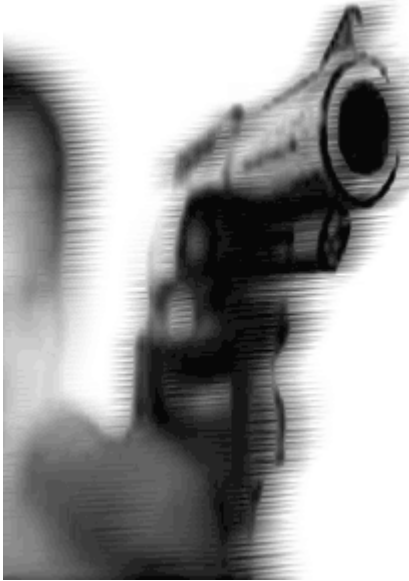




## GUN CRIME



*Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South) (Lab):* I do not represent the area in which Danielle Beccan was killed—it is represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, East (Mr. Heppell)—but I lived most of my adult life in St. Ann's. For many years, I was the chair of governors of the school that Danielle attended, and all my children went to that school. I now represent the adjoining constituency, which includes areas such as the Meadows, Radford and Lenton.

Such places are often caricatured as areas of conflict, in which gangs of young people are permanently at violent odds with each other. Indeed, I regret some of the past week's press coverage, which has painted the city that has become my home in terms that I often do not recognise. I walked around the streets in many of those communities over the

weekend, and talked to families that I have known for decades. The people who make up Nottingham are kind, decent and generous, and the city needs to be understood and recognised as comprising such people.

*Mr. Dhandra:* I do not mean to interrupt my hon. Friend's flow—he is making a very good point about his home city—but as a former resident in his constituency, I wanted to endorse his comments. I spent five very happy years in Lenton, at the university of Nottingham. Nottingham is one of the most sought-after places to live in the entire country, and like many others I spent some of the happiest times of my life in that city. I commend everything that my hon. Friend says about Nottingham.

*Alan Simpson:* I am grateful for that intervention, which illustrates one of the reasons why, on coming to Nottingham as a student, I stayed and have never wanted to leave. But I have to recognise that some of the things that families were telling me over the weekend paint a rather different picture of life in the inner city since my children's school years. Indeed, I have been confronted in a stark way with the huge changes that have taken place since my own childhood.

At the age of 14, it was easy to identify the many young males aged between 13 and 15 who cycled around estates delivering vegetables or groceries. Yet families tell me that the sight that they most frequently readily identify now is of young teenage men age cycling around delivering drugs. In Nottingham, such kids are known as "shotters", because they deliver shots of drugs on behalf of drug dealers. The process is fairly simple. They stick the consignment of crack cocaine or heroin between their buttocks, get on their bike and deliver the package to whomever the dealer has specified. Some £30 a day is the going rate, which is much better than the pay for delivering vegetables, so one can see the financial attraction. The process begins with a simple and innocent set of instructions: "Just deliver this package to the fellow on the corner." As a result, kids are being drawn into this world.

The families told me that they wanted us to stand with them in support of strategies that intervene at every level of that process, and preferably long before the drugs reach the kids on the streets. Those

families also said that we needed to understand that the same "benevolent" dealers also have a pretty unscrupulous and exploitative record in terms of their kindnesses towards children. These people offer children access to crack cocaine, and such "kindness" very quickly gives way to a set of demands that draw children into prostitution. We are confronted as much with the cynical and cruel theft of childhood—the theft of a generation's childhood—as we are with the problem of hard crime and hardened criminals. In many ways, the biggest challenge that we face is the theft of the security in which children can play on, and live in, estates.

Communities in every part of the city are saying that we have to find ways to separate their children's lives from the activities of those who deal in drugs and guns. That will be difficult. We already know that, in addition to those involved in shooting, some kids are being asked to stash drugs. I am told that very rarely are the main dealers of drugs and guns found in possession of them. Parents are terrified that, unbeknown to them, their children are being asked, "Will you just stash this somewhere safe? Don't open it; just put it somewhere safe and you'll be looked after." We have to understand that in getting people to come forward, we must make it clear that, however tough we are going to be on those caught with guns, we will not be tough on the kids who are inadvertently being drawn into this world at the sharpest end of all. Our intervention should constitute almost a rescue mission, to ensure that the children who are pulled out of those broader networks are not criminalised at our first point of contact with them.

We need also to address another complaint that was regularly made to me over the weekend. Why, I was asked, are guns so easily available? I am told that it is possible to rent a gun for £200. The deal is that if it is returned unused, a £100 refund is given. Families in these communities are telling us that we—as a Government and as a society—have to prevent our entering an era in which guns are as easy to rent as videos. We must tackle that absurdity at the level at which we interrupt the supply of drugs and guns. I have a number of specific proposals about the strategies that we need to employ to deal comprehensively with the problem. We need partnerships between Government and national agencies, between Government and local authorities, and between local authorities and local communities. People tell me that the first thing that they want from the Government is additional resources to allow us in Parliament to be confident in our ability to intervene on the supply of drugs and guns to this country. They repeated the message that the easiest way to take guns off the streets is to prevent them from getting there in the first place. They want the Government to ensure that sufficient resources are deployed to make life tough for dealers in drugs and guns.

