

Research briefing: Alcohol-related and community violence

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Introduction

The most recent data from the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey suggests that the risks of violent victimisation are highest for those living in deprived communities and that victims of repeated incidences of violence account for the majority of non-sexual physical violence reported. In response to these patterns, the Scottish Government commissioned qualitative research to better understand repeat violent victimisation. This briefing paper summarises key findings from the research relating to community violence, including violence between young people, violence in the night-time economy, and neighbour disputes.

Box 1.

Repeat Violence in Scotland: A qualitative approach

The research involved in-depth, qualitative interviews with people with lived and living experience of repeat violence (n=62), alongside shorter, semi-structured interviews with community stakeholders (n=33). To provide important contextual data on communities and services, this primary data collection was centred in distinct, geographically defined communities: Urban, Town and Rural areas characterised by high levels of deprivation and violent victimisation. Most lived-experience participants were recruited via third-sector organisations; however, we employed lived-experience research assistants to assist in recruitment and interviewing as a means of reaching individuals who were not accessing services and who might not usually participate in research. Our sample included people experiencing homelessness, people in recovery from addiction, and people with convictions, many of whom did not consider themselves to be victims (or want to be identified as such).

The interview topic guide steered the discussion towards repeated experiences of non-sexual physical violent victimisation, but these experiences were also often inextricably linked to childhood experiences of neglect and abuse, institutional violence, domestic abuse, sexual violence, the perpetration of violence, and involvement in the drug economy. Interviews also explored participants' experiences and views on reporting violence and accessing support services.

More information on the research design of the study can be found in Chapter 2 of the final report.

Understandings and experiences of community violence

Community violence is interpersonal violence that occurs between people who are not intimately related, but may or may not know one another, usually in a public setting (i.e., outside of the home). Examples include one-on-one assaults or fights among groups. Participants experienced a range of different forms of community violence, including violence between young people, at and after school, and on the street; violence in the night-time economy, in and around pubs and off-licences, but also house parties; and neighbour disputes, linked to complaints around anti-social behaviour, as well as longstanding feuds between families. Much, but not all, of this violence involved young men as both perpetrators and victims. It was commonly described as 'recreational', featuring excessive alcohol, or presented as an informal form of dispute resolution, linked to community norms around self-reliance and 'no grassing'. Despite receiving serious injuries, participants who had experienced community violence were resistant to seeing themselves as victims. This was often because such violence was presented as mutual or reciprocal, deemed to involve willing participants.



Box 2. 'Mutual violence' versus 'bullying'

Amongst male participants, a distinction was made between a 'square go' and an unprovoked assault, with the former category referring to a one-on-one fight that was mutually agreed upon, often to resolve a dispute or respond to perceived disrespect:

A square go between two guys didn't necessarily mean it was violence. It was wanted, it was agreed, it was tolerated. (40-year-old man, East Town)

A dynamic of mutual or reciprocal victimisation was also discussed in relation to ongoing conflicts, for example between neighbours, rival territorial youth groups, or organised crime groups.

Distinctions were also made between deserving and undeserving victims, allied to descriptions of 'lifestyle' and cultural norms relating to 'civilians' and 'fair targets':

You play the game. That's the way I used to look at it. If you're in about it and you've done stuff, then you're a fair target [...] What goes around comes around. (32-year-old man, West Urban)

'Innocent' or 'vulnerable' victims included women and children, and perpetrators of violence against these groups were vigorously condemned as 'beasts' and 'bullies' – as well as regarded as legitimate targets for righteous violence. A defining characteristic of bullying was the existence of a mutually exclusive perpetrator and victim. 'Bullying' was usually unprovoked, repeated, and always involved a perceived power imbalance between perpetrator and victim.

These distinctions help explain participants' reluctance to identify themselves as a 'victim'. For participants living in communities characterised by an ever-present threat of mutual violence, safety remained contingent on projecting an image of 'hardness' or invulnerability, often bound up with masculine notions of 'respect' and 'reputation':

If people see you as a boy about the town, you've got to live up to that expectation all the time. So you have to be doing stuff to show you're not weak. (50-year-old man, West Town)

Resistance to victimhood and vulnerability were thus linked to gendered concerns about vulnerability and safety, as well as perceived culpability due to perpetration of violence.

Violence between young people

One of the most common forms of repeat violence reported involved young people in public contexts, e.g., fights in school and on the street, predominantly but not solely involving young men. Violence between young people on the street was generally explained as the result of young people having nothing to do, alongside a lack of robust statutory response and/or support. Most of this violence occurred over weekends, in the evening. Participants recounted many examples involving the use of weapons, including bricks, bats, bottles, poles, knives, and hammers, and many of the men in our sample had suffered serious injuries and been permanently disfigured as a result.

I've been hit with bricks, all that kind of stuff, hit people with bricks and just used all different weapons that were lying about the streets. And mainly because growing up in a housing scheme, there's not much to do. The majority of it is boredom. There was nothing- Like there was football pitches, but there were no goals. Or if there were goals, they would get stolen, people would come and cut them down and scrap them for metal.

(24-year-old man, West Urban)

The lack of safe spaces for young people growing up in deprived areas was a theme that emerged throughout our data, as both a longstanding issue and an acute contemporary problem linked to austerity cuts, the ongoing economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the current cost of living crisis. Against the backdrop of a long-term decline in violence between young people, stakeholders commonly expressed concerns that recent withdrawal of youth and community provision was driving increases in violence, warning of a 'coming crisis':

We don't have gang violence as it was in the 2000s, but it's raising its ugly head. And my concern is that we may well get to a tipping point where we are back there and then it takes a huge amount of resource to get us back to where we were. [...] It may take five years or 10 years to see it raise its ugly head again, to get to its peak, if we don't resource provision in the poorest communities correctly, and that's buildings, workers, etc.

