

Serious Violence Reduction Orders: The impression of doing something

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Foreword

The Labour government came into office earlier this year, with an ambitious *'aim to halve knife crime in a decade'*. Early moves have included, in September, the launch of a 'Coalition to Tackle Knife Crime', aiming, as the press release put it, to *'bring together campaign groups, families of people who have tragically lost their lives to knife crime, young people who have been impacted and community leaders, united in their mission to save lives and make Britain a safer place for the next generation'*. This was followed, in November, with proposals to fine senior executives of online companies if they market illegal weapons, along with moves to ban the sale of so-called ninja swords.

The government is also proposing both 'rapid intervention and tough consequences' for those caught in possession of a knife and a network of 'Young Futures hubs', to improve access to support for young people at risk of criminalisation. The second of these proposals, which prioritise prevention and support for young people at risk, has a strong evidence-based underpinning it. *'Decades of research and evidence gathering'*, this briefing points out, *'has shown that the drivers of serious violence are insecure employment prospects, poverty, substance misuse, mental health issues, volatile drug markets, experience of violence'*.

The same cannot be said of the 'rapid intervention and tough consequences' proposals, which tend to prioritise often short-term enforcement over longer-term prevention. One recent example of such action, the subject of this briefing, is the Serious Violence Reduction Order (SVRO), currently being piloted in four police areas in England. At its simplest, the imposition of an SVRO on an individual in effect gives the police *carte blanche* to stop and search them, at any time and in any place, and without the police having to demonstrate 'reasonable suspicion'.

Previous research on so-called suspicion-less stops and searches, cited in this briefing, found no evidence that they had any impact on the levels of violent crime. Indeed, there is scant evidence that stop and search in general has much of an impact on underlying crime levels (Bradford and Tiratelli, 2019).

This is not an argument for no police enforcement. The police clearly perform important public order functions. But it is an argument for the importance of effective, evidenced-based policing. The roll-out of the SVRO pilots are shrouded in secrecy, with information hard to come by. While they are subject of an evaluation, there are some questions over whether it will provide the rigorous evidence of impact (or not) required, or, indeed, whether it will ever be published.

I hope that this briefing, in addition to filling the current information gap on SVROs, will be helpful in offering something of a reality check on the usefulness of enforcement-led approaches to violence, as well as the importance of pursuing long-term solutions grounded in prevention.

Richard Garside
Director

Introduction

‘ I tell you what I think has happened: the Government have said, “My goodness, we have a real problem here, what are we going to do?”, and reached for an order which gives the impression of doing something. Of course, everyone wants the Government to do something—all of us want knife crime reduced—but is this the most effective and best way of doing it? Is this proportionate? Will it work? I have very serious concerns about the process but also about whether these orders will actually do what the Government, and all of us, want them to do, which is to reduce knife crime [...] The Minister needs to explain why these will work. Why will they do what the Government intend?’

Lord Coaker, HL debate, 17 November 2021, (emphasis added)

Serious Violence Reduction Orders (SVROs) were introduced in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and the Courts Act 2022. Brought in by the then Conservative government, with the stated aim of reducing serious violence involving a knife or offensive weapon, the power was novel in two respects. Firstly, it introduced a new civil order that can be imposed on individuals convicted of an offence involving a knife or offensive weapon in addition to the criminal sanction they receive.

Secondly, it granted an additional power to the police to stop and search an individual subject to an order at any time, in any public place, any number of times, and without the need for reasonable suspicion (suspicion-less stop and search). Issued by a court for a fixed time period of up to two years, the order intends to deter weapons carrying:

‘ to help prevent individuals from committing further crime, through the deterrent of an increased risk of detection, and supported by wider efforts in relation to reducing serious violence.’

Home Office, 2021

Following the enactment of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and the Courts Act, the first SVRO was issued in April 2023 as part of a two-year pilot involving four police areas in England and Wales. A decision on the future of SVROs beyond the pilot, including whether the order should be rolled out nationally, is anticipated around late 2025.

The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies and StopWatch have been working together to try to track the new orders since their implementation. Numerous concerns were raised about the order during the passage of the legislation through parliament. These were principally about the unsound basis for introducing an expansive police power, linked to discrimination for Black communities in particular, with a low threshold for use, and considerable police discretion (see StopWatch *et al*, 2021, HL debate, 17 November 2021). Table 1 summarises the SVRO process as it is set out in the official guidance (Home Office, 2023a) alongside the key concerns raised about the measure. Of all the issues raised when the order was proposed, the lack of evidence about SVROs as an intervention to reduce serious violence was particularly striking. The Home Office’s own impact assessment failed to find any evidence to support the case for the measure:

‘ No studies could be located showing that similar orders, which allow the police to stop and search individuals more indiscriminately, would necessarily lead to a reduction in serious violence. As such, it is not possible to accurately estimate the number of crimes that would be prevented by the introduction of this measure and no analysis of crime reduction benefits has been conducted.’

Home Office, 2021

Whilst there are important differences between the police power introduced with SVROs and the pre-existing police stop and search powers, the evidence about suspicion-less searches in general is not any more encouraging. In a study of a surge in suspicion-less searches (also known as Section 60 or S60), ‘no statistically significant change in the trend in non-domestic violent crime’ was discovered between the period of their increased deployment and the preceding period (Tiratelli *et al*, 2018). This briefing intends to contribute to much needed efforts to scrutinise SVROs, particularly for those advocating for the important policy goal of serious violence prevention and reduction. With this in mind, the briefing is divided into three main sections:

- Background and emergence of SVROs.
- The SVRO pilot so far.
- Priorities for reducing serious violence involving young adults.

