Gang members taught first aid for stab wounds
Rehabilitation course in Liverpool gives life-saving skills to young offenders involved in knife and gun crime

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Medical students show young offenders in Wavertree, Liverpool, how to give first aid to injured friends. Photograph: Christopher Thomond for the Guardian

Teaching young, violent criminals the first aid techniques that could save the lives of fellow gang members might seem a dangerous move but a new project doing exactly that is gaining the attention of youth offending teams across the country.

The brainchild of a group of medical students at Liverpool University, the course specialises in teaching teenagers already involved in knife and gun crime the skills to give pre-hospital care immediately after a penetrating injury.

The two-week Basics course is now a core part of Liverpool's Young Offenders Team's restorative justice programme. Youth offending experts in Nottinghamshire and medics in London have also expressed interest.
"The course changed my life," said Michael, 16, who was convicted of threatening a rival gang member with a blade earlier this year. "It makes you think, because you realise you can kill someone really easily with a knife. There's no safe place on the body to stab someone. I had a friend who was stabbed recently. I would have been a lot more help to him if I'd done this course when it happened. But it's good to know all this stuff in case I'm in that situation again," he added. "I've told my friends what I've learned here, so now they all know the basic first-aid techniques too."

World Health Organisation research showed that knives were used in almost four out of 10 killings of young people in the UK last year, more than any other weapon. The cost to the NHS of the combined injuries of gun and knife crime is more than £3m a year, according to the Trauma Audit Research Network.

In Merseyside alone, the tragic toll of teenage killings includes Rhys Jones, who was 11 when 18-year-old Sean Mercer shot him in the back in 2007. Three years earlier, Anthony Walker, 18, was murdered in a racially motivated attack with an ice pick by Michael Barton – brother of footballer Joey Barton – and his cousin, Paul Taylor.

Nick Rhead, a fifth-year medical student, co-devised the Liverpool YOT course after realising the majority of 11- to 16-year-old offenders attending his general first aid class had known someone who had been stabbed or shot – or had been the victim or had stabbed someone themselves.

"I realised we had a valuable opportunity to make genuine contact with young people involved in extremely high-risk behaviours, who had to engage with us because it was part of their court order," said Rhead who, along with his fellow medical students, teaches the course on a voluntary basis.

"Talking to them, we realised knife violence isn't just the preserve of drug dealers and gangs involved in territory disputes. For young people today, it almost seems like a game. It's part of everyday gang culture to stab someone in the back of the knee or the arm. They don't realise they can kill someone like that. At the same time, they are a reservoir of potential healthcare providers."

The course, which all newly convicted violent and non-violent young offenders must attend, teaches the basic principles of haemorrhage management, with cardiopulmonary resuscitation and the recovery position in two 90-minute sessions.

The course has the full support of Steve Boote, senior practitioner in restorative justice at the YOT. "Knife and gun crime is so common nowadays that it seemed common sense to teach every young offender the basics of specialised first aid," he said.
"The beauty of this project is that you have someone from the YOT sitting in to make sure the young people engage," he added. "I have the power to rule them as having breached their court order if they refuse to take part, and return them to court."

A controversial aspect of the scheme is that the medical students and YOT team workers do not try to dissuade the young people from violent behaviour.

"We don't want to say they should never stab people because that's not what we're about," said Rhead. "We hope the course will speak for itself and change their behaviour but we don't preach to them. They know it's wrong. We're just there to reduce mortality and make sure the consequences of any violence are limited.

"It's unlikely to increase incidents by giving the children the idea that they can cope with the consequences of violence," he added. "These are young people already engaging in high-risk behaviour."

Luke, an 18-year-old former offender who attended the course earlier this year, agreed. "After doing this project I have stopped going around with those sorts of people because I realised that the consequences of getting mixed up in this sort of thing are too serious. I've persuaded a couple of my friends to come with me.

"Another thing I realised was how bad knife wounds can make you look for ever. Even if you later decide to leave all that sort of thing behind you, if you've got a massive knife scar on your face, it would really put anyone off employing you. It made me think," he added.