



The violence must stop: Authorities' experiences of communicating anti-violence messages to violent groups in Malmö, Sweden

Anna Hedlund

Senior Lecturer, School of Global Studies, Gothenburg University
anna.hedlund@gu.se

Anna-Karin Ivert

Associate Professor, Department of Criminology, Malmö University
anna-karin.ivert@mau.se

Caroline Mellgren

Associate Professor, Department of Police work, Malmö University
caroline.mellgren@mau.se

Abstract

Following a period of increased gun violence in Malmö, Sweden, law enforcement authorities and social service agencies, together with representatives from the local community, initiated a project called Ceasefire Malmö with the aim of stopping severe violence in the city. Ceasefire Malmö is based on a focused deterrence strategy known as Group Violence Intervention (GVI), with the primary goal of reducing gun violence. A core component in GVI is strategic communication with offenders where authorities communicate a clear anti-violence message to groups that violence must stop or be met with swift and severe consequences for the entire group. This article examines the main communication tool employed in GVI: the call-in meeting. Based on 54 interviews with 22 professionals representing all the authorities responsible for organising and implementing call-ins, we analyse how the strategy was adapted to the Swedish context and how authorities experienced communicating with offenders. Our findings show that working with strategic communication enabled the development of new ways to identify and reach out to potentially violent groups. Ceasefire Malmö also encountered several difficult and time-consuming challenges related to call-ins, for example, identifying and engaging community representatives.

Keywords

group violence intervention, GVI, call-ins, gun violence, Ceasefire Malmö

Introduction

In 2018, the first call-in meeting as part of a group violence intervention (GVI) took place in Malmö, Sweden's third-largest city. During call-ins, group members identified by the police as members of criminal groups driving the violence in Malmö are summoned to a formal meeting with authorities and invited speakers from the community, who will all express concerns that these individuals can potentially become involved in a gun-related homicide or become victims of such violence. The following extract is from a rehearsal of

the first call-in in Malmö where the city's police chief begins the meeting by addressing the group:

It is no coincidence that you are here. [...] You belong in some form to a violent group in Malmö. A group that makes it difficult for yourselves, for others, and for the citizens in Malmö. You can't change the past, but you can decide what your future will look like. I know you live in great insecurity. You wear a bullet-proof vest, and you are constantly exposed. We have police officers who work with mapping people and groups like you. So, we know who you hang out with, we know who you are. Take our message now: if someone in your group commits lethal violence, or shootings, we will focus on you and your entire group. From now on, it will be difficult to be the most violent group in Malmö. You will be arrested, searched, seized, and we will wire-tap your phones. [...] We will prosecute everyone and confiscate everything. If you are suspected of a shooting and we find stolen goods, or an expensive watch, or drugs, in your apartment, or if your friend has done something illegal, we will come after you. [...] All groups in Malmö will get the same message. The people I meet are individuals like you. They tell me and my colleagues that they are very afraid and worried about being killed. They are afraid that they might be forced to kill someone. And quite often they are sad that the friends they have grown up with, the ones they played with when they were little, they don't even know if they can trust them anymore. It can be difficult to find your way in the society system with all the paperwork, but from now on it will be easy. You will get all the help possible if you are willing to make a change. There is more, and better help, than you may think. All I ask of you is that you take your finger off the trigger. I want you, who are sitting here, to take all the help that is available. I don't want you to die. (Transcribed extract from the first rehearsal of a call-in meeting, Malmö City, 2019).

Ceasefire Malmö (*Sluta Skjut*) is a partnership between the local police authority, the prison and probation services, social services and community members to stop shootings in Malmö. The project is inspired by the GVI model developed in the United States in the 1990s as an effort to reduce homicide among criminally-involved youth groups in Boston. (Kennedy et al., 2001), and later refined by the National Network for Safe Communities (NNSC) with the primary objective of stopping severe gun violence (National Network for Safe Communities, 2015). Central in GVI is communication with members of violent groups (so-called GMI: 'group members involved'). In formal meetings (call-ins) and personal meetings (custom notifications) group members receive a message from the partnership that violence is unacceptable and will lead to sanctions (National Network for Safe Communities, 2015). The message includes an offer from social services to help individuals who want to exit a criminal group.

Based on 54 interviews with 22 professionals representing all of the authorities responsible for GVI and in charge of the call-ins in Ceasefire Malmö, this article focuses on the part of the GVI that is about communicating the core message: that violence must stop. The aim is to examine how authorities in Ceasefire Malmö adapted the call-in to Swedish conditions and how professionals have experienced working with strategic communication in call-ins so far. This way of directly communicating with violent groups is a completely new approach to working with violent groups in Sweden, and it is therefore important to know how this is perceived by practitioners. We ask: How did authorities in Ceasefire

Malmö interpret and implement the call-in and how did they experience strategic communication with group members?

