Preventing Serious Youth Violence

The Strategic Needs Assessment (2020) explored the research and literature to identify public health informed models for violence prevention and the evidence-base for what works in preventing youth violence. This briefing provides an overview of learning.

Reducing Risk Factors and Strengthening Protective Factors

The VRN believes violence is preventable. The VRN Briefing: 'Risk and Protective Factors for Youth Violence' (No.3 May 2020) highlights that the causes of youth violence are multiple and arise from a complex interplay between a wide range of risk and protective factors which operate at different levels (individual, relationship, community and societal). To have the greatest impact on preventing and reducing violence, research suggests that whilst individual change (for example, improved skills) is important, this needs to be combined with approaches that also seek to address relationships with parents, peers, siblings and significant adults as well as those that positively influence a young person's environment (for example, school or community) (Centre for Disease Control, 2016).
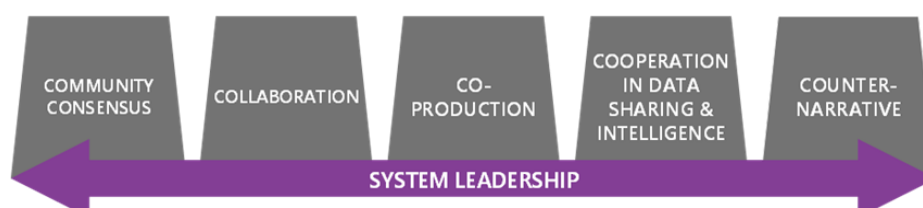
The VRN's approach is to tackle the causes of serious violence and seek to reduce risk factors whilst simultaneously strengthening protective factors.

Public Health Frameworks for Preventing Serious Youth Violence

Public health approaches work by providing a framework to support the design and delivery of comprehensive, evidence-informed prevention programmes which tackle the complex and multi-layered nature of risk and protective factors.

A Whole-System Place-Based Approach

The VRN has adopted Public Health England's (PHE, 2019) 5 C's model as the critical building blocks to a violence prevention system. Importantly, it endorses system leadership wherein silo working is reduced and replaced by collaborative working between partners and communities aimed at improving long-term outcomes for the 'whole place' (a defined population), not just at an individual level.

COMMUNITY CONSENSUS — COLLABORATION — CO-PRODUCTION — COOPERATION IN DATA SHARING & INTELLIGENCE — COUNTER-NARRATIVE

SYSTEM LEADERSHIP

Community consensus: Empowering communities to play a central and sustainable role in violence prevention through strengthening assets and increasing opportunities to lead and shape responses.

Collaboration: All partners to playing their role and working collaboratively across organisational and partnership boundaries.

Co-production: Involving young people and/or relevant communities in the design and delivery of services to improve their relevance, legitimacy and effectiveness.

Cooperation in data sharing and intelligence: Using multi-agency data, the evidence-base and insights to improve both our understanding of violence and increase the effectiveness of our response.

Counter-narrative: Counteracting negative perceptions of young people and enabling change through accurate messaging and information, promoting positive social norms, providing positive role models for children and young people and offering credible and concrete alternatives to crime.

A Life-Course Approach

A life-course approach to violence prevention considers the critical stages, transitions and settings where there are opportunities to reduce and manage risk factors and strengthen protective factors. The propensity towards violence develops over time and, like with virtually every other aspect of human development, the early years are critical. The emerging evidence around Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and their cyclical relationship with violence also highlights the importance of investing upstream to prevent the onset of violence at the earliest opportunity.

However, there are other opportunities for prevention throughout childhood and into young adulthood. For example, adolescence and young adulthood are now accepted as distinct developmental stages in life which give rise to a number of additional risks and importantly, opportunities for prevention. Patterns in antisocial and offending behaviour tend to be age-graded which suggests that different forms of intervention will be required at different stages of the life-course. For adolescents, a system-wide shift in understanding and responding to risks within their changing social and physical context, rather than just those within the family setting, is crucial to prevent offending and victimisation.

