

What is PREVENT and why should we oppose it?

Under the 'Prevent duty' of the Counter-terrorism and Security Act 2015, colleges, universities and other public bodies are bound to enact PREVENT.

This guide provides a brief introduction to PREVENT and why students should oppose it, and campaign to get rid of it.

What is PREVENT

- **PREVENT** is one strand of Britain's Counter-Terrorism Strategy (**CONTEST**).
- Its aim is responding to "the ideological challenge of terrorism"¹ and disrupting the process that it alleges bridges 'extremist' ideology to violence. This model is often analogised as a 'conveyor belt' or an 'iceberg'.
- PREVENT was introduced in 2006, going through changes in 2009, 2011 and 2015.
- These changes reflect the shifting focuses of whichever government was in power, and their attempts to quell the criticisms it has received.
- Early versions of PREVENT dealt exclusively with Muslims – allocation for PREVENT funding was even based on the proportion of Muslims within a particular region².
- Latter versions have broadened the focuses of PREVENT somewhat, whilst simultaneously expanding its operational scope greatly. It is now embedded into the function of sectors across society, including in education.
- In 2015, the **Counter-terrorism and Security Act** placed PREVENT on a legal basis for '**specified authorities**', including colleges and universities – known as the **Prevent duty**.
- The Prevent duty states that "A *specified authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism.*"³

How does it work?

- PREVENT is part of the **Home Office**'s remit, and implemented primarily through local authorities and police.
- Individuals deemed 'at risk of radicalisation' are referred. This process can be initiated by anyone.
- Specified authorities are expected to make referrals, according to a prescribed criteria of 'vulnerabilities' outlined in the government's **Vulnerability Assessment Framework**⁴.
- Frontline staff – such as teachers, lecturers, nurses, support staff – are trained to raise concerns about individuals with coordinators in these authorities.
- Individuals are assessed by coordinators and may be investigated. If deemed necessary for intervention, individuals are placed on de-radicalisation programmes prepared by local **Channel** panels.
- In theory, engaging with Channel is voluntary and consensual. In practice, this may not been the case, with individuals and their families harassed and threatened to take part, and children taken onto Channel without parental consent⁵.

For more information on how PREVENT may be implemented on your campus, see the briefing 'How does PREVENT affect your institution?'

What do we think is wrong with PREVENT?

Anti-democratic

PREVENT has steadily eroded civil liberties – including freedom of speech and freedom to organise. By whipping up the public's fear around violent attacks, it has been used to justify lowering the bar for police and state intrusion into our lives, even in the absence of crime.

Civil spaces, which should enable challenging state power in a democracy, have been narrowed by interference from PREVENT – it chills the free flow of subversive ideas, and has been used to physically shut down spaces for organising.

Racist

Racism and Islamophobia are hardwired into it. PREVENT emerged in, feeds off and in turns sustains a climate of mass paranoia, anti-Muslim sentiment and anti-migrant xenophobia, hinging on the seemingly permanent threat of 'terrorism'. It draws on crude Islamophobic stereotypes to legitimise racial profiling, conflating religiosity with susceptibility to 'extremism', and promotes an exclusionary, nationalist ideal of '**British Values**'.

Repressive

PREVENT has used Islamophobia as an instrument to shore up state power. The government now wields the power to brand more beliefs and causes as 'extremism' and crack down on them, even when falling far short of criminality.

This has been stretched even further with the introduction of 'non-violent extremism' as a focus. Targets by PREVENT have included anti-fracking, anti-war, pro-Palestine and anti-austerity activism!

"Extremism"

Throughout the lifetime of PREVENT, the concept of extremism has never been legally defined. The definition used is only a government one – and therefore open to political abuse. Over time it has been stretched to encompass stances that conflict with the government's foreign and domestic policy.

Chilling effect

PREVENT is often described as having a 'chilling effect' – causing people to self-police what they speak out, study or organise around.

Given that the boundaries of 'extremism' are so hazy, and ever-shifting, this chilling effect is an inevitable consequence of PREVENT.

