College of
Policing

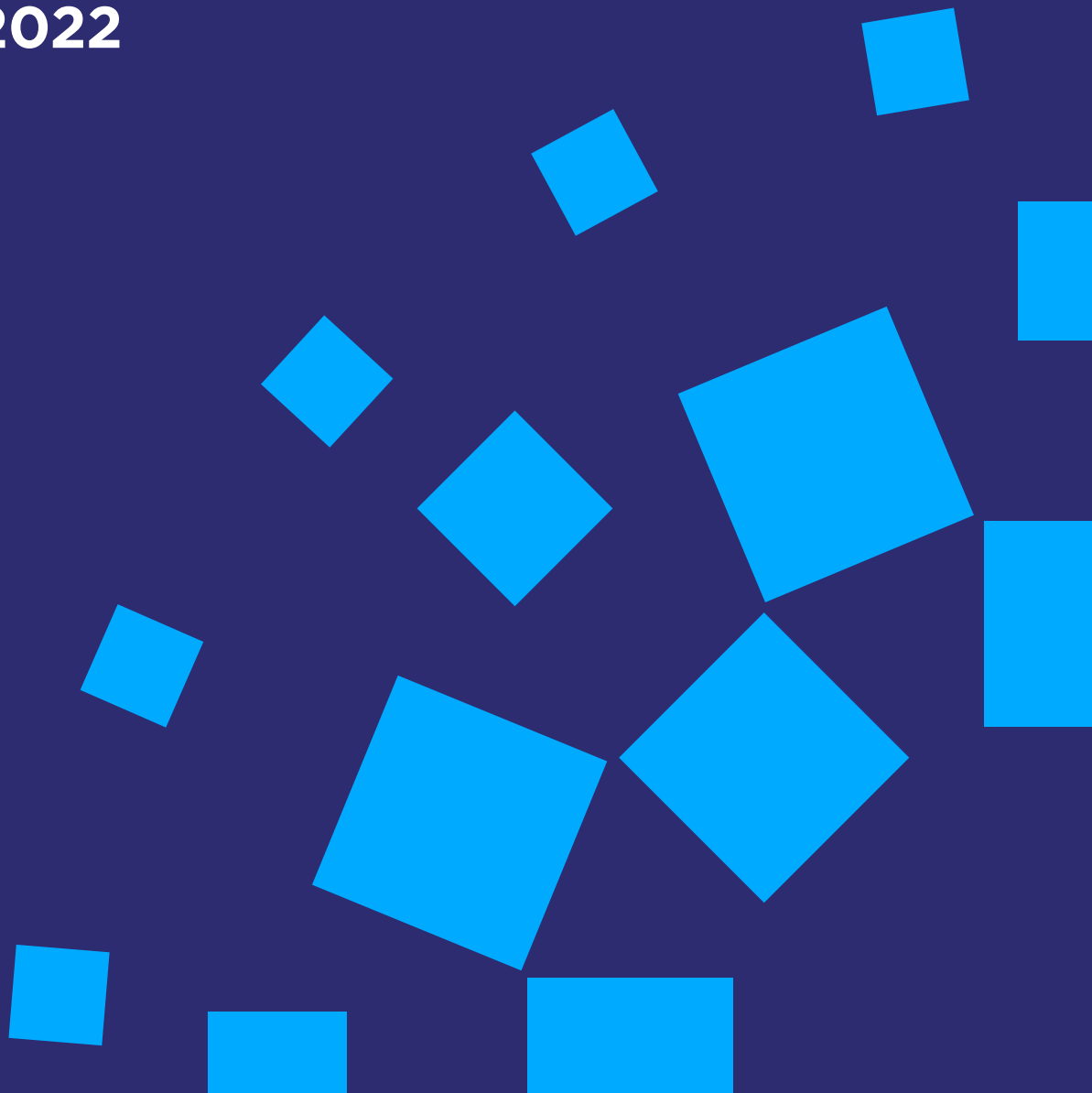# Interventions to reduce violence against women and girls (VAWG) in public spaces

Evidence briefing

March 2022

Contents

Background

In July 2021, the government launched its **Tackling violence against women and girls strategy**. Evidence presented in the strategy suggests that some forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG) are so commonplace that many women and girls don't even think they are worth reporting. This is the case for experiences like being grabbed, touched and/or threatened by strangers.

