

5 minutes on... **Gun Culture**

In America, the term 'Gun Culture' is used to identify advocates for the legal and legitimate use of guns, including using guns for self defence, sporting uses such as hunting, and recreational uses including target shooting. In the UK it is generally used to refer to the illegal ownership and use of guns.

Facts and figures on UK gun crime

- London, the West Midlands, Greater Manchester and Nottingham account for more than half of the recorded gun crime in England and Wales.
- In 2004-2005, 34% of recorded gun crime occurred in London.
- Between April 2001 and October 2005, 63% of victims of murder and attempted murder involving firearms in London were black.
- Gun crime is mainly committed by young men aged 16-25.
- Shotguns can be purchased in London for as little as £50.
- There is an increasing number of people using firearms to settle relatively minor disputes.

Drugs remains the single most important theme in relation to the use of illegal firearms, but gang membership and the desire to emulate successful criminals are also important factors.

In south London, 'crews' in key areas such as Brixton, Peckham and New Cross have territories that include housing estates and shopping centres. Guns are used to enforce these 'patches'.

Even minor disputes can result in shootings because the presence of guns aggravates threats and makes pre-emptive attacks more likely; the so-called 'shoot or be shot' scenario.

Chief Constable of Manchester Police Michael Todd said, "We have got 14 and 15-year-old kids walking around in body armour. When we do house searches, we find 13-year-olds in possession of firearms."

Chief Constable Keith Bristow, the chief police officers' firearms spokesman believes that official gun crime figures does not reflect the reality. He said, "There is significant under-reporting of firearms use. There is an increasing use of guns in robberies. We are not just talking about traditional bank raids. We are talking about robberies in streets, homes and cars."

Children as young as eight are now used as gun runners. Older gangsters use younger brothers and cousins as weapons couriers because they were below the legal age of criminal responsibility.

In Brixton, pizza delivery-style gun-running occurs, with gangsters paying teenagers to deliver a handgun to a customer who has hired it for 24 hours.

Putting it into perspective

Contrary to public perception, the level of gun crime in the UK is very low – less than one-half of one per cent of all crime recorded by the police is gun-related. Over the past few years, the law has been strengthened on firearm possession:

- A minimum five-year sentence is now imposed for people convicted of possessing an illegal firearm
- It is now an offence to possess an air weapon or imitation firearm in public without legal authority or reasonable excuse
- The age limit for possession of air rifles is now 17
- Air weapons that are easily converted to fire live ammunition have been banned

The Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006 includes provisions to:

- Target imitation firearms – by making it illegal to manufacture or sell imitation firearms that could be mistaken for real firearms, strengthening sentences for carrying imitation firearms, and creating tougher manufacturing standards so imitations can't be converted to fire real ammunition.
- Reduce illegal use of air weapons – by increasing the age limit for buying or firing air weapons without supervision.
- Reduce the supply of firearms into the country by tightening security on import routes and international mail, and monitoring online firearm suppliers.

Tackling the rise in gun culture

Home Secretary John Reid said, "There is not a single, simple solution to keeping guns off our streets. Policing and tough penalties must go hand in hand with education, community action and personal responsibility."

The Church Consultation on Violent Crime, recently launched by Premier Christian Radio and the Metropolitan Black Police Association, reveals that 65% of churchgoers thought their churches should be involved in reducing violent crime by working in partnership with the police.

As Rev. Kirby, whose organisation Hope for London aims to combat violent crime in London said, "Churches can help people put their lives back together, but they can also offer opportunities to young people to stay away from gun crime in the first place. We're in a unique position to be seen as honest brokers."

What you can do about gun crime

If you see people carrying firearms, report it to the police.

Visit the Connected website (<http://www.connected.gov.uk/>) to find out how you can get involved in community projects to fight gun crime.