Since GVI was implemented in Malmö, it has been perceived by Swedish authorities as a promising strategy. Currently, GVI is being extended to other Swedish cities facing group related gun violence, such as Gothenburg, Örebro, Huddinge, Järfälla/Upplands-Bro and Uppsala. While several evaluations of how GVI has been implemented in Sweden exist (Ivert et al., 2020; Ivert & Mellgren, 2023; Starke & Larsson, 2023; Hellfeldt et al., 2023; Gustafsson et al., 2023), there is a lack of qualitative studies addressing the call-in in Sweden, and only a few studies exist internationally (e.g. Trinkner, 2019). The purpose here is not to evaluate or assess whether call-ins ‘work’ or not. Rather, we focus on how authorities have experienced working with call-ins and some of the challenges they have encountered in this process. When examining any gun violence reduction ‘model’ or ‘programme’ there is always a risk that authorities or policy-makers will invariably promote their work in positive terms, i.e., as a way of ending violence and establishing security. Therefore, there is always a risk that studies focusing on the implementing actors will be ‘one-sided’ and only include the voices of those participating in the study. While future evaluations will have to show whether the strategy had any long-term effects on reducing serious violence in Malmö, this article adds to the literature on GVI and call-ins by addressing how authorities comprehend the core components of the strategy: communicating an anti-violence message to group members. Since GVI is a new strategy in the Swedish context, this research contributes with a deeper understanding of how implementing authorities undertook the exercise, and how they experienced strategic communication with group members which can be useful for practitioners engaged in gun violence reduction efforts and who are considering implementing GVI in Sweden or elsewhere.

To understand how Malmö authorities adapted the call-in, we first provide an overview of GVI to show how the strategy is designed in the United States. We then review how GVI has been examined in previous literature and discuss some of the limitations of previous evaluations. After the methods section, we present our main findings focusing on how authorities in Malmö organised call-ins, how they experienced communicating with offenders, and some of the challenges they faced. Finally, we provide an overall analysis of our results, demonstrating that even if authorities in Malmö found the call-in to be a new and innovative method to reach active group members, there were elements that authorities found difficult and time consuming, for example, engaging the local community and finding suitable speakers and audiences to attend call-ins.

The group violence intervention strategy

Like other ‘models’ or ‘programmes’ focusing on violence prevention, the GVI strategy is based on basic knowledge about street group behaviour and violence. This research has shown that serious violence primarily takes place in marginalised neighbourhoods and is mainly carried out by a small number of young men who are the main perpetrators of serious violence in street groups (Kennedy et al., 2001; National Network for Safe Communities, n.d.; National Network for Safe Communities, 2015; Braga et al., 2019). The overarching aim of the GVI strategy is to focus on the individuals and groups who are the main drivers of violence.

The GVI model is designed based on focused deterrence theory, sometimes referred to as *Pulling levers policing programs* (Braga & Weisburd, 2012a), which simply suggests that “crimes can be prevented when the costs of committing the crime are perceived by

the offender to outweigh the benefits” (Braga & Weisburd, 2012a, p. 7). In other words, focused deterrence is based on the principle that individuals and groups are dissuaded from violence if they understand that their behaviour is followed by sanctions or punishment (Braga & Kennedy, 2021; Braga et al., 2019; Braga & Weisburd, 2012a; Braga & Weisburd, 2015). The GVI model builds on three general principles of deterrence: “the certainty, swiftness, and severity of punishment” (Wheeler et al., 2019, p. 3). In other words, the GVI law enforcement should communicate “a credible message about the potential consequences” (Wheeler et al., 2019, p. 3) directly to the offenders to deter group members from committing crimes or violence.

According to NNSC who are developing GVI in the United States, the strategy disseminates the deterrent message through call-ins or custom notifications (National Network for Safe Communities, 2015). The message emphasises two points. First, that violence is unacceptable and will result in sanctions and punishment, not only for individuals but for the entire group. This approach is said to leverage peer pressure to deter future violent actions and to influence group members to seek alternative ways of resolving conflicts (Wheeler et al., 2019; Ivert & Mellgren, 2023). The goal is that group members will spread the message in their groups, thereby serving as a deterrent mechanism for all members. Secondly, the partnership should make clear to the targeted groups that help from society is available for individuals who want to stop offending (National Network for Safe Communities, 2015; National Network for Safe Communities, n.d.). For the GVI strategy to work, it is highlighted that the partnership must focus all its resources on the most active groups and that there must be collective action from the whole partnership (National Network for Safe Communities, 2015; National Network for Safe Communities, n.d.). According to NNSC, GVI can be applicable to any country, despite legal or social differences, as long as the focus is on reducing offending and victimisation (National Network for Safe Communities, 2015).

The call-in

A call-in is described as a formal information meeting to which selected group members are summoned to receive the anti-violence message from the GVI partnership. Braga and Kennedy (2021) state that “the purpose [of the call-in] is to identify group members and to use the call-in to convey key messages through them back to their groups: the call-in is largely about the larger universe of groups and group members, and less about those group members actually present” (Braga & Kennedy, 2021).

Call-ins take place in a public meeting location such as a city hall or community centre and should be thoroughly prepared (National Network for Safe Communities, 2015). The location, speakers and audience should be chosen carefully, and comprehensive preparations and rehearsals take place before the meeting. Those speakers who participate in call-ins should represent the authorities but there should also be representatives from the local community whom the group members summoned to call-ins should recognise. The purpose is that community representatives should serve as “moral voices” of the community (National Network for Safe Communities, 2015). They are invited to speak about the negative consequences that gun violence has on entire neighbourhoods and should voice their expectations that violence must end. Community voices should be people respected by the groups’ members, and could be a teacher, an activist, or a grass-roots leader (Crandall & Wong, 2012; National Network for Safe Communities, 2015). The idea is that community representatives should promote informal social control and

support change in beliefs, norms and behaviours among street groups (Crandall & Wong, 2012).

