

Focussed deterrence (FD) for habitual knife carriers

A problem-solving approach delivered by the safeguarding team within social services to reduce the offending of habitual knife carriers, across two cohorts of over-18s and under-18s.

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Key details

Stage of practice	Independently evaluated
Purpose	Reoffending
Topic	Knife and gun crime Violence (other) Offender management
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Region	South East
Partners	Police Health services
Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.
Start date	March 2023

Key details

Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Offenders

Aim

Focussed deterrence (FD) aims to take a problem-solving approach to reducing the offending of habitual knife carriers, across two cohorts of over and under-18s.

The aim is to perform in depth problem solving and develop a tailored support offer for each person. This is to address underlying problems that were experienced by young people who were committing knife offences. This level of support was not something that could be delivered by business-as-usual resources. This was provided alongside a procedurally just offer of policing and enforcement which was introduced to the cohort at the same time as the offer of support, to provide a focused deterrence approach.

Intended outcome

The initiative intends to:

- reduce the cohort offending (including sexual, violence and knife crime)
- reduce cohorts' victimisation in violence crimes
- improve the cohort members' experiences with, and trust in, police
- improve quality of life for the cohort members
- reduce commission of knife offences by the cohort

Description

FD is a strategy, underpinned by a problem-solving approach, used here to reduce reoffending amongst individuals who habitually carry knives. It combines targeted social care support with a procedurally just policing response, applied in parallel when necessary. The need for this initiative was identified in response to a rise in knife-related murders involving children in Thames Valley during 2022 and 2023. A review of the Youth Endowment Fund toolkit and supporting literature

identified Focused Deterrence as the most promising strategy for addressing this issue locally.

Thames Valley Police (TVP) ran a pilot from March 2023 to September 2024, which consisted of two cohorts (young people aged 11–17 and young adults aged 18-24). The 12-month pilot allowed each participant to receive 12 months of support. It has since transitioned into a business-as-usual approach.

The pilot engaged 45 individuals under the age of 25 with histories of repeated knife, violent, or sexual offences. Participants already receiving intensive case management through multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC), multi-agency tasking and coordination (MATAC), or PREVENT were excluded. Out of the participants identified:

- 11–17 cohort: 17 out of 20 engaged with the programme
- 18–24 cohort: Engagement was more challenging and of the 25 individuals:
 - 10 did not engage
 - two were in long-term custody
 - one was excluded due to complex mental health needs
 - one remained wanted by police
 - seven were uncontactable by either case workers or police at the time of analysis

The programme was delivered through a partnership between:

- contextual safeguarding team (Milton Keynes Child Social Care)
- local neighbourhood policing (problem-solving team)
- staff trained in child-centred and problem-solving approaches

While no bespoke training was provided, all staff received thorough briefings and access to ongoing support from management and a dedicated resource lead.

Each participant was introduced to the programme during a joint meeting with a police officer and a case worker. The purpose of this meeting was to:

- explain the support available through focused deterrence
- clarify that enforcement would occur in response to further offending
- emphasise the police's intent to support not solely punish the young person

The programme was funded with £150,000 from the Violence Prevention Partnership (VPP), which was used to recruit two dedicated case workers one for each age cohort.

Case workers maintained small caseloads (20–25 individuals) to allow for intensive, tailored support. The interventions utilised existing services and pathways, with minimal additional cost. Case workers also had access to limited discretionary funds for essential items that could help remove barriers to engagement (e.g. clothing for job interviews).

Each participant received 12 months of support, focused on building trust and addressing any identified needs, whether or not they directly related to knife crime. This could include support around:

- education or college attendance
- housing and family relationships
- employment and life skills

Support was personalised, and case workers had flexibility to assist in any area deemed relevant to the individual's well-being.

Police and case workers met monthly to review individual cases and ensure a balanced, fair response to any incidents of reoffending. These multi-agency panels:

- facilitated information sharing
- assessed the effectiveness of interventions
- ensured that police responses remained proportionate

Reoffending did not automatically result in exclusion from the support programme. Except in cases where individuals were in custody, support continued regardless of criminal proceedings. The programme was underpinned by regular multi-agency review panels, which used a risk-based approach to coordinate efforts and deliver a consistent response. These panels helped maintain a cohesive, person-centred approach across partners.

