

PUBLIC EXPERIENCES OF THE UK COUNTER-TERRORISM SYSTEM

James Lewis and Sarah Marsden

INTRODUCTION

The UK counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST, consists of four work strands – Prevent, Pursue, Protect and Prepare. Each strand is delivered through a diverse range of counter-terrorism measures. These are supported by counter-terrorism legislation, such as the Terrorism Act 2000 and the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, that confer overt powers to a range of authorities.

This guide brings together insights into how members of the public perceive of, and experience, the counter-terrorism system based on academic and grey literature produced from 2017 onwards. Where relevant, it draws on several larger-scale studies produced outside of this period, and work from comparable fields such as criminology. While the majority of research focuses on the UK, the guide draws on studies from other countries in Europe, and from North America and Australia. As well as research on general perceptions of counter-terrorism measures, the guide examines five policy areas of the counter-terrorism system on which there was the greatest research. Given the lack of research into other areas of counter-terrorism policy, it does not provide a definitive review of every feature of the UK counter-terrorism system.

The Full Report draws on studies that have been assessed by the authors to have robust methodologies. However, where necessary, this guide is explicit about the limitations of the data drawn from specific studies.

KEY POINTS

Perceptions of the UK counter-terrorism system have been widely studied. Existing research largely supports the view that the public is broadly unopposed to current counter-terrorism measures. However, there is evidence



that a significant minority remain concerned about their potential effects.

Studies that explore direct experiences, as opposed to perceptions, of the counter-terrorism system are rare. For some areas of the counter-terrorism system, studies are entirely absent. However, the impacts of more indirect experiences, or the knowledge of others' experiences of counter-terrorism measures, have been widely studied, and are known to have similar effects to direct familiarity with such measures.

This Full Report examines public perceptions of counter-terrorism measures in the UK and overseas, and also brings together evidence on how members of the public directly and indirectly experience five specific areas of counter-terrorism policy:

- Schedule 7 and airport security
- Police stop-and-search powers
- Prevent and the Prevent Duty
- Public communications campaigns
- Protective security measures.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PUBLIC EXPERIENCES OF THE UK COUNTER-TERRORISM SYSTEM

It provides examples drawn from the research base which relate to these five policy areas and which are relevant to those working on these issues.

The Full Report also points to important evidence gaps that would benefit from future research, including:

- robust studies that compare experiences across different protected characteristics
- experiences of individuals supported through Prevent and Channel interventions
- direct experiences of police counter-terrorism powers such as those who are suspected of an offence, or who have been stopped under Section 43
- the longer-term impacts that public communications campaigns have on behaviour
- the impact that such campaigns and protective security measures have on feelings of security and/or fear.

Much of the literature remains theoretical, and most empirical research is based on small, qualitative studies. However, qualitative studies provide valuable evidence of how members of the public directly experience the counter-terrorism system. For some measures – particularly airport security and the Prevent Duty – this qualitative evidence is robust. For other areas, such as public communications campaigns and protective security measures, it is weaker and more exploratory.

Qualitative research, alongside a smaller number of quantitative studies, indicates that direct and indirect experiences of the counter-terrorism system can have short- and long-term impacts on members of the public. This includes the impact of perceived experiences, such as contact with the authorities which is not explicitly counter-terrorism-related but which is perceived in that way by those affected. A number of conclusions can be drawn from the existing literature.

1. *Some communities have disproportionately more contact with the counter-terrorism system.* Qualitative studies suggest that British Muslims

and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities have disproportionately more contact with the counter-terrorism system and are more concerned about its actual and perceived impacts. While quantitative research suggests that the majority of the British public are unopposed to current counter-terrorism measures, it still estimates that up to one-third of British Muslims distrust the counter-terrorism system.

2. Both *direct experiences and indirect experiences, or a broader awareness of incidents where friends, family members or members of one's community have had actual or perceived contact with the counter-terrorism system, can have similar impacts.* This 'shadow of the collective story' can exacerbate perceptions of personal victimisation and can reinforce the view that counter-terrorism measures discriminate against one's community as a whole.¹
3. The *effects of having contact with or engaging with the counter-terrorism system extend beyond the individual involved*, with studies finding that families and communities can also be affected.
4. *Official statistics give an incomplete picture of how many people see themselves as having direct contact with the counter-terrorism system.* Qualitative research has found that experiences, such as being asked additional screening questions at airports, are often perceived as being related to the counter-terrorism system. Perceived and actual experiences can both contribute to a lack of trust in counter-terrorism policies and to perceptions of victimisation.
5. There appears to be a *high level of willingness to engage in both formal and informal counter-terrorism efforts under the right circumstances.* However, there are still barriers; a lack of trust in the authorities and concerns about discrimination reduce people's willingness to engage.
6. There are *challenges with ensuring that built environment designers, builders and operators take protective counter-terrorism measures seriously*, although more research is needed to explore how these professionals – including those working in the private sector who design and build structures,

1 The reference to the 'shadow of the collective story' is from Blackwood et al. (2013).

and those who work in or manage crowded places – engage with counter-terrorism policy.

7. *More overt counter-terrorism measures can increase feelings of security and safety, but only when the authorities are trusted and perceptions of procedural justice are high.*
8. *The counter-terrorism system does not operate in isolation.* Concerns about broader discrimination in society, and perceptions that the government is discriminatory, shape perceptions of counter-terrorism policy. Other policy areas that promote equality and social inclusion are therefore crucial for increasing trust in the government and in the counter-terrorism system.
9. *Maintaining and ensuring high levels of procedural justice is crucial for maintaining the legitimacy of the counter-terrorism system, and for mitigating unintended consequences.* In order to build trust in the counter-terrorism system it is important that it is viewed as neutral, treats people fairly and with respect, and provides the opportunity for people to voice concerns.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This Executive Summary comes from the Full Report from the project *Knowledge Management Across the Four Counter-Terrorism 'Ps'*. You can find the Full Report [here](#).