The community is also represented in the invited audience that participates at the call-in. Community members in the audience should indicate that they support the GVI message, but they also play an important role in being present as a sign to group members that there are people in the community who care about them and can offer support. The audience should be made up of what is sometimes referred to as 'influentials'. Influentials are persons who are close to the group members, such as parents, relatives or friends. Influentials are also said to have great abilities to affect individuals' behaviours (National Network for Safe Communities, 2015).

Another method, although not the focus here, is custom notification, a form of individual conversations (Kennedy & Friedrich, 2014). Custom notifications target individuals considered to be at risk, for example, individuals associated with criminal groups, who are exposed to threats, or face the risk of becoming victims of shootings. In custom notifications, authorities deliver the same message as in call-ins.

Previous research on GVI

Research on GVI is primarily based on evaluations measuring the effects of the strategy. There is a lack of theoretical studies focusing on the various components in GVI. Previous evaluations of GVI have found positive effects on violence reduction, and GVI is often viewed as a promising strategy in terms of reducing gun violence (Braga et al., 2014; Braga et al., 2018; Kennedy et al., 2001; Statens Beredning för Medicinsk och Social Utvärdering, SBU, 2023). For example, studies from U.S. cities such as Boston, Detroit, New Orleans, Philadelphia and Cincinnati have all demonstrated positive results in gun violence reduction (see e.g., Braga et al., 2008; Kennedy & Braga, 1998; McGarrell et al., 2006; Papachristos et al., 2007; Braga & Weisburd, 2012b; Moyer, 2023; Roman et al., 2019; Kennedy et al., 2001; Braga et al., 2013). In Europe, strategies similar to GVI have been implemented in Glasgow (Williams et al., 2014), London (Densley & Jones, 2016), several cities in Sweden (Ivert et al. 2020; Ivert & Mellgren 2021, 2023; Starke & Larsson, 2023; Hellfeldt et al., 2023; Gustafsson et al., 2023), and, more recently, in Copenhagen and Rotterdam. In Glasgow, research showed that the proportion of people carrying weapons decreased, although the same was not true of London (Davies et al., 2016; Densley & Jones, 2016). In Sweden, the impact evaluation showed that shootings decreased after the implementation of GVI. However, it was not possible to conclusively link this decline to the GVI work (Ivert & Mellgren, 2023).

Previous research findings, however, should be interpreted with caution. Braga et al. (2015) emphasise, for example, that previous studies have a rather weak evaluation design (see also Roman, 2021). Research has emphasised that it is difficult to determine which elements in the method can potentially be successful since GVI contains several components (Ivert et al., 2020). A general critique of GVI is that the strategy does not address the underlying causes of violence, i.e. why some people commit acts of violence, instead focusing only on the symptoms (see, e.g., Fagan, 2002; Rosenfeld et al., 2005). Furthermore, it has been emphasised that it is unclear to what extent alleged reductions in violence can be attributed to the GVI framework or whether the reductions in gun violence are due to more general societal changes (Ivert & Mellgren, 2021, 2023). While several aspects of GVI warrant further examination – for example, custom notifications, focused deterrence and the role of civil society – we focus our analysis on one specific component: namely, the communication process through call-ins.

Methods and data

Our data was collected from two different research projects examining different aspects of Ceasefire Malmö. One project focused on evaluating the implementation process and effect of GVI in Malmö and the other focused on the group members' experiences of participating in call-ins. In this study we focus on the authorities' narratives and perspectives only. We only include interview data representing the core authorities involved in Ceasefire Malmö and who have the main responsibility for planning call-ins, drafting the anti-violence message and communicating with group members. While representatives from the community are invited to call-ins as speakers and audience members, they do not have the same responsibilities in Ceasefire Malmö as the authorities do in terms of what message to deliver, who to call to the call-in, or how to organise the set-up of call-ins. A limitation of this study is therefore that the perspectives of the participants and 'outsiders' are not represented, since we have a single focus on the implementing authorities with key responsibilities for call-ins.

Respondents were selected based on their role and position in Ceasefire Malmö and represent all authorities who are part of the project: the police authority, the social services, probation and parole, and the prosecutor's office. In total, we carried out 54 semi-structured interviews with 22 professionals involved in Ceasefire Malmö. The present study builds on data representing the Malmö police chief, the head of probation and parole in Malmö, managers from the social services, project managers from the police and social services (such as the exit program), project coordinators from the police, probation and parole and social services, lawyers from the police and the city, police analysts and intelligence coordinators, probation officers, and the strategic advisor from NNSC. The interviews were conducted in 2019 and 2020, but we also carried out follow-up interviews in 2023. Besides interviews, we have conducted observations and participated in meetings held by the Ceasefire Malmö project group and observed one call-in meeting in Malmö.

We conducted interviews with professionals individually, but also in pairs, and in some cases we conducted group interviews. Some of the participants, such as the project managers from the police and social services, were interviewed several times, depending on their roles and responsibilities in Ceasefire Malmö. The interviews, on average, lasted about one hour, and were semi-structured. We asked several open questions focusing on the implementation of Ceasefire Malmö, and the respondents were asked to share their perceptions regarding different parts of the project and the strategy. All interviews were tape recorded, transcribed and coded. We have translated interviews from Swedish to English and sometimes adjusted the language to make it more readable but without changing underlying meanings. We have used thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns in the data. We focus on the parts of the interview data associated with the call-in. In this data, we have identified themes about how call-ins were planned and organised, how professionals undertook the overall set-up of call-ins, discussions regarding identifying and targeting group members to summon to call-ins, security aspects, and the authorities' general experiences of communicating the anti-violence message. Both projects were reviewed by Swedish ethics review boards prior to the study beginning.

