

West Midlands
Violence Reduction Strategy
2023-2026

Co-produced by Safer Together in conjunction with agencies, stakeholders, communities and young people



WEST MIDLANDS
VIOLENCE
REDUCTION
PARTNERSHIP

“It (violence reduction) is really tough. Really hard to get right, but I am hopeful for change. After all, there is more that unites us than divides us right?”

Youth worker

Foreword

The Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP) provides an invaluable platform for everybody to work together, to prevent and reduce serious violence that affects young people.

I am delighted to introduce the first **West Midlands Violence Reduction Strategy**, which sets out how we will work together across the West Midlands and in our local places, to prevent and reduce the likelihood of children and young people under the age of 25, becoming a victim or perpetrator of violence.

The strategy aims to address the underlying causes of violence and prevent it from happening in the first place, because prevention will always be better than having to deal with the consequences of violence.

Working with local authorities, police, fire, probation, health and other partners, we aim to support thousands of young people across the West Midlands, to enable them to lead happy and fulfilled lives, free from the scourge of violence.

The principle that everyone has a role to play in creating safer communities, is one which runs throughout this strategy. We are driven by a committed, collective and co-operative mission to prevent violence, protect young people and save lives.

Sadly, there are still far too many of our young people being impacted by violent crime as a consequence of many factors, that include inequality, poverty, abuse, neglect, lack of opportunity, low educational attainment and exploitation. It is everyone's responsibility to support each other and collectively contribute to safeguarding and protecting our young people.

This strategy focuses on ensuring that we can develop a range of programmes and approaches, that reduce vulnerability to violence and prevent harm. It is critical that we develop a sustainable, community and youth led approach to violence reduction and we will do this by working alongside young people, communities and their leaders, parents and carers.

Work across the education system is also a key priority, to embed the skills and knowledge to support our most vulnerable young people. It is important that we stand shoulder to shoulder in our efforts, to keep our young people and communities safe.

We will develop a clear counter narrative and use social media, to drive positive messages, so as to challenge and change attitudes to violence. I am confident that together, we will make a difference, so that we ensure the region is a safer place for our young people to grow up, flourish, succeed and fulfil their potential.

Simon Foster
West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner



Contents

Page	
3	Foreword
5	Executive Summary
7	1. Introduction and Context
7	Introduction
8	The issue of violence: A National Context
9	Improving Understanding and Response: The Serious Violence Duty
9	Our Strategy: Key Principles and Aims
11	Strategic Priorities
11	The West Midlands: Context and Demography
13	What violence looks like in our region
14	Victim Profile
15	Exploitation: A Driver of Violence
18	2. Defining and Understanding Violence
19	Violence: Driving Factors
21	Regional Drivers
23	Violence: Impacts and Consequences
25	3. Innovation and change
25	Priorities and Principles
25	Key Principles
25	The 5Cs
26	Priorities
38	4 . Critical Role of Communities in Preventing and Reducing Violence
38	Community and Youth Engagement: A Snapshot
39	Uniting Communities against Violence
41	5. Governance, evaluation and monitoring

Executive Summary

The West Midlands Violence Reduction Strategy is a step forward in realising a vision for the region to be free from violence. This document sets out a regional response to the **Serious Violence Duty** and a regional strategic plan to prevent and reduce violence between 2023-2026.

This strategy has been informed by the voices of communities, children, young people and those professionals who work tirelessly to reduce violence in all its forms. They are local and system experts, and as such it is right that this strategy has been co-produced with them. Their generosity in sharing their lived experiences, insights and unique perspectives means we are assured that this plan puts us in the best position to respond to the needs of local people, places and populations.

The approach has also been carefully designed to respond to current limitations and challenges, whilst simultaneously recognising the work we already have in place to reduce violence across the West Midlands, upscaling and replicating those approaches and interventions that have shown success and promise in turning the tide against violence.

We have also seized the opportunity to provide a more in-depth and shared regional understanding of what violence looks like across the West Midlands, and the range of factors that drive this complex issue.

The implementation of this strategy also forces us to widen our lens, ensuring that as well as embedding a response to violence that is proportionate and robust, we are also focused on preventing violence from occurring in the first place. The strategy is strongly underpinned by a public health approach to violence reduction, which enables us to firmly contribute to the prevention of adversity and harmful social, and community experiences that are so often inextricably linked with violence and harm.

To achieve our ambition and vision we have established **five strategic priorities**:

- 1 Influence systems to deliver prevention across the life-course.**
- 2 Development of a sustainable, community and youth led approach to violence reduction.**
- 3 Building regional and local partnerships that enhance collaboration and innovation.**
- 4 Development of a West Midlands wide movement that aims for a violence free region.**
- 5 Influence delivery of evidence-based programmes in educational settings.**

The **five strategic priorities** have been informed by communities, children and young people, the seven local strategic needs assessments and reflect our shared themes and challenges (see links to local Strategic Needs Assessments on page 21). By focusing on these priority areas, we will create further opportunity to ensure alignment with cross-cutting workstreams such as those related to Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), Domestic Abuse, Sexual Assault and Abuse and Exploitation.

In addition to this strategy, we will create a bespoke regional delivery plan which sets out the action required to ensure that we are effectively delivering against the strategic priorities, and that all partners and specified authorities are clear on their role in reducing violence across the region.



1. Introduction and Context

1.1 Introduction

Violence is endemic across the country and for some, so commonplace, that there is a real danger of it becoming normalised and accepted as part of our everyday lives. This may be especially true for those that live in predominantly urban areas, such as the West Midlands, where rates of violence are typically higher.

The potential normalisation of violence increases the risk of becoming desensitised to the devastating and far-reaching impact that violence has not only on victims, but also on their friends, families and wider communities. Tragically, we have seen too many fatalities in our region, and as such are acutely aware of the cataclysmic and long-term impact that violence has on us all. Violence is never acceptable, and whilst it can feel that successfully preventing the occurrence of violence is an unsurmountable task, we must remind ourselves that violence is preventable. We already recognise this, because in our region, our unrelenting focus on reducing serious violence amongst children and young people has started to turn the tide; with focused operations against organised crime and work within gang impacted areas showing particular success in reducing rates of serious violence involving our children and young people. Violence with injury where the victim was under 25, has reduced by 12% from December 2022 to November 2023 compared to the same period in 2021/2022.

To successfully tackle violence, a key starting point should be acknowledgement of the fact that it is a complex social issue, with a multiplicity of driving factors and inter-related root causes. As such, tackling violence cannot be the sole responsibility of any one agency, we can't simply "police our way out" of violence, and it cannot be tackled by agencies working in silos. Instead, successful, sustainable approaches to violence prevention and reduction require a collective effort from all agencies, as well as a recognition of the fact that each and every one of us has it in our gift to be part of the solutions we seek.

Furthermore, agencies must collaborate meaningfully with communities and young people to ensure that approaches to violence reduction are tailored to local need. They are after all, our local area experts and are well placed to provide us with valuable, unique insights and perspectives that further enhance our knowledge of the local issues that drive violence.

The West Midlands is a vibrant, diverse area of the UK. Therefore, when adopting whole-community approaches it is imperative to recognise and respond to the differences in lived experience across the region. Approaches to address violence must be intersectional to address the disproportionate impact that violence too frequently has on certain groups.

We should recognise that harm does not only arise from actual acts of violence, but also the fear of it. Fearing and anticipating harm affects the quality of our lives and may impact on the economic and social choices that people make.

In addition to the social costs associated with violence, there is of course the economic burden; the brunt of which is felt by our NHS, the criminal justice system, social care and other sectors such as education. At a time when economic impact is felt even more acutely due to the enduring cost of living crisis currently gripping the nation, it makes absolute economic sense to prioritise tackling this issue, and to re-invest money saved into our communities to bolster their resilience against violence.

We know that there is more that we need to do to reduce violence, and the fear of it in the region. We also recognise that some of the more traditional approaches we have previously adopted to reduce incidents of violence have not been sufficient to respond to the complexity and ever-evolving challenges we face.

Therefore, our strategy sets out an ambitious, innovative plan that has been shaped by the lived experiences of communities, children and young people. It aims to steer towards a collective goal of achieving long-lasting change that makes the region a safe place to live, work and enjoy.

