***First Do No Harm: What the British experience of preventing violent extremism in domestic contexts can teach America***

By Tom Parker[[1]](#footnote-1)

Extract: Programs to prevent violent extremism are a relatively new addition to the counter-terrorism toolbox, and have flourished in the post 9/11 era. These rapidly proliferating programs take many forms, but despite their current ubiquity we still actually know very little about which programs work best, and still less about the wider impact that they have on the ‘at-risk’ communities they seek to help. Part of the problem is the idiosyncratic complexity of the drivers of violent extremism, and the unique character of each referral. Another element is the difficulty distinguishing proximity from causation, which is exacerbated by the challenge of quantifying what doesn’t happen and understanding why it didn’t. Finally, there appears to be an underlying foundational assumption in all PVE programming that the problem at issue is entirely on one side, and that there might not be some logic to why individuals have turned to violence as a solution to their grievances in the first place. This often leaves states in denial about structural drivers unpinning the violent extremist movements on their soil. When PVE programming is implemented without nuance and focused on a marginalized community, there is considerable potential that instead of being a palliative measure it can become, no matter how unintentionally, itself a driver of future conflict. The key challenge facing the United States as it confronts a new generation of right-wing and ethnically motivated violent extremists will be to consider whether it is even possible to deploy these new tools in a manner that does not add further fuel to the fire. Drawing heavily on the experience of the United Kingdom's Prevent programme, this article will seek to identify some of the missteps made by previous PVE campaigns that the US policymakers will need to avoid if they are to address this emerging threat successfully.

On 15 October 2021 British Member of Parliament Sir David Amess was stabbed and killed at an open forum for his constituents by twenty-five-year-old Islamic State sympathizer Ali Harbi Ali. It would subsequently emerge that as a teenager Ali had been identified by the UK’s Channel referral mechanism as being at-risk of radicalization by violent Islamist groups and had received several months of voluntary counselling from the United Kingdom’s much-heralded Prevent program.[[2]](#footnote-2) He was discharged from the program after those handling his case concluded that he no longer posed a significant threat. During his trial in 2022 Ali told the Court that he had feigned compliance to mislead his Channel counsellors about his true beliefs and intentions: “I just knew to nod my head and say ‘yes’ and they would leave me alone afterwards and they did.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) is a relatively new discipline in the field of counterterrorism, which is itself a rapidly evolving area of both practice and research. As the name suggests, PVE has evolved from, and thus shares many of the same theoretical foundations as, the closely related discipline of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). The main difference between PVE and CVE programming is essentially the element of pre-emption, the desire to intervene to divert an individual from a potential descent into violent extremism before they have committed any criminal offence. It is this aspect that makes PVE potentially so contentious – PVE initiatives operate in a “pre-criminal space” where no laws have been broken.[[4]](#footnote-4) We still lack sufficient data on the success or otherwise of many of these programs, and while it is possible to quantify manifest failures, such as the case of Ali Harbi Ali outlined above, it is much harder to quantify PVE’s successes and credibly attribute causation to events that did not occur. Indeed, it is quite reasonable to posit that many, if not most, of those individuals referred to PVE programs around the world would not have gone on to be involved in terrorism, regardless of whether or not there had been any intervention by the state. Even more troubling is the possibility that PVE programs may even be pushing more individuals into extremist groups than they pulling out of it. According to an investigation broadcast by the British television news programs *Dispatches* in April 2022, seven of the 13 terrorist attacks carried out in Great Britain in the past five years were perpetrated by offenders known to the Prevent programs. These attacks killed 14 people and injured 128.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In this chapter I will seek to unpack some of the main challenges and shortcomings of PVE programming that have emerged in the past decade. In doing so, I will be focusing on Britain’s Prevent program as it is perhaps the most extensive and mature of such national interventions, and thus also the most extensively studied and reported. In the interests of full disclosure, I must also confess that I was an early advocate of PVE programs and I played a significant role in the drafting of the United Nation’s Preventing Violent Extremism Plan of Action. It continues to be my firm belief that there is much that is worthwhile in the desire to strengthen the resilience of at-risk communities to resist the siren call of extremist voices who often appeal to powerful deep-seated atavistic impulses rooted in identity, race, and religion. Where significant political, economic, and social inequalities exist, such voices can reasonably find an audience in some quarters of a marginalized community, and this is as true for perceived out-groups that might have roots outside a given state as it is for more established nativist in-groups. Or, to put it another way, this is as true in Western nations for immigrant communities as it is for marginalized White ones. Seeking to engage with communities and civil society actors to address such inequalities is a societal good, whether or not it is a successful counter-terrorism strategy. The real challenge comes when you move from the macro to the micro level, and start to grapple with individual cases seeking to intervene directly and purposefully in people’s lives.

*The Social Science of Prevention*

The literature on the causes and processes driving radicalization is constantly expanding and it is increasingly hard for practitioners to keep up. There are many persuasive and broadly compatible theories that have contributed to different PVE programs around the world. An influential 2011 study by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) suggested a binary classification system for the drivers of radicalization, which it divided into “Push and Pull factors”[[6]](#footnote-6) The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in the United Kingdom expanded USAID’s typology to suggest three levels of analysis: structural motivations, individual incentives, and enabling factors.[[7]](#footnote-7) Other theories that have attracted particular attention since the September 11th attacks include Fathali Moghaddam’s “staircase to terrorism” which conceptualizes radicalization as a series of narrowing choices,[[8]](#footnote-8) the four stage model developed by Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt for the New York Police Department (NYPD),[[9]](#footnote-9) the “pyramid model of radicalization” developed by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) as part of the United Kingdom’s Prevent strategy,[[10]](#footnote-10) and Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko’s “twelve mechanisms of political radicalization”, which posits twelve dimensions of radicalization operating at the individual, group, and societal levels.[[11]](#footnote-11) Most of these models share an underlying assumption that radicalization to violent extremism is a progressive process, with distinct phases, thus emphasizing the need for early intervention.[[12]](#footnote-12) Catherine McGlynn and Shaun McDaid have wisely warned policymakers to be wary of the “suspicious neatness of the models and their eye-catching metaphors”, but such models do at least have the merit of offering policymakers a framework around which to begin crafting a response to a multifaceted challenge that might otherwise seem overwhelming.[[13]](#footnote-13) The bottom line, in the words of deradicalization practitioners Daniel Koehler and Verena Fiebig, is that “scholars studying violent radicalization processes agree that these processes are highly complex and individual, and connected to a range of drivers, influences, and pathways.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

