

Seminar: The role of Prevent in managing violence-fixated individuals

Child Rights International Network (CRIN)

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Introduction

1. Prevent is a programme designed more than twenty years ago for a specific risk. Since then the programme has expanded in an attempt to address a much broader range of threats. A lack of publicly available evaluations of the programme means that it is hard to assess how well it works currently and its ability to address new risks.
2. Violence-fixated individuals (VFIs) remains loosely defined within Prevent and is open to broad interpretation while there remains a lack of understanding as to the risk and its drivers. As such there are a variety of questions as to the suitability of Prevent to address the risk being suggested.
3. What is clear from the Prevent programme's history is that where there is a lack of clear definition around the risks being addressed, the programme's effectiveness is questionable and the negative impact upon child rights is considerable.

What legal, governance or legitimacy risks arise if Prevent's remit is expanded to VFIs?

Legal risks

4. There are a number of legal risks if Prevent's remit is expanded to VFIs. First, as it stands, VFIs remain ill defined. The absence of a precise definition risks confusion as to who fits this profile. This will potentially cause issues for those legally bound by the Prevent Duty, which is tied to terrorism legislation. There is a risk that an ill-defined concept will lead to overreporting, potentially overwhelming the referral stage of Prevent and leading to children needlessly being drawn into the auspices of counter-terrorism policing and making it harder to identify those who pose a risk.
5. Second, Prevent operates in a pre-criminal space; it is a programme designed to fit with the terrorism legislative framework. There is a risk therefore that VFIs are sent towards the wrong policing space - counter-terrorism - where other areas of policing or public services are better placed to address problems.
6. Finally, there have been long-standing issues around the retention of children's data in relation to Prevent. There should not be a further expansion of the programme without these issues being satisfactorily addressed. Given the long-standing issues of infringements on children's right to privacy this is particularly pertinent.

Governance risks

7. There has been a long-standing issue with the governance of Prevent. Until recently there has been no consistent independent oversight and the data released on

Prevent has been of poor quality. The Home Office has been consistently opaque as to the programme's performance and has been reluctant to share information for independent scrutiny.

8. The creation of the Independent Prevent Commissioner and improvements in data released in recent years are steps in the right direction but further significant improvements in transparency and governance are required.
9. Much more must still be done to improve governance, including regular reports from the Independent Prevent Commissioner, a significant improvement in the data released on Prevent, publication of all existing evaluations relating to Prevent and regularly review the programme's impact on children, both for those who progress to Channel and those who do not so as to understand its long-term impact on them.

Legitimacy

10. The Prevent Programme has failed to identify and effectively intervene with individuals who have gone on to commit violent atrocities. It has also seen thousands of children who likely never had any intention of committing terrorism offences pushed through its programme to their detriment and infringing upon their rights. This, combined with the legal and governance concerns highlighted above, raises concerns as to its legitimacy in addressing an as yet not fully understood or defined risk.
11. Given the significant evolution of the terrorism threat since the Prevent programme was conceived, along with the emergence of new threats, there are legitimate questions as to the programme's ability to cope and prevent atrocities.
12. All these factors in combination should raise significant questions for the public, politicians, legal experts and security specialists as to how well Prevent can address the risk of VFI's.

How clearly does Prevent currently distinguish between ideological risk and violence risk, and how does this matter operationally?

13. A long-standing critique of Prevent is that it does not distinguish clearly between ideological risk and the risk of committing violence. Ideological risk is hard to define and subjective. For example, the UK definition of extremism includes phrases like 'vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values'. Reliance on such terms creates a subjectiveness which makes identifying risk hard and may not relate to violence.
14. For children in particular, it is not uncommon for them to explore issues which are abhorrent but not illegal. This does not mean that they pose a risk of being drawn into terrorism or that they pose a risk of violence.
15. In understanding risk and identifying individuals who are of concern, emphasis should be put on identifying and addressing underlying causes that may lead children

to be drawn towards unhealthy behaviours. Where behaviours are exhibited, particularly minor criminal behaviours, suitable early interventions should be made.

16. Publicly available data relating to Prevent is poor and does not clearly show how many children referred pose an ideological risk compared to a violence risk. In CRIN's experience this differentiation may only be identified at Channel stage, if at all.
17. While there has been a focus on Prevent and likening ideological risk and VFIs, it is worth considering other approaches to addressing the potential concerns. Lessons could be drawn from other interventions which we know have been successful. In particular, programmes that have been used to reduce youth violence, including knife carrying, have been successful in reducing instances of youth knife crime.

Reflections

18. The effectiveness of Prevent is questionable. It suffers from legal ambiguity and poor governance which renders its legitimacy questionable as to its ability to manage VFIs.
19. Significant steps should be made to make the programme more transparent and allow for it to be comprehensively evaluated.
20. Much clearer definitions for categories are required along with improved training for those who the Prevent duty falls on would benefit the programme and would reduce the number of children referred to it.
21. There should not be an assumption that Prevent is the only way to address new risks. Other programmes of work and safeguarding structures should be considered when looking at ways of addressing individuals who could be described as violence-fixated.