

# PUTTING ROBBERS OUT OF BUSINESS

## Armed robbery and the role of the flying squad

Armed robbery is a grave crime which demands an appropriate response from the police. While the ultimate loser may be a corporate body, the most immediate victim is the member of staff who may be staring down the barrel of a gun. A gun presented at the counter has to be carried to and from the scene and the most likely person to confront this danger is an unarmed police officer. Thus a strategy is required which could include the following elements:

- effective firearms control
- crime prevention measures
- efficient deployment of armed police
- remorseless detection
- robust criminal justice system

The Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) has identified the criminal use of firearms as a priority (MPS 1994). The Flying Squad, the first mobile detective force formed 75 years ago, is at the cutting edge of the MPS Strategy and has had a role to play in all aspects of gun control.

We are indeed fortunate in Britain to enjoy a predominantly unarmed police service. Therefore, comparisons which are often drawn with the United States are inappropriate. The situation in America however does provide a clear reminder that unlimited supplies of guns lead to more armed crime and thereby to more loss of life.

So the response to armed robbery should begin with a regime of firearms control which limits the number of guns which end up in the hands of criminals. We need to deal with three sources of supply:-

- **smuggling**, known to be associated with drugs.
- **leakages**, (mostly dishonest) from the authorised sector including military sources.
- **recycling**, the worrying growth in the re-activation of prohibited (i.e. automatic) weapons that, once certified as 'de-activated' by one of the Proof Houses, are deemed to be no more than scrap metal.

A national 'enforcers' group is being developed by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO). This will involve all relevant agencies in a co-ordinated effort to stem the illegal flow of firearms. This initiative will be supported operationally by the Flying Squad in London and the Regional Crime Squads and Her Majesty's Customs and Excise elsewhere.

Another inhibitor of armed crime is to ensure sensible crime prevention measures are deployed. 'Counter Action - putting robbers out of business' is a cam-

aign for London launched in April 1994 which aims to build on the good practice developed in the financial sector (banks, building societies etc.) where investments in fast rising screens and ballistic protection for staff have turned 'robbery' into 'attempted robbery'; and where installation of decent quality cameras operated by well drilled staff are providing excellent aids to detection as well as providing considerable deterrent value.

In 1993, shots were fired by robbers during the commission of robbery in London 123 times as against shots being fired by police in armed robbery responses on two occasions (1 fatal). In the same year the Flying Squad were authorised to carry firearms on 686 occasions, each under the direct control of a detective inspector, and 250 robbers were arrested.

Upward trends have been turned round (see figure) and primary detections have remained consistently healthy (average 31%). This has been achieved through the approach recently advocated by the Audit Commission (1993).

- make the best use of resources
- concentrate on intelligence
- target the criminal (2)

Dealing with robbery in a thematic way ensures the efficiency and flexibility of response. The addition of dedicated scene examiners and photographers helps ensure that expertise is developed and maintained in relation to the collection of forensic evidence.

'Intelligence' can be sub-divided into 'crime' and 'criminal'. Analysis of methods and the identification of links, patterns and trends is conducted by the Flying Squad. This has been most instructive, particularly when aided by photographic evidence. Not only does this valuable

intelligence enable the establishment of links even when the suspects are disguised or masked, but it can also help resolve ambiguities in witness description. Most importantly, it can identify the perpetrators either through police records or to appeal to the public for assistance through the media.

The main thrust of criminal intelligence in this context is knowing 'who', then investing time and resources in discovering 'when' and 'where'. It is through targeting that continuing success has been achieved.

Finally, the strategy requires the support of the criminal justice system in the form of:

- Increased mandatory sentences for the possession of a firearm in a public place.
- Protection of the sources of information.
- Increased length of sentences for consistent armed robbers.

For the future, the twin inhibitors of progress - inflexibility and complacency - must be overcome and managed if armed crime is to stay within reasonable bounds of control. Failure to secure and maintain a grip on the problem will inevitably lead to a more dangerous world for the citizens we are paid to protect.

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### References

1. MPS Focus Document April 1994
2. Audit Commission 1993, HMSO. 'Tackling Crime Effectively'.

