

Prevent-ing Dissent:

How the U.K.'s counterterrorism strategy is eroding democracy



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report reveals that, in the United Kingdom, fundamental rights and equality within social justice movements are being eroded by Prevent - the country's strategy that aims to stop people from embracing forms of 'extremism' that the government claims could lead to terrorism.¹ The fundamental rights that people in the UK are gradually losing include the freedoms of thought and belief, freedom of association and the rights to speak out and protest peacefully against state policies.

Our findings suggest that, while the government's use of the strategy continues to disproportionately impact Muslim communities, the targeting of so-called 'nonviolent extremism' is producing a climate in which **people from non-Muslim backgrounds are also losing their ability to engage in nonviolent protest and civic action without fear of harms.**

These findings are based on interviews we conducted with people in the UK from across a range of social movements, including environmental and anti-racism movements; international solidarity campaign groups; and members of civil society groups from Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds. We also interviewed educational professionals to understand how their officially designated role of nurturing students into becoming socially aware and politically active citizens² is affected by their legal duty under Prevent³ to monitor and report students for signs of 'extremism'.

Our research finds that the existence and use of Prevent are suppressing democracy through two processes:

1. Prevent is having a **'chilling effect' on the ability of people to exercise their fundamental rights and freedoms.** That is, people are censoring themselves due to a fear of being targeted by the government in ways that could lead to negative consequences for their personal or professional lives. This self-censorship stems from an awareness of the broad Prevent strategy, as well as concerns based on alleged personal or community experiences of government entities targeting outspoken individuals. The result is a climate in which people report being afraid to engage in legitimate debates or nonviolent political activities due to worries that they, too, will attract the attention of the authorities. The chilling effect is also occurring in spaces where critical thinking and freedom of speech are paramount, such as schools, colleges and universities.
2. The **alleged direct censorship of people who are critical of, or raise concerns about, Prevent.** Our research participants report that they, or people they know, have had their lawful activities and spaces closed down, including through being denied public platforms to speak, having events canceled or altered, and being denied opportunities

¹ HM Government (2011) Prevent Strategy (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office).

² DfE (2014) The national curriculum in England: Key stages 3 and 4 framework document (Department for Education).

³ This refers to the 'Prevent duty'. See Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, Section 26.



for funding. While our research did not seek to verify these claims, the consistency and seriousness of the alleged experiences raise concerns about the impact Prevent may be having on public life, education and the arts, and point to a need for government transparency regarding practices under Prevent. Some respondents made specific allegations of being censored as a consequence of raising concerns about Prevent itself, leading to questions about the government's accountability and willingness to engage with criticisms in a rights-respecting manner.

Although the chilling effect and censorship are harming the activities of people from non-Muslim backgrounds involved in nonviolent protest, we nevertheless conclude that the most profoundly negative consequences associated with Prevent are still being disproportionately felt by individuals in the UK from Muslim backgrounds.

Finally, our report finds that **Muslims in Northern Ireland are also experiencing the negative effects of Prevent.** This influence over their actions and behaviours reveals how deep and pervasive the influence of Prevent is, as Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom where the strategy's legal duty does not formally apply.

Based on our research, we conclude that Prevent is undermining democracy UK-wide because these pressures – the chilling effect, censorship, disproportionate impacts on particular groups and pervasiveness – are limiting the ability and willingness of people from various backgrounds to engage in nonviolent activism and protest, including their ability to voice concerns over Prevent itself. Under the guise of protecting national security, the government's use of Prevent is shrinking civic space and is harming people's ability to hold officials to account.

Recommendations:

To address the concerns highlighted in this report, we make the following policy recommendations.

1. **Counter-terrorism strategies should focus on people who demonstrably engage in or incite violence, as shown through objective evidence. Governments should recognise research indicating that nonviolent movements do not place people on a path toward violence; instead, nonviolent groups compete with groups that may promote violence, and provide an outlet for the peaceful expression of views.**
Therefore, 'nonviolent extremism' should not be within the scope or focus of counter-terrorism strategies such as Prevent.
2. **Governments, including the UK's, should respect the freedom of expression. Speech should not result in policing or other interference by the state – including regarding schools, the arts or nonviolent movements – except where such interference is clearly authorised by specific laws, genuinely necessary to protecting public safety, and subject to accountability.**



Governments should also respect the freedom to hold thoughts, beliefs and opinions, which - under human rights law - is absolute.

3. Governments should recognise that a vibrant, diverse civil society, and the freedom to express views that may shock or offend others, are essential to a democratic and peaceful society. Any UK government interference with nonviolent expression in schools, universities, the arts or other sectors under the guise of preventing terrorism should cease.
4. The UK and devolved governments should take concrete, transparent steps to stop any discriminatory targeting of Muslims under Prevent and any other counter-terrorism programmes, including through measures that have the effect of discouraging people from Muslim backgrounds from speaking freely. Concerns consistently expressed by individuals interviewed for this study, as well as in much other reporting on Prevent, indicate that the Prevent strategy is having a disproportionate chilling effect on the free expression and freedom of association of people from Muslim backgrounds, and therefore is not fit for purpose.
5. International human rights groups, UK civil society, national human rights bodies such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission, academics and other stakeholders should monitor and review the impact of Prevent on the suppression of nonviolent dissent and civic activism in all areas. They should also devote greater attention to the impact of Prevent in Northern Ireland, where the Prevent duty officially does not apply but where our research suggests it is nevertheless affecting free expression and education.
6. In a democratic society, it is legitimate for individuals, groups and organisations to question, challenge and oppose (or support) particular counter-terrorism laws, policies and practices - including in settings such as schools, universities and artistic venues. People should not be adversely targeted or penalised by government officials or institutions for simply exercising their right to free expression regarding these issues.
7. State institutions should be willing to engage with all nonviolent activists and civil society groups and should not seek to influence or engineer 'legitimate' forms of activism, including based on a group's or individual's degree of support for government policies.
8. Any collection, retention or sharing of personal data through the implementation of the Prevent strategy and Prevent duty should have a clear and specific legal basis, be necessary and proportionate, and be subject to oversight and controls (such as time limits). The government should provide transparency about the nature and extent of any data collected, such as information about people's beliefs or nonviolent activities, as well as which agencies hold the data and why.



1. Introduction

1. This report investigates the impact of the United Kingdom's Prevent strategy on civic space and activist movements. '**Civic space**' refers to the spaces where people and civil society groups come together to share ideas, promote critical thinking and organise to bring about changes to society.⁴ '**Prevent**' is the UK's strategy for stopping people from becoming terrorists.⁵

2. So far, research on Prevent has focused mainly on the experiences of Britain's Muslims; it draws attention to the ways in which Prevent is implicated in the security-focused treatment and surveillance of Muslim communities in Britain and is undermining their ability to enjoy the fundamental rights and freedoms exercised by others.⁶ Earlier research has also focused on Prevent's implementation in, and impact on, education, social work, health and social care in the UK.⁷ Until now, researchers and policy makers have paid less attention to the impact of Prevent on wider civic spaces and movements.

3. This report draws on data from interviews with a range of individuals, community groups and public servants who engage in nonviolent dissent. It offers new insights into the ways Prevent increasingly permeates and shapes everyday life in the UK, including social, cultural and political spaces. Reflecting the recent broadening of the scope of counter-terrorism policies, this report documents how Prevent is experienced by a diverse set of people engaged in civic action, including as part of environmental and anti-racism movements. It reveals the structurally negative impact of Prevent on democratic society and the ways in which this impact is experienced differently between activists within the same movements, thus reinforcing racial inequality.

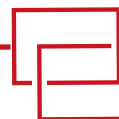
4. This introduction sets out the context behind the research. It provides a brief overview of earlier research on Prevent and the emergence of concerns about the strategy's impact on a range of civic spaces - the inspiration for this report. Section 2 outlines the methodology used in the research for this report, and Section 3 sets out the findings. Section 4 concludes with a summary of the main findings and the recommendations for addressing the issues identified throughout the report.

⁴ This definition also includes gatherings of public sector professionals (such as teachers, healthcare workers and social workers) who, although employed by the state, come together with non-state actors to understand the society in which they live and promote changes within key institutions. Social change can take many forms and includes seeking to alter political structures and priorities, modify legislation or transform socio-economic conditions, such as inequalities.

⁵ HM Government (2011) Prevent Strategy (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office).

⁶ Arun Kundhani (2009) Spooked: How not to prevent violent extremism (London: Institute of Race Relations); Tufyal Choudhury and Helen Fenwick (2010) The impact of counter-terrorism measures on Muslim communities: Research report 72 (London: Equality and Human Rights Commission); Imran Awan (2012) The impact of policing British Muslims: a qualitative exploration. Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism 7(1), pp.22-35; Fahid Qurashi (2018) The Prevent strategy and the UK 'war on terror': embedding infrastructures of surveillance in Muslim communities, Palgrave Communications 4(1), pp.1-13.

⁷ Charlotte Heath-Kelly and Erzsébet Strausz (2018) Counter-terrorism in the NHS: Evaluating Prevent Duty Safeguarding in the NHS. Coventry: The University of Warwick; Tony Stanley, Surinder Guru and Anna Gupta (2018) Working with PREVENT: Social Work Options for Cases of 'Radicalisation Risk', Practice, 30(2), pp.131-146; Joel Busher, Tufyal Choudhury and Paul Thomas (2019) The enactment of the counter-terrorism "Prevent duty" in British schools and colleges: beyond reluctant accommodation or straightforward policy acceptance. Critical Studies on Terrorism 12(3), pp.440-462; Tarek Younis and Sushrut Jadhav (2019) Keeping Our Mouths Shut: The Fear and Racialized Self-Censorship of British Healthcare Professionals in PREVENT Training. Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry 43(3), pp.404-424; also Hilary Aked, Tarek Younis and Charlotte Heath-Kelly (2021) Racism, mental health and pre-crime policing: the ethics of Vulnerability Support Hubs (London: Medact).



A strong and vibrant civil society is crucial for ensuring that people can express their grievances with laws, policies and practices; hold their governments to account for perceived abuses of power; and have nonviolent opportunities to effect change.

1.1. Prevent and the shrinking of civic space

5. A strong and vibrant civil society is crucial for ensuring that people can express their grievances with laws, policies and practices; hold their governments to account for perceived abuses of power; and have nonviolent opportunities to effect change.⁸ Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, has stated that ‘preventing’ or ‘countering violent extremism’ (P/CVE) policies are emerging as a significant threat to civic space.⁹ In her report to the UN General Assembly in 2020, she concluded:

Civic space is shrinking and under sustained pressure in many parts of the world. The prevention and countering of violent extremism increasingly functions as a device to silence, limit the scope of and target civil society actors.¹⁰

6. Ní Aoláin’s verdict reflects the concerns of civil society groups globally regarding the use of national security legislation by states to curtail the lawful activities of civic groups, particularly where these groups are robustly challenging the government’s priorities or exposing miscarriages of justice. Her report highlights aspects of the UK’s Prevent model that, in her view, raise particular concerns about respect for human rights. Unlike many other violence prevention approaches around the world, the UK’s model of preventing violent extremism (PVE) casts a broad net in an attempt to identify people who may be ‘at risk’ of being drawn into terrorism.¹¹ Research into how Prevent officials identify individuals who are ‘at risk’, and therefore require an intervention through Channel, the UK’s ‘deradicalisation’ programme associated with the strategy, suggests that these decisions are laden with bias and a ‘worst-case’ logic where ‘banal behaviors become associated with terrorism concerns’.¹²

7. Ní Aoláin also voiced concerns about the conflation of nonviolent forms of protest with violent extremism, resulting in the suppression of lawful forms of dissent. She expressed further concerns about the co-optation of education, health and social care professionals into national security roles by imposing upon them a legal duty to monitor their patients, students or service users for signs of ‘extremism’; and, ultimately, the lack of scientific validity and robust evaluation to justify strategies such as Prevent.

