National
POLICYBRIEF

PROMISE POLICY BRIEF: UNITED KINGDOM (2 OF 2)

YOUTH MOBILISATIONS OF 'SUSPECT COMMUNITIES'

OCTOBER 2018

INTRODUCTION

PROMISE explored the ways young people with a history of stigmatisation or conflict participate in society. Our research explores the stigmatisation associated with being a young Muslim in the UK. Rising anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiments together with the securitisation of society, including through counter-terrorism legislation introduced amidst concerns about 'home grown' terrorism, have contributed to the construction of Muslim populations as 'suspect communities'. Young British Muslims are particularly affected by the 2015 UK counter-terrorism Prevent Duty, which brings them into tension with a range of institutional sites – especially schools, colleges and universities they attend - that have a statutory duty to deliver this preventative arm of the counter-terrorism CONTEST strategy.

This policy brief is concerned with the experiences of stigmatisation among young Muslims in the UK in the post 9/11 climate and 'war on terror' but, in particular, their responses to them. Our findings suggest that young people respond to stigmatisation in proactive ways that resist the misrecognition of British Muslims, re-present Islam and its practice and carve out new spaces to live out British Muslim identity in a way that is meaningful to them.

The policy recommendations are directed towards:

➢   Policy makers in local and national government ;
➢   Police and counter-terrorism officers and Prevent coordinators responsible for community policing;
➢   Safeguarding leads and Prevent duty coordinators in institutions with statutory duties to deliver Prevent including schools, Higher Education and Further Education institutions, Local Authorities, the National Health Service and prisons;
➢   Key workers in the communities working with young people such as youth workers, community leaders and activists and community cohesion officers.

The aim of the recommendations is to:

➢ Raise awareness about pre-emptive counter-terrorism measures such as PREVENT and how it impacts on young Muslims;

➢ Prompt a consideration of the PREVENT policy and procedures to avoid any iatrogenic effects that could potentially contribute to stigmatisation of young Muslims;

➢ Add to an evidence base which highlights the importance of taking into account the wider socio-political context in which these policies are enacted and thus experienced by young Muslims.

KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

STIGMATISATION

Our findings demonstrated that young Muslims experience a strong sense of stigmatisation due to: the widespread, negative connotation of Islam and Muslims; personal experiences of racism and Islamophobia; and their interactions with the UK counter-terrorism Prevent strategy and its implementation. The strong association of Islam with terrorism has contributed to the creation of a 'suspect community' that positions Muslims as a homogenous group that is collectively responsible for terrorist atrocities. This narrative legitimises the scrutiny of Muslims and leads to feelings of being constantly under suspicion. This stigmatisation problematises already complex and sometimes troublesome identity work that young Muslims face and contributes further to their marginalisation in the British society.

Examples

Everyday experiences of Islamophobia:
[…] it's very difficult for them to be a young Muslim, because they're scared and they get called all sorts. Like following the [names city in the UK] attack, I was walking into a library just to do some revision. I just was just (…) out by some lady in a car, just like following me with her eyes, because I had a back pack on. She was just like following me with her eyes. [...]I suppose that's what a lot of my hijabi friends experience on a daily basis. Like getting people calling names in a takeaway, all sorts. [...] there's a whole undercurrent of abuse which is directed at British Muslims... (Dmitri)

Public scrutiny and mistrust:
And like even if it, whether or not it's true, whether or not it's taken out of context and manipulated and warped into something else, the point at the end of the, the picture at the end of it is that we're [Muslim community organisation] seen as bad, we're seen as, you know, extremist or like retaliative to British society. (Nadira)

Being treated with equal respect:
I don't want to be assumed guilty without having done anything. You know, so if I go on the street, I want to be treated as any other respected citizen of the country. You know, I don't want to be treated guilty without having committed anything. (Tariq)

Recommendations

➢ It is recommended that more attention be paid to raising awareness about the discriminatory effects of stigmatisation. While stigmatisation is distinct from hate crime - which is a punishable offence – it is nonetheless debilitating. It is a process of the imposition of an identity (a 'self') that has not been chosen and that constrains life chances. It is reinforced through everyday encounters, small acts, feelings and sensations.

➤   It is recommended that educators and people working in youth settings encourage peers to recognise how stigma is experienced and reproduced. This can be achieved through conducting exercises in empathy (walking in another person's shoes) to see how small acts can be experienced as reinforcing the sense of being under suspicion.

ENGAGING WITH PREVENT

The statutory obligations attached to the Prevent duty mean that most participants in our research had had direct engagements with Prevent provisions at some point in their educational careers. These experiences were mainly negative. Respondents described how the 'Prevent agenda' pervaded everyday classroom experience, working to shut down debate on issues important to them (e.g. British foreign policy or injustices experienced by Muslims), turned university lecturers into 'the police' or led to stringent risk assessment procedures, including the vetting of external speakers, when organising student events. However, some respondents reported a positive experience in working with local authorities, schools, and Prevent panels to make sure that they identified correctly individuals at risk of being radicalised and to develop ways of implementing the duty that reduced the chances of iatrogenic effects.