The Opinions and Lifestyle Survey June 2021[1] found that from a sample of 16,112 adults aged 16 years and over in Great Britain, two out of three women aged 16 to 34 years had experienced one form of harassment in the previous 12 months. In total, 44% of women aged 16 to 34 years had experienced catcalls, whistles, unwanted sexual comments or jokes in the previous 12 months, while 29% had felt like they were being followed.

In addition to the experience of violence or harassment, fear of crime can have a profound effect on people's lives. Office for National Statistics (ONS) data[2] suggests that while both men and women felt less safe when walking alone after dark than during the day (in quiet streets close to home, busy public spaces, and parks or open spaces), a greater proportion of women reported feeling unsafe than men. As a result of feeling unsafe, many people reported that they had modified their behaviour in the past month. This finding is supported by research which suggests that, as a result of both experiences and feeling unsafe, women and girls develop and undertake a range and higher amount of safety strategies[3],[4].

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1   Office for National Statistics (2021).

2   Office for National Statistics (2021).

3   Kavanaugh (2013).

4   Vera-Gray and Kelly (2020).

Introduction

This briefing provides details of evidence-based strategies, tactics and general approaches that have the potential to reduce VAWG in public spaces. It does not include approaches specifically targeted at reducing domestic abuse.

While many of the interventions listed are not focused on preventing VAWG specifically, developing strategies that focus on reducing the risk or prevalence of violence generally is likely to bring with it a decrease in VAWG.

Interventions and approaches are grouped into four types:

- policing strategies

- designing out crime interventions

- interventions that tackle violence in the night-time economy

- education interventions

Many of these interventions require the police to influence or work in partnership with other agencies to deliver. Finally, a number of **Tilley Awards** projects are included that demonstrate the potential impact of police-led local problem-solving initiatives.

The evidence included in this briefing has been identified through a non-systematic search of the literature, taking existing systematic reviews from reliable sources as a base where possible. It is not intended to review all of the available research evidence, nor to present a formal assessment of its quality. However, in order to provide some indication of the strength of the evidence related to the included strategies and initiatives, we have coded them in the following way.

- Strong – a systematic review or multiple high-quality experimental studies. Where the crime reduction outcomes identified do not specifically relate to violence against women and girls, this is specified.

- Moderate – multiple experimental studies, where one has a control.

- Limited – qualitative evidence only, such as interviews or case studies.

- No evidence – the initiative has been evaluated but no evidence of positive outcomes has been found.

- Untested – the initiative has not been evaluated.

The briefing also includes relevant examples of practice in forces that fit the existing 'what works' evidence, although we are not aware of all of them having been independently evaluated. Where this is the case, they are described as 'untested'.

Policing strategies

Hot spots policing[5] and **problem-oriented policing**[6] are both policing strategies that can be effective at reducing a wide range of different crimes, including violence, in a variety of different contexts. Hot spots policing requires the police to target resources and activities to those places where crime and harm are most concentrated. To implement this strategy, the police will need to know where and when VAWG is concentrated. Similarly, problem-oriented policing requires the police to implement tailored and targeted interventions based on an analysis of the nature and extent of a problem that draws on a range of data and intelligence sources. Problem-solving approaches can be used in identified hotspots.

Given concerns about the reporting and recording of VAWG, the police will need to consider the extent to which its crime and incident data accurately reflects women and girls' experiences of victimisation, and proactively take steps to address any identified gaps in its understanding of the problem.

Strong evidence

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5   For full details, see the **Hotspots** entry on the crime reduction toolkit.

6   For full details, see the **Problem-oriented policing** entry on the crime reduction toolkit.

Tactics to understand the problem better

Publicity campaigns

There is evidence from the 'Report it to stop it'[7] campaign in London, which used video messages circulated online, social media messages and leaflets, that media campaigns can increase the reporting of unwanted sexual behaviour on public transport without increasing fear of crime.

