



EARLY  
INTERVENTION  
FOUNDATION

**SUMMARY**

# **Understanding the potential of trauma- informed training in Violence Reduction Units**

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**September 2022**

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## About EIF

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) is an independent charity established in 2013 to champion and support the use of effective early intervention to improve the lives of children and young people at risk of experiencing poor outcomes.

Effective early intervention works to prevent problems occurring, or to tackle them head-on when they do, before problems get worse. It also helps to foster a whole set of personal strengths and skills that prepare a child for adult life.

EIF is a research charity, focused on promoting and enabling an evidence-based approach to early intervention. Our work focuses on the developmental issues that can arise during a child's life, from birth to the age of 18, including their physical, cognitive, behavioural and social and emotional development. As a result, our work covers a wide range of policy and service areas, including health, education, families and policing.

### Summary

To read the full report, please visit:  
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# Contents

- Summary** ..... 4
  - Aims and methods ..... 4
  - What are VRUs currently delivering through the Home Office trauma-informed training grants?..... 5
  - What outcomes are VRUs trying to deliver through trauma-informed training, what is their theory of change, and how will the training achieve this? ..... 5
  - To what extent are VRUs’ theories of change for trauma-informed training plausible and grounded in evidence? ... 7
  - What evaluation of trauma-informed training are VRUs conducting and what can this tell us? ..... 8
  - To what extent have VRUs considered equality and diversity issues within the design and delivery of trauma-informed training? ..... 8
  - Key messages..... 8
  - Recommendations ..... 9
- Introduction** ..... 11
  - Violence Reduction Units ..... 11
  - Research aims and questions ..... 11
  - Methodology ..... 12
  - The structure of this report ..... 12
- 1. What do we mean by trauma, ‘trauma-informed’, and trauma-informed practice, care and training?** ..... 13
  - What is trauma?..... 13
  - What is ‘trauma-informed’? ..... 13
  - What is trauma-informed practice? ..... 14
  - What is trauma-informed care? ..... 14
  - What is trauma-informed training? ..... 15
  - Terminology used in this report..... 16
- 2. The effectiveness of trauma-informed training** ..... 17
  - Areas of preliminary evidence ..... 17
  - Gaps in the literature ..... 20
  - A lack of impact evaluation ..... 20
- 3. A VRU theory of change for trauma-informed training** ..... 21
  - Rationale for trauma-informed training..... 21
  - Recipients of trauma-informed training ..... 23
  - Intensity of trauma-informed training ..... 23
  - Content of trauma-informed training ..... 23
  - Content of training in relation to minoritised groups ..... 24
  - What outcomes are VRUs trying to achieve through trauma-informed training?..... 24
  - Areas of significant difference in VRUs’ theories of change ..... 26
- 4. Enablers, assumptions and barriers for VRUs** ..... 28
  - Enablers and mechanisms of change..... 28
  - Assumptions ..... 29
  - Barriers ..... 31
- 5. The use of trauma-informed training: research and evaluation conducted by VRUs**..... 33
  - Questions for future research..... 34
- 6. Key messages and recommendations**..... 36
  - Recommendations ..... 38
  - Conclusion ..... 39
- References** ..... 41
- Appendix A: The prevalence of trauma in the criminal justice system** ..... 44
- Appendix B: Methodology** ..... 46

# Summary

Increasing practitioner awareness of trauma and developing services and frontline practice to become 'trauma-informed' has become increasingly popular in recent years. These approaches are being taken forward in a range of settings, including as part of work to tackle and prevent youth violence. Trauma-informed training is often delivered as part of broader attempts to develop services to be 'trauma-informed', which can include trauma-informed leadership, adopting strengths-based practice models, screening individuals for trauma, increasing the safety of the physical environment, redesigning services in order to increase client choice, and taking steps to prevent and reduce the potential for causing retraumatisation in services.

The Home Office has recently made funding available for Violence Reduction Units (VRUs) to invest in trauma-informed training.