1.2 The issue of violence: A National Context

Incidents of serious violence have increased in England and Wales since 2014. To provide some context, police recorded violence against the person¹ continued to increase to 2.1 million offences in the year ending September 2022, a 21 per cent rise compared with the year ending March 2020, where in contrast, 1.8 million violence against the person offences were recorded.²

For the same reporting period, police recorded that sexual offences rose by 22%; the highest annual figure ever recorded in England and Wales.³

Yet understanding the true nature and scale of criminality and violence nationally is undoubtedly a complex task. It is widely recognised that a sole reliance on police recorded data is unhelpful, only providing us with a picture that is at best, partial.

There is a real and recognised need to increase the visibility of children and young people in official statistics, particularly given the significance and prominence of serious violence amongst children and young people that has been endemic across the country in recent years, to the point that this issue has been declared as a national emergency in official and research reports. (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018; HM Government, 2018; McNeish, Scott, and Ludvigsen, 2018; The Youth Violence Commission, 2018; The Centre for Social Justice, 2018; House of Commons, 2019).

However, it is not just the fragmentation of data sets that obscures and clouds our ability to understand and detect the true breadth and scale of violence nationally, but also the code of silence fuelled by high levels of violence and intimidation that exerts social control in many marginalised and socio-economically deprived communities. This factor is frequently overlooked but is central to impeding the reporting of violent crime and effective engagement with agencies. Therefore, building trust with children, young people and communities must have centrality in our approach to prevent and reduce violence.

1.3 Improving Understanding and Response: The Serious Violence Duty

Challenges continue in our ability to accurately quantify and measure the impact of violence and in response, the government recognised the need to develop a practical approach to facilitate a better understanding and prevent serious violence in all its forms. The Serious Violence Duty (the Duty) was introduced in January 2023, under the Police, Crime and Sentencing and Courts Act (2022), making it incumbent on “specified and required authorities”⁴ to work together to reduce violence within their local communities.

The Duty advocates and adopts a whole systems and multi-agency approach that is place-based and incorporates public health principles.⁵ The statutory guidance provides local areas with a much needed national steer that will result in more effective partnership working to prevent and reduce violence; increased co-production with communities; and improved co-operation in data and intelligence sharing across agencies.

We welcome the introduction of the Serious Violence Duty, and how preparing for its implementation has driven further opportunities for closer collaboration and development of our existing prevention work and strategic priorities.



1.4 Key Principles and Aims

The development of this strategy has been underpinned by the statutory guidance set out by the Serious Violence Duty, and represents an important opportunity to further develop and embed partnership and public health approaches to violence prevention and reduction.⁶

1. Violence against the person is a term used to describe a range of offences that include harassment and common assault to grievous bodily harm and murder.

2. Crime in England and Wales: Year ending September (2022). Office for National Statistics. January 2023.

3. Crime in England and Wales: Year ending September (2022) Office for National Statistics January (2023)

4. Specified and Required authorities are agencies set out by the Serious Violence Duty that have a statutory responsibility within a local government area to collaborate and plan to prevent and reduce serious violence.

5. Public Health England. A guide for community centred approaches for health and wellbeing

6. How prepared are we for The Serious Violence Duty? Hopkins (M), Floyd (K), August 2022.

In addition, this strategy also aims to align with the World Health Organisation's (WHO) 'Public Health' model of violence reduction⁷. Whilst we recognise that frameworks and statutory guidance provide useful direction, most importantly of all, (and in the true spirit of the Duty), this strategy has been written in a way that aims to truly and accurately reflect the lived expertise and unique perspectives of communities, children and young people, that have been impacted in a variety of different ways by violence and/or the fear of it.

This strategy and approach to violence reduction is innovative and ambitious. As earlier outlined, we are acutely aware that more traditional approaches to reduce violence are often limited and unsustainable. It is therefore time to be brave and bold with our approaches.

During the scoping undertaken to develop this strategy, the scale of innovation happening across the region became apparent, along with evidence of how working more collaboratively is making a difference. The West Midlands is leading the way on a national pilot focused deterrence programme - CIRV (Community Initiative to Reduce Violence) and delivering and commissioning a range of training and interventions to improve the identification and responses to violence across the system.



This strategy has also been designed to be a live document which will be regularly reviewed in partnership with agencies, children, young people and communities, to ensure that it is accurate and relevant to both the regional landscape and the national picture as they both evolve.

Given the complexity of the issues we face, we recognise that making a sustainable impact requires considerable investment and time. Therefore, this strategy sets out our three year vision, spanning from 2023-2026.

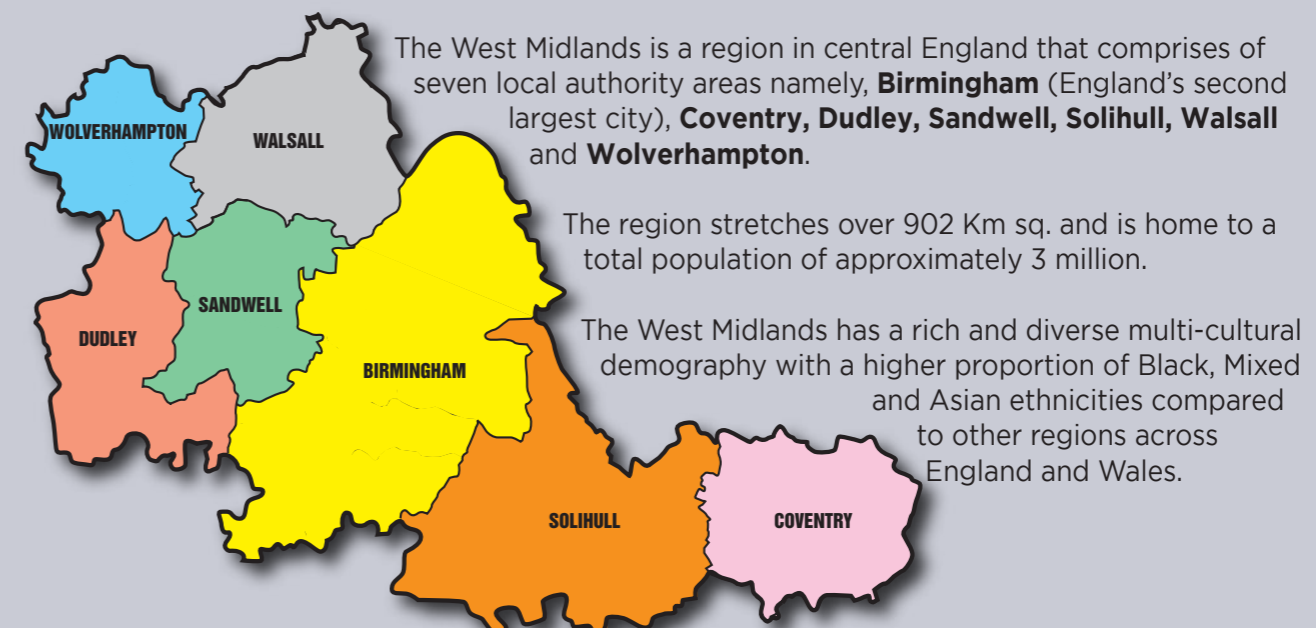
⁷ The World Health Organization (2017) defines a public health approach to reducing violence as one that: 'Seeks to improve the health and safety of all individuals by addressing underlying risk factors that increase the likelihood that an individual will become a victim or a perpetrator of violence. Producing a strategy for the West Midlands is complex due to the size and scale of the region. The seven local authority areas have each produced a strategic needs assessment which provides a more detailed local understanding of violence. The seven assessments have informed the priorities in this strategy, recognising that shared priorities need regional leadership and solutions for consistency and efficiencies, whilst other more local nuanced challenges require a local response.

1.5 Strategic Priorities

Our strategy is designed around five key strategic priorities that were formed in collaboration and consultation with valued partners and stakeholders. These key areas for focus will be reviewed at least annually and are summarised below. Each of our five priorities will form a separate workstream and will be underpinned by a clear workplan.

- 1 Influence systems to deliver prevention across the life-course.
- 2 Development of a sustainable, community and youth led approach to violence reduction.
- 3 Building regional and local partnerships that enhance collaboration and innovation.
- 4 Development of a West Midlands wide movement that aims for a violence free region.
- 5 Influence delivery of evidence-based programmes in educational settings.

1.6 The West Midlands: Context and Demography



Approximately 13% of the West Midlands population do not speak English as their first language.

One of the great strengths of the West Midlands is its young population. In the 2021 Census, 34% of the population of the West Midlands police force area was under 25. The West Midlands Police Force area has the greatest proportion of under 25 out of all of the police force areas in England and Wales.

