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# ‘Gun crime’ A review of evidence and policy

**Peter Squires**  
*with Roger Grimshaw  
and Enver Solomon*

*Whose Justice?* series



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# Introduction

'Gun crime' represents less than 0.5 per cent of all police recorded crime (18,489 offences in 2006–2007). If crime committed with air weapons is set aside for the moment (see Chapter 2) this figure falls by about a half to 9,650 offences or 0.2 per cent of recorded crime (Kaiza, 2008). Yet 'gun crime' is more than just a question of statistics and this has to be reflected in any discussion of the issue, in understanding perceptions of the problem and in the responses to it. 'Gun crime' can be regarded as a 'signal' crime (Innes, 2004), important not just in and of itself but also for the messages it sends about violence and danger in urban areas, about the feared breakdown of community and about the risks and vulnerabilities of modern living. These themes are frequently played out in a great deal of the media reporting of 'gun crime'. The problem is invariably seen as becoming worse; 'we' are becoming more like America – or like the 'Wild West' (Squires, 2000). And even when the statistics fail to tell this story, the relative youth of the perpetrators, the youth of the victims or the casual, supposedly 'senseless' brutality of the offence that tears communities apart typically speak louder than mere statistics.

The year of 2007 was a case in point. February saw three teenagers shot and killed in south London, an 11 year old boy was killed in Liverpool and two 16 year olds were killed in London and Sheffield. Alongside such tragedies, the news that, overall, 'gun crime' now appears to be falling often gets overlooked. 2003 was very similar. This was the first year since 1998 that a steep four-year increase in 'gun crime' in England and Wales came to an end (by contrast, in the same four-year period, Scotland saw a marked decline in 'gun crime'). Yet, for England and Wales, 2003 began with the New Year's Eve shootings in Birmingham of Charlene Ellis and Letisha Shakespeare and this established a pattern for the reporting of 'gun crime' (Chrisafis, 2003; Muir, 2003; Khan, 2003). During the summer there were the first 'drive-by' shootings in the home counties and the year ended with the murder of a police officer, on Boxing Day, in Leeds.

Against this apparent and very visible ratcheting up of the seriousness of 'gun crime', few commentators appeared to notice that the sharp increase in firearm offences recorded by the police had come to an end (see Chapter 2). As far as crime is concerned – perhaps 'gun crime' especially – an unshakable pessimism appears to have set in. The public appears sceptical of claims about falling crime, and perhaps with good reason – there are some real issues about the under-reporting of violent crime, which we discuss in Chapter 2. In any event, the consequences are important and we will return to this issue later.

This report reviews a number of aspects of the 'gun crime' problem in the UK, including: the UK firearms control laws; the adequacy of existing statistics and information about the problem; the contexts of firearm misuse and the communities most affected by it; the policy context and the effectiveness of the measures adopted by the government to tackle the problem. It begins by considering the legal context of firearms control in England, Wales and Scotland, and in particular the ways in which the definition of 'gun crime' influences the patterns of crime recording. For example, the criminal statistics record offences involving the *criminal 'use' of a firearm* rather than simple offences of illegal firearm possession (and even here, as Hales has shown (2006: 5), there are ambiguities involved in the interpretation of the notion of firearm 'use'). Such deficiencies in offence definition and recording inevitably contribute to intelligence gaps and crime prevention problems precisely because it is the breach of the more 'technical' firearms control laws that can put firearms into the hands of the people most likely to use them.



Some technical breaches of firearms laws may be relatively harmless, others may be more problematic. The purpose of this analysis is to try to understand the ways in which a particular regime of firearms controls (and the ways in which this is currently audited and thereby ‘known’) may influence different patterns of firearm use and misuse. There is an important problem here, as we demonstrate later in the report, it concerns the ways in which we currently separate the collection of data on firearm-enabled crime from that concerning breaches of firearms regulations. This separation often serves to obscure the development of a more coherent perspective on the issue. Our focus on the harmful use of weapons is set in the context of a need to better understand the impact of firearm regulation on trafficking, fraud, transfer, supply and intelligence development in order to appreciate how these are related to harmful outcomes – rates of accidents, suicide and homicide.



# The legal situation

The law concerning firearms is complex and highly technical, and it is therefore not feasible to provide a comprehensive overview in this briefing report. For example, there are as many as 55 offences involving firearms that it is possible to commit even before a gun is pointed or its trigger pulled. Many of these are apparently technical in nature and non-newsworthy, but it is the commission of such offences that puts firearms (and ammunition) in the hands of the offenders who may actually use them. The Home Office publication *Firearms Law: Guidance to the Police* (Home Office, 2002) provides a detailed account of the relevant legislation.

For the purposes of this report, there are two key issues: the definition of firearms; and the types of criminal offence relating to firearms.

## Definition of firearms

The most important distinction to be made is between firearms that are capable of inflicting a lethal injury and those that are not. ‘Real lethal firearms’ (or ‘lethal barreled firearms’) include purpose-built lethal firearms, reactivated firearms, converted imitation firearms, and airguns. ‘Imitation firearms’ closely resemble real lethal firearms in appearance but cannot discharge a projectile capable of inflicting a lethal injury.

Legally, the issue of ‘lethality’ is subject to court interpretation as to ‘whether any particular weapon is capable of causing a (potentially) lethal injury’ (Home Office, 2002: 3), but it is generally accepted that anything with a ‘muzzle energy’ below 1 joule lacks this capability and should not therefore be classed as a firearm. In practical terms of course, when a robbery victim is confronted by what looks like a handgun, if the gun is neither fired nor subsequently recovered by the police, there may be no means of assessing the genuineness of the firearm. An armed robbery will still be recorded.

Research conducted for the Home Office by Hales, Lewis and Silverstone suggests that one reason for the increase in the use of imitation firearms is that armed robberies are being committed with realistic imitation firearms by people who do not have the necessary contacts to obtain real firearms (Hales, Lewis and Silverstone, 2006). Nevertheless, it should be noted in this context that the figures for 2006–2007 show a 23 per cent reduction in the number of offences in which imitation firearms were used, compared to 2005–2006.

## ‘Gun crime’ or criminal offences relating to firearms

There are eight ways of illegally possessing or using a firearm (including, for example, administrative offences such as failing to renew a firearms licence and possession of illegally imported firearms). In general, illegality will be determined by one or more of the following factors: (i) firearm type; (ii) possession of an appropriate firearm/shotgun certificate (if required); (iii) any illegal modifications to a firearm; (iv) where and how the firearm is used. The fact that ‘firearm illegality’ is constructed in these different various ways reinforces our point about the fragmentary approaches currently adopted towards regulation, supply and licensing, and ‘use’ and ‘misuse’. The lack of coherent or integrated data systems about firearms management, in its entirety, severely hampers

our ability to address the harmful consequences of regulatory failures – rather like trying to plan for road safety without knowing how many cars there are or which ones are most prone to fatal accidents.

In the context of policy debate about ‘gun crime’, the most consequential definition of ‘gun crime’ is perhaps the formulation used in the Home Office Statistical Bulletin, *Homicides, Firearms Offences and Intimate Violence*: ‘...crimes recorded by the police that involve the use of a firearm. Firearms are taken to be involved in a crime if they are fired, used as a blunt instrument against a person, or used as a threat. (Kaiza 2008, 35). Although even here – as Hales notes in *A Guide to and Review of Home Office Gun Crime Statistics* (Hales, 2006) – there are different definitions of what counts as ‘use’ of a firearm, depending on whether the firearm in question was an air weapon or not. For example air weapons tend to be described as ‘misused’ when they are fired and damage or injury results, whereas handguns are misused in the course of, for example, a robbery when they are brandished to intimidate a victim and when they are discharged. Simple illegal firearm possession, which may come to light as a result of a search, is not collated in a compilation of gun-enabled crime.

Two further points are worth noting at this stage. The first is that the UK is internationally recognised as having one of the most restrictive firearms control regimes in Europe and, in fact, the world – although, until the Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006 (the VCRA), the same could not be said of a variety of other weapons, including air weapons, replica firearms and deactivated firearms. The main provisions of the VCRA in relation to firearms were:

- The introduction of a new offence of using another person to look after, hide or transport a dangerous weapon.
- Increasing the age of consent for purchasing an air weapon to 18 and the introduction of a requirement that air weapons can only be sold or transferred via registered firearms dealers and on a face-to-face basis.
- The introduction of a ban on the manufacture, import and sale of realistic imitation firearms. Subsequent to the passage of the VCRA 2006, following lobbying by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and the Police Federation, the Home Secretary announced the government’s intention to ban the import and sale of deactivated firearms. Similarly, a newly revised EU Directive (Directive: No. 91-477 EEC) seeks to combat firearm trafficking throughout the EU and will strengthen EU controls over replica, blank-firing and deactivated weapons.

The second point to bear in mind is the cautionary note that the ‘gun crime’ question is already popularly and symbolically constructed as a ‘problem of the gun’ as if ‘gun crime’ were a distinct set of offences that made sense and could be understood together. This is unlikely to be the case and probably unhelpful as ‘gun crime’ can take a wide variety of forms, which share no necessary common features and have no necessary relationship to one another (Squires, 2008a). For example, ‘gun crime’ can include: crime committed involving real guns; anti-social behaviour (criminal damage) with an air weapon; crime committed involving public display of imitation guns; crime *facilitated* by guns; the sale, transfer, distribution or mere possession of guns; and the discharge of a gun even where no injury results (Squires, 2007).

# The nature and extent of 'gun crime'

The statistical data on firearm-related offending present a more complicated picture than one might assume from the frequently emotive and alarmist media coverage of the issue. There has been a general upwards trend in the criminal use of firearms since the mid-1960s. This trend appeared to accelerate during the 1980s, with the handgun overtaking the shotgun as criminal weapon of choice in 1980. In 1988 handgun offences climbed steeply for five years, a trend coinciding with the appearance on the UK market of a number of realistic (often plastic) imitation handguns (Taylor and Hornsby, 2000; Squires, 2000). Handgun offences peaked in 1993 at around 4,200, falling back by almost a third over the next three years. In the immediate aftermath of the Dunblane shooting tragedy (13 March 1996), and while the British gun control debate raged, crime involving handguns fell further to 1998 (when the post-Dunblane handgun ban became law) before rising sharply in England and Wales (but not Scotland) for the next four years (see Figure 1).

This paradox of rising 'gun crime' in the wake of a ban on the private ownership of handguns prompted some ill-informed criticism (especially from certain American commentators) on the perverse effects of handgun prohibition, although, more recently, the contribution of a wide range of 'unorthodox' firearms types (imitation handguns, converted imitation handguns, reactivated firearms, converted air pistols, BB gun/airsoft weapons, deactivated firearms, blank firers, converted and unconverted blank-firing starting pistols, CS gas and pepper sprays) to the 'gun crime' statistics has become increasingly apparent. For example, in 2006–2007, handguns, shotguns and rifles comprised 26 per cent of the firearms offences recorded by the police, suggesting that the remaining 74 per cent was comprised of the complex array of types mentioned above (Kaiza, 2008: 48). In one sense, this suggests a form of 'weapon displacement' occurring. None of the 'alternative weapons' mentioned were affected by the Firearms (Amendment) Acts of 1997, some remaining largely unregulated until the 2006 VCRA.

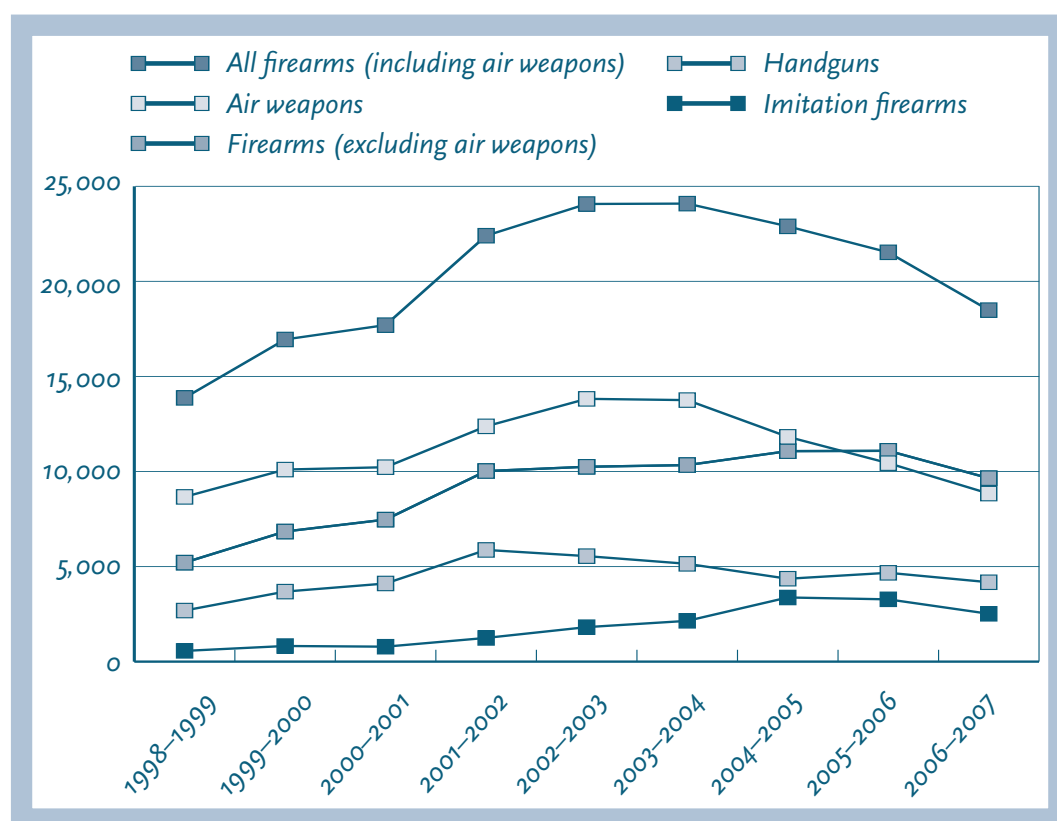
## Core statistics and trends

In January 2008, the Home Office published its supplementary analysis of *Homicides, Firearm Offences and Intimate Violence* (Supplementary Volume 2 to Crime in England and Wales 2006/07) (Povey et al. (ed.), 2008). The analysis presented below has incorporated these most recent statistics.