In my book *Avoiding the Terrorist Trap* I set out to disaggregate the main ideas that play an active role in these models into five categories: youth and identity formation; empathy for others; membership of extremist social networks; social, economic and political marginalization; and experience of state human rights abuses.[[15]](#footnote-15) The first three of these categories of driver highlight the potential for a youth to make poor choices, to fall prey to powerful, but not always truthful, narratives, and to fall in with or to be born into the wrong crowd. These are in essence all drivers that locate the blame for extremist behavior securely on the failures of the individual, or on the nefarious other, typically a shadowy recruiter preying on the lonely and vulnerable. Indeed, some models, like the Extremism Risk Guidance (ERG22+) framework developed by the UK’s National Offender Management Service (NOMS), even use the language of “conditioning or grooming”, in effect equating terrorist recruiters to sexual predators.[[16]](#footnote-16) To some extent this makes the challenge of preventing violent extremism seem more manageable, creating an operating assumption that if the state can just identify the right individuals before their flirtation with extremist views has become irreversible then the right combination of psychosocial interventions or commonsense engagement can pull them back from the brink.[[17]](#footnote-17) This framing casts the state in the role of protector, shielding the vulnerable from harm. It is a seductive notion, but it strips the potential recruit of a significant degree of personal agency, and assumes that an individual’s reasoning for finding violence an attractive engine of change is inherently flawed and thus can potentially be corrected through reasoned engagement.[[18]](#footnote-18)

However, the remaining two categories of driver commonly found in the radicalization literature turn the focus firmly back onto the state, and this can be extremely challenging for states to respond to effectively, not least because it can profoundly challenge their own deep-seated beliefs and self-image, as well as established political positions. As the former UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, Ben Emmerson, has noted: “States have tended to focus on those [drivers] that are most appealing to them, shying away from the more complex issues, including political issues such as foreign policy and transnational conflicts.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Structural inequalities that lead to social, economic and political exclusion for minority groups can be difficult for states, politicians, and majoritarian communities to acknowledge, especially as they may require compromise or sacrifice to address. State violence, especially when it involves the kind of unlawful acts that fall into the category of human rights abuse, is an even more difficult subject to navigate. Some such acts are contested, the facts in dispute, some, state actors might feel are justified in the circumstances, others, like extraordinary rendition or targeted killing, may even be secret and formally denied. Yet, we know from a wide range of both quantitative and qualitative studies that adverse state security actor conduct is, in the words of a 2017 transnational United Nations Development Programme study on violent extremism in Africa, “a prominent accelerator of recruitment.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Indeed, the preponderance of research suggests that human rights abuses probably rank as the most significant driver of violent extremism of all.[[21]](#footnote-21) Yet because these structural drivers are so much more problematic they feature far less prominently in most PVE programming. This is not to say that some PVE programmes do not try to address social inequalities by providing pedagogical or vocational education opportunities, mobilizing welfare support, or finding space for community outreach or civil society engagement, but the emphasis nonetheless tends to consistently remain on the individual’s need to change, and not society’s.[[22]](#footnote-22)

*The Prevent Programme*

Prevent is one of four pillars of the British Contest counter-terrorism strategy, adopted by Prime Minister Tony Blair’s government in 2003 and first shared with the general public in 2006 – the other pillars being Pursue, Protect and Prepare. In its initial phase, conceptualized in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Prevent’s focus was solely on the threat from international terrorism, specifically that associated with “distorted and unrepresentative” Islamist extremism.[[23]](#footnote-23) Indeed, initial Prevent programmes targeted local authorities with a Muslim population that made up at least 5% of the community, later revised to just 2,000 Muslim residents.[[24]](#footnote-24) Prevent interventions had five enumerated goals: “challenging the violent extremism ideology and supporting mainstream voices; disrupting those who promote violent extremism and supporting the institutions where they are active; supporting individuals who are being targeted and recruited to the cause of violent extremism; increasing the resilience of communities to violent extremism; and addressing the grievances the ideologues are exploiting.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

In April 2007 the Channel programme was established within the Prevent pillar as “a community-based initiative which uses existing partnerships between the police, local authority and the local community to identify those at risk from violent extremism and to support them.”[[26]](#footnote-26) In practice, this has meant empowering parents, teachers, and other public sectors workers to identify the warning signs of radicalization in young people using a Vulnerability Assessment Framework, itself derived from Extremist Risk Guidance developed by psychologists working for the National Offender Management Service (known colloquially as ERG22+ after the 22 key indicators that made up the model). When an at-risk individual is identified utilizing this framework local government officials can then draw upon locally available resources to mount an intervention.[[27]](#footnote-27) These Extremism Risk Guidelines had been originally designed to identify radicalized offenders incarcerated in British prisons, not alienated school children, and this difference in context does not appear to have been significantly addressed by the Prevent materials. Furthermore, the architects of ERG22+, Monica Lloyd and Christopher Dean, readily acknowledged that their guidelines were “a qualitative tool that require[d] a level of professional judgement and experience to be used effectively” and a “political awareness in the area of extremism in question”[[28]](#footnote-28) – qualities most of those at the sharp end of Prevent delivery could not realistically be expected to possess.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Wide-ranging reviews of the Contest strategy took place under successive governments in 2009, 2011, and 2018. In March 2009 the Labour government of Gordon Brown released a revised counter-terrorism strategy known as Contest 2, which significantly widened Prevent efforts to counter “extremism” – not just violent extremism – and specifically “views which fall short of supporting violence and are within the law, but which reject and undermine our shared values and jeopardize community cohesion.” As Anthony Richards has noted, in doing so the Brown government blurred “the important distinction between ‘extremism’ of thought and ‘extremism’ of method”, arguably resulting in a reduced focus on the real threat.[[30]](#footnote-30) Gabe Mythen, Sandra Walklate and Elizabeth-Jane Peatfield further cautioned that “the sheer breadth of this definition potentially criminalizes legitimate political opposition and institutional critique.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Contest 2 also inspired the roll out of new programmes designed to promote ‘British values’, and in doing so it also created a whole new arena of contention, as well as a potential new source of alienation.[[32]](#footnote-32) As Gordon Brown’s successor David Cameron told an audience at Birmingham’s Ninestiles school in July 2015: “Some argue [there is terrorism] because of historic injustices and recent wars, or because of poverty and hardship. This argument, what I call the grievance justification, must be challenged.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

