



TONY BLAIR  
INSTITUTE  
FOR GLOBAL  
CHANGE

# Past, *Prevent* and Future

## Improving *Prevent* for a New Generation

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# Contents

## The Challenge **5**

Key Findings

## Considerations **7**

Radical Transparency

Work with Communities to Address

Concerns of Discrimination with Prevent

## Introduction **11**

## Public Awareness and Exposure **15**

## The Way Forward **21**

Efficacy of Prevent

Discrimination

Understanding Prevent

## Conclusion **33**

## Methodology **35**

Quantitative Survey

Qualitative Survey

## References **37**



# The Challenge

Launched in response to the 7/7 London bombings in 2005, Prevent is one strand of the UK government's counter-terror CONTEST strategy. Prevent, responding to an evolving threat landscape and changing political climate, has been through three iterations already. With the first independent review announced in February 2019 suffering a succession of postponements, Prevent is now under the spotlight again.

The review comes in the wake of rising right-wing activity, the continuing threat of Islamist-inspired attacks and the emergence of unclear and unstable ideologies. Meanwhile Prevent itself is under continual attack, both because of legitimate criticisms regarding how it is delivered and from extremist groups who have a vested interest in opposing and undermining counter-extremism policy.

The government's current approach has seen it struggle to effectively respond or get ahead of such criticisms, inadvertently fuelling allegations of being an opaque programme, and allowing Prevent to be targeted by successive campaigns from those seeking to undermine the programme – including the legal challenge which resulted in the first Independent Reviewer of Prevent being removed from their post.

These challenges are not unique to Prevent, with counter-extremism policy as a whole suffering from widening scepticism and a lack of political consensus. Recent incidents have only contributed further to political division and a lack of public trust in the government's abilities to tackle extremism and terrorism.

The terrorist attacks in Streatham and Fishmongers' Hall, committed by former inmates, sparked public ire over the relaxing of sentences of convicted terrorists, leading to emergency legislation rather than any additional focus on underdeveloped deradicalisation strategies. The stabbing attack in Reading during the Covid-19 pandemic has only revived the memory of past attacks in the public's psyche.

Elsewhere, the government's decision to appeal the reinstatement of Shamima Begum's citizenship appears to be a missed opportunity to instil public confidence in the government's approach and to prove that the UK's counter-terror strategy is robust enough to deal with ISIS returnees.

With the delivery of the independent review of Prevent pushed back to August 2021 in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, this policy paper explores incremental improvements to Prevent as a discrete programme, recognising the challenge and subsequent paralysis UK policymaking on extremism has faced. It advocates for an inclusive and constructive approach to restore trust, based on evidence-informed responses. The evidence for this paper is based on a wider survey of 2,000 Muslim and white non-Muslim (WNM) 18 to 30-year-olds carried out in May 2019 by Savanta ComRes, which examines the cut-through of extremist sentiments within this demographic. Our wider research paper, *Resonating Narratives*, examines the overall findings of this survey, while this policy paper provides a breakaway of respondents' perceptions, opinions and interactions with Prevent.<sup>1</sup>

## KEY FINDINGS

The findings point to three clear challenges for the next iteration of Prevent:

1. Public awareness and exposure of Prevent
  2. Its effectiveness in challenging divisive ideologies
  3. Perceptions of discrimination
- **Prevent is poorly understood.**<sup>2</sup> Participants in our online focus groups had a very limited understanding of Prevent, with most having never heard of the programme. British Muslim respondents were relatively more aware of

Prevent than their white non-Muslim (WNM) counterparts, who were more likely to say they had never heard of it. Most participants in our online focus group were supportive of the aims of preventing radicalisation, although some were critical of the way Prevent has been implemented and brought up perceptions of the programme as discriminatory.

- **Around one in ten respondents have been through or know someone who has been through Prevent.** But despite low degrees of personal experience, Prevent strategy-related queries are nine of the top ten searches on Google for Prevent-related terms, while many hold firm opinions on the programme.
- **Those who agree with certain extremist statements are more likely to have been through or know someone who has been through Prevent.** Over one-third of WNM and over one-fifth of Muslims who agree that "conflict between the West and Islam would be a good thing" have been through Prevent (34 per cent and 21 per cent). Meanwhile, only 10 per cent of WNM and 9 per cent of Muslims who think that "there is no conflict between being Muslim and British" have been through the programme. While Prevent seems to be reaching the right networks, as evidenced by the finding that a significant percentage of people who agreed with extremist statements in our survey have been through Prevent, we cannot ascertain whether the programme is challenging these dangerous ideologies.
- **A significant minority of respondents think Prevent discriminates against Muslims and white people.** Twenty-nine per cent of Muslims think Prevent discriminates against Muslims while 14 per cent of WNM think it discriminates against white people. Both Muslim and WNM respondents with a connection to Prevent are significantly more likely to believe Prevent discriminates against white people (26 and 28 versus 10 and 11 per cent respectively), but fewer British Muslims who have been through Prevent think it is discriminatory towards Muslims than those who have not been (28 per cent versus 38 per cent). Muslim respondents with a connection to Prevent are more likely to see discrimination as a problem in society.

# Considerations

This paper has outlined some of the deep challenges hampering Prevent's core functions. Instead, a new progressive approach to how Prevent operates and communicates can begin to address each of the challenges. This is not about scrapping Prevent in its entirety or continuing to operate business as usual, but rather about moving it to a less politicised, more stable and more inclusive footing which would make this world-leading programme even more successful.

This new strategy should:

1. Deliver radical transparency.
2. Work with communities to address concerns of discrimination.

Community engagement should be led locally, with the central government helping to coordinate and share best practice. The Home Office has included local engagement as a key indicator of best practice, but cultural barriers to implementation remain.<sup>3</sup>

If fewer people are suspicious of Prevent, they will be more open to supporting it in challenging extremism and helping those in need of support. With improved transparency, Prevent also won't be starting from a perception deficit in challenging ideologies. This is not simply about community engagement, as there is already substantial community engagement undertaken by Prevent practitioners across the country, but rather improving the quality of communication with the wider public about the aims, objectives and outcomes of Prevent. While there is no silver bullet when it comes to countering extremism and preventing terrorism, complementing existing community engagement efforts with enhanced communication to raise awareness about Prevent at a grassroots level may help communities be more confident and comfortable with confronting and countering extremism.

## RADICAL TRANSPARENCY

A fundamental and recurring call from our evidence is for radical transparency in Prevent. This should begin in the review. Except where individuals can be personally identified or are a genuine security risk, any evidence to the review should be made available to the public and Parliament. To trust the process, everyone must be able to review the review. Transparency should address a lack of understanding in Prevent, allowing researchers and the media to assess claims with evidence.

The review should take on board each of these recommendations before seeing how they could apply to the next iteration of Prevent.

1. **Make the “secret” Prevent database publicly available.** The Prevent Case Management Tracker is acknowledged and referenced by the government. But its media coverage contributes to a general lack of accountability that was regularly raised in focus groups as undermining trust. The government is willing to acknowledge its existence, so it must now go further and prove the importance of holding this data for safeguarding reasons – ensuring data is anonymised, has appropriate consent and is security screened. There are challenges. More granularity, such as regional breakdowns, may provide a path to identification of referrals. But the Home Office has an example to follow
2. **Set clear targets for Prevent.** Building on existing resources such as IMPACT Europe, Prevent needs to prove that it is effective. Assessing countering violent extremism (CVE) interventions is challenging, but our focus groups show that the public is content to see that government is trying and has a process. Prevent coordinators should lead target development alongside communities to ensure they reflect the goals of all stakeholders. With publicly set and available goals, the government will be better able to assess the efficacy of Prevent.
3. **Where possible publicise and share intervention stories.** Those who have been through the programme are more likely to hold a positive view of government than those who haven't. If they're willing, those who have been through Prevent should be supported to speak about their experience, whether to communities or the media. Both practical and cultural barriers remain. An unapologetic approach to anti-Prevent lobby groups can help remove the stigma attached to discussions. The data from the Prevent database will help put these stories in context.
4. **Consolidate resources, materials and communications on Prevent.** Local ownership and delivery are integral to the success of Prevent. The role of central government is to ensure the resources, materials and wider support needed is available and easily accessible for successful delivery, however there are challenges to overcome. From strategy documents and guidance notes to educational resources and Prevent referral statistics, there is already a wealth of material available to support local Prevent delivery, however these valuable materials are spread across multiple sites and pages, making it difficult to access. While delivery should remain local, Prevent resources and materials should be consolidated to

improve access not only for practitioners but the wider public who may wish to learn more about the programme. This could include creating a single government-run website, which would deliver a one-stop shop encompassing all the relevant, related resources, updates and statistics on Prevent, making it easier and more convenient for practitioners and the public to find credible, trusted information directly from the source. While the Home Office and Counter Terrorism Policing already run public awareness campaigns around Prevent, there remains a need to bring together materials and resources into a consolidated platform to improve accessibility and ensure those with an interest in Prevent are able to easily access timely, accurate information from a reliable source. Other considerations include expanding the scope of non-English-language Prevent resources and materials beyond just strategy documents. At present, strategy documents are available in non-English languages but the scope of wider resources and materials relating to Prevent in such languages is limited. Government should ensure the full suite of supporting resources is available in languages it already considers to be important for publishing documents such as the CONTEST strategy, which is available in Urdu and Arabic, to help improve understanding of Prevent's aims among all parts of the population.

