This finding aligns with emerging scholarship highlighting the increasing prevalence of composite and ideologically fluid extremist pathways.

Fourth, online environments and extremist communities appeared frequently associated with broader psychosocial themes including belonging, identity, recognition, purpose, significance, certainty, and social connection alongside ideological engagement.

Collectively, these findings suggest that vulnerability within contemporary Prevent Channel Panel populations is best understood as emerging through interactions between

ideological narratives, individual experiences, social relationships, developmental histories, and environmental influences. Rather than revealing a singular pathway into radicalisation, the findings point towards multiple intersecting pathways shaped by differing combinations of vulnerabilities, opportunities, identities, relationships, and beliefs.

Discussion

Understanding Vulnerability within a Pre-Criminal Prevention Population

This study examined 137 individuals known to NHS mental health services who were discussed within Prevent Channel Panel processes between February 2022 and August 2024. Unlike much of the existing literature, which frequently draws upon convicted terrorists, imprisoned extremists, retrospective accounts, or post-incident investigations, the present study focused upon a pre-criminal prevention cohort situated within contemporary safeguarding systems. As such, the findings provide a rare opportunity to examine how vulnerability to radicalisation is understood and operationalised before terrorist offending has occurred.

Consistent with contemporary radicalisation scholarship, no singular profile of vulnerability emerged (Horgan, 2008; Neumann, 2013; Jensen et al., 2020). Instead, vulnerability appeared characterised by the interaction of multiple developmental, psychological, social, relational, and environmental influences. Histories of trauma, psychosocial adversity, neurodevelopmental needs, social isolation, educational difficulties, family disruption, mental health concerns, online immersion, and identity-related challenges frequently overlapped within individual narratives.

These findings support a growing body of evidence suggesting that radicalisation vulnerability is best understood through interactions between multiple influences rather than through singular causal pathways or demographic profiles (Webber & Kruglanski, 2017; Kruglanski et al., 2019; Marchment et al., 2025). The findings therefore reinforce longstanding critiques of profiling approaches and support contemporary models that emphasise complexity, context, and interaction.

Importantly, the findings should not be interpreted as suggesting that any particular characteristic causes radicalisation. Rather, the data indicate that vulnerability often emerges through the convergence of multiple experiences and circumstances. This observation aligns with contemporary formulations that understand radicalisation as a socially situated and context-dependent process rather than a predictable consequence of individual characteristics.

Mixed, Unclear and Unstable Ideological Pathways

Whilst traditional ideological categories remained evident across the cohort, many individuals did not demonstrate coherent, stable, or fully developed ideological commitments. Several participants expressed combinations of beliefs, grievances, identities, and violence-supportive attitudes that did not fit neatly within conventional categories of Islamist or extreme right-wing extremism.

These observations resonate strongly with emerging scholarship concerning Mixed, Unclear and Unstable (MUU) extremism, composite violent extremism, incoherent violent extremism, and contemporary hybrid ideological pathways (Brace et al., 2024; Astley, 2025; Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2025; Tibby, 2026). Such work suggests that contemporary prevention populations increasingly include individuals whose extremist engagement is characterised by fluidity, ideological inconsistency, or movement between multiple grievance-based environments.

The findings therefore contribute empirical support to growing concerns that traditional ideological classifications may not fully capture the complexity of contemporary vulnerability pathways. For practitioners, this highlights the importance of understanding the broader personal, relational and contextual factors influencing engagement rather than relying exclusively upon ideological categorisation.

At the same time, the findings should not be interpreted as diminishing the importance of ideology. Ideological narratives remained central to how grievances, identities, and aspirations were explained and articulated. Rather, the data suggest that contemporary vulnerability pathways frequently involve dynamic interactions between ideology, identity, belonging, grievance, and social experience.

Belonging, Identity and the Psychosocial Context of Extremist Engagement

The most significant finding to emerge from the qualitative analysis concerned the recurring psychosocial themes that appeared within vulnerability narratives. Across the cohort, experiences relating to belonging, identity, significance, certainty, recognition, social connection, meaning, and purpose were repeatedly evident. These observations strongly support contemporary theories that conceptualise radicalisation as involving interactions between personal needs, social environments, and ideological narratives (Kruglanski et al., 2019; Bélanger et al., 2019).

