



Early Interventions to Reduce Violent Crime



Violent crime includes a range of offences, from assault to murder. Although overall crime has fallen since a peak in the 1990s, some violent crimes have risen over the past 4 years. This POSTnote examines evidence on the effectiveness of early interventions and approaches to reduce violent crime.

Context

Violent crime is any action that intentionally inflicts (or threatens) physical or psychological damage.¹ As criminal law is a devolved matter, this POSTnote will mainly focus on definitions and interventions for violent crime in England and Wales. The Crown Prosecution Service includes a range of offences in its definition of violent crime, from assault to murder.² Offences may also include the use of weapons (such as firearms, knives or corrosive substances). Serious violent crimes (homicide and crime involving guns/knives) account for 1% of the total crime recorded by police.² This POSTnote does not discuss sexual violence as it is defined separately by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and often has separate strategies and interventions.³

The ONS reports that violent crime has stayed at a similar level for the past four years with 1.4 million violent offences recorded in 2018, around half of which resulted in physical injury.⁴ Over the past decade, crime has decreased overall and violent crime is down by 69% since 1995.⁴ However, homicides and crimes involving knives/sharp instruments have risen since 2014.² Hospital data show an 18% rise in admissions for assault with a knife/sharp instrument between 2013–14 and 2016–17.² These data indicate greater increases in the number of victims/perpetrators of violent crime aged under 18 years than those aged over.² Violent offences are disproportionately concentrated in metropolitan areas, such as London and cities in West Yorkshire, Greater Manchester and the West Midlands.⁴

Overview

- Violent crime involving knives/sharp instruments has increased since 2014, disproportionately in metropolitan areas.
- There are individual and environmental factors that make a person more likely to be a victim/perpetrator of violent crime.
- Preventing adverse childhood experiences through support for families or individuals may reduce negative life outcomes.
- Deprivation and poor relations between the community and the police are associated with increases in violence in a local area.
- Data suggest that population-wide interventions involving multiple agencies may be effective in reducing violence.

In response to these trends, the Offensive Weapons Bill 2017–19 seeks to make it illegal for under-18s to buy some weapons (such as corrosive substances) and to ban the sale of others (such as spring-assisted knives) outright.⁵ In April 2018, the Home Office launched its Serious Violence Strategy. The strategy aims to bring together law enforcement, youth services, social services and other agencies to identify and address potential risk factors (an experience/trait that increases the likelihood of a negative outcome) for violent crime.² It also commits up to £22 million over 2 years for an Early Intervention Youth Fund.^{6,7} In October 2018, the Home Office launched the Youth Endowment Fund; £200 million delivered over 10 years to build evidence for early intervention. These two funds focus on early interventions, which include both programmes implemented in early life to reduce risk factors for future violent crime and those targeted at individuals when they are first involved in crime.⁸ The Home Office is currently consulting on multi-agency approaches to preventing and tackling serious violence.⁹ In response to the increase in violent crime in metropolitan areas, the Mayor of London established a Violence Reduction Unit in September 2018, mirroring a multi-agency approach used in Scotland, to tackle the causes of violent crime.¹⁰

This POSTnote outlines the types and prevalence of violent crime. It describes risk factors associated with involvement as a victim or perpetrator of violent crime. It then presents evidence on the effectiveness of early interventions to counter these risk factors and prevent violent crime.

Types and Prevalence of Violent Crime

Violence without injury, which includes threats or minor assaults, is the most common type of violent crime, making up 41% of cases.⁴ The least common type is homicide (less than 1% of cases).¹¹ The majority of perpetrators of violent crime are male (74%) and they also make up the majority of victims of violence with injury (55%) and homicide (69%).¹¹ In 2017–18, police linked 14% of violent incidents to alcohol.¹¹ Violent crimes may be one-off incidents, but more often occur in conjunction with other crimes, such as domestic abuse, stalking and harassment (POSTnote 592), robbery, or gang-related crime.⁴ Repeat victimisation, where individuals experience the same crime twice or more within 12 months, occurred in 57% of violent offences in 2017–18, commonly in cases of domestic abuse.¹¹ Gang-related violence represents a small proportion of overall violent crime.¹² However, in 2018, gang-related homicides accounted for 37% of all homicides in London.¹²

There has been a rise in homicides every year since 2014, increasing from 507 in 2014 to 739 in 2018.⁴ Of all recorded homicides in 2018, 37% involved knives/sharp instruments, a similar proportion to the previous 2 years.⁴ However, between 2017–18, police recorded that use of knives/sharp instruments across all violent crimes increased by 8% (over 3,000 extra cases), while offences involving firearms fell by 4%.⁴ London had the largest rise in offences involving knives/sharp instruments, accounting for 25% of the increase across England and Wales.⁴