## WORK WITH COMMUNITIES TO ADDRESS CONCERNS OF DISCRIMINATION WITH PREVENT

**Our data show that a significant minority think that Prevent is discriminatory. The review must focus explicitly on this challenge.** The review cannot dismiss stories from sources the government may not agree with, but these stories need to be put in context with data and evidence. Building on our research, the review should identify and provide the data to show definitively how Prevent affects different communities, and ensure that accurate, evidenced information about Prevent continues to be shared in a timely manner going forward. Community involvement is a vital way to rebuild lost trust.

If Prevent is deemed to be discriminatory, or even if that is the popular perception, the government has to work even harder in engaging with local communities. When a policy is considered to be too top down, and priorities are set behind closed doors, it is no surprise that it is met with a degree of suspicion and scepticism. If the only experience that communities have with Prevent is through exaggerated media scandals and accusations against local authorities and the police, this contributes towards a deep sense of cynicism which ultimately hampers Prevent's effectiveness.

Greater community involvement and engagement will directly challenge the accusations of discrimination levelled at Prevent and help better communicate reforms to a broader audience. We recognise the challenge and sensitivity in talking to specific communities about radicalisation and extremism, but currently there is large disparity among local authorities.

On the basis of the polling commissioned by The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (TBI) and subsequent focus groups, there are five areas for consideration which would help to bridge the gaps that exist between communities and the Prevent programme:

1. **Reconciling security and counter-extremism policies with social cohesion and integration efforts.** The urge to delineate Prevent and wider security policy from social cohesion and integration work may come from a good place and seem like an appropriate response in addressing some of the accusations and allegations levelled at government. However, changing departmental ownership or inventing new labels represents nothing more than a cosmetic change and does not get to the heart of the matter. A pragmatic, bold and progressive approach that moves beyond trying to separate security and social cohesion and instead seeks to reconcile the two is required. While this is undoubtedly a more difficult task, long-term success necessitates policymakers being prepared for difficult conversations and radical thinking in order to address hateful extremist narratives from dividing communities and whipping up fears.

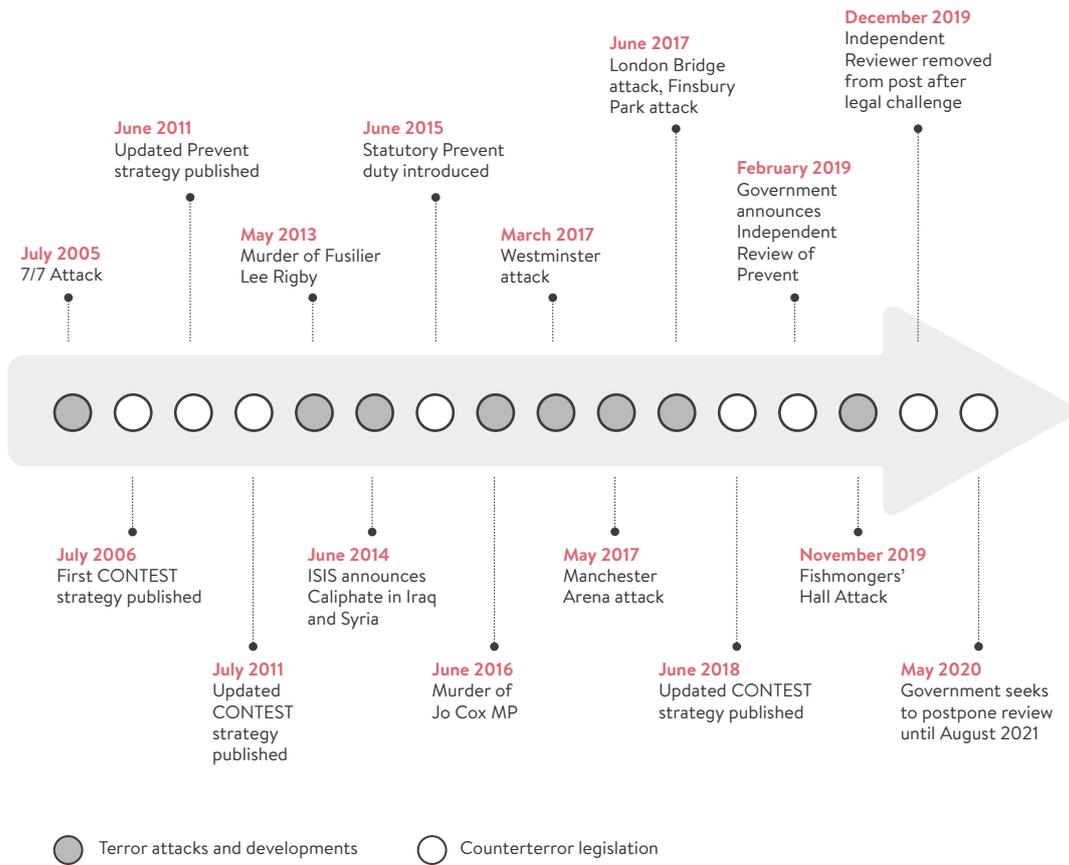
2. **Work with willing individuals, families and communities who have received support through Prevent to help dispel myths and address misconceptions.** Working with individuals, families and communities who have received support through Prevent and sharing their experiences of Prevent could help improve the wider, long-term impact of such initiatives and interventions. Our focus groups signalled how young people are sceptical of government communications that too often appear to be PR exercises. Amplifying authentic, organic voices with first-hand experience would be a way to develop trust by highlighting positive engagement and outcomes. This should go beyond the individual and include families and communities too. While Prevent focuses on individuals, the purview of the programme should begin to move beyond the individual and give greater consideration to family and community support as a means of ensuring the wider ecosystem feels confident and supported in addressing extremism. Thus far, the remit, responsibilities and resources for Prevent have centred only on individuals, however extremism does not exist in a vacuum, and so greater consideration must be given to the wider context to ensure a more comprehensive set of drivers and factors are being addressed. Trust must be established on a communal level, not just on an individual basis.
3. **Greater diversity and representation in oversight and advice on counter-extremism funding.** Transparency is stage one, but assessment and accountability must also follow. While Prevent already has an independent oversight board, like many other government programmes, it is largely made up of civil servants and the government is yet to comment on its diversity and representation. The government should consider opening this board up, involving those on the ground and those whose buy-in is crucial to delivering an effective programme.
4. This board should help **establish clear lines of accountability for community and counter-extremism funding**, including obligations for transparency from government, contractors and implementers to prevent successive scandals and ‘revelations’ about Prevent’s funding. While recognising and respecting the inherent security sensitivities related to Prevent, instilling a culture of openness and transparency with regard to tendering processes, procurement of services, partnerships, funding opportunities and so on will help to break down barriers, eliminate suspicion and ensure the system remains open to engage and work with a wider set of partners.
5. **Look beyond the public sector and involve the private sector, trade unions and business community in Prevent as part of a wider, more inclusive response to extremism.** As evidenced in our online focus groups, personal experience with government engenders greater trust, while negative experiences engender the opposite. Currently the private sector is largely overlooked when it comes to the scope of Prevent safeguarding and, importantly, the training and guidance that comes with it. But large businesses are often an integral, trusted part of Britain’s diverse communities. As valued and vital members of the community, large businesses are more than just employers. Government should look to widen engagement with Prevent among the private sector and trade unions such as through the provision of industry-tailored training and resources, but also around developing mechanisms for safeguarding employees and supporting local community initiatives to address extremism. Engaging the private sector and trade unions would allow trusted members of the community to help spot the signs, raise concerns and seek help for extremism-related concerns in the workplace. Not only would this widen the lens of Prevent beyond the public sector, it could also help to challenge perceptions of Prevent as being overly focused on young people or stifling debate in school settings, by providing avenues to other age groups and communities to learn about extremism. Government should give consideration to greater private-sector involvement with Prevent ahead of the next iteration of the strategy, and rather than the use of a statutory duty, consider pursuing an incentive-based approach for engagement.

# Introduction

Prior to Prevent's public launch in 2006 as one of the four core pillars of the UK's counter-terrorism strategy alongside Prepare, Protect and Pursue, counter-terror policy had largely focused on threats from overseas. But following the London 7/7 attacks, which were perpetrated by Islamist extremists from the UK, a renewed focus on addressing homegrown radicalisation was called for. New Labour's vision of Prevent was a mixture of integration, community cohesion and deradicalisation measures, representing a new, early-intervention approach to preventing terrorism. Despite some initial challenges and shortcomings, the goal of Prevent was to stop individuals' engagement with terrorism-related behaviours and activities through proactive early intervention.

In 2011, following a review, the coalition government sought to separate community relations from tackling radicalisation – putting greater emphasis on non-violent extremism. A further iteration in 2015 introduced the Prevent Duty, a contentious legal obligation for public-sector workers to escalate concerns related to safeguarding against extremism.

