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GANGS ENCOURAGED TO POLICE THEMSELVES

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Gang members have met police as part of a US-inspired initiative to reduce **violence**, it emerged today.

About 150 people attended the "self-referral" sessions held at Glasgow Sheriff Court.

The move is part of a £5 million plan unveiled today to break up gangs in the east end of the city.

A report published by the Centre For Social Justice think-tank earlier this year said that Glasgow had 170 teenage gangs - the same number believed to be in London.

The Community Initiative to Reduce **Violence** (CIRV) is based on the Boston Ceasefire project which reduced gang-related crime in the US city in the mid-1990s.

Led by Scotland's **Violence** Reduction Unit (VRU), the initiative works by treating the gang as a unit rather than as individuals and using the gang itself to address individuals' behaviour.

After intelligence-gathering, gang members are approached by CIRV street level workers with the offer of help to find an alternative to a gang lifestyle.

They are then invited to attend a self-referral session, where they are addressed by a senior police officer, an accident and emergency consultant and other members of their community.

They will also come face-to-face with the parent of a victim of gang **violence**.

The police tell them that if they commit a crime they will pursue the entire group, not just the individual.

The VRU said this had the effect of pushing gangs into policing their own behaviour.

At the end of the sessions, gang members are given the freephone number where they can get guidance on how to receive education, health services, careers advice and social services.

The VRU said 63 people to date had taken up the offer of help after the two sessions in October.

If the project is a success it will be rolled out to other areas of the city.

Det Ch Supt John Carnochan, head of the VRU, said: "Gangs are not necessarily a bad thing - gangs are formed by people coming together with a common purpose.

"It's what the gang does when it comes together that is the issue. If they were meeting to play football, or basketball or baseball, no one would mind.

"But if the reason they meet is **violence** then that cannot and will not be tolerated."

Justice secretary Kenny MacAskill added: "For too long now areas of Glasgow have been blighted by gangs and gang **violence**.

"But enough is enough. It cannot go on. The law needs to be enforced but it's also time to try something new, something bold and sort that problem at the source.

"I believe this initiative can make a difference and that is why the Scottish Government has invested £1.6 million to make the project a reality.

Violence is not inevitable - it is preventable."

Scottish Labour's community safety spokesman Paul Martin said: "New attempts to tackle **violence** should not be ignored, but what communities expect is tough policing and tough sentences for those who break the law and terrorise our communities.

"The SNP may be content to try the same 'hug a hoodie' approach as the Tories but with support staff being lost from the police service, community wardens going down and criminals ignoring the community sentences that the SNP like so much, more needs to be done.

"When the message from Kenny MacAskill is, 'let's empty our prisons of any offender on a six month sentence or less', his words on crime ring hollow."

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