Table 1: SVRO provisions and key concerns

Overview: An SVRO is a civil order which can be issued to an individual convicted of an offence involving a bladed article or offensive weapon. Granted by a court, the order provides the police with the power to stop and search the person subject to an SVRO, to ascertain if they have a bladed article or offensive weapon with them. This police power extends to any public place, any number of times, and without the need for reasonable suspicion. An SVRO can be imposed for a time period of between six months and two years. Breach is a criminal offence punishable by up to two years in prison. The order can be renewed.

<p>Qualifying criteria</p>	<p>Orders can be imposed on individuals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Aged 18 and over and, ● Convicted of an offence <i>involving</i> a knife or offensive weapon. Either where used or where present. See ‘issuing’ below for more detail about the test for granted an order. 	<p>Whether to lower this age threshold a matter to be kept ‘under active review’ (Home Office, 2021b).</p>
<p>Application</p>	<p>The prosecution applies to a court to impose an SVRO. This can be made on the advice of the police.</p>	<p>Low evidential rules. Low quality evidence such as hearsay and evidence deemed inadmissible at a criminal trial may be used.</p>
<p>Low threshold. Orders issued on the civil standard for proof, rather than the higher criminal standard (beyond reasonable doubt).</p>	<p>Issuing</p> <p>The court issues an order if it is satisfied:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 On the balance of probabilities that a knife or offensive weapon was involved with the offence. This includes either: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● By the individual themselves carrying or using a knife or offensive weapon. OR ● That individuals ought to have known that someone else convicted in relation to the same crime was carrying or used a knife or offensive weapon. 2 It will protect the public from harm involving a bladed article or offensive weapon <p>An SVRO is issued by court alongside and in addition to any criminal sanction an individual receives for conviction (i.e. prison sentence, community order or other).</p>	<p>Wide scope. Conviction could be for any offence. No requirement for a weapon to have been used in the commission of an offence. No discretion for consideration of coercion.</p>
<p>Punitive add on. Prolonging contact with criminal justice may further ostracise individuals and impede move to prosocial identity.</p>	<p>Commencement and intervention</p> <p>In the case of imprisonment an SVRO begins once the individual is released from custody. The individual must report their address to the police within three days of the order taking effect.</p> <p>An individual subject to an SVRO can be stopped and searched by the police in any public place, without grounds for reasonable suspicion, an unlimited amount of times.</p>	<p>Woolly culpability. Vague threshold which casts the net significantly wider than those directly engaging in violence. Much like notion of foresight in joint enterprise (see Waller, 2024).</p>
<p>Racial discrimination. Given ethnic disproportionality in deployment of existing stop and search powers, concern SVROs will replicate and compound discrimination, particularly for Black communities. Evidenced in the Home Office’s own assessment of the likely impact of the order (Home Office, 2021a).</p>	<p>Breach and consequences</p> <p>Violating an order is a criminal offence, punishable by an unlimited fine or imprisonment of up to two years. Individuals can breach the order for reasons including failing to report their address in time, or obstructing a search, or if found carrying a weapon.</p>	<p>Highly intrusive and discretionary. Appears to remove any clear accountability and give police officers a licence to use their judgement about frequency / proportionality of searching. Concerns include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Adverse mental / physical health implications for individuals’ subject to multiple searches. 2. Potential for police abuse of power. 3. Setting police up to fail / putting further strain on police relations with the public (see Paddick in HL deb, 10 January 2022, vol. 826, col.831).
<p>Duration</p>	<p>Order is issued for between six months and two years. The SVRO ends or an application is made to renew the order.</p>	<p>No limitation to renewal.</p>
<p>Unbalanced. No clear provision for engaging individuals with wider support services such as mental health, substance misuse, trauma, housing, poverty, secure employment.</p>	<p>Overcriminalises. Reliance on imprisonment, discredited for its rehabilitative effectiveness. Address notification requirement likely problematic for some recent prison leavers.</p>	

Background and emergence of SVROs

The concept of a civil order giving the police suspicion-less stop and search powers in respect of specific individuals seems to have evolved from proposals by the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), a centre-right thinktank.

In 2017, the CSJ proposed this approach in response to a Home Office consultation on acid attacks and offensive weapons (CSJ, 2017). The following year, in 2018, the CSJ recommended SVROs – ‘a suspicion-less stop and search order allowing police to search *any ex-offender still on sentence*’ – be introduced in the Offensive Weapons Bill (CSJ, 2018, emphasis added).

The Offensive Weapons Act, passed in 2019, made no mention of SVROs. The legislation did however introduce a different civil order, the closely-related Knife Crime Prevention Order (KCPO). The pilot for KCPO had not even begun when the government at the time committed to introducing another civil order addressing knife crime. In late 2019, the Conservative party included in their general election manifesto a promise to introduce:

‘ a new court order to target known knife carriers, making it easier for officers to stop and search those convicted of knife crime.’

The Conservative and Unionist Party, 2019

This manifesto commitment was met by the inclusion of SVROs in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, which became an Act in the spring of 2022.

