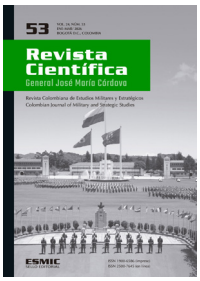

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Replanteamiento de la estrategia *Prevent:* análisis de las deficiencias en la evaluación del riesgo antiterrorista británico mediante el modelo *Pathway to Violence*

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ABSTRACT. This article critically examines the United Kingdom's Prevent strategy, arguing that its assessment mechanisms are fundamentally flawed. Current reliance on a risk assessment focused on vulnerability and susceptibility to radicalisation is ineffective at identifying individuals on escalating trajectories toward targeted violence, leading to significant false negatives. A scoping review of 15 counterterrorism frameworks identified the Pathway to Violence Model (PTVM) as a potential augmentation tool. The discussion outlines how PTVM's six-stage evidence-based framework enables a shift toward a contextualized, threat-based approach, thereby improving triage and resource prioritization. The 2024 Southport attack is analysed to illustrate how it can aid the prevention of the identified systemic issues and demonstrates the PTVM's utility in preventing future failures.

Keywords: counterterrorism; intelligence failures; pathway to violence; prevent strategy; risk assessment; terrorism; threat assessment

RESUMEN. Este artículo examina críticamente la estrategia Prevent del Reino Unido, argumentando que sus mecanismos de evaluación presentan deficiencias fundamentales. La dependencia actual de la evaluación de riesgos basada en la susceptibilidad resulta ineficaz para identificar a individuos en trayectorias de escalada hacia la violencia dirigida, lo que genera importantes falsos negativos. Una revisión exploratoria de 15 marcos antiterroristas identificó el Modelo de Camino a la Violencia (PTVM) como una herramienta de refuerzo vital. El análisis describe cómo el marco de seis etapas basado en la evidencia del PTVM permite una transición hacia un enfoque contextualizado y basado en amenazas, mejorando así el triaje y la priorización de recursos. Se analiza el ataque de Southport de 2024 para ilustrar cómo prevenir problemas sistémicos y demostrar la utilidad del PTVM para prevenir futuras infracciones.

Palabras clave: camino hacia la violencia; contraterrorismo; estrategia de prevención; evaluación de amenazas; evaluación de riesgos; fallos de inteligencia; terrorismo

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Introduction

Although the targets of terrorist violence may not always be individually identifiable in advance, attacks are exclusively directed against individuals, groups, or locations due to social, political, religious, or ideological distinctions. Violent terrorist acts can, therefore, be categorized as a form of targeted violence. The United Kingdom's (UK) counterterrorism response is structured around the CONTEST strategy, and follows the "4P model," comprising Pursue (stopping terrorist attacks), Protect (strengthening protection against terrorist threats), Prepare (mitigating the impact of terrorist incidents), and Prevent (tackling the ideological foundations of terrorism) (Home Office, 2023a).

The UK's Prevent strand of the counterterrorism framework has long been subject to scrutiny, but concerns intensified following two significant incidents. The first was the murder of Sir David Amess MP on October 15, 2021, while he was conducting official duties at Belfairs Methodist Church Hall in Leigh-on-Sea, Essex, UK. The second, more recent attack, albeit not categorised as a terrorist incident, involved a subject who was repeatedly examined by Prevent on several occasions. This occurred on July 29, 2024, when 11 children and two adults were targeted during a children's dance class in Southport, Lancashire, UK, resulting in the murder of three children. A key concern raised in the aftermath of both is that the offenders had previously been assessed and disengaged from the Prevent program. This has led to two separate Prevent Learning Reviews (Home Office, 2025a; Home Office, 2025b), both of which raised concerns about the program's risk assessment processes, echoing issues previously identified in a 2023 Independent Review (Home Office, 2023d).

Having worked within the counterterrorism system, including within Prevent, the primary issue I raise in this article is that many of the intelligence failures in the strategy stem from assessment processes that focus on vulnerability and susceptibility to radicalisation. This focus is put before detecting behavioural escalation toward targeted violence, thereby heightening the risk of missing individuals who do not present obvious markers, but are progressing toward violence regardless. In this article, I explore this concern and add to the limited scholarly literature to date (Augestad Knudsen, 2020) that has critically considered the risk assessment processes used within Prevent by examining the frameworks and processes that underpin it.

To achieve this, the paper first outlines the Prevent and Channel processes to provide a contextual foundation, followed by a review of the principal criticisms of Prevent within broader debates on risk and threat assessment. In response, I call for the Prevent risk assessment framework to be augmented with an escalating threat-based consideration, beyond what presently exists, which is more effective at identifying individuals on a trajectory toward violence (Borum et al., 1999). To this end, the methodology section then details the scoping review and criteria used to evaluate relevant models and frameworks. At the same time, the findings present a comparative analysis of 15 risk and threat assessment tools, before settling on a final proposed augmentation. The discussion then situates the findings in

relation to systemic flaws in Prevent and uses the 2024 Southport attack as a case study to demonstrate the potential of the proposed model as a complementary solution. The article concludes by summarising the main arguments and setting out recommendations for policy and practice.

The Prevent and Channel Process

Prevent is delivered through a structured process designed to enable organisations to comply with their statutory counterterrorism responsibilities (Home Office, 2023b). It has three main aims: (1) identify people at risk, (2) assess the nature and extent of that risk, and (3) develop the most appropriate support plan for the person (Home Office, 2023b, p. 8). The process broadly is as follows:

1. **Initial Referral** – A concern about an individual at risk of extremism or radicalisation is raised by professionals, family members, or the community and submitted through the Prevent National Referral Form, triggering the assessment process (Home Office, 2023b).
2. **Counter Terrorism Police (CTP) Prevent Gateway Assessment (PGA)** – The referral undergoes an initial Gateway Assessment, during which Counter Terrorism Police determine its relevance to Prevent, leading to either case closure, further investigation, or immediate escalation to the Pursue strand (Home Office, 2023b). The assessment guidelines outline how this is informed by a person's susceptibility or vulnerability to extremism and radicalization (Home Office, 2023b).
3. **Dynamic Investigation Framework (DIF)** – If deemed worthy of further investigation, the DIF process begins. This includes gathering intelligence and information from law enforcement and intelligence agencies and using a triage tool to assess whether a more comprehensive referral should be considered and, if so, where it should be directed (e.g., Channel or other forms of support).
4. **Vulnerability Assessment Framework (VAF)** – If a case is considered as being suitable for progression, then the full spectrum of partner agencies is brought together to help complete a deeper assessment underpinned by the Vulnerability Assessment Framework (VAF) to evaluate ideological engagement, intent, and capability for subsequent multi-agency review.
5. **Multi-Agency Channel Panel Review –** Ultimately, it is the decision of a multi-agency Channel panel that thoroughly reviews the case and decides whether the individual should receive support through Channel, also known as being "onboarded" (Home Office, 2023b).
6. **Tailored Support and Interventions –** If onboarded into Channel, the individual receives customized interventions, which may include mentoring, ideological direction or deconstruction, mental health support, education, or employment as-

sistance, depending on the risk factors identified (Home Office, 2023b). For those who have already engaged in extremist activity, rehabilitation and disengagement are pursued through the Desistance and Disengagement Program (DDP) (Home Office, 2023b).

7. **Case Closure and Post-Support Monitoring –** Once the intervention is complete or susceptibility or vulnerability is no longer present, a case can be formally closed, and six-month and twelve-month reviews should be conducted to assess ongoing risk.

It is important at this stage to outline that not all individuals suspected of terrorism are processed through the Prevent program. Those deemed to pose an imminent threat, such as individuals engaged in active attack planning, are typically managed through the full investigative powers of the security services and counterterrorism policing. Such cases often bypass Prevent entirely, either because the assessment process has correctly escalated them or because their threat is immediately evident and picked up by other means.