As Figure 1 shows, in England and Wales in 2006-2007 there was a reduction in all categories of firearm misuse compared to the previous year. Yet even these trends oversimplify the 'gun crime' phenomenon. One 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 offenders this can be an escalating criminal career path, it is less often reported that, including air weapon offences, only 3 per cent of recorded gun crimes result in serious (or fatal) injuries.

**Figure 1: Crime recorded by the police in England and Wales in which firearms were reported to have been used by principal weapon, 1998–1999 to 2006–2007**

Source: Kaiza, 2008: 48



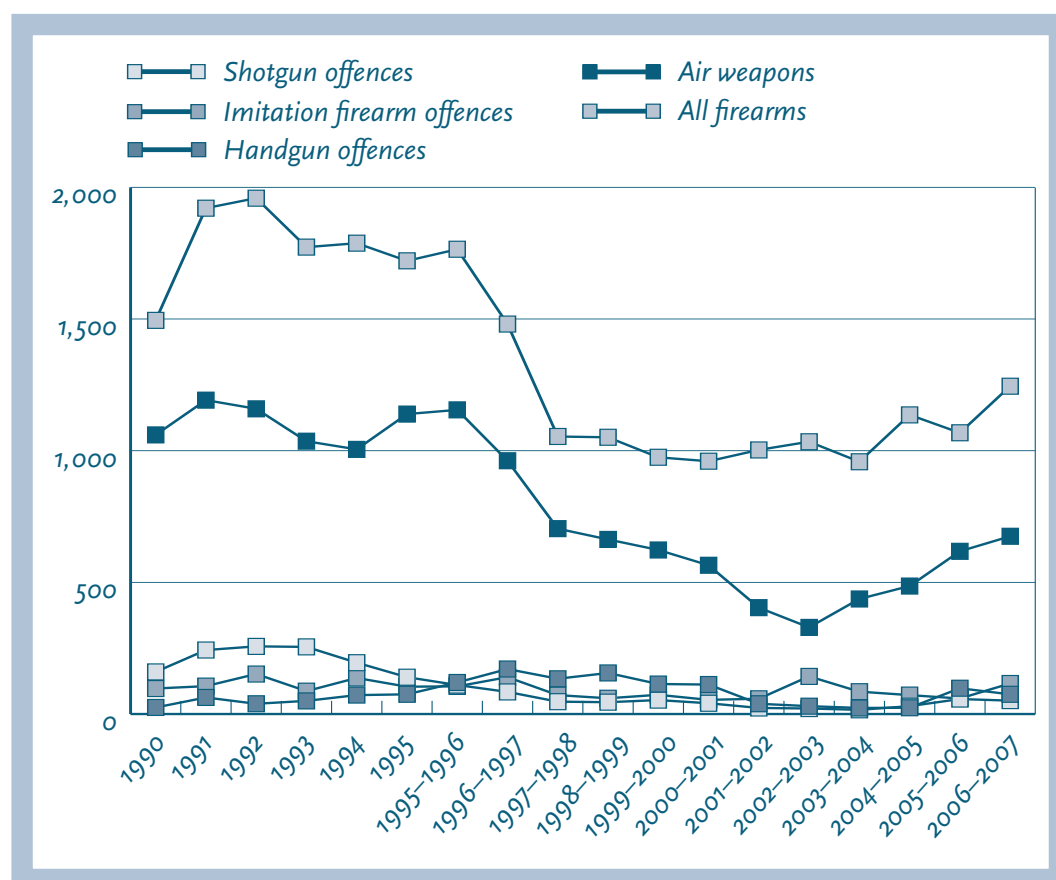
Contrasting with trends in England and Wales, Scotland (Figure 2) saw a marked decline (of almost 80 per cent) in crime involving handguns in the five years after the Dunblane shootings and the Firearms (Amendment) No. 1 and No. 2 Acts of 1997. Crime involving shotguns fell sharply after 1994. Overall, there was a sustained fall in ‘gun crime’ in the ten years to 2001. However, more recently it has risen since 2003–2004. As is the case in England and Wales, rates of air weapon crime in Scotland are far higher than all other types of ‘gun crime’.

### Criminal use of different types of firearms

Firearms, including air weapons, were reported to have been used in 18,489 police recorded crimes in England and Wales in 2006–2007, which amounted to 0.3 per cent or nearly one in every 300. The figure for firearms excluding air weapons was 9,650, 0.2 per cent or about one in every 600 police recorded crimes (Kaiza, 2008: 35). The figure for 2006–2007 represents a 13 per cent reduction on the 2005–2006 figure for all firearm crimes and a 14 per cent reduction for firearms excluding air weapons. But as Figure 1 shows, overall, the total number of recorded crimes involving firearms increased by a third between 1998–1999 and 2006–2007 and crimes excluding air weapons have risen by 85 per cent between. (Following changes in the recording of crime statistics, the year 1998–1999 is regarded as the most reliable baseline for comparisons.)

In 2006–2007 air weapons accounted for 48 per cent of firearm-related offending but show a distinct pattern of use compared to ‘other’ firearms. Air weapon offences are generally committed when the weapon is fired (92 per cent of air weapon offences involved the weapon being fired compared to handgun offences where only 12 per cent involved the discharge of the weapon). Although nine people have been killed by air weapon discharges since 1998, 78 per cent of air weapon offences involve criminal damage only (Kaiza, 2008: Figure 2.6).

**Figure 2: 'Gun crime' in Scotland, 1990–2007** Source: Scottish Government and the Gun Control Network: <http://www.gun-control-network.org/GFo4.htm>



The biggest proportionate increases in types of firearms recorded as being misused between 1998–1999 and 2006–2007 (see Figure 1) have been:

- Imitation firearms (up 345 per cent from 566 to 2,517)
- Unidentified firearms (up 92 per cent from 665 to 1,277)
- Handguns (up 55 per cent from 2,687 to 4,175).

(Kaiza, 2008: 48)

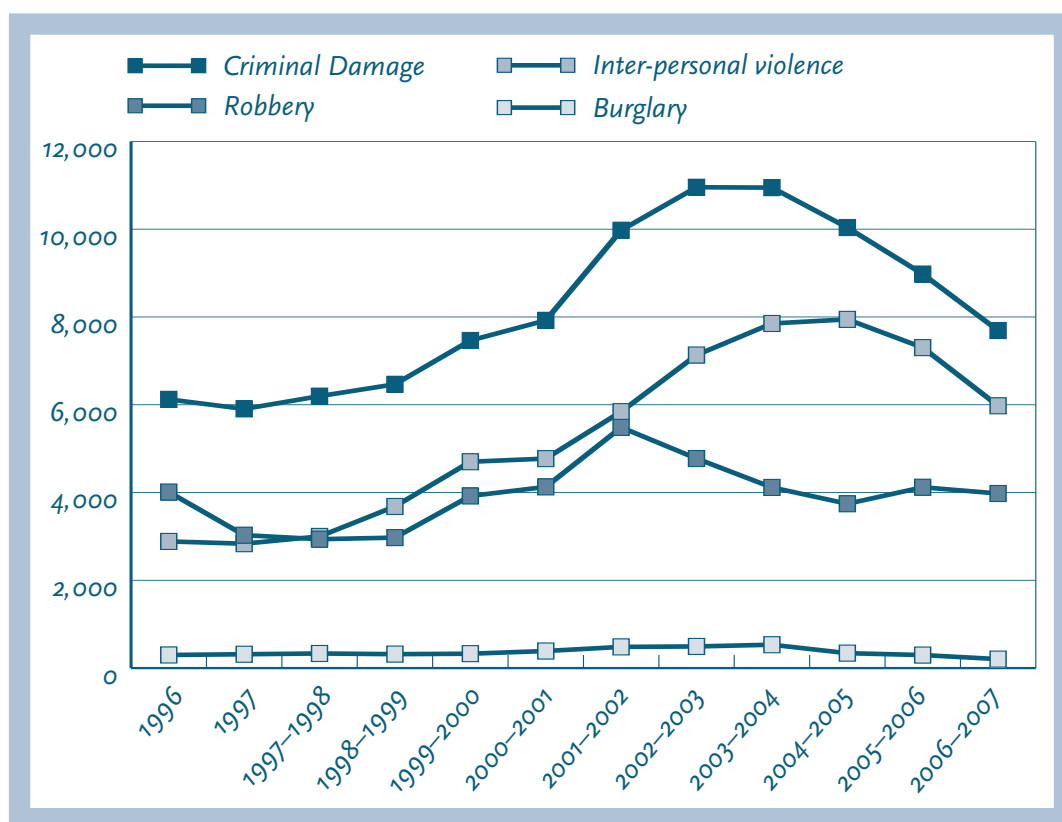
Air weapons were almost always fired when recorded as used in crimes (air weapon 'misuse'), whereas other firearms were more typically used to threaten (firearm 'misuse') rather than shoot, although they were occasionally used as a blunt instrument (ibid: 37). Of the offences involving a non-air weapon, 43 per cent involved a known handgun and 26 per cent involved known imitation weapons (ibid: 38), and in 13 per cent of cases the firearm remained unidentified.

## Firearm offences, homicides and injuries

While illustrating the trends for different categories of crime in which firearms are employed, Figure 3 also throws up the ambiguity regarding definitions of firearm 'misuse', in that the criminal damage category is dominated by damage caused when air weapons are fired, whereas the other categories involve firearms (real and imitation handguns) used to threaten. The robbery and interpersonal violence trends exhibit the steep post-1998 increases, although the downturn in robberies after 2001–2002 may well be attributable to the Home Office Street Crime Initiative in 2002 which targeted, among others, the three police areas accounting for over half of recorded 'gun crime' in England and Wales (London, Manchester and the West Midlands) (Tilley et al., 2004).

**Figure 3: Major crime categories recorded by the police in England and Wales in which firearms were reported to have been used: from year ending 1996 to year ending 2007**

Source: Kaiza, 2008: 46



The National Crime Recording Standard was introduced on 1 April 2002. Figures for some crime categories may have been inflated by this.

Firearms were used in 59 homicides in 2006-2007, constituting 8 per cent of all homicides that year and representing an 18 per cent increase on the previous year (although 2005-2006 had seen the lowest firearm homicide total for almost a decade). Firearm offences resulting in serious or fatal injury totalled 566, a fall of 12 per cent compared to 2005-2006 (Kaiza, 2008: 40). They accounted for only 3 per cent of firearm crimes overall. However, looking further back, the number of firearm crimes resulting in serious or fatal injury increased between 1998-1999 and 2006-2007 from 345 to 566 and the number excluding air weapons more than doubled from 212 to 468 (ibid).

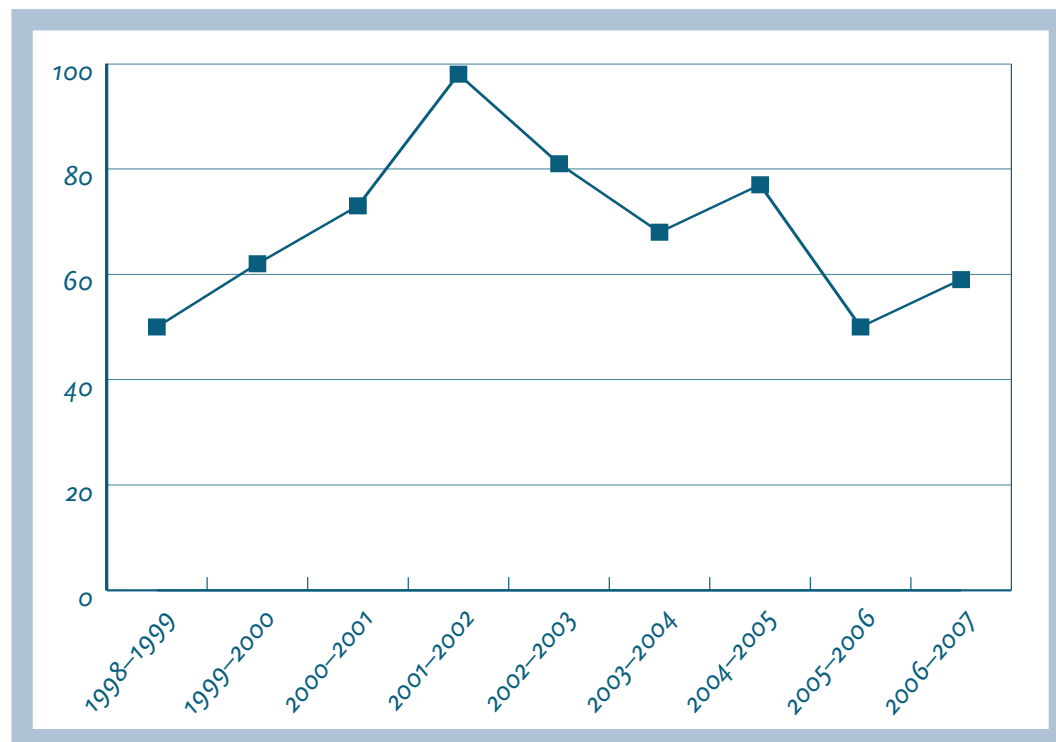
As shown in Figure 4, firearm homicides (typically representing just under 10 per cent of all homicides) rose fairly steadily from 1998-1999 to 2001-2002, but have followed a more generally downwards trend during the past five years.