Surveillance and Securitisation

PREVENT has embedded the work of security services across society, turning our teachers, health workers and everyday citizens into amateur agents of the state, monitoring one another. It has also added an extra layer of Islamophobic profiling to sectors like immigration and the prison system, further institutionalising racism. Finally, with PREVENT operating under the banner of 'safeguarding' duties as of late, it has hijacked wellbeing and mental health issues for national security purposes.

Reductionist, and therefore ineffective

The causes of political violence are complex and multifaceted, spanning global and localised factors. They should not be reduced down to a 'fast-food analysis', as PREVENT does, to try and force the work of 'counter-terrorism' on to regular people. And as it deals with something that hasn't happened, PREVENT works on the shoddy idea that casting the net of suspicion over everybody *might* eventually pick up someone worthy of intervention – whilst alienating many more in the process.

Reshaping relationships

PREVENT fuels suspicion, and fundamentally alters the nature of relationships between people. Teachers, charged with the welfare of students, are now expected to monitor them for 'extremism'. We are students, not suspects.

An all encompassing climate of fear

PREVENT is fundamentally a political tool that depends on, and gives oxygen to, a permanent climate of fear and suspicion in British society. At the national level, fearmongering and propaganda is used to justify continued resources and expansion of this failed programme.

And this in turn is passed on at a local level. With the Prevent duty enforced from above on public bodies, institutions are more likely to institute 'trigger-happy' PREVENT policies that result in over-referrals, than risk being judged as 'soft on extremism' and face being penalised.

It is only with solidarity forged through our organising that we can break this climate of fear.

For more arguments on why we should oppose PREVENT, see Section 2: The case against PREVENT in the Preventing PREVENT updated handbook⁶

STUDENTS
NOT
SUSPECTS



Evaluating PREVENT

- **It is difficult to objectively measure or quantify the effectiveness of PREVENT**, as it concerns something that has not happened yet (and may never) – dealing with ‘extremism’ before it develops into something more.
- How can we then calculate the success rate of PREVENT – *by how many people stop thinking ‘extremist things’, by how many people were deterred from doing something they didn’t yet know they were going to do?*
- PREVENT has never been proved to reliably determine what factors lead to violence nor how to stop this – **there is a strong dissociability between ‘extreme beliefs’ and propensity to violence.**
- Increased referral rates to PREVENT and/or Channel are often touted by officials as a measure of success – either to show public consent for PREVENT, or a claim to have successfully deterred extremism⁷.
- But this is deeply cynical: **the vast majority of referrals to PREVENT are dismissed** – sign of a ‘trigger happy’ referral culture, not success of the programme.
- According to official figures, 7,631 people were referred to PREVENT between 2015/16. Of these, only 381 people ended up in Channel for further action⁸.
- **This means that 95% of the referrals to PREVENT did not go through the process, and/or were deemed unnecessary!**
- The story should be about those 95%, the majority of them young people, and the ordeal of being referred for the risk of extremism.

What do we want to do with PREVENT?

- PREVENT has been repressive and racist from inception, and opened the door wide for abuses of state power and over-policing.
- Therefore we cannot accept a mere rebrand or remix - we want PREVENT abolished.
- When challenging PREVENT, we’re often asked **“So what would you replace it with?”**. But this assumes the framework it operates in is sound, only poorly executed. Instead ask:

Does PREVENT correctly identify the factors leading to political violence?

No, it reduces them to a shallow, sensationalist analysis.

Does PREVENT then offer a solution to the problem?

No, it diverts our attention through scapegoating.

And: has PREVENT prevented any acts of violence?

There is no proof it has: as PREVENT doesn’t deal with ‘terrorism’, it shoots in the dark at ‘extremism’.