In 2011, Cameron’s incoming Conservative-led coalition government had reorganized the Prevent pillar around three specific strategic objectives: “[R]espond to the ideological challenge of terrorism and the threat we face from those who promote it; prevent people from being drawn into terrorism and ensure that they are given appropriate advice and support; [and] work with sectors and institutions where there are risks of radicalisation that we need to address.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Extremism was now defined as “vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs”, as well as making calls for the death of armed forces personnel.[[35]](#footnote-35) In February 2015 the Cameron government successfully introduced the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (CTSA), which included a provision creating a new legal duty – known as the Prevent Duty - for a range of public bodies including universities, schools, National Health Service Trusts and criminal justice entities to give “due regard to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism”.[[36]](#footnote-36) Workshop materials prepared by the Home Office in 2016 to raise awareness of Prevent within these public bodies noted: “The number of those at risk are comparatively small. However, the risk is there, and the potential consequences of it mean we can’t ignore the possibility – no matter how remote it is.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Such a formulation inevitably creates a bias for action.

The existing publicly available data on the Channel programme is inchoate and hard to investigate in any real depth, which makes it challenging for researchers to produce definitive analysis regarding the success or otherwise of the programme. However, there is much can be interfered from what we do know. There were 4,869 terrorism-related arrests in Great Britain between September 11th 2001 and 31 December 2020 – an average of 270 arrests a year over eighteen years. These resulted in a total of 665 convictions, including 50 convictions for non-terrorism related offences – an average of 37 convictions a year.[[38]](#footnote-38) Between April 2012 and March 2017, 3,251 individual cases were referred to the Channel programme, resulting in the provision of support to 1,316 individuals.[[39]](#footnote-39) The average annual number of Channel referrals was thus roughly double that of the average annual number of terrorism-related arrests, and more than 17 times the number of actual convictions.[[40]](#footnote-40) Ben Wallace, the British minister responsible for security and economic crime, reported that between April 2015 to September 2020 over 780 individuals had left the Channel programme with no further terrorism-related concerns – an average of 130 individuals a year over six years.[[41]](#footnote-41) Of course, this figure presupposes that they posed a genuine threat to begin with. The Oxford University political scientist Karma Nabulsi reported in May 2017 that she had successfully obtained results from a Freedom of Information Act request that revealed that more than 80% of the reports to the British authorities concerning individuals suspected of extremism had been dismissed without further action.[[42]](#footnote-42)

*False Positives*

It is in the very nature of early intervention programs that they focus their attention on younger members of society, including on some occasions, minors below the minimum age of criminal responsibility, which in England and Wales is already a remarkably low ten-years-old.[[43]](#footnote-43) The Prevent strategy has become associated with a number of high profile examples of state overreach involving small children. Three stories in particular stand out. In March 2016 the Guardian reported a Luton mother’s claim that staff at her son’s nursery school had threatened to refer her four-year-old to Prevent after he drew pictures of his father cutting a cucumber with large knife. The child’s pronunciation of cucumber was misinterpreted by teacher as a ‘cooker bomb’ prompting further concern. In June 2021 an 11-year-old primary school pupil was referred to Prevent after a teacher mistook the word “alms” for “arms” when the boy said he wanted to give “alms to the oppressed”.[[44]](#footnote-44) In January 2022 another 11-year-old boy, a domestic abuse survivor with special educational needs, was referred to the Prevent programme after he told another pupil that he wished the school would really burn down during a fire drill. Although the Prevent officer who received the referral decided not to take the complaint any further, the boy’s details were still automatically added to the counter-terror policing database and it took a determined campaign from the boy’s mother to get his details expunged. According to the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC), 415 children under 10, and 1,400 children between 11 and 15-years-old, were referred to the Channel programme between April 2012 and December 2015.[[45]](#footnote-45)

When one considers the superficial level of training that most individuals within the education and health sectors charged with the Prevent Duty actually receive – typically just two to four days – it is less surprising that so many flawed referrals take place. The indicators identified in the Prevent training materials that might suggest an individual is at-risk of being radicalized include “becoming disrespectful”, asking “inappropriate questions”, “absenteeism”, “becoming detached or withdrawn”, “crying”, being “quick to anger” and repeating “scripted speech” – all qualities most of us would already associate with the everyday travails of an ordinary childhood and adolescence.[[46]](#footnote-46) These Prevent indicators were derived from the Extremist Risk Guidance developed by Lloyd and Dean, but ERG22+ was a sophisticated tool designed to be applied by specialists working with convicted adult criminals – not by teachers working with small children. The former UN Special Rapporteur on Counterterrorism and Human Rights, Ben Emmerson, warned the United Kingdom that the introduction of the Prevent Duty would inevitably result in an increase of referrals in part driven by a lack of expert knowledge and a reluctance to take responsibility for difficult decisions: “The lack of certainty about what elements to take into consideration may also lead educators to be overly cautious and needlessly report through fear of sanctions.”[[47]](#footnote-47) This indeed seems to have been the case. Creating a legal duty to intervene inevitably raises institutional concerns about the potential liabilities that may result if the institutional fails to make a necessary referral, thus creating a further structural bias for action. It is always easier to opt for being safe now by referring a potential threat, no matter how remote, to the ‘proper authorities’, rather than to risk being sorry later.