The CSJ have cited group violence interventions in America as the inspiration for their support for SVROs (Crossley, 2021, in oral evidence to House of Commons Public Bill Committee on the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, 18 May 2021). How applicable this evidence base is to the UK is, at best, questionable. The premise of dramatically limiting the ‘pool’ of people the police need to focus on, because it is possible to identify ‘the problem’ individuals and focus more intently on them, has a practical appeal. It could be considered as reassurance to ‘the law-abiding majority’ that the new powers will be restricted to the ‘dangerous’. However, patterns of knife crime in the UK suggest that the

overwhelmingly majority of incidents are one-off events between two individuals, rather than confined to small, identifiable networks of individuals, or groups (Bailey *et al*, 2020). Other advocates of US group interventions have emphasised the importance of procedural justice: the perception that people in authority apply fair and just processes and decision making, a key element in the potential of such arrangements (Braga *et al*, 2019). The suspicion-less searching that SVROs involve violates this principle. The Policing Federation said they were ‘deeply concerned about moving away from a form of stop and search that isn’t rooted in ‘reasonable grounds’, criticising SVROs as setting up police officers to fail because suspicion-less searching violates procedural justice (HL debate, 10 January 2023).

The emergence of SVROs also takes place in a broader context of the proliferation of civil orders. Civil orders ‘have been introduced by every administration that followed Blair’s New Labour government,’ notes Dr Rory Kelly, who identified that over thirty different orders had been introduced by 2019 (Kelly, 2019).

The popularity of civil orders amongst policy makers has not been diminished by the dearth of evidence about their effectiveness. A recent review of a broad range of civil orders notes their popularity, even though they have ‘never been the subject of any systematic, government-led review’ (JUSTICE, 2023). A distinct gap in the mechanisms for assessing the impact of orders was also identified by the JUSTICE report:

‘ The Home Office does not publish data relating to orders centrally, nor in an accessible format. Moreover, there is no clear mechanism for measuring the effectiveness of orders, nor any clear guidance on what criteria their effectiveness should be measured against. Once introduced into the law, there is a failure to monitor orders to ensure that they are working in practice and/or not leading to adverse impacts.’ (ibid)

Orders introduced to control undesirable behaviour have been described as ‘a policy trend [...] that has exhibited no sign of learning from past experience and has instead appeared to proceed counterfactually’ (Hendry, 2022). The result is that SVROs have joined an increasingly

long list of civil orders ostensibly tackling a wide range of social problems, with little or no evidence as to their ability to do so.

Civil orders were first associated with approaches prior to a formal criminal justice intervention, such as a community order. SVROs, however, join a subgroup of orders designed as measures in *addition* to a criminal justice sanction. Given that individuals' eligibility for receiving an SVRO includes a conviction for a crime involving a knife or offensive weapon, it should also be noted that these are individuals for whom repeat offences involving a knife already results in a mandatory minimum prison sentence of six months for those aged over 18 years old. The significance of the additional punitive load this entails was noted in the parliamentary debate accompanying the introduction of SVROs:

' An SVRO is a criminal sanction. It is nothing less. We cannot make it the same as civil penalties. This all started back in the 1990s when parking offences were decriminalised. In my service as a local councillor, I benefited hugely from that. It was a tremendous idea and worked extremely well, but we cannot then carry on applying the same principle. An SVRO is not a parking ticket; it is a potentially serious restriction on your liberties that travels with you and, if you are a young person, stigmatises you, if are trying to make your way in university or wherever you might move to around the country, by making you go and register and so on. This is not a parking ticket; it is very much more serious.'

Lord Moylan, HL debate, 17 November 2021

The SVRO pilot so far

The SVRO pilot scheme began on 19 April 2023. Four police forces areas are involved in the pilot: Merseyside, Thames Valley, Sussex, and the West Midlands.

During the pilot, only courts in these four areas can impose SVROs. However, the corresponding SVRO stop and search power is available to police officers across England and Wales.

Prior to commencing, the pilot was extended from one to two years.

The issuing of SVROs during the pilot is due to end in April 2025. There will then be an additional six-month period where no new SVROs can be issued, but 'live' SVROs already issued will continue to take effect in the community.

The pilot is overseen by a Home Office working group. Ecorys, an international consultancy firm, has been commissioned by the Home Office to evaluate the pilot.

'Safe space' transparency exemption

Restrictions on the release of information about the SVRO pilot have made it impossible for us to obtain a clear understanding about how this new police power is being used. Our attempts to obtain information about the SVROs issued to-date through Freedom of Information (FoI) requests have been relatively fruitless:

- Requests to the Home Office to share the number and demographics of those issued an SVRO have been rejected.
- Requests to the police for data about the stop and searches that have taken place under the new power, including the demographics of those searched and the outcome of these searches, were also rejected. Also rejected were requests for information about the sources of information used to apply for an SVRO, court rejections of SVRO applications, breaches, appeals, renewals, and the services those subject to an SVRO were referred to.
- Police forces did release data in response to our initial request for information about the number of SVROs issued in the first three months of the pilot. However, all four police forces involved in the pilot have since rejected our requests to update the initial data we obtained for a longer time period.

The responses to our requests acknowledge 'transparency in policing is an important aspiration' and that 'disclosure would improve the public's understanding as to the effectiveness of this law enforcement pilot scheme regarding an important policing issue'. However, information about the SVRO pilot has been exempt from disclosure because:

' it is just as important to maintain a safe space where public officials can hold discussion to develop ideas, debate major

issues, and reach decisions away from external interference and distraction. Disclosure of the information requested, would be likely to inhibit free and frank discussions over the results gathered during the course of the pilot scheme.’

This lack of openness about a new police power makes it very difficult to track its implementation. Other recent pilots, such as that for Knife Crime Prevention Orders (KCPOs), were not subject to the same information exemptions that the SVRO pilot has been subject to.

