SCOTTISH
VIOLENCE
REDUCTION
UNIT

# Unfinished Business

## Violence Reduction in Scotland

### 2026

# Unfinished Business:
## Violence Reduction in Scotland

The Scottish Violence Reduction Unit (SVRU) was founded twenty years ago marking a crucial turning point in Scotland's approach to tackling violence as a public health issue by acknowledging that violence and its root causes can be treated and prevented. In that time, homicide has fallen from 137 victims in 2004/05 to a historic and significant low of 45 in 2024/25: a 67% reduction. Recorded crime also remains far below its historic peak. The proportion of adults experiencing crime is still significantly lower than in the late 2000s, and most people report feeling safe in their local area and in their homes. Using the Home Office cost of crime data with inflation factored in, violence cost Scotland £1.8bn a year in 2005. Today, it is around £960m.

Things have changed because police, medics, teachers, social workers, youth workers, and many more stepped up to play their part. They built a rich body of evidence for what works, and we now know that the most powerful antidotes to violence are nurturing relationships, opportunities and belonging. Youth work, safe spaces where young people can gather and be themselves, direct support for families who might be experiencing hardship and good role models are all vital.

Now, Scotland is more confident about prevention, trauma and the wider determinants of violence than at any point in history. The learning from Scotland's story has travelled well, influencing how other countries think about prevention, early intervention and partnership. There are now 22 VRUs in England and Wales and more are forming all over the world, taking direct inspiration from the Scottish progress.

# But the work is far from done.

Violence is still present in Scotland. It completely devastates families, communities and the futures of those affected.Bereaved mothers, fathers and friends remind me of this often. We must not become complacent. We must work tirelessly towards our vision of a Scotland free of violence.

The Scotland of 2026 is markedly different to that of 2005. The pandemic has completely reshaped the social contract.

Communities are feeling the strain of decades of public sector cuts, with more people living in poverty and families having to choose between heating and eating. Organisations are being asked to do more with less, at a time where demand is increasingly acute. Social media has changed the way we engage with one another – helping us to stay in touch and to discover new communities. At the same time, it may increase fear of violence due to the ease with which videos with violent content can be shared in an instant, and to huge audiences. We are also seeing the exploitation of impressionable young people – particularly boys – in online spaces who are receiving messages about unhealthy forms of masculinity, with misogyny and violence firmly at its core. Deaths of despair (alcohol, drugs, suicide) continue to be a prominent challenge for Scotland.

Automation, technology and AI are changing prospects for all of us – especially young people – and creating huge uncertainty. We live at a time where change has never been this fast, but indeed, with the pace of change ever-increasing, it will never be this slow again.

Despite the challenges, I think we have reason to be very hopeful. The future of violence reduction will build on Scotland's rich history. We know what works, and we need to do more of it, fit for today's context. However, we need to work together like never before, pooling resources and knowledge in service of communities. In the years ahead, continued success will depend on how well we design *with* people rather than *for* them, making decisions with the long term firmly in mind. By ensuring that the voice of the community is combined with better quality data, we will be able to not just to react to challenges, but to anticipate them; and this is vital in our rapidly changing Scotland. This requires bold, unwavering leadership.

*Unfinished Business*

# Scotland's Quiet Revolution:
# From Punishment to Prevention

In 2004, a UN report placed Scotland at the top of the league table for violence. Throughout the early–mid 2000s, Glasgow was a city which had a particularly challenging context. Knife crime was endemic, gang disputes spilled onto the streets and international reports branded Scotland as one of the most violent countries in Europe. The responses at the time weren't working; longer sentences, more stop and search, and robust policing saw no sustained change. It was clear that punishment alone wasn't shifting the tide.

The then Strathclyde Police recognised that something needed to change. In 2005, the Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) was founded. Its leaders, John Carnochan and Karyn McCluskey knew they had to do things differently, so they made a radical move: joining the WHO's Violence Prevention Alliance and treating violence as a public health issue.

## "There is no 'them and us', there's only us"

— KARYN MCCLUSKEY, 2015

## "Violence isn't inevitable. It's preventable - if you treat it like a disease."

— JOHN CARNOCHAN, 2005
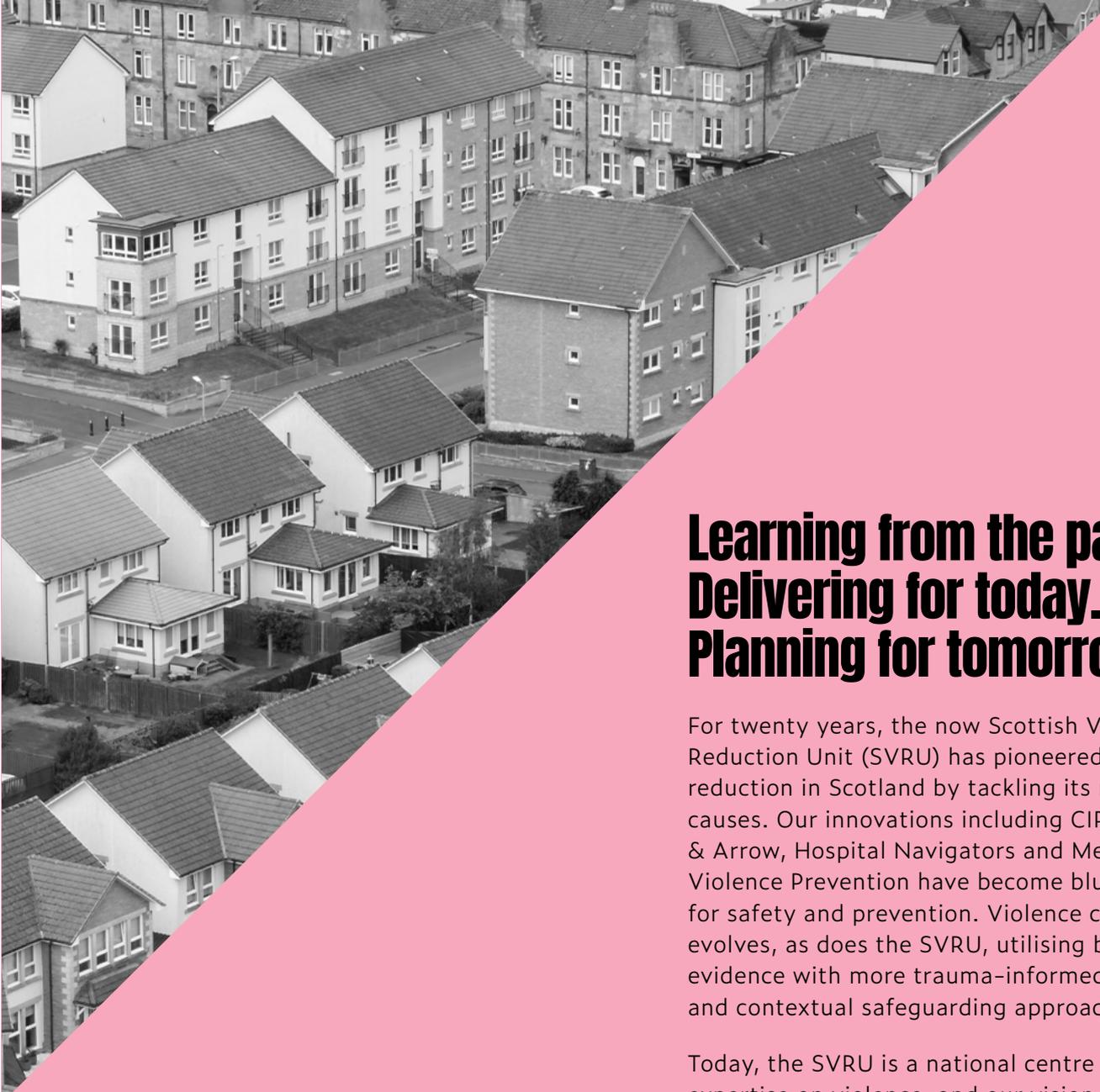
# Learning from the past. Delivering for today. Planning for tomorrow.

For twenty years, the now Scottish Violence Reduction Unit (SVRU) has pioneered violence reduction in Scotland by tackling its root causes. Our innovations including CIRV, Street & Arrow, Hospital Navigators and Mentors in Violence Prevention have become blueprints for safety and prevention. Violence constantly evolves, as does the SVRU, utilising best new evidence with more trauma–informed practices and contextual safeguarding approaches.

