

## GUN CRIME



Let us be clear about gun crime. The likelihood of being shot is remote. Guns are a minute part of overall crime in this area, and even a small fragment of the violent crime we face. Does this make it any less urgent to come up with a more effective plan to tackle gun crime? No.

Gun crime cannot be separated from the climate of fear it creates. Nor can it be answered without reference to the drugs networks it often underpins.

Whatever race you are, none of us can ignore the sense in which guns also form part of the pattern of black-on-black crime that blights the lives of youngsters themselves, and devastates the lives of families and whole communities.

I make no apology for saying that anyone caught in possession of a gun should face an automatic 5 year sentence. Of course you can inflict terrible damage on people with a whole range of other implements. But the only purpose of a gun is to shoot and if you are caught with one it must carry the assumption that you are willing to use it. A mandatory sentence makes it clear where this takes you.

Doing something about gun crime, however, also requires us to take a hard look at strengthening the relationship between society and the police, and breaking the relationship between drugs and crime.

I have had numerous discussions with family and community networks who are the victims of gun crime. My position remains unchanged. There are people in every community who know those responsible for the shootings. There will be no convictions or imprisonment if those who know will not come forward with evidence and information. It is an easy thing to say, but a much harder one to do.

Young people (and adults) tell me they would be in fear of their lives if they went to the police with information. They have no faith in our ability to protect the innocent from becoming the next victim. If the police, and other public bodies, cannot break through this barrier we will drift into a society in which only the criminal feels safe. How we protect those who would speak out against crime is one of our biggest challenges.

The second challenge is no less difficult. Many of those in communities affected by gun crime claim that the police already know who is behind it. They express an incandescent anger about the apparent freedom with which 'yardies' operate in Nottingham and more widely within the UK.

Black communities have every right to be angry. The activities of a small group of known hoodlums plays both to the fear of crime and to latent racism. Successive generations of black people have brought with them a warmth, generosity and honesty that has made Nottingham rich and diverse. Yet now they are the ones most likely to be both the principal victims of gun crime and of the caricatures left behind. The most common accusation is this – "These guys were crooks when they came in and they'll be crooks

when they go out. What we don't know is why the police allow them to stay? These guys aren't even difficult to spot. They strut their credentials like they know they are above the law. What's the point of informing the police. The police know already."

It is a harsh challenge that, at best, can only be partially true. The police know that those coming into the UK to enforce 'the turf' for different drugs or crime networks are also regularly moved from one region to another.

Sure, deportations are now taking place. But this is just a fragment and a start. And who is tipping off the villains before raids take place?

If we are to do something about gun crime, we have to make life a lot tougher for those whose criminal networks are established or protected by the presence of the gun. We talk a lot about 'zero tolerance' and usually get no further than relating this to those who are drunk or abusive on the street, those who drop litter, or the kids who nick off school. I would prefer us to be intolerant of life threatening crime rather than of beggars who can't play a whistle properly.

If the police want to make life difficult for people – and they can when they want to – then it is the organisers of serious crime who must feel uncomfortable. If this identifies others with no legal right to be in the UK (or whose presence is not conducive to the public good) then rapid removal should be the order of the day.

If we are going to do this then it should be with as much publicity as possible. Communities have to see that Britain is not a safe haven for criminal gangs backed by guns. People – particularly young people – will not come forward to talk the talk on gun crime until the police, the courts and the rest of us are willing to walk the walk – to the prisons or the airports – with those who are behind it.