

Healing Community Harm: A restorative response to violence and disorder

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Why me?

Transforming lives through
Restorative Justice



A note on language

When discussing incidents like this summer's violence, the careful and considered use of language is key. We recognise the importance of using care when describing what happened and hope to minimise further harm that could be caused by the use of inaccurate or misleading language.

We believe that it is crucial to recognise the racist and Islamophobic motivations behind the violence, whilst simultaneously acknowledging that many participants, particularly children and young people, may have been unaware of the true extent of the actions they were taking part in. Other factors such as poverty, a lack of resources in local areas and anti-immigration rhetoric in the media and by politicians also played a significant role in exacerbating the violence. Whilst an array of language has been used in the public discourse around these events, we have chosen to primarily use the word 'violence' rather than 'protests', 'riots', etc. While not all the behaviour was physically violent, violence and the threat of it were present across the country and caused high levels of harm.

Harmer - The person who caused the harm or committed the crime.

Harmed - The victim of the crime or someone impacted negatively by what happened, whether directly or indirectly.

Why me? stands against hate and racism, and in solidarity with the people of Southport and with communities across the UK who have been affected by the violence that followed. If you were affected by the violence, please see the resources at the end of this guide.

Context

On the 29th of July 2024, a stabbing at a Taylor Swift-themed dance class in Southport left three young children murdered and 10 others injured.

Following the attack, thousands of people attended a vigil to remember the victims, Bebe King, Elsie Dot Stancombe and Alice da Silva Aguiar. On the same day as the vigil, hundreds of people congregated near the scene of the crime and sparked violence against the police as they began throwing bricks and rocks at a nearby mosque. They went on to loot a local shop and set fire to a police car, with the disorder leaving over 50 police officers injured. This disorder was fuelled by misinformation online that stated that the Southport attacker was Muslim or an asylum seeker, neither of which were true.

Far-right and anti-immigration rhetoric were fuelled further on social media, leading to the spread of unrest across the country, with racist and Islamophobic violence breaking out in many areas including Belfast, Tamworth, Rotherham and Hartlepool. With a backdrop of the cost of living crisis, lasting effects of the pandemic, messaging from the media and politicians and socio-economic disadvantage in local communities, many more joined in. Up to 5000 people participated, including young people swept up in the violence, some with little understanding of what they were participating in. Children as young as 12 have appeared in court after participating in the violence. A variety of criminal offences were committed, including hate crime, criminal damage, looting, attempted murder and attacks on hotels housing asylum seekers.

Despite the violence and hatred displayed, many people came together and showed solidarity and community spirit in the aftermath, helping those who had been worst affected. Residents in the local area following the violence in Southport came out with cleaning equipment, helping to repair some of the damage done to the mosque and surrounding streets.

Following such widespread violence and disorder, the Government chose a swift, punitive approach to dealing with 'rioters', arresting over a thousand people, and sentencing many, including children, for the offences committed. Aside from the effect that this has on the existing prison crisis and overcrowding, it fails to address the underlying causes of the violence and does little to reduce the prospect of reoffending in the future.

Repairing the harm

How can restorative interventions be used to support the communities harmed by violence?

The hurt, damage and fear that spread as a result of the violence and disorder will take a long time for communities to recover from. It will not be a quick process. However, there are steps that the Government, PCCs, policy makers, criminal justice professionals and community support groups can take to support communities in their healing. We need to use creative responses to address the individual and community needs of those affected and to ensure that those causing the harm understand the impact and desist from causing further harm down the line. This is where Restorative Justice comes in.

Restorative Justice gives a voice to people who have been harmed by crime or conflict. By having a dialogue with someone that harmed them, they can have their say, explain the impact it had on their lives and share what they need to move forwards. For the person who caused the harm, it is an opportunity to understand the impact of their actions, make amends and change their behaviour moving forwards. The process is flexible: for some it may involve meeting face to face with someone that harmed them, but for others, an indirect process like a letter may be more suitable. It can also involve the wider community through a restorative circle, bringing groups of people together to discuss an incident and what the community's needs are.

85% of victims who took part in a Restorative Justice meeting were satisfied with the process.

Restorative Justice can reduce reoffending rates by up to 27%.

Despite these benefits, only 5.5% of victims with a known offender recall being told about Restorative Justice.

For every £1 invested in Restorative Justice, £14 is saved.

Individual Restorative Justice interventions

Restorative Justice can help to address individual instances of harm by bringing together someone who was impacted and someone who caused the harm. For example, facilitating a safe and controlled dialogue between a shopkeeper whose shop was looted and someone who stole from them.