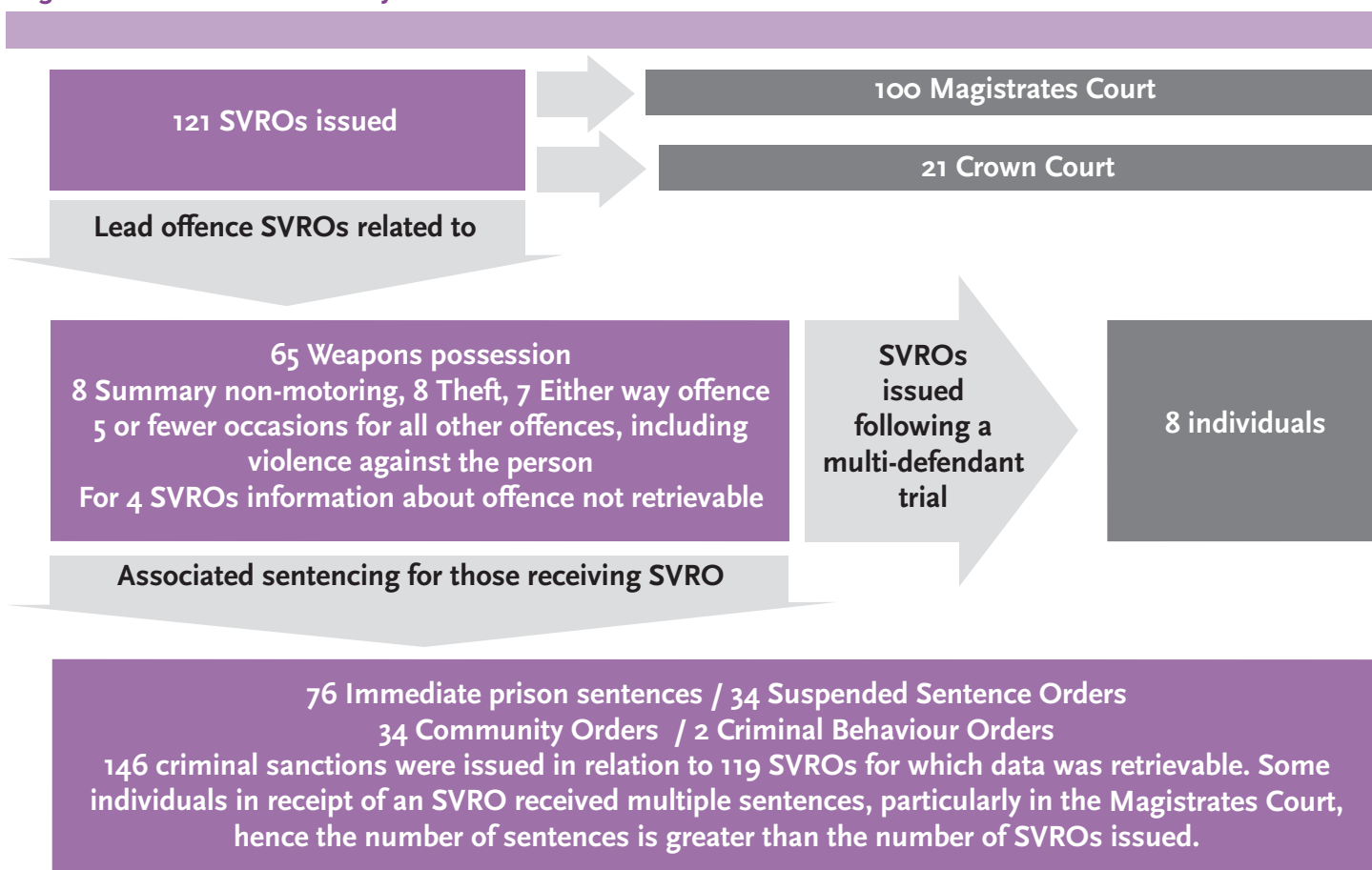
Best available data

Obtaining comprehensive data on the implementation of SVROs has proven challenging. However, some insights have been gained from the following sources:

- Unpublished court data: Accessed via Freedom of Information (FoI) requests to the Ministry of Justice, rather than to the Home Office or to the police forces participating in the pilots.
- Annual stop-and-search data: Published by the Home Office.

