

Youth trainee detectives programme

A week-long, multi-agency initiative using immersive virtual reality technology with the aim of deterring young persons aged 11-14 years from knife crime and gang involvement.

First published

30 July 2025

Key details

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| Stage of practice | Untested |
| Purpose | Prevention |
| Topic | Knife and gun crime Violence (other) Community engagement |
| Organisation | Northumbria Police |
| HMICFRS report | PEEL 2023–25 Police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy: An inspection of Northumbria Police |
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| Region | North East |

Key details

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|--------------------------------|---|
| Partners | Police Criminal justice (includes prisons, probation services) Education Health services Local authority Voluntary/not for profit organisation |
| Stage of Implementation | The practice is implemented. |
| Start date | April 2024 |
| Scale of initiative | Local |
| Target group | Children and young people |

Aim

The Youth Trainee Detectives Programme aims to deter young persons aged 11-14 from engaging in knife crime, serious youth violence (SYV), and urban street gangs (USG). By providing comprehensive training, mentorship, and a positive experience of local policing, the programme empowers young individuals to make informed and safer choices. Utilising the latest in immersive and virtual reality (VR) technology, the programme creates a realistic working environment that enhances learning and engagement.

Intended outcome

- improved awareness of knife crime consequences and impact
- improved understanding of legal processes and first aid knowledge
- enhanced problem-solving, communication, analytical and teamwork skills
- increased engagement in community safety
- positive behavioural changes

Description

The Northumbria Police Youth Trainee Detectives Programme (TDP) is a collaboration between Education Partnership North East, Northumbria Police, North East Regional Organised Crime Unit and the Connor Brown Trust, empowering young people to understand the impact of knife crime through an immersive educational experience. Pupils assumed detective roles, solved a real-life murder, and learned about the societal impact of knife crime. This programme not only aims to raise awareness but also to equip participants with critical skills, inspiring future careers, and strengthening community partnerships.

The Immersive/Virtual Reality (VR) training package was collaboratively developed by Northumbria Police and Education Partnership North East (EPNE). Northumbria Police contributed media content derived from a real-life murder investigation case file, including edited CCTV footage, evidential photographs, and a detailed incident storyboard and timeline. EPNE subsequently transformed and edited this material into an immersive training experience. The development of the Youth Trainee Detectives Programme (TDP) was led by Northumbria Police, with all partner organisations contributing their expertise and services on a pro bono basis.

The TDP was developed as a reactive measure in response to the issues identified by a 'clear, hold, build' (CHB) project. This initiative was implemented in an economically deprived, semi-rural area with high levels of crime and disorder. The first cohort consisted of children nominated from a local youth group and school. This area had recently experienced the tragic murder of 18-year-old, which resulted in ten young persons, aged between 14 and 16, being sentenced under joint enterprise for murder.

In this programme, participants delve into the world of criminal investigation, working with real murder case files. Nothing in this programme is fictional; every detail is drawn from actual cases, providing an unparalleled level of authenticity and realism. All CCTV footage, witness statements, and exhibits are from the original case file, ensuring a genuine investigative experience.

Participants will volunteer to join the programme and are immersed in scenes leading up to a real-life murder, experiencing the gravity and consequences of serious crime first-hand. This powerful approach is designed to foster empathy, understanding, and a deep sense of responsibility.

Key activities

- Witness movements: Participants will witness both the offender's and the victim's movements on the day leading up to the fateful event, as well as the aftermath immediately following the murder.
- Meeting the victim's parents: Immediately after the immersive experience, participants will meet the parents of the victim. The parents will inform the children about the "ripple" effect of the incident, not only on their family and friends but also on the wider community and the impact on the offenders and their families.
- Understanding joint enterprise: An input session on the concept of joint enterprise, exploring its implications and fairness, and understanding of how individuals can be held accountable for crimes committed collectively.
- Reproduced crime scene in virtual reality: The original crime scene has been meticulously recreated in virtual reality, allowing participants to investigate the murder in a highly immersive environment.
- Witnessing arrests: Participants will witness the arrests of two offenders, one of whom still has blood on his hands, highlighting the immediate aftermath of violent crime.
- Medical training: A team of vascular surgeons will train learners in the awareness of knife injuries and how to stop a catastrophic bleed, providing essential life-saving skills.
- The wider impact: The children meet the parents of the murder victim again and learn about the far-reaching effects of the incident. They explore how the tragedy has impacted not only the victim's family and friends but also the wider community, as well as the offenders and their families and friends.
- Courtroom experience: Participants will attend a Magistrates Court where two of them will be placed in the dock and sentenced for murder, using the same charge wording from the real court case. They will also listen to an emotional Victim Personal Statement (VPS).
- VIP award ceremony: The week culminates in an award ceremony for all participants, with special awards for those who have shown great personal advancement.

Participant selection

The children selected for this programme are chosen due to their vulnerability and potential involvement in SYV and county lines activities. This targeted approach aims to provide support and intervention for those most at risk.

Programme structure

The programme follows the timeline of a real murder investigation, providing participants with an authentic and immersive experience. It begins with the incident itself, where participants will analyse witness statements and CCTV footage, and conduct a forensic examination of the crime scene. They will then meet the suspects as they are arrested and processed, leading up to the point where two of the children are 'sentenced' in a real Magistrates' Court.

The programme also incorporates an optional input, where the children can meet an ex-offender who was part of an Urban Street Gang (USG) and, at the age of 18, killed an innocent bystander with one punch. His story of redemption and restorative justice provides a powerful lesson on the consequences of violence and the possibility of change.

This approach aims to ensure that participants gain a deep understanding of the investigative process, the legal system, and the far-reaching effects of violent crime.

