

A SAFER SOCIETY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Advancing a public health approach to violence prevention



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Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

Serious violence devastates the lives of far too many children and young people. Though longer-term trends indicate that violence in England and Wales is broadly in decline, there has been a notable increase in certain forms of serious violence in recent years, particularly involving young people and the use of knives. We therefore welcome the government's strong commitment to reducing serious violence, and to halving 'knife crime' in a decade.

To turn the tide on recent increases in serious violence, it is crucial that we make a strong and enduring commitment to a holistic public health approach to violence prevention. This commitment should be grounded in the four, interrelated core principles of the public health approach:

1. Ecology of causes - 'the what'

Violence is the product of societal, community, relational, and individual factors. These are the social determinants which must be addressed if violence is to be reduced.

2. Stages of prevention - 'the when'

Violence reduction must involve primary, secondary and tertiary prevention: population-level universal action, targeted action to support those with identified vulnerabilities, and responsive action to prevent repeat violence. Adequate investment must be allocated across all stages of prevention, reducing reliance upon enforcement and criminal justice responses.

3. Model of implementation - 'the how'

Public health approaches should follow the World Health Organisation's four-step cyclical model: i) defining and mapping the problem of violence; ii) identifying the causes of violence; iii) designing, implementing and evaluating policies and interventions; and iv) embedding and expanding effective policies and scaling up interventions that work.

4. Acting both nationally and locally - 'the where'

Sustainably reducing violence requires cross-departmental central government action to promote child flourishing and to address the societal determinants of violence. It also requires well-coordinated and adequately resourced action at regional, local and neighbourhood levels.

Some progress has been made in advancing a public health approach to violence reduction in recent years, for instance through:

- the establishment of 20 regional Violence Reduction Units operating in the areas of England and Wales with the highest rates of violence;
- the establishment of the £200 million Youth Endowment Fund, tasked with establishing 'what works' to prevent violence; and
- the creation of a Serious Violence Duty that has been enshrined in legislation, mandating a range of public services to plan and work together to reduce violence and safeguard young people.

These initiatives are important and should continue to receive sufficient long-term funding and support. When viewed from the perspective of a holistic public health approach to violence prevention, however, these initiatives are not enough. At present, too much faith is being placed in the potential of multi-agency working and discrete, time-limited interventions to reduce violence.

While these measures have a place in an overarching violence prevention strategy, they must not crowd out a wider focus regarding 'the what' and 'the where': ensuring that the full range of social determinants of violence are addressed, through action at national, regional and local levels.

In particular, there is an urgent need to address what has been termed the 'macro-social determinants' of violence (Bellis et al 2017) – societal factors such as poverty, inequality, an inadequate welfare state, illicit drug markets, insecure and deficient housing, high rates of precarious work, and a lack of adequate mental health support (see also World Health Organisation 2021).

To shift the dial on many of the entrenched root causes of violence, these societal factors must be tackled at a national, cross-departmental level.

Urgent action is needed from central government to address the societal conditions that predictably breed violence, rather than regional and local bodies being over-relied upon to address the local manifestations of national problems.

It is right for regional and local bodies (such as Violence Reduction Units, Community Safety Partnerships, Local Child Safeguarding Partnerships, and so on) to lead the way in addressing the factors which contribute to violence in their local areas. But they must have adequate resources and powers to do so in a well-coordinated manner, and their efforts must be complemented by central government action to address national-level drivers.

Figure 1: The ‘Four Is’ of violence prevention



This Four Is framework helps to convey the breadth, depth and forms of activity required to effectively implement a public health approach to violence prevention, aligned with the ‘what, when, how and where’ principles outlined above.

Inequalities must be addressed; institutions, services and social infrastructure (such as schools, social care, and leisure facilities) must be adequately resourced and of high quality; effective specialist interventions must be delivered; and the direct interactions and relationships experienced by all young people (within their families, communities, and with professional adults) must be enriched.

At present, there is a disproportionate focus on the third I – interventions – at the expense of addressing inequalities, improving institutions, services and social infrastructure, and enriching relationships.

A list of themed policy recommendations is provided in the final section of this policy briefing.



Introduction

Interpersonal violence devastates the lives of too many young people, families and communities, in the UK as elsewhere. Although the general trend in violence overall is one of decline, there have been recent increases in certain forms of violence in England and Wales, particularly serious violence involving the use of knives (see Office for National Statistics 2023a).

To address the recent increase in serious violence and to ensure we achieve a sustainable, permanent reduction in violence, this policy briefing recommends a thorough-going commitment to a holistic public health approach to violence prevention. While the focus is on serious violence between young people in England and Wales, its findings and recommendations have wider relevance to other forms of violence and to other jurisdictions.



The briefing has a threefold purpose that is mirrored in its structure:

1. To highlight recent trends in violence in England and Wales.
2. To summarise the current state of violence prevention work in England and Wales and outline some recent policy initiatives.
3. To consider where we should go from here and provide some specific policy recommendations that can help us move towards a safer society.

This policy briefing is based on recent research conducted by the authors in the area of violence prevention, as well as key insights drawn from an extensive review of academic and community research. Many of its findings and recommendations are grounded in a three-year study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, entitled, Public Health, Youth and Violence Reduction. A core component of this project involved mapping the current landscape of violence prevention in England and Wales.

The project team generated and collected data from four main sources:

- **Interviews and focus groups**

In England and Wales, a total of 90 interviews were conducted. Interviewees included: senior policymakers; senior managers and professionals across a range of policy areas including policing, youth justice, education and health; frontline practitioners working with young people in various capacities; and young people themselves.

- **Workshops with Violence Reduction Units**

Two online workshops were held to explore key themes emerging from interviews with all 20 of the regional Violence Reduction Units in England and Wales, as well as a subsequent full-day, face-to-face event, which focused on pressing issues identified by VRU Directors.

- **Police recorded crime data**

To examine trends in different types of violence over time, we analysed police recorded crime data in England & Wales. In addition, to explore the dynamics of violence at a local level, bespoke requests were made to the Metropolitan Police for granular data that is not publicly available.

- **Documentary analysis**

A systematic and comprehensive documentary analysis examined the emergence and development of public health approaches to violence prevention in England & Wales. Sources included policy documents, legislation, official statements, public and third sector reports, and outputs from mainstream and social media.