Informed by a life-course approach and our knowledge of risk and protective factors, the VRN is weaving the following design principles into its overall approach:

- ✓ Invest in parenting, early years and education
- ✓ Support pro-social and emotional development
- ✓ Provide available and trusted adults
- ✓ Adopt a trauma-informed, relational approaches

- ✓ Understand and reduce contextual risks
- ✓ Identify and respond to reachable moments
- ✓ Actively support transitions between life-stages, systems and services

A Hierarchical Prevention Approach

An effective violence prevention system will seek to develop strategies across the different levels of prevention with an unwavering commitment to preventing violence through establishing the necessary conditions and tackling the root causes at the earlist stage in the life-course.
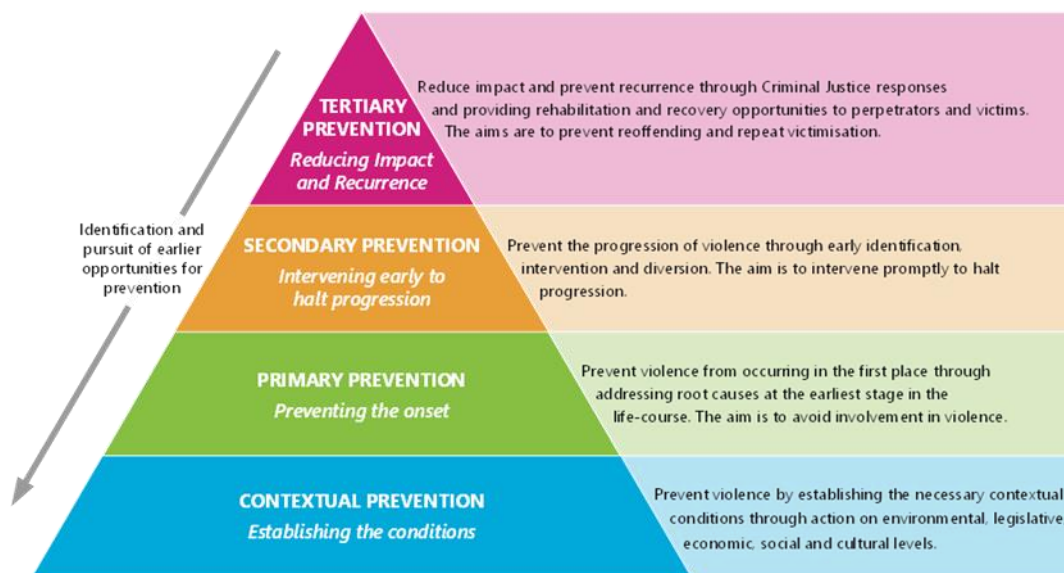
Four Hierarchical Levels of Prevention

Contextual Prevention seeks to establish the necessary conditions and has potentially the most far-reaching impact due to its focus on civic level policy and strategy. It includes:

- Legislation and Policy
- Organisational and Partnership Ethos and Culture
- Environmental Design
- Criminal Justice Response
- Workforce Development
- Social Norm Change

The primary, secondary and tertiary levels of prevention focus on different populations starting with a universal 'for all' focus and becoming more targeted and specialist as the risks and development of violence increases.

- Universal (primary prevention): aimed at the whole population
- Targeted (primary and secondary prevention): aimed at populations which can be identified as greatest risk
- Specialist (tertiary prevention): aimed at populations who have committed violence and/or experienced victimisation

The VRN's approach is to ensure there is a comprehensive programme of violence prevention which spans all four levels. It is important to strike the balance between doing something for everyone (universal) but more for those that need it the most (targeted).

The VRN's Prevention Framework

Drawing on the above, the VRN has adopted a framework for planning and implementing strategies aimed at reducing and preventing violence.

