

VIOLENCE REDUCTION

Good Practice Case Studies

LB Waltham Forest
Perceptions of Crime
Research

Independent qualitative research commissioned by Waltham Forest Council's Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP) is being used to feed the lived experiences and views of residents into communication strategies and plans across agencies and enable a more joined up approach to communicating violence reduction efforts.



The Problem

Despite crime rates in Waltham Forest being lower than the London average, worries about crime have continued to rise. MOPAC data showed that Waltham Forest residents had the highest fear of gun crime in London and 46 per cent reported feeling that knife crime is a problem locally. Furthermore, recent resident insight surveys, carried out by the council, have suggested that concerns about crime have increased in the borough; 59 per cent of respondents rated crime as the issue they were most concerned about in March 2019 and 58 per cent in July 2019. The council sought to understand the reasons for resident's fear of gun and knife crime being the highest in London for targeted work to be undertaken to make residents feel safer.

Proposed solution

Waltham Forest Council's Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP) commissioned qualitative research to better understand residents' experiences and perceptions of crime and safety and to explore the reasons for an increase in crime as a concern and the fear of crime amongst residents.

Desired outcomes

Specifically, the research aimed to:

- Understand residents' experiences contributing to diminished feelings of safety.
- Explore how the wider community influence feelings of safety.

Partners involved

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- Understand how the media, social media and other outside factors impact on the fear of crime.
- Understand key concerns about crime amongst different groups.
- Understand how different demographics are affected by concerns about crime and safety. – Explore any ideas that residents have for tackling concerns about crime.
- Understand what messages to communicate and how best to communicate them to residents (and whether that differs according to demographics of the audience).

The VRP strategy commits to reducing violence through a public health approach underpinned by evidence and research

Approach

Waltham Forest Council commissioned independent researchers Public Perspectives to undertake qualitative research to better understand our resident fear of crime to enable activity to make residents feel safer. The VRP strategy commits to reducing violence through a public health approach underpinned by evidence and research, therefore the research was essential in ensuring we made evidence-based decisions about activities to meet our objective.

Methodology

- Twelve in-depth interviews with a mixture of local residents by demographics such as age, gender, ethnicity, social economic grade, parental status, length of living in the borough, geography and perceptions of crime and safety (October 2019).
- First stage established interim findings, which informed second stage of research. Recruitment screeners to ensure the right mix/type of participants, discussion guides to ensure coverage of the aims of the research consistently across the different interviews and focus groups, and financial incentives to encourage participation.
- Three focus groups involving a total of 32 participants – one with a general demographic mix of participants, one with women only and one with BAME parents only to explore specific issues and themes in more depth (November 2019). Discussions audio-recorded and analysed, identifying key themes, issues and using quotes to evidence the findings.



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Research findings

- Almost all participants had either direct experience of crime, had a friend or family member that had experienced crime or had witnessed a crime in the past two years. These crimes included car theft, burglary, mugging and knife crime.
- Knife crime acts as a signal crime, in that awareness or reporting of it has a significant impact on perceptions of crime and fear of crime – it is both experienced or witnessed directly or indirectly by residents, as well as heavily reported in the media.
- The experience of crime, although common among participants, affects people in different ways depending on their personality, life-stage and experiences – for some the experience made them more concerned about crime and feel less safe, concerned about the safety of friends and family (especially parents about their children), or about their personal property or their home.
- Similarly, behaviour is affected by their experience and perceptions of crime, what they do, where and when they go somewhere, and they have a heightened sense of vigilance.
- In contrast, some people felt it is 'just part of life', where crime had become normalised and they had become desensitised to it – they said it was not something that affected them, although under the surface these experiences did affect their perceptions and behaviour.
- Perceptions of crime and safety, including the increase in fear of crime and concern about crime are based on real, lived experience (with knife crime as a signal crime as well as some first-hand experience of mugging, burglaries and car theft).
- The media, including social media, plays a role in heightening awareness, while news travels fast and in real time. This news is based on real events, albeit with some sensationalism from the media.
- Participants were not supportive of knife amnesties or the police reporting publicly and showing images of the weapons they confiscate because this could increase fear

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Research conclusions

The findings suggest that the strategy to address the increase in fear of crime could involve a mixture of tangible actions to deal with crime, alongside longer-term community interventions and communications activity. The tangible actions, as suggested by participants in this research, include community and targeted policing, alongside diversionary activities for young offenders and those at risk of offending and initiatives to help parents and promote parental responsibility. There is also some support for improved lighting, CCTV and maintenance of the local environment. Alongside this, there is some support for community initiatives and initiatives such as the Violence Reduction Partnership and involving local people in these activities.

The research appreciates that much of the above is taking place already, although these messages are not necessarily getting through to residents. Limited budgets and external factors restrict the capacity of the council and partners to respond to service-based requests, therefore perhaps more of the focus to reduce fear of crime should be on communicating actions and outcomes to tackle crime.

There is support for information and communications from the Police and the council to promote the activities and initiatives that deal with crime and their impact to help reassure residents that something is being done. Similarly, there is some support for communications and initiatives to promote personal responsibility and help people stay safe, and also promote parental responsibility.

Focus on violent and knife crime, especially specific and recent incidents, which act as a signal crime driving negative perceptions of crime and safety, resonates most among parents and the older the person. The research showed that there did not appear to be support for communications that try to directly challenge perceptions around crime and safety or provide an alternative narrative, because the perceptions are 'real' and 'felt' and based on 'lived experience' and/or a perceived 'factual' basis.

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Current picture

In response to the research findings the Community Safety Partnership has agreed a 6-month trial of collaborative partnership communication messages on both the local MPS and Council social media channels and agreement to:

- Increase the number of positive stories on the twitter accounts for example community engagement and policing operations ensuring a rounded depiction of partnership activity and demonstrate the ongoing partnership work to reduce violence
- Suspend the use of knife and weapon imagery

The research findings have also enabled the partnership to feed the lived experiences and views of residents into communication strategies and plans across agencies and enabled a more joined up approach to communicating violence reduction efforts.

Next steps

Working with our existing community ambassadors and focus group participants to feed back the resulting action plans to residents and continue to promote the work of the violence reduction partnership

The borough will also test the impact of these new approaches using resident insight services and the MPS public perceptions survey data.

Contact 

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This is one of a series of case studies submitted by London boroughs and collated by London Councils to share experience and learning across the capital. Publication date: May 2021