

The Street Weapons Commission

PC Geoff Smith

Commissioner

Afternoon gentlemen. PC Geoff Smith, thank you very much for coming. You're representing Strathclyde Police, or 1 of them, several who are going to represent Strathclyde Police here this afternoon and we're grateful to you for coming. We know that you're a Campus Police Officer at St Mungo's Academy at Carlton and you're gonna tell us a lot about that, I know, but I wondered if, just to put everything into context, particularly clear my mind on the issue of the macho image that seems to have permeated a lot of the Glasgow gang culture for years. I know it's been a continuing problem going back a long time, probably before the Second World War, but you're right in the centre of this and it would be helpful to us if you could give us your perspective on, on why this should have grown up, why it's reached the state it has now, how it starts and then later on we'll talk about how you, how you might seek to address it. Could you help us on that?

PC Geoff Smith

I'll certainly try. I'm not a trained historian but I've looked a little bit into it. Glasgow gang culture probably stems back maybe 2, 300 years or even perhaps as long as the City's been here. We've had various levels of immigration through the City and obviously movement from the North of Scotland and the South of Scotland, everybody moving to the Cities for work and when everybody moved to the City, they moved into different areas, specific to their group and the gangs formed through that. Back in the last century, early 1920s, 30s, you had huge gangs in the Bridgetown area of Glasgow, the Razor Gangs and books are written about that, no mean City being 1 of them. We had grave robbing gangs in the century before that. 1 of the earliest grave robbing gangs was in Cal...

Commissioner

Birkenhead, I think.

PC Geoff Smith

That was the, one of the first Police Forces in Britain ever to be issued with swords, were the ones who policed the graveyard in Calton because of the grave robbing that was going on. So these gangs built up over 100s of years and they've been here with us for 100 years, they're a tradition and I come across children all the time that are in gangs and they tell me that their Grandparents were in gangs and their Grandfather will tell them stories about what they did when they were in gangs, so you can trace your, your family history back through the gangs that have been in Glasgow and the central belt of Scotland.

Commissioner

But the rather violent macho culture that goes with that is something that one doesn't always find elsewhere. It's growing perhaps, South of the Border but Glasgow's had a name for violent gang confrontation for a long time and I don't know whether it's fair to ask you if you have a view about that.

PC Geoff Smith

It's a difficult question because it's, it's a cultural thing. We have a... I was discussing this before I came into sit down here and you have other countries like America where you have huge gun crime, but the people committing gun crime over there would have difficulty coming face to face with somebody and stabbing them, plunging a knife into them, eye to eye, whereas in Glasgow, we seem to have no problem or no issue with that whatsoever. It's a thing that you get close and personal when you wanted to hurt somebody and it happens in our nursery schools, in our playgrounds, in our streets and it also happens in the home with Husbands and Wives and Partners and so consequently it's a thing that we perhaps lack empathy in certain families and the empathy's the key part of it perhaps and that, when you haven't got a great deal of it, it's easier for you to get that close to somebody and really,

really hurt them and that's something that's perhaps specific to Glasgow and the central belt of Scotland.

Commissioner

Yeah. I know my colleagues will have a lot to talk to talk to you about, as to your current day to day role and that's... on Campus, St Mungo's Academy in Calton and that's really what you've come to talk to us about today.

PC Geoff Smith

That's right.

Commissioner

Can you fill us in on how long you've been there, what the role is and what you're doing?

PC Geoff Smith

I've been there for 4 years, I've been a Police Officer in the general area for nearly 14. It's Calton Gallowgate and Barrowfield which are high deprivation areas of Glasgow. I think Calton is probably about one of the worst in Scotland at the present time. I think the life expectancy for a male there is 54 at the present time. I think you live longer in Beirut, which kind of puts a perspective on the kind of area that I'm working in. The school itself is a fantastic school, like most of the schools in the area, absolutely superb, but because of the gangs in the area, a lot of children had difficulty getting there, getting home safely, playtimes, break times, it was a dangerous place to be and parents were scared for their children's safety. As a Police Force, we'd also lost maybe 1 or 2 generations because of perhaps the way we are Policing, so you were walking around the streets or driving around the streets and young people just wouldn't engage with you and it's possibly something to do with the panda car, it's a big bubble, so you don't really get to talk to a

