

Protecting vulnerable students from being targeted by gangs

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Five years ago, we were discussing safeguarding challenges relating to students who live in Brent, and the risk that they may become involved in criminal activity. We worked with Danny Coyle, the head teacher of Newman Catholic College, which is in an area known to have issues with gangs, to organise a summer camp.

The camp has run each year since and about 500 children have participated. Our aim is clear: to protect our students from the pull of gang culture and from criminal activity throughout the holiday period and beyond.

We knew that many of the families had difficulties in supplying food and entertainment for their children during the holidays, so we agreed with the school that this would be an incentive for getting students and parents involved in the camp.

We approached local businesses in Harlesden who provided free food and drinks, with some businesses kindly bringing hot meals to the school each day. Some businesses also went on to offer apprenticeship schemes to the students, which have been excellent in building continued rapport with the school.

The summer camp has also provided free day trips into London. Many of the students have never been into central London and these exciting trips offer fun days out, as well as an educational element and an opportunity to build closer relationships.

Some of the free activities over the past five years have included: trips to the London Eye, Madame Tussauds and the West End theatres; sports like golf, rugby, football and cricket (some delivered by

ex-professionals); life skills, including cooking and nutrition; and providing free refurbished bikes from seized property.

We were unable to provide our usual trips in 2020, because of COVID-19 restrictions. Instead, we ran fun activities based at the school. Students also received visits from specialist police units, such as the territorial support group and dog units. We facilitated guest speakers who tackled issues such as stop and search, providing students with an opportunity to discuss matters that they found concerning.

One session was even covered by the radio station, Capital London. Students took the role of a police officer and executed stop and searches on participating officers. This learning experience for students – and for officers – provided some perspective on the problems that can arise in the execution of an officer's duties, and also offered some good entertainment for all.

The role of the schools officer is crucial and depends on attending the school, almost on a daily basis, to build rapport with the school and students. The schools officer also regularly fronts health days and lessons covering safeguarding, and shares information on gangs, drugs and personal safety.

Having an office in the school means that students can pop in to ask questions about local incidents and policing, or even to ridicule the weekend's football results!

Discussions with the school take place regularly. It is preferred that we are in plain clothes while engaging with the students, but wear uniform when dealing with official policing matters. Students continually ask us when the next camp will be run and preparation has already begun to introduce new holiday camps in 2021.

The summer camps have enabled us to break down the 'us' and 'them' barriers, and have reduced the stigma around approaching police officers. Through these interactions, we have provided an enjoyable safe place for the students to meet and interact, while diverting them away from criminal activity.

Newman Catholic College has received an Outstanding Contribution Award for its community work from the Violent Crime Prevention Board, reflecting the hard work of students, police, the local community and the school.

- This article was peer reviewed by Detective Constable Flaminia Romita, Bedfordshire Police

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