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Mixed, unclear, unstable extremism: When a category is not a typology

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Contributing to recent debate in this journal, this article outlines the phenomenon of Mixed, Unclear, Unstable extremism from the perspective of a law enforcement agency. Outlining a study conducted in 2025, I argue that the MUU phenomenon does not represent a unique or nascent type of extremism, and is instead a dynamic category primarily used in threat mitigation. There was no shared motive or uniform behavioural pattern within the group, and over 50% moved out of the classification within twelve months as fresh details emerged. The MUU label serves primarily as an administrative tool to handle people whose actions demand police focus, yet who lack the unified nature of a violent extremist or terrorist threat. The sole constant was their interaction with transnational online extremist ecosystems. Consequently, the critical issue shifts from asking if we need improved terrorism classifications to determining if counter-terrorism authorities are the right mechanism for dealing with these individuals, and examining how digital environments are influencing emerging criminal trends.

Keywords: MUU, NVE, Practitioner View, Terrorism, Violent Extremism

1. INTRODUCTION

Following recent debate in this journal initiated by Horgan and Shayler (2026) in relation to the topic of Mixed, Unclear, Unstable extremism (MUU), a study of MUU individuals in Aotearoa/New Zealand is offered as an example of how the issue is managed by a contemporary law enforcement agency. From the perspective of a practitioner working in a small country, the expositions of the 'salad bar' phenomena provided in this journal are a significant and welcome addition to New Zealand's efforts to understand the ongoing evolution of counter-cultural Siege-style leaderless resistance (Sunshine, 2024) and associated threats such as militant accelerationism or participatory memetic extreme violence (Ondrak & Vitelli, 2025).

2. CATEGORISATION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN NEW ZEALAND

To assist in understanding the extremist threatscape, New Zealand uses a system of categorisation for violent and recognisably violence-fascinated individuals or groups (CTAG, 2022). Allocation to a category typically reflects a professional judgement that a potentially violent individual is expressing support for, or adherence to ideological, political, or religious extremism.[a] In such an instance they might be categorised as an 'identity-motivated violent

extremist', or 'faith-motivated violent extremist' as appropriate.

In agreement with Cassam (2026, pp.4-5), in New Zealand statute the crime of terrorism must be evidentially linked to a 'cause', which means that for New Zealand Police the definition of terrorism is not theoretical, and has a specific and statutory meaning. Importantly, serious violence such as school shootings or family annihilation that can reasonably be linked to an individual's participation in online violent extremist ecosystem, but which lacks a clearly defined cause, cannot be charged as terrorism even where it might have a significant effect on the public's feelings of safety.

Initiated in recognition of specific reporting to NZ Police, and the growing number of reports of concern about 'non-ideological' extreme violence in both greyzone and academic literature, in a 2025 study we unpacked and examined a small cohort of individuals classified as MUU by New Zealand Police staff, and under active investigation in July 2025 (Tibby, 2026). The cohort comprised individuals who were considered either:

- 'leads', primarily made up of individuals reported to Police via non-emergency channels, and who were not yet established as persons of interest, or,
- 'persons of interest', individuals under investigation as a potential threat to national security.

At the time of extraction, this cohort made up over 20% of the total number of individuals under either assessment or investigation by specialist counter-terrorism staff. Approximately 20% of the national security cohort has been categorised as MUU since the implementation of the category in 2023.

3. SEEKING PATTERNS IN THE MUU CATEGORY

In order to determine if there were specific patterns in the 2025 cohort, it was examined using 5 non-'cause' lenses known to adversely affect individuals and create susceptibility to extremism including: loneliness and social isolation; suicidal ideation; poor mental health; exposure to family harm as either bystander, victim or offender; and exposure to or participation in online extremism. The investigative records held on each individual were manually reviewed and coded against these variables by an experienced analyst (Tibby, 2026, pp. 2-3).