Key considerations

- Include education as part of the restorative intervention, in order to help the harmer understand cultural differences and address their misconceptions. One of our attendees shared a case from their local area where a young person had shouted racial abuse at a passerby in the street. With the support of their local restorative service, the young person engaged in a dialogue with the person they had harmed and visited their local mosque to learn more about other religions and cultures. This experience was echoed by other attendees who had used visits to places of worship as part of a restorative intervention.
- Try to identify anyone who has expressed remorse for their actions e.g. in the press or online. They may be interested in taking part in Restorative Justice so they can express this directly to the people they harmed.
- As this is a complex area of work, restorative interventions should be delivered in pairs, rather than by an individual restorative worker. This will ensure that each facilitator is supported and can effectively challenge racism, Islamophobia or other harmful attitudes.
- Work with harmers as individuals and establish their needs. Try to avoid 'us versus them' rhetoric.
- Meetings should take place with both direct and indirect victims. Consider the use of proxy participants e.g. a representative of a faith group meeting with someone who committed a crime, rather than the specific individual that was harmed.

Hearing without colluding or condoning

It is crucial that we hear the perspectives of people who have caused harm, and support them to share their motivations and needs, but do not encourage or condone any harmful attitudes.

Remember

There are logistical considerations as many of those involved in the violence are currently going through the court system or have been given prison sentences, some spanning many years. Typically, Restorative Justice is delivered post-sentencing, and early on in a sentence may not be the right time to deliver a restorative intervention. However, starting the conversation now means that participants will be aware that it is an option and can take part when they're ready. Restorative Justice should not be a one time offer, and it should be revisited throughout someone's journey through the criminal justice system.

Working with young people

Many young people were involved in the violence and disorder, with some appearing in court for the part that they played. There are unique considerations and challenges to keep in mind when working restoratively with young people.

Key considerations

- A multi-agency approach and effective information sharing is crucial in ensuring that young people are kept safe.
- Consider the use of Restorative Justice as part of an Out of Court Resolution.
- Use education to help young people challenge misconceptions and reduce the likelihood of any future offending. For example, some areas are delivering workshops with refugees to educate young people, break down barriers and build understanding.

- You could record videos of people who have been harmed by the violence, or from affected communities, talking about the impact of what happened. These videos could then be used in prisons, youth groups, schools and youth justice services. This can help promote understanding and correct misinformation.
- Children have been left with many questions about what happened both in Southport and across the country. Schools should aim to address misconceptions with pupils, educating them on what happened, the harm that was caused and how to build positive relationships in their communities. They should also be educated on Restorative Justice and how it can be used to address conflict.
- Restorative Justice should be part of a school curriculum, for example in a PSHE lesson. All of this should be delivered creatively, in a way young people will understand, for example through videos, graphics or interactive activities.

Circles for change

by Charlotte Weatherley

This is an activity that could be used in schools, youth groups and youth justice services to spark conversation, give children a space to explore difficult topics and answer some of their questions.

Using restorative questions, in threes (one adult and two pupils), work through the restorative questions, relating to the violence or an aspect of it that affected the local community.

Restorative questions are:

- What's happened?
- Who has been affected? / What's the impact?
- What needs to happen now? / What's next?

Case study - Working restoratively with young people

A service in our network shared an example of how they used a community circle to help bring people together and address anti-social behaviour committed by young people.

Following a rise in anti-social behaviour within the community, the youth justice service met with shopkeepers, young people, local councillors, police, leisure services, street pastors, school staff and pupils, drug support services and others to collate information, incidents, views and opinions on the anti-social behaviour within the community. This culminated in a restorative meeting.

The meeting was very well attended, with all parties playing an active role throughout. The impact of anti-social behaviour upon the community was discussed at length and the young people seemed to have a greater understanding of how their actions may have affected so many. A statement was read out from a local shop and there appeared to be an acknowledgement of how much harm has been caused to the local businesses and apologies were offered. The young people were listened to regarding their views of why boredom often leads to drug taking, drinking and ultimately anti-social behaviour. They were asked what they feel might help to resolve this.

The leisure centre was offered as a safe space to go, a peer mentoring group was established and a parent made a photo diary of projects the young people become involved with. The local police sergeant gave an open invitation to all young people to call on him for whatever reasons, at any time, confidentially. Street pastors also reiterated that they are out and about on Friday nights to offer help and advice to the young people.

By the end of the process, the young people involved offered to act as mentors for other local children. Many retailers said that since the meeting, there have been no more issues, and when they did see the children, they were polite and respectful. There were no reports of any alarm, harassment or distress being caused to any named individuals and within 6 months, youth-related ASB calls dropped by over 35%.

Working with the police

Throughout the violence, a large number of the victims were police officers, with over 100 being attacked or injured. However, many of the services we spoke to across the country said they had faced challenges in getting police to engage with Restorative Justice.

Key considerations

- Allowing police officers to engage in Restorative Justice during police time may encourage them to take part and support their own recovery, as well as the rehabilitation of the person that harmed them.
- Police officers should take part in restorative processes with children and young people to educate them on the impact of their involvement.
- Police forces should consider providing proxy victims if the individual officer that was harmed does not want to take part in Restorative Justice.

Restorative responses in the community

In some areas where violence broke out, it may be difficult to identify direct victims as the harm spread across communities. 'Victims' could range from those who were physically attacked, whose shops were looted, buildings were damaged or housing was threatened, to people who were too scared to leave the house, were exposed to online hate or remain in fear of further violence. Similarly, the people who caused the harm range from those present on the streets to people inciting violence, organising the unrest or spreading misinformation online.

