



# Using virtual reality for police training on hate crimes and victim support

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**Pilot project on the use of VR technology in Hamburg to professionalize/sensitize police officers to the experiences of victims of bias-motivated crimes**

# Structure

Introduction

Bias crime

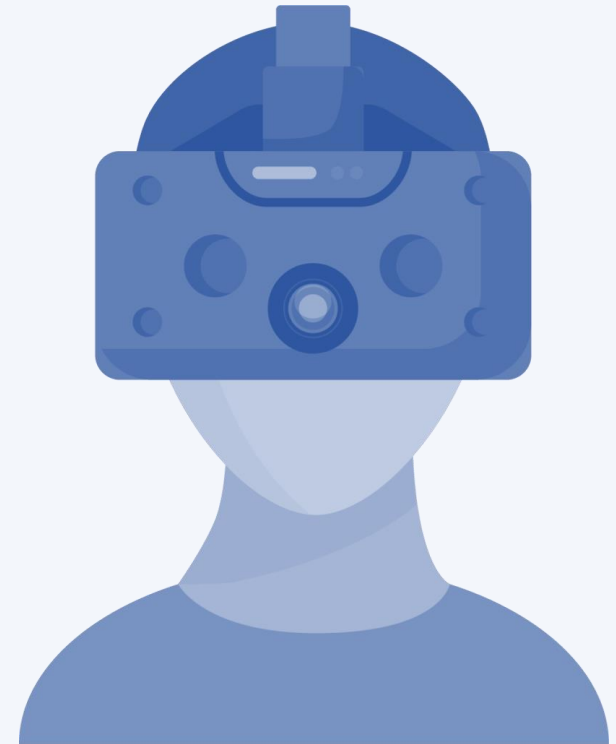
Research objective

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# Introduction

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- Immersive technologies offer **new opportunities for learning**
- **Virtual reality (VR)** = digital image of reality created on a computer
- Trainees can immerse themselves in **virtual and fictional worlds**
- Technologies offer **great potential for education and training** in various fields
- **Professionalization in dealing with those affected** is important for trust in the police and the state
- **VR pilot project at Hamburg Police University** focused on bias crime

# Bias crime

- Biased actions are a **problem for diversity and inclusion** in many countries
- **Hate crime** = crimes are directed against people because of their social group affiliation and are based on characteristics such as skin color, religious beliefs or sexual orientation *(Groß & Häfele, 2021)*
- Group-focused enmity (GMF) = **attitudes**;  
Bias crime (BC) = **acts**
- Concept of assuming inequality of different population groups is the same for GMF and BC *(Heitmeyer, 2002; Zick, Küpper & Heitmeyer, 2009)*
- In bias crime, victims are **not attacked for personal actions/statements**, but because of **ascribed group membership** *(Groß & Häfele, 2021)*

# Bias crime

- Criminal offense sends an **intimidating message to the entire group** *(Groß & Häfele, 2021)*
- Since 2001, such acts are **officially recorded as “hate crime”** in Germany *(Lang, 2014)*
- Registered **case numbers rose significantly in Germany** between 2014 and 2018 *(Riaz et al., 2021)*
- **2023: 17.007 offenses**  
→ Increase 2022 to 2023: **48%**  
2021 to 2022: **10%** *(BMI & BKA, 2023; 2024)*
- **Unreported cases: 50%–90%** *(z.B. Church & Coester, 2021)*

## Offenses against persons based on their... (“hate crime”):

*(BKA, 2023)*

- Political attitudes/engagement
- Nationality
- Ethnic affiliation
- Skin colour
- Religious affiliation
- Belief/social status
- Physical/psychological impairment
- Sexual identity
- Sexual orientation
- Physical appearance

# Bias crime

- **Recording hate crime in Germany: Continuous adjustments** *(Groß & Häfele, 2021)*
- Indications of **quality gaps in the perception and recording of bias crime in police practice**
- **Underestimation of BC:** Counseling centers register approx. 1/3 more acts of violence than the police; especially homicides caused by right-wing and racist violence *(Lang, 2014; Feldmann et al., 2018)*
- **Causes for this discrepancy:** Among other things, non-reporting of BC, as victims often lack trust in the police *(Groß, Dreißigacker & Riesner, 2019)*
- Reasons for low trust: **Lack of empathy, lack of understanding, insufficient training**
  - Solution: Professionalization