⁸ June Edmunds (2010) *Elite young Muslims in Britain: From Transnational to Global Politics*, Contemporary Islam 4(2), pp.215-238; Tufyal Choudhury (2017) *Campaigning on Campus: Student Islamic Societies and Counterterrorism*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism 40(12), pp.1004-1022; Zin Derfoufi (2020) *Radicalization’s Core. Terrorism and Political Violence*, DOI: [10.1080/09546553.2020.1764942](https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1764942); United National General Assembly (UNGA) Human Rights Council (HRC), Human rights impact of policies and practices aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering Terrorism (A/HRC/43/46). Forty-third session 24 February–20 March 2020.

⁹ At a conceptual level, a distinction exists between *countering* violent extremism (CVE) and *preventing* violent extremism (PVE). CVE usually targets individuals known to engage in or promote violence whereas PVE has a significantly broader focus of stopping people from becoming susceptible to violent ideologies. PVE is particularly controversial because it targets individuals and groups of people where there is no evidence of criminality (see Pettinger 2020; Aked et al., Racism, mental health and pre-crime policing) The UK’s Prevent strategy is an example of PVE.

¹⁰ UNGA HRC, Human rights impact of policies and practices aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism. Paragraph 43.

¹¹ UNGA HRC, Human rights impact of policies and practices aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism.

¹² Tom Pettinger (2020) *British terrorism preemption: Subjectivity and disjuncture in Channel “de-radicalization” interventions*, The British Journal of Sociology 71(5), pp.970–984, page 973; also Aked et al., Racism, mental health and pre-crime policing.



8. In 2015, the UK became the first country in the world to expressly draft its public sector into national security duties through the introduction of the ‘**Prevent duty**’. The duty places a legal obligation on specified authorities and their staff in England, Wales and Scotland – including teachers, doctors and other professionals who work for these institutions – to ‘have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism’.¹³

9. The following year, Rights & Security International (as Rights Watch UK) published research on the impact of the Prevent duty on human rights in the public sector.¹⁴ The report analysed the duty’s impact on schools and students, revealing concerns among educators, parents, children and young adults about the effect of this regulation on free speech and critical thinking, particularly among students and staff from Muslim backgrounds. Since then, further evidence has emerged of the unease felt by public sector professionals over the requirement to monitor their patients, students or service users for signs of ‘extremism’ as well as the self-silencing and censorship of professionals from Muslim backgrounds who have raised, or would like to raise, concerns about Prevent.¹⁵ These underlying concerns as well as fears about the disproportionate targeting of people from Muslim backgrounds and the problematic associations of Islam with terrorism are also found in representative surveys among public sector employees¹⁶ and Britain’s Muslims.¹⁷

1.2. Impact on environmental and anti-racism movements

10. Some of the UK’s leading human rights groups have raised concerns that Prevent has been expanded to target an increasing range of protest movements.¹⁸ The policy foundation of this widening of Prevent lies in the Home Office’s 2011 revision to the strategy (current at the time of writing), which formally introduced the concept of ‘nonviolent extremism’.¹⁹ It states:

In assessing drivers of and pathways to radicalisation, the line between extremism and terrorism is often blurred. Terrorist groups of all kinds very often draw upon ideologies which have been developed, disseminated and popularised by extremist organisations that appear to be non-violent (such as groups which neither use violence nor specifically and openly endorse its use by others).²⁰

¹³ Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, Section 26.

¹⁴ Rights Watch UK (2016) Preventing Education: Human Rights and UK Counter-Terrorism Policy in Schools (London: Rights Watch (UK)).

¹⁵ Heath-Kelly and Strausz, Counter-terrorism in the NHS; Joel Busher, Tufyal Choudhury and Paul Thomas (2022) Surveillance and Preventing Violent Extremism: The evidence from schools and further education colleges in England, in Michael Kwed (eds) The Cambridge Handbook of Surveillance and Race. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Younis and Jadhav, Keeping Our Mouths Shut; also Aked et al, Racism, mental health and pre-crime policing.

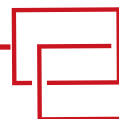
¹⁶ ICM Unlimited (2019) Prevent: Public Knowledge and Interactions. A research report from ICM summarising key findings. London: ICM Unlimited.

¹⁷ Jon Clements, Manon Roberts and Dan Forman (2019) Listening to British Muslims: policing, extremism and Prevent (London: Crest Advisory (UK) Ltd).

¹⁸ Amnesty International (2020) UK: ‘Deeply concerning’ that peaceful climate activists were referred to ‘dubious’ anti-terrorism programme; Article 19 (2020) Freedom of expression in the UK Policy briefing, March 2020, Available at: https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Fex_UK_briefing.pdf (last accessed: 03/01/22); Liberty and Human Rights (2020) liberty responds to police listing extinction rebellion as extremist, Available at: <https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/issue/liberty-responds-to-police-listing-extinction-rebellion-as-extremist/> (last accessed: 28/01/2021).

¹⁹ This concept also appeared in an earlier speech by then-Prime Minister David Cameron, in which he stated that government efforts to counter terrorism would shift towards targeting ‘non-violent extremism’. See David Cameron (2011) PM’s speech at Munich Security Conference. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference> (last accessed: 12/08/2021)

²⁰ HM Government, Prevent Strategy, p.19.



In theory, all peaceful, direct action movements and anyone who belongs to such movements may draw state suspicion.

11. This concept of ‘nonviolent extremism’ appears to be influenced by the ‘conveyor-belt’ theory of ‘radicalisation’. It represents a distinct policy shift because the conveyor-belt theory regards groups engaged in nonviolent dissent as being responsible for people who may pass through their ranks but, ultimately, break away and engage in violence. Its implications mean that, in theory, all peaceful, direct action movements and anyone who belongs to such movements may draw state suspicion. The conveyor-belt theory has been criticised by behavioural and social scientists for conflating groups genuinely committed to nonviolence with those who believe in violence.²¹

12. The UK’s approach is distinct from that of countries in Europe that maintain a policy of engaging with a range of civic partners so long as they do not actively promote violence.²² Also, the UK’s approach contradicts the growing empirical research that shows people who are involved in nonviolent dissent actually compete with, rather than act as a conveyor towards, violent groups because they are often involved in challenging violent philosophies and have highly developed arguments that oppose violence.²³ Other research suggests that nonviolence is not a precursor to terrorism because some people with no prior history of peaceful activism may engage directly in violence in response to atrocities committed by a state.²⁴

13. Despite the lack of scientific research to support the conflation of nonviolent dissent with violent forms of ‘extremism’, the UK government now regards nonviolent dissent as a potential indicator of risk and casts a ‘national security’ net across a vast array of civic spaces. This net-widening has included spaces dedicated to environmental justice, by groups such as Greenpeace and Extinction Rebellion, anti-war groups such as Stop the War Coalition and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and anti-racism campaigns such as Unite Against Fascism.²⁵

14. Tom Wilson and Richard Walton, a former head of the Metropolitan Police Counter-Terrorism Command, have offered a justification for policing Extinction Rebellion as an extremist group.²⁶ They refer to the alleged anti-capitalist views held by some of the movements’ leaders along with the permissive attitudes towards disrupting society through civil disobedience, although the authors acknowledge the movement’s

²¹ Sophia Moskalenko and Clark McCauley (2009) Measuring Political Mobilization: The Distinction Between Activism and Radicalism, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21(2), pp.239-260; Paul Joosse, Sandra M. Bucerius and Sara K. Thompson (2015) Narratives and Counternarratives: Somali-Canadians on Recruitment as Foreign Fighters to Al-Shabaab, *British Journal of Criminology* 55(4), pp.811-32.

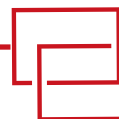
²² Floris Vermeulen (2014) Suspect Communities – Targeting Violent Extremism at the Local Level: Policies of Engagement in Amsterdam, Berlin, and London, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26(2), pp.286-306.

²³ Robert Lambert (2008) Salafi and Islamist Londoners: Stigmatised minority faith communities countering al-Qaida, *Crime, Law and Social Change* 50(1-2), pp.73-89; Moskalenko and McCauley, Measuring Political Mobilization; Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, (2012) The Edge of Violence: Towards Telling the Difference Between Violent and Non-Violent Radicalization, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24(1), pp.1-21; Joosse et al, Narratives and Counternarratives; Derfoufi, Radicalization’s Core.

²⁴ Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko (2017) Friction: How Conflict Radicalizes Them and Us (New York: Oxford University Press); Marc Sageman (2017) Turning to Political Violence: The Emergence of Terrorism (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).

²⁵ The Guardian (2020) Greenpeace included with neo-Nazis on UK counter-terror list. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jan/17/greenpeace-included-with-neo-nazis-on-uk-counter-terror-list> (last accessed: 31/07/2021).

²⁶ Tom Wilson and Richard Walton (2019) Extremism Rebellion: A review of ideology and tactics (London: Policy Exchange).



commitment to nonviolence. This rationale could also explain why the government now targets a range of social movements under Prevent: UK authorities perceive the shared desire across those social movements for systemic changes to the capitalist economy, including through the use of non-violent but disruptive forms of direct action, as a threat to the status-quo.

15. Until now, there has been a lack of research on how wider civic spaces are affected by Prevent, and how these impacts compare to the experiences of Muslims affected by the strategy. This report aims to fill this knowledge gap. The next section outlines the methodology of the research and is followed by a discussion of the findings.

2. Methodology

16. This study is based on a qualitative research methodology. The research questions, methodology and sampling techniques were informed by previous academic and policy-related research on P/CVE. The existing research is largely critical of Prevent; therefore, rather than seeking to test this overall consensus, the current study investigates a gap in our understanding of how the strategy is experienced across a wide range of civic spaces, particularly after the refocusing of policy towards ‘nonviolent extremism’.

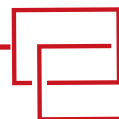
2.1 Interviews

17. A total of 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with civil society actors from across the UK and different civic spaces (six Muslims and nine non-Muslims). Multi-site interviews provide an insight into how experiences vary across sites and what factors can help to explain those differences.²⁷ However, we are unable to make claims of direct cause-and-effect without a larger and more representative dataset.²⁸ Interviews included people from Northern Ireland, a region of the UK where the Prevent duty does not formally apply even though the region has been the location of the country’s most frequent and sustained acts of deadly politically motivated violence in modern times.²⁹

²⁷ Michele Lamont and Ann Swidler (2014) Methodological Pluralism and the Possibilities and Limits of Interviewing, *Qualitative Sociology* 37(2), pp.153-171.

²⁸ Lamont and Swidler (2014) Methodological Pluralism and the Possibilities and Limits of Interviewing; André Queirós, Daniel Faria and Fernando Almeida (2017) Strengths and Limitations of Qualitative and Quantitative Research Methods, *European Journal of Education Studies* 3(9), pp.369-387.

²⁹ As noted by Jonathan Hall QC, the UK’s previous Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, ‘Northern Ireland-related terrorism was responsible for the vast majority of terrorism that matured into action: of the 64 security-related incidents reported by the United Kingdom to Europol in 2019, 55 related to Northern Ireland’; see Jonathan Hall (2021) *The Terrorism Acts in 2019: Report of the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation on the Operation of the Terrorism Acts 2000 and 2006* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office), page 171. The Global Terrorism Database, a database that tracks terrorist incidents worldwide, shows the bulk of terrorist-related attacks that occur in the UK do so in Northern Ireland and are related to conflict over that territory. See <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>



18. Interviews were conducted over the video conferencing platform, Zoom, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and all but one participant agreed to have their interview recorded for transcription purposes. The participant who declined was an academic active in their university's Palestine solidarity campaign group, and agreed for the final dataset to include a paragraph they emailed summarising their concerns about Prevent being used alongside other measures to restrict discussion of the situation facing Palestinians.

