

# **Terrorists or trafficking victims? An analysis of how the UK Prevent policy frames those at risk of joining terror groups abroad.**

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this research is to analyse whether the Prevent policy in the United Kingdom has resulted in the labelling of the Muslim community as ‘suspect’ and to assess the impact this has on potential victims of terrorism related trafficking. The strategy was first implemented in 2003 in the wake of 9/11 and in the early years of the ‘War on Terror’. It has been accused of being Islamophobic and playing a large role in labelling Muslims as a suspect community. Prevent is a referral system through which anybody who causes concern regarding extremism can be reported. Once reported the case is assessed and it is decided if it will be dismissed, signposted to other services or taken further (UK Government 2019). This report will analyse statistics released by the government regarding Prevent referrals as well as case studies through which it is evident that the policy creates a suspect community. The rise of ISIS in 2011 led to a rise in people travelling to join in the following years. Among these people there were children aged under 18. The international definition of human trafficking lays out that there does not need to be proof of deception involved in order for a child to have been a victim of trafficking (OSCE 2021). Prevent is the policy that would be employed if there was believed to be risk of a child travelling to Syria. The Prevent Duty Statutory Guidance was introduced in 2015 and legally obliges professionals who work in healthcare, schools, nurseries, prisons and other settings to take Prevent training and report any concerns they might have about individuals regarding extremism (UK Government 2018). This has been problematic as it involves civilians carrying out counterterrorism work with minimal training which appears to have led to overreporting of cases with concerns of Islamist extremism. There have been accusations that the policy infringes on children’s rights and makes it difficult for them to discuss potentially sensitive topics about religion and politics in public spaces. There is concern that this can drive young people into online spaces to discuss such issues where they are vulnerable to be groomed. Overall it is clear that the Prevent policy has solidified Muslims as a suspect community in the UK and this framing of Muslims as suspects endangers potential future child victims of trafficking.

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# Chapter One: Introduction

Concern after 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001 terror attack on the World Trade Center (9/11) and the 7<sup>th</sup> of July 2005 London bombings (7/7) resulted in an overhaul in counterterrorism strategy in the UK (Choudhury & Fenwick 2011:153&155). The most simplistic description of the Prevent policy is that it aims to stop people from becoming terrorists. For the first time in the early 2000s homegrown terrorism was a major concern for governments around the world. The focus on preventing radicalisation was deemed to be key to stopping people from getting to the point of committing terrorist attacks.

In 2011 ISIS began to gain territory in Iraq and Syria and continued to gain power until its peak at which it held territory in about 30% of Syria and 40% of Iraq (Wilson Center, 2019). Leaders called on Muslims to move there and be a part of the 'Islamic State' and as its successes grew people were travelling there from all over the world. By the end of 2017 ISIS had suffered losses of 95% of its territory following three years of international intervention (Wilson Center 2019). For this reason, the peak years in which people travel to Syria to join ISIS were 2013-2015, when its power was at its height. It is estimated that 900 people from the UK, travelled to Syria to Join ISIS between 2013 and 2018 (UK government 2018:18).

Inevitably, children have been caught up in ISIS either being taken there by parents or, as will be discussed in this research, travelling there themselves. Online grooming was a key aspect of luring children to travel to Syria without their families' knowledge. There has since been a debate about what to do with such people who have ended up in the midst of the conflict in Syria. The key argument of this dissertation is that Prevent is unhelpful in preventing children from becoming victims of human trafficking because it furthers the Muslims as a suspect community and creates a hostile environment in schools where religious and political discussions are stifled by fear of a Prevent referral.

Prevent is a part of the CONTEST counterterrorism strategy which is made up of the four Ps. Pursue, Prevent, Protect and Prepare (UK government 2018). Prevent is a system in the UK through which referrals are made regarding concerns about possible extremism. Referrals can be made by anybody, however, in recent years the introduction of the Prevent Duty Statutory Guidance made it a legal obligation for anyone who worked with children or vulnerable people to undertake Prevent training and report any concerning behaviour that they might witness. The professions that are legally obligated include but are not limited to, teachers, early years providers such as nursery staff, NHS staff and social workers.

There have been many critiques of Prevent ever since it was created, however, there have not been discussions of the impact of the creation of the suspect community on terrorism-related child trafficking and discussing how harmful this can be for children who are at risk.

The focus of this research is on the impact of Prevent on children and potential child victims of terrorism related human trafficking. It is important to note that Prevent impacts adults and children, however, the discussion around whether or not adults are victims of human trafficking is a different one as there has to be proof that the adult has in fact been trafficked or whether they consented and undertook their actions of their own volition. The difference when it comes to children is that children are unable to consent. Therefore if they have travelled to a warzone, become a member of a terrorist organisation and have been exploited, under the international definition of human trafficking they have been trafficked regardless of whether or not they were forced initially to go.

This is the reason why this study discusses child victims, though not to dismiss that fact that adult victims of trafficking to terror groups exist and also encounter negative and unnecessary engagement with Prevent. As this is a discussion about the impact on children and child trafficking victims the cases analysed will all be regarding schools and nurseries that have made Prevent referrals. There are many more cases of adults who have had Prevent used against them unfairly, such as in universities, prisons and when accessing NHS services, these will, however, not be discussed in this dissertation.

Another point to note is that all data and cases discussed pertain to England and Wales specifically. The Prevent policy is in place in Scotland, however, it is not identical to the policy in place south of the Border. Prevent does not operate in Northern Ireland. The reason for assessing the policy in

England and Wales is that there was access to more information and data. The majority of data made available by the government comes from this policy in addition to which there have been a number of news stories highlighting examples of the misuse of Prevent and various examples of children who have been trafficked primarily coming from England. The discussion about the Muslim community being labelled suspect by the policy will be UK wide, it is argued in the People's Review of Prevent that the Prevent duty impacts the way that Muslims are framed in the public consciousness throughout the country (Holmwood & Aitlhadj 2022:21).

## **Aim of the Research**

The research question for this thesis is as follows: Has the government's Prevent policy resulted in the labelling of Muslims in the UK as a suspect community and how does this impact potential child victims of terrorism related trafficking?

This dissertation will assess evidence that is published both by the government and anecdotal evidence in relation to Prevent referrals as well as cases of children who have been trafficked to Syria to join ISIS.

## **Prevent & Channel**

When an individual is referred to Prevent, their case is considered by the police or local authority where an assessment is made as to whether the individual is suitable for a Channel referral. Channel is a program which 'provides tailored support for a person vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism' (UK Government 2019). It is in place across England and Wales and involves a multi-agency approach which includes the local authority, healthcare providers, the education sector and the police (UK Government 2019). Participation in Channel is voluntary and intervention requires consent from either the individual involved or a parent/guardian (UK government 2019).

Once a referral is assessed as suitable for Channel, it is brought to a 'Channel Panel' made up of relevant partners (ibid). This panel is led by the local authority and decides whether there is appropriate risk that requires intervention (ibid). If intervention is deemed to be necessary then an approach will be tailored to the individual to de-escalate or prevent radicalisation (ibid).

The Home Office has published statistics regarding the Prevent referral system each year since the introduction of the statutory Prevent Duty Guidance in 2015. These include, the overall number of Prevent referrals, those which are taken further to a Channel Panel and those requiring further support from Channel. Included in these statistics are the demographics of age, gender and the type of extremism that referrals have been made for. Patterns that emerge when analysing these statistics show a steady increase over the years in referrals related to Far Right extremism and a decrease in the number of referrals for Islamist extremist concerns.

## **Chapter Overviews**

Chapter two provides an overview of literature, firstly exploring the impact of the Prevent policy throughout its existence. In addition to the Prevent referral system, there are other aspects of counterterrorism policy that intertwine with Prevent such as the incorporation of ‘fundamental British values’ into the British school curriculum. Critics argue that this is alienating and creates the narrative that anything that is not inherently ‘British’ is a threat that must be tackled. The chapter will then expand on the history of suspect community theory and the construction of Muslims as a suspect community in the UK. The suspect community is created by both public and state level suspicion. The narratives existing in politics surrounding Islam in the wake of 9/11 have been argued to have created public suspicion which, along with undue state attention focussed on Muslims, contributed to the creation of a suspect community. This has been furthered by the Prevent Duty Statutory Guidance since 2015. It is key to discuss the creation of the pre-criminal space which is an important aspect of furthering developing the suspect community. The pre-criminal space describes the limbo in which people exist when they have had police contact and may have their details stored on counter terror police databases for a minimum of six years despite never having committed a crime.

The chapter goes on to discuss the international definition of human trafficking and literature that investigates the issue of child trafficking in terrorism. The conclusion of this is that it is very clear that children who have ended up in Syria for the purposes of exploitation by a terrorist group are victims of trafficking and should be treated as such. This means that potential victims of trafficking should be treated as being at risk of becoming victims rather than potential future terrorists.

Chapter three then details the methodology and how the research was carried out. Secondary source

analysis was utilised, government statistics and newspaper articles which detailed case studies were the main sources consulted.

The data and analysis is presented in chapter four where the bias against people referred to Prevent for Islamist extremist concerns is made clear. The statistics released yearly by the government tell a story of a huge disparity between the number of referrals between referrals for Islamist extremism and for Far Right extremism related concerns. The case studies that are analysed highlight a level of absurdity in some of the Prevent referrals that have been made and illustrate why young people feel they cannot speak up in class and discuss sensitive political and religious topics. The cases of children who have been trafficked to Syria are explored, particularly the case of Shamima Begum, which is potentially the most well-known case of a child who has been trafficked to Syria due to the Government's legal case against her that resulted in her being stripped of her citizenship.

The discussion in chapter five demonstrates how the data in the previous chapter shows that the Prevent Duty Statutory Guidance solidifies the suspect community. This is particularly shown through the way in which the policy erodes children's rights and creates an environment in which they cannot express themselves. The fact that the statutory guidance legally obligates civilians with certain jobs to report on people, particularly young children, brings the issue of public suspicion forward in importance than it was deemed to be in previous explorations of suspect community theory. The term 'safeguarding' is often used to describe the purpose of the policy. It is compared to policies that protect children from sexual and physical abuse, however, in these cases, once children are victims of abuse they receive help. When a child is trafficked out of the country for the purpose of exploitation by terrorists they are no longer deemed to need help by the government as is seen in Shamima Begum's case. This highlights the fact that it is not really the children that the government cares about but the potential future risk they are deemed to pose.

Overall, it is clear based on the evidence analysed in this dissertation that the Prevent policy has played a major role in the creation and continuation of Muslims as a suspect community in the UK. This existence as a suspect community results in the violation of human rights and lack of protection for potential victims of human trafficking. To classify anyone who is at risk of being radicalised as a potential terrorist rather than potential victim does not safeguard them. The policy discriminates against people and alienates them by further creating the narrative of Muslims in the UK as a suspect community. This can increase the risk of radicalisation in some cases as children are drawn to the internet to have discussion about politics and religion where groomers are waiting to take advantage of them.

# Chapter Two: Literature review

## Introduction

The rise of Islamic State in 2011 led to a sharp increase in the number of people, particularly young people, making their way to Syria in order to join the group. In the end it is thought that around 900 British citizens travelled to join the group (UK Government 2018:18). The concept of foreign fighters is not unique to this situation. There was, however, something unique about the increase in numbers and particularly the increase in the number of women and girls who made the journey to join ISIS.

Concerns around 'homegrown' terrorism in the UK rose in the wake of the 7/7 London bombings as it was revealed that the men involved, who carried out the first suicide bombing attack on British soil, were British citizens (European Monitoring centre on Racism and xenophobia 2005:5). This risk had not previously been considered by the general public, terror attacks were thought to be carried out by foreign nationals and the prevailing opinion was that the most important arena of security was at the border. ISIS was weakened after international intervention and eventually lost up to 95% of its territory by the end of 2017 (Wilson Center 2019). As a result the number of people travelling abroad for the cause has declined, however, should a similar situation arise in the future it is important that the strategy is amended and more is done to help children who are at risk of being groomed to prevent them being trafficked to an active war zone.