Looking at firearm injuries, interpreting the trends in Figure 5 is not necessarily straightforward. As the graph shows, overall, firearm injuries increased steadily to the year ending 2004-2005 and then began to decline. Total air weapon injuries have fallen by more than 50 per cent since 2004-2005, which is also the year during which the rate of air weapon injuries was overtaken by injuries resulting from more powerful weapons. Serious injuries show a relatively stable trend, never exceeding 600 per year but forming a declining proportion of overall firearm injuries. The falling trend lines in all categories after 2004-2005 is undoubtedly positive, although the increasing proportion of injuries resulting from non-air weapon misuse after 2004-2005 is a cause for concern. However, the overall downward trend may suggest a number of things, including, given that the majority of these injuries represent only slight injuries, the diminishing relative lethality

of the illegal firearm stock in England and Wales or, for whatever reason, a growing reluctance of those using them to risk causing serious injuries or death.

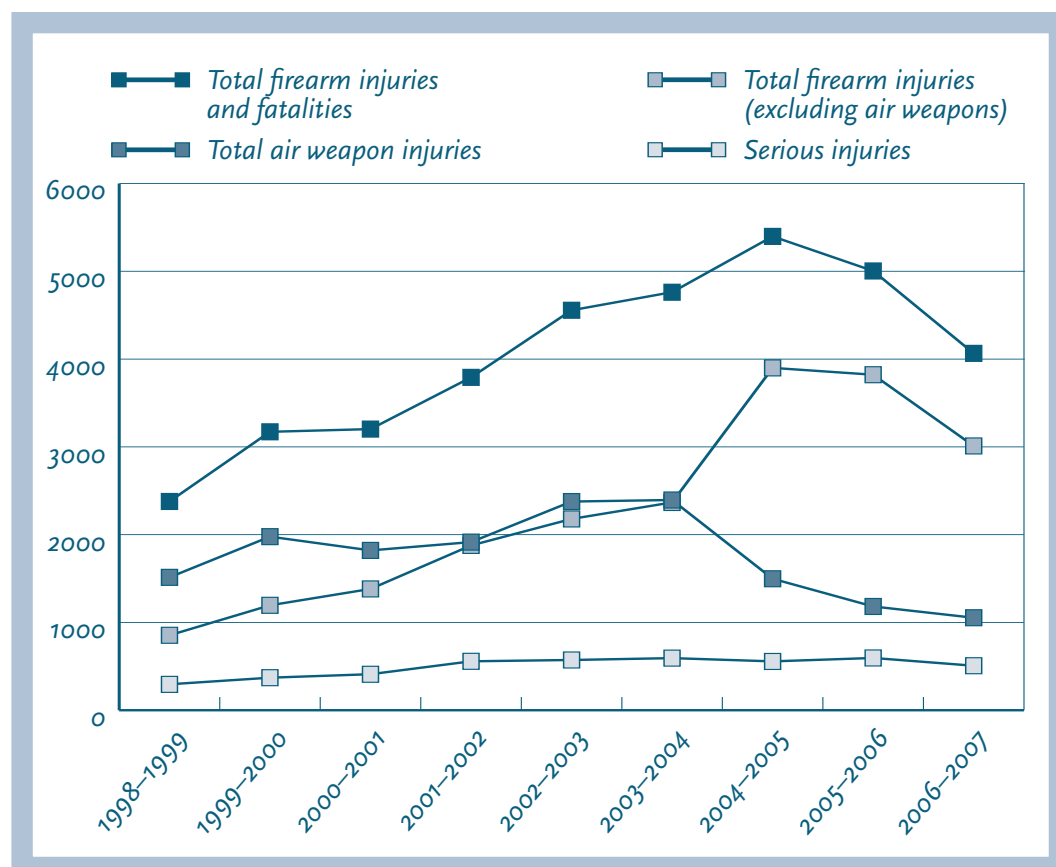
**Figure 4: Firearm homicides, 1998–1999 to 2006–2007**

Source: Kaiza, 2008



**Figure 5: Firearm injuries (selected firearm types), 1998–1999 to 2006–2007**

Source: Kaiza, 2008: Table 2b





It is worth noting at this point that firearm homicides only represent around half of all deaths caused by firearms. Home Office statistics show that there were 187<sup>2</sup> deaths from firearms injuries in the UK in 2003 compared to only 81 firearms homicides in England and Wales in 2002–2003. In England and Wales in 2001, there were 111 suicides by firearms compared with 97 homicides in 2001–2002. Cukier and Sidel (2006) provide some international comparative data on firearms and suicide revealing that, in all countries with reasonably reliable data, firearm suicides exceed firearm homicides (Figure 6). They show that this strengthens the gun controllers' argument that countries where firearms are more readily available to civilian populations have significantly higher rates of overall firearm-involved homicide (a pattern which is perhaps less obvious when suicides are excluded).

**Figure 6: International firearm homicides and suicides** *Source: Cukier and Sidel, 2006*

Deaths per 100,000	Homicide	Suicide	Accident
USA (2001)	3.98	5.92	0.36
Italy (1997)	0.81	1.1	0.07
Switzerland (1998)	0.50	5.8	0.10
Canada (2002)	0.4	2.0	0.04
Finland (2003)	0.35	4.45	0.10
Australia (2001)	0.24	1.34	0.10
France (2001)	0.21	3.4	0.49
England/Wales (2002)	0.15	0.2	0.03

A recent study by the University of Oxford Centre for Suicide Research found that 86 per cent of its sample of firearm suicides were committed with shotguns (79 per cent) and rifles (7 per cent). Handguns (post-1998 prohibition) still accounted for 14 per cent of firearm suicides but, overall, such figures suggest only a relatively limited relation between the criminal ownership of firearms and overall suicide rates (Sutton et al., 2005).

Figure 7 provides a breakdown of firearm crimes according to the type of offence committed for the years 1998–1999, 2001–2002 and 2006–2007. It can be seen that homicide has reduced as a proportion of all firearm crime from 0.4 per cent to 0.3 per cent over the eight-year period, although acts of violence against the person as a whole increased as a proportion of firearm crime from 26.6 per cent to 32.2 per cent over the same period. Otherwise, the proportionate breakdown has remained relatively steady, with a fall in the proportion of criminal damage being the main other noticeable trend (Kaiza, 2008: 46).

To place the above statistics within a wider context, it is worth noting that firearms are used in only 1 per cent of all violent offences recorded by the British Crime Survey (BCS) (Nicholas et al., 2007: 71).<sup>1</sup>

In conclusion, two general observations can be made about the statistics presented in this section. On the one hand, there is no question that there have been some significant changes in the quantity and type of firearm-enabled crimes recorded in England and Wales over the past eight years. Over the period considered as a whole, the total number of firearm offences has increased by a third, the number of firearm offences (excluding air weapons) causing serious or fatal injury has more than doubled and there has been a marked increase in the use of imitation weapons.

1. The BCS is an annual survey of approximately 50,000 respondents' experiences of victimisation. It is generally regarded as a more reliable picture of the rates of crime in the UK than police recorded crime because it counts offences which the victims may have failed to report or which the police may not have recorded (because of insufficient evidence). Whereas the police record in the region of 4 to 5 million crimes annually, the BCS evidence suggests a figure closer to 11 to 12 million offences. Even so, there are significant gaps in the BCS: offences against persons under 16 are not surveyed, nor are crimes against businesses.

2. See: <http://www.gun-control-network.org/GFo7.htm>



On the other hand, when one examines the year-on-year trends behind these figures, the picture becomes less clear. For example, the most recent data on total firearm offences (excluding air weapons) show a significant drop compared to the previous year (Figure 1), while the number of firearm homicides has fluctuated up and down in recent years (Figure 4). Violence against the person is up as a proportion of all firearm crime, although homicide has fallen in proportionate terms (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Crimes recorded by the police in England and Wales in which firearms (including air weapons) were reported to have been used, by offence group, 1998–1999 to 2006–2007** Source: Kaiza, 2008: Table 2.01

Type of offence	1998–1999		2002–2003 <sup>†</sup>		2006–2007	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Homicide	49	0.4	81	0.3	59	0.3
Attempted murder (and other acts endangering life)	724	5.2	1,285	5.3	759 *	4.1
Other violence against person	2,910	21.0	5,767	24.0	5,159*	27.9
Robbery	2,973	21.4	4,776	19.8	3,979	21.5
Burglary	319	2.3	494	2.1	206	1.1
Other (excluding criminal damage)	433	3.1	711	3.0	636	3.4
Criminal damage	6,466	46.6	10,956	45.5	7,691	41.5
Total	13,874	100	24,070	100	18,489	100

\*N.B. from 2005–2006 ‘threat or conspiracy to murder’ offences were moved from the ‘attempted murder’ to the ‘other violence against the person’ category, lowering slightly the numbers of offences in the former category and increasing those in the latter.

<sup>†</sup> The National Crime Recording Standard was introduced on 1 April 2002. Figures for some categories may have been inflated by this.

## Limitations of data on ‘gun crime’

Along with homicides, Home Office data on the criminal use of firearms are unique owing to the level of detail police forces are obliged to submit (Hales, 2006: 15). Nevertheless, there are a number of caveats that must be borne in mind when analysing the data presented above.

To begin with, it is generally recognised that data derived from police recorded crime are not reliable measures of ‘real’ crime rates and trends. There are a number of reasons for this, including the fact that, for a variety of reasons, most crimes go unreported to the police (see Garside, 2006 for a full discussion of the shortcomings in police recorded crime). Allen and Ruparel have calculated that only around 42 per cent of crimes recorded by the 2005–2006 BCS were reported to the police; and that, of offences reported to the police in the year to September 2005, approximately 70 per cent were subsequently recorded as crimes (Allen and Ruparel, 2006, cited in Hales, 2006).

More specifically, the implementation of the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS) by police forces on 1 April 2002 increased the number of crimes recorded in 2002–2003, and further ‘improvements’ in recording practices resulted in statistical increases in the

following two years also. The Home Office states that it has not been possible to assess accurately the effect of this change on recorded firearms crimes but notes: (a) the change inflated the overall number of violence against the person and criminal damage offences (while having less effect on the number of robberies); and (b) many firearm offences are amongst the categories, such as criminal damage involving an airgun, that are most likely to have been affected by the NCRS (Coleman et al., 2007: 32).

It should also be noted that local policing activity and priorities affect the levels of reported and recorded violent crime. Nicholas et al. (2007) cite research by the Cardiff Violence Research Group which suggests that police data primarily reflect changes in policing activity against violence rather than measuring changing levels of actual violence. Their study showed an association between the introduction of CCTV surveillance and increased police detection of violence (Nicholas et al., 2007: 50).

A second significant qualification with regard to the figures provided above is the recognition that there is substantial under-reporting of 'gun crime'. Given the frequently noted reluctance (often underpinned by fear of reprisals) of many 'gun crime' affected communities to provide evidence to the police, and the strong 'no grassing' conventions in gang cultures, it is likely that much 'gun crime' (especially incidents involving only intimidation, or firearms discharges resulting in either no injuries or only minor injuries) goes unreported. On the basis of their interviews with 80 convicted 'gun crime' offenders, Hales, Lewis and Silverstone (2006) concluded that '[v]ictimisation generally only came to the attention of the police in the case of fatalities or serious injury requiring medical attention... Otherwise, interviewees reported a preference for taking personal retributive action and a fear of being labelled a 'grass' (Hales, Lewis and Silverstone, 2006: 37). This conclusion was consistent with the findings of the Jill Dando Institute's *Rationalisation of Current Research on Guns, Gangs and Other Weapons: Phase 1*, which suggested that under-reporting 'may be due to negative attitude towards the police, fear of retribution for 'grassing', or a culture of enacting informal retribution' (Marshall, Webb and Tilley, 2005: 14). Having said that, Nicholas et al. (2007) also note that the proportion of violent crime that is reported to the police is estimated to have increased since the late 1990s, although reporting rates are now stable (Nicholas et al., 2007: 50).

In addition to these general reservations about the reliability of official statistics, the recent (2006) analysis undertaken by Gavin Hales of the compilation of Home Office 'gun crime' statistics, provided a comprehensive and detailed assessment of available Home Office data on offences involving firearms. In the context of the criminal use of firearms, the study identified the following five key points:

- The main Home Office dataset only covers offences in which firearms were *used*, not all offences in which a firearm was present. In particular, this excludes an unknown number of simple firearm possession offences [even though parliament legislated for a mandatory five-year sentence for illegal possession].
- Very often the type of firearm used in an offence is unknown, especially when the firearm is neither fired nor retrieved.
- Only the principal firearm and victim are recorded for each offence in which a firearm is used, meaning that potentially important information is lost.
- No data are recorded on offenders.
- The impact of the crime counting rules needs to be considered and understood. (Hales, 2006)

A number of these limitations were recognised by the recent Home Affairs Committee report, *Young Black People and the Criminal Justice System*, which included in its recommendations a proposal that '[g]overnment should include a breakdown of the type

of weapon used in its statistics on firearms offences, to allow distinction to be made between crimes involving air weapons and those involving other types of firearms' (HAC, 2007: 95). The government accepted this proposal (Ministry of Justice, 2007), pointing to the most recent analyses of 'gun crime' trends in the supplementary volumes to the Crime in England and Wales series (for example: Coleman, 2007; Kaiza, 2008), although, as we show later in Chapter 5, the government already has access to a far more informative database of retrieved illegal firearms in the database of firearms submitted to the National Forensic Science Service (FSS).

## The illegal gun stock: its size and origins

The size of the illegal gun stock<sup>3</sup> is unknown, although many are drawn to speculate. At the time of the post-Dunblane debate about handgun prohibition in Britain, estimates varied between 500,000 and 4 million. If our focus remains on properly functioning handguns, rather than conversions and imitations, it seems likely that both estimates are excessive. Even so, a follow-on question invariably asks, where do the guns come from and how do they get into the country? Here, once more, the anecdotal evidence surpasses the research findings, although there are grounds for suspecting that the government knows more than it is letting on.

