

An inspection of how well the police tackle serious youth violence

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Summary

In 2018, the Home Office published its [Serious Violence Strategy](#), setting out its response to increases in knife crime, gun crime and homicide. It stated its approach wasn't focused on law enforcement alone, but "depends on partnerships across a number of sectors such as education, health, social services, housing, youth services and victim services".

The following year, the Home Office began funding violence reduction units (VRUs) in 18 parts of the country with high instances of violent crime.

How the police work with violence reduction units and partner organisations to reduce serious youth violence

There is some early evidence that points to VRUs reducing violent crime. In 2021, the Home Office carried out an [evaluation of VRUs](#). It estimated that, between April 2019 and September 2020, 41,377 violence without injury offences and 7,636 violence with injury offences were prevented in VRU areas, relative to non-funded areas.

VRUs were originally funded on an annual basis. This created difficulties as VRUs couldn't make long-term plans with any certainty. In 2022, the Home Office awarded VRUs a three-year funding grant, which has provided additional certainty.

We found that some VRUs and [community safety partnerships](#) didn't have a consistent approach to allocating resources for reducing serious youth violence. Although the Home Office requires all VRUs to conduct analysis into what is causing violence locally and create a strategy to prevent it, in some areas officers and staff told us of a scattergun approach to implementing serious youth violence interventions.

We found that some interventions weren't evaluated often enough or well enough, or, in some cases, at all. As a result, we have recommended that the Home Office should define processes for VRUs to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions.

We found that information-sharing arrangements were in place, and that VRUs had good relationships with voluntary and other organisations, including police. But in some areas, better communication between organisations would help bring about more effective partnership working, as would training for VRU officers and staff on working with partner organisations.

As well as inspecting ten force areas that each had a VRU, we also inspected two forces that didn't. In these two forces, we found that officers and staff worked with other organisations to reduce serious youth violence, but their work suffered from a lack of funding and training, and from less efficient information sharing. These forces and other organisations try to replicate some VRU approaches despite these limitations.

How well do police use their powers of enforcement to reduce serious youth violence, and do they understand racial disproportionality?

In all the forces we inspected, we found officers were receiving training to improve their understanding of, and confidence in, the use of stop and search powers. Since 2017/18, there has been a steady increase in police using stop and search powers in England and Wales. We will cover the police's use of stop and search powers more comprehensively in a [super-complaint report](#), which will be published in due course.

We found that the police didn't make full use of other relevant powers. [Section 34 of the Policing and Crime Act 2009](#) gives the police powers to apply for injunctions to prevent gang-related violence and drug dealing. These are known as [gang injunctions](#). But we found that some forces find applications for them too time consuming, bureaucratic and expensive. This discourages the police from using gang injunctions, even though recent research shows they can reduce offending.

Forces are working hard to build trust in their communities – for example, using stop and search scrutiny panels, youth assemblies and youth independent advisory groups. But the police may not always be reaching the right people. To do this, forces and other organisations may need to collaborate with people with recent experience of serious youth violence, and who may have more credibility with those peers still involved in it.

In its [framework for police recorded crime outcomes](#), the Home Office sets out how the police can conclude investigations. Not all investigations should lead to a prosecution. There are a range of different ways an investigation can conclude. One of these involves the suspect being diverted to a programme intended to reform them and prevent future offending. This is referred to as [outcome 22](#) and, in some circumstance its use is appropriate. We found that forces were starting to use this option in relation to serious youth violence, but some officers had a flawed understanding of it, which undermined its use in those forces. This may disproportionately affect young people from ethnic minority backgrounds and contribute to them being more likely to be prosecuted than their White counterparts.

Academic research and government statistics show that children and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds are at far greater risk from serious youth violence than their White counterparts. But some forces don't record or analyse [protected characteristics](#) data well enough, so they don't understand the extent of racial disproportionality in relation to serious youth violence. As a result, those forces can't make fully informed plans to address it.

How well do the police work with partner organisations and take a public health approach to serious youth violence?

[Section 8 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022](#) introduces the [serious violence duty](#). This legally requires the police and partner organisations to work together to analyse serious violence in their areas and make plans to respond to it. In the [statutory guidance](#), [responsible authorities](#) are encouraged to adopt the World Health Organisation's definition of a [public health approach](#), in which scientific evidence is used to identify causes of violence and possible interventions to prevent it.

We found that police were increasingly willing to share information with partner organisations. For example, they share information with health professionals to support those involved in serious youth violence. This includes referring young people for support. But we found that referrals relating to the mental health of children and young people often outstripped those organisations' resources.

Police can support children at risk of exclusion, but better communication is needed between police and schools

The *Serious Violence Strategy* recognises that school exclusion leads to an increased risk of victimisation and perpetration. This includes children being manipulated by criminal gangs and going on to be involved in serious violence. Forces and VRUs are working with schools to support children at risk of exclusion, but the relationships between these organisations would benefit from better communication. For example, some head teachers don't consult with police about pupils at risk of exclusion. This makes it difficult for police to support those children while in education or if they are excluded from school.

More evaluation is needed on the effectiveness of schools liaison officers

Police work with schools to reduce serious youth violence. One way of doing this is through schools liaison officers – police officers dedicated to supporting pupils and staff, helping to keep them safe and being trusted points of police contact.

We received a lot of positive feedback from independent advisory groups about the role of schools liaison officers, but we also heard concerns about them. The role of schools liaison officer hasn't been evaluated by the Home Office, the National Police Chiefs' Council or the College of Policing. We think it should be.

Introduction

About us

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) independently assesses the effectiveness and efficiency of police forces and fire and rescue services in England and Wales, in the public interest. In preparing our reports, we ask the questions that citizens would ask.

Background and context

In 2018, the Home Office published its [*Serious Violence Strategy*](#), setting out its response to increases in knife crime, gun crime and homicide. It stated its approach wasn't focused on law enforcement alone, but "depends on partnerships across a number of sectors such as education, health, social services, housing, youth services and victim services".

The following year, the Home Office provided funding for 18 violence reduction units (VRUs). (In some force areas, these units are known as violence reduction partnerships. In this report, we use the term violence reduction unit.)

Despite this, the lives of far too many children and young people in England and Wales are blighted or cut short by violence, especially knife-enabled crime.

Comparison of violent crime across different force areas is difficult due to changes in crime-recording and data-collection methods. However, knife-enabled crime isn't evenly spread across England and Wales. The highest numbers of these types of offences tend to be in metropolitan areas, while lower numbers are recorded in those forces that could be considered to be rural in nature. Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that, as of March 2021, the Metropolitan Police Service, West Midlands Police and Greater Manchester Police were the three force areas with the highest volume of knife-enabled crime.

In this report we highlight the issue of police forces failing to accurately record the ethnicity of victims and offenders. This makes the identification of those groups that are at more risk of knife-enabled crime difficult. However, government data shows that the chance of being a victim of homicide is six times higher for Black people than for White people.

Data also shows that children and young people have one of the highest rates of homicide and most homicide victims are male. In the year ending March 2021, there were 72 homicide victims who were killed using a knife/sharp instrument aged 16 to 24. This was 31 percent of all homicides for the year period. Nearly half of Black victims of this crime type were aged 16 to 24, compared to 21 percent of White victims who were aged 16 to 24.

And although children and young people are often victims of serious violence, they are also over-represented as perpetrators, particularly young males. In the 3 years to March 2021, 40 percent of all those convicted of homicide were males aged 16 to 24.

Our commission

At the request of the Home Office, we included the topic of serious youth violence in our [policing inspection programme and framework](#).

The full terms of reference for this inspection are set out in [Annex A](#). In this report, we will cover the following subjects:

- how the police work with VRUs and partner organisations to reduce serious youth violence;
- how well the police use their powers to reduce serious youth violence, and whether they understand racial disproportionality; and
- how well the police work with partner organisations and take a public health approach (see definition below) to serious youth violence.

Methodology

We secured support from [His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation](#) and [Ofsted](#). We inspected 12 police force areas – 10 with a VRU and, for contrast, 2 without. The methodology for this inspection is described in full detail in [Annex B](#).

We reviewed more than 300 documents provided by forces, VRUs and community safety partnerships.

Fieldwork for this inspection took place in January and February 2022, while pandemic-related guidance to restrict contact in the workplace was in place. We held remote video interviews and focus groups with relevant officers and staff, including:

- chief officers responsible for tackling serious youth violence;
- heads of VRUs;
- senior responsible officers appointed by [police and crime commissioners](#) to oversee VRUs; and
- senior managers in some partner organisations.

We also spoke to members of [independent advisory groups](#) that work with police forces.

We reviewed a sample of monitoring data submitted to the Home Office from the ten police force areas with VRUs that we inspected.

