

WHITE PAPER

REDUCING CRIME AND VIOLENCE THROUGH HEALTH INTERVENTIONS: A UK PERSPECTIVE

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Executive Summary



Crime and violence are not merely justice or security issues, they are symptoms of wider social and health inequalities. The pressure on UK prisons, policing, and youth services is unsustainable. By reframing violence as a public health issue, and by investing in preventative, health-based interventions, particularly for children and young people, we can break cycles of harm and offer measurable social and economic returns.

This white paper highlights the role of initiatives such as WHISKids, a preventative early years programme under the World Health Innovation Summit (WHIS), and explores how Smart Social, a social impact organisation, helps track, measure, and communicate the value of such programmes. Additionally, we introduce the role of Social Outcome Contracts (also known as Social Impact Bonds) as a vehicle to scale what works.

The Rising Burden on UK Prisons and Policing

Overcrowding: As of mid-2025, the UK prison population is at over 88,000, with projections exceeding 106,000 by 2027. Emergency use of police cells (Operation Safeguard) continues in some regions.

Police Time: Reports show up to 40% of police time is spent dealing with mental health or non-crime incidents.

Youth Crime: Youth offending and serious violence remain stubbornly high, with knife crime among under-18s rising again in urban areas post-COVID.

Underlying Causes:

- **Childhood trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)**
- **Poor mental health and undiagnosed neurodevelopmental conditions**
- **Community disconnection and lack of opportunity**

The Scottish Violence Reduction Model

Prof. Niven Rennie's leadership of the Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) in Scotland is a widely cited example of treating violence as a public health issue, not just criminal behaviour.

- 46% drop in homicides in Glasgow over a decade
- Cross-sector interventions involving schools, GPs, social care, and employment
- Emphasis on early years, mentoring, trauma-informed responses

UK Prison Mental Health Statistics

- 70% of male prisoners in England and Wales have a diagnosable personality disorder
- 60% have experienced abuse, neglect, or instability in childhood
- 80% of young offenders have a speech, language, or communication need

WHISKids: Health-Led Early Years Innovation

WHISKids is a flagship prevention programme under the World Health Innovation Summit (WHIS). It introduces social prescribing, wellbeing, and emotional literacy into early childhood education, embedding community-based health support at the foundation of a child's development.

Core Principles:

- Support for emotional and social development
- Access to mental health and parenting support
- Nutrition and physical activity programmes
- Integration with local services (e.g. GPs, schools, community orgs)

Outcomes:

- Improved school readiness
- Lower behavioural referrals
- Reduction in future risk factors associated with crime and long-term health costs

Public Health England states that every £1 spent in the early years returns £9 in saved costs across criminal justice, health, and education systems.



Largest Fund of its Kind to Support Vulnerable Kids & Families

The UK Government has launched the world's largest fund of its kind, a £500 million initiative to support vulnerable children and families across the country. The fund aims to improve early years support, strengthen family resilience, and reduce risks that can lead to crime, violence, and poor health outcomes later in life. By investing in family support services, local authority capacity, and targeted interventions, the programme aligns with public health and preventative approaches to reducing social harm.

Source: UK Government, 2025

Smart Social, founded by Lee Whitehead, supports public, private, and third sector organisations to evidence and improve their social impact. In the context of crime and violence reduction, Smart Social enables programmes like WHISKids to:

- Track key performance indicators (KPIs) over time
- Demonstrate cost savings and returns on investment
- Communicate measurable outcomes to funders, partners, and communities
- Build a shared understanding of success across stakeholders

In a landscape where policy and funding are increasingly outcome-driven, the ability to quantify impact and tell compelling data stories is essential for scaling effective health-led interventions.

Social Outcome Contracts: Funding Prevention at Scale

What Are Social Outcome Contracts?

Also known as Social Impact Bonds, these are financing mechanisms where investors fund preventative services upfront, and the government repays them only if outcomes are achieved (e.g. reduced youth offending, improved school attendance).

Why It Matters:

- Unlocks private capital for prevention and innovation
- Aligns incentives across sectors (investors, commissioners, delivery teams)
- Focuses on measurable impact and accountability
- Shifts risk away from government and toward solution delivery

Case Example: UK Youth Engagement SIB (2018–2022)

- Supported 2,000 young people at risk of exclusion in Greater London
- Achieved 71% increase in sustained engagement in education/training
- Resulted in over £8 million in social value, including reduced police and council costs



A Model for WHISKids and Smart Social

By aligning WHISKids and similar programmes with outcomes-based finance, and using Smart Social to verify impact:

- We can scale rapidly across the UK
- Provide robust evaluation of social return
- Attract ethical investors focused on sustainable impact

Recommendations



1. Adopt Public Health Violence Reduction Models Nationwide

- Expand VRUs in all UK regions
- Fund trauma-informed training across schools and police

2. Invest in Early Years Health and Education Integration

- Scale up WHISKids in priority areas
- Embed social prescribing and emotional support in EYFS settings

3. Enable Transparent, Evidence-Based Practice

- Use Smart Social frameworks to demonstrate social return on investment
- Build impact literacy into public sector and NGO commissioning

4. Mobilise Social Outcome Contracts

- Develop local partnerships to design outcome-based funding models
- Align delivery, commissioning, and investment for prevention

Conclusion

Preventing crime and violence begins long before an offence is committed, it begins in the first years of life. Through coordinated health, education, and community approaches, we can build a society where children flourish and crime recedes.

By proving impact, securing long-term investment, and uniting sectors, we can deliver a safer, fairer, and healthier society for all.

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Authors



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CEO and Founder of the World Health Innovation Summit (WHIS) and CEO of the Global Social Prescribing Alliance. An international healthcare strategist and adviser to governments, Gareth has served on Pope Francis's COVID-19 Commission, as Chief Officer of the National Haemophilia Council in Ireland, and as a leadership fellow at Windsor Castle. He focuses on prevention, precision health, and building sustainable, thriving communities.



Prof Niven Rennie

Former Director of the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit

Former Director of the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit, internationally recognised for pioneering the public health approach to tackling violence in Scotland, resulting in a 46% drop in Glasgow's homicide rate over a decade. A former senior police officer, he advises governments and organisations worldwide on crime prevention, community safety, and trauma-informed practice.



Lee Whitehead

Director of Smart Social

Director of Smart Social, a social impact consultancy that helps organisations measure, evidence, and communicate the value of their work. Lee has over 20 years' experience in the public, private, and voluntary sectors, with expertise in designing impact frameworks, social value reporting, and scaling innovative, community-led interventions.

Contact & Next Steps

We welcome partnerships with policymakers, commissioners, investors, and community leaders to scale proven health-led interventions for violence and crime prevention.

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