In March 2008 the Home Office launched the National Ballistics Intelligence Service (NABIS) as a 'new weapon in the fight against gun crime' (Home Office Press Release, 10 March 2008). NABIS takes the form of a database allowing British police to link evidence from crime scenes to bullets fired, to cartridge cases and to guns recovered. NABIS inherited from the FSS a database comprising four and half years' worth of forensic science analysis on guns submitted to the FSS. The database is not complete because financial restrictions meant that police forces did not submit every gun recovered for analysis but primarily concentrated upon those to be used in evidence in criminal proceedings. Nevertheless, over four and a half years, the FSS was able to compile a substantial database.

The database contains information on firearm makes and types, serial numbers, stamps and other markings, where still visible, from which it is possible to derive country of origin (and maybe more) and how the police came to retrieve the weapon. Such evidence would be an important start in tracing how a firearm produced legally in another part of the world slipped into illegality before making its journey to the streets of London, or Manchester, or Nottingham (Spapens, 2007). There are undoubtedly political considerations underpinning the government's reluctance to disclose the contents of the database:

Firstly, in recent months concern has grown about firearm security in the Ministry of Defence (MoD) following press stories of soldiers bringing 'souvenirs' home from Iraq and Afghanistan, selling confiscated weapons or even stealing guns from military armouries to sell in the UK. Facing criticism that the MoD may be inadvertently contributing to British 'gun crime' problems, tougher security processes were introduced to screen returning soldiers (Owen and Johnson, 2007).

Secondly, there have been suggestions that one consequence of the Northern Irish 'peace dividend', rather than the decommissioning of weapons, has been the return of small arms from the six counties to the streets of Liverpool and Manchester where they now command higher prices.

Finally, the ending of the Soviet Union, the incorporation of Eastern European societies into the EU and the lowering of trade barriers across Europe have provided opportunities for gun trafficking, particularly given the highly militarised character of the former Soviet societies (Clements, 2007; Spapens, 2007).

3. Commentators invariably distinguish between the criminal gun stock – those weapons currently in active criminal hands and a 'grey pool' of unauthorised (illegal) weapons comprising anything from wartime souvenirs, working antiques, weapons capable of simple reactivation or those which have slipped outside the licensing system and therefore beyond the regulatory framework.

Each of the above issues raises genuine political sensitivities which the government may wish to avoid even if it impedes the kind of analysis necessary to tackle weapon trafficking effectively. In 1994–1995 the then Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Paul Condon, attracted considerable criticism from the British shooting fraternity and the gun trade for his claim that dishonest firearm dealers were the source of up to 70 per cent of the illegal firearms recovered by police in London (Squires, 2000: 110–111). Sir Paul never publicly substantiated his figures but, as the ‘gun crime’ issue has climbed the political agenda during the decade following his remarks, the lack of an answer to the question about the UK illegal gun supply seems ever more striking. As even senior police commentators have acknowledged:

‘People are very concerned about the level of firearms availability and firearms offences... I don’t think we do know enough about supply, either in terms of the sources or the volume. We need to know more to suppress it.’  
(Commander Cressida Dick, then head of Operation Trident, MPS, quoted in Goodchild and Lashmar, 2005)

Except in the case of replica weapons (Gill, 2008), despite occasional suggestions that illegal firearms are ‘flooding into the country’ (Ungoed-Thomas, 2000; Bamber, 2002; Goodchild and Lashmar, 2005; Clements, 2007), largely anecdotal evidence reflected in media reporting seems to suggest a variety of trickles rather than any floods, as a Home Office Memorandum of Evidence to the Home Affairs Committee in 2000 suggested:

‘The evidence now available leads the Government to reject the idea that a large number of guns are ‘flooding’ into the UK from abroad, and rendering our controls ineffectual. The Police Service and HM Customs have no evidence of organised and large-scale smuggling of firearms into the UK, either through seizures made by HM Customs, or by the appearance of a large number of such guns in crime. It should be noted in this regard that both random and intelligence-led searches by HM Customs recover considerable quantities of controlled drugs, pornographic material and other illegal material every year, of which firearms represent a consistently low proportion.’  
(HAC, 2000)

To some extent, such conclusions are reinforced by the limited research available on firearm smuggling within the EU, although the evidence is invariably framed in the negative. Smuggling does go on but there is little evidence of it being large scale or particularly widespread (Sagramoso, 2001). Nevertheless, both Sagramoso and a subsequent Saferworld report on organised crime and illicit arms trafficking in the EU by Davis, Hirst and Mariani (2001) recommended further research on the issues:

‘There is need for further research to more thoroughly identify the threat posed by organised crime and illicit arms trafficking and appropriate policies and collaboration strategies to combat it, especially in relation to the particular risks inherent in EU expansion.’  
(Davis, Hirst and Mariani, 2001: 7)

Kaiza’s (2008) analysis of firearm crime for the Home Office focuses only, as Hales has noted, on crime *committed with* firearms, except for two tables covering the theft of firearms (Kaiza, 2008: Tables 2.10 and 2.11). It tells us nothing about any offences resulting from the breach of firearms control laws (trafficking, possession, adaptation etc.) which put firearms into the hands of potential offenders in Britain, and which might allow us to develop a better picture of the provenance of illegal firearms in the UK.

Regarding the theft or ‘misappropriation’ of firearms, here misappropriated is defined as ‘stolen, obtained by fraud or forgery etc., or handled dishonestly’. In the decade to 1996 approximately 1,000 shotguns, rifles and handguns were recorded as stolen annually,

most from private homes (Squires, 2000: 190–91). By 2006–2007, 2,219 firearms (air weapons and imitations now being included in the figures) were misappropriated. During the decade 1997 to 2007, over 29,000 firearms were recorded as misappropriated. Around 50 per cent are air weapons, with imitations the next highest category (355 in 2006–2007). Shotguns, rifles and handguns accounted, respectively, for 282, 210 and 103 of the firearms misappropriated in 2006–2007. Not surprisingly, the highest rates of misappropriation relate to firearms stolen from private homes (Kaiza, 2008: Tables 2.10 and 2.11).

To conclude this chapter on what we do not know about ‘gun crime’ it seems appropriate to return to a conclusion reached by Hales on the basis of his review of Home Office ‘gun crime’ statistics:

‘The utility of these data [on the criminal use of firearms] for planning interventions is limited by the fact that important information, particularly concerning weapons and the profile of offenders, is not recorded and therefore unavailable for analysis... It has been seen that these data are subject to a number of limitations and inconsistencies, which somewhat undermine their utility... The limitations are most apparent in the case of recorded crime data.’

(Hales, 2006: 15, 29)



# Who does 'gun crime' affect most?

Turning now to a consideration of the characteristics of firearm crime victims and offenders, the immediate observation to make is that surprisingly little information is currently available – a point that was also noted by Hales, Lewis and Silverstone in the study referred to above (Hales, Lewis and Silverstone, 2006: 6). That said, the information that is available suggests a similar pattern to that observed in the analysis of 'knife crime' undertaken by the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies (CCJS) in 2006 (and updated in 2007): it seems that children and young people, those living in poor areas and members of black and minority ethnic communities are particularly likely to be the victims (and to be convicted) of firearm offences (Eades et al., 2007: 24–25).

One of the most important issues relates to the age of victims and offenders. An analysis of age data from eight police forces found that the peak age for victimisation in relation to firearms (excluding air weapons) was 20–24 years, and for air weapon offences 40–44 years (Dodd et al., 2004, cited in Hales, Lewis and Silverstone, 2006: 6). A self-report study undertaken by the Home Office of more than 5,000 young people aged 10 to 25 years old found that the peak age for carrying a gun was 16 to 17 (Wilson et al., 2006).

Moving on to gender, research undertaken in London found that men were significantly over-represented both as victims and, in particular, as offenders. The same research also found that certain ethnic groups, particularly black men (African Caribbean, Black British and mixed race), are over-represented as victims and offenders, while others, notably Asians, are under-represented as offenders (Hales and Silverstone, 2004: 20–56). According to Metropolitan Police data for the period between April 2001 and October 2005, 63 per cent of the victims of murder and attempted murder involving firearms in London were black. The West Midlands Police highlight the significance of both British Asian and white 'gun crime' offenders in addition to black individuals (both Police Service statistics are cited in Hales, Lewis and Silverstone, 2006: 12).

The Metropolitan Police data are broadly in line with more recent information from the Metropolitan Police's Trident unit, which was established to investigate 'gun crime' within London's black communities. In its submission to the Home Affairs Committee inquiry into young black people and the criminal justice system, the Trident unit provided a statistical analysis of firearm homicides and shootings in the Metropolitan Police Area in 2006 (HAC, 2007). The statistics showed that African Caribbean males had committed 79 per cent of the offences, and that three-quarters of the incidents had involved African Caribbean victims.

Moreover, the Trident unit commented that '[t]he most worrying trend over recent years is the commission of Trident offences by younger suspects', with the peak age of both offending and victimisation being 19 years. And its evidence also confirmed that 'gun crime' is predominantly committed by males: in only one of the 1,195 firearm homicides and shootings that the Trident unit examined was a female identified as having discharged the firearm.



In this context, it is worth noting one of the conclusions reached by Hales, Lewis and Silverstone on the basis of their research for the Home Office:

‘It could be argued that race has often been positioned as the most significant variable in explaining involvement in gun and other criminality. The evidence collected for this research suggests that such an analysis is significantly limited.’  
(Hales, Lewis and Silverstone, 2006: 102)

The Jill Dando Institute review of research found that ‘gun crime appears highest in areas with far higher than average levels of deprivation and unemployment’ (Marshall, Webb and Tilley, 2005: 13). Similarly, Hales, Lewis and Silverstone note, in relation to the 80 men interviewed in the course of their research:

‘With few exceptions, the men interviewed came from communities characterised by economic deprivation, an active and visible local criminal economy and personal opportunities limited by a lack of qualifications, criminal records and poor work histories.’  
(Hales, Lewis and Silverstone, 2006: 61)

In this context, the evidence of the Trident unit noted: ‘Much of Trident gun crime is, unsurprisingly, linked to the poorer London Boroughs, areas of deprivation, high ethnic minority population and high unemployment’ (HAC, 2007). Dorling (2005) and Wilkinson (2005) have both undertaken important studies of aspects of the relationship between economic inequality and violent crime, which are considered in the next chapter.

The Home Office statistical analyses of ‘gun crime’ cited above also provide an insight into the spatial localisation of firearm-related offending, noting that 55 per cent of reported offences in 2006–2007 occurred in areas covered by just three metropolitan forces: the Metropolitan Police, Greater Manchester and the West Midlands (Nicholas et al., 2007: 63; Kaiza, 2008).

The studies by Hales, Lewis and Silverstone and the Jill Dando Institute also concurred in identifying the close relationship between offending and victimisation. Hales, Lewis and Silverstone found that 40 of the 80 men they interviewed had previously been threatened with guns, 29 shot at and eight shot, and 26 had had friends or family members shot or injured (Hales, Lewis and Silverstone, 2006: 36). In Hales and Silverstone’s 2004 study of ‘gun crime’ in Brent, it was found that 73 per cent of firearms-related offenders had also been victims of ‘gun crime’ (Hales and Silverstone, 2004). Similar findings regarding the similarities between those guilty of ‘gun crime’ victimisation and those most likely to be victimised by offenders carrying firearms emerged in Bullock and Tilley’s (2002) study, *Shootings, Gangs and Violent Incidents in Manchester*.

Some of the more recent research exploring gun violence and gang cultures (Pitts, 2007) draws connections between the American experiences of community fragmentation, the loss of mainstream economic opportunities and the growth of lucrative illegal economies – especially drug dealing – in the 1980s and 1990s. Here, patterns of racialised social exclusion combined with the frustrations of relative deprivation amidst the affluence of the ‘American Dream’ to produce an assertive and violently aggressive form of masculinity (Katz, 1988) well suited to the demands of the illegal economy. Drug dealing implies a different kind of economics. Research from many countries (Gunst, 1995; Anderson, 1999; Jacobs, Topalli and Wright, 2000; Bourgeois, 2003; Mullins, 2006) shows violence to be a necessary component of successful drug dealing. You cannot call the police if a deal goes wrong or a customer refuses to pay. A capacity for violence is your credibility, your ‘capital’, the respect you are due. It has to be won, both earned and protected. Your reputation is what prevents others from trying to ‘mess’ with you, making them take you seriously. In the street drug dealing scene this violence is not ‘meaningless’ – it means



precisely the same as the notices in high street shops: 'We always prosecute'. It means: 'I always retaliate'.

Many recent shootings bear out these seemingly 'tit-for-tat' violent reprisals. As Elliott Currie has argued (1997), they are familiar and powerfully corrosive of wider community safety, confidence and order. Only very recently, the gang-related gun murder of a teenager in Sheffield bore all the signs of this violent culture of reprisals. Members of the S4 gang (a postcode area of Sheffield) went in search of a member of the S3 gang to exact their own brand of postcode justice for a serious insult to S4 family members. No doubt, in their eyes, they were doing what impetuous, reckless and violent young men have done for generations. Not to act in the way they did would be to lose face, suggesting they didn't have the 'bottle' to protect their 'turf' – the postcode being a very crude and intentionally ambitious marker for their self-proclaimed 'business zone'. In their terms, not being violent would only invite further violence. As Firmin, Turner and Gavrielides (2007) point out, summarising a range of research findings, such tensions produce:

'Men who will retaliate at the slightest provocation. A cycle of retaliation is often inevitable... 'Feminine' values such as forgiveness, care and compassion are rejected in favour of masculine ideals of strength and power... Mundane arguments are 'reconstructed... into the stuff of legend' (Hallsworth and Young, 2004). Trivial arguments are amplified and believed to be 'wars' or 'battles'. Neighbourhoods and estates become re-branded as 'turfs' or 'territories' as the legend is expanded [by] unstable men who consider themselves invincible and untouchable.'  
(Firmin, Turner and Gavrielides, 2007: 28)

Furthermore:

'Cowards will find that their criminal careers come to a rapid and ignominious end. In the criminal underworld there is no place, or mercy, for the weak.'  
(Jacobs, 2000: 3)

And:

'The use of guns and weapons become related to imagery and machismo. They become a symbolically powerful method of demonstration, far more effective in their message than fist-fighting. Issues of respect, and disrespect, may lead individuals and groups to have 'beef' with others. So called 'diss' shootings become common... [as] expressive and symbolic violence not only [provides gang members] with personal status [it is also] used to usurp rivals.'  
(Firmin, Turner and Gavrielides, 2007: 28)

Ultimately, as Hales, Lewis and Silverstone point out, 'in the context of a criminal culture in which conflict and firearms are to some extent normalised, conflict can quickly develop into what is effectively a 'shoot or be shot' scenario and even very trivial precipitating incidents may result in fatal violence' (Hales, Lewis and Silverstone, 2006: 82–83). Firearms can raise the stakes quickly in very trivial disputes.