Furthermore, if an individual refuses support, is suspected of serious non-terrorist criminal conduct, and/or presents an ongoing but unprosecutable risk (meaning their behaviour is below the criminal threshold), they can be managed by alternative means. For example, Police-Led Partnerships (PLP) can be instigated, involving surveillance, targeted interventions, or other risk mitigation strategies, including traditional criminal investigation for non-terrorist-related activity (Heath-Kelly, 2024). Alternatively, individuals can be monitored through Multi-Agency Centres (MACs), which the UK has developed as a semi-covert structure to manage those persons assessed as posing a national security risk, but who fall below the criminal threshold (Heath-Kelly, 2024). Unlike Prevent/Channel, participation in such interventions is not consensual (Heath-Kelly, 2024). Instead, Counter Terrorism Policing and intelligence agencies work covertly with social care, offender management teams, and education services to allocate support such as employment, training, or mental health provision (Heath-Kelly, 2024). While officially positioned under the Pursue strand of the CONTEST strategy, the MAC effectively bridges the space between Prevent and Pursue, providing a covert alternative to Channel for "closed subjects of interest." This means that individuals who disengage from or refuse interventions from Prevent may still be covertly managed through welfare provision or alternate disruption strategies (Heath-Kelly, 2024) in an effort to ensure they do not go on to commit violent attacks.

The Prevent Strategy and Associated Criticisms

The UK Prevent strategy is a fundamental component of the country's counterterrorism framework, and a key tenet is that terrorists often misappropriate political or social grievances and combine these with misinterpreted religious doctrine to justify terrorist actions (Home

Office, 2023a). It therefore works to address this by engaging with individuals who espouse or are at risk of engaging in extremism or radicalisation (Home Office, 2011). The primary aim of the program is to "stop people from becoming terrorists, or supporting terrorism" (Home Office, 2023a).

To achieve this aim, it pursues several objectives, including tackling the ideological foundations of terrorism, intervening early to safeguard people susceptible to radicalization, and supporting individuals already engaged in extremist activity to disengage and rehabilitate them, thereby reducing the likelihood they will commit acts of terrorism (Home Office, 2011). These are implemented through a multi-agency approach that spans law enforcement, security services, education, healthcare, and local government. In the UK, it is a legal obligation under the Counterterrorism and Security Act 2015 for organizations within these sectors to "have due regard" to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism and Prevent provides the framework for them to achieve this (Home Office, 2023b and 2023c).

Despite Prevent's effectiveness relying on coordinated partnership working, research suggests that this collaboration has been fraught with issues, including fragmentation and conflicting priorities (Dresser, 2019). The two recent Prevent learning reviews identified that "*record keeping is problematic*," and "*there is a blurring of responsibilities in terms of the police and the local authorities*" (Home Office, 2025a and 2025b).

Focus on Muslim Communities

In addition to issues within Prevent's multi-agency delivery, controversy persists surrounding the disproportionate focus on Muslim communities, with some arguing this reinforces concerns about ethnic and religious profiling (Amnesty International UK, 2023; Cohen & Tufail, 2017; Innes et al., 2011; Qurashi, 2018). This has led to what has been described as the construction of a "suspect community" (Pantazis & Pemberton, 2009). Counter terrorism chiefs argue that this is because the nature of terrorism in the UK has dictated its priorities. As a result, the main emphasis is on Muslim groups like Al-Qaida, and more recently, Daesh (ISIS) (Home Office, 2023a). Prevent also addresses the threat from extreme right-wing movements (Home Office, 2023a); however, the risk landscape reflects investigative priorities, resulting in "80% of the Counter Terrorism Police network's live investigations are Islamist while 10% are extreme right-wing" (Home Office, 2023d, p. 8).

Controversy *within* Prevent, however, is not caused by its potential to target Muslim communities disproportionately, but quite the opposite. This is because despite 80% of investigations focusing on radical Islamist threats, "only 22% of Prevent referrals for the year 2020 to 2021 concerned Islamism", leading the Independent Reviewer of Prevent to state that this represents "…a loss of focus and failure to identify warning signs," and that Prevent "…is out of kilter with the rest of the counterterrorism system, and the UK terrorism threat picture." (Home Office, 2023d, p. 8).

Freedom of Speech

Prevent has also been criticized for its impact on freedom of speech, particularly within universities and schools. The duty imposed on educators to report students who display signs of "extremism" is considered to create a climate of suspicion and discourage open discussion, especially around contentious political issues (Busher et al., 2017), such as the discourse regarding Israel and Palestine. Some have argued that it may discourage legitimate debate (Busher et al., 2017). Others go further and argue that applications within the education, healthcare, and local government systems have seen them repurposed as instruments of counterterrorism (Dresser, 2019).

These perceptions have led to Prevent being seen as a "tainted brand" (Innes et al., 2011; Qurashi, 2018). Driven by a lack of clear communication and effective community engagement, there is widespread distrust of the program (Innes et al., 2011). Among Muslim communities, particularly, there exists the perception that the strategy is a covert intelligence-gathering tool operating under the proviso of a safeguarding initiative (Innes et al., 2011). Such perceptions foster mistrust, leading some to contend that rather than preventing radicalization, the strategy deepens grievances and sows division, inadvertently contributing to the very problem it seeks to address (Pantazis & Pemberton, 2009).

Evidence-Based Research on Prevent

There is also scant evidence to substantiate Prevent's effectiveness. At its core, the empirical evidence to support the program's primary claims, that early intervention is capable of diverting individuals from radicalization or preventing terrorist acts, is highly debated and far from accepted (Dresser, 2019). What research on Prevent does exist is limited to examinations of the characteristics of individuals who enter the program (see Seaward et al., 2025; Clemmow et al., 2024). Rather than supporting the aims and objectives of Prevent or its conceptual ethos, these highlight the limitations of the assessments used, which disaggregate risk into distinct categories of violent/non-violent and radicalised/non-radicalised (Seaward et al., 2025; Clemmow et al., 2024).

Such separation is problematic as extremism involvement is not binary, with both violent and non-violent individuals within Prevent displaying distinct and inconsistent behaviours, degrees of radicalised motivation, and vulnerabilities (Seaward et al., 2025; Clemmow et al., 2024). Such findings support arguments questioning Prevent's conceptualization, particularly the suggestion that extremism and radicalization lead to violent terrorist action, a claim upon which it is built (Augestad Knudsen, 2020). Some go so far as to suggest that this position runs counter to the evidence on radicalisation (Augestad Knudsen, 2020; Bhui, 2016), and the major Prevent studies to date appear to support this.

Pitfalls of the Prevention Referral and Assessment Processes

In addition to the poor evidence base underpinning Prevent's conceptual ethos, there are a plethora of concerns regarding the myriad assessments utilised within the framework and the

issues this causes. At a fundamental level, the most apparent issue is the system's complexity. The assessments in Prevent are used to facilitate a Structured Professional Judgement (SPJ) process, which involves experts seeking behavioural or circumstantial indicators of an individual backed by research (Clemmow et al., 2024).

This is a recognised methodology in such contexts (Borum 2015a, 2015b; Monahan, 2017). However, task complexity is a significant driver of human error (Podofillini et al., 2013). In this regard, the array of assessments in Prevent creates a complex patchwork of tools that are used in combination, and potentially in competing or interchangeable ways, to assess a range of distinct issues—susceptibility, vulnerability, mental health, extremism, radicalisation, risk, and threat.

I argue that this issue is at the root of many Prevent intelligence failures. In the face of such complexity, it is unsurprising that inconsistency and unpredictability in outcomes emerge as error is inevitable, regardless of whether systems of assessment and recording exist to guide practitioners (Cox, 2008). William Shawcross, the Independent Reviewer of Prevent, identified this and has called for greater consistency, stating: "Prevent must ensure a consistent and evidence-based approach to setting its threshold and criteria." (Home Office, 2023d, p. 7). However, achieving consistency first requires unpicking the processes that drive the complexity of issues before a potential "simpler" solution can be identified. Doing this requires a reductive approach, beginning with the process's foundational roots.

The Roots of the Prevent Assessment Process

The extremist risk guidance (ERG) developed for the UK prison service (Lloyd & Dean, 2015) is the source material for the assessment processes underpinning Prevent. It was designed for, and is presently used to assess prison inmates, and particularly terrorism offenders, to evaluate their degree of extremism or radical persuasion (Lloyd & Dean, 2015), often as part of their rehabilitation process. Since implementation, the ERG has received criticism for its limited evidence base and method used to identify and develop the 22 indicators (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2016), which form the basis of Prevent's primary risk assessment process, and are outlined in Table 1.

Critique has primarily focused on its validity and reliability in identifying individuals involved in terrorism (Brown & Cox, 2011; Garrick, 2002; Gill, 2016; Herzog-Evans, 2018; Sarma, 2017; Scarcella et al., 2016). As a result, early in 2025, the ERG 22 was updated to address the shifting profiles and ideological fluidity of subjects (Kenyon et al, 2025). The revised ERG, referred to as ERG-R, represents a significant expansion and restructuring from the previous version, introducing a fourth dimension (Protective/Risk Mitigating factors) alongside the existing Engagement, Intent, and Capability (Kenyon et al, 2025).