Ceasefire malmö and the structure of call-ins

As 2023, five call-ins had been carried out in Malmö. We focus on the first three of these, which took place at intervals of approximately six months. In Malmö, call-ins take place at a meeting room at Malmö Stadion, one of the largest event venues in the city.

On each occasion, about ten group members attended. The structure of call-ins is that the partnership carefully chooses those staff who will attend call-in meetings. Along with public authorities, community members will attend, such as someone from the religious community, a resident of the neighbourhood, or a member of the local sports club. At the meeting, group members also listen to people who have first-hand experiences of gun violence; for example, a mother who has lost her child. The call-ins in Malmö are prepared for thoroughly. Comprehensive preparations and rehearsals take place before the meetings, and everyone follows a detailed ‘manuscript’ where each speaker delivers a moral message that violence must stop. At call-ins, the group members are not expected to talk. They should simply listen to the message delivered by the authorities.

Findings

The first part of the findings represents the authorities’ opinions and overarching experiences with setting up the call-ins and emphasises some of the challenges encountered in identifying appropriate audience members and speakers. This part shows how Ceasefire Malmö identified individuals to be summoned to the meeting and how professionals dealt with security during call-ins. In the second part, the findings show how professionals experienced strategic communication and how authorities engaged with group members during call-ins. Finally, we show how professionals perceived the potential impacts of call-ins and the spread of the message among group members. We conclude with an overall discussion of the findings. It is important to emphasise that our findings are not evaluating the intervention but rather focusing on the authorities’ opinions and experiences of call-ins.

Professionals’ overall experiences of call-ins

The work with call-ins was described by all the professionals involved as well-planned but also very time-consuming, since this part of the strategy involves many people and consists of several different elements that all need to come together perfectly. A lot of thought was given to selecting the right location, finding speakers and carrying out risk assessments, as well as drafting the anti-violence message and conducting rehearsals prior to the call-in. The overall experience of the participating professionals was that the meetings were implemented in a very professional manner and everything went as planned. Although all the call-ins were planned and carried out in the same way, some adjustments were made following the feedback from those who participated in them.

The overall impression of the call-in was described by some professionals as a new and ‘non-Swedish’ way of working, since everything was so carefully planned. As one police officer explained:

Call-ins are the most ‘non-Swedish’ thing you can do. The meetings are super planned. Everything that happens at call-ins follows a script [manuscript]. We follow a minute-by-minute timetable. We have our notes, and we know what is going to happen next, how the social gathering should take place, etc. Call-ins are extremely directed, very non-Swedish.

The interviewees described spending a significant amount of time preparing a call-in in the finest detail. As part of the preparations, it was important to think about how to organise the meeting in such a way that authorities sent a signal that they care about the

group members and that they should feel respected at call-ins. For example, interviewees described how they meticulously prepared various small gestures, such as providing soft drinks to the participants. One interviewee mentioned that she had brought nicotine-free chewing gum for those group members who were smokers as a gesture of hospitality. All the careful planning, minute-by-minute agendas and detailed scripts were described by the authorities as an important part of the overall strategy; to build mutual trust and to signal to the group members that they take the call-in seriously and that they want the violence to stop.

We find two major challenges related to the set-up of the call-ins: identifying speakers and finding the appropriate audience.

The speakers

Speakers at the call-in should be representatives from the authorities as well as from the local community. Finding speakers that could represent the authorities was uncomplicated. The lineup included the police chief, a local police officer with a long engagement working with criminal groups, a representative from the social services, a chief prosecutor and a local politician. This lineup has remained unchanged over the years. Although some individuals have been replaced, the functions remain the same.

Finding voices representing the community was described as more difficult. Identifying the community voices was the primary responsibility of the project manager from the social services. Interviews reveal that this was quite a challenging mission and required a lot of thought. At an early stage, a mother who had lost her child, not to violence but to illness, was selected to represent the voice of pain. In our interviews, many mentioned this mother and the emotional impact they thought she had on the group members participating at the call-in: “So, we did get the effect we wanted and even more. I mean, she was absolutely fantastic.” (Project manager, 2019)

More of a challenge was finding someone who could represent the voice of redemption. This voice should be represented by someone who had previously been a member of a violent group but who had left their criminal lifestyle behind. Equally important was that this person was someone to whom group members participating in the call-in could relate. This was difficult to achieve, and after the review of the first call-in, that role was left vacant. The police project manager said: “I’m a bit uncertain about that voice. I’ve told [name] that if we can’t find the perfect one, we’d rather skip it.”

The social service project manager discussed how, in a Swedish context, it is difficult to find someone that fills the requirements for this voice. The overall experience voiced by the professionals was that the decision to leave out the voice of redemption in the early years did not have any negative impacts on call-ins since the authorities argued that it was better to leave this voice empty rather than inviting “a bad voice”, e.g., someone to whom the group members could not relate.

The choice of speaker to represent the voice of aspiration or grassroots community also required some reflection. At the first call-in, this voice was represented by an imam from a local congregation. The decision to engage the imam was preceded by discussions regarding whether this was a suitable choice due to some people finding him somewhat controversial. However, overall, the professionals said his speech seemed to reach the group members at the meeting. At the following call-ins, there was also a deacon from the Swedish church who delivered the message that all religious congregations in Malmö cooperated and that whoever wanted could turn to any of them for help and support. The choice of voice from the grassroots community was discussed in several interviews during

the implementation of call-ins, indicating that selecting speakers from grassroots society was challenging.