This structural problem is further compounded when viewing radicalization through the lens of vulnerability because this actually makes it easier to carry out interventions that would not be considered reasonable when viewed purely through a security lens. After all, what actual terrorist threat does a ten-year-old boy really pose? Intelligence and security professionals typically assess terrorist threats by considering an individual or a group’s intent and capability to mount an attack. To the best of my knowledge, in the past 150 years there has not been a single terrorist incident in the United Kingdom involving a child aged ten or under as a witting actor in the plot. This begs the question, why would anyone in a position of authority feel it was anyone’s interests to refer 415 cases involving children under the age of ten to the Channel programme in little over three and half years? The framing of vulnerability casts the state, and its proxies, in the role of protector, as acting in the child’s best interests, but it doesn’t take much imagination to consider just how traumatizing a Channel referral must be for young child – and the child’s family. Attiq Malik of Liberty Law Solicitors, who represented the boy who was reported for wanting to give alms to the oppressed, has called for the Prevent programme to be scrapped, observing, “there is no need for a policy which is the equivalent of using a sledgehammer to crack a nut.”[[48]](#footnote-48) It is hard to escape the conclusion that the vulnerability narrative has become a cover for what is still in essence a coercive counter-terrorism policy, simply carried out by other means. Educational researchers Stijn Sieckelinck, Femke Kaulingfreks and Micha de Winter, who have investigated ‘routes to radicalisation’ in Flanders and the Netherlands, argue that when young students engage in hate speech or similarly confrontational behavior they are most effectively engaged “not as villains or victims, but as political agents in spiritual and educational need.”[[49]](#footnote-49) They add: “Unlike the intelligence and security perspective, an educational outlook allows youth, through extensive educational interaction, to probe identities that differ from the expectations and demands by the mainstream environment.”[[50]](#footnote-50) Applying an educational lens is after all what schools and universities are best at.

*Potential Iatrogenic Effects*

In addition to the negative social impact that Prevent interventions may have on referred individuals, criminologists Gabe Mythen, Sandra Walklate and Elizabeth-Jane Peatfield have raised the potential of an adverse clinical reaction occurring in some of those referred as well, comparing it to the medical phenomenon of iatrogenesis – an illness that actually results from the treatment proscribed.[[51]](#footnote-51) Noting that “searching for meaning and identity is precisely what most human beings do most of the time, and young people do this more than most”,[[52]](#footnote-52) Mythen and his colleagues warn that by closing off legitimate avenues for dissent policymakers are also denying many youths from marginalized backgrounds the space to fully explore the complex identities that are often a product of attempting to process and synthesize often conflicting cultural and societal influences. This can be a challenging process, but it is one that the vast majority of people living in multicultural societies ultimately navigate successfully - if left to their own devices. But, as Arun Kundnani notes, one consequence of Prevent is that this is often no longer the case: “For young Muslims in Britain, there is little space to express strongly worded criticisms of foreign policies that have led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands in the Middle East, South Asia and East Africa. Those who denounce such policies are dubbed extremists and seen to be on a pathway of radicalization rather than as fellow citizens exercising their right to dissent. That is bad for civil liberties and bad for countering terrorism - without a legitimate outlet for political grievances, violence is more likely.”[[53]](#footnote-53) Mythen and his colleagues warn that this process of “suspectification” can push individuals into more extreme positions than they might otherwise have adopted, and that by pressuring individuals into counselling or stigmatizing them as potential threats, the state may only be increasing their sense of persecution and alienation, and thus be clinically worsening their disposition.[[54]](#footnote-54) It must be acknowledged that we currently lack sufficient granularity in the publicly available data on Prevent (a common theme) to point to specific individual cases, but with seven terrorist attacks in the past five years perpetrated by individuals known to Prevent programmes, it is seems clear that this is a line of inquiry that merits further investigation.

*Creating Suspect Communities*

‘Suspectification’ is not just limited to individual cases. Writing about the application of the Prevention of Terrorism Act in Northern Ireland in the 1980s and early 1990s, the Belfast-based criminologist Paddy Hillyard coined the term “suspect communities” to describe how the Catholic community in Northern Ireland had come to be treated very differently from the rest of the British population in law, policy, and police practices. Hillyard defined a suspect community as “a subgroup of the population that is singled out for state attention as being ‘problematic’. Specifically in terms of policing, individuals may be targeted, not necessarily as a result of suspected wrong doing, but simply because of their presumed membership of that sub-group. Race, ethnicity, religion, class, gender, language, accent, dress, political ideology or any combination of these factors may serve to delineate the sub-group.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Hillyard argued that the passage of the first Prevention of Terrorism Act in 1974, and specifically the introduction of new offences, wide powers of examination, seizure, arrest and detention, to proscribe selected organisations and to issue exclusion orders, had in effect socially constructed a suspect community on British soil. Hillyard concluded: “To the extent that the legislation is principally directed at Irish people, it is an example of institutionalised racism.”[[56]](#footnote-56)

Tazeen Said was one of the first to draw the parallel between Hillyard’s work and the government’s response to the threat posed by Islamist extremism in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, observing in a report written for the human rights charity Liberty in reference to Hillyard’s thesis: “A decade later, substitute ‘Irish’ for ‘Muslim’ and this could easily be read as a description of the impact and operation of the Terrorism Act 2000 and the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001.”[[57]](#footnote-57) The Muslim Council of Britain also referenced Hillyard’s work in a memorandum submitted to the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee’s hearings on Terrorism and Community Relations in September 2004, noting that once a community is treated as suspect by the police “the public are encouraged to do the same” and warning that this dynamic had led to an “unprecedented boost to Islamophobia which members of the public now recognize as a legitimate and acceptable form of discrimination.”[[58]](#footnote-58)

