

New approaches to gun violence

Peter Squires highlights the complexity of 'gun crime' and considers strategies to tackle it.

The tragic shooting of Rhys Jones in Liverpool and the subsequent police investigation have, once again, brought a number of important aspects about British gun crime to the fore. One recurring issue has been the apparent reluctance of witnesses to come forwards. Fear of reprisals is often cited as a reason for this, although it is too often overlooked that the communities wracked by gun crime are often those with the least satisfactory experiences of policing and the least likely to have a great deal of trust and confidence in the police. It has also long been acknowledged that the fullest evidence of criminal wrongdoing is likely to be obtained from those closest to it, and this also poses particular problems when trying to address the issues arising.

Clearly frustrated by a lack of progress in this and other shooting investigations, some police chiefs have argued for powers to compel witnesses to provide evidence; on the other hand, ACPO recently urged for an extension of witness protection and guarantees of anonymity. Later, at the 2007 Labour Party conference, Gordon Brown advocated more high-profile policing of gun-crime hotspots, greater use of stop-and-search powers (a proposal subsequently endorsed by Keith Jarrett, president of the Black Police Association), and the introduction of new metal-scanning equipment to allow officers to detect weapons. What the impact such intensive policing measures might be in the communities affected by routine violence can only be guessed at – it

rather begs the question about the extent to which there is a 'policing solution' to these problems.

Especially worrying, of late, has been the young ages of shooting victims and, by implication, the relative youth of the people using guns and knives to murderous effect. But, as has been argued before (Squires, 2000), whatever the aggregated gun-crime statistics may say, the gun-crime 'media story' will always be the spread of gun violence to new, hitherto supposedly peaceful areas and communities. Likewise, a dramatic story, the apparently senseless murder of a youngster, will always overwhelm the drier statistical analysis, especially where that analysis is unclear or complex. And, it has to be said, the gun-crime figures are no simple matter.

In the immediate wake of the handgun prohibition, following Dunblane, opponents of the policy (at home and abroad – for example the US gun lobby took great delight in using the British case to claim that gun control could 'never' work) and the government found much to criticise in the rapid increases in firearm related offending between 1998 and 2002. During this period, 'gun crime' rose by as much as 103%, and *this* story was apparently very clear: the problem was spiralling out of control, and the government was 'losing the war on gun crime' as *The Sun* put it.

The most recent figures available (Kaiza, 2008) show a 13% year on year reduction in gun crime (excluding air weapons), an 11% fall in crimes involving handguns and a 12% fall in firearm-related serious injury or fatality. Given the contexts of firearm misuse, problems of under-reporting are likely to affect the figures, although this may be less likely where injuries are serious or fatal. Gun crime is a complicated phenomenon. A mistake often made is to lump all gun crime together as if it were a single, unified, phenomenon. In fact, firearm crime runs all the way from anti-social behaviour to murder, and while, for some, this can be an escalating criminal career path, it is less often reported that only 3% of gun crimes result in serious (or fatal) injury.

Second, there are as many as 55 firearm offences which can be committed even before a gun is pointed and fired. Many of these are apparently technical in nature and non-newsworthy, but it is the commission of such offences which puts firearms (and ammunition) in the hands of offenders who will actually use them. Third, while approximately half of all British gun crime is accounted for by air weapons, it is now recognised that a large proportion of the rapid increase in firearms offences after

1998 will have comprised offences committed with a variety of replica and imitation weapons (now the fastest growing

category of UK gun crime). A glance at the types of illegal firearms recorded in the latest Home Office gun crime statistics (Kaiza, 2008) reveals a wide variety of weaponry including: imitation handguns, converted imitation handguns, reactivated handguns, converted air pistols, BB gun/soft air weapons, deactivated firearms, blank firers, converted and unconverted blank-firing starting pistols, and CS gas and pepper sprays. In other words, the UK has a diverse illegal mixed

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economy of firearms – the full list certainly includes production-quality shotguns, rifles, and handguns, although, excluding handguns, such weapons represent only 6% of all non-air weapon firearms offences. Complicating the picture still further, of the *known* handgun types (even though 70% remain unknown) used in offences, around 40% were imitations or replicas, thereby prompting a reasonable assumption that the composition of the ‘unknown weapon’ category is likely to reflect that of the known. In London, for example, 14% of firearm offences is accounted for by CS gas sprays. The increasing use of these weapons in London accounts for the rise in firearm offences in the capital between 2006 and 2007.

Two types of displacement

We have here a fairly classic case of displacement. Civilian handgun prohibition in 1998 made Britain’s relatively limited stock of serviceable handguns that much harder to acquire, and the demand came to be met by a range of firearm types which, until the recent Violent Crime Reduction Act, went largely uncontrolled. A second form of displacement probably accounts for some of the spread of gun crime to younger age groups and new communities.