User Voice research

We also commissioned [User Voice](#) to interview some young people who had been both perpetrators and targets of serious youth violence. The charity conducted face-to-face interviews with 13 young people aged between 18 and 24, all of whom were in prison, young offender institutions or under probation supervision. The full findings from this research appear in [Annex C](#).

Conclusions in Annex C are those of the research author/s, not HMICFRS.

Definitions

Child

The [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) defines a child as anyone under the age of 18. We have used this definition in our inspection.

Youth or young person

The [United Nations defines youth](#) as anyone aged 15 to 24. We have used this definition in our inspection when referring to young people. We recognise the overlap between children and young people in these definitions.

Serious youth violence

We found no universally accepted definition of serious youth violence. We used the definition of youth above as a starting point to define serious youth violence, and we expanded it to include 14-year-olds.

Therefore, for the purposes of our inspection, we defined serious youth violence as any incident involving people aged 14 to 24 that included:

- violence causing serious injury or death;
- violence with the potential for causing serious injury or death; and/or
- carrying knives and/or other offensive weapons.

In the definition above, we deemed “involving” to mean those who had:

- been violent towards another person;
- carried knives and/or other offensive weapons; and/or
- been attacked and/or threatened by another child or young person.

1. How the police work with violence reduction units and partner organisations to reduce serious youth violence

In 2019, the Government introduced violence reduction units (VRUs) in 18 parts of the country with high instances of violent crime, initially providing £35m in funding.

In areas where there is no VRU, police forces and community safety partnerships (CSPs) remain responsible for reducing violent crime, including serious youth violence. These areas don't receive additional Home Office funding to address serious violence.

VRUs are intended to bring together police, local government, health, community leaders and other organisations to address violent crime by understanding its causes and responding in a co-ordinated way.

It is open to VRUs to set the geographical boundaries of their activity, but, generally, they reflect force areas, meaning they follow existing partnership structures in their areas, such as CSPs. Decisions relating to the operation of the VRU are the responsibility of all the local members, rather than the police alone.

By February 2021, VRUs had received £105m in funding. And in April 2022, the Home Office announced another £64m, to support the existing 18 VRUs and establishing 2 new units. In 2022, the Government provided three-year grant agreements running until March 2025.

There is some early evidence that points to VRUs reducing violent crime. In 2021, the Home Office carried out an [evaluation of VRUs](#). It estimated that, between April 2019 and September 2020, 41,377 violence without injury offences and 7,636 violence with injury offences were prevented in VRU areas, relative to non-funded areas.

The organisation and structure of violence reduction units

The funding arrangements for VRUs have been made longer-term but may benefit from further simplification

VRUs were originally funded on an annual basis by the Home Office. This created difficulties as VRUs couldn't make long-term plans with any certainty. In 2022, the Home Office awarded VRUs a three-year grant agreement. This has allowed VRUs to make longer-term plans.

VRUs must apply to the Home Office for their funding. The application process to secure this funding includes the completion of three documents:

- a strategic needs assessment, which should include data relating to serious violence from all partner organisations, to demonstrate a shared understanding of what the root causes of violence locally are;
- a response strategy, which should set out what activity the partner organisations have decided to carry out to deal with those causes of violence; and
- a delivery plan submitted prior to the start of each financial year. This should summarise each intervention the VRU plans to provide. The Home Office told us that it must approve the plan before the VRU can be awarded funding.

The application process also requires VRUs to match part of the allocation from the Home Office with funding from other sources. They must match 10 percent of the allocation in the first year, 15 percent in the second year and 20 percent in the third year. The Home Office doesn't stipulate where this proportion of funding should come from. Instead, VRUs must negotiate with partner organisations to identify and secure funding from them.

The Home Office told us that the requirement to provide the three documents enabled it to restrict and direct the funding of VRUs. In 2021, a Home Office evaluation of VRUs found that they had improved the way they match strategic needs assessments (the way they determine the needs of local communities) to response plans (the way they plan to respond to those needs).

VRUs can apply for other sources of funding, which are open to applications from various organisations. In some cases, organisations within the same VRU independently apply for funding with little or no consultation. This can create confusion and inefficiency.

For example, senior leaders in one VRU told us a partner organisation had received £3m in direct government funding to address serious youth violence in schools. The VRU didn't know about it and was planning its own response to address the problem. The senior leaders welcomed the funding, but they pointed out that, as it hadn't been allocated through the VRU, it risked duplicating work and creating confusion among staff involved in similar projects.

A senior official from the police and crime commissioner's office in this force area also expressed frustrations and suggested that the multiple sources of funding made matters unnecessarily complicated.

Some VRUs' partnership arrangements work well to reduce serious youth violence, but in other VRUs these arrangements lack a coherent approach

Although all VRUs follow the borders of their local police force, they vary in size, structure and the involvement of different organisations.

In the VRU covering the Metropolitan Police Service area, we found extensive partnership arrangements for addressing serious youth violence. These arrangements include:

- a youth crime management board;
- a missing and exploited [children and young people] team;
- a multi-agency child exploitation team;
- an extra-familial harm panel; and
- other forums bringing together police and partner organisations.

Many of those working in this VRU were appointed from existing partnership structures, so many of the information-sharing arrangements needed for this kind of work were already well established.

But in some other areas, we found officers and staff didn't fully understand their own or the VRU staff's roles and responsibilities in reducing serious youth violence. Worryingly, in one force this included those working in child protection roles.

For example, some officers and staff told us their VRU's terms of reference and objectives weren't well publicised internally. This meant those officers and staff didn't understand how their role contributed to the VRU's overall plan to reduce serious youth violence. It also meant they didn't know how the VRU could support them to carry out their tasks.

Complex local government structures can be a barrier to police and partner organisations working effectively to reduce serious youth violence

To varying degrees, VRUs benefit from existing local arrangements such as CSPs. These organisations are run by councils. And because local government structures can be complex, VRU staff often need to manage relationships with multiple CSPs.

In some areas, representatives from CSPs attended VRU meetings. This helped them collaborate effectively and share resources. But in other areas, CSPs didn't collaborate directly with VRUs. In these cases, VRUs tended to use a 'hub-and-spoke' model. This meant the central VRU acted as the hub, while smaller divisions of the units, working together with local authority structures (including CSPs), acted as the spokes. We found that, in these VRUs, the hub sometimes had weaker

relationships with CSPs and, consequently, less of an influence on them. Some officers and staff from the hubs of these VRUs told us this resulted in CSPs being less likely to co-ordinate efforts with them or share resources.

In one area, a focus group of partner organisations in a hub-and-spoke VRU told us the highly complex local government arrangements presented barriers to co-operation. Because individual CSPs wouldn't routinely work closely with each other, there was very little chance of the VRU being able to establish a consistent intervention to reduce serious youth violence across the force area.

Officers and staff from another VRU told us their hub had little influence over the activities carried out by the spokes, which were more closely affiliated to, and directed by, the local CSP. As a result, that hub had no consistent approach to reducing serious youth violence, leading to disjointed working arrangements.

Violence reduction units' approaches and processes

VRUs don't have a consistent approach for assessing emerging threats and allocating resources to reduce serious youth violence

The Home Office requires VRUs to produce a strategic needs assessment, a response strategy and an annual delivery plan. In these documents, VRUs must demonstrate a link between serious violence in their areas and what they plan to do in response.

Although the Home Office requires VRUs to develop their strategic analysis and responses, sometimes this isn't reflected in day-to-day activity. In some VRUs, there is a formal commissioning process for all interventions intended to reduce serious youth violence. But in others, funds are allocated to smaller projects without sufficient evidence or analysis to suggest that they would work or represent value for money.

This means that interventions can be funded and implemented without any reference to identified priorities. We assessed that VRUs would benefit from taking a more consistent, rigorous approach in the way they assess emerging threats and risks; and develop and review tactical plans to counter them. As a result, there would be stronger evidence to support their use.

To address serious youth crime effectively, VRUs need to understand the specific issue they are seeking to resolve before allocating resources. In some areas we found VRUs' priorities and aims weren't made clear internally. In these areas, officers and staff told us of a 'scattergun' approach to implementing serious youth violence interventions.

We found examples of VRUs inviting bids for funding even though the eligibility criteria were unclear, and the objectives hadn't been defined.

These VRUs allowed applications from a wide range of organisations. In some cases, we found VRU staff struggled to provide any evidence that demonstrated the link to reducing violence or the justification for allocating resources.

Youth Endowment Fund

The [Youth Endowment Fund \(YEF\)](#) charity was set up in 2019, with a ten-year mandate from the Home Office to develop and evaluate interventions to reduce violence involving children and young people. The YEF has created an [online toolkit](#) for police forces, VRUs and other organisations, summarising and assessing 18 different approaches to preventing serious youth violence. VRUs are required to allocate a minimum of 20 percent of their annual Home Office grant to interventions assessed by the YEF as having a high impact on violent crime. At the time of our inspection, these interventions included:

- [focused deterrence](#);
- [trauma-specific therapies](#);
- [sports programmes](#);
- [accident and emergency navigators](#);
- [social skills training](#); and
- [cognitive behavioural therapy](#).