Victims and Perpetrators of Violent Crime

There are multiple individual and environmental factors that make a person more likely to be involved in crime. Similar risk factors are implicated in being either a victim or a perpetrator of violent crime and an individual can be both simultaneously. For example, those involved in gang-related violence may be considered both a victim (of violence or sexual abuse) and a perpetrator (of violent or other offences).¹³ Children and young people can be groomed, tracked and threatened into carrying out offences on behalf of gangs, sometimes through the use of smart phones.^{14–16}

Individual Risk Factors

Individual risk factors develop throughout a person's life and can include adverse childhood experiences (ACEs, Box 1), school experience and health factors.⁸ It is difficult to attribute outcomes directly to risk factors because factors are interrelated and may occur simultaneously. Some risk factors can also be outcomes in themselves. For example, poor mental health is a risk factor for violent behaviour; however, some mental health conditions are an outcome of childhood trauma.¹⁷ No individual factor causes a person to become a perpetrator/victim of violence. However, a combination of risk factors can create early experiences that can leave individuals vulnerable to exploitation.^{18,19}

Negative Experiences at Home

Growing up in a household with child maltreatment, domestic abuse or substance misuse is associated with some negative outcomes later in life (Box 1).²⁰ Evidence indicates that those involved in perpetrating violence have

Box 1: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

ACEs are experiences in early life that lead to an increased risk of negative health or social outcomes later in life.^{17,21} ACEs include child maltreatment and exposure to family alcohol misuse or domestic abuse. Growing up with multiple ACEs is associated with long-term health impacts and health-damaging behaviour (such as poor mental health or increased violence towards oneself and/or others).^{17,22} Understanding the link between ACEs and future outcomes can support preventative action. For example, services can aim to prevent ACEs or deliver trauma-led early interventions, where programmes aim to reduce the negative effects of ACEs on psychological/social development by building resilience and emotional competency.^{17,23,24}

frequently been victims of violence themselves.²² In England and Wales about half of adults experienced at least one ACE as a child.²³ The NSPCC estimates that 1 in 5 children have experienced severe maltreatment.²⁴ Over 1 million children aged 0–5 years live with an adult who has experienced domestic abuse and over 600,000 live with an adult with reported substance misuse or drug/alcohol dependency.^{25,26} However, despite the prevalence of ACEs in childhood, fewer than 1% of children become involved with gangs and even fewer engage in violent crime.^{23,25}

School Exclusion

Data on how school exclusion relates to violent crime is limited. There is no current evidence showing that exclusion causes future violence. However, the Serious Violence Strategy, the cross-party Youth Violence Commission (YVC), the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Knife Crime, and the charity Barnardo's suggest that young people excluded from mainstream education are at greater risk of youth violence.^{2,15,27} A long-term study of 4,000 young people in Scotland and research carried out by Ofsted indicate that excluded children are more likely to carry a knife.^{28,29} A 2012 survey of 1,435 prisoners by the Ministry of Justice also found that 42% had been permanently excluded from school.³⁰ Exclusion and lack of adequate alternative education can perpetuate issues of low achievement, creating disadvantage in the labour market and increasing the perception of a lack of opportunities, which may lead to individuals engaging in crime.^{15,18,31}

Health Factors

The YVC identifies undiagnosed/untreated mental health issues as a potential cause of violence.¹⁵ In 2012, the Chief Medical Officer for England reported that mental health issues affected around 10% of children and young people.³² Some mental health issues are related to ACEs (Box 1) with child maltreatment associated with behavioural and emotional disorders.^{33,34} Experiencing adversity as a child and/or adolescent may also alter the production of certain brain chemicals, resulting in more aggressive behaviour.^{32,35}

Environmental Risk Factors

Environmental factors are those that relate to a geographic location, including the local area and surrounding community. Some individual and environmental factors are interrelated. For example, Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) individuals are disproportionately affected as both victims and perpetrators of crimes involving knives/sharp

instruments.³⁶ However, this apparent individual risk factor (having a BAME background) is actually an accumulation of environmental factors, including that BAME individuals are more likely than the overall population to live in metropolitan areas and are more likely to have experienced damaged community police relations due to perceived unfair targeting in tactics such as stop and search (Box 2).^{21,37}

Areas of Deprivation

The 2009 inquiry into knife crime reported that living in an area with low aspirations and reduced employment opportunities was a risk factor for involvement in violent crime.³⁸ The YVC also identified poverty and inequality as a potential cause of violence.¹⁵ A study of 4,300 young people in Scotland found that neighbourhood poverty was strongly associated with an increased risk of involvement in violent crime.³⁹ Similar trends have been found in the USA, with evidence that income inequality (where earnings are unevenly divided between households) is associated with higher rates of violent crime.⁴⁰

