

Research note #2

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Gun and knife crime in Great Britain

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Think Tank
of the Year 2006/2007



Summary

This research note explores public perceptions of gun and knife crime, opinions about the Government's response, the ease of which members of the public can get hold of illegal firearms, and the level of support for tougher penalties and robust enforcement.

There are various ways to portray gun crime statistics, many of which can be manipulated to 'create' trends. In an effort to avoid distortion, we have focused on the broadest statistics; this data suggests that gun related crime has risen over the last decade.

Polling commissioned by Policy Exchange provides a rare insight into public opinion on this issue.

- 45% believe that their area is not as safe as it was five years ago as a result of gun and knife crime (56% in London).
- Nearly a third (29%) feel that they or their immediate family are at threat (42% in London; 32% urban areas v 23% rural areas).
- One in eight men (12%) know someone who has or has had an illegal firearm.
- Nearly a fifth (18%) of men would be able to acquire an illegal firearm.
- 82% of respondents believe that the Government has not done enough to address the rise in gun crime in the last five years.
- 88% support an increase in the penalty for possessing an illegal firearm.
- 72% support an increase in the number of armed police patrols to combat gun and knife crime.

The Government has passed legislation and introduced numerous initiatives to address this issue. But as we explain, there is more to do.

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Home Office figures show a rise in the level of gun crime

Since the 1997 Firearm Act, gun crime has risen steadily, peaking in 2005/06.*

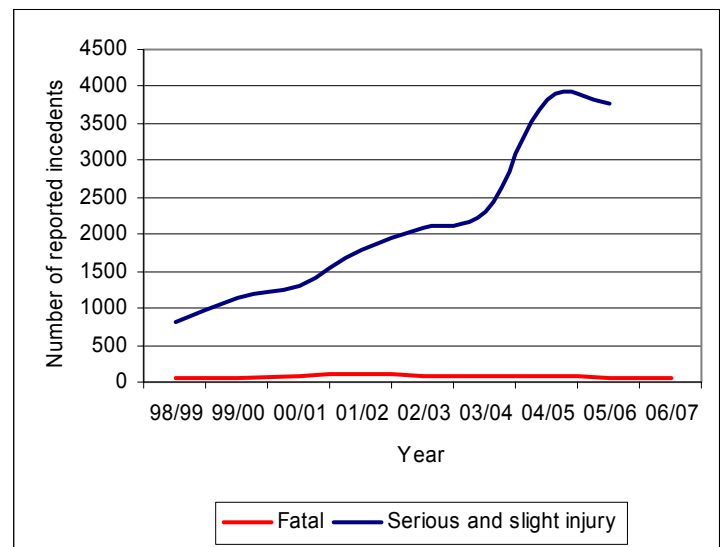
While the number of fatal shootings has dropped in the last four years, this trend will not continue into 2006/7. Provisional Home Office figures report 58 firearms-related homicides in 2006/07 compared with 49 in the previous year, an 18% increase. (If we include airguns, the number of homicides in the same period rises to 61.) Moreover, the Metropolitan police report that in the 12 months to July 2007, there has been a 3.5% increase in firearm offences.

The table below provides a broader picture of gun crime levels, showing the total number of firearms offences (including possession, supply, theft and criminal damage to property) and not just crimes in which a recordable injury occurs. This information should supplement the data on injuries, providing a more comprehensive picture of the gun crime landscape. The figures provide a useful guide to trends in firearms availability. Overall crimes involving a firearm have dropped between 2005/6 and 2006/07, although this is still nearly double the number of recorded crimes involving a firearm eight years ago.

Both the rise in non-fatal gun crime and interviews with senior police officers, suggest that more guns are falling into the hands of inexperienced criminals. Traditionally, gun crime was limited to a small sect of serious and/or organised crime. But today 'amateur' criminals are acquiring illegal firearms, resulting in a disproportionate rise in injuries vis-à-vis homicides; statistically speaking, there are now four times more recorded firearms-related crimes resulting in an 'injury' today than there were eight years ago.

But there is good news for those caught up in such an incident: victims are one sixth less likely to be killed than they would have been in 1998/9.