This chapter will explore what the Prevent policy is and what role the Prevent Duty Statutory Guidance has played since its introduction in 2015 with the Counter Terrorism & Security Act (UK Government 2015). The policy has long been criticised by the Muslim community and has been accused by academics of labelling Muslims in the UK a 'suspect community'. Suspect community theory has been around since the 1990s and initially was used to describe the situation of the Irish community during the height of the troubles in Northern Ireland. It has since been used to explore how the Muslim community has been treated in the years since the 'War on Terror' was declared.

The chapter will then go on to discuss the relevance of the Prevent policy to human trafficking and will highlight the fact that children, regardless of whether they have consented, are unable to legally make the decision to travel to Syria to join ISIS. Particularly as children are likely to be exploited, with girls in particular at risk of forced marriage and sexual exploitation. The framing of children as potential terrorists rather than potential victims of trafficking is highly problematic and dangerous.

## **Prevent policy**

The UK counter terrorism policy titled CONTEST was developed by Tony Blair's Labour government in 2003 in order to update responses to terrorism in the aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in New York (UK Government 2009). The strategy was structured using the 4Ps which are as follows; Pursue; Prevent; Protect; Prepare (Gearson & Rosemont 2015). The Prevent strand of the policy did not play a dominant role in the early years of the policy's inception (Qurashi, 2018). There was, however, a shift in the wake of the London suicide bombings on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2005 as there was an increase in concern about 'homegrown terrorism' after the men who carried out the attacks were identified as British citizens. The aim of the Prevent policy is as follows; 'To safeguard and support those vulnerable to radicalisation, to stop them from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism' (UK Government 2018).

There have been numerous phases of the Prevent policy. The first phase being prior to the London 2005 bombings and the next in the wake of the 7<sup>th</sup> July 2005 in which Prevent was more heavily focussed on. In 2010 there was a shift in the language used in the policy, until this point the policy had focussed on countering violent extremism. In 2010 this was expanded to include any kind of extremism, creating a more vague idea of what is worthy of a referral (Sabir 2017). In 2011 there was a review of the policy and some aspects were reformed, it aimed to address accusations that the policy targeted the Muslim community and was discriminatory. It was outlined in this updated policy that partnership programmes would not be run with Islamists or Salafists, Lambert (2011) argued that this was contradictory as the policy claimed to be moving away from the idea that it was targeting conservative Muslims, however, it refused to work with communities that could aid the success of the policy. The most recent phase began in 2015 when one of the most criticised aspects of the policy was passed. Prevent guidance was updated and included safeguarding duties for schools, universities, prisons, local authorities and NHS services (UK government 2015). This

guidance has been criticised for targeting Muslims and Islamist ideology disproportionately. The concern over the impact of Prevent is clear as Rights Watch UK (2016) argues that there are serious concerns regarding the human rights of students, particularly children with regard to the policy (Patel, 2017).

## **Independent Review**

In 2019 an independent review of Prevent was ordered. This review was to be undertaken by Sir William Shawcross who was a writer, prior to his work with the government as Charity Commissioner from 2012 to 2018 (UK government 2021). The review has been finished and is awaiting finalisation and publishing by the Government which is estimated to take place in August 2022 (Elgot & Dodd 2022). His appointment to review Prevent was controversial due to comments he has made in the past regarding Islam. The Guardian reports that in 2012 in his position as a director of the neoconservative thinktank 'The Henry Jackson Society' he said: "Europe and Islam is one of the greatest, most terrifying problems of our future. I think all European countries have vastly, very quickly growing Islamic populations." (Elgot & Dodd 2022). Additionally, The Guardian found that between 2012 and 2014, years in which William Shawcross was the commissioner, the Charity Commission investigated a disproportionate number of Muslim organisations (Ramesh 2014). These factors combined present Shawcross as having bias against Islam and therefore being potentially unsuitable for the position of independent reviewer.

In May 2022 there were leaks regarding conclusions that Shawcross has made in his review, which have been widely criticised. Among the issues with the report, he has been accused of politicising counter terrorism. He reportedly asserted that moderate right wing thought is being policed excessively as the net of what is considered to be extreme has been widened too much (Elgot & Dodd 2022). He argues on the flip side, that the net of what is considered 'extreme' in the case of Islamist extremism and radicalisation is not wide enough (ibid). This is disputed by the People's Review which outlines the discrimination faced by young people based on their race and religion. The report displays examples of cases in which it is clear that children and vulnerable adults have been reported for nothing more than expressing their religious or political views as well as cases in which there is no relevance to either.

## **People's Review of Prevent**

Over 500 agencies and groups declined to take part in the Government's Independent Review as

they did not approve of the way it was being conducted and feared that the review would not be thorough or radical enough. Many of these groups agreed instead to take part in the People's Review of Prevent. The Peoples Review of Prevent has been promoted as an alternative to the review issued by the government and aims to give a voice to those most impacted by the controversial Prevent Duty Guidance implemented in 2015 (Holmwood & Aitlhadj 2022). The People's Review is run by Prevent Watch, an independent community funded organisation which supports those impacted negatively by Prevent (People's Review of Prevent). It is chaired by Professor John Holmwood , a professor in the school of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Nottingham and Dr Layla Aitlhadj who is the director of Prevent Watch and a Senior Caseworker supporting people impacted by Prevent (Holmwood & Aitlhadj 2022).

The review was deemed necessary after the Independent Review was announced by the Government (People's review of Prevent). Prevent Watch sees a pattern in which Prevent has been expanded after reviews of the policy in 2011 and 2015 (ibid). Prevent Watch wanted to give a voice to people who have been impacted by Prevent and organisations that did not feel comfortable participating in the Government's review (ibid). The key aims of the people's review was to assess the true impact of the policy.

In the review, evidence considered includes primary data of testimonies from people impacted by the policy, the evidence that organisations and individuals who declared their boycott of the government review, some of this evidence will have been originally prepared for the 'independent review', however after the boycott was submitted to the People's review instead (ibid). Academic researchers were also involved, providing evidence (ibid).

## **Fundamental British Values**

The introduction of the teaching of Fundamental British Values (FBVs) in the school curriculum in 2014 is an aspect of counterterrorism policy which has been accused of alienating the Muslim community. Hoque (2015) writes that conflating these values with Britishness creates an environment in which pupils who are not culturally British may feel alienated. He sees it as a tool to other those who are not white and British and alienates other communities such as the Muslim community.

Messages of integration rather than multiculturalism can be seen in language used by politicians in the wake of the 7/7 bombings. Michael Gove, who later became Education Secretary, wrote a book in 2007 in which he referred to 'Islamism's challenge to Western Values' and the need to defend these values at home (Lockley-Scott, 2019:357).

In 2008 then Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith stated that a ‘civil challenge’ was necessary to counter those who ‘undermined British values’ (ibid). British Values and Western values are often conflated, this can be othering to people who are not from western countries, it suggests that anything that is not British could be a threat to society. It has been argued that its use in counterterrorism policy specifically others the Muslim community and presents Muslim ideology as a threat (ibid).

## **Suspect community theory**

The marginalisation and stigmatisation of the British Muslim community by the Prevent policy has been argued to have contributed to the creation of a new ‘suspect community’. Suspect community theory was created in 1993 by Paddy Hillyard and discussed legislation that led to the marginalisation of Irish and Northern Irish communities during the Troubles. The suspect community denotes a group of people that are under suspicion from members of society at large (Ylitalo-James, 2020). The othering and marginalising of communities based on perceived threat has been happening in society since long before the Troubles in Northern Ireland, however, it was through the context of this conflict that the theory was created (ibid). Between the years 1972-1996 Irish people and those of Irish heritage were under peak levels of suspicion as this was the period in which the IRA bombing campaign was at its height (ibid).

The origin of the suspect community theory lies with the passing of the British Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1974 (Pantazis & Pemberton 2009:646). This act implemented discretionary powers for police, immigration and customs officers when it came to terrorism investigations (ibid:647). This resulted in increased border security measures which disproportionately impacted Irish people at border crossings between the island of Ireland and Great Britain and the across the border between the Republic and Northern Ireland.

The Act was passed a week after the Birmingham pub bombings, carried out by the IRA, in November 1974 in which 21 people were killed and 180 more were injured (ibid:647). The most significant aspect of the Act was that it allowed for anyone to be brought into custody and interrogated regardless of whether there was evidence of a crime having been committed (ibid). Hillyard argued that the passing of these laws created a dual justice system, one where ordinary criminal offences such as burglary or murder were dealt with under one set of rules and those

suspected of Ireland-related terrorism were subject to a more 'draconian' system (ibid). The fact that these laws separated the Irish from the rest of the UK population resulted in Hillyard's (1993:257) argument that the Act had constructed a suspect community in Britain and labelled it an act of institutionalised racism (p257).

Pantazis and Pemberton (2009) make the argument that the legislative framework which was developed in response to the threat of terrorism since the beginning of the 'War on Terror', and more specifically after the 7/7 bombings, identifies Muslims as the main target of attention from the state. They argue that there are many factors at play in creating the new suspect community. This includes extensive stop and search and the alienation of conservative Muslim groups due to the approach taken by the police to work with certain groups and not others (ibid). They also cite that high profile police activity such as raids, arrests and detention of 'Muslim terrorist suspects' had an impact on public consciousness and encouraged the public to treat the Muslim community as suspect (ibid, p661). This led to increased instances of Islamophobia and violence experienced by Muslim communities (ibid).

A key aspect of suspect community theory to consider is that legal discrimination and state attention are not the only things that create a suspect community. Pantazis and Pemberton discussed in 2009 that public suspicion was an important element, this was developed further by Breen Smyth (2014). She argues that in the wake of 9/11 and 7/7 the way in which politics has constructed the war on terror has portrayed Islam as barbaric and uncivilised in order to justify actions taken in the aftermath, such as the invasion of Iraq (ibid:231). This has been reflected in the press and has impacted the way in which the public views the Muslim community (ibid).

Hickman et al. (2011) discuss the similarities and differences between the experiences of suspicion in the Irish and Muslim communities. Their research found that the idea of threat to British values and culture was stronger in the case of Muslims than of the Irish community. The study was carried out by analysing government documents and statements, press coverage of events between 1974 and 2007, interviews with people heavily involved in the communities or whom had been negatively impacted by counterterrorism policy as well as mixed Irish and Muslim discussion groups (ibid:7&8). They found that both communities had experienced trouble when travelling internationally and had been required to undergo more intrusive searches and checks (ibid). The study found that the treatment of the Irish community paved the way for the Muslim community

being treated similarly.

## **The Pre-Criminal space**

The space in which the Prevent policy operates is referred to as the ‘pre-criminal space’ in the People’s Review of Prevent. The pre-criminal space is the limbo people find themselves in when they are in contact with the police through Prevent. Despite never having committed a criminal offence and there being no evidence that they plan to do so many people, including children, are questioned by police and have their details stored in police counterterrorism databases (Holmwood & Aitlhadj 2022). This information is generally stored for a minimum of six years regardless of whether the referral was decided to be of no consequence (ibid).

The People’s Review of Prevent (PRP) was written as an alternative to an independent review being conducted by the government. It is heavily criticised in the PRP that Prevent unnecessarily entangles young people and vulnerable adults with the police and counterterrorism services when they have not committed any crimes nor is there proof that they intend to (Holmwood & Aitlhadj 2022).