2.2. Research sample

19. This study's sample size is consistent with qualitative research that investigates new areas relating to Prevent.³⁰ The sample includes individual activists involved in civic spaces targeted by Prevent, members of community-level representative groups, and staff from charities, and human rights groups that assist people and professionals impacted by Prevent. Educational professionals were also interviewed to understand how their role in encouraging students to become engaged citizens³¹ is affected by their obligations under the Prevent duty to monitor students' beliefs and behaviours for signs of extremism.

20. Interviewees went to great lengths during their interviews to stress the importance of ending all forms of political violence, whether from state or non-state actors. Many were aware of what some scholars in the field of terrorism studies describe as a 'dialectical' relationship between the state and opposing groups, wherein an act of state-sanctioned repression or violence triggers a cycle of action and reaction from groups willing to go further than most others to address their grievances, including through the use of violence.³² The 'positionality' of our respondents is similar to that of other civil society groups: they play a mediating role in addressing conflict by providing individuals with opportunities to channel their grievances against the state without resorting to violence, while also challenging the narratives of non-state actors who advocate for violent conflict.³³ It is these encounters, as well as their own experiences of navigating Prevent, that makes them an ideal sample to study the strategy's impact on civic spaces.

21. Finally, although interviewees are highly critical of Prevent, opposition to the strategy was not part of the sampling criteria. We were unable to recruit advocates of Prevent to speak with us for the study, and in the absence of this alternative view, our research is informed by government-sponsored³⁴ and independent³⁵ research that present an overall positive narrative of Prevent - although the data in those studies also corroborate the underlying concerns expressed by respondents in this report.

22. Despite our sample's overall negative attitudes to and experiences of Prevent, few participants expressed a total lack of faith in the state's role to counter terrorist threats. The majority of respondents spoke of the important role of state institutions, including the police,

³⁰ Awan, The impact of policing British Muslims; Heath-Kelly and Strausz, Counter-terrorism in the NHS; Younis and Jadhav, Keeping Our Mouths Shut.

³¹ See DfE (2014) The national curriculum in England: Key stages 3 and 4 framework document. Department for Education.

³² Sageman, Turning to Political Violence; also McCauley and Moskalenko, Friction.

³³ Bartlett and Miller, The Edge of Violence; Narratives and Counternarratives; Derfoufi, Radicalization's Core.

³⁴ ICM Unlimited, Prevent.

³⁵ Clements et al., Listening to British Muslims.



in countering terrorist threats. However, this positive finding must be interpreted alongside the forceful arguments that *all* of our respondents made for scrapping key elements of the Prevent strategy (if not abandoning it entirely) and replacing it with policies that protect nonviolent civic spaces, uphold human rights obligations - including non-discrimination - and address the foreign and domestic policies that they argue are an important source of grievance against the state. In other words, our participants support the principles of countering terrorism but are disillusioned by the specific policies that have been developed to tackle it.

23. This mixed picture corroborates existing survey-based research with large samples of public professionals and British Muslims.³⁶ It means that our respondents should not be seen as blind critics of government counter-terrorism policies, nor as people who fail to appreciate the difficulties of countering violence. Their views on Prevent are directly shaped by their shared experience of the strategy, as the rest of the report discusses.

3. Findings

24. This section presents an analysis of the interview data. Overall, participants expressed wide-ranging concerns about the impact of Prevent on restricting various civic spaces that remain firmly grounded in nonviolent dissent. Across the interviews, there was agreement that Prevent entails a racially discriminatory approach towards targeting Muslims in Britain even as it expands to include other groups engaged in dissent. The interviewees suggest the net-widening, yet apparently discriminatory, approach is suppressing dissent by creating a 'chilling effect' on the exercise of freedoms and censoring critics of Prevent. Each of these themes - discrimination, the suppression of dissent, the chilling effect and the censoring of Prevent's critics - are discussed below.

3.1. Discrimination

25. All interviewees, whether they self-identify as Muslim or not, argued that Prevent disproportionately lumps Muslim communities into a suspect group that requires surveillance and control. For Muslim interviewees, belonging to a suspect group means that even mundane, daily behaviours that would not otherwise attract attention could be misinterpreted as indicators of risk. As one interviewee recounted:

My first direct experience of Prevent was during university when I was a master's student... I remember when I was doing my very first essay on 'Is terrorism based on religion?' - that was the essay title - and obviously I argued it wasn't. I actually got questioned then by my teacher based on the fact that I've got a Muslim name. And that was my first direct experience with it. But after that, the lecturers actually got to know me, they kind of dropped that.

(Interview 3; Muslim, male, race equality activist).

³⁶ Ibid.



26. This interviewee also spoke about a politics student he knew who, he alleges, 'had rented out a book on terrorism from the university', leading to the individual being 'questioned under the arm of Prevent'. While this latter example is an indirect account, when combined with the interviewee's own experience, the two incidents indicate how prejudiced understandings of who represents a security threat can become embedded within an institution. This can result in a Muslim student who engages in what are otherwise normal educational activities - such as critically discussing an essay question or simply taking out a book from the library - being profiled and questioned.

27. Further, the respondent mentions that the lecturers 'dropped' their concerns about him after they 'got to know' him. This suggests that he may have had to renegotiate his identity by deliberately seeking to develop enough rapport with his lecturers to allay any ongoing concerns they had over him. If so, this would reflect the burdens that are placed on Muslims in the UK to present an 'outwardly safe identity' and to know what is 'safely sayable'.³⁷

In the context of Prevent, this racialisation involves constructing symbols of Islam and Muslimness as foreign, risky and incompatible with western cultures alongside the more usual racial marker of skin colour.

28. It also speaks to a racialisation of Muslim identities. The racialisation of Muslims is a process in which the diverse range of opinions and practice across those communities are collapsed into a set of fixed, negative traits to the point that outsiders perceive Muslims as a distinct class of people - i.e. a racialised group.³⁸ In the context of Prevent, this racialisation involves constructing symbols of Islam and Muslimness as foreign, risky and incompatible with western cultures³⁹ alongside the more usual racial marker of skin colour.⁴⁰ It is these problematic perceptions that bring 'race' into effect and have real consequences on the lived experiences of Muslims because their Muslimness is interpreted along a scale of risk. This phenomenon is illustrated in the experience of Interviewee 3, quoted above, who by challenging the association of religion with terrorism, makes himself known to individuals acting on a duty to identify those 'at risk' of radicalisation. These individuals with responsibility for identifying risks interpret his perceived Muslimness through a lens of security, leading to him being questioned by them.

29. Other participants from Muslim backgrounds raised similar experiences of having to renegotiate identities, including overtly racist treatment. A community activist spoke about the pressures that she and other Muslim women face for wearing a headscarf:

³⁷ Gabe Mythens, Sandra Walklate and Fatima Khan (2012) 'Why should we have to prove we are alright?' Counter-terrorism, risk and partial identities, *Sociology* 47(2), pp.383-398, page 394.

³⁸ Tufyal Choudhury (2021) *SUSPICION, DISCRIMINATION AND SURVEILLANCE: The impact of counter-terrorism law and policy on racialised groups at risk of racism in Europe* (Brussels: European Network Against Racism); Simon Dawes (2021) Islamophobia, racialisation and the 'Muslim problem' in France, *French Cultural Studies* 32(3), pp.179-186; Juliette Galonnier (2021) The racialization of Muslims in France and the United States: Some insights from white converts to Islam, *Social Compass* 62(4), pp.570-583.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Robert Miles and Malcolm Brown (1989) *Racism*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge); Steve Fenton (2010) *Ethnicity* (Cambridge: Polity Press).



When we look at the way that Muslim women are politicised - the hijabs, the face veils - there are ordinary women who choose to be modest... The idea that, as an individual, I should be able to wear what I wear, should be able to believe what I believe and how I want to believe, is a lot more complicated when you're a Muslim [woman]... It is a lot more criticised and more scrutinised. Everything about being a Muslim is up for debate especially when you are a woman.

(Interview 11; Muslim, female, Black equalities campaigner)

30. Interviewee 11 finds that by simply wearing a headscarf, her adherence to what she later referred to as 'British values' is constantly questioned. Her personal, yet visible, display of religious devotion is misinterpreted as an act of defiance to British society and in ways that Muslim women do not themselves recognise as being incompatible with being British⁴¹. As a person treated in a racialised way and within a context in which counter-terrorism narratives identify supposed opposition to 'British values' as a sign of extremism,⁴² interviewee 11's display of religiosity generates questions for state authorities about whether she is willing to 'integrate' or if she poses some level of risk. This treatment positions Muslims, particularly Muslim women, as an inferior group that need to adhere to a vision of Britishness that frames white (especially English) forms of being British as morally superior to other interpretations.⁴³

31. The experiences discussed in this section so far reinforce longstanding, documented concerns among Muslims in Britain about how state authorities can interpret normal, everyday acts as indicators of risk within the racialised climate enabled by Prevent. Surveillance - or the awareness of the potential to be surveilled - is an ever-present experience that reminds Britain's Muslims of their societal position as outsiders, including through the cooption of important public services into those surveillance structures, notably education and health and social care.⁴⁴

32. Our non-Muslim respondents also expressed concerns over the discriminatory nature of Prevent and evidenced this by contrasting their own experiences with the harsher treatment of Muslims. A charity worker we interviewed spoke about her previous experience of being a teacher, arguing:

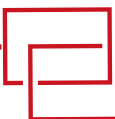
I remember working as a teacher [in a rural area]... They [students] used to say awful things. They used to be like 'Oh, miss, your Muslim friends are gonna blow us up' like that type of thing and when I would report it to the senior management team they would ignore it. They wouldn't do anything... every year I would teach about Islam and I used to get parents taking their kids out my classes because they

⁴¹ See also: Nick Hopkins and Leda Blackwood (2011) Everyday citizenship: Identity and recognition, *Social Psychology & Citizenship* 21(2), pp.215-227.

⁴² According to the UK government, fundamental British values include belief in 'democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs' and 'active opposition' to any of these is deemed to be 'extremism' (HM Government 2011:107). Such a view was also expressed in an earlier speech by then-Prime Minister David Cameron (2011), in which he argued that a lack of unifying British identity leads some young Muslim into being drawn into terrorism.

⁴³ Claire E. Crawford (2017) Promoting 'fundamental British values' in schools: a critical race perspective, *Curriculum Perspectives* 37(2), pp.197-204.

⁴⁴ Heath-Kelly and Strausz, Counter-terrorism in the NHS; Younis and Jadhav, Keeping Our Mouths Shut; Aked et al., Racism, mental health and pre-crime policing.



didn't want their kids to learn about Islam but worse than that they used to send in BNP [British National Party] and EDL [English Defence League] literature.⁴⁵ Now for me that should have been a Prevent referral. If we're doing it by the letter of the law, you are actually sending in BNP and EDL literature, but no action was taken
(Interview 7; White, non-Muslim, female, community caseworker)

33. Interviewee 7 uses this example to argue that threats that do not conform to the racialised association of Muslims with violence appear to be taken less seriously by public authorities. All of our non-Muslim respondents raised similar points, arguing that this difference in treatment is an example of 'white privilege', in which white people are protected from generalised suspicion as they are not seen to be part of a 'suspect group'.⁴⁶ Interviewee 7 offers the example of white students and their parents who espouse views associated with the far-right to illustrate how an institution with the legal responsibility for making referrals to Prevent interprets risks. In this case, white non-Muslim people are apparently treated with less urgency than threats perceived to emanate from people of Muslim backgrounds. This apparently disproportionate treatment is also reflected in Prevent referral data. While the data from recent years shows a greater proportion of Prevent referrals for 'far-right' than 'Islamist' related extremism,⁴⁷ further detailed analysis of the data suggests there is an over-reporting of Muslims, as it finds that referrals for 'Islamist'-related concerns are less likely to be assessed as requiring a Channel intervention than referrals for far-right extremism.⁴⁸

34. In their study of the attitudes of school teachers and staff towards the Prevent duty, Busher et al.⁴⁹ offer a potential explanation for why Muslim students attract a disproportionate focus compared to others, particularly white non-Muslim students. They argue that this higher level of scrutiny may reflect teachers' lack of confidence in interpreting the cultural and religious practices of students from Muslim households, particularly against the backdrop of wider, anti-Muslim sentiment across society. This can lead to educators erring on the side of caution and being more likely to refer Muslim students to Prevent in contrast to students from majority white backgrounds whose practices are more familiar to them and, therefore, easier to interpret.

