

GUNMEN AND GROUPS

Officer S. Astle and E. R. Brady, Senior Probation Officer, describe groupwork that is done in Swinfen Hall with inmates who used firearms in their offending.

Swinfen Hall YOI caters for long term young offenders, the range of sentences being three and a half years to Life. Among them are a number who have used guns in their offending, either handguns (mostly), shotguns or automatic weapons.

Existing courses in the prison already dealt with offending behaviour, drugs and alcohol, but not specifically the use of guns. Those offences cause particular fears and carry, particular dangers both to the victims and to the offenders themselves from the response of the Police Firearms Units.

It was therefore considered important to tackle this particular facet of offending behaviour.

The tutors are an experienced prison officer who has extensive knowledge of firearms from previous army service, and the Senior Probation Officer in the prison who has 30 years experience in the Probation Service.

Preparation

Inmates are seen individually by the Senior Probation Officer to explain the purpose and content of the three day course. It's relevance to a future Parole application as demonstrating to the Parole Board a willingness to 'tackle their offending behaviour' is emphasised and is usually their motivation to attend initially. It is explained that a report will be prepared on their response to the course which will be discussed with them and put in their prison file to go with their parole documents.

The Aims of the Course

These are described and written up on the flip-chart to keep in mind:

1. To think about using guns in offences;
2. To better understand the effects of guns on the victims :-
 - a. Physical
 - b. Psychological.
3. To better understand the consequences :-
 - a. Longer prison sentences
 - b. The effects on their family
 - c. Getting shot themselves by Police Firearms Unit.

The Course

It opens, after the preliminaries, with a brainstorm on 'What I like about guns'. The ideas are written up on the flip-chart. Replies have varied but usually centred around feelings that the weapons give 'power' and 'dominance'.

Two videos are screened, the first showing the effects of bullets upon the victim, the second clips from the siege at Waco in 1993.

The impact of the videos is almost invariably strong, a little surprisingly as conversations indicate a liking for violence in their normal TV viewing habits. There seems to be a realisation that these wounds are for real, not actors make-up.

It is pointed out that this is not only what would happen to their victims but it is what would happen to them should they try to resist a Police Firearms Unit, (Aim 2a. 3c).

The purpose of showing the Waco incident is to emphasise the point that a situation can get out of hand from their original intention. This is used in succeeding sessions when each recounts their offence/s.

The ABC Method

This sequence of describing the offence is also used by the Offending Behaviour Group in the prison. Some inmates attend both which are seen as complementary because of the difference in focus.

Antecedents

What led up to the offence? - The first questions are - Why commit an offence at all? Why decide to use a gun?

Frequently the answers are around: 'I needed money and an armed robbery was the quickest and easiest way to get a lot'. Some have contrasted: 'The low returns' from burglaries and 'The quick, big, cash' from the hold up.

Further probing will sometimes, but by no means always, indicate it is to counteract deeper feelings of inadequacy and inferiority, but to others a gun is seen simply as a more effective tool to terrorise than is an iron bar.

They are asked to describe how they got the weapon and their feelings when doing so.

Their answers point up the fact of how easy it is to get a weapon of varying levels of capability, and ammunition for it.

They are asked if they carried the weapon as a matter of course, or only when going to commit the offence. Replies have varied but a proportion did carry them routinely even when the weapon was a replica rather than a fireable weapon.

Behaviour

The offence itself. - They are asked to describe the whole offence beginning from the time they left home to their escape from the scene. Their memories of their own feelings throughout and the perceived reactions of the victim/s are asked, with the emphasis on the gun use element. Their particular part, (ie, did they or a co-defendant have the gun) is closely questioned.

Consequences

On their victim - a great deal of emphasis is placed upon this, stressing the psychological effects (through fear) both short and long term. The Senior Probation Officer uses general principles, the offender's perception at the time of the offence and any comments in court.

Victim Support, both locally and nationally, were approached with a view to obtaining first-hand material. To our surprise we were informed that they had none as such offences which were regarded as 'work based' rather than 'home based', and the organisation did not deal with such incidents at the present time. However this is being pursued locally.

On themselves - not surprisingly, almost all were arrested by Police Firearms Units. One described the shock of being woken from sleep to find his bed encircled by three policemen with their guns pointing at him. He now readily understands his own victim's feelings!

Many were told by the Judge on being sentenced that it was being lengthened by reason of their having used a gun, sometimes a specific time period being stated.

Few were concerned about revenge attacks on themselves, mainly because of the type of victims they had chosen, but more were concerned about younger brothers or sisters being attacked or abused at school as a result of publicity.

On their family - this aspect most often produced a thoughtful and sometimes an emotional response to a degree. One described the long-lasting shock it was to his partner when he was arrested by armed police. He too was able to identify with his victim's feelings as a result.