In Nottinghamshire, pressure is being brought to bear through the "More Cops for Notts" campaign. That is an issue in its own right and I do not want to distance myself from it, but in some respects it is separate from the specific issues that the Opposition have raised today. I would love to believe in my heart that an extra 1,000 police on the streets of Nottingham that day would have saved Danielle Beccan's life. Can I in all honesty say that? No, I cannot, and it does not help if I pretend otherwise. We have to get the resources to target dealers of guns and drugs. There might be a case for deploying additional police, but if we do, I want such resources to be akin to the people who turned up in the film "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" every time Butch and Sundance got off a train. Butch and Sundance would look behind them, see dust in the distance and ask, "Who are those guys?" I want the drug dealers and gun dealers to know that the resources that would drive them out of Nottingham would not be happy if they ended up in Leicester—that they would continue in pursuit of such gangs wherever they happen to go. This is a national problem that happens at the moment to be manifesting

itself specifically in Nottingham. We have to deal with the problem by deploying national resources in a national strategy.

*Mr. Kerry Pollard (St. Albans) (Lab):* My hon. Friend talks about the national dimension, but does he accept that we must also consider the huge significance of the international dimension? I was on board HMS Sheffield in the West Indies two years ago, while efforts were being made to stop crack cocaine coming to the UK from Colombia via Florida. So before considering the specific issues that my hon. Friend mentions, we must consider the international dimension and get right the rules of engagement of our forces, which are trying to stop this stuff getting into the country.

Alan Simpson: I accept that and it forces us to address other difficult issues about how best to approach those with a hard drug dependency. However, the issues raised with me on the doorstep include the point that Britain is an island. People know that there are many problems beyond our reach or competence as a single country to deal with—the work has to be done on the basis of international collaboration. However, the question is whether it is right to assume that, as a Government, we can do nothing more to halt the supply of the guns and drugs that come into the UK—and the answer is no. It has to be the case that we can find more effective intervention strategies to attack the supply side both where it is generated and where it enters this country. I also know that, at the local level, the resources that people ask for to deal with these problems are not primarily police related. People are looking for resources, security and clarity from the Government about strategies to empower communities to be an effective part of the process.

*David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op):* My hon. Friend lives in the centre of the very city that he represents. I know the area very well. When my hon. Friend talks about numbers, deployment and the responsiveness of the police in Nottingham city centre—it has quite a bleak reputation within the east midlands—does he agree that things could be improved somewhat if the licensing regulations in the city centre were radically altered to free up police from their current roles on Thursday to Sunday evenings? If that happened, it would help to stem the reduction of much-needed resources and help in the fight against drugs and guns.

*Alan Simpson:* I agree with my hon. Friend's point and I remind him that those were precisely the amendments that I tabled to the Licensing Bill. They would have given local communities and the local police much greater powers to object to some of the large-scale watering holes that currently absorb disproportionate amounts of police time on a Friday evening.

My point about the use of existing resources is that local people told me that what they needed from the central Government was to feel that they, the Government, were there with them on tackling a number of issues that they rightly viewed as their own. They wanted resources to allow them to break the links between kids and gangs. They wanted the backing of the Government for some of the initiatives taken by mothers, for example, working across the communities traditionally regarded as hostile to each other, to trash the myth and foolishness of that inter-community conflict. They want to know that the information that they pass on to the police can be given safely—in ways that will not imperil their lives.

*Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con):* The hon. Gentleman talked about the wider implications, then the national and regional implications, of the problem. Does he recall that the regional crime squads that used to operate have, for desirable reasons, largely gone? In the past, it would have been to the regional

crime squads that Nottingham, Derby and Leicester would have turned for resources to tackle the issues affecting all those cities because of the gangs and all the rest of it. Is the hon. Gentleman satisfied that the new national unit is effectively replacing the old effort that we used to have on a regional basis—in other words, that enough national support is available to the Nottinghamshire police service to tackle the drug and gun problems that are particularly acute in the city of Nottingham, but whose origins extend over the whole region, in many cases across the police force boundaries?

*Alan Simpson:* There are two elements in that question. Not enough national resources have been available to tackle Nottingham's current problems, but I remain agnostic about whether there is a compelling case for revisiting the regional crime squads as opposed to the National Crime Squad. It would be nice to feel that the drug and gun problems could be dealt with in an east midlands context, but in reality the networks run much further afield—from Nottingham to Manchester, from Nottingham to Birmingham and from Nottingham to London. At this stage, I do not want to create unnecessary boundaries that might allow someone to feel that they could escape surveillance if they simply crossed a boundary.

*Mr. Clarke:* I agree with that. I am not suggesting that we should go back to having regional crime squads. I am just wondering whether the hon. Gentleman shares my feeling that, having lost the regional crime squads, we are now at a time of crisis insofar as drugs and guns are concerned because not enough resources are getting through to a particular area from the national service that has been set up. The resources are being diverted to immigration crime and all sorts of other areas. We no longer have the specialist support that we might have had in the past and could, perhaps, have again if we were able to draw on more national resources.