In the immediate aftermath of the London Transport bombings of 7 July 2005, carried out by four apparently well-integrated Muslim men, three of whom were born and raised in Britain,[[59]](#footnote-59) the Blair government established the Preventing Extremism Together Taskforce which brought together a “relatively wide cross section” of Muslim community representatives to advise the government on how to address home grown extremism.[[60]](#footnote-60) The taskforce submitted 64 recommendations to the government in November 2005, at the heart which was the need to tackle issues that adversely impacted Muslim communities around the country including inequality, discrimination, deprivation, and British foreign policy.[[61]](#footnote-61) However, the government strategy that emerged once more pushed responsibility back on to Muslim communities to take “a leadership stance against sophisticated campaigning and extremist messages.”[[62]](#footnote-62) Furthermore, prompted by a series of riots fueled by tensions between white and Asian youths that occurred across multiethnic communities in Northern England, like Oldham and Bradford, over the summer of 2001, Labour ministers had already become interested in promoting community cohesion by emphasizing shared values. After the London Transport bombings, this policy initiative was also coopted by the Prevent strategy, and statements about “shared values” were increasingly accompanied, or even replaced, in public discourse with the term “Britishness”.[[63]](#footnote-63) However, rather than bringing communities together, this had the reverse effect. As one youth service manager in London told researchers from the Institute of Race Relations: “The push for Britishness causes alienation. We become the ‘other’. We need to be studied, managed, contained. Every conference we go to on Prevent frames things this way.”[[64]](#footnote-64) It was as if the government was, in effect, telling Muslim communities: ‘It’s not us, it’s you’.

Unfortunately, it seems that it was this unintended message that was received most clearly by minority communities. Marie Gillespie, who researched the experiences of British Muslims in the years after the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks, found that “most interviewees feel that they have become more insecure in recent years and most are more afraid of the consequences of security policy than of terrorism. These include ‘casual’ everyday racism, state surveillance, arrest and detention, creeping militarism and threats to civil rights and traditions of democracy and the rule of law… A large proportion of racialism minorities base their fears on personal experience of stop and search, identity checks and temporary detention.”[[65]](#footnote-65) Lee Jarvis and Michael Lister convened a series of linked focus groups to consider the impact of anti-terrorism measures on minority communities, and similarly found that many of their Black and Asian participants stated that “the pull of terrorist suspicion has made it more difficult for them to identify, and be identified by others, as British” and reported “a profound loss of rights… an inability to participate politically and skepticism about meeting citizenship obligations.”[[66]](#footnote-66) Especially troubling in this regard is the fact that the 2011 Prevent Strategy actually identified perceptions of discrimination, experience of racist or religious prejudice, and “a negative view of policing” as potential risk indicators, creating something of a self-fulfilling prophecy.[[67]](#footnote-67) As Christina Pantazis and Simon Pemberton have noted: “The demarcation of a specific social group as a suspect community arguably serves to generate fear of this social group amongst wider society.”[[68]](#footnote-68)

After a visit to the United Kingdom in April 2017, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Maina Kiai, expressed concern that, by fostering suspicion and giving little clear direction, Britain’s Prevent strategy was “having the opposite of its intended effect - by dividing, stigmatizing and alienating segments of the population, Prevent could end up promoting extremism, rather than countering it.”[[69]](#footnote-69) Each new scandal associated with Channel programme simply served to magnify this sense of victimization, while, at the same time, government defensiveness led to the dismissal of community concerns by government spokespersons. A vicious circle of cause and effect had been created, widening divisions, accentuating differences, and actually undermining community cohesion. Dr Layla Aitlhadj, the Director of Prevent Watch, told reporters in June 2021: “Historically, the government response has been to play down such incidents as misapplications and anomalies that can be fixed. However, such cases show quite the opposite - that Prevent injects suspicion and discrimination deep into the imagination of frontline workers to the detriment of Muslims.”[[70]](#footnote-70)

*Human Rights Concerns*

The United Nations Human Rights Committee has urged Member States “to ensure that any measures taken to prevent and counter violent extremism comply with all their obligations under international law, in particular international human rights law, international refugee law and international humanitarian law.”[[71]](#footnote-71) However, if one views the Prevent strategy through a human rights lens a number of further troubling issues arise. At a minimum, Prevent initiatives could be interpreted as impinging upon the right to privacy (and to be protected from arbitrary and unlawful attacks on one’s honour and reputation); the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; the right to freedom of Information, opinion and expression; the right to liberty and security of person; the right to liberty of movement; the right to family life;[[72]](#footnote-72) the right to take part in public affairs; the right to freedom of association; the right to not be discriminated against; the presumption of innocence; and the right to due process. That is quite a long list. Some of these rights can legitimately and lawfully be limited or qualified – either as explicitly outlined in the text of individual treaties or balanced against the rights of others or in certain circumstances against the wider public interest including national security – but the last three rights - the right to not be discriminated against, the presumption of innocence, and the right to due process - are considered to be universal and absolute.

One major challenge posed by many PVE initiatives is exactly where one locates them on the legal spectrum. The framing that occurs around vulnerability and social welfare is clearly intended to distinguish such initiatives from law enforcement or security intelligence activities, but at the same time it is equally clear that the stigma associated with PVE programming can have an extremely detrimental effect on an individual’s standing within society and potentially also on the full enjoyment of his or her protected rights. This is especially true when, as the current UN Special RapporteurFionnuala Ní Aoláin has noted, laws, policies and programs seek to regulate “extremism” - as opposed to violent extremism - a concept, which she reminds us, has “no purchase in international law and domestic law”.[[73]](#footnote-73) There are four over-arching human rights norms that govern all interactions that take place within the rubric of the criminal justice system between law enforcement agents and members of the public suspected to have breached the law or to pose a threat to public safety – that any action undertaken by those law enforcement agents be lawful, reasonable, necessary and proportionate. These seem to be useful guiding principles to apply to PVE initiatives as well, and it is clear from some of the examples offered above that, while lawful, many past Channel referrals would likely fail the reasonable, necessary and proportionate tests.