35. While Busher et al.'s study relates to staff within educational establishments, it provides an insight into why Muslim professionals and service users could be subject to greater scrutiny in

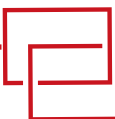
⁴⁵ The British National Party (BNP) is a far-right political party that operates in the UK. Its policies advocate for imposing restrictions on how Muslims practice their faith, such as banning religious dress and denying permission for mosques to be built. The English Defence League (EDL) is a far-right movement set up in 2009 to counter what its founder argued is a growing threat of 'militant Islam'. Although its presence has since waned, the EDL and its regional branches tend to hold street rallies that have often resulted in violence and disorder, and deliberately march through areas where there is a high Muslim resident population.

⁴⁶ Attempts were made to speak to respondents who were both white and Muslim, but this was unsuccessful. This means our final sample consists of people who either identify as white or Muslim, in addition to other identities that they may hold.

⁴⁷ Home Office (2020) Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme, April 2019 to March 2020. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-april-2019-to-march-2020/individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-april-2019-to-march-2020#contents> (last accessed: 28/01/2022); Home Office (2021) Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme, England and Wales, April 2020 to March 2021. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-england-and-wales-april-2020-to-march-2021/individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-england-and-wales-april-2020-to-march-2021> (last accessed: 28/01/2021).

⁴⁸ Busher et al., Surveillance and Preventing Violent Extremism.

⁴⁹ Busher et al., The enactment of the counter-terrorism "Prevent duty" in British schools and colleges.



other public services. This includes the health sector where Muslims may attract more attention than their non-Muslim counterparts for speaking out against government policies⁵⁰ – a situation enabled by public sector training on Prevent, which encourages public servants to make referrals based on ‘intuition’ and ‘gut feeling’ rather than more robust and scientifically valid criteria.⁵¹

36. Some academics argue that the discriminatory focus on Muslim communities is better explained by the structural positioning of Muslims as a ‘suspect group’ by UK counter-terrorism policies.⁵² This notion of ‘suspect communities’ was first proposed in the 1990s by Paddy Hillyard in reference to the treatment of people from Irish backgrounds in Britain during the violent conflict over Northern Ireland.⁵³ It has since become a popular critique among those concerned that security and public discourses have, in recent decades, constructed people from Muslim backgrounds into the latest suspect group. It is this framing of Muslims as ‘suspicious’ and potentially ‘dangerous’ at the structural level – potentially reinforced by training and public sector guidance on Prevent that some commentators believe reflect bias⁵⁴ – that shapes the views of public servants and their decisions to subject Muslims to a higher degree of scrutiny.

37. The findings discussed in this section of the report are consistent with existing research that points to the heavily racialised manner in which threats are imagined under Prevent. It adds to the increasing weight of evidence that argues that Britain’s Muslims are placed in a disempowered position compared to white non-Muslim Britons, but it also shows how this is a view shared by non-Muslims whose proximity to Muslims enables them to draw this conclusion.

38. The next part of this report discusses the role of Prevent in closing down spaces for dissent, comparing the experiences of non-Muslims targeted or otherwise impacted by the strategy to the racialised experiences of our Muslim research participants. The two subsequent sections detail how the strategy, in practice, discourages people from engaging in dissent and censors those who are engaged in nonviolent direct action.

3.2. Suppressing dissent

39. This section of the report reveals growing alarm among interviewees over the reported misuse of Prevent to suppress nonviolent dissent.

40. The concerns we document are twofold: first, worries that the government is extending Prevent beyond Muslim communities to curtail a broad range of nonviolent spaces; and, second, fears that Britain’s Muslims will continue to disproportionately experience the strategy’s most harmful consequences.

⁵⁰ Heath-Kelly and Strausz, Counter-terrorism in the NHS; Younis and Jadhav, Keeping Our Mouths Shut; Aked et al., Racism, mental health and pre-crime policing.

⁵¹ Heath-Kelly and Strausz, Counter-terrorism in the NHS; Pettinger, British terrorism preemption, page 978.

⁵² Christina Pantazis and Simon Pemberton (2009) From the ‘Old’ to the ‘New’ Suspect Community: Examining the Impacts of Recent UK Counter-Terrorist Legislation. The British Journal of Criminology 49(5), pp.646-666; Choudhury and Fenwick, The impact of counter-terrorism measures on Muslim communities; Awan, The impact of policing British Muslims.

⁵³ Paddy Hillyard (1993) Suspect Community: People’s Experiences of the Prevention of Terrorism Acts in Britain (London: Pluto Press).

⁵⁴ Heath-Kelly and Strausz, Counter-terrorism in the NHS; Younis and Jadhav, Keeping Our Mouths Shut; Aked et al., Racism, mental health and pre-crime policing.



3.2. (a) Suppressing nonviolent dissent

41. Interviewees were aware of the public debate concerning whether groups such as Extinction Rebellion, Unite Against Fascism and Palestine solidarity campaigns should be placed on a list of 'extremist' groups alongside proscribed organisations associated with white supremacy or al-Qaeda and Daesh⁵⁵-related ideologies.⁵⁶ A peace activist we interviewed spoke about his work and that of his colleagues involved in movements such as Extinction Rebellion and anti-war campaigning, arguing:

*A lot of [us] are in grassroots organisations and movements and take nonviolent direct action and we've seen, obviously, some of those groups labelled as problematic. [We] were quite alarmed to see the emergence of the phrase 'nonviolent extremists', 'nonviolent extremism' and that kind of conveyor belt theory that [claims] it was a precursor to violence if you were political... [The government's view on] nonviolent extremism misrepresents the idea that nonviolence is an active commitment to *not* use violence, to try and create justice without furthering harm and seeing the humanity of even your enemy.*

(Interview 2; White, non-Muslim, male peace activist)

42. The UK government revised the Prevent strategy in 2011 to expressly include 'nonviolent extremism' as a focus of counter-terrorism policies.⁵⁷ As Interviewee 2 argues, this net-widening of what constitutes a security threat conflates a range of civic movements genuinely committed to nonviolence with those that support violence. In his view, the discourse on nonviolent extremism is based on a 'conveyor-belt theory' of violent radicalisation, which assumes that people involved in nonviolent dissent are more prone to using violence as they come into greater conflict with the state. In this respect, the government's approach fails to recognise that spaces dedicated to nonviolence are different to, and compete with, those that endorse violence.

43. Concerns over this net-widening effect were widespread among interviewees. Several interviewees provided explanations for the shift in attention towards targeting nonviolent action groups alongside Muslim communities (emphasis added):

It is becoming a tool to be used against any form of dissent. So, what really reared its head primarily in my experience of it as something directed very, very much at Muslim people in a completely broad and indiscriminate way and inappropriately for that [reason], and is problematic for that reason. I have then subsequently seen it increase its scope nominally.

(Interview 6; White, non-Muslim, female, artist)

⁵⁵ Daesh is also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/the Levant (ISIS/ISIL).

⁵⁶ The Guardian (2021) Wrong to label Extinction Rebellion as extremists, says Home Office adviser, Tom Wall. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/aug/21/wrong-to-label-extinction-rebellion-as-extremists-says-home-office-adviser> (last accessed: 27/09/2021).

⁵⁷ HM Government, Prevent.



It's inevitable that it does expand out into other groups and we've already seen that. It's been used against anti-fracking protesters, against Extinction Rebellion protesters and effectively anything that challenges the norm.

(Interview 8; White, non-Muslim, male academic)

44. Interviewees 6 and 8 both argue that Prevent is being used to close down opportunities for dissent. Although Interviewee 6 believes that this targeting is only nominal, others provide examples of its tangible consequences in discouraging people from engaging in civic action or censoring activists. For example, a Kurdish activist we spoke to stated:

A lot of the basis of this stuff is Islamophobia, but a large majority of the Kurdish community in the UK are not Muslim. They're Alevis⁵⁸... it's not just about profiling Muslims. We're all racialised to some degree but I think this is the crucial thing: it really is the entire counter-terror legislation - from Schedule 7⁵⁹ to Prevent and so on - it really is a war against self-determination.

(Interviewee 9, female, Kurdish activist)

45. Interviewee 9 goes on to argue that, although counter-terrorism measures are justified through an imagined Muslim threat, the legislation that underpins those measures is not written in ways that limit its use to specific threats. This means that, in practice, counter-terrorism measures are also applied against other sections of society, including people from

46. Kurdish backgrounds who actively campaign for an independent and united Kurdistan.⁶⁰ For Interviewee 9, Prevent is a good example of how one aspect of counter-terrorism bleeds into harder measures, such as powers to detain individuals at ports and airports, and in ways that curtail the activities of Kurdish Britons who oppose the UK's military alliances and activities that undermine the desire for self-determination. This example also highlights the possibility of Prevent being used as an extension of UK foreign policy, by aligning the domestic policing of dissenters with foreign policy goals.

47. However, the apparent contradiction between Interviewee 6, who argues that Prevent is expanding only 'nominally', and Interviewee 9, who details how Kurdish activists are allegedly

⁵⁸ Although Interviewee 9 classifies Alevis as a group distinct from Muslims, other Alevis would consider themselves to be part of the extremely diverse Muslim traditions. It should also be noted that Kurds are a diverse people with a multitude of religions (or no faith), beyond Islam, and different cultural practices.

⁵⁹ Schedule 7 to the Terrorism Act 2000 is a power that enables police officers at ports and airports to question and detain individuals for up to six hours without requiring any reason to believe that they are engaged in acts of terrorism. It grants wide-ranging powers to question detained individuals, conduct a search of their person and belongings, subject them to a strip search, scan and download data on their mobile phone or other electronic devices, and take the individual's biometric information, including DNA and fingerprints. Schedule 7 is a well-known power among international campaigners and Muslim communities due a large number of people from these groups being detained under the power. See: Leda Blackwood, Nick Hopkins and Steve Reicher (2013) I know who I am, but who do they think I am? Muslim perspectives on encounters with airport authorities, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36(6), pp.1090-1108; Tara Lai Quinlan and Zin Derfoufi (2015) "Counter-Terrorism Policing," in Rebekah Delsol and Michael Shiner (eds) *Stop and Search: The Anatomy of a Police Power* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan), pp.123-145; Choudhury, *Campaigning on Campus*.

⁶⁰ It should be noted that the UK government has proscribed a number of groups that operate across Kurdish-dominated regions of the world. This includes the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK). See Home Office (2021) *Proscribed terrorist groups or organisations*, Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/proscribed-terror-groups-or-organisations--2/proscribed-terrorist-groups-or-organisations-accessible-version#list-of-proscribed-international-terrorist-groups> (last accessed: 11/08/2021).



targeted under the strategy, is in many ways inevitable. This is because the net-widening is a recent policy shift that will take time to embed and be experienced across a range of civic spaces. Both interviewees agree that Prevent is inherently imbalanced in its disproportionate targeting of Muslim communities, but this does not mean that other groups are not impacted, such as Kurdish activists who have experienced UK counter-terrorism policies alongside Muslim communities (note that some Kurdish activists may also identify as Muslim).

48. Overall, the emerging picture from interviewees provides evidence to support the broad critique presented by the United Nations Special Rapporteur, who argues that governments are using P/CVE programmes as a means of closing down legitimate spaces for dissent.⁶¹ It also validates Richard's⁶² prediction that the UK's counter-terrorism apparatus will become increasingly ideological in targeting wider challenges to the state.

