

# Gun Wars

In the wake of 11-year-old Rhys Jones' murder, Carol Jenkins looks at how Merseyside Police is working to beat gun crime.

The call that came through to Merseyside Chief Constable Bernard Hogan-Howe's office informing him of the murder of 11-year-old Rhys Jones is a call that every senior police officer dreads.

Rhys' murder has sent shockwaves through communities in Britain because it served as a poignant reminder of the prevalence of guns on our streets especially in the hands of young people. It was a sickening crime that could have happened in any major city in the UK, and illustrated the need for tougher action to be taken to prevent gun crime taking hold of our streets.

Official Home Office figures paint a worrying picture of the state of gun crime in England and Wales with the

number of overall offences involving firearms rising steadily since 1997/8. Crimes involving imitation weapons were up 55 per cent compared to the previous year. There has also been a rise in the number of young people carrying real or imitation firearms in an attempt to boost their image or from a mistaken idea about self-protection, said the Home Office.

It remains to be seen whether new laws - such as the introduction of a minimum five-year sentence for people convicted of possessing an illegal firearm and a new offence making it illegal to possess an air weapon or imitation firearm in public without legal authority or reasonable excuse - have an impact on gun crime levels in the next few years.

At a recent gun crime summit, Home Secretary Jacqui Smith told senior police officers and other representatives of the service and wider criminal justice system that more needs to be done to tackle the issue in the coming months to ensure that the tragic death of Rhys Jones doesn't become just another statistic. As a result of the summit, ACPO is to lead a National Gun Crime Review and will report back to the Home Secretary within the next month with its findings.

Efforts to tackle gun crime in Merseyside were stepped up even before Rhys' murder following concern about the level of cash-in-transit (CIT) robberies involving guns, and also the fact that more young people were increasingly becoming involved in gun crime.

This resulted in the setting up of Matrix - a specialist team made up of 200 officers tasked with dealing specifically with gun and gang-related crime. Formed in January 2005, it is the only dedicated team dealing with gun crime outside of London and is unique because it is jointly run by uniform and CID officers. It has already had a huge impact since its introduction, making more than 5,500 arrests and seizing nearly £1.5m of criminal cash. On average, the Matrix team executes a firearms warrant every two days and has seized 50 firearms in the last 12 months. These results have contributed to a fall in overall crime in Merseyside of 11 per cent in April 2007 compared with the previous year.

The murder on Merseyside of 11-year-old Rhys Jones sent shockwaves through Britain



Photography: PA Photos



Detectives in the team actively target gun criminals, while uniform officers work to disrupt criminal activity. The force is also one of the first to use a 'flying drone', a remote control helicopter fitted with CCTV cameras to monitor the streets and gather intelligence.

In an interview with *Police* magazine, Chief Constable Bernard Hogan-Howe admitted feeling "shocked and angry" about the death of Rhys Jones.

"Having an innocent child killed in an area where you have overall responsibility for policing is one of the worst things that can happen to a chief constable," he said. "Despite the fact that we have worked hard to reduce crime levels over the past three years, still a young boy died, and that's very difficult to accept."

Mr Hogan-Howe said the aim of Matrix was to 'put the fear back into the criminal' and was part of a wider force strategy to wage a 'total war on gun crime'.

He believes the biggest deterrent is the certainty of detection, so key to the success of Matrix are constant public declarations by the force that stiff penalties will be enforced against all those involved in gun crime.



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Merseyside federation Secretary Ian Leyland agrees with this tough stance and has worked with the force to present a united front against gun crime. “Enforcement isn’t a dirty word in our force and what Matrix is trying to achieve is to put the criminal on the back foot. Incidents like the death of Rhys Jones shocked us all to the core and there is now a renewed vigour among all officers to make sure this doesn’t happen again.”

Mr Leyland praised Matrix officers for ‘working tirelessly’ in their efforts to reduce gun crime, but he warned against them becoming burnt out as a result of the long hours and unsociable shifts they work.

“The effort that the Matrix staff have put in has been unbelievable but it’s important to ensure that this performance is sustainable, and to do this we have to make sure that officers get a proper work life balance.”

**“This is a fight that requires a national response and a war that we can’t afford to lose ... I think we all have a duty to make sure that another child’s life isn’t lost in this way.”**

The local federation has been working with the force to ensure that the health and welfare of the officers on the squad is protected. “We should be praising and encouraging officers to go the extra mile but you don’t drive a performance car with your foot to the floor all the time. You need some down time to recharge your batteries.” Looking to the future, the force is determined to continue its tough stance on guns by running Matrix indefinitely. It will also become the first area to have a CPS lawyer and judge who will both be dedicated to gun crime prosecutions.

Mr Hogan-Howe will also continue to publicly voice his concern over gun crime levels nationally. Even before the death of Rhys Jones, he called on the Home Office to tighten legislation on guns by focusing on three areas: changing the law to compel witnesses and victims to give evidence, excluding those involved in gun crime from their communities and gripping the importation and supply of weapons.

“This is a fight that requires a national response and a war that we can’t afford to lose,” he said. “I think we all have a duty to make sure that another child’s life isn’t lost in this way.”



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