The study revealed that in New Zealand the MUU category does not capture a recognisable *type* of extremist, and aligns with Horgan and Shayler's (2026, p. 2) statement that MUU is an administrative category that intentionally captures three separate types of individuals: individuals with an evident mixture of causes, no clear cause (the largest subcategory in the New Zealand example), or unstable attachment to any one cause (i.e. who might sometimes rapidly shift from one position to another, or express variable causes and other issues).[b]

The 2025 study also clearly demonstrated that in the New Zealand context the MUU category was *not* capturing multi-cause-selecting 'salad bar' individuals; the category was populated by a wide range of individuals with unique motivations and poorly defined ideation. On careful examination of the case files the most specific pattern was the absence of association with a cause, and no consistent or common patterns of behaviour that brought each individual to the attention of Police. Put plainly, the New Zealand MUU cohort provided no contribution to understanding typologies in violent extremism. Instead, the cohort closely conformed to the findings of Gill (2026), Horgan (2024), and others (Colvin & Campion, 2026; Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2018; Marchment et al., 2025; Mohamed Ali et al., 2017), where the only commonality among different extremists is often the absence of generalisable patterns or pathways in radicalisation.

4. PROCESSES STRONGLY AFFECT CATEGORISATION IN NEW ZEALAND

The study also provides a very specific retort to Perliger (2026, p.2), who correctly notes the preference for behavioural assessment among practitioners. For New Zealand, the absence of cause-oriented ideation among national security threats does not require greater

understanding of administrative typology, or the need for greater or better training of analysts. Supporting McCauley's (2026) assertion that cognition is not a crime, ideation is not a crime in New Zealand statute. The observation of a *possible* violent cause is however a triage trigger (i.e. ensuring that the individual or group in question is investigated by an appropriately specialised member of staff). Behavioural assessment is therefore critical, because reasoned identification and prevention of possible violence and harm is a key plank of our mission statement, and carries greater importance than regulation of opinion, however extreme the opinion may be.

While the proportion of cases categorised as MUU in New Zealand has remained constant since 2023, this consistency masks that at least some allocation to the category is informed by *processes* within Police. When an analyst or investigator is presented with an individual who does not readily conform to any of the 'traditional' causes, they are provisionally placed in the 'Unclear' category, and can cycle out into another category as further information is uncovered. It is uncertain whether this also occurs in places that use a similar set of categories, but this New Zealand practice demonstrates that Horgan and Shayler are once again correct – MUU does not represent a discrete typology. It is instead an operational portmanteau used to encompass a range of individuals with potentially concerning behaviours and possible attachment to a cause.

This practice on the part of New Zealand Police staff means that Perliger's (2026, p. 2) assertion that declining ideological literacy is contributing to insufficient recognition of typology is at best only partially correct. As seen in Figure 1, 54% of the 2025 MUU cohort were Active Leads under assessment, and 46% were Active Persons of Interest (POI) under investigation. Between June 2025 and May 2026 turnover was high, with only 8% of the cohort converting from Lead to POI, and approximately 57% of the cohort cycling out from 'active' status: 46% became 'Filed Leads' as clarificatory information came to hand, and 11% were POI who were investigated and 'downgraded' to inactive. Filed Leads typically represented instances where the individual either did not meet the threshold for investigation or presented no threat of violence and were 'parked', and inactive POI were typically cases where investigation was intentionally ceased.