lot of people, so we'd lost that whole generation, you're losing witnesses, people are becoming victims and you're really not solving the problem. So I was asked 4 years ago if I could go into the school and enhance the profile of the Police and positively affect behaviour and there really wasn't a big tone that was pushed across the table to help me do that, it was just... we've failed so far, we've been failing for maybe 30, 40 years, trying to solve this problem of violence, let's look and see if we can do it a different way and Police Force perhaps realising that education and looking at violence as a public health model was perhaps the way to do that, trying to draw all the agencies in and work together. Freedom of information was one of the big ones. We weren't sharing information with each other and me working in the school, I'm able to do that now. Putting programmes into place in the school for children who have been victims of crime, potential victims of crime and they can also be gang members as well. A lot of children will perhaps go into a gang because they see themselves a victim or a potential victim and they'll graduate towards an alpha male or female. I find that, when I first started in the school, I walked into the playground the first day and it was so obvious how many children there were potential victims. Same as when I was at school, that you see them standing in a playground, you think this child is just waiting to be hurt, it's like having a big tattoo of a V on your forehead and I thought, if I can do something about that, that's a huge change, but you also saw the alpha male, the boy or the girl who in, perhaps a more prosperous environment, would graduate to some level of industry or some level of professionalism, but because they're in an impoverished environment, they use their leadership skills in a different manner and that the best one for a boy is to be a gang leader, you get ultimate control of an entire gang and you get a huge buzz out of it and it's fantastic and sometimes people put you on courses to improve your leadership skills and the gang gets tighter. So, challenging that whole spectrum of gang involvement and those people who are drawn into it, was a thing that really interested me and then looking at how people learnt their

violence at a really, really early age. I was fortunate that I got to go on some seminars that discussed early years violence and how you learn violence from the age of perhaps 2, 3 or even earlier than that and then I looked well, I'm working in a secondary school but I've also got 5 primary school feeders and 3 nursery schools that feed into them. Perhaps I can start going into these places and making a difference there and it was really down to just being a role model. A lot of the children there don't necessarily have a positive male or female role model and it's nothing rocket science about it, it's just me sitting there with children, I'm a Police Officer, I'm a male, I'm hopefully a good role model and just letting them know, this is the way that I behave and this is the way that perhaps you can aspire to and it's working. Over 4 years, we started with 9 gangs in St Mungo's, we're down to 3 gangs or the gang membership has reduced dramatically, really has reduced dramatically, through perhaps some of the programmes I'm putting together for victims so that they don't feel as if they have to go to a gang for protection anymore, they can get their own peer group, they can develop themselves, they can gain confidence. My difficulty is targeting the alpha male, that's a real tough one when you get to, I think, 11, 12, 13 and you have that skill and it's not been channelled anywhere else, there's very little I can do that's gonna give you something else that's as good as what you're already doing and so it's looking at the earlier age group.

Commissioner

Maybe the V stands for Villain.

PC Geoff Smith

Possibly.

Commissioner

Possibly.

PC Geoff Smith

Possibly but villain can also be a victim.

Commissioner

But, 4 years as a Campus Cop and we've actually heard a lot of very good accounts of Police Officers in schools which delights me as I was one of the architects of this in England and Wales, I didn't know it had reached Scotland, in 2002, under our Safer Schools Partnership Approach and Street Crime Initiative and it's good news. Nearly all of it's a good story and the sort of stuff you're doing is the best of those stories. However, there's always an issue about the cultures of the Police and how much you're seen as a bit of cycling proficiency adviser rather than a real Cop and we've heard accounts from other Senior Police Officers about, you know, total Policing, about going in where it hurts and where it counts and there's often a role conflict for someone in your position, balancing some of your Policing responsibilities with some of your educative responsibilities within school and I just wondered whether you see, maybe you don't see a conflict, but if you do, what is it?

PC Geoff Smith

When I first started there was certainly that kind of, you're the cycling proficiency Cop and you do that kind of thing. I think over the 4 years, it's developed. Certainly the people and sort of my level, they're coming to me for information all the time. They recognise that I've got the ear of the children and the children speak to me. Also the Parents, the Grandparents, the community as well, so we try and use the school as the hub of the community, which is what they should be. I would love to see schools as the centre of your communities, where you would have perhaps Social Worker and Doctors and all the rest of that kind of thing, but from the Police's sort of function, obviously the enforcement side of it, you really do need it, you can't

let 12, 13, 14, 15 years olds go round willy nilly and whacking each other golf clubs and stabbing each other, you just can't do that, but you've also gotta look at their younger Brothers and siblings and if, at some point, Mummy, Daddy, Granny's gonna say, right, go out and play with your older Brother and older Brother's going around stabbing somebody, so I try to intervene at that younger age group and then I'll pass the intelligence to my other colleagues about what the older ones are doing and I can tell 'em exactly when they're gonna do it because they put it on MSN or Yahoo or Bibo. Sorry...