Whilst there are pockets of rurality in and around the West Midlands, the region is predominantly characterised by expansive urbanisation and urban regeneration which has continued at pace since the West Midlands became the centre of manufacturing during the industrial revolution. Yet despite the rapid regeneration and urban development, deprivation in the West Midlands is high, with 34% of our localities falling well within the classification of the most deprived areas of the country.

We face a number of social and economic challenges in our region, many of which have been exacerbated further by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing cost of living crisis that is further widening the gap for those living in the most disadvantaged places.

Some of the challenges that are most acute include (but are not limited to):

- High levels of unemployment
- Low educational attainment
- High levels of homelessness, poor and over-crowded housing

In recent years, the numbers of children entering the care system have increased, along with increasing rates of school exclusion and non-attendance. Factors that are often linked with the exploitation and harm of children and young people.

From March 2018 to March 2022, the rate of children entering the care system in the West Midlands has increased from 82 per 100,000 to 86 per 100,000.

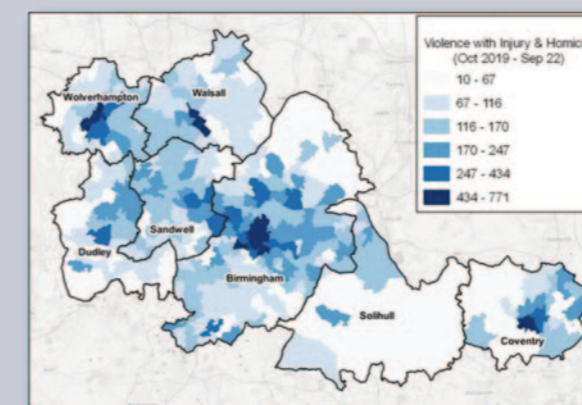
School exclusions across state funded schools in the West Midlands increased from 0.07% in 2020-21 to 0.11% in 2021-22. However, it should be noted that schools were closed for part of 2021-22 due to the Coronavirus pandemic and the rate of exclusions in 2021-22 was lower than 0.13% in 2018-19.

Pupil absences in state funded schools across the West Midlands have increased from 4.8% in 2018-19 to 7.7% in 2021-22.

Within the West Midlands, there are clear links between violence, criminality, victimisation and deprivation. Analysis of data indicates that whilst our victims are equally dispersed across the region, those that have committed acts of violence are more likely to come from our hotspot areas, where deprivation and marginalisation are most entrenched.⁸

Figure 1: Regional Map showing concentration of Violence with Injury offences and Homicide (Oct2019-Sept 22)

Source: Wolverhampton SNA 2023



1.7 What violence looks like in our region

There were almost 7,500 serious youth violence offences recorded across the West Midlands in the past 12 months, an overall decrease of almost 900 offences (10.6%).

All Local Authorities (with the exception of Sandwell) have seen a decrease.

The largest percentage decreases were seen in Wolverhampton (18%) and Dudley (16%). Sandwell experienced a very small increase of four offences rising from 880 to 884 offences (+0.5%).

Local Authority	Dec 2021 to Nov 2022	Dec 2022 to Nov 2023	Difference	Difference %
Birmingham	3,766	3,319	-447	-11.9
Coventry	908	860	-48	-5.3
Dudley	768	648	-120	-15.6
Sandwell	880	884	4	0.5
Solihull	470	423	-47	-10.0
Walsall	790	701	-89	-11.3
Wolverhampton	792	650	-142	-17.9
West Midlands	8,374	7,485	-889	-10.6

Birmingham, Solihull and Walsall all saw decreases of 10% or more. Across the West Midlands the rate is 7.7 offences per thousand residents aged under 25.

Birmingham has the highest rate with 8 offences per thousand residents aged under 25. Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton also have above West Midlands rates.

Coventry and Dudley have rates below that of the whole West Midlands. Solihull has the lowest rate with 6.8 offences per thousand residents aged under 25.

⁸ Serious Youth Violence (WMP data - victim aged under 25 - non-domestic abuse related offences or crimes against the state i.e. assault of police officer)



1.8 Victim Profile

Our data tells us that in the West Midlands, victims of violent crime are most likely to be white, male and aged between 15-24. However, black boys and young males are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system and in school exclusion data. This does not mean that people of any age group from black or minority ethnic backgrounds are more likely to commit violence, but rather indicates a need to focus on addressing inequality and over-representation.

Between **December 2021** and **November 2023** there were **37 fatal stabbings** across the West Midlands Police force area; **33 of these were male victims** and **4 female victims**. There were **12 victims aged under 25**.

In total, 29 defendants were identified for 10 of these offences; the majority were male. 19 defendants were aged under 25.

1.9 Exploitation: A driver of violence

Exploitation, particularly in the context of serious violence, is a complex issue that has serious and harmful consequences for communities within the West Midlands. At its core, exploitation is abuse. It refers to the act of targeting vulnerability for another's personal gain, often resulting in serious harm or disadvantage to those who are exploited. The regional Missing and Exploitation Board and the regional Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Board bring partners together, to share best practice and to develop innovative and different ways of working, to more effectively tackle exploitation and abuse.

The organised crime methods that are used target vulnerability, particularly children who are then coerced into harmful, illegal, and violent activities. Exploitation in the West Midlands is closely linked to serious violence, manifesting in several forms of criminal typologies including:

- 1. Local Drug Supply** - Involves individuals being coerced into local distribution of illegal drugs.
- 2. County Lines** - Refers to the exploitation of vulnerable people by criminal networks to move, and sell drugs across the UK.
- 3. Sexual Violence and Child Sexual Exploitation** - Includes forcing individuals into sexual activities against their will. Sexual exploitation affects both boys and girls, it is linked with other forms of violence. Victims face multiple types of exploitation concurrently.
- 4. Storing Weapons** - Involves exploiting individuals to store firearms or other weapons that have been used in violence.
- 5. Home Invasion** (sometimes referred to as cuckooing) - This is when criminals take over the home of a vulnerable person to support drugs distribution.
- 6. Money Mules/ Laundering** - Individuals being used to launder money to fund the proceeds of crime. West Midlands Police force areas saw nearly 3,000 cases between January and September 2022, which held intelligence indicative of money mule behavior.
- 7. Organised Car Theft:** Involves the exploitation of individuals in stealing vehicles or parts for organised crime.
- 8. Urban Street Gangs and Organised Crime Gangs** - Young people are often exploited into gang activities, which can include a range of illegal and violent acts.

Perpetrators of exploitation may subject children, young people and vulnerable adults to multiple forms of abuse at the same time, using cruel and violent treatment to force victims to take part in activities that they have no choice to say no to. The harm and abuse they suffer as a result of exploitation lead to physical, emotional harm, at the detriment of their physical and mental health, education, and moral and social development which are all common drivers of violence.

County Lines

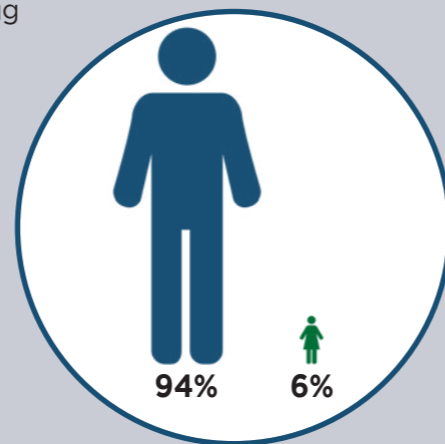
"County Lines" is a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas within the UK, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other (social media) form of "Deal Line". (Home Office, 2023)

The West Midlands is one of the top 5 exporting areas of county lines that are linked to smaller towns and rural areas. The county lines model presents a troubling trend in the West Midlands, bringing with them increased violence and crime. This not only affects the areas where these organised networks are based, but also significantly impacts smaller communities into which they expand.

In December 2023, the County Lines Strategic Performance Dashboard stated that within the West Midlands Police Force area, Birmingham has the highest volume of identified County Lines, followed by Wolverhampton and Coventry. Areas of the West Midlands may fluctuate month to month however, Birmingham consistently remains the largest exporter of County Lines. The exporting lines from the West Midlands reach much of the UK.

Whilst there are fluctuations in levels of county lines activity month by month, there is no identifiable seasonal trend. Spikes in detection of county lines activity are largely attributable to intensification in policing activity and focused operations aimed at targeting serious organised crime and drug distribution.