Limited evidence

Dedicated reporting routes

Dedicated reporting routes, such as online tools and numbers for texting reports of incidents – for example, the use by **British Transport Police** of the 61016 number for reporting unwanted sexual behaviour.

Untested

Apps for reporting crime, incidents and/or fear

Although there is no evidence of the impact of crime-reporting apps on crime reduction[8], there is potential for local use of a crime-reporting app to provide information on where and when crimes and incidents are occurring. This could help to understand the nature of the problems, provided there is widespread uptake[9]. The **Streetsafe** tool allows the public to report locations where they feel unsafe, thus allowing relevant authorities to make changes to police patrols and the built environment. For a discussion of the different types of apps related to crime prevention, see the article **Primary crime prevention apps: A typology and scoping review** by Wood, Ross and Johns (2021).

Untested

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7   Solymosi and others (2018).

8   Wood and others (2021).

9   Ceccato (2019).

Data sharing

In the context of reducing alcohol-related violence, evidence[10] suggests that data sharing was a valuable process in helping to identify hotspots. Initiatives that combined health data with police data to inform the development of interventions resulted in reduced assaults, as well as reduced accident and emergency admissions. For example, see the **Cardiff TASC project**.

Strong evidence

Physical environment interventions

At a more tactical level, systematic review evidence exists on several physical environment interventions that could be deployed to better protect women and girls in public spaces. The evidence, however, tends to be broad and does not always specify whether interventions are effective specifically in respect of VAWG.

Improved street lighting[11]

Overall, improved street lighting has been found to reduce crime. On average, violent and property crime reduced by 21% in areas where street lighting was improved, relative to areas where it was not. It is possible that improved street lighting is likely to have more of an impact in those places where lighting is currently poor.

Strong evidence

CCTV[12]

While the evidence suggests that CCTV can reduce some crime types, there is no evidence that it is effective in reducing violent crime. CCTV tends to be most effective in reducing drug crimes, vehicle crime

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10 McGuire and others (2020).

11 For full details, see the **Street lighting** entry on the crime reduction toolkit.

12 For full details, see the **CCTV** entry on the crime reduction toolkit.

and property crime, particularly in car parks and, to a lesser extent, residential areas. CCTV is more likely to be effective when live footage is actively monitored, when there are high levels of camera coverage, and when used alongside complementary interventions (eg, street lighting).

Strong evidence (no evidence in relation to VAWG specifically)

Neighbourhood Watch[13]

Overall, the evidence points to Neighbourhood Watch having resulted in modest reductions in crime, though the evidence mainly focuses on its effectiveness in reducing burglary, rather than violence in public spaces.

Strong evidence (no evidence in relation to VAWG specifically)

Crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED)

A combination of many features of the urban environment can have an impact on crime prevention and safety. There is a wide range of research that describes how CPTED can be used to tackle crime and reduce fear. These design features, which are often used in combination, include the following.

- Closing roads, footpaths and subways[14] – Evidence points towards crime reduction effects, but mainly for burglary.

- Lighting and visibility – There is a range of evidence to suggest that good lighting can reduce perceptions of fear and increase public usage of space. Evidence in relation to transit environments suggest that they can be planned in a way that reduces the possibility of crime occurring, including by:

- improving surveillance and visibility

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13 For full details, see the **Neighbourhood Watch** entry on the crime reduction toolkit.

14 For full information, see page 60 of the **Safer Streets Fund – Crime prevention** toolkit.

■ reducing areas of conflict by controlling access and improving overall perceived safety[15]

- Maintenance is a fundamental aspect of the safety of public places for a variety of environments, such as school grounds, parking lots and transit stations. Poorly maintained areas subject to vandalism and disrepair can affect people's perceptions of fear[16].