Commissioner

How much enforcement do you do in schools?

PC Geoff Smith

I have a line that I draw in the sand and all the kids know that there is a line. You don't do anything to do with gangs in a school, it is neutral territory. You do not bring alcohol or drugs into the school and you do not use violence in the school.

Commissioner

So you would arrest people in school?

PC Geoff Smith

If I found it necessary to arrest, I would arrest. If it was a weapon in school, I would arrest and they know they're gonna get arrested and they will be taken to a Police Officer and I'll [INAUDIBLE] them that way. If there's something like 2 boys fighting in the playground, I'll look for something different, I'll look at say something like there's a technical restorative practices which is basically just sitting a person down with a victim or somebody who's been harmed and trying to get them to see why they were harmed and the effect it's had. It's worked tremendously well for the bullying that's going on in schools

and I have to say, 90% of that is girls.

Commissioner

What I don't get and I mean thank you for what you've shared, it's assisted us in understanding, at a deeper level, what it is that you do and how it relates to the general Policing and offending behaviour prevention function, but what I don't get from that is, how that wraps around the role of the school itself, because if these children are coming from a domestic situation which quite often itself is characterised by violence, they're part of a violent culture with the community etc, you're only 1 person, there are 36 of you, Campus Officers in the Strathclyde Police area and 50 across Scotland generally, as compared to 100s of teachers, what is the role of school in relation to those very matters which you single-handedly, with such bravery and courage, are taking on.

PC Geoff Smith

Thank you for blowing my trumpet there.

Commissioner

Wholly true.

PC Geoff Smith

The role of the teachers is to educate and it's to give every child the ability to achieve their potential. That's, I think the number 1 thing in the National Curriculum. If you've got a situation at school when you have tension because there's a potential for violence and you've got children who are too scared to come to school, others that are too scared to say anything in a classroom because of what's going on, then if I can do anything to alleviate that, that gives the teachers the opportunity to do what they're trained to do and...

Commissioner

But that's my very point. Given the culture that we're talking about, in the West of Scotland generally...

PC Geoff Smith

Yeah.

Commissioner

...should the teachers not be about something else, so that they are organically engaging with young people's needs, given their backgrounds etc, in a way that would either render your role unnecessary or simply supplementary to what they see as their core role?

PC Geoff Smith

I see what you're getting at. Yes, perhaps that would be the ideal world. If teachers were able to do that and were able to do what I do, that would be fantastic. There's a spin-off for the Police. If I wasn't in the school, we wouldn't be able to re-engage with those teenage children and those younger children and if you just let the teachers do it, then the school becomes an island again and the school is a little bit of an island. If you look at our secondary schools, a lot of them are islands within communities. The teachers are fantastic, they're doing a really, really superb job but they're there from 8.30 to 4.30 Monday to Friday, some of them are obviously there later than that, but as a Police Officer, I'm working in the community the whole time and I have links in the community, so I'm able to draw the other community workers into the school to give them the opportunity to come and work with the children that are there, so whether that be statutory organisations, charities, anybody that's looking to work with children, I open the doors for them and I'm able to guarantee that they're able to deliver what

they're able to deliver. I'm also able to push them down the line a little bit, to a certain extent and say look, I'm doing this, perhaps some of this is your role, would you like to do it? and most of the time they've actually fallen over themselves to do that. Teachers have got a huge role to do in the classrooms, whether they have the skills and the training to also be the sort of the Police Officer for the school and the area as well is perhaps a little bit difficult for them, I think that's asking too much, that would be... it would be a real tough one over and above what they already do. I know what I do is full-time and if you're trying to teach a class and mark all the books and then do all the testing as well, then try and do what I do, I think that would be a tough remit for a teacher.

Commissioner

So my question would be, how do you prevent pupils becoming victims or offenders?

PC Geoff Smith

Right okay, this is the \$64 million question.

Commissioner

...and do you see that school is the right setting to do that?