The Prevent aspect of the CONTEST strategy was aimed at violent extremism on its inception in 2003 when it was published, however, in 2010 it was expanded to include non-violent extremism (Sabir 2017). Sabir (2017) argues that counterterrorism policy in the UK in recent years is being presented as an extension of social welfare, it is clear this is the case when looking at the introduction of the ‘safeguarding’ responsibility to the Prevent Duty Statutory Guidance. The People’s Review of Prevent criticises the use of safeguarding as an aspect of the Prevent Duty Statutory Guidance, it points out that the aim of safeguarding in any other circumstance is to protect the person deemed vulnerable (Holmwood & Aitlhadj 2022). However, when it comes to the Prevent Duty Statutory Guidance it is clear that it is not the individual being ‘safeguarded’ that is being protected but the state and others from the potential that they could commit terror offences in the future (Holmwood & Aitlhadj 2022). Contrary to being safeguarded, children are being subjected to interviews with police and being intimidated, which comes across in the anecdotes within the PRP. Sabir (2017) agrees that presenting the Prevent policy as socially inclusive and progressive is harmful. In reality, Sabir (2017) finds that Prevent, with its surveillance of ‘potential’ terrorists, results in exclusion and isolation. Similarly to the PRP, Sabir argues that the emphasis on intervening with ‘potential’ terrorists in the stage at which they have done nothing wrong is dangerous (Sabir 2017). It creates a very grey area, the ‘pre-criminal’ space referenced in

the PRP.

Sabir (2017) argues that the policy is racialised towards the Muslim community as it does not allow people to express a distinct Muslim identity, despite an approach that claims to be compatible with promoting a multicultural society. Qurashi (2018) describes how Prevent funding was distributed according to the number of Muslims in each local authority area in the early days of the policy. This displays the direct way in which Muslim communities were initially targeted by the policy, in recent years there have been target areas identified as 'Prevent Priority Areas' these are located in areas of the country with higher Muslim populations (Holmwood & Aitlhadj 2022).

Hickman et al. (2011) found that the systemic elements of the discrimination against the Irish were stronger, however, the construction of the community as 'suspect' was similar. The study was published in 2011, four years prior to the 'safeguarding' aspect of Prevent being passed. This notion of 'safeguarding' has since intensified the pre-criminal space and has resulted in many more children becoming entangled with the justice system despite having never committed a crime. The PRP highlights how the Muslim community is unfairly targeted by the policy and shows the continuation of the 'suspect community' despite the policy not outwardly stating that it targets Muslims (Holmwood & Aitlhadj 2022)..

There have been arguments that a suspect community has not been created as, contrary to the Irish population in the 1970s, there are not laws explicitly discriminating against the Muslim population and that there has not been a dual justice system created (Greer 2010). This dissertation will explore the fact that the Prevent Duty Statutory Guidance has in fact created something other than a dual justice system but a system in which many Muslim children have ended up entangled in the justice system despite never having committed a crime with the creation of the 'pre-criminal space' within which those reported to Prevent exist. The fact that Muslim children and vulnerable people have been targeted by the policy in a way that other groups have not creates the suspect community with a number of children and vulnerable people experiencing unnecessary involvement with law enforcement. Involvement with the 'pre-criminal space' is not held to the standard that is required when dealing with criminal offences such as the requirement to have a responsible adult present in police interviews with children (Holmwood & Aitlhadj, 2022: ). This can lead to situations where children are interviewed on their own by the Police and others which can be intimidating. In addition it will be argued that one of the key aspects that contributes to the suspect community in

this case is public suspicion due to the use of many civilians to carry out the policy.

## **Trafficking**

This dissertation will set out the argument that the Prevent policy has labelled Muslims as suspect for many years and the Prevent Duty Guidance introduced in 2015 has exacerbated this issue. This labelling of a community as suspect can cause problems between the community and authorities, which in turn has a negative impact on children potentially at risk of being trafficked. Policies such as Prevent have created great distrust between the Muslim community and authorities. Prevent claims to be a 'safeguarding' policy (UK Government 2018). It has been argued that it is not focussed on safeguarding the individual concerned but safeguarding against the risk that that individual might pose to wider society. This false labelling of Prevent in order to make it seem like it has the best interests of those it is aimed to help at its core. The policy has instead discriminated against Muslims and created a situation in which young children do not feel they can comfortably discuss potentially sensitive topics in public forums. These factors combined create a situation in which children at risk of being trafficked are not being helped effectively. There is clear evidence that many cases in which children have travelled to Syria to join ISIS there are grounds for it to be considered human trafficking, however, it has never been seen as such by the UK government.

The internationally accepted definition of human trafficking is as follows:

“The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.” (OSCE 2021:22)

The 'Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children' also known as the Palermo Protocol (2000) was adopted by the United Nations in November 2000 to supplement the 2000 Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime.

As well as providing the first definition of human trafficking, the Protocol is an international treaty that has been ratified by 26 OSCE countries, including the UK, which lays out legal obligations to victims of trafficking (OSCE 2021:22).

Legal minimum standards accepted by the states that signed up include, the obligation to criminalise human trafficking in any form according to the definition that had been agreed; protecting and assisting victims; establishment of prevention strategies (OSCE 2021:22). As well as the commitment to support human trafficking victims specifically, countries also have an obligation to adhere to human rights. When children are involved, states have further obligations to children in situations involving human trafficking. One of the key aspects of human trafficking protection is the principle of non-punishment. States are obliged not to punish any crimes committed by a person as a result of them being a victim of trafficking (OSCE 2021:22).

The Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons especially Women and Children, Siobhan Mullally stated in 2021 that states are failing to identify and protect victims due to their alleged association with terrorist groups and reiterated that states have the obligation to protect all victims of trafficking, without exception (Mullally 2021). Besenyo (2016) argued that a trafficking route was created between the West and Syria for the purposes of forced marriage. An important point to highlight is that under the Palermo Protocol it is also acknowledged that trafficking can occur at any stage of travel. For example, when the person sets off, they may not be a victim of trafficking but if they later arrive at the location and, for example, a marriage that they originally agreed to becomes sexual slavery or domestic servitude they can now be considered a victim of trafficking (OSCE 2020).

The United Kingdom claims to have a zero tolerance policy on human trafficking and aims to eradicate the practice (UK Government, 2021). The human trafficking policy does not consider the UK to be an origin country for trafficking, focussing on areas of trafficking in which the UK is a destination country such as trafficking for the purpose of modern slavery, an issue which has been on the rise in the UK in the last decade (UK Government 2021). Similarly the National Crime Agency has information about trafficking on its website and it does not mention the UK as an origin country for trafficking (National Crime Agency). It has videos about how to spot the signs of modern slavery and explains the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) which is a framework used to identify victims of modern slavery and trafficking (National Crime Agency). The Human Trafficking Foundation is an organisation that started from the All-Party Group on Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery in order to influence policy and legislation by better equipping government departments, the police and statutory agencies with the necessary tools to understand the landscape of the issue of human trafficking. The organisation also works with charities to

campaign against modern slavery (Human Trafficking Foundation). Once again, there is no mention of terrorism related trafficking or of the UK as an origin country at all.

The UN acknowledges that the widening reach of terrorist propaganda has resulted in exploitation and recruitment of children outside of conflict zones (UNDOC, 2017). It reports that exploited children are exposed to 'ferocious recruitment methods, sexual exploitation, exposure to constant fear, indoctrination and psychological pressure' as well as physical violence (ibid:2). The report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime titled 'Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System.' discusses how children are groomed online (ibid). The report makes reference to the Palermo Protocol and highlights that in the case of a child the 'means' of trafficking is irrelevant, that is, the proof that there has been coercion, force, abduction, fraud or other means of deception involved. When children are involved there is no question of consent as it is acknowledged that they are unable to make informed choices (ibid:17).

It is important to highlight that it is not only girls who can be trafficked but young boys are also at risk. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism stated in that even in cases where boys might have travelled to Syria on their own most child recruitment involves some form of constraint or coercion (2021:3). UNDOC (2017:14) states that all children can be victims of exploitation by terrorist groups, however, identifies the particular concern surrounding the increase in involvement of young girls. It recommends that prevention of child recruitment and trafficking to terror organisations should be done using a multiagency approach and it should avoid stigmatisation, primarily focussing on integrating into wider crime prevention policy that is aimed at preventing violence against children (ibid:36).

It is clear that policies in place to prevent people being radicalised into terror organisations have not been operating effectively given the crisis that developed as many young people attempted to or managed to travel to Syria to join ISIS. Reprieve is a legal action NGO focussed on defending marginalised groups facing injustice. The organisation conducted an investigation which found that authorities in the UK failed to protect at-risk women and girls from being trafficked to Syria for sexual exploitation (Reprieve 2021:46). A particular case that is highlighted is one in which a child had been stopped from leaving the country with an adult unknown to the family, however, her

passport was not confiscated and she was able to leave the country the following day and made the journey to Syria (ibid).

The fact that the education sector is a focus of Prevent activity highlights that there is concern about young people and the fact that they could be influenced and radicalised. No concern appears to be shown for the horrors that will befall them if they are trafficked to join ISIS or similar organisations. One of the key aspects of suspect community theory is that individuals in the suspect group are made to feel isolated and alienated from society. This can create a situation in which people are more likely to become radicalised and end up victims of trafficking. A human rights based approach that is primarily concerned with the safety of potential trafficking victims could be a more successful way forward in counter-radicalisation policy.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear based on the evidence that the Prevent policy is ineffective and counterproductive in the way it operates, creating suspect status of the Muslim community. This is harmful to children who are impacted by Prevent in schools.

An alternative would be use human trafficking policy to address the issue. Rather than framing those it targets as potential perpetrators of terrorism and stigmatising them, to see them as potential victims of trafficking and create a policy that considers the protection of vulnerable young people its primary concern, thus removing those who are potentially vulnerable from the 'pre-criminal' space discussed in the PRP.

# Chapter Three: Methodology

## Introduction

This dissertation aims to analyse whether the Prevent policy frames those it is supposedly aiming to help as suspects and what this means for children at risk of being trafficked abroad for the purposes of terrorism and sexual slavery. For this reason it has been important to analyse the number of referrals to Prevent as well as the cases that have come out in the press in which children have been referred for reasons that have no relation to extremism.

## Method chosen

The method chosen to analyse the policy is secondary source analysis. The reason for this rather than carrying out field work is the sensitive nature of the topic at hand and the difficulties that would be faced in speaking to those who have had personal experiences with the policy. The sources that have been analysed include statistics released by the government and newspaper articles and published reports which highlight cases in which children have found themselves a target of the Prevent policy for reasons that had nothing to do with extremism. The second type of cases that will be looked at are cases which involve children being trafficked to Syria to join ISIS.

The aim is to highlight that this is human trafficking regardless of how it is presented in the press and by the government.

## Statistics Analysed

The first sources that will be analysed are the statistics released by the government regarding the demographics of people referred to Prevent since 2015, when the Statutory Guidance was brought in. The figures are published yearly and are available on the Government website. Within the documents each year there are many aspects of the figures are discussed, such as the age, gender, type of concern and region of the UK that the referrals come from. It is accepted that the statistics are reliable as they are released directly by the government.

In the following chapter the statistics focussed on are the type of concern and the age of the person by type of concern. One of the key questions of this dissertation is about whether the Prevent policy

makes Muslims a 'suspect' community in the UK. This is the reason why looking at the figures regarding numbers of referrals for different types of concern is important. The data shows how many referrals proportionally were for 'Islamist' extremism and how many were for right-wing extremism. This is important as the documents reveal the number of referrals that get taken further to Channel and it allowing one to assess whether the reported figures are disproportionate and from this an insight can be gleaned into whether suspect community theory applies.

The second set of statistics to be analysed is the age by type of concern. The data set crucially looks at the numbers of people referred for Far Right extremism and for Islamist extremism and presents and discussed for the most common groups for referrals which are in the age categories of under 15 and 15-20. This can highlight whether there is a disparity between younger children being referred for Islamist extremism and Far Right extremism.