In particular, the findings align with Significance Quest Theory, which proposes that experiences of exclusion, marginalisation, humiliation, personal crisis, or uncertainty may increase receptivity to extremist narratives offering meaning, status, recognition, or purpose. Across numerous cases, extremist communities appeared capable of providing social relationships, identity resources, explanations for personal frustrations, opportunities for belonging, and frameworks through which grievances could be interpreted and understood.

These observations also resonate with wider scholarship emphasising the role of masculinity, loneliness, social exclusion, identity uncertainty, and belonging within contemporary extremist pathways (Kimmel, 2018; Pearson, 2023; Miller-Idriss, 2025). For many participants, extremist engagement appeared embedded within wider developmental and social experiences rather than operating as an isolated ideological phenomenon.

However, the findings do not suggest that extremist involvement can be reduced to psychosocial factors alone. Ideology remained important across the cohort and frequently provided the narratives through which personal experiences, grievances, frustrations, or aspirations were interpreted. The findings therefore support contemporary scholarship that emphasises interactions between needs, narratives, and networks rather than privileging any single explanatory dimension.

Implications for Contemporary Deradicalisation and Disengagement Theory

The present findings have important implications for contemporary debates regarding prevention, disengagement, and deradicalisation. However, they should not be interpreted as

suggesting that factors associated with vulnerability to radicalisation are identical to those associated with disengagement or deradicalisation.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly distinguishes between entry into extremism, continued involvement, and disengagement as related but distinct processes (Koehler, 2016; Marsden, 2017; Morrison et al., 2021). Initial vulnerability may emerge through experiences of exclusion, identity uncertainty, loneliness, psychosocial adversity, significance loss, or grievance formation. By contrast, disengagement may be influenced by factors arising during extremist involvement itself, including disillusionment, changes in personal relationships, burnout, competing identities, alternative opportunities, or dissatisfaction with extremist groups.

Consequently, the present findings should not be interpreted as establishing a direct equivalence between vulnerability and disengagement. The data cannot demonstrate why individuals leave extremist pathways, nor can they determine whether particular interventions successfully facilitate disengagement. Such questions require longitudinal and outcome-focused research.

Nevertheless, the findings contribute to contemporary deradicalisation scholarship by illustrating the kinds of vulnerabilities and psychosocial needs that may be present within individuals entering prevention systems. Understanding these experiences may help inform intervention planning and support existing evidence emphasising individualised, person-centred, and multidisciplinary approaches to prevention and disengagement (Khalil et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2021; Khalil et al., 2023).

Rather than challenging contemporary deradicalisation theory, the study therefore provides empirical support for an increasingly established consensus that extremist vulnerability and successful intervention are shaped by interactions between ideological, social, relational, developmental, and psychological factors.

Implications for Prevention and Intervention Practice

Towards Functional Understanding Rather than Risk Profiling

A central implication of the findings concerns assessment practice. The absence of a singular profile of vulnerability reinforces longstanding criticisms of profiling approaches within radicalisation research (Neumann, 2013; Sarma, 2017). The complexity observed across the cohort suggests that vulnerability is unlikely to be adequately understood through demographic characteristics, diagnostic labels, or ideological categories alone.

Instead, the findings support formulation-based approaches increasingly advocated across safeguarding, mental health, and P/CVE practice. Assessments may benefit from exploring not only ideological content but also the functions that extremist engagement appears to serve within an individual's wider social and developmental context.

Table 2. Functional Dimensions of Vulnerability and Associated Intervention Considerations

Function	What Practitioners Should Assess	Potential Deradicalisation / P/CVE Response
Extremist Engagement Serves		
Belonging	Loneliness, social isolation, peer relationships, community attachment	Mentoring, prosocial peer networks, community participation, group-based interventions
Identity	Identity confusion, self-concept, masculinity concerns, search for purpose	Identity-focused work, strengths-based approaches, youth work, positive role models
Recognition	Experiences of marginalisation, rejection, status frustration, low self-esteem	Achievement pathways, volunteering, leadership opportunities, restorative approaches
Significance	Feelings of insignificance, humiliation, grievance, lack of	Personal goal setting, education, employment, meaningful social

