



Using multi-agency, multi-professional collaboration to reduce serious violence and organized crime

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This article is related directly to the Law Enforcement & Public Health (LEPH) Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, October 2019.

ABSTRACT

Serious violence and organized crime have been rising both nationally and in Sheffield, contributing significantly to increasing knife and gun crime, which results in threats to community safety and well-being.

A multi-agency project with stakeholders across all levels of command and co-located operational staff was established to undertake collaborative activity that would protect the public by pursuing offenders as well as preparing for and preventing serious violence and organized crime: Fortify. Using a 4P approach, Fortify worked across professional and organizational boundaries to disrupt serious violence and organized crime.

Relationships between partners have improved substantially through increased communication and understanding of the different roles, perspectives, and levers of each partner. A recent Home Office locality review applauded our partnership. Intelligence sharing has improved, leading to increased disruptive activity, including increased seizure of money, drugs, and firearms, as well as more arrests and safeguarding referrals. The number of mapped Organized Crime Groups (OCGs) operating across the city has reduced from 19 to 12. Processes and procedures have improved, reducing duplication and holding of information in silos. Community groups are more engaged, allowing us to address serious violence and organized crime in partnership. We propose to undertake action research with the involvement of all partners to provide more robust evaluation of our initial findings.

We have found that collaboration between Police and Partners increases collective responsibility and facilitates success in tackling serious violence and organized crime.

Key Words Partnership; collaboration; community safety; community well-being.

Journal of CSWB. 2019 October;4(3):63-65

www.journalcswb.ca

Serious violence and organized crime have been rising both nationally (Home Office, 2018b, 2018c) and in Sheffield, contributing significantly to increasing knife and gun crime, which results in threats to community safety and well-being. In tandem, public concern is also rising, along with media and government interest, culminating in the proposed legal duty for organizations to work in partnership to reduce serious violence (Home Office, 2019).

Violence escalated in Sheffield in early 2018, with a number of linked offences starting with a serious assault on a main road in Sheffield, quickly followed by a string of violent offences, including stabbings, firearms discharges, and damage to residential properties. Concerned partners from a wide range of organizations and professions came together and agreed that this escalation must not continue and that immediate action was required to address a

number of elements, including Organized Crime Groups (OCGs) and urban street gangs; the criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable people (including “cuckooing,” where the home of a vulnerable person is taken over for the purpose of drug dealing); the illegal drug trade (including “County Lines,” where illegal drugs are exported out of bigger cities into one or more smaller towns in the UK, using dedicated mobile phone lines—OCGs often exploit children and young people to do this); criminal use of firearms; and those making a financial gain from crime (asset recovery, money laundering).

A multi-agency project with stakeholders across all levels of command and co-located operational staff was established to undertake collaborative activity that would protect the public by pursuing offenders, as well as preparing for and preventing serious violence and organized crime: Fortify.

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METHOD

A 4P approach was adopted (Prepare, Prevent, Pursue, and Protect) (Home Office, 2018b) and a fifth “P,” partnership, is embedded across everything we do. A command structure was established with multi-agency and multi-professional partners involved at Strategic, Tactical, and Operational levels. Partners involved in Fortify include the following: Sheffield City Council: public health, social care, early years, the Multi Agency Support Team (MAST), the Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) team, environmental health, trading standards, community safety; South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue; Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust; Sheffield Children’s Hospital NHS Trust; Sheffield Clinical Commissioning Group; Youth Justice Service; Probation; Pupil Referral Unit; Learn Sheffield. The involvement of partners in Fortify fluctuates depending on the issue being addressed, and work is ongoing to further include education, primary care, the mental health trust, and the ambulance service.

There is the option for all partners to be co-located as a team at a local police station in order to carry out disruptions to serious violence and organized crime. Disruptions include not only traditional enforcement disruptions but also novel disruptions by partners, for example, tenancy withdrawal, closure notices, and fines, using all levers possible.

Partners recognize the need to work with communities that are disproportionately affected by serious violence and organized crime. Increasing confidence and strengthening resilience in these communities is key to reducing the impact of serious violence and organized crime in partnership. Fortify coordinated community meetings in five key areas of the City to establish a network of key contacts, increase the two-way flow of information between communities and partners, support individuals to report issues (increasing intelligence), and provide opportunities for joint working. The value of working collaboratively with local communities has also been recognized in a local report (Mason *et al.*, 2019).

By collaborating across organizational and professional boundaries, partners gain a sense of collective responsibility. All Fortify partners are engaged in sharing information, making disruptions, and attempting interventions to protect vulnerable adults and young people. This has given us a comprehensive understanding of serious violence and organized crime in Sheffield, which is expanding daily. Information sharing was improved between organizations, with intelligence reports now being submitted by more partners in the correct format, enabling increased mapping and knowledge of the OCGs and how those on the periphery are involved, where their reach is, and possible ways to intervene.

Increased connection between partners was facilitated through two off-site training days, one at tactical level and one at operational level. Knowledge of different perspectives gained during these days has been key to collaboration. Understanding the capabilities and focus of our colleagues has enabled us to better work together. Feedback from the off-site days was focused around the positive impacts of networking and building relationships with colleagues. We are building a database of all operational staff involved in Fortify that will enable greater communication by phone and e-mail. During the off-site training days, the team learned from the Regional Organized Crime Unit (ROCU) about county lines and CCE.

