

The Street Weapons Commission – Birmingham

Chief Constable Keith Bristow

Chair, Cherie Booth

We welcome Keith Bristow.

Chief Const Keith Bristow

Thank you, good afternoon.

Chair, Cherie Booth

You're the Chief Constable of Warwickshire Police and also the ACPO lead for violent crime. So from your perspective, how would you assess the extent of youth violent crime in Britain today?

Chief Const Keith Bristow

Just before I start, perhaps it'll be helpful just to explain a little bit of the role that I've got. I lead on violence for chief police officers; the work is divided into 13 work streams that range from child abuse through to guns and gangs. I think my role here today is to talk about the sort of approach that we're trying to adopt nationally, rather than individual issues within other Chief Constables' areas, I don't think they'd thank me for that.

Chair, Cherie Booth

Tell us what the national trend seems to be.

Chief Const Keith Bristow

What the statistics tell us is that in general terms, both British Crime Survey and Recorded Crime, we're making real progress. After a significant rise in violent crime since 1997, we've started to see some of that top off and actually we've started to see some reductions there in gun crime. But I think the really big debate is about what people see outside their front doors, whether that's perception or reality, and I think the real big challenge, not just

for policing, but for government and society as a whole, is to make sure that the crime figures that people see, what they tell the police about and the reality of what actually goes on outside their homes and their places of work, actually look and feel the same. So I think the important thing is to talk about peoples' experience and what difference we can make.

Chair, Cherie Booth

And so what are you finding at the moment, the experience doesn't match the reality?

Chief Const Keith Bristow

I think there's 2 really important trends. I think increasingly we're seeing young people both being the victims of violent crime and also the perpetrators of violent crime. I think that's one very significant trend. An issue that concerns me is that if you look at gun crime, for instance, we're seeing some pretty significant, over the last few years, drops in recorded gun crime. But I do think there's a whole range of activities involving guns and violence that people aren't reporting to us. And I think that's a very real problem.

Chair, Cherie Booth

What sort of things were they, do you think?

Chief Const Keith Bristow

Well I think it tends to be less about people actually being seriously hurt or killed as a result of, for instance, gun crime, and more about guns being shown or people being aware of shots being discharged. And the difficulty for us as a service, the difficulty for us as a society, is we can only solve problems if we know about the problem. And I think it's really important that all of us stand up and say we need people to tell us what's going on, we need people to tell us who's doing that, to give us the best opportunity to do

something about it. And I suspect there is under-reporting of some of the lower parts of gun and knife crime that we absolutely need to know about if we're going to make progress.

Chair, Cherie Booth

We get the impression that there are more guns and indeed knives around, would that accord with your view and taking an overview nationally?

Chief Const Keith Bristow

I think in general terms, yes. But I think the number of these things that are available is one dynamic, the other one is about availability. In the sense that guns are passed between different groups and I think young people in particular who have the right contacts within the communities where they live, or more properly, the wrong contacts, are not likely to have difficulty in getting hold of weapons if that's what they want to do. A big problem around guns is dealing with the guns that already exist within our communities. It's very easy to become obsessed with dealing with those guns that we believe are coming from elsewhere. That is important, but we also have to deal with what we've got at the moment.

Chair, Cherie Booth

And how do we deal with the guns that are in circulation at the moment?

Chief Const Keith Bristow

Well I think if you want to talk specifically about guns, rigorous law enforcement is incredibly important. But if that's going to be intelligence lead and make a difference, we need the communities to have the confidence to talk to us about where the guns are and who's using them and where the ammunition is. Without that sort of intelligence and information, and a lot of that is about confidence in policing and the Criminal Justice process, we can't

make progress. I think the wider debate is this is not just a law enforcement problem, it's not just a Criminal Justice system problem, it's a problem for all of us across government and as a society. And I think we need to make some choices about how we're going to move forward.

Chair, Cherie Booth

We've heard something in some of the other cities where we've been to about a total policing approach. Is this a trend that we're going to see adopted nationally as well?

Chief Const Keith Bristow

I think the really important thing nationally is for us to recognise that what the police service stands for is protecting communities. We want people to live and work and travel in safe places so their children can be well educated, they can have employment, the property they've worked hard to own isn't taken from them and they're not frightened. And quite clearly fear dis-empowers people from living their lives just as much as the reality of crime. I think if we focus on making that real difference, rather than constantly focusing on metrics and lines on graphs, which are important indicators of progress we're making, I think that liberates us to work in a different way. So for instance, we might be better off measuring the level of violence within our communities by looking at the number of people who present to hospitals and A & E departments with injuries, rather than focusing on recorded crime. There are a whole range of ways in which we can move things on if we focus on making a difference, reducing harm and creating safe spaces, instead of all the time metrics seem to be the only measure of the progress that we're making, perception is important.