**FIGURE 1** The evolution of Prevent



**FIGURE 2** The perceptions of Prevent across the political spectrum



In light of the changing threat landscape, which included the growing need for managing the threat of returning foreign fighters, an updated CONTEST strategy was published in June 2018 which saw disengagement, desistance and rehabilitation provisions included as part of the Prevent delivery model. This decision extended the purview of Prevent's work and meant that, in addition to preventing individuals from becoming involved in terrorism, for the first time Prevent would now also encompass the rehabilitation and deradicalisation of those who had already engaged with terrorism.

In January 2019, the government announced a new independent review of the Prevent programme, responding to external pressure and opposition amendments to the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill. Despite some initial obstacles, which included the removal of the first independent reviewer from their post in December 2019 following a legal challenge, and the subsequent onset of the global Covid-19 pandemic, it remains vital that the now-delayed review provides a space for credible, informed evidence to be assessed with a view to shaping how Prevent can evolve and reform to be more effective across the delivery model.

The dominant narrative of Prevent is not positive. Negative stories and allegations about Prevent in the press, which are often disproved but not before they have gone viral, have more cut-through, even though the government has improved reporting and journalist engagement. Rights groups raise concerns through case studies of negative experiences of Prevent, some of which are not factually consistent. These stories can't be dismissed, and the review should be open to all evidence. But a lack of context and at times balance has led discussion about Prevent to become politicised and polarised, with both sides becoming deeply entrenched in arguing that Prevent should either be scrapped in its entirety or that it is already the most effective option in stopping terrorism.

It is inevitable that some groups will oppose Prevent. Our previous report, *Narratives of Division*, shows how Islamist inspired groups have long painted Prevent as biased, conspiratorial and authoritarian. This is an attempt to gain attention, credibility and support.

There is increasing evidence that the far right is now doing the same. Prevent should not be focusing on responding to this minority, but rather the vast majority whose only experience of Prevent is through the media.

Prevent, and those responsible for implementing it, are playing into opposition narratives. The legal challenge and eventual removal of Lord Alex Carlile as the first independent reviewer of Prevent gave activist groups the space to argue that the system is rigged and that there is no viable future for Prevent. Closed-door decision-making that lacks transparent criteria, such as Lord Carlile's appointment, is hard to justify and risks playing into an increasing climate of politicisation around counter-extremism.

This follows successive scandals that continue to undermine community trust in Prevent. The Prevent guidance to universities has been ruled unlawful for potential restrictions on free speech.<sup>4</sup> The *Guardian* exposed a Home Office database storing details of all referees to Prevent.<sup>5</sup> Home Office funding more broadly has been tainted by secretive funding to the Muslim community-led websites This is Woke and SuperSisters, which at times appeared to have no Muslim involvement.<sup>6</sup> The furore over Counter-Terror Policing South-East's advice on Extinction Rebellion in January 2020 only further highlights how important it is to have inclusive, objective discussions on Prevent.<sup>7</sup> Currently debate is split down the middle into support and oppose, leaving little room for constructive dialogue about improvement.

To understand how these views are impacting trust in the programme, we partnered with Savanta ComRes to survey 1,011 British Muslims and 1,011 white British non-Muslims aged 18 to 30 (fieldwork dates 3 to 24 May 2019). This was followed by two five-day-long online focus groups. Their responses explore some of the core issues at the heart of Prevent and its effectiveness.

While the wider polling study touches on a broader set of topical issues, from trust in government and institutions to attitudes towards integration and cohesion, this Prevent-focused paper is intended to supplement the study by diving deeper into a debate that ranks highly for sensitivities, but also seriousness.

Unlike the deeply divided political narrative around Prevent, this paper does not take an all-or-nothing approach. We do not endorse scrapping Prevent or continuing to operate business as usual. Our data points to Prevent's reputation shortfalls but also how it can improve through a credible review and a progressive approach to policymaking and communication.

The report opens with an exploration of awareness and experience of Prevent, before looking at three specific issues – **effectiveness**, **discrimination** and **understanding** – that the review should focus its efforts on to build a sustainable next-generation Prevent. Each section concludes with a point of strategic focus for the review to better understand the challenges Prevent faces.

# Public Awareness and Exposure

People can only trust what they know and understand. To work out how to improve Prevent, we need to know what people think about the programme. To find this out we surveyed 2,000 Britons aged 18–30, with an even split of Muslims and white non-Muslims (WNMs), and carried out online focus groups with 57 participants from across both samples. This focus on young people is vital, because they are the ones both at greater risk of radicalisation and integral to tackling it. We asked:

- What their interaction with Prevent has been,
- What their opinions on the UK's counter-extremism policies are, and
- How they think Prevent currently works.

**Our online focus groups showed that knowledge of Prevent is very limited, and that while British Muslim respondents were more aware of Prevent, most British white non-Muslim respondents had never heard of it.**

“I have never heard of [Prevent]. It’s something I would have loved to have known about or be a part of but clearly this hasn’t been very well advertised.”

WNM, female, aged 22-25, North West

“I have never heard of this programme, is this the ‘say it see it sort it’ programme?”

Muslim, female, aged 26-30, North West

“If [Prevent] is well published and taught to youngsters, then I believe it can make a difference. But the main difference will come from how the government deals with terrorism, rather than blaming Islam and the Muslim people they need to work with people rather than isolating them. If the government is not willing to take this step, then Prevent is a lost cause in addition to anything else they implement.”

Muslim, male, aged 26-30, North West

This points to a significant lack of awareness of the programme among young people. A March 2020 report by CREST echoed our findings: 56 per cent of British Muslims and 68 per cent of the general population said they had not heard of the Prevent programme.<sup>8</sup> Polling of students at universities also showed that 59 per cent had never heard of Prevent, although Muslim students were more likely than those of other faiths to be aware of it.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, very few of the respondents in our wider survey had had first-hand experience of Prevent, with around one in ten having received support through Prevent or knowing someone who had received support (see Figure 3).

In our survey, two in five respondents from both groups think that counter-extremism policies could be improved but are mostly a good thing. Opinion is divided on why policies need improving. For example, one-third think that policies should be harsher in cracking down on extremists (see Figure 4).

Our focus groups were generally neutral or positive about the idea of Prevent, with most participants suggesting that preventing radicalisation is a good idea. Some of the respondents, particularly those from the Muslim group, see it as well-intentioned but badly executed. Muslim respondents who say that the programme needs to be improved in the future criticise Prevent for its disproportionate focus on Muslims and feel vulnerable as they fear that others could report them in everyday situations.

“Having just read about it now I believe it is a positive scheme. By educating people about what terrorism is and who is at threat, it can help people understand the risks of falling across extremist ideas and what to do about it”

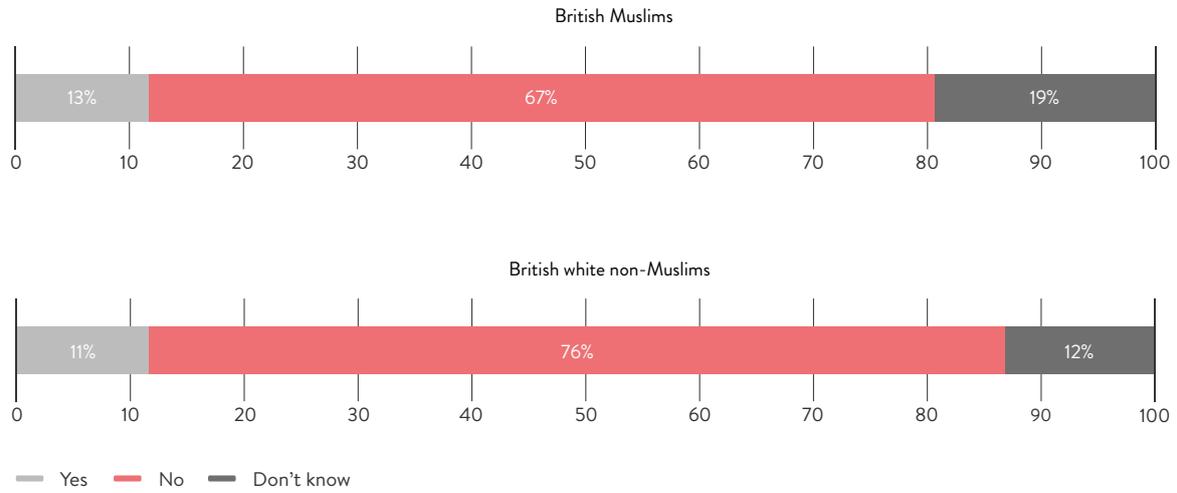
WNM, male, aged 18-21, London

These feelings echo the sentiments of those on the ground, ie, those responsible for implementing the Prevent Duty. A majority of primary and secondary education workers see the programme as a proportionate response to the threat of extremism.<sup>10</sup> In health care, 47 per cent of professionals see Prevent as a genuine safeguarding procedure, with a similar number agreeing that it has a place in health care and that it leads to more open discussions (all these are a majority if those with no opinion or who don’t know are subtracted).<sup>11</sup>

“I have heard about Prevent and have had training in regards to Prevent. It is a strategy that is put in place to help prevent those from being enticed into terrorism. It is a form of safeguarding in our education system, it is to help students be aware of terrorism and extremism. And being alert to whether a child is possibly in trouble, this way helping the child to ensure that they will not go towards this path.”