# Research objective

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- Familiarize police officers with bias crime (sensitively & professionally)
- Virtual reality-based training “Affinity”: Developed by *“Mother Mountain Productions”* together with Greater Manchester Police based on the experiences of those affected
- With the help of immersive virtual reality: VR glasses can bring real people's stories to life. Real case scenarios were re-enacted by actors and recorded in 3D technology.
- Training: Scenario from the victim's perspective, including encounters with officers; effects of posture & wording
- Thus tangible: Narratives and stereotypes, police officers should be sensitized in this way

# Methodes

- **Objective:** Create feelings of connection and empathy with the victims, increase trust in the police, higher reporting rate
- **Immersive democracy project:** August 21st & 22nd 2023; VR affinity training with future police officers
- **N = 25;** Police students in their 3rd semester
- **Three different English-language films** (topics of the attacks: anti-Semitic, trans-hostile, against people with visual impairments)
- **Procedure:**
  - 1) Scenario
  - 2) Questioning of the victim by the police & mocked original interviews
  - 3) Questions on empathy immediately before and after the training

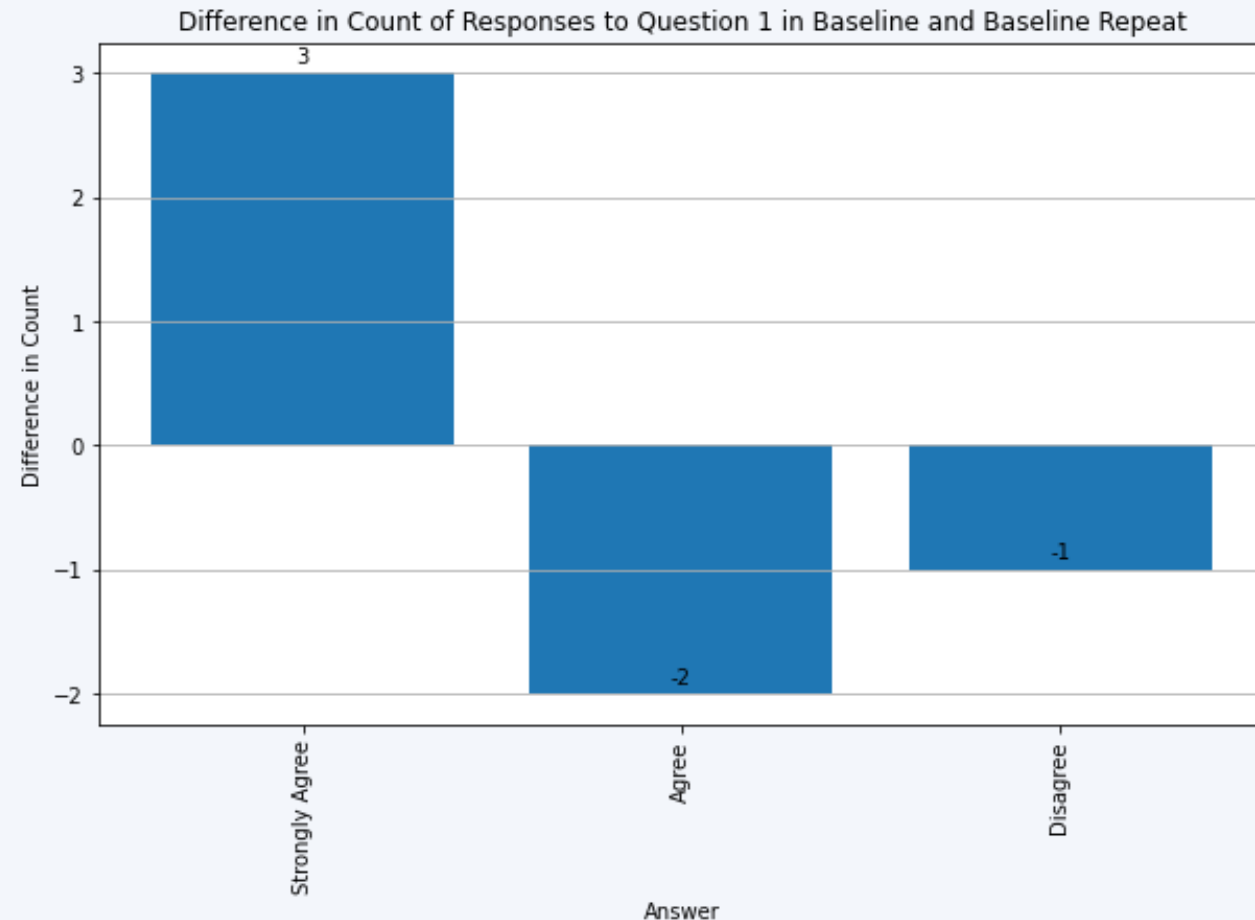




# Results

- 21/25 students answered all questions before and after the application; therefore not representative
- **No control group & lack of randomization** → weak quasi-experimental design
- **Strong agreement that hate crime should be a priority in police work**
  - Greater sensitivity after the VR application

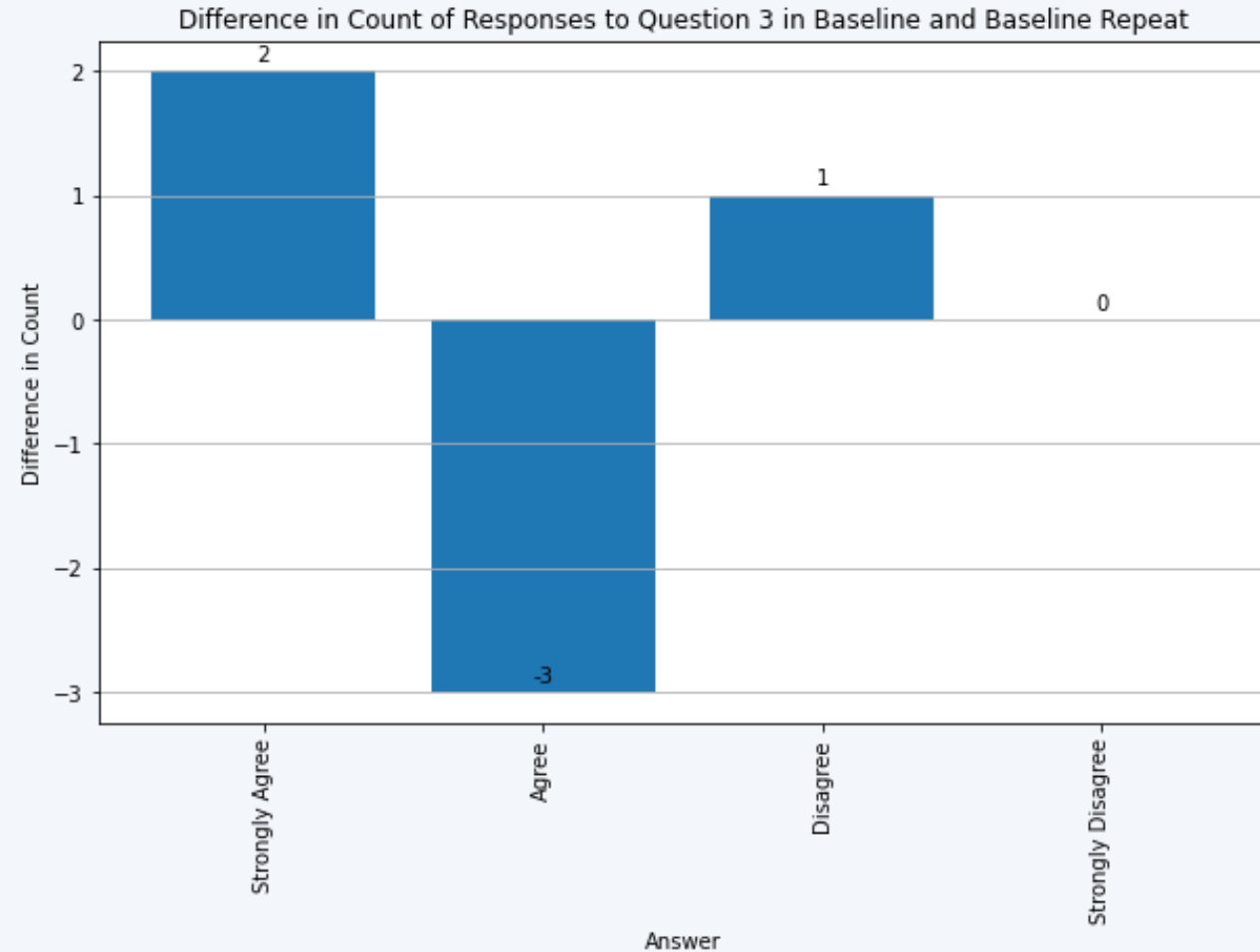
## ***“Hate crime should be a priority in police work.”***



