

# **What Works to Prevent Youth Violence: Key Findings**

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# What Works to Prevent Youth Violence: Key Findings

Youth violence is broadly defined as violence that takes between individuals aged 10 to 29 years old. It can take many forms (i.e. physical and non-physical) and occurs most often in community settings between acquaintances and strangers (World Health Organisation, 2020).

This paper focuses on **primary prevention** - preventing violence before it happens, through interventions that target key risk factors for violence perpetration and experiences.

## Approach

The review was undertaken to draw together international evidence of what is known about what works to prevent youth violence. The paper aims to:

1. Synthesise existing evidence about youth violence prevention interventions
2. Provide a clear indication of the effectiveness of interventions
3. Provide information around barriers and facilitators to the successful implementation of the interventions

### Effective Interventions

There is strong evidence that school and education-based interventions are **effective** in preventing youth violence.

These include both bullying prevention programmes (e.g. *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program*, *KiVa*) and social and emotional learning programmes (e.g. PATHS)

### Promising Interventions

- Bystander programmes (e.g. Mentors in Violence Prevention)
- School-based programmes to prevent violence in dating and intimate partner relationships
  - Of these programmes, there is evidence that *Safe Dates* is an **effective** intervention
- Good quality pre-school education
- Parenting training/education
- Mentoring programmes
- Community coalitions

### Mixed Interventions

- Early childhood home visitation programmes
- Out-of-school activities

### No effect/ potentially harmful

- Deterrence and fear-based approaches

### Inconclusive Interventions

Due to the current limited research it is not yet possible to draw reliable conclusions on the effectiveness of interventions that seek to reduce gang involvement.

## What is out of scope?

This report focuses on pre-criminal justice and prevention-focused interventions. Interventions that focus exclusively on reducing violence perpetration in young people (rather than preventing it from happening) are therefore **out of scope**.

However the [What Works to Reduce Reoffending \(2015\)](#) report, which is due to be updated in 2021, will review the international evidence on programmes to reduce reoffending. The full out of scope list is available in main *What Works to Prevent Youth Violence* report [here](#).

## Moderating Factors: Key Findings

It is important to recognise the moderating factors, potential facilitators, and potential barriers.

Accounting for these factors can encourage effective implementation of evidence-based interventions. The [Early Intervention Foundation](#) note that the “principles of effective programmes” for preventing youth violence include:

- Strategies that seek to create positive change in the lives of youth and/or their families as well as reduce risk factors
- Facilitators who are experienced in working with children and families
- Working with young people in their natural setting (e.g. school or home)
- Ensuring programmes are delivered as originally designed, specified, and intended
- Regular and/or frequent contacts
- Encouraging positive interactions between young people, families and teachers/schools
- Delivery through interactive sessions that provide the opportunity for skills-based demonstrations and practice.

As demonstrated in the tables below, accounting for the barriers to successful interventions is important in applying them.

## Points for reflection:

1. Youth violence is a key public health priority. It is multi-faceted and takes many forms, so it is necessary to reduce risk and promote protective factors at individual, relationship, community, and societal levels.
2. By indirectly exacerbating key risk factors, COVID-19 has the potential to contribute to increased rates of youth violence in Scotland.
3. School contexts can be ideal places for activities aimed at preventing youth violence before it happens. There is the potential to engage many young people at one time and to influence them early in life.
4. It is important to account for cultural context when applying interventions. Much of the available high-quality evidence is from high income countries (e.g. USA) and the evidence base within a Scottish context is limited. The transferability of interventions or their effectiveness cannot be assumed.
5. Assessing the effectiveness of primary preventative interventions in relation to future violence is challenging as behavioural change is difficult to measure.

## Directions for Future Research

- **Further evaluations of interventions**, both in Scotland and elsewhere, are **necessary to understand ‘what works’**. For interventions classified as ‘inconclusive’, evaluative evidence would be beneficial for understanding the impacts of these interventions on preventing youth violence over time. Evaluations should include both quantitative and qualitative approaches to better understand the impacts and effects of each intervention.
- **Evaluation research should incorporate validated measures of behaviour change and associated risk factors.**
- Education based approaches have been shown to be effective when delivered within school settings. **Further research could investigate the impact of these interventions when delivered in alternative community-based settings** and with those who do not attend school and when implemented in those who are not of school age.
- Improved evaluation efforts are necessary to better understand **what works for whom and under what circumstances, as well as why certain approaches are effective, when others are not.**
- Strengthening this evidence base will **require longitudinal evaluations of effectiveness across different population groups and communities, using validated measures of violence related outcomes and relevant associated risk factors.**

# Information about interventions

## Effective

Evidence that the intervention is associated with a positive impact on preventing violence, based on a moderate or strong evidence base.

Type of Intervention	Evidence of effectiveness in preventing violence	Moderating factors <sup>1</sup> (where available)
<b>Bullying prevention programmes</b>	<b>Effective:</b> A number of evaluations have found that school-based bullying prevention programmes are effective in reducing both bullying perpetration and victimisation (e.g. Olweus & KiVa)	<p><b>Potential facilitators:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Well-planned</li> <li>• Intensive/longer duration</li> <li>• Based on theories of bullying perpetration and victimisation as well as bystander behaviour</li> <li>• Whole school approach (involving staff, students, parents, and the community)</li> <li>• Multiple delivery modes</li> <li>• Trained facilitators</li> <li>• Culturally sensitive</li> <li>• Age-tailored</li> </ul> <p><b>Potential barriers:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resistance/ scepticism on the part of administrator and staff around the problem of bullying</li> <li>• Lack of readiness of school staff to implement and sustain a comprehensive effort</li> <li>• Implementation fidelity</li> <li>• Unexpected changes that burden the school staff</li> </ul>
<b>Social, emotional, and life skills development</b>	<b>Effective:</b> There is evidence to suggest that programmes that seek to develop young people's social, emotional and life skills can have a positive impact on a range of violence related outcomes (e.g. PATHS)	<p><b>Potential facilitators:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementation fidelity<sup>2</sup></li> <li>• Incorporates the teaching of cognitive, affective, and behavioural skills</li> <li>• Competence enhancement and empowerment approaches</li> <li>• Interactive teaching methods</li> <li>• Well-defined goals</li> <li>• Provision of clear teacher guidelines</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> Factors which might facilitate effectiveness or act as a barrier to effectiveness

<sup>2</sup> 'Implementation fidelity' is the degree to which an intervention is delivered as intended

## Promising

Findings were positive but not to the extent that they constituted evidence that an intervention was 'effective'.

