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TECHNICAL REPORT

Violent crime

Risk models, effective interventions
and risk management

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Prepared for the National Audit Office

The research described in this report was prepared for the National Audit Office.

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Executive Summary

Violent crime is costly but not intractable

The cost of violent crime to victims and the criminal justice system is significantly higher than other crime. The Prime Minister's Strategy Unit in the UK has estimated the cost of reoffending alone at £11 billion annually, and relative to non-violent crime, violent crimes are disproportionately costly both to public services and to victims. At the same time, violent offenders are less resistant to change than some other types of offenders such as some sexual offenders or property offenders. Thus, learning from and implementing effective interventions from other countries to reduce violent crime could yield significant reductions in rates of violent crime and in fear of crime, improving quality of life, reducing costs and thereby representing an efficient allocation of public funds. This review identifies a range of types and examples of factors and interventions for reducing violent crime, highlighting some of the key issues that emerge across this range.

There is scope for improving risk assessment tools

These improvements could be achieved in part by incorporating more of what is known about triggers and contexts associated with violent crime into the offender-focused tools currently in use. This would lead to a more contextualised understanding of the situations in which individuals identified as being at risk of future serious offending are most likely to commit violent offences, allowing a more focused allocation of resources to effectively target not only offenders for intervention, but situations and communities as well.

Effective interventions for offenders are tailored and rehabilitative rather than punitive

Punitive interventions, and especially incarceration, have been widely and consistently shown to be costly and ineffective means of reducing offending. Cognitive behavioural therapies (CBT) and multi-systemic therapies (MSTs) work with individual offenders to change their cognitive styles, improve empathy, understand the underlying reasons for their behaviour and change the everyday practices and interactions that are associated with their offending. They have been shown to reduce subsequent rates of offending by 20–30 per cent. MST incorporates CBT practices into a programme tailored to the individual offender that carries on beyond the individual therapeutic context to also work with those in the individual's wider social environment of family, school and peers to encourage and facilitate change in the individual and their social world. While there are ongoing questions and debates about the findings of the more positive MST evaluations, MST is considered by many to be one of the most effective non-punitive interventions for young offenders.

Careful piloting and evaluation in the UK will help clarify whether and how MST works to reduce subsequent offending.

Effective interventions in communities are multifaceted and have wide reach

Effective interventions to reduce violent crime in areas where violence is a problem acknowledge the multifaceted nature of crime. Such interventions involve police, community residents and other agencies to take account of local goals and needs as well as gaps in community capacity that may act as obstacles to offenders' desistance from crime. Working to overcome these barriers entails facilitating the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders into communities that provide better opportunities for employment, social support, community involvement and participation in shared moral codes. These interventions may focus on individual offenders and work their way out to the wider context, for example with post-release programmes. Or such interventions may start with a focus on communities with high rates of violent crime and seek to integrate stakeholders across the community in a coordinated effort to reduce violence.

Risk assessment, management and effective interventions could inform each other

There could be a constructive feedback loop in which risk management practices integrate lessons from effective interventions and from assessment tools that have been shown to have relatively good predictive validity for violent offenders such as the Violence Recidivism Appraisal Guide (VRAG). We found little evidence of coordination of information about what works for individual offenders or offender management with information about what works in communities or neighbourhoods with high rates of violent crime.

There is an evaluation deficit for many interventions and risk management practices

There are evidence-based interventions such as Resolve to Stop the Violence Project (RSVP) that have been evaluated and show promising initial results. However, caution should be taken over drawing firm conclusions from single studies and from the often disparate literature on reducing specifically violent offending. There are relatively few meta-analyses in this area, and relevant research from across the psychiatric, sociological, social psychological, economic and criminological literatures differs in approach and criteria for measuring success. Further, in many cases the transportability of effective interventions elsewhere to the UK context remains to be tested. However, initial evaluations of primarily US interventions and some programmes in other countries are informative, pointing to good practice and potentially useful lessons for UK programme development as well as for further evaluation.