As 'gangs' became influential in communities they attract 'wannabe gangsters' – impetuous, unstable or even deluded young men keen to acquire the successful trappings of their peers. There are also those whose 'gang' involvements are rather more ambiguous and ambivalent, even reluctant (Pitts, 2007). Gang activity is often highly localised around residential neighbourhoods, reinforcing control over local drug dealing, prostitution, protection rackets or stolen goods markets: protecting their turf. Many in the local community live in fear, no one talks to the police or wants to be labelled a 'grass'. Young people often find it safer to join a gang, 'thugging up' – looking the part, walking the walk, however reluctantly. Safety lies in numbers (Hallsworth, 2005).

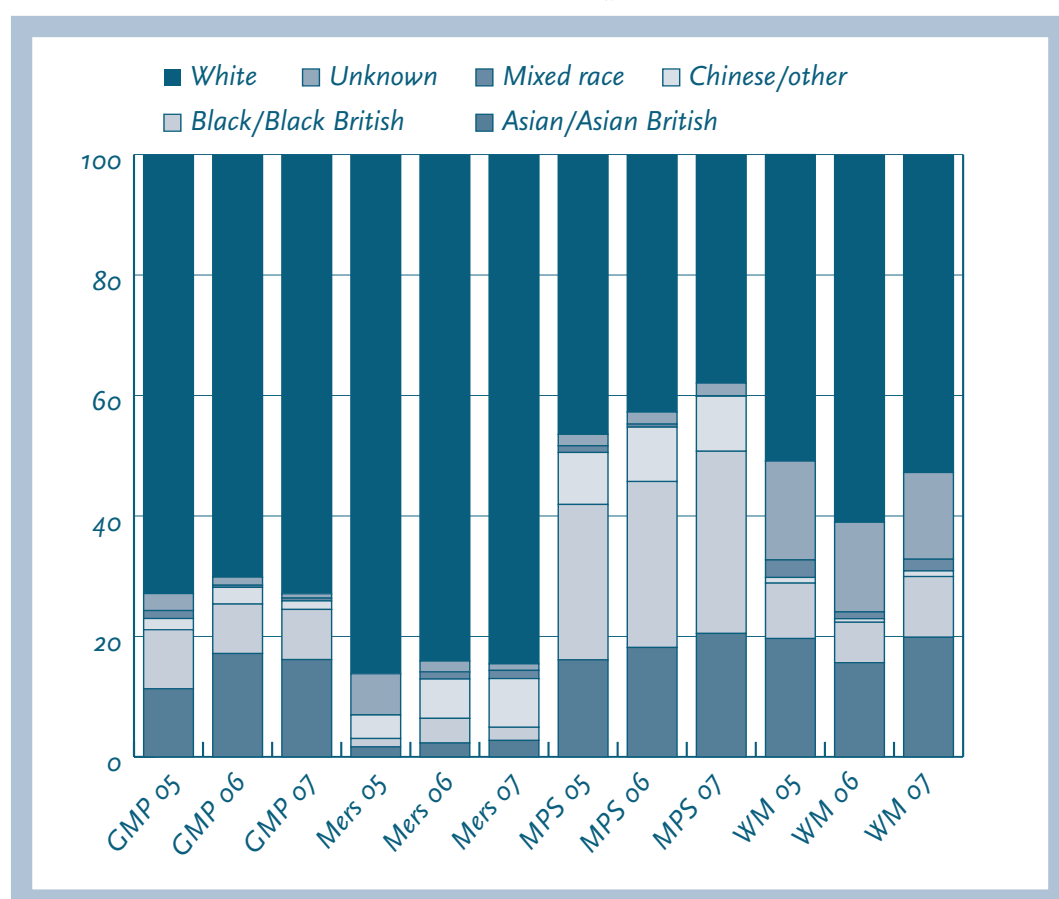
Concerns about processes of ‘weaponisation’ and the ‘racialisation’ of youth violence have been reflected in the evidence to the Home Affairs Committee in its (2007) report, *Young Black People and the Criminal Justice System*. The report noted:

‘Statistics indicate that black people are no more likely than white people to fall victim to crime... [but] evidence does point strongly to a much greater likelihood of young black people falling victim to violent and weapon-enabled crime, including homicide. Overall, black people are 5.5 times more likely than white people to be a victim of homicide... but the greatest disproportionality is at younger ages, where black males account for nearly two thirds of all murders of 10 to 17 year olds.’  
(HAC, 2007: 15)

Black communities, especially their younger members, appear disproportionately victimised by weapon-involved crime. In 2007 over half of the murders in London had a victim from a black or minority ethnic group, and black males account for nearly two-thirds of all murders of 10 to 17 year olds. In 32 homicide cases in London during 2007 involving victims aged under 17, weapons were used in 91 per cent of the incidents, significantly higher than for any other age groups. In 17 cases (53 per cent) the murder weapon was a knife; in 12 cases (38 per cent) the murder weapon was a firearm. Fights and violence amongst acquaintances, between gangs and ‘black on black’ violent crime accounts for over two-thirds of the homicides involving victims aged under 17 in London.<sup>4</sup>

If we look across the country at the police areas with the highest rates of gun crime (London’s Metropolitan Police Service, Greater Manchester, Merseyside and West Midlands) it is clear that each city manifests a significantly different racial profile to the gun victimisation encountered there (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Ethnicity of gun crime victims 2005-2007: percentages from different minority ethnic communities** Source: Data supplied by the Home Office

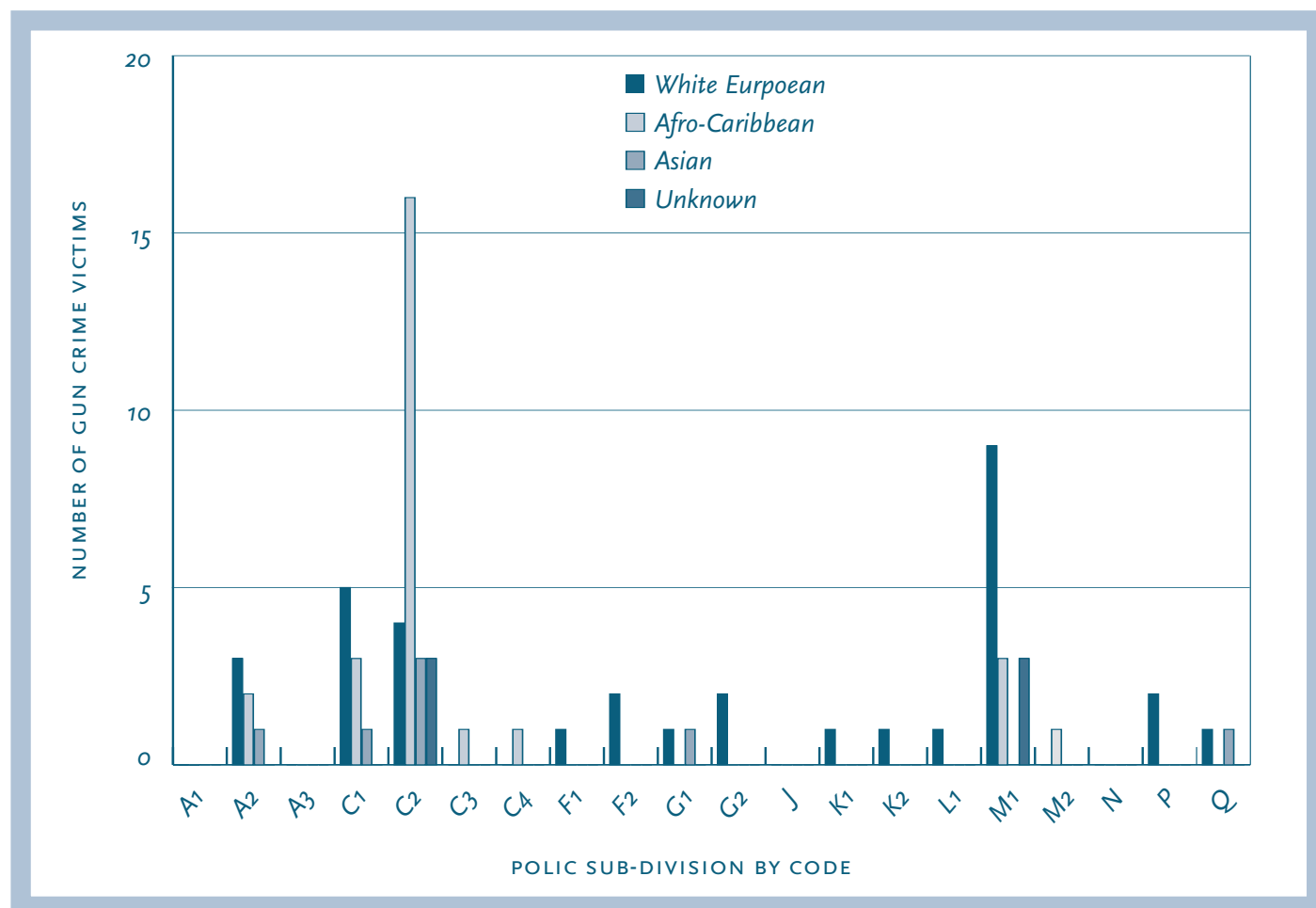


4. All the data in this paragraph is taken from Metropolitan Police Service figures.

These four cities appear to have different racial and ethnic gun victimisation profiles. Gun victims are around 70 per cent white in Manchester, 85 per cent white in Merseyside, 40 per cent white in London, while the proportion of white gun victims hovers at around 55 per cent in the West Midlands. And while black and Asian communities are significantly over-represented in the distribution of gun victimisation in three out of four of these cities, when we look at the concentration of gun victimisation at the neighbourhood or community level within cities, we find even greater evidence of racialised victimisation. See Figure 9.

**Figure 9: Gun crime victims in Manchester in 2003 by police sub-division and ethnicity**

Source: MMAGS: 2003



An understanding of contexts and motivations is particularly important to an understanding of street violence. It is vital to take seriously the concentrations of violence in deprived areas (beyond statistical debates about ‘clustering effects’), especially the ways in which these areas curtail and distort the lives, opportunities and aspirations of young people growing up in them. In such areas, many young people come to see crime and violence as a credible and even necessary ‘career’ choice. Some aspire to become involved, others are drawn, reluctantly, into illegality. Many young people who become involved in ‘gang activity’ cite protection, ‘safety in numbers’, as a reason for doing so, and the overwhelming majority who carry weapons say that they do so for the same reason. For many young people the ‘performance’ of violence in public may be crucial to their street credibility and respect, itself a form of ‘social capital’.

These issues relate directly to the wider social contexts of gun violence which are considered in the next chapter.



# The social context

Important as the statistical and demographic information is, it is impossible to develop a full understanding of the phenomenon (or phenomena) of ‘gun crime’ without consideration of the relevant social and cultural contexts. In terms of recent and current policy debate, three aspects of this context are particularly important: the relationship between ‘gun crime’ and illegal drugs; the relationship between ‘gun crime’ and gangs; and the existence or otherwise of a ‘gun culture’.

## ‘Gun crime’ and illegal drugs

One of the recurrent themes in both public and political debate about ‘gun crime’ is the purported relationship between ‘drugs’ and ‘guns’. It is not unusual for such ‘commonsense’ correlations to be disproved by the available objective data, but in this instance the existing research evidence base would appear to support the suggested relationship. There is strong evidence of a link between firearm-related offending and the trade in illegal drugs; and the evidence also provides some possible explanations for the link.

On the basis of what has been called ‘probably the most extensive research study of ‘gun crime’ in the UK’ (Squires, 2007: 76), which involved detailed interviews with 80 convicted firearm offenders in Prison Service establishments around the country, covering aspects of their personal and social histories, their first involvement with firearms and their most recent offending, Hales, Lewis and Silverstone concluded that ‘illegal drugs markets represent the single most important theme in relation to the use of illegal firearms’ (Hales, Lewis and Silverstone, 2006: 65). Noting that the level of violence appears to increase towards the street, or retail, end of the market, they cite four specific aspects of the relationship between illegal drugs and illegal firearms: the robbery of drug dealers; territorial disputes; protection; and sanctioning (in the context of recovery of debts, for robbing of dealers, for ‘putting a dealer’s name about’ and for selling ‘dud’ drugs) (ibid: 65–72).

The researchers comment that the underlying explanation for this relationship is that participants in illegal drug markets have no recourse to conventional risk management strategies such as legally enforceable contracts, calling the police or purchasing insurance (ibid: 65); and they identify three main challenges for policy makers:

- Drug dealing underpins the criminal economy, and is ‘out-competing’ the legitimate labour market alternatives for some young people, especially those in more structurally marginalised positions.
- The non-availability of legal solutions means that firearms offer ultimate levels of both protection and empowerment.
- Police intervention in drug markets can destabilise them, breaking down relationships, and so making markets more violent.