*Alan Simpson:* Again, I do not know what the National Crime Squad has done in respect of diverting its resources. I made the point initially that Nottingham has not had sufficient support from the National Crime Squad to address or halt the problems with which the police, local authorities and local communities are being confronted. In that sense, I can say yes to the right hon. and learned Gentleman. It is for the National Crime Squad to come up with an explanation. My gut feeling is that local communities—and, to some extent, the police and local authorities—feel that they are on their own.

I was coming on to the point that local people do not feel that it is safe to come forward with information about the possession of guns that are circulating in their communities. One family said to me that it was very easy to talk about the problem from outside, but that until anyone has had the experience of having a gun pointed in their face with the threat that if they say a word to the police, they—or their kids—will be dead, they cannot truly understand it. It changes people's sense of how safe they can feel when they realise that to stay alive is to stay silent. We have to deal with that fear by putting mechanisms in place to allow safe channels for information that do not put the lives of others in the community at risk. I would like to set out how that might be done.

When I spoke to people about the problem, they were aware that the Government had successfully run a rat-on-a rat campaign. My belief is that we should now be telling people in Nottingham to grass on a gun. The experience of the tragic and completely senseless death of Danielle Beccan has forced people to cross a line. It is no longer seen as an issue between rival gangs, but as an issue that intrudes on innocent young lives. I believe that we will see a huge response from local communities and the local authority in Nottingham, but there must be mechanisms in place to make them feel safe.

People told me that it would be good to run a grass-on-a-gun campaign, but that more amnesty days would also have to be provided. If we are to say to our own kids in our own communities, "If I hear that you are carrying or stashing or that your mates, nephews or school friends are doing it, I will pick up the phone to send the information on", there has to be an element of security

The problem is twofold. First, people have to know that there will be a police response, so the police need resources to back it up. It is not an effective message if people believe that the police will follow it up only in two or three days time, when the guns may no longer be in the place reported or in the possession of the people reported. The police must be available to deal with the level of information at the point at which communities feel safe to provide it.

Secondly, people's own confidence and security is important. I am often asked to explain why we allow cars with blacked-out windows on our streets. It is easy to see what happens on the pavements when cars with blacked-out windows slow down—people back away. The expectation is that there is something untoward going on inside the car that could easily threaten their lives. People often ask me what is the case for allowing that to happen. A case could be made for allowing blacked-out windows only with special licences. The ambulance service and perhaps Securicor services need such windows. Licences could be extended even to people running stretched limos for certain social occasions, but why does anyone else who has nothing to hide require the right to drive round streets in vehicles that are perceived as constituting a threat to local communities? I cannot see any reason why we do not make it a requirement for all vehicles to have a special licence to have blacked-out windows. The police could then have the power to stop vehicles to check the licence and, if necessary, to check the vehicles. It would remove a completely unnecessary threat from the streets of the communities where people live.

*Patrick Mercer:* What consideration has the hon. Gentleman given to an extended witness protection programme?

*Alan Simpson:* I know that that is a very weak area. Families who are willing to give information that could be traced back to them ask us how their families can be protected. They do not want much, but they do want to live. We have seriously weakened the ability of local authorities to offer emergency rehousing as part of witness protection schemes. I know of several cases in which people have given evidence and have been moved by the local authority. However, the details of their relocation in Nottingham have been discovered and they have asked to be moved to another part of a country, but the transfer system between local authorities has broken down. It requires a police officer to say that the people involved must be moved as part of a witness protection scheme. The bureaucracy stretches out across a time scale that does not equate to the day-to-day sense of risk that the families involved feel. That is a matter of cash resources and the inability of local authorities to put the safety of families before the bureaucracy of the system.

I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and his team will visit Nottingham on 5 November. It will give Ministers an opportunity to talk directly to those involved in making the policies and driving the strategies that will intervene at a community level. It will give Ministers the chance to hear and co-ordinate what needs to happen nationally with what happens in local areas. I hope that my right hon. and hon. Friends will be able to bring us some positive news about the resources that are needed. Piecemeal resources are no good—we need the clarity of a structured intervention.

I hope that the message that will come across in the press and to the people of Nottingham is that the Stand Together initiative in the city will be continued in the days and years to come. That has to involve the measures needed to tackle national and international sources of supply, as well as empowering communities to make a stand on their own behalf. The killing of Danielle Beccan was a watershed for the people of Nottingham. The outrage that it provoked will change the way in which communities feel willing to act in partnership with others. That amounts to a policy challenge for the Government and for local communities. People now know that the challenge at local level is to take the toys from the boys. We have to do that because they are not toys any more, but weapons that take lives—and not only of those involved in gang conflict or in drug and turf wars. They kill children. In many ways, the guns are now a threat to our future. Unless we stand together, we will not deliver a future safe for our children to live in. I hope that we can.

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