

Lessons about violence

Betsy Stanko summarises the findings of the Violence Research Programme.

The Economic and Social Research Council's Programme on Violence held its final feedback session in June 2002. Its 20 research project findings have largely seeped into government policy, academic debates, served as foundations for some legislative change, and led to a host of subsequent studies, promotions and publications.

The ESRC Violence Research Programme 1997-2002

The VRP funded twenty studies throughout the UK. These included:

- Historical studies;
- Projects exploring domestic violence (during pregnancy; women's understanding of service provision);
- Studies of settings where violence took place or was mediated by its environment (in prison; in the night-time economy; in children's residential homes; in schools; in settings of prostitution; in neighbourhoods; in professional settings such as health or the church);
- Studies of different forms of violence (racist violence; homophobic violence; homicide; children's discipline); and
- Studies of the behaviour of bystanders in situations of violence.

The VRP brought together an eclectic group of largely academics (85 in all), across the UK, using different methods, with views from different disciplines. It was a research programme with a motley crew of researchers, topics and perspectives.

Overarching lessons

As Director, I had the luxury of knitting together the overall lessons from the programme. I have come to reduce these lessons to three.

- 1) The assumption that violence is hidden (and thus unknowable) is unsustainable.
- 2) Violence has different meanings to different people in different places, and knowing the impact of inequalities is critical to the mediation of meaning as well as the provision of service and remedies.
- 3) People adapt to the threat of violence (but with cost).

Lesson One: Violence is not hidden

While violence may be largely hidden to criminal justice agencies, nearly all acts of violence are either witnessed directly or known about by third parties. For instance, the study of girls and violence found that 98.5 per cent of girls had

witnessed at first-hand some form of interpersonal violence. While the impact and outcome of violence may not be visible to criminal justice, it is often strewn across the records of many other agencies. The damage and the harm are certainly often managed by people's family and friends.

Only now are we beginning to map other public and statutory sector knowledge about violence onto what the criminal justice system 'knows' about violence. Hospital casualty departments, social service records, citizen advice bureaus, dentist surgeries and housing departments routinely manage the impact of violence on people's lives. We should demand better – and demand joined-up information, and that we share what we do know about violence. I'd even go further: To act as if violence is hidden is irresponsible. Look at your records.

Lesson Two: Violence means different things to different people, and the impact of inequalities on people's lives give us clues as to how violence makes difficult lives even more difficult.

Violence has a differential impact on groups of people, especially the most vulnerable. Violence falls heavily on the shoulders of the young, and young adults in particular. It is often compounded by the interactive effects – living in violence, living with violence, adapting to abuse, being abusive. While these patterns are not predictive, they are clearly known as part of the provision of services for those committing or experiencing violence.

Violence is often targeted at vulnerability. Women – young or old – are still most at risk from known men. The youngest target of homicide – babies under one year old – are most at risk from their carers. It is therefore important when dealing with the impact of violence to understand *as best possible* the context within which it takes place. It is this context riddled with information of how the structures and spaces of inequalities sustain violence and abuse that enables us to devise protective factors to minimise the harm – and the sustenance – acts of violence take from the situation/environment within which they take place. For example, racist violence may be exacerbated by housing policies, school policies or prison policies. We must continue to ask why the contexts of violence are invisible to social service and other statutory agencies and demand that the context of violence is known as much as is possible. Recognising inequality can assist in exploring long term solutions rather than short term responses which neglect structural or policy change.

In this way, we can harness what we know in order to widen our ability to intervene and disrupt the conditions which give those who commit violence power wider than any punch. Silences around violence are fed by threat, intimidation, and humiliation which work because the wider knowledge about how threat is realised is known by the parties. As agencies or listeners, we categorise routine information about violence in ways that obscure its meanings and impacts on different kinds of people. We often don't hear the information we are given about the context of threat or humiliation. We must be much better at unpacking information to expose the impact individual acts of violence and abuse has collectively on communities and groups.

Common findings about violence – many of which the 20 projects reproduced in many different contexts – have not changed over time. For example, the typical victim of violence is male. Female victims are most likely to be separated or single, single parents, private renters, living in highly disordered areas. Domestic violence is the only category of violence where the risk to women is higher than risk to men. Alcohol-related assault is a common feature; alcohol-related rape is also common. Publicity around violence has a long history – newspaper headlines are so rarely new. These characteristics of violence are consistent over time.

Lesson Three: People adapt to the threat of violence (but with cost).

Most violence is often managed by people themselves. According to the British Crime Survey, less than half of violence is reported to police, and some forms of violence are more likely to be reported than others. People then adapt to their experiences and threat of violence. Precautions, insurance, choices about where to live, work and play are influenced by the avoidance of violence.

We know that some people must manage more violence than others. At the time of writing this piece, there is extensive coverage of the killing of five young women sex workers in Ipswich. The discussion and debate triggered by these terrible killings has exposed a great ambivalence. We know for a fact that sex workers face high levels of violence. We know for a fact that sex workers who work 'the street' do so out of desperation, usually because they are trying to raise funds in the illegal economy to feed the illegal economy of the illegal drug market. We wring our hands as if 'nothing can be done' to minimise the dangers of the illegal markets. Government policy facilitates contradictory and frankly dangerous policy contradictions that propel women addicted to illegal drugs to find illegal means to feed their habits. Sex work is untaxed, unregulated, and dangerous, but provides the means to fund addiction. Whether we resume turning our gaze away from what we know is dangerous about street sex work after (or if) the killer is caught remains to be seen.

How do we explain the virtual acceptance of the ubiquity of violence in sex work? Such acceptance, I suggest, stems from the denial of harm. Those who work in the sex industry must then adapt to this denial, taking their own precautions and minimising the risks of danger as best they can. But such adaptations to dangerousness and violence have costs. These costs may be economic, social, and/or psychological and may lead to a diminished quality of life not only for those who are directly affected, but for all of us.

What do these three lessons tell us? First, they suggest where we can start the dialogue about the prevention of violence. We can start from what we know about violence and how it impacts us individually and collectively. We should be prepared to prioritise 'higher' harm – and challenge our ambivalence as a society that is prepared to tolerate more violence in some places and towards some individuals than others. We are not equally at risk of violence. We should insist that we mitigate harm by harnessing what we know about what protects us – and those who experience less of it – from violence.

Patterns of violence by and large can be found in routine sources of information. We should encourage ourselves as practitioners and as researchers to probe known information, encourage consultation and dialogue to discover the silences about what we do not know.

We should start by mitigating the harm we already know about, and map what is known about how people experience violence on to what we offer as 'services' and how we could deliver more comprehensive or more specialised services – whichever is needed. Finally, we can challenge the legitimisation of violence and the presumption that in some places and for some people violence is inevitable. Everyone deserves safety, and as a civilised society we can move positively toward that end.

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References

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