Trauma-informed approaches were initially developed in mental health services to increase engagement in evidence-based, trauma-specific treatments. There has, however, been a lack of research to evaluate the specific impact of trauma-informed practice or training models on outcomes. In light of the growing investment in these approaches, it has been argued that the evaluation of trauma-informed practice and training is needed to establish its specific benefits.<sup>1</sup> This study aims to understand the specific activities being delivered as part of trauma-informed training by a number of VRUs, and to provide recommendations for future evaluation and delivery of this training.

## Aims and methods

The Home Office commissioned the EIF and Dartington Service Design Lab to understand how trauma-informed training is being approached within VRUs. This study has involved a review of the existing literature and fieldwork with VRUs to explore the approaches currently being taken and the theory behind them. It makes recommendations for the future use and evaluation of trauma-informed training.

We address the following specific questions:

- What are VRUs currently delivering through the Home Office trauma-informed training grants?
- What outcomes are VRUs trying to deliver through trauma-informed training, what is their theory of change, and how will the training achieve this?
- To what extent are VRUs' theories of change for trauma-informed training plausible and grounded in evidence?
- What evaluation of trauma-informed training are VRUs conducting, and what can this tell us?
- To what extent have VRUs considered equality and diversity issues within the design and delivery of trauma-informed training?

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<sup>1</sup> Asmussen, K., Masterman, T., McBride, T. & Molloy, D. (2022). *Trauma-informed care: Understanding the use of trauma-informed approaches within children's social care*. Early Intervention Foundation. <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/trauma-informed-care-understanding-the-use-of-trauma-informed-approaches-within-childrens-social-care>

# What are VRUs currently delivering through the Home Office trauma-informed training grants?

VRUs are delivering a wide range of training approaches through the funding they have received from the Home Office. The specific workforces being trained varied considerably, with some VRUs focusing primarily on the police, while others were training a range of professionals who interact with young people in schools, community and healthcare settings. The content that was included and the depth of the training also varied. Some workforces were offered a two-hour training session, while others had much longer sessions with extensive follow-up engagement, such as one-to-ones with training providers or reflective sessions with senior leaders to consider how new knowledge could be applied to their practice.

VRUs identified a range of factors that affect the impact of training on frontline practice. These include senior leadership buy-in, having sufficient time and resources, and the availability of post-training supervision for the workforce to embed training and reflective practice principles into their work with young people and communities.

## What outcomes are VRUs trying to deliver through trauma-informed training, what is their theory of change, and how will the training achieve this?

While the primary aim of the trauma-informed training for all VRUs was to improve young people's experiences of interacting with staff and services, within this broad objective VRUs are trying to deliver a range of both short- and long-term outcomes relating to their workforces, services and systems, and young people's outcomes. These included:

### Short-term outcomes:

- **Improving workforce understanding of trauma:** All VRUs focused on increasing awareness and knowledge of trauma and its long-lasting impacts on children and adults, and on helping the workforce to recognise signs of trauma in their interactions with young people and communities.