We have already seen some community responses to the violence that are restorative in nature, which should be identified and celebrated. For example the community cleanup of damaged streets and raising money for businesses that had been targeted.

Key considerations

- Collective victim impact statements should be gathered.
- Organise community conferences, providing a space for local businesses, community groups and residents to come together and share how they are feeling and what they need. Identify people who have been affected and invite them to come together and reflect on what happened.
- If it is safe to do so, set up restorative circles that include people who have caused harm. This can offer a space for them to be heard and explain their actions, and for them to hear how their behaviour affected their local community. This can be particularly useful to reintegrate people back into their communities, identifying everyone's needs and working out next steps.
- Use specific dates in the calendar e.g. International Peace Day and Black History Month as opportunities to hold proactive, safe spaces for people to share thoughts and feelings.
- Bring people from key community groups and charities, e.g. a refugee resettlement scheme, anti-radicalisation groups, faith groups etc. to speak to people involved in the violence.
- Remember that some people harmed by the violence may not feel ready to talk about it yet, even when safe spaces are provided. You can remind them that there is no rush and that they can revisit Restorative Justice at any point.
- Create support packages for people most affected, ensuring that they are tailored to meet the needs of different groups e.g. refugees, Muslims, migrant communities.
- As with individual Restorative Justice interventions, community circles also require multi-agency working. Involving local schools, youth justice services, councils, police, prisons and businesses will make a more representative group and enable everyone to have their say in a supported environment. (See the case study above for an example of this in practice.)

Challenges to consider

- Some of our forum attendees reported difficulties getting community engagement. For some, this was because they felt they couldn't spare the time, and for others, seeing a lack of engagement from others (like the police) made them question why they should be involved.

We met with the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner in Cleveland, as they were one of the areas worst affected by outbreaks of violence. They had several ideas about practical steps that can be taken to rebuild communities:

- Food is a big part of many cultures. Bringing people together and sharing food in community spaces can be healing and also educate others on participants' cultures.
- Some people in their area wanted to make token gifts to give to people in prison as a symbol of reconciliation and goodwill, letting them know that they are welcome back in the community. For example, 'hearts of hope', small handmade wooden hearts.
- A display of artwork created by people in prison can help the public to see there is more to them than the crime they committed.

Conclusions

Whilst many individuals and communities have been harmed by the violence, there are a variety of ways that restorative practice can be used to support the healing and reintegration of those affected. There are two levels where restorative interventions are needed: on an individual case-by-case basis and on a broader community level.

It is crucial that a multi-agency approach is taken, with collaboration between the restorative service, police, prisons, schools, youth groups, youth justice services and local businesses.

Particularly when working with groups of people, it's important to create safe spaces for people to share, encouraging them to express their needs. Ensure you take into account the cultural preferences of those involved.

In order to facilitate an effective restorative process, it is crucial that there is information sharing between prisons, police and the restorative service.

There should also be an emphasis on education through restorative processes, particularly for the young people and adults involved in

committing hate crimes and racist violence, without putting the onus of responsibility on those who have been harmed. This should also extend to schools, bringing education about what has happened, how to address conflict and Restorative Justice into the classroom.

Finally, PCCs, police and victim support services should collaborate to raise awareness of Restorative Justice amongst people affected by crime. This can be done through the sharing of accessible resources (leaflets, videos etc.), public visibility campaigns (social media, billboards, etc.) and conversations with people affected by crime.

We hope that through the implementation of Restorative Justice, healing can begin and we can reduce the likelihood of people committing similar offences in the future, leading to safer, more cohesive communities.

Actions for Police and Crime Commissioners

There are a few steps that PCCs can take to ensure that restorative interventions can be delivered safely and effectively in their area. For example:

- Allow flexibility in the geographical boundaries of the cases the restorative service can take on. We know that a lot of people travelled to take part in the violence and unrest, so not excluding cases where one party is beyond the borders of your police and crime areas means more people will be able to access the resources they need to heal.
- Raise awareness of Restorative Justice so people in your area know that they can access it.
- Be aware that the restorative process needs to be done safely and can take a long time. This isn't something that can be sped up and may not be appropriate as an immediate response to harm.
- Think outside the box about the type of restorative interventions that can be used.
- Read our [Ten Asks for Police and Crime Commissioners](#).

If you are in need of support, please see the following resources:

- Find your local [Restorative Justice service](#).
- [Tell MAMA](#) supports victims of anti-Muslim hate and prejudice across the UK.
- [Stop Hate UK](#) provides independent and confidential support to people affected by hate crime, including a free, confidential helpline available 24/7.
- [Victim Care Merseyside](#) is a single point of contact for victims of crime living in Merseyside.



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Why me? works with people affected by crime and conflict. We build greater access to Restorative Justice through campaigns, communications, projects and delivery to help people recover and rebuild their lives. For any questions about this guide, please get in touch.



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