The audience

The audience plays an important role at the call-ins as they represent the group members' communities. The audience should be composed of individuals that group members recognise and who can exercise a form of informal social control and show that the violence perpetrated by the groups has consequences for people around them. At the same time, the idea is that the audience constitutes a form of support by showing that they care. However, just as with the moral voices of the community, it is important to identify the right people. The working group was careful when choosing who was invited as an audience to make sure that the audience consisted of people who could influence the decision-making of the group members, and could be so-called 'influentials'. However, it was not easy to define the audience. The project manager from the social service said that:

The definition of civil society here in Ceasefire Malmö is different [compared to the United States]. We have individuals employed by the municipality who serve as part of civil society, such as at youth centres, outreach workers, and so on.

In addition to the challenges involved in defining the right audience, there was also a challenge in recruiting and motivating representatives from the local community to participate. One interviewee mentioned that there was an uncertainty among members of civil society in Sweden about what it meant to participate in the call-in meeting. Additionally, recruiting an audience from the community was difficult due to some not wanting to jeopardise the trust they had in relation to the group members, or to risk being associated with the police, and some were simply afraid of being seen in a call-in context. This was also described as concerns about getting involved or meddling in conflicts. One police officer described:

People in the neighbourhood find it very uncomfortable [to interfere with criminals]. In Sweden people do not venture out when it is dark. Or go out after working hours [to confront criminals]. [In Sweden] people trust the social services to take care of the problem.

In Malmö, the partnership tried to recruit community representatives, for example from the local boxing club, MMA fighters, or the local shop owner in one neighbourhood, but were for a long time unable to find any representatives who were willing to participate in call-ins. Identifying and recruiting speakers and audiences remained a challenge during the first years. Later on, Ceasefire Malmö appointed one coordinator from the social services whose main task is building relationships with local community representatives and raising awareness about GVI among civil society organisations. Interviewees emphasised the importance of building community relationships early in the implementation and of ensuring enough resources are allocated for this work.

Who to call to a call-in?

The first step of the call-in process is to identify the focus group (GMI) to be called in. The individuals who were called to the call-in were all mapped within Ceasefire Malmö

and were identified as being associated with the most violent groups in Malmö. The initial selection of eligible group members was done by the police and then discussed with probation and parole officers. To be eligible to be called as participants of the call-in, the group members had to be under supervision from probation and parole officers and they were summoned to the call-in as part of their probation and parole. Not showing up to the call-in was considered as disobedience. In addition to being under supervision, the group members had to be individuals who deemed likely to be receptive to the message and who had the authority or trust to convey the message to the other group members. Those who were called in had to be at least 18 years old and could not be individuals with mental illness or drug abuse problems. The authorities emphasised that efforts were made to ensure that several different groups should be represented at the meeting and that there should be a balance between the groups. All individuals called to call-ins had committed a crime and been sentenced to a punishment that included probation. They were then selected based on their current or previous role and position in criminal groups and the authorities' collective concerns that they could potentially become involved in gun-related incidents or serious violence. Identifying the 'right people' to summon to call-ins was described as challenging since it is based only on assessments and knowledge about a person's past and criminal records. Once the authorities had selected participants, these individuals received a letter from the authorities. One person described:

They receive a very formal letter saying that "together with the police and the City of Malmö we have identified you as being in a risk group", and in the letter it is quite clear that they [group members] are not expected to say anything at the meeting, they just have to listen. They will get the information that policemen will be there for their safety and security. So, it is very formal. The letter is signed by police and law-enforcement agencies.

Security

The difficulty and risks associated with gathering individuals from different, and sometimes rival, groups were mentioned by almost all respondents. A security group was put together with responsibility for reviewing and planning the safety of everyone involved, before, during and after the meetings. To make sure that the location was safe and that the call-in could be carried out as planned, there were both uniformed and plain-clothes police officers in attendance. In interviews with police officers, it was mentioned that security aspects were carefully planned and that it was important that security measures, such as body searches, were carried out in a respectful way so that group members felt safe at the call-in. One police officer said:

Body searches must be based on respect. It is important that we treat them with respect and that that they feel safe when we search them. We do not hold them up against the wall and tell them to keep quiet.

The general perception of security was that significant efforts have been made to ensure safety before, during and after the call-ins.

Communicating the message

Communicating an anti-violence message with one unified voice, and meeting face-to-face with active group members, was described as a new experience. Several professionals expressed that prior to the call-ins they were concerned about the actual turnout at the meeting and how group members would perceive and react to the message. To be prepared, much time was spent on formulating the message and practicing how to communicate it in a powerful way. In almost all interviews, respondents emphasised that it was important that group members were able to understand that the authorities were not their enemy, and that the whole society cared about them.

All interviewees were very positive about how the message was delivered and how they perceived that the group members reacted to it. This was especially noticeable in interviews with the police, perhaps because the message was a departure from the traditional image of the police as ‘tough’ and disciplined. One police officer admitted that he had anticipated that group members would react strongly or disrupt the proceedings at call-ins. To his surprise, however, he recalled that they listened attentively to the message. In an interview with two police officers, they explained that they had initially felt unfamiliar with delivering the ‘emotional’ and ‘caring’ component in GVI. Expressing concerns such as ‘we worry about you’, ‘we want to help you’ and ‘we don’t want you to die’ initially felt unfamiliar:

We have never worked that way before. I have worked as a police officer for 40 years, but I have never told anyone that ‘I am worried that you will be shot’. I have never said that before. It feels very strange in the beginning.