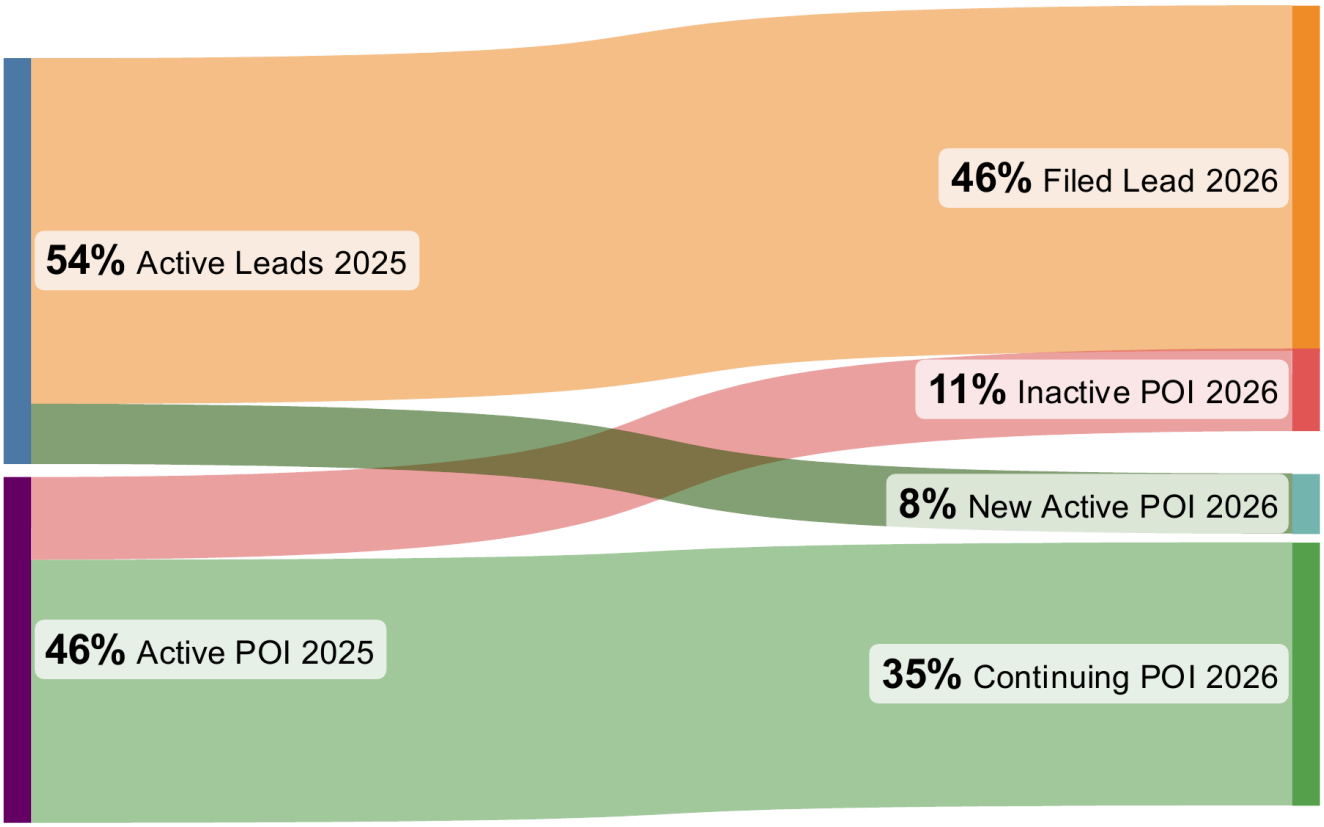
5. LESSONS PROVIDED BY THE NZ MUU COHORT

Examination of the New Zealand MUU cohort by a senior and experienced analyst clearly demonstrated that the Police attention paid to the individuals in the cohort was justifiable (i.e. their behaviour was sufficiently concerning to warrant initial concern, and also sufficient to justify preventative or other actions by Police). But it also showed that any assumption that they collectively presented a discrete and clearly bounded typology would be misguided. This supports Horgan and Shayler's (2026, p.14) argument that ideology is merely a single motivation for action, supports our previous observation that reaction to, and prevention of, *criminal extremism* (statutory criminality associated with or driven by extremism) has greater value in threat assessment than reaction to evidence of ideology (Tibby, 2026), and supports assertions that holistic and multi-agency responses to this type of threat are the most appropriate reaction (Argentino & Lindsay, 2026; Clemmow et al., 2026).