VRU personnel we interviewed rarely made reference to this requirement.

There aren't consistent processes for evaluating activity

We found that some interventions weren't evaluated often enough or well enough, or, in some cases, at all. In almost half of the forces that we visited (including those without a VRU), there weren't consistent processes for monitoring and evaluating activity. This means that some VRUs can't fully understand if their actions are reducing violent crime in their communities. However, in other VRUs, we did find evidence of independent evaluation.

For example, Liverpool John Moores University has close links to the Merseyside VRU and has published [evaluations of the unit's work](#). One evaluation was critical of the VRU's decision to stop funding an intervention project. The funding was reinstated. At the time of our fieldwork, some other VRUs were building similar links with Liverpool John Moores University or a local university. We recognise that this level of evaluation is both time-consuming and expensive, and is often not proportionate to the activity that has taken place. Nevertheless, consistent monitoring should be carried out for each intervention to allow for an assessment of its effectiveness.

The 2021 Home Office evaluation of VRUs recommended that they improve the quality of "intervention monitoring data" (data concerning the VRUs' activities, effect and cost).

Our inspection resulted in a similar finding. To secure such an improvement, VRUs would need to adopt consistent processes for assessment and evaluation. But first, these processes need to be defined.

Recommendation 1

By 31 March 2024, the Home Office should define processes for violence reduction units to use when evaluating the effectiveness of interventions designed to reduce serious youth violence.

VRUs aren't consistently sharing learning

Forums for sharing learning are generally well established in the partner organisations represented in VRUs. However, these forums are mainly focused on interventions that are considered to have been successful.

Interventions that didn't achieve their objectives, or had unintended consequences, are rarely discussed. But evaluation of these flawed interventions can still have value in preventing other VRUs making similar plans and wasting resources. VRUs should also share information on unsuccessful projects, so other units can avoid wasting resources. A leader in one VRU told us: "I want to hear how forces have learned. I'm willing to share our warts with others if they do the same."

Recommendation 2

By 31 March 2024, the Home Office should further develop existing joint evaluation and learning for violence reduction units to share learning with each other.

VRUs are building positive relationships with voluntary organisations, but more work is needed

Most of the voluntary organisations we spoke to were positive about their relationship with their local VRU. Their representatives attended relevant VRU meetings and contributed to the unit's work.

A representative from a voluntary organisation in one police area told us that, before the VRU was set up, it had been difficult for their organisation to get involved in addressing serious youth violence.

Involving voluntary organisations in VRUs can benefit other partners in the unit. Representatives from these organisations told us they often had high levels of trust among people in the community. Police and other partner organisations in the VRU can benefit from this. Some representatives said they saw the role as a bridge between service users and statutory agencies.

All VRUs have information-sharing arrangements between partner organisations, but some need to share information more effectively

In our 2019 county lines report, [Both sides of the coin](#), we found that barriers to sharing information undermined effective partnership working. In this inspection, we were pleased to find that many officers and staff described a better situation. All the VRUs we inspected had information-sharing arrangements in place, allowing partner organisations to share information with each other. The 2021 Home Office evaluation also found VRUs had improved the way they shared information between partners.

But some VRUs still need to work on how quickly they can share information in a way that is accessible to all partner organisations. Analytical staff in VRUs repeatedly told us that information they received was often out of date. This is particularly a problem in fast-changing situations, such as when a VRU is trying to understand levels of tension between youth gangs.

VRUs generally have good relationships with police forces, but some areas would benefit from better communication

We found VRUs and police forces generally had good working relationships. Officers and staff in VRUs told us about their forces' activities to tackle serious youth violence. Often these were part of larger, multi-agency plans co-ordinated by the VRU.

In the Metropolitan Police Service area, Disrupt and Deter is an enforcement and diversion campaign that has resulted in police recovering firearms and knives. It is part of a long-term intervention run by the local CSP to reduce violence affecting young people. Various organisations meet monthly, meaning the local authority can plan action that complements enforcement activity. To help manage sensitivities in the community, police discussed their planned use of stop and search with the [independent advisory group](#) before carrying out the campaign. The effective planning and communication between the force, VRU and CSP contributed to its success.

In the South Wales Police area, officers told us about a [county lines](#) disruption operation to intercept a 14-year-old child using the rail network for the transportation of drugs. Following the arrest, social services staff, working as part of the VRU, collaborated with investigating officers to put in place an immediate safeguarding plan for the child.

Conversely, in another VRU, staff said relationships with the area's police force were "fragmented". They said that was because they had no single point of contact in the force. In this area, the VRU operated under the hub-and-spoke model. Our inspection showed that this model – if not managed effectively – can present a barrier to effective partnership working.

Officers and staff in VRUs need consistent training in the processes and principles that are known to help reduce serious youth violence

We didn't find any evidence that VRU staff were receiving training in partnership working and how the different organisations contained in a VRU should work together. Instead, we found that some leaders in VRUs made assumptions about the training officers and staff had received from their parent organisations.

Several officers and staff told us they had received no training in what was expected of them as members of the VRU and didn't have protocols for working together.

As well as inspecting the VRUs in ten police force areas, we also inspected two forces where there was no VRU. (Since our inspection, a VRU has been created to cover the Cleveland Police area.) As part of our analysis of how effective and efficient VRUs are at reducing serious youth violence, we needed to compare their approaches and results with those in force areas without VRUs.

The Home Office set up VRUs in force areas with high instances of violent crime. We took this into consideration in our analysis.

In these two force areas, we found attempts to replicate some VRU approaches, but this often involved officers and staff (in the forces and in other organisations) carrying out work on top of their normal duties.

We considered how these forces:

- worked with other organisations to reduce serious youth violence;
- shared information with other organisations;
- evaluated their interventions to reduce serious youth violence; and
- trained officers and staff to deal with serious youth violence.

Forces in areas without VRUs work with partner organisations to reduce serious youth violence, but lack of funding can be a problem

In areas where there is no VRU, police forces and CSPs are responsible for reducing violent crime, including serious youth violence.

CSPs don't receive the additional Home Office funding to address serious violence. In the two force areas we inspected, police and partner organisations carried out activities intended to reduce serious youth violence in addition to their normal roles.

But officers and staff weren't confident their activities would have meaningful results. For example, response officers were expected to support high-profile patrol operations in areas negatively affected by serious youth violence, but they were also expected to continue with their response role. As a result, they couldn't guarantee they would be available to take part in the operation.

Officers and staff in these two force areas had the will to address serious youth violence. But they reported problems.

For example, we were told that a CSP had brought in a specialist health advisor to design a public health approach to tackling serious youth violence in the area. However, the plan was reliant on one individual who was diverted to other duties during the pandemic. At the time of our inspection, that individual hadn't returned to the role and, without commitment from senior leaders to providing resources, the CSP's plans had been halted.

In force areas without a VRU, police and other organisations share information less efficiently

In both forces we inspected, we found police and partner organisations weren't as efficient at sharing information with each other, in comparison with those in areas with VRUs.

In one of these forces, a senior officer told us the force didn't have any access to data from partners.

Both forces referred children and young people at risk of further involvement in serious youth violence to other organisations. But those organisations didn't have enough capacity to deal with the volume of cases and their work wasn't always co-ordinated with that of the police.

For example, probation service staff in one of these force areas told us they weren't fully aware of the current intelligence situation for county lines activity locally. This meant they couldn't co-ordinate with police to respond quickly to safeguarding needs that arose from police operations.

Forces in areas without VRUs don't fully evaluate their activities to reduce serious youth violence

We didn't find any evidence of either force evaluating its activities to reduce serious youth violence. Representatives from some partner organisations told us measures to address serious youth violence weren't assessed at all. And when asked about how their force measured performance in relation to serious youth violence, an analyst from one force told us: "We've never been commissioned to do it."

Police and staff from partner organisations in force areas without VRUs don't receive enough training to effectively reduce serious youth violence

In the two force areas, police officers and staff in partnership organisations didn't receive any consistent training in reducing serious violent crime, including serious youth violence.

In one of these forces, schools liaison officers had received some awareness training in the trauma-informed approach (see [chapter 3](#)), county lines and child exploitation. And we were told some neighbourhood officers had received training in how to make referrals to partner organisations. But we didn't find any other evidence of training specific to serious youth violence.

2. How well do police use their powers to reduce serious youth violence, and do they understand racial disproportionality?

In this chapter we consider how well police use these powers and responsibilities to reduce serious youth violence.

