

Street Weapons Commission – London

Commander Mark Simmons

Chair - Cherie Booth

Well welcome to Commander Mark Simmons, Head of Youth Violence in the Metropolitan Police, that's an interesting title. I wonder if you could give us a little bit of an over-view of what is the picture, the overall picture in the Metropolitan Police area of youth violence?

Commander Mark Simmons

Okay, I think we're in the difficult position at the moment of seeing on the one hand the high number of young people who were murdered over the last 12 month period and it's impossible to overstate the degree of concern there is about that, but we see that in the context of overall declining levels of violent crime, declining levels of overall crime, we see a 20 percent reduction in robbery, we see a 15, 16 percent reduction in crime involving knives, we see reduction in assaults of all types, which is clearly good news for London but within that picture we have this very worrying aspect and clearly and rightly that is right at the centre of our concerns at the moment.

Chair - Cherie Booth

Well maybe those statistics simply show what people suspect, which is that statistics don't always tell the truth.

Commander Mark Simmons

Statistics certainly don't tell the whole picture, there is a huge debate around the degree of crime that's reported and unreported and absolutely acknowledge that for young people in particular there are concerns about the degree of crime that is reported. We've invested hugely in some of the ways of engaging with young people that we think ought to make it easier for young people to come to us, so the investment of something like 140 Officers in London in secondary schools where they can build up a relationship both with the staff and the pupils, the investment of nearly 630 neighbourhood teams across London with youth panels in each Ward that those teams work with, those are initiatives designed to make

sure we have, amongst other things, the engagement that we hope makes it easier for young people and those that work with young people equally importantly, to help us understand what the levels, the difficulties they face and the problems they face are. But I accept the ball point, yes statistics don't tell the full [INAUDIBLE].

Chair - Cherie Booth

But let's concentrate a little on the guns and the knives. I mean is there a profile of young people who are likely to be involved and encounter guns and knives? I mean is there a sort of set picture that you can paint or is it in fact more varied than that.

Commander Mark Simmons

It's, there are risks in presenting too clear a picture because it's dangerous that we get into stereotyping some of the things that happen and we clearly shouldn't do that. But we know that the majority of the people, of the young people that are victims of knife crime, whether homicide or whether the other assaults, we know we're talking about people of the ages about 15 to 17, 18

is the biggest, in the teens it's the biggest element. We know that out of the 10,000 or so knife enabled crimes in the last 12 months the highest proportion of victims about 4,200 of those came from the 18 to 29 age group and the second highest came in the age group just below that, so we have a profile around age. We...

Commissioner

[INAUDIBLE]

Commander Mark Simmons

Yes I was just gonna commentate, we know that disproportionately people from black minority ethnic communities are represented in both victims and in terms of the people that are suspects and offenders in those crime types, so we know there's that feature as well, and that differs of course in different parts of London so I'm painting the picture in terms of the overall London area.

Chair - Cherie Booth

And poverty?

Commander Mark Simmons

And we know that these crimes, not exclusively but are disproportionately occur in the Inner City areas where there are the greatest challenges around the social and economic conditions for people. So we know there are those features that run through this. They're not unique just to violent crime of course, some of those features run through other types of crime as well, but they are very much features of the youth violence issues that we're talking about.

Chair - Cherie Booth

We've heard a lot about gang culture, and yesterday we were in Liverpool and Liverpool their profile of youths would be the guns and the weapons is different in that that tends to be white working class boys.

Commander Mark Simmons

But the profile will be different in different places, I don't pretend to be familiar with, with Liverpool in particularly but in terms of London the very broad picture is as I described. I think there is something about being careful that that doesn't become, you know, a stereotype that we apply and mis-apply in individual circumstances, and we have to be very careful that those profiles that we absolutely need in order to work out what, you know, how we should target the work we do, don't get carried into inappropriate sort of tactics, at street level, and we are conscious of that and we try very hard to make sure that doesn't happen. So those are some of the, you know, the issues in looking at that profile.

Chair - Cherie Booth

Is it masculine though?

Commander Mark Simmons

Yes, I mean, yes certainly, the violence profile is overwhelmingly male dominated yes.

Chair - Cherie Booth

I think Geoffrey...

Lord Geoffrey Dear

A lot of Police work is on the prevention end, and quite rightly, but I wanna take you up to the sharp end and Operation Blunt which we've got some details of in front of us, but it's very raw, as I understand it this is going to be quite a proactive operation using metal detectors, search arches similar to airports and so on, I wonder if you could tell us something about this, in the

context of we've heard varying opinions today about stop and search, and this is really a sort of stop and search, some saying properly used, properly targeted, very good, cuts crime enormously, others saying, and I overstate it just to make the point, we don't want it at all because it simply stokes up animosity, and there has always been this debate about stop and search and

this is right in the middle of that discussion it seems to me, so can you help us on the point?