A Place-based, Whole System Framework for Violence Prevention

Based on PHE (2019) "A whole system multi-agency approach to serious violence prevention"
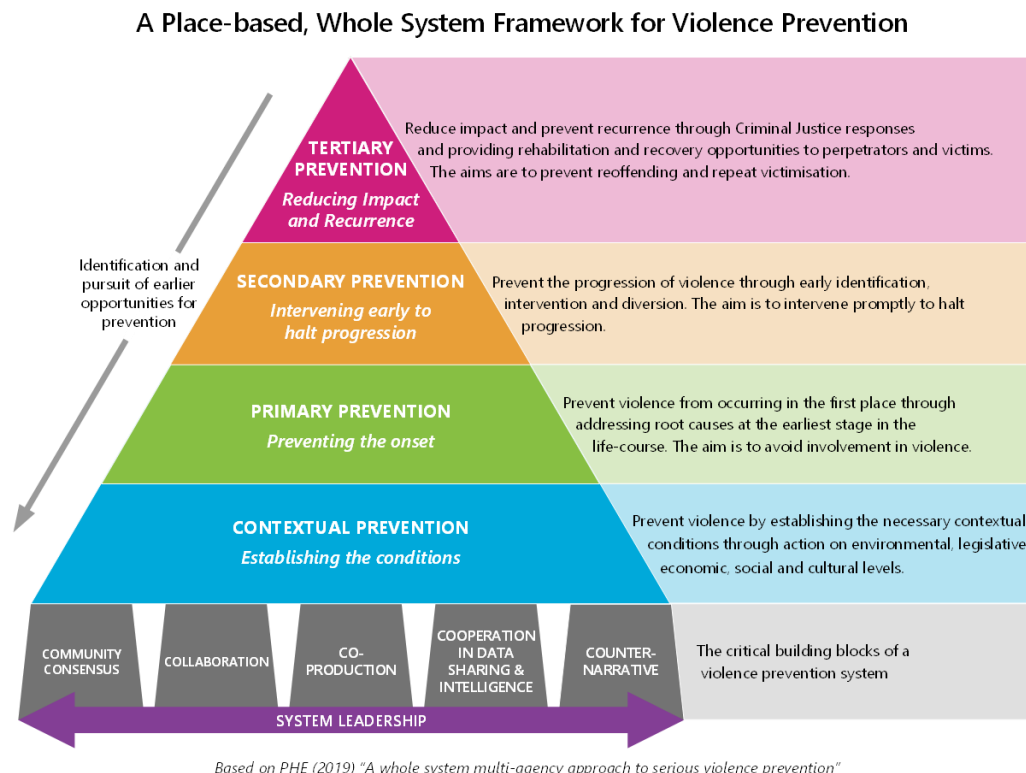
The Evidence Base: What Works?

There is a considerable volume of literature in the field of violence prevention and research in this arena is still developing. When considering the evidence-base it is important to take the following information into account:

- There are considerable gaps in what is known to prevent youth violence. Many programmes and interventions have not been evaluated and many of those that have vary in quality of the evaluation.
- An absence of evidence does not mean that an intervention is not effective. Some interventions lend themselves to evaluation better than others. Multi-layered community-based initiatives, for example, are harder to evaluate that single strand, highly specified interventions such as parenting programmes.
- Most of the more robustly evaluated programmes and interventions are from the USA. Whilst several of these have been adapted for use in the UK, they have not been evaluated to the same extent as within their USA setting.
- Interventions for which there is good research evidence will not necessarily work in every setting or with every population.
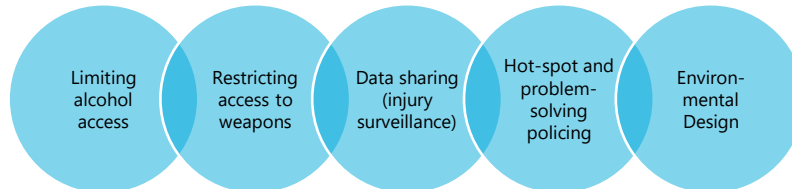
Given the above, the VRN recommends that when designing solutions to prevent violence, partners refer to the VRN prevention framework, draw on available data, co-produce with communities and consider the available evidence-base to inform design. Ensuring evaluation is built-in to all programmes and interventions should always be a priority.

Best Available Evidence

The types of individual interventions and strategies that have some evidence of effectiveness are summarised briefly below. Further details can be found in the SNA (Appendix D: page 192)

Contextual Prevention Effective Interventions

Prevent violence by establishing the necessary conditions; for example, through legislation, policies, CJ and enforcement, workforce development and social norms change

- Limiting alcohol access
- Restricting access to weapons
- Data sharing (injury surveillance)
- Hot-spot and problem-solving policing
- Environ-mental Design

Primary Prevention Effective Interventions

Prevent violence from occurring in the first place by reducing risk factors and strengthening protective factors. The aim is to avoid involvement in violence. Interventions can be either universal or targeted, below provides examples of both.

- Parenting and Families Programmes
- Family Nurse Partnership
- Family-Based Therapy
- Bullying Prevention
- Schools-based programmes (emotional/ social develop-ment & preventative)
- Classroom management
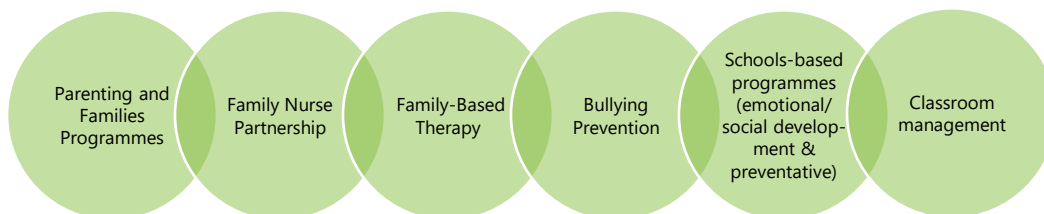
Secondary Prevention Effective Interventions

