

# Blog post: Knife crime, violence and the promise of a public health approach?

March 2019

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## *The need to tackle increasing rates of knife crime and serious violence*

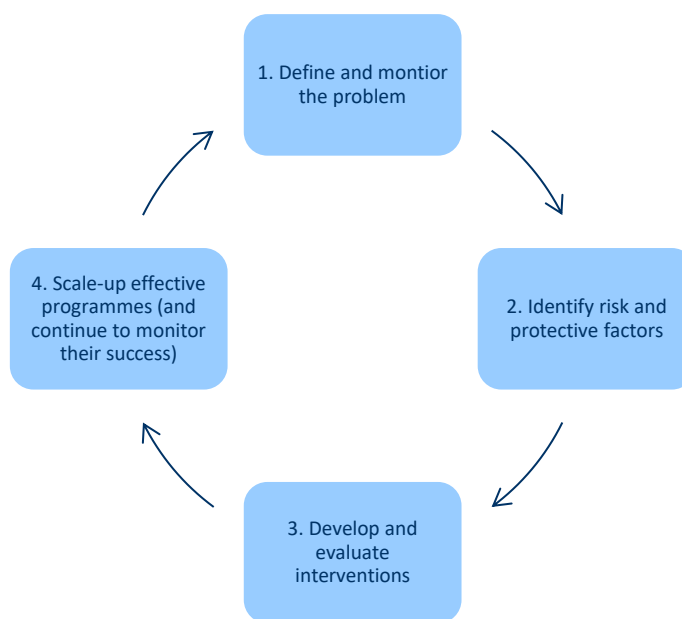
We've been hearing a lot about violence, especially knife violence, over the last few weeks and months. Reports of deaths from knife crime are multiplying in the news, with reports that [the number of teenagers killed with a knife has almost doubled in the last five years](#), and that [at least ten have died so far in 2019 alone \(4 March 2019\)](#).

Unsurprisingly, the immediate public response has been urgent and upset. Commentators are focussed on the need for more effective police enforcement to stop knife crime, even going as far as [saying it should be treated as a national security crisis](#). Perhaps more unexpected is the reaction of ministers: Chancellor Philip Hammond announced in the Spring Statement last week (13 March) that [an extra £100 million would be released for police enforcement against knife crime in England and Wales](#). There is no denying that this cash injection will be welcome after years of budget cuts for police. However, the £100 million falls short of the amount requested by police chiefs and is unlikely to be enough to address the root causes of knife crime and youth violence – especially given [rising evidence that criminal justice interventions are 'both damaging and disproportionate'](#).

For a realistic long-term strategy, we look to a different approach, which has been gaining traction in the world of prevention. As reported in a [review of the evidence](#) published last year by the LGA, with support from Cordis Bright, the public health approach to reducing violence offers a realistic alternative to tackling the violence problem, with a growing body of evidence to support interventions that look at violence from the public health perspective.

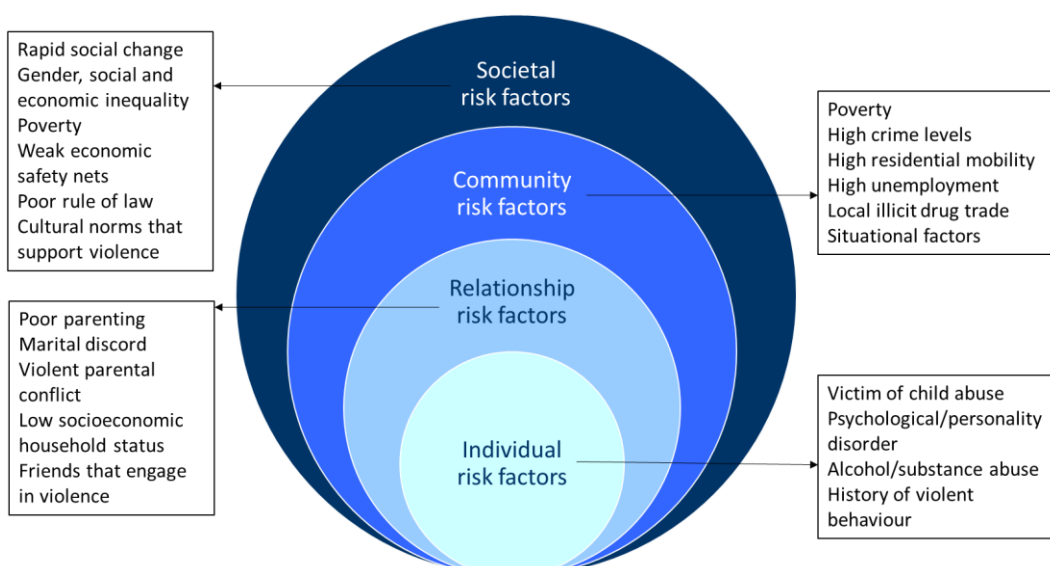
## *What is a public health approach to reducing violence?*