Today, the SVRU is a national centre for expertise on violence, and our vision is a Scotland free from violence.  We are funded by the Scottish Government from the 'Safer Communities' Directorate, and we are a part of Police Scotland's 'Policing Together' Division. We use the WHO's definition of violence:

## The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation[1].

The logic behind this was simple, but profound. Violence behaves like a disease – it spreads through communities, has identifiable risk factors, and crucially, can be prevented. Instead of focusing solely on catching offenders, the VRU asked: why does violence happen and how can we stop it before it starts?

The transformation of violence prevention in Scotland that followed was not delivered by a single agency, policy or even strategy. It was the cultural reframing of violence as preventable, and through that, the creation of a legion of community workers, teachers, nurses, police officers, social workers, parents – it was everyone who'd had enough and wanted something different for their children, their friends and ultimately, Scotland.

# Scotland's Data Journey:

## 2004/05 - 2025

SINCE 2004/05 MALE VICTIMS OF HOMICIDE HAVE REDUCED BY

# 73%[3]

SINCE 2004/05 COMMON ASSAULT HAS REDUCED BY

# 20%[5]

SINCE 2004/05 HOMICIDE IN SCOTLAND HAS REDUCED BY

# 67%[2]

SINCE 2004/05 FEMALE VICTIMS OF HOMICIDE HAVE REDUCED BY

# 44%[3]

SINCE 2004/05 SERIOUS VIOLENCE (SERIOUS ASSAULT AND ATTEMPTED MURDER) REDUCED BY

# 60%[4]

# Related data

# 49%
of people in prison had reported using drugs in their community and

# 32%
said they were under the influence at the time of their offence[6]

# 26%
of Scottish prisoners self-report experience of the care system with

# 38%
of those having spent time within secure care[7]

Scotland continues to be the drug death capital of Europe. After adjusting for age, there were:

# 19.1 drug related deaths per 100,000

PEOPLE IN 2024

THIS IS

# 3.6 times as high

AS 2000[8]

IN 2024 THERE WERE

# 704 probable suicides

IN SCOTLAND.[9]

IT IS ESTIMATED THAT MORE THAN

# 50 people die each week

DUE TO ALCOHOL IN SCOTLAND[10]

# The cost of violence to Scotland

The estimated cost of violence in Scotland in 2006 was roughly **£1.8billion** when adjusted for today's rates of inflation[11].

The estimated cost of violence in Scotland in 2025 was just over **£960million.**

This is an annual saving of more than **£830million** when comparing these two years which marks real progress.

**But there is more work to be done.**

# Scotland and Violence today

Post-Covid, there has been a consistent rise in the frequency of non-sexual violent crime, however these levels remain much lower (–23%) than the peak in 2006-07[12]. The most up to date data published by The Scottish Government extends to the year ending September 2025. This data shows since 2021, there has been a 14% increase in non-sexual crimes of violence[13].
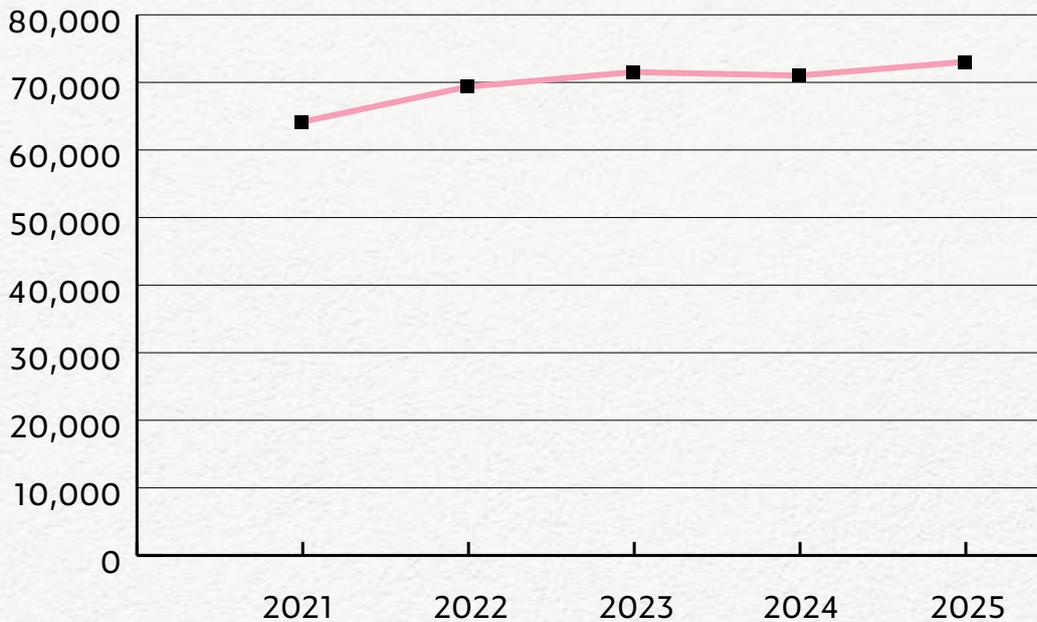
Figure 1. Source: Main findings – Recorded Crime in Scotland: year ending September 2025 – gov.scot. *Non-Sexual Violent Crime – Total (Scotland) – Year Ending September 2021-2025. Published November 2025.*

Increases identified within this category predominantly reflect changes in recording. This is notable within the category of 'domestic violence', introduced in 2019, which has increased by 64% since 2021 and the 'other violence' category which rose by 61% over the last decade which includes 'threats and extortion' (including cyber-crimes),

'cruel and unnatural treatment of children' and 'stalking' – all of which increased during Covid[14]. Recorded crime statistics from 2015/16 to 2024/25 highlight that other categories involving serious violence, including homicide and serious assault, have largely been on a downward trajectory since 2021/22 and have also decreased in comparison with 2015/16 figures[15].



- Murder and Culpable Homicide
- Serious Assault and Attempt Murder
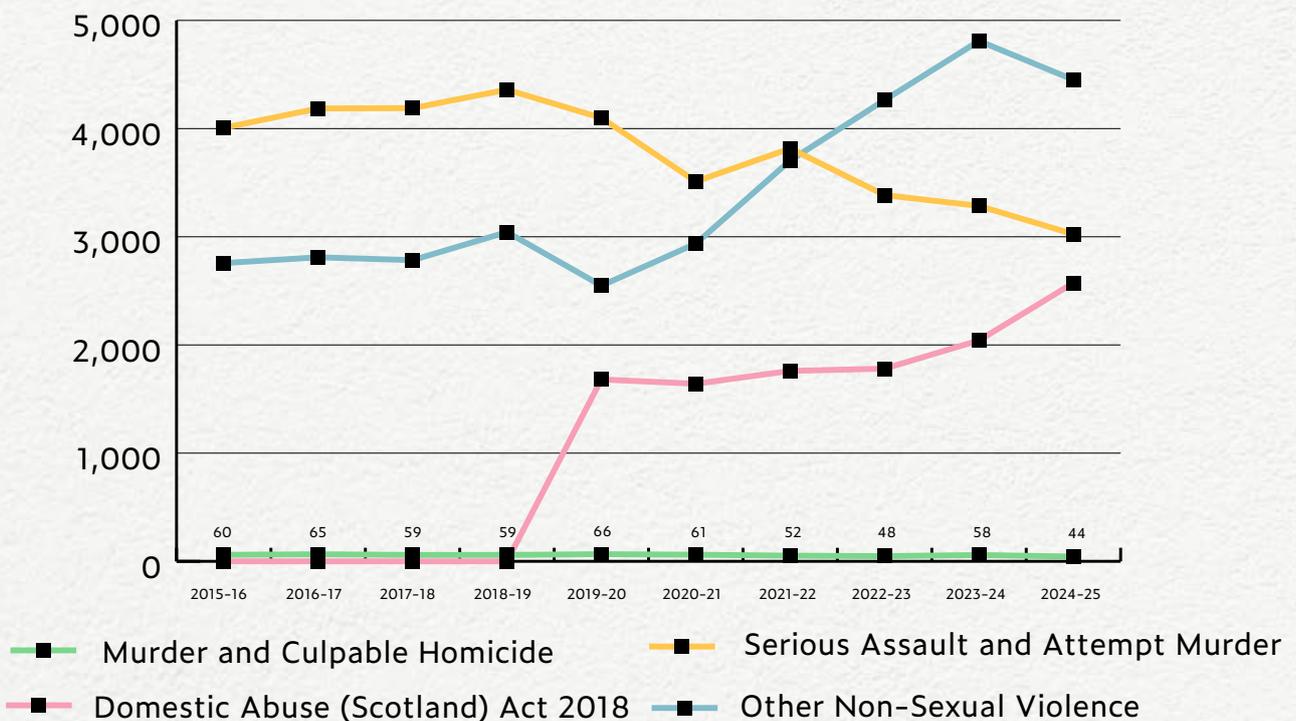- Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018
- Other Non-Sexual Violence

Figure 2. Source: Non-sexual crimes of violence – Recorded Crime in Scotland, 2024-25 – gov.scot. *Non-Sexual Violent Crime Types (Excluding Common Assault, Robbery & Death by Dangerous Driving) – 2015-16 to 2024-25. Published June 2025[1].*

[1] Figures correct as of June 2025 – data published later in the year may differ.