Prevent progression of violence through early Identification and intervention. The aim is to intervene promptly to halt progression (targeted)

- Family-based therapies
- Behavioural/ skills-building interventions
- Substance Misuse Interven-tions
- Therapeutic approaches to trauma
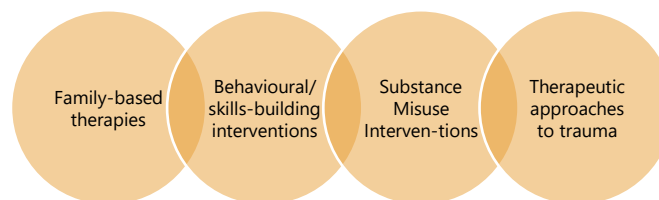
Tertiary Prevention Effective Interventions

Prevent recurrence and reduce impact of violence by providing support and treatment to perpetrators and victims. The aim is to prevent reoffending and/or repeat victimisation (specialist).

- Therapeutic Approaches for Victims
- Therapeutic and Cognitive-Behavioural approaches for perpetrators
- Hospital-based interventions
- Enforcement and Engagement Programmes
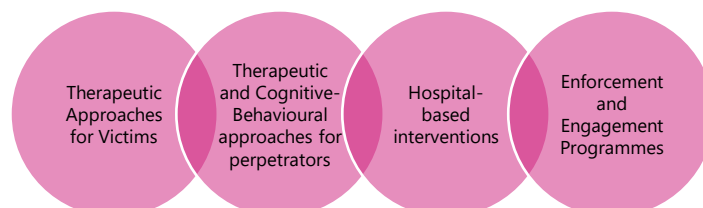
Emerging Evidence

Although not as robust, there are also interventions and approaches which are promising but still have limited or mixed evidence. The VRN is keen to develop, monitor and evaluate the following:

Mentoring

Mixed evidence but found to have a positive impact whilst in process

Gang-focussed strategies

Limited evidence that targeted (focused deterrence) schemes that individual and group based social interventions offering support, concrete opportunities as well as enforcement. They require close multi-agency co-operation and mobilising community resource.

Diversionary approaches

More likely to be effective if structured, supervised and go beyond keeping young people occupied and safe to providing opportunities for the development of resilience and life-skills

Restorative Approaches

Face-to-face conferencing has the strongest evidence. General approaches are less well evidenced

Employment Programmes

(with wrap-around support and where it addresses barriers)

Guiding Principles

Given the complexity of serious violence and the caveats relating to the existing evidence-base, many reviews have highlighted that there is some evidence of key characteristics and principles of programmes and interventions which have been found to be effective. These are summarised below and should be considered when designing relevant interventions aimed at preventing violence:

Prevention Level	Principles and/or Key characteristics of Effective Interventions
Primary (universal interventions)	Interventions with goals relating to both preventing/reducing negative factors and increasing positive factors
	Interventions involving both schools and parents through either written or personal interaction between each side tend to do better than those involving just one side
	Group-based approaches, rather than individual-based, which are interactive involving skills-based demonstrations, practice through role play/games and homework in relation to either school-focussed or family/parenting programmes
	Use of trained facilitators, already regularly working with young people/families
	Programmes with well specified goals and structured or manualised content which can be easily and consistently replicated.
	Regular and frequent contact (often at least weekly and over months and up to a year)
Primary or **Secondary** (targeted)	Interventions with goals relating to both preventing/reducing negative factors and increasing positive factors. Successful targeted programmes tended to focus on family-level risk factors with parent/family training and home-visiting being a key feature.
	Active participation of parents in the context of family-school combined interventions
	A mix of formats e.g. group-based, small group and on-to-one rather than single delivery formats
	Use of interactive and real-life examples
	Well specified goals with structured goals but flexibility of tailoring content to individuals
	Use of trained facilitators with a good level of education