Gender: Between 2019 and 2022, 94% of those entrenched in county lines activity were male compared with just 6% of females. However, the disproportionate gender split is perhaps indicative of under identification of females who are exploited via county lines methodology.



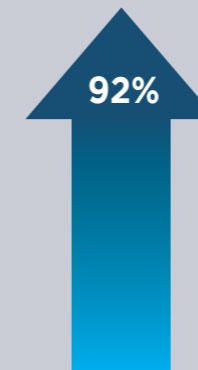
Age: The youngest child identified as a victim of county lines exploitation was aged 8 years old.

Ethnicity: There is significant and concerning disparity in the proportion of black people exploited via county Lines when compared with the size of the black population in the West Midlands.

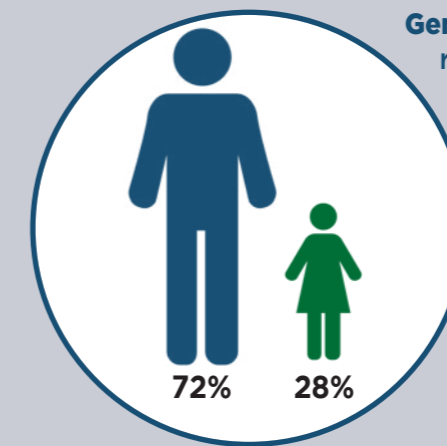
Between 2019-2022, **38%** of those identified as being entrenched in county lines activity were black, compared to just **8%** of the general population. **This equates to a fivefold disproportionality.**

Ethnicity is not a criminogenic factor, but ethnic disparity is however the result of a complex set of interconnecting factors such as structural inequality, social disadvantage and adultification of black children which culminates in those from black backgrounds being over-represented at every point of the criminal justice system.⁹ This strategy seeks to ensure that this over representation and disproportionality is understood, recognised and addressed.

The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is a key tool that is used for identifying victims of Modern Slavery, Human Trafficking and Exploitation. It plays a crucial role in referring victims to suitable support services, ensuring their protection and recovery”.



NRM: From Quarter 4 (Jan-March) 2018/19 to Quarter 1 (April-June) of 2023/24, numbers of NRM referrals made across the West Midlands for all exploitation typologies rose by **92%**.



Gender: Males accounted for 72% of referrals, and females 28%

Age: Those referred to the NRM were most commonly children aged 15, 16 and 17 years

Age: 15, 16 & 17 year old children account for 33% of those identified as entrenched in county lines activity between 2019-22

9. Understanding ethnic disparities in involvement in crime - a limited scope rapid evidence review. Professor C. Scott (et al.) April 2021

2. Understanding and Defining Violence

Definitions

The Serious Violence Duty does not define violence but instead states that:

“Specified authorities will need to work together to identify the kinds of serious violence that occurs in their areas as far as possible.”

Therefore, to effectively develop sustainable violence reduction approaches, the first step needs to be establishing a regional consensus on how we define violence and conceptualise the issue.

As a region, we refer to **World Health Organisation (WHO)** definition of violence that recognises the many categories of violence that take place, how that violence may take many different forms, and occur in a variety of different contexts:

“The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in, or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation” - WHO

This definition acknowledges how it is both the fear and threat of violence as well as actual violent acts that are harmful. Therefore, our attempts to reduce and tackle violence must take into consideration the pertinence of perception, which can increase public fear and anxiety; fear and anxiety which may fuel violence by culminating in behaviours such as carrying weapons.

Figure 10*: Typologies of violence (adapted from The World Health Organisation)



2.1 Violence : Driving Factors

Despite the pervasive nature of violence both globally and nationally, it remains an issue that is commonly misunderstood. Violence may often appear as spontaneous, unplanned and as a response to provocation, yet this is a too-narrow view. Violence is often the reaction to cumulative tensions, frustrations and stress that simmer and build over time.

There is a growing academic evidence-base that provides valuable insights into the multiplicity of complex and often entwining factors that drive violence. It is imperative that this evidence-base is used and referenced in violence prevention approaches, and that practitioners are supported to recognise the complex interplay between individuals, relationships, communities, and societal factors that put people at risk of violence or protects them from experiencing it (and perpetrating harm).

“Violence is a complex social, economic, and political problem, its resolution requires strategies integrated throughout affected communities and nations, and based on a conceptual framework that brings a holistic understanding of the causes and impacts of violence and possible interventions for reducing it.”
(Moser, C et al 2021)

Common drivers of violence that may increase the likelihood of victimisation and/or perpetration are outlined below:

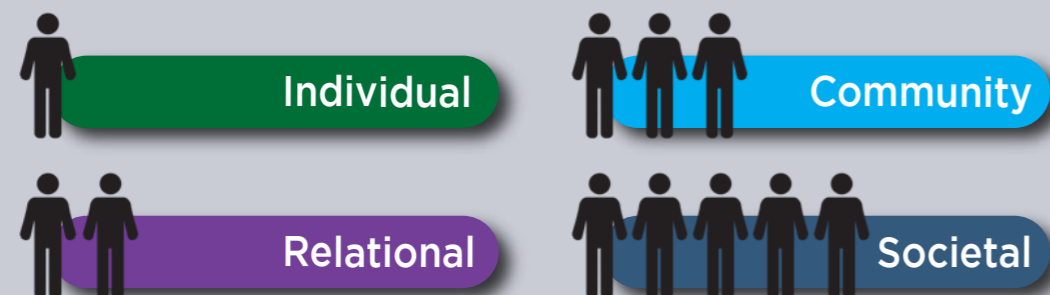


Figure 11: An ecological framework (adapted from World Health Organization, 2020; drawing on Irwin-Rogers et al., 2020b and Currie, 2016)



2.2 Local Picture

Each Local Authority area has produced a strategic needs assessment which provides a detailed picture of their local violence trends, challenges and priorities. These can be found on the following links:

Birmingham
Coventry
Solihull
Wolverhampton
Walsall
Sandwell
Dudley

2.3 Regional Drivers

Detailed analysis of the regional strategic needs assessments clearly identified drivers of violence and harm that are common across the region. Understanding these factors has further informed our strategic areas of focus. Our most prevalent regional drivers of violence are outlined below:

School Exclusion/Absence

Substance Misuse

Gender and Ethnicity

Deprivation

Source: Crest Advisory. A review of Community Safety Partnerships SNAs in the West Midlands (2023).

School Exclusion and Absence

There is clear evidence of links between exclusion from education, persistent absenteeism and youth violence amongst children and young people. The Commission on Young Lives produced a thematic report: **Inclusion not exclusion** in April 2022. It looks at how thousands of vulnerable children are falling through gaps in the education system, putting them at risk not only of low attainment but also serious violence, county lines, criminal exploitation, grooming and harm. It calls for a new era of incentivising all schools to become more inclusive and makes a series of recommendations for how schools can be supported to divert vulnerable teenagers away from crime and exploitation and enable them to thrive.

The report highlights the disadvantages and dangers that falling out of school can have on some young people and highlights the scale of the challenge facing the education system, including:

- The high number of children in England excluded from school.
- Thousands of children who are persistently absent from school.
- Alternative Provision that is failing to provide many children with a good education or to keep them safe.
- A Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) system that is not meeting the needs of many vulnerable children.
- A school inspections system that does not value inclusion and can offer perverse incentives for some schools to remove children from their school roll.
- The disproportionate number of Black children who are not attending school or are excluded from school.

Substance Misuse

Alcohol and/or drugs are linked to a substantial proportion of violent offences committed regionally.

Children's Social Care and Youth Justice Teams also commonly identify that parental drug and alcohol misuse features frequently in the lives of the children they support.



We know there is more work to do across the region to ensure that approaches to violence prevention and reduction acknowledges the central role that alcohol and drugs play in fuelling violence and harm.

Gender and Ethnicity

Victims and suspects of serious violence locally are most frequently male, under the age of 25 and white.

However, minority ethnic groups are consistently over-represented in both victim and perpetrator profiles. We

recognise a need to develop a more intersectional approach to violence reduction, and to support approaches to reduce structural and societal inequalities that can drive violence whilst addressing factors such as adultification and professional bias.

Deprivation

There is a clear link between levels of deprivation and levels of serious violence.