	direction	contribution
Certainty	Cognitive rigidity, uncertainty, black-and-white thinking, exposure to simplistic narratives	Critical thinking, reflective dialogue, psychological support, guided exploration of complexity
Purpose and Meaning	Lack of future goals, hopelessness, existential concerns	Future planning, vocational support, values-based work, constructive life projects
Social Connection	Family conflict, poor attachment, weak support networks	Family interventions, relationship-building, social support and reintegration planning
Grievance Resolution	Perceived injustice, victimisation, social exclusion	Trauma-informed practice, emotional literacy, constructive civic engagement
Online Community and Validation	Dependence on online communities, online identity formation, digital isolation	Digital resilience, alternative online communities, positive online participation

Table 2 summarises recurring psychosocial dimensions identified within the dataset and their potential relevance for assessment and intervention planning. These findings suggest that practitioners may benefit from exploring how experiences of belonging, identity, significance, recognition, certainty and social connection are addressed through existing person-centred prevention and disengagement interventions.

For Channel practitioners, mentors, intervention providers and mental health professionals, the practical implication is that assessment and intervention should routinely explore the functions extremist engagement serves. Alongside ideological beliefs, practitioners should assess whether extremist involvement provides belonging, significance, identity, recognition, certainty, purpose, or social connection. Intervention planning can then focus on developing prosocial alternatives to these functions through mentoring, education,

family support, employment, community participation, psychological intervention, and positive identity development.

Supporting Contemporary Person-Centred Practice

Importantly, the findings do not suggest that contemporary P/CVE and deradicalisation programmes neglect psychosocial factors. On the contrary, current scholarship and intervention frameworks increasingly emphasise mentoring, social reintegration, family intervention, mental health support, education, employment assistance, and identity-focused work (Koehler, 2016; Marsden, 2017; Khalil et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2021).

The contribution of the present study is therefore not to propose a fundamentally new approach, but rather to provide empirical evidence from a large pre-criminal cohort that supports the continued importance of such interventions. Across this population, vulnerabilities associated with belonging, identity, social connection, uncertainty, trauma, and psychosocial adversity were recurrent themes. These observations reinforce the value of holistic, trauma-informed, neurodiversity-informed, and relational approaches increasingly advocated throughout contemporary prevention systems.

Functional Dimensions of Vulnerability and Intervention Considerations

The findings further suggest that practitioners may benefit from considering the apparent functions extremist engagement serves within an individual's life. Across the cohort, recurring themes involved belonging, significance, recognition, identity, certainty, purpose, social connection, and community participation.

The framework presented in Table 2 should therefore be understood not as a novel deradicalisation model, but as an empirically informed summary of the recurring psychosocial dimensions identified within the dataset and their potential relevance for assessment and intervention planning.

In practice, this may involve exploring:

- how experiences of isolation influence vulnerability;
- the role of online communities in providing belonging;

- identity-related concerns;
- experiences of exclusion or rejection;
- trauma and adversity;
- opportunities for prosocial connection and participation.

Such considerations are already reflected within many contemporary P/CVE and disengagement programmes, but the present findings illustrate how frequently they arise within real-world Prevent Channel Panel populations.

Conclusion

This study examined 137 individuals known to NHS mental health services who were discussed within Prevent Channel Panels between February 2022 and August 2024. In doing so, it contributes rare empirical evidence from a large cohort in the pre-criminal prevention population that remains underrepresented within the broader radicalisation and deradicalisation literature. Unlike much existing research, which frequently focuses on convicted terrorists, extremist offenders, retrospective accounts, or post-incident investigations, the present study examined individuals identified within safeguarding systems before terrorist offending had occurred. As such, it offers an important insight into the populations contemporary prevention programmes seek to identify and support.

Several findings emerged. First, no singular profile of radicalisation vulnerability was identified. Rather, vulnerability appeared characterised by the interaction of multiple developmental, psychological, social, and environmental influences, including psychosocial adversity, trauma, neurodevelopmental needs, mental health difficulties, social isolation, online immersion, family instability, and identity-related concerns. Consistent with contemporary radicalisation scholarship, the findings suggest that vulnerability is best understood through the convergence of multiple influences rather than through singular causal pathways or demographic characteristics.

