



Corrosive Attacks

Preventing acid attacks and corrosive substance crime

Key Policy Recommendation

Implement a series of measures to generate a more effective, holistic and evidence-based response.

These measures would:

1. **Develop a more robust long-term understanding** of the patterns of acid attacks and the motivations of offenders; and
2. **Prioritise a range of preventative strategies**, including the restriction of access to harmful products, the wider use of testing kits at street level and the development of public health approaches to deter those at risk of engaging in acid violence.

The impact of acid attacks and corrosive substance crime

Taking these steps will allow policymakers to better understand:

1. The longitudinal geographical concentrations of acid attacks. This will enable policymakers to **identify high-risk locations and to target resources** to the locations most in need;
2. The types and concentrations of substances used in acid attacks (from household bleach to high concentrate sulphuric acid). This will allow policymakers to **plan for the types of substances most likely to be used in attacks and to understand the likely injuries** that will be sustained by survivors; and
3. The contexts of acid attacks in terms of who the survivors/offenders are and why conflict occurred. This will enable **prevention to be targeted in ways that will reduce the likelihood of potential offenders** engaging in acid attacks.

The United Kingdom faces a **continuing problem with acid attacks and corrosive substance crime**. Such attacks involve throwing a corrosive substance – normally into the face – of a victim. This **can cause life changing injuries and, in some cases, death**.

The problem of acid attacks became the focus of media attention in 2017, when a spike in attacks was observed in London and nationally the number was 941 (Hopkins et al, 2021). Although a decline in numbers was observed between 2018 and 2021, **more recent evidence points to increasing numbers, increased risks for women and high costs to society**.

The case for action

1. Increasing Numbers

Based upon Freedom of Information data collected by Acid Survivors Trust International (ASTI) from police forces, (see Figure 1 on page 4) there were 427 reported offences in 2021; rising to 710 in 2022 (a 70% increase) and 1,244 in 2023 (a 75% increase on the 2022 figure).

2. Increasing risks for females

The data also points to a potentially worrying change in the nature of acid attacks (Economic Times, 19th October, 2023). Whilst attacks in the UK, have commonly been male on male, in 2023, for the first time, women were more likely to be the victim of an attack than men.

3. High costs to society

There is strong evidence that acid attacks are a substantial drain on the UK economy in terms of costs to the criminal justice and health system. ASTI report that one acid attack costs the UK economy £63,000; with the total cost of attacks between 2017 and 2022 in the region of £200m (ASTI, 2024).

Evidence base

Analysis of over 1,000 corrosive substance crimes by Hopkins *et al.* (2021) revealed the following:

1. Household products (such as bleach) are the most commonly used substances in attacks (35%), followed by ammonia (32%) and corrosives labelled as acids/alkalis (15%).

2. In 27% of attacks, there is a serious injury to a victim.

3. In the UK, the majority of attacks occur in public settings against young, male victims.

4. Suspects are often under age of 24. They are most likely to use substances

that are described as acid/ammonia or noxious substances, whereas those over this age are more likely to use substances described as household corrosives.

5. Attacks are more concentrated in economically deprived urban areas, with over 50% of these crimes occurring in areas within the top 20% of most deprived locations.

6. 30% of cases involve the throwing of corrosives while committing another crime (generally robbery or burglary). 17% are unprovoked attacks and 10% are related to gang activity (disputes over territory, access to drug markets etc.).

Interviews with offenders suggest that they obtain and carry corrosives due to:

- Ease of Availability
- Perceived 'low-risk' of possession
- The ease of disguising possession
- Low financial costs
- Need for self-protection
- Enhance criminal/street reputation

Our research also reveals that offenders use corrosive substances in crime events for a range of reasons, including:

1. Element of surprise: There can be an element of surprise to these attacks not as achievable with other weapons.

2. Weapon readiness/speed: Corrosives can be more 'ready to use' and 'easy to hand' than other weapons that need to remain concealed.

3. Instant visual incapacitation: Corrosives are effective in instantly visually incapacitating a victim, allowing a further crime to be carried out.

4. Physical distance: Using corrosives allows offenders to keep a physical distance from their victims

5. Silent to use: Corrosives offer an advantage over other weapons by virtue of being relatively noiseless.

Implementation

Our research suggests that the following measures would generate a more effective, holistic and evidence-based response to the problems posed by corrosive substance attacks:

- **Collect more robust data on the numbers of attacks**

Data on the number of acid attacks are patchy, mainly because we are reliant on (a) whether crimes are reported to the police and (b) the accuracy of police recording. Efforts should be made to promote more accurate police data collection and to build more complete datasets through complimenting police data with hospital A&E data.