Table 1. ERG Indicators Used in the Police Vulnerability framework dimensions and features

Dimension	Feature Number	Feature Description
Engagement	1	Feelings of grievance and injustice
	2	Feeling under threat
	3	A need for identity, meaning, and belonging
	4	A desire for status
	5	A desire for excitement and adventure
	6	A need to dominate and control others
	7	Susceptibility to indoctrination
	8	A desire for political or moral change
	9	Opportunistic involvement
	10	Family or friends' involvement in extremism
	11	Being at a transitional time of life
	12	Being influenced or controlled by a group
	13	Relevant mental health issues
Intent	14	Over-identification with a group or ideology
	15	"Them and us" thinking
	16	Dehumanisation of the enemy
	17	Attitudes that justify offending
	18	Harmful means to an end
	19	Harmful objectives
Capability	20	Individual knowledge, skills, and competencies
	21	Access to networks, funding, or equipment
	22	Criminal capability

Source: own elaboration

Key changes include broadening the terminology, with "Susceptibility to indoctrination" reframed as a looser indicator of "Susceptibility to influence" (Kenyon et al., 2025). Significantly, the Intent dimension has been expanded to include new indicators such as identity fusion, expressed intent, willingness to self-sacrifice, and explicit planning or preparation. At the same time, "attitudes that justify offending" have been reframed as antisocial or violence-supportive attitudes (Kenyon et al., 2025). Capability now encompasses the production, dissemination, or use of terrorist materials and replaces "criminal capability" with

the broader "criminal history" (Kenyon et al., 2025). Despite these changes, the original 22 factors within the original ERG remain in use within Prevent.

Regardless, I suggest that even if the ERG-R were incorporated within the Prevent risk assessment processes today, it would be insufficient to address the primary issue I put forth in this article, that the assessment process remains centred on vulnerability and susceptibility to radicalisation rather than on detecting behavioural escalation toward targeted violence, thereby missing individuals who do not present clear markers but are progressing toward attack. Although the new features, such as "expressed intent," "planning or preparation," and "criminal history," potentially overlap with pre-attack behaviours, the ERG-R treats them as discrete indicators rather than elements of a discernible process, which is a primary threat assessment principle (Borum et al., 1999).

In addition, "capability" is considered to encompass knowledge, skills, or attributes, networks or resources, criminal history, and whether the person is a consumer or disseminator of terrorist material (Kenyon et al, 2025). However, these are not fit for purpose in the current terrorist environment. This is because counterterrorism officers are often trained to consider whether subjects have military experience, undergone "terrorist training," have access to firearms, or are members of the criminal fraternity. Although these may have been traits of previous attackers, such as those responsible for 9/11, the attacks on the London Underground in the 2000s, or the 2008 Mumbai hotel attack, they are not reflective of emergent terrorist modus operandi.

Increasingly, successful terrorist attacks involve rudimentary methods, specifically knife attacks and driving vehicles into crowded places, both conducted randomly or in a targeted fashion, neither of which requires high degrees of capability. This makes the utility of the features within the capability dimension limited at best. As a result, even if the ERG-R were fully incorporated into a revised risk assessment process, the risk of false positives and false negatives would persist, and the structural gap in which violent intent can mature unchecked would remain.

Radicalisation Vulnerability and Susceptibility-Based Risk

Compounding the ERG assessment's inability to identify escalating behaviour, within Prevent, it is actually used to assess "vulnerability or susceptibility" to radicalisation. Doing so is potentially problematic, as this is being assessed using a tool (the ERG) developed for one purpose, outside its intended context (assessing prison inmate radicalisation). Of note, the use of the ERG in this way is but the first of several examples of repurposing within Prevent.

To badge the repurposing of the ERG in this way, the Vulnerability Assessment Framework (VAF) (His Majesty's Government, 2012) was introduced. The VAF takes the 22 features from the ERG outlined earlier in Table 1, specifically, the dimensions of engagement, intent, and capability (Home Office, 2023c), and designates this as authorised professional practice by the UK College of Policing (CoP) (College of Policing, 2021a). This means it

should be adopted by all police services in the UK, including those within counterterrorism policing, to help decide whether an intervention is justified and necessary, and what kind of support may be appropriate (Home Office, 2023c). The assessment is argued to be dynamic, allowing professionals to track an individual over time through regular multi-agency review meetings (Home Office, 2023c). However, it provides only a static snapshot of a person at the time of the assessment.

It is not unusual for the security and criminal justice system to use risk assessments per se in this way, with both clinical—conducted by specialist psychiatrists—and actuarial—using data and quantification tools (Leese, 2014; McCulloch & Wilson, 2016; Fazel et al., 2012) frequently utilised. However, their use in counterterrorism is relatively new (Monahan, 2017). Ordinarily, to develop such an evidence base of indicators suitable for use in risk assessments, analysis is conducted to identify traits possessed or displayed by subjects in relation to the context in which they are examined (Borum et al., 1999), which in Prevent is "vulnerability or susceptibility to radicalisation." However, as I now point out, and others before me have also (Augestad Knudsen, 2020) the Prevent assessment is not being used by practitioners to assess a convicted prisoners radicalisation risk, (its intended purpose) but to determine whether a civilian, potentially with no criminal history at all, is "susceptible" or "vulnerable" to radicalisation (Augestad Knudsen, 2020). It is therefore self-evident that the VAF has not been developed with this mindset.

The effect of this repurposing is unknown and understudied. It cannot be overlooked that reapplying a risk assessment in this way can be problematic for several reasons. First, at its core, the primary aim of Prevent is to stop people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism (Home Office, 2023a). In respect of the first element of this aim (stopping people from becoming terrorists), the use of the outlined assessment process is built on the assumption that extremist or radicalised views lead to or increase the risk of a person conducting a violent terrorist act. This is not a widely accepted assumption within counter terrorism (Augestad Knudsen, 2020; Bhui, 2016; Borum, 2011 and 2014; Kundnani, 2012; Richards, 2015; Schmid, 2013; Sedgwick, 2010). In fact, a violent terrorist act is just one of a wide range of outcomes that may emerge from a person being radicalised, along with multiple alternate outcomes, many of which are non-violent, or even criminal (Borum, 2015b; Logan & Lloyd, 2019; Perliger et al., 2016; Schuurman, 2020).

Furthermore, there are a wide range of studies that have examined both violent and non-violent terrorism offenders and identified that they are distinct in a range of demographic, social, political, religious, psychological and behavioural characteristics (Bartlett & Miller, 2012; Becker, 2021; Challacombe & Lucas, 2018; Evans et al., 2021; Gill & Horgan, 2013; Gill & Young, 2011; Horgan et al., 2016; Jasko et al., 2016; Kerodal et al., 2016; Klausen et al., 2016; Knight et al., 2017, 2022; LaFree et al., 2018; Perliger et al., 2016; Scrivens et al., 2023). As such, using a risk assessment process for radicalisation as a method of stopping people from becoming terrorists embeds potentially flawed assumptions and may increase

misclassification of whether someone presents a risk, leading to both false positives and negatives.

Second, at a foundational level, understanding what radicalisation is can be troublesome for those working within Prevent, given the ongoing definitional instability since its inception. There have been multiple revisions to the Home Office's definition of radicalisation by Prevent that have contributed to uncertainty about its manifestations (Bhui, 2016; Kundnani, 2012; Richards, 2012). The many descriptors used to describe radicalisation and train statutory agencies are loosely defined, vague, and theoretically underdeveloped, a fact previously highlighted (Augestad Knudsen, 2020; Heath-Kelly, 2017).

Unsurprisingly, many professionals report feeling unequipped to assess radicalisation risk accurately (Dresser, 2019). This issue is further complicated by the growing number of individuals with "mixed, unclear, or unstable" (MUU) ideologies, characterised by fluid, situationally influenced belief systems (Brace et al., 2024). These cases are particularly challenging for counterterrorism agencies because unstable ideologies obscure both motivation and intent (Home Office, 2022a). The scale of this problem is evident in the fact that more than half of all Prevent referrals in 2020–2021 were categorised as MUU (Home Office, 2023d).