Risk has decreased for some groups, for example victimisation for the 16–24-year-old age group more than halved between 2008/09 (12%) and 2016/17 (5%) and has since remained at a similar level[16]. Additionally, the rates of young people aged 15–25 admitted to hospital for assault have experienced a long-downward trend (-82%) from 2005/06–2023/24[17]. As with any dataset, there are limitations in fully understanding the factors behind recorded changes.

Issues such as under-reporting of violence and individuals receiving care without being admitted to hospitals may have influenced the figures. **Nevertheless, the scale of the reduction represents significant progress over the last two decades – especially for young people.**

# Public Perception of Violence

Within the 2023/24 Scottish Crime and Justice Survey (SCJS), 71% of respondents indicated they felt that levels of crime in their local area have either reduced or remained steady[18]. Notably, this differed across population groups including females and those living in areas of high deprivation who were more likely to report feeling unsafe in comparison to their male counterparts and to those living in other areas[19]. This stresses the importance of considering the impact of violence through an intersectional lens, recognising that not all groups experience violence equally.

Furthermore, there was an increase in the perception of knife carrying, with 13% of respondents viewing this as a prevalent issue in their area, a rise from 10% in 2021/22 but largely in line with pre-Covid perception levels[20] and much lower than at 22% when the question was first asked in 2009/10[21]. It is important to note that Scotland was in the earlier days of the Covid pandemic in 2021/22 and the removal of social distancing measures may have influenced these changing perceptions[22]. Growing concerns around violence were expressed by communities and practitioners who attended the SVRU listening roadshows, reporting they had witnessed increases in physical violence, including gang-related violence, football-violence and violence in schools, with many describing the violence as becoming more severe.

# Common Assault

Common assaults account for the highest proportion of crimes committed within the non-sexual violent crime category (83%) in 2024/25[23]. Over the last decade, common assaults have remained largely at the same level, rising by 1% between 2015/16 and 2024/25, with very minor fluctuations in-between[24]. Interpreting changes within this category is challenging due to the levels of under-reporting, with the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey (SCJS) 2023/24 estimating that less than 50% of violent crimes were reported to the police[25].

# Homicide

Figure 3. Victims of Homicide by Local Authority 2021/22 to 2024/25. Source: Scottish Government – Homicide in Scotland 2024–25 – gov. scot. Published October 2025.
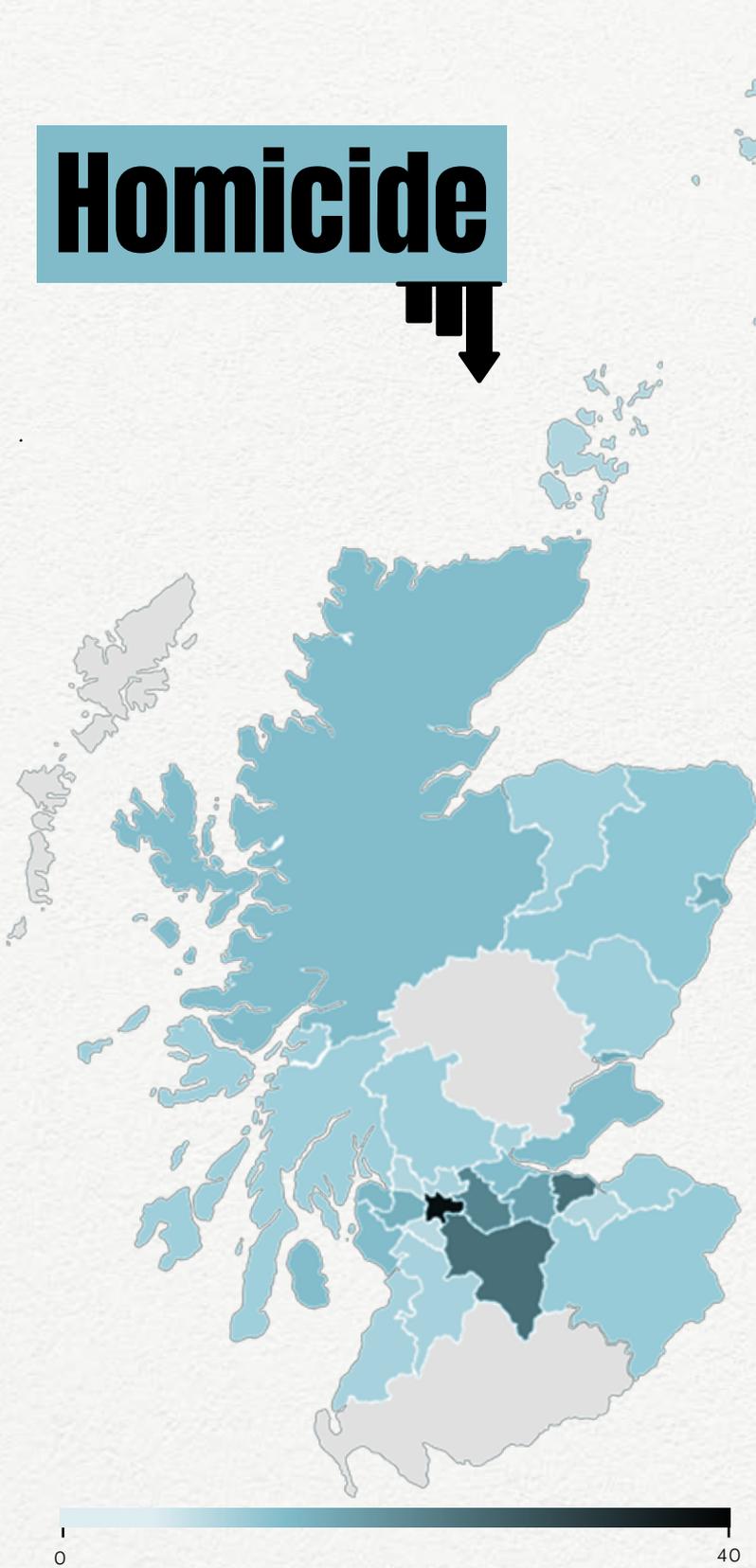
In 2024/25, there were 45 homicides: the lowest recorded level since records began in 1976[26]. **Rates of homicide have continued to fall**, decreasing by 67% between 2004/05 and 2024/25[27] and 24% between 2015/16 and 2024/25[28]. Glasgow City consistently accounts for the highest proportion of homicides in comparison with the rest of Scotland, although levels have continued to fluctuate with some decreases, particularly when compared with the early 2000's[29]. Young people aged 16–24 have witnessed a marked reduction in the number of homicides within their age group, with figures decreasing by around 70% between 2005/06–2009/10 and 2019/20–2024/25[30]. Despite this, there have been four homicides in the west of Scotland since 2021 involving sharp implements, where both the victim and accused were under the age of 18. Whilst this is very rare in Scotland the drivers influencing young people to become involved in serious violence must be addressed due to the devastating impact on young people, families and communities.

# Attempted Murder and Serious Assault

Similar to the pattern seen amongst homicides, attempted murders and serious assaults have been on a downward trajectory in Scotland since 2018/19. In 2024/25, attempted murders and serious assaults accounted for only 4% of the non-sexual violence category[31], decreasing from 6% in 2021/22[32]. In 2024/25 almost 70% (68%) of those accused of serious assaults and attempted murders were over the age of 25, with distinct persons aged 25–39 accounting for the highest proportion (44%)[33]. Nevertheless, there are concerns that young people are becoming involved in serious violence at a younger age, with Police Scotland and SVRU analysis identifying a higher frequency of younger accused in comparison with 2019[34]. Additionally, distinct accused per 10,000 population was highest amongst 16–24-year-olds in relation to serious assaults and attempt murders, in 2024/25[35]. However, the Scottish Police Authority reported that the number of adults co-accused with young people involved in attempt murders between April–June 2025 had risen[36].