### Medium-term outcomes:

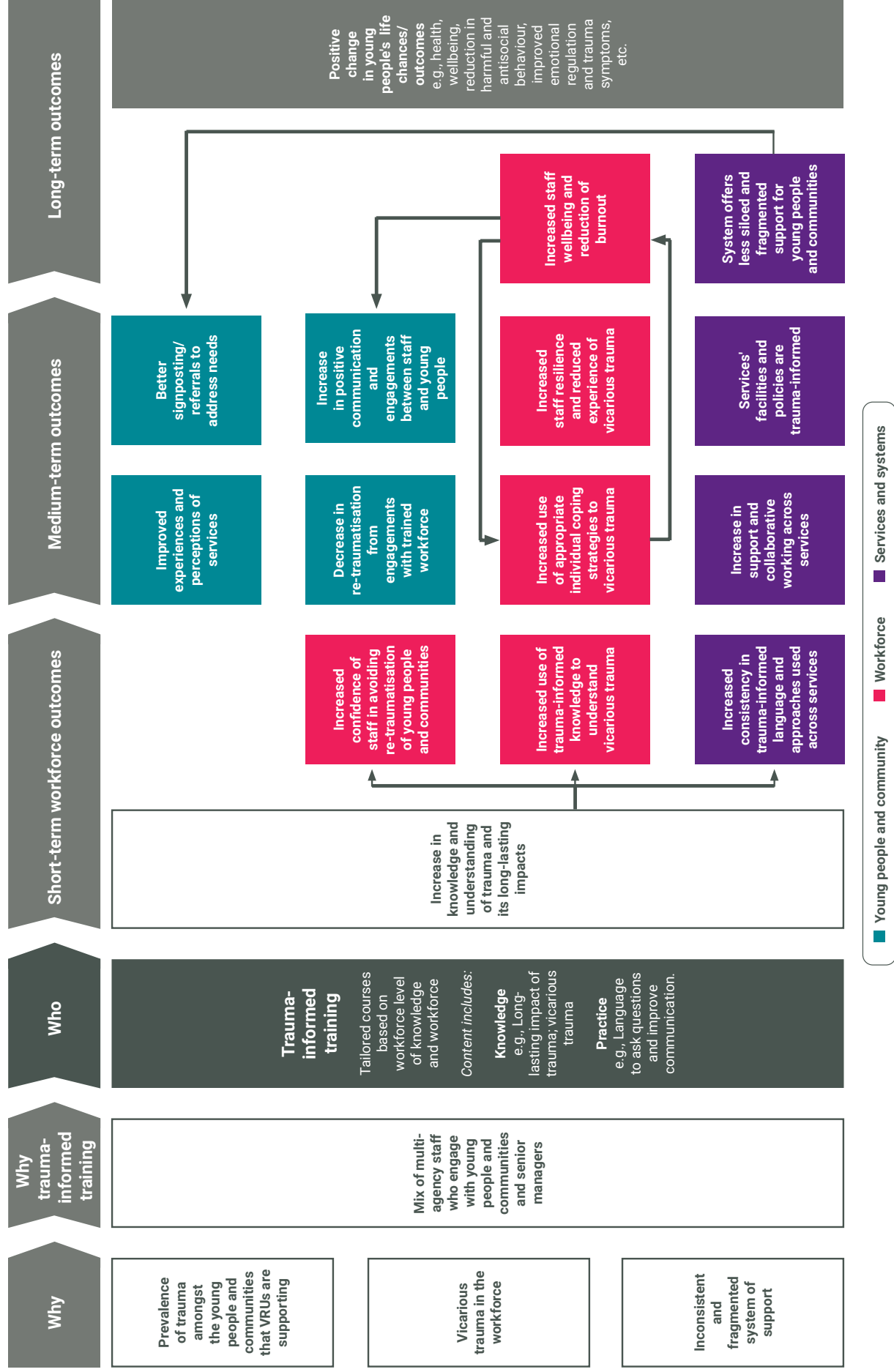
- **Reducing retraumatisation of young people in specific settings:** Some VRUs intended their training to help practitioners, through more sensitive interactions, to avoid further retraumatisation of young people.
- **Staff wellbeing and reducing vicarious trauma within the workforce:** Some VRUs intended trauma-informed training to help practitioners to cope with the vicarious trauma experienced through their work, in order to improve workforce resilience and wellbeing.

### Longer-term outcomes:

- **Improving services and systems:** Some VRUs intended trauma-informed training to contribute to more consistent language and service responses across the local system, which would improve multiagency collaboration.
- **Improved child outcomes:** Some VRUs were explicit in their theories of change that trauma-informed training would contribute to demonstrable improvements in children and young people's life chances.

**FIGURE 1**

Overarching theory of change for trauma-informed training across VRUs



# To what extent are VRUs' theories of change for trauma-informed training plausible and grounded in evidence?

VRUs are trying to deliver a range of outcomes through their trauma-informed training. Some of the outcomes that it is hoped trauma-informed training and practice will deliver are more feasible than others, when considered in the light of the wider evidence base.

## Short-term outcomes:

- **Improving workforce understanding of trauma:** The objectives articulated by VRUs of improving staff understanding of trauma, how it affects behaviour and the principles of trauma-informed practice, are plausible. The existing evidence (mainly drawn from other settings such as social care and health services) indicates that training can improve practitioners' knowledge of trauma. Trauma-informed training, therefore, has the potential to improve knowledge and awareness of the impact of trauma.