The third and most problematic issue of all three highlighted here is that the risk assessment, as it is applied, is not even used to identify whether a person holds radicalised or extremist views, but instead to help determine if they are "susceptible or vulnerable to radicalisation." Conceptually, this is a step before such views may even emerge. Although some argue risk assessments should be used to provide the broadest perspective (Meloy et al., 2012), this is a stretch too far.

Because of such shortcomings (and others), the independent review of Prevent has called for replacing the VAF, arguing that it has several flaws, including a limited risk-assessment evidence base (Home Office, 2023d). In response, it is scheduled to be replaced at some point in the future by an adapted model, the Prevent Assessment Framework (PAF). The Independent Review of Prevent: One year on progress report' indicates the PAF is more succinct and "will ensure that Prevent support is only provided to those that are 'susceptible' to radicalisation" (Home Office, 2024). This strongly suggests the new model will retain its conceptual focus on identifying vulnerability or susceptibility to extremist or radicalised views and will avoid any dramatic shift from its roots.

Mental Health as a Precursor to Vulnerability or Susceptibility to Radicalisation

To help address the latter of the aforementioned issues (susceptibility or vulnerability to radicalisation), within the most recent version of the VAF published by the College of Policing, officers are guided to identify this using another risk assessment processes born from the assessment of psychological health (College of Policing, 2023a) called the Public Psychiatric Emergency Assessment Tool (PPEAT) which was redeveloped into the "ABCDE Model"

(Wright & McGlen, 2012). This is another structured assessment to evaluate individuals experiencing mental health crises in emergency settings.

This guidance applies to all UK officers, which potentially includes those in counterterrorism policing and Prevent. The ABCDE model consists of five domains: Appearance and Atmosphere (A), Behaviour (B), Communication (C), Danger (D), and Environment (E) (Wright & McGlen, 2012). The categories are designed to enable professionals, i.e., police officers (including counterterrorism officers), teachers, and nurses, to use the criteria to systematically gather information about an individual's condition without specialist psychiatric training (Wright & McGlen, 2012). In terms of its features, the ABCDE model outlines additional factors that police officers are expected to consider when assessing a person's overall susceptibility and vulnerability to radicalisation (see Wright and McGlen, 2012, for the complete list).

Despite this tool being developed to assist the police in responding to people suffering mental crisis (Wright et al., 2008), the ADCDE model has also been adopted by the CoP as their formal process for identifying vulnerability by looking for what are described as "Clues," of which there are 15 (College of Policing, 2021b). These clues are, in fact, the features from the ABCDE model and serve as a further example of the foundational models used by policing, and frequently within the Prevent assessment process, incorporating tools designed for one purpose (mental health) and applying them to another (identifying vulnerability).

As a result, vulnerability, as defined by mental health state, forms a significant part of Prevent assessments, resulting in inadvertently creating a fertile environment for both unintentional and deliberate misuse of the system. This was confirmed by the Independent Review of Prevent, which found evidence of agencies using Prevent referrals to access alternative services, including mental health support, for individuals who do not present a terrorism risk, a practice that misallocates resources and diverts attention from genuine threats (Home Office, 2023d). The review concluded that this "serious misallocation of resources… risks diverting attention from the threat itself" (Home Office, 2023d, p. 7).

In this regard, using the ABCDE models description of vulnerability for counterterrorism purposes flies in the face of one of the main principles of risk assessment: it must be clear about what it seeks to assess and identify (Borum, 2015b; Roberts & Horgan, 2008; Logan, 2021). Applying this tool to risk assess susceptibility and vulnerability (predominantly in the form of mental health) as a precursor to radicalization and terrorism risk is ambiguous, unclear in its mechanism, and untested. Bhui (2016) supports this position and highlights the issues of using a mental health tool for this function, stating that while individuals with psychological distress or psychiatric conditions may be more susceptible to manipulation, and therefore *potentially* radicalization, mental illness is rarely a common factor among those who commit terrorist offences (p. 83). Consequently, filtering potential attackers through a risk assessment process using a radicalization lens that is itself flawed due to being based on a mental health process, significantly overestimates the role of psychological susceptibility

in the commission of terrorist acts, and misrepresents the process of terrorist offending (Bhui, 2016, p. 83).

Assessing Risk and Threat

In addition to the aforementioned models, UK police and counterterrorism officers are also guided to assess overall risk and threat before reaching a final decision, enabling staff to identify and prioritize individuals who require intervention. According to the recent Learning Review (Home Office, 2025b), Counterterrorism Police make this decision after reviewing all previous referrals and gathering and reviewing the results of the assessment processes, alongside relevant intelligence and information from law enforcement, security, and safeguarding agencies relevant to the subject.

The overall objective is to determine whether the individual presents a genuine risk and threat of "radicalization", not whether they are at risk of committing an attack. Only cases meeting the legal threshold set by the Counterterrorism and Security Act 2015 (CTSA), where there are reasonable grounds to believe that an individual is vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism, proceed for further consideration for Prevent, who may proceed to a multi-agency Channel panel, PLP, MAC, or other intervention (Home Office, 2025b).

At a conceptual level, a threat has been defined as "an expression of intent to harm" (Dietz et al., 1991; O'Toole, 2000). Such a threat can be implicit, explicit, written, or oral (Meloy, 2001b). When identified, a threat must be assessed to determine the likelihood it will be realised (Cornell et al., 2009). To achieve this, three longstanding principles underpin threat assessments. First, targeted violence follows a discernible process of thinking and behaviour, meaning attacks are not spontaneous but develop over time (Borum et al., 1999). Second, violence arises from an interaction between the attacker, current circumstances, and the target, emphasizing that danger is situational rather than individual (Borum et al., 1999). Third, identifying attack-related behaviours is crucial for assessing and preventing threats from being realised (Borum et al., 1999).

As tools, threat assessments are not perfect, and, like risk assessments, their efficacy in predicting violence remains modest (Meloy et al., 2014). However, they are more useful than risk assessments for managing targeted violence, such as violent terrorism, because they better identify specific behaviours requiring immediate intervention (Meloy et al., 2014), including those related to intent and capability (Meloy et al., 2012). As with risk assessments, there are no agreed-upon indicators that can predict when threat-related behaviour turns into violence (Mitchell & Palk, 2016). Instead, six broad dimensions have been identified that are frequently present when people threaten targeted violence (Mitchell & Palk, 2016). These include mental health, substance use/abuse, motivation for the threat, a plan for realising it, access to weapons, and attack-related behaviour (Mitchell & Palk, 2016).

Despite these longstanding assumptions about threat assessment, to make this risk judgement call, guidance from the College of Policing again directs the police, including

counterterrorism policing, to focus on vulnerability. To comply, UK officers are increasingly using yet another model called THRIVE. This THRIVE model provides guidance on "vulnerability-related risk" and assesses Threat, Harm, Risk, Investigation, Vulnerability, and Engagement needs (College of Policing, 2015; National Police Chiefs' Council, 2017). In the context of counter terrorism assessments, the first two elements, Risk and Threat, are particularly relevant. In this context risk is defined as "the possibility of something occurring, the likelihood that the threat or harm will take place" (National Police Chiefs' Council, 2017, p. 102). Threat is defined as "a person or thing likely to cause danger or damage" (National Police Chiefs' Council, 2017, p. 102).

Therefore, THRIVE, whilst the strongest threat assessment component amongst the processes outlined, suffers from overlooking foundational threat assessment principles, has no empirical evaluations of its validity or efficacy, and is a further untested component. Despite these facts, studies identify that it has already been broadly applied in police intelligence departments (Keningale et al., 2024; Walley & Adams, 2019) but the degree to which it is deployed in CT policing is unknown. This is potentially dangerous because it is too vague, and the definitions that underpin it provide insufficient explicit guidance and omit key principles and features of the threat assessment literature. As other studies suggest (Keningale et al., 2024), this leads to highly subjective assessments. In the case of Prevent, recall how it is also used to assess the risk and threat of radicalisation, not violence. This further cements the process of structured professional judgement into one rigidly focused on behavioural or circumstantial indicators regarding an individual's vulnerability, and in the worst-case scenario, mental health vulnerability, instead of those backed by research on targeted violence.