## **Cases Studied**

The majority of the newspaper articles discussed have come from The Guardian newspaper. It is generally accepted that The Guardian is a reliable news source although it is left leaning politically (Ad Fontes Media). There are many opinion pieces written in the Guardian, which, of course, contain some bias as they are opinion pieces but the news reporting is generally reliable. It makes sense that The Guardian would have more news articles that present information that is critical of Prevent, as right wing newspapers are more likely to support the policy and therefore less likely to publish articles that paint it in a negative light. It is also more likely that families would approach a newspaper like The Guardian as it is left leaning and therefore they might feel that their story will be told sympathetically.

The second most common news source used in this dissertation is the BBC. Despite being the state broadcaster, the BBC which is funded by licence payers has faced accusations of bias. However, it is widely acknowledged to be one of the most trusted news sources for factual information which made it an appropriate source to use (Neilson et al. 2020).

## **Conclusion**

Secondary source analysis has been a useful method to use for this project as it has provided the necessary information to analyse whether Muslims are a suspect community in the UK and to present the case that children who end up in Syria have very likely been trafficked.

# Chapter Four: Data & Analysis

## Introduction

This chapter will begin by exploring evidence gathered on the Prevent Duty Guidance, analysing statistics of the demographics of Prevent referrals as well as cases that have been made public regarding Prevent and the reasons for referrals of children in England and Wales. Between the year 2016, when the policy was first implemented and 2021, the number of cases referred has varied. One trend that has been consistent is that the number of referrals for Far Right extremism has been increasing year on year. Of the referrals made, most years there have been a higher proportion of Far Right extremism cases that are referred to Channel for support.

When comparing this to Islamist extremism for which there have historically been far higher number of referrals, there has been a much smaller proportion being referred to the end stage of Channel. It is clear that a higher proportion of referrals made for Islamist extremist concerns end up being dismissed. This suggests that the net of what is considered extreme has been much wider where Islamist extremist issues are concerned. This is reflected in the many cases in the press where very young children have been referred and their families allegedly intimidated by Prevent officers or social services over what appear to be very minor issues which later end up being dismissed. The findings of the Government's independent review of prevent that have been leaked infer that the opposite is true and that 'moderate right wing thought' is being 'over policed'. It is difficult to see how this conclusion has been reached when looking at the statistics side by side with examples of cases where there is clear bias against children and families that are Muslim and of Asian descent.

The second section will highlight cases of young people aged under 18 who were groomed into travelling to Syria to join ISIS which is considered trafficking under international law. These cases are important to analyse as the way in which they are reported does not mention trafficking. Prevent is supposed to stop this from happening and it hasn't done in these cases.

Historically the policy has been criticised for targeting Muslims even before the introduction of the statutory guidance, the Prevent Duty introduced in 2015 has furthered this and evidence shows that many young people have been reported for discussing topics related to which have absolutely no extremist roots. Their details may be stored in counterterror data bases, and their futures negatively impacted despite them not having done anything wrong. Creating an environment where children are hesitant to discuss their religious beliefs is clearly not conducive; not only does it stop them bringing up concerns regarding extremist behaviour they have witnessed, but it alienates and isolates them, increasing their risk of radicalisation.

When a policy such as this one alienates people and creates suspicion around a group it can be isolating for people of that group who feel as though they are under suspicion. Many young people are ending up in the pre-criminal space of having police contact and their details stored in counterterror data bases which can impact future opportunities despite not having committed any crimes. This has negatively impacted many young people who have not done anything wrong and has created a hostile environment making it difficult for some people to have open discussions due to their experiences with Prevent.

## **Section One: Statistical analysis**

In 2015/2016, the first year that the Prevent Duty Statutory Guidance was in operation, there were proportionally far more referrals made regarding Islamist extremism in comparison to Far Right extremism. There were 7,631 referrals made through Prevent in total and 4,997 of these concerns were regarding Islamist extremism (UK Government 2016). This compares to only 759 cases referred for concerns about Far Right extremism (ibid). However, when it came to the later stages of the process, only 5.3% of referrals through Prevent for concerns regarding Islamist extremism resulted in tailored Channel support, in comparison 13% of those reported for concerns about Far Right extremism received support (ibid). This clearly displays that a higher percentage of cases referred for Far Right extremism were found to show legitimate concern and needed in depth intervention with the rest disregarded or signposted to other services. The analysis of the data and cases below reflects that there has been an overreaction to reporting incidents which supposedly suggest 'Islamist extremist radicalisation'.

This trend continued in following years, in the year ending March 2017 6,093 individuals were referred to Prevent, the majority, 3,487 were referred for Islamist extremist concerns. In comparison, only 697 people were referred for Far Right extremist concerns (UK Government 2017). Once again there was a much higher proportion of cases related to Far Right extremism which resulted in Channel support with 17.7% of referrals resulting in Channel intervention whilst only 5.2% of those referred through Prevent for issues relating to Islamist extremist ended up receiving tailored Channel support. This reiterates the extent to which the net of what is considered worthy of a prevent referral when it comes to issues regarding Islamist extremism has been cast far wider than that of Far Right extremism.

The year ending March 2018 saw a marked change in the statistics reported. Until this point three main categories had been reported in the released statistics each year. These were, Islamist extremism, Far Right extremism and 'other'. Other was defined as anything that did not fall within these categories and included left wing and Northern Ireland related terrorism. Typically this category was responsible for a much smaller proportion of referrals each year than the other two as is clear in the graph displayed in figure 1 below. In the first two years of reporting a percentage of referrals were said to be 'unspecified' at the point of referral, however, these were later categorised or dismissed as the category does not appear in the numbers referred to a Channel Panel or those who received tailored support.

The police's data retention policy does not differ for adults and children and retains information such as a Prevent referral for a minimum of six years (Grierson 2019). It is clear that a high proportion of cases involving Islamist extremist concerns may have been dismissed entirely and is important to note that even when a referral is dismissed, it is likely to have stayed on the record of individuals who have been referred for a minimum of six years. Information has been deleted in cases in which parents have taken legal action, however, in the case of a young child in London, the Metropolitan Police would not confirm that the data would not be disclosed in the future despite its deletion from that specific database (ibid).

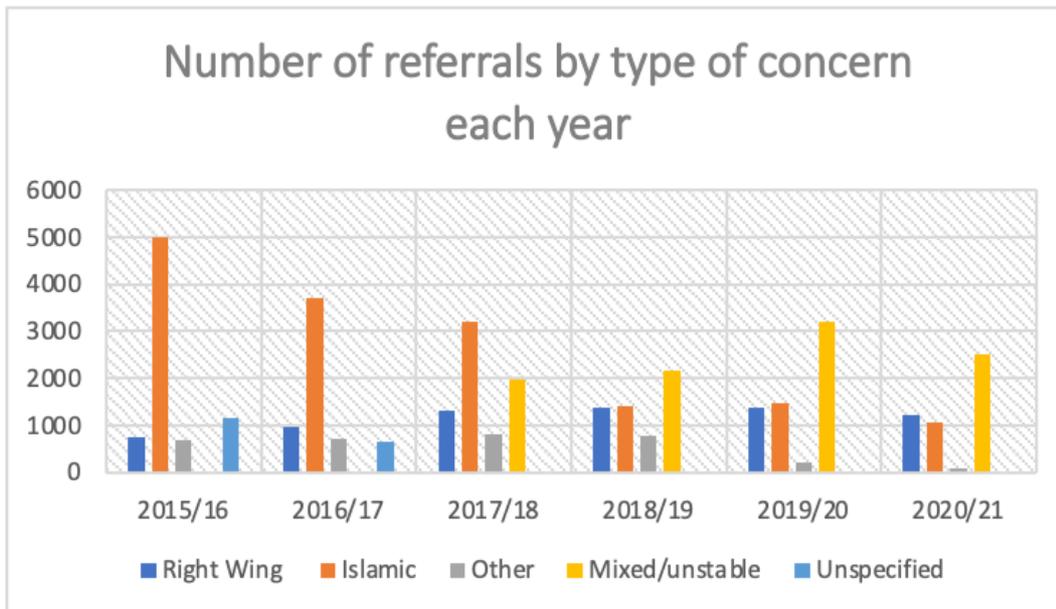


Figure 1

As shown in figure 1 above, in the year March 2017 to March 2018 the category of ‘mixed and unstable ideology’ was added. ‘Mixed or unstable ideology’ was described in the release of statistics in 2020 as a combination of ideologies, shifts between ideologies and where there is no coherent ideology but there could still be a risk of terrorism (UK Government 2020:11). In the following year ending March 2019 this category gained prominence in the reported statistics. In the year ending March 2019 it is important to note that there was a decrease in the number of referrals overall with 5,738 referrals being made (UK government 2019, p10) in comparison to 7,318 the year before (UK Government 2018:13). Of the 5,738 referrals, a similar amount were made for both Far Right and Islamist extremism with both at roughly 24% of the total number. The majority of people were referred for ‘mixed or unstable ideology’ with 38% of total referrals being made for this reason, the remaining referrals came under the ‘other’ category.

The referrals that were categorised as mixed or unstable ideology appear from the statistics to be cases that would have been categorised as either Far Right or Islamist extremism in previous years. This is reflected in the fact that in 2016/2017 the percentage of cases categorised as ‘other’ was 12% and the following year after the new category was added this number remained similar with 11% of referrals made for ‘other’ forms of extremism, this level remained in 2019 as the new category gained prominence and the number of reports of ‘other’ concerns remained low at 14% of all referrals. From this it can be inferred that the cases that have been described as ‘mixed or unstable ideology’ since 2017/18 are cases that would have previously been classed as either Far Right or Islamist extremism.

The addition of this category makes it more difficult to assess the data as there is not a breakdown in demographics of individuals whose referral was placed in the category. When we look at cases that progressed to a Channel Panel and then those that received Channel support it is clear that many of the cases in this category are dismissed. The addition of this category has led to a levelling out of the number of Far Right and Islamist extremism cases and proportionally the number brought to a Channel Panel and then taken further has also evened out. The proportion of Far Right extremist concerns that were taken on as a tailored Channel case increased with 21.7% of cases referred for this reason receiving support. This compares to 19.6% of Islamist extremist cases receiving support in 2019/2020. This increase for Islamist extremism cases is dramatic from the average of 5% in previous years.

The number of Far Right cases remained at a similar level after the addition of the new category. In comparison, as can be seen in figure 1, the proportion of cases referred due to Islamist extremist concerns dramatically dropped. This suggests that many of the cases now classed as ‘mixed or unstable ideology’ might be ones that would have previously been classed as Islamist extremism as there is no other explanation offered by the data as to why the number dropped so significantly. This makes it difficult to assess the proportion of cases taken forward to a Channel Panel and taken further in the years after 2018 as we cannot see what the mixed or unstable ideology is rooted in and so cannot infer the reason behind the referral. However, this is merely an assertion as the information is not available.

### **Age by concern**

From 2015 to 2018, each year the highest proportion of referrals in the category of Islamist extremism was made in the under 15 age group. Some examples of cases such as these are discussed further in the chapter. Despite the fact that the age category with the highest number of initial referrals in these years was the youngest category, the most Channel referrals and Channel intervention year on year has been among 15-20 year olds (UK Government 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021). In the latest two years of available data, 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 it has been close to an equal number of referrals for children who are under 15 and those aged 15-20 with Channel Panels and Channel intervention remaining most common in the latter age group (UK Government 2020, 2021) . This points to the fact that most of the cases regarding young children and young teenagers are dismissed or signposted to other services. Anecdotal evidence provided through press

reports by angry parents whose children have been questioned and referred by Prevent provides an idea of some cases in which young children have become entangled in this system.

The statistics tell a story of overrepresentation of referrals regarding 'Islamist extremism' and within this category an overrepresentation of children aged under 15. However, it is difficult to assess the proportions in recent years due to the addition of the unstable/mixed ideology category. It is important to add to this story, anecdotes of cases that have been reported in the press in which young children have been put through the experience of having a Prevent referral over issues which quite clearly are not terrorism related and are later dismissed. Records of the referral will remain on a child's record for a minimum of six years and as is explored in the case studies can impact their education. The next section of this chapter will highlight some of these cases.