(Youth service manager, West Urban)

Young people participating in the research told us that the closure of youth services and community centres made them feel like 'no one cares' or 'we don't matter'. This sense of marginalisation was particularly common amongst young people who reported negative experiences with the police and said they relied on youth services to keep them safe and out of trouble.

Whilst violence between groups of young people was reported to be much less of a problem in our Rural versus our Town and Urban case study areas, there were several reports from Stakeholders of young people from out of town using free bus passes to travel to urban centres, where they were said to congregate in large groups, damaging property and carrying out unprovoked attacks on members of the public. Police intelligence suggested these groups included loosely connected young people, arranging meetups via online platforms. New technologies were also seen to be instrumental in the facilitation of violence between young people, allowing them to track potential victims' locations but also to film and share videos of violence online. (Adults were reported as doing this too).



Violence in the night-time economy

The involvement of young people in violence and disorder in urban centres is one example of the overlap between community violence and violence linked to the night-time economy, occurring in and around off-licenses, pubs, and clubs, on public transport, and at house parties. Most of this violence occurred in the evening or in the early hours of the morning, fuelled by excessive alcohol consumption, and sometimes recreational drug use. Violence around pubs and clubs included 'mutual violence', in response to perceived disrespect, but participants also reported experiences of unprovoked attacks by strangers, including hate crime (i.e., physical violence aggravated by homophobic abuse) and violence against staff working in licenced venues.

There was remarkable consistency in how participants described violence between young people and violence in the night-time economy in terms of mutuality or reciprocity, problem-solving, deservingness, and lack of choice (linked to masculine notions of 'respect'):

I don't think that violence happens during the week in [East Town]. It's more so at the weekends. [...] Friday, Saturday, it's a normal thing. I don't go out thinking I'm going to get in a fight, but I do go there ready for one. [...] Where we're from, if you spill someone's drink, you expect to be punched, you expect to have to punch them back.

(21-year-old man, East Town)

Violence between young people and violence in the night-time economy were also both described in terms of recreational release, sometimes in response to generalised feelings of anxiety and fear, themselves a response to experiences of repeat violence. Young men reported that this meant they were often on high alert when going on a night out outwith their local area:

You're walking into a pub thinking something could happen. It might be an assessment when you're looking at how many young guys are in here. Him, a guy here that I know that's a problem. I'll get one drink, so I don't look like a shitebag, and then I'm going up to the next boozier cos I'm not wanting any carry-on.

(35-year-old man, East Town)

One of the consequences of having a reputation for violence, or a prior history of violence, was that it could make people a target, even when they were trying to 'move on' from a violent lifestyle. Participants reported experiences of unprovoked assaults, for example in pub toilets or outside nightclubs, and these examples usually involved more serious injury than 'mutual' forms of violence, sometimes because they involved an element of surprise (being attacked from behind, for example), use of weapons, or groups of attackers (usually young men). Several participants reported experiences of LGBTQI+ hate crime in this context, with particular venues being targeted.



Neighbour disputes

Violence involving neighbours was another common experience, sometimes related to complaints around anti-social behaviour, but also longstanding feuds between families. Close living conditions and inadequate soundproofing of social housing contributed to conflicts over noise, sometimes caused by everyday living (children running across the floor, use of washing machines), as well as pets (dogs left barking) and parties (loud music, late night visitors banging the door). Longstanding familial connections meant that community members often held grudges for lengthy periods of time, sometimes generations. That said, normative rules about 'no grassing' and the need to 'stand up for yourself' meant that neighbour disputes could also escalate quickly:

My door got kicked in and some boys came in with weights in pillowcases and kicked my head in and I had to go to hospital. It ended up I got put into the (homeless) centre cos I wasn't fit enough to look after myself cos they fractured my skull. [...] I had went up and complained about the music, it had been blasting for about four or five days solid, so I went up and asked them to turn it down and that's how it all came round about. Just cos I said, 'Go and turn the music down guys, I'm trying to get a sleep'.

(43-year-old man, West Town)

Alcohol and drug use were also contributory factors, linked to housing policies resulting in people with complex needs being concentrated in particular communities. Some of our stakeholder participants also suggested a link between alcohol outlet density and neighbour disputes:

Violence occurs with off-license premises as well [...] You now have the position that it's just a number of off-licenses within areas. So, there will be certain areas of [West Town] where the violence is perpetrated in a domestic setting, not domestic abuse, but in a domestic setting [...] the party houses where you were getting large volume of complaints regarding the sheer number of people and the noise that was being generated.

(Local authority manager, West Town)

Violent disputes with neighbours and other forms of violence targeting participants in or outside their homes caused high levels of fear, not just for themselves but their families. This sometimes led to a sense of despondency and social isolation, which had a profound impact on participants' mental and physical health.

Community-based violence prevention

Taken together, the findings emphasise the central and critical role of the community in violence prevention. Histories of marginalisation within socio-economically deprived areas are associated with a lack of trust in state institutions. This contributes to a culture of self-reliance and non-cooperation with the police. 'Grassroots' community development approaches that encourage dialogue and ownership have the potential to develop positive relationships between community members and partner agencies, tackling key drivers of repeat violence through participatory processes. This is in line with a place-based public health approach to violence prevention, bringing partners together to focus on long-term outcomes for the whole community and not just individuals.

