

Time to tackle violence

Violence has devastating effects on victims, witnesses and communities. The World Health Assembly says the violence is a public health issues and councils need to pay more attention to prevention. Catherine Heffernan reports.

Violence is one of the leading causes of ill health and premature death globally. In England and Wales alone, it is estimated that there are 2.7 million incidents of violence every year. One in four women experience domestic violence, 24% of women and 5% of men experience sexual assault and half a million older people experience abuse at any one time in the UK. Almost a fifth of 18 to 24 year olds report some serious maltreatment during their childhood and assault is the second leading cause of hospital admission for males between the ages of 15 and 24 years.

Victims suffer physical, mental or sexual injury. Fear of crime, financial burden and overstretched public services impact on the wider community. Quite simply, violence costs.

The World Health Assembly has declared violence a major and increasing public health problem across the world. It advocates a public health approach, that is, moving the emphasis from dealing with the consequences of violence to preventing its occurrence.

Many risk factors are shared between different types of violence. For example, poor academic achievement and truancy can increase a young person's vulnerability to youth violence as both a victim and a perpetrator and can lead to reducing learning potential, which has been linked to intimate partner violence and elder abuse in later life. Intolerance of a disability or limiting illness is strongly associated with family abuse. Alcohol consumption, particularly binge drinking amongst young people, worsens risk of domestic violence and physical assault. Indeed more than a fifth of all violence in England and Wales takes place in or near pubs and nightclubs and 80% of those incidents involve alcohol.

Within the UK, the Home Office and the Department of Health have been working on developing strategies for tackling violence. From a public health perspective, the emphasis is on early intervention and addressing the root causes of violence and abuse. Prevention of a disease or a condition (in this instance, violence) comprises of three levels:

- primary prevention, which consists of interventions to prevent violence from starting
- secondary prevention, which involves early identification of violence and raising awareness for people to know where to seek help
- tertiary prevention, where violence has taken place and you look to support or provide services for the abused and abusers.



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Primary prevention of violence essentially involves societal and community interventions. This may involve partnership working between local authorities and health services in tackling issues of alcohol and drugs, raising community awareness of violence, information sharing and enhancing the connectivity of communities.

Secondary prevention may include more individually targeted programmes, for instance, anti-bullying and abuse education at schools, home visitation or parent skill training programmes, developing positive relationship skills amongst couples and promoting sexual and mental health.

Tertiary prevention could comprise of child and family therapy, management of abusers (alcohol and treatment) and housing and support services for the abused. All forms of prevention will entail policy and actions on national and local levels.

Tackling violence on a local level is a partnership enterprise. Information sharing between police, health, local authority, social services, schools, voluntary sector and business sectors is crucial. This can help to inform local strategic approaches to include:

- development of early prevention approaches with Healthy Schools and health services
- joint procedures, referral and communication regarding child protection
- using Local Area Agreements and Community Strategies, prioritising early prevention initiatives with a focus on parenting skills, violence prevention and mental health promotion in schools, work and 'high risk' groups
- promotion of Safer Communities through planning and urban design, which enhances people's feeling of safety in public places, clear visibility, street lighting, noise reduction, CCTV, community policing and encourage leisurely pursuits (which would deter anti-social behaviours)
- providing brief interventions for alcohol misuse in primary care, A&E and prisons
- local authority responses to alter the environment, for example to improve street lighting, provide night time public transport, disperse fast food outlets and taxi ranks, reduce litter and graffiti, have night time litter collection and increase pedestrian areas. All of these can help reduce violence in public places, especially near pubs and nightclubs.

Prevention of violence is a substantial task. Violence comes in many forms from threatening behaviours to murder. However, measures for prevention are available. Violent behaviours can be reduced. We just need better inter-agency cooperation and together raise public awareness of what causes violence, where violence occurs and empower people to stop it.

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