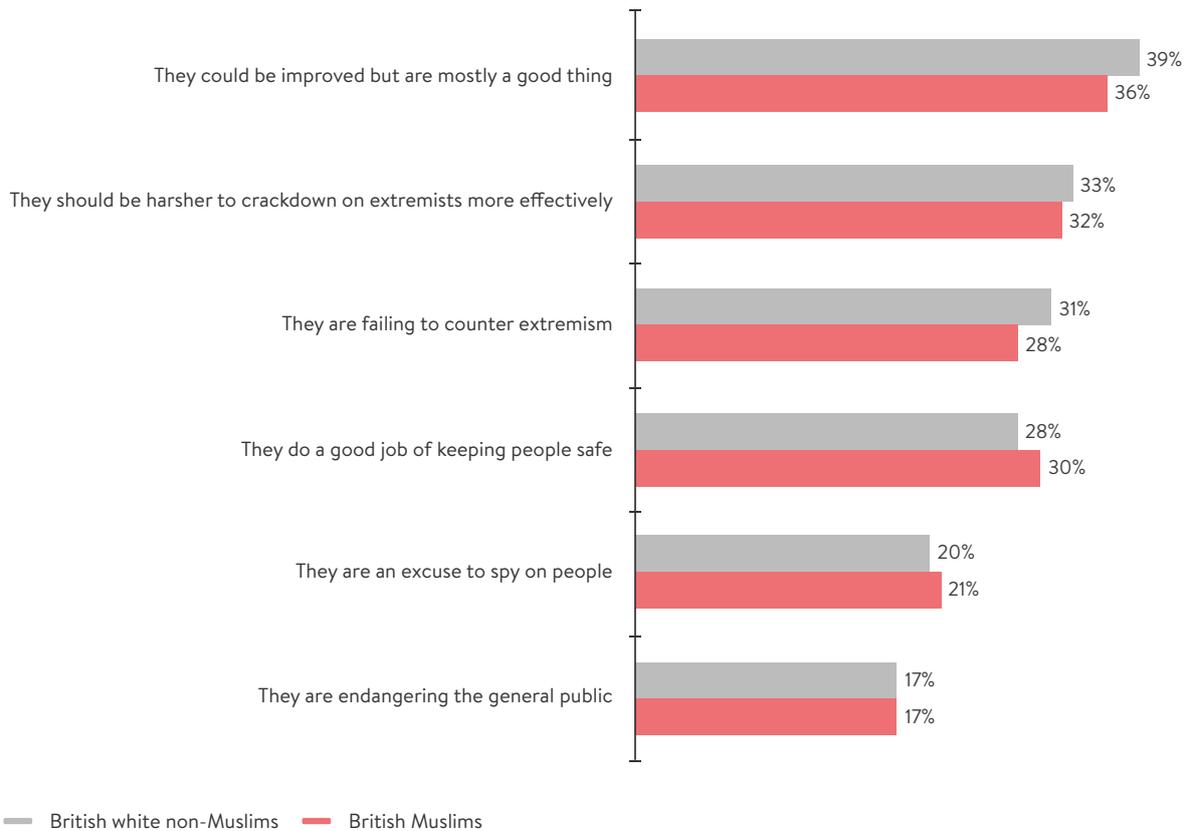
Muslim, female, aged 22-25, North West

**FIGURE 3** Percentage of survey respondents that have, or know someone who has, been through the Prevent programme



Source: Q20. Have you or do you know anyone that has been through the Prevent Programme? Base: Muslim (n=1011), white non-Muslim (n=1011)

**FIGURE 4** Perceptions of Prevent



Source: Q19. Prevent is part of the UK's Counter Terrorism Strategy. Prevent works to stop individuals from getting involved or supporting terrorism or extremist activity. Which of these statements most accurately reflects your views on government's policies to counter extremism, such as Prevent programme? Base: Muslim (n=1011), white non-Muslim (n=1011)

This support among young people and those responsible for Prevent's implementation contrasts with Prevent's framing in the media and the narratives perpetuated by some activists. There is a danger in letting a minority set a tone for the debate that does not reflect the sentiments of the majority.<sup>12,13,14,15</sup> Our survey shows that barely a quarter of Muslim respondents think groups like these – such as Mend, Hizb ut-Tahrir and CAGE – are representative. However, their misleading narratives on Prevent permeate the media coverage of the programme.

### Net percentage of British Muslim respondents in our poll who think these groups represent Muslims in the UK:

- Mend – 26 per cent
- Hizb ut-Tahrir – 25 per cent
- CAGE – 22 per cent

The issue here is not these groups' criticism of Prevent – as with other policy areas, it undoubtedly has failings – but finding constructive responses. If the process of the much-anticipated review is so heavily criticised that groups cannot submit and debate evidence, then improvements will never happen. Instead, the perpetuation of business as usual will allow the continual banging of the drum of opposition, never improving the safeguarding, and rights, of those individuals at risk of radicalisation.

Analysis of Google Trends data shows that of the top ten Google searches over the past five years with the word Prevent, six were related to the Prevent programme. Of the rising related searches, nine out of ten refer to the Prevent programme, as do nine of the ten related topics, with "British values" in top position. Yet there is no single point of information for Prevent. Instead, every institution with a responsibility for Prevent – NHS Trusts, universities, local government and schools – has its own page of Prevent guidance.<sup>16</sup> The result is that those interested in knowing more about Prevent are reliant on the vocal minority and media reporting.

According to the Office for National Statistics, 5.36 million people work in the UK's public sector.<sup>17</sup> Currently these are the only workers legally obliged to implement the Prevent Duty. This leaves at least 27.04 million people working elsewhere (16.5 per cent of the working population) who are not. The Duty is not perfect; its use in settings such as universities has been heavily criticised. But it does bring an obligation for improving awareness, training and understanding.

"I have attended Prevent training in my job in the NHS. I enjoyed the training and it opened my eyes to all the different types of terrorism."

WNM, female, aged 26-30, South East

A widespread lack of exposure was reflected in our online community discussions, where most attendees had never heard of Prevent. Community participants who worked in health care or education were the only ones who could confidently explain what Prevent is and does. This indicates that the public, at least outside the public sector, could be reliant on interpretations of Prevent by others.

With awareness low but interest high, government is leaving a void for information that others are filling. The review is the perfect opportunity to bring information and clarity to a wider audience on what Prevent is and why it is important.

"I have just googled [Prevent] and it seems like a good initiative but I have just read some of the horror stories involving kids."

Muslim, male, aged 26-30, Yorkshire and Humberside

**FIGURE 5** A sample of social media commentary from activist groups relating to Prevent

**MEND Community** @mendcommunity

**This is what happens when you make #Prevent a statutory duty in a climate of anti-Muslim paranoia**



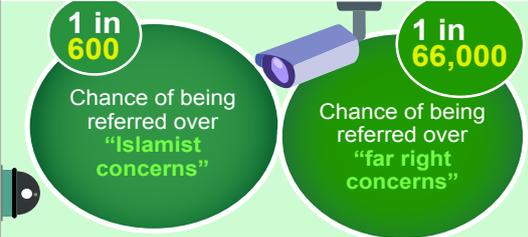
**Alert over Muslim boy's water pistol**  
Police officers were sent to the home of a seven-year-old boy after he boasted of owning a water pistol. West Yorkshire police were tipped off by...  
thetimes.co.uk

12 Feb

**MEND Community** @mendcommunity

**Due to the nature of #Prevent referrals, Muslims are much more likely to be referred than any other group, despite making up only around 4% of the population**

**The overwhelming majority of those referred do not receive "specialist help"**



18 Jan

**Hizb ut-Tahrir** @hizbuttahrir

**Prevent needs to be abandoned not reformed. #hizb.org.uk/view-point/prev...#pve#contest**



31 Mar

**CAGE** @UK\_CAGE

**The Prevent Policy is a sophisticated attempt at social engineering that even the old USSR would have envied. The minds must be controlled in line with the traditional wishes of the Old Establishment. #WhoSpeaksForBritishMuslims**

26 Mar



# The Way Forward

If the first challenge for both the review and Prevent is to make themselves more visible, providing more credible and consistent information, the next stage will need to tackle more difficult and fundamental issues.

**While most people we asked feel counter-extremism policies like Prevent are warranted, a significant proportion see room for improvement.** Thirty-six per cent of young British Muslims and 39 per cent of young white non-Muslims agree that Prevent, while mostly a good thing, could be improved.

Given that resources are not infinite, to improve Prevent and build a credible programme, the review should focus its attention on three key areas of concern among young people:

1. The connection between agreement with extremist statements and exposure to Prevent, ie, Prevent's efficacy.
2. The perception of Prevent as discriminatory.
3. Understanding of the Prevent processes.

## EFFICACY OF PREVENT

Our data points to what could be either a golden ticket or a death knell for Prevent. **Respondents who agree with extremist statements, for example on conflict between the West and Islam, are more likely to have been through or know someone who has been through Prevent.**

Is Prevent finding the right people, or failing to challenge extremist ideologies? Is it turning people against the government?

In our previous reports, *Narratives of Division* and *Narratives of Hate*, we developed toolkits that highlight real-world examples of dangerous extremist rhetoric. These include views on the compatibility of the West and Islam in the UK, a feeling of victimisation and anti-establishment sentiment. We used these toolkits to poll the resonance of extremist narratives in the wider public.