Intelligence suggests that child criminal exploitation (CCE) may be a rising influential factor in young people accused of attempt murder, a sentiment shared within SVRU engagement sessions whereby CCE was expressed as a rising concern in relation to young people's involvement in violence.


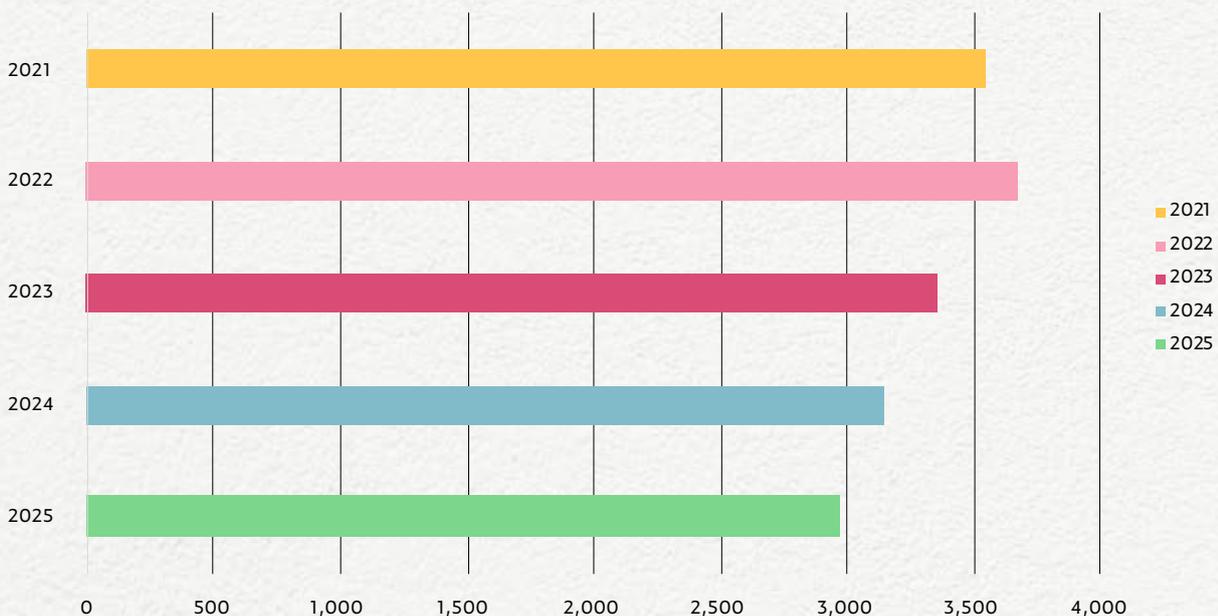
Figure 4. Source: Main findings – Recorded Crime in Scotland: year ending September 2025 – gov.scot. *Serious Assault and Attempted Murder by Year – Year Ending September 2021-2025 (Scotland). Published November 2025.*

# Repeat Victims

Repeat victimisation of violence has been identified as a complex, persistent issue in Scotland, with a relatively small pocket of society being impacted by a high level of repeated violent crime. The 2023/24 SCJS reported that the number of individuals experiencing repeated violent crime (more than one) is extremely low (0.9%), around 1 in 100, in comparison with 2008/09, where those experiencing multiple victimisations accounted for 1.6%[37]. However, this small proportion experienced 61% of all violent crime within this time frame, emphasising the highly concentrated nature of violence. This can be impacted by several overlapping factors such as gender, social environment, high levels of deprivation and consistent levels of trauma, usually beginning in early childhood[38]. Through our engagement with communities, the SVRU has heard about the pervasive impact of the cost-of-living crisis. Community members expressed this was compounded by a lack of employment opportunities, stemming from limited access to education and training for young people, particularly those that have stopped engaging in formal education.

## Making safer, healthier decisions can be challenging when living in severe stress, with a history of adverse childhood experiences, and worrying about providing for you or your family.

For those who experience high levels of repeated violence, they can often feel a reluctance to report or access support. Therefore, relying upon datasets from recorded incidents or self-reporting in surveys may not provide an accurate representation of where harm exists in society. Some people who have disclosed being repeat victims to the SVRU explained feeling disconnected from others in the community and from the services that are in place to support them. In recent decades, services – both those provided by statutory services and by the third sector – have seen increased demand on reduced resources pushing them to breaking point.

# Knives and Weapons

## Weapon Usage

Since 2021, weapon usage has increased by 27% from 5637 crimes to 7143, indicating that this is on a consistent upward trajectory[39].
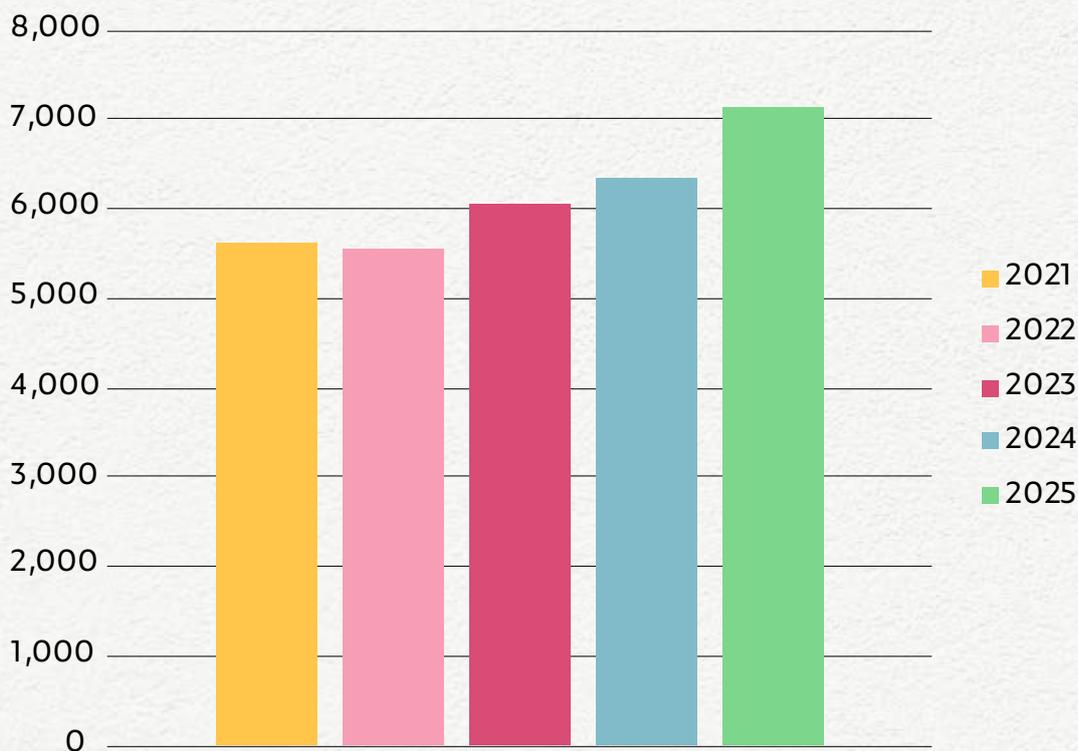


Figure 5. Source: <u>Main findings – Recorded Crime in Scotland: year ending September 2025 – gov.scot</u>. *Possession of Weapon (Used) – Year Ending September 2025 – Scotland. Published November 2025.*

Although serious assaults have steadily decreased since 2021, 'possession of weapon (used)' has been on an upward trajectory since 2022. Whilst there has been an overall decrease in hospital admissions for assaults involving a sharp object between 2014/15 and 2023/24 (–18%), Public Health Scotland data shows that hospital admissions involving a sharp object have slightly increased from 400 in 2021/22 to 438 in 2023/24[40], accounting for 26% of overall admissions for assault in 2023/24[41].