Another police officer shared a similar experience. He said that engaging with group members and communicating face-to-face with them was a new method for the police. He explained that call-ins were not about coercing information but rather about voicing a sense of concern: “we want to make sure you do not end up in a pool of blood on the street”. In his view, this way of communicating was also perceived positively by the group members themselves:

There is not anyone who has not left us with gratitude. Most of them are positive already when we say that we come from Ceasefire Malmö because they do not like these shootings, it comes too close to themselves and their friends. Those who were a little suspicious in the beginning, they were definitely not negative after half an hour [at a call-in].

The emotional element in how the message is delivered – for example, when the mother spoke about the loss of her child or when the police chief said that he did not want the group members to die – was mentioned in many interviews as being very effective: “I don’t think there is anyone who can watch a call-in in Malmö without being emotionally touched. [At call-ins] we do something *more* than just an intervention.” The authorities who had been involved in the call-ins thought the message had some kind of effect, although they could not tell whether it had a deterrent impact. Whether or not the message reached other group members is difficult to research without adequate data (see, e.g., Ivert & Mellgren, 2023). In the final section below, we present the opinions

of professionals regarding the dissemination of the message and the potential impact of call-ins.

Dissemination, sanctions and impact

The overall impression from the authorities appears to be that the message got through to the group members who participated in call-ins. However, while the probation officers, who are the ones with regular contact with group members, had the impression that group members “got the message,” they were unsure to what extent, and in what ways, they forwarded the message to other group members. Their impression was that most group members thought the call-in “was good” even if some of them had questioned why they were part of it:

Several said that they thought call-ins were good. They thought it was about time, and they believed that more criminals should be brought in. So, there have been pretty positive responses. Very few people have protested [about attending call-ins]. Then several, or a few, have said, ‘it’s not me who’s a gang leader’ and ‘I’m not the worst guy in this city’. But we have explained this to them previously that they are not always called in because they are ‘the most criminal’, but because they belong to a criminal constellation. And they somehow understand it.

The probation officers say that it was a “dramatic” experience for the group members to be called to a meeting where, among others, police chiefs, chief prosecutors and grieving mothers spoke directly to them. Most interviewees thought that the message had a deterrent effect, and that call-ins could potentially lead to a reduction of gun violence. Professionals noted, however, that it was too early to speak about impacts, and highlighted that it was important to continue to deliver on what they communicate in messages at call-ins and to follow through with sanctions. At the second and third call-ins, the police showed anonymised pictures of members of violent groups who were in custody or prison to clearly demonstrate to those present that they were serious about sanctions. To follow through with the sanctions was, however, described by one police officer as difficult:

[One thing that is difficult] is the sanctions part, because it includes ‘we know who you are’ and ‘we know who you hang out with’ and ‘if you or someone else in your group of friends carry out shootings or bombings there will be consequences for the whole group’. It is difficult to get all parties onboard because everyone has their routines and their regulations [...] We try to get them to stretch these principles but in some cases it doesn’t work.

In the final section, below, we provide an overall analysis of the findings and its contributions.

Discussion

This article set out to examine how authorities in Ceasefire Malmö experienced call-ins and some of the challenges they have faced so far. Previous literature has mainly focused on the development and implementation of the strategy (e.g., Braga & Kennedy, 2021) or evaluating the effects of gun violence reduction (e.g., Braga et al., 2008; Kennedy & Braga, 1998; Papachristos et al., 2007, etc). Other research has focused on the role and

impact of focused deterrence in GVI (e.g., Wheeler et al., 2019; Braga et al., 2018; Braga & Weisburd, 2012a) as well as offering more critical perspectives on how GVI evaluations are designed (Roman, 2021). This article adds to the literature on GVI by showing how authorities working with call-ins in Malmö undertook the strategy and how they experienced communicating directly with group members.

The interview data show that, overall, the professionals interviewed in this study associated the call-in with many benefits that they believed improved their work, such as enabling better coherence and focus on a single task and strategic communication. The authorities in Ceasefire Malmö took the GVI model instructions seriously and carefully followed each step of call-ins. The authorities dedicated a significant amount of time to preparing for meetings, drafting manuscripts, writing the anti-violence message and inviting both the audience and community representatives to call-ins. It was stressed that preparing for call-ins was more time-consuming than the professionals had expected. But it was still argued that in the end, the work was not seen as burdensome since they had prepared call-ins carefully.

We find that strategic communication offered an opportunity for authorities to reach active group members and try new methods. Communicating directly with group members was experienced as an innovative approach. Professionals believed that the balance between focused deterrence and the emphasis on group members' value to society was a new strategy in the Swedish context. For example, the 'caring' aspect of the message – 'we want to help you' – was experienced as an unusual communication strategy, since displaying emotions and concerns in front of group members was not a method used previously. While almost all of those interviewed believed that the implementation of call-ins had been successful since they had carefully followed the guidelines offered by NNSC and 'ticked all the boxes' in the manual for how to reach out to group members and conduct call-ins, authorities also shared the perception that they could not be certain that call-ins would have the desired effect on gun violence reduction. Nevertheless, the authorities agreed that working with call-ins had improved their collective work with gun violence in the city. It helped them gain a shared understanding of who the individuals driving the violence are, and provided a channel through which to spread information about where these individuals could seek help and support if they want to leave a criminal group and a venue in which to make it clear that they were serious about sanctions if violence did not stop.