- **Increase the effort for potential offenders to obtain corrosives**

Efforts have been made to limit sales of harmful corrosives through voluntary retailer agreements and sales restrictions, such as those in the Offensive Weapons Act. However, further action can and should be taken. This could include measures such as:

1. **Banning all sales** of acid and corrosives online
2. **Changing packaging and advertising** in store to reflect the harms that these products can cause and how dangerous they are
3. **Committing not to sell acid and other corrosives to anyone under 21** and to increase retailer education and training
4. **Introducing a permit system to record all sales** so as to allow the tracking of purchases in the event of attacks that could also be used as evidence in subsequent legal proceedings.

- **To increase the risks of detection for those carrying corrosives**

The Offensive Weapons Act (2019) gave the police powers to search individuals for corrosives. However, testing for corrosives on the street is reliant upon the police having expensive street testing kits

available. Efforts should be made to ensure that more testing kits are available in policing areas where acid attack risk is highest. The law could also be strengthened to make it illegal to decant acid and other corrosives into unmarked bottles.

- **To heighten awareness of victim/offender impact**

Potential carriers and users of acid would benefit from educational programmes that outline the harms of using corrosives and the negative impacts on the lives of both survivors and offenders. Programmes such as 'Project Irreversible', which is an interactive animation developed by Acid Survivors Trust International outlining the harms of acid use, should be rolled out in high-risk locations.

- **To tackle the underlying causes of acid violence through public health focused approaches**

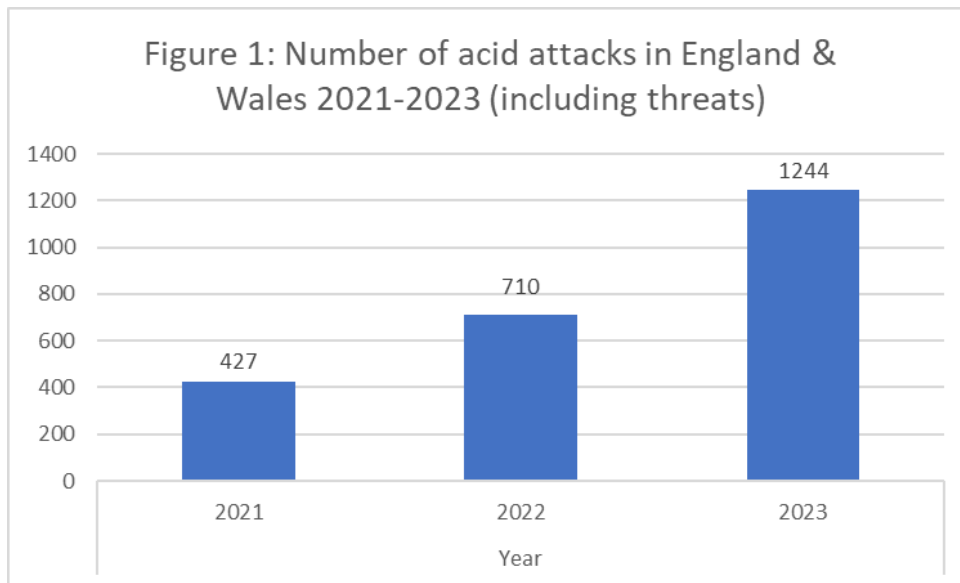
The World Health Organization defines a public health approach to reducing violence as one that 'seeks to improve the health and safety of all individuals by addressing underlying risk factors that increase the likelihood that an individual will become a victim or a perpetrator of violence'. A public health approach has been championed in England and Wales through Violence Reduction Units (VRUs), tasked with reducing serious violence in the 18 police areas most seriously affected. Here a range of innovative approaches are used, such as focused deterrence, social skills training and trauma specific therapies. Priority might be given to channelling existing resources into locations with high concentrations of acid attacks in order to address the underlying factors that generate such violence.

This policy briefing paper was produced by: Dr Matt Hopkins (Associate Professor in Criminology) with the support of the University of Leicester Institute for Policy.



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(Figure 1: No. of acid attacks in England & Wales 2021-23 (including threats))



References

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