## Gangs and guns

A significant element in the current emotionally charged debate about 'gun crime' concerns the seeming prevalence of 'gangs'. The research conducted by Hales, Lewis and Silverstone also provides some useful contributions to the debate about the relationship between the illegal use of firearms and the existence and activities of 'gangs' – not least, drawing upon the work of Hallsworth, 2005, in proposing the following typology of 'gangs and crews':

- Close friendship groups – having a social focus, involved in localised and time-limited conflicts, which occasionally escalate to more serious violence.
- Associates – not close friends, and periodically involved in low-level criminality.
- Criminal crews – focusing on activities such as controlling local drugs markets, and in some cases other offending such as armed robberies.
- Organised crime networks – whose activities include middle-market drug activity, more serious armed robberies, and quasi-legitimate enterprises such as door security companies.

(Hales, Lewis and Silverstone, 2006: 29–31)

This, of course, is just one of a number of possible ways of defining and categorising types of gangs. As Bennett and Holloway note in their 2004 study 'Gang membership, drugs and crime in the UK', '[t]he issue of the definition of gangs is problematic and part of the current debate among gang researchers'. They go on to comment that '[t]he problem of the definition is exacerbated in the UK context, as much less is known about the nature of gangs'. For the purposes of their own research, these authors cite the prevailing American definitions of street gangs: 'groups based on a strong gang identity, moderate levels of organization, versatile offending patterns (with some exceptions), amplification of criminal behaviour over time and a variety of structures' (Bennett and Holloway, 2004: 306).

One of the values of this kind of typology is that it immediately conveys the inherent complexities of the relationship between firearms and 'gangs'. A 'complex and nuanced picture begins to emerge concerning the ways in which 'gun crime' and 'gang crime' may or may not be related to one another. Furthermore the current debate about gangs and firearms is taking place at a time when definitions of gangs and concerns about gang-related criminal activity have become increasingly contested' (Squires, 2007: 21, 79).

Nevertheless, the overview of research undertaken by the Jill Dando Institute did identify some useful findings in this context. For example, the authors cite an unpublished Home Office analysis of arrestee data showing that gang members are five times as likely as non-gang members to report owning a gun and another unpublished report, by Communities that Care, showing that London students claiming to be gang-involved were nearly seven times more likely to have carried a gun in the past year than students claiming not to be involved with a gang (Marshall, Webb and Tilley, 2005: 17). Bennett and Holloway also examined the relationship between gang membership and gun use. They found:

'Gang members were also more heavily involved in possession of weapons and guns. All comparisons between gang members and non-gang members were highly significant. About two-thirds of current gang members had taken a weapon to commit an offence. Over half had possessed a gun and three-quarters said that they had mixed with people who possessed guns. One-third of gang members said that they had taken a gun with them when committing an offence, and two-thirds of gang members said that they had fired a gun.'

(Bennett and Holloway, 2004: 317)

Of less direct relevance to issues relating to ‘gun crime’, but of considerable importance to current policy debates, the Jill Dando Institute also found that gangs were more likely to be based on territory than on ethnicity, that there was little evidence to support conjecture that female involvement in gangs was increasing, and that the age of involvement in gangs may be decreasing (Marshall, Webb and Tilley, 2005: 8).

Research by Pitts (informed by international gang research) on gang development in Waltham Forest has cast further light on the ages of those becoming involved in gang activity. Pitts titled his report *Reluctant Gangsters* (Pitts, 2007), pointing out how gang development could be seen as an extension of younger bullying networks that vulnerable young people were required to negotiate in their communities. For some, joining the gang, albeit reluctantly, was preferable to being victimised by it. Hallsworth (2005) likewise cites young people ‘thugging up’, adopting the styles and behavioural conventions of gangs or even joining them as the most viable form of self-protection. Such findings seem entirely consistent with the work of ethnographic researchers (referred to earlier) undertaken on both sides of the Atlantic, detailing how young males in particular are required to negotiate their masculinity and ‘street cred’ in impoverished, oppressive and often highly competitive environments (Katz, 1988; Anderson, 1999; Mullins, 2006).

Perhaps surprisingly, these issues came up in the ‘gun crime’ summit organised by the Home Office in January 2004. Participants at the conference described the attractions of guns and the gun culture in the following ways:

‘... to show allegiance to a group or gang... to imitate icons such as rap artists or action heroes, or more generally to increase one’s status in the neighborhood – to get ‘respect’... to have or use a gun for protection ‘on the street’... to use a gun to commit crimes or to fight in conflict situations... The focus was on young men who have or use guns because they believe that guns give a person ‘respect’, power and/or protection.’

(Home Office, 2004: 2)

At the same time, participants at the event discussed the wider ‘causes’ of gun culture, ‘from global trends to individual circumstances... [where] ‘guns get you respect’ [and] may be seen as survival tools in some areas’ (ibid: 3, 11). Yet, as we will see in Chapter 6, when considering the policy interventions emerging from these ‘summit’ events, despite such insights and the situated understandings of ‘gun culture’ they established, the policies being proposed appeared a familiar ‘New Labour’ cocktail of responsibilisation, partnership policing, community capacity building and moral rearmament, as if the problems ‘belonged’ to the communities and might be dealt with simply at that level.

At the same time, discussing the ‘intelligence-led’ community policing contributions to tackling ‘gun crime’, Squires (2007, 2008a) has argued that police activities in targeting key gang members have also established a further form of firearm displacement, with younger gang ‘conscripts’ unknown to the police being required to run errands, transport drugs or conceal weapons for older gang members. In turn this has led to new government legislation for a new offence of ‘minding a gun’ and for the lowering of the age at which mandatory sentences apply (under sections 28 and 30 of the Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006).

## ‘Gun culture’

The third prevalent theme underpinning the debate about ‘gun crime’, regularly reflected in both the media and political commentary, is the notion that the UK has an evolving or increasingly problematic ‘gun culture’ (Squires, 2000; Hales, Lewis and Silverstone, 2006; HAC, 2007). The essentially nebulous nature of this term means that it can be used to

convey a wide array of presumptions, preoccupations and prejudices. These include, for example, the role of music and 'unsuitable' role models, and the general explanation of 'gun crime' in terms of 'lifestyles choices' rather than broader social factors.

The vagueness of the term 'gun culture' also means that it is a particularly difficult subject to address through statistical or research-based evidence. Nevertheless, recent research has produced a number of findings that are of direct relevance to some of the assumptions that underlie the current policy debate in this area.

One of the most fundamental contributions is the suggestion by Hales, Lewis and Silverstone that there are two general categories of 'gun culture':

'It is clear that the possession and use of illegal firearms is too complex to be explained by reference to a single unifying criminal 'gun culture', and that it may be more useful to describe the presence of plural criminal gun cultures. Specifically, two 'ideal types' may be identified, distinguishing between an instrumental criminal gun culture in which guns are used only for offensive criminal purposes such as armed robbery, and a complex criminal gun culture in which the role of firearms is more generalised, including offensive, defensive and symbolic functionality.'

(Hales, Lewis and Silverstone, 2006: 103)

The authors go on to note that 'the latter [the complex criminal gun culture] is more recent, appears to reflect changing criminal cultures and is becoming increasingly significant', and suggest that it is underpinned by three consistent themes: 'the ascendancy of criminal role models, the market in illegal drugs and cultures of gang membership' (ibid), thus reinforcing the interrelationship between drugs, gangs and firearms crime. Notions of 'street credibility' and 'respect' are critical here.

These conclusions are broadly in line with those reached by Wright, Brookman and Bennett (2006) on the basis of their research into violent street crime in the UK. One of their main conclusions was:

'Many of the street robberies in our sample were committed not to sustain the offenders' lives, but rather to maintain a particular sort of hedonistic lifestyle that rejects 'rationality and long-range planning... in favour of enjoying the moment'.'

(Wright, Brookman and Bennett, 2006: 12)

Hales, Lewis and Silverstone (2006) note that '[m]uch of the recent debate about the emergence of a 'gun culture' in the UK has focused on two themes: the significance of race and the symbolic value of firearms (fashion, status), with popular cultural sources – noticeably certain music genres – periodically singled out for vilification' (ibid: 98). However, they conclude that, for the offenders interviewed in the course of their research, instrumental motivations were far more significant than symbolic explanations. In the specific context of the role of music, they considered:

'On balance, while music... does provide an important cultural reference point for the majority of offenders interviewed, be they Black, White or Asian, its relationship to crime and violence remains unclear and appears peripheral. It seems likely that if anything the most significant factor is the aspirational lifestyle portrayed by some sections of the music industry, rather than the specific lyrics of any particular artist or genre.'

(ibid: 99)

This assessment was supported by Squires, who suggested:

'While there are periodic outcries about 'irresponsible broadcasting' allegedly celebrating gangster lifestyles, whether such complaints really add to our



understanding of the role of ‘aspirational media’ in an unequal world is rather doubtful. So called ‘gangsta rap’ may simply be the latest in a long line of disapproved of, music related, youth cultures...

(Squires, 2007: 32)

Two final implications of the research undertaken by Hales, Lewis and Silverstone are also worth mentioning here. The first is their recognition that particular criminal cultures have indeed changed in recent times, characterised by an escalation of violence and the diffusion of firearms down to younger offenders who are reported as being less restrained in their use of such weapons (Hales, Lewis and Silverstone, 2006: 103).

The second is that the relatively more straightforward category of ‘instrumental criminal gun culture’ does nevertheless have nuances of its own. Hales, Lewis and Silverstone stress that ‘there is no such thing as a ‘typical armed robbery’’, and propose four groups of armed robber (in addition to those whose offences are related to drug dealing): specialist armed robbers, mixed offending robbers, opportunists, and debtors (Hales, Lewis and Silverstone, 2006: 74–81).

Academics continue to debate the significance of gangs in the UK, especially the extent to which they display the same characteristics and, in particular, the same relationship to criminality as their US predecessors. These issues are still largely unresolved. At the same time, more research-informed and sophisticated understandings of different types of ‘gun cultures’ are now beginning to emerge, some of these even percolating into official accounts of community consultations, such as the ‘Connected’ conferences (Home Office, 2004 and 2006) and the Home Affairs Committee (2007) which talk variously and sometimes almost interchangeably, of ‘street’, ‘gang’, ‘crime’ and ‘black’ cultures. For example: ‘Witnesses also believed peer pressure and the need to fit in with the dominant street culture may also lead young people to carry firearms’ (HAC, 2007: 21).

The problem is that while such insights, albeit still contested, filter into some of the understandings being developed of the socially disadvantaged and politically marginal contexts in which ‘gun crime’ occurs, at best they appear to play only a limited role in helping form the policies to respond to these problems. At worst, as we shall see in Chapter 6, they are inappropriately taken as evidence that the problems are solely the responsibility of such communities. In both respects, a sense of denial often permeates the policy response, refusing to acknowledge that concentrated patterns of violent crime in poor communities has anything much to do with inequality, racism or the rest of society. Instead, as Hagedorn has argued, a city-wide perspective is required in order to understand the role of violence as a resource in poor communities marginalised from the mainstream economy of the city (Hagedorn, 1998, 2007).



# Policy implications and strategies for tackling ‘gun crime’

Despite the fact that the UK has one of the most comprehensive bodies of firearms legislation in the world, there is a remarkable absence of data relating to the effectiveness of both the existing legislation and its enforcement and of the wider policy framework and specific local initiatives to tackle the possession and use of illegal firearms.

For example, Hales, Lewis and Silverstone note Squires’ judgment that the impact of firearms legislation is contested and ‘notoriously difficult to measure’ (Squires, 2000) and they list several mediating factors which ‘underline the difficulties inherent in trying to understand the relationship between firearms legislation and recorded firearms offences’ (Hales, Lewis and Silverstone, 2006: 115). These include: crime counting and recording practices; crime reporting rates; legislation; policing [such as the establishment of dedicated firearms units]; and the availability of intelligence data to ascertain which illegal firearms are used and how often any particular firearm is used. Reflecting on the comments of the 55 Greater Manchester police personnel interviewed in the course of recent research with the Magnet Project (2007), Squires noted:

‘Within police culture... we find both fluidity and difference as well as important areas of agreement and disagreement concerning the problems of gun and gang related criminality and how they might most appropriately be tackled... Opinion was significantly divided [on the adequacy of the legislation for dealing with gun and gang related offending], with a quarter of respondents commenting that the legislation was adequate. A similar proportion felt that the sentencing powers available to or utilised by the courts were inadequate. A third group believed the existing firearm legislation to be inadequate for a variety of reasons, a fourth group were critical of criminal justice processes and procedures (which hindered ‘effective policing’), and a fifth group referred to specific ‘loopholes’ within the firearms legislation.’ (Squires, 2007: 75, 82)

Recently the Chief Constable of Merseyside, Bernard Hogan-Howe, weighed into the debate by accusing some members of the judiciary of being ‘lenient on gun crime by overlooking mandatory five-year sentences for possession of a firearm’ (BBC News, 25 March 2008).

The team at the Jill Dando Institute also drew the conclusion that it was difficult to assess the effectiveness of a range of ‘gun crime’ prevention policy interventions: ‘little evidence exists about what works as interventions into gun-related problems... there is little to indicate how they [various suggested interventions] can best be implemented. There is also no British evidence to speak of, of their outcome effectiveness’ (Marshall, Webb and Tilley, 2005: 18, 21).

What, then, can the evidence base outlined in earlier chapters tell us about the best strategies to address the problem of ‘gun crime’? The answer would appear to be threefold: not very much; we do know that it’s complicated; any effective response to gun crime will need to address the wider social and economic causes and contexts of interpersonal violence.

## Gaps in the evidence base

Given the obvious seriousness of the consequences of 'gun crime', and the correlative level of public concern about the problem, it would seem reasonable enough to anticipate that extensive efforts would have been made (a) to understand the problem and (b) to develop appropriate responses based on that understanding. In fact, the opposite would appear to be the case. One of the strongest and most consistent themes to emerge from the research that is available is the inadequacy of the existing evidence base in terms of providing a basis for formulating policy responses to the problem of 'gun crime'.

