



The Untangled Web

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Guns, Gangs and Government Action



Above: Guns have dominated February's news

February 2007 has been dominated with discussions on gun crime following a number of shootings in London and Manchester. Three of the shootings have resulted in the deaths of teenagers, two of which were shot in their own homes. These killings have been linked to the gang culture that seemingly controls some estates and areas throughout the UK and has opened the debate on what membership of these gangs can lead to, including the prevalence of the carrying of guns and knives and the rule of violence.

Politicians, the police and community groups have spent the past week debating what can be done to prevent any more violent killings taking place and how to 'unglamourise' the gang culture that can draw young people into a life of crime. Various commentators, including Conservative Party leader David Cameron, have blamed the prevalence of gangs on a breakdown in family life and the absence of a male role model at home. The Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has also talked about the need for positive role models in society to show young people that there is an alternative to crime.

However, the Government also spent last week drafting new laws and devising tough measures to tackle gun crime and gang membership and, following an emergency summit on the issue, announced a set of initiatives. Is this a knee-jerk reaction from the Government so it is seen to be 'doing something' or is the use of the law the best way to stop gun crime and the dominance of gangs on the streets?

There has already been a dramatic increase in the number of armed police officers in the areas of London where some of the killings have taken place. These officers are searching vehicles and stopping people in an effort to show the community that they are there for them, as well as to get to solve the killings and catch the perpetrators. However, questions remain as to whether this approach is the best way to stamp out the use of guns in our cities.

Is increasing the number of armed police officers out on patrol the most effective way to tackle gun crime?

Danny Langley thinks that an increased armed police presence will not help solve the problem.

There is something false about Tony Blair riding to the rescue of the communities affected by gun crime and the unopposed power of gang culture. Perhaps it is because he has never lived in an area like Moss Side in Manchester or Peckham in London and he would only ever visit such places at election time.

Tony Blair says he will lower the age for dishing out longer prison sentences for those in possession of guns. Somehow I am not sure the average gang member is so terrified by an extra three years behind bars that he would change his ways to avoid them.

Sending armed police officers into such areas will only be a temporary measure and send completely the wrong messages: Firstly, that the way to deal with someone having a gun is to get a bigger gun yourself.

Secondly, that the consistent police presence that such areas have been crying out for for years only comes when they hit the national headlines. Once everyone has stopped talking about the killings, those police officers will be reassigned elsewhere as they were before and a genuine police presence in these areas preventing gangs from conducting illegal business will again be non-existent.

Preventing all crime in such areas means winning hearts and minds and focussing the passion of the community on a single target. It means that people need to see that real justice is done to criminals; that small offences are met with as much authority as murders and that the police are genuinely concerned about fighting all crime head-on. Only this will help the police to regain respect in these areas and give the communities a genuine alternative to living in fear of the dominance of gangs.

Glen Ruffle thinks more armed police in these areas will help reduce the fear of crime and give people worthwhile role models.

Placing more armed police onto the streets is the best way to shore up confidence and feelings of security amongst communities where gun crime is taking place. Far more people report a fear of crime than actually suffer a crime and a heavy police presence will not only reduce that fear but will also make it far harder for criminals to operate; if they do, they are far more likely to be caught and have to pay for their actions.

Police officers can also be positive, alternative, symbols to these communities. The young people in these areas, so often exposed to a glamorous image of guns and gangsters, will be able to see an alternative set of role models. If the police combine their heavy on-street presence with building relations with the community groups and leaders and spend time with the youth so they do not fear them but like and respect them then, rather than growing up in an atmosphere where gangsters with guns are the dominant role models, these young people will grow up to see there is an alternative. They will see that law enforcers are worth respecting and perhaps they will even aspire to becoming a police officer.

In time, the number of armed police can be reduced but for now we must understand that guns are freely available in many urban locations. In order for the public to feel safe and in order for the police to now, the police need to be on patrol with weapons. Any alternative will not send the right message and will simply allow the gangs to continue to dominate.

Government Action

Following the recent killings, Prime Minister Tony Blair held an 'emergency summit' which was attended by senior police officers, representatives from community groups and voluntary organisations. After the summit, the Home Secretary, John Reid MP, announced a three-point plan to tackle gun crime. This plan involves the Government focussing on:

Policing – ensuring the police are equipped to tackle gun crime.

Powers – giving the police and courts the powers to deal with offenders.

Prevention – empowering communities to take action themselves to prevent gun crime and gang culture and offering support to parents to challenge their children's behaviour.

