



Violence Reduction Unit's (VRUs) approach to childhood trauma and domestic abuse

Introduction

The Serious Violence Strategy which was launched in 2018¹, stressed the importance of “early intervention to tackle the root causes” and “break the deadly cycle of violence experienced by families each year” in relation to gun and knife crime usually perpetrated by young people against young people. It emphasised that serious violence was “not a law enforcement issue alone” and would require “a multiple strand approach involving a range of partners across different sectors”. While the strategy acknowledged that a significant proportion of violent crime was linked to domestic abuse, it specifically excluded these crimes from its scope, even as it admitted that evidence-based interventions targeting domestic abuse “are likely to help bring serious violence levels down”.

In March 2019, the Home Secretary announced a **£100 million Serious Violence Fund** to help tackle serious violence. This was allocated to 18 police force areas worst affected by serious violence. Of the funding, £35 million has been invested in Violence Reduction Units (VRUs) in the same 18 areas, which forms a key component of the Government’s action to build capacity in local areas to tackle the root causes of serious violence. VRUs bring together police, local government, health and education professionals, community leaders and other key partners to ensure a multi-agency response to the local drivers of serious violence and agreement to take necessary action to tackle these. This includes being responsible for driving local strategy and embedding cultural change.

Serious Violence Reduction Duty

Following a consultation in 2019², the Government proposed the introduction of a new Serious Violence Reduction Duty which is currently part of The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill underway in Parliament.

SafeLives’ response to the consultation stated: *“We are concerned that a specific approach for knife-crime as opposed to a common response for a range of violent behaviours and safeguarding concerns, could create more siloed working, and propose that serious violence is defined more widely than currently to include DVA, which will be the most common form of serious violence in many local authorities.”*

The Government’s response to the consultation³ did not reflect on this point and the definition of serious violence in the Bill focuses on knife crime and gun crime, and areas of crime where serious violence or its threat is inherent, such as county lines drug dealing. Decisions about including other forms of serious

¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/698009/serious-violence-strategy.pdf

² https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/791253/SV_Legal_Duty_Consultation_Document.pdf

³ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/816885/Government_Response_-_Serious_Violence_Consultation_Final.pdf

violence such as domestic abuse and gender-based violence are left up to local needs assessment. Given the close links between all these types of crime, we remain convinced that domestic abuse and sexual violence must be explicitly included in the serious violence prevention duty.

In her letter dated 28th May 2021, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales highlighted that one third of all violence recorded by the police is domestic abuse related.⁴ This holds true across every region of England and Wales, where the percentages range from 32% in London to 39% in the North East.⁵ At the level of individual police force areas, the picture is much the same, ranging from 30% in Dyfed-Powys up to 42% in Merseyside.⁶

Responding to the Police Bill, the Commissioner stated: *“The new Serious Violence Prevention duty is designed to be flexible enough to allow individual forces to focus specifically on the crime types that most affect their local area. However, compared to other crime types such as gang violence we know that there are no significant regional variations per head in rates of domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG. It cannot therefore be left to individual forces to opt out of including it.*

There are serious concerns about culture and attitudes throughout the criminal justice system, including the police, regarding the distinction between violence that takes place in the home or at the hands of an intimate partner as less serious than violence perpetrated in the public sphere by a stranger. To give an example, less than half of the 18 Violence Reduction Units name domestic abuse in their strategy. By including VAWG on the face of the Bill the government will send a robust message to the public and police forces across the country about the need to prioritise preventing and tackling domestic abuse as a form of serious violence.”⁷

Moreover, domestic abuse is the most common type of violence to be experienced on a repeated basis and 48% of all female homicides (and 8% of male homicides) are domestic homicides.^{8,9} Charging, prosecution and conviction rates, however, have fallen significantly in recent years, for both rape and domestic abuse.¹⁰ Between April 2014 and March 2020, the annual number of prosecutions in rape flagged cases fell by 55% and the annual number of convictions fell by 44%. In the year ending March 2020, only 1.4% of rape flagged cases recorded by the police led to a charge or summons. It is estimated that since the last HMICFRS inspection took place in 2015 a further 75 victims have been murdered in the name of ‘so-called’ honour in the UK. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the national HBA helpline has experienced increased call volumes by up to 264%. This is against a backdrop of declining HBA related prosecutions, which has fallen by 43% since 2014/2015 according to the CPS annual VAWG report.

We consider it crucial that domestic abuse and sexual violence is explicitly included in the serious violence reduction duty, to ensure a gender-informed approach to tackling serious, violent crime. Domestic abuse and sexual violence is not dependent on local dynamics and is often inextricably linked to violence outside the home, and therefore warrants a national response such as this duty.

We welcome the multi-agency approach set out in the duty but, without the inclusion of these crimes we are concerned that this duty will fail in its core aim of preventing and reducing serious violence, including making a significant, positive impact on the annual rate of homicide.

Progress of VRUs in recognising domestic abuse as part of serious violence reduction

⁴ Office for National Statistics (2020), The nature of violent crime in England and Wales: Year ending March 2020, Section 7, Groups of people most likely to be victims of violent crime.

⁵ Office for National Statistics (2020), Domestic abuse in England and Wales overview: November 2020.

⁶ Excluding City of London, a unique policing environment with historically low levels of reported, domestic-abuse related crime. This is partially due to the low numbers of residents (estimated at 9,721 in mid-2019) in comparison to the 500,000 – 1,000,000 estimated people who work within the square mile.