Drivers of violence do not exist in isolation but rather operate often in tandem with each other. As such, there is a need to develop and embed approaches that avoid short-term and individual interventions, instead opting to adopt a public health approach that is focused on complex, multiple, upstream population-level actions and interventions.¹⁰

2.4 Violence : Impacts and consequences

The wide-ranging impact that violence has on individual, community and societal levels must also be understood in order to implement effective preventative approaches that both prevent and reduce the transmission of violence.

Even when victims have been well supported and safeguarded, the impact of the violence may affect them across their life-course, changing the way they perceive and view the world around them.

Being a victim of violence may also impact how we live our lives. For example, they may spend less time in places and spaces outside of their home, limiting social, educative and employment opportunities. For those that have been impacted by violence in a domestic context, victims may experience enduring economic hardship and isolation.

Poly-victimisation: Understanding cumulative harm

Whilst violence may have limited occurrence in the lives of some, for others, their exposure to violent crime types may be frequent. For too many, exposure and experience of violence is not a rarity. This may be especially the case for those that live in some of the most deprived areas of our region, as inequalities such as childhood adversity, substance misuse and poverty may increase the prevalence of violence in both familial and extra-familial contexts.

Understanding the cumulative harm that consequently occurs when violence takes place on multiple occasions in various environments is crucial. The reason being that poly-victimisation can lead to the future perpetration of violence.

This is already well-evidenced in the West Midlands thanks to the commitment to commission ground-breaking research such as the **Punishing Abuse Report** - one of the most wide-ranging contemporary studies ever conducted on the lives of children in the Criminal Justice system in this country.

This report considered the lives of 80 West Midlands children and young people and illuminated the impact and influence that early childhood adversity, abuse and exposure to violence had on their offending behaviour.

Therefore, trauma-informed, preventative programmes that prevent the occurrence of childhood adversity in all its forms must be at the heart of our approach to reduce violence, and life-course prevention is a central focus of our strategy.

Perpetration

There are long-term consequences for those that perpetrate violence, many of whom have been victims themselves, with the impact of criminal sanctions potentially resonating across the life-course. Criminal records can limit the opportunity for people with convictions to live pro-social lives free from criminality and violence, trapping them in positions of disadvantage that in turn, increases the propensity of recidivism.

This strategy seeks to ensure that those who have offended receive the support that they need to enable them to live healthy lives that are free from crime and offending.

Witnesses and by-standers

The traumatic impact of violence is not felt solely by direct victims, but has a ripple effect on the families, friends and the communities where violence occurs.

Thought must also be given to those that witness violence for example children who are exposed to acts of violence, witness domestic abuse, or observe child-on-child violence in locations where they should be safe from harm, such as schools.

They too are victims and we are committed to ensuring that they have access to timely support and intervention.

“His death (16-year-old victim of knife crime) rocked the school and the entire community to the core.”

Statement from a Knife Crime Thematic Review in Wolverhampton in November 2022.

“I think me being stabbed had a bigger effect on my little brother than it did me as he watched it all. I feel a lot of guilt about that and have had to make sure that he was okay. I was worried for a while that they (the perpetrators of the attack) would come after him. So, we had to move away for a bit.” Statement from a Knife Crime Thematic Review in Wolverhampton in November 2022.

Whilst a key priority of this strategy is rightly focused on prevention, continued efforts are also required to ensure that clear plans and partnership working is in place to respond to the wider impact of violence in the aftermath of serious incidents. We will continue to support consistent and effective safety planning for siblings, peers, and family members, and simultaneously provide further assurances for impacted schools and communities to address fear and feelings of unsafety that can manifest in future acts of violence.

Vicarious trauma and workforce capacity

It is also important that support is available to professionals who work tirelessly to tackle violence within communities. We need to ensure that they are buffered from the effects of vicarious trauma associated with their work. We will achieve this by further development of the Trauma Informed Coalition, the Regional Trauma Informed Learning and Development Framework and Community of Practice, to enable organisations to better support their workforce. We will also invest in key training to support local violence prevention and reduction boards to better equip frontline workforces to deliver violence prevention as business as usual.

3. Innovation and Change

3.1 Priorities and Principles

The strategy has identified five priority areas. Each priority has a specific workstream.

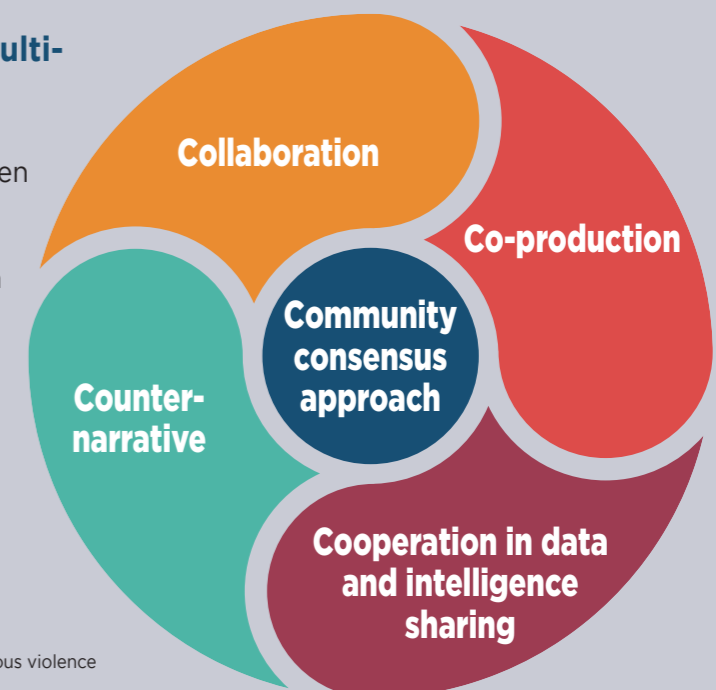
The workstreams have been carefully considered to ensure that the actions within them align with the key principles of a public health approach to violence reduction and as such are underpinned by the following principles:

3.2 Key Principles

- 1. Primary Prevention:** Prevent violence before it occurs by addressing societal causes and structural inequalities that are common drivers of violence. Primary prevention is a thread that runs throughout all five workstreams.
- 2. Secondary Prevention:** Provide early and targeted support where violence is happening and contain the transmission, escalation and re-occurrence of violence.
- 3. Tertiary Prevention:** Supporting people to live lives free from violence via response, treatment and rehabilitation. Providing holistic support to reduce recidivism.

3.3 The 5Cs: a place-based multi-agency approach to serious violence prevention

The five strategic priorities have been developed to align with the “5 Cs” approach to violence prevention which supports the implementation of a robust violence reduction approach across the entire life-course.



Source: A whole-system multi-agency approach to serious violence prevention, HM Government (2019)

3.4 Priorities

1 Priority 1 - Prevention across the life-course

- **Develop a greater understanding of the factors that drive violence in the region**
- **Develop consistent screening and risk assessment processes, referral pathways and evidence-based programmes that effectively identify and respond to vulnerability and harm**
- **Increase focus on vulnerable groups such as transitional cohorts (18-25-year olds) and those disproportionately impacted by violence**
- **Influence universal services and ensure that they are aware of the critical role they play in violence prevention**
- **Develop commissioning frameworks that encourage co-production, joint commissioning and sustainable funding**

Develop a greater understanding of the factors that drive violence in the region

We know that violence is preventable, but to prevent violence effectively we must first better understand the local and regional drivers of violence. Annual review of the local strategic needs assessments will allow us to identify and respond to local and regional patterns and trends, and ultimately enable us to develop evidenced-based programmes and tailor our approach. This knowledge and evidence base also enables us to robustly develop our prevention profiles, and respond in ways that are proactive and preventative as opposed to merely responding to violence when it occurs.

Develop consistent screening and risk assessment processes, referral pathways and evidence-based programmes that effectively identify and respond to vulnerability and harm

In order to achieve long term change, we need to ensure that our violence reduction approach is consistent and sustained. We will focus on supporting practitioners at all levels and from across all sectors to understand their role in identifying and reducing harm from violence. This support will include training, and the provision of toolkits and guidance.

We will work across regional partnerships to streamline and improve screening and risk assessment processes for children and young people in order to avoid duplication, and ensure that practitioners can provide effective interventions at the earliest possible opportunity to meet the complex, often multi-layered needs of children and young people. The risk to and from children and young people in relation to violence, is often blurred by the label applied to them, it is important that they are treated as children first and foremost. We will work to increase the understanding of contextual safeguarding and the importance of broader risk and need assessment tools.