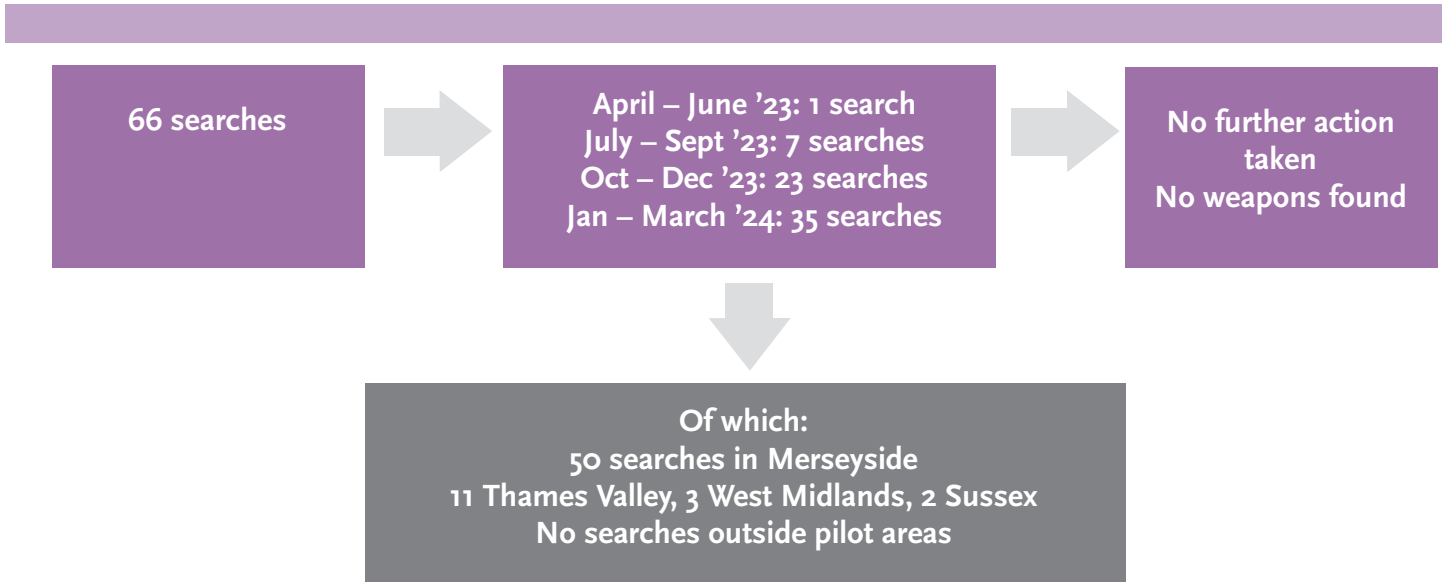
The summarised information on SVROs issued by courts is illustrated in Figure 1, while Figure 2 provides details on SVRO-related stop and searches.

Figure 1: SVROs issued by courts



Figures are inclusive of Magistrates Court data until 31 December 2023 (eight and a half months into pilot) and Crown Courts data until 30th September 2023 (five and a half months into pilot). Source: FoI requests: Ministry of Justice 231219080 and 240703020. See Appendix Ai and Aii for detailed figures and definitions. Demographic information about individuals who have received SVROs was only available in relation to 72 individuals. This is detailed in Appendix Ai, Table A3.

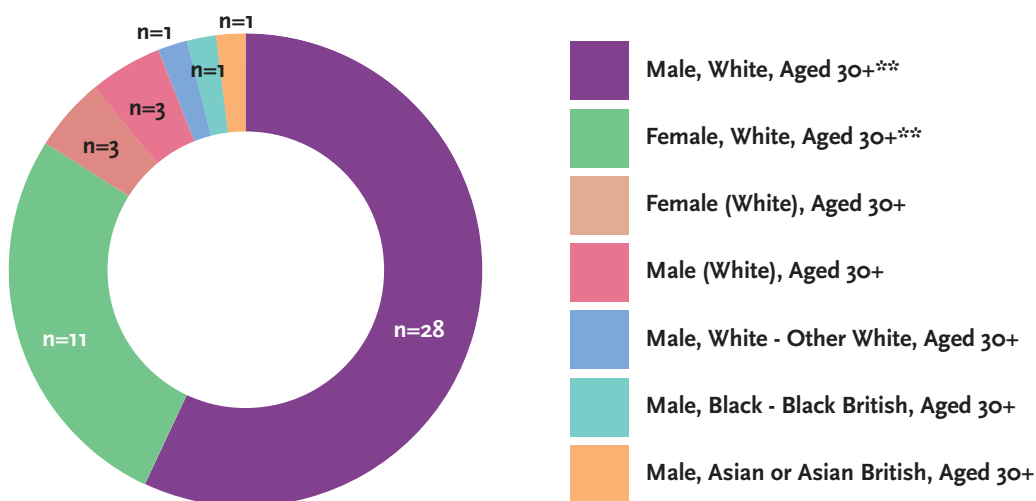
Figure 2: SVRO stop and searches



Note: Figures are for the time period until 31st March 2024 (almost one year into the pilot). Source: Home Office (2024).

Figure 3: Key demographics of SVRO searches in Merseyside*

* This source identifies the number of searches conducted according to a shared demographic profile. It is not possible from this source to identify the number of individuals who have been searched or whether the same individual has been searched on multiple occasions. Multiple searches according to the same demographics may involve the same person or different individuals who share a similar demographic profile.



** The age and ethnicity categories are as source provided. Ethnicity is self-defined. When self-defined ethnicity is not stated, the police officer assigned ethnicity is given in brackets.

Figures are for the time period until 31st March 2024 (almost one year into the pilot). Source: Home Office (2024).

Due to the limited and fragmented nature of the available data, definitive conclusions about the use of SVROs cannot yet be drawn. Nevertheless, from this data we offer some preliminary observations:

1 The number of SVRO issued aligns with expectations

Courts appear to be issuing SVROs at a rate consistent with the Home Office's expectations for the pilot. Approximately 150 orders are needed for the pilot evaluation (Home Office, 2021a). With at least 121 orders issued before the half way point of the pilot, this target seems likely to be exceeded.

2 Weapon possession dominates the convictions

Most SVROs have been issued in relation to convictions for weapon possession. The relatively low issuing of SVROs in relation to a knife or offensive weapon being used in the commission of violence raises questions about how effectively SVROs are targeting individuals committing such offences, an important rationale for their introduction.

3 Fewer searches than anticipated

By 31 March 2024, almost a year into the pilot, only 66 searches had been conducted under SVRO powers. This is far fewer than the Home Office's estimate of 1,800 searches being undertaken in the pilot period (Home Office, 2021a).

