

Policy Document: The Prevent Strategy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Prevent duty imposes a burden on professionals to intuit attitudes underpinned by “extremism” (an ill-defined term) and the likelihood of radicalization in those they work with, creating suspicion in the relationship between professionals and their patients, students, and service-users. In its current form it presents a threat to freedom of expression and civil liberties and risks stigmatizing particular groups.
- Existing measures, such as safeguarding policies embedded within schools and the Mental Health Act, already allow for actions to be taken to safeguard vulnerable individuals and to protect others from them. The extra level of surveillance produced by Prevent is unnecessary, unhelpful, and overlays a political agenda onto safeguarding.
- Any strategy designed to replace Prevent should be conceptualized in collaboration with public sector professionals and academics. It should remove the burden of reporting from these professionals, and focus instead on education and values of freedom of expression. Where appropriate, referrals should be made via existing safeguarding channels within the professions concerned.

Introduction

Section 26(1) of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 states that specified authorities “must, in the exercise of [their] functions, have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism”. Certain bodies including the Royal College of Psychiatrists have highlighted the risk of perpetuating stigma for people with “mental illness”, “certain communities”, and those who “dissent against authority” in implementing the requirements of Prevent.

My research focuses on how cultural outliers are understood in the context of an understanding of social power as operating along “normative” lines – that is as defining in-groups (the norm) and out-groups (the “abnormals”), after the work of Michel Foucault. It examines the risk of stigmatizing difference and the need for nuanced understandings of the complexity of group and individual identities, respect for the rights of different groups, and awareness of conflicts of rights and interests. When taken in tandem with an assessment of the demands and workings of the Prevent strategy, my conclusions are that unconscious bias and stereotyping may be accelerated and intensified by this duty, and freedom of expression curtailed.

Points of Contention:

(The following points are a response to the Government's Review of Prevent question 16: "What are your main criticisms or complaints of Prevent, and why? What is the evidence underpinning these criticisms and/or complaints?")

1. Definitions of extremism

The Prevent duty imposes a burden on professionals to intuit attitudes that are "extreme" or "extremist". These are ill-defined terms which are described by one expert as "subjective, awkward and opaque" (Lowe 2017). This can introduce suspicion in the relationship between professionals and their patients, students, and service-users. In its current form, the Prevent duty presents a threat to freedom of expression and civil liberties. It is often claimed that Prevent is inherently Islamophobic, and certainly its introduction in 2006 was a direct response to the rise in Islamist attacks (Lowe 2017). Claims that the recent increase in the number of referrals for far-right radicalization proves that Prevent is not inherently Islamophobic are only partly convincing. Simultaneously, we have recently seen the first case of environmental activists being referred under Prevent (Evans, 2019) and the addition of groups including Extinction Rebellion to the Government's list of extremist organizations. The danger of a strategy like Prevent is that the ill-defined nature of the terms "extremism" and "radicalization" mean that, potentially, a strong adherence to any ideological viewpoint could come under suspicion and be subject to counterterrorism as cultural and political mores shift. The contingent and arbitrary nature of "extremism" makes Prevent a potentially dangerous policy.

2. Stereotyping and danger to social outliers

Societal expectations and biases – including unconscious bias – feed into the perceptions that guide referrals to Prevent. Research has shown that Prevent referrals "[reproduce] assertions familiar from the 'war on terror' of Muslim men as a suspect and risky community" (Pearson 2019) and repeat stereotypical assumptions about the motivating factors of women's actions based on their traditional roles – especially in the case of Muslim women who tend to be understood from outside their communities firstly as wives and mothers, shoring up a notion of "passive" Muslim female identity (Brown 2013, Downing 2020 in press).

My research has focused on the danger of assuming that individuals' political affiliations and motivations can be predicted on the basis of the identity group (sex, gender identity, sexuality, religion, etc.) to which they belong (Downing 2018). I coin the term "identity category violation" to describe individuals whose apparently contradictory affiliations and beliefs show up the fragility of identity-based logics and assumptions in a cultural moment that is increasingly tending towards identity politics. The Prevent Strategy risks reinforcing "givens" about identity categories when predicting radicalization. It thereby reinforces stereotypes about groups that are deleterious to public wellbeing and to individual liberty, and that flout concerns with social equality, diversity and inclusion.

3. The inherently political nature of Prevent and interference with effective safeguarding/ care-giving

The language of Prevent focuses on “supporting people vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism”. Yet safeguarding mechanisms already exist in all public sector bodies, such that the imposition and forced integration of Prevent into safeguarding in fact muddies the water by conflating state securitization and healthcare or safeguarding (Brown 2010; Bhui 2016). Prevent relies on a strategy of social surveillance and can result in the psychological internalization of that mechanism of surveillance, leading to mental ill health at an individual and societal level (paranoia). It is understandable as an example of institutional “gaslighting”, creating or reinforcing an irrational fear of certain groups (especially Muslims in the current moment) in the wider population, while telling targeted groups that their (rational) fear of the Prevent strategy is irrational. In this way its messages are mixed and its outcomes potentially harmful.

Research carried out in educational settings by Faure Walker (2019) found that, where students were once open with their teachers about, for example, their concerns regarding British action in the Middle East, which led to classroom discussions and incentivized young people to become politically active within the bounds of the law, once they were made aware of their teachers’ Prevent duty, they became more secretive and withdrawn. This suggests that, as well as being ethically problematic, Prevent is ineffectual and produces the opposite ends to those sought.

Ways Forward:

(The following points are a response to the Government’s Review of Prevent question 17: “How do you think these criticisms and/or complaints could be addressed or overcome?” and question 19: “Which organisations, groups or individuals do you think are best placed to lead the effort to safeguard those who are vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism, and why.”)

- The strategy in its current form is not fit for purpose and is the object of widespread suspicion and resentment among many of the professionals who are compelled to implement it.
- Any strategy that replaces Prevent should be designed in collaboration with those who will be expected to implement it – teachers, community leaders, mental health experts, and care-givers. Any such strategy should be:
 - focused on nurturing the mental health and wellbeing of all sections of the population.
 - research-led (including taking onboard, and acting on, philosophical objections to “reporting” strategies from academics in a range of disciplines).
 - underpinned by the principles of open debate and freedom of expression.
- Any new strategy designed to prevent and safeguard against “radicalization”, especially in working with young people, should not include the threat of referral or the duty to report, but should focus instead on education and on the free

exchange of ideas, since this is likely to reduce secrecy about growing ideological convictions in the young and help individuals to work through concerns in productive ways and within the bounds of the law, as borne out by the findings of Faure Walker's research (2019, described above).

- Any new counter-extremism strategy would need a better working definition of what is meant by "extreme" and "extremism" as the existing uses of the term are vague, ambiguous, and dangerously subjective.

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(With thanks to Dr Shazad Amin, Rob Faure Walker, Dr Jonathan Hurlow, Navine G. Khan-Dossos.)