In cases that directly concern children a further body of human rights law applies, codified in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which entered into force in 1990 and is the most widely ratified of all UN conventions. The Convention distinguishes childhood from adulthood, establishes that childhood lasts until age 18, and describes childhood, the words of the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), as “a special, protected time, in which children must be allowed to grow, learn, play, develop and flourish with dignity.”[[74]](#footnote-74) The former UN Special Rapporteur Ben Emmerson advised UN Member States in 2016 that they should be guided by the Convention in any and all circumstances in which children come to notice of the authorities in the context of counter-terrorism operations, and that the best interests of the child should always be states’ primary consideration.[[75]](#footnote-75) He also recalled that the Convention required states to take suitable measure to ensure “the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the opinions or beliefs of the child’s parents, legal guardians, or family members.”[[76]](#footnote-76)

*Missed Opportunities?*

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that a number of individuals who have gone on to carry out acts of terrorism in the United Kingdom have passed through institutions targeted specifically by the Prevent pillar without triggering a Channel intervention. Perhaps because the Prevent model fails to adequately ascribe individual agency to potential violent extremists by relying so heavily on a vulnerability-based “grooming” narrative, it appears to miss some very real threats.[[77]](#footnote-77) Not every potential violent extremist presents as being vulnerable. Some individuals – like Sir David Amess’ killer Ali Harbi Ali – are more than capable of living a double life and presenting one face to the world around them while harboring very different views in private. Roshonara Choudhry, a promising 21-year-old university student who had walked away from her studies at a leading London university shortly before stabbing and severely wounding Labour MP Stephen Timms at a constituency surgery in May 2010, told police officers after her arrest: “I didn’t wanna tell anyone because I know that if anybody else knew, they’d get into trouble ‘cos then they would be like implicated in whatever I do, so I kept it secret.”[[78]](#footnote-78) When Roshonara Choudhry was asked by police officers who had pushed toward watching sermons by US-born Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula theologian Anwar al-Awlaki, she replied: “No one, I just found them really interesting ... I became interested in Anwar al-Awlaki's lectures because he explains things really comprehensively and in an interesting way so I thought I could learn a lot from him and I was also surprised at how little I knew about my religion so that motivated me to learn more.”[[79]](#footnote-79) Roshonara was completely unknown to the authorities when she launched her attack.

We also have the case of 22-year-old Salman Ramadan Abedi, who detonated a suicide bomb outside the Manchester Arena in May 2017 killing 22 people and wounding 250 others. Abedi attended Burnage Academy for Boys, Manchester College, and Salford University. However, despite multiple potential red flags, Abedi escaped meaningful attention from the authorities. Secret testimony delivered before the Public Inquiry initiated into the events surrounding the Manchester Arena attack [still ongoing at the time of writing] has established that Abedi had come to the notice of the British Security Service (MI5) on several occasions in the years before the attack, that he was known to be in contact with convicted terrorist recruiter Abdalraouf Abdallah, that he had travelled to Libya to participate in the fighting that followed the collapse of Colonel Gaddafi’s regime, and that had even been briefly considered for a Prevent referral, although the context for this is currently unclear.[[80]](#footnote-80) Disappointingly, the Prevent programme has been less than transparent about its failures, which in itself is an important shortcoming. However, one possible explanation for the lack of state intervention in this instance could be that Abedi’s very agency meant that his case was dealt with through a security lens, rather than a vulnerability lens, which requires a higher threshold for purposeful state action. The Manchester Arena bombing is still most serious terrorist incident to strike the United Kingdom since the 2005 London Transport bombings.

*Lessons Learned*

While the United Kingdom’s Prevent strategy was initially designed to combat the threat from violent Islamist extremism, it has over time evolved to encompass other strains of violent extremist activity, including extreme right wing activism. What can be said with certainty about the Prevent strategy’s contribution to the fight against Islamist terrorism is that it has clearly not proved to be a “magic bullet”.[[81]](#footnote-81) As documented above, some individuals referred to the Channel programme have gone on to commit acts of terrorism. There has not been a noticeable reduction of terrorist incidents in the United Kingdom and, even if there had been, it would be nearly impossible to demonstrate a direct causal effect resulting from the Prevent strategy since so many other potential variables exist. It is reasonable to conclude that in some cases Channel interventions may have succeeded, although proving what would have counterfactually occurred absent this intervention is also near impossible, but equally it is reasonable to conclude based on public opinion surveys of minority groups’ negative experiences of British counter-terrorism measures, as well as established criminological phenomena such as ‘suspectification’ and iatrogenesis, that in some cases these interventions may have exacerbated previously existing hostility towards the British state.[[82]](#footnote-82) As Christina Pantazis and Simon Pemberton have argued: “It is difficult to see how… skillful, yet ultimately fragile, ‘soft approaches’ can thrive, when the full weight of state suspicion and the brutality of ‘hard’ methods have fallen on these communities.”[[83]](#footnote-83)

So what, if anything, can Britain’s experience of the Prevent strategy teach us about addressing the threat of Racially and Ethnically Motivated Terrorism (REMT) in the United States? What the British government refers to as Extreme Right Wing (XRW) terrorism was explicitly added as a focus area to the Prevent strategy, and by extension to the Channel programme, in 2011, and as one might expect in the years that followed there was an incremental increase in the number of XRW-related referrals.[[84]](#footnote-84) Britain has a very modest history of low-level XRW violence with the worst incident of the past three decades occurring in April 1999 with the detonation of three nail bombs in areas of London associated with minority communities by the Neo-Nazi David Copeland. A British Member of Parliament, Jo Cox, was also murdered in June 2016 by a right-wing extremist, Thomas Mair. There are currently four XRW groups proscribed by the British government: National Action since 2016, *Sonnenkrieg* Division (SKD) since February 2020, *Feuerkrieg* Division (FKD) since July 2020, and The Base since July 2021. Oddly the best known British XRW group, Combat-18, has not been proscribed in the UK although members are banned from joining criminal justice entities. However, it must also be acknowledged that there has been no evidence to suggest that XRW groups in the UK have ever managed to progress to a level of capability where they were able to sustain a terrorist campaign, and that the major incidents which have occurred in the past twenty-five years or so can mostly be ascribed to lone actors at best inspired by, rather than acting under the direction of, the proscribed XRW groups and other aligned sympathetic organizations like Combat 18 and the English Defence League (EDL).