Chair, Cherie Booth

I'm interested you should say that, because we had some evidence in London

from a consultant who deals with a lot of the trauma injuries, and it was quite surprising to us that a lot of the information that he had, precisely about people presenting with these sort of injuries, in fact wasn't really available to the police.

Commissioner

And Merseyside Ambulance Service reporting that 50%, they reckon, of stabbings don't end up known to the police. Which is 50%, I mean that's...

Commissioner

I asked the consultant who was one of the main London hospitals dealing with the east of London, would it be possible within the bounds of propriety and not disclosing patient's confidential information, and all of that as a standard, could he nevertheless give the statistics of the numbers coming in with gunshot wounds or stabbings and slashings. I'm not sure that he answered it very clearly, but he certainly didn't demur from the fact that it might be possible if the BMA were to agree. And that might help you.

Chief Const Keith Bristow

It would, I think there's been some very interesting work done in Scotland, where the Scottish Violent Crime Unit have repositioned violence as being more of a health issue than just a law enforcement issue. And I think that sort of liberates you to think in a different way. And quite clearly if I talk from a police perspective, because that's what I understand, policing is a very important part of protecting communities, but the reality is communities have a role in protecting themselves. It's a cross government issue. Health, education, local communities, the houses where people live, all of that is important, not only in terms of building the right infrastructure to prevent it happening in the first place, but also in terms of sharing information so we can identify risky places, risky people, people who are at risk and then a really

clear concerted effort to manage some of that risk to protect people. And that isn't me trying to push some of the responsibility away from the police, I'm very clear that we have an incredibly important role, we are central to making progress. But so is the rest of government. So are communities. So are the voluntary sector.

Chair, Cherie Booth

So would it be a good idea for example for ACPO to approach the various Royal Colleges or the BMA and see whether there could be an agreement about sharing some more of this information?

Chief Const Keith Bristow

It would and I think the recently published government Violence Action Plan very much is about that multi-agency, cross-government approach. And I know that the Home Secretary is going to chair a ministerial group and I've been invited to join that ministerial group, which is all about getting that really clear coherent view of what we're trying to do. It seems to me that if we haven't got safe and secure communities, the reality of everything we're trying to do for ourselves and for others, we actually just won't make progress because that all gets unpicked. But we have to be very clear, it's very easy to talk about this as being violent crime and it becomes a policing or law enforcement issue. Well yes, partly. But mostly it's about all of us. The very important point for me is we, as a society, have to repudiate violence. We make choices in a civil society to say we're willing to give up some freedoms in return for greater safety and security. Let's just be clear that we are making some choices. Really important choices. If we allow violence into our homes through DVD's and TV and online networking, let's just absolutely clear we're making the choice to do that and that has an impact on the way that young people see the places they live, how they conduct themselves and what they see as being the right moral threshold for their own behaviour. So we do

make choices.

Lord Geoffrey Dear

In very simplistic terms, there are 2 phases to policing, there's a hard face and a soft face. The soft face is what you've been talking about and you're quite right, the police have a role to play with many others in society to try and dissuade and prevent and re-educate, and all of that down one end of a spectrum. But when it comes down to it the only organisation that will enforce is the police and I wanted to focus just on that for a moment and without in anyway diminishing from the rest, but to focus on the enforcement side. And to ask you whether ACPO has a view on what you might call, what I'd call, the hard end, that's to say, is stop and search good or a bad idea? The use of metal detectors, good a bad idea? The use of a coordinated policy exchanging information between police forces or groupings within the police. All of that would be of great interest to us because you're the only people who can talk about that, where we're getting a lot of information from others about the coordinated multi-agency approach. So let's go to the hard end and just talk about that for a moment.

Chief Const Keith Bristow

I wouldn't want you to misunderstand me, I'm not proposing that policing in the language that you've used goes soft, I'm proposing quite the opposite. What I'm saying is that some of the aspects of the work that we need to do are for others and not for the police, but we have a role in that. But I think specifically we come with powers and the ability to reassure and to do things. I think if we focus on 3 categories and perhaps I try and illuminate some of the police role. Risky places, as an example. Quite clearly the presence of police officers, PCSO's, volunteers, a uniform presence with powers, is absolutely crucial to manage the risk in some places. And all of us when we go out in the evening, where we live, we know where those places are. So I think

there's quite clearly a role for the police around risky places. Not just identifying them, but doing something about it.

Chair, Cherie Booth

But what about Geoffrey's specific question, does that mean therefore screening in these places, is a good or is it a bad idea?

