

Reducing Public Place Violence across the East Midlands: The development of strategies, interventions and preparation for the Serious Violence Duty

Matt Hopkins and Keith Floyd¹

Please visit the VRIN webpage at: [https://le.ac.uk/criminology/research/violence-reduction-information-network²](https://le.ac.uk/criminology/research/violence-reduction-information-network)

Introduction

The purpose of this discussion paper is to further our understanding of the response to public place violence across the East Midlands region. While this work helps build our knowledge of regional responses to the Government Serious Violence Strategy (Home Office, 2018) and the desire for public health responses to serious violence; the primary focus is to understand how prepared the region is for the forthcoming serious violence duty (SVD) as outlined in the Police, Courts, Sentencing and Crime Bill (2021)³. The SVD places a new statutory duty on a number of public sector agencies⁴ to tackle and prevent serious violence and is part of a range of government initiatives aimed to develop whole system multi-agency approaches to violence prevention (see Bath & O' Moore, 2019: 5)⁵. The essence of the SVD is to make the prevention of serious violence a legal requirement and for greater cooperation, collaboration and communication across agencies on which the duty is placed. This should then create the optimal partnership

arrangements for public health responses to serious violence to be developed.

The data presented in this paper were collected from each of the five policing areas across the region (Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire and Nottinghamshire) through interviews with relevant stakeholders conducted in the summer/ autumn of 2021. In total, five interviews were conducted with eleven participants working in the field of violence reduction, ranging from police officers and analysts, Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) and Police and Crime Commissioner staff to council and health representatives. Due to restrictions in meeting face-to-face imposed by the Covid 19 pandemic all interviews were conducted virtually using the Microsoft Teams platform. Due to the broad range of subject knowledge covered by the interview questions, each areas representatives were interviewed jointly. This allowed the most comprehensive answers to be obtained as partnership knowledge was aggregated. The interviews took place after ethical approval was received from the University of Leicester and all participants

¹ Both East Midlands Violence Reduction Information Network, School of Criminology, University of Leicester.

² This work was funded by an ESRC Impact Acceleration Account Grant.

³ At the time of writing The Bill is current at the House of Lords committee stage: see <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2839>

⁴ Duty holders will be the police, local authorities, Youth Offending Teams, Probation, Fire and Rescue and Health Authorities. It will be expected for a local strategy to be published, the will be reviewed annually.

⁵ These also include investment in 18 Violence Reduction Units and funding through the Youth Endowment Funding to tackle the development of interventions to address risk factors in young people/ children.

provided their informed consent. All participants are anonymised in this paper and interview data used to explore common themes and potential developmental areas for the benefit of all areas - rather than compare area progress to date. Two of the five areas had set up Home Office funded VRU's since 2019. The interviews were structured around the five core elements of the whole-system multi-agency approach to serious violence prevention (the 5c's) as outlined by Bath & O' Moore (2019) and focused upon:

1. **Collaboration:** how areas bring partners/ system leaders together;
2. **Co-production:** multi-agency strategy and intervention development, co-location and establishing collaborative working;
3. **Co-operation in data and intelligence sharing:** understanding what data are collected across relevant agencies and challenges with this;
4. **Counter-narratives:** identifying risk and protective factors in local populations and working with communities to produce alternatives to criminal activities.
5. **Community consensus approach:** how areas recognise that communities are key assets, knowledge providers and able to provide solutions. How a systems approach helps empower communities and utilise available social networks and social capital.

In addition to this, the interviews also asked about the definition of serious violence used in each area, public health approaches to the prevention of violence; evaluation and monitoring, and specific challenges relating to the SVD.

The following pages present a summary of the main findings and in the final section, some

recommendations are made for further learning/ preferred practice.

