UK police gain access to details of thousands of men, women and children through government's Prevent database

Barry Mason
19 October 2019

The UK's police forces have full access to private information, including the political views, of thousands of men, women and children who have been referred to the government's Prevent programme.

The information is available to police forces through a database—the National Police Prevent Case Management (PCM)—that is centrally managed by the national counter-terrorism body.

Liberty, an organisation defending civil liberties and promoting human rights, established that police had access to this information using Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation.

Any individual referred to the Prevent programme is assessed as to whether they are at risk of being vulnerable to radicalization. Those deemed to be at risk can be referred to the Channel programme on a voluntary basis. The UK government describes this as, "providing support at an early stage to people who are identified as being vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism… (using) a multi-agency approach to protect vulnerable people…"

Prevent was introduced by the then Labour government in 2003 and its remit widened in 2011 by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government. In 2015, legislation made it a statutory duty for school, local authority, prison and National Health Service staff to report any individual deemed vulnerable to radicalization to the Prevent programme.

Liberty's October 7 press release explained that the database was "being used to monitor and control communities." It noted that the FOI results showed that the police database, "includes the sensitive personal information of every referral ever received by Prevent... (including) the vast majority of referrals which haven't resulted in any deradicalisation action—meaning potentially thousands of people have been entered into a secret Government database based purely on what they are perceived to think or believe."

According to Liberty, all police forces add to the database to which the Home Office has access. Those put on the database are not informed or told what information is being held.

The report quoted Liberty's policy and campaigns manager, Gracie Bradley saying, "This secret database isn't about keeping us safe. It's about keeping tabs on and controlling people—particularly minority communities and political activists. It is utterly chilling that potentially thousands of people including children, are on a secret government database of what they're perceived to think or believe… this database is just the latest example of the government's increasingly totalitarian approach to policing."

Muslim Council of Britain general secretary Harun Khan said, "This database—over and above being a hugely authoritarian tool—will mean that the vast majority of those referred, who are found to have no terrorism link, will still be perceived as potential risks by the state, and this will disproportionately affect Muslims."

According to Liberty, it is not known how long the information is held or if other organisations such as local authorities can access it. Also, it is not known what the implications of being on the database would be or if the record would show up on an enhanced criminal record check.

It is not known exactly how many people appear on the database but according to the FOI all those referred to Prevent are added to it. In the three years up to March last year, 21,042 individuals were referred to Prevent. For the year 2017–18, there were 7,318 people referred to the program. Of these, 90 percent were not forwarded to the next stage of the process, Channel. Two thirds of those referred that year were under 20 years of age and one third of the referrals came from schools.

Liberty highlights how Prevent can end up with discriminatory results, giving as an example how some British Asian children had been questioned by police for

© World Socialist Web Site

having toy guns at home.

Writing in the *Metro* newspaper on October 8, the advocacy director of Liberty, Clare Collier wrote, “what we found is disturbing for a number of reasons. Firstly, it was built by the police and contains information that is stored and shared without people’s knowledge or consent, which disproves the government’s recent claim that Prevent is a safeguarding policy. Many of those on the database haven’t actually done anything wrong—they are reported to Prevent because of what they’re perceived to think or believe. In fact, less than one out of 10 referrals to Prevent have resulted in deradicalisation action.”

She continued, “the system forces teachers—as well as nurses, doctors and other public servants—to report purported signs of so-called extremism (destroying) the trust that should underscore relationships like those between teachers and pupils.”

In January, the Home Office announced a review of the Prevent programme that would be undertaken later in the year. On August 12, Conservative government Minister for Security, Brandon Lewis, announced the review would be undertaken by Liberal Democrat politician, Lord Carlile.

Carlile is a trusted representative of the British ruling elite and a prominent defender of MI5. He was a supporter of the 2016 Investigatory Powers Act allowing the state warrantless access to internet connections and called Edward Snowden’s exposure of illegal mass state surveillance “a criminal act.”

Prior to the announcement of Carlile’s appointment 10 human rights and community groups had written to Lewis. They raised concerns at the manner in which the process of selecting a reviewer of the Prevent programme had been conducted behind closed doors and feared it would become a “whitewash.” The letter to Lewis was quoted in part in an article in the *Independent* on August 10. It stated, “An incredibly broad range of people and organisations have raised concerns about the impact of the Prevent strategy, including politicians of all parties, health and education workers, members of the security establishment and people from communities disproportionately affected by counter terror policy.” They said any review should look at Prevent’s “underlying assumptions and evidence base, its human rights implications and ultimately whether it is fit for purpose.”

In a public statement on Carlile’s appointment to head the review of the Prevent programme, Liberty stated, “We are deeply troubled by the appointment of Lord Carlile as Independent Reviewer of Prevent. Not only has the government failed to follow its own Governance Code on Public Appointments, but Lord Carlile’s close ties with and publicly declared support for the Prevent strategy undermine the integrity and credibility of this review from the outset.”

It continued, “There seems to be little purpose in an ‘independent review’ whose outcome is pre-ordained by Lord Carlile’s self-declared partiality. His appointment to this vitally important position shatters the credibility of the review from the outset. The review should be comprehensive and wide-ranging in scope and not one that starts with the premise that Prevent should be continued and/or expanded.”

That the widespread and indiscriminate use of Prevent is raising concerns among trusted representatives of the political and intelligence establishment shows the degree to which they fear that such authoritarian measures will generate mass opposition among workers and broader layers in society.

The revelation that data garnered by the Prevent programme is being fed into an all-encompassing police database confirms that central to the plans of the crisis-ridden British ruling class, as with ruling elites internationally, is the enormous strengthening of the state apparatus. There can be no doubt that in the coming period, as the class struggle accelerates, that referrals to Prevent will be used to monitor all manner of opposition, including left-wing, socialist opposition, with its information immediately accessible to the police.

As well as fostering divisions among workers and youth, the repression of freedom of speech and democratic rights via Prevent is bound up with the suppression of opposition to the government’s entire reactionary agenda. This is critical for the ruling elite as they seek to impose—in the immediate post-Brexit period—even greater attacks on living standards, and slash the right to health, education and housing.

The author recommends:

UK Home Office set up fake social media network to target young British Muslims
[30 August 2019]

UK: Children referred for “deradicalisation” under “anti-terrorist” strategy
[15 July 2016]

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site