



Firearms and the Police

Jan Berry, Chairman of the Police Federation:

- *“In light of increased gun crime and the threats police officers are increasingly facing in the line of duty, we felt it necessary to canvas opinion on arming officers and other issues related to officer safety”.*
- *“The Police Federation of England and Wales wants more officers to be given firearms training as they face increasing danger on the streets of Britain. We have seen an increase in gun crime year on year and police officers out on the streets are telling us that our resilience is just not enough.”*

As the figures for gun and knife crime continue to soar in the UK, the Police Federation of England and Wales (PFEW) continues to push for more police officers to be trained specifically as Authorised Firearms Officers (AFOs).

At the Police Federation of England and Wales Annual Conference 2006 held in Bournemouth this May, the findings from the third survey on arming the police were announced. (Please see top line results at end).

Summary of key findings member survey

The response rate was high and the message emphatic. An overwhelming majority of 82 per cent stated that they do not want all officers to be routinely armed on duty. This is particularly significant given that there has been almost no change in police officers' opinions since we conducted the previous surveys in 2003 and 1995, and this despite the massive rise in gun related crime.

2006 survey results:

At a time when police officers face increasing levels of violence while on duty, the Police Federation of England and Wales has polled over 141,000 police officers on issues including safety, training, workload and routine arming.

The survey was conducted by ERS Market Research and follows the Officer/ Arming Survey of 26,476 officers in 2003 and compares the results where applicable.

Officers at greater risk

- Almost half of the 47,328 police officers polled have felt that their lives were placed in serious jeopardy on at least one occasion since the last survey was released.
- This equates to approximately 23,000 officers across England and Wales facing extreme levels of violence from members of the public at some point over a two year period.
- Over 40% have been assaulted whilst arresting suspects by as much as eleven times in some cases in the same period. However, the figures the Home Office use to gauge the dangers officers face are currently unavailable following errors made in the HM Inspectorate of Constabulary's annual report.

Arming the Police

- Despite the threat of terrorism and increase in gun and knife crime 43% of officers are not confident that armed support would be available should they need it.
- Since the 2003 survey was conducted there has been an increase in the numbers of authorised firearms officers from 5,763 in 2002/03 to 6096 in 2003/04. However, ACPOs recommended figure of 5-8% of AFO officers nationwide has failed to be met by more than two thirds of forces in England and Wales.
- The Police Federation want to see a 5% rise in the total number of officers in England and Wales trained in the AFO role and this appears to represent the views of our members with 43% of officers supporting moves to increase the numbers of officers trained to use firearms.
- When asked if a decision was made to train and arm all police officers whilst on duty, 70% of officers would be prepared to do so. However, out of the 6,516 (13.8%) respondents who stated that they would never carry a firearm on duty, a staggering 56% claimed they would resign from the force rather than accept an order to carry a firearm.
- Taser gained support from 44% who felt that that appropriate training should be made available to enable all front-line officers.

Greater protection for operational policing

- Over half the officers polled provided their support for moves to make the wearing of appropriate protective vests mandatory for operational policing with 58.4% backing body armour.
- Following Federation campaigns to pressure forces to provide this essential piece of kit, 6.2% more officers have been provided with covert body armour at 36.9% and a 19.6% increase since 2003 with 91.3% of officers being provided with overt armour.

Perceptions of the non-sworn officers

- The role of the Community Support Officers (CSO) has proved controversial since they were introduced five years ago. Designed to act as the eyes and ears of the police force, the Federation has raised concerns over the lack of clarity regarding funding, accountability, role definition, power and responsibility.
- Initially introduced as a means of providing sworn staff with support to enable officers to focus on fighting crime, pressures resulting from amalgamations and reform may result in a decline in police numbers.
- An overwhelming 63% of officers reported that the presence of non-sworn police officers has done nothing to lighten their workload. A further 20% claim their work load has actually increased since the introduction of the CSO role.

Training

- 48.7% not satisfied with the additional ongoing training available.
- In recent years the police service has seen a 10% drop in the number of AFOs. This trend is likely to continue until the problems surrounding incident investigations and decrease in officer downtime is remedied. Currently few officers perceive an AFO career to be an attractive option.
- Officers should be safe in the knowledge that all has been done to protect their safety this means appropriate, reliable equipment and sufficient back-up officers should they be required.