Considerations for diversity, equality and inclusion

Considerations for diversity, equality, and inclusion have been built into the programme from a theory of change framework and scheme of learning and have been designed to be inclusive and accessible to all participants, regardless of their background. The programme actively promotes equality by providing equal opportunities for all participants to engage, learn, and succeed. Additionally, the involvement of diverse role models and mentors helps foster an environment of inclusion and respect.

Safeguarding, welfare and consent

Given the sensitive nature of the immersive VR training package, particularly its use in communities affected by serious violence, safeguarding and trauma-informed practice are central to the programme's design and delivery.

Parental consent and pre-participation screening

All participating children are required to have a completed parental consent form, which outlines the aims and content of the programme. This form collects essential information including medical history, emergency contacts, and media consent.

Psychological oversight and content review

Northumbria Police consulted with an educational psychologist whose guidance informed the selection and editing of the content, ensuring it remained impactful whilst being age-appropriate for the participants.

School collaboration and participant suitability

Schools are fully briefed on the programme content and are responsible for identifying suitable candidates. Pupils with a known history of trauma or those considered at risk of being adversely affected by the material may be deemed unsuitable for participation, though this is assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Ongoing monitoring and support

Throughout the programme, pupils are closely monitored by both school staff and programme mentors. Daily briefings are held to discuss each participant's wellbeing. Should a child display signs of distress, immediate support is available including access to a designated quiet space and pastoral care from school staff. In such cases, the child's parent or guardian is informed, and a Child Concern Notification is submitted via the police reporting process.

Case selection and community sensitivity

The case was selected with careful consideration. There are no known extended family members or individuals connected to the offenders within the participating schools or surrounding area.

Anonymity and media consent

All key witnesses featured in the VR content have been anonymised. The CCTV footage used is of insufficient clarity to allow identification, and media consent has been obtained from all individuals whose likeness or testimony is included.

Evaluation

Quantitative data

The programme has incorporated pre-event and post-event Microsoft Teams questionnaires, to measure the learning for each child and highlight areas for improvement. The questionnaire

showed that almost 100% of the children initially had no knowledge or understanding of joint enterprise. Post-event, 100% of the children could explain joint enterprise.

Behavioural improvements

Each school has reported examples of participants having positive behavioural changes following the programme, as well as an improvement in attendance, academic achievements, empathetic attitudes and helping peers.

Example of behaviours from the first cohort:

- 100% of participants improved their attendance and engagement at school
- 28% reduction in detentions for classroom behaviours and/or lateness
- 13% reduction in removals from lessons and failed interventions
- 100% reduction in failed supervision room interventions
- 56% reduction in fixed-term exclusions

Qualitative data

This includes feedback from students, parents, work the children produce during the sessions and case studies:

Post-event update from the Behavioural Officer of a Newcastle City Secondary School (names anonymised):

- “B22F13: Had a heart-to-heart with her mum after day one, leading to her agreement to do exploitation work with the school.”
- “B06M11: Made friends on the course, improving his social interactions at school.”
- “B05M11: Realised the consequences of past actions and discussed them with his mentor.”
- “B17M12: Decided not to carry knives after discussions with his mentor.”
- “B13M12: Improved attendance during the course.”

Northumbria Police have worked in close consultation with Durham University throughout the development and delivery of the TDP.

The force are exploring formal programme evaluation and longitudinal assessment to track outcomes and observed behaviour change over time.

Overall impact

- Engagement and participation: An average of 20 participants take part in each cohort. To date, five cohorts have successfully completed the programme. The programme successfully engaged a diverse group of young people, providing them with hands-on experience in crime investigation. The use of immersive technology and real-life case studies significantly enhanced the learning experience.
- Behavioural changes and skill development: There have been noticeable positive changes among the participants, observed by the trainers and reported by their schools after the programme. Participants have developed critical skills, including problem-solving, teamwork, and communication.
- Community impact: The programme has fostered positive relationships between young persons and police mentors.
- Reward and recognition: The programme has fostered positive relationships between young persons and police mentors.

Learning

Challenges and barriers

- Support difficulties: Initially, there were challenges in gaining buy-in from schools and parents due to concerns about the sensitive nature of the content. This required careful communication and reassurance.
- Funding hurdles: The first event was partially funded by the local authority, and every agency since has provided their services for free. However, long-term reliance on partners including police, to provide services for free is not sustainable. The force are now in the process of looking into funding to continue the Youth Trainee Detectives Programme.
- Resource intensive: The programme is resource-intensive, requiring significant time and effort from police officers, educators, and community partners. Coordinating these resources effectively has been a logistical challenge.
- Staffing challenges: Having the right staff is essential. Where possible, having dedicated programme staff is recommended. The force has relied on volunteers to facilitate the event as part of their continuing professional development.

Advice and implementation

- **Clear communication:** Ensure clear and consistent communication with all stakeholders, including schools, parents, and community organisations. Address concerns early and provide detailed information about the programme's benefits and structure.
- **Partnerships:** Build strong partnerships with local organisations, violence reduction units, and educational institutions. These partnerships are crucial for securing funding and resources.
- **Flexibility and adaptability:** Be willing to adapt and change to challenge. Flexibility in delivery methods and content can help address unforeseen challenges.
- **Sustainability planning:** Develop a long-term sustainability plan, including strategies for ongoing funding and resource allocation. Consider the potential for scaling the programme to other areas.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** Implement robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track progress and measure outcomes. This data will highlight areas for continuous improvement of the programme and demonstrate its impact to stakeholders.
- **Schools package:** Develop a comprehensive school package that includes a contract, risk assessment, good behaviour agreement, parental consent forms, and safeguarding information.

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