Year / Degree of injury	Fatal	Serious	Slight	Total
98/99	49	162	653	864
99/00	62	200	933	1195
00/01	72	244	1066	1382
01/02	95	392	1390	1877
02/03	80	416	1683	2179
03/04	68	437	1862	2367
04/05	77	411	3424	3912
05/06	49	476	3296	3821
06/07	58	n/a	n/a	n/a
% increase 98/99– 05/06 (06/07)	18	194	405	342



Trends in firearm violence 98/99—06/07

Year	98/99	99/00	00/01	01/02	02/03	03/04	04/05	05/06	06/07
Firearms offences	5209	6843	7470	10023	10248	10338	11079	11084	9608
% increase from 98/99	n/a	31	43	92	97	98	113	113	84

*All crime statistics on this page are from the Home Office (Homicides, Firearm Offences, and Violence and Crimes involving firearms). Where available we have used preliminary data for 2006/07.

What the Government has done

LEGISLATION

1997 - Firearms Act

The Firearms Act 1997 laid the foundation for a stream of policies to combat gun crime. The Act was drafted in response to the Snowdrop Petition, which gained momentum following the Dunblane Massacre. The Act originally banned high calibre handguns although the amended version of the Act bans the private ownership of all cartridge ammunition handguns, regardless of calibre. The full implementation of the Government's outright ban on handguns was swiftly and effectively enforced, although the call for the creation of a national register of firearms has long been delayed through a ten year implementation process.

2003 - Criminal Justice Act

The Criminal Justice Act 2003 established mandatory, five-year minimum sentences for the illegal possession of a prohibited firearm. Prior to the minimum sentencing clause of the Act, those convicted of carrying an illegal firearm were given average custodial jail sentence of eighteen months. The efficacy of the Act was called into question in February 2007, when it emerged that the courts were not enforcing mandatory minimums outlined in legislation.

2003 - Anti-Social Behaviour Act

The Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003 made it an offence to be in possession of an imitation firearm or air gun in public. The Act banned the sale, manufacture and import of guns that use self contained gas cartridge systems—a measure aimed at preventing the spread of non-conventionally firing guns that are particularly vulnerable to conversion to fire live ammunition. In an effort to address problems with air guns, the Government also raised the minimum age of purchase for air guns to 17.

2006 - Violent Crime Reduction Act

The Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006 included several measures aimed at dealing with firearms-related crime and the growing proportion of gun crime involving a replica firearm. The first provision targeted imitation firearms, by making their manufacture or sale illegal. Additionally, the Act strengthened sentences for carrying imitation firearms, and created tougher manufacturing standards so imitations can't be converted to fire real ammunition. However, replica and ball-bearing guns remain easy to purchase and are easily mistakable for real firearms.

INITIATIVES

Community engagement

According to the Home Office, "the Government recognises the important part played by communities in addressing the wider issue of the underlying gun culture. The Home Secretary hosts regular Round Table meetings on gun crime, involving the police, community representatives and policy officials". The Connected programme is part of the Home Office strategy to tackle gun crime and gun culture, by working with community groups.

Specific gun control projects

The Government supports the work of intelligence-led gun crime operations in police forces around the country, such as Operations Trident and Trafalgar in London, Operation Ventara in the West Midlands, Operation X-Calibre in Manchester and Operation Stealth in Nottinghamshire.

Funding

In 2003-04 £1.2 million, reclaimed from criminals through the Recovered Assets Fund, was disbursed through regional Government offices to community projects tackling gun crime.

Advertising

In September 2006, the Home Office launched a poster campaign to raise awareness of harsher penalties under new law among young people in areas most affected by gun crime.

Tackling the supply of illegal weapons

As part of a joint Action Plan, the National Criminal Investigation Service (NCIS) has carried out a thorough investigation into the supply of illegal firearms. HM Customs and Excise and the UK police service are active in targeting groups who would seek to illegally import firearms, whatever their motive, including criminal gangs who use firearms to protect or expand their illegal activities.

More than 1 in 8 men know someone with an illegal firearm, nearly a fifth would be able to acquire one

In an effort to understand public access to illegal firearms, our survey* asked respondents about their proximity to illegal firearms and whether or not they could attain one.

One in eight male respondents know someone who has or has had an illegal firearm (12%). Nearly a fifth (18%) of men said they would be able to acquire an illegal firearm if they wanted to do so, compared with 6% of women.

The ability to acquire an illegal firearm varies by social class. 14% of C2DE respondents said that they would be able to acquire an illegal firearm if they wanted to do so, compared to 10% of ABC1 respondents.



The likelihood of a respondent reporting the ability to acquire an illegal firearm declines with age. 19% of respondents between the ages of 18 and 24 reported that they would be able to acquire an illegal firearm if they wanted to, whilst only 8% of respondents in the 55+ age group reported that they would be able to do so.