Some forces are using intelligence to support their approach to serious youth violence. But more work is needed, particularly in the way police understand their responsibility to use diversion instead of prosecution to conclude certain investigations. We also found that police in many forces still weren't recording ethnicity data well enough, which was preventing them from understanding the full extent of racial disproportionality in serious youth violence.

Police adopt an intelligence-led approach to preventing serious youth violence, but the quality of the data and analysis varies

In all the force areas we inspected, police reviewed intelligence about serious youth violence at regular meetings. They used this to prioritise police operations. But the quality of intelligence, data and analysis varied.

The Metropolitan Police Service uses a system called Insight to analyse intelligence about offenders, victims and locations. The system automatically updates five times a day, drawing information from the force's other systems. It helps the force understand the threat from serious youth violence and deploy resources and tactics accordingly.

We also saw evidence that some forces were using the [Grip](#) initiative, funded by the Home Office to provide high-visibility patrols in high-crime areas. These forces used Grip patrols to complement other interventions to address serious youth violence, rather than as a single approach.

In South Wales, officers from the force used data analysis to show that serious youth violence on the Swansea beachfront was a seasonal problem, often corresponding with the end of school exam periods. This analysis has allowed them to patrol the area at the right times and enforce restrictions on under-age alcohol sales. The force told us the operation had reduced serious youth violence. But it may be even more effective and efficient in the long term if the force and the violence reduction unit

(VRU) work with partner organisations from the community to divert young people into other activities.

Conversely, one force lacked data and high-quality analysis of serious youth violence, resulting in a poor understanding of the causes. Prior to the lifting of pandemic-related restrictions in 2021, the force hadn't analysed locally held intelligence on youth gangs; it had only prepared for an increase in violence relating to the night-time economy including domestic abuse. This meant it didn't anticipate the surge in gang-related serious youth violence it experienced.

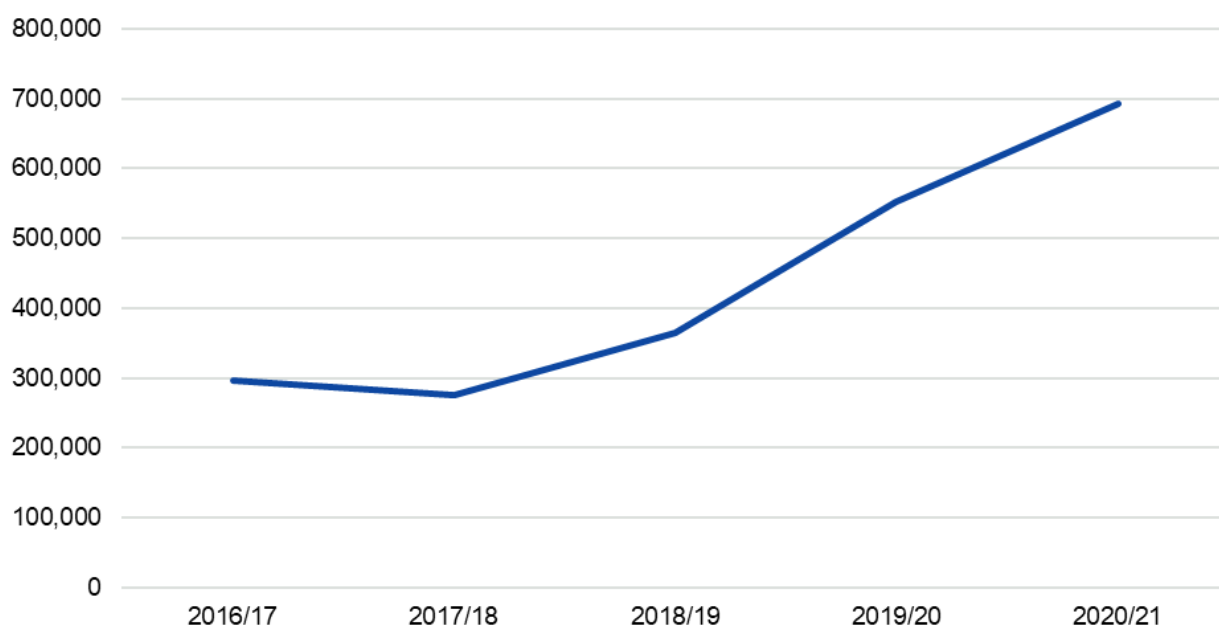
Forces are training officers to use stop and search powers

Police can use [stop and search powers](#) under [section 1 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984](#) or [section 23 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971](#) if they have reasonable grounds to suspect they will find offensive weapons or controlled drugs. They can use these powers to help prevent crimes taking place, including serious youth violence.

In all the forces we inspected, we found officers were receiving training to improve their understanding of, and confidence in, the use of stop and search powers. For example, the Metropolitan Police Service uses role-play scenarios and other techniques to help officers understand how to use these powers respectfully.

Home Office data shows a steady increase in officers using stop and search powers since 2017/18.

Figure 1: Stop and searches under section 1 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 and section 23 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 over time in England and Wales



Source: Home Office

[Section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994](#) allows officers to search people – without grounds for suspicion – for offensive weapons or dangerous instruments. Often this follows a violent incident, or if police expect violence to take place.

Senior officers in some force areas told us their force didn't use section 60 stop and search powers at all. Instead, they relied on section 1 stop and search powers. They said they would use section 60 powers, however, if the circumstances required it. This is reflected in [Home Office data](#), which shows that in the year to March 2021, section 60 stop and searches made up just 1.3 percent of all instances of stop and search.

We will cover the police's use of stop and search powers more comprehensively in a [super-complaint report](#), which will be published in due course.

Gang injunctions may help reduce serious youth violence, but the capacity needed for applying means some forces don't use them

[Section 34 of the Policing and Crime Act 2009](#) gives the police powers to apply for injunctions to prevent gang-related violence and drug dealing. These are known as [gang injunctions](#). They can be a useful tool in managing serious youth violence and recent [research from Merseyside](#) indicates they can reduce offending and levels of harm.

A 2014 [Home Office review](#) found that practical challenges could be preventing forces from realising the full value of gang injunctions. Our inspection suggests this is still the case. Of the 12 forces we inspected, only 5 had used gang injunctions. A senior officer in one force said they hadn't used gang injunctions since March 2021 as the applications were too time consuming, bureaucratic and expensive.

We examined a gang injunction that had been obtained by the Metropolitan Police Service in 2021. The application contained 319 pages, including photographs, maps and excerpts from police reports.

Serious violence reduction orders will be piloted, giving police new powers to look for offensive weapons

The Government has introduced serious violence reduction orders (SVROs) under [section 165 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022](#). SVROs will give police officers the power to stop and search a person subject to an order, so they can look for knives or other offensive weapons. The orders will apply to those aged 18 and over.

SVROs were to be piloted in four force areas before a decision was made as to whether to use them throughout England and Wales. At the time of our inspection, the pilot hadn't begun.

The Metropolitan Police Service is piloting knife crime prevention orders

[Knife crime prevention orders \(KCPOs\)](#) were introduced in [part 2 of the Offensive Weapons Act 2019](#). They are civil orders, which a court may impose on anyone aged 12 or over who is known to be regularly carrying a knife or is convicted of a knife-related offence. They allow early intervention to help divert people from violence. KCPOs may include conditions such as curfews and not associating with particular people, and positive interventions such as attending educational courses or participating in sports.

At the time of our inspection, the Metropolitan Police Service was the only force using KCPOs. The force started a pilot in July 2021, which was to run for 14 months. In March 2022, the [Mayor of London's Office confirmed](#) that 36 KCPOs had been granted 8 months into the pilot. University College London and the University of Cambridge are [assessing the impact of KCPOs](#).

Engagement and use of police powers to prevent serious youth violence

Police are working to build trust in communities as part of their work to reduce serious youth violence, but they may not always be listening to the right people.

Our inspection showed that police carried out varied activities to build trust and relationships with the communities they serve, and that many of these were specifically designed to reduce serious youth violence.

In the West Midlands police area, the PCC had set up ten stop and search scrutiny panels, made up of members of the public who reflected the demographics of local communities. These people analysed stop and search records, and viewed body-worn video to check police were following the right procedures. The aim was to show police were listening to people's concerns and were carrying out stop and search fairly.

In the same police area, the VRU has carried out work to prevent serious youth violence by setting up youth assemblies – groups of young people who have experienced violence. The aim is to find out their views and learn how violence affected their lives.

Gloucestershire Constabulary has set up a youth independent advisory group (IAG), with the purpose of improving community links to reduce serious youth violence and other crime. When we inspected, this was a new initiative intervention and it was yet to be evaluated, but members of the existing IAG told us that the force's work in this area was improving levels of trust in the police.