The current threat posed by XRW actors is therefore quantifiably of a lower order of magnitude than that posed by supporters of *al-Qaeda* or ISIL, and mostly relates to violent extremist rhetoric rather than actual violence or terrorism. Admittedly, since March 2017, British counter-terrorism police and the intelligence services claim to have interdicted twelve “terrorist plots” inspired by extreme rightwing terrorist ideology.[[85]](#footnote-85) Furthermore, 41% of terrorism-related arrests in 2021 related to XRW activity, and the Metropolitan Police’s Head of Counter-Terrorism, Matt Jukes, told reporters in March 2022 that 19 out of 20 children who had been arrested in the previous 12 months for terrorism offences were linked to XRW ideologies.[[86]](#footnote-86) However, suspected plots and arrests are not the same as cases proven in a court of law and convictions upheld. If we look at these, the numbers are far less intimidating. Indeed, an MI5 Strategic Intelligence Group paper issued in January 2020 acknowledged that “the official number of [XRW] attacks has not increased significantly in recent years.”[[87]](#footnote-87) The last successful XRW attack occurred in June 2017 when Darren Osborne drove a hired van into a crowd of worshippers outside Finsbury Park mosque, killing one and injuring ten. The total number of recorded victims killed by right-wing terrorism in the UK still remains in single figures. It is hard to escape the conclusion that despite the hype, the XRW threat in the UK is still more smoke than fire, which raises the question of the Prevent strategy’s potential role in the escalating figures reported by the authorities. Has the threat really increased or has an increased focus on XRW issues simply generated more and more false positives? It is extremely hard to say with any certainty, and this is an area that requires further independent research and greater transparency regarding government data.

If the Prevent strategy had not already existed it is unlikely that there would have been a pressing need identified to develop such a pervasive national policy tool to respond to the threat posed by XRW groups. Indeed some researchers, like Craig McCann, have suggested that XRW was only added “to demonstrate a parity of response to Muslim communities alienated by the previous iterations of the Prevent strategy.”[[88]](#footnote-88) This is precisely the kind of mission creep that is predicted by Jerry Pournelle’s *Iron Law of Bureaucracy.* Pournelle argued every public sector institution is sooner or later captured and controlled by those who put the need to sustain and protect the institution above the explicit purposes for which it was created, and pointed to the growth of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) in the United States as an example of his *Iron Law* in operation.[[89]](#footnote-89) It could be argued that the Prevent strategy has followed a very similar trajectory, being progressively widened in its scope and application, and with additional powers such as the Prevent Duty being bestowed on its administrators. The most recent Prevent data from 2020-2021 showed that of a total of 7,000 preliminary referrals over a one year period, 1,680 cases were connected to Islamist extremism and 1,540 due to Extreme Right-Wing activity.[[90]](#footnote-90) It is hard to escape the conclusion that this number of referrals is greatly out of proportion to the XRW threat that has actually materialized to date, and that perhaps confirmation bias within the Prevent programme may be playing an outsize role in the identification of these referral subjects.

It is also worth noting that there has been no attempt on the part of British government officials to extend the Prevent programme to Northern Ireland as a potential tool to tackle extreme republican or loyalist activity. The Troubles in Northern Ireland claimed more than 3,500 lives between 1969 and 1998 and, while the Peace Process continues to endure almost twenty-five years since the conclusion of the Good Friday Agreement, tensions have grown over the past decade and there has been a reemergence of a low-level threat of terrorist violence, with the clear potential to worsen. If Prevent is a reliable tool for deescalating extremist violence there would seem to be an obvious argument for its application in Northern Ireland, but it is not an argument anyone in authority has seen fit to make. It is perhaps instructive to ask why. One possible answer is that there is a tacit recognition that historical injustice and social marginalization are indisputably part of the Catholic experience in Northern Ireland, and as such are understood to be the primary drivers of violence in the Province. As a result, less emphasis is intuitively placed on personal vulnerabilities to recruitment since Catholic antipathy to the British state is not uncommon and to a certain extent normalized. Another potential explanation, perhaps more relevant to the American context, is that in the highly polarized context of the Northern Irish Assembly - dominated by two implacably opposed political parties, *Sinn Féin* and Democratic Unionist Party, both formerly closely associated with sectarian paramilitary groups - extremism is already so closely entwined in quotidian political life that the Prevent strategy, which has so comprehensively and unhelpfully blurred the line between extremism and terrorism, is simply too blunt an instrument to be useful.

*Conclusion*

It is incredibly challenging to assess with confidence the positive impact of PVE programmes, reliable data is both hard to come by and hard to quantify. This is as true of the British Prevent programme as of any other. Indeed, as the former Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS) officer Phil Gurski has observed: “This is, in many ways, an unfair question and akin to asking a doctor how many cancers were prevented by good living habits. In short, we don’t know.”[[91]](#footnote-91) Many PVE programmes – such as those aimed at improving the life skills of young people, providing counselling and mentorship, promoting critical thinking, reducing unemployment, or encouraging participation in civic life - are unquestionably a good thing, but do they stop terrorism? That is a much harder question to resolve. How to do you prove someone has successfully been deterred from committing an act of terrorism when the original assessment that the individual posed a potential risk is essentially speculative and may be itself flawed - especially when one takes into account the possible cross-cultural misunderstandings and misconceptions, as well as the inherent biases of those making the assessment, which might have influenced the initial referral? As the architects of the ERG22+ framework which underpins so much of the Prevent strategy so clearly apprehended, a few days of training is surely not sufficient to eliminate such risks.

For US policymakers, beyond the potential risks and flaws in the Prevent strategy identified above, there are three further issues to consider from a specifically American perspective. First, by American standards, the United Kingdom is a highly centralized state and the government of the day has the means at its disposal to ensure the uniform national implementation of policy initiatives at local community level. The federal structure of the United States does not afford the United States Government the same power, and implementing a comprehensive nationwide Prevent-style initiative would face perhaps insurmountable jurisdictional challenges. It is hard to see how a jigsaw of disparate state programmes would effectively cohere – especially in a landscape of heavily polarized ‘red’ and ‘blue’ states. Furthermore, because of the tragic history of school shootings in the United States many local school boards already have a range of early intervention policies in place to identify and intervene to support alienated youths. It may be that the United States already has some very effective mechanisms for confronting the threat of REMT operating under the counter-terrorism radar at the local level. This could be a fruitful area for further research.