⁷ <https://domesticabusecommissioner.uk/blogs/violence-against-women-and-girls-must-be-considered-as-serious-violent-crime/>

⁸ Office for National Statistics (2020), The nature of violent crime in England and Wales: Year ending March 2020, Section 6, Levels of Repeat Victimisation.

⁹ Office for National Statistics (2020), Homicide in England and Wales: year ending 2019

¹⁰ Crown Prosecution Service, Data summary Quarter 1 2020-2021.

We know that some VRUs, including London's, *have* included domestic abuse and sexual violence as a key focus and we welcome this.

Separating 'public' street violence from 'private' home violence and abuse fails to acknowledge the clear links between the two, including how Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) have severe impacts on children's health, wellbeing, and development.

As we argued in our consultation submission: *"At the moment, young boys who watch their mum being assaulted and coerced for years by her partner or ex-partner receive almost no support to recover from their experience of this and build their sense of manhood and safe masculinity after those who have been their initial or abiding role model. If we want to stop violence outside the home, we believe firmly that we must look at these early experiences, and the fact that many boys talk about wanting to protect their mum, as one of the reasons they've adopted violence as part of their lifestyle."*

The [APCC report](#), 'Violence Reduction Units (VRUs) in Focus' highlights the steps taken by the 18 VRUs across the country and indicates that some are expanding their definition of serious violence to include issues of domestic abuse, with an additional focus on trauma-informed, ACE approaches.

From looking at the various VRU response strategies, we found that at least 12 of the 18 VRUs across the country are already using preventative approaches to serious violence which includes domestic abuse and/or childhood trauma. Currently, these inclusions go above and beyond the Government's scope of serious violence.

- **Merseyside** – their [strategy](#) acknowledges different forms and expressions of violence, which contain overlapping factors behind them that are either 'risk factors' for making violence more likely, or 'protective factors' which mitigate against victimisation or perpetration of violence. However, their approach is strictly in line with the Serious Violence Strategy, and so does not include DA.
- **Lancashire** - some of their VRU team are members of a writing team that has written a successful book to explain the lifelong effects of unrecognised and untreated trauma on young people called, "The Little Book of ACEs". They have also led on a [survey](#) about DA and Sexual Violence services.
- **Kent and Medway** – one of the VRUs core [training modules](#) covers ACE and trauma, which includes instances of DA.
- **Sussex** – priority 2 of their [outcomes framework](#) specifies an increased understanding of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and a trauma-informed approach to tackle the root causes of serious violent crime. However, their definition of SV only covers violence within public settings.
- **Wales** – on page 6 of their [strategy](#), they identify DA as an important subset of risk factors for other types of violence. They have committed to work with partners to embed learning from the Early Action Together Programme and the ACE Hub Wales to build an ACE aware Wales.
- **London** – their VRU has explored opportunities to prevent [VAWG](#), which includes reducing the instances and impact of ACEs. The VRU has awarded £1m¹¹ in funding for the expansion of IRIS, a primary care intervention for domestic abuse victims, as part of a public health approach to serious violence reduction.
- **Manchester** - also working to embed a trauma-informed approach across the workforce, particularly in those services working with vulnerable children and young people. This will ensure frontline workers can spot the signs of trauma, provide trauma-informed support and signpost people and families to appropriate services.
- **West Midlands** – their VRU have online guidance and [webinars](#) on ACEs and trauma-informed practice.
- **South Yorkshire** – this VRU is operating under the more expansive WHO definition of serious violence than the one set out in the Serious Violence Strategy. This includes 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. This could be within both a domestic and a public setting.
- **Avon and Somerset** – their VRU is a member of the North Bristol NHS Trust & Severn Major Trauma Network. The VRUs [annual report](#) (pg.28) states that they are operating training programmes for police officers and PCSO's to incorporate Trauma Informed Practice, Contextual Safeguarding and whole family approaches. Their definition of serious violence *does* include domestic violence.

¹¹ <https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/1m-from-vru-for-victims-of-domestic-violence-0#:~:>

- **Leicestershire** – they recognise the emerging evidence around ACEs and their cyclical relationship with violence, but do not incorporate domestic abuse within their definition of serious violence.
- **Thames Valley**- in the forward to their [Strategic Needs Assessment](#), DCI Lewis Prescott-Mayling acknowledges the overwhelming evidence that ACEs such as abuse, neglect and witnessing domestic abuse are risk factors for mental illness, poor academic outcomes, contact with the justice system and both violence perpetration and victimisation.

Conclusion

The criminal justice system still has a significant way to go in bringing perpetrators to justice and providing a consistently high-quality response to survivors of domestic abuse. We welcome the ‘public health’ approach taken by Violence Reduction Units and as shown above, several VRUs including London’s have included domestic abuse and sexual violence as a key focus.

Artificially separating ‘public’ street violence from ‘private’ home violence and abuse fails to acknowledge the clear links between the two, including how harm experienced in the home by children and young people has severe impacts on their health, wellbeing and development. Given the critical national conversation we have seen on male violence this year, it would be an unacceptable step to push violence against women and girls back into the realm of ‘private’ matters, rather than a concern to us all.

To achieve the wholesale reform required to improve criminal justice outcomes for victims and survivors, and to build confidence in the process, it is imperative that violence against women and girls is not dismissed as a ‘less serious’ form of violence in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill.

The role of specialist VAWG sector organisations - including those led ‘by and for’ Black, Asian and racially minoritised women, Deaf and disabled women and LGBT+ survivors - in helping to prevent and combat serious violence should also be made explicit in the guidance accompanying the new duty. This will be vital ensure that expert VAWG organisations are seen as key partners in the multi-agency response to serious violence reduction.

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