Findings show that in Malmö, the authorities had difficulties engaging community representatives in call-ins, and especially the voice of 'redemption.' The process of finding the right contacts, establishing partnerships with potential community organisations and appointing individuals capable of participating in call-ins was difficult. The challenges were mainly related to difficulties identifying 'influentials' in local communities and individuals who could potentially have an impact on informal social control and who were willing to participate in the call-ins. After the first call-in, the position representing the voice of redemption was left vacant for a number of call-ins (outside the timeframe of this study, this role has been reinstated). Finally, given that GVI is a new strategy in Sweden, it is understandable that, when authorities adopt models from other countries, they must follow certain checklists or templates that will enable the project to be evaluated and show what has worked and what has not worked so well. However, there is a risk here that the focus lands more on the preparations, rehearsals and drafting the anti-violence message than on the actual problem itself.

While future evaluations will have to show whether Ceasefire Malmö has any long-term impacts on gun violence reduction or not, it is important for future research to pay attention to how and whether the deterrent message is spread among group members. As Wheeler et al. (2019) note, prioritising specific individuals in call-ins does not guarantee that they effectively convey the message to other group members, and as such it is important to monitor the potential spread of the message in groups (Wheeler et al., 2019). In Malmö, the spread of the message has not been monitored and this kind of data is still lacking.

As a concluding remark, the process of choosing individuals to participate in call-ins raises some critical questions. For instance, there is no guarantee that the ‘right’ individuals will be chosen to attend call-ins, which raises questions about engaging with group members and individuals who may not identify with the targeted groups. There is a risk that those who are summoned to call-ins may feel stigmatised, which could potentially cause long term harm to the justice system and authorities if individuals believe they are selected based on arbitrary assessments. There is therefore a need for more research about how individuals summoned to call-ins perceive the message, and whether stern warnings and expressions of concern have any impact on their daily lives and the ways in which they respond to the support offered by social services or the informal social control by community representatives.

Data availability

Data for this article derived from qualitative interviews and is not publicly available for confidentiality reasons.

Acknowledgements

Research for this article has received funding from Forte: Swedish research council for health, working life and welfare (project grant number 2018–00973) and the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (project grant number 5.1–0190/17 and 0244/22). The authors are thankful to the anonymous reviewers for invaluable feedback and to Josefin Nilsson for contributing to the data collection. Thanks also to Isabel Lima, Steven Sampson, Florian Kühn, Proshant Chakraborty, and Aly Verjee for reading earlier drafts of this paper.

References

- Braga, A. A., Apel, R. & Welsh, B. C. (2013). The spillover effects of focused deterrence on gang violence. *Evaluation Review*, 37(3–4), 314–342. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193841X13518535>
- Braga, A. A., Hureau, D. M. & Papachristos, A. V. (2014). Deterring gang-involved gun violence: Measuring the impact of Boston’s Operation Ceasefire on street gang behavior. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 30(1), 113–139. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10940-013-9198-x>
- Braga, A. A., Pierce, G. L., McDevitt, J., Bond, B. J. & Cronin, S. (2008). The strategic prevention of gun violence among gang-involved offenders. *Justice Quarterly*, 25(1), 132–162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07418820801954613>
- Braga, A. A. & Weisburd, D. L. (2012a). The effects of “pulling levers” focused deterrence strategies on crime. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 8(1), 1–90. <https://doi.org/10.4073/csr.2012.6>
- Braga, A. A. & Weisburd, D. L. (2012b). The effects of focused deterrence strategies on crime: A systematic review and meta-analysis of the empirical evidence. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 49(3), 323–358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427811419368>