1

Violence trends in England & Wales

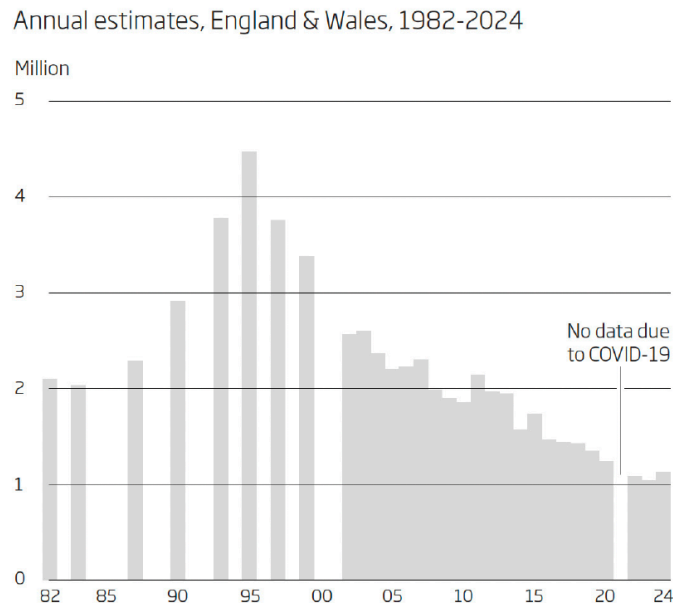




Violence trends in England and Wales

After a period of continually increasing violence in the post-war period, this trend reversed, and violence has declined in England and Wales since the mid 1990s (see Figure 2).

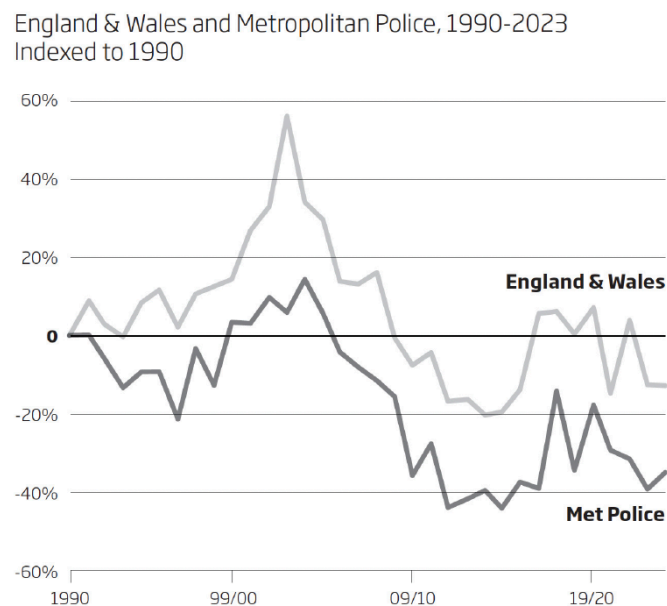
Figure 2: Number of Violent Incidents in England and Wales



Office for National Statistics (2024)

Looking at general trends in violence taken as a whole, however, masks some important variation in trends for specific types of violence. For example, some metrics indicate that certain types of serious violence increased in recent years, particularly during the period between 2014-2019. However, since 2019 serious violence appears to be on a downward trajectory again (see Figures 3 and 4)

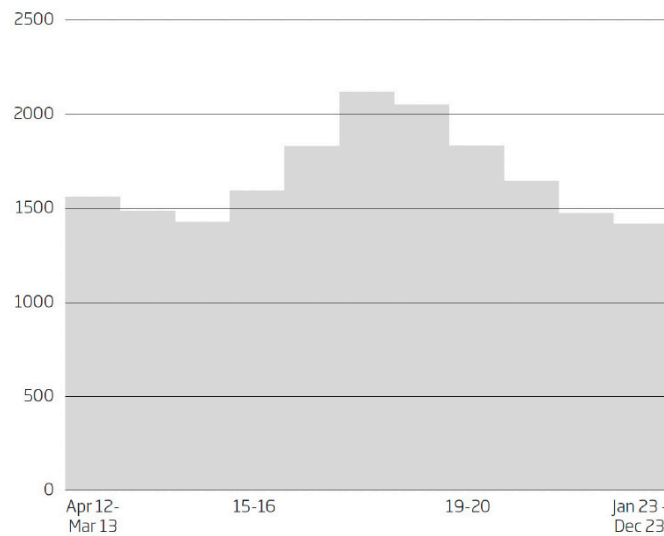
Figure 3: Homicide incidents in England and Wales, and Metropolitan Police



Office for National Statistics (2024)

Figure 4: Hospital admissions in England and Wales

For assault with sharp objects, England & Wales
Age group 0-24, 2013-2023



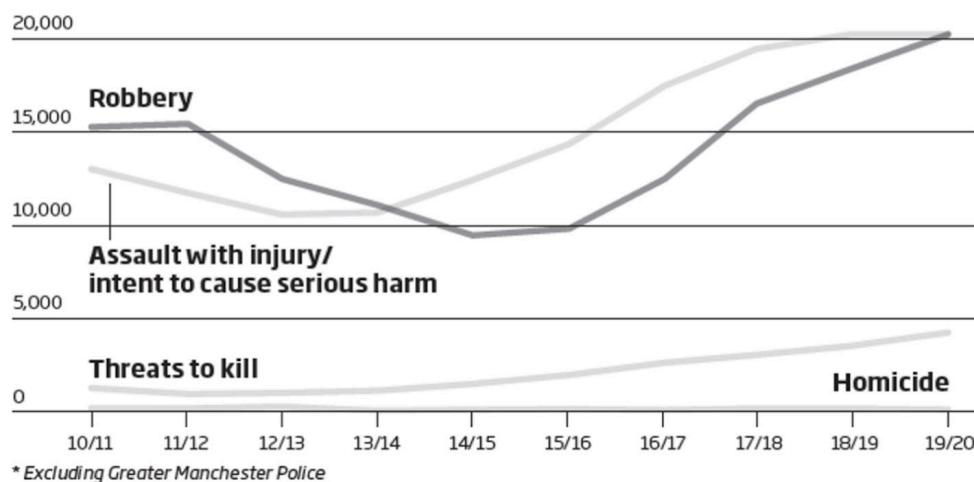
Source: NHS Digital (2023)

Figure 3 shows that although homicide incidents were down 34.7% in London and 12.4% in England and Wales since 1990, they were both up on 2014 (Office for National Statistics 2024). Figure 4 shows hospital admissions for assault with a sharp object rose from 2014/15 to 2017/18, before declining year-on-year until the end of 2023 (NHS Digital 2023).