The National Decision Model (NDM)

By combining all the aforementioned information, including features from the ERG, the ABCDE model, and risk and threat considerations, police and counterterrorism officers can then make their final assessment. The CoP outlines that results to this point "*may be used and integrated into the NDM (National Decision Model) at the stage of gathering information and intelligence*" (College of Policing, 2021b). As a tool, the NDM is structured around six key elements, with stages one and two including information gathering and a risk and threat assessment (College of Policing, 2021). In addition, it guides officers to consider the ethics and professional standards of policing, and to reflect on legal and policy guidelines before making their decision (College of Policing, 2021). Officers are then advised to consider all options and contingencies before deciding on a final course of action (College of Policing, 2021).

As the NDM is a cornerstone of the Prevent assessment process, only after completing the assessment which may incorporate all, or a combination of the ERG, ABCDE model, Risk and Threat analysis, and the use of the NDM, can police, counterterrorism officers and statutory partners determine a conclusion. Often, this complex process is completed at the pre-emptive gateway stage but may continue into the DIF and even inform their position during the multi-agency channel panel review. If they (or, for late-stage cases, the multi-agency

channel panel review) deem that an individual is not vulnerable or susceptible to radicalisation, the case can be closed or redirected (Home Office, 2025b). Once a case is redirected or closed, Prevent and Channel no longer maintain involvement, and the individual is not monitored further unless future concerns arise, in which case a new Prevent referral may be submitted (Home Office, 2025b). Alternatively, at this point, a case may continue in line with the earlier outlined Prevent process.

The influence of this final decision model in the overall assessment process should not be understated, as it is among the most influential in UK policing. Despite its importance, as with the other areas of the process highlighted, the NDM also lacks a clear evidence base. Some suggest it fails to account for key factors that influence police decision-making (Halford, 2024). Many have argued that it provides limited utility for decision-making during investigations (Dando & Ormerod, 2017; Fahsing & Ask, 2016; Halford, 2024). While others suggest, just like THRIVE, it is also overly subjective, leading to inconsistent results (Fahsing & Ask, 2016; Halford, 2024). These concerns have led to calls for reconsideration of its scope and remit in policing unless its efficacy can be proven, which, at this stage, has not occurred. Such concerns regarding the NDM should not be considered in isolation. Instead, consider how it is influenced by the compounding effect of the multiple procedural flaws I have outlined that go before it, as follows:

1. The Prevent assessment process is highly complex and is built by combining the ERG, which includes 22 extremist indicators, designed for prison inmates, often alongside the 15 "clues" derived from the ABCDE model, a mental health risk assessment repurposed for application in circumstances of susceptibility/vulnerability to radicalisation. The complexity introduced by considering more than 37 repurposed features increases the risk of human error during the assessment process.
2. Together, these complex assessment processes are used to pursue one of Prevent's primary tenets, that extremism and radicalisation risk lead to violent terrorism, which is a questionable position given that research on this link remains ambiguous.
3. Furthermore, at a conceptual level, the assessment components are in fact operationally applied to consider the contexts of vulnerability and susceptibility to radicalisation, and specifically, as evidence from the learning reviews suggests, that driven by mental health, which is a significant preceding and highly debatable stage.
4. They are then frequently supported by vague risk and threat dimensions that have apparent gaps and pay only passing attention to fundamental threat assessment principles. They also possess only a limited number of factors related to the potential for violent action.

Therefore, adding a final decision-making tool that does not address these flaws but instead magnifies them by facilitating highly subjective, discretionary judgment serves to "build in" significant complexity and inconsistency, thereby raising the likelihood of resultant intelligence failures.

The Call for Redesigning the Prevent Process

In this article, I argue that the need for reform within the Prevent assessment processes lies not in assessing the clear-cut, high-threat cases undertaken by the Pursue strand, but in how agencies manage the ambiguous layer of risk beneath the immediate and obvious. This is often where individuals experiencing acute emotional, mental, or psychological distress are situated, and where intent and capability may be forming, but indicators remain inconsistent or unclear. In this context, a significant weakness of the current Prevent processes, including their ability to manage MUU ideologies, is their limited alignment with established threat assessment principles.

For example, the first accepted threat principle is that targeted violence follows a discernible process (Borum et al., 1999), but this is not fully integrated in Prevent, increasing the likelihood that escalating behaviours may be overlooked. While the process does reflect the second principle, that situational risk emerges from the interaction between an attacker, their circumstances, and a potential target (Borum et al., 1999), through the ERG and ABCDE models, its treatment of the third principle, attack-related behaviours, remains underdeveloped. The ERG model provides some insight, but primarily at the earliest stages of escalation. If and where officers have the experience to recognise potential attack-development behaviours, they may apply considerations informally. However, the absence of an explicit framework for doing so leads to inconsistency in evaluations and outcomes.

An improved framework must therefore incorporate all three threat assessment principles, with particular emphasis on Principle 1, which is most effective for identifying escalating behaviour and reducing the likelihood of intelligence failures that result in violent attacks. This requires moving away from the existing static, point-in-time assessments that move beyond binary categories of vulnerable/susceptible, radicalised/non-radicalised, or violent/non-violent. This is because the existing focus on vulnerability or susceptibility to radicalisation privileges cases involving mental illness, or those espousing overtly solidified political or ideological dispositions, producing false positives and negatives among those who fall outside the programme's narrow definitional boundaries.

This is a severe limitation, as although Prevent and its myriad assessments are formally positioned as upstream and pre-emptive, rather than a threat-management tool, they function in practice as the primary gateway into the counterterrorism system for individuals below the Pursue investigative threshold. When its vulnerability and susceptibility-based assessments fail to capture behavioural escalation, individuals are unlikely to be referred onward

to Pursue, subjected to PLPs or other violent offender management programmes delivered by the MAC, leaving a critical gap in which intent can mature unchecked.

Addressing this flaw requires more refined classification tools that facilitate behavioural analysis over time. Such an approach would enable more precise differentiation between the codification of risk indicators and the often slow, gradual emergence of violent intent (Seaward et al., 2025; Clemmow et al., 2024). Without such capability, risks continue the familiar pattern seen in high-profile cases where individuals previously referred, but later rejected, disengaged, or de-escalated, go on to commit acts of violence. To address this issue in a manner that also incorporates established threat principles, I believe, as others have argued (Seaward et al., 2025; Clemmow et al., 2024), it will require a broader analytical lens capable of revealing a more meaningful relationship between risk factors and actual threat. This means the Prevent assessment process must incorporate mechanisms to identify individuals on a trajectory toward targeted violence. The rest of this article focuses on identifying a suitable potential solution, should one exist, from the existing literature.

Method

To identify a suitable solution to enable the Prevent assessment process to identify individuals escalating towards violence, a scoping review methodology is used to systematically map the literature on the use of threat and escalation assessment frameworks within law enforcement practice. This method was selected as it enables researchers to chart the breadth and depth of evidence on complex topics without the rigidity of systematic or meta-analysis (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). As the study relied exclusively on secondary sources, including published academic literature, and did not involve primary data collection involving human participants, formal ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, care was taken to ensure that all sources were appropriately cited, that data were interpreted responsibly, and that sensitive material was handled with due consideration to context and purpose, in line with guidance on handling such sources (Gathama, 2025).

To conduct the review, a search strategy was developed to capture relevant literature. Searches were conducted across Scopus, Google, and Google Scholar to capture both academic and grey governmental and policy literature. To conduct the searches, terms of keywords and Boolean operators relating to a range of areas were combined. These included "threat assessment," "violence escalation," "violent behavioural indicators," "risk assessment," and "counterterrorism" to ensure a breadth of literature was identified, while maintaining relevance (Peters et al., 2020). Eligibility criteria were established a priori to ensure consistency and transparency in the screening process as follows:

Inclusion Criteria (one or more of the following)

1. V**iolence Escalation Frameworks** – literature focused on violence escalation processes, attack progression, or behavioural pathways.

2. **Terrorist Extremism of Radicalization Assessment Tools** – frameworks or tools specifically designed to measure or assess extremist and radicalized terrorist behaviour.
3. **Operationalised Models** – models explicitly proposed or used in practice by law enforcement and security agencies to assess threats or risks of violence.

In terms of source type, the inclusion of material was restricted to English-language sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, official government or non-governmental reports, independent reviews, inquiry documents, and grey literature from think tanks. Publications focused solely on theory, without reference to assessment, escalation, or operational application, were excluded. Searches were conducted on Google Scholar and Scopus. Figure 1 presents the PRISMA flow diagram, detailing the number of records identified, screened, and selected. In total, 136 results were identified. After screening, 27 articles met the inclusion criteria and were selected for full-text review and data extraction.

