

Scottish Violence Reduction Unit submission of 24 November 2022

PE1947/D: Address Scotland's culture of youth violence

The Scottish Violence Reduction Unit (SVRU) would like to thank the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee for seeking our views on the petition lodged by Alex O’Kane.

It may be helpful to briefly outline how the SVRU works to set our response in context. As members of the [World Health Organisation’s Violence Prevention Alliance](#), the SVRU uses a [public health](#) approach to violence prevention. There are four steps to the approach: using data to define the problem, identifying risk and protective factors, developing and evaluating interventions and implementing those programmes which have been proven to be effective. Implementation of programmes is largely done by partners as the SVRU is an innovations unit rather than service provider. We are not part of the emergency police response or investigation into individual incidents.

Our approach is anchored in the evidence that [violent behaviour and its consequences can be prevented](#). As such, we agree with Mr O’Kane that youth violence, and indeed all forms of violence, are disturbing and should motivate an evidence-based discussion of the causes and solutions.

Looking at the available data, we are beginning to see levels of interpersonal violence nationally return to levels experienced pre-pandemic in 2019. However, at a local level the picture is more nuanced. In the first quarter of this year, according to the [Recorded Crime in Scotland: year ending June 2022](#) figures, in Glasgow and Edinburgh we have seen small decreases in violence, whereas Aberdeen and Dundee recorded small increases. We recognise that not every community’s experience of violence, crime and anti-social behaviour is the same, and in some cases, despite decreases at national or city level, their community sees higher levels of violence and other social problems.

Primary prevention of violence is the most effective and cost-efficient form of prevention. This involves supporting young people and their families at the earliest opportunities and over the long-term. The SVRU and Justice Analytical Services have assessed the [evidence on the most effective forms of intervention for youth violence](#). One recent study

looking at England by [Frontier Economics and UK Youth](#) estimates that for every £1 spent on youth work the return on investment is between 2.5x and 7.8x. They model the indirect economic value of the youth sector at up to £0.6billion in decreased crime with an overall indirect value including health and employment/education at £3.2billion. [Youth Link Scotland](#) found the social return on investment in youth services to be at least 3:1. Supporting youth work and vulnerable young people is a fundamental part of any form of violence prevention work.

The age of victims and/or those involved with violence is not available and it is not possible to reliably determine the exact number recorded by the police. However, if we consider homicide as the most serious form of violence, some measures can be looked at. According to the most recent figures from [Homicide in Scotland 2021 – 2022](#) the median age of victims was 42, and the median age of accused was 35. There were 53 victims of homicide, which is the lowest number of recorded homicide victims since comparable records began in 1976. While there has been a significant decrease, each of these deaths is a preventable tragedy.

Looking at other forms of available evidence, a recent [survey](#) of young people in England and Wales suggested one in seven young people had experienced some form of violence including threats, bullying and low level violence. However, at least one in two have witnessed serious violence online through video sharing platforms. The sharing of videos involving real life violence does have consequences including secondary victimisation of those targeted. Such videos can also increase the salience of incidents - increasing fear among young people and communities. There is also a risk these videos may normalise forms of violence.

We urge caution in terms of utilising the term culture in relation to youth violence. Such terms can have consequences in terms of the stigma it applies to young people especially those in our most vulnerable communities (for example [Edinburgh Study](#)). Marginalising and stigmatising young people, the vast majority who are not involved in violence, is harmful.

Listening to and working with communities will be key to supporting vulnerable groups, including young people, through extremely challenging times ahead. We believe the voices of young people from communities facing the greatest challenges are fundamental to proper consideration of this petition.

We are encouraged that Alex O’Kane and No1seems2care have shown that there are plenty of people who do care. Raising and reporting violence in all its forms is a crucial part of tackling it. The response to the issues raised must be evidence-based and inclusive, seeking out the drivers of all forms of violence and applying the solutions that work - creating a healthier and safer Scotland for all.