

UK's Prevent Program Must 'Up Its Game' After High-Profile Failures, Review Warns

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The United Kingdom's (UK) flagship counter-radicalization initiative, known as Prevent, must be significantly improved following two tragic cases in which individuals previously referred to the program carried out deadly attacks, according to a government-commissioned interim review.

Prevent, launched after the September 11 attacks of 2001, seeks to stop people from becoming radicalized and committing acts of violence. Despite its widespread role in schools, healthcare, and social services, the Independent Prevent Commissioner, Lord David Anderson, concluded that the program has “systemic mistakes and misjudgments” that allowed dangerous individuals to slip through its safeguards.

The report highlights two particularly grave failures. Axel Rudakubana, the 17-year-old who stabbed three girls at a dance event in Southport in 2024, had been referred multiple times between 2019 and 2021 by teachers concerned about his violent dialogue and fixation, but prevent failed to escalate his case. Similarly, Ali Harbi Ali, who murdered Member of Parliament (MP) Sir David Amess in 2021, had received only one mentoring session instead of the seven mandated by the Channel deradicalization program.

Anderson emphasized the need for a broader scope, noting that preventive efforts should cover individuals with obsessive violent tendencies, even absent ideological motives. He also urged that Prevent integrate more closely with wider violence prevention frameworks. “Prevent needs to up its game in the online world, where most radicalization now takes place,” he said, stressing better engagement in digital environments where radical messaging often takes root.

The critique is not limited to casework. The report identifies poor communication and lack of follow-through as persistent weaknesses. It recommends adding an open-source intelligence unit to monitor online risks and establishing a Cabinet Office-led task force to embed Prevent within a national safeguarding strategy.

In response, Home Secretary Yvette Cooper pledged to implement the review's recommendations without delay. She reaffirmed the government's determination to restore public confidence and tackle the weaknesses identified in the report.

Official data shows that nearly 7,000 individuals were referred to Prevent in the year ending March 2024. Of these, 36 percent were flagged for vulnerability without clear ideological links, 19 percent were referred for extreme right—wing concerns, and 13 percent for Islamist radicalization.

While the program has drawn criticism, especially from some Muslim groups concerned over disproportionate surveillance, Anderson maintains that Prevent can succeed with proper reform and transparent operation. He noted that teachers acted appropriately in referring cases like Rudakubana and Ali, but the system failed to follow through.

As UK authorities move to implement these reforms, the ongoing case of Southport is under further public inquiry, and Amess's family is calling for deeper accountability. Strengthening Prevent isn't just a matter of policy; it's a test of whether the UK can effectively address evolving threats in a more connected, radicalizing world.