- Braga, A. A. & Weisburd, D. L. (2015). Focused deterrence and the prevention of violent gun injuries: Practice, theoretical principles, and scientific evidence. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 36, 55–68. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-031914-122444>
- Braga, A. A., Weisburd, D. & Turchan, B. (2018). Focused deterrence strategies and crime control: An updated systematic review and meta-analysis of the empirical evidence. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 17(1), 205–250. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12353>
- Braga, A. A., Weisburd, D. & Turchan, B. (2019). Focused deterrence strategies effects on crime: A systematic review. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 15(3), 1–65. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1051>
- Braga, A. A. & Kennedy, D. (2021). A framework for addressing violence and serious crime: Focused deterrence, legitimacy, and prevention. In D. Weisburd, (Eds.), *Elements in criminology* (pp. 1–94). Cambridge University Press.
- Crandall, V. & Wong, S.-L. (2012). *Practice brief. Call-in preparation and execution*. National Network for Safe Communities. Retrieved November 30, 2023 from https://nnscommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/GVRS_Call-In_Guide.pdf
- Davies, T., Grossmith, L. & Dawson, P. (2016). *Group violence intervention London: An evaluation of the Shield Pilot*. MOPAC. Retrieved March 14, 2024 from https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/gvi_london_evaluation270117.pdf
- Densley, J. A. & Jones, D. S. (2016). Pulling levers on gang violence in London and St. Paul. In L. C. Maxon & F.-A. Esbensen, (Eds.), *Gang transitions and transformations in an international context* (pp. 291–301). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-29602-9_16
- Fagan, J. (2002). Policing guns and youth violence. *The Future of Children*, 12(2), 133–151. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1602743>
- Gustafsson, N.-K., Feltmann, K., Kvillemo, P., Elgán, T., Strandberg, A. & Wall, H., et al. (2023). *En processutvärdering av Group Violence Intervention (GVI) i Huddinge, Järfälla/Upplands-Bro samt Uppsala. Delrapport*. Centre for Psychiatry Research, Karolinska Institutet. Report No. 80.
- Hellfeldt, K., Olsson, K., Frogner, L. & Strand, S. (2023). *Processutvärdering av GVI Örebro: en strategi för att minska och förebygga utvecklingen av grovt och dödligt våld kopplat till kriminella grupper*. Institutionen för beteende-, social-och rättsvetenskap vid Örebro universitet.
- Ivert, A.-K., Mellgren, C. & Nilsson, J. (2020). *Processutvärdering av Sluta Skjut*. FoU Rapport 2020:3. Malmö University.
- Ivert, A.-K. & Mellgren, C. (2021). *Processutvärdering av Sluta Skjut*. Institutionen för Kriminologi & Enheten för polisärt arbete, Malmö University.
- Ivert, A.-K. & Mellgren, C. (2023). *Uppföljning av Sluta Skjut. En strategi för att minska det grova våldet i Malmö*. Institutionen för Kriminologi & Enheten för polisärt arbete, Malmö University.
- Kennedy, D. M. & Braga, A. A. (1998). Homicide in Minneapolis: Research for problem solving. *Homicide Studies*, 2(3), 263–290. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088767998002003008>
- Kennedy, D. M., Braga, A. A., Piehl, M. A. & Waring, E. J. (2001). Reducing gun violence: The Boston Gun Project's Operation Ceasefire(pp. 20–23). U.S. Department of Justice Programs. National institute of Justice. Retrieved November 30, 2024 from <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/188741.pdf>
- Kennedy, D. M. & Friedrich, M. A. (2014). *Custom notifications: Individualized communication in the group violence intervention*. Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Retrieved March 2023 from https://nnscommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/GVI_Custom_Notifications_Guide.pdf
- Malmö City. (2019). “Sluta Skjut” – Tillsammans för ett tryggt Malmö. Retrieved March 11, 2023 from <https://malmo.se/Sa-arbetar-vi-med.../Trygghet-och-sakerhet/Trygghetsskapande-arbete/Sluta-skjut.html>
- McGarrell, E. F., Chermak, S., Wilson, J. M. & Corsaro, N. (2006). Reducing homicide through a “lever-pulling” strategy. *Justice Quarterly*, 23, 214–231. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07418820600688818>

- Moyer, R. A. (2023). An evaluation of the current Group violence intervention (GVI) Implementation in Philadelphia. University of Pennsylvania. Retrieved March 14, 2024 from <https://crimejusticelab.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/PENN-GVI-EVALUATION-REPORT-FOR-POSTING-20230227.pdf>
- National Network for Safe Communities. (2015). Group violence intervention: An implementation guide. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Retrieved December 5, 2023 from <https://nnscommunities.org/guides/group-violence-intervention-issue-brief/>
- National Network for Safe Communities. (n.d.). Group Violence Intervention issue brief. Retrieved December 5, 2023 from <https://portal.cops.usdoj.gov/resourcecenter/content.ashx/cops-p280-pub.pdf>
- Papachristos, A. V., Meares, T. L. & Fagan, J. (2007). Attention Felons: Evaluating Project Safe Neighborhoods in Chicago. *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies*, 4, 223–272. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1740-1461.2007.00096.x>
- Roman, C. G., Link, N. W., Hyatt, J. M., Bhati, A. & Forney, M. (2019). Assessing the gang-level and community-level effects of the Philadelphia Focused Deterrence strategy. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 15, 499–527. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-018-9333-7>
- Roman, C. G. (2021). An evaluator's reflections and lessons learned about gang intervention strategies: An agenda for research. *Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research*, 13(2/3), 148–167. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JACPR-02-2021-0576>
- Rosenfeld, R., Fornango, R. & Baumer, E. (2005). Did Ceasefire, Compstat, and Exile reduce homicide? *Criminology & Public Policy*, 4, 419–450.
- Starke M. & Larsson, A. (2023) *Slutrapport. Processutvärdering av Group Violence Intervention (GVI) i Göteborg*. Göteborg.
- Statens Beredning för Medicinsk och Social Utvärdering, SBU. (2023). Psykosociala insatser för att förebygga och minska gängkriminalitet bland barn och vuxna. SBU Utvärderingsrapport 369. <https://www.sbu.se/369?lang=sv>
- Trinkner, R. (2019). Addressing the “black box” of focused deterrence: An examination of the mechanisms of change in Chicago's Project Safe Neighborhoods. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 15, 673–683. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-019-09364-3>
- Wheeler, A. P., McLean, S. J., Decker, K. J. & Worden, R. E. (2019). Choosing representatives to deliver the message in a group violence intervention. *Justice Evaluation Journal*, 2(2), 93–117. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2934325>
- Williams, D. J., Currie, D., Linden, W. & Donnelly, P. D. (2014). Addressing gang-related violence in Glasgow: A preliminary pragmatic quasi- experimental evaluation of the Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV). *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 19, 686–691. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2014.09.011>