But police may not always be listening to the right people. Officers in some force areas told us of frequent community meetings, where they explained police actions, offered reassurance and built trust. While these are useful activities, they recognised that vulnerable, alienated and at-risk people, including young people involved in serious violence, aren't likely to attend these meetings.

IAG members and youth justice service staff from more than one force area told us that, even though they had expertise on serious youth violence, police weren't making the most of it. And in another force area, an IAG member said some police officers lacked "cultural competence" – that is, they don't know how to interact effectively with people from other cultures. They said this made it particularly hard for officers to build relationships.

In Hampshire, the VRU commissioned a YouGov survey with the aim of learning more about serious youth violence in the force area. But one senior member of the VRU told us that in their opinion, the survey hadn't reached the right people.

Some of the 13 young people interviewed by User Voice said they felt a greater connection with people who had experienced serious youth violence themselves. They saw these people as more credible mentors than those who hadn't had that experience. One interviewee told us:

"[You] need some type of lived experience. You have no idea what my life's like. You have no idea what's gone on in my world. You have no idea what I go through on a day-to-day basis. And you think you can pop up on me on a fortnightly basis and you're going to benefit my life? You're not."

Better engagement may involve collaborating with people with experience of serious youth violence. Revolving Doors, for example, is a charity that aims to break the cycle of crisis and crime, using volunteers with experience of serious youth violence. Children and young people at risk of serious youth violence may accept these volunteers as more credible influencers than older professionals.

The responsibility to conclude investigations of serious youth violence

Forces are starting to use outcome 22 in relation to serious youth violence, but some officers have a flawed understanding of it

In its [framework for police recorded crime outcomes](#), the Home Office sets out how the police can conclude investigations. Not all investigations should lead to a prosecution. There are a range of ways an investigation can conclude, one of which is with the suspect being diverted to a programme intended to reform them and prevent future offending. This is referred to as [outcome 22](#).

In 2019, outcome 22 was introduced. It allows police to divert people from crime and improve their life chances. The Home Office defines outcome 22 as when: “diversionary, educational or intervention activity, resulting from the crime report, has been undertaken and it is not in the public interest to take any further action”.

Police can refer suspects, including young people, to statutory and voluntary organisations through schemes often supported by [youth offending teams](#).

In our inspection, some force leaders told us they were starting to use outcome 22 to avoid criminalising some young people found carrying knives. In the right circumstances, its use in this way is appropriate. This doesn’t mean that outcome 22 should be liberally applied to knife crime.

The Crown Prosecution Service and National Police Chiefs’ Council [Guidelines on the cautioning and charging of knife crime offences](#) makes it explicit that an outcome other than a charge would be in exceptional circumstances. Among children who have committed first-time or low-level offences, [evidence from the Youth Endowment Fund](#) suggests diverting them from the formal youth justice system has a moderate impact on violent crime.

But officers in more than one force, including some in senior leadership roles, told us they could only use outcome 22 when the suspect had admitted the offence (as is the case for a police caution). This is incorrect. Although police must be able to show it isn’t in the public interest to prosecute, the suspect doesn’t have to accept responsibility for the offence for police to use outcome 22.

Evidence shows that young men from a Black, Asian or ethnic minority background are more likely to enter a not guilty plea in court, compared to their White counterparts. The Government-commissioned, independent [Lammy review](#) concluded that this is because many don’t trust the advice of their solicitors, or that the criminal justice system will keep promises of less punitive treatment in return for admissions of guilt. This suggests suspects from ethnic minority backgrounds are also less likely to admit guilt in interview. Indeed, the review states that young Black men often respond to their arrest with a ‘no comment’ interview in a police station, before entering a not guilty plea.

As a result, officers’ flawed understanding of outcome 22 may disproportionately affect young people from ethnic minority backgrounds and contribute to these young people being more likely to be prosecuted than their White counterparts.

Recommendation 3

By 31 March 2024, chief constables should make sure their officers are trained in the use of Home Office crime [outcome 22](#).

Racial disproportionality in serious youth violence

Some forces don't fully understand the extent of racial disproportionality in serious youth violence in their areas

[Ministry of Justice statistics](#) from 2020 on ethnicity and the criminal justice system indicate that people from ethnic minority backgrounds are over-represented at many stages of the criminal justice system, in comparison to the ethnic breakdown of the population of England and Wales.

Over-representation of people from ethnic minority backgrounds is also apparent in serious youth violence. Academic research and government statistics show that children and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds are at far greater risk of becoming victims of serious youth violence than White children and young people. Young Black males are at particularly high risk. For example, a 2020 academic study, [Racial Disparities in Homicide Victimisation Rates](#), found that the most recent homicide rate for people aged 16 to 24 was twenty-four times higher for Black people than for White people. See [Annex D](#) for a more detailed explanation of the data.

Despite this, some forces don't understand the extent of racial disproportionality in serious youth violence in their areas well enough to make fully informed plans to address it.

For example, one VRU collected data on demographics and risk factors such as drug misuse, truancy and exclusion, but we found it hadn't analysed the data fully. Leaders from the VRU accepted they didn't have a sufficiently well-informed understanding of the prevalence of these risk factors for serious violence among children and young people from all ethnic groups.

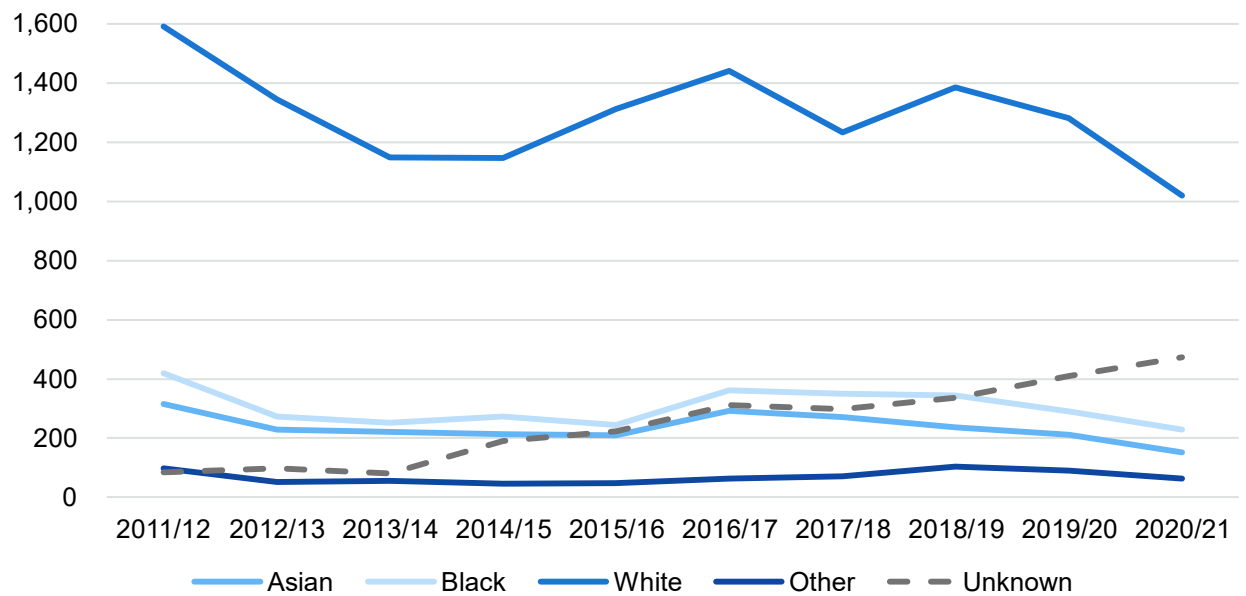
In another force area, a focus group of youth justice and probation services staff told us they were aware that disproportionality existed nationally but were unaware of the local situation. And in a different force area, an officer told us the force didn't collect complete ethnicity data on serious youth violence so couldn't present an accurate picture of any disproportionality.

Some forces still aren't recording ethnicity detail well enough in crime reports

When crime reports lack ethnicity data, forces are less able to accurately analyse the extent of racial disproportionality in their area. In our inspection, a senior officer told us that their force didn't record ethnicity for 15 percent of victims and for 3 percent of offenders, and that sometimes ethnicity was recorded inaccurately.

As an example, missing ethnicity data could mask important trends in the data for victims aged 25 and under of firearms offences (excluding those involving air weapons). Where ethnicity is known, the number of recorded victims from each ethnic group reduced between 2012 and 2021. Over the same period, the number of recorded victims from an unknown ethnic group had increased from 84 to 473.

Figure 2: Police recorded firearms (excluding air weapons) offence victims aged 25 and under in England and Wales, by ethnicity, 2011–21



Source: Home Office

Figure 2 above suggests that, since 2016/17, apparent reductions in the number of victims from each ethnic group may be nothing more than a decrease in ethnicity recording, not real reductions in the number of victims from each background. In 2020/21, 24 percent of victims of firearms (excluding air weapons) didn't have a recorded ethnic group.