- Improved guardianship – In research examining the perceived safety of park users, respondents reported feeling safe when someone else was around, including other people, police or city guards, or their dogs. They reported feeling unsafe in the presence of alcohol consumption, or in presence of homeless people and vandalism[17]. The signal crimes perspective[18] suggests that some events were more important than others in shaping the public's perceptions of crime and people's feelings of safety. Research suggests that levels of disorder such as vandalism can be as important in shaping peoples' perceptions of fear as witnessing or experiencing crime. Reassurance could therefore be improved by understanding local people's perceptions of an area, then by identifying and targeting the crimes, incidents and events that adversely affected people's feelings, thoughts and actions related to their safety.

Moderate evidence

15 Ceccato and others (2022).

16 Ceccato (2020).

17 Bogaka (2020).

18 Universities' Police Science Institute (n.d.).

Reducing sexual offending on public transport

Multi-faceted approach

Research[19] has suggested that in order to reduce sexual offending on public transport, a coordinated package of complementary initiatives is the most effective approach. Some of the interventions that can be combined in such an approach include:

- increased surveillance, in the form of extra transport staffing and police (both uniformed and plain clothes) and technological surveillance, such as CCTV

- CPTED measures, such as increased visibility, lighting, alarms, phones and good maintenance of transport facilities

- alternative means of reporting, such as the use of hotlines, texting and phone apps

- awareness campaigns through advertising, grassroots action and online platforms

- new technology, such as smartphone apps to report incidents, track passengers, record experiences and create maps with hotpots of offending

Moderate evidence

Project Guardian

A long-term strategy from British Transport Police, Transport for London, Metropolitan Police Service and the City of London Police, which incorporates many of the interventions list above. These interventions include teams of specialist officers to target hot spots of sexual offending and look out for suspicious behaviour, social media campaigns, and hotline and SMS text reporting numbers to make reporting easier.

Untested

19   Gekoski and others (2015).

Reducing violence in the night-time economy

Targeting locations or situations with a high risk of violence generally, such as the night-time economy, is likely to also have an impact on VAWG. The following initiatives have been shown to be effective in tackling alcohol-related violence.

Increased police presence

Targeted police enforcement

Evidence from a systematic review[20] suggests that police measures that target specific licensed premises with violence problems in collaboration with local agencies are more effective at reducing alcohol-related violence than measures that do not include collaboration. For example, see the **TASC project**. Untargeted measures that heighten officer presence in and around licensed premises, as well as increased monitoring of licence law violations, in general have a mixed impact on police-recorded assaults and violence.

Strong evidence

Multi-level community interventions

Evidence from a recent systematic review[21] suggests that the most effective programmes involved engagement with stakeholders – for example, license holders – combined with enforcement where the stakeholders share the same objectives as the police. The types of components included stricter enforcement of licensing laws, community information campaigns, training for bar staff and door staff, and police engagement of licensees in considering aspects of bar management that can reduce risks. Research includes a three-year evaluation across

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20 McGuire and others (2020).

21 McGuire and others (2020), Jones and others (2011).

Europe of the Stockholm Prevents Alcohol and Drug Problems (STAD)[22] model, which includes multi-agency planning, community mobilisation, strengthened law enforcement and responsible beverage service training[23]. The evaluation focused implementation of the STAD approach in three drinking environments: licensed drinking environments (nightlife, festivals and sports events), home drinking and public drinking environments (streets, parks and beaches). It found that there is potential for the effective transfer of the model to a different drinking setting, with the pilot interventions associated with addressing factors that promote the harmful use of alcohol. Community mobilisation was found to be critical for successful development and implementation of the interventions. For a discussion of how to effectively engage communities, see the article **How can communities influence alcohol licensing at a local level?** by Ure and others (2021).

Strong evidence

Project Vigilant

A combination of increased uniformed and non-uniformed officers focused on perpetrators of VAWG in the night-time economy was initially piloted by Thames Valley Police and is currently being evaluated.

Untested

Citizen patrols

'Citizen patrols' is a generic term that refers to a range of different models of the public voluntarily carrying out patrols in local areas. The theory is that the presence of guardians could help to identify and support vulnerable individuals and deter perpetrators. Evidence of their effectiveness in reducing VAWG is currently limited. Research suggests that alcohol consumption is a predictor of target-selection in cases of unwanted sexual attention[24]. Models include the following.