A third feel that they or their immediate family are at threat from gun and knife crime

Fear of gun crime is no longer confined to specific communities, but now affects a large proportion of the population.

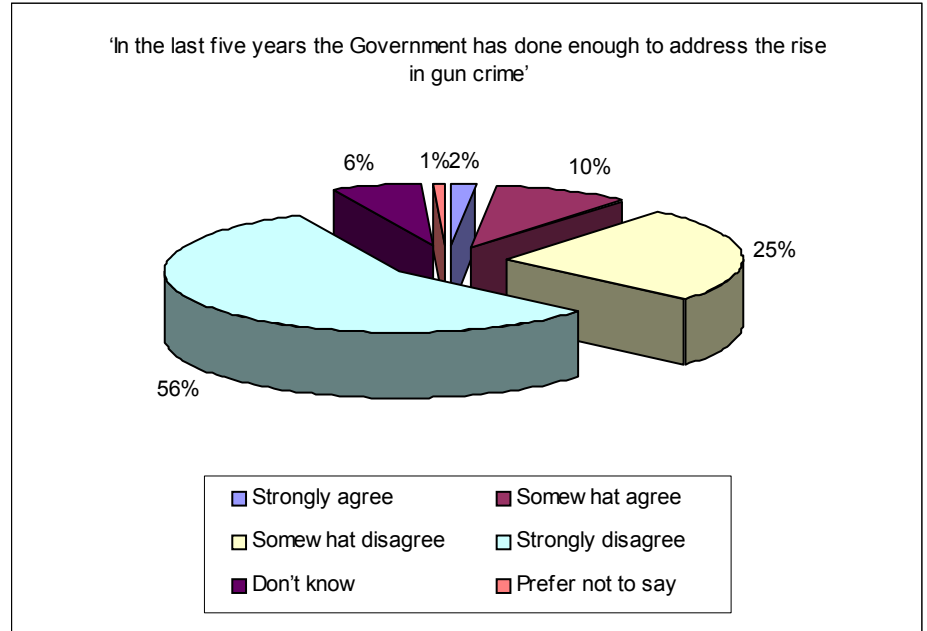
At a national level 45% of respondents believe that their area is not as safe as it was five years ago as a result of gun and knife crime. Such a response captures the pace at which gun and knife crime has affected the quality of life and the perceived safety of citizens across Britain. For respondents residing in London, the figure increases 11%: 56% of Londoners feel that they are less safe than they were five years ago. Obviously, at a time of heightened media coverage the issue of gun crime weighs on the minds of respondents, but knowing that the majority of those in the capital feel personally affected is telling of the issue's prevalence.

Nearly a third (29%) of respondents feel that they, or their immediate family, are at threat from gun crime. This figure reflects the extent to which the public feels personally affected by the rise in violence involving a firearm. Again, respondents living in London feel more at risk, with 42% reporting that they feel they are at threat from gun crime. Additionally, respondents living in urban areas are more likely to feel threatened than respondents in rural areas (32% v 23%).

* All polling figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,156 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 3rd - 5th September 2007. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

82% believe that the Government has not done enough to address gun crime

While there have been attempts to address gun crime through initiatives and legislation, the Government has maintained that gun crime is an endemic feature of a highly specific criminal sect, allowing it to explain away rising gun crime figures. But there remains strong dissatisfaction with the Government's commitment and ability to combat rising gun crime; only 2% of respondents strongly agree that the government has been doing enough to address gun crime over the past five years.