Increase focus on vulnerable groups such as transitional cohorts (18-25-year olds) and those disproportionately impacted by violence

There is a need to ensure that robust transition arrangements are in place for vulnerable young people turning 18 who require continued support and protection. We need to strengthen pathways and services for those who are disproportionately represented in victim and perpetrator profiles. Regionally, there is a fragmented approach to transition, and too many children and young people fall through system gaps as they approach adulthood. For some, this may increase the risk of them becoming a victim and/or perpetrator of violence.

Support for individuals who are transitioning back into community contexts from the secure estate, is often fragmented. This means that those highly vulnerable individuals are unaware of where they can access support within their communities, which undermines the success of resettlement. These are factors which can lead to homelessness, unemployment and further incidents of violence. Additional support is required to prevent re-offending by supporting those that have served custodial sentences to re-connect with their communities. We will ensure that effective resettlement interventions and those aimed at reducing reoffending are in place and that children and young people have an opportunity to access the right support and opportunities.

Influence universal services and ensure that they are aware of the critical role they play in violence prevention

There are key opportunities across the system to provide effective preventative interventions that can lead to improved outcomes for children and young people. There is a role that every professional can play in violence prevention and reduction and we will work to support the children and young people's workforce to recognise and integrate violence prevention as part of their daily practice.

We will work with key settings where universal prevention can be the most effective and cost-efficient, for example, schools, to shape consistent, long-term plans that embed prevention in their settings. Developing an understanding of trauma and trauma informed practice will form a key part of this work.

We will pilot new interventions, robustly evaluating their effectiveness and upscaling those that demonstrate promising outcomes. We will be bold and innovative and willing to explore new ideas in the pursuit of meeting the needs of children, young people and communities. We will continue to pilot interventions that address gaps in the current system, for example, those that address the needs of children and young people impacted by parental imprisonment.

We will continue to pilot approaches in early years settings, demonstrating the importance of maximising the earliest possible opportunities to deliver meaningful violence prevention.



Develop commissioning frameworks that encourage co-production, joint commissioning and sustainable funding

We will continue to produce robust evaluations and evidence of what works in violence prevention and reduction to support regional and local commissioning. We will also continue to work with each local partnership in the region to explore joint and co-commissioning opportunities and ensure that duplication is avoided and funding is maximised to meet the needs of communities. In the context of consistent reductions in funding for public services and the financial difficulties experienced by some local authorities, drawing together key sources of investment in violence prevention and reduction is more important than ever. Where possible, we will work with commissioners to identify opportunities to integrate our strategic approaches to prevention, thereby maximising interventions and activity.

2 Priority 2 - Development of a sustainable community and youth led approach to violence reduction

- Work alongside community leaders to build trust between services and our most disadvantaged communities
- Embed lived-experience within services to promote better engagement
- Develop a community and youth led approach to violence reduction

Work alongside community leaders to build trust between services and our most disadvantaged communities

Community Leaders across the West Midlands are already playing a critical role in violence prevention and reduction, and support communities when incidents occur. The VRP will connect with and support leaders across the region to meet the bespoke needs present in their community and provide an opportunity to become part of the regional Community Advisory Group, which will be developed in 2024, to ensure that communities have a leadership role in preventing violence alongside other key partners.

The work of the West Midlands Faith Alliance has been pivotal in equipping, enabling and empowering communities of all faiths to play a role in preventing violence. The three-year Faith Alliance Strategy was launched in November 2023 and provides a robust platform to build knowledge and capacity across faith settings to prevent violence and to support the active role of faith communities in the aftermath of serious incidents. We will continue to grow the membership of the Faith Alliance, uniting more people together to prevent and reduce violence across the region. The role of community leaders will help bridge the divide between partnerships and some of the most marginalised communities where there are often low levels of trust with statutory services.



Embed lived-experience within services to promote better engagement

We recognise the value and importance of lived experience and working with those with direct experience of the complex issues often related to criminality and violence, supports us to develop our understanding of factors that can prevent successful and meaningful engagement.

Local pilot projects focused on community co-production have demonstrated the efficacy of embedding lived experience practitioners within statutory services. For example, Navigators based in hospital accident and emergency departments and custody settings. We will continue to support and encourage the development of effective and safe lived experience led interventions.

Develop a community and youth led approach to violence reduction

Whilst we have already carried out extensive consultation with communities, children and young people, we understand that consultation can appear tokenistic if those that have engaged cannot see how their views have shaped our work and directed our focus. Therefore, we aim to move from consultation to adopt a model of true co-production. We will achieve this by developing a West Midlands Violence Reduction Partnership Community Engagement Strategy that ensures that we are working in equal, reciprocal partnership with children, young people and communities. We will also work alongside young people and communities to develop a youth-led counter-narrative to violence which will form the basis of a robust campaign against violence in the West Midlands in 2024 and 2025.

Continue to develop sport as a violence reduction intervention

Recognising the critical role sport can play in the lives of children and young people, we will continue to embed the West Midlands Sport and Violence Reduction strategy by:

- Growing the number of high-quality sport providers in the West Midlands most deprived and vulnerable communities which contribute to the prevention of violence.
- Enhancing the confidence, competence and capacity of the sport workforce to ensure high quality delivery which is pro-social in its approach and embeds the principles of trauma informed practice.
- Increasing the number of vulnerable children & young people meaningfully, and successfully, referred into sport through evidence-based, multi-agency referral pathways.
- And in turn developing and growing the evidence base for sport as a violence reduction intervention.



3 Priority 3 - Building closer regional partnerships that supports innovation

- Drive improvement in data sharing (including cross border data sharing with neighbouring regions and across administrative borders)
- Understanding and responding to disproportionality
- Improved data sharing across partnerships with a greater emphasis on the use of health data
- Development of a range of dashboards and directories to connect people to activities and support/services

Drive improvement in data sharing (including cross border data sharing with neighbouring regions and across administrative borders)

Data and intelligence is essential to enable our partnerships to collaboratively plan strategic, tactical and operational responses that are effective in both preventing and responding to violence. We have a wealth of data in our region, but accept that the way we share that data is often fragmented, preventing us from having a full and detailed picture of the constantly evolving and dynamic regional landscape.



To tackle this issue, we have developed a **West Midlands VRP Data Framework** that supports the fluidity of data sharing across the region. This framework will assist with overcoming barriers that impede data sharing by introducing clear governance arrangements and data sharing agreements, whilst also building on best practice and learning from other colleagues in this arena. The data framework will also support the identification of gaps in data insights and the data types needed to enable us to develop our violence reduction approach in a way that is effective and purposeful.

Understanding and responding to disproportionality

Local needs assessments provide an opportunity to understand the individuals and places across the region disproportionately affected by violence. We will improve the data that is used to develop strategic needs assessments in order that we do not over-rely on crime data. We must work together as a partnership to fully understand and address the factors influencing disproportionality. It is important that we work together to ensure that local systems and provision are equipped to effectively identify and respond in a culturally competent way to prevent and reduce violence. We will also provide trauma informed and anti-racist practice training, alongside key training on the impact of gender on violence, throughout 2024 and 2025.



Improved data sharing across partnerships with a greater emphasis on the use of health data

The collation of health data is a priority area of focus. Rates of injury and hospital admission provides an understanding of the impact of violence at a regional level and further supports to identify geographical “hotspots” (areas where violence is occurring most frequently) as well as supporting the identification of cohorts who are at higher risk of serious violence. Our aspiration is to extend data collection across a range of health settings including primary care and mental health, to further develop our understanding of the drivers and disparities that are frequently linked to violence. This data will support us to develop effective violence prevention programmes that are successful in reducing vulnerability and inequalities that are often pre-cursors of violence, across the life-course.

Development of a range of dashboards and directories to connect people to activities and support/services

The economic strain experienced by many in our region is translating into lack of hope. For some of our children and young people they see that the only way to survive financially is via illegal means which is often entwined with exploitation and violence. As such, we have to create hope via opportunity, and we see one way of achieving this is by ensuring that professionals have a clear and robust understanding of activities, groups and services to meet practical, social and emotional needs that affect health and wellbeing and support children and young people to thrive.

The third sector provides a vast range of support and interventions in the region that support the most vulnerable and diverts children and young people away from criminality and harm. Yet too many professionals, communities and young people do not know what is available in their local areas or how the provision available will benefit them. There is also work to do to ensure that service provision and support is accessible in every part of the region and is culturally competent in our most diverse areas. **The Coventry and Warwickshire Social Prescribing for Children and Young People Project** provides a really good example of how we want to develop this approach more broadly across the region.