Local Community Relations with Police

An independent review of the treatment of BAME individuals by the criminal justice system found that damaged local community relations with the police lowers belief in police legitimacy.²¹ This can reduce local willingness to abide by the law and to cooperate with police investigations.⁴¹ A study that interviewed 107 young people in communities labelled by police as 'gang areas' found that those not involved in gangs felt unfairly monitored, experienced higher rates of school exclusion and had lower social mobility.¹⁹ Community relations with police can be affected by the perception of unfair treatment in police tactics, such as stop and search (Box 2). Bias has also been found in the Gang Matrix (where police record individuals as potential gang members) where 87% of the individuals listed are BAME.¹²

Early Intervention

Early interventions include both programmes implemented in early life to reduce risk factors and those targeted at young people when they are first involved in crime (Box 3).⁴² Early interventions have been suggested as a way to reduce

Box 2: Stop and Search

Police can stop and search someone if they have 'reasonable grounds' to suspect they are in possession of drugs, a weapon, stolen goods or something that could be used to commit a crime (known as a 'section 1').⁴³ Police can also stop and search any individual in a particular location at a particular time if they believe serious violence has taken or will take place there (known as a 'section 60').^{44,45} The Home Office recently made it easier for police in seven areas with the highest knife crime to use section 60 searches.⁴⁵ However, there are concerns that stop and search unfairly targets BAME individuals. In 2017–18, there were 3 stop and searches per 1,000 white people and 29 per 1,000 black people.⁴¹ The 2009 Commons Home Affairs Committee inquiry into Knife Crime and the inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence report that stop and search is damaging to local community-police relations.^{38,46} Data from the Metropolitan Police Service indicate that increased use of stop and search does not increase arrests.⁴⁷ Evidence also shows that random stop and search does not reduce the level of violent crime in an area, although it may be more effective when it is intelligence-led.^{41,48}

Box 3: Interventions at First Contact

Some programmes target individuals when they first come into contact with police or emergency services, such as when a young person is in police custody or hospital following an attack. These interventions aim to divert the young person by encouraging them to engage with employment, development and education opportunities, supported by trained practitioners. An example of a custody-based diversion intervention is the Metropolitan Police Service's Lambeth DIVERT programme, where participants have a 7% reoffending rate, 22% lower than the average reoffending rate in Lambeth.⁴⁹ An example of a hospital-based diversion intervention is Redthread's Youth Violence Intervention Programme, which operates in hospitals in London, Nottingham and Birmingham. Between 2014–17, the programme engaged with 717 young people to create action plans to increase future engagement with health and other support agencies.⁵⁰ In a follow up of 110 participants after a year, the percentage of those who reported being involved in violence dropped from 59% to 19%.⁵¹

violent crime because evidence in other policy areas, such as education, shows that they may reduce risk factors associated with future involvement in crime.⁴² Preventing early criminal activity reduces the likelihood of later committing serious crime; after the age of 17 years, individuals are far less likely to initiate criminal activity.⁵²

There are many different types of early intervention and they can be complex to evaluate. This is because there are no standard evaluation measures, there are numerous contributory factors associated with violent crime, and assessing the long-term effect of early interventions requires multiple follow-ups over many years.^{42,52,53} Even when interventions are well evaluated, attempts to replicate them from one setting to another may not produce the same outcome. For example, interventions can have different effects on males and females.⁵³ Below are some of the interventions being trialled to tackle risk factors.

Individual Interventions

One-to-One Interventions

Many one-to-one support services are offered to young people by organisations and charities. The following represent some of the wide range of approaches available that attempt to reduce the effect of individual risk factors:⁴²

- **Mentoring:** The role of a trustworthy adult can help to develop resilience in children and adolescents, as well as reduce childhood adversity.²² Evidence on the success of mentoring is limited, with a study of 350 programmes across England finding the structure and context greatly varied.⁵⁴ Mentoring can reduce levels of violence in young people if mentors are well-trained and spend sufficient time with participants.⁵⁴ However, mentoring can have negative effects on the mental health of both mentor and mentee if delivered without appropriate training and without long-term support for participants.^{54,55}
- **Multisystemic Therapy (MST):** A programme that combines family and community interventions, with individuals receiving an assigned support worker to help them resolve issues. In an evaluation of 108 families, half received the usual targeted services from youth offending teams and the rest received MST in addition.⁵⁶ During an 18-month follow-up period, MST participants displayed

positive outcomes, with reduced aggression and some reduction in reoffending.⁵⁶

- **Specialist children's services:** Children's services staff liaise with other agencies and arrange access to financial support for children/young people exposed to domestic abuse. This has been shown to reduce the percentage of parents reporting abusive behaviour by their child from 25% to 7% over a timescale of 1–3 months.⁵⁷
- **School inclusion:** Interventions in school can identify students at risk of exclusion or low academic attainment and implement additional support for academic and behavioural skills. When used instead of exclusions, this approach has been shown to have a positive impact on community engagement, academic achievement, and the ability to express emotions constructively.¹⁸