Commander Mark Simmons

The, certainly the situation you describe it goes absolutely to the heart of the tension between a tactic that we are absolutely clear from Policing terms is really important, whether it's in Operation Blunt specifically, when it's in some of the other operation activity we undertake, or generally in policing, it is a really important tactic and we couldn't manage without it to the extent that

we do now. Having said that we equally recognise that the way in which the tactic is used is absolutely just as critical cos it helps us not a jot to be effective in detecting offences in the short term if by doing so we alienate a whole range of people that are potentially not just offenders in some circumstances, a very small proportion of them, but overwhelmingly may be

victims, and we clearly don't want to alienate them. That's why, but equally we can't get away from the fact that things like Operation Blunt, some of the other operations we've run such as [Curb] in London, the Operation Alliance activity, all those do rely on the proactive exercise or Police powers part of their tactics, proactive exercise the Police

powers in public places, in hot spots, using the intelligence picture that we build up around those offences, a local intelligence picture, not as I said before, not using broad stereotypes, a local picture of what is the profile of offending, what is the profile in that particular location, that is really important. The engagement that needs to go alongside that activity is absolutely critical in managing the, you know, the effects of using, what is in any way you describe it an intrusive power in managing that in ways that don't have the adverse effects. So things like say the neighbourhood teams, the local Policing teams engaging with their Youth Panels, the work the Safer Schools Partnership Officers and other Officers do in schools, engaging with young people in other circumstances. The links with other people who work with young people whether it's youth workers, whether it's teachers, whether it's pupil referral units, the staff there, all those links are really, really important in providing that balance, so hopefully we can explain to young people why we exercise those powers, and we do know, from the research we've done, young people want us to protect them, young people generally recognise that stop and search is a useful tool but...

Lord Geoffrey Dear

But can I focus on the point I obviously haven't made it altogether clear and I apologise for that, the argument against stop and search is that it's too random, now quite rightly you said that if it's properly targeted and it's not too random and it has very good results, it just strikes me that one of the criticisms of, and I'm not criticising it but I'm putting this up as an argument,

that one of the criticisms against metal detecting arches and frisking down with metal detectors and so on, is by its very nature random, because you would presumably have it at the end of a street or outside a school or outside a club or wherever, everyone goes through it, presumably, and by its nature it then becomes random and I wondered how you squared that potential criticism against its use, so I'm interested in the practicality of that.

Commander Mark Simmons

Right firstly we need to explain why we're doing it. It's not a covert tactic, it's overt. It's

obvious we're doing it and we're using, you know, metal detectors and so on, we're not trying to hide it, so we have to explain, we do try and explain to people why we're doing that. We explain in local communities what our concerns about a particular hot spot, a particular feature that might

generate some types of crime, so why do we deploy there, and that's where that engagement firstly is really important in explaining what we are doing and why we are doing it. Very clearly it's important that the way in which we do that is appropriate and is, meets the expectations of the people that we're subjecting that to. The other thing that's really important to recognise is that

one of the principle things we expect to do with metal detectors is deter people from carrying knives. It's not a covert tactic as I said so do we expect it to be surprising a lot of people? Not necessarily but we do expect it to create an environment where people understand if they do carry a knife they've increased the risk that they will be found with it. Now by definition

that means a lot of the people that we use this with are not going to have knives with them, but we think it is really important, and we do need to articulate this to people, that it's really important people see that the risk of being found with a knife, if you carry one, is there and is significant, and I absolutely agree that we need to make sure we explain that so people

understand that and we carry it out in the right manner, but that doesn't change the fact I think that some of the reduction in knife crime we've seen, very difficult to draw exact causal links but some of the reduction has clearly gone alongside the deployment of these sort of tactics on a fairly consistent basis as we've looked at where its worked and we've promulgated the good

practice around to other places about how it's operated. You know, we need to carry on doing that and we need to manage some of the tensions that that creates, and I don't underestimate the challenge in that, but it is a really important part of what we're doing in terms of generating that environment where people feel there is a real deterrent to carrying a knife.

Chair - Cherie Booth

[INAUDIBLE]

Commissioner

Can I take you back to an earlier answer, you gave us these statistics about the number of incidents and people arrested with knives [INAUDIBLE] can you just aggregate that so that you attribute some of those to known gang activity and the rest to general people, youths or whoever, just carrying weapons around the place.