By way of an indicative example, these are just some of the 'unresolved issues' requiring further research identified by the Jill Dando Institute in its overview of research into gangs, guns and related issues:

- The extent and nature of weapon possession, guns in particular, is unclear.
- Due, in part, to under-reporting, the actual extent and nature of crime involving weapons is unknown.
- The proportion of firearms-related offences that involve the use of firearms capable of discharging ammunition is unclear.
- There is little to explain the apparent variations in patterns of firearms offences by place.
- The extent and nature of the relationship between gang involvement and the use of weapons is unclear.
- It is difficult to determine the prevalence of gangs and gang membership, or the proportion of crime attributable to them.
- We know relatively little about the factors which encourage and discourage the presence of weapons.
- Differences between gangs involved in firearms and those that aren't are unclear.

(Marshall, Webb and Tilley, 2005: 12–25)

## The complexity of the problem

It can be seen, then, that there are a considerable number of substantial deficiencies in the evidence base relating to the nature and extent of gun-related offending, including a dearth of sound evidence about the effectiveness or otherwise of possible approaches to addressing the phenomenon or phenomena. Notwithstanding these deficiencies, however, it is possible to draw two general lessons from the statistics and research referred to in this paper that have direct relevance for current policy debates about 'gun crime' in the UK.

The first is that any response to 'the gun crime problem' which fails to take into account the complexity of the problem is unlikely to be successful. As the Jill Dando Institute expressed it, 'There is a need to move away from crude stereotypes of drug dealing, gun wielding gangs and towards acknowledging the considerable complexity of the issues involved' (Marshall, Webb and Tilley, 2005: 23). For example, as the discussion in Chapter 4 of the wider social context of firearm-related offending suggested, it is essential that policy responses address the social and cultural significance of activities such as gang conflict, armed robbery and drug dealing.

One implication of the way in which the use of firearms has become embedded within broader criminal lifestyles is that interventions based on a 'rational choice understanding of offending' are likely to be of limited effectiveness (Hales, Lewis and Silverstone, 2006: 114). Of more direct relevance to the topics that are prominent within the public debate about 'gun crime' is the fact that the available research provides persuasive grounds for

questioning the likely efficacy of mandatory minimum sentences as a means of addressing 'gun crime'. For example: 'Increasingly punitive approaches may only have a marginal impact on individuals who perceive a high credible risk to their personal safety. Indeed, where such individuals feel that they may be killed it is conceivable that no reasonable criminal sanction would deter them from carrying firearms' (Hales, Lewis and Silverstone, 2006: 95). The authors also note that mandatory minimum sentences constitute a disincentive to enter an early guilty plea or to co-operate with police investigations (ibid: 94).

This scepticism about the wisdom of attempting to address firearm offending by means of sentencing policy accords with the conclusions reached by the Halliday review of sentencing undertaken on behalf of the government in 2001. Although the review found that sentences did have a deterrent effect, it found 'no evidence to show what levels of punishment produce what levels of general deterrence'. It further noted:

'The evidence shows the importance of certainty of punishment, so that deterrent effects are unlikely to be achieved if the prospects of avoiding detection and conviction are high. It is the prospect of getting caught that has deterrence value, rather than alterations to the 'going rate' for severity of sentences. The lack of correlation between punishment levels and crime levels is in line with the current literature which analyses these trends in other jurisdictions... There appears to be no statistical correlation between types of sentence and likelihood of desistence, according to Home Office analysis of the Offenders' Index.'

(Halliday, French and Goodwin, 2001; 8–9)

We can develop this point about the respective merits of different intervention strategies for tackling 'gun crime' – and, in particular, the limitations of deterrent, enforcement only and imprisonment policies – by reference to the recent Magnet Gun Crime Modelling project (Magnet Project, 2007). This innovative project, funded by the Engineering and Physical Science Research Council in 2005–2006, following a 'Tackling Gun Crime' research 'sandpit', sought to test the potential effectiveness of a range of gun crime intervention methods and strategies. The project utilised actual data derived from key offender populations in Manchester to predict realistic transition rates between those considered 'at risk/susceptible', to 'gun user', to imprisoned population, to recidivist. Drawing on information about gun supply, gang conflicts and police interventions, an epidemiological modelling tool developed by the project was able to predict the impact of given crime management interventions.

Consistent with more qualitative, theoretical and ethnographic work in the USA referring to 'prisonisation' processes (Anderson, 1999) and Wacquant's notion of 'deadly symbiosis' (Wacquant, 2001), the Magnet model was able to demonstrate that widespread imprisonment of young 'at risk' men is likely to increase gang formation and, overall, to escalate levels of gun crime as these men are returned to the community. Direct empirical confirmation of this as an issue was evident in the wider array of qualitative intelligence data made available by Greater Manchester Police to support the project. Thus a number of police intelligence scripts ran as follows: 'XX1 is said to be touring pubs in the YY area with XX2. They are thought to have access to handguns. XX1 is trying to reassert his position in YY following release from prison.'

## Addressing the causes of crime

As a corollary to the above point about the complexity of the 'gun crime' problem, the second general lesson to be drawn from the available evidence base is that it is necessary, in the words of the second part of that much-quoted soundbite, to be 'tough on the causes of crime'. In the present context, part of what this means is the importance of

developing and implementing contextualised strategies that address local problems. This requires a thorough analysis of the problem to determine what interventions and measures should be put in place (see: Hales, Lewis and Silverstone, 2006: 105; Marshall, Webb and Tilley, 2005: 21).

Fundamentally, however, the core message from the existing evidence base is that firearm-related offending must be understood as the result of a complex combination of social and economic factors – and it will be necessary to address these social and economic factors in order to tackle the ‘gun crime’ problem effectively. This conclusion accords with the more general proposition, supported by a substantial body of research, that there is a direct correlation between economic inequality and violent crime, including homicide. For example, Wilkinson has recently noted that ‘there have been more than fifty studies showing a clear tendency for violence to be more common in societies where income differences are larger’ (Wilkinson, 2005: 47). He goes on to suggest that ‘so firmly established is the relationship between inequality and homicide... that many criminologists regard it as the most well-established relation between homicide and any environmental factor’ (ibid: 50).

In the particular context of homicide, Dorling undertook a detailed analysis of the murders committed in Britain over the two decades from January 1981 to December 2000 (Dorling, 2005). His analysis showed that, although the overall murder rate had increased over the period concerned, this increase had not been distributed evenly across the population. For example, the risk of being murdered had increased for men but decreased for women. However, the strongest determinant of an individual’s likelihood of being murdered is poverty. In the five years from 1996 to 2000, people living in the poorest 10 per cent of wards in Britain were 5.68 times more likely to be murdered than those living in the least poor 10 per cent of wards (ibid: 31). And for the whole 20-year period he studied, Dorling found that ‘the rise in murder in Britain has been concentrated almost exclusively in men of working age living in the poorest parts of the country’ (ibid: 32). On the basis of this analysis, Dorling concluded that the deeper causes of the increased murder rate lie in the social and economic policies pursued by successive governments during the 1980s and 1990s.

In the light of the discussion in Chapter 3 about the demographics of ‘gun crime’ offenders and victims, it is interesting to note what Dorling says about firearm homicide:

‘The most important myth to dispel is that of gun crimes being a key factor behind the high murder rates in poor areas. Firearms account for only 11% of murders in the poorest wards of Britain compared to 29% of murders in the least poor areas. The more affluent the area, the more likely it is that guns will be used when murders are committed... The use of firearms has risen in the poorest wards over the 20 years, but only by roughly an additional five murders a year (roughly one extra murder per million people living there).’  
(Dorling, 2005)

In conclusion, the key to addressing firearm-related offending – based on the existing evidence – is perhaps best summed up by Hales, Lewis and Silverstone’s reflection upon their interviews with 80 convicted firearm offenders:

‘Some of the findings of this research point to clear recommendations, such as greater efforts to tackle the availability and conversion of highly realistic imitation firearms; most, however, are more challenging and require social and economic rather than technical solutions.’  
(Hales, Lewis and Silverstone, 2006: 114)

# The government's approach

In recent years, the government has sought to respond to high profile crimes involving firearms that have received extensive media coverage. This chapter provides a brief overview of the government's most recent actions and statements in relation to 'gun crime' and highlights the defining features.

One of the most revealing recent illustrations of the government's inclinations in this regard came in February 2007, prompted by four fatal shootings in south London over an 11-day period, in which three of the victims were teenagers. The then Prime Minister Tony Blair's response was to announce a review of firearms legislation, indicating that he wanted to lower from 21 to 17 the age at which the mandatory five-year prison sentence for carrying a gun would be imposed. He also called a summit of ministers and police to discuss the 'gun crime' problem.

However, it quickly emerged that the 2003 Criminal Justice Act had already lowered the age at which the five-year minimum sentence could be applied from 21 to 18. It was also noted that this would be the fourth summit in just over three years that Mr Blair had called to address the issue of 'gun crime and gangsters' (Jones, 2007).

At the first such summit, 'Connected: Together We Can Tackle Gun Crime', held in Birmingham in January 2004 in the wake of the New Year's Eve murders of Charlene Ellis and Letisha Shakespeare, the government strategy centred on community empowerment against the 'gang and gun culture' developing in a number of cities and on rebuilding trust and confidence in community policing in excluded and vulnerable communities. Participants at the event 'included young people, officers from local authorities, police officers, teachers, central government civil servants, activists on gun issues, youth workers and others with direct experience of gun crime' (Home Office, 2004). While this membership implied a familiar 'joined-up', community-led, activist and experiential approach to the issue, a research and evaluation dimension was notably absent from the event. While the conference report of the event certainly took a broad-based understanding of the gang and gun problem, drawing effectively upon the experiences of many community groups while sharing and disseminating good practice, there is also a sense in which the conference was, above all, endorsing a strategy of social and moral renewal and 'capacity building' (Ennifer, 2004) at the community level, aided and abetted by community policing, not unlike the government's later 'Respect' agenda (see Squires (ed.), 2008b).

Proposals from the conference included:

- Rooting initiatives in local communities
- Finding and funding local solutions to local problems
- Supporting strong local partnerships
- Building sustainable, cohesive, socially inclusive, thriving communities
- Encouraging active citizenship – promoting empowerment and responsibility
- Encouraging and supporting parents to take responsibility and ownership of their children's life chances, and helping make sure that children and young people get the support and care they need



- Encouraging and supporting positive role models and mentoring schemes
- Providing accessible, appropriate and responsive youth provision
- Including young people in setting local agendas, developing policies, planning services, advocacy, peer mediation etc.

(Home Office, 2004)

While such proposals did not lack ambition, they were generally stronger on aspirational rhetoric about community capacity building and effective partnership, punctuated with participants 'hopes' and 'pledges' (ibid: 27–28) than they were on mainstreaming the practical policies to address poverty, educational disadvantage, social exclusion, racism and lack of economic opportunities – in other words, the issues that academic and policy research has consistently and over many years shown to be associated with inflated rates of crime, anti-social behaviour, violence and intimidation (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998; Dorling, 2005; Pitts, 2007).

A second summit event was held in Oxford in May 2006 (Home Office, 2006), which, while it couldn't be faulted for its breadth and enthusiasm, seemed to suffer from a similar lack of practical focus. Although it recommended developing 'a robust understanding of the issues that need to be addressed, by talking to people directly affected and other stakeholders' (ibid: 22), the highlighting of such homespun truths as: 'a biblical lifestyle will change gun and knife crime' (ibid: 23) and Home Office minister (now Attorney General) Baroness Scotland's comment, 'I want all my dreams to come true – that is not easy, but it is doable' (ibid: 24) suggest that something other than traditional policy making, drawing upon a conventional evidence base, was going on at the first two summits.

Following a third summit in 2007, the then Home Secretary John Reid announced a 'three-point plan' to tackle gun crime': 'policing, powers and prevention'. Specific measures included:

- A wide-ranging review of the legislation relating to guns, gangs and knives
- Consideration of making gang membership an aggravating factor when judges pass sentence in gun and knife crime cases
- A parliamentary order to ensure that judges apply the five-year minimum sentence to people aged between 18 and 21
- The new offence of 'minding a weapon', passed in the Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006, would be introduced earlier than planned, meaning that under-18s could face sentences of up to ten years
- A ban on the sale, manufacture and importation of realistic imitation firearms to be implemented later in the year.

(Home Office, 2007a; Glover and Travis, 2007)

A second prime ministerial intervention in the debate about violent crime came in April 2007, this time prompted by concerns about a spate of shootings in London where the perpetrators and victims were thought to be unusually young. Tony Blair expressed his view that the murders were not caused by poverty but by a 'distinctive black culture' (Wintour and Dodd, 2007). On this occasion, the Prime Minister's assessment set him somewhat at odds with his then Home Office minister Baroness Scotland, who the previous month had told the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee that while she accepted there was a problem with 'gun crime', there was no evidence that it was specifically a black issue (Johnston, 2007).



An early indication of Gordon Brown's inclinations with regard to 'gun crime' was provided in his speech to the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) in June 2007, shortly before he became Prime Minister. He said:

'The clear message needs to go out to young people: carrying weapons will not be tolerated. No matter the circumstances, no matter the peer pressure, no matter what anyone else is carrying... Five years for carrying a gun, two years for a knife – there will be no let up on our efforts to bear down on these crimes.' (Brown, 2007)

And this stereotypically tough stance was maintained by the then Prime Minister's response to the shooting of 11 year old Rhys Jones in Liverpool in August: 'Where there is a need for new laws, we will pass them, where there is a need for tougher enforcement we will make sure that that happens' (Brown, 2007a). For her part, the Home Secretary Jacqui Smith added that she would be looking at legislation to compel witnesses of 'gun crime' to give evidence to the police and the courts<sup>5</sup>. In September 2007 the Home Office announced a renewed initiative, the Tackling Gangs Action Programme (TGAP), to tackle 'gun crime' in areas identified by the police as 'suffering disproportionately from problems with criminal gangs... involved in gun crime' (Home, 2007b). Proposals included:

- Use of covert operations and surveillance against targeted gang members
- High visibility police presence on the streets in the target areas including on routes to and from schools
- Use of civil orders to restrict gang members
- Supply of safe houses for victims, witnesses and those seeking to leave gangs
- Provision of mediation services for gang members
- Greater witness protection including considering ACPO proposals for witness anonymity.