## Medium-term outcomes:

- **Reducing retraumatisation of young people in specific settings:** It is also plausible that the training could improve interactions between young people and staff, and reduce the risk of further traumatisation of young people. The literature provides some preliminary examples which suggest that training can contribute to changes in practice, leading to more sensitive interactions and reduced violence within specific service settings, when implemented alongside other trauma-informed components. Training that encourages staff to approach young people's past trauma sensitively may reduce the likelihood of further traumatisation. Further research is needed to test the wider factors that might facilitate this in the youth justice system.
- **Staff wellbeing and reducing vicarious trauma within the workforce:** It is plausible that the training could increase staff understanding of vicarious trauma. While it might be logical to assume that this might contribute to healthier coping mechanisms, there is limited evidence for the idea that increased knowledge and awareness of trauma will, *on its own*, improve workforce resilience and wellbeing. The wider literature emphasises the extent to which organisational culture affects trauma workers' wellbeing, suggesting that trauma-informed training is unlikely to improve staff wellbeing in isolation, although it may contribute alongside other organisational factors.

## Longer-term outcomes:

- **Improving services and systems:** It is also plausible that trauma-informed training may *contribute* to improvements in services or local systems, for example, through improving staff or agency collaboration (as per the overarching theory of change presented in figure 1). The evidence does, however, suggest that a range of other factors present in the local system are also needed to achieve this goal, such as effective strategic leadership, multiagency working arrangements, strong information governance arrangements, etc. Again, trauma-informed training *alone* is unlikely to achieve this in isolation but *may* potentially contribute, alongside other factors.
- **Improved child outcomes:** While trauma-informed training *may* contribute to more positive interactions between practitioners and young people and to better onward referrals, there is currently no empirical basis to suggest that trauma-informed training on its own can result in improvements in young people's longer-term life chances. It is possible that trauma-informed training may help to enhance the impact of evidence-informed trauma-specific interventions, but this would require testing in future evaluations.

# What evaluation of trauma-informed training are VRUs conducting and what can this tell us?

There is significant variation in VRUs' approaches to evaluating their trauma-informed training. All VRUs were collecting information about the training sessions delivered and the workforces attending. The majority of VRUs were also undertaking pre- and post-surveys with staff that sought to capture information about the short-term outcomes that the VRU was aiming to achieve.

The evaluations of trauma-informed training being conducted by VRU's are likely to provide useful information, but will not allow for comparisons of the effectiveness of different approaches. Current evaluations are not designed to provide evidence of medium or longer-term outcomes for young people, staff or services and systems.

# To what extent have VRUs considered equality and diversity issues within the design and delivery of trauma-informed training?

All VRUs' trauma-informed training courses focus on and explore dimensions of inequality. However, there is significant variation in how this has been incorporated into the training and the specific inequalities considered. Further use of local data to understand who is over-represented within the criminal justice system would help VRUs to consider what is most relevant in their context.

## Key messages

**1. Some of the outcomes that it is hoped trauma-informed training and care will deliver are more feasible than others when considered in the light of the wider evidence base.**

This study has found that VRUs were hoping to deliver a range of outcomes through their investments in trauma-informed training and practice. As set out above, some of these outcomes are plausible when considered in the context of the wider evidence about the types of activities shown to improve outcomes including those for children and young people, and others less so.

**2. The contribution of trauma-informed training is best understood as part of a wider trauma-informed system of support.**

There is clear potential for trauma-informed training to contribute to a reduction in further traumatisation of young people and improve relationships, but only when used as one component of a wider trauma-informed system of support for young people that includes evidence-based practice and trauma-specific services.

Trauma-informed training should not be seen as a route to reducing youth violence in itself, but rather as a contributory factor to an effective evidence-informed system of support for young people. The experience of trauma is intertwined with other factors that may contribute to violent behaviour. This reinforces the need to deliver and test the impact of trauma-informed training, principles and practice when integrated into a system of interventions with good evidence of either preventing or reducing youth violence. These might include focused



deterrence, mentoring, pre-court diversion or social skills training,<sup>2</sup> alongside wider system-change activities.