Specifically in relation to knife and sharp instrument offences, two offence types account for the bulk of the increase during the period 2014-20: robbery and assault with injury/intent to cause serious harm (see Figure 5)

Figure 5: Knife/sharp instrument offences, England and Wales, 2011-2020

Recorded offences in England & Wales*, by type
March 2011 - March 2020



* Excluding Greater Manchester Police

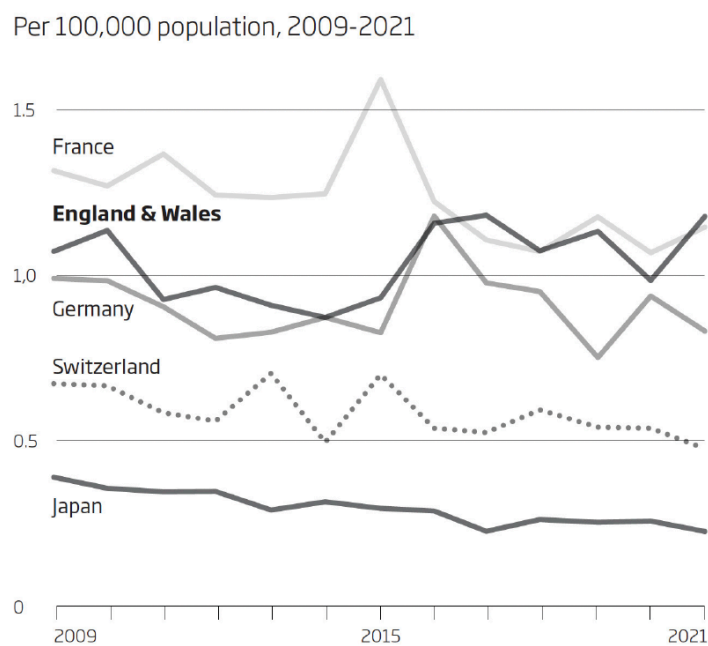
Source: Office for National Statistics (2021)

While the link is not direct and straightforward, there is a strong connection between areas with high levels of socioeconomic deprivation and high rates of violence. In London, for example, Richmond, Sutton, Kingston

upon Thames and Harrow have the lowest rates of homicide and all are in the bottom ten boroughs in the index for multiple deprivation (a measure of relative deprivation for small areas). Lambeth, Newham, Hackney and Brent, on the other hand, have the highest rates of violence and all are in the top ten boroughs as ranked by the same index (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019).

It is also useful to note some international comparisons. In global context, England and Wales is a relatively low violence society, particularly when compared to certain countries in South and Central America, and to a lesser extent, Eastern Europe. There are, however, numerous countries with consistently lower levels of violence, particularly in Northern Europe and Eastern/South-Eastern Asia.

Figure 6: Homicide rates in selected countries



Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2023)

In summary, then, violence in England and Wales has been in general decline since the mid 1990s. In recent years, however, some forms of serious violence, particularly involving the use of knives, have increased, particularly during the period 2014/15 to 2019/20. Regardless of trends, however, we must avoid complacency in the present, and continue to strive towards the creation of more peaceful societies in the future.

2

The causes of violence



The causes of violence

Violence is a complex social phenomenon. This makes it difficult to address the question of its causes, particularly in brief. A good starting point is to distinguish between root and direct causes. In short, root causes are those ‘at the back’ of the causal chain. They refer to underlying factors that create environments in which violence becomes more or less likely. These factors include poverty, inequality, access to education, cultural norms, and the quality and availability of employment.

In contrast, direct causes are those that trigger, or are more directly related to, a specific incident of violence. These include weapon possession, threats, disrespect, instrumental motivations (for example, financial gain), and alcohol use. Explanations that attempt to outline the cause(s) of violence might centre on root or direct causes, or both.

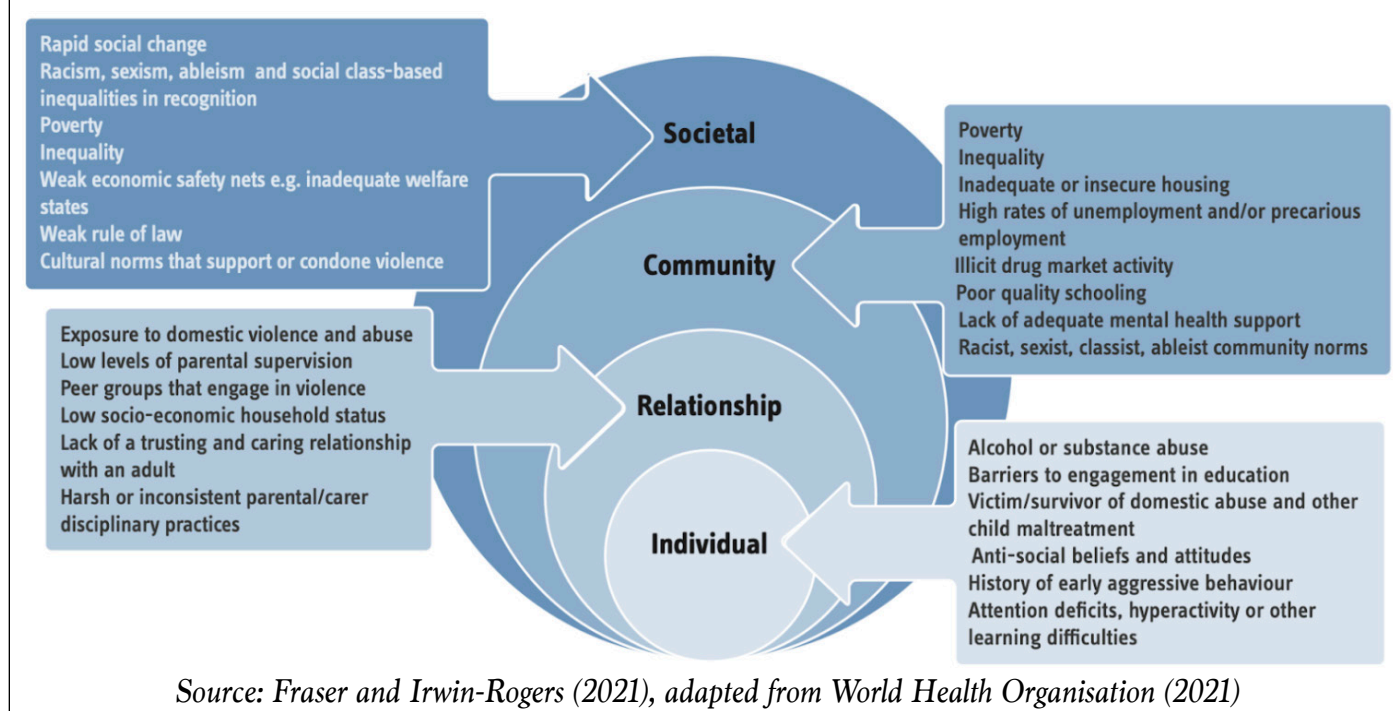
In our interviews with the regional Violence Reduction Units in England and Wales, one director distinguished between macro and micro levels factors when thinking about the key drivers of violence:

We can get into all the micro factors that drive people and enable group violence... but actually, fundamentally, it's all the issues around it – inequality and lack of opportunity I think are the big drivers.

VRU Director 1

In its ecological framework, the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2021) frames violence as an outcome of factors operating at four different levels: the societal, the community, the relational, and the individual (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: An ecological framework for understanding the factors linked to violence



The people and neighbourhoods most affected by violence are most often those which experience the complex interweaving of factors across all four of these levels. During our interviews, we heard frequent references to factors operating at all of these levels, and to the links between them. This means that work to address one factor is likely to have a bearing on others. By way of one example, it is well-established that reducing poverty and inequality is likely to bring about reductions in alcohol and substance abuse (Room 2005).