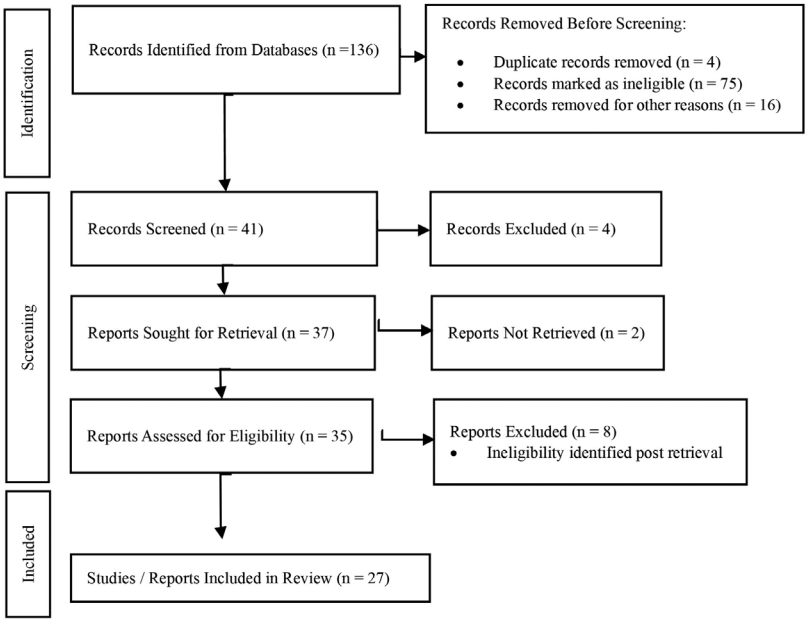

Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram: Identification and Selection of Literature

Source: own elaboration

All search results were imported into a Microsoft Excel table for screening. Titles and abstracts were initially reviewed against the eligibility criteria, with full texts retrieved for potentially relevant literature. A two-stage process was then employed: (1) an initial broad screening to remove irrelevant literature, and (2) a detailed full-text review to determine fi-

nal eligibility. Where uncertainty remained, conservative inclusion was favoured to preserve breadth (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

To help chart the literature, consistent with scoping review guidance (Peters et al., 2015), an iterative approach was adopted, involving thematically mapping each to a set of self-designed assessment criteria to enable discussion and a conclusion regarding the most suitable model. This enabled any conclusion to be better understood, more justified, and more defensible. In this regard, each model or framework identified was rated across six dimensions. First, "Process" examined the extent to which the framework conceptualises violence as a dynamic process rather than a static state, reflecting threat assessment principle 1. Second, "Escalation" assessed sensitivity to behavioural signals of movement towards a violent attack, a critical gap which I believe exists in Prevent assessment processes. Third, "multi-agency applicability" was considered, recognising that Prevent is embedded within a broader safeguarding system in which non-specialist practitioners require easily relatable tools. The fourth criterion, "Redundancy versus ERG," examined the extent to which the framework risked duplicating the existing guidance, since I believe value at this stage is best achieved through augmentation rather than a systematic overhaul. Fifth, "Implementation" considered the model's compatibility with the current referral and case-management structures, including the PGA, VAF/PAF, and Channel review panel processes. Finally, "Evidence base" considered the breadth and robustness of empirical or operational support for each framework to strengthen defensibility. This process of comparative scoring allowed for transparent mapping of the strengths and limitations of each model or framework assessed using a simple rating of High (H), Medium (M), or Low (L) for each criterion.

Findings

Identified Models and Frameworks

The review identified a sizeable body of literature on threat assessment and radicalisation, including detailed reviews (Clesle et al., 2024; Logan et al., 2023; Seaward et al., 2024) as well as broader examinations of generic threat assessment and the behavioural trajectories of individuals who commit acts of terrorism (Borum, 2003; Bouhana, 2019; Fahey & Simi, 2018; Lloyd & Kleinot, 2020; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017; Moghaddam, 2005; Neo, 2019; Pfundmair et al., 2022; Precht, 2007; Sageman, 2008; Silber et al., 2007; Taylor & Horgan, 2006; Veldhuis & Staun, 2009; Wiktorowicz, 2004). From this body of work, 15 models were identified for potential consideration, which are summarised in Table 2.

From the perspective of generic threat assessment, much of the foundational literature stems from the seminal contributions of Borum et al. (1999) and Calhoun and Weston (2003), who articulate the general principles of Threat Assessment and Threat Management (TATM). Building on these foundations, several violence escalation frameworks were identified, with each seeking to describe how behaviours may evolve along a psychological or developmental pathway toward violence.

Moghaddam's (2005) Staircase to Terrorism Model conceptualises radicalisation as a narrowing staircase where opportunities for disengagement diminish at each stage, thereby increasing the likelihood of violent action. At the ground floor, individuals experience perceived injustice and relative deprivation. On the first floor, conventional solutions are sought, but when these fail, frustration propels individuals upward. The second floor involves displacement of aggression toward perceived enemies, while justifications of violence characterise the third floor as legitimate or necessary. The fourth floor represents engagement with terrorist organisations and processes of indoctrination. Finally, the fifth floor marks the stage at which individuals are prepared to commit terrorist acts, often viewing them as obligatory.

Table 2. Identified Models and Frameworks

Source / Tool	Category	Inclusion Justification
Borum, et al (1999)	Generic Threat Assessment Frameworks/ Operationalised Models	Foundational article outlining structured approaches to threat assessment across domains of targeted violence.
Pathway to Violence Model (PTVM) Calhoun & Weston (2003)	Violence Escalation Frameworks / Operationalised Models	Escalation framework widely used by US agencies to track behavioural progression to violence.
Threat Assessment & Threat Management (TATM)	Generic Threat Assessment Frameworks / Operationalised Models	Provides a structured approach to threat management, positioned for operational uptake in agencies.
Staircase to Terrorism (Moghaddam, 2005)	Violence Escalation Frameworks	Psychological model conceptualising individual escalation toward terrorism in progressive stages.
Three Pathways Model (Khalil, 2017)	Violence Escalation Frameworks	A framework outlining distinct routes to violent extremism, with a focus on mechanisms of escalation.
RECRO Model (Neo, 2016)	Violence Escalation Frameworks	Stage-based model of radicalisation.
TRAP-18 (Meloy, 2018)	Terrorist Radicalisation Assessment Tools	Structured instrument assessing proximal warning behaviours and distal characteristics of lone-actor terrorists.
VERA-2R (Pressman, 2009; Pressman & Flockton, 2012)	Terrorist Radicalisation Assessment Tools	Validated tool designed for structured professional judgment of extremist risk.
MLG v2 (Cook et al., 2013)	Terrorist Radicalisation Assessment Tools	Second-generation model for evaluating risk factors in radicalisation processes.
IR-46 (Lloyd, 2019)	Terrorist Radicalisation Assessment Tools	Developed for the Dutch National Police, a structured checklist for radicalisation risk.
SAVE (Dean, 2014)	Terrorist Radicalisation Assessment Tools / Operationalised Models	Developed for operational policing and security services; positioned for case management.
RAN CoE Returnee 45 (Meines et al., 2017)	Terrorist Radicalisation Assessment Tools / Operationalised Models	EU practitioner tool for assessing returnees; designed for direct operational use.
RADAR-iTE (Bundeskriminalamt, 2017)	Terrorist Radicalisation Assessment Tools / Operationalised Models	The German federal tool for assessing the Islamist extremist threat is already in active deployment.
INSiGHT (Hung et al., 2018)	Terrorist Radicalisation Assessment Tools / Operationalised Models	Machine-learning-based screening instrument designed for operational intelligence contexts.
The JCAT First Responder's Toolbox	Violence Escalation Frameworks// Operationalised Models	Practitioner-oriented toolkit designed for frontline use.

Source: own elaboration

Other models conceptualise the trajectory of radicalisation as a set of discrete pathways. For instance, Khalil's (2017) Three Pathways (3P) model identifies three distinct trajectories toward violent extremism. Pathway 1 (P1) involves a gradual transition from non-extremist to non-violent extremist beliefs, which eventually progress into support for violence. Pathway 2 (P2) bypasses the non-violent stage, with individuals adopting extremist views and supporting violence simultaneously, often influenced by doctrines associated with Al-Qa'ida or Daesh. Pathway 3 (P3), by contrast, describes individuals who engage in violence without ideological commitment, motivated instead by coercion, material incentives, or the pursuit of belonging, status, or adventure.