4 Priority 4 - Development of a West Midlands wide movement that aims for a violence free region

- **Development of a clear counter-narrative that tackles the fear of violence in the region**
- **Using social media for good - creative use of social media to promote positive messaging and improve the interface between communities and services**
- **Further development of trauma informed approaches that promote a better understanding of our approach to intersectional trauma**

Development of a clear counter-narrative that tackles the fear of violence in the region

Fear of violence is a problem for too many children, young people and communities, and everyone in the region deserves to be safe and to feel safe. As a result, our approach is simultaneously centred on reducing the fear of harm as well as actual harm. This is vital, given that we know how the fear and anticipation of threat and violence can lead to behaviours such as weapon carrying that may manifest in actual harm being caused.

Whilst we do not minimise the effect that violence has on communities, there exists some disparity around actual levels of violence in localities and the fear of being subjected to harm. To tackle this, we will create a strong, community and youth led counter-narrative to promote and foster feelings of safety and assurance, with the aim of reducing weapons carrying and reducing fear. This will be widely accessible through a campaign that will be rolled out in 2024 and 2025 across the region. We will be accountable for engagement with the campaign and for connecting children and young people into a West Midlands wide movement that aims for a violence free region. The developing Youth Assembly, working together with established children and young people forums across the region, will provide a hub and bespoke model that engages as many children and young people as possible to become upstanders in violence prevention.

Using social media for good - creative use of social media to promote positive messaging and improve the interface between communities and services

Although social media is a clear driver of violence and a trigger of fear, as highlighted in the **Children Violence and Vulnerability Report 2023** produced by the Youth Endowment Fund, it is here to stay. Therefore, in alignment with our counter-narrative work, we aim to seize the opportunity that social media provides to engage and communicate virtually with communities, children and young people. Using platforms such as TikTok and Instagram will allow us to widely disseminate our carefully constructed counter-narrative, and engage proactively with communities in the aftermath of violent incidents.

Given the availability and easy access of violent content that depicts acts such as weapon carrying, child-on-child violence and serious youth violence, the role that social media has in fuelling and feeding into the contagious cycle of violence that is so difficult to intercept, should not be overlooked nor underestimated. Social media may also play a role in the normalisation and de-sensitisation of violence, given that sexually explicit, racist, misogynistic and violent content is more accessible than ever before.

Practitioners commonly feel that their understanding of the digital landscape is lacking and this knowledge gap is exacerbated by the way the world of social media changes at lightning speed. Therefore, this strategy seeks to provide practitioners across all sectors with training and practical support to ensure that they have the knowledge, confidence and competence to recognise and respond to the harms that are linked with social media.

Social media is also an important vehicle in supporting us to raise awareness of the work that we are doing in the region, to promote service availability, and to provide communities, children and young people with a virtual interface with organisations such as the police. The potential social media has in enabling us to better connect in a relational way with communities should not be underestimated. Now is the time to harness that power and use social media to propel positive change.

Further development of trauma informed approaches that promote a better understanding of our approach to intersectional trauma

To achieve our ambition of a violence-free region, we need to provide better support to those that are disproportionately represented in victim and perpetrator profiles. Whilst we have already commenced on a journey to become trauma-informed across the region, now is the time to widen our understanding of trauma and adversity, looking beyond childhood adversity to understand trauma that is intersectional.

This approach is imperative to enable us to build trust in communities where it is absent, commission and develop culturally competent service provision, and to understand the factors that prevent effective engagement. We will continue to support the West Midlands Trauma Informed Coalition and promote the use of the Trauma Informed Learning and Development Framework to further develop regional understanding of the concept of intersectionality and how factors such as gender, sexuality, poverty and race intersect with oppression, inequality and violence.



5 Priority 5 - Upscale delivery of evidence - based programmes in schools

- Provide greater consistency and support by developing violence reduction toolkits for education
- Provide access to programmes that support a generational shift in attitudes to violence
- Promote the role that trauma informed practice can play in reducing school exclusions and school non-attendance that are frequently linked to violence



“Bullying is a massive problem. I know about one kid who was quiet and that but he got so bullied and the teachers didn’t stop it and so he ended up carrying this massive Rambo knife and got chucked out in the end.”

“If I got bullied I would just get in with a gang - I think loads of kids do that you know so that you don’t get hurt ‘cause teachers can’t do much after school”

“I think school is much harder if you are a girl in a way because of the way boys behave to you and yeah I laugh it off but it does make you feel unsafe and not want to go school.”

Provide greater consistency and support by developing violence reduction toolkits for education

Education is at the heart of our violence prevention approach and as such, our schools and education settings are well placed to inform children and young people about issues such as knife crime, exploitation, gangs and violence against women and girls (VAWG).

The complexity of children's lives is often apparent in schools and classrooms. Some of the local strategic needs assessments identified how increases in violence in school settings have been observed and the impact that this has on educational attainment, mental health and wellbeing and school attendance – factors that are often inter-related. In addition, we know that rates of exclusion are consistently higher in schools located in the most deprived communities, where higher rates of violence are also observed. Some of the children and young people consulted for the purpose of developing this strategy reflected candidly about their school experiences and the impact that incidents at school (such as bullying, physical and sexual violence) had on them:

We will produce sustainable resources to guide and support the children and young people's workforce to embed violence prevention and reduction approaches within their daily practice. The toolkits will focus on contextual safeguarding and maximising inclusive approaches in education and provide accessible guidance that can be practically integrated into settings. They will be co-produced with education colleagues.

This strategy aims to provide additional support for schools that creates school environments that are trauma-informed and therefore more inclusive and culturally competent, with the aim of reducing exclusions that are in certain parts of our region, disproportionately impacting those with the most complex needs and those from black and ethnic minority backgrounds.

The toolkit will aim to prevent and reduce all forms of violence including violence against women and girls (VAWG), by giving educational settings the knowledge and resources they need to respond to sensitive and complex issues such as sexual harassment and harmful sexual behaviour, and achieve cultural change within school environments. The toolkit will also provide a template for prevention planning across the academic year, in order to avoid reactive and short-term responses to violence in favour of effective and well-embedded long-term prevention.

Provide access to programmes that support a generational shift in attitudes to violence

External providers and third-sector organisations play a hugely important role in supporting children and young people's violence reduction education. However, whilst this support is equally valued by educational settings and pupils, the commissioning and delivery of programs is variable. Consequently, there is inequity and variation in the preventative education being received. We will therefore provide evidence based primary prevention programs that are accessible to all education settings across the region. We will promote the use of academic-year

long prevention planning bespoke to individual education settings, and a move away from reactionary, short-term responses to violence and the risk factors that make violence more likely.

Promote the role that trauma informed practice can play in reducing school exclusions and school non-attendance that are frequently linked to violence

We understand behaviour as communication and recognise that many children who might demonstrate challenging behaviours within the classroom, are often those who may have experienced trauma and adversity within their lives. To support positive outcomes for these children and young people, we seek to embrace trauma informed practices across our region. By embracing trauma informed practices, we can build a more inclusive education system, one that cultivates empathy and emotional safety in order to support the reduction of trauma-related responses, which can go on to reduce the risk of exclusions and non-attendance. Our approach seeks to:

- **Equip the educational workforce:** We will offer region-wide awareness-raising and evidence-based training programs for educators. This targeted approach seeks to develop further our understanding of trauma, potential impact and recovery in the context of educational settings, eliminate duplication, and ensure long-term skill retention.
- **Collaborative leadership:** We will work with key partners and stakeholders to streamline trauma informed practices across the region.
- **Sustainable implementation:** We will support schools in embedding trauma informed principles into their practices, policies, and procedures. This goes beyond trauma awareness to create education environments that strive to promote meaningful, culturally sensitive and sustainable trauma informed practice that can benefit all students and staff members.

Our goal is to equip educators with the knowledge and skills to create a truly inclusive and supportive learning environment for every student, regardless of their past and present experiences.

18. The Serious Violence Duty. Pg 94

4. The Critical Role of Communities in Preventing and Reducing Violence

4.1 Community and youth engagement: A snapshot (November 2023)

“For me, knife crime ain’t about wanting to hurt nobody, but it is about not wanting to get hurt yourself.”