The WHO's ecological framework highlights significant factors associated with violence, but it does not explain how or why these factors are linked. The question of causation and correlation is a crucial one when it comes to understanding violence and developing effective violence prevention strategies.

James Gilligan, an American prison psychiatrist and researcher, has produced a highly influential account of violence which has helped to shape contemporary approaches to understanding its drivers. For Gilligan (1996), many of the societal and community level factors identified above drive intolerable forms of psychological tension which make the perpetration of violence far more likely. His work focuses especially on the prominence of shame and humiliation in the lives of men who have committed violence.

The relationship between shame, mattering and violence

If we wish to prevent violence, then, our agenda is political and economic reform...reforming the social, economic, and legal institutions that systematically humiliate people can do more to prevent violence than all the preaching and punishing in the world

Gilligan (1996: 236, 239)

Gilligan suggests that societies with high levels of inequality, poverty, patriarchal cultural norms, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice, tend to generate high levels of shame among a significant proportion of the population. Those who are most marginalised, powerless and disenfranchised feel a sense of humiliation and belittlement. Other scholars (e.g. Sayer 2005; Young 2007; White 2013) have used the term 'structural humiliation' to denote how structural inequalities tend to generate acute emotional distress. Based on extensive psychiatric practice with perpetrators of violence, Gilligan suggests these deep-rooted forms of shame and humiliation, in turn, serve as proximate triggers for many acts of serious violence (particularly for men).

Similarly, the authors of this briefing have highlighted the importance of the psycho-social concept of 'mattering', which connects many of the factors in the WHO's ecological model with violence (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers 2022). Mattering is made up of two components (Flett 2018). The first is a feeling of social significance, built on trusting and meaningful relationships that help people to recognise their value to others. The second is a feeling of agency – that a person can make a difference in the world, and experience a degree of control and power in their lives (as opposed to feeling diminished and powerless).

Billingham and Irwin-Rogers argue that factors such as inequality, poverty, inadequate housing, exclusionary forms of education and high rates of precarious employment can serve to significantly undermine young people's sense of mattering. The cumulative effects of these factors from the earliest years of life can leave a young person feeling insignificant and powerless. This lack of mattering makes the perpetration of violence more likely for a number of reasons.

First, if a person feels a shameful or humiliating sense of insignificance and powerlessness, they are likely to be more volatile in the face of interpersonal disrespect. Those who lack a firm sense of mattering are more likely to experience insults or disrespect as fundamental threats to their self-identity, which can result in highly emotional and physically violent responses.

Secondly, young people who feel that they do not matter are far more likely to end up in situations where they are more exposed to the risk of serious violence. For example, young people who perceive themselves to be lacking in social significance are much more likely than their peers to become gang-involved, as a route to achieving greater recognition and power. In turn, gang involvement entails a higher risk of conflict with other groups of young people, as well as increased exposure to the violence inherent in the operation of illicit drug markets (Fraser 2017; McLean 2019; Hales 2020).



Summary

The question of what causes violence is complex and contested. The WHO ecological model provides a useful orienting device for policymakers because it draws attention to the importance of factors operating at different levels, ranging from the societal to the individual. Meanwhile, the work of Gilligan (1996) and others has aided our understanding of how factors at these different levels are generate psychological tensions within individuals which make violent behaviour far more likely.

An effective violence reduction strategy must therefore address the social determinants of violence outlined in the WHO's ecological framework, and must attend to the ways in which these determinants operate at different levels, from the micro-scale psychology of individuals to the macro-scale causes of 'structural humiliation'.

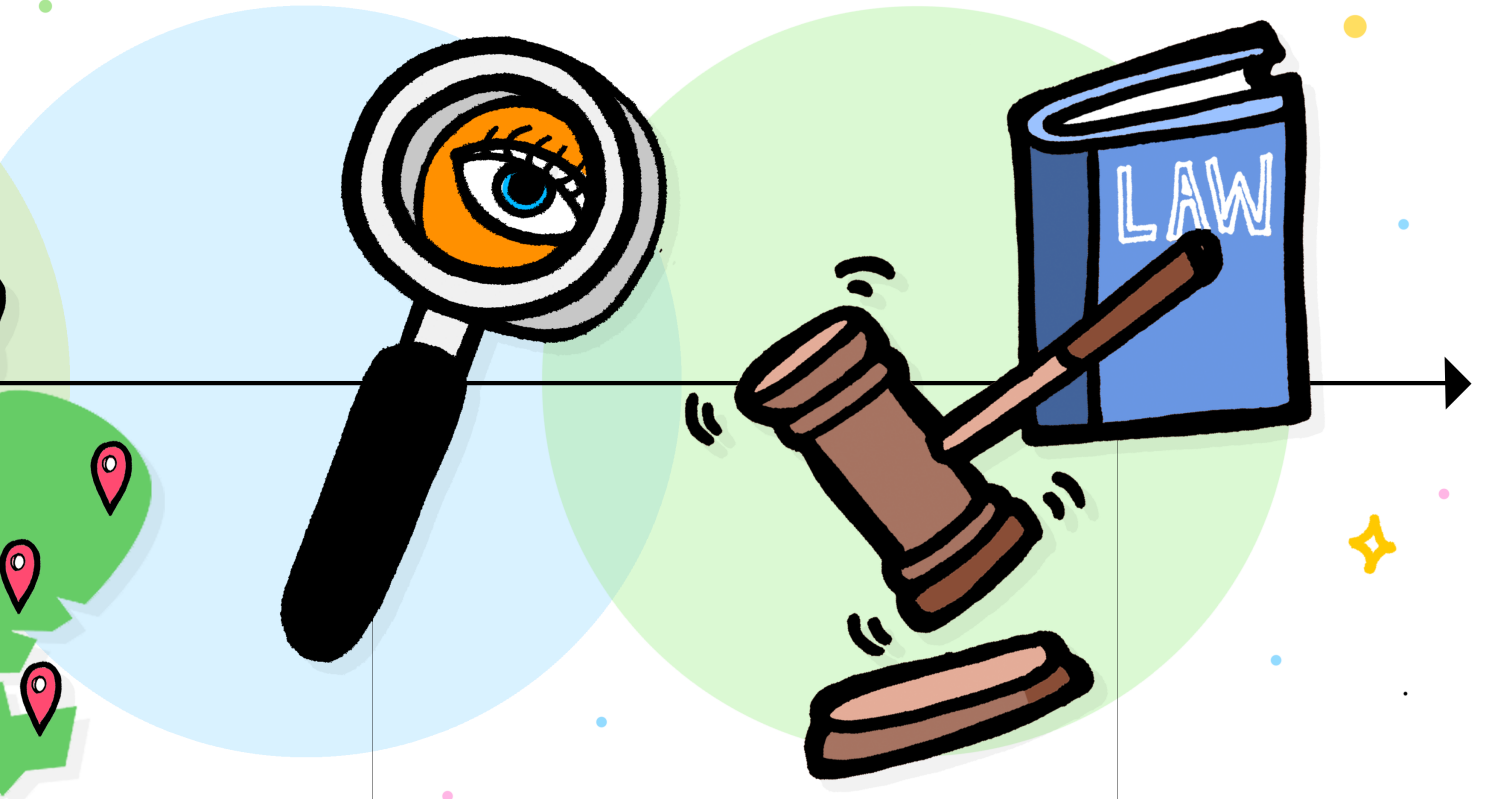
3

Violence prevention in England & Wales: Where are we now?