Evaluation

A randomised control trial was conducted to evaluate the intervention. Individuals were randomised into two groups treatment cases would be allocated to a case worker and receive the intervention

on top of business-as-usual services, whilst control cases would continue to receive the business-as-usual services. This was an intent to treat methodology, with all cases allocated to treatment being compared to those randomised to control. No service was restricted for the control cohort, and they received business as usual support, consistent with what would be given in the absence of the focused deterrence programme.

An interim evaluation conducted after all cases had received 6 months of delivery showed promise, with a significant reduction of 59% in knife offending in the under-18 cohort. A full evaluation was conducted in September 2024, after all cases had received 12 months of delivery and this has been published on Thames Valley VPP website and on www.researchcore.co.uk/our-publications

The evaluation revealed that after the first 6 months there was a statistically significant decline in suspect recorded knife offences with a 59% decrease.

Overall experimental findings – All Age groups

Statistically significant reduction of 54% in crime harm as a suspect.

Non-Statistically significant findings in reduction were also recorded, these noted:

- 39.8% reduction in knife offending as a suspect
- 28.5% reduction in identification as a suspect in violent and sexual crimes
- 28.2% reduction in identification as a suspect in violent crimes
- 21.4% reduction in Identification as a suspect in all crime types
- 36% reduction in victimisation of violent crime

Engagement in the trial was much higher in the under-18 group than the 18-24 group, and so sub-group analysis was conducted for under-18s.

Sub-group analysis of 11-17 age group revealed:

- 70% reduction in crime harm as a suspect (this is statistically significant)
- 59% reduction in knife offending as a suspect (this is statistically significant)
- 15% reduction in violence crime as a suspect (non-significant)
- 16.7% reduction in violence or sexual crime as a suspect (non-significant)
- 75% reduction in knife-related crime victimisation (non-significant)

Sub-group analysis for the 18-25 age group was not possible due to the low engagement rate.

Overall impact

- Milton Keynes local policing structures (LCU) historically had seen an increase of knife crime Knife Enabled Robberies and serious violence, over the last few years this has now changed with a current 14% reduction.
- In the cohort of under-18s who received this programme, their knife related offending was reduced by 59%, and this finding was statistically significant. If used in similar cohorts across the UK, this could reduce offending in some of the highest harm offence types massively.
- Workshops have been conducted with other forces across the UK in relation to design of focused deterrence in order to expand these findings beyond Thames Valley.
- As part of the evaluation previously mentioned, some case studies were carried out to ascertain feedback from those involved in the pilot. These are contained in the published report.

Learning

Strengths of the initiative

- Working with the strengths of the locality ensured it met local need.
- Ongoing analysis and monitoring provided continuous learning and facilitated the programme to be tweaked as it went along.
- Good structure and relationships in place for information sharing- this meant the case worker was informed of any interactions between the young person and the police, including arrests and missing episodes.
- Children's social care worked very well as a location to run this intervention.
- Not restricted by statutory timescale allowed flexibility with the individual, providing the space to build relationship, adapt to their changes if needed and work at that individuals pace.
- Procedurally just police response was well received by people on the programme, with some stating that they felt more fairly treated and would trust police more.
- At the start of the trial, it was not known how many cases an appropriate caseload would be for each caseworker to be able to deliver the high level of personalised problem solving that this intervention provides. Therefore, the start of the trial was staged to ensure that new cases were added once the caseworker knew they were able to deliver the level of treatment that was

required of them. Based on pilot testing it recommends a max case load of 20-25.

- It was a trauma informed approach:

"you don't have to talk about knife crime straight away, you can talk around it until the person is ready."

- Personalised package of interventions from statutory and non-statutory partners meant there was something for everyone, it meets all needs.
- Panels provided a space to reflect and adapt, reduced risk of drift or delay, a problem-solving approach and facilitated learning from practice.
- Working through the research and building it based on the research project lifecycle (Olphin, 2023 – available at www.researchcore.co.uk/research-project-lifecycle) made it much easier to take from idea to evidence-based plan, to delivery and on to finding out what works.

Challenges

- Building momentum at the beginning was difficult especially due to the professional nervousness implementing a project in a space where there was so much else already happening.
- The adult cohort were more difficult to manage as push/pull factors were more entrenched. They were also more difficult to locate and track down as owned more mobile phones.
- The initiative name made it more difficult to “sell” as it doesn’t fit a child-based perspective.

Best available evidence

The [Crime reduction toolkit](#) has best-available evidence on [Focused deterrence strategies](#) | [College of Policing](#).

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