- **Defining Serious Violence:** Areas reported that a number of definitions of violence exist that they could use locally – such as the World Health Organization (WHO) (Krug et al, 2002) and the Home Office definition (Home Office, 2018). Three areas have adopted the definition that is presented in the Home Office Serious Violence Strategy (see Home Office, 2018:14)⁶, though one of these areas noted there was a possibility of refining this when a new head of crime takes post and also when the SVD is implemented. Another area simply devised a board definition of 'any violence capable of causing serious harm' in order to capture all potential forms of serious violence and another specifically focused on 'weapon-enabled violent offences that take place in public spaces and domestic addresses'. It was evident, however, that most areas carefully thought about the complexity of violence (what it is, who it impacts, what the harms are) and the connection between how violence is defined and how this might then be operationalised into interventions. Thus, in line with Hamby (2017), several areas noted that how we define violence can shape the potential responses to it. However, one VRU area noted that as there was no prescribed definition of serious violence given by the Home Office when VRUs were originally funded and there is no definition in the Police, Courts, Sentencing and Crime Bill, this allows for areas to develop their own definitions. While this enables areas to have control over how they define, one area thought it might create challenges when trying to align measures/ indicators of violence for comparative analysis and for evaluative purposes at a national level (as many different indicators will be required). There was much discussion about whether the focus should just be on place-based violence as it was noted that

inherent, such as in gangs and county lines drug dealing'.

⁶ This is cited as 'specific types of crime such as homicide, knife crime, and gun crime and areas of criminality where serious violence or its threat is

several definitions of violence include domestic abuse and sexual violence, and the WHO encourage responses that focus upon the psychological impacts and wider harms of violence (see Krug et al, 2002). Further to this, the SVD legislation offers wide scope for the types of violence might be targeted by requiring that agencies ‘identify kinds of serious violence that occur in the area’ (C1 section 7 part 3: Police, Courts, Sentencing and Crime Bill 2021) without defining what serious violence is. Therefore, we potentially see very broad parameters that might be included in local definitions of violence in future. Generally, respondents were of the view that definitions should change from area to area (according to local needs and priorities), but all partners need to be (1) clear on what the definition is and (2) how to operationalise into robust interventions.

- **Area approaches to the prevention of serious violence:** A requirement of the SVD is for local authorities to prepare and implement a strategy for exercising their functions to prevent and reduce serious violence in their area (C1 section 7 part 3c: Police Courts and Sentencing Bill 2021)⁷. The interviews illustrated that several areas are at different stages in the development of their violence strategies/ strategic needs assessments (SNA). Unsurprisingly, the VRU areas were the most advanced here; had SNAs in place and had developed responses that were aligned to the five c’s approach. Indeed the VRU areas spoke about developing plans that were focused on public health approaches and they integrated system level theory of change in to the SNAs. The non-VRU areas had developed plans that were focused on specific local authority areas where serious violence was identified as a problem, though these were not county-wide and did not include a fully integrated public health approach. However, one non-VRU area did highlight a focus on harms in their area

based on the use of the Cambridge Harms Index (Sherman et al., 2016) in their strategic plan. Despite the development of needs assessments and responses in the VRU areas, concerns were also expressed about the future sustainability of plans due to the relative short term nature of many funding arrangements.

- **Collaboration:** All areas have done a great deal to build partnerships – much of which is a legacy of the requirements of the Crime & Disorder Act. However, there was a distinction between the VRU and non-VRU areas. The VRU areas had robust governance arrangements in place, with strong PCC buy-in, strategic boards and violence delivery groups (indeed, there was already close involvement of the partners required to comply with the SVD legislation). A constant theme from all respondents was the desire to move away from ‘silo working’ and all areas appeared to be doing much to get relevant agencies together. Although one non-VRU area had a Violence Reduction and Prevention board in place, the non-VRU areas are currently working to the legislation outlined in the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act (section 17), which focuses on crime and disorder, rather than serious violence. This means that that violence prevention could often be side-lined over other priorities. One non-VRU area noted that as ‘serious violence’ is not a ‘heading’ in their community safety plans, only aspects of serious violence get prioritised. It was felt that this can be a hindrance to developing a holistic approach to violence – which coming together under the SVD or a VRU banner could possibly remedy. While it was acknowledged that the SVD might help overcome some of these issues, the development of collaboration was also said to be hindered by other issues – budgetary constraints, political tensions and the geographical size of some larger counties.
- **Co-production:** Co-production includes developing approaches that are informed by all

⁷ This builds upon what was already in place in the Crime & Disorder Act, by specifically including serious violence.