Similarly, the RECRO Model (Neo, 2016) conceptualises radicalisation as a five-phase process: reflection, where unmet needs and vulnerabilities create receptivity; exploration, where extremist content is actively engaged with; connection, where social networks reinforce beliefs; resolution, where ideological commitment transforms into readiness for action; and finally, the operational stage, where individuals are prepared to enact violence. Finally, the Pathway to Violence Model (PTVM) describes six stages: grievance, where perceived injustice creates fixation; Ideation, where violence is considered a solution; research and planning, where targets and methods are studied; preparation, involving the acquisition of weapons or rehearsal of attacks; breach, where the attacker positions themselves and overcomes security; and the final stage of attack, where the violent act is carried out (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999; US Secret Service, 2021).

Alongside conceptual models, several structured assessment tools have been developed to guide practitioners in operational settings. The Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18) (Meloy, 2018) is designed for interdisciplinary teams, including probation officers, law enforcement, and mental health professionals. It identifies behavioural indicators of radicalisation and supports the prevention and management of extremist threats. The Violent Extremism Risk Assessment (VERA) (Pressman, 2009), later refined into the VERA-2R to address issues of reliability and validity, was also identified as it has been adopted internationally as a structured framework for assessing extremist beliefs and behaviours and guiding case management (Pressman & Flockton, 2012).

Complementing this, the Multi-Level Guidelines, Version 2 (MLG V2) (Cook et al., 2013) was designed for professionals in criminal justice, security, and health, with a particular emphasis on monitoring changes in radicalisation risk and identifying intervention opportunities. The Islamic Radicalization (IR-46) tool was also included, as this was developed by the police in the Netherlands in 2009, drawing on case analysis and expert input to create a staged model of radicalisation (Lloyd, 2019). The review also identified the Australian model SAVE (Structured Assessment of Violent Extremism), which evolved from the earlier Risk Assessment for Violent Extremists (RAVE). It was designed for operational policing and national security agencies (Dean, 2014).

In Germany, the RADAR-iTE instrument is used by the Federal Criminal Police Office to assess risks of Islamist terrorism and was developed through systematic research, expert

consultation, and feedback from practical application (Sonka et al., 2020). The Investigative Search for Graph-Trajectories (INSiGHT) (Hung et al., 2018). This tool draws on the Klausen dynamic radicalisation model (Klausen et al., 2016 & 2020). It uses machine learning techniques to support law enforcement and counterterrorism intelligence agencies in identifying trajectories of radicalisation by monitoring extremist indicators and assessing risk patterns. Finally, the review identified a single specialised tool, developed for foreign terrorist fighter cases, called the Radicalisation Awareness Network's Centre of Excellence (RAN CoE) Returnee 45, produced by the Netherlands, to guide multi-agency counterterrorism teams in managing returning fighters (Meines et al., 2017; von Berg, 2019).

In addition to these instruments, several models have been explicitly operationalised in counterterrorism. The Pathway to Violence Model outlined above, for example, has been widely adopted across US agencies, including the Department of Justice, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Secret Service (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999; US Secret Service, 2021). Similarly, the generic Threat Assessment and Threat Management (TATM) framework has been formalised by the FBI's Joint Counterterrorism Assessment Team (JCAT) and disseminated through practitioner-focused resources such as the First Responder's Toolbox (JCAT, 2017). These operationalised models provide structured processes for assessing individuals who may pose a risk of targeted violence and for prioritising them for coordinated interventions across law enforcement, security, and community partners.

Assessing Model Suitability

Table 3 presents a comparative evaluation of the 15 frameworks and models against my six criteria: process, escalation, multi-agency usability, redundancy vs ERG22+, implementation, and evidence base.

Table 3. Assessment Results for Each Framework and Model Analysed.

Model / Tool	Process	Escalation	Multi-agency	Redundancy vs ERG	Implementation	Evidence Base
Borum, et al (1999)	H	M	M–H	L	H	H
Pathway to Violence Model (PTVM) Calhoun & Weston (2003)	H	H	H	L	H	H
Threat Assessment & Threat Management (TATM)	H	H	H	L	M	M
Staircase to Terrorism (Moghaddam, 2005)	M	M	M	L	M	M
Three Pathways Model (Khalil, 2017)	M	H	M	L	M	M
RECRO Model (Neo, 2016)	M	H	M	L	M	M
TRAP-18 (Meloy, 2018)	H	H	M	M	M	M–H

Table continues...

Model / Tool	Process	Escalation	Multi-agency	Redundancy vs ERG	Implementation	Evidence Base
VERA-2R (Pressman, 2009; Pressman & Flockton, 2012)	M–H	M	M	H	M	M–H
MLG v2 (Cook et al., 2013)	M	M	M	M	M	M
IR-46 (Lloyd, 2019)	M	M	M	M	L–M	M
SAVE (Dean, 2014)	M–H	M	M	M	M–H	M
RAN CoE Returnee 45 (Meines et al., 2017)	M	M	H	M	M	M
RADAR-iTE (Bundeskriminalamt, 2017)	M	H	M	M	L	M–H
INSiGHT (Hung et al., 2018)	M	M–H	L–M	M	L–M	M
The JCAT First Responder's Toolbox	H	H	H	L	M	M

Source: own elaboration

Several models score consistently high across multiple domains. The TATM model (as operationalised by JCAT/FBI) shows consistently high scores for process, escalation, and multi-agency applicability and implementation. Predictably, one might argue, given their emphasis on risk assessment, many of the structured assessments received moderate grades, primarily because they paid limited attention to the process of escalating violence. Of these, TRAP-18 performs relatively well, with high ratings in process and escalation and moderate-to-high scores in evidence base.

VERA-2R also stands out, particularly for its strong evidence base, but it had a high degree of crossover when compared to the ERG. However, its scores across other dimensions are more mixed. Tools such as MLG v2, IR-46, and SAVE occupy the lower range, with generally medium scores across most criteria, while more specialised tools like RADAR-iTE, RAN CoE Returnee 45, and INSiGHT evidence strengths in a limited number of criteria (e.g., escalation or multi-agency) but lack the consistency of the higher-performing frameworks. Models grounded more in theoretical or developmental psychology, such as Moghaddam's Staircase, Khalil's 3P, and Neo's RECRO, scored in the medium range and often scored lower due to their limited evidence base.

Overall, the models and frameworks by Borum et al. (1999) and, more specifically, by Calhoun and Weston (2003) through their Pathway to Violence Model (PTVM) were graded highest. The latter, which is significantly influenced by the work of Borum et al., demonstrated the strongest overall profile, with high gradings across process, escalation, multi-agency application, implementation, and evidence base. It also had a low redundancy rating, meaning it did not clash with the existing ERG and would be suitable as a "bolt-on," making it, in my view, the most effective and operationally versatile framework among those reviewed.

Discussion

This article aimed to identify a suitable complementary model for the UK counterterrorism Prevent assessment process to address what I perceive as a systematic weakness in the system's capability to identify individuals on a trajectory to commit targeted violence. To achieve this, a scoping review of existing models and frameworks was conducted, followed by a systematic assessment of their suitability. This process identified, as previous literature has argued (Clemmow et al., 2024), that despite the wide range of material available on terrorism, radicalisation, and extremism that correlate with both violent and non-violent terrorism, there are still few tools available to those in the counterterrorism field that effectively help them identify escalating risk and threat.

This is vital because a terrorist act is often a significant act of violence; it stands to reason, therefore, that assessments of potential terrorists, including those in Prevent, should first consider the subject's present position on, or their ongoing path towards violent action, and not solely their susceptibility or vulnerability to radicalization. This is the best way to ensure the strategies' primary aim is achieved: preventing acts of terrorism. Only by considering an evidence-based model that begins with, and retains at its core, the identification of escalating behaviour can practitioners be confident of not overlooking what may appear, on first inspection, to be behaviours of 'curiosity'.

Process and Escalation

Based on the review and assessment conducted, the pathway to violence model (PTVM) stands out as the seminal model in this regard and was identified as being the most suitable to help incorporate threat principle 1 (Process), Its underpinning principals are that those who commit targeted violence follow a frequently observed "path" which involves research, planning, preparation, and implementation (Calhoun & Weston, 2003; Fein and Vossekuil, 1999). This position echoes the most basic principle of threat assessment, that violence is a process rather than a spontaneous act (Borum et al., 1999; Fein & Vossekuil, 1999).