Commander Mark Simmons

I think it's really difficult to pin that down very specifically, what a gang means to, it means different things to different people. Some of the research we've done indicates that what I might see as a gang might be very different from what a young person sees as a gang, and what I see as a group of, you know, young people in a particular state, in a particular Estate, in a particular

road might be perceived very differently by them, and one of the important things for us I think is not to get too hung up on what is or what isn't a gang but to look at how do young people see themselves, their relationship with their peers, their relationship with people that may be coming to the area they see as being their territory, that sort of thing, and how that manifests itself

So yes of course we do do analysis, we require each place in London to do its own local profile around knife crime as part of Operation Blunt, that's one of the things they have to do, so that they are locally targeting their activity in the right way there, but part of that is assessing what are the dynamics in that particular location, and it varies from place to place, I'm back into saying

again we've gotta be careful about drawing very broad assumptions about this, but at the core of it for me is not so much what do I define as a gang, but where are the things the dynamics for young people that generate the sort of behaviour, the offending, and the likelihood of being a victim that comes out of that particular local circumstance, and making sure what we're doing is, takes

that fully into account at the very local level. Clearly there are some networks, some groups of people that are much more organised, much more focused than others, there are some very clearly at that end, that we can see, you know, very clearly.

Commissioner

I wonder if I can ask you to comment briefly on the Phoenix programme that your colleague Sharon Rowe, Commander in Brixton, and Derek Anderson the Chief Executive launched a little while ago, where they are targeting the most repeated offenders involved in particularly guns and knives, and specifically answer the question that organisations, community organisations within that consortium, who to all intents and purposes are doing pretty good work with that cohort of people, are also struggling for funds to do the preventive work before they become repeated offenders. To what extent is your programme connected to that programme?

Commander Mark Simmons

Okay the Phoenix programme in particular I don't know a vast amount about, it's a local programme as you say that's happening in one Borough, what I look to do for my place is see what are the, when the local programmes start to evidence some results then we look at where we can learn the lessons and roll that out. There is a really important point of course about funding for preventative programmes. The, we work in partnership in each Local Authority, in partnership with Local Authority, in partnership with [INAUDIBLE] in partnership with all the different people, different agencies, different groups that work there, and we have to jointly work at how we can lever in the funding to do some of that work. Do the Police have the funds to take from our work rightly leading on the enforcement, the intelligence gathering and so on element to invest so much to support some of those. No we don't. We do put some funding into those programmes but clearly we're funded specifically with certain things in mind. But working with other agencies in terms of generating funding opportunities is clearly a really important issue for us.

Chair - Cherie Booth

Ian.

Ian Levy

Just a quick question, in terms of the metal detectors, how, what I'm interested in is how

are they deployed and is there sort of an advance notice of its intended deployment in a particular area?

Commander Mark Simmons

How they're deployed locally needs to be geared towards what are the particular features of that location. So they could be deployed without a branch notice although we would expect then there to be an explanation of what is going on at that time, in other occasions there will be deployed with advance notice, if we're deploying around schools for example, I think it's

very important we're doing that in conjunction with the schools, so that there's not a surprise for other people working with young people there. But the principle thing for me is that whether it's something that we trail in advance or whether it's something that is done at shorter notice, is that we are absolutely actively communicating both with the individuals concerned at that time and

to the community in the area in which it's taking place what we are doing and why we are doing it. So that is absolutely crystal clear.

Ian Levy

And I'm just concerned about the actual effectiveness of it and how that can be measured if the deployment is known in advance because all we would seem to be doing is to move the persistent knife carriers to some, to another location, sort of bypassing the arch if you like.

Commander Mark Simmons

We can do although, you know, young people by and large there are reasons why they want to go to certain locations, there are things whether it's around places of entertainment, whatever it is, there will be reasons why young people want to go a place, we have to be careful that people who it's so important to carry a knife merely just avoid those places, but part of what

we're doing is saying, you know, you can come and use these places still, you can come and still congregate here, this is an entertainment facility of some sort then come and use it, but don't bring a knife with you when you come, and that's, you know, part of the message that we wanna get across there. I would not, for most of the young people that

we're talking about here, I would not expect them to consciously say, to say you know I'm not gonna go there I'm gonna go somewhere else because I can take my knife there but I can't take it here. Having said that, displacement in any type of policing activity is an important thing to monitor. We need to see what happens when any initiative we take, any operation activity we undertake, we need to monitor and assess what the impact is on surrounding areas and on the people concerned, and that's part of what we do when we evaluate, you know, the work we do in any particular place. What has happened to crime in the surrounding areas because of what we're doing here and we try and make sure that we respond to that and we move, you know, we deploy, you know, in accordance with the patterns that emerge from that. But rarely do you see in any type of crime you see displacement of activity totally occur so that, you know, even if some people were moved, take their weapons somewhere else, very rarely do we see 100 percent displacement of anything, we usually see a beneficial effect but then we need to manage those bits that clearly still involve people offending elsewhere.

Chair - Cherie Booth

Commander Simmons thank you for coming and sharing your experiences with us today.

Commander Mark Simmons

Thank you very much, thank you.