## **Section 2: Prevent cases in the press**

There have been many cases reported in the press which highlight the wide net cast over what is considered 'extreme' when it comes to the issue of 'Islamist extremism'. Families have taken to the newspapers to express their upset and anger when young children have been referred seemingly because of their religion and the colour of their skin, as the reasons for the referrals are tenuous at best, particularly considering the ages of the children involved.

### **Case One: The Fortnite Case**

The Guardian newspaper reported in 2021 that a four year old boy was referred to Prevent over comments made regarding the videogame game Fortnite (Stein & Townsend 2021).

The referral was made after the young boy made a comment about his father having 'bombs and guns in the shed' at an after school club. It is revealed in transcripts of the conversation he had with the club worker who reported it that it was in reference to the game Fortnite (ibid). Fortnite is a video game in which characters collect guns and bombs (ibid). The referral that was made not only began an investigation into the case but also triggered a call out from police at 10:30pm due to the perceived seriousness of the allegation (ibid). The child's mother was allowed to see a transcript of the conversation and said that it was obvious that her son was talking about a game of Fortnite his cousin had played the night before. The mother of the child felt strongly that had her son not been

Muslim he would not have been profiled for the comments as they would not have been seen as a risk for radicalisation (ibid).

### **Case Two: The cucumber case**

In a similar case reported by The Guardian in 2016, a four year old boy was reported to Prevent by his nursery as his drawing of his father chopping a cucumber was mistaken for a bomb (Quinn 2016). The confusion arose with the boy's pronunciation of the word 'cucumber'. The article refers to a video sent to The Guardian by the boy's mother, in this video he can be heard responding as she holds up a cucumber, calling it a 'cucker-bum' (ibid). The staff mistakenly thought he was saying 'cooker bomb' and initiated a Prevent referral. In the end the referral did not go through as relevant agencies were consulted and decided that it was not an appropriate or necessary response (ibid). The mother discussed her distress as nursery workers greeted her with a file of his work, claiming that one of the drawings was of a cooker bomb. She was told at one point that "Your children might not be taken off you ... you can prove yourself innocent." (ibid). This is evidently a very distressing thing for any parent to hear. The mother of the young boy felt that had her son not been from a Muslim family he would not have been profiled in this way (ibid).

### **Case Three: The Terraced House Case**

The Huffington Post (HuffPost news blog) reported in 2016 that an eleven year old boy was referred to Prevent over the misspelling of the word 'terraced' when describing the kind of house he lived in (Snowdon, 2016). He instead spelled the word 'terrorist'. He was reported to Prevent and the police examined the family's laptop and interviewed the boy the following day after which it was determined that the family posed no risk and the boy was not at risk of radicalisation (ibid). BBC news (2016) reported on the case that Lancashire Police denied that the issue had simply been a result of a spelling mistake, however, stated that "no concerns were identified and no further action was required by any agency".

### **Case Four: The 'Alms' Case**

Another eleven year old boy found himself in a similar position when a teacher was alarmed as they thought that in response to a question about what he would do if he came into a large amount of money he would give 'arms to the oppressed' (Taylor, 2021). In fact, the boy had said that he

would give ‘alms to the oppressed’ not arms (ibid). A Prevent referral was made regarding this incident but the police subsequently concluded there was no sign of radicalisation and closed the case without furthering it to Channel (ibid). A particularly concerning aspect of this case is that the school did not attempt to contact the boy’s parents to discuss the referral before it was made. One of the stipulations in the Prevent policy is that consent should be obtained from the person involved or their guardian wherever possible before sharing data by making a Prevent referral. The boy’s parents were concerned about the referral remaining on his record and following him to the secondary school he was due to start in September 2021. If they do not fight it, the referral will remain on the boy’s record for a minimum of six years, during a time in which he will be applying to sixth form and then to university. Less than a year after the reports on this case were made, another of a similar nature arose.

### **Case Five: The Fire Drill Case**

A third 11 year old Muslim boy found himself at the centre of a Prevent referral (Dodd, 2022). The boy, who is from the north of England, was referred to Prevent due to an incident that occurred during a fire drill (ibid). He made a comment to another pupil during the drill that he wished the school would burn down (ibid). This comment made its way back to a teacher who deemed it appropriate to make a referral to Prevent (ibid). The boy who had been struggling with the pressures of homework, had been assessed as vulnerable due to suffering anxiety and having witnessed domestic violence at a young age, was on the school’s register for special educational needs.

It is clear that the boy’s mother believed that her son was referred due to the fact that he is Asian and Muslim. She said that her son was suffering from the effects of childhood trauma and that although the comment he made was unacceptable it was an isolated incident and did not need to be dealt with in this manner (ibid). There was no evidence to suggest that the boy had a pattern of behaviour that could trigger an investigation prior to the comment. The boy’s mother had to fight to remove her sons name from the counter-terrorism police database, despite the fact that there was no prior criminal record and the investigation had been closed with no further action (ibid). The police did agree to remove his name, however, at the time of reporting the mother was still waiting to hear about the information in files related to her son held by the Home Office (ibid).

### **Case Six: The Ecoterrorist Case**

In 2015, the Guardian reported that a 14 year old boy was questioned about his views on Islamic State after a discussion in class in which he used the term ‘eco-terrorist’ (Dodd, 2015). The boy was in a French class when the topic of environmental activism was discussed by pupils who were talking about people who use violence to protect the planet (ibid). The boy, then 14 years old, who is Muslim, mentioned the use of the term ‘ecoterrorist’ by some people to describe these actions (ibid). This concerned a teacher who decided it was best to make a referral (ibid). In the resulting discussion with staff the boy and his parents were asked if they were ‘affiliated’ with ISIS. His parents were shocked and upset as the boy was shaken up and distressed by the incident.

This case is an example of how education can be hindered by such a discriminatory and stringent policy. It is difficult to see how the report in this case was not because the boy is Muslim. The reference to ‘eco-terrorists’ has no relevance to ISIS and yet this is what he and his parents were questioned about. This suggests that another aspect of the situation led to concerns and it is clear that the fact that he is Muslim had an impact on a referral being made. Children and teenagers at school who are Muslim might feel stifled and unable to discuss certain topics for fear of being misunderstood and ending up with a Prevent referral as has happened in this case.

### **Case Seven: The Sixth Form Rejection Case**

Further cases reported in the People’s Review of Prevent (PRP) are very concerning and show the risk of keeping the records of children referred to Prevent. A case is reported in the review in which a 16 year old boy, with the pseudonym Tarik, was set to attend a highly regarded Sixth Form College (Holmwood & Aitlhadj 2022:112). He was called in for a meeting which he believed to be about enrolment, however, upon arrival he found himself being questioned over incidents that had occurred at his secondary school more than two years previously which had led to a Prevent referral (ibid). The referral had been dealt with and the investigation closed at the time that Tarik applied for college (ibid). The Sixth Form College subsequently withdrew his offer due to the ‘new information’ coming to light (ibid). The secondary school he attended said that the Prevent officer who had dealt with the case had advised the school to ensure the information was passed on to the Sixth Form after his place had been confirmed (ibid).

This is particularly concerning as under this policy young Muslim children and teenagers are at risk

of being denied the education they have worked hard for. This could limit the opportunities of the child if they have to attend a sixth form that perhaps doesn't perform as well, despite the fact that they have no criminal record and have been cleared of any issues regarding Prevent.

### **Case Eight: The Case Without Consent**

Another case discussed in the PRP is of particular concern, this case is of a boy called 'Yunus' (Holmwood & Aitlhadj 2022). A point is made in available information about Prevent that consent is required from the person taking part or their parent/guardian (UK government 2021). Both Yunus and his parent felt uncomfortable about the process and did not want to take part in anything Prevent related (ibid). They happily engaged with all other social care recommendations (ibid). Despite claiming that participation in Prevent is entirely voluntary, the family was put on a Child Protection Plan, once this was in place Yunus was once again asked about engaging with intervention under Prevent. Again he insisted he did not want to, however, this was not taken into consideration and a Prevent assessment was still carried out (ibid).

### **Case Nine: The Intimidation Tactics Case**

Another example presented in the PRP is a situation where 'Hannah', a single mother of three young children was allegedly intimidated by a Prevent officer and a social worker (Holmwood & Aitlhadj 2022:104). When she was visited by them she was told that there were concerns that her children were at risk of radicalisation, although not from her (ibid). They insisted that she sign a consent form for her children to be questioned at school and when consent was not given, Hannah was told that if she did not sign it the case would be referred to children's services (ibid). The point was made to her that if the case was referred to children's services then the children would be spoken to regardless of whether she gave consent or not. The officers did not explain to Hannah the reason that they wanted to speak to her children and she was not given the option for the children to be spoken to in her home (ibid). Despite feeling intimidated Hannah did not give consent and as a result there were many unannounced visits to her home over the following six weeks which she avoided (ibid). The experience made her question the why she was even asked for her consent if her decision not to allow the authorities to speak to her children was not respected (ibid).

A key point made by the Home Office is that Prevent intervention requires consent, however,

multiple stories discussed above clearly demonstrate that this is not the attitude felt by those who are asked for consent. Parents and older children who are asked for their consent can feel pressured and intimidated. It is also worth noting that even when consent is given, the nature of what they are consenting to does not seem to be fully explained to those involved. The request for consent does not make it clear that consent is being given for data on the individual involved being retained by the police for years regardless of the outcome of the investigation. This is made clear by the cases in which families have had to fight for their children's data to be removed from the system, something they were not aware would happen when their child was referred to Prevent. In some cases, such as the 11 year old boy in case The Alms Case above, consent was not sought from the parents before a referral was made. It seems that children are being referred without any effort made to establish contact with parents and potentially establish context to avoid many of these cases ending up as Prevent referrals which result in children remaining on counter terror police data bases for years.

### **Case Ten: The Palestine Case**

Rights Watch UK reported in 2016 that a 17 year old boy named Rahmaan was reported over his activity at school relating to Palestine (Rights Watch UK 2016:35). He had been wearing a Palestine badge on his school uniform and scarf which he was asked to take off by teacher who cited the school uniform policy as the reason (ibid). He was also handing out leaflets which he was asked to stop doing. He was later questioned by staff at the school, a member of staff in particular that he spoke to was named as a special constable responsible for Prevent. He was subsequently referred to Prevent which neither he nor his parents were informed about (ibid). They found out when police officers showed up at his house and asked him about his religious beliefs. During his interaction with police he tried to translate what they were saying to his mother so that she could understand what was going on but was stopped as the police told him that he should not speak in a language that they do not understand (ibid:36). Rights Watch UK (2016) points out that not allowing parents to be informed of questions asked to their child appears to be in contradiction to a child's best interests. Rahmaan was ultimately found not to be at risk of radicalisation, however, the police officers allegedly told him that the file would be stored for the rest of his life and could be brought up if he did anything similar again (ibid). This threat is the sort of comment that would indicate that he is not allowed to speak his mind without fear of having more trouble with the police.

Proportionally every year the age category with the largest proportion of referrals for Far Right extremism has been 15-20 year olds. In comparison, every year until the last two years the largest

age category proportionally for Islamist extremist concerns has been under 15s. As discussed above, in the last two years of reported figures the number is even between 15-20 year olds and children aged under 15. The percentages of children under 15 years old referred to Prevent are not broken down for Far Right extremist concerns as it is not the most significant category. The statistics highlight that there have been, proportionally, over the years far more children referred for issues relating Islamist extremism. This is backed up by further investigation as after searching the internet extensively there have not been any reports found regarding outraged parents who believe their children have been wrongly referred due to Far Right extremism in comparison to the many cases displayed here where Islamist extremist concerns were the issue.