2018
ESTABLISHMENT OF
VIOLENCE REDUCTION
UNIT IN LONDON

2019
ESTABLISHMENT OF
VIOLENCE REDUCTION
UNITS ACROSS
ENGLAND & WALES



2019
ESTABLISHMENT
OF THE YOUTH
ENDOWMENT FUND

2023
ESTABLISHMENT OF
SERIOUS VIOLENCE DUTY



Violence prevention in England & Wales: Where are we now?

Beginning in 2018, and prompted by rising rates of serious violence, particularly involving young people and the use of knives, a number of significant policy shifts have recently taken place in England and Wales in the area of violence prevention (Allen et al. 2023). These shifts were influenced by the perceived success of the public health approach to violence prevention in Scotland, pioneered by the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit (Fraser et al. 2024).

Many recent policy initiatives in England and Wales reflect an attempt to advance a public health approach to violence prevention south of the border. Three violence prevention initiatives are particularly worth noting:

- The establishment of 18 regional Violence Reduction Units in 2019 (followed by a further two units in 2022), tasked with supporting the implementation of a public health approach to violence prevention in the areas of England and Wales with the highest rates of violence.
- The establishment of a £200 million Youth Endowment Fund in 2019, with the goal of identifying ‘what works’ to reduce violence.
- Enshrining a ‘Serious Violence Duty’ in legislation in 2023, which requires a number of public services to collaborate, plan and work together to prevent violence.

Violence Reduction Units

Based on our interviews with all of the regional Violence Reduction Units (VRUs), it is clear that they are taking a multi-pronged approach to preventing violence, which includes:

- Enhancing multi-agency working and data sharing
- Commissioning and evaluating interventions to prevent and reduce violence
- Listening to and amplifying the voices of communities and young people to better inform responses to violence

At best, VRUs are well-integrated with regional and local government bodies, as well as well-connected with grassroots community organisations. VRUs are well-placed to address local drivers of violence, galvanise local systemic coordination, and to understand “what works” within their specific local contexts – not just in terms of interventions, but also in terms of systems, services, partnerships and protocols.

Annual evaluations of the work of VRUs have already generated some evidence of success in reducing rates of violence in their respective regions (Home Office 2023). The same evaluations have highlighted the successful work of VRUs in pushing the issue of violence up the list of priorities of various agencies with a stake in the safeguarding of young people.

During our interviews, VRU Directors were particularly keen to talk about the importance of multi-agency working and the progress that VRUs have made in bringing organisations together to collaborate on the issue of violence prevention:

Certainly multi-agency working is important, and I think that real focus on working as a system in partnership hasn't been an easy journey. I'm not saying we're there yet by any means, but that cultural shift – to people working as system leaders and really acknowledging their role in preventing and reducing violence – has been really key.

VRU Director 2

VRU Directors also spoke about the positive impact of many of the programmatic interventions their units had commissioned. Not only were VRUs filtering money into interventions, but they were also enhancing their quality by supporting delivery partners to develop their theories of change, collect data, and better evidence their impact:

As we've grown as a VRU, we've now got a process whereby we support grassroots organisations in building theories of change, helping them look at the right data, helping them identify the outcomes that they're looking to impact upon, and then partnering them with an evaluator. So, they're not only able to strengthen their own skills and knowledge in terms of evidence-based evaluation, but they're also able to prove impact in terms of what they're delivering.

VRU Director 3

Despite this progress, significant challenges and barriers remain. VRUs have struggled to develop long-term violence preventative strategies that tackle the root causes of violence. Narrow performance metrics, pressure from various stakeholders with vested interests in securing immediate results, and short-term funding arrangements, have all undermined the ability of VRUs to pursue long-term primary prevention as well as systemic and societal change.

If I'm genuinely going to adopt a public health approach...you want to intervene early to provide greater protective measures, and alternate pathways in order to enable more positive outcomes. How can I achieve that if I have to deliver quarterly statistics against reduction in knife crime offences, reduction in knife crime hospital admissions, and reduction in homicides, because that forces me down the road of tertiary intervention...it becomes more of a mechanism to feed the data-hungry beast of quarterly reports.

VRU Director 4

The Youth Endowment Fund

The Youth Endowment Fund has made important strides in gathering and generating evidence on the effectiveness of interventions to reduce violence, as well as the causes of violence. Its toolkit provides an accessible breakdown of which interventions appear to generate the greatest reductions in violence, as well as an indication of their cost and the quality of evidence underpinning their perceived effectiveness.

More recently, it has also begun to produce 'systems guidance', outlining particular changes to protocols and approaches which could make a positive difference within specific points of relevant systems and services – such as point of arrest (YEF 2023).

The Serious Violence Duty

The Serious Violence Duty (the Duty), which came into force in 2023, has prompted existing services to work more closely together to support and safeguard children and young people. This is important, because organisations working in silos are prone to miss opportunities to increase their efficiency and effectiveness (Public Health England 2019). Many VRU Directors were keen to highlight the value of the Duty in bringing relevant stakeholders onto the same page.

I think what [the SVD] has actually done is pushed that idea of joining up workstreams, understanding that systems change has to happen in order to implement some of what we're trying to deliver long term – that's started. I think we're seeing join up of exploitation and serious violence and county lines and things like that. There's a sort of movement to understand that these are not separate things, that they are all part of the same conversation.