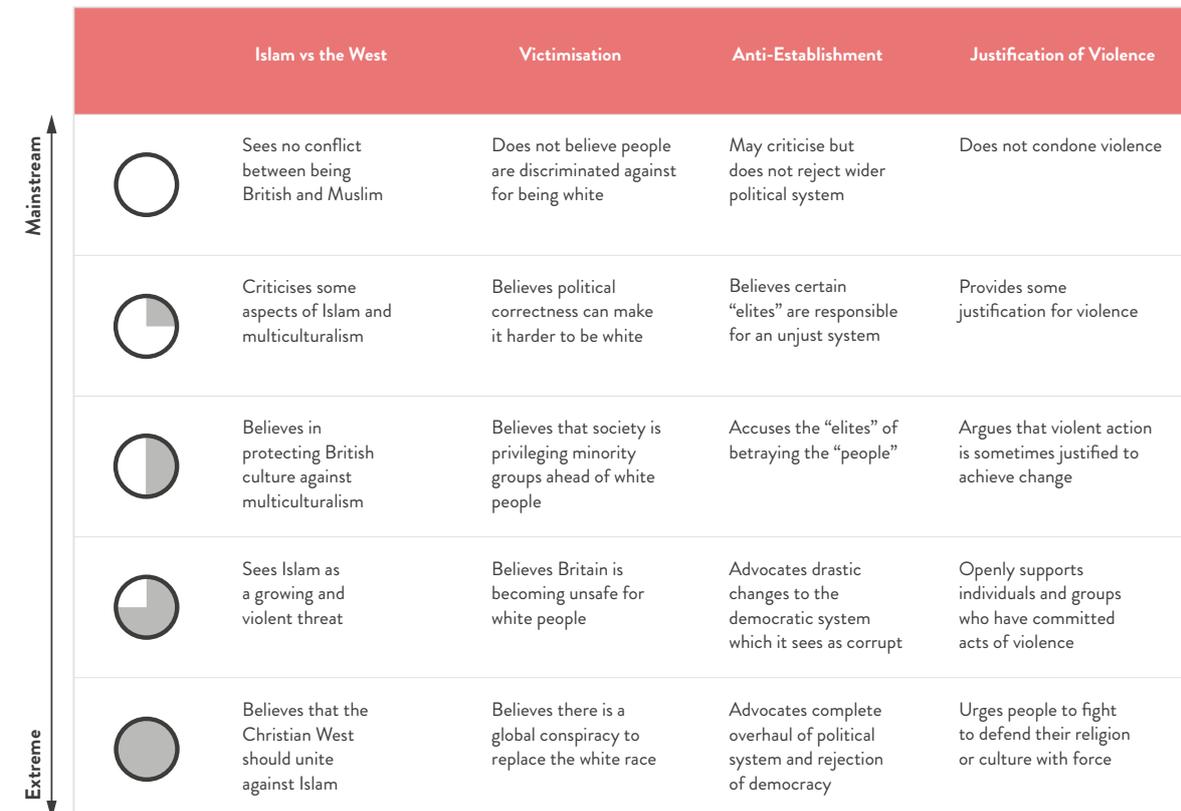
While one in ten young Brits have been through or know someone that has been through the Prevent programme, this rises to over one-third for WNM

and over one-fifth for Muslims who agree that “*conflict between the West and Islam would be a good thing*”. A divisive view of the West and Islam in general is strongly felt by those connected to Prevent.\*

This problem is especially acute for Muslim respondents with a personal link to the programme, with agreement on each of the following extremist narratives testing significantly higher.

- Twenty per cent of those with experience with Prevent (versus 7 per cent) think “*engaging with non-Muslim institutions, like UK politics, means you are a traitor to Islam*”.
- Twenty-two per cent of those with experience with Prevent (versus 12 per cent) agree that all Muslims should “*strive to create a unified Islamic caliphate*”.
- Twenty-nine per cent (versus 17 per cent) agree that “*there is unresolvable conflict between Islam and the West*”.

**FIGURE 6** The language underpinning the ideology of far-right activist groups in the UK



This tendency is not only found in Muslim respondents.

- Fourteen per cent (versus 6 per cent) of WNM who have personally been through or know someone who has been through Prevent agree that *“all Brits should strive to ensure our country is white”*.
- Forty-two per cent of those who have experience with Prevent agree that *“democracy is broken and/or the government should be boycotted”*, compared to 23 per cent who have no experience with Prevent.

This could prove Prevent is reaching people who hold extremist sentiments, or at least those associated with them, implying that existing guidance for identifying signs of extremism is effective.

In the absence of before and after figures, it is impossible to ascertain the relationship between individuals agreeing to extremist statements and individuals having a personal connection to Prevent, and whether Prevent could be hardening beliefs that were previously held. However, while the aim of Prevent is not explicitly to change individuals' beliefs, it is worrying that this subset of respondents has higher-than-average support for violence.

**Twenty-one per cent of Muslims with a connection to Prevent agree “people should be prepared to go out and fight to defend their religion or culture with force”,** opposed to 14 per cent of those with no connection to Prevent.

Yet further evidence in our poll does not necessarily frame exposure to Prevent as an indicator of extremist views. **Muslims who know someone who has been through Prevent are more likely to agree that government aims to make life better for people** – 56 per cent versus 41 per cent of those who have no connection. They are also more likely to agree that government is working in the interest of their community (49 versus 35 per cent), and that they can engage with government to make a difference (49 versus 34 per cent). WNM connected to Prevent agree. They are more than twice as likely to agree that they can engage with government on the issues they care about than those with no connection (49 versus 23 per cent).

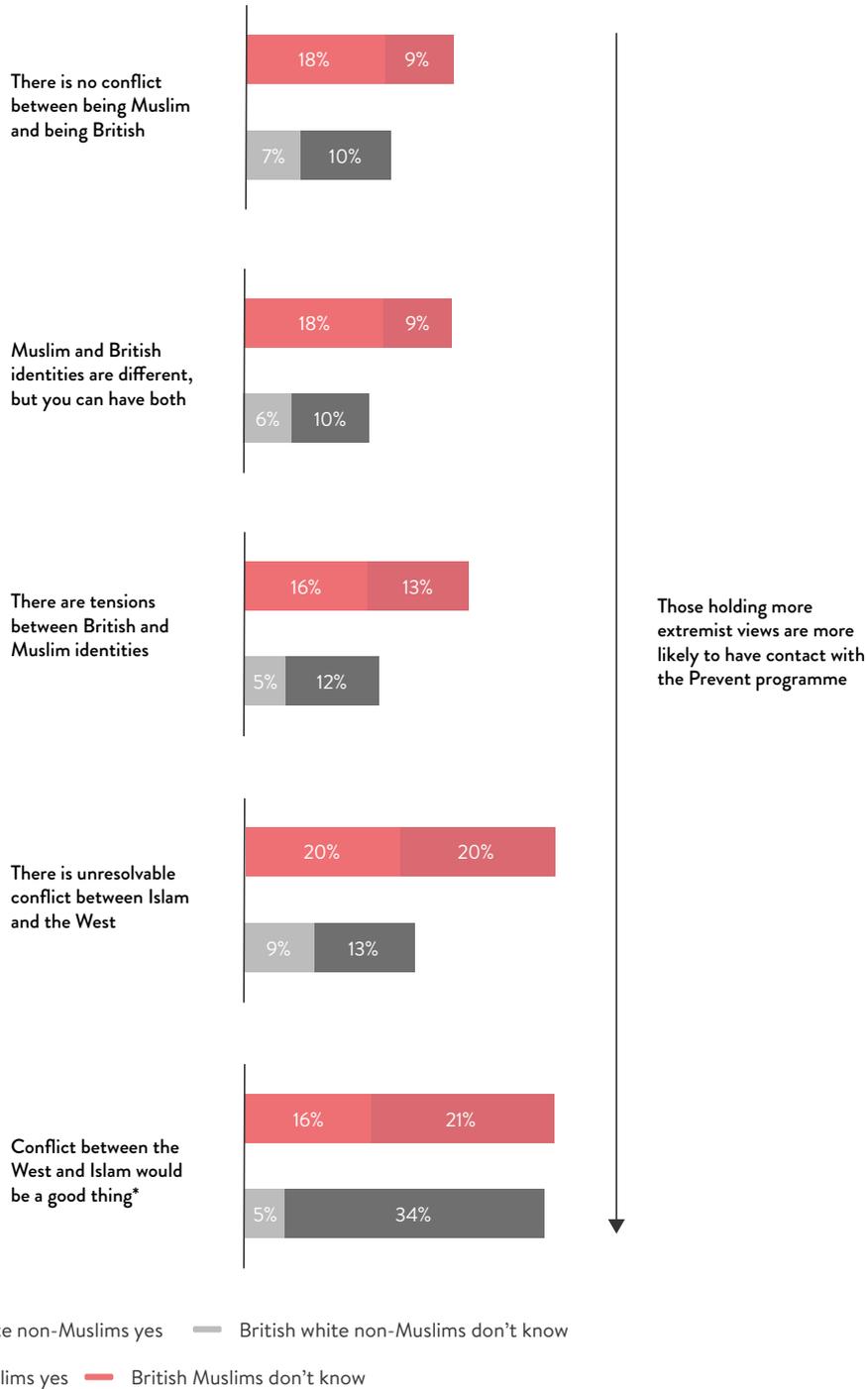
While we cannot prove that Prevent has improved respondents' view of government, this indicates that Prevent exposure is not necessarily correlated with anti-establishment sentiment, a key marker of extremist ideology.

