

Virtual reality to prevent youth exploitation in organised crime

Project evaluating virtual reality (VR) as a prevention tool for child criminal exploitation (CCE).

Key details

Lead institution	P-ACE LAB (University of Leicester, Aston University and University of Birmingham)
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Police region	West Midlands
Collaboration and partnership	Virtual Decisions (Round Midnight Ltd)
Level of research	PhD
Project start date	September 2025
Date due for completion	September 2029

Research context

Criminal gangs operating in local communities pose serious threats to young people, including exposure to violence, weapon-carrying and recruitment into child criminal exploitation (CCE) such as ‘county lines’ drug transportation (HM Government, 2026). Gang involvement disproportionately affects disadvantaged youth (for example, deprivation, poverty and family disruption) and is linked to significant harm (Frisby-Osman and Wood, 2020). Evidence-based interventions grounded in behavioural science are needed to address this issue.

Interactive virtual reality (VR) interventions developed via community theatre with youth consultation have potential to meet the criteria of an effective behavioural intervention. Prior research (Bilello and others, 2023) found that participants using VR experienced authentic emotions, gained experiential knowledge in a safe setting, and reported insights into gang dynamics, empathy, responsibility and identity-shaping choices. This project will build on this prior work to evaluate the use of VR to address youth gang involvement and CCE using 'Virtual Decisions: INFLUENCE'.

Virtual Decisions is a Birmingham-based CreaTech (creative technology) company that creates immersive educational VR experiences. These live-action scenarios allow young people to explore real-life scenarios and navigate consequences in a safe, trauma-informed setting. Following the experience, the young people have access to wraparound workshops which provide a safe space to talk about issues raised and the consequences of their virtual decisions.

This mixed-methods project, in collaboration with Virtual Decisions, aims to evaluate the use of VR and the workshops that accompany them as an early intervention for CCE and youth gang involvement. This will include a systematic review on the previous literature and the development of a logic model, both of which will inform a longitudinal evaluation of the impact of the intervention in an identified 'at-risk' sample in educational and legal settings. This project is funded by Centre-UB (ESRC).

Research methodology

Study one

Study one is a systematic review titled 'Early intervention and the prevention of child criminal exploitation (CCE): A systematic review of the evidence'. It involves creating a cognitive map using content analysis and integrated synthesis to explore the following aims:

- identify and synthesise evidence on how CCE is defined in the literature and the types of early interventions designed to prevent or reduce the risk of CCE
- synthesise evidence on the effectiveness, feasibility, and acceptability/ appropriateness of early intervention approaches aimed at preventing or reducing the risk of CCE
- explore the understanding, perspectives and experiences of key stakeholders (young people, parents/carers and practitioners) regarding the design, implementation and perceived impact of

early intervention approaches for CCE

Study two

Study two will involve creating a logic model and a theory of change using stakeholder consultation. Alongside this, we will also be creating a crime script that outlines the processes that a young person may face when being coerced into CCE, which will highlight the opportunities for intervention.

Study three

Study three will be a longitudinal study with a select sample of at-risk young people using INFLUENCE. Findings from studies one and two will be used to support the design of this.

Research participation

This study will be advertising to interview stakeholders/service users (for example police officers, VRUs, PCSOs, criminal justice workers) who use Virtual Decisions: INFLUENCE. This is to inform a theory of change.

The final study will be recruiting young people who are 'at-risk' of child criminal exploitation/youth gang involvement. 'At-risk' will be defined as the project continues.

Additional resources

[Project website](#)

References

Bilello D and others. (2023). [Adolescent risk taking and decision making: a qualitative investigation of a virtual reality experience of gangs and violence](#). Frontiers in Virtual Reality, volume 4, article 1142241.

Frisby-Osman S and Wood JL. (2020). 'Rethinking how we view gang members: An examination into affective, behavioral, and mental health predictors of UK gang-involved youth'. Youth Justice, volume 20, issues 1-2, pages 93-112.

HM Government (2026). [County lines programme overview](#). London: Home Office. Last accessed 23 July 2026.