Second, the findings highlighted the prevalence of ideologies, particularly the far-right, however also a significant cohort who held fluid, mixed, and unstable ideological presentations. Many participants did not demonstrate coherent or fixed ideological

commitments, instead presenting with combinations of grievances, violence-supportive beliefs, identity concerns, online influences, and shifting ideological affiliations. These observations provide empirical support for emerging scholarship concerning Mixed, Unclear and Unstable (MUU) extremism, composite violent extremism, and contemporary hybrid ideological pathways, suggesting that traditional ideological classifications may not always fully capture the complexity of contemporary vulnerability presentations.

Third, recurring psychosocial themes relating to belonging, identity, significance, purpose, certainty, recognition, and social connection were evident across many vulnerability narratives. These findings align with a growing body of scholarship arguing that extremist engagement frequently occurs within broader developmental and social contexts in which ideological narratives interact with personal experiences, relationships, needs, and life circumstances (Kruglanski et al., 2019; Kimmel, 2018; Pearson, 2023; Miller-Idriss, 2025). The findings therefore support contemporary understandings of radicalisation as an interaction between needs, narratives, and social environments rather than a process driven by ideology in isolation.

Importantly, the study does not suggest that factors associated with vulnerability to radicalisation are identical to those that facilitate disengagement or deradicalisation. The data do not permit conclusions regarding intervention effectiveness, disengagement trajectories, or long-term outcomes following Prevent Channel Panel support. Contemporary scholarship increasingly distinguishes between entry into extremism, continued involvement, and disengagement as related but distinct processes (Koehler, 2016; Marsden, 2017; Morrison et al., 2021). Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as contributing to understanding vulnerability within prevention populations rather than explaining why individuals disengage from extremism.

The principal contribution of this article is therefore empirical rather than theoretical. The findings do not challenge contemporary deradicalisation scholarship. Rather, they provide support for an increasingly established body of evidence indicating that effective prevention and intervention require attention to social, relational, developmental, and psychological dimensions alongside ideological considerations. Across this cohort, vulnerabilities associated with belonging, identity, social connection, adversity, uncertainty,

and recognition were recurring features of the radicalisation concerns recorded within safeguarding systems.

The findings also have important implications for practice. They reinforce the value of formulation-based, trauma-informed, neurodiversity-informed, relational, and person-centred approaches increasingly advocated across contemporary prevention, safeguarding, and deradicalisation programmes. Rather than relying primarily upon ideological categorisation or demographic indicators, practitioners may benefit from exploring how experiences of exclusion, isolation, uncertainty, adversity, identity formation, online engagement, and social belonging interact within individual vulnerability presentations.

The study has limitations. Data were drawn from a single NHS Mental Health Trust, no comparator population was available, and data concerning intervention outcomes or long-term trajectories were not systematically available. The findings should therefore not be interpreted as evidence that mental illness, neurodevelopmental conditions, trauma, care experience, or any other individual characteristic causes radicalisation. Nor do the findings establish causal relationships between identified vulnerabilities and subsequent extremist behaviour.

Future research should extend examination of pre-criminal populations across multiple Channel Panels from different regions across the country, explore the growing prevalence of mixed and unstable or non-ideological presentations, and examine how vulnerability profiles relate to intervention pathways and long-term outcomes. Longitudinal research that follows individuals through Prevent Channel Panel processes would be particularly valuable in improving understanding of how psychosocial vulnerabilities, ideological engagement, intervention experiences, and disengagement trajectories interact over time.

Nevertheless, this study makes an important contribution to contemporary radicalisation scholarship by providing rare empirical insight into a large pre-criminal prevention cohort. The findings reinforce contemporary understandings of radicalisation vulnerability as a multifactorial and context-dependent phenomenon shaped through interactions between individual experiences, social relationships, developmental histories, online environments, and ideological narratives. For researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, the study highlights the importance of understanding not only what individuals

believe, but also the broader social and developmental contexts within which extremist beliefs and identities acquire meaning.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Professor Clare Allely (University of Salford) and Professor Paul Gill (University College London) for their helpful advice, guidance and recommendations on earlier drafts of this article. The authors acknowledge the support of Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, particularly its Prevent Lead (Philip Blurton) and Research Governance Team.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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ISSN: 2363-9849

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