The public discussion of Prevent's database is a prime opportunity to help assess the outcomes of Prevent interventions. Media reporting of the existence of the database claims that referees were not aware of their data being held (few others were either).<sup>18</sup> Yet there is a legitimate security concern with regards to notifying individuals that they have been referred before police can assess that the individual does not pose a security threat. To address this concern, the Home Office should build a process that is ethical and suitably anonymised, screened for security risks and with consent from those on it.

Making this data available to the review and to researchers would improve understanding of the links between extremist sentiment and Prevent referrals. Excellent examples of extremism-related data made easy already exist, such as the *MET Police's crime dashboard*, or the University of Maryland's *START database*. There are challenges: Data quality control is resource intensive, while breaking down this small data set by location, for example, could make it easier to identify specific referrals. However, with more resources and involvement from data scientists, these challenges can be overcome.

There are two areas of strategic focus for the review. First, assess Prevent's use of networks. If Prevent is reaching the right people, is it maximising each referral to speak to wider communities? Second, to rule out the negative reading of our data, the review needs transparency on the efficacy of Prevent interactions. Although research design is challenging in such settings, assessing interventions against publicly set metrics, like those developed by IMPACT Europe, can show whether Prevent is successfully challenging both violence as a solution, and underlying extremist ideologies.<sup>19</sup> IMPACT Europe aims to improve knowledge on counter-radicalisation programmes by assessing and sharing the effectiveness of and evidence for interventions.

**FIGURE 7** How those who have, or know someone who has, been through the Prevent programme view the relationship between Islam and the West



Source: \*Q20. Have you or do you know anyone that has been through the Prevent Programme? Base: Muslims who believe there is no conflict between being Muslim and being British (n=265), Muslim and British identities are different, but you can have both (n=413), there are tensions between British and Muslim identities (n=312), there is unresolvable conflict between Islam and the West (n=178), conflict between the West and Islam would be a good thing (n=96\*), and white non-Muslims who believe there is no conflict between being Muslim and being British (n=169), Muslim and British identities are different, but you can have both (n=386), there are tensions between British and Muslim identities (n=360), there is unresolvable conflict between Islam and the West (n=202), conflict between the West and Islam would be a good thing (n=52\*)

**FIGURE 8** Perceptions of Prevent as discriminatory



Source: Q19. Prevent is part of the UK's Counter Terrorism Strategy. Prevent works to stop individuals from getting involved or supporting terrorism or extremist activity. Which of these statements most accurately reflects your views on government's policies to counter extremism, such as Prevent programme? Base: Muslim (n=1011), white non-Muslim (n=1011)

## DISCRIMINATION

Prevent has long faced accusations that it unfairly targets certain communities. Our data show that this sentiment is held by a minority, albeit significant, proportion of the population. **Three in ten British Muslims in our survey agree that Prevent discriminates against Muslims, a feeling shared by 17 per cent of WNM.** There is also a notable number who feel Prevent discriminates against white people: 12 and 14 per cent of Muslims and WNM respectively.

Most British Muslim participants in our online focus groups were neutral towards the idea of Prevent, although some respondents were skeptical of the way it is carried out and apprehensive of its impact on Muslims. Meanwhile, only a few of British white non-Muslims mention a bias of Prevent towards the Muslim community; however, this perception is by no means mainstream among this sample.

This suggests that perceptions of Prevent being discriminatory are only held by a minority of respondents, rather than the majority.

**“I have distrust towards the government because of things like the ‘prevent’ scheme which discriminates against all Muslims living in Britain and labels as us ‘potential suspects’.”**

Muslim, female, aged 22-25, East Midlands

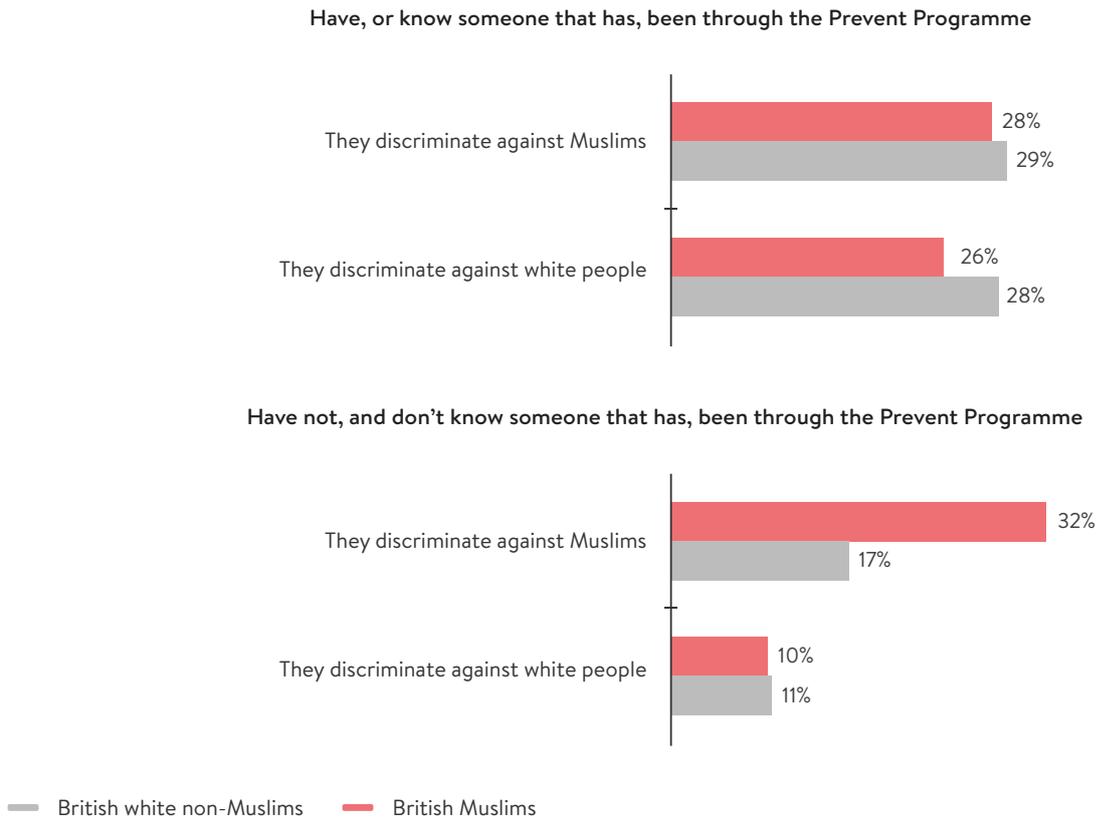
**“The government need to stop portraying a negative image of all Muslims due to the actions of a few who don’t belong in our community. The prevent scheme needs to be changed to stop innocent people from becoming suspects and having to endure invasive procedures in their daily lives.”**

Muslim, female, aged 22-25, East Midlands

**“From what I’ve read and heard, it seems to be having some, if limited, success. Although I have heard that in some cases it’s brought together people with similar extreme views and has also felt a bit stigmatising by the Muslim community.”**

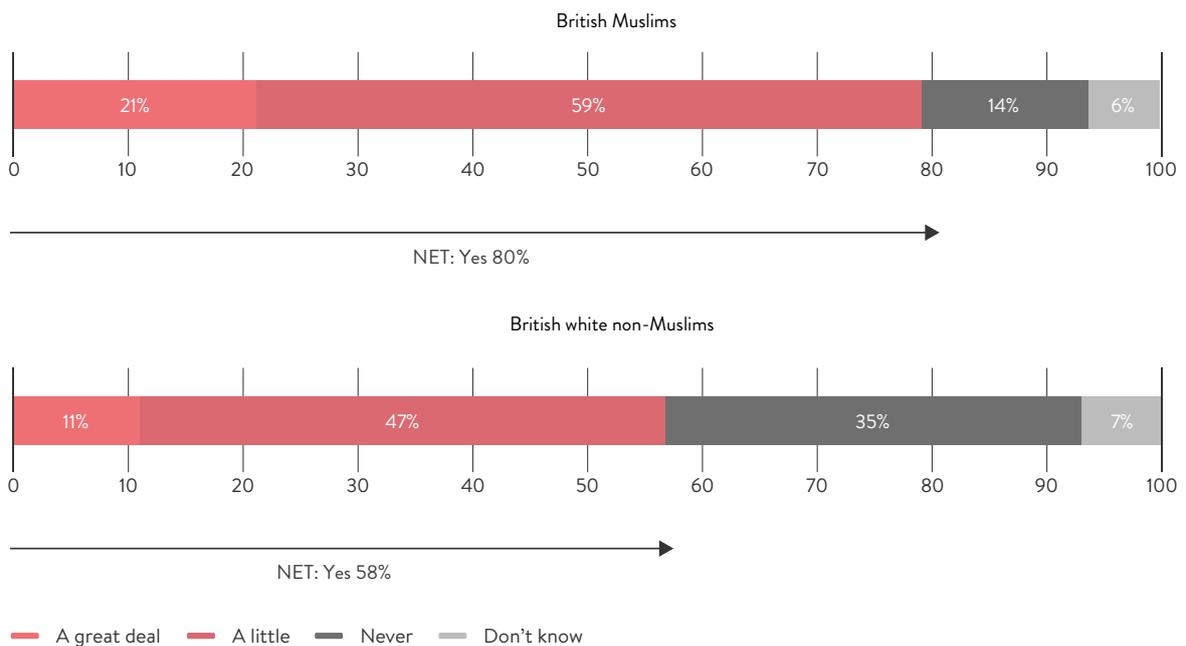
WNM, male, aged 26-30, North West

**FIGURE 9** Views that Prevent is discriminatory among people with connection to Prevent



Source: Q19. Top 3 summary: Prevent is part of the UK's Counter Terrorism Strategy. Prevent works to stop individuals from getting involved or supporting terrorism or extremist activity. Which of these statements most accurately reflects your views on government policies to counter extremism, such as the Prevent programme? Base: Have or know someone that has, been through the Prevent Programme (n=268), Have not, and don't know anyone that has, been through the Prevent Programme (n=1443).