PC Geoff Smith

School is as... I'll answer it in reverse. School's the right setting at the minute because that's where they come or the majority of them come. You have a percentage of children that don't attend school and unfortunately I can't get to them at the minute. That is an issue and they're truanting school earlier and earlier in Glasgow. Didn't it used to be the case...

Commissioner

Have you got any figures on that?

PC Geoff Smith

I don't unfortunately, no, but I know that the primary schools that I have, over the last 10 years, you have more truants at P7 and P6, which is roughly about 10, 11 age group, than you've had in the last 15, 20 years, so they're disengaging at schools from an earlier age. I'm not in a position to be able to get to those kids at the present time, so for me the school is the obvious place, 'cause that's where they're coming. Whether you can affect the reason for them being a victim or being the bully or being the aggressor at that time is a different matter but it's the only place I can do, it really is the only place I can do that and at the early stages I'd like to do it in a classroom, because it's important if you're talking about empathy and you're feelings and your ability and the reason you were gonna hurt somebody, it's important that you do it in a classroom setting where everybody else is there and you've all got different ways of being brought up and we're talking about a very small percentage of people here that are willing to carry a knife, or willing to hurt somebody and so you're looking to develop a level of empathy that perhaps wasn't learnt in their own family and hasn't been learnt for 2 or 3, 4 or 5 generations and so you're trying to break a cycle of violence through their early years. In the secondary schools it's slightly different, I use the methods that we used to use for diversion tactics with gangs. I used to be involved with an awful lot of those, when you would take gang members or people on the cusp of gang violence, take them away for say a 8, 9, 10 week course, you would do a lot of aggression training, you would do a lot of leadership training, you would do outward bound training and in the majority of cases, the alpha male came back a better leader, the gang members bar perhaps 1 would be really in the gang and it wouldn't be really that effective. The offender would stop during the 8, 9 week period but it would kick off back again and we just didn't have the funding for another 2 years, but if I do it for people who like to be victims,

the success rate is absolutely astounding. You don't get people dropping off the course, the ones who are delivering it absolutely love it because the kids are generally absolutely fantastic and really wanna do it and then when they come back into the school environment, the home environments, their confidence levels are up, they're no longer being bullied because they're not setting themselves up for it and they don't have to progress towards a gang for the protection, because they don't need that anymore.

Commissioner

...and that's the key, isn't it, lifting the confidence, lifting the expectation, giving them a better base in life, I suppose?

PC Geoff Smith

Absolutely. Just looking at it from a different point of view, rather than looking at the aggressor, look at the victim. I also, when I'm doing a lot of education in the classrooms, assisting the teachers and we used to show videos of knife crime and there's 1 in particular called As It Is, it's used in Glasgow and it's absolutely fantastic and rather than doing the no, no, no, if you carry a knife, you're gonna get the jail for 5 years, I really try and target the girls in the classroom because every gang fight I've ever seen, there's a girls watching it and those group of girls will be sitting there, with a bottle of Buckfast or whatever kind of alcohol they drink. We've got specific problems with alcohol in Glasgow and the central belt of Scotland they're selecting Partners and the boys that are hurting somebody with a golf club or a knife are selecting a Partner, because they know the girls are on the Embankment and those girls have possibly been in a situation where their own Father was like that, or Grandfather, so they just keep going down the same line, the same kind of cycle and so I talk to those girls and say look, when you select somebody who's willing to hurt somebody in that way, get up close and personal, stick a knife in them, then when you select them as a Partner, 10 years down the

line, when they're looking for a £10 to go out for whatever they want and you say no, I'm gonna use that for the children's breakfast in the morning, they're just gonna punch you or they're gonna hurt you and it's saying, who you select is key now, because if you select somebody like that, they're gonna hurt you later on and your children get to see that and then the cycle goes on again.

Commissioner

So how would those sorts of things be picked up in the normal school curriculum? In various parts of Scotland and indeed in England, over the years, there have been some very successful projects where theatre and education groups go and work through issues such as those, through Drama, exploration of values, looking at young people's aspirations and so on. I'm still trying to understand what happens in the mainstream curriculum that addresses those issues if God forbid tomorrow you would fall under a bus or something?

PC Geoff Smith

I don't think I can answer that question, I don't know what they would do if I wasn't there. I would hope that they would pick up the pieces and try and deliver some of the things that I've already been doing. It's...

Commissioner

So you can't be sure that they're not dumping on you the sorts of things that... if they are concerned about young people's development, they themselves should be doing?