However, the most recent admissions data from 2024/25, (376) involving sharp objects, is an overall 33% reduction in comparison with 2015/16 levels[42]. Whilst this is promising, public health data from 2021/22–2023/24 corresponds with the potential increase in recorded weapons usage but not with the decrease in overall recorded serious violence (see graph). The use of weapons continues to be of concern to communities and policy makers due to the devastating impact they can have.

Figure 6. Source: [Main findings – Recorded Crime in Scotland: year ending September 2025 – gov.scot](#). *Possession of Weapon (Used) & Serious Assaults – Year Ending September 2025 – Scotland. Published November 2025.*

# Weapon Carrying

Some individuals may carry weapons without the intent to use them, but to maintain a personal sense of safety due to the perceived threat of being harmed themselves. However, anyone who carries a weapon puts themselves and others at greater risk of experiencing significant harm and legal consequences regardless of intent. Understanding the factors that may drive someone to pick up a weapon are crucial for primary prevention and addressing the root causes before violence occurs. Stop and search data highlights that between April to June 2025, there were 293 positive searches of weapons, with 12–17-year-olds accounting for 24% of these[43]. This includes 37 weapons recovered from 12–15-year-olds and a further 32 from 16–17-year-olds – representing an increase in weapons found amongst both age groups from the previous

year[44]. The perception of increased weapon carrying amongst young people continues to be of concern, however, it is important to emphasise that young people are not responsible for the majority of weapon offences.
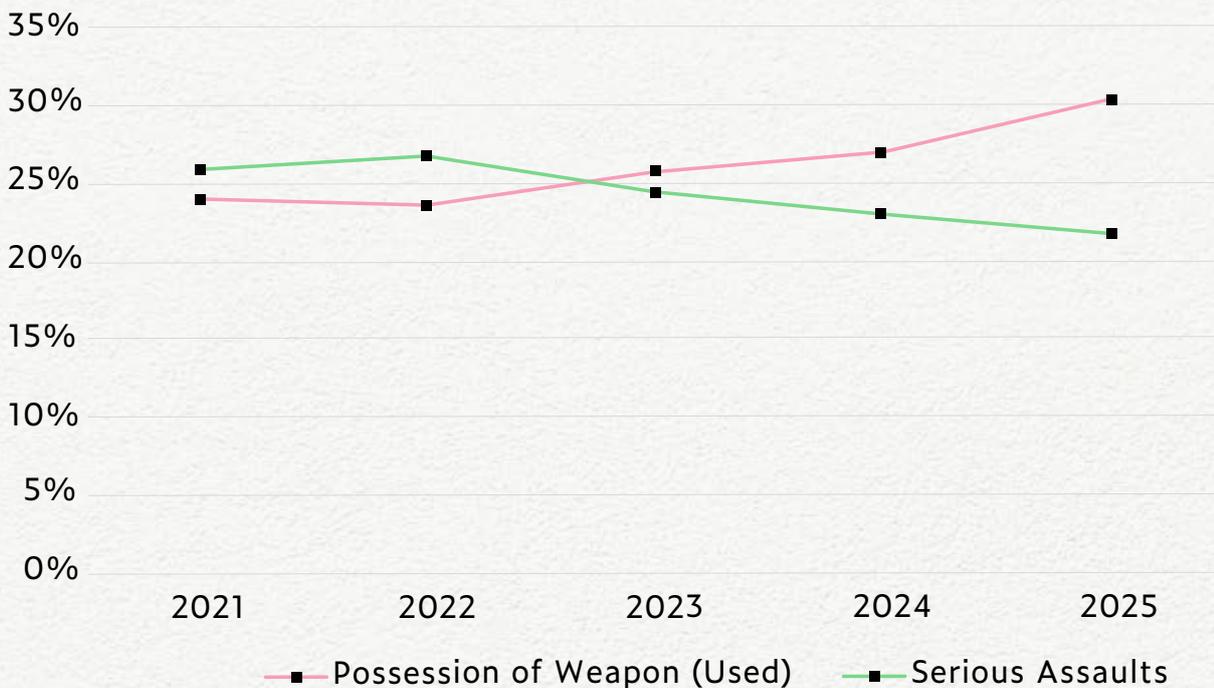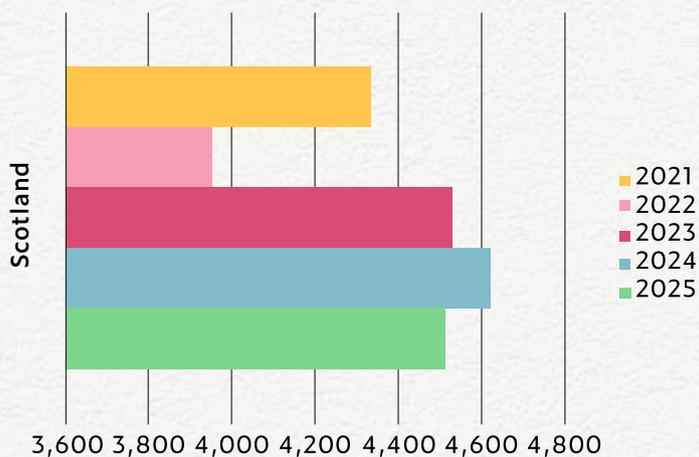


Figure 7. Source: [Main findings – Recorded Crime in Scotland: year ending September 2025 – gov.scot](#). *Possession of Weapon (Not Used) – Year Ending September 2025 – Scotland. Published November 2025.*

# Age

Most weapon offences in Scotland are committed by adults. In 2024/25, 67% of the individuals accused of weapon possession (used in other criminal activity) were over the age of 25, with those aged 25-39 responsible for the highest proportion of all accused of this crime[45]. Whilst young people account for a minority of weapon offences overall, there are rising concerns around those under the age of 18 carrying and using sharp objects and becoming involved in serious violence. A breakdown by distinct persons per age group in relation to using offensive weapons suggests that 12–15-year-olds accounted for 11%, and 16–24-year-olds made up 19% of all accused[46].

However, when examined per 10,000 of the population 12–15-year-olds accounted for 18 per 10,000; the highest when compared with all other age groups[47]. Additionally, from 2023/24 to 2024/25, there was an increase of 20 crimes in relation to 'possession of a weapon (used) in schools' rising from 95 to 115. This suggests that, although young people are not responsible for most weapon usage offences, the overall pattern of weapon usage amongst young people appears to be increasing. Early intervention and evidence-based solutions to prevent young people from carrying or using weapons as well as increasing young people's access to trusted adults and support should be prioritised to prevent this from worsening.
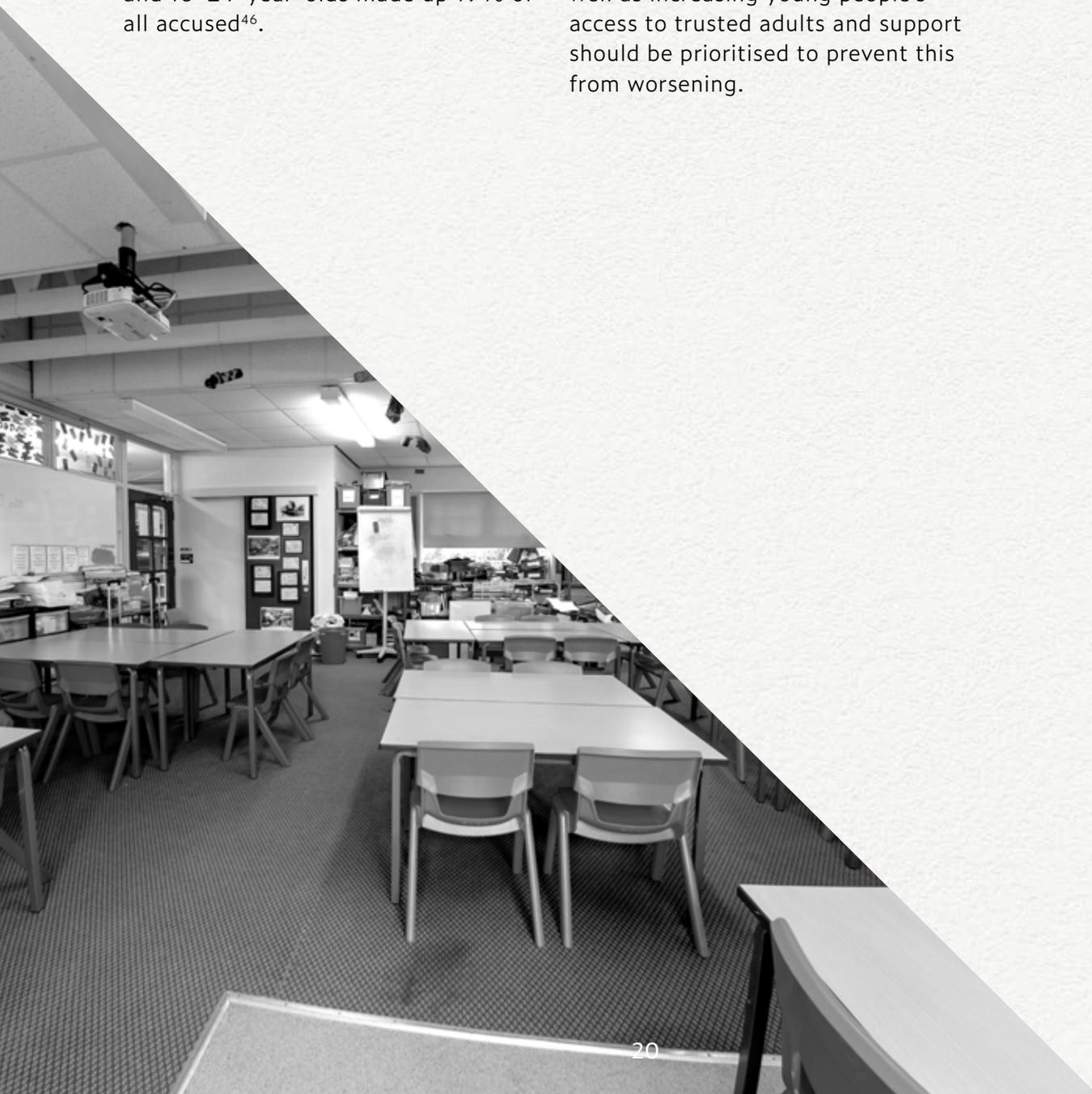
# Fear