Under the Freedom of Information Act it was revealed that there were 624 Prevent referrals for children under the age of six and 1,405 for children aged between six and nine between the years 2016 and 2019 (Stein & Townsend 2021). These figures highlight just how many children have been assessed as a risk when they are of only nursery or primary school age. This is a worrying statistic as the referrals can be held on file in the counterterrorism police database for up to six years, leaving these children in the pre-criminal space. They are added to the database despite the fact that they have not committed any crimes, have been found not to be at risk of radicalisation and despite being children, some of whom are under the age of five. This information could be passed to schools and universities they may apply to where judgement of the fact that they were once referred will be made despite the case having been closed. This could leave children who have been referred to Prevent in a position where they feel like they are unable to speak their minds and crucially, if they were being radicalised or had come across concerning content online, they may not feel they can reveal this information for fear of the police involvement if they do.

The cases discussed are merely a selection of ones that have been made public either by families that have contacted the press or through the People's Review of Prevent and Rights Watch UK's report on Prevent in schools. The way in which the families in these cases have been treated has been varied, however, none of the experiences have been positive.

### **Section 3: Human trafficking cases**

During the time that ISIS was at its height there were many cases of young people travelling to join

the organisation. In the years since these young people have been demonised and classed as terrorists by the press and by the government. It is clear that many people slipped through the net and were not 'prevented' from being radicalised. The Prevent policy has been in place for many years, which means that it was encouraged to report incidents that caused concern regarding extremism, however it was not until the Statutory Guidance was introduced that this was a legal requirement. The Prevent Duty Statutory Guidance came into place after the cases discussed in this section unfolded. The response to young girls who were trafficked to Syria from the government in the years since has been to dismiss the horrors they have been through and blame them for their situation, despite the fact that they were children at the time of travel. This is evident in the response to Shamima Begum as discussed below. It is clear that although it is referred to as 'safeguarding' if the policy does not succeed and a child finds themselves in the position that the young people in the cases below have found themselves in then they are likely to be blamed.

### **Case One: The Bethnal Green Four**

In February 2015 three school girls, aged 15 and 16, left their homes in Bethnal Green and, unbeknownst to their families, headed for Gatwick Airport (BBC News 2015). They boarded a flight to Turkey and continued their journey on to Syria where they entered territory controlled by ISIS (ibid). The teenagers are believed to have been radicalised online as were many people who travelled to the territory during this period. The most shocking aspect of the lack of effective safeguarding is that the girls friend and fellow pupil at Bethnal Green Academy, Sharmeena Begum who is of no relation to Shamima, had left the UK in December 2014, approximately two months before the rest of her friends aged just 15 (Dodd, 2015). Sharmeena had lost her mother to cancer just 18 months before she left and her father remarried just weeks before she left, it is clear she was very vulnerable at the time she would have been groomed (ibid). It is believed that she encouraged them to join her in Syria and she may have been the one to introduce them to the recruiters who groomed her (ibid). It seems that the school and police were aware of the risk that the three remaining friends could be vulnerable to similar grooming, however, they failed to inform the parents directly of Sharmeena's travel to Syria and that their children may be at risk (ibid). The police had requested interviews with the three friends to try and understand what had happened to Sharmeena, however, the girls were given letters to take home to their parents which they subsequently hid (ibid). As a result they slipped through the net and befell the same fate as Sharmeena. It was reported that Shamima was married within days of her arrival in Syria (BBC News 2019), as she was under the age of 16 this is a child marriage and illegal in the UK. This is clear evidence that she was trafficked.

Two of the three girls who travelled together, Kadiza Sultana and Amira Abase are believed to have been killed in the conflict whilst the third, Shamima Begum, aged just 15 when she left the UK, has been fighting for her right to return after having her British citizenship revoked (BBC News, 2021). Begum was located in a Syrian refugee camp in 2019, pregnant and already having lost two children. The baby she gave birth to in the camp died of pneumonia due to the harsh conditions there (ibid). It is important to note that her citizenship was revoked due to her Bangladeshi heritage, and resulting entitlement to dual nationality. This meant the argument was made that removing her British citizenship would not render her stateless. This is a point of contention, as it has been argued by her lawyers that as she is not a citizen of Bangladesh nor does she hold a Bangladeshi passport. The ruling has resulted in her being left stateless which is in breach of international law.

This is arguably the most infamous case in the UK of British nationals travelling abroad due to the publicity that the Shamima Begum case has had. However, during the period 2013-2019 many foreign nationals including approximately 900 from the UK, travelled to Syria to Join ISIS (UK government 2018:18). Data from Kings College British estimates the number of men women and children to have travelled from the West to be as high as 52,808 including children of foreign nationals who were born there (BBC News 2021).

### **Case Two: Yusra Hussein**

A similar case is that of Yusra Hussein who is also thought to have been radicalised over the internet (Steven, 2014). The 15 year old is believed to have flown to Syria after failing to return home after school on the 24<sup>th</sup> of September 2014 (ibid). There is no further information on Yusra's whereabouts, with previous ambitions to go to university and be a dentist, it appears she was groomed and radicalised without the knowledge of her family and friends (ibid). This is another example of a case in which a child was groomed and able to leave the country despite being under the age of 16. There is no further public knowledge of Yusra Hussein's whereabouts, however, it can be assumed that on arrival in Syria she was married to an ISIS fighter as this was the standard procedure when women and girls would arrive in Syria and cross into ISIS territory (Peresin 2015). This means she would have been in a child marriage and at risk of physical and sexual abuse (ibid).

### **Case Three: 17 year Old Boys**

There are fewer examples in the media when it comes to male children who have been trafficked to Syria. There have of course been young children, both male and female who have been taken there by their parents. In the case of teenage boys travelling to Syria of their own accord there are fewer examples. Many more men than women travelled to Syria overall, however, there were not many publicised cases of British teenage boys travelling.

Official numbers are not available on this, so it is based on information about cases that are available on the internet. There was a case in 2015 in which two 17 year old boys travelled to Syria (ITV News 2015). As they were under 18 they were considered children under the law and could have been taken advantage of and groomed online. It is important, despite there being fewer examples, to discuss the issue of boys who ended up in Syria. The UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism reported in 2021 that young boys who are held in camps in Syria should also be treated first and foremost as victims and any investigation done into crimes committed should be done with this in mind (Ní Aoláin. 2021).

There is difficulty when it comes to the discussion about many of the teenagers who have ended up in Syria, this is because they have not been in contact with their families since soon after their arrival and are believed to be dead. There is no testimony about the horrors they have been through. However, the fact that they left the UK as bright young individuals with great futures ahead of them and have ended up missing presumed dead in a war zone, a member of a terrorist organisation that has been named a cult by some, highlights that they were very likely groomed and lured there under false pretences which they paid for with their lives.

In the cases listed above the children who travelled to Syria in these were all under the age of 18 and therefore had years before they would be old enough to be legally considered an adult. Two of the girls were 15 which means that in addition to not being legally adults they were below the age of consent, below the age of marriage and considered children in every aspect of British law. It is clear based on these facts that regardless of whether they thought they had consented to travel they are considered victims of trafficking under international law.

With an estimated 900 people having travelled to Syria from the UK between 2013 and 2019 the Prevent policy was clearly not doing its job to prevent extremism and it certainly was not successful in safeguarding vulnerable people from this risk. In order to prevent young people being trafficked and ending up in a war zone as has happened in the case of ISIS, a policy that is genuinely centred on the individuals at risk and one that considers them potential victims of trafficking is necessary. Treating people as potential terrorists is not necessarily going to engage them or make them feel as though they can open up if they have been exposed to worrying themes either online or in their real life. The Prevent policy claims to be a 'safeguarding' tool and claims to have the same aims of safeguarding policies that are in place for risks of abuse (UK government 2018:31). However, it is clear that the policy aims to safeguard the potential future victims of terrorism, and the security country at large before it considers the risks to a potentially radicalised individual. Threats of children being taken away from their parents and other intimidating tactics to try and engage people are not going to create an environment in which it is easy to communicate and work with families who are genuinely in a situation in which children could be at risk. Overall it is clear that Prevent was not designed to help people in this position avoid becoming victims of trafficking.

## **Conclusion**

The Prevent policy was designed to 'prevent people from becoming terrorists'. When considering what this means, it is clear that preventing people from becoming terrorists is not something done for their own good but for the good of society. The policy claims to be a predominantly safeguarding based and to be protecting the individual. The disproportionate number of cases relating to Islamist extremism and the examples of cases where the policy has clearly been misused and has resulted in the retention of the data of children on counterterror databases shows bias and a lack of regard for children's rights and their safety as a priority.

Once somebody has been radicalised and has been trafficked to another country it is clear that the government has no regard for their safety or the trauma they have been through. Based on international definition of human trafficking it should be simple to see that any child under the age of 18 is a victim of trafficking if they end up in a war zone under the rule of a terrorist organisation. The Prevent policy is what would be triggered if there were concerns that a child was at risk of travelling to join a terror organisation. The way the policy has operated in recent years and the distrust towards it felt by the Muslim community does not create an environment conducive to

protecting children. The fact that the aim is to stop people being becoming terrorists rather than to protect people from predatory terror organisations that could take advantage of them is a mistake. A policy that alienates and isolates people, making them feel as though they are constantly having to watch what they say for fear of ending up under suspicion is not a policy conducive to protecting young people from grooming and the risks of trafficking. Policies that are in place to educate and protect young people from grooming in regards to sexual abuse for example do not shame people and paint them as perpetrators of crime. This is done to allow people to feel as though they can talk to someone and get help to get out of a scary situation. The next chapter will explore the themes and issues identified in this chapter and discuss them in relation to suspect community theory and what this means for potential human trafficking victims.

# Chapter Five: Discussion

## Introduction

This chapter will outline the way in which the Muslim community has been labelled as suspect by the British state and the public. Suspect community theory which was created by Hillyard (1993) to describe the Irish community has been related to the Muslim community and the struggles faced by them in the years since the inception of the 'war on terror'. There have been developments in the policy since Pantazis & Pemberton used it to discuss the labelling of the Muslim community in 2009.

Prevent and other counterterrorism measures in place in the UK created the suspect community, however, in recent years it has been exacerbated by the legal obligation imposed upon civilians working in certain jobs to make Prevent reports. This chapter will begin by discussing the introduction of the fundamental British values taught in schools and how this has been argued to be alienating. Additionally, the removal of the word 'violent' from 'violent extremism' in the Prevent policy has sparked debate about what is considered extreme. It is then important to highlight the strong evidence that Prevent violates children's rights and creates an environment in which Muslim children feel unable to express themselves fully in public spaces for fear of a Prevent report. The statistics presented in the previous chapter will be discussed in relation to how they further contribute to the sense of the suspect community and the disproportionality with referrals made for other reasons. The pre-criminal space is a crucial aspect of the furthering of the suspect community. It is damaging and entangles children with the legal system despite them not having committed any crimes, Prevent Priority Areas will then be discussed as well as the independent review being conducted by Sir William Shawcross on behalf of the government.

Secondly, it is important to explain how this all relates to potential victims of trafficking into a war zone such as Syria. The mistrust sewn by the police and Prevent due to the labelling of the Muslim community as 'suspect' is key to the reasons why the policy is ineffective and needs to be overhauled. Evidence from the previous chapter on case studies will be analysed, particularly in relation to the double standards faced by Muslim victims of trafficking in relation to their Far Right

counterparts.

In conclusion, the analysis of suspect community theory in relation to the Muslim community and the Prevent Duty Guidance, in particular, lead to the fact that Muslims face unfair discrimination and alienation as a result of the policy. Children's rights are violated and they are put at risk as they are less likely to feel comfortable to talk to somebody if they have concerns relating to extremism and grooming. It is clear that the relationship between children and authorities created by Muslims being seen as 'suspect' is not conducive to protecting potential victims of trafficking.