Prevention Level	Principles and/or Key characteristics of Effective Interventions
	A high implementation fidelity (delivery of the programme as originally specified) with some types of intervention. for example norms and values and mentoring interventions
	Use of screened and trained mentors in one-to-one adult-to-youth mentoring rather than young peer-to-peer or untrained mentors
Secondary (targeted)	Therapy based in structured but tailored formats
	Working with families in a group-based format or combining these with separate sessions for the young person and/or their parents
	A focus on addressing multiple risk factors and acting beyond the level of the individual
	A focus on preventing the recurrence of negative outcomes as well as increase positive outcomes
	The use of highly trained facilitators who are delivering the intervention as part of their profession
	Family therapies delivered in a natural setting (home) rather than in a healthcare or other institutional setting
	Implementation fidelity was a feature in some effective programmes
Tertiary Prevention	Skills-based approaches, with the most successful being cognitive-behavioural or social skills training interventions
	Counselling approaches involving a personal relationship between a young person and responsible adult (therapist-led group-based counselling or family counselling being most successful)
	Use of the risk-need-responsivity framework in rehabilitation interventions with a focus on the responsivity element
	High quality implementation with fidelity to original specification

Ineffective and potentially harmful approaches

As highlighted above, the absence of evidence does not mean that a particular intervention does not work. However, there is robust evidence from research that interventions based on deterrence or discipline are associated with increases in offending

⚠ **Scare Tactics**

Deterrence-based approaches aimed at deterring through scare tactics or confrontational techniques with the intention of them realising negative impacts or harsh realities of behaviour appear to be ineffective but can also make things worse. This has led to researchers advising that caution should be used when deploying similar tactics with other groups and settings.

⚠ **Bootcamps**
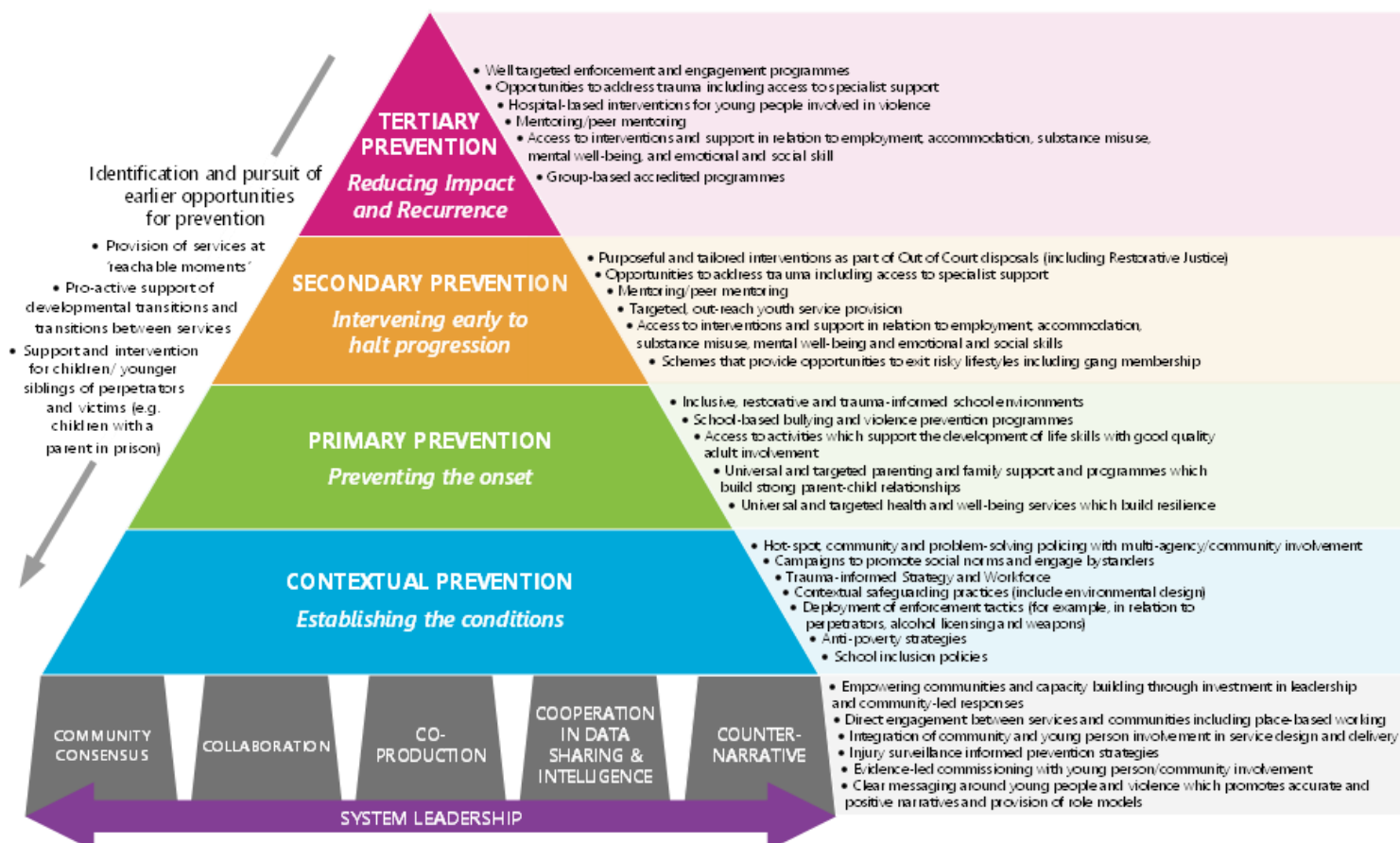
Discipline and/or control type approaches which takes the view that young people need to learn discipline to succeed in life through boot-camp environments (as opposed to ordinary discipline techniques in different settings such as school) have been shown to be ineffective. Where combined with significant rehabilitative components there is some, but limited, evidence of desirable effects.