3.2. (b) Suppressing Muslim activism

49. As argued earlier, irrespective of whether participants self-identified as Muslim, they argued that Prevent disproportionately targets civic spaces that mobilise Muslim identities that challenge state policies. Participants from non-Muslim backgrounds contrasted their experiences with Muslim friends and colleagues, arguing:

There's a lot of [us] in groups like Extinction Rebellion and a lot of campaigning for migrant justice [we] are involved in as well as the peace movement and anti-nuclear [movement]... [but we] have not been on the sharp end of some of that kind of active discrimination. I think still [my group] in the protest does not have the same level of fear as a Muslim on a protest... I do have some of that white privilege.

(Interview 2; White, non-Muslim, male, peace activist)

As an individual I am very, very aware that I have a level of white privilege and it pains me that I can say something that my Muslim colleagues could not.

(Interview 7; White, non-Muslim, female, community caseworker)

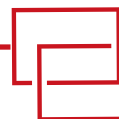
50. These interviewees argue that their non-Muslim identity - specifically being 'white' - affords them privileges that shield them from the sharpest impacts of Prevent that their Muslim associates are experiencing. Interviewees from Muslim backgrounds made the same contrast, and activism on Palestine was a frequent example raised. One participant stated:

People who often are activists for Palestine are Muslims... I don't feel like [the government] view liberal groups and lefty groups as the same as the Muslim community, and I don't know if they would provide the same amount of resources to surveillance them in the same way that they do to the Muslims. And in terms of far-right groups it was like yesterday that they even wanted to call them extremist groups/terrorist groups.

(Interview 11; Muslim, female, Black equalities campaigner).

⁶¹ UNGA HRC, Human rights impact of policies and practices aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism.

⁶² Anthony Richards (2015) From terrorism to 'radicalization' to 'extremism': counterterrorism imperative or loss of focus? International Affairs 91(2), pp.371-380.



51. Together with the earlier quotes, Interviewees 2, 7 and 11 point to a widespread belief that the likelihood and intensity of being targeted by Prevent are shaped by a range of factors, and that Muslims consistently fare worse than non-Muslims across different spaces. Despite the differences between these spaces - environmentalism, anti-racism and Palestinian solidarity campaigns - the fear among Muslims of attracting more attention than others leads them to censor themselves. These fears are grounded in their own lived experiences of Prevent and awareness of how other Muslims are impacted by the strategy, as is discussed in the next two sections of this report on the chilling effect and censorship.

52. The targeting of Muslims aligned with international causes, such as Palestine, also raises questions about the impact of Prevent in stifling dissent and criticism on foreign policy issues.⁶³

The combined effect of being targeted and self-censoring produces a shared sense among interviewees that there is a suppression effect being experienced by Muslims, preventing them from increasing their engagement in civic action.

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54. Some interviewees gave a rationale as to why Muslims may be disproportionately targeted - or at greater risk of a Prevent referral - compared to non-Muslims present in the same spaces:

In some ways I do think the Prevent strategy does want Muslims to just be people who pray in their mosques and don't get involved in politics and don't have opinions on the wider society that could lead to people ... ((long pause)) I don't know how to put it without sounding crazy, but I just think they want a little bit of shutdown of that [i.e. Muslims getting involved in politics]. They don't want active Muslims in politics that might inspire certain individuals [prone towards engaging in politics].

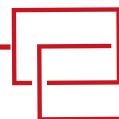
(Interview 11; Muslim, female, Black equalities campaigner)

55. Interviewee 11 argues that Prevent is a means of governing Muslim communities. This involves using Prevent as a means of curtailing the ability of politically active Muslims to inspire others, and instead encouraging traditions that promote quiet religious practice.

56. This claim echoes Ragazzi's theory of 'policed multiculturalism', which argues that 'counter-terrorist and counter-radicalisation policies [operate] as a specific form of "government through community"'.⁶⁴ As Ragazzi explains, this approach involves dividing Muslim

⁶³ Mark Sedgwick (2010) The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22(4), pp.479-494.

⁶⁴ Francesco Ragazzi (2016) Suspect community or suspect category? The impact of counter-terrorism as 'policed multiculturalism', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 42(5), pp.724-741, page 732.



communities into three distinct categories and governing them in accordance to their alignment with government policies rather than any inherent theological differences between them. The first category consists of 'trusted' Muslims who, in return for lending legitimacy to government policies, benefit through obtaining funding opportunities, training, and recognition as the official spokespeople for Muslim communities. A second category are 'victims', who are deemed susceptible to terrorist narratives but able to reform. However, it is against these categories, but particularly 'trusted' partners, that the government implicitly designates a third group: these are 'risky' Muslims who are unwilling to be managed by the state and are, therefore, marginalised and controlled through strategies such as Prevent. The experiences of Interviewee 11 and other Muslim participants who took part in this study suggest that our research participants believe the government treats them as part of this latter category of 'risky' individuals. As Interviewee 11 suggests, refusing to conform to a state-approved Muslim identity - marked by quiet religious practice and acceptance of government policies - brings people like her to the attention of the state and leads to their alternative identities being suppressed, particularly when the government views those identities as conflicting with 'British values'. Her assertion that the government is managing Muslim communities - something she fears makes her sound 'crazy' - is supported by some research that argues Prevent has been used by successive governments to promote forms of Islam that are more 'acceptable' to them,⁶⁵ as well as enabling some of these theological groups to silence their rivals through false accusations of violent extremism.⁶⁶

57. This state-centric view of what constitutes a security threat was also discussed by another interviewee, who stated:

I think it's to do with the way that right-wing and politically motivated violence is viewed, versus religiously motivated, because if it's right-wing it seems a public order problem because it's seen as attacking individuals, it's attacking minorities -- whereas if it's religiously motivated, it's seen as attacking the state and therefore it's a security problem rather than a public order problem.

(Interview 7; White, non-Muslim, female, community caseworker)

58. For Interviewee 7, the way in which state actors judge what constitutes a security threat lends itself to discriminatory practices. Rather than basing this judgement on a more objective measure, the state treats an imagined Muslim threat as being in a more severe category, because the authorities regard it as targeting the state itself. She argues that right-wing threats are not treated with the same urgency because they are deemed to target ethnic minorities who, by virtue of their minority status, are not representatives of the state.

⁶⁵ House of Commons' Communities and Local Government Committee (2010) Preventing Violent Extremism (London: The Stationery Office Limited); Gwen Griffith-Dickson, Andrew Dickson and Robert Ivermee (2014) Counter-extremism and Deradicalisation in the UK: a Contemporary Overview, *Journal for Deradicalization* Winter 2014/15(1), pp.26-37.

⁶⁶ Sedgwick, *The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion*; Griffith-Dickson et al., *Counter-extremism and Deradicalisation in the UK*.



59. In other words, an imagined Muslim threat - an idea that is itself based on heavily racialised assumptions - is presumed to threaten western democratic order, whereas far-right activities are considered to only threaten individuals or, at most, community cohesion. In this view, therefore, the government treats right-wing threats as a public order issue rather than an existential security threat. This practice also creates a disconnect between the threats articulated by the state and those that communities affected by Prevent would likely describe based on their lived experience. For example, while government authorities might describe the most serious threat facing the people of the UK as 'terrorism', people in communities affected by Prevent might point to harsh treatment by the state, being misrepresented by the media, or discrimination and deprivation as the most serious and pressing problems that they experience.⁶⁷

60. Whether the targeting of Muslim civic spaces operates as an extension of foreign policy or as a means of managing groups that are resistant to being directed by the state, there was a consensus among interviewees that the suppression of political action undertaken by Muslims is a deliberate strategy of Prevent. However, for all participants, but particularly Muslims, a very real boundary exists between the types of activities and spaces permitted by the state and those that are managed through Prevent. This discriminatory approach includes singling out Muslims for harsher treatment even when they are engaged in spaces where non-Muslims are highly active. Two examples already mentioned are the environmental movement and campaigns in support of Palestine.

61. The perceived treatment of non-conformist Muslim spaces and campaigners as a counterculture that require surveillance and suppression through a broad range of tactics provides an insight into how other countercultures could be affected by government interference, especially as Prevent expands to target wider challenges to the state. The policing of Muslim activists and spaces through a 'security'-centered approach that pits 'moderates' against 'extremists', and one in which the government takes an active role in deciding what constitutes a legitimate form of civic participation, provides an insight into how broader social movements could be policed. In this climate, the criteria that may be used to demarcate the boundaries between moderate-legitimate and extremist-illegitimate action is a commitment to capitalism and protesting in ways that remain firmly within the law⁶⁸ - something that would inhibit civil disobedience.

62. The next two sections of this report discuss experiences and perceptions of how Prevent is allegedly used to close down civic spaces, and the ways in which this is experienced differently among a range of people and types of groups targeted.

3.3. Chilling effect

63. Respondents were asked whether Prevent directly impacts them and their civic action. One of

⁶⁷ Choudhury and Fenwick, The impact of counter-terrorism measures on Muslim communities; Clements et al., Listening to British Muslims.

⁶⁸ See Wilson and Walton, Extremism Rebellion.



the most common negative experiences reported by interviewees, both Muslim and non-Muslim, is self-censorship. In law, this phenomenon is sometimes described as a 'chilling effect', which describes the effect of regulations in deterring people from exercising their rights.⁶⁹ People may self-censor from fear of attracting the attention of the authorities, being subjected to more extensive surveillance, or becoming subject to harsher measures such as arrest or other sanctions.

64. Our interviewees identified civic spaces, and particularly educational settings, as key sites where Prevent is producing a chilling effect. While the Prevent strategy only formally applies to Great Britain (i.e. England, Scotland and Wales), we identified ways in which it was nevertheless casting a shadow on the actions of Muslims in Northern Ireland. Each of these three settings - education, wider civic spaces, and Northern Ireland - is discussed below.

3.3. (a) Education

65. In the interviews, there were numerous examples of students and staff reportedly engaging in self-censorship in secondary schools and universities across the UK. Two include:

There are countless other examples of younger Muslim kids talking about how they've - whether it be [secondary school] kids I used to teach or kids that I've met at events that I've been talking [at] - who will say they haven't felt confident to speak out in class. Some of them, for years they haven't felt confident to speak out in class.

(Interview 8; White, non-Muslim, male academic)

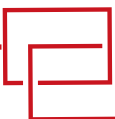
It was especially prevalent in politics students [at my university], because they felt that they couldn't fully express what they wanted to say out of fear of being called out for something that their white counterparts could have said but would not have been given the same treatment or would not have been judged and analysed the same way, just because it came from a Muslim mouth. So I think it's effectively silenced a lot of students.

(Interview 3; Muslim, male, race equality)

66. Education should provide spaces for young people to develop the critical thinking skills necessary to become active citizens. However, data from the interviews reveal a concern that Prevent is causing some young Muslims to avoid expressing their views, opinions and identities in educational settings. The national curriculum for secondary education states that schools should use citizenship education to 'provide pupils with knowledge, skills and understanding to prepare them to play a full and active part in society' through 'equip[ping] pupils with the skills and knowledge to explore political and social issues critically, to weigh evidence, debate and make reasoned arguments'.⁷⁰ However, the testimonies of interviewees are consistent with other research suggesting that Prevent is creating a chilling effect that is undermining the stated aims of citizenship education.

⁶⁹ Jonathan Penney (2019) Chilling effects and transatlantic privacy, *European Law Journal* 25(2), pp.122-139.

⁷⁰ DfE, *The national curriculum in England*, page 227.



67. This evidence of self-silencing among Muslim students is consistent with research that shows how the security-focused treatment of Muslims in Britain is resulting in many from those communities being too fearful to engage in debate or even express basic aspects of their religious identity.⁷¹ However, one interviewee identified a range of groups in educational settings, other than Muslims, who are now impacted by Prevent:

I think it has had a silencing effect on debate... It's had a wider effect on the ((gestures)) 'progressive left causes' as a whole, like anti-racism, [challenging] anti-blackness, talking about that kind of thing... Individual students [who were part of the Palestine Society] were referred on to the Prevent officers [by the students union and university]. I'm not sure whether it went further but that was enough [to have an effect]... there were definitely non-Muslim members of the PalSoc [Palestine Society] who were also targeted because they spoke up on Palestine.