- On all fronts, PREVENT fails to address these issues or to heed experts in the field.
- We cannot continue within the same reductionist framework of PREVENT and expect better results.
- The abolition of PREVENT is part of a wider process of reshaping the way the state engages with its citizens, and how the people in society engage with one another. It is as much about building as dismantling.
- This will entail grappling with the social and political issues at the roots of political violence.
- This includes working towards combatting social deprivation and poverty, a more ethical foreign policy, and instituting proper equality among citizens in Britain and civil society space to critique and challenge government.
- This is a process we are stakeholders in and can be actors to, in varying degrees – but unlike PREVENT it doesn’t rely on us becoming agents of the state to do so.



Responding to common questions

- **What is PREVENT?**

PREVENT is one strand of the government's counter-terrorism strategy.

It aims to counter 'extremism' which it claims can lead to acts of terrorism.

- **What's wrong with PREVENT?**

PREVENT has served to create a surveillance culture in our spaces of learning and beyond.

Its key concept of 'extremism' is elastic and often applied to repress criticism of the government's domestic and foreign policy, and from its beginning has been used to target Muslims, especially politically active ones.

On campuses, it has seen staff being trained to spot and report on 'vulnerable' students, the stifling of student-organised speaker events, and students being approached to be informants on their peers.

- **Surely there is nothing wrong with countering terrorism?**

PREVENT doesn't deal with terrorism, it deals with 'extremism' – which it says is a pathway to terrorism.

Experts in the field say that this model is reductionist. There is no evidence that PREVENT can or has actually prevented any terrorist acts.

- **How does PREVENT affect me?**

PREVENT has been made obligatory on colleges and universities.

It is now embedded in everything from Welfare to IT services to external speaker processes.

Teachers and support staff have been trained to spot and report vague signs of 'radicalisation' such as '*becoming more religious*', '*changing behaviour*', '*changing patterns of speaking*'.

Some students have been notified that their emails may be monitored and recorded.

Universities have added more bureaucracy for hosting speaker events and made the process much harder, in cases pressuring them to cancel or vastly water down events – especially when dealing with political or 'controversial topics'.

All in all – PREVENT on campus has altered what a university should fundamentally be for and has turned students into suspects.

- **If I'm not guilty of anything I should have nothing to fear though?**

By definition PREVENT deals with things that *aren't* crimes that you can be 'guilty' of.

Laws already exist to deal with crimes of violence, but PREVENT acts in what has been termed the 'pre-criminal space'. The government's definition of 'extremism' has no legal basis has been stretched cover more and more non-criminal acts.

- **PREVENT isn't Islamophobic. Issues of over-referrals of Muslims are down to implementation, not intention.**

Islamophobia is built in to PREVENT.

PREVENT emerged in, feeds off and in turns sustains a climate of mass anti-Muslim sentiment, hinging on the seemingly permanent threat of 'terrorism'. Earlier versions of PREVENT even allocated funding based on the proportion of Muslims in an area. Disproportionate referrals are therefore an inevitability, not an accident.

- **Wouldn't it be ok if PREVENT targeted other types of extremists besides Muslims then?**

The foundations of PREVENT are fundamentally wrong, repressive and beyond reform – we don't want an 'equality of oppression'. PREVENT is also tangled up with many other laws and policies affecting immigration, policing and so on which also threaten our civil liberties. As such, PREVENT is but one strand in a 'web' of repressive measures which need to be tackled from root.

- **Isn't the 'anti-PREVENT lobby' just run by extremist groups?**

PREVENT is opposed by a huge range of organisations, unions and civil liberties groups, Muslim and non-Muslim, academics, politicians and even former figures in the UN. This includes NUS, NUT, UCU, Liberty, and the Liberal Dems. The accusations of 'extremism' levelled at campaigners is a smear to tarnish their credibility, and is often targeted at Muslims.

- **PREVENT is about safeguarding not surveillance**

Safeguarding is primarily concerned with an individual's welfare, not looking at them as potential threats to national security.

If PREVENT was truly about safeguarding it would have said so from the start, not 10 years in.



Contacts

If you encounter PREVENT and need legal support,
please contact
PREVENT Watch

References

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