The time required to operationalise a new power is likely to be one factor contributing to this discrepancy. As Figure 2 shows, unsurprisingly the number of searches still appears to be on a growth trajectory over the period we have data for. In addition, because a significant proportion of those subject to SVROs are also a subject to a custodial sentence, this is also likely to cause a delay between SVROs being issued and the commencement of SVROs in the community and the potential for searching. However, even bearing in mind these factors, the searching aspect of SVROs does not seem to be happening on the scale that the Home Office envisaged. Notably, outside of Merseyside, only 16 searches were conducted across the other three SVRO pilot areas by the end of March 2024.

4 No weapons found during the first year of the pilot

Critics of suspicion-less stop-and-search powers may cite this as evidence of the measure's ineffectiveness in reducing violence. Meanwhile,

proponents of SVROs might argue it reflects SVRO's deterrent effect on weapon carrying. The pilot's ability to produce sufficient evidence to assess these competing claims is an acknowledged challenge (see next section), particularly given the discretionary and flexible nature of these police powers.

5 Key data gaps: Who is searched and frequency of searching

Searching under SVROs power has not been expansive to date in terms of the total number of searches that have taken place. However, because frequency of searches is subject to police discretion, and individuals can be subject to multiple searches, even the relatively constrained number of 66 searches may still be highly concentrated on a small number of people. Unfortunately, currently available data does not clarify this important matter. Figure 3 outlines demographic details of the 50 SVRO searches conducted in Merseyside as of 31 March 2024. This data is derived from the Home Office's annual stop-and-search database, which provides aggregate statistics by searches and does not identify whether the same individual has been searched multiple times. For example, the 28 searches of 'Male, White, aged 30+', may be 28 searches of the same individual. Equally it may be searches of 28 different individuals who share the same grouped demographic characteristics identified in the Home Office database. Or, of course, somewhere between these two scenarios. The withholding of data on the number of individuals searched during the pilot is impeding clarity about this essential issue.

Pilot evaluation

The lack of transparency about the use of a new power thus far is disappointing. That no evidence was offered to support the introduction of SVROs as a serious violence reduction measure, allied with evidence about the ethnic disproportionality in the deployment of existing stop and search powers (see StopWatch, 2023), only strengthens the case for openness about the use of SVROs. The Home Office commissioned evaluation of SVROs raises the expectation that further insights will emerge in the future, though this is unlikely to be before late 2025. Experience also suggests that even this relatively distant date may be optimistic.

As is the case with SVROs, the Home Office commissioned an evaluation of the KCPO pilot,

the civil order intended to address knife crime which preceded the SVRO. The pilot ended in March 2023. The evaluation of the KCPO was due to be laid before parliament following the end of the pilot, prior to a decision about a national roll out. At the time of writing, nearly two years on from the end of the KCPO pilot, no information about the evaluation is in the public domain. No decision about the future of KCPO beyond the pilot has yet been made.

The Home Office commissioned evaluation of SVROs, even if it does emerge, may not be an adequate 'test' of SVROs. The evaluation will consider process questions. For example, how SVROs have been implemented and criminal justice professionals' perceptions of working with the new powers. It will also consider the impact of SVROs. For example, what difference has this new power made to its target of reducing serious violence involving offensive weapons? The latter is a vital question. However, it is also one that may prove elusive. SVROs are preventative orders. Evaluators have been given the difficult task of measuring something that has not happened (in this case, violence / weapons carrying), that would have happened if the order had not been in place. As the terms of reference for the evaluation note:

' It is difficult to measure the exact deterrent effect of these orders, but if searches of those with SVROs result in no weapons being found more frequently compared to a control group without SVROs, this would indicate that the policy has been successful in terms of reducing possession offences.'

Lord Sharpe, 2023

The number of searches in which no weapon is found is a good measure of police activity. However, it is a more problematic and circuitous measure of success. Would the opposite be true? If an SVRO search finds a weapon, is this a measure of the failure of SVROs? Or will this be considered an intervention which has successfully taken a weapon off the streets? In which case, it is foreseeable that SVROs cannot really 'fail', given the two possible outcomes of a search; that weapons are found and that no weapon is found, can both be considered a 'success'. It is also an evaluation criterion that could be vulnerable to perverse incentives; how will it be

possible to assess whether SVROs have encouraged multiple searches on the already compliant?

Priorities for reducing serious violence involving young adults

The Labour government is committed to the ambitious target of halving knife crime in the next decade. While no evidence was found by the Home Office for potential efficacy of SVROs, there is considerable scope to improve the current offer to reduce serious violence. Taking serious violence involving young adults seriously requires a concerted effort on the part of policymakers to improve their strategies, programmes and funding. Three key priorities, borne out by the available evidence as important and requiring policymakers' attention are:

- 1 Place-based investment.
- 2 Prioritising programmes for individuals affected by violence.
- 3 Repairing damaged trust and community participation.

Place-based investment

Decades of research and evidence gathering has shown that the drivers of serious violence are insecure employment prospects, poverty, substance misuse, mental health issues, volatile drug markets, experience of violence, and knowledge about the threat in particular areas influencing the decision to carry weapons (for example, see Browne *et al*, 2022; Grimshaw and Ford, 2018).

