Anti-gang scheme cuts violence by nearly 50%

Glasgow’s gang culture and accompanying violent crime is being broken down by a pilot scheme which diverts gang members into training or jobs, police claimed yesterday.

A report assessing the first year of the Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV) scheme showed that recorded violence among members who engaged with it dropped by almost half — 49.2 per cent. There was also an 18.5 per cent decline in violent activity among gang members who refused to join the project.

The £5 million scheme run by the national Violence Reduction Unit, was launched in October 2008 with a two-year remit. It initially focused on the East End of Glasgow, where there is estimated to be 55 gangs with up to 700 members, and recently expanded to the north of the city, where there is a further 21 gangs with about 400 members.

Gang members are invited to attend meetings with police and other community representatives, during which they are asked to lay down their weapons in return for help to access training or jobs. Those who agree to join the scheme are linked with a youth worker who assesses their needs and decides which activities — including anger management classes, fitness training and addiction treatment — would be most suitable to help them escape the gang lifestyle. According to the report, 368 gang members have already engaged with the programme, including at least 100 who are now in full-time employment, work placements or education.

The initiative is based on a US project called Ceasefire, implemented by police in Boston, which was hailed as an overwhelming success. For 18 months, nobody under the age of 17 in the US city was killed. A similair programme was also tried out in Cincinnati.

Chief Inspector Robert Stevenson, the officer who heads the Glasgow scheme, gave the report a cautious welcome.

“This is a 50, 60, 70 year-old problem. However, we have seen a significant reduction in violent offending among those street gang members who have engaged so far,” he said.

Although the scheme is voluntary, Mr Stevenson said they made it clear to gang members that they would take tough action against them if they did not take up the offer of help.

He said: “We know everything about these gangs. We know who they are; we know who the gang members are; we know what weapons they carry; we know where they stay and we know where they meet to fight.
“When we meet with the gang members to tell them just that and lay out in clear terms what enforcement activity that we have planned for them, many have already accrued convictions for their violent gang activity. We give them a series of options and a series of opportunities to help get out of that embedded lifestyle.”

They also spelled out the consequences that their gang activity could have, he said. “Our experience is that the chances are they will end up in accident and emergency, or worse, or in prison.”

Mr Stevenson said they intended “to keep up the momentum!” after research carried out in the US suggested that gang violence soared again when intervention is phased out.

“We fully anticipate there is a chance that, in a year’s time, the figures may not be as good as this — they may, despite our efforts, have increased,” he said.

“Gang violence has been with us for many, many years and we will not change that culture overnight.”

The first year report was presented to Kenny MacAskill, the Justice Secretary, at the Bambury Centre in Glasgow’s East End.

Mr MacAskill praised the scheme but agreed that the pressure on gang members must be maintained.

He said: “The results so far are very encouraging but we have to be aware that the problem of gang violence has not been cured. Gang violence has existed in this area for decades, there is no quick fix.

“Over the coming year we must look to build on the positive start and continue to steer young people who are involved in gangs away from the acts of violence that will inevitably see them arrested and jailed.”

Case study: David

David*, 18, signed up to the CIRV project when his gang activities caused him to lose his job.

"I was gutted when I lost my job," he said. "I'd been there about eight months and liked it, liked getting regular money. Then the police turned up one day and charged me with assault, and that was it."

David became involved in gangs at the age of about 13. He admits to drinking, fighting, and on some occasions, carrying — and using — a knife. Although he was never seriously injured he knew others who were. "One boy I knew got stabbed a couple of times and that's when I started thinking it was a waste of time. Losing my job made it seem even more of a waste."

He heard about the CIRV scheme through friends. Once he joined, he embarked on a range of activities, including awareness programmes about gang violence and knife crime.

"A lot of people doubted me, they doubted I would stick it. But I didn't care what they thought, because I knew inside I was going to do this, to get on, sort myself out, get a job, a motor, maybe my own place."

He is now almost at the end of the process and has been asked to help mentor other young men embarking on the scheme. "I'm really chuffed that they asked me, it'll be great to help someone else go through what I've been through."

* name changed to protect identity

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