A public health approach treats a problem like violence as if it were a disease. It uses evidence to try and identify the root causes of the issue, and develops and evaluates interventions to prevent the problem from growing and spreading.



Adapted from the [World Health Organisation \(2019\)](#)

The approach depends on identifying risk and protective factors that can make someone more or less likely to become involved in a problem. The interventions aim to tackle the causes by reducing these risk factors, and bolstering the protective factors to make people less vulnerable. For instance, a public health approach to violence might involve programmes that aim to reduce poverty, improve parenting, and support people struggling with alcohol or substance misuse, as [these are all thought to be risk factors that increase a person’s likelihood of becoming involved in violence](#). It might also include interventions to bolster protective factors like [having a strong social support network or high self-esteem](#).



Adapted from [World Health Organisation \(2019\)](#)

### *Adopting a public health approach*

The London Mayor's office is among those moving towards a public health approach to tackling violent crime: in December, they announced funding of £6.8 million to establish a 'Violence Reduction Unit' (the 'VRU'). The VRU describes itself as taking a public health approach to tackling the underlying causes of violent crime in London.

*"A public health approach to tackling violence means looking at violence not as isolated incidents or solely a police enforcement problem. Instead, this approach looks at violence as a preventable consequence of a range of factors, such as adverse early-life experiences, or harmful social or community experiences and influences."*

[Greater London Authority \(2019\)](#)

The London VRU is based on a unit in Scotland that has been treating violence as a disease for more than 10 years. The Scottish VRU was established in response to rising rates of homicide in Glasgow and rates have fallen in that time [by 39% across Scotland](#).

The continued fall in violence in Scotland is often attributed to the work of the VRU, which oversees a range of interventions. One such project, the Community Initiative to Reduce Violence, has been evaluated and was [found to be associated with lower rates of violence and weapon carrying](#) over two years. However, the unit's other interventions – such as [a social enterprise](#) employing people with a history of offending or at risk of committing crime, [a peer support project](#) for BAME families and young people newly arrived in Glasgow, and [a training programme](#) to help professionals in every field offer help and support to victims of domestic violence – are yet to be evaluated, and the impact of the unit as a whole remains unclear.

As pointed out by [researchers at the University of Edinburgh](#), although violence has been falling in Glasgow and across Scotland, we cannot be sure how much of that is attributable to the VRU. It's tempting to assume that the VRU is the reason, and therefore that it might help reverse the rise in violence [seen in every London local authority from 2012 to at least 2016](#), but there might be other reasons that shouldn't be ignored. For example, the differences in trends in violence between London and Glasgow could be affected by other factors such as [different levels of cuts to local services under austerity](#), or be due to the impact of strategies and interventions not overseen by the VRU.

What is more, the authors found that rates of violence in 2004-2016 were consistently higher in London than in Scotland, and were more concentrated across local authorities. The differences in these patterns of violence may well impact the success of strategies for reducing violence, so even if the Scottish VRU model explains the reduction in Glasgow there is still no guarantee of its success in London.

### *An opportunity to learn*

Public health approaches are by definition evidence-driven. The shift towards a public health approach to reducing violence in London offers hope for a multi-faceted strategy to tackle the underlying causes of the problem, but it also represents an opportunity to evaluate the impact of the VRU and help adjust and improve the model, to deliver maximum impact.

The Scottish VRU is still in need of comprehensive and robust evaluation. To avoid this situation occurring in London, the London Mayor's office should set in place a robust evaluation strategy which demonstrates the Unit's impact on its intended outcomes as well as the extent to which it delivers value for money.

At the heart of the most effective strategies to tackle violence (or any problem) is a commitment to monitor, evaluate and improve our interventions; an approach founded on evidence is the only way to ensure we keep delivering the best prevention possible, to protect and improve current and future Londoners' lives.