PC Geoff Smith

No I can't be sure of that but I also can't be sure that the teachers in the school that I work in have seen the same kinds of things that I've seen in the

last 14 years in the East End of Glasgow. I know that when they're going in a classroom and they're trying to talk about domestic violence or gang activity, territorialism, they haven't seen people chopped to pieces, they haven't held the bits together, they haven't stuck their fingers in the holes to stop them bleeding to death, taken them to the hospital, they just don't have that personal experience of it, so when I'm in the classroom talking about these things, it's so much more real and the children realise that, they know that I'm a Police Officer, they know that I deal with these things all the time. They know that perhaps I've been out and helped their Father or their Brother or maybe locked up their Father and Brother for a similar kind of circumstance, so it's that level of trust and it's that level of confidence in what I'm talking about and believing in what I say and I think it's difficult for a teacher to come across with these hard hitting issues, unless they've actually seen it and been involved in it.

Commissioner

But... Sorry, go on then...

Commissioner

Yeah, I mean obviously you have been at the front line and you have the experience of the reality and it's a difficult question to ask 'cause we're in Glasgow, 'cause Glasgow has the longest history of real gang activity and often was the only place associated with gangs for a long time in the UK, but one of our problems has been to really unravel exactly what is meant by the gang or a gang and you gave us a history lesson about different kinds of gangs, which was helpful. You talk about 9 becoming 3 in your particular school, so 6 just dissolved did they? 6 were only composed of school kids. I mean I... it's not meant to be a cynical question but... you know, how did they just sort of evaporate.

PC Geoff Smith

No, it's not just school...

PC Geoff Smith

Gangs are still there, those 6 gangs that you speak of, those gangs are still there, they haven't disappeared off the streets.

Commissioner

Okay.

PC Geoff Smith

The gang membership has reduced, the level of violence and the level of activity has reduced dramatically.

Commissioner

So, sorry the kids in your school only belong to 3 now, is that what you're saying?

PC Geoff Smith

The kids in my school only belong to 3.

Commissioner

Okay... ..and how do you define them, I mean, can you give us 3 criteria?

PC Geoff Smith

How I define the gang?

Commissioner

Yeah.

PC Geoff Smith

It's very easy, I go onto any one of the websites and I just look up the gang members, 'cause they write about themselves, they put their photographs on and it's very, very easy. I'll sit down with gang members...

Commissioner

Yeah, you can...

PC Geoff Smith

...and they'll tell me, I'm in such and such a gang...

Commissioner

In London, there's a Needlework Gang, which is a group of girls who do needlework together.

PC Geoff Smith

I appreciate what you're saying, that you have different kind of gangs, you have positive gangs and negative gangs but realistically, the children in the schools that I work in, when they talk about a gang, it's a gang that goes out and hurts somebody, it's not the gang that goes out and has a kick about with a football, but I appreciate that there is a difference. I dealt with 5 8 year olds last week who all purported to be members of a gang and they rhymed off names of senior gang members who had been involved in attempt murders, murders, serious assaults and these are the people that they're playing with in the evening and they'll associate themselves with a gang now, they tell me the name of the gang that they're in and their gang tag, they show me that and they'll, they're willing to tell me the, the website that they've put themselves up on because they've got these wonderful computer skills, so they've graduated towards that gang really, really early on. Coming back to your question about the 6 gangs that aren't in the school anymore, those

gang members have perhaps voted with their feet, they don't wanna be in St Mungo's Academy because they can't do what they were able to do in the past, but it was also certainly true that the gang membership of those gangs has reduced dramatically because of what I do, but also because of some of the other Policing and also because of some of the other projects that are going with the other agencies, it's not just a Policing thing, there's lots of other agencies that we're able to tie in with. I tried to do a lot of multi-agency work before I worked in the school but failed miserably, absolutely miserably. It looked great on paper from some document that came from Headquarters...

Commissioner

You may have failed miserably in your eyes but you come with a considerable amount of respect, surrounding you and what your colleagues are doing and if I may say so, it's been a long hard road obviously and there's a long road to follow but I would think there's some real success stories along the way and it's a road worth travelling. But thank you very much for coming today, we've learned a lot and we're very grateful to you and if you take back to your colleagues who are doing the same sort of work, a word of thanks from us. I'm sure my colleagues would agree. But thank you for coming.

PC Geoff Smith

Thank you, thank you.

Commissioner

Thank you.

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