Second, an important takeaway from the British experience is that the national security frame within which Prevent operates is itself often a major source of friction, and that traditional social welfare or educational mechanisms may ultimately be more effective in preventing violent extremism because they fall outside the orbit of security agencies. Careful consideration should be given to how pre-emptive US government interventions – especially those that would likely fall primarily on children – might be received by wider political constituencies that often fall prey to what Richard Hofstadtler famously described as “the paranoid style in American politics”.[[92]](#footnote-92) Long before Q dropped his first breadcrumb and the radical right fringe developed an obsession with imaginary pedophile rings operating out of pizza parlours in Washington DC, neo-Nazi and white supremacist movements in the United States have indulged in all manner of lurid conspiracy theories about the federal government, which gained dubious currency in the wake of emblematic confrontations between likeminded individuals and federal law enforcement agents. The 1992 Ruby Ridge stand-off in Idaho and the 1993 Branch Davidian Sect Compound siege in Texas were both cited as justification for the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City by the far-right bomber Timothy McVeigh.[[93]](#footnote-93) There would be a very real danger that the introduction of PVE programmes targeting REMT-affiliated extremist youths would simply ‘suspectify’ a large segment of population and end up exacerbating existing anti-government narratives, adding further fuel to the paranoid fantasies that appear to underpin many of the REMT groups and militias currently active across America.

The third challenge relates to the high degree of polarization within mainstream political parties in the United States. Even in the considerably less febrile atmosphere of British politics, Sir Peter Fahy, formerly the national police lead for Prevent told the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights in July 2017 that he was concerned that police chiefs would inevitably come under pressure from MPs and others to use Prevent powers in inappropriate situations, for example to silence unwelcome dissent.[[94]](#footnote-94) Arun Kundnani similarly cautioned in relation to plans to extend the Prevent strategy: “The danger is that the distinction between ‘moderate’ and ‘extremist’ is flexible enough to be exploited by government to marginalize those who are critical of its policies.”[[95]](#footnote-95) There is a very real concern that PVE policies may be captured or expanded to make partisan political points or to demagogue already marginalized communities, rather than delivered in line with evidence-based policy research. The August 2022 Conservative Party leadership election in the United Kingdom, which saw one of the two penultimate candidates, Rishi Sunak, seek to burnish his patriotic credentials by pledging to extend the Prevent strategy to encompass those who “vilify” Britain, is an instructive case in point.[[96]](#footnote-96) Given that some right-wing political figures and media commentators in the United States, including former President Donald Trump, have previously described social justice protesters, including some inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, as terrorists, it is easy to envisage how similar powers might be abused in the current American political environment.[[97]](#footnote-97)

Finally, it is worth remembering that Prevent was meant to be “quite an enlightened and progressive idea.”[[98]](#footnote-98) In conception, Prevent was intended to be a collaborative venture between the state and at-risk communities, a ‘soft’ alternative to police action, but in execution it became, albeit unintentionally, something perceived as being much more coercive.[[99]](#footnote-99) Unfortunately, in the words of Arun Kundnani, if the objective of Prevent was to win the trust of Muslims in Britain, “its failure cannot be overstated.”[[100]](#footnote-100) The bottom-line is that the British experience shows that there can be a significant political and societal price to be paid for addressing the social challenge posed by youthful flirtations with violent extremism exclusively through a security lens. Other pre-existing approaches anchored in welfare and educational service providers may actually prove to be equally, if not more, effective, with fewer downsides. In addition, policies enacted in willful blindness of some of the structural factors that can also serve as significant drivers of violent extremism, especially those grounded in historical injustice or contemporary prejudices, only serve to reinforce the significance of those drivers and credibility of violent extremist narratives.

It is hard to know what course of action to suggest to American policymakers at this juncture that won’t end up making an already volatile situation worse, and we should acknowledge that XRW violence is already a far greater threat in the US than it has ever been in the United Kingdom. In such circumstances, I am always drawn to the clinical injunction: “First, do no harm.” There are PVE interventions, which I have described above, that are relatively politically uncontentious and contribute obvious social goods to society, and these are worthy of government’s attention. Otherwise, the British experience suggests that securitizing welfare and educational spaces offers little added value to ensuring public safety, and may actually do more harm than good. We should also have more faith in our own core values and the values of liberal democracy, but perhaps instead of seeking to vilify those who criticize our values we should focus more on actually living up to them ourselves. In the past two decades since the 9/11 attacks many democratic states have compromised on those values and in doing so eroded public trust in critical institutions and undermined many of the shared narratives that bound together their populations. The former UN Special Rapporteur Ben Emmerson has observed that “the creation of open, equitable, inclusive and pluralist societies, based on full respect for human rights and with economic opportunities for all, represents the most tangible and meaningful alternative to violent extremism and the most promising strategy for rendering it unattractive.”[[101]](#footnote-101) This is a vision that we seem to have lost sight of in recent years, and in doing so we have alienated fellow citizens and potential allies alike. If we can get back to building that shining city on a hill perhaps today’s tensions will subside somewhat. Or, to put it another way, perhaps it’s less about them, and more about us.

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7. James Khalil and Martine Zeuthen, *Countering Violent Extremism and Risk Reduction*, Royal United Services Institute Whitehall Report 2–16, June 2016, at 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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14. Daniel Koehler and Verena Fiebig, *Knowing What to Do: Academic and Practitioner Understanding of How to Counter Violent Radicalization*, Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol. 13, No. 3 (June 2019) at 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Tom Parker, *Avoiding the Terrorist Trap: Why Respect for Human Rights is the Key to Defeating Terrorism* (World Scientific Press; 2018) in Part II. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Monica Lloyd and Christopher Dean, *supra* note 4, at 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Gabe Mythen, Sandra Walklate and Elizabeth-Jane Peatfield, *supra* note 12, at 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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