Family-Based Programmes

Some interventions work with families as well as the individual deemed at risk of negative future outcomes, with reviews of multiple studies indicating programmes can be more effective when they address family risk factors.⁵⁸ The largest family-based programme in the UK is the Troubled Families Programme, which targets families with risk factors such as domestic abuse or family members involved in crime.⁵⁹ The programme aims to support family members into employment or achieve progress with their problems.⁵⁹ The programme assigns a family intervention worker to support participants in engaging with various local programmes.⁶⁰ The first phase ran in England between 2012–15 and involved around 120,000 families.⁶¹ An independent evaluation in 2016 found no evidence of the programme meeting its aims within 12–18 months.⁶⁰ The second amended phase of the programme started in 2012 and will finish in 2020. It involves an additional 400,000 families.⁵⁹ An initial report suggests a slight reduction in children going into care, some increase in adult employment and a reduction in juvenile convictions.⁶²

Mental Health Support

Early diagnosis and support for mental health conditions of both children and parents can alter the environment in which a young person develops, and reduce exposure to ACEs (Box 1).^{24,42} For example, Infant Parent Psychotherapy (IPP) supports parents in forming an attachment with their baby. Improving child attachment has beneficial effects on the mental health of both parents and children and improves children's social behaviour at school.⁴²

Environmental Interventions

Environmental interventions attempt to reduce the risk factors in a geographical area and treat violence as a population-level threat (Box 4). When targeting young people there are two main areas where interventions may be based: within the community and within schools.

Community Interventions

Appropriately policing an area may play a role in preventing future violent crime, as research indicates that a decrease in opportunities for debut crimes (such as car theft) can prevent the escalation to more serious crimes later in life.⁶³ Increased numbers of visible police in an area may affect

violent crime.⁶⁴ For example, following the 7/7 terror attacks in London, there was an increase in police deployment in some boroughs for the following 6 weeks.⁶⁴ Compared to boroughs without an increase in police, violent crime in these areas dropped by 3%.⁶⁴ Police numbers across the UK have fallen by 13% since 2010.⁶⁵ This has led some stakeholders, such as the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, to suggest that there is a link between the rise in knife crime and reduced police numbers.⁶⁶

School-Based Interventions

Interventions designed to teach children social, emotional and communication skills at primary school have been shown to have a positive impact in reducing substance misuse, antisocial behaviour and mental health problems in adolescence ([POSTnote 583](#)).⁴² A review by the Early Intervention Foundation found evidence that skills-based interventions in adolescence also reduce aggression.⁵³ As well as interventions to improve general behaviour, some programmes target areas with higher rates of violence.⁶⁷ For example, Growing Against Violence has provided training in over 600 London schools to students aged 9–15 years.⁶⁷ Evaluations indicate positive effects on participants, including reduced frequency of violence and improved attitudes towards police.⁶⁷ However, not all programmes have positive results. Fear tactics or military-style programmes to deter young people from engaging in crime have been found to be ineffective and even damaging, with some increasing the propensity for criminal behaviour.^{53,68}

Box 4: Approaches to Tackling Population-Wide Violence

There are different approaches to tackling violent crime at a population level, but the two most common approaches are:

- **The Public Health Approach**, which focuses on prevention and multi-agency engagement. Its premise is that violence is preventable and, like a disease, its risk factors in a population can be identified and managed. In Scotland this approach helped form a Violence Reduction Unit in 2005, which used evidence to identify violence risk factors. For example, the World Health Organisation cited alcohol consumption as a risk factor for youth violence and the 2000 Scottish Crime Survey indicated that up to 72% of perpetrators of violent crime were drunk at the time.^{69,70} Scotland then developed and implemented interventions to combat risk factors, such as policy changes to reduce alcohol misuse, support for individuals in moving away from a criminal lifestyle and awareness programmes created by medical professionals.⁷¹ Violent crime reduced in Scotland between 2008–18, with a 39% reduction in homicides.⁷²
- **Pulling Levers**, which also involves multiple agencies, including police and social services.⁷³ Pulling levers attempts to ensure that the cost of undertaking crime outweighs the benefits based on evidence that increased punitive measures (such as longer prison sentences) can have a modest deterrence on violent crime.⁷⁴ An example of pulling levers was Operation Ceasefire in Boston USA, where police contacted gangs to inform them that there would be zero tolerance policy on carrying weapons and firearms offences would be heavily prosecuted. At the same time, gang members were put in touch with various services, such as probation services and community groups, to support them in making life changes. Operation Ceasefire saw a 31% reduction in youth homicide.⁷⁵ Northamptonshire Police's Community Initiative to Reduce Violence will use an approach based on Boston's model.^{76,77}

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