Fear is a significant factor that can heighten a young person's perceived need to carry a weapon. Both media reporting on incidents involving weapons and social media content showcasing weapon carrying and use can amplify fear by making this appear to be a widespread issue that young people are likely to encounter. The Youth Endowment Fund identified that 80% of young people exposed to weapon-related content said that it made them feel less safe, with a substantial proportion (58%) noting that it normalised the carrying of weapons[45]. Fear-based aggression has been found to be a contributor to violent behaviour, with research on the motivations of violence stating that while young people may not intend to harm another individual, the risk of being harmed themselves is an influencing factor[49]. Recent findings suggest that around half of young people who perpetrated violence within the last twelve months, had also been victims[50].

A young person in S2 we spoke to expressed, in relation to carrying a weapon themselves,

 "***If someone else had it and you didn't, you're done for, but if you have it and they have it, it's 50/50***".

The Youth Endowment Fund reported 79% of young people they surveyed who stated they had carried a weapon within the last twelve months had also been victims of violence – a victimisation rate around five times higher than for young people who did not report carrying weapons[51]. This highlights the perpetual nature of fear and its impact on motivating violence, particularly weapon carrying. It also reinforces the importance of addressing the topic of violence with young people in a sensitive manner, detailing the realities of the potential consequences of carrying weapons and where they can receive support if they are concerned for their safety.

*Scotland and Violence Today*

# Drivers of Violence

1. Societal
2. Community
3. Relationship
4. Individual
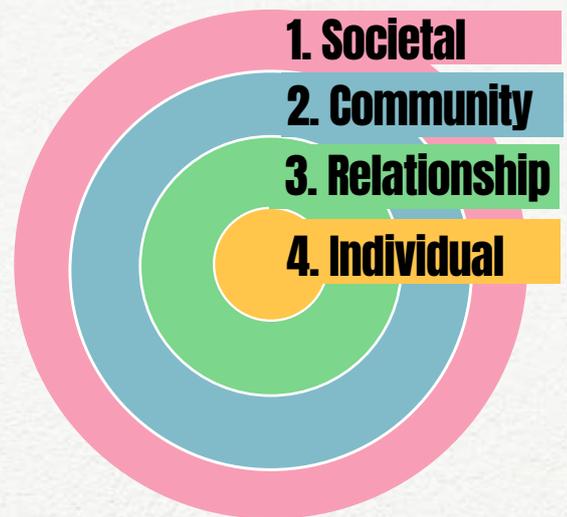
## 1. Societal Level

- **Economic Inequality:**
  There is a growing gap between the very rich and those struggling to get by. Perceptions of inequality, as well as struggling to support yourself or your family, increases stress and may result in adverse childhood experiences.

- **Structural Discrimination:**
  This may lead to certain minority groups being unsupported, underserved and pushed to the edges of society.

- **Algorithms, radicalisation and desensitisation:**
  Social media sites use programmes that push hateful or violent posts to the top of people's feeds, spreading extreme ideas quickly[52]. This puts people at risk of becoming desensitised to violence.

- **Unhealthy Gender Norms:**
  Both men and women suffer from unhealthy gender norms. With a pervasive view of masculinity in Scotland involving violence and emotional non-expression, men continue to be the primary perpetrators of violence, and women are disproportionally impacted by domestic and sexual violence. Also, many men continue to be victims of serious violence and are more likely to die from 'death of despair'.

## 2. Community Level

- **The "Automation Graveyard":**
  Areas where AI and new tech have taken over jobs leave towns feeling "empty". Automation and the changing job market may impact on young people who are worried about their prospects[53].

- **Core service disinvestment:**
  Due to disinvestment in core services, it is harder to sustain youth clubs and community centres, meaning fewer safe spaces for young people to take part in recreational activities and build positive, trusting relationships with peers and youth workers.

- **The "Manosphere":**
  Misogynistic ideologies often found on social media that promote aggression appear to be becoming more common in schools, making classroom environments more hostile for all but particularly girls and female teachers and increasing negative stereotypes in relation to masculinity amongst boys.

# 3. Relationship Level
## Family and friends

- **Family Trauma:**
Children who have experienced adverse childhood experiences including parental drug use, domestic abuse and physical abuse are more likely to commit violence[54]. The Scottish Prison Service 2019 survey[55] highlights this with 34% of prisoners stating they had lived with someone in childhood with an alcohol addiction, and 20% stating they had lived with someone in active substance use. Additionally, 47% prisoners surveyed noted that they had been physically abused by an adult in their home throughout childhood.

- **Financial Control:**
Abusers often use a lack of money to stop partners from leaving, which keeps victims in dangerous and volatile homes[56].

- **Societal Disconnection:**
When people feel disconnected or excluded from their community and have no positive role models, they are more likely to look for belonging in other environments which can take the form of violent or organised crime groups[57].

- **Daily Stress:** Worries about paying for everyday needs can exacerbate stress within a household.  Living in chronic stress may result in adverse childhood experiences for family members. It can be harder to make safer, healthier decisions if you live in chronic stress[58].

# 4. Individual Level
## Personal life and feelings

- **Substance Use:**
People can often use drugs or alcohol to cope with stress in their lives[59], which can lower inhibitions and increase opportunities for them being exploited or involved in violence[60].

- **Untreated Trauma:**
Without adequate support (including mental health support) people may find it hard to manage their feelings and therefore may find it more challenging to choose safer, healthier actions.

- **Sense of Hopelessness:**
If someone feels they have no chance of a good future, they may feel they have nothing to lose and be more likely to be involved in risk-taking activities[61].

*Drivers of Violence*

# Current and Future Challenges

## Implementing and Evidencing Primary Prevention

We know that exposure to violence in the family home can have long-term negative impacts and can be a risk factor for young people becoming involved in violence. Continued offending into adulthood can be influenced by several vulnerabilities, however this can be linked with engaging in serious offending in childhood, as well as exposure to adverse childhood experiences[62]. A key finding within Batchelor and Gormley's[63] study on repeat victimisation illustrated that those who reported persistent levels of repeat victimisation across their life span often disclosed abuse beginning in their adolescence, with women experiencing more sexual abuse.