(Interview 13; Muslim, female, Palestine activist)

68. This quote is from an interviewee who reflects on her experience as both a student and, later, a member of staff in higher education. She highlights the consequences of a net-widening of Prevent, through which a broad range of social issues are problematised alongside Muslim civic identities. The awareness of being targeted or potentially targeted under Prevent then results in both Muslims and non-Muslims withdrawing from civic action. This concern is supported by another respondent, who said the following in relation to secondary schools:

We were setting up a peace issues day in a school and we had an opportunity to bring... survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. So, they'd be talking about their experiences and the issue of nuclear weapons. Certainly political but not really connected to violent terrorism, but the school specifically said 'we're not sure that that would be allowed because of Prevent'.

(Interview 2; White, non-Muslim, male, peace activist)

69. This testimony is from someone who, while not directly employed as a teacher, is regularly invited in to schools to engage with students as part of citizenship education. It is consistent with the experiences described by Interviewee 13, quoted above, in showing how the chilling effect is not restricted to Muslims or Muslim civic spaces and is experienced across a range of other spaces in the UK. In this case, Interviewee 2 reports that awareness of Prevent among school leaders is producing a risk aversion to hosting debates on wider topics unrelated to terrorism, such as the availability of nuclear weapons.

70. This testimony also shows that it is not only students who are forced to disengage from debate, but educational professionals too. A former teacher corroborated this point when reflecting on why he left teaching:

In terms of my own silencing as well, the significant reason for me stopping teaching was that I felt my speaking out on Prevent was drawing undue attention on the school where I worked. It didn't feel to me that speaking out against Prevent was compatible with being a teacher, which I think is highly problematic.

(Interview 8; White, non-Muslim male academic)

⁷¹ Blackwood et al., I know who I am, but who do they think I am?; Rights Watch UK, Preventing Education.



71. For Interviewee 8, his ability to voice professional concerns over the suitability of Prevent in education is constrained by the climate created by that very strategy. In his interview, he mentions that he taught in a school with a high proportion of Muslim students, which regularly brought his vision of being a teacher into conflict with his responsibilities under Prevent. This experience, he says, ultimately led to him leaving the profession. The experience of this interviewee who is from a non-Muslim background underlines the diffuse ways in which Prevent is leading a wide range of civic actors to censor themselves, in addition to Muslims affected or potentially affected by the strategy.

72. Two interviewees offered insights into how some of these pressures arise. The first quote, below, is from the peace activist already cited above. In this case, he reflects on his conversations with teachers as part of his outreach work. The second is from a community leader who draws on his knowledge of the education sector as an advisor to educational bodies as well as other public services.

You're worried what your head of department is going to think about your choices. The head of department is worried about the headteacher. The head teacher is worried about Ofsted⁷² and so on and so on. So everyone's looking over their shoulder thinking 'well, how can I signal that I'm being very diligent under Prevent', and as much as anything that sounds like a lot of work.

(Interview 2; White, male non-Muslim, peace activist)

Another serious challenge for me is, because it's embedded, it means that things like Ofsted will look into schools and say, 'oh, you haven't had any Prevent referrals this year? That's a problem, that means we're going to downgrade you'.

(Interview 12; Muslim, male, community leader)

73. Both of these quotes highlight the role of institutional processes in embedding the harms of Prevent and creating a chilling effect, resulting in some people to withdraw from debate or action. They both point to a risk aversion generated by Prevent that, as these and other interviewees claim, results in schools closing down opportunities for debate. Significantly, these two interviewees both blame Ofsted for institutionalising this fear. Interviewee 2 observes that the pressures school leaders face in 'signaling' that they are being 'diligent under Prevent' leads to certain topics being disallowed for debate, even when they are not connected to a racialised Muslim threat. Interviewee 12 supports this perception, but adds further insight. He claims that Ofsted's inspection regime creates pressures on schools to provide tangible evidence to prove that they are fulfilling their responsibilities under the Prevent duty. When no referrals are made by a school, as he explains, school leaders fear that the relevant authorities will interpret this as evidence of the school's failure to uphold the Prevent duty.

⁷² The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) is the official inspector of education and training services in England. Education is a 'devolved matter' and so the governments of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own responsibility for these services and separate inspection regimes.



74. These fears point to a potential consequence of institutionalising Prevent in education through Ofsted: a risk that schools will make inappropriate referrals of children and young people - not because there is any factual reason to believe they could pose a danger to themselves or anyone else, but in order to 'signal' compliance to higher authorities and thereby avoid sanctions.

3.3. (b) Civic activism

75. Our interviewees provided evidence of a chilling effect felt across civil society as a direct consequence of shifts in the government's Prevent policies. One community activist makes the link particularly clear when explaining why she withdrew from civic activism:

I used to run in all kinds of groups in all sorts of political spaces before, and I realised I had to be careful. I realised I don't have the same rights as a young white person or lefty group, liberal individual and that at any given time I could be in the wrong place and may say something on, like, I even used to be on panels and speak on certain topics and stuff and I realised, 'Yo, I could say one wrong thing and I could be on a list'.

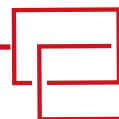
(Interview 11; Muslim, female, Black equalities campaigner)

76. Interviewee 11 is a devoted community activist with a track record of grassroots campaigning, so the pain in withdrawing from civic activism is one that was felt during the interview. Although her campaign work has gained public recognition, including one campaign that received support from parliamentarians, this validation has not been enough to reassure her that she is safe from being 'on a list' of suspect individuals.

77. When asked to elaborate about how Prevent had caused her to withdraw from campaigning, Interviewee 11 spoke about specific individuals that she claimed to have become aware of during her work. She claims these individuals were people whose 'lives were put in danger' due to information that was gathered as part of Prevent being shared with foreign police and security agencies. She also raised concerns about cases in the UK of 'coercion' and there being 'a lot of seeded secretive acts [i.e. undercover operations]' occurring as part of the strategy.⁷³ These fears suggest a perception that the authorities could blur the lines between Prevent - a strategy that claims to support vulnerable people by steering them away from negative influences that could draw them into terrorism - and policing activities associated with pursuing people who are actually engaged in terrorism.

75. Interviewee 11's concerns are consistent with the remarks of a former university manager with responsibility for risk management, who spoke about the conversations that he had with counter-terrorism officials, arguing:

⁷³ The specific cases referred to are not described here because they may reveal the identity of the interviewee.



If what you're [Prevent leaders] saying *officially* is this isn't intelligence-gathering then you need to be saying that unofficially as well, because that's not what you're saying unofficially. *Unofficially*, you're making [it] very clear this is intelligence-gathering and the problem is, if your police officers sit within the counter-terrorism organisation and they share the same organisational databases and they're part of the same transnational information sharing and that kind of thing, then there can be no guarantee at the point where we volunteer information that we believe is being volunteered for the purposes of safeguarding, that it won't be used for other purposes.

(Interview 15, White, male, former university manager)

76. In this interview, Interviewee 15 summarises his experience as someone previously involved in managing issues that fell within the realm of Prevent at his university and those relating to formal requests as part of criminal investigations, wherein counter-terrorism police officers sought information on students and staff who had come into contact with students implicated in a terrorism investigation. As the quote from the interview above shows, he raises concerns that Prevent's central purpose is to gather intelligence, despite official claims to the contrary, and that this information has been handled in ways that blur the important separation between safeguarding - the ostensible purpose of Prevent - and criminal investigations. It is this perception of Prevent being used beyond its stated purpose to gather intelligence⁷⁴ that Interviewee 11, previously quoted, argues has shaped her understanding of how she ought to behave and whether she is able to remain politically active. The claims that Prevent is being used for intelligence gathering first surfaced in 2009.⁷⁵ A subsequent parliamentary inquiry was unable to rebut these claims and, instead, called on the government to take 'urgent steps to clarify how information required under Prevent does not constitute "intelligence gathering" of the type undertaken by the police or security services'.⁷⁶

77. As with Interviewee 11, a number of participants drew on a range of historic and recent examples of how, they argue, national and local authorities regulate different civic spaces through Prevent:

[The] mosque for sure. I remember when I was there and they [the mosque's leaders] were demanded to give their khutbahs [i.e. Friday sermons] in English... [by] the guy who used to work within Prevent [based in the local] council. He was just, like, 'it would be better if everyone understood what is being said', and the mosque was like 'well, predominantly our people who come to the mosque are Somali. We rarely get any non-Somalis.' If there were any non-Somalis often they would give the khutbah in Arabic sometimes. It depends who's giving it. But it's the fact that it became a demand.

(Interview 11; Muslim, female, Black equalities campaigner).

⁷⁴ House of Commons' Communities and Local Government Committee, Preventing Violent Extremism; Qurashi, The Prevent strategy and the UK 'war on terror'.

⁷⁵ Kundnani, Spooked.

⁷⁶ House of Commons' Communities and Local Government Committee, Preventing Violent Extremism.



You know about the whole [name withheld] Literary Festival?... one of the programs within the festival was funded by a grant from the Home Office's Building Stronger Britain Together program, which is very much a way of infiltrating civic space and I think something really worth looking at... [Artists] didn't want to perform for a program that had funding from the state... State funding has skewed and has basically colonised creative space and made it unsafe.

(Interview 6; White, non-Muslim, female, artist)

[Prevent] has had a silencing effect on debate and also not even just debate: just outright calling out human rights violations. It has silenced discussion for marginalised communities: specifically Muslim, specifically Palestinian, specifically any kind of Middle Eastern/Arab/Muslim groups. And then it's had a wider effect on the ((gestures)) 'progressive left causes' as a whole, like anti-racism, [challenging] anti-blackness, talking about that kind of thing. So, yeah, I think if people present [Prevent] as something that is ((gestures)) 'protecting people' I think they're lying.

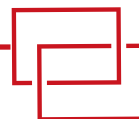
(Interview 13; Muslim, female, Palestine activist)

Whether the space in question is a religious institution, an arts event or a collective that brings together an array of citizens concerned about the most pressing issues of the day, these testimonies convey a sense that spaces carved out for action are no longer safe due to a fear of them being 'infiltrated' or 'colonised' by the state through Prevent.

78. Whether the space in question is a religious institution, an arts event or a collective that brings together an array of citizens concerned about the most pressing issues of the day, these testimonies convey a sense that spaces carved out for action are no longer safe due to a fear of them being 'infiltrated' or 'colonised' by the state through Prevent. The experiences of both historic and recent incidents (as well as alleged incidents facing their family or friends) perpetuate a real sense of spaces being infiltrated by the state, including through reported demands by local Prevent actors to amend religious services or national government breaking its neutrality by funding groups that it prefers. These instances raise questions among participants about whether they, as independently minded activists, are able to remain in those spaces, particularly in light of the alleged links between state funding and surveillance.⁷⁷

79. The testimonies in this section of the report and elsewhere reveal that both Muslim and non-Muslim participants are engaging in self-censorship. However, they also point to a much greater anxiety among, and perceived surveilling of, Muslim respondents compared to respondents of non-Muslim,

⁷⁷ See House of Commons' Communities and Local Government Committee, Preventing Violent Extremism; Qurashi, The Prevent strategy and the UK 'war on terror'.



white backgrounds who spoke about their greater ability to resist these pressures. The differential experience of a chilling effect and varied capacity to resist is consistent with recent studies into other spaces, such as the health sector⁷⁸ and education.⁷⁹ These studies also suggest that staff from white backgrounds feel more able to vocalise their concerns compared to the higher levels of self-censorship among their colleagues from ethnic minority backgrounds, and most acutely among people from Muslim backgrounds.

3.3. (c) Northern Ireland

80. Although Prevent does not legally apply in Northern Ireland, testimonies from three interviewees from that region reveal that the strategy still casts its shadow across the Irish Sea. One participant argued 'Prevent has crept in different ways', and that the strategy has created a climate that shapes actions and behaviors in the region (White, non-Muslim, female, academic).