Example

Negative experiences of Prevent:

[…] certain other ISOCs [Islamic Societies at Colleges and Universities] have… like, their prayer halls have been installed with, like, cameras and, like, recording... like, they're recorded twenty-four hours a day. Like, I think they certainly feel the effects a lot more. Like, they feel like being watched and, like, just for going and praying and stuff. (Shareef)

Tarring everyone with the same brush:
We understand like the thought process behind it [Prevent], and the fact that it was aimed to stop radicalisation. But we felt like it was victimising a large group of people, and stigmatising any actions that they do in order to catch a few rotten apples. (Ashraf)

Working with Prevent to safeguard one another:
I've worked with some young people to go to their local authority and be like, 'Look, you know, we, we want to be part of a Prevent Advisory Board, let's, let's better understand how it's implemented, let's see if we can maybe get an Imam in to do some religious sensitivity training for you, to make sure we're not conflating religious conservatism with potential non-violent extremism.' […] I think the council were very, very receptive, quite surprisingly. […] they [the local councils] are more than willing to engage with the community and I think they actually quite value the participation of young people who, who know what they're doing. So as long as you're not simply going in there and criticising everything, but you're saying, 'I wanna work with you to create something, you know, let's co-create something,' there is that reciprocity. (Ruksana)

Recommendations

➤   It is recommended that the potential iatrogenic effects of counter-terrorism policy – whereby measures designed to increase security have the counterproductive impact of further alienating marginalised communities and acting as a potential driver of violent extremism – are taken into consideration when devising policy and how it is implemented.
➤   It is recommended that young people are included in, rather than being made the objects of, the Prevent duty. Working with those delivering Prevent encourages a sense of being involved in a shared safeguarding exercise rather than being an object of suspicion.

➢ It is recommended that young people's active engagement with Prevent delivery is transmitted to other young people to ensure Prevent is engaged with not only at an abstract, political level.

COUNTERING STIGMATISATION

The counter-terrorism Prevent policy may contribute to the construction of Muslims as 'suspect communities' but, simultaneously, it mobilises young Muslims to challenge their misrecognition through social and political activism. This takes a range of forms including participation by students in actions such as the NUS 'Students not Suspects' campaign, which lobbies for the repeal of the Prevent duty. However, many more young people are active in charity, volunteering, educational and social activities which aim to counter negative images of Islam and represent Islam in a positive way. For young Muslims 'doing good deeds' can be a powerful weapon in the fight against stigmatisation.

Examples

Promoting good work:
'Cause you very rarely hear positive new stories [about Muslims], and I think that's kind of why [Muslim] people feel that they have to promote when they're doing good work or they try to, to market things much more effectively. I think there's a real lack of responsible reporting, but it's not just on Islamic issues, I think it's on all kind of minority communities. They're, kind of, it's easy to scapegoat and it sells, like these headlines sell papers, and that's very worrying because they're not recognising the minority communities as equal stakeholders, but also they're not taking into consideration the long term impact it has. (Ruksana)

Benefits of getting engaged in community and charity work:
Kind of a giving back to your community, kind of thing […] it helps dispel a lot of these stereotypes at a young age for a lot of these young people, because they would know a Muslim who's, who's been helping them. (Yardan)

Recommendations

➢ It is recommended that young people's community and charity work is recognised and publicised both to encourage young people who want to be active to become so but also in order to disseminate positive stories about young people, including about young Muslims.
➢ It is recommended that young people's positive social action be supported and promoted by community agencies and young people be made aware of what their peers are engaged in.

MARGINALITY & SOCIAL ACTIVISM

The mobilising potential of the stigmatising effects of the Prevent agenda appears to confound existing evidence that socioeconomic deprivation inhibits civic engagement and political participation. However, our study finds that marginality acts as an enabler to social activism only in conditions of a range of other supportive factors. Particularly important is the family whose aspirational orientation encouraged respondents down pathways of educational achievement, which also gave access to the social networks and organisational resources that impact positively on young people's propensity to participate.

Examples

Disadvantage as mobiliser:

Yeah, like my mum and my dad, they both didn't go to university. And my sisters have been through so much like hardships like when we were kids, and I have as well like, it's all motivated us like. We said, 'Enough is enough' like. […] and we were like, 'We want to have this. We want to have a degree. We want to be, in the nicest way, like the white kids off [sic] the school. (Dmitri)

Family support for political activism:

[…] you need to be emotionally resilient because when you put yourself, when you raise your head above the parapet, you are putting yourself out there to also be attacked. So whether it is through social media and I have a lot of trolls who message me, but also, quite a lot of messages of support as well. But also, if you don't have the support, the right support network around you, it can be draining. So, for example, this Ramadan I have been incredibly busy, so I'm doing my full-time job, but then I've also been doing, supporting various different communities with community responses. I think last night I got an hour's sleep because we're helping co-ordinate for this fire appeal. And it's all really important work, and I know without my family I wouldn't be able to do it because it's not sustainable. So I've got, like my mother will be like, "Okay, you just need to stop today," and that's useful because otherwise you can push yourself to the limits […] (Ruksana)

Prevent 'politicked' young Muslims:

It's [the Prevent policy] been able to mobilise hundreds of student activists across the country and to make sure that, you know, their universities have an anti-Prevent policy and that they're standing up to Islamophobia, institutional Islamophobia. But on the other hand, it's also made people very, very conscious of the Muslims around them. So like if a Muslim says anything [...] they will scrutinise that and […] treat it in a way that they would never treat it if it was a white non-Muslim counterpart. (Meena)

Recommendations

➢   It is recommended that awareness is raised of multiple marginalities experienced by young Muslims who often come from deprived neighbourhoods and have low socio-economic starting points whilst also experiencing stigmatisation around ethnicity and religion.

➢   It is recommended that support be extended to those groups working specifically to encourage civic engagement of ethnic minority and socio-economically deprived young people.

➢   It is recommended that the organisation of young Muslims is encouraged and supported in order to enable them to be engaged publically and voice their opinions.

PROJECT IDENTITY

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FURTHER READING Acik, N. and Hilary Pilkington (2018) *Youth Mobilisation of Suspect Communities*. Report. May 2018, 61pp. http://www.promise.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Youth-mobilisations-of-%E2%80%98suspect-communities%E2%80%99.pdf

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