**FIGURE 10** Percentage of respondents who say discrimination affects their life



Source: Q3a. To what extent do you feel that you face discrimination that affects your life? (Base: Muslims n=1011, white non-Muslims n=1011, Male Muslims n=503, Female Muslims n=498, Male white non-Muslims n=481, Female white non-Muslims n=520)

Interestingly, views that Prevent discriminates against white people increases with first-hand exposure to the programme for both samples, while fewer British Muslims who have been through Prevent think it is discriminatory towards Muslims in comparison with those who have not been (28 per cent versus 38 per cent, see Figure 9).

A view that Prevent is discriminatory could be linked to its evolution. Following terror attacks in the early 2000s, Prevent was initially focused on Muslim communities. There were legitimate concerns that the only engagement some communities received was through a security lens.<sup>20</sup> Only recently has Prevent begun to better challenge extreme-right views. While this reflects security realities at a given point in time, it has had an enduring legacy on people's perception of Prevent.

“Initially [Prevent] was set up mainly to target Islamic extremism but I know that the fastest-growing threat re extremism at the moment is from the far-right so I think far-right extremists are now on the Prevent programme.”

WNM, male, aged 26-30, North West

The representation of Prevent referrals by activists may contribute to perceptions of discrimination. In 2017-18 (the most recent data available at the time of the survey), 94 per cent of Prevent referrals for Islamist extremism did not go on to receive Channel support, compared to 87 per cent of far-right referrals.<sup>21</sup> As Channel is the part of the Prevent programme aimed at providing early support to individuals identified as being vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism, such “false referrals” can give the appearance that Prevent is discriminating against Muslims, erroneously accusing them of extremism.

“Prevent disproportionately targets Muslims and the legislation surrounding it is very unclear/murky. It is a way for the state to continue to surveil and criminalise Muslims. No clear parameters as to what is 'suspicious' behaviour and people who may not even know much about what radicalisation looks like are empowered to put forward 'suspects.'”

Muslim, female, aged 22-25, East Midlands

The Channel statistics paint a similar picture. Individuals discussed at a Channel panel with concerns related to right-wing extremism are proportionately more likely to receive Channel support (174 of 427; 41 per cent) than those with concerns related to Islamist extremism (179 of 662; 27 per cent).

But these statistics could also mean that Prevent practitioners are effectively triaging referrals, using non-Channel techniques to deal with concerns. Higher-risk referrals could also be escalated directly to police or Pursue, another branch of CONTEST, the government's counter-terror strategy.

A further factor could be that our understanding of the signs of Islamist extremism may be more developed than for the far right, making it easier for people to identify and make referrals. This is plausible given how long it took Prevent, at least in the public eye, to turn to far-right extremism.

Without transparency on the decision-making by those involved at each stage of the referral process, we are unable to tell where or if discrimination takes place. Essentially, we can deduce why people might feel Prevent is discriminatory, but we do not have the data to say definitively whether it is.

This points to an imperative on transparency for the review. The review needs to assess how and why referrals are made and what happens after. Only then we can properly rectify, if any, the discriminatory aspects of the programme.

If further transparency indicates Prevent is not in fact discriminatory, we still need to understand why this feeling is held. It is likely that this speaks to the wider issue of discrimination in society. **Almost one in four Muslim respondents (23 per cent) who have experience with Prevent agree that anti-Muslim sentiment is widespread in society.** Our previous report, *Designating Hate*, showed that religious hate incidents have skyrocketed in recent years. This is backed up by our survey: A worryingly high proportion of respondents “have experienced discrimination that affected their life” (either a little or a great deal) – 80 per cent of young Muslims. Of British Muslims respondents who feel discriminated, 75 per cent feel that they face discrimination because of religion followed by 59 per cent who feel discriminated against

because of their race. As a point of comparison, 58 per cent of young WNM's felt discriminated, and they were more likely than their Muslim counterparts to feel discriminated against for every trait (age, gender, financial status, sexuality and disability), except when it comes to religion, race and political views.

**“I think we as a [Muslim] community are constantly in fear of being ‘thrown out’ or ostracized to an extent where it is no longer feasible to live in the country we were born and raised in.”**

Muslim, female, aged 26-30, London

**“It is like we are targeted at times. Once I was walking to the polling station and went past a group of young white men and they tried to hit me with their football a few times and tried to throw an egg at me. When all I was doing was walking past them?”**

Muslim, female, aged 22-25, North West

In our online focus groups, many accused the government of propagating hate.

**“And yes its very true that the government has, alongside the media, caused so much fear and hate towards Islam. So many tory MP's have been so openly islamophobic with little consequences in their actions.”**

Muslim, female, aged 22-25, London

Wider concerns of discrimination in society and government seem to tie with Prevent being also seen as discriminatory. For Muslim respondents who face a great deal of discrimination, 37 per cent think that Prevent discriminates against Muslims, while for white respondents in the same scenario, 29 per cent think it discriminates against white people – a significant increase for both, compared to the total sample.

**“When I saw it [training materials] with images of nurses standing next to a hijabi woman telling her to not to forget to suspect I was quite shocked and reminded me of WW2 propaganda.”**

Muslim, female, aged 26-30, London

This points to a parallel process for government after the review: Do more to tackle discrimination affecting communities. Our previous recommendations to strengthen religious hatred crime laws, and bring parity to religious and racial hatred, are important signals to communities of government's commitment to cohesion.

In summary, while it is still a minority who perceive Prevent as discriminatory, this is potentially driven by coverage of referrals, exposure to the programme or how Prevent has developed. We need more data to truly understand this, tackling either the discrimination of the programme or its perception as a priority.

## UNDERSTANDING PREVENT

The final issue in our research points to major misunderstandings in how Prevent works, or even a complete lack of awareness. In our focus groups, awareness of the programme was low in general, with more British Muslims being aware of it than British white non-Muslims, who had never heard of it.

**“I have heard of Prevent but have not heard it mentioned in the media or by the government at all. [...] I believe the government should make people more aware of this as it is not common knowledge.”**

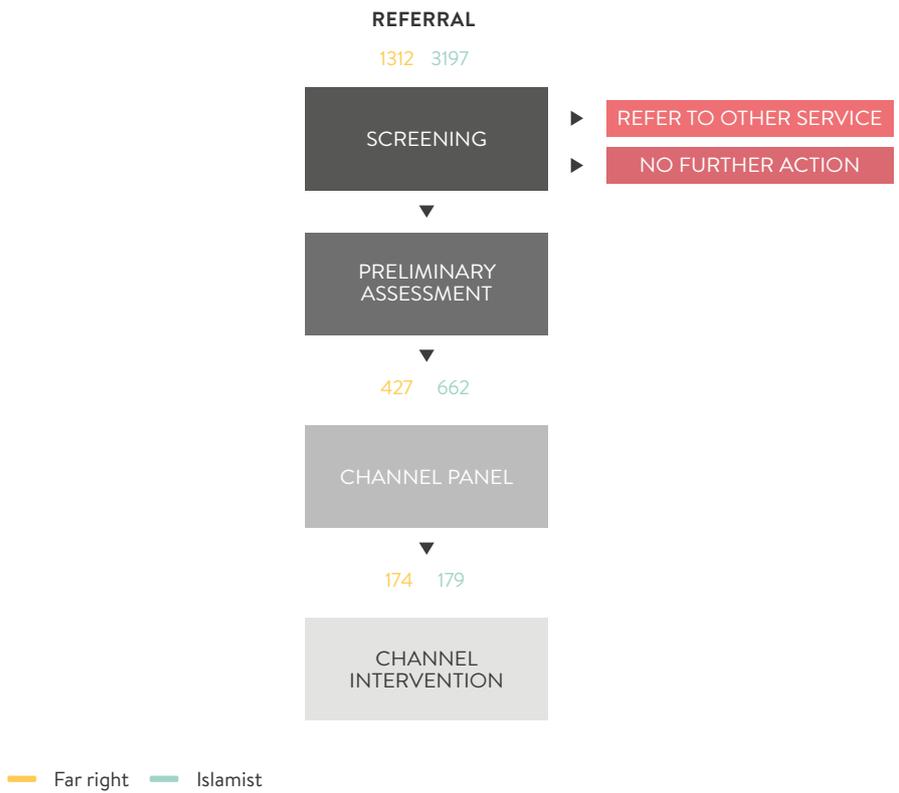
Muslim, male, aged 26-30, North West

**“I have not heard about Prevent before. I do however feel that this is something that should be more readily available. If you type into google 'terrorism prevention' you won't even find 'Prevent' on the whole of the first page. Yet another example where the Government puts helping people somewhere far in the back...”**

WNM, male, aged 26-30, Scotland

Since 2015 the Home Office has published statistics on individuals referred to and supported by the programme. While not referring to individual cases for security and privacy reasons, the statistics show breakdowns including age, gender or type of concern, at each stage. Likewise, type of concern shows whether referrals are related to Islamist, right-wing or other types of extremism.