## **Suspect community theory & Prevent**

The Prevent policy has created an environment in which Muslims have felt targeted and under suspicion since it was rolled out in 2003. Pantazis and Pemberton identified in 2009 that the new suspect community in the UK had become the Muslim population. The way in which they define a suspect community is that a group of the population is targeted by the State for being 'problematic' (Pantazis & Pemberton 2009:649). The arguments they made in 2009 were based on counterterrorism policy more widely in the wake of 9/11 and the 7/7 bombings as well as the Prevent policy as it stood at the time. There have since been many scholars furthering the research and agreeing that Muslims have been targeted as suspects (Hickman et al 2011, Gearson & Rosemont 2015, Quarashi 2018)).

In their 2009 article, Pantazis and Pemberton highlighted the reasons that the Muslim community had become the new suspect community after the term was initially coined to refer to the Irish community in the 1970s and 1980s in the UK. As was explained in the literature review, they described issues such as stop and search and the divisive nature of the 'soft' policing tactics which tried to engage people from certain Muslim communities but not others. In addition they found that high profile raids and arrests created a public narrative of suspicion which resulted in a rise in Islamophobia including violence against Muslims (Pantazis & Pemberton 2009). Since their article there have been many updates to the Prevent policy and the suspect community status of Muslims has only been strengthened.

## **Non-Violent extremism and fundamental British values**

The validity of the theory underpinning Prevent has been questioned by experts. The UK Government counterterrorism strategy has consistently been to counter ‘extremist-ideology’ as, according to the government, it will inevitably lead to violence. Experts have questioned whether this is the right way to go as there is no concrete proof that extreme beliefs lead to violence (Rights Watch UK 2016:17). When the Prevent policy was initially introduced its aim was to tackle ‘violent extremism’, the ‘violent’ has since been dropped and anybody engaging with extremist ideology whether violent or not is deemed to be at risk of being radicalised into terrorism (Rights Watch UK 2016).

These changes to Prevent in 2014 which broadened once again the net of what was considered worth reporting created an environment in which the idea of what is extremist is vague and up for interpretation. Rights Watch UK (2016:4) discusses the fact that teachers with very little training are being tasked with identifying extremism from a very vague description. Behaviour contrary to the so-called ‘fundamental British values’ is deemed by the Government to be one of the signs that a person is vulnerable to radicalisation and potential engagement with terrorism in the future (Rights Watch UK 2016:4). This was assessed by Rights Watch UK in 2016 to contravene the rights of children to have discussions and hold views contrary to those of the government, it hinders freedom of expression and when that is targeted at a particular section of the population it solidifies the existence of the suspect community.

## **Violations of children’s rights**

The Prevent Duty Guidance has created an environment in which the rights of Muslims are being restricted as they live in fear of being reported for expressing their beliefs or having political or religious debates in public spaces. This has particularly impacted the school environment as children are unable to discuss and debate these issues in a safe space. Concerns have been raised about human rights in relation to the Prevent Duty Guidance ever since it was rolled out in 2015.

The report published by Rights Watch UK (2016) highlights the harm the Prevent policy has been causing for years and particularly the harm that the Statutory Guidance causes to young people. Evidence in the report is gathered from interviews with teachers, students, parents and other professionals (Rights Watch 2016, p4). Criticisms are made in the report that the policy has caused children to feel as though they cannot speak about certain issues or discuss religion in the classroom or at school at all. One sixth form student who was interviewed described this feeling. She felt as

though she could not contribute in discussion about certain topics as she was afraid she might end up with a Prevent referral (Rights Watch UK 2016:44). She worried that the policy was isolating young Muslims and that this could lead to young people ending up with the wrong crowd if they felt they had to go to someone who accepts them to talk about certain issues (ibid). There was a teacher interviewed who similarly was concerned about the isolation of Muslim students as he had pupils telling him that they no longer felt comfortable speaking to adults openly (ibid).

The conclusions of this report are that the human rights of Muslim school pupils are being infringed upon and that children do not have a safe environment in which to discuss political and religious issues (ibid). This is echoed in the evidence presented in the previous chapter with examples of children who ended up being involved with the police and Prevent over incredibly minor issues that had no roots in extremism.

The issue of freedom of speech is very clearly a problem in secondary schools. Having opinions that are at odds with UK foreign policy, such as supporting Palestine, can end up being attributed to extremism. As was discussed in the previous chapter a boy was reported to prevent for handing out leaflets in support of Palestine at school (Rights Watch UK 2016). The fact that expressing political views such as this one and with no violent extremist content is enough to end up with a referral and be in the pre-criminal space should be glaring cause for concern about the policy (ibid). The young boy was questioned by the police about his religious views and made to feel very uncomfortable about expressing his opinions at school after that (ibid). The case was taken no further after he was questioned by police. However, it was a scary experience for him and left him feeling uneasy about what he could and couldn't say when in public for fear of being reported again (ibid).

In addition to being unable to express political and religious views is the worrying trend of children being questioned about things that are related to neither. The case of the teenage boy who was discussing ecoterrorism in a French class is an example of a situation which was not a risk in any way. There was no indication from what he said that he had any sympathies towards terrorism and the type of terrorism described was not Islamist terrorism (Dodd 2015). However, he and his parents were asked by the school if they supported ISIS (ibid). This is a clear example of a case in which the religion of the pupil was the factor that resulted in him being reported.

Many of these are issues that could easily be resolved if teachers put them in context or contacted parents to clarify any potential misunderstandings. In the case of nursery aged children in particular it

is clear that these cases are not commonly referred all the way to Channel support and it is difficult to understand why they are being reported in the first place. An example of this is when the four year old boy in The Cucumber Case was reported to prevent after the mispronunciation of the word 'Cucumber'.

### **Statistical evidence of disproportionality**

The evidence in the statistics released by the government has also shone a light on how the Prevent Duty Guidance has furthered the existence of the suspect community. It has been shown that many more referrals have been made regarding Islamist extremism over the years than other types of extremism, yet a smaller proportion of these reports go further than the first stage of referral. In comparison, Far Right extremist reports were more likely to be taken further in the process. It is clear from this that there was undue attention on Muslims as there have been so many cases of potential Islamist extremism which were later dismissed. This is further exemplified in the many cases of children who appear to have been profiled for their religion and skin colour by teachers.

### **The pre-criminal space**

The creation of the pre-criminal space in the area of counterterrorism and the fact that it is occupied by many Muslim children is an aspect of the policy which has solidified Muslims as a suspect community. The pre-criminal space which involves interactions with police and details being retained on police and anti-terror databases can negatively impact children in many ways. In the UK there are strict laws regarding the rights of people who have been arrested. These include the right to a lawyer, for example, and the right to refuse to answer questions. When children are arrested they must have a responsible adult, normally a parent or guardian, present when they are interviewed (Holmwood & Aitlhadj 2022:68). However, cases where no crime has been committed and the child is not under caution there are no legal requirements when it comes to the way in which the police must speak to them (ibid). There is not a requirement for a responsible adult to be present and this can lead to children having to speak to the police on their own (ibid). This can be an intimidating experience, creating a negative mindset towards the police if they feel as though they are being treated as a suspect.

Within the pre-criminal space there is also the risk of having data held for a minimum of six years.

This information can be disclosed to universities and colleges, with colleges in Greater Manchester agreeing to share data with universities about prevent referrals that have been made in the past about incoming students (Grierson, 2020). As has been stated, a very small number of those referred actually make it as far as receiving Channel support and referrals remain on the system despite in many cases being found to have no substance. This can negatively impact young people who were referred to Prevent and have been found to have no risk of radicalisation. When this policy disproportionately impacts Muslim young people it can be seen as nothing but discrimination. The over reactions to young children talking about videogames, teenagers engaging with political causes such as Palestine or discussing worldwide issues in class such as ecoterrorism are resulting in children entering the pre-criminal space. These children disproportionately come from Muslim families. This is a direct example of how the suspect community is being furthered by the Prevent Duty Guidance.

### **Prevent Priority Areas**

Another aspect of prevent that indicates a particular focus on Muslims as the targets of the policy is the existence of Prevent Priority Areas (Holmwood & Aitlhadj 2022:72). It is reported in the People's review that the Prevent Priority Areas are areas of the country with the highest proportion of Muslims (ibid). The geographical targeting of the community in addition to the other issues evidenced creates a world in which a person being Muslim is a warning sign that radicalisation could occur (ibid). This leaves the door open for small insignificant comments to be blown out of proportion and end up in a referral to Prevent and involvement in the pre-criminal space.

Greer (2010) argues that a suspect community has not been created and because there are not laws that specifically discriminate against and creating a second legal system for Muslims in the way that there were for the Irish which means they cannot be classed as a suspect community. Despite the fact that the laws do not specify Muslims as the main target, it is clear that this is how they have been applied. The fact that a higher proportion of Muslims, particularly Muslim children are being reported to Prevent for issues that very clearly do not require intervention highlights that this is not the case. The pre-criminal space appears to be occupied by Muslims more than other demographics of people, particularly when it comes to school aged children. This is based on the figures released by the government each year since the introduction of the Prevent Duty Guidance.

## **Importance of public suspicion in constructing the suspect community**

Although Greer (2010) marks one of the parameters of the suspect community as state suspicion that is based in the law and how it is applied, Breen Smyth (2014) argues that the creation of a suspect community is also steeped in public levels of suspicion. She ponders how one can only be a suspect if the state suspects them but not their neighbour (p221). This aspect of public suspicion became critical in 2015 when the state legally obligated civilians working in certain sectors to undertake counterterrorism initiatives by introducing the Prevent Duty Statutory Guidance. Teachers, doctors, nurses, social workers and many more civilians who work with children and vulnerable groups are obligated to be on the lookout for potential terrorists who are at risk of radicalisation. Due to political construction of Islam and the way it has been presented in the press since the start of the War on Terror people are likely to have bias against the community (ibid:231). It makes sense, therefore, that people would be quicker to make reports in regard to Islamist extremism which they are on high alert for.

Teachers reported to the Muslim council of Britain (2015) that they had been trained to try and find out the views of children and their families by tasking them with preparing presentations on sensitive topic such as Syria. This shows intent to use teachers as spies on pupils and their families. This highlights the importance of the public in carrying out counterterrorism policy. The public suspicion of the Muslim community has had a direct impact on reporting to prevent and the interactions that many people, both adults and children, have had in the pre-criminal space and therefore makes up an important part of the reason why it is clear that a suspect community exists in this case.

## **Government's Independent Review of Prevent**

Based on the evidence presented, it is clear that the Muslim community has been targeted by the Prevent policy and the construction of Muslims as a suspect community has intensified. However, Sir William Shawcross and the Government's independent review appear to have found otherwise. The fact that Shawcross was chosen to carry out the review is a statement in itself that the government does not consider there to be an issue of potential bias despite his previous public statements and opinions on Islam. The reason that so many organisations chose not to engage with the review is that they believed it was likely to paint Islam in a negative light and come to

conclusions that would negatively impact the community. This appears to be exactly what has happened. Despite all the evidence presented which points to the overreporting of Islamist extremist concerns to Prevent and a level of reporting that more accurately assesses the risk when it comes to Far Right extremism, the conclusion appears to have been made that the opposite is true. According to leaks, Sir William Shawcross has concluded that moderate right wing thought is being 'over policed' and that the net as to what is considered extreme when it comes to Islam should be widened. It will be interesting to read the full report as the reasoning behind these statements does not seem clear based on information that is currently publicly available. The idea that right-wing thought is being 'over policed' is confusing, as if this were the case you would expect for there to be reports of this over policing in the press. On the contrary, the cases that have caused outrage in the press are a result of children being unnecessarily reported for concerns relating to Islamist extremism. This furthers the view that a suspect community exists in the Muslim population as even though there is strong evidence to suggest that Muslims have been unfairly targeted by the Prevent program, this continues to be denied by the government.