We have commented on this lack of understanding of ethnicity data before, in individual [police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy](#) and thematic reports.

In 2021, we raised the point in our [Joint thematic inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service's response to rape](#). The report made the following recommendation: "Immediately, police forces should ensure information on the [protected characteristics](#) of rape victims is accurately and consistently recorded."

In the same year, in our [Police response to violence against women and girls](#) report, we highlighted a gap in the information forces recorded on the protected characteristics of crime victims. This included large gaps in their ethnicity data. That inspection found that in one force area, "50 percent of cases had no self-defined ethnicity information recorded, while the best performing force only had this recorded in 65 percent of cases". During that inspection, we were told that one reason this important information was missing was because race and other protected characteristics weren't mandatory fields on the crime reporting systems.

Our findings in this inspection were consistent with our earlier ones. That is, forces weren't recording [protected characteristics](#) of victims well enough. This meant they couldn't adequately assess and address any racial disproportionality in serious youth violence, or other areas of crime, in their communities.

As a result, we are compelled to repeat the recommendation made in the *Police response to violence against women and girls* report.

“By March 2022, all police forces should ensure information on the protected characteristics of victims is accurately and consistently recorded.”

[Police response to violence against women and girls](#), HMICFRS, September 2021

Recommendation 4

By 31 March 2024, chief constables should make sure their forces, through data collection and analysis, understand the levels of racial disproportionality in serious youth violence in their force areas.

3. How well do the police work with partner organisations to take a public health approach to serious youth violence?

To reduce serious youth violence, police need strong partnerships with organisations involved in education, health, social services, housing, probation, youth offending services and victim services. The [Serious Violence Strategy](#) makes this clear: “Our overarching message is that tackling serious violence is not a law enforcement issue alone. It requires a multiple-strand approach involving a range of partners across different sectors.”

[Section 8 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022](#) introduces the [serious violence duty](#). This legally requires the police and partner organisations to work together to analyse serious violence in their areas and make plans to respond to it. In the [statutory guidance](#), responsible authorities are encouraged to adopt the World Health Organisation’s definition of a [public health approach](#), in which scientific evidence is used to identify its causes and possible interventions to prevent it. It has four stages:

1. Surveillance: define the problem through collecting information and data about violence.
2. Identify risk and protective factors: use research to assess the causes of violence, what is linked to it, risk factors for violence and where interventions could be effective.
3. Develop and evaluate interventions: find out what works in preventing violence by designing, implementing and evaluating interventions.
4. Implement effective interventions: also monitor the effects of these interventions on risk factors and evaluate their impact and cost-effectiveness.

The College of Policing has also developed its [approach to public health](#) as part of a joint commitment with Public Health England and the National Police Chiefs’ Council. The approach involves police working with communities and other organisations to prevent and understand the causes of crime. This is relatively new to police forces, so not all officers are aware of it.

In this chapter we analyse how well police forces and partner organisations including violence reduction units (VRUs) are taking a public health approach to reducing serious youth violence.

Implementing a public health approach

More effective partnerships consider the factors that contribute to serious youth violence

When allocating resources, partnerships and VRUs should consider all the factors that contribute to serious youth violence, including living in poverty.

For example, the VRU for the Merseyside Police area recognised that hotspots for serious youth violence corresponded with data from the [English indices of deprivation](#). It used this knowledge to help it allocate the right resources and to address serious youth violence in the context of living in poverty. Senior leaders in Merseyside made it clear they saw a strong link between poverty and crime there.

And most of the 13 young people interviewed by User Voice said they came from disadvantaged backgrounds, where crime was considered the norm. They said they got involved in gangs to make money. One interviewee told us:

“People come from poverty. They don’t know how to get a job. Sometimes they get roped into it.”

The Merseyside VRU included representation from the Department for Work and Pensions. This helped to support children and young people living in poverty. The VRU supported an intervention that encouraged young people involved in serious youth violence to join a boxing gym, then co-ordinated with the Department for Work and Pensions to help them get stable employment in the construction industry.

We welcome this considered and focused approach. Similarly, the VRU in the Nottinghamshire Police area took a long-term approach to commissioning services with the aim of reducing serious youth crime.

Police generally identify vulnerability and take safeguarding measures, but they need to be more aware of vulnerable children and young people involved in crime

Officers are generally aware of victims’ and witnesses’ vulnerabilities. But they don’t always identify vulnerability in those accused of criminality. Improving officers’ awareness about safeguarding children and young people – even when suspected of crimes – is likely to help prevent these children and young people from becoming victims of violence.

Throughout the criminal justice process, children and young people involved in crime can be at risk from criminal exploiters and gang rivals. We found forces didn’t always

identify this type of vulnerability or take safeguarding measures to protect these children and young people.

In one force, a senior officer recognised that diversion should form part of the safeguarding plan for any young person charged with violent offences, but the force was poor at doing that. They suggested that the risk assessment process on the force's case management system should prompt this consideration, but the system wasn't programmed to do so.

Police in some force areas are working with partner organisations to take a trauma-informed approach to serious youth violence

The *Serious Violence Strategy* says adverse childhood experiences increase the likelihood of a person "becoming a victim, becoming violent, becoming involved with hard drugs and excess alcohol and ending up in prison." These experiences might include childhood neglect, abuse, parental criminality and parental substance misuse. The strategy says adverse childhood experiences may need a new approach, underpinned by increased collaboration. Police and partner organisations often refer to this as a trauma-informed approach.

In July 2021, the Home Office announced it was [investing £17m in interventions to reduce serious youth violence](#), including training in the trauma-informed approach for frontline professionals. One example of this was in the Hampshire VRU, where personnel were trained in this approach.

Another was in the West Midlands Police area, where the VRU trained all force custody staff in the approach. VRU personnel told us they intended to broaden this training to a wider group of officers.

We recognise that the police's use of the trauma-informed approach is still at an early stage. And, at the time of our inspection, the approach was still being evaluated by the Home Office and hadn't been fully adopted in all the forces and VRUs that we visited.

How police work with education, health and other partner organisations

Police are increasingly willing to share information with partners

Our inspection showed police were consulting with partner organisations and communities to help build a consensus on how they should work to reduce serious youth violence. This involved talking to partner organisations about how they could add value to police operations. Although police needed to keep certain information confidential (such as advance notification of times and locations of police operations), they were willing to share information with partners and community contacts.

Police can support children at risk of exclusion, but better communication is needed between police and schools

The *Serious Violence Strategy* cites evidence showing that school exclusion leads to an increased risk of victimisation and perpetration. This includes being manipulated by criminal gangs and going on to be involved in serious violence.

In the Lancashire Police area, the VRU funded a pilot involving nine football clubs' community foundations, focusing on children at risk of being excluded from school. Officers told us it had resulted in a marked reduction in young people being excluded, and that it had helped children build self-esteem. In Northumbria, there is a similar project called YOLO (You Only Live Once) that works with young people aged 8 to 14 who are at risk of being drawn into knife crime or violent crime. The project aims to help them make positive life choices that divert them from crime and provides opportunities for their future. These include the provision of school-related support by the Newcastle United Foundation and Foundation of Light. And in the South Wales Police area, the VRU spent £500,000 in a financial year on intervention schemes involving more than 5,000 school pupils. Keeping children in mainstream education makes them less readily available to criminals who might exploit them, but these schemes need to be formally evaluated.

In some schools, head teachers don't routinely consult police as part of their decisions to exclude children. Instead, they inform schools liaison officers after the child has been excluded. There is no Department for Education guidance stating head teachers should consult police on exclusions, but in these cases police often find it harder to support children after the exclusion.

More evaluation is needed on the effectiveness of schools liaison officers

Police work with schools to reduce serious youth violence. One way of doing this is through schools liaison officers – police officers dedicated to supporting pupils and staff, helping to keep them safe and being trusted points of police contact.

The 2018 [Youth Voice Survey](#) found that, in London, children and young people were generally willing for police to engage with their schools.

But we heard of some head teachers resisting having police officers in schools. Some were willing to have liaison officers visit their schools, but not in police uniform.

The [Youth Endowment Fund toolkit](#) says there isn't enough evidence yet to calculate the impact of police in schools. This is perhaps why forces take different approaches to the deployment of schools liaison officers. Some use them in considerable numbers; others less so.

Some schools liaison officers we spoke to said they were responsible for large numbers of schools, which limited how closely involved they could get with each one. For example, a schools liaison officer in South Wales told us they had responsibility for 25 schools.

Abstracting schools liaison officers undermines their work to divert children from crime

In some forces, schools liaison officers are often “abstracted”. This means they are temporarily removed from their duties to carry out other important police functions, such as call handling, neighbourhood patrolling and public order policing, sometimes for long periods. Officers told us this undermined their relationships with vulnerable children. Often these children have low trust in the police, and they feel let down when officers have to cancel their arrangements with them.