“I worry about the lack of opportunity now and how that translates into a lack of hope.”

“I don’t like the police but fact is we need them, and when we see them and they are there, things are less likely to happen.”

“Money a big problem now and getting access to money is important to live a good life. Fact is, anything illegal gives you easy access to money.”

The voices of communities and specifically children and young people have shaped this strategy. This was achieved through direct focus groups, surveys and interviews to gather their views and perspectives. The aim was to ensure that it reflected their lived realities and provided a greater insight into the complex factors that fuel and incite violence. Alongside this, a detailed analysis was undertaken of community engagement conducted by local areas as part of the development of their local area Strategic Needs Assessments (SNAs). Focus groups and interviews were also held with a wide range of third sector organisations, professionals and community based organisations that work closely with communities across the region, some of which are disproportionately impacted by violence.

Regardless of where in the region children and young people lived, cross cutting themes were identified from engagement. These themes can be summarised as:

- Concerns about “no go zones”, places and spaces.
- Worries about gangs and exploitation.
- High levels of fear of violence and harm. Fear was in some instances impacting how children and young people lived their lives.
- Concerns about how violence and abuse is proliferated by social media.
- Some young people, living in the most disadvantaged parts of our region expressed a lack of hope and optimism for the future.

- Many young people felt there was a lack of provision or accessible positive activities in their community or they did not what was available to them.
- The majority of young people (including those cohorts who have had negative firsthand experiences), expressed that they wanted to see a greater, more visible police presence. Young people talked about how they felt the police (regardless of if they viewed them favourably or not) increased feelings of safety and eased community tensions that may spill over into violence. However young people expressed that they wanted to be “policed in the right way”.
- Some young people spoke about how they valued education in school that focused on topics such as VAWG and Child Exploitation. However some expressed that this educative input lacks relevance to the worlds they are navigating and therefore needs to be delivered by external speakers and those with lived experience of the issues being discussed.
- Some young people talked about feeling “undervalued and unheard”.
- Many young people talked about the impact that poverty and deprivation had on their lives, and how criminality linked with violence is the only way that they may be able to make a good income in adulthood.
- Some young people lived in communities where they had been subjected to racism or were fearful of it. They felt there is a greater need for work to be done to create communities that respected differences in faith and culture.

4.2 Uniting Communities Against Violence

Whilst there will always be an important role for law enforcement and criminal justice in preventing and responding to violence, due to the multi-faceted nature of the problems we face, developing preventative approaches that successfully reduce violence is not the sole responsibility of those agencies, and requires more than a statutory response.

As such, this strategy aims to further develop and strengthen the regional VRP, making it more accessible and uniting more people together to become actively involved in violence prevention and reduction.

The voices and lived-experience of communities and young people must be at the heart of the partnership. They are local experts and allies, best placed to provide unique perspectives and insights that add to the academic and professional understanding of violence.

Therefore, we aim to ensure communities and young people are recognised as equal, valued partners by increasing the centrality of their views in the work that we do.

Whilst some local areas have developed positive relationships with children, young people and communities, and conducted a broad range of engagement activities to support the development of their local area strategic needs assessments (as required by The Serious Violence Duty), the overall approach to engagement across the region is fragmented and inconsistent. There is more to do to ensure that all communities, especially those most adversely impacted by violence, are heard.

Fear is a factor we cannot ignore. Speaking out about crime and violence may trigger worries about reprisals and further victimisation. For others, there may be an engrained belief that sharing their views and lived experience renders them 'weak' or 'a snitch'. This is particularly a problem in communities where strength and silence are necessary to avoid further violence (Antrobus, 2009).¹⁵

To circumvent fear and walls of silence, we need to be innovative with our engagement, enabling communities, children and young people to share their views, lived-experience, insight and intelligence in a variety of ways, remaining anonymous if they want to. The Youth Assembly will play a key role in identifying and providing opportunities for young people to be heard and responded to effectively when sharing their concerns about the fear of violence in their community.

The use of surveys that enable us to have a broad reach across communities has already proven to have had some success in gathering feedback and views. Examples of this include the VRP Insights Survey launched in August 2023 which received around 1200 responses. The aim of this survey was to gain a greater understanding of how people feel about levels of youth violence across the region.

The demographics of respondents tells us that our engagement and surveys could be more representative, particularly for ethnic minority communities, varied faith groups and under 25's. The priorities in this strategy have been informed by consultation and co-production together with the findings from the survey and data collected to inform local strategic needs assessments. In addition to this, going forward, future surveys will incorporate the learning from 2023, with a commitment to reach more of our communities, providing them with an opportunity to share their insights.

We will develop a **Regional Engagement Strategy**, driving forward our commitment to meaningfully engage with communities children and young people, using their shared lived-experience to inform, steer and tailor approaches in a way that best meets local and cultural need.

5. Governance, evaluation and monitoring

Accountability and monitoring

The Violence Reduction Partnership Strategic Board will provide oversight and challenge in terms of the delivery of this strategy. In addition, each of the seven local authority areas will also have arrangements in place to monitor the delivery of their local delivery plans.

Reducing violence is a collective responsibility as mandated by the Serious Violence Duty therefore it is incumbent for all specified and required authorities to scrutinise their own local delivery and contributions to the overall regional response.

We will develop a performance and evaluation framework which will enable us to monitor how the activity being delivered is impacting on both the prevention and reduction of violence.

We acknowledge that measuring efficacy and impact is harder for longer-term public health measures and will introduce milestone and success measures to help us better understand the direction of travel.

The VRP team will be responsible for co-ordinating and leading on implementation of this strategy and providing regular updates and briefings locally and regionally on behalf of the VRP strategic board.

Strategic Interconnectivity

The activities that form part of the priority workstreams overlap with many agendas and strategic areas of focus both nationally, regionally and locally. As such, there is already work underway that can underpin and strengthen the work we, as a partnership, plan to undertake.

In order to avoid duplication and fatigue, we aim to co-ordinate and interconnect strategies that have relevance to the serious violence agenda and have built our workplan in a way that acknowledges and builds upon existing activity. Better alignment of strategies also enables us to use the support of existing partnership arrangements to enable us to successfully deliver against our delivery plan.

Delivery Plan

We are developing a delivery plan that will set how we are going to work locally and regionally to deliver against the priorities in this strategy.

The delivery plan will be reviewed annually. This review phase will enable us to identify the actions and deliverables that have made the greatest difference and show the greatest promise. This will inform the development of successive delivery plans across the life course of the strategy.

It should be noted that given one of our priority areas is to build trust with our children, young people and communities, that a measure of success may be evidenced by increases in the volume of crime reported and recorded. This should not be immediately seen as an indicator that violence in the region has increased, but perhaps an early indicator that the public confidence in services has moved along the right trajectory.

We also know that this strategy is only the very start of a journey to make the West Midlands a violence free region. We still have challenges to face and hurdles to overcome. However, it is our hope that the strategy will steer us along a common course to realise our shared vision.

Summary

In conclusion, whilst there is a wealth of work already underway across the region, there is a collective commitment to do more to achieve our ambitious target of ensuring the region is free from all forms of violence. By the end of the life-course of this first regional strategy, our ambition is to be more prevention focused, by:

- addressing root causes of violence.
- building trust with communities.
- upscaling the use of evidence-based and sustainable interventions that strengthen protective factors.

List of Contributors

Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Care Board
Birmingham Children's Trust
Birmingham City Council
Birmingham Youth Offending Service
Birmingham Youth Service
Black Country and West Birmingham Integrated Care Board
Black Country Integrated Care Board
Birmingham Voluntary Service Council
Catch 22
Coventry City Council
Coventry Youth Service
Dudley Integrated Health
Faith Belief Forum
HMP Birmingham
Home Office
Horizon Care
NetworkFour
NHS Coventry & Warwickshire Integrated Care Board
OLSC, Wolverhampton
Positive Youth Foundation
Probation Service
Redthread
Safer Together
Sandwell Council
Sandwell Youth Offending Service
Sandwell, West Midlands Police
Solihull Council
Solihull Metropolitan Council
Streetgames
The Mentoring Project
Walsall Council
West Midlands Faith Alliance
West Midlands Police
West Midlands Probation Service
West Midlands Violence Reduction Partnership
West Midlands Combined Authority
Wolverhampton Council
Wolverhampton Children's Safeguarding Partnership



WEST MIDLANDS
VIOLENCE
REDUCTION
PARTNERSHIP