VRU Director 5

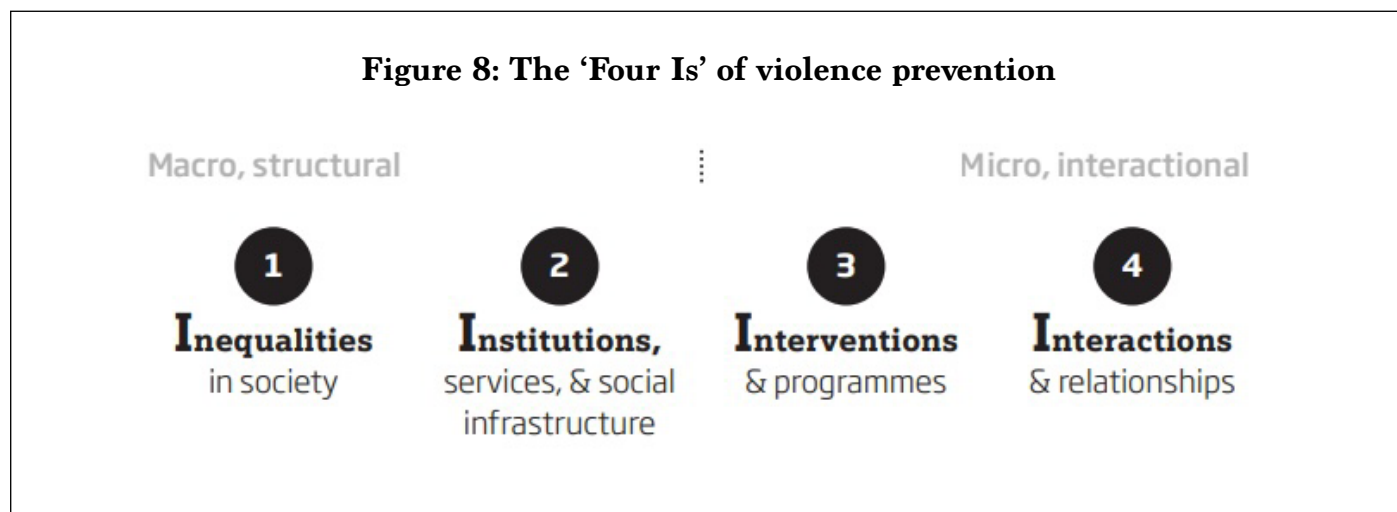
Interviewees raised concerns about increasingly stretched agencies, however. The services subject to the Duty – the police, youth offending teams, local authorities, local health boards, integrated care boards, fire and rescue authorities, and probation – find themselves struggling under the weight of increasing demand and depleted resources, after a long period of austerity in public services. There is a limit as to what can be achieved by enhancing collaboration between agencies experiencing acute resource scarcity.

In summary, recent policy initiatives such as the establishment of VRUs, the Youth Endowment Fund, and the Serious Violence Duty have been put in place to drive the development and implementation of a public health approach to violence prevention. While these initiatives represent progress, stark limitations remain in our society’s capacity to reduce and prevent violence, particularly due to a lack of significant change at the societal level of the WHO’s ecological framework.

Violence Prevention and the Four Is

One way of making sense of the current state of violence prevention work in England and Wales is to distinguish between four connected levels and forms of potential activity (see Figure 8). Looking at violence prevention through this lens can help to highlight where we have achieved more and less progress.

As outlined above, much work is currently being done at the level of interventions (3), and some progress has been made addressing institutional problems (2). But far less has been achieved at the level of societal inequalities (1). Vast and entrenched inequalities, combined with continued, pressing issues at the level of institutions, services and social infrastructure, have significant negative effects on the consequential interactions and relationships in young people’s lives (4). In what follows, we explain the crucial importance of addressing these failures.



Inequalities

At the macro level, in terms of inequalities in society, it is impossible to overlook the country’s highly unequal distribution of wealth and income. The UK ranks as the 8th most unequal of the 37 OECD countries as measured by the Gini coefficient (OECD 2023). In the UK, the number of children living in relative poverty (after housing costs) was 4.2 million in 2021-22 (Francis-Devine 2023). The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has raised urgent concerns about the growing problem of destitution in this country: approximately 3.8 million people experienced destitution in 2022, including around one million children (Fitzpatrick et al 2023).

The Resolution Foundation (2023) has forecast that relative child poverty will continue to increase and reach its highest levels on record in 2027-28. In practical terms, this means that many children find themselves living in insecure and inadequate accommodation, with their families unable to afford bills, food and other basic household items.

Inequalities in income and wealth are accompanied by other forms of inequality and social injustice, including class and racial prejudice. In relation to the former, there is no shortage of examples of people with the least wealth and income being stigmatised and discriminated against (see e.g. Tyler 2020). In relation to the latter,

a range of aggregate social statistics, as well as first-hand accounts, demonstrate the persistence of abuse and discrimination that many UK citizens face on the basis of their ‘race’ (Byrne et al. 2020). From police stop and search, to sentencing, to youth custody, to the adult prison estate, for instance, it is clear that the criminal justice system is discriminatory and has a disproportionate impact on low-income and racialised populations (see, for example, Prison Reform Trust 2021, Williams and Clarke 2018).

As discussed in Section 2 of this report, all of these inequalities increase the likelihood of serious violence by, for example, enhancing levels of shame and stigma amongst a significant proportion of the population, and undermining people’s sense of mattering.

Institutions

There are many glaring problems affecting the institutions, services and social infrastructure which should help to keep our children safe. This can be exemplified by a handful of cases. Youth services, for instance, have been decimated since 2010, including the closure of many long-running centres which were embedded in communities and provided support to young people through multiple generations (see Weale 2020).

The rates and consequences of school exclusions and suspensions are a cause for deep concern, particularly in England, with permanent exclusions rising towards pre-pandemic levels, and suspensions at their highest since 2006 (Department for Education 2023a). The Children’s Commissioner (2019), among others, have highlighted the connections between school exclusions and risk of violence.

Flaws and failures in children’s custody settings are entrenched and chronic – in light of the latest Children in Custody report (HMIP 2023), the Chief Inspector of Prisons said that ‘the Youth Custody Service are unable to guarantee basic services for children’. The number of children in temporary accommodation doubled between 2011 and 2023 (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government 2023), and the rate of young men aged 16-24 not in education, employment or training in England and Wales rose from 9% in 2000 to 13% in 2022 (Department for Education 2023b). Each year, hundreds of vulnerable children are sent to illegal and unregulated care homes in England (Wall 2024).

For many of our children, and particularly the most vulnerable, our institutions and services are failing to provide the most basic building blocks for safety and wellbeing.

Interactions and relationships

These inequalities and institutional inadequacies have direct consequences for significant and protective relationships in children and young people’s lives – whether they be with family, friends or professionals. Inequalities and discrimination affect personal and professional relationships of all kinds. The institutional issues outlined above affect relationships in a variety of ways: many young people have lost access to supportive youth work relationships; housing issues exacerbate family tensions and can result in relocation away from community networks; and school exclusions often abruptly separate young people from their friendship groups.

Brierley (2021) has coined the term ‘relational poverty’ to describe the acute scarcity of supportive relationships in many young people’s lives, and suggests that there is a direct connection between this experience and the perpetration of violent behaviour.