<p><b>Dating violence prevention programmes</b></p>	<p><b>Promising:</b> There is promising evidence that school-based programmes which seek to prevent violence in dating and intimate partner relationships<sup>3</sup> (through developing life skills, improving knowledge of abuse, and challenging social norms and gender stereotypes that increase the risk of violence) are effective.</p>	<p><b>Potential facilitators:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Content underpinned by evidence-based theory and appropriately tailored to the target audience</li> <li>• Multiple sessions over time, that aim to change attitudes and norms rather than simply provide information</li> <li>• Should be incorporated into school policies</li> <li>• For men, programmes delivered in mixed male and female groups are more effective than those presented in all-male groups</li> </ul>
<p><b>Pre-school academic enrichment</b></p>	<p><b>Promising:</b> There is promising evidence that programmes that set out to provide good quality early education are effective.</p>	<p><b>Potential facilitators:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parental interventions integral part of the programmes</li> <li>• Administered to at-risk children and families (although care should be taken to avoid stigmatization of such groups)</li> <li>• Combining group and individual work</li> </ul>
<p><b>Parenting training/education</b></p>	<p><b>Promising:</b> There is promising evidence that interventions, which aim to develop parenting skills and strengthen the relationship between parent and child may have positive effects on perpetration of youth violence.</p>	<p><b>Potential facilitators:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunities for parents to practice new skills</li> <li>• Teaching principles of positive parenting, rather than specific prescribed techniques</li> <li>• Teaching strategies to handle child's behaviour in a positive and age appropriate way</li> <li>• Accounting for potential difficulties in relationships between adults in the family</li> </ul>

<sup>3</sup> There are overlaps between youth violence prevention (primary) interventions and those aimed at preventing Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). For more information, see the Scottish Government report on [What Works to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls](#). This report on preventing youth violence and the report on preventing VAWG are part of a linked series of reports on violence as part of the Scottish Government's violence research programme.

<b>Mentoring</b>	<b>Promising:</b> There is promising evidence that Universal and Targeted <sup>4</sup> mentoring programmes are effective	<b>Potential facilitators:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional support as part of provision</li> <li>• Meet at least once a week</li> <li>• Mentoring takes place over a prolonged period</li> <li>• Part of wider suite of interventions</li> <li>• Programme well-run with effective training and support for mentors and careful monitoring of contact</li> </ul> <b>Potential barriers:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unstructured mentoring</li> <li>• Unmotivated or otherwise unsuitable mentors</li> </ul>
<b>Community coalitions</b>	<b>Promising:</b> There is promising evidence that community coalitions which use local data to understand problems, inform preventative action, and encourage community partnerships are effective.	There is currently insufficient evidence to form reliable conclusions on facilitators and barriers relevant to community coalitions.
<b>Mixed</b> Studies with contrasting results and/or body of evidence		
<b>Early childhood visitation</b>	<b>Mixed:</b> There is mixed evidence that home visitation programmes are effective.  Research is lacking within a UK setting.	The literature does not yet highlight any potential moderators for this intervention.
<b>Out-of-school activities</b>	<b>Mixed:</b> There is mixed evidence that out-of-school activities such as after school provision and activities that are provided separately from	<b>Potential facilitators:</b> Not clear whether particular activities are more effective than others but whatever the specific activities, programmes should be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comprehensive</li> <li>• Age/development appropriate</li> <li>• Long term</li> </ul>

<sup>4</sup> Universal programmes are delivered to all pupils in a year group or school) whilst Targeted programmes are implemented with young people who are considered to be at increased risk of engaging in youth violence.

<p>education are effective.</p> <p>Evaluation of programmes taking this approach is limited.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Should attract, retain, and build good relationships with young people who are at risk</li> </ul> <p><b>Potential barriers:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unstructured activities</li> <li>• Peer contagion<sup>5</sup></li> <li>• Programme costs</li> <li>• Lack of reach and awareness within communities at particular risk of violence can reduce the participation of young people who more likely to become involved in violence</li> </ul>
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### Ineffective and potentially harmful effects

Evidence that the intervention is associated with worse violence outcomes

<p><b>Deterrence and fear-based approaches</b></p>	<p><b>Ineffective and potentially harmful effects:</b> Programmes using fear-based approaches are not effective, and may be associated with an increased risk of offending. Their implementation should be avoided.</p>	
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### Inconclusive

Insufficient evidence to make a judgement on impact.

<p><b>Programmes that seek to reduce gang involvement</b></p>	<p><b>Inconclusive:</b> Due to a limited body of research it is not yet possible to draw reliable conclusions on the effectiveness of these interventions.</p>
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This evidence summary was undertaken by Dr Kirsten Russell of the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit. Access to the full *What Works to Prevent Youth Violence: A Summary of the Evidence* report here.

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<sup>5</sup> Peer contagion refers to the transmission or transfer of violence-related behaviour from one adolescent to another.



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