From the perspective of a practitioner, what needs to be asked in the debate about the growth of 'non-ideological extreme violence' is not whether better typologies of terrorism are required, but whether activation of 'national security' or counter-terror powers represent the appropriate method of threat management when a 'non-ideological' individual is identified by authorities. In practical terms, if a person has committed no crime, then attention to them placed by New Zealand Police needs to be justifiable – there needs to be a reasonable demonstration that their behaviour, and not their ideation, might result in offending. Granted, ideation has been a confirmatory proxy for 'pathway to violent extremism' assessment models for many years. But that practice is also becoming questionable as some extremism has evolved away from adherence to 'conventional' causes such as Salafi Jihadism or Neo-Nazism

Figure 1

Movement of study subjects between 2025 and 2026. Values are percentages of the full cohort.



Note. POI = Person of interest. Leads that were made inactive shortly after the 2026 comparison date (4% of the cohort) are counted as Filed Leads.

(Cooter, 2026), and is beginning to represent less and less justification for reasonable suspicion.

This leaves open a key question. There is a through line that ran in the majority of the cases studied – the interaction of individuals with a transnational online extremist ecosystem. New Zealand is effectively an 'import ecosystem' for extremist materials; we tend to be recipients of extremist messaging and disinformation aimed at larger countries or populations, but which is unfortunately both passively and actively consumed by domestic extremists. For some of these consumers they prefer to 'theme' their consumption of material, and upon examination by an analyst or investigator this diet of extremism clearly indicates preference for a particular cause. This in turn results in allocation to a specific category such as 'white identity-motivated violent extremism' (CTAG, 2022). For others, their diet is eclectic or mosaic, and if examined with the intention of identifying a clear and themed pattern might result in the conclusion that the individual is ideologically incoherent (Tibby, 2026). The findings clearly aligned with Baele's (2026, pp. 2-3) assertion that idiosyncratic ideation or 'hybridity' can be reasonably and logically associated with the engagement of the MUU-categorised individuals with the chaos and self-directed learning evident in internet dependency.

As stated, 'ideology' or cause has acted as a proxy for suspicion that a person or organised group is involved or implicated in violent extremism for several decades. If involvement in online extremist ecosystems has at least partially replaced that vector for radicalisation, then it is logical for law enforcement to move attention to staunching such ingress. I therefore agree with McCauley (2026) that the critical question is not whether ideology has changed or morphed into new types of terrorism. The core question is how online extremist ecosystems are driving patterns in offending, or

creating new classes of criminal behaviour – of which, sadistic online exploitation is unquestionably the most pressing (Thorn, 2026).

Horgan and Shayler's (2026) initiating paper in this series serves as a welcome warning to both scholarly and practitioner colleagues about the dangers of over-applying any novel and assumed typology to an evolving and diverse extremist landscape, particularly in a social and cultural interregnum instigated by the advent of ubiquitous smartphones and attention-greedy algorithms (boyd, 2026). There are undoubtedly misanthropic individuals and groups operating in contemporary, transnational extremist ecosystems, and we have significant evidence of individuals aggregating self-justificatory, bricolage causes for violence and crime. As experts, we should recognise that blithe uses of generalisable, descriptive mantles like 'Nihilistic Violent Extremism' or MUU are likely increasing in currency because they are shorthand for 'extremism that worries us but doesn't fit our current conceptual frameworks'. This should be viewed as an opportunity to broaden both knowledge and practices, while concurrently fitting observed threats first and foremost to existing legislative frameworks.

6. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declare no competing interests

7. FUNDING

This research received no external funding.

8. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Che Tibby conducted and examination of MUU-categorised individuals in a New Zealand cohort, and drafted the entirety of this paper.

ENDNOTES

a. In NZ Legislation a violent act is terrorism where it is intended to advance a political, ideological, or religious cause, and is also intended to force or coerce a government or organisation (section 5, Terrorism Suppression Act 2002).

b. NZ Police does not publicise the number of individuals under investigation as national security 'leads' or 'persons of interest'.

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