This tough policing-led response was subsequently reiterated by Gordon Brown, speaking at the Labour Party Conference. In targeted areas, he said, the police would also be embarking on high-profile stop and search operations to deter gun carrying by offenders. Action on these priorities followed on 28 November 2007 when, as part of the TGAP initiative, a co-ordinated day of action saw four police forces, in conjunction with HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA), execute 67 search warrants and arrest 118 people while seizing over 1,300 firearms. Intriguingly, however, only ten of the firearms seized were capable of live firing (and four were air weapons), confirming yet again the nature of the UK illegal firearms inventory and the significance of replica weapons within it (Home Office, 2007c).

TGAP 'is run by a dedicated national unit comprising of members from central Government, local Government and frontline services. It is overseen by a central Ministerial Taskforce on guns and gangs, chaired by the Home Secretary' (Home Office, 2007d). It forms part of the new Violent Crime Action Plan for 2008–11 (Home Office, 2008).

The action plan promised a seemingly comprehensive and 'joined up' response as articulated by the Home Secretary in her foreword to the document:

'We will continue to prevent and detect illegal firearms entering the UK, and introduce new controls to remove deactivated firearms from our streets. We will work with the police to develop new technology to improve police intelligence on firearms used in crime. We will ensure that, particularly in relation to gang violence, witnesses receive the best possible protection from the earliest stage of the criminal justice process. Over the next five years we will educate 1.1 million young people on

5. Reported in *The Guardian*, 24 August 2007.

the dangers of carrying weapons. We will immediately give the police and others 100 search arches and 400 search 'wands' to increase detection of [weapons].'  
(Home Office, 2008)

Policing, target-hardening, intelligence, technology and social crime prevention form the core of the strategy but there is little reference to research or learning capacity referred to within the programme and, save for a positive hint that 'gun crime' seems at last to be falling slightly, very little is said about sources of illegal gun supply. By contrast, examples are presented within the programme document and the wider action plan initiative to illustrate the kinds of educative anti-gang and anti-violence work designed to reduce demand for guns in key communities. The action plan document illustrates the work of the Manchester Multi-Agency Gang Strategy (MMAGS) (ibid: 17), while the Home Secretary praised the work of Lambeth's X-it project 'which aims to reduce offending behaviour among young people who are directly at risk of joining gangs or who want to leave gangs' by using ex-gang members as mentors for young people (Home Office, Press Release, 19 December 2007).

These most recent developments have followed the implementation of the Violent Crime Reduction Act (VCRA, discussed in Chapter 1). Following pressure from ACPO and the Police Federation, amongst others, there is to be a ban on the trade in deactivated firearms. Within the EU, the VCRA has been complemented by a strengthening of EU Directive 477 (European Union, 1991) on the control of the acquisition and possession of weapons. The directive will align the EU policy with the so-called 'firearms protocol' against transnational organised crime by the United Nations and is aimed to strengthen controls on illicit manufacture and trafficking of small arms.

An indication of the progress of the government's strategy was provided in May this year, in the form of the publication of *Tackling Gangs: A Practical Guide* (Home Office 2008a). It comprised guidance on a wide range of measures that were either already in place (in the Manchester, London, Birmingham or Liverpool areas) as well as proposals for future measures for local agencies to pursue. Illustrative examples included:

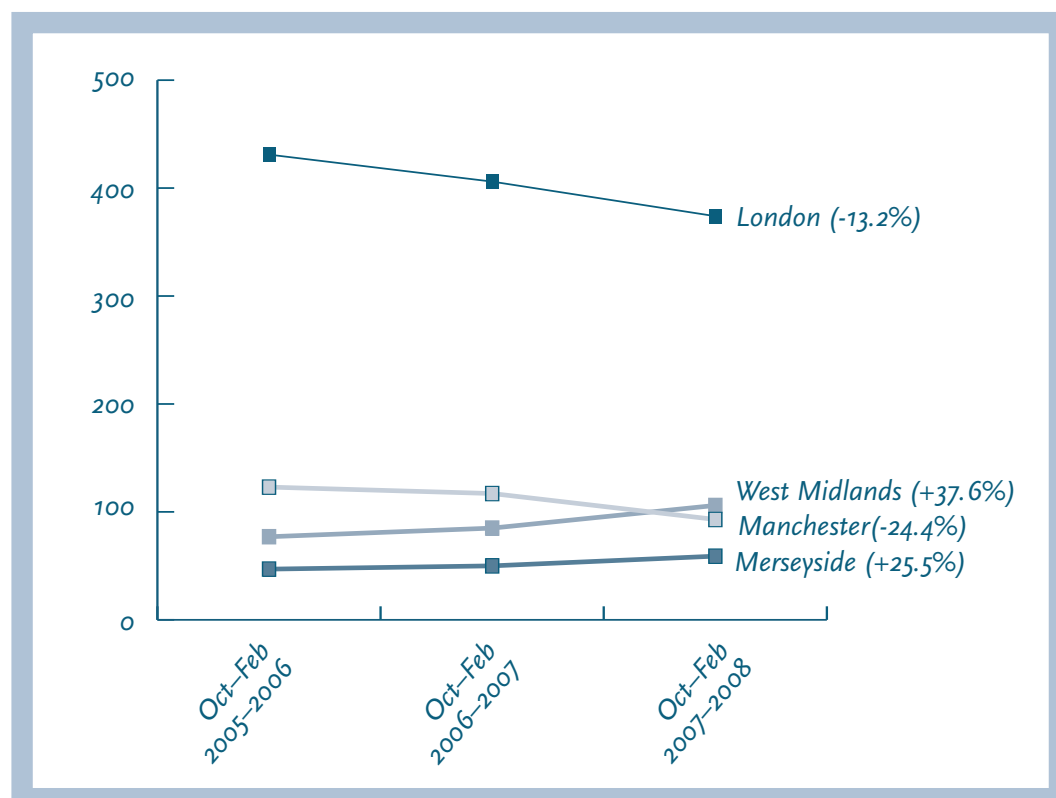
- Enforcement strategies for dealing with gangs
- Section 60 stop and search initiatives
- Armed checkpoints
- ANPR initiatives
- Gang disruption operations
- Crack house closures
- Witness intimidation initiatives
- ASBOs and injunctions for use against gang members

(Home Office, 2008c)

The publication of the *Tackling Gangs: A Practical Guide* coincided with the publication of monitoring data from the Tackling Gangs Action Programme (TGAP) centering upon police enforcement and surveillance activities and which had run for six months from October 2007 to February 2008. The purpose of TGAP had been to target and reduce gang-related gun crime. The initiative was focused upon the four English police force areas with the highest rates of gang-related gun violence (London, Greater Manchester, Merseyside and the West Midlands), targeting the highest crime neighbourhoods within these four areas. The policing activity was supported by a monitoring exercise examining: (i) police recorded firearms offences and firearm injuries, (ii) analysis of the characteristics of the gang member target group and (iii) public perceptions of the programme's impact. It is acknowledged, however, that not all gun crime is attributable to gang activity.

As Figure 10 suggests, however, the results were mixed. Comparing the TGAP intervention period with the same months during the two previous years, we can see that the two police force areas, London and Greater Manchester, experienced reductions in overall firearms offences by the end of the TGAP initiative whereas the other two (West Midlands and Merseyside) saw overall increases in firearm offending. This evidence also provides a perspective from which to question further the overall effectiveness of the TGAP initiative.

**Figure 10: Comparing the impact of TGAP across four cities: numbers of firearms offences in each city, October 2007 to February 2008 and the same period in the previous two years (and overall percentage changes, 2005–2006 to 2007–2008)** *Source: TGAP Monitoring Data*



Given the scale of the different cities' gun crime problems, and especially the dominant effect of the London figures within the national totals, the overall gun crime reduction claimed by the TGAP programme (27 per cent) is largely attributable to the falling rate of gun crime in London alone. In this light, it is appropriate, perhaps, to question the contribution that a predominantly enforcement led approach to gun violence might have – especially when its precursor has demonstrated such mixed results.

Finally, early 2008 saw the long-awaited launch of the National Ballistics Intelligence Service (NABIS) and suggestions that SOCA may be increasing the priority given to addressing the trafficking of firearms into the UK. However, such developments remain blanketed in a 'high policing' or political 'security' paradigm and, despite a brief mention in the Violent Crime Action Plan, tend not to be the kinds of issues over which the authorities appear willing to share information. Hence, it becomes difficult to research or evaluate either the effectiveness of policies adopted or how such interventions contribute to the wider evidence base informing policy making.



# Conclusion: government policy and the evidence base

This report has sought to identify key lessons from the evidence relating to the use of firearms in crime. Generally speaking both ‘gun crime’ offenders and their victims are likely to be male, are disproportionately likely to be black (African Caribbean and Black British) and mainly come from economically deprived communities. Research demonstrates significant relationships between ‘gun crime’ and illegal drugs markets (Hales, Lewis and Silverstone, 2006), but the general message from the evidence base is that the nature and causal explanations of ‘gun crime’ are highly complex and that there are substantial gaps in our existing knowledge of the facets and causes of ‘gun crime’ and its regulation. However, one strong message that does emerge from the current evidence base is that most of the problems associated with the illegal use of firearms require social and economic rather than criminal justice solutions. On the other hand, there is no compelling evidence to suggest that the approach currently being pursued by the government – with its emphasis on punitive, mandatory sentencing – is likely to prove a durable or effective way of dealing with firearm-related offending. In fact, some evidence seems to point quite the other way.

The most striking feature of the government’s approach to addressing ‘gun crime’ is that ministers, including prime ministers, tend to respond to highly publicised murders by reassuring the public about the toughness of their intentions, rather than taking the opportunity to highlight the complexity of the issues at stake or even acknowledging that we do not, by any means, have all the answers when it comes to addressing firearm-related offending.

It might reasonably be stated, however, that we should not assess government policy on ‘gun crime’ on the basis of the febrile aftermath of distressing events. Furthermore, it is certainly true that the approach articulated in the recently published Violent Crime Action Plan (Home Office, 2008) is rather more multi-faceted than one might predict on the basis of ministerial statements alone. Nevertheless, even that document, which at the time of writing represents the most comprehensive current statement of the government’s thinking in this area, is arguably as problematic as the more hard-line ministerial statements cited in Chapter 6.

There are two main reasons for suggesting this. The first is that nowhere in the catalogue of actions is there any mention of further research to enhance understanding of either the problems themselves or the effectiveness of possible measures to address them. Despite the abundant evidence of the extensive gaps in the existing evidence base, it would appear that the government is content to commit substantial public resources to tackling this highly sensitive and distressing form of offending by means of a largely enforcement-led strategy on the basis of an at best partial understanding of the issues.

The second problem with the approach set out in the action plan is that nowhere within the plethora of social programmes and proposals listed within the category of ‘prevention’ is there any recognition of the need to tackle income inequality and poverty. While it is certainly true that programmes such as Neighbourhood Renewal and Connections are designed to address *some* of the *consequences or symptoms* of inequality, this is a very different thing to actually addressing inequality itself.

By way of conclusion, it has to be said that neither of these flaws in the government's approach should come as any great surprise. Contrary to its commitment to be 'tough on crime' – and to its similarly oft-repeated commitment to 'evidence-based policy making' – the government's criminal justice policy (and wider social policy) has been characterised by a reluctance to acknowledge the causal relation between income inequality and violent crime (and other forms of social harm), and a more or less flagrant disregard for the relevant evidence base, including gaps in that evidence base.

Despite the existence of the Jill Dando Institute's cataloguing of the 'known unknowns' of UK 'gun crime' (Marshall, Webb and Tilley, 2005) there has, across the board, been an apparent reluctance to fully engage social scientific and criminological research into the problem. Even the study by Hales, Lewis and Silverstone (2006), the most comprehensive and informative analysis of the issue we have so far in the UK, saw its publication delayed by the Home Office for several months, presumably to enable some of the report's specific policy recommendations to be more effectively synchronised with the government's proposals. It has to be said that a number of the report's more immediate and enforcement-centred recommendations have found their way into the 2006 Violent Crime Reduction Act and the subsequent Violent Crime Action Plan (Home Office, 2008), but it is equally clear that other, more searching and far-reaching policy options have not found governmental ears quite so receptive. As we noted earlier in Chapters 4 and 5, there have been two 'Connected' conferences and two further gun and gang crime 'summits'. These comprised part reassurance, part community engagement and partnership development, and they partly reflected the government's need to be seen to be doing something. Research, as we have noted, scarcely seemed a priority at these events, however.

Finally, there have been two ACPO conferences, in 2006 and 2007, devoted to 'tackling firearms', but these have been almost entirely devoted to managerialist responses either to aid the police and streamline the relationships between the police, Crown Prosecution Service, HM Customs and Excise and other agencies, to share lessons and good practice or to lobby for (potentially controversial) changes in evidence and procedure to make it easier to bring offenders to justice or to protect victims and witnesses. The ACPO conference proposals also included suggestions for the extension of 'super ASBO' provisions for gang-related serious offenders, the amendment of rules relating to evidence disclosure and provisions to ensure witness anonymity. At the same time a number of Chief Constables have made headlines with their own further suggestions. An assumption here seems to be that the skills, insights and intelligence to tackle 'gun crime' problems are all available 'in house', within the police and criminal justice system. By contrast, our argument, based in part on a wider appreciation of available criminological research and partly upon our broader reservations about the efficacy or durability of criminal justice solutions for social problems (Garside, 2006), is that this is very unlikely.

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