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22 Quigg and others (2019).

23 For a safer bar training manual, see: Braun and others (2000).

24 Kavanaugh (2013).

Street pastors

are church-run and provide outreach service to users of the night-time economy, often in partnership with the police. Research on street pastors and other citizen patrol models has tended to focus on implementation issues, so their effectiveness in reducing crime overall is unknown, although there is some limited evidence that they improve perceptions of safety[25].

Limited evidence

Drinkaware Crew

The Drinkaware Crew are specially trained staff who work in pubs, bars and clubs to reduce drunken anti-social behaviour among those between 18 and 24 years old. They are employed by venues to identify vulnerable individuals within the venue(s) and promote a positive atmosphere. An evaluation[26] of the Drinkaware Crew initiative and a version adapted to a music festival context suggests that the impact did not reduce crime within the venues studied. However, there were limitations with the data, as 'lower-level' sexual crime is especially subject to under-reporting and recording practices[27]. It was not possible to draw final conclusions in relation to the impact of the Drinkaware Crew initiative, but the potential for impact was evident.

Limited evidence

Shomrim

Other examples of uniformed patrols carried out voluntarily by citizens that work in partnership with the police include **Shomrim** in Northwest London.

Untested

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25 Swann and others (2015).

26 Garius and others (2020).

27 Office for National Statistics (2017).

Other night-time economy interventions

Bar staff training

While evaluations have shown no evidence of bar staff training having an impact on responsible serving or on alcohol consumption[28], the 'Safer bars' scheme[29] found that staff training using the three-hour training (see Braun and others, 2000) to prevent and de-escalate bar-room violence, as well as identifying environmental risk factors, had a modest effect on reducing aggression. However, the effect was lower when there was a high turnover of managers and of door and security staff.

Moderate evidence

Publicity campaigns

Many publicity campaigns to reduce unwanted sexual behaviour and sexual violence in the night-time economy have been aimed at giving safety messages to women to reduce their risk and have been criticised as putting the responsibility for sexual violence purely onto women[30]. There are some examples of campaigns targeted at men and boys, such as the 2008 Rape Crisis Scotland outdoor publicity campaign '**This is not an invitation to rape me**'. While an evaluation found it had good awareness, there is no evaluation of its impact on attitudes or behaviours. In addition, the recent Police Scotland campaign '**Don't be that guy**' aims to reduce rape, serious sexual assault and harassment by having frank conversations with men about male sexual entitlement.

Untested

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28 Jones and others (2011).

29 Graham and others (2004).

30 Carline and others (2017).

Education interventions

Bystander programmes[31]

Bystander programmes to prevent sexual assault among young people aim to encourage young people to intervene when witnessing incidents or warning signs of sexual assault. The programmes are usually delivered in an educational setting, with the format of a single training or education session (for example, as part of university induction). They are sometimes accompanied by advertising campaigns that post signs across university campuses to encourage students to act when witnessing incidents or signs of sexual assault. Bystander programmes were found to have a beneficial effect on individuals' identification of incidents, knowledge of strategies and confidence in taking responsibility for intervening in sexual assault. However, there was little or no evidence of an effect of bystander programmes on gender attitudes, date rape attitudes and victim empathy, and no evidence was found to suggest that bystander programmes affect self-reported sexual assault perpetration among participants.

Moderate evidence

School-based interventions

School-based interventions to reduce dating violence and sexual violence. A systematic review in 2014[32] looked specifically at school-based interventions aimed at reducing sexual violence and violence in relationships. Of the 23 included studies, the review found that students in the intervention group showed moderate increases in knowledge about dating violence, a lower acceptance of stereotypical 'rape myths', and moderate improvements in appropriately resolving conflicts in interpersonal relationships. This finding is supported by a systematic assessment of what works to prevent violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence conducted by the Wales Violence Prevention

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31 For full details, see the College of Policing's Bystander programme briefing.