### Therefore, prioritising early intervention is vital.

The SVRU's Safe Horizons project, in partnership with Public Health Scotland and Police Scotland aimed to understand the current challenges facing those working in frontline prevention with young people. Practitioners voiced that receiving funding for prevention activities was hindered due to the difficulties surrounding the evidencing of impact – and that there should be a larger focus on grassroots family support. It is estimated that since 2005, violence prevention initiatives have saved the Scottish taxpayer over £830 million[64], subsequently reinforcing the need for early intervention. For example, programmes that focus on social and emotional learning (SEL) are estimated to have a high impact on violent crime[65]. The SVRU supports the use of SEL in early interventions and has been successful in implementing this within a nursery-based setting in several local authorities across Scotland – including Glasgow, Fife and North Lanarkshire[66]. The SVRU is also providing Family Peer Support opportunities, based on Scotland's commitment to whole family wellbeing, in Fife and North Lanarkshire.

# Social Media

Although the vast majority of young people will never become involved in violence, exposure to violent content is becoming a worryingly common part of growing up in an online world. Viewing violence on social media has tangible, real life consequences with concerns about the algorithm directing potentially violent content at young people. Consequently, many professionals working with young people are now pushing for stronger regulations for social media companies. The Youth Endowment Fund's annual Children, Violence and Vulnerability survey identified that 70% of the surveyed young people had witnessed real-life violence on social media platforms within the last year, most commonly fighting amongst young people – with over half reporting they had witnessed this[67].

To understand the key issues around the links between young people, social media and violence it is vital to hear from young people themselves. From engagement with young people as part of a joint project between the SVRU and Police Scotland's Youth Engagement team named 'The Way We See It', we heard that social media plays a significant role in the lives of young people as well as often escalating online arguments into physical violence, with girls specifically highlighting bullying as something which may start online but lead to in-person conflict or fights.

The media landscape has increasingly become a primary engine for misogyny. The rise of the 'manosphere' fuelled by online influencers has created a 'gateway' to extreme ideologies for young men and boys, promoting violence and emotional non-expression.

## "Social media pushes out more bad stuff than good" (S2 Pupil, Glasgow)

Practitioners within SVRU engagement sessions who work with young people have also indicated a rise in domestic abuse incidents at younger ages. The development of the MVP programme with Education Scotland in 2014, was a pivotal point in the development of Bystander programmes in Scotland. Expanding from its two test schools in Portobello and Port Glasgow, the programme is now delivered in every local authority in Scotland. The SVRU has begun to convene key partners across Scotland to build a healthy version of masculinity in future years.

*Current and Future Challenges*

Young people told us that social media apps such as Instagram and Snapchat were where young people witnessed violence, citing Instagram as the platform they saw it on most frequently. Young boys highlighted seeing more fighting and physical violence online, normalising this behaviour, alongside posts "*glamourising gang culture*" (S2 pupil, Glasgow). One young person in an S4 SVRU/Police Scotland led workshop in Edinburgh explained they, "*wouldn't scroll past because I would want to see who's fighting and who's getting beat up*". Others voiced that they would be more likely to watch videos of fights if they knew the young people involved, with a minority voicing that they found the videos "*entertaining*".

A collaborative campaign between the SVRU, YouthLink Scotland and Medics Against Violence named Quit Fighting for Likes (QF4L)[68] explored young people's experiences of harm online, aiming to address the filming and sharing of fights on social media through an online campaign, snapchat advertisements and a resource toolkit for practitioners working with young people. As of June 2025, there were nearly 50,000 clicks on the ad with 31,500 video completions. The House of Commons Youth Select Committee report on violence amongst young people and social media stated in relation to QF4

"The campaign's clear messaging gives young people the tools and confidence to modify their social media experience to one that features less violent content.

Quit Fighting for Likes is a positive example of how police forces, and Violence Reduction Units, can model good social media behaviour."[69]

# Education

Recently, behaviour and violence in education settings have featured as a public concern with the voices of parents and teachers rising in unison to highlight the issue. Since the return to school post-Covid, there appears to have been a marked difference in behaviour, with increasing levels of oppositional/dysregulated behaviours, threats and assaults on teachers, and threats and assaults on fellow pupils. The Behaviour in Scottish Schools Report commissioned by the Scottish Government found 43% of school staff had witnessed violence amongst young people within their classrooms within the last week[70].

In 2024/25, in collaboration with Education Scotland, the SVRU delivered in-person Relationship Based Practice Sessions to over 2,500 teachers and staff across Nursery, Primary, Secondary and College settings. These sessions covered Trauma, ACE's, conflict management, personal resilience and wellbeing.

In 2026, the SVRU aims to introduce emotional regulation workshops in primary schools to provide children and young people with tools to regulate themselves and prevent escalation to physical violence. The SVRU also host CPD events specifically developed for school-based police officers twice a year. These events include guest speakers and workshops delivered in partnership with youth organisations and professionals working with children and young people. Attendees at previous SVRU events referenced how the tools they were provided with allowed them to reflect and enhance how they engaged with young people in a meaningful way:

> **"The way that I engage with young people will change and be focused on positive outcomes. Each interaction should have a focus."**
>
> **- (School Engagement Officer)**

It is widely accepted that two of the main factors that can help to prevent violence are purposeful employment and/or education. Schools are not just a place of education but a contextual place where young people should feel a sense of belonging and safety and have access to support from trusted adults. The Youth Endowment Fund reinforce the distinctive role of education in preventing violence amongst young people, allowing them to feel safe, reducing the risk of exploitation and providing evidence-based support[71].

This was echoed in community engagement sessions where individuals highlighted that an ideal safe community would provide access to education, alternate learning pathways and employability opportunities. Young people in Fife emphasised the importance of youth organisations that were able to help and support education and employment opportunities, as they felt they had nowhere else to turn when traditional education routes weren't accessible for them. The SVRU will continue to support organisations who deliver such work, such as the Community Trade Hub in Fife who seek to address this issue by engaging with over 160 young people per year at risk of being dislocated from education, employment and life opportunities.

*Current and Future Challenges*

# Drugs and Alcohol

In Scotland, it has been well documented over the last two decades within the public health discourse that there is a strong but complex relationship between the sale and consumption of alcohol, illegal drugs and violence. This is often due to the contextual and physical risks associated with them, as opposed to directly causing involvement in violent behaviour. The SVRU supported work with the Simon Community and No Feart in Awareness and Recovery Training with the Men's Managed Alcohol Programme (MAP) in Glasgow which demonstrated improved relationships and reduction in aggressive behaviour and violence amongst participants.

Results from the 2023/24 SCJS provide insight into this, showing 45% of victims of violent crime reported that offenders were under the influence of drugs, 35% were under the influence of alcohol and 31% were under the influence of both[72]. Since 2008/09, there has been an increase in the level of violent crime where the offender has been under the influence of drugs (29% to 45%)[73]. Conversely, the frequency of violent crime involving alcohol has declined from 63% to 35%[74].

As part of a community consultation in Fife, several young people expressed that due to the lack of suitable activities for them, they often find themselves gravitating to the pubs in the local areas which can often lead to them finding themselves in fights or escalating incidents.

## 45%

OF VICTIMS OF VIOLENT CRIME REPORTED THAT OFFENDERS WERE UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF DRUGS[72]

## 35%

WERE UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF ALCOHOL[72]

*Current and Future Challenges*
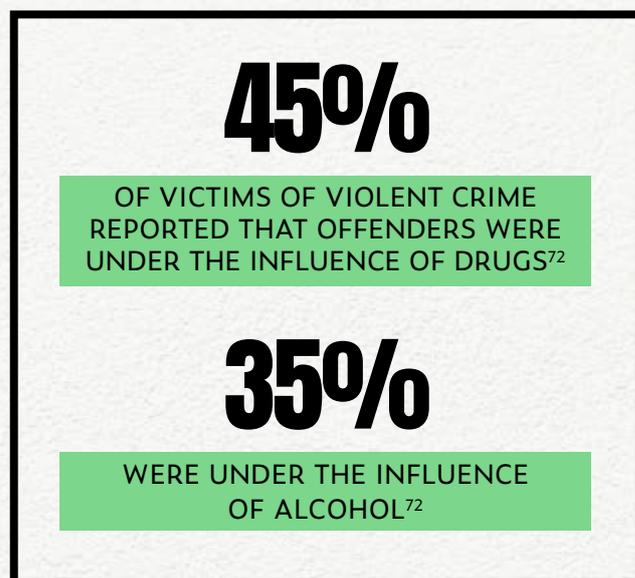
# Organised Crime, Exploitation and Drug Markets

Although the physical effects of all drugs may not directly contribute towards individuals becoming violent, the sale of drugs and the acquisition of money to buy drugs has largely fuelled much of the violence relating to drug use. There is an emerging threat of vulnerable young people being exploited into involvement in dealing drugs in smaller towns, also referred to as "county lines". "County lines" is defined by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) as a type of criminal exploitation where organised crime groups coerce vulnerable young people to carry or store drugs, often transporting them across local authority boundaries[75]. For example, The Youth Endowment Fund investigated the impact of exploitation and gangs on young people, discovering that over 1 in 10 young people reported being asked to sell, transport or store drugs, weapons and money[76]. Although this research was undertaken in England and Wales, it is clear from our own engagement, academic evidence and recent media coverage that this is an emerging threat in Scotland currently.