In this context, focusing policy and practice on support and opportunities related to place-based investment, particularly in housing and employment, has been shown to improve outcomes for individuals at risk of being implicated in weapon enabled violence. For example, the landmark violence reduction strategy in Glasgow was accompanied by major changes in local housing (Lympelopoulou and Bannister, 2022; Zhang *et al*, 2022). A careful study of the individual impacts of the Glasgow Violence Reduction programme showed that support in housing, education, and employment made a difference to weapon carrying among 16-29 year-olds (Williams *et al*, 2014).

In contrast, evidence of a positive impact from stop and search was lacking:

‘ To be clear, at the time of writing, there is no robust evidence to suggest a direct association between the use of stop and search and offending levels, either in Strathclyde, or in Scotland more broadly.’

Murray, 2014

Whilst policymakers are making some efforts to finance and promote a range of place-based programmes, progress has been insufficient. It is clear that effective implementation and the sustainability of this approach have represented, and continue to represent, challenges as local authorities and other services suffer from long-term financial pressure (Kerr *et al*, 2021).

Prioritising programmes for individuals affected by violence

Responding to those involved in serious violence should have the offer of services alongside enforcement if it is to succeed (Braga *et al*, 2019). The development of violence reduction in Scotland successfully negotiated a balance between enforcement and service provision (Fraser *et al*, 2024). Young adults (18-25 year olds) specifically require greater focus in these arrangements. Fundamental services are lacking, according to a police inspection report focused on interventions for people aged from 15 to 24:

‘ Our inspection showed that referrals relating to the mental health of children and young people involved in serious youth violence often outstripped partner organisations’ capacity.’

HMCFRS, 2023

Young adults should be prime candidates for support and programmes which encourage maturation, as individuals who are assuming responsibilities and seeking opportunities in employment and education (Tonks and Stephenson, 2019). Young adults are officially included in the criteria for the flagship public health initiative on violence, Violence Reduction Units (VRUs), the age remit of which is up to 25 years old. However, a recent evaluation of these arrangements leaves room for doubt that this ambition is being adequately met in practice. The national evaluation for 2022-23 reported a concern among the VRUs that:

‘... VRUs were not sufficiently prioritising young adults and young people who are already entrenched in offending and violence, including younger prisoners and young people leaving custody. This was a widespread concern across the VRU sites, with challenges described in different forms in different areas.’

Home Office, 2023b

This assessment is echoed in a recent Probation Inspectorate review of provision for young adults (HMIP, 2024). It found young adults were a stated priority in probation guidance but that this had not clearly translated into improved or bespoke practices. The review noted a lack of support, bespoke services and prioritisation of young adults when leaving custody and regarding knife and weapons interventions specifically (*ibid*).

Damaged trust and community participation

Effective violence reduction strategies rely on community support and extensive and deep collaborations. As a recent review states:

‘ Alongside whole system, multi-agency collaboration – and equally, if not more, important – is organisational commitment to actively engaging and collaborating with communities, families and young people as partners in the identification and implementation of solutions to social problems such as violence.’

Fraser and Irwin-Rogers, 2021

In the face of declining trust in the police, especially among women and Black communities, the reliance of effective violence reduction strategies on community support creates a significant challenge (Brown and Hobbs, 2023). Active leadership from the centre is required in order to signal the importance of change and to make progress on a broad front. In particular, the unrestrained and discriminatory deployment of stop and search must end.

Looking forward

We welcome the government's pledge and ambition to halve knife crime in a decade and increase confidence in the police. Making progress towards these commitments will require interventions for which there is good evidence and trust. In light of this, SVROs, at best, seem a distraction.

The Home Office's own impact assessment during the passage of the legislation through parliament amply showed the lack of evidence for the SVRO at its outset. The lack of transparency about the application of SVROs thus far has made it difficult to track the pilots as they unfold. We have reservations about both whether the evaluation of the SVRO pilot will publicly emerge and, if it does, whether the pilot will prove an adequate test of SVROs.

The speed at which civil orders like the SVRO have emerged contrasts with the slow pace at which evidenced-based measures to reduce serious violence have been adopted. Place-based investment, interventions for individuals affected by violence, and building damaged trust and community participation, require greater prioritisation.

The fundamental policy choice facing the government on reducing serious violence is clear. Does it develop stronger strategic programmes, based on the well-established evidence, and deliver the reductions in violence we all wish to see. Or does it continue with measures that, while giving the impression of being decisive, ultimately fall very short.

Data appendix

A. Courts data

Under the Freedom of Information (FoI) Act, we requested and obtained data from the Ministry of Justice relating to the issuing of SVROs on two occasions (FoI requests: Ministry of Justice 231219080 and 240703020).

We initially requested data for the time period 19th April 2023 to 30th September 2023. Some data was provided in response to our request. This data was extracted from unpublished court data (see Ai).

In order to update our initial data, a second FoI request was later sent to the Ministry of Justice for the time period 19th April 2023 to 31st December 2023. However, whilst some data was provided in response to this request, it is not comparable to the previous data we obtained due to the Ministry of Justice migrating to a new recording database (see Aii).

Hence the data obtained for the two time periods requested above is set out separately below.

Unsuccessful FoI requests

Information about the demographics of those who have received an SVRO, obtained in response to our first request, was exempt from disclosure on our second request. The reason for the exemption was that the information is intended for future publication. Hence it was not possible to update the demographic information about who has received an SVRO beyond the first few months of the pilot.

Other information we requested from the Ministry of Justice, which was exempt from disclosure, includes the number of applications for SVROs and the number of breaches and reasons for breaches of SVROs.