In addition, it explicitly categorizes the various stages of escalating behaviour, from Ideation through to the probing and attack stages. As such, it meets two of my key criteria (it models targeted violence as a process and provides categorisation of an escalating trajectory), and in doing so, effectively addresses fundamental flaws within existing Prevent assessment approaches, which have limited efficacy in predicting future violent incidents (Fazel et al., 2012; Ramesh et al., 2018).

Evidence Base

The PTVM also has excellent background credentials. The US Secret Service created it in the late 1990s through the Exceptional Case Study Project, which examined what preceded planned attacks on high-profile figures (Fein et al., 1995; Fein & Vossekuil, 1999). Therefore, in terms of the model's evidence base, it is highly regarded and to date, its efficacy has been

demonstrated in multiple studies which have identified that "warning behaviours" (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999; James et al., 2007, 2008, 2011) linked to the pathway to violence are often present prior to the conduct of various forms of violent offences.

This includes school shootings (Hoffman et al., 2009; Meloy et al., 2001a, 2004), domestic homicides (Campbell, 2004; Campbell et al., 2003; Campbell et al., 2007; Echeburua., et al, 2009), workplace attacks (Calhoun & Weston, 2003; Hoffmann & Dölitzsch, 2006; Southerland, et al., 1997), and terrorist attacks (Jones et al., 2024), including those committed against public targets (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999; James et al., 2007; James et al., 2009; Scalora et al., 2002). Despite this base, it is not routinely used by any law enforcement agencies in the UK, including those in the counterterrorism field.

Redundancy vs ERG

A key consideration in evaluating the suitability of models for this article was the degree of redundancy with existing processes, particularly the ERG, which already provides a risk assessment component using structured radicalisation and extremist risk factors. Therefore, models that duplicate its functions add limited value. The Pathway to Violence Model was rated low in this regard, indicating it avoids this pitfall by offering a genuinely complementary approach.

The PTVM can be used to contextualise risk indicators retrieved by following the ERG (or ERG-R) along a behavioural pathway of escalation, enabling practitioners to visualise better warning signs across its progressive stages (Calhoun & Weston, 2003; US Department of Justice, 2017). By tracking escalation in this way, regardless of ideological clarity, the PTVM has the potential to identify individuals who may be progressing toward violence but do not fit neatly into the fixed categories of vulnerability and susceptibility to radicalisation or extremism, as emphasised in Prevent.

Multi-agency and Implementation Capability

In terms of its capability for use within a multi-agency setting and its ease of implementation into existing Prevent assessment processes, the PTVM ranks highly in both regards. This is because a key part of the model's effectiveness is its simplicity and the unambiguous nature of its six components, all of which are evidence-based, pre-attack warning behaviours that indicate a person is escalating towards violence (Calhoun and Weston, 2003; The US Department of Justice, 2017). Due to their manageable volume and simplicity, these components could be embedded within both settings with relative ease.

To exemplify this, the attack in Southport, UK, in 2024 provides a compelling case study of its potential (Home Office, 2025b). Although not categorised as a terrorist act, the attack committed by Axel Muganwa Rudakubana is a high-profile Prevent failure. It perfectly highlights the issues I outline in this article, particularly the absence of consideration for the principle that targeted violence is a process, rather than a spontaneous act (Borum et al.,

1999; Fein & Vossekuil, 1999). In this case, the subsequent Prevent learning review identified systemic failures in the assessments, with multiple indicators of the offender's escalating behaviour overlooked (Home Office, 2025b).

In total, Rudakubana was the subject of 3 referrals to Prevent, none of which suitably identified the threat posed. As a result, the offender was not subject to adequate intervention. As his escalating risk was overlooked, he was allowed to progress through each stage of the pathway to violence. Table 4. Illustrates these failures by outlining each stage of the PTVM alongside whether it was identified, acknowledged, or dismissed in the Prevent response to the Rudakubana case, and highlights that every stage was present but was either misclassified, ignored, dismissed, or overlooked.

Table 4. Analysis of the Pathway to Violence Model Stages in the Case of Axel Muganwa Rudakubana.

Pathway to Violence Model Stage	Present in the Rudakubana Attack?	Identified in the Prevent / Channel Response?
Grievance (Fixation)	Present	Misclassified as Autism Spectrum Disorder
Ideation (Violence Justification)	Present	Ignored due to unclear ideology
Research and Planning	Present	Dismissed as curiosity
Preparation (Weapons Possession)	Present	Significance overlooked
Breach (Final Steps)	Present	Not reported
Attack (Execution)	Present	Too late to intervene

Source: own elaboration

In the case of Rudakubana, pathway warning signs first emerged in 2019 when teachers reported hostility toward peers and staff, alongside an interest in school shootings and terrorist attacks (Home Office, 2025b). A Prevent referral followed on December 5, 2019, after a teacher raised concerns, including his prior exclusion for carrying a knife (Home Office, 2025b). Despite clear indicators of grievance (fixation on school and aggression), ideation (interest in violence), and preparation (weapons possession), his case was closed on January 31, 2020, for lack of immediate terrorism risk (Home Office, 2025b).

On February 1, 2021, a second referral arose from his social media posts referencing mass violence (Home Office, 2025b). Although this escalation signalled entrenched grievance and Ideation, Prevent dismissed the case within two weeks, attributing his behaviour to possible autism spectrum disorder (Home Office, 2025b). A structured PTVM assessment would have identified this as progression along the pathway. On April 26, 2021, a third referral followed after internet searches for "London bomb," the IRA, MI5, and the Israel-Palestine conflict, coupled with expressed interest in weapons and explosives (Home Office, 2025b). Officers dismissed this research as "curiosity" and closed the case (Home Office, 2025b).

Within the PTVM framework, these were clear indicators of research and planning; however, under the existing Prevent framework, the reliance on radicalisation categorisation obscured the trajectory of escalating behaviour. Similarly, during the preparation phase, his prior exclusion for carrying a knife in 2019 indicated capability and access to weapons, a key feature in preparatory behaviour. Prevent, however, did not treat this as meaningful, overlooking the significance of such rudimentary means within the PTVM framework. Had the model been applied, the convergence of grievance, Ideation, research, and preparation would have revealed an escalating pathway to violence. Importantly, all of these features would likely be captured using the risk assessment processes within Prevent. However, the absence of an escalatory framework permitted the threat to proceed unabated.

The breach stage was reached the week before the attack when his father removed him from a taxi outside his former school. He had booked under a false name and wore the same clothes and mask later used in the murders (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998, 1999; Home Office, 2025b). This "textbook" breach signalled imminent violence but went unreported, missing the last opportunity to intervene. The final stage occurred on July 29, 2024, when Rudakubana entered a children's dance class in Southport armed with a knife, attacking 11 children and two adults, killing three (Home Office, 2025b). The failure to recognise his progression through the PTVM stages over five years meant Prevent and Channel did not act in time to stop the attack.

Although a single case study, this attack highlights how the integration of the PTVM within both a multi-agency and a counterterrorism setting in the UK, as a complementary framework for Prevent, could add considerable value. Its six-stage structure, grievance, Ideation, research and planning, preparation, breach, and attack, offers a reliable framework for contextualising existing risk assessments that could realistically enhance the ability of practitioners to distinguish between low-threat individuals and those who require actual intervention to prevent their behaviour transitioning into violent action, thereby better achieving Prevent's primary aim. It could also enable the whole system to identify better individuals who are already too far along the pathway toward violent action, whether terrorist-related or not, and ensure that individuals on a demonstrable trajectory are prioritized for PLPs or the Pursue strand, thereby potentially reducing the repetition of past failures.

Conclusion

This article examined the Prevent strategy's assessment mechanisms, demonstrating how its reliance on a susceptibility/vulnerability-based assessment process creates systemic failures in identifying individuals on a trajectory toward targeted violence. Because of this shortcoming, the Prevent and Channel assessment processes are prone to both false positives and negatives. The reliance on a system that conflates vulnerability with risk and threat has led to a pattern of misidentifications, diverting resources toward individuals who do not require intervention while failing to act against those on a clear pathway to violence. The Southport

attack illustrates these facts by demonstrating how the existing process can translate into intelligence failures, as multiple warning signs of escalating violence are either misclassified, dismissed, or overlooked entirely. The result of the graded scoping review identified that the PTVM offers a model that can be used to address these issues by contextualising existing risk assessment findings to support practitioners in identifying escalating threats of violence.

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