The 2020 [Safeguarding children at risk from criminal exploitation](#) report by the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel says building a trusted relationship with children is essential for effective risk management. And in our inspection, staff from organisations that work with police said children were adversely affected when they started to trust a police officer, but then found that officer absent while deployed elsewhere.

An [independent advisory group \(IAG\)](#) member told us some schools liaison officers were dedicated, knew their work, engaged with parents and “had a lot of kudos with parents and children”. They told us the IAG wanted the force to maintain its funding for schools liaison officers and resist the frequent changes in personnel. The IAG believed it could take schools liaison officers two years to build effective relationships, but abstractions often made it take longer.

We received a lot of positive feedback about the role of schools liaison officer, but we also heard concerns about it. The role of schools liaison officer hasn’t been evaluated by the Home Office, the National Police Chiefs’ Council or the College of Policing. We think it should be.

In some force areas, police work with health professionals to support those involved in serious youth violence

In Lancashire, accident and emergency (A&E) navigators and nurse advocates are health professionals trained to understand serious youth violence and help the young people involved. Often, incidents aren’t reported to the police, even when they result in injuries requiring hospital treatment. And being a victim of serious youth violence is strongly linked to future involvement in violence. According to the Youth Endowment Fund, studies suggest A&E interventions may have a high impact on violent crime.

In South Wales, nurse advocates in a Cardiff emergency unit engaged with young people treated for injuries from violent incidents. Officers told us nurse advocates helped those young people come into contact with police, when otherwise they may not have done. This helped police give them the support they needed and reflected the public health approach adopted by the all-Wales VRU.

How the police work with Youth Offending Teams (YOT) to tackle serious youth violence

Youth Offending Teams are responsible for providing services to children and young people who have offended or are at risk of offending.

We saw benefits in intelligence sharing and the provision of preventative and diversionary services where YOTs and VRUs engaged with each other effectively. We found good communication and co-ordination between the YOT and other partners, including the police. This included examples of YOTs providing diversionary activity. The local VRU funded the activity which was focused on both individuals and locations.

VRUs that are in receipt of Home Office funding are required to have YOT representation on their core membership group; and it is the core membership group that has responsibility for operational and financial decisions relating to the VRU. Despite this, in some areas we found little communication, shared understanding or effective partnership working between the YOT and the VRU. For example, in one area, the VRU was focused primarily on community based early prevention, while the YOT mostly focused on children who had already come to the attention of the police. As a result, the work of both organisations appeared to have little co-ordination.

More widely, VRUs didn't always consider the YOT as a provider for commissioned services, despite being ideally placed to do so. We also found that, in most areas we inspected, the probation service didn't play a prominent role in partnership activities. This is something that needs improvement.

Where police officers are seconded to youth justice services, we found that they played a useful role in sharing intelligence and information between partners. However, some YOT managers told us that sometimes opportunities for co-ordination were missed and the potential effect of police operations on other services wasn't always fully understood. For example, we were told of a planned police operation that involved the arrest of a large number of children and young people. However, other partners hadn't been informed and were unprepared for the demand this placed on their services.

Police are referring young people involved in serious youth violence to partner organisations, but young people don't always get the support they need

We found police sometimes referred young people involved in serious violence to partner organisations for support. Custody staff, in particular, often recognised risk and vulnerability at an early stage and acted on it by making referrals.

In the West Midlands, the VRU had commissioned the charity St Giles Trust to run a project called [Teachable Moments](#) in police custody suites, as well as in hospital A&E departments. Youth workers from the charity worked with police to offer practical and emotional mentoring to young people in custody and on release. And they worked with healthcare professionals in A&E to support young people affected by serious violence. The support extended to their families. A VRU interviewee said they had carried out an evaluation of the project that showed those involved felt highly positive about it.

In one of the areas we visited, children's social care staff told us they didn't have enough capacity to deal with all the referrals made by police. And we found access to mental health support was a particular problem. In our [2020 State of Policing report](#), we said: "Some children wait intolerably long for their mental health needs to be identified and to access a specialist service." Our inspection showed that referrals relating to the mental health of children and young people involved in serious youth violence often outstripped partner organisations' capacity.

Some officers told us that some referrals weren't suited to the individual needs of children and young people involved in serious youth violence. They said intervention programmes tended to focus on sport or music, which were sometimes "stereotypical". They said more educational programmes would be helpful. This reflected the views of some of the young people spoken to in the User Voice research. They told us referrals sometimes presented unrealistic solutions to their problems.

Police in some force areas co-ordinate their enforcement activities with partner organisations' work to reduce serious youth violence

Generally, police in the force areas we inspected carried out enforcement activities that supported the work of partner organisations. For example, in the Metropolitan Police Service area, police provided a dedicated custody suite, where staff from the training and employment charity [Bounce Back](#) could engage with young people involved in serious youth violence and talk to them about employment opportunities.

We also found examples in some areas of police working effectively with youth justice services to provide a range of diversionary services. These were provided at various points in the justice process, including when considering alternatives to prosecution.

Annex A – Terms of reference

HMICFRS will examine how well police address serious youth violence to reduce violent crime involving young people (particularly between the ages of 14 to 24 years).

The inspection will assess:

- how well the police address serious youth violence, investigate and support victims including where racial disproportionality may be a factor;
- how effective and efficient the police are at working with partners to implement the *Serious Violence Strategy*, including a public health approach;
- how police-led enforcement activities are supportive of partnership activities; and
- how efficient and effective violence reduction units are at reducing serious youth violent crime.

Annex B – Methodology

The inspection was carried out in four parts: scoping, document review, field inspection and User Voice research interviews.

Scoping

We conducted interviews with a wide range of interested parties and subject matter experts to identify the main themes and areas of concern. We then included these within the inspection framework. We involved staff from Ofsted and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation to revise our fieldwork plans and areas of inspection.

Document review

We reviewed more than 335 documents provided by the forces, violence reduction units, organisations involved in rehabilitation, National Police Chiefs' Council and College of Policing

Interviews

The interviews (carried out remotely) took place in January and February 2022.

Forces

- Avon and Somerset Police
- Cleveland Police
- Gloucestershire Constabulary
- Hampshire Constabulary
- Lancashire Constabulary
- Merseyside Police
- Metropolitan Police Service
- Northumbria Police
- Nottinghamshire Police
- Sussex Police
- South Wales Police
- West Midlands Police.

Interviews and focus groups

In each force we carried out the following interviews:

- force lead for serious violent crime;
- force tactical/strategic lead for neighbourhoods and partnerships;
- force lead for criminal justice;
- head of witness care;
- violence reduction unit (VRU)/force senior analyst; and
- neighbourhood and schools liaison officers (focus group).

We also interviewed other interested parties:

- police and crime commissioner's office senior responsible officer;
- chair/head of the VRU;
- youth justice service manager;
- probation service manager;
- chair of independent advisory groups (IAGs) and youth IAG;
- VRU/force senior analyst; and
- community safety partners (focus group).

Due to partnership arrangements differing from force to force, we met (online) with staff and groups that reflected local arrangements.

Interviews with young people with experience of serious youth violence

In January 2022, we commissioned User Voice to conduct research with those who have committed and been the target of serious youth violence. The aims of the research were to understand:

- What factors do young people believe make them vulnerable to serious youth violence?
- What are young people's experiences of reporting, safeguarding, interventions and support from the police and other services?
- What facilitators and barriers have young people experienced in receiving or seeking support?

User Voice is a nationwide UK charity created and run by people with 'lived experience' of the criminal justice system. It exists to reduce offending by working with the most marginalised people in prisons and on probation. It gives these people the opportunity to be heard and to influence change.

All the User Voice peer researchers on this consultation had experience of the criminal justice system and many of them had experience of youth offending services, social care and serious youth violence. Shared experience helps staff connect with young people and adopt a sensitive and informed approach.

As part of this research project, User Voice gained access to three prisons and young offender institutions and used snowball sampling and purposive sampling to recruit participants. Staff also contacted User Voice council members throughout the country and used their networks of volunteers, as well as their relationships with third parties.

User Voice conducted 13 semi-structured face-to-face interviews with young people between the ages of 18 and 24. Of those:

- 11 were currently in custody and 2 were on probation;
- 10 were males and 3 were females;
- 7 were aged 18 to 20 and 6 were over 20;
- 7 were Black, 4 were White and 2 were Asian; and
- 9 had been in care and 4 hadn't been in care.

Annex C – User Voice research report

The independent report by User Voice contains graphic accounts by young people describing violent acts they have inflicted upon others. The report also contains accounts of when interviewees had been attacked. Not all of the incidents were reported to the police to investigate.