## **How does this relate to trafficking?**

It has been argued that the creation of a suspect community has caused a negative impact on relationships between Muslims and the police and undermines the trust between them (Awan, 2011:1160). An environment of mistrust and the feeling of being under suspicion can lead to children feeling uncomfortable discussing topics that are potentially sensitive politically or religiously in public forums. The way that children and families who have been reported in the case studies have been treated is not conducive to an environment in which children may feel comfortable to make a disclosure such as if they are worried they might be being groomed. Similarly parents being intimidated by social services and Prevent officers are not likely to want to go to those services if they have a concern.

In 2015 a document was released by the government to warn teachers of the signs of radicalisation by ISIS online and the risk that children might attempt to travel to Syria. In this document children are referred to as being 'recruited' by ISIS on social media (UK Government 2015). Despite the evidence that children have been trafficked to Syria under false pretences in order to participate in forced marriages or forced terrorist acts the fact that they are at risk of being trafficked has never been acknowledged.

The Prevent policy is referred to as ‘safeguarding’ throughout documents released by the government (UK government 2018, CONTEST). As has been evidenced, the policy is not concerned with safeguarding the children it is aimed at but is rather trying to safeguard the public from the future threat they may pose. The discussion of victims being ‘recruited’ in government documents shows that this is not considered trafficking and once the child has been trafficked out of the country the government does not consider them in need of ‘safeguarding’ any longer but frames them instead as terrorists. This makes it clear that the claim that children are being safeguarded, similarly to how they would be where concerns of sexual abuse are present, are false.

The OSCE laid out in 2021 the risk that ISIS posed particularly to women and girls who were at risk of entering marriages that might turn into domestic or sexual slavery (OSCE 2021:33). The OSCE stated that children are wrongly being punished and that instead of criminalising them there should be efforts made to repatriate, rehabilitate and reintegrate them (ibid:55). It suggests a human trafficking lens would be useful to assess these cases and could be used to prevent and counter terrorism (ibid). It similarly suggests coordination between Counterterrorism agencies and Anti-Trafficking agencies, suggesting that methods used to prevent trafficking could be implemented and public campaigns discussing trafficking and terrorism to raise awareness of the risk (ibid:59).

## **Double standards**

The case of Shamima Begum was laid out in the previous chapter. The legal battle for her return to the UK has been ongoing for years. The BBC reported that lawyers on behalf of the Home Office argued in court that allegations that Shamima Begum was trafficked were ‘entirely speculative’ (De Simone 2022). This statement is entirely untrue. Clearly based on the international definition of trafficking that she, along with Amira Abase and Kadiza Sultana was trafficked as she was under 18 and was groomed online to leave the country without the knowledge of her family for the purpose of a sexual exploitation. As she was 15 years old she was under the age of consent and as she was married off to a Dutch foreign fighter days after her arrival she would have been in a child marriage which she could not consent to (BBC News 2019).

A 16 year old girl, who was 14 at the time of her arrest under terrorism laws relating to Far Right extremist behaviour in 2020, had her case dismissed as a result of human trafficking laws (De

Simone 2022). In court, it was argued that she had been groomed online by an American Far Right extremist and the case was dismissed after a referral was made to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). The NRM is a system for the referral of potential victims of modern slavery (UK Government, 2022). It was concluded by the Home Office's Single Competent Authority that there were 'conclusive grounds' that the girl had been groomed and sexually exploited (De Simone 2022). Subsequently the conclusion was made that the girl had been a victim of trafficking under modern slavery laws. This was taken into account and the case against her was dropped by the Crown Prosecution Service (ibid).

The ethnicity and religious affiliation of the girl in question was not disclosed in the press, however, as she was arrested for Far Right related terrorism it is most likely that she is a white girl. The fact that this case has been considered trafficking and the cases of Shamima Begum and others like her have not clearly shows, the double standard when it comes to victims who are Muslim and those who are not. The treatment of young girls who have ended up in Syria has been to criminalise them and class them as terrorists.

The framing of children who are at risk of being trafficked as potential terrorists rather than potential victims of trafficking is dangerous. It can lead to situations in which children do not know where to go to for help. There is clear signposting to discuss with a trusted adult if you experiencing grooming or sexual or physical abuse, such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which distributes resources for schools teaching children what to do if they are worries about these issues (NSPCC). Resources regarding trafficking are plentiful, there are many charities and NGOs that are involved in human trafficking prevention and modern slavery as well as it being a government priority. It is clear that if a person is at risk of being trafficked or suspected to have been trafficked their safety is the top priority of everyone involved regardless of any crimes they may have been implicated in in the process. It is important to take this attitude towards potential victims of terrorism-related trafficking as an approach that considers somebody a victim and supports them fully is one that can be successful in helping to save someone form this type of situation.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear due to the environment of suspicion created by Prevent and the evidence collected by

Rights Watch UK and the People's Review of Prevent that Muslim children feel uneasy to voice their thoughts in the classroom and other public spaces. It is clear to see why from the cases and statistics highlighted in this report which show a disregard for the right of children to express themselves without fear of being reported to the government.

The aim of this research was to answer the following question: Has the Prevent policy resulted in the labelling of Muslims in the UK as a suspect community and how does this impact potential child victims of terrorism related trafficking? The answer is clearly yes, the Prevent policy has led to the labelling of the Muslim community which has had a detrimental impact on the way in which children feel able to engage with teachers and other adults. This could drive them into other spaces in which they could be at risk of being groomed.

When young people feel as though they do not have an outlet to discuss these issues, it has been argued that they are more likely to turn to the internet and outside spaces to have such discussions. The report by Rights Watch UK suggests that this is more likely to lead to fewer nuanced discussions and if controversial topics come up children are less likely to be challenged on their views (Rights Watch UK 2016). This can cause people to become isolated which in turn can leave them open to radicalisation and grooming. Therefore, the policy could potentially have the opposite of the intended impact.

It is clear through the presentation of cases and statistics in the previous chapter that a suspect community exists in the UK in the form of the Muslim population. When a community is labelled as suspect this sews mistrust between the community and authorities and can alienate people. Those targeted by Prevent are seen as potential future perpetrators of terrorism. When a child is groomed and considering travelling abroad to join a terror organisation they are at risk of being trafficked. They cannot consent to their travel and are likely to be exploited, sexually, physically or forced to commit terrorist acts when they arrive. For this reason, it is vitally important that children identified as at risk for being trafficked are first and foremost considered potential victims. Children at risk of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation or modern slavery are never blamed, however, when terrorism is involved it is a different story. The Prevent policy should be completely rethought and more care should be taken to ensure that potential victims of trafficking receive the level of support they require and receive it without judgement or demonisation. This could be done by creating human trafficking policy that includes those trafficked for the purposes of terrorism and using this to address the issue rather than focussing on counterterrorism policy to address it.

# Chapter Six: Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that the Prevent policy has for years created marginalisation of the Muslim community. Since its inception in 2003, to its update in 2011 and the expansion of what was classed as extremist and finally the 2015 Counter Terrorism & Security Act the policy has been controversial. The 2015 update created the legal obligation for professionals such as teachers to undergo Prevent training and report anything they found concerning. This expansion has only served to exacerbate the issues involving Islamophobia with many documented excesses and the perception by many including the Muslim Council of Britain that this has led to Muslim young children, in particular, being viewed through the lens of security (Muslim Council of Britain 2015).

The framing of the Muslim community as a suspect community by the Prevent policy creates an unsafe environment for potential future victims of terrorism related trafficking. The government unwillingness to accept that this type of trafficking exists and that the UK can be an origin country for it is dangerous. As this thesis has pointed out a significant minority of children have been groomed online for the purpose to being trafficked to ISIS. These children have to date generally been considered by the British state to be terrorists rather than victims once they have travelled to Syria. If a similar situation arises in the future then it is clear that history could repeat itself. Shamima Begum is the example that we have the most information on as many children who have travelled to ISIS have lost contact with their families and are missing presumed dead. It has been reported that on her arrival in Syria she was married to a Dutch foreign fighter at the age of 15 (BBC News 2019). This is an illegal child marriage and denotes a clear case of trafficking. The continuation of the suspect community creates a relationship between the Muslim community and the authorities that is not conducive to an environment in which children can be open about any concerns they might have about being groomed or concerning things they have been seeing online.

## Prevent

It has been clearly highlighted through case studies and government statistics in this thesis that there have been disproportionate numbers of referrals for Islamist extremism in comparison to referrals for Far Right extremism. The data and analysis chapter provides evidence that particularly in the early years of the data, it is clear that many more referrals were made for Islamist extremism despite the fact that proportionally far more cases that were related to Far Right extremism were taken to

the stage of requiring Channel support. The case studies presented show a strong case for the fact that there have been many Prevent referrals made for issues that are very clearly not related to extremism. This has happened because the government thought it best to introduce the obligation for teachers who have had minimal training to make judgements about extremism which could result in data being stored on children referred by counter-terrorism and police databases. This creates an environment in which children are unable to discuss certain topics without fear of a prevent referral and this infringes on children's rights.

The removal of the word 'violent' from the initial policy which was aimed at countering violent extremism in 2010 widened the net of what is considered necessary to refer to Prevent. The fact that the fundamental British values have been a compulsory aspect of the curriculum in schools in England and Wales since 2014 is concerning as it has been argued that it could be alienating to those who do not have British heritage. It is an othering concept to focus so much on this idea of 'Britishness' as it paints anything other than that as threatening. The notion of 'safeguarding' within the policy is simply false. Based on the evidence presented, it causes distress to children and their families due to the subsequent interactions with schools, police and Prevent officials and results in Muslim children disproportionately ending up in the pre-criminal space. The interactions with the police and the fact that children have their records held despite having committed no crimes and having been proven to not be a risk makes the pre-criminal space dangerous. There is concern that this could lead to disadvantages in education as data is shared between schools and sixth form colleges and colleges and universities. The pre-criminal space was referred to by Professor Connor Gearty who wrote the foreword for the People's review of Prevent as 'the space we used to call freedom' (Peoples Review of Prevent 2022:9).

## **Creation of a suspect community**

Muslims in the UK have been labelled as a suspect community in the wake of the war on terror for many reasons. This includes the way they have been portrayed in politics, the media and policies written by the government. The definition of suspect community in this research draws from Paddy Hillyard's original theory and Pantazis and Pemberton's theorisation of it in relation to Muslims as well as the more recent work of Breen-Smyth (2014). It is important to capture the fact that both state attention on the group, which is the measure used by Hillyard, as well as public suspicion are ways in which a suspect community can be created.

In this case public suspicion is pivotal to the furthering of the suspect community as it is civilian public service workers who are responsible for initiating the Prevent policy in many cases. And there have been teachers who confirmed to the Muslim Council of Britain (2015) that they were trained to find out the views of young children by having them do presentations on sensitive topics in order to find out what their parents views were. Overall it is clear that the Prevent Duty Statutory Guidance has solidified the suspect status of the Muslim community.

## **Child Trafficking Victims**

The suspect status of the Muslim community in the UK has been detrimental for potential victims of terrorism related trafficking. Children who have been trafficked to Syria have been failed by the authorities which did not safeguard them from this risk. Pupils were framed as potential 'recruits' to ISIS by government documents drawn up for schools, this did not allow space to protect them from trafficking. Shamima Begum was only 15 years old when she was trafficked to Syria and should have been protected as such. Once she ended up in Syria and the government that should have attempted to guarantee her safety did nothing to protect her and attempt to keep her safe, instead it has removed her citizenship and vilified her.

It is clear that human trafficking is an important issue to the government unless terrorist groups are involved. Trafficking when it is related to modern slavery or sexual exploitation is taken incredibly seriously. Everything possible is done to remove people from these situations and prevent them from ending up in them. When it comes to children being taken advantage of for the purposes of terrorism the government appears to take a different approach, framing the potential victims as potential perpetrators which does not create a situation in which they will likely feel comfortable to ask for help.

This research has sought to address a gap in the literature by discussing the relation between the furthering of the suspect community by Prevent and the impact this can have on potential victims of terrorism-related trafficking. In future the Prevent policy needs to be considered from this angle and more should be done to protect potential child victims of terrorism related trafficking.

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