To put this plan into action, many measures will be implemented, including:

- Tough punishments for those who use other people to look after weapons.
- Improved technology for linking weapons to incidents.
- Increased funding for community groups.

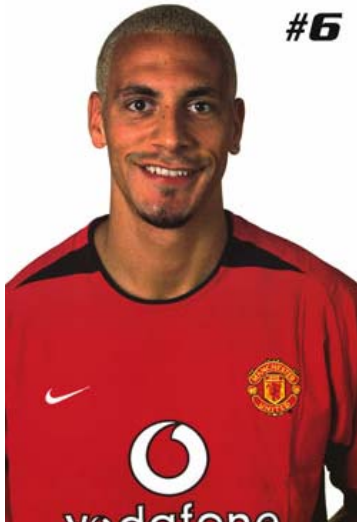
In addition, John Reid announced a review of the legislation on guns, gangs and knives and also welcomed the creation of a London Youth Crime Prevention Board by the London Community Safety Partnership to bring the Metropolitan Police, local authorities and other bodies together.

This approach includes work that was already underway and community leaders have raised questions about how these measures will help bring about the necessary culture changes. Rev Nins Obunge, of the churches group 'Peace Alliance' said that changes in legislation would not help support young people who need an exit strategy and, whilst Conservative Shadow Home Secretary David Davis welcomed the sentiment of John Reid's announcements, he also asked 'where is the action on family breakdown, truancy and stopping drugs and guns from coming into the country through our porous borders?'

Role Models

Politicians have talked of the need for positive role models, with David Cameron talking about the responsibilities that fathers have and how young people need a stable male influence in their lives. Both Cameron and Tony Blair praised the work of community leaders and the Prime Minister discussed the need for positive role models with Manchester United footballer Rio Ferdinand, who, with his brother Anton, survived an inner city upbringing without becoming embroiled in a life of crime.

Right: Footballer Rio Ferdinand successfully avoided a life of crime



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Gun Crime: The facts

- The number of people injured by firearms in England and Wales has more than doubled since 1998.
- There were 11,084 recorded firearm crimes in 2005/2006.
- London, Greater Manchester and the West Midlands account for 54% of recorded incidents.
- Figures from 2006 show that half of all firearm incidents in Manchester are committed by males aged between 15 and 20.
- No-one knows how many guns are in circulation across Britain – thousands of AK-47s from east Europe have gone 'missing' in the UK and senior police sources say guns are quick and easy to obtain.

Teen Killings

4 February 2007: James Andre Smartt-Ford, 16, was shot at Streatham Ice Arena, South London

6 February 2007: Michael Dosunmu, 15, was shot in his bedroom in Peckham, South London

14 February 2007: Billy Cox, 15, was shot at home in Clapham, South London

Several other killings took place in London this month and three shootings occurred in Manchester.

Child Deprivation

On the same day that Billy Cox was murdered, Unicef published a report looking at the well-being of children in the 21 most economically advanced countries. This study put the UK at the bottom of the league table, stating that children growing up here suffer greater deprivation, worse relationships with their parents and are exposed to more risks from alcohol, drugs and unsafe sex than those in any other wealthy country in the world.

The Netherlands tops the league, followed by Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Spain. The bottom five are Portugal, Austria, Hungary, the US and the UK.



Questions for discussion

Do you think armed police patrols will stop gun crimes from happening?

Are children today lacking positive role models?

Would you want to carry a gun?

Is gang membership necessary in some areas of the UK today?

Do you think children in the UK are deprived?

Is it up to community groups to tackle gun culture or the Government?

Whilst some commentators have argued the report was using statistics from several years ago, the study caused Al Aynsley Green, the Children's Commissioner for England, to state, "There is a crisis at the heart of our society and we must not continue to ignore the impact of our attitudes towards children and young people and the effect that this has on their wellbeing."

Does this apparent deprivation go some way to explaining why teenagers in some areas in the UK turn to gangs, drugs and guns?



Want to know more?

Guardian Newspaper's special report on gun crime: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/gun/0,,178412,00.html>

Trident's (the Metropolitan Police's specialist unit for gun-related activity within black communities) website: www.stoptheguns.org

The Government's plan to tackle gun crime: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/about-us/news/gun-crime-plan>

David Cameron's thoughts on tackling gang culture: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6367273.stm

Unicef's report: http://www.unicef.org/media/media_38299.html