All the areas which have acquired a reputation for gun crime (London, Manchester, and the West Midlands, which, taken together, accounted of 54% of all recorded gun crime) have specialist, intelligence-led, police operations designed to target prominent gun crime offenders. While there are certainly many questions relating to the impact and effectiveness of intelligence-led policing initiatives, the close surveillance of gun offenders’ activities has led some to adopt a range of avoidance practices: having younger associates, and sometimes children or girlfriends, unknown to the police, hide or ‘mind’ firearms on their behalf, run errands, or undertake a variety of roles – including dispensing violence and intimidation. The recent case in Manchester, in which a young man

accidentally killed his 12 year old sister with a handgun his mother had buried in her garden after she had been forced into hiding it by a violent ex-boyfriend reveals something of the complex relations of violence and intimidation surrounding our contemporary gun culture. Earlier this year, the Home Office announced the creation of a new offence of having a child mind a firearm, which will be punishable by ten years’ imprisonment.

Various commentators have identified a number of parallel processes alongside this ‘trickle-down’ of guns into communities. The overlap of illegal firearm possession with serious and organised crime in the UK is no new phenomenon, although relatively little research in the UK has explored in any depth the ‘supply’ and ‘demand’ aspects of this illegal mixed economy of firearms. And, likewise, the social factors influencing (pushing and pulling) young people’s involvement in gun crime activities are neither well understood nor properly contextualised in the UK; simply importing models of gang development based upon American findings is inappropriate.

New research approaches

Earlier we referred to a continuum of weapon-related activities reaching from anti-social behaviour to murder. Viewed in developmental terms, ASB and bullying could represent ‘entry-level’ activities, although the peculiar nature of the UK’s mixed economy of illegal firearm supply might facilitate a sudden escalation in offence seriousness depending upon the weaponry becoming available to volatile young people. Localised ‘gun cultures’, as well as particular violent incidents, show a worrying propensity to become ‘gun driven’. Recent research does go some way to highlight connections and continuities between youthful bullying, entrapment in communities of fate, young people’s strategies of self-protection, and the appeal of criminal opportunities (especially in the drug economy) for young people who have few opportunities of any other kind.

Such findings are reflected in the work of the MAGNET project (Magnet, 2007) (funded, uniquely, by the EPSRC) which has been examining the interplay of risk and protection factors as they influence the lives of young people on the fringes of gun crime networks in Manchester. The types of epidemiological models employed by the project have been used with some success in the study of gun crime in the USA. Although crime is not a virus, in the absence of recognised risk factors relating especially to gun crime, the modelling offers a means of specifying key influences at vital turning points in gun offender ‘careers’. Once validated, the models may help test the effectiveness of policing interventions and crime prevention measures.

Any analysis of risk and protection factors needs to be set in context and complemented by the perspectives of those most directly involved. Here, John Pitts’ recent work on ‘reluctant gangsters’ (Pitts, 2007) develops an analysis of the situational factors pushing young people both out of mainstream opportunity structures (he refers, in particular, to the racialisation of disadvantage) and into closed and localised criminal networks in deprived communities. Offender and victim groups are symmetrical, he argues, mirror images of one another: the violence is implosive, repetitive, under-reported (everyone fears reprisals), and embedded (no one ‘grows out’ of it).

While these analyses go some way towards an appreciation of the reality of the ‘gun-driven’ lifestyle, research by Hales *et al.* (2006), based upon interviews with eighty convicted gun crime offenders, drew directly upon the insights of gun offenders themselves. The research produced evidence revealing the existence of both an older, instrumental gun culture and a complex, younger, ‘expressive’ and more volatile gun culture. Illegal drugs represented the most frequent association with gun use – running like a thread through most of the interviews – and gang membership was also common. Contrary to the

comments of many senior police officers, often readily reported in the press, there was little of a 'lifestyle choice' about much gun crime, guns were seldom really 'fashion accessories', and while 'gangsta' rap music and videos might be exploiting the phenomenon, they were scarcely the cause of it.

Hales *et al's* research goes on to propose a four-tiered response to our contemporary gun-crime problems comprising (1) closing gun supply loopholes, (2) criminal justice policy changes (sentencing and policing strategies), (3) diversion and 'exit' strategies for young people, and (4) prioritising harm reduction for gun-crime problems (successfully employed in the USA in Boston's

Operation Ceasefire). A good case can undoubtedly be made for each of the various suggestions, but ultimately they still leave us with a final question. This concerns the purchase that a criminal justice system can have on the essentially social relations of violence becoming established in our poorest communities and which now are spilling out beyond them. ■

Peter Squires is Professor of Criminology and Public Policy, University of Brighton.

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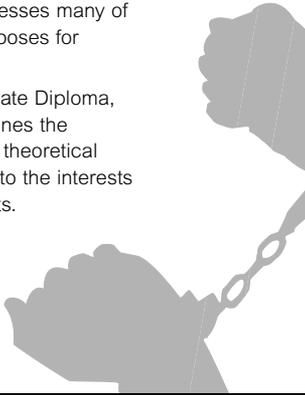
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