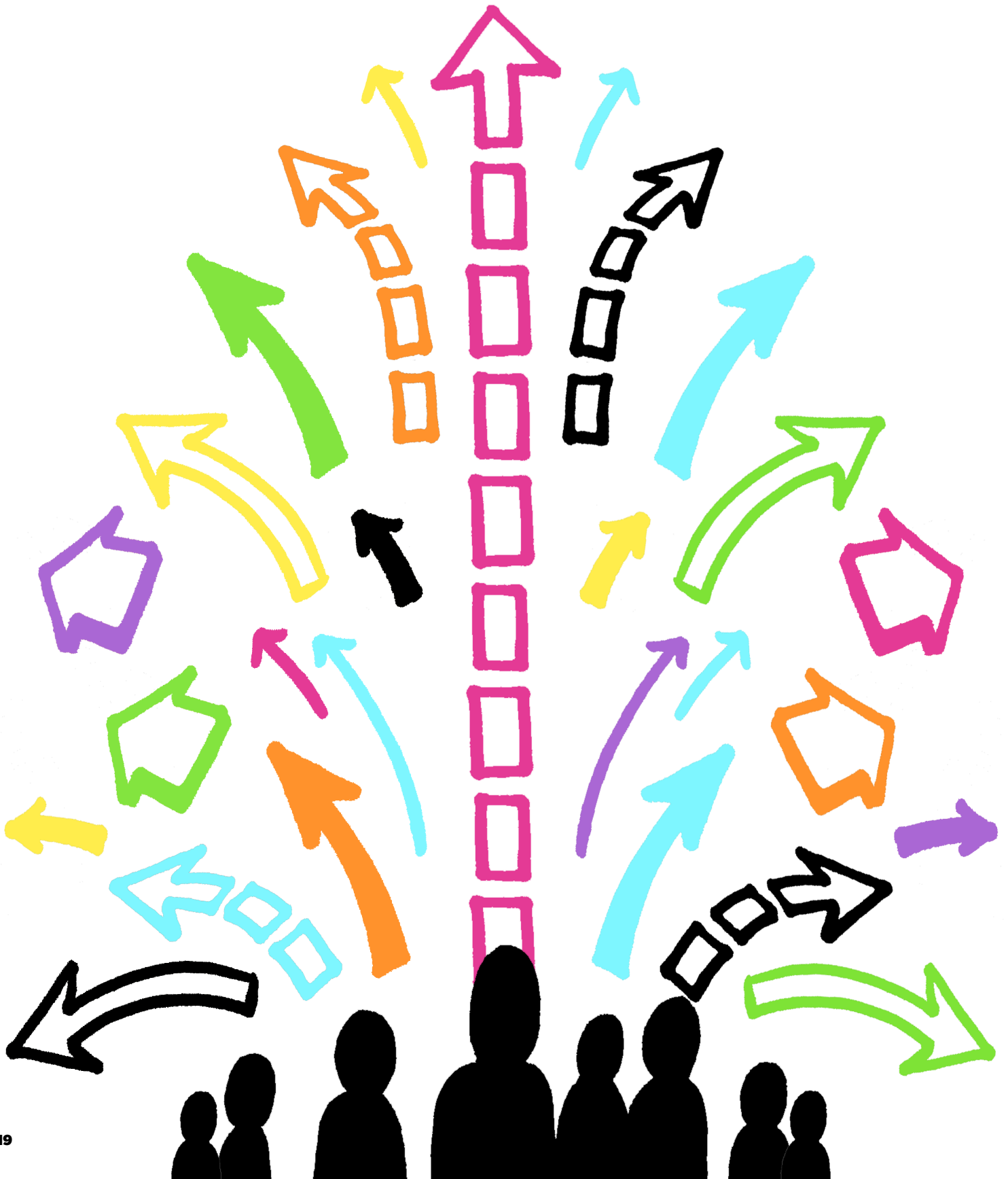
Summary

The three policy initiatives outlined above – the establishment of 20 regional Violence Reduction Units, the Youth Endowment Fund, and the Serious Violence Duty – go some way towards putting public health principles into practice. However, they constitute limited and piecemeal steps that neglect a number of important drivers of violence, particularly at the macro level of societal inequalities and institutions.

Without further action being taken at a national policy level across various areas of social policy, these recent violence prevention initiatives are unlikely to shift the dial on many of the entrenched root causes of violence. To bring about a safer society, a wider-ranging and more ambitious vision is needed.

4

Where should we go from here?





Where should we go from here?

How, then, might we turn the tide on the recent increases in serious violence in England and Wales, to ensure our country becomes and remains a permanently low-violence society?

One crucial step towards securing a safer society would be to move beyond the predominant focus in violence reduction policy on delivering interventions and enhancing multi-agency working – as important as those measures are.

We need to make a strong and enduring commitment to a holistic conception of the public health approach to violence prevention, grounded in the following four core elements:

1. **Ecology of causes – ‘the what’:** Violence is the product of societal, community, relational, and individual factors. These are the social determinants which must be addressed if violence is to be prevented.
2. **Stages of prevention – ‘the when’:** Violence prevention must involve primary, secondary and tertiary prevention: population-level universal action, targeted action to support those with identified vulnerabilities, and responsive action to prevent repeat violence. Adequate investment must be allocated across all stages of prevention, reducing reliance upon enforcement and criminal justice responses.
3. **Model of implementation – ‘the how’:** Public health approaches should follow the World Health Organisation’s four-step cyclical model: i) defining and mapping the problem of violence; ii) identifying the causes of violence; iii) designing, implementing and evaluating policies and interventions; and iv) embedding and expanding effective policies and scaling up interventions that work.
4. **Acting both nationally and locally – ‘the where’:** Sustainably reducing violence requires cross-departmental central government action to promote child flourishing and to address the societal determinants of violence. It also requires well-coordinated and adequately resourced action at regional, local and neighbourhood levels.

Urgent action is needed from central government to address the societal conditions that predictably breed violence, rather than regional authorities being overly relied upon to address the local manifestations of national problems.

It is right for regional bodies such as Violence Reduction Units to lead the way in addressing the factors which contribute to violence in their local areas, but they must have adequate resources and powers to do so, and their efforts must be complemented by central government action to address national-level drivers.

Arguably, recent violence reduction initiatives have been disproportionately focused on ‘how’ questions – in particular, on delivering the right programmatic interventions, and enhancing mechanisms for multi-agency working. Whilst both of these broad measures make important contributions to violence reduction, they must not crowd out attention on the vital ‘what’ and ‘where’ questions: ensuring that all significant social determinants of violence are addressed, at national, regional and local levels.

There is an urgent need to address what has been termed the ‘macro-social determinants’ of violence (Bellis et al 2017) – societal factors such as poverty, inequality, illicit drug markets, insecure and deficient housing, high rates of precarious work, and a lack of adequate mental health support (see also World Health Organisation 2021). Ultimately, these factors substantially undermine our capacity as a society to enable child flourishing, and substantially increase the numbers of children and young people experiencing acute vulnerability. Far too many children are growing up without the basic building blocks of safety and wellbeing.

As broad orienting devices for developing a more effective violence reduction approach, we advocate for the combination of ‘what’, ‘when’, ‘how’ and ‘where’ questions detailed above, as well as consideration of improvements that can be achieved in Four Is: inequalities; institutions and services; interventions; and interactions and relationships. A holistic public health approach would incorporate comprehensive answers to each of those four questions, and would aim at substantial positive change in each of the Four Is.

Learning lessons from a global perspective

If we are to become a permanently low-violence society, we can also gain helpful guidance from international evidence on the commonalities that exist among nations which have the lowest rates of violence. Rather than only looking to other countries to learn about the efficacy of specific interventions, we can learn more from considering the broader question of what makes for a peaceful society.