81. Another interviewee spoke about the dominant identities in the region and how this impacts the civic activities of Northern Irish people of Muslim backgrounds:

Everything here has a Protestant and Catholic line to it. So, if you are sympathetic to the Palestinian cause that means you're automatically [perceived to be] sympathetic to the republican nationalist cause, and that's where lines are drawn here... But then there is a fear of a lack of sympathy from state forces. So, say for example the local mosque here wanted to put a Palestinian flag on its in its front garden and is then subsequently attacked as a result of that -- I think it would be a genuine fear that the response from the PSNI [Police Service of Northern Ireland] would be 'well, why did you do that? What did you expect?'. It wouldn't be 'oh, right, of course you have a right to express your views here'.

(Interview 5; Muslim, former public appointee)⁸⁰

82. Interviewee 5 explains a process of racialisation that Muslim groups experience in Northern Ireland. As the respondent explains, spaces where support for Palestine is expressed are seen to be automatically aligned with the Catholic-Nationalist-Republican (CNR) side of Northern Ireland's pre-existing divide. Support for Palestine becomes a signifier of suspicious activity as it is interpreted as reflecting wider views that state authorities in the region are already concerned about. It results in Muslims being policed in the same way. As the research participant goes on to explain, this creates a chilling effect, but also:

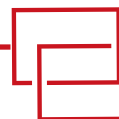
Self-censorship is really more profound here than you can probably imagine and I think there's always been that thing from migrant parents about 'don't get involved', 'don't say too much', 'just keep your head down and get on with things', that I think that's even probably more so here because there is that pressure that 'we've been quite lucky here so let's just keep a lid on this and not really say much about anything', which doesn't necessarily make it a safer space. I think it makes it a lot more complex for young people.

(Interview 5; Muslim, former public appointee)

⁷⁸ Younis and Jadhav, Keeping Our Mouths Shut.

⁷⁹ Busher et al., The enactment of the counter-terrorism "Prevent duty" in British schools and colleges.

⁸⁰ This participant's gender is withheld in order to maintain their anonymity, particularly in light of the comparatively small population of Muslims in Northern Ireland.



83. Here, Interviewee 5 is referring to civic life in the shadow of Prevent. They argue that a collective sense among Northern Ireland's Muslim communities of being 'lucky' to escape the levels of securitisation facing their peers in Great Britain makes the self-censorship even more 'profound'. This is due to a fear that too much political activity could provoke an extension of Prevent into that region and, should that happen, the considerably smaller sized Muslim population would have only a limited capacity to respond. As Interviewee 5 concludes, 'we're probably at more of a disadvantage because we don't have that sense of community that you would have in other parts of the UK'.

84. This fear that exists under in shadow of Prevent was also present in another interview from Northern Ireland:

I remember even my own experiences in [a university in Northern Ireland] when that first happened, then I silenced myself, but then when I realised being where I'm from... there is a lot of Catholics who will talk similar points of view that I will talk because they've gone through the same thing in a completely different way. But that kind of enabled me to be like 'okay, I can still talk about this'... I think, overall, it's just the policing of self and I think that in itself gets exhausting.

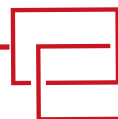
(Interview 3; Muslim, male, race equality)

85. This quote from Interviewee 3 shows that he was able to reflect on Northern Ireland's pre-existing identities and find comfort in a shared history with Catholics, whom he perceives as understanding his experience of being racialised into a suspect group. However, his statement still exhibits some hesitation to fully express himself. This is because his awareness of being in the shadow of Prevent, combined with knowledge of how Catholics have been policed in the region, means that he still engages in self-policing. As he explains, this takes its toll on him because it is an 'exhausting' task having to constant think carefully about how he engages in debate.

These testimonies reveal how far-reaching the fear of Prevent is among Muslim communities in the UK: even people in Northern Ireland are aware of it and engage in self-policing to avoid falling afoul of a policy that does not even apply to them.

86. These testimonies reveal how far-reaching the fear of Prevent is among Muslim communities in the UK: even people in Northern Ireland are aware of it and engage in self-policing to avoid falling afoul of a policy that does not even apply to them. It also shows how older local identities relevant to the conflict in Northern Ireland - Catholic-Nationalist-Republican (CNR) and Protestant-Unionist-Loyalist (PUL) - are used as proxies for categorising Muslim civic action, irrespective of whether the person in question is a university student or holds a public role.

87. The chilling effect experienced by Interviewee 5, a public appointee, is particularly revealing of how Prevent has crept into Muslim identities in the region because, despite the approval and legitimacy that comes with holding a public office, they nevertheless engage in self-censorship. As they mention



during the interview, their fear of being associated with security threats means they have declined opportunities to advance their career in public life.⁸¹

88. These findings indicate the presence of a chilling effect in Northern Ireland that future research should investigate, along with how Prevent's racialised assumptions are superimposed upon preexisting identities in the region. It should be noted that both of our respondents quoted in detail above (Interviewees 3 and 5) argue that Muslim communities in Northern Ireland are faring better than their counterparts in Great Britain partly because, as our second interviewee argues, he is able to draw upon the experiences of Catholics to understand and articulate his own position, although this is still 'exhausting'. These comments support Choudhury and Fenwick's early research into Prevent, which highlights how the stronger community engagement models found in the UK's devolved nations can provide some buffer against the problems associated with its implementation in England.⁸² This also means that Northern Ireland serves as a potentially telling case study for P/CVE programmes worldwide, as it is a region where the Prevent duty does not formally extend, despite being the part of the UK that faces the most significant and frequent politically motivated threats.

3.4. Censoring critics of Prevent

89. The interviewees for this research were sufficiently concerned about particular social or political issues to be engaged in nonviolent dissent. Their engagement in dissent does not mean that they are immune from the chilling effect, as discussed above, but the intensity of this effect differs based on factors such as their own personal resilience, the urgency of the issue being contested, and the environments in which they operate.

90. As with previous research with nonviolent activists who belong to communities governed through a national security lens,⁸³ the fact that these respondents were willing to be interviewed on such a sensitive topic suggests they may have higher levels of personal resilience than some of their counterparts. This enables them to resist the more profound consequences associated with the chilling effect that they argue is suppressing the ability of their peers' to speak out or engage in civic action.

91. However, these respondents spoke of another barrier that undermines their democratic freedoms: censorship. Unlike the self-censorship that arises from the chilling effect, censorship involves individuals who wish to speak out or engage in civic action being silenced by people in positions of authority.

92. Interviewees gave specific examples to support their claims of how they and the spaces dedicated to nonviolent dissent are being targeted by various authorities, and precisely due to their public criticisms of Prevent.

93. One case worker whose organisation supports people impacted by Prevent spoke about the frequency with which her group's events are cancelled, including an event co-organised with a local council:

⁸¹ The details of their appointment(s) and the opportunities that they turned down are not reproduced here in order to protect their identity.

⁸² Choudhury and Fenwick, The impact of counter-terrorism measures on Muslim communities.

⁸³ Edmunds, Elite young Muslims in Britain; Derfoufi, Radicalization's Core.



She [the head of the local council] sent a really bizarre email that simply said 'I've heard that [your] organisation doesn't support Prevent'. So we responded saying 'well, we are in agreement with the UN Special Rapporteurs and academics etcetera' - just chucking them all in ((laughs)) - 'Rights Watch UK, we're actually in agreement with all these people that it's problematic'. She responded and said 'in which case, we cannot go ahead with the event' and she cancelled it. So because we speak out against the strategy - and we've had that numerous times, where we've had events arranged and then all of a sudden people have said, 'Oh, sorry, the space is not available', 'We've got a double booking' and it's always come just after they've discovered that [our organisation] criticises the Prevent strategy - but that was the first time it was actually put into writing that this is the reason that we are not letting you come into the council.

(Interview 7; White, non-Muslim, female, community caseworker)

94. In this example, the participant explains the consequences of her organisation's public critique of Prevent. She highlights the ways in which criticising the strategy may result in being denied opportunities to hold events including, as she reports, by the elected head of a local council that had previously agreed to host her group for a public event. Her reported experience illustrates the potential for UK public authorities to use criticism of Prevent as a criterion for deciding whether to engage with a group and, therefore, exercise undue influence over public debate.

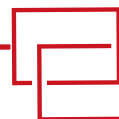
95. Examples of censorship came from several interviewees, including the two participants quoted below. The first interviewee works in the arts sector and spoke about an incident she says occurred during an event that she co-organised to discuss the impact of security policies on the industry; the second interviewee is an academic who spoke about an event organised by officials from the Home Office, where he was invited to speak.

A senior [arts funding manager] told me during the coffee break, that if I thought I would get any more money out of him I should think again. He was extremely uncomfortable and visibly angry that I had effectively created a space to critique government policy in front of a senior police officer and there was some heated discussion, especially from arts managers from a Muslim background who attended the roundtable.

(Interview 6; White, non-Muslim, female, artist)

I knew that the Home Office had essentially blacklisted any local Muslims who might have appeared on the panel and so it ended up that I'd been brought in as an outside critic, which was actually a visceral demonstration of your question before, I guess, which was this absurd situation where the one white guy in the room was me on the panel ((laughs)) talking on behalf of the [predominantly Muslim] audience. It's just a total farce, which I raised in the meeting. So that was a clear instance where I guess I was called in to speak on behalf of other Muslims but I guess in that instance it wasn't that those Muslims weren't willing to talk but they've actually been blacklisted by the Home Office.

(Interview 8; White, non-Muslim, male, academic)



96. These interviewees argue that the government and public authorities are mobilising a range of tactics against critics of Prevent and across a range of different spaces. Such tactics allegedly include disinviting critics of Prevent, refusing critically minded individuals access to funding and, where critics are engaged by officials, extending opportunities to those viewed as a safer pair of hands – as in the case with Interviewee 8, who says he became an unwitting means of censoring local Muslims directly impacted by the strategy. These reported experiences reinforce Ragazzi's theory of policed multiculturalism discussed earlier, where people unwilling to comply with government initiatives are subject to being controlled.⁸⁴

97. However, the findings in this section of the report add a further dimension to Ragazzi's argument by showing how non-Muslim actors can also be coopted into the forms of division and control central to policed multiculturalism.

The prevailing sense among respondents is that the state is exercising undue influence across autonomous public sectors and non-governmental spaces by enabling Prevent-friendly spaces to flourish while shutting down critics.

98. Like Interviewee 8, other respondents also spoke about a 'blacklist' of individuals and organisations with which they believe national government and state authorities refuse to engage. Whether such a list exists or not, this designation is outside of the formal legal process for proscribing groups that participate, glorify or otherwise engage in acts conducive to terrorism.⁸⁵ The prevailing sense among respondents is that the state is exercising undue influence across autonomous public sectors and non-governmental spaces by enabling Prevent-friendly spaces to flourish while shutting down critics.

99. Respondent 6, who works in the arts sector and stated that a funding manager told them they would be denied further funding, also spoke about a number of other alleged incidents within the industry. All of these incidents, if true, would be suggestive of a systemic policy of closing down critical voices that aim to facilitate meaningful debate on the Prevent strategy. Other relevant incidents include the well-known case of Homegrown, a play involving 115 young people in an examination of violent-radicalisation in the UK. In an op-ed, the playwright, Omar El-Khairi, and director, Nadia Latif, detail their experience of actions that led to the cancellation of their production:

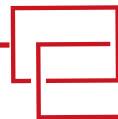
local government intervention led to us being thrown out of our original venue, and after police had suggested security measures that included reading drafts, attending rehearsals, planting plainclothes officers in the audience, and carrying out daily sweeps of the venue by a bomb squad.⁸⁶

100. In their article, they point to a number of plays created by people from white, non-Muslim backgrounds that did not face the same scrutiny; they argue if the venue 'wanted to make a play that honestly

⁸⁴ Ragazzi, Suspect community or suspect category?