partners. Again, it was noted that the areas are at different stages of development here and that many of the issues observed in relation to collaboration surface again when considering co-production. While all areas noted that some strong local working relationships had developed, the non-VRU areas were most likely to suggest that co-production was hindered by a lack of strategy and a lack of accountability (which could potentially be overcome through the SVD and/ or the development of a VRU). Indeed, one non-VRU area commented on the willingness of some partners to engage, but how the area had been 'plagued' by a lack of strategic direction and letting partners know exactly what is it they need to do. Another non-VRU area also commented that co-location is problematic when there is no VRU as the VRU banner enables and fosters the view that collaboration and co-location is required. One VRU area explored the concept of collaboration and co-production in a little more depth and suggested what was required was not just 'multi-agency' teams where there is agency representation, but the correct multi-disciplinary knowledge: thus multi-disciplinary, rather than multi-agency co-production is required. Generally, there was a view that the SVD should help remove silo working and reduce serious violence, but in order to achieve this it would be necessary to have partners working together to tackle a range of risk factors (and build protective factors) that often appear generic to many forms of violence. Indeed, it was suggested part of the challenge going forward will be in identifying how partners can draw upon a range of multi-disciplinary knowledge to build effective strategies.

- **Co-operation in data and intelligence sharing:**

If multi-disciplinary knowledge is to be produced it is evident that data and information sharing is required. Respondents spoke about (1) what data was required; (2) issues with data sharing and (3) achieving partnership data 'buy-in'. Whilst most areas were clear about what data they would like to

have access to, one non-VRU admitted that they still had a depth of learning to go through to understand what data were held by partners that could help them develop a strategy. Others held a better understanding, with one VRU area developing their own data dashboard for monitoring and evaluation purposes and another non-VRU area giving an example of a similar data hub they were developing. However, data sharing is still an issue in some cases – with one VRU noting challenges around accessing health datasets (which are needed for information on survivors of knife crime). One non-VRU area did mention that they had few issues with data sharing as they had often referred to the legislation set out in section 115 of the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act when trying to access data (which gives partners the power to share data for the purpose of crime and disorder reduction). Further to this, it was also suggested that issues with data sharing could be overcome if (1) there was a dedicated person centrally in the VRU tasked with this and (2) if partners are able to clearly understand why the data are required. Finally, several areas also mentioned that there possibly needs to be better understanding across partnerships about the types of data that need to be collected and how to interpret data. For example, it was noted that there not only needs to be a strong relationship between 'operational knowledge' (knowledge/ data about what is happening on the ground) and 'strategic knowledge' (how to build effective and workable strategies) but also recognition that understanding and interpreting data can be an issue when it is being passed between partners. Here there is a need for adequate collaboration in understanding 'of what data means' (what it measures) and potential training for analysis.

- **Counter-narratives:** All areas were mindful of identifying risk factors and working 'with' communities to develop protective factors. To this extent there was clear evidence of areas developing approaches that moved away from traditional criminal justice solutions to those that focus on building protective factors within

communities. One VRU area had several community ambassadors working across a city to help connect with local communities (these regularly meet with the VRU). One non-VRU area spoke about their efforts to do community mapping to try to reach the correct people and their engagement with children's care homes. Indeed, another VRU area spoke about their strong efforts to engage with communities and to integrate community involvement, but how there was still work to do. Overall, there was a clear message from all areas that community involvement and development of counter-narratives are necessary. However, it was acknowledged that this can be challenging and resource intensive. It was also noted that more local investment is needed (such as in community policing) to build those community links and gain the knowledge required for counter-narratives.

- **Community consensus approach:** There was a clear sense across all-areas that approaches to serious violence reduction need to empower communities and help them to produce solutions. As one respondent said, 'you don't do to communities, you have to take them with you'. However, there was a sense that this was an ongoing process where partnerships needed to understand and work with communities to provide tools for change. As might be expected, different areas across the region feel as though they are at different stages with developing their understanding of communities, collaborating with the vulnerable and tapping into community networks/ social capital. One VRU had a separate community engagement and participation strategy with a communications plan (which links into the police communications team). Another VRU had invested in a communication and campaigns officer to take this work on (both the VRU areas also commented on their strong social media presence). However, one non-VRU area spoke about how the lack of deprivation in their area and the sheer geographical size made it difficult to achieve community consensus. There was a general view that partnerships

need to develop shared understanding of community needs and to build strong links to communities. However, the non-VRUs generally spoke about the need to develop better communications with key vulnerable communities in their locations.