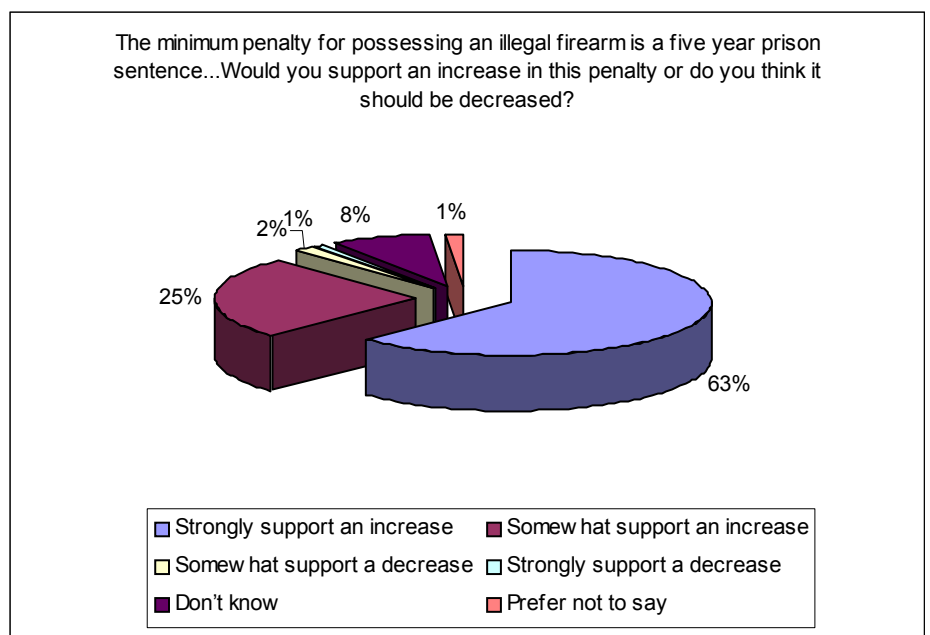


88% support greater penalties for possessing an illegal firearm

Such strong support for increased penalties for carrying an illegal firearm could be the result of a perceived failure to enforce the current five year custodial sentence, or a reaction to recent media coverage of firearm homicides.

Accounting for socio-economic status, 69% of C2DE *strongly* support an increase in the penalty, compared with 58% of ABC1s.

It is difficult to speculate, but the geographic proximity of C2DEs to higher levels of crime could be driving their support for stiffer penalties for gun crime.



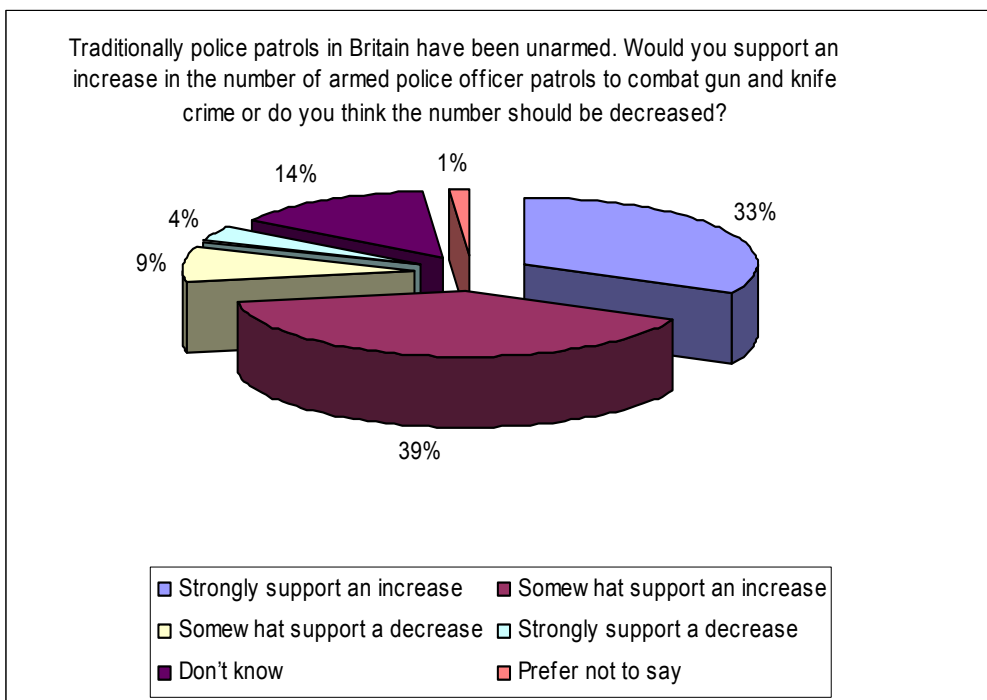
72% support an increase in the number of armed patrols

Britain's historical stance against armed police officers appears to be evolving in response to increased perceptions of threat. Britain is one of the few places in the world in which the vast majority of police officers are unarmed. About 10% of the Metropolitan police in London are armed; elsewhere the figure is approximately 5%, although it varies from force to force, depending on operational requirements. A poll in 2002 suggested that an overwhelming 80% of officers did not want guns.

The debate about armed officers is further complicated by the terrorist threat and new guidelines on armed officers shooting to kill suspected suicide bombers, the first deployment of which led to the death of an innocent man.

The Home Office rejected calls to arm all police officers in the wake of the death of PC Sharon Beshenivsky in 2005. Hazel Blears, the policing minister at the time, said: "It is important that the police have a very close relationship with the public, and for them to routinely carry guns might put that relationship at risk."