⁸⁵ Home Office, Proscribed terrorist groups or organisations.

⁸⁶ Omar El-Khairi and Nadia Latif (2016) Drama in the age of Prevent: why can't we move beyond Good Muslim v Bad Muslim? Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/apr/13/drama-in-the-age-of-prevent-why-cant-we-move-beyond-good-muslim-v-bad-muslim> (last accessed: 12/08/2021).



assessed the hostile climate around contemporary British Muslim life, it should have put the voices that emerge out of the shattering legacy of Prevent front and centre'.⁸⁷

101. The artist we interviewed expressed similar views and referred to a play that went ahead:

Ironically, but interestingly, a few months later a play called 'Another World: Losing Our Children to Islamic State'... [focused on] on the same subject and it went to the National Theatre and it wasn't contested in the slightest [...] I think that a Muslim who is willing to toe the line, who's not critical, is fine and it's this thing about good [versus] bad, inconvenient Muslim.

(Interview 6; White, non-Muslim, female, artist)

The arts industry is a sector where critical thinking is usually celebrated but, as with the education sector, those who use this space to question the state's security strategy feel they draw additional scrutiny - particularly when they belong to the communities already racialised by security policies.

102. The arts industry is a sector where critical thinking is usually celebrated but, as with the education sector, those who use this space to question the state's security strategy feel they draw additional scrutiny - particularly when they belong to the communities already racialised by security policies. The idea of a good Muslim/bad Muslim dichotomy reinforces a binary logic that Muslims have to navigate if they wish to speak out on important political issues and create space for debate.⁸⁸ The policy of engagement and disengagement was considered, in 2010, by the House of Commons' Communities and Local Government Committee, which conducted the first significant Parliamentary examination of Prevent. It concluded:

There is widespread criticism of the Government's failure to engage with more 'radical' voices which do not promote violent extremism. The Government should engage with those who demonstrate a desire to promote greater understanding, cohesion and integration. No organisation - unless proscribed - should be excluded from debate and discussions.⁸⁹

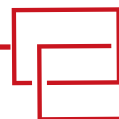
103. The earlier testimonies cited in this section of the report suggest that Prevent has evolved in ways that contradict the Committee's recommendation, including - as our interviewees allege - actively censoring people and groups who are critical of Prevent.

104. This is a development aided by the broad and opaque language of 'nonviolent extremism'. Although there are inevitable difficulties for state agencies in deciding what specific organisations to partner with and

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ House of Commons' Communities and Local Government Committee, Preventing Violent Extremism; Younis and Jadhav, Keeping Our Mouths Shut.

⁸⁹ House of Commons' Communities and Local Government Committee, Preventing Violent Extremism. Page 39.



fund under the Committee's recommended approach, the Committee's emphasis on only censoring legally proscribed terrorist groups stresses the importance of upholding the rule of law in the area of national security. This is particularly important given the broad and discretionary powers available under national security legislation⁹⁰ that provides wide scope for abuse.⁹¹ It would ensure that groups that can genuinely relay different strands of public opinion, and have the credibility needed to engage sections of the public deemed vulnerable to violent narratives, are able to inform government policies without the prerequisite of having to agree with the government of the day.⁹² It would also ensure that civil society actors can continue their own initiatives that challenge violent narratives without having their activities undermined by the state.⁹³

CONCLUSION

This report presents the UK's first known study of the structural impact of Prevent on civic space. Based on interviews with a broad range of civil society actors, we conclude that the UK's strategy is having a negative impact on nonviolent dissent, enabled by the highly subjective and opaque notion of targeting 'nonviolent extremism'. We make three specific findings about this harm that is being experienced by both Muslims and non-Muslims.

First, a chilling effect on the exercise of freedom of expression and association is widely felt by respondents, particularly within the communities and professions that have long been specially affected by Prevent. This effect was particularly pronounced among interviewees who work (or recently worked) in the education sector. The legislation that introduced the Prevent duty explicitly directs authorities, such as further education and higher education institutions as well as the Secretary of State, to have 'particular regard to the duty to ensure freedom of speech' and have 'particular regard to the importance of academic freedom'.⁹⁴ However, the duty and the ways that this report suggests UK authorities are applying it are creating a context in which people are self-censoring - i.e. refraining from saying things they could lawfully say, and doing things they could lawfully do. It is through interviewees' exercise of an abundance of caution to avoid coming under suspicion that Prevent chills the right to freedom of expression. This harmful impact of Prevent is so pervasive that we conclude it is even producing a chilling effect among respondents from Northern Ireland, even though the Prevent duty does not legally extend to that region.

Second, this study suggests that authorities are using Prevent to curtail civic space through the deliberate censoring of the strategy's critics. The experiences that interviewees describe paint a disturbing picture of the exercise of state power to silence critics of government policy, with this report reproducing specific examples of the alleged censorship due to criticisms of Prevent. According to the respondents, this phenomenon of censorship includes having venue spaces shut down, being disinvited to events and being denied funding after enabling concerns about Prevent to be raised in meetings or directly raising those concerns themselves. These harms to the freedoms of opinion, expression and association are particularly concerning, as they suggest a sharply ideological approach to Prevent in which human rights concerns about the strategy - or even reminders of the lack of scientific rigor to underpin policy shifts - are actively silenced rather than debated.

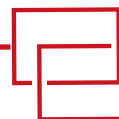
⁹⁰ Choudhury, *Campaigning on Campus*.

⁹¹ Genevieve Lennon (2015) *Precautionary tales: Suspicionless counter-terrorism stop and search*, *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 15(1), pp.44–62; UNGA HRC, *Human rights impact of policies and practices aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism*.

⁹² Griffith-Dickson et al., *Counter-extremism and Deradicalisation in the UK*; Ragazzi, *Suspect community or suspect category?*

⁹³ Lambert, Salafi and Islamist Londoners; Bartlett and Miller, *The Edge of Violence*; Joosse et al., *Narratives and Counternarratives*; Derfoufi, *Radicalization's Core*.

⁹⁴ *Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015*, Section 31.



The alleged censoring of critics, alongside the recent expansion of the focus of Prevent onto a broader range of civic causes, reinforces fears that the strategy has become a tool for closing down dissent rather than focusing on genuine safety threats.⁹⁵ This net-widening is a risky strategy because it appears to ignore the international body of research that specifically highlights the role of closing down nonviolent opportunities for dissent in propelling some people towards adopting violence instead.⁹⁶

Finally, this study reinforces prior research by concluding that the chilling effect and reported censorship are experienced disproportionately by people from Muslim backgrounds, due to a racialised and state-centric view of what constitutes a threat to national security. Despite the broad agreement among interviewees that people from non-Muslim backgrounds are also now affected by Prevent, the prevailing belief is that people from Muslim backgrounds will continue to be the authorities' primary focus and, therefore, experience Prevent's most profoundly negative impacts.

Criticism of Prevent does not equate to a rejection of the idea that violence is a real problem or that it requires government action to prevent it. As one interviewee argued:

We all want to keep our country safe. We all want to prevent terrorism in every way that we can... the first duty of any government [is] to keep everyone safe, but like in all things, we need to make sure that we do things in the right way which is proportionate, which recognises the trade-offs that there are between human rights and otherwise.

(Interview 12; Muslim, male, community leader)

This interviewee reflects the mood among other participants. He expresses the collective recognition that, in the words of another respondent, terrorism is indeed 'a problem' (Interview 3, Muslim, male, race equality activist) and an issue that requires a collective effort to tackle. He also reflects the common concerns that Prevent is operating in ways that lack proportionality, and a belief that it should be replaced with alternative strategies grounded in an approach that upholds human rights and the rule of law.

As with previous research on civic society actors operating these spaces, this study's participants appear to play an important role in countering violent narratives by creating spaces for frustrated citizens to vent their frustrations and challenge state injustices through nonviolence.⁹⁷ The findings of this research suggest that Prevent is curtailing democratic spaces rather than enabling them or, at the very least, restricting their ability to coexist alongside pro-government spaces. The findings of this report show that Prevent poses threats to civil society actors and in ways that merit being taken seriously by policy-makers and other decision-makers in the UK. As the government continues to expand Prevent to target a wider range of civic spaces, affecting both Muslims and non-Muslims engaged in dissent, its approach raises fundamental questions about the nature of the strategy and whether it is compatible with a rights-respecting, democratic society. Rather than 'protecting our freedoms', as the justification for security policies often claims, the evidence from those with lived experiences of Prevent shows that it is undermining those very freedoms and making the strategy everybody's problem.

⁹⁵ Richards, From terrorism to 'radicalization' to 'extremism'; UNGA HRC, Human rights impact of policies and practices aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism.

⁹⁶ McCauley and Moskalenko, Friction; Sageman, Turning to Political Violence.

⁹⁷ Lambert, Salafi and Islamist Londoners; Bartlett and Miller, The Edge of Violence; Joosse et al, Narratives and Counternarratives; Derfoufi, Radicalization's Core.



Policy recommendations:

We propose the following recommendations to address the issues raised in this report.

- 1. Counter-terrorism strategies should focus on people who demonstrably engage in or incite violence, as shown through objective evidence. Governments should recognise research indicating that nonviolent movements do not place people on a path toward violence; instead, nonviolent groups compete with groups that may promote violence, and provide an outlet for the peaceful expression of views.**

Therefore, 'nonviolent extremism' should not be within the scope or focus of counter-terrorism strategies such as Prevent.

- 2. Governments, including the UK's, should respect the freedom of expression. Speech should not result in policing or other interference by the state - including regarding schools, the arts or nonviolent movements - except where such interference is clearly authorised by specific laws, genuinely necessary to protecting public safety, and subject to accountability.**

Governments should also respect the freedom to hold thoughts, beliefs and opinions, which - under human rights law - is absolute.

- 3. Governments should recognise that a vibrant, diverse civil society, and the freedom to express views that may shock or offend others, are essential to a democratic and peaceful society. Any UK government interference with nonviolent expression in schools, universities, the arts or other sectors under the guise of preventing terrorism should cease.**
- 4. The UK and devolved governments should take concrete, transparent steps to stop any discriminatory targeting of Muslims under Prevent and any other counter-terrorism programmes, including through measures that have the effect of discouraging people from Muslim backgrounds from speaking freely. Concerns consistently expressed by individuals interviewed for this study, as well as in much other reporting on Prevent, indicate that the Prevent strategy is having a disproportionate chilling effect on the free expression and freedom of association of people from Muslim backgrounds, and therefore is not fit for purpose.**
- 5. International human rights groups, UK civil society, national human rights bodies such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission, academics and other stakeholders should monitor and review the impact of Prevent on the suppression of nonviolent dissent and civic activism in all areas. They should also devote greater attention to the impact of Prevent in Northern Ireland, where the Prevent duty officially does not apply but where our research suggests it is nevertheless affecting free expression and education.**



- 6. In a democratic society, it is legitimate for individuals, groups and organisations to question, challenge and oppose (or support) particular counter-terrorism laws, policies and practices - including in settings such as schools, universities and artistic venues. People should not be adversely targeted or penalised by government officials or institutions for simply exercising their right to free expression regarding these issues.**
- 7. State institutions should be willing to engage with all nonviolent activists and civil society groups and should not seek to influence or engineer 'legitimate' forms of activism, including based on a group's or individual's degree of support for government policies.**
- 8. Any collection, retention or sharing of personal data through the implementation of the Prevent strategy and Prevent duty should have a clear and specific legal basis, be necessary and proportionate, and be subject to oversight and controls (such as time limits). The government should provide transparency about the nature and extent of any data collected, such as information about people's beliefs or nonviolent activities, as well as which agencies hold the data and why.**

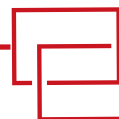


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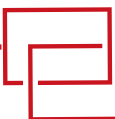
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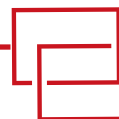
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