



# Understanding gun crime offenders

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## Document information

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This revised advice has been produced and approved by the NABIS and the National Criminal Use of Firearms Group. It has been approved by NCOCC and VPP portfolio lead. The operational implementation of all guidance and strategy will require operational choices to be made at local level in order to achieve the appropriate police response and this document should be used in conjunction with other existing Authorised Professional Practice (APP) produced by the College of Policing. It will be updated and re-published as necessary.

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## **1. Understanding gun crime offenders**

### **Key points**

- **Groups defined as gangs are likely to use firearms in a chaotic and destructive manner.**
- **Gangs are most likely to use firearms against similar types of offenders or to commit lower level street/commercial robbery offences.**
- **Organised crime groups are likely to use firearms with a greater degree of planning than gangs, with a view to maintaining control of a crime scene during the commission of a crime (usually high value).**
- **Offenders may sit on a continuum between gang and organised crime groups where their use of firearms during the commission of a crime, despite some degree of planning, may be impulsive and aggressive, thereby presenting a higher degree of risk towards innocent members of the public caught up in the offence.**
- **When members of gangs come into possession of firearms, they are likely to take advantage immediately of crime opportunities that arise.**
- **There should be prepare, prevent, protect and pursue strategies around gangs and organised crime groups that are linked to firearms use.**

### **1.1. Gangs and organised crime groups**

To distinguish between co-offending groups, researchers have examined samples of groups in terms of their criminal purpose and the level of professionalism that they display. By doing so, an overall distinction has been made between 'gangs' and 'organised crime groups'. Gangs are described by some as being typically loosely organised, and although the term may already be outdated, as 'delinquent groups' who commit an array of criminal activity. 'Organised crime groups', on the other hand, are usually more sophisticated and professional (Caddick and Porter 2012: p 63).

It is perhaps likely, therefore, that gangs will use firearms in a more disorganised and expressive manner to gain respect, build a reputation and for retribution. This sometimes involves protecting territory, punishing perceived disrespect and securing the local drugs market. It is unlikely that those using firearms within gangs will have much consideration for the destructive consequences.

Despite this, the National Crime Agency has found evidence that the way gangs operate continues to evolve and some street gangs are operating at a more sophisticated and organised level.

Organised crime groups are likely to use firearms in a non-impulsive, rational manner during planned offences which might result in significant financial