# Results

***“Victims of hate crime should be more resilient and able to deal with the situation without reporting it to the police.”***

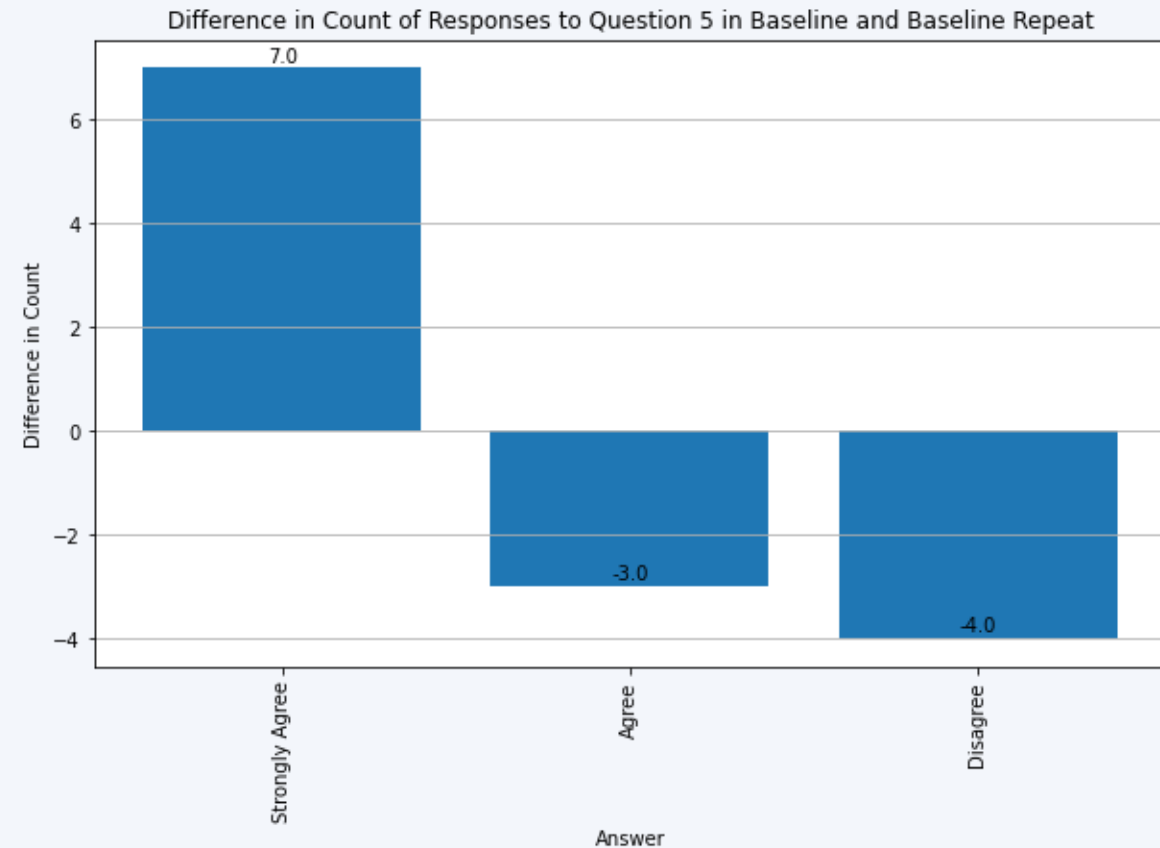
- Statement lost approval after the VR application, rejection increased  
→ Indicates **greater sensitivity**