Chief Const Keith Bristow

I think any of the tactics that we can adopt which manages some of that risk, including screening, including use of stop and search, including arresting people, including entering their homes and recovering violent material which may be relevant to their behaviour, doing all of those robust things are crucial. And that for me is about managing risky people. And if we share information in a proper and thoughtful way, we are able to identify those people within our communities who present the greatest risk. And the police need to be at the forefront of dealing with some of that risk by bringing some of these people to justice. And being robust. But also there's victims, we're the front end of dealing with the victims as well. And so you can't sort of disengage all this and imagine that, in my view, there's one set of hard policing over here and some soft policing, it's a coherent, sensitive, well thought through approach which ranges from sensitive caring for victims through to robust enforcement, which often requires police officers to use force. And we are the only people that can do that and we need to do it well. And it needs to be well directed and we need to be confident about that. And communities need to support us in appropriately robust policing to deal with those people who cause enormous harm within the communities where they live. And most of the people who cause harm in the communities do live in those communities, and we need to know who they are so that we can bring them to justice.

Commissioner

But one of the issues that's coming up quite a lot for us is the organised use of guns, and guns particularly rather than knives, by sort of organised criminal groups. And the more chaotic, casual one might even call it, use of knives and guns that often leads to fatalities and to serious injury. We're talking about young people here particularly. Now the police have been, I think very progressive in recent years in terms of a lot of their youth strategy, and you've given us a copy of the ACPO strategy. But they've also been criticised a lot for kind of picking low hanging fruit and going for the easy targets. And failing rather miserably with the chaotic use of knives and guns in disadvantaged areas. I think it relates to Geoffrey's question, it's not always hard or soft, it's smart or dumb. And it's really what are the smart moves that the police need to make in conjunction with others or alone, to actually start to address what is a relatively small problem, but when it has its effects, it's a dreadful and tragic effect?

Chief Const Keith Bristow

I don't want to use up a whole lot of management speak, and I get to the core of the issue.

Commissioner

No, we'd rather you didn't.

Chief Const Keith Bristow

There's a really important point here. If we set a performance regime for the police that suggests that one detection, one detected crime for a broken window is as important as dealing with a gang or an organised crime group who are causing enormous harm, it's the same tick in the box. Don't be surprised there's a group of human beings, if human beings gravitate to what's most easily achievable.

Commissioner

Let's get away from offences brought to justice and those issues, let's just think about, if you had a freer hand, less governed by those targets, how would you really go about starting to make some inroads on that small but dangerous and minority of young people who are causing such political and public concern at the moment?

Chief Const Keith Bristow

I think there is a shift. I think the new PSA's help us focus on the most serious violence. But the sort of things that we need to see is a really coherent understanding of what's happening on the ground. And that isn't necessarily about people coming from outside, that's about neighbourhood policing teams working with local communities, working with partners, to share information on a local basis, not a global basis. Who's doing what where? So we understand where our really well directed activity can be [INAUDIBLE].

Commissioner

Ok, but what do we need to be doing for those kids? I mean, should we be banging them up? Should we be broadening their education? Should we be sending them to more deprived areas of the world to find out that life isn't so bad here after all?

Chief Const Keith Bristow

Well I wouldn't agree with the latter, but I'll agree with four points.

Commissioner

Well some people wouldn't.

Chief Const Keith Bristow

There are some people, the best way in which we can protect communities, is putting those people behind bars. And the police service and the Criminal Justice system has a very clear role in doing that. There are some people where early intervention, some of which is not about the police, some of which is about the wider public sector and the voluntary sector, and parents, and communities, and the police as well, where intervening early can divert people. You know, you look at the risk factors for some of these young people, if you put together the information like their conduct in school, the conduct of their parents, alcohol and drug abuse within homes, them hanging around in the streets with nothing to do. Low level offending not being tackled. You take those things together and you and I very easily, and everybody else here, can very quickly identify the young man mostly and sometimes young women who are going to offend.

Commissioner

I mean, one last point from me, but I mean, we're very, very good at assessing these kids and assessing these risks, pretty good anyway now, but we're pretty damn poor at actually making the right interventions at the right time. I mean who should be doing it? What should we be doing? This is what we're searching for, this holy grail of intervention.

Chief Const Keith Bristow

I think there's much more we can do around identifying those risks. We do a lot, but there's more that we can do. And by we I don't just mean the police, I mean all of us. I think the difficulty is having identified the young person that's at risk of offending, or the risky place, or the person who's at risk, however we want to describe this, just identifying the risk isn't enough, you've got to do something about that. And that's about a very clear approach. We've seen some of this in domestic abuse around the MARACs, the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences, a really clear coherent approach to managing the

likelihood of offending, as we are with violent and sexual offenders through with the MAPA processes. That sort of approach where we share information but not just because its good to do, but because we're then going to prioritise effort to deal with some of these young people, and that continuum can range from early intervention which is about support within families, through to bringing to justice. And I think it's on that whole continuum. But it is about taking action. I'm not suggesting any sort of tip-toeing around the issue or being soft on this. Sometimes it's about being very, very robust, but it's got to be well directed.

Chair, Cherie Booth

Well Keith Bristow, thank you, intelligent based action is what's required. Thank you.

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