Peter Squires - From Dunblane to Duggan: the rise and fall of British gun crime?

March 2016 will mark the twentieth anniversary of the shooting massacre at Dunblane Primary School, when 16 five-year old children and their teacher were killed, by a lone gunman carrying four (licensed) handguns. The two decades since frame an important chapter in the evolving story of gun crime in Britain. Superficially, it may appear a simple story of rise and fall, problem and response, but looked at more closely it is rather less simple, and it may not yet be concluded.

The story begins before 1996: gun enabled crime had been steadily rising since the 1960s, although Michael Ryan’s August 1987 shooting spree through the town of Hungerford, (31 people were shot, 16 fatally) marked a key turning point. The media focused on his legal possession of a Chinese model AK47 semi-automatic assault rifle, and government went on to prohibit semi-auto rifles and shotguns (though not handguns, with which Ryan also killed). A Firearms Consultative Committee, dominated by shooting interests, was established to advise the Home Office – but ‘safer shooting’ rather than ‘gun control’ was envisaged. Hungerford also gave the green light to the generalised adoption of ‘armed response units’ by police forces.

After Dunblane, Lord Cullen’s carefully crafted inquiry proposals were overwhelmed by public outrage and, between them, the outgoing Conservative government and incoming New Labour, prohibited all handguns. Banning lower calibre handguns became part of Blair’s capture of the ‘law and order’ issue; elite sports shooting interests breathed a sigh of relief, having avoided tougher controls. The gun problem now settled on the urban hand-gunner – legal and illegal - rather than ‘field sports’, which survived yet another Select Committee scrutiny (the 3rd) following Derrick Bird’s killing spree in Cumbria in 2010.

In fact, the urban gun crime problem was changing shape; urban gang cultures generated a demand for cheap handguns and new sources of supply became available including: converted weapons, air weapons, reactivated weapons, imitation weapons, antiques and BB guns. These supplies of ‘junk guns’ to inner city gangs – a form of weapon displacement - helped inflate recorded gun crime figures (an 105% increase 1998 – 2003/2004 to a peak of around 11,000 offences (excluding air weapons) or 0.3% of recorded crime) even after the handgun ban had made factory quality weapons relatively harder to come by. New legislation, effective intelligence and proactive policing were still playing catch up.

A drive-by gang shooting in Birmingham in which two young women were killed, led to tougher mandatory sentences and a series of high profile policy summits focussing upon gang-related gun crime. In London, the MPS Operation Trident began to target ‘black on black’ gun crime. But after 2004-2005 recorded gun crime began to fall. In part this was due to sections 37-9 of the Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003 which reclassified misuse of air and imitation weapons in a public place as ‘ASB offences’ rather than ‘gun crimes’. Subsequently new restrictions on air weapons, realistic imitations and progressive controls on ‘readily convertible’ firearms (Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006) have closed further loopholes.

Vitaly important in containing demand for illegal firearms have been anti-gang, intelligence-led, policing initiatives in a number of major conurbations, aided by the introduction, from 2008, of the National Ballistics Intelligence Service (NABIS) which maintains a live database on criminally active firearms (drawn from trace evidence, cartridge cases, crime scenes and intelligence reports). NABIS is a major resource for tracing illegal firearm use and supply both into and across the country. With recorded gun crime in England and Wales falling almost 50% throughout the past decade (3,000 firearm offences – excluding air weapons – in 2012-2013), NABIS spokesmen are reporting less than 1,300 criminally active firearms. In the wake of the Paris shootings it was reassuring to see so few AK47s, favourite of terrorists, amongst these. So far.

One might hope that failing gun crime – anti-terror preparations notwithstanding - would ease the pressure for more police armed deployments, except that police arming reflects other pressures (witness the single-crewing, police morale issues wrapped up in the recent Police Federation demand for Tasers). Police deploy firearms often but shoot very seldom, although when they do, as the recent cases of Jean Charles de Menezes, Azelle Rodney and Mark Duggan in their own ways reveal, they trigger a major crises for law and order, and for trust and confidence for the police.

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