**FIGURE 11** Home Office data on how referrals flow through the Prevent programme



Source: Home Office, 13 December 2018  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-april-2017-to-march-2018>

The general lack of knowledge was reinforced when we tested respondents’ estimates of referrals. For the minority of respondents who perceive Prevent as discriminatory, we could expect estimates of referrals to reflect opinions of the problem, ie, a higher estimated percentage of Islamist referrals for Muslim respondents could indicate a view that the programme targets Muslims.

One-third of Muslims and white non-Muslim respondents in our survey overestimate far-right referrals to Prevent. On the release of the statistics for the period in which our survey took place (figures are representative of 2017-18, but were published in December 2019, seven months after our survey), most media outlets led with the 36 per cent rise in far-right referrals.

Interestingly, these aggregate estimates are much closer to Channel referral statistics. With the recent rise in the far-right threat, as outlined in our *Narratives*

*of Hate* report, many outlets noted the equal level of Islamist and right-wing referrals receiving Channel support. This suggests referrals could be a proxy for what each group sees as a bigger concern.

Although some Islamist-inspired groups claim that Prevent is targeting Muslims, the **feeling that certain activist groups are representative of wider Muslim opinion is not tied to greater estimates of referrals for Islamist extremism according to our survey**. Even if this understanding is not coming from divisive groups, a significant proportion of British Muslims who feel Prevent is discriminatory overestimated Islamist referrals to account for more than half of all referrals (28 per cent).\* There is also no noticeable increase in referral estimates for those who feel discrimination affects their life. Personal importance placed on religion also does not lead to greater estimates.

Misestimating referrals as an indicator of misunderstanding was further shown in online

community discussions. When respondents were asked if they had heard of Prevent, most prefixed responses with “from what I’ve heard”, “from my understanding” or “only just looked it up”. Those with the most understanding mentioned having received Prevent training in the education sector or the NHS or having learned about it through employers or at universities, with few of them comfortable judging whether it had been a success or not.

“It’s hard to know [whether Prevent has been successful] without knowing how many people are picked up on from this programme. I have never referred anyone or spotted anyone.”

WNM, female, aged 26-30, South East

“I think that generally the UK’s anti terrorism scheme has been very successful, it is just that you don’t ever hear about the failed terror attempts in the media, you only hear about the massive minority that slip through the net. However, I am not sure if this lack of terror attempts is due to Prevent or other schemes.”

WNM, male, aged 18-21, Yorkshire and Humberside

“How can I measure the success of Prevent? There are no hard statistics on the number of people at risk of terrorism or extremism and whether this is declining as the result of Prevent. I’ve had no personal experience or have heard of its use in the local community, so I cannot say if it is successful. I believe Prevent is massively overestimating the number of people at risk, so its impact is incremental.”

Muslim, male, aged 22-25, London

This gap in understanding is a communication challenge for Prevent and the review – particularly as releasing statistics was a deliberate communications effort by government. Understanding is obviously swayed by media reporting and the headline of any given press release, but the context of the statistics is not reaching people. Prevent coordinators need to assess how increasing transparency is communicated, not merely rely on the media to disseminate information.

By keeping data behind closed doors Prevent reinforces perceptions that it is “keeping tabs” on individuals. But there is nothing inherently wrong about retaining data on how Prevent works. Without databases, government could not issue statistical releases. Yet, a perception of secrecy has surrounded the programme and led to a narrative of “exposing Prevent” that government lost control of.

“It mainly seems the whole establishment is built of secrecy; it’s never been made clear or apparent what is done and what changes have been made.”

Muslim, female, aged 26-30, London

The review should focus on how Prevent uses and publicises data. As Google Trends show, there is a strong desire from the public for more information on Prevent. There are already examples of innovative and real-time ways it can help fill the void.

**FIGURE 12** Comparison between official Prevent referrals and estimation by respondents of our survey

Prevent statistics (2017-18, published end of 2018, available at time of the Institute/Savanta ComRes survey in May 2019)

Total number	Percentage of total referrals	Type of concern
3,197	44	Islamist extremism
1,312	18	Right-wing extremism
<b>Channel panel</b>		
662	50	Islamist extremism
427	32	Right-wing extremism
<b>Channel support</b>		
179	45	Islamist extremism
174	44	Right-wing extremism
<b>Estimated referral numbers from respondents to the Institute/Savanta ComRes survey (May 2019)</b>		
Group type	Percentage of total referrals	Type of concern
Muslim respondents	42	Islamist extremism
	31	Right-wing extremism
White non-Muslim respondents	44	Islamist extremism
	33	Right-wing extremism

**FIGURE 13** Headlines relating to the 2018 Prevent Statistics release<sup>22</sup>

Prevent scheme:  
Extreme right-wing  
referrals up by 36%



Number of far-right referrals  
to counter-extremism  
programme Prevent rockets  
36% in a year



Number of people  
referred to Prevent  
programme for far-right  
extremism soars 36%



Surge in far-right  
extremists reported to  
authorities as Islamist  
cases fall



# Conclusion

Covid-19 will only exacerbate the problems that existed before the onset of the pandemic, including issues such as trust in government and public confidence in its counter-terrorism and counter-extremism strategies. Despite the difficulties in prioritising such reviews amid the urgency of the Covid-19 pandemic response across government, it remains vital that the Prevent review does not fall further behind, as it provides a safe, constructive space for reforming and improving the programme to be more effective across the delivery model.

Our research points to recurring and connected issues:

1. Few people have experience of Prevent, but lots of people are interested in learning more. This allows other actors to fill the information void.
2. We are unable to assess whether Prevent is truly tackling extremist ideology.
3. A significant minority of people view Prevent as discriminatory, particularly those who have been through the programme. In the absence of a review, it is impossible to know whether Prevent has been delivered in a discriminatory manner or not.
4. Existing efforts in communication have not cut through and in fact could be contributing to misunderstandings.

With trust in government according to some accounts at an all-time low, the review provides an excellent opportunity to rebuild confidence and prototype a new approach – one that is marked by radical transparency – and processes that both involve and educate the public on government aims, strategy and interventions.

Only by making accurate and timely information on Prevent available to everyone who wants it can we assess it against other safeguarding measures, such as those designed to protect against child exploitation or sexual abuse. This transparency could also help with other questions, such as whether Prevent is the government's only approach to community engagement and whether it is hurting free speech in universities.

Fundamentally, for a programme focused on the public to be effective, it needs the wider public to have trust in its aims and intentions. The only way the government can do this is by providing people with the knowledge and understanding they need to make decisions on their own.

# Methodology

## QUANTITATIVE SURVEY

Savanta ComRes conducted an online survey of 1,011 young British Muslims and 1,011 young non-Muslim white Britons aged 18–30 in May 2019, as well as a regression analysis (Key Drivers Analysis) of the survey data. Data from the online survey were weighted to be representative of:

- Muslims by age, gender, region and ethnicity in Britain.
- White non-Muslims by age, gender and region in Britain.

The aim of the survey was to explore the extent to which the divisive “us versus them” political narratives of Islamist and far-right groups are resonating with young people in the UK. To do this, we designed a list of survey questions that matched each of the categories from the spectra of views identified in our previous reports. We also added questions reflective of a spectrum of views on topics like Prevent.

Within this report, there are references to quantitative data with a base size of less than 100 respondents. This is a result of the niche audience interviewed, and the even more specific subsamples analysed. These are clearly indicated with an asterisk (\*). As a result, those data points should be used for indicative purposes only. This is to be expected, since extremist views are held by a minority.

## QUALITATIVE SURVEY

From 30 September to 4 October 2019, Savanta ComRes ran a discussion with 57 adults of the same characteristics as the survey sample in an online community platform. Respondents engaged in interactive conversations and participated in creative tasks. The research questions for this study were:

- Why do young people not trust the government?
- What could government do to restore young people’s trust in the system?
- Are young people aware of Prevent and what are their perceptions on it?



- 1 We surveyed two specific groups of the population in terms of age (18 to 30), religion (Muslim/non-Muslim) and race (white/other); for this reason, the results cannot be generalised on the level of the whole population.
- 2 As follow-up on the survey, from 30 September to 4 October 2019 we ran a discussion with 57 British adults of the same characteristics as the original respondents through an online community platform.
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