Developing Violence Prevention Startegies

By understanding the risk and protective factors for violence, the available national policy and reviews and the evidence-base outlined above, the VRN has broadly identified the type of activity which needs to take place across all levels of the VRN's Prevention Framework in order to strengthen the local response to youth violence. This is a suggested starting point rather than exhaustive and it will evolve over time as local need changes and we enhance our understanding of effectiveness.

Developing Whole-System Strategies for Violence Prevention

Identification and pursuit of earlier opportunities for prevention

- Provision of services at 'reachable moments'
- Pro-active support of developmental transitions and transitions between services
- Support and intervention for children/ younger siblings of perpetrators and victims (e.g. children with a parent in prison)

TERTIARY PREVENTION
Reducing Impact and Recurrence

- Well targeted enforcement and engagement programmes
- Opportunities to address trauma including access to specialist support
- Hospital-based interventions for young people involved in violence
- Mentoring/peer mentoring
- Access to interventions and support in relation to employment, accommodation, substance misuse, mental well-being, and emotional and social skill
- Group-based accredited programmes

SECONDARY PREVENTION
Intervening early to halt progression

- Purposeful and tailored interventions as part of Out of Court disposals (including Restorative Justice)
- Opportunities to address trauma including access to specialist support
- Mentoring/peer mentoring
- Targeted, out-reach youth service provision
- Access to interventions and support in relation to employment, accommodation, substance misuse, mental well-being and emotional and social skills
- Schemes that provide opportunities to exit risky lifestyles including gang membership

PRIMARY PREVENTION
Preventing the onset

- Inclusive, restorative and trauma-informed school environments
- School-based bullying and violence prevention programmes
- Access to activities which support the development of life skills with good quality adult involvement
- Universal and targeted parenting and family support and programmes which build strong parent-child relationships
- Universal and targeted health and well-being services which build resilience

CONTEXTUAL PREVENTION
Establishing the conditions

- Hot-spot, community and problem-solving policing with multi-agency/community involvement
- Campaigns to promote social norms and engage bystanders
- Trauma-informed Strategy and Workforce
- Contextual safeguarding practices (include environmental design)
- Deployment of enforcement tactics (for example, in relation to perpetrators, alcohol licensing and weapons)
- Anti-poverty strategies
- School inclusion policies

COMMUNITY CONSENSUS | **COLLABORATION** | **CO-PRODUCTION** | **COOPERATION IN DATA SHARING & INTELLIGENCE** | **COUNTER-NARRATIVE**

SYSTEM LEADERSHIP

- Empowering communities and capacity building through investment in leadership and community-led responses
- Direct engagement between services and communities including place-based working
- Integration of community and young person involvement in service design and delivery
- Injury surveillance informed prevention strategies
- Evidence-led commissioning with young person/community involvement
- Clear messaging around young people and violence which promotes accurate and positive narratives and provision of role models

Further Reading

There are a number of reviews of existing evidence, several of which have been drawn upon for our SNA and this briefing. If you would like to find out more, we recommend the following publications:

- Centre for Disease Control (2016). "A Comprehensive Technical Package for the Prevention of Youth Violence and Associated Risk Behaviours"
  https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/yv-technicalpackage.pdf
- Early Intervention Foundation (2015). "Preventing Gang Involvement and Youth Violence"
  https://www.eif.org.uk/files/pdf/gyv-commissioning-mentoring-programmes.pdf
- Public Health England (2019). "Approaches to prevent or reduce violence with a focus on youth, knife and gang related violence – literature review" http://westmidlands-vru.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Youth-violence-interventions-evidence-review-2019.pdf