Police Scotland's Operation Portaledge has encountered several young people linked to wider organised crime feuds accused of firebombing, firearm offences and other serious violent crime. Although Scotland has witnessed a significant decline in the level of territorial street–based gang violence, the perceived return in more recent years may be linked to the increasing involvement of organised crime groups[77]. Young people from Glasgow were interviewed, revealing that violence was linked to drug debts, with older adults exploiting vulnerable young people from deprived communities who are enticed by the premise of financial gains[78].

Creating safe spaces for young people in our towns and cities not only helps to reduce violence and disorder but it also helps to minimise the opportunities to exploit young people. Contextual safeguarding approaches which increase the level of capable guardianship (safe adults) on the streets, reducing opportunities for exploitation whilst also expanding the help and support for young people without criminalising them. The SVRU alongside Barnardo's have now introduced a 'Street Guardians' approach in Glasgow City Centre with early indications suggesting this has been successful, with a full evaluation to follow.

# Changing Demographic and Vulnerability

In recent years, there has been a notable change in the demographic of those becoming involved in violence, particularly an increase in the frequency of younger accused, with these instances of violence often being committed against other young people[79]. It is possible that the social and emotional impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, coupled with the changing nature of gang culture whereby exploitation is a more prominent factor at play, have influenced this trend. Furthermore, research carried out by the SVRU and Police Scotland's Analysis and Performance Unit discovered that the gender gap between young males and young females involved in violence was becoming narrower, with an increase of young females becoming involved in violence[80]. This reinforces the requirement for primary prevention and targeted, early intervention to address risk factors and promote protective factors and the safeguarding of young people.

Additionally, financial pressures and the declining level of youth provision across communities, resulting in less safe spaces for young people could also be a driving factor. More provisions for youth work within communities was a common theme through school engagement sessions as well as consultations with stakeholders, with youth work being identified as one of the most important factors in not only creating but maintaining safe communities. Young people told us that safe spaces aren't about the physical place but "*it's the people*" (Fife young person).

Discussions around funding were apparent through all engagement sessions and are a key limiting factor for many services currently. Many stakeholders highlighted the need for funding to be collaborative and joined up across many services to avoid competition for funds. There was also an emphasis on the longevity of funding, as many services find themselves competing on an annual basis to continue with their funding and therefore find it hard to implement long-term solutions under the current model.

*Current and Future Challenges*

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# There is More That We Must Do

The notable progress that Scotland has made, stems from the nation adopting a radical truth: violence acts like a disease that can be prevented by working together to address root causes and implementing innovative prevention strategies.

### Complacency is the enemy of safety.

The energy and commitment towards violence reduction in 2005 was palpable. Today, we see the headlines, and we feel the anxiety rising in our communities. While the official data is largely positive, our findings suggest that in communities affected by violence the *perception* of danger is rising.

### Now, in Scotland in 2026, we are at a crossroads.

2026 is very different to the early days of the VRU. The challenges outlined in this paper present emerging threats: economic pressure, social media dynamics and the increasing concern around the exploitation of young people, to name a few.

### This is a call to action.

Scotland must build on the successes of the last two decades, with a firm focus on the future. Everyone in Scotland has a role to play to make sure that the next twenty years are just as impactful.

# Scotland must:

## Remove silos and prioritise deeper collaboration than ever before.

Scotland is more than the sum of its parts. In times of financial strain, we need collaboration now more than ever – including the sharing of comprehensive, multiagency data to make sure we can identify risk factors and implement effective prevention strategies.

## Meaningfully involve communities & young people in change.

Communities are facing a number of challenges, but we know they have the solutions. Therefore, Scotland must share power with communities and provide them with the resources they need to allow them to take ownership and flourish, whilst ensuring that best practice engagement principles are employed when doing this.

## Prioritise prevention - even when it's not easy.

Too often, with cuts to core services, preventative activity is defunded. We know the benefits of primary prevention so we must prioritise the long term in our actions today.

## Keep children in schools - where it is safe to do so.

Education is one of the strongest protective factors from violence, and keeping young people in school should be the aspiration. Education settings can assist in building relationships between young people and trusted adults as well as developing their social and emotional skills. In recent years, school staff have made significant progress towards implementing alternative, trauma informed and targeted support for young people who require it. We need to see more of this across Scotland and do our very best not to exclude children, opening up opportunities for the rest of their lives.

*There is More That We Must Do*

# Act in the reachable, teachable moments

The NHS deals with the consequences of violence, under immense financial pressures. Medics have proven how critical they are at teachable moments, such as when people present at A&E. This approach has also been successful when tested within a custody setting, with navigators providing person-centred support aiming to reduce the likelihood of an individual re-offending. Scotland needs to double down on hospital and custody-based intervention programs (Navigators) to break "treat and release" cycles.

Additionally, social workers deal with the trauma and instability that predate violence. In the face of increased caseloads in both numbers and complexity, social workers continue to be the architects of resilience, beyond the immediate crisis management to focus on the long-term relationships that build trust.

# Support Scotland's third sector partners

The last few years have been exceptionally challenging with increasing need and depleting resources across the country. The SVRU will always champion the work of the third sector, and advocate for more support. Without the third sector, prevention is immeasurably harder. A Scotland that is serious about violence reduction must ensure we have a thriving third sector that is appreciated as the frontline of prevention.

# Be adaptable

The landscape of violence is changing. It is moving online, and it is moving into private spaces. Scotland must do more to share knowledge about these changes so we can work together effectively, in service of communities. This will allow us to get ahead of challenges and not constantly react to them.

# Enable the citizens and communities of Scotland

We should all feel safe, and communities can help make their neighbourhoods safer for each other. Communities provide mentorship, a watchful eye, or simple acts of kindness that build relationships and can change the trajectory of a life. We can all make a difference in personal acts such as being a role model or challenging negative behaviours in our peers. Communities can reject the normalisation of violence and be powerful advocates for change. To enable more community influence, Scotland needs to nurture and listen to its citizens and its communities, and this needs to be reflected in how systems operate and in funding priorities.

# Create a hopeful narrative in the media

The fear of violence remains a concern for some individuals and communities in Scotland. The media has significant influence; it can reduce fear by not sensationalising instances of violence which can invoke moral panics and provide a balanced narrative by also reporting on positive community stories and building hope. Both mainstream and social media companies have a responsibility to limit the extent of young people witnessing violence, including prohibiting the use of knife imagery or stigmatising images of young people in media articles.

# Frame violence reduction for solutions, not fear

Most violence committed in Scotland is by the adult population. Persistent, inflammatory reporting on violence amongst young people can make it feel as though it is more prevalent than it is. This can influence the way in which the public interact with young people as well as increasing fear around the threat of violence in their communities. Through our engagement in schools, young people told us that media reporting after an attempt murder in a nearby area had dramatically heightened fear levels amongst their peers, making them feel less safe and increased their perceived need to carry weapons for protection.

The demonising of Scotland's young people by the media needs to end. The media has a role to play and must remember to include positive stories about young people's roles in communities to help shape a narrative that fits with Scotland's Promise; that all young people will grow up loved, safe and respected so they can fulfil their potential[81]. Young people have led the way in making Scotland a safer place in the last twenty years and Scotland's media reporting should reflect that.

*There is More That We Must Do*

# The Next
# Twenty

No parent should feel the loss of a child to violence, no woman should be threatened by their partner, and no one should be fearful in their community.

# Violence has no place in Scotland.

All of us have a role to play, as the public health approach that Scotland has embraced reminds us.  We know what works, we have the blueprint, and we have the people.

**Violence is preventable, not inevitable. But only if we work together.** Let us prioritise safety through connection, compassion, and an unrelenting commitment to prevention.

Let's work together like never before to achieve our vision:

# A Scotland free from violence.

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