- **Evaluation and Monitoring:** All areas were asked whether they are monitoring and evaluating their interventions. Two areas (both non-VRU) said they are waiting to develop serious violence performance measures, whereas all other areas had indicators in place and had taken steps to do some evaluation of interventions related to serious violence reduction. There was a distinction between the VRU and non-VRU areas, with VRUs having a clear package of evaluation work related to their funding requirements. For the non-VRU areas, violence reduction was generally more piecemeal and the lack of a central 'violence reduction identity' sometimes meant evaluation could be a little more haphazard. There was general agreement that intervention impact needed to be measured in some way and even in areas where no evaluation had been done, some thought had been given to this. As noted above, as a result of central funding, the VRU areas were better prepared for evaluation - one VRU area had an evaluation lead and both VRUs had ensured strong monitoring processes were in place and had commissioned independent evaluations of some interventions. Thus, VRU funding had allowed for a firm culture of monitoring and evaluation to be embedded. Two other important points about evaluation were raised by non-VRU areas. One raised concerns about a performance measure culture in their area. They voiced concerns over a rigid 'hard-nose' performance culture linked to police targets and noted how positive outcomes from violence reduction might focus on harms and helping the vulnerable in ways that are not always easy to measure through police targets - which might possibly fit better with a more public health focused approach. One non-VRU area also commented on the lack of any long-term evaluation in their area, noting that this

was a result of the organisations desire to always move onto the next priority, which resulted in missed opportunities for learning.

- **Preparing for the Serious Violence Duty:** The SVD was generally welcomed across all areas as it has the potential to change processes and deliver interventions that will reduce violence. However, a number of concerns were also raised. In one non-VRU area concerns were expressed over additional work: ‘What we are being asked to do is quite a lot on top of the day job. I’ve not got staff for knife crime, I’ve not got the budget, winging it is effectively what I am doing’. Another area noted how there had been much organisational change. They were concerned the SVD would add to this constant ‘flux and change’. The same respondent also expressed concerns over ‘historically.... poor partnership buy in’ in their area and the resource implications for implementing the SVD. However, it was hoped that the SVD might help to leverage more resource to deliver violence reduction as this becomes a statutory duty. Another non-VRU area noted the existing complexity of partnership structures in the county, suggesting the SVD could help to generate stronger ownership of serious violence issues in the area, bringing with it the stability required to develop a more robust partnership culture. On a similar theme another respondent said that accountability for serious violence is a problem and this could change the perception held by some that this is just a police responsibility, therefore increasing accountability amongst other partners. One VRU area welcomed the SVD as it will help to embed VRU expectations and a public health approach nationally. They did note, however, that a lack of finance for the SVD could become a real challenge. Indeed, some concerns were expressed that the SVD could be trying to get VRUs developed across all areas ‘on the cheap’. Further concerns were also expressed as it was thought that nationally, there are likely to be several areas with existing effective structures, whereby the SVD could actually upset what is already working well.

Implications and recommendations

This discussion paper highlights a number of aspects of good practice in relation to the delivery of violence reduction across the region. However, when viewed through the lens of the 5c’s approach, it identifies that – due to a number of factors – areas are at different stages in the development and delivery of the process. The VRU areas have better developed strategies that aim to address violence as a public health issue; have more developed governance structures in place to monitor progress and more integrated partnership collaboration. It is widely recognised across all areas that successful delivery moving forward will require building multi-disciplinary knowledge through partnership work and the close involvement of communities where intervention is most needed. That said, some areas face challenges with partnership arrangements similar to those identified in previous research (see Berry et al., 2009) and resourcing/ funding for violence reduction was a consistent theme of discussion. What is apparent is that, at present, the region is developing a two tiered approach to violence reduction, with the resources provided for VRU areas allowing them to lead the way. While the VRU areas were funded on the basis of the extent of serious violence problems in their areas, it needs to be borne in mind that serious violence also concentrates in non-VRU funded locations across the region and at present, there is a risk that provision for violence reduction in these areas could be lacking in future. That said, there was broad agreement across the region that the SVD has the potential to strengthen local and regional analysis and responses to serious violence. Indeed, embedding VRU principles nationally and developing closer partnership working/ knowledge building is welcomed. While it is evident from the SVD that there is a desire for the development of partnership approaches to prevent serious violence across all policing

areas, it is also evident that the East Midlands is in a good position to respond to this. There is a depth of knowledge across the region and many areas of good practice in relation to developing violence reduction strategies. With this in mind there are three main recommendations to take forward:

1. **Consideration should be given to holding a number of regional/national learning events:** As there is much experience across the region in terms of developing serious violence reduction strategies, it would be logical for that knowledge to be disseminated regionally (or even nationally), through a series of learning events. These might include specific sessions about:
 - Developing Strategic Needs Assessments;
 - Developing partnership knowledge and collaboration;
 - How to build community consensus;
 - Evaluation and monitoring.
2. **Police areas should consider appointing Violence Reduction Champions:** Concerns were raised (particularly in non-VRU areas) about the resources required for the SVD and how dealing with serious violence requires full-time dedicated staff. It was also evident that VRU areas had people capable of driving initiatives forward and the VRU's have developed a clear identity. It would appear a good starting point for OPCCs to appoint full-time violence leads or champions in their areas to drive strategies forward, foster

collaborative relationships and ensure interventions are delivered. Without resource and ownership, there is a risk of serious violence prevention becoming a side-line to other policing tasks.

3. **Areas need to ensure evaluation and monitoring of interventions is a key focus:** The SVD will ensure that a plethora of intervention activity is implemented nationally. This will build upon work already conducted across the eighteen VRU areas. An opportunity exists to add to the existing knowledge base in relation to what works to reduce serious violence. However, in order to do this, it will be necessary to build in strong evaluation to interventions and ensure findings are disseminated to appropriate audiences. While the findings of several violence reduction interventions have been disseminated through several routes (see for example, Youth Endowment Fund, 2021); a regional online hub for dissemination could be created or findings publicised through bodies such as the College of Policing.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the participants, stakeholders and support staff in the five counties for their time making the interview arrangements in difficult circumstances. Without this cooperation writing this discussion paper would not have been impossible.

References

Bath, R. & O' Moore, E. (2019) *A whole-system multi-agency approach to serious violence prevention A resource for local system leaders in England*. Public Health England. [e-link to report](#) [accessed 19th October 2021].

Berry, G., Briggs, P., Erol, R. & van Staden, L. (2009) *The effectiveness of partnership working in a crime and disorder context A rapid evidence assessment*. Home Office Research

Report 52. [e-link to report](#) (accessed 19th October 2021).

Hamby, S. (2017) 'On defining violence, and why it matters'. *Psychology of Violence* 7(2): 167-180. DOI:[10.1037/vio0000117](https://doi.org/10.1037/vio0000117)

Home Office (2018) *Serious Violence Strategy April 2018*. London: Home Office. [e-link to strategy](#) (accessed 19th October 2021)

Home Office (2019) *Consultation on a new legal duty to support a multi-agency approach to preventing and tackling serious violence Government response*. [e-link to report](#) (accessed 19th October 2021).

Home Office (2021) *Serious Violence Duty Preventing and reducing serious violence Draft Guidance for responsible authorities. Draft Guidance for Responsible Authorities* [accessed 18th October 2021]. [e-link to report](#)

Krug, E. G., Dahlberg, L.L., Mercy, J. A., Zwi, A.B. & Lozano, R. (2002) *World report on violence and health*: World Health Organization [e-link to report](#) [accessed 18th October 2021].

Sherman, L., Neyroud, P. & Neyroud, E. (2016) 'The Cambridge Crime Harm Index: Measuring Total Harm from Crime Based on Sentencing Guidelines', *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, Volume 10, Issue 3, pp. 171–183, <https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paw003>

Youth Endowment Fund (2021) *Evidence and Gap Map to Prevent Children Getting Involved in Violence*. Website: [e-link to webpage](#) [accessed 19th October 2021].