Each participant goes through their ABC, with the group eliciting facts, discussing implications and relevances to their own situation and experiences. These will not be completed on the first day but the majority of the six to eight participants may have done so.

At the end of the first day they are given a single sheet questionnaire to complete overnight relating to their offence and knowledge of firearms.

Throughout the day the tutor who is not leading the particular section will be observing the group interactions, the individuals' participation and will participate himself when he considers it appropriate.

The Fear Factor

This section is used to provide a break between ABCs if there appears to be a degree of boredom or repetition developing, or to start the second day after the 'homework' has been collected for later examination by the tutors.

Diagram 1

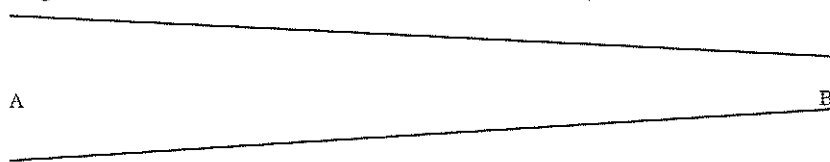
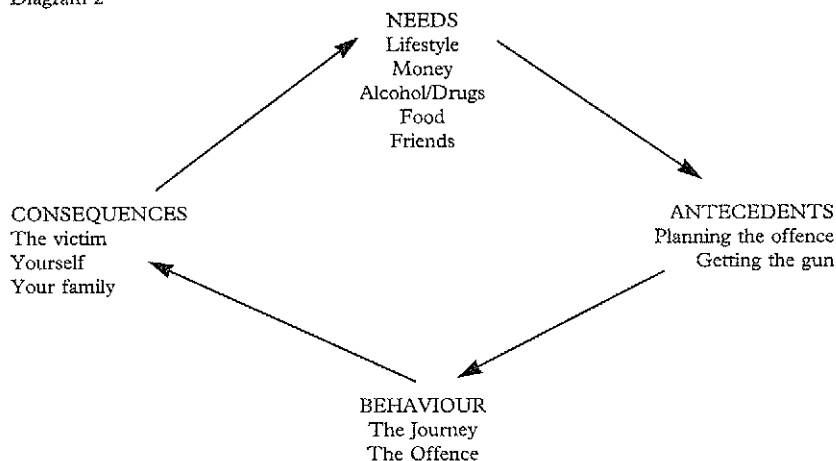


Diagram 2



Each participant is asked to think of and then describe their most frightening experience. The tutors also participate in this. Perhaps inevitably the situations have involved a possibility of serious injury or death. Sometimes it has been when they were arrested by armed police and so being at the wrong end of the gun.

This is then related to the fear and feelings they had caused to their victims.

The Forensic Complications

These are explained in a straight lecture which the participants always listen to with close interest and attention.

The methods of connecting a particular weapon to particular bullets and casings found at the scene of a crime and that these are recorded permanently are described. So if they obtain a weapon illegally they will not know its history or what other crimes, possibly murders, it has been used to commit. They could find themselves being questioned and possibly charged with very serious offences they did not commit by reason of possessing that weapon.

The Prison Officer Tutor goes on to explain the fact that illegal weapons are rarely maintained properly, and could be as dangerous to them as to their victim. Methods of maintaining weapons are NOT described.

This session is found to have a very

sobering effect.

This is reinforced by videos showing the effects from mishandling explosives, and the Police Firearms Units.

The Offending Cycle

This is to clarify the changes the participants will need to make individually to break this cycle of offending. It is introduced by explaining the Closing Options Concept. (See diagram 1.)

At 'A' there is a wide variety of options available to meet their 'needs'. As time passed and they take certain actions, options become fewer until at 'B', options are limited to perhaps one.

Each presents their ABC again, but from a different standpoint, beginning with their 'needs' at the time they decided to commit the offence. (See diagram 2). The group discussed their alternative options at the different stages.

It is stressed that at the end of the cycle they are back where they started - at the point of 'needs'.

Closing

The closing sections are 'reparation' to the victim; can they do anything now? If only a letter of apology, addressed to the place where the offence took place?

The significance of the Firearms Act in relation to their possessing weapons is explained.

Finally a brainstorm on 'What I don't like about guns', which is related back to the brainstorm at the beginning of the course.

Assessment

The take-up for the courses has been good though there have been refusers, who have usually been from the 'heavy' end of firearms offences.

Those attending have invariably participated well even when discussing highly personal matters.

As far as can be seen from comments they have made, their attitude to the using of firearms does become modified through a greater understanding of the impact on their victims and their own families and a new realisation that they will meet up with the Police Firearms Units and that the possible consequences for themselves could be the injury or death with which they have threatened others. ■