# Results

***“I believe that my way of interacting with a victim of a prejudiced act can affect that person's ability to deal with what has happened.”***

- This statement also **gained approval** after the VR training
- **Increased sensitivity and increased reflection on one's own behavior** as a police officer after the application



# Results

- Similar direction of difference in the answers before and after the application can also be seen here

- Similar to the ones of the Manchester police officers, also with a view to long-term effects

*(MMP & GMP, 2023)*

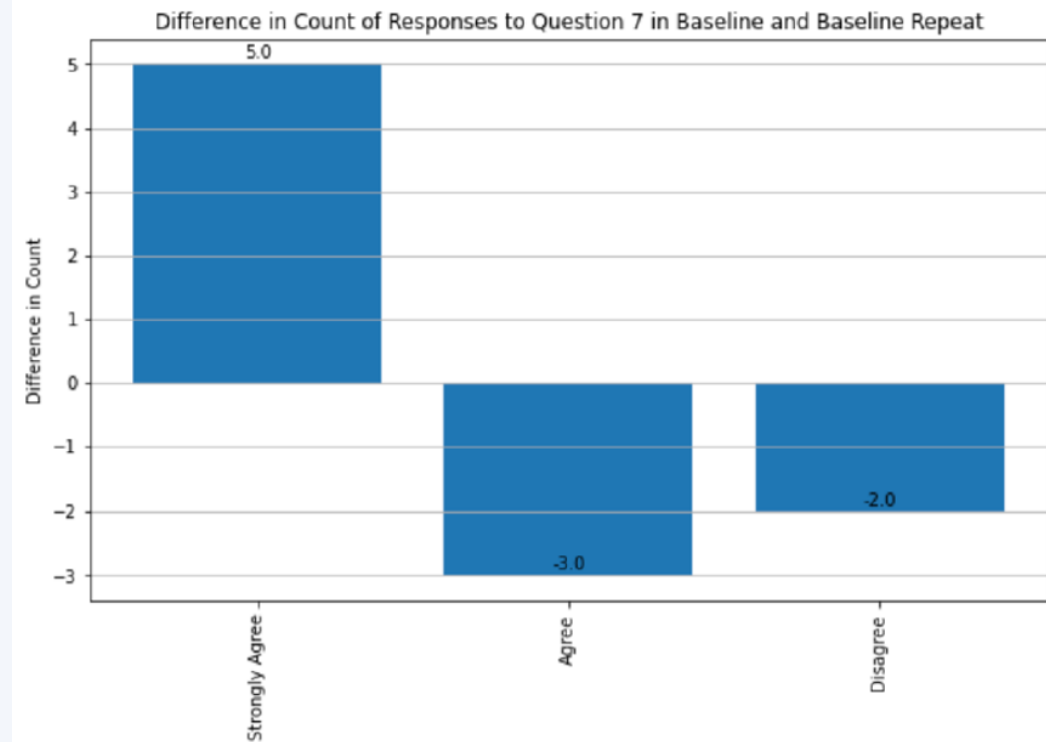
- Opinions on the Affinity application:

*“Understand more how the people feel.”*

*“An experience like being there yourself.”*

*“Good way to get people's point of view, which is important when they are in contact with the police.”*

*“The way I interact with a victim has the potential to improve the victim's experience.”*



# Summary

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- **Hate crime: Implicit message of devaluation, exclusion & inequality**
- **Victims of hate crime** often do not turn to the police; they have a particularly low level of trust in the police
- It must be in the **interest of the police to increase this trust** so that vulnerable victims turn to the police and the number of unreported cases is thus reduced
- The **virtual reality-based training “*Affinity*”** was developed to **put police officers in the perspective of victims of bias crime**
- **Data from England shows high and long-term effectiveness** of such training in terms of attitude and behavior change

# Summary

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- **Similar results in Hamburg pilot project:**
  - **After the application:** Strong approval for the prioritization of hate crime, the required resilience decreased
  - **Participants also became aware of their own responsibility in dealing with victims → Positive effect of the training!**
- **But: Real victimization can never really be replicated!**
- **Increased sensitivity:** Increased trust in the police and willingness to report
- In terms of language, clothing and environment, the **scenarios should be adapted for Germany** to make the experience as realistic as possible

# Thank you!

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