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Violence-Informed Approaches to Preventing Criminalisation in the UK

Evidence, Research, Policy, Practice, and Emerging Thinking

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Introduction

This briefing paper examines the emerging framework of "violence-informed approaches" as a critical development in understanding and responding to violence, particularly in the context of preventing criminalisation in the UK. Traditional approaches to violence prevention have often focused on individualised explanations, frequently obscuring the broader social, political, and economic contexts in which violence occurs. Whilst trauma-informed approaches have gained significant traction, they have been critiqued for sometimes inadvertently pathologising individuals and focusing on psychological impacts rather than addressing structural causes.

Violence-informed approaches build upon and extend these frameworks by offering a more explicitly political and contextual analysis of violence and its social determinants. This briefing draws on the foundational work of Professor Stan Gilmour (2025) on violence-informed approaches to preventing criminalisation[16], integrating this with current evidence, research, policy, and practice in the UK to outline the theoretical underpinnings, key characteristics, and practical applications of this emerging framework.

The Emergence of Violence-Informed Approaches

Violence-informed approaches have their theoretical origins in Response-Based Practice, developed by Canadian scholars and practitioners Allan Wade, Linda Coates, Cathy Richardson, and Shelly Bonnah beginning in the 1990s. This practice emerged as a critique of dominant discourses about violence and victimisation that tended to obscure perpetrator responsibility and ignore victims' resistance.

Core Principles

Violence-informed approaches are built upon four fundamental principles:

Violence as Deliberate Action

Violence is conceptualised as a deliberate and purposeful action by perpetrators, carrying specific social meanings and occurring within broader social, cultural, and political contexts. This challenges the notion of violence as random, impulsive, or primarily driven by individual pathology. For instance, domestic violence is understood as deliberate tactics to control and dominate a partner within contexts of gender inequality, rather than simply an 'anger problem'.

Recognition of Victim Resistance

Victims are recognised as always responding to and resisting violence in contextually specific ways, challenging notions of passive victimhood. Resistance doesn't always manifest as physical fighting back; it can be subtle, hidden, or internal, depending on what is possible in a specific situation, considering power differentials, resources, and risks. Even behaviours conventionally labelled as 'dysfunctional' may represent meaningful forms of resistance and self-protection. For example, a child who dissociates during abuse is actively protecting themselves psychologically, which constitutes a form of resistance.

Impact of Social Responses

What happens after violence is disclosed significantly impacts outcomes.

Positive social responses—believing, validating, offering practical help—can promote healing and justice, while negative social responses—disbelief, blame, indifference—can compound harm. Institutional responses from police, courts, and social services powerfully shape whether justice is achieved, reflecting and reinforcing broader social attitudes about violence and its victims.

Language and Representation

The language used to describe violence profoundly influences how it is understood and addressed. Discourse can conceal violence (using 'had sex with' rather than 'raped'), obscure perpetrator responsibility (passive constructions like 'she was raped' rather than 'he raped her'), conceal resistance (describing victims as 'helpless'), and blame victims (focusing on victim behaviour rather than perpetrator choices). These linguistic patterns serve to misrepresent violence in ways that benefit perpetrators and disadvantage victims.

These principles move away from individualising and pathologising frameworks toward a contextual understanding of violence. They centre the agency and resistance of those experiencing violence, recognise the influence of social and institutional responses, highlight the role of language, and connect interpersonal violence to broader social and political contexts.

Distinction from Trauma-Informed Approaches

Whilst trauma-informed approaches gained significant traction in the early 2000s by emphasising how traumatic experiences affect individuals' neurological, biological, psychological, and social development, violence-informed perspectives emerged partly in response to perceived limitations in this framework. Scholars have argued that trauma-informed approaches sometimes:

- Focus primarily on psychological impacts rather than social contexts and causes

- Inadvertently pathologise natural responses to abnormal situations
- Fail to adequately address issues of power, oppression, and social justice
- Use language that obscures the deliberate nature of much violence and the responsibility of perpetrators

Violence-informed approaches therefore represent both a building upon and a critical extension of trauma-informed frameworks, seeking to retain their insights whilst addressing their limitations through more explicit attention to social contexts, power relations, and structural determinants.

Social Determinants of Crime and Criminalisation

Violence-informed approaches operate within a framework that conceptualises crime not primarily as a product of individual moral failure or pathology, but as arising from specific social, economic, and political conditions that shape opportunities, constraints, and experiences. Several key social determinants emerge from the research:

Economic Inequality and Poverty

Economic inequality represents one of the most robust predictors of crime rates across societies[1]. Strong correlations exist between income inequality and rates of violent crime across developed nations[2]. Poverty itself creates conditions of strain and limited opportunity that increase vulnerability to certain types of crime. However, it is often the experience of inequality—the perceived gap between cultural expectations and economic realities—that creates conditions conducive to crime[3].

