



Photography: Guzelian

PC Gerry Dawson chats with door staff

A taste of reality

As the Independent Police Complaints Commission investigate CCTV footage of an officer restraining a woman after she was forcibly ejected from a nightclub in Sheffield, Syreeta Lund finds out what it's really like on a normal late shift on the streets of Sheffield.

"What you doing here?" shouts a man in his late 20s in a broad northern accent, as he and a group of around five others congregate around me and Sgt Sam Wardman, leading the late shift of a neighbourhood team covering the main street in Sheffield

In the wake of the recent furore over the CCTV footage of the officer from the force tumbling down the stairs of a Sheffield nightclub while attempting to make an arrest, you could be forgiven for taking this question as a veiled threat of aggression.

Actually, the protagonist is an easy-going reveller, who just wants to banter and find out what we are there for, he then jovially asks me if I'd like to join them on a lad's night out, I politely decline. They sway off into a cut-price drinks bar.

It's only early, around 7.30pm but the team, made up of four other police officers, aside from Sgt Wardman, and a Special constable, want to make sure they have a high-profile presence before the serious drinking begins. "They will remember there is a police presence when they are drinking later on in the night and, hopefully, this will minimise any potential problems," says Sgt Wardman.

Sheffield itself has a population of around 600,000 and two universities mean there are large quantities of students. There is also strong Asian and Afro-Caribbean communities, a growing diverse population with Kosovans and, more recently, the city provides housing for Somalian refugees.



Officers respond to reports of a possible drug deal

We are patrolling Sheffield's West Street, dotted with brightly-lit neon pubs and bars, a throng of people already beginning to get into the swing.

So far, people are in good spirits and the interactions between officers and the public are very positive, but this is not the whole picture.

I wanted to find out whether officers patrolling this part of town face violence and assaults on a regular basis.

abuse. You only really get the grief when you need to lock someone up.

"Personally, I have never needed to draw a baton or CS gas, you can usually stop someone by speaking to them but some people who are really drunk are impossible to reason with."

During the night, we get called to a bar where a few pub-goers will not leave when asked by staff, the worry is



Stag night revellers

Nationally the Police Federation of England and Wales carried out a survey of 141,000 police officers, of nearly 50,000 who answered, around half felt their lives had been placed in serious jeopardy in 2004/05.

This year alone, to date, a total of 132 police officers reported injuries as a result of assaults from the public, 22 of which occurred in Sheffield city centre, according to the South Yorkshire Police Federation. Many incidents are often not reported – officers being verbally assaulted, spat at and kicked, go unreported in official statistics.

PC Stella Hartley, out on patrol with us tonight, says: "Sometimes, on a Friday and Saturday nights, it can be really quiet on a shift, another night, you get lots verbal

that they may be part of an infamous football gang and may be building up to causing some trouble.

PC Hartley recounts a particularly nasty incident where two officers were ravaged by a football gang.

"Officers were called out by door staff early in the evening to some trouble. A female and male officer went to the incident. As soon as they got there the male officer was set upon straight away and the female officer had to pull him out before both of them had to take refuge in the toilets and she had her head smashed quite badly."

She says it is rare for violence to kick off on a big scale in the city but that when you get extremely



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drunk people, it does not matter how small they are, they are on a different planet and will kick out hard. “You often need a number of officers to restrain someone in that state, I challenge anyone to come and do the job we do and see if they can pacify someone in that state, it’s not easy, and it’s just part of the job.”

Sgt Wardman also recalls how a fight between two girls ended with a female officer being smacked on the head from the side so hard that her eye socket was broken and she was not sure she would be able to see again.

As it gets later, the pub-goers get slightly worse for wear. We get a call to a bar that has refused to serve a drunken 18-year-old who decides to leave when police turn up, a girl, possibly his girlfriend, trails from the pub and shouts random abuse in the direction of the officers. Later on during the night, a student tips the officers off about a drug deal. We race to the dark alleyway where it is taking place and use the riot van to block their exit, those accused are becoming verbally very aggressive, they are separated by the officers and searched; nothing is found on them, but a wrap of speed lay on the floor nearby.

Later, we find out that they were targeting students, trying to dupe them into buying pot pourri, instead of cannabis. One of the officers tells me that the students were definitely potential victims of a mugging before we turn up.

The officers are not only patrolling to maintain a visible presence in the town. Every Friday and Saturday night they are furnished with information from the intelligence team which will look at the types of incidents occurring in the area, whether it is drunk and disorderly or assaults, so they can target their patrol in problem areas.

They will carry out checks on pubs and nightclubs with door staff, ensuring they are registered under the SIA (Security Industry Act) and displaying their armbands with identification.

The shift routinely check that CCTV is working at the clubs and its obvious the door staff know the officers’ faces, if not their names. I follow officers through a gothic rock club, as they carry out routine checks and

look for any problems, such as under-age drinkers or drugs. As we make our way through the sweaty hordes of Goths and punk rockers, there are a few puzzled looks, I’m wearing a suit which might make me look like drug squad or they may just think I’ve taken a wrong turn after a long commute, either way, they don’t create any problems and the club has a clean bill of health.

PC Gerry Dawson and Sgt Wardman are part of the licensing team and have been involved in shutting down several licensed premises that had issues including, under age drinking, fights, firearms and knives being used.

Generally, they do not encounter major problems, says PC Dawson. He added: “We sometimes get called out where you have gangs squaring up to each other at nightclubs every week. You end up having to stop them as they are still trying to fight each other and you get a lot of four-letter tirades in your direction.”

PC Paul Ibbotson has been on the team for two years and has a background in CID. He says officers tend to be on the receiving end of violence when they are trying to make an arrest and get quite aggressive resistance.

Although the experience of the frontline officers is that they do not regularly encounter violent assaults, all the officers have a colleague or have experienced extreme violence while working on the streets.

Sgt Wardman found himself in hospital after getting knocked out by a crack addict. Mark Brears, who has been a Special with the force for four years, recalls how a colleague was head butted so badly by a prisoner, being transported in the back of his police car, that brain fluid was literally leaking through his broken nose.

All the officers I interviewed understood that they were accountable for their actions with the public, but they were concerned about the amount of time investigations took and the affect it has on officers’ lives; their careers, their families. It sometimes takes years and before innocent officers are cleared and in the meantime they undergo the humiliation of having a complaint hanging over their heads.