Some interviewees criticised agencies and individuals including the police. And some interviewees described police officers mistreating them.

User Voice staff ensured that they supported interviewees with any concerns that they raised throughout the research. We have worked with User Voice staff to advise any interviewees who wish to report crimes against them or make complaints about how police officers or other professionals treated them.

We have taken advice from the Independent Office for Police Conduct to address any matters raised from the accounts in the report.

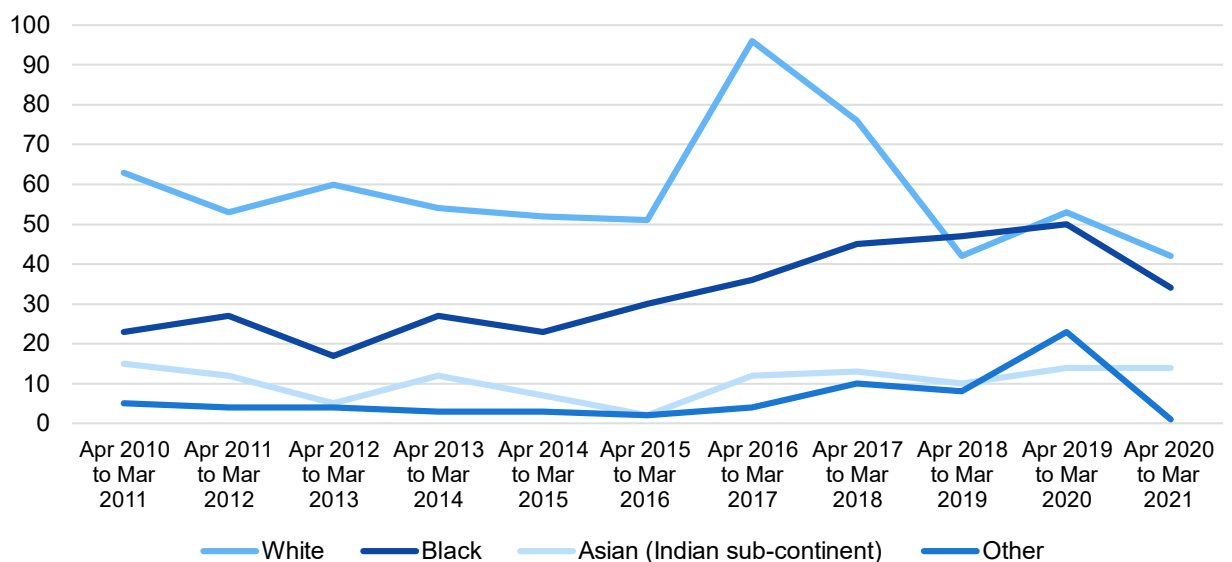
Conclusions in the report are those of the research author/s, not HMICFRS.

[The User Voice research report is available on our website.](#)

Annex D – Analysis of racial disproportionality

[Government data for the three years to March 2021](#) shows rates for homicide victimisation for Black people were six times higher than for White people, and almost four times higher than for people from other ethnic groups. And 3 percent of Black victims were aged 16 to 24, compared to 29 percent of Asian victims and 10 percent of White victims.

Figure 3: Number of offences currently recorded as homicide for victims aged 16 to 24, by ethnicity, England and Wales over time



Source: Home Office – Homicide Index

The disparity is even starker in London. Young Black males in London are six times more likely to be a victim of homicide than young White males in the capital.

Black people, particularly young Black people, are at a higher risk of becoming a victim of homicide than people of other ethnic groups. And Black people are also subject to stop and search by the police more often than people of other ethnic groups. These two facts have led to debate and [research as to whether the use of stop and search among Black people is appropriate](#).

Similarly, young people from ethnic minority backgrounds are at a higher risk of becoming victims of serious youth violence. But, as we said in our 2021 report [*Disproportionate use of police powers: A spotlight on stop and search and the use of force*](#), police forces need to analyse their data and understand any reasons for disproportionality, or take action to address it.

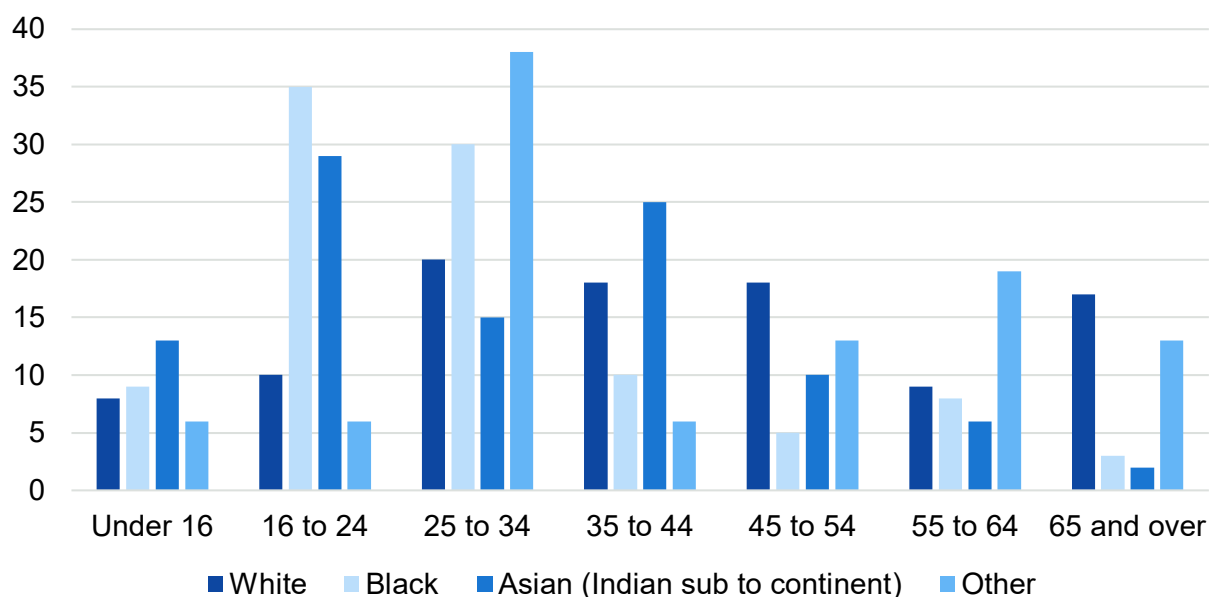
Research shows that children and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds are at greater risk of being involved in serious violence than White children and young people. Black male children and young people are at a particularly high risk.

Disparities are particularly evident in data on:

- stop and search;
- remands in police custody (as opposed to releases on bail or under investigation);
- the prison population; and
- homicide rates.

The age profiles of victims also differ by ethnic group. Figure 4 below shows that in the year ending March 2021, Black and Asian victims aged 16 to 24 accounted for roughly a third of the homicides among people from these ethnic groups. This is a much higher proportion than for White victims and those of other ethnicities, where there was a more even distribution across ages. Differences may be partly due to different distributions of ages within ethnic groups, but they may also indicate a disproportionate victimisation of young people from Black and Asian ethnic groups.

Figure 4: Percentage of homicide victims, by age and ethnic group, England and Wales, year ending March 2021



Source: Home Office – Homicide Index

Annex E – About the data

Data in this report is from a range of sources, including:

- Home Office;
- Office for National Statistics;
- Ministry of Justice;
- our inspection fieldwork; and
- data we collected directly from all 43 police forces in England and Wales.

When we collected data directly from police forces, we took reasonable steps to agree the design of the data collection with forces and with other interested parties such as the Home Office. We gave forces several opportunities to quality assure and validate the data they gave us, to make sure it was accurate. We shared the submitted data with forces, so they could review their own and other forces' data. This allowed them to analyse where data was notably different from other forces or internally inconsistent.

We set out the source of this report's data below.

Methodology

Data in the report

British Transport Police was outside the scope of inspection. Any aggregated totals for England and Wales exclude British Transport Police data, so will differ from those published by the Home Office.

When other forces were unable to supply data, we mention this under the relevant sections below.

Data sources

Stop and search

We took this data from the November 2021 release of the Home Office *Police powers and procedures: Stop and search and arrests, England and Wales, year ending 31 March 2021 second edition*. The Home Office may have updated these figures since we obtained them for this report.

Data caveats

Police recorded offences involving knives or sharp instruments

Increases in police recorded knife-enabled crime are likely to be due to higher occurrences of this crime type as well as improved police recording practices.

New recording methodology for knife-enabled crime was introduced in 2019, which has been adopted by 37 of the 43 forces. This means data for these forces isn't directly comparable with past years as improved recording via the new methodology is likely to have resulted in increases in the volume of offences recorded as knife enabled.

The Office for National Statistics has published full information on the [methodological changes and their potential impact](#).

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