Social Exclusion and Marginalisation

The systematic denial of resources, rights, and opportunities to particular groups significantly increases vulnerability to criminalisation. Research demonstrates how marginalised young people become entrapped in cycles of crime and punishment through processes of social and economic exclusion[4]. Educational exclusion specifically drives

criminalisation, with school exclusion significantly associated with earlier age of first conviction in male prisoners[5].

Of particular concern is research showing that prisoners who had been sent to Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) were first convicted an average of six years younger than those never excluded, and two years younger than those who were excluded but not sent to PRUs[6]. This suggests that the severity of educational exclusion directly correlates with earlier criminalisation, and that school exclusionary practices may function as a mechanism for the systemic criminalisation of children with neurodisability.

Educational Disadvantage and Disengagement

Education represents a critical social determinant that shapes pathways into or away from criminalisation. Educational disadvantage and early school leaving significantly predict later criminal justice involvement[7]. Educational policies that increased the minimum school leaving age have been found to significantly reduce property crime[8], suggesting education functions as a protective factor by providing legitimate opportunities and social integration.

Neighbourhood and Community Factors

Spatial concentrations of disadvantage significantly impact crime rates and criminalisation processes. Neighbourhood social cohesion and informal social control mediate the relationship between structural disadvantage and crime rates[9]. Crime is not randomly distributed but clusters in areas of concentrated disadvantage, reflecting broader patterns of social and economic inequality.

Health Inequalities and Substance Use

Health inequalities, including disparities in mental health and substance use, represent significant social determinants of criminalisation. Problematic substance-use and untreated mental health needs are connected to criminal justice involvement, reflecting broader patterns of social injustice[10].

The social determinants framework shifts the focus from individual deficits to social conditions, arguing that effective crime prevention requires addressing structural inequalities and challenges punitive criminal justice responses that fail to address underlying causes.

Key Elements and Applications

Violence-informed approaches aim to prevent criminalisation through several interconnected strategies:

Contextual Analysis of Violence

These approaches view criminalisation as a social process, involving complex interactions of legal frameworks, institutional practices, and social discourses that define certain individuals and behaviours as 'criminal' and subject them to control through the criminal justice system. Criminalisation processes disproportionately affect marginalised communities, including those experiencing poverty, racial discrimination, and social exclusion. These processes often function to manage social problems through criminal justice responses rather than addressing their underlying causes through social policy and structural change.

Addressing Social Determinants

Violence-informed approaches recognise that social determinants of crime create conditions in which individuals become vulnerable to both experiencing and perpetrating violence. By addressing these social determinants, these approaches aim to prevent crime at its source rather than managing it through criminal justice responses. This is evident in violence-informed initiatives that address social determinants through structural interventions such as poverty reduction, housing provision, educational support, and employment opportunities.

Reframing Narratives

Violence-informed approaches challenge dominant narratives of crime and justice that individualise social problems and obscure structural causes. They offer alternative narratives that contextualise criminal

behaviour within broader social conditions and recognise the agency and resistance of individuals navigating difficult circumstances. This involves challenging discourses that pathologise individuals and communities experiencing structural disadvantage, instead promoting understanding of how behaviours labelled as 'criminal' often represent responses to and resistance against oppressive conditions.

Transforming Institutional Responses

These approaches seek to transform institutional responses to behaviour that might otherwise lead to criminalisation. This involves developing alternatives to criminal justice, such as diversion programmes, restorative justice approaches, community-based interventions, and integrated service models. These institutional transformations are guided by violence-informed principles of contextual understanding, recognition of resistance, attention to language and representation, and commitment to structural change and social justice.

Intersectional Analysis

Violence-informed approaches increasingly incorporate intersectionality, recognising that experiences of violence and criminalisation are fundamentally shaped by the intersection of various social identities and systems of power, such as gender, race, class, disability, sexuality, nationality, and age[11]. This integration guards against overgeneralised analyses and highlights how criminalisation processes disproportionately affect multiply marginalised groups through the interaction of various systems of oppression.

Current State in the UK

Evidence and Research

The UK's approach to violence reduction is increasingly guided by a public health framework, viewing violence as a preventable issue rooted in complex social, economic, and environmental factors. There is strong emphasis on understanding the "causes of the causes" of violence, moving

beyond individual acts to examine broader societal determinants such as poverty, inequality, substance abuse, and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

Evidence-based interventions are consolidated through toolkits and frameworks from organisations such as the College of Policing and the Youth Endowment Fund. These often point to interventions like focused deterrence, cognitive behavioural therapy, social skills training, and mentoring. However, a limitation is often the small number of rigorously evaluated interventions specifically targeting homicide, leading to a focus on serious violent offending more broadly.

