

Safeguarding and security: understanding the prevent-pursue nexus in Scotland

Project examining how Scotland's Prevent and Pursue counter terrorism approaches intersect, informing ethical, evidence-based decision-making, multi-agency collaboration, safeguarding and future data-driven policing practice.

Key details

Lead institution	Scottish Policing Academic Centre of Excellence (SPACE)
Principal researcher(s)	space@napier.ac.uk
Police region	Scotland
Collaboration and partnership	• Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV), University of St Andrews • Police Scotland
Level of research	Professional/work based
Project start date	August 2026
Date due for completion	August 2027

Research context

Background

This project examines the operational and ethical dimensions of the Prevent–Pursue nexus in Scotland at a time of significant organisational and threat landscape change. The contemporary threat environment has become increasingly fragmented, characterised by digital influences, fluid

ideologies, online extremism and complex vulnerabilities among younger people. These developments have blurred the distinction between safeguarding-led intervention (Prevent) and security-led disruption (Pursue), creating challenges for practitioners deciding when individuals should remain within Prevent or be escalated to criminal investigation.

Although Prevent and Pursue are distinct workstreams within the UK counter terrorism strategy (CONTEST), they are increasingly interconnected through information sharing and multi-agency working. Existing evidence suggests greater insight around referral thresholds, safeguarding responsibilities and proportionate responses, particularly for children and individuals with complex needs would be welcome. Despite these challenges, there has been little systematic research examining how the Prevent–Pursue nexus operates within Scotland's unique legal, policing and public health context.

Aims and objectives

Grounded in Scotland's public health approach to justice, this study will provide the first comprehensive examination of the Prevent–Pursue nexus for policing. Using a Rapid Evidence Assessment, practitioner interviews and multi-agency data landscape mapping, the project will:

- map the operational boundaries between Prevent, Pursue and wider public health, violence reduction and mental health systems
- examine decision-making processes, referral thresholds, information sharing and multi-agency collaboration across frontline and specialist practitioners
- explore the ethical and legal implications of contemporary counter terrorism practice, including human rights, professional trust, data sharing and impacts on racialised communities, young people and individuals with complex needs
- map administrative datasets across partner agencies to identify governance arrangements, research potential and opportunities for future linked administrative data research

Research methodology

Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA)

An REA of academic and grey literature will follow Campbell Collaboration methodological standards to examine:

- intersections between Prevent, Pursue and wider public health ecosystems
- partnership and multi-agency working and information sharing within these systems
- how these systems function in different countries, drawing out implications for Scotland
- the contemporary threat landscape, including the implications of 'post-ideological' radicalisation, online extremism and youth cases for Prevent and Pursue frameworks.

Narrative synthesis will identify key themes.

Semi-structured practitioner interviews

- 20 semi-structured interviews with practitioners from Police Scotland, local authority Prevent leads/coordinators, PMAP members (social work, mental health, education).
- Interviews will focus on decision-making processes and perceived risks, opportunities and constraints, and will examine how practice affects different population groups, including racialised communities, young people and individuals with complex needs. Data will be analysed using thematic analysis.

Multi-agency data landscape mapping

- A structured elicitation process with data leads across relevant agencies will capture the datasets held, variables recorded, retention arrangements and data sharing agreements across the multi-agency system.
- A governance and linkage feasibility assessment will identify the steps required for a future linked administrative data research project.

Synthesis and dissemination

- Findings will be integrated and disseminated through eight outputs designed for different audiences (police, research, public, policymakers and practitioners).

Research participation

The study will involve approximately 20 stakeholders from across Scottish bodies with responsibility for Prevent and Pursue. Participants will take part in semi-structured interviews exploring decision-making, multi-agency collaboration, information sharing and operational and ethical challenges within the Prevent–Pursue nexus.

In addition, the project will engage data leads from relevant partner organisations through a structured data landscape mapping exercise to identify existing datasets, governance arrangements and opportunities for future linked administrative data research. No members of the public, individuals subject to Prevent or Pursue processes or children will be recruited as participants in this study.