FoI requests were also sent to the four police forces involved in the pilot and to the Home Office, as the government department overseeing the pilot. All FoI requests to the Home Office were rejected. Our initial FoI requests to police force areas were met, some with significant time delays. However, requests for more updated information were rejected and the information initially obtained has been superseded by the data obtained from the Ministry of Justice.

Ai: Courts data obtained for the time period 19 April 2023 to 30 September 2023 (around 5.5 months of two year pilot)

Table A1: No. of SVROs issued

72

Of which: 51 in the Magistrates Court and 21 in the Crown Court

Table A2: Lead offence for which SVRO were issued (n=70)

Possession of weapons

41

Criminal damage, drug offences, public order offences, robbery, summary non-motoring, theft, violence against the person.

Between 1 to 5 incidences of SVROs being issued in relation to each offence category at either the Magistrates or Crown Court.

Note: Only the lead offence is recorded. For offences in which five or fewer incidences were recorded the exact number of incidences was not provided. Offence type was available for 70 SVROs issued. For two SVROs data about the offence type could not be extracted.

Table A3: Demographics of those who have received an SVRO (n=72)

Sex				
Male	Female		Not specified	
61	8		3	
Age				
18–25	26–35	36–45	46–55	56–63
16	21	17	11	7
Ethnicity				
British	Not specified	African/ Caribbean/ Black other	White and Asian, Pakistani	Any other
42	16	9	2	3

Note: Age and ethnicity categories as source provided. Ethnicity described as self-defined.

Table A4: Criminal sanctions issued to those in receipt of an SVRO (n=70)

	Immediate custody	Suspended Sentence Order	Community Order	Criminal Behaviour Order
All courts	51	15	14	0
Of which:				
Magistrates' Court	33	13	12	0
Crown Court	18	2	2	0

Note: The criminal sentencing received was retrievable for 70 SVROs. For two SVROs sentencing was not known. In total 80 criminal sanctions were issued in relation to 70 SVROs. Some individuals will have received more than one criminal sanction, particularly in the Magistrates' Court.

Table A5: SVROs granted to individuals convicted in a multi-defendant case 5

Of which: 3 were in the Magistrates Court and 2 were in the Crown Court.

Note: This information was retrievable for 70 SVROs issued. For two SVROs information about multidefendant cases is not known.

Aii: Courts data obtained for the time period 19 April 2023 to 31 December 2023 (around 8.5 months of two year pilot)

Data for this longer time period was obtainable for the Magistrates' Court only. Updated data for the Crown Court was not available because 'Crown Court data is in the process of migrating on to a new

database which means that the raw data is not held in the format requested, nor can it be readily extracted from the new database'.

Table A6: No. of SVROs issued

100

Note: All were issued in the Magistrates Court. Data about the Crown Court was not obtainable.

Table A7: Lead offence for which SVRO were issued (n=70)

Possession of weapons	53
Summary non-motoring	8
Theft	8
Either way offence	7
Criminal damage, drug offences, public order offences, robbery, violence against the person, miscellaneous crimes against society	Between 1 to 5 incidences of SVROs being issued in relation to each offence category

Note: Only the lead offence is recorded. For offences in which five or fewer incidences were recorded the exact number of incidences was not provided. Offence type was available for 96 SVROs issued. For four SVROs data about the offence type could not be extracted. Data is for Magistrates Courts only, Crown Court data was not obtainable.

Table A8: Criminal sanctions issued to those in receipt of an SVRO (n=98)

	Immediate custody	Suspended Sentence Order	Community Order	Criminal Behaviour Order
Magistrates' Court	58	33	32	2

Note: The criminal sentencing received was retrievable for 98 SVROs. For two SVROs sentencing was not retrievable. In total 125 criminal sanctions were issued in relation to 98 SVROs. Some individuals will have received more than one criminal sanction. Data is for Magistrates Courts only, Crown Court data was not obtainable.

Table A9: SVROs granted to individuals convicted in a multi-defendant case 6

Note: This information was retrievable for 98 SVROs issued. For two SVROs information about multidefendant cases is not known. Data is for Magistrates Courts only, Crown Court data was not obtainable.

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Young adult safety project

Serious Violence Reduction Orders: The impression of doing something is part of the Young Adult Safety project at the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies. This project aims to strengthen advocacy about key aspects of serious violence that affect young adults and is supported by the Transition to Adulthood Alliance convened and funded by the Barrow Cadbury Trust.

Transition to Adulthood (T2A) is a Barrow Cadbury Trust criminal justice programme and campaign. Since 2009, T2A has been building the case for a distinct approach to policy and practice relating to young adults in the criminal justice system. By collaborating with criminal justice professionals, the voluntary and community sector, policy-makers and young adults themselves, T2A is building a body of evidence and good practice guidance. The T2A Alliance supports this programme of work - and consists of leading criminal and social justice organisations, including the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies. Alliance members collaborate on T2As reports and resources - and have previously explored young adults who have had repeat contact with the police, violence reduction, and problem-solving courts.



Transition to Adulthood (T2A) is a Barrow Cadbury Trust criminal justice programme building the case for a distinct approach to policy and practice relating to young adults in the criminal justice system.

StopWatch is a coalition of legal experts, academics, citizens, and civil liberties campaigners. They aim to address excess and disproportionate stop and search, promote best practice, and ensure fair, effective policing for all.

At Centre for Crime and Justice Studies we create lively spaces for collaboration and learning, where conventional criminal justice policy agendas are scrutinised and challenged, fresh knowledge and ideas are discussed, and transformational solutions are developed.