Our survey shows that 72% of Britons support an increase in the number of armed police patrols to combat gun and knife crime.



What the Government should do

- Rigorous enforcement has been an area of weakness for the Government, as enacted legislation has been woefully under-enforced. According to Home Office figures for 2005, only 40% of people convicted of being in possession of a firearm received the minimum jail term set out in the Criminal Justice Act 2003.
- The Government has learnt little from international experience. Whereas gun crime has risen in the UK it has dropped elsewhere. In Australia, enforcement of gun control by the Liberal-National Howard Government has led to significant reduction in both incidents and fatalities. The same is true of Japan.
- In the US, where the problem is much greater, community policing schemes have significantly reduced gun crime. While some of the US lessons have been incorporated through police anti-gun operations there is little co-ordination between the Home Office and the police.
- There is a lack of 'joined up' thinking. More could be done to counter the gun-fascination in the popular media; to target toy manufacturers – in short, to initiate a culture shift. The music industry has shown an interest in cooperating with authorities to reduce the negative impacts of gun fascination.
- Government schemes of gun control are often knee-jerk reactions. Only after very publicised gun fatalities has the government initiated anything: Hungerford 1987, Dunblane 1994, Aston murder 2002-2003, Rhys Jones 2007
- The Government has failed to put the tough words into practice. It is still possible to buy imitation guns such as ball-bearing guns and air-pistols.
- Education about this issue should be delivered by those with credibility: communication facilities should be provided to social community groups.

Where to go from here

The perception of gun crime as a phenomenon limited to geographically-concentrated, deprived areas such as South London, Moss Side in Manchester, Aston in Birmingham, and Knowsley in Liverpool, is being challenged. The survey results reveal that concern about gun and knife crime is affecting a wider proportion of society than hitherto believed.

The high levels of support for stronger firearm control, coupled with public fear of gun and knife crime, reflect the need to address the issues highlighted in this research note. Future work should explore geographic and international trends, as well as influences associated with violent crime.

Previous research

Crime and Justice is one of Policy Exchange's key areas of research. Over the past four years Policy Exchange has been leading the debate on police reform through several influential publications.

Going Local examined how putting forces under the control of locally elected representatives fosters efficiency. Acknowledging increased public demand for a voice in establishing policing priorities, the publication posited that police forces require an accountability mechanism, linking them directly to mayors and council leaders. This view has recently acquired a high degree of acceptance.

Manifesto for the Met provided a critique of the Metropolitan police, highlighting its apparent inability to make significant impact on crime in London.

Size isn't Everything argued that the Government should abandon plans for police force mergers, given that amalgamation has a negative impact on accountability structures and draws resources away from neighbourhoods towards the centre.

In June 2007 Policy Exchange argued that the quality and efficiency of local policing would be improved through greater delegation of budgetary and human resources control, as well as an overhaul of the performance measurement regime. *Fitting the bill* emphasised the importance of a full and successful implementation of the Neighbourhood Policing Initiative, and the subsequent need for flexible, mixed economy teams to support the programme.

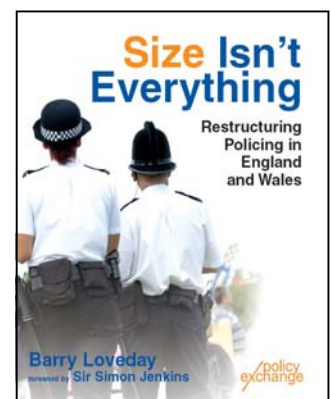
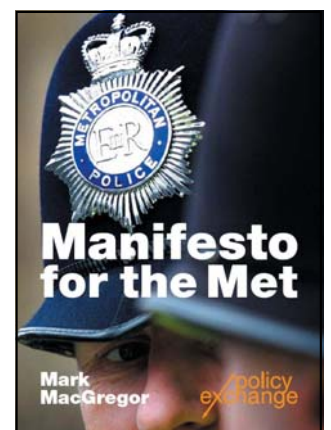
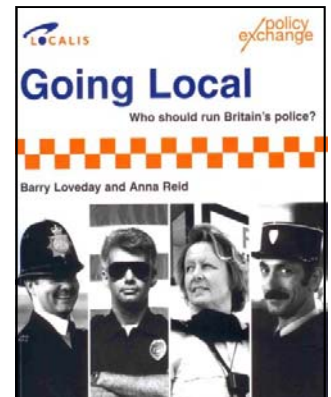
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