Taking a global perspective and drawing on an extensive body of international evidence, Currie (2016) substantiated the WHO ecological model, concluding that societies with low rates of violence tend to: .

1. Adopt social policies that produce low levels of socioeconomic inequality.
2. Avoid harsh and ineffective criminal justice systems that serve to exacerbate root causes and perpetuate cycles of violence.
3. Provide strong social supports, including family support programmes, high quality and accessible mental health services and family-friendly economic policies.
4. Make it difficult for people to access firearms.
5. Minimise levels of marginal work (jobs that are demeaning and very low-paid) and maximise the availability of inclusive forms of work (jobs that allow people to make a decent living and foster a sense of purpose and self-worth).

Importantly, there do not appear to be many (if any) examples of countries that have successfully reduced rates of violence significantly and for the long-term through the implementation of programmatic violence reduction interventions (see further Stevenson 2023).

To reiterate, this does not mean that interventions cannot form part of an effective violence prevention strategy. However, it is important to ensure that a focus on localised interventions does not crowd out the importance of undertaking measures to bring about significant societal changes, to address the deeper-rooted drivers of violence outlined in this briefing, which have been highlighted by agencies such as the WHO (2021) and researchers such as Currie (2016).

Although violence is not inevitable, there is also nothing inevitable about England and Wales becoming a more peaceful society in the years ahead. In short, we need to move away from seeing the problem of violence as one that predominantly requires a focus on changing the behaviour of 'at-risk' individuals. We must be more ambitious, delivering the societal and systemic changes which can create conducive conditions for wellbeing, safety, and peace among our children and young people.

This will be complicated and challenging endeavour, requiring significant and sustained attention, and long-term commitment from a range of individuals and groups – including central and local government policymakers, senior professionals, frontline practitioners, community activists and young people themselves.

5

Policy implications





Policy implications

It is beyond the scope of this briefing to provide in-depth blueprints for all relevant areas of national, regional and local policy. However, the following list provides an indication of the kind of policy changes we believe are necessary to bring about a sustained reduction in violence, in line with the holistic public health approach we have advocated throughout this briefing.

Crucially, these proposed policy recommendations – particularly when contrasted with a narrow focus on programmatic interventions – highlight the broad-ranging policy changes that are needed to bring about significant and lasting reductions in violence.

Securing a safer society will require a bold and ambitious programme of change, which the following policy recommendations are intended to support.

Overarching Recommendation

- To enable the success of its violence prevention mission, the government should make a lasting commitment to a holistic public health approach to violence prevention. Crucially, this will entail cross-departmental collaboration, particularly to consider and address the macro-social determinants of violence.
- Responsibilities, resources and powers should be proportionally allocated between central and regional governments, to ensure that both the national and local level drivers of violence are effectively addressed. This may involve increasing resources for institutions, agencies, and systems involved in primary prevention.

Economy

- Economic policy should have the explicit goal of bringing about a substantial reduction in poverty and inequality, both of which are vital in enhancing child flourishing and preventing violence. The government's Child Poverty Strategy must be sufficiently ambitious and broad-ranging as to produce permanent reductions in child poverty, the benefits of which will be seen for generations.
- Targeted economic development programmes are needed in the most deprived and violence-affected communities of the country. Among other things, these programmes should aim to stimulate high-quality employment opportunities, improve local housing and enhance community infrastructure.

Early years

- All parents should have access to high-quality and affordable childcare. To make this a reality, far greater subsidies are needed to bring England and Wales into line with comparable countries that command similar resources.
- Well-resourced and high-quality parenting support should be made universally available. This should include family education programmes, home-visiting services, and enhanced resources for early family help services delivered through social care.

Violence Reduction Units

- The Home Office should work closely with Violence Reduction Units to better understand the national-level factors driving violence across the country, as well as to better understand how it can support VRUs' work to coordinate local violence reduction efforts and to address local drivers.
- Violence Reduction Units should be provided with the long-term funding and flexibility they need to best undertake their roles, through the pursuit of systemic and institutional change, as well as the commissioning of interventions.
- Violence Reduction Units should provide long-term funding, support and challenge to community-based organisations supporting young people.

Criminal justice, youth justice and policing

- Criminal justice policies should shift towards enhancing the welfare of our most marginalised citizens and away from a heavy focus on controlling and punishing misdemeanours – a rebalancing that would bring us closer to the policy framework of other European nations which experience lower rates of violence.

- The Government's reinvestment and reprioritisation of neighbourhood policing should focus not just on visible patrols, but on relationship-building with communities and local youth organisations, in order to build trust and confidence at the neighbourhood level.
- There should be a nationally-mandated approach to the policing of children and young people, building on the NPCC's "child-centred" principles and Child First approaches. This should include a strong focus on avoiding the criminalisation of children, and viewing the police's role in relation to children as one centred on safeguarding.
- Diversion and out-of-court disposals are an important way of avoiding the harmful and criminogenic effects associated with young people's contact with the formal youth and criminal justice systems. The use of both diversion and out-of-court disposals should be increased, and robust systems of evaluation put in place to monitor their impact on young people's lives and effectiveness in reducing offending.

Education

- Adequately funded, incentivised and supported by the Department for Education and Ofsted, schools should seek to create inclusive and nurturing environments enabling all children and young people to achieve their potential.
- School curriculums should be broad and flexible enough to meet the needs and passions of all children. All schools should have the requisite funding to support the high-quality delivery of a wide range of subjects, often available only to those in private, fee-paying institutions.
- Designated Safeguarding Lead and Special Educational Needs Coordinator roles should be provided with the resources, training and support that they require in order to safeguard the welfare and meet the learning needs of all students.
- Given the close correlation between additional learning needs (such as speech and language difficulties) and perpetration of violence, adequate resources should be invested at a national level in educational services such as educational psychology and speech and language therapy.

Housing and local communities

- Central and local governments should take urgent action to invest in genuinely affordable and social housing.
- Housing policies should encourage the creation of diverse housing estates with ample public leisure facilities and amenities, fostering more inclusive and cohesive communities.

Employment

- Central government should increase investment in high-quality employment programmes, training schemes and apprenticeships to boost young people's experience, skills and opportunities.
- Government agencies should work with employers to enable the provision of high-quality work for young people, with competitive pay, good job security, training opportunities and progression routes. This should reduce the predominance of precarious and low-paid work for young people.

Physical and mental health

- Central government should commit to pursuing the recommendations of the Marmot Review, to reduce health inequalities and maximise the wellbeing of children and young people.
- Central government should commit to addressing the social determinants of mental ill-health, which include poverty, inadequate housing, and un(der)employment.
- Central government should commit to the provision of high-quality mental health support for young people, ranging from universal support within schools and youth settings, to more specialised psychological interventions.

Youth services

- All young people should have access to high-quality youth services: both targeted specialist interventions where needed, but also long-term, open-access support from youth facilities and youth workers. This would enable the development of lasting, trusting relationships between young people and professionals, which are particularly crucial for vulnerable young people.



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