**3. The evaluations of trauma-informed training being conducted by VRUs are likely to provide useful information but will not allow for comparisons of the effectiveness of different approaches.**

The current evaluation methods VRUs are using will provide useful information, but will not provide robust data about the impact of the training. Some VRUs were capturing information on measures related to the learning outcomes of the training, which will provide an insight into whether the current approach *within* each VRU is resulting in immediate shifts in workforce capability, attitudes or motivation. In cases where VRUs were using follow-up surveys with staff, this will also provide helpful insight into whether any such outcomes are sustained. Overall, however, the variability in measurement tools used by VRUs means that comparison *between* VRUs will not be possible.

**4. There is a lack of evidence about the application of trauma-informed training within the criminal justice system generally, and further research is needed to confirm the impact of trauma-informed training on the knowledge and attitudes of staff towards trauma.**

Although trauma-informed practice and training have been widely used, there has been little robust evaluation of their impact. This is particularly the case in relation to the use of these approaches in the criminal justice system, as much of the evidence that is available is from health and social care settings.

**5. Trauma-informed training has the potential to improve the experiences within the criminal justice system of those disproportionately impacted by trauma.**

The role of the criminal justice system in causing trauma for vulnerable groups should not be underestimated. Despite recent efforts from the Home Office and VRUs, young men from minoritised groups are still disproportionately impacted by trauma and over-represented in the criminal justice system. VRUs could ensure training has a sufficient focus on the experiences of young men from minoritised groups, who are more likely to experience violence as victims and perpetrators.

## Recommendations

**1. There is a need for impact evaluation of trauma-informed training and related activities to confirm if the short- and medium-term outcomes aimed for by VRUs are being achieved.**

Given that most research to date has focused on trauma-informed training in a health and social care context, further research is needed to improve our understanding of trauma-informed training within the criminal justice system.

<sup>2</sup> For examples of evidence-based approaches, see the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) Toolkit: <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/toolkit/?evidence-min=4&reduction-min=4>

Specifically to:

- improve understanding as to whether trauma-informed training is feasible and acceptable in this context, and of the barriers and enablers to effective implementation
- explore the short-term impact of the training on staff knowledge and awareness of the impact of trauma
- test whether trauma-informed training programmes can deliver on the short-term and medium-term outcomes that are most plausible, such as increasing knowledge and understanding of trauma, shifting perceptions and changing practice
- in turn, if the evaluation of the short-term outcomes provides promising results, the next stage of research should look to test medium-term outcomes (including the impact on young people's experiences and perceptions of services).

Any research looking at changes in the medium and longer term should consider the contribution of trauma-informed training alongside other components of trauma-informed practice and interventions that support child outcomes at a local level.

Some of these recommendations are being taken forward as part of the grant round currently being run by the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) which plans to carry out impact evaluation of up to three promising models of trauma-informed practice.<sup>3</sup>

## **2. Future research could also usefully build knowledge about which models of trauma-informed training most effectively improve outcomes.**

Given the variety of trauma-informed training approaches being used, attention could also usefully be focused on building our understanding of *which* models of trauma-informed training most effectively improve short- and medium-term outcomes for staff and, potentially, for young people.

## **3. In order to support local decision-making, it may be helpful to provide guidance for VRUs and other organisations seeking to implement a trauma-informed approach within the criminal justice system.**

The provision of clear information about what can and cannot feasibly be expected from trauma-informed training and how best to maximise its contribution could be helpful in supporting decision-making among VRUs and wider partners involved in tackling serious youth violence.

Any guidance should make clear that trauma-informed training has the potential to add significant value to staff understanding of trauma and to encourage person-centred, empathetic practice within the criminal justice system. On the basis of current evidence, however, trauma-informed training should not be seen as a primary prevention method to reduce youth violence. If combined with high-quality evidence-informed services with good evidence of preventing or reducing trauma, however, trauma-informed training may be an important part of an evidence-informed system of support that seeks to improve young people's outcomes.

It is important that the messages about what it is feasible to expect to achieve through trauma-informed training are communicated to and within VRUs to support decision-making about how best to reduce serious youth violence. Work is also needed to develop understanding about the impact of trauma-informed training, and VRUs have an important role in taking this work forward. VRUs should continue to reflect and learn from their experiences of implementing the training, considering the barriers and enablers identified within this report.

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/grants/trauma-informed-care-and-preventing-young-people-from-becoming-involved-in-violence/>