The team was also educated on the impacts of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) throughout a person’s life-course and informed of proposals for the inception of a Navigator programme launching in Accident & Emergency later this year. Attendees focused on how to improve collaboration, and many ideas were suggested at both off-site days for discussion at strategic level.

RESULTS

Relationships between partners have improved since the inception of Fortify. Previously, operational staff had only communicated via referrals. Social workers and police officers had not spoken directly to each other. Now, however, a sense of collective responsibility has been created at all levels. Fortify is becoming a way of working, in that these issues are recognized as the responsibility of all, every day. There is a can-do attitude among partners, and “not my job” is not welcome.

A “Locality Review,” conducted by the Home Office in February 2019, showed us to be ahead of the game in comparison with most areas of the UK. The review highlighted the advanced status of partnership arrangements in Sheffield, citing the comprehensive knowledge built up by partners sharing data and intelligence. The Home Office also highlighted and welcomed the increased focus on criminal exploitation and the work we are doing to improve the way in which we respond to this issue, as well as our move to prevent problems from escalating by sharing information and responding positively to early signs.

There has been increased disruptive activity in the pursue strand of Fortify. Activity has increased following an expansion of intelligence reports, which has resulted in more seizures of money, drugs, and firearms, as well as more arrests and safeguarding referrals. Eighty-five members of Sheffield OCGs have been sentenced to time in prison. Collective efforts to tackle the criminal use of firearms has seen 16 guns recovered so far in 2019, which can now no longer be criminally used to cause or threaten violence. A refreshed focus on tackling some of the root causes of organized crime has seen an increase in recorded offences of drug trafficking, indicating increased enforcement activity allowing identification of offenders and recovery of drugs (includes possession with intent to supply, supply, and conspiracy to supply).

The number of mapped OCGs operating across the city has reduced from 19 to 12. During the same period, the MORILE (management of risk in law enforcement) scoring matrix (Home Office, 2018a) shows a reduction of over 60% in the harms and risks posed by our OCGs, measured against our capacity and capability to respond.

Safeguarding referrals have increased. Although there are several variables involved, we can intimate that this increase is due to a greater understanding of children involved in serious and organized crime as criminally exploited victims. This understanding has also been expanded to potential for harm for children linked to those already involved, such as siblings and friends. Further work is required to explore thresholds for safeguarding action to take place and alternative activity that could support children and young people. We have begun work with the voluntary and community sector to identify options for alternative provision.

Processes and systems have improved. More partners are now sharing intelligence. Previously, there was an intelligence black hole where information remained in silos. Now there is an approved way of sending intelligence anonymously from partners to police that allows a fuller picture to be built of situations in the city. It also allows communication between prevention agencies, helping to ensure children on the periphery of serious violence and organized crime can be protected.

Previously overlooked community groups have been engaged in this work and are eager to support in any way possible. Interested primarily in safeguarding children, they have asked for training to support parents. The groups were impressed with what we knew about the areas they lived in and that we can give comprehensive feedback about their communities.

DISCUSSION

By working together across organizational and professional boundaries, Fortify has created a sense of collective responsibility from all partners. Better relationships have led to increased intelligence and increased disruptive activity. Safeguarding referrals have increased, highlighting potential previous under-reporting. Community groups that had been overlooked are now engaged, and we can reach affected communities more comprehensively.

The flexible approach taken by Fortify has been credited as the cause of its success so far. Key elements of this approach that will continue include: regular face-to-face meetings at all levels of command; permission to fail, learn, and try again; encouraging creativity and innovation; and giving operational staff the freedom to try new things.

This approach is working in Sheffield. It is important that successes in practice are shared with other organizations and areas that wish to make the same improvements. It is acknowledged that the results from this work are not generalizable. It may be that some elements can be replicated and evaluated for success in a similar trial-and-error approach. Evaluation is proposed in the form of action research, due to the complex nature of the work. A multi-agency steering group is currently being established to manage the action research process.

CONCLUSION

Through our continuing action research, we aim to determine that collaboration between Police and Partners increases collective responsibility and facilitates success in tackling serious violence and organized crime. We also encourage further research by others into this and similar collaborative, multi-agency efforts, with a view to learning the ingredients

for success for agencies involved, and for community safety and well-being outcomes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With thanks to Melanie Palin, Detective Superintendent, South Yorkshire Police; Phil Etheridge, Detective Chief Inspector, South Yorkshire Police; and Maxine Stavrianakos, Head of Community Safety, Sheffield City Council for their contributions to Fortify. Thanks also go to all members of the strategic, tactical, and operational teams, who have worked tirelessly to achieve our successes so far. Sheffield City Council and South Yorkshire Police have both invested directly in this work in terms of staff and resources. All partners have invested staff time. Funding was received from the Police and Crime Commissioner for an analyst.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

All authors are directly involved in this work and are employed by organizations that form part of the multi-agency partnership. All authors are determined to make change that translates into better lives for the communities in Sheffield and as such are not under any influence to alter or present the work differently to reality. A trial-and-error approach is something that has been applauded as useful in this work. The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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