Several academic institutions are dedicated to violence research, including the University of Worcester's Trauma and Violence Prevention research group, Cardiff University's Violence Research Group, and the Violence Research Centre at the University of Cambridge.

Policy Developments

Serious Violence Duty
A key government policy requires specified authorities (including police, local authorities, health services, and probation) to work collaboratively to prevent and reduce serious violence. This requires them to share data, undertake evidence-based analyses of local causes of violence, and develop bespoke collaborative strategies.

Violence Reduction Units (VRUs)
Established since 2019, VRUs are multi-agency partnerships funded by the Home Office that adopt a public health approach, bringing together police, local government, health, education, and community groups. Early evaluations suggest positive impacts in reducing violent crime, with reductions in violence with injury and without injury offences in VRU areas.

Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy
The government has a specific strategy to tackle VAWG, including

commitments on prevention, victim support, perpetrator pursuit, and system strengthening. However, the National Audit Office has noted limited progress in developing measures to prevent VAWG and achieve long-term societal change.

Practice Applications

Violence-Informed Youth Justice
Violence-informed approaches have been applied to youth justice initiatives seeking to prevent the criminalisation of young people. The Youth Inclusion and Support Panels (YISPs), which operated from the early 2000s until approximately 2011, represented an approach aligned with violence-informed principles. These multi-agency panels focused on addressing social determinants through providing support with education, housing, mental health, and family relationships for children aged 8-13 at risk of offending[12].

Violence-Informed Domestic Abuse Responses
Violence-informed approaches have significantly influenced responses to domestic abuse, challenging traditional models that inadvertently blame victims or fail to address structural causes. The "Islands of Safety" approach developed by Richardson and Wade exemplifies violence-informed work with families experiencing domestic abuse, explicitly addressing the social responses that shape outcomes for families[13].

Violence-Informed Mental Health Services
These approaches recognise connections between experiences of violence, mental distress, and criminalisation. They challenge models that individualise distress and ignore its social contexts, instead situating mental health within broader social, political, and economic conditions. These approaches aim to prevent the criminalisation of mental distress by addressing its social determinants[14].

Emerging Thinking and Challenges

Several areas require further development:

Sustainability and Equity
While VRUs have shown positive impacts, their long-term sustainability is an ongoing concern, with requirements for local funding matches raising questions about equitable provision across the UK.

Evaluation Consistency
Despite recognition of the importance of evaluation, there remains inconsistency in robustly evaluating all violence reduction programmes, making it difficult to ascertain what truly works and to scale effective interventions.

Addressing Disproportionate Impacts
Concerns remain about the disproportionate impact of some policing powers on young people from ethnic minority backgrounds. Violence-informed approaches with an intersectional lens are crucial here, revealing how disparities result not simply from individual bias but from the structural intersection of racism, class oppression, and other forms of discrimination embedded in criminal justice systems.

Bridging Theory and Practice
A significant challenge for violence-informed approaches is addressing the gap between theoretical frameworks and practice realities. Practitioners in established systems may face difficulties translating violence-informed principles into everyday practice, requiring sustained investment in workforce development, supervision, and organisational change strategies.

The 'Carceral-Assistential Net'
Emerging thinking highlights how welfare conditionality and poverty management increasingly blend with criminal justice approaches to create what Wacquant terms the 'carceral-assistential net'[15]. This system disproportionately captures multiply marginalised communities, criminalising poverty whilst failing to address its structural causes.

Future Directions

Further development of violence-informed approaches requires:

Research Priorities
Robust research that can document the mechanisms through which social determinants shape pathways into and out of criminalisation, evaluate the effectiveness of violence-informed interventions, and centre the voices and experiences of individuals and communities most affected by criminalisation processes. This requires methodological innovation beyond traditional outcome evaluations, including participatory and community-based approaches.

Transformative Practice and Policy
Moving beyond critique toward transformative practice and policy involves developing specific tools, protocols, and intervention models that embody violence-informed principles whilst remaining adaptable to diverse contexts. It also requires challenging dominant narratives about crime and justice whilst advocating for investment in addressing social determinants.

Community-Level Transformation
At the community level, transformative approaches involve supporting collective capacity to address violence and harm without relying on criminal justice systems, connecting criminalisation prevention to broader movements for social justice.

Conclusion

Violence-informed approaches offer a critical framework for understanding and addressing the complex relationships between violence, social inequality, and criminalisation. By shifting focus from individual pathology to social context, these approaches provide tools for developing more effective and just responses to violence that address root causes rather than simply managing symptoms through criminal justice interventions.

The UK's evolving approach to violence reduction, particularly through VRUs and public health frameworks, provides fertile ground for implementing violence-informed principles. However, sustained commitment to addressing structural inequalities, coupled with robust research and advocacy for transformative social policy, remains essential for creating more just social arrangements that reduce reliance on criminalisation and promote wellbeing for all individuals and communities, not just "the public".

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