32 De La Rue and others (2014).

Unit[33]. This assessment identified the following UK examples of these interventions: The Fourth R, Healthy Relationships Programme, Shifting Boundaries, Safe Dates.

Moderate evidence

Dating violence programmes

A 2013 systematic review[34] found 38 studies that evaluated educational and skills-based interventions designed to prevent relationship and dating violence, targeted at young people aged 12 to 25 years. The effectiveness of these interventions was measured by changes in the number of episodes of relationship violence, changes in behaviours, attitudes and knowledge, and protective skills attained. This review found no evidence of an effect of these interventions on the outcomes reported.

No evidence

Empowerment or feminist self-defence classes

A systematic assessment of evidence review by the **Welsh Violence Prevention Unit** found that there is promising evidence on interventions focused on awareness raising among girls, and supporting them to recognise inappropriate behaviour by others, learn ways to keep themselves and their friends safe, feel empowered and enhance self-esteem. Overall, girls in all age groups showed significant improvements in understanding the importance of help seeking for themselves and others where the programme is taught by carefully trained instructors with a strong empowerment focus. A rapid evidence review for the European Parliament[35] also concluded that there is a growing evidence base that feminist self-defence can be effective in preventing violence.

Moderate evidence

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33 Addis and Snowdon (2021).

34 Fellmeth and others (2013).

35 Kelly and Sharps-Jeffs (2016).

Relevant Tilley Awards: Local problem-solving approaches

The following problem-solving projects were submitted to the Tilley awards. Although the majority focus on disorder rather than specific offences against women and girls, the approaches taken could be relevant.

- **2002: Burnley Against Nighttime Disorder (BAND)** – High levels of night-time disorder were recorded. This was tackled by a multi-agency approach involving compliance with licensing legislation, banning offenders from pubs and clubs, CCTV and community radio for participating premises, and a dedicated town centre police team.

- **2003: Police Service of Northern Ireland: 'Get Home Safe'** – The Get Home Safe campaign was developed to combat rising alcohol-related violence levels in South Belfast, Northern Ireland. Responses to this problem included a door supervisor scheme, enforcement of street drinking, toughened glassware, free transportation, CCTV, dedicated police patrols and marketing campaigns. An independent evaluation showed a significant reduction in assaults, serious assaults and victims with serious injuries seeking support after the scheme had been implemented.

- **2019: Thames Valley night-time economy** (link requires access to Problem Solving and Demand Reduction Knowledge Hub Group) – Windsor's demand was disproportionately high due to the night-time economy. Violence was escalating and the fear of crime and disorder among the residents and visitors was on the rise. Solutions implemented included a review of pub licenses, pub watch, creation of a 'safety hub' for individuals to attend if they experienced problems, and street pastors. Results showed a decrease in recorded incidents despite a reduction in resources deployed to the area.

- **2020: Warwickshire Stalking Incidents** (link requires access to Problem Solving and Demand Reduction Knowledge Hub

Group) – Stalking and suspicious incidents involving a lone male. Interventions included targeted patrols, enhanced lighting and CCTV. No further incidents were reported.

- **2020:** Metropolitan Police Neighbourhood Improvement Districts (link requires access to Problem Solving and Demand Reduction Knowledge Hub Group) – The highest crime-generating areas were identified and mapped. Interventions were implemented according to the crime types recorded but included signage, crime prevention advice and leafleting, enhanced lighting and targeted patrols.

Knowledge sharing

Round three of the **Safer Streets Fund** has an emphasis on the safety of women and girls, primarily through the design and management of public spaces. On 3 October 2021, the Home Office announced that 57 projects had been awarded grant funding, including the British Transport Police. The successful bids comprise a range of creative interventions, including:

- bystander training programmes

- guardianship schemes

- street pastors

- taxi marshals

- safe haven spaces

- educational and awareness raising initiatives working with schools and young people

- personal safety applications

- the use of a theatre production to challenge attitudes and behaviours

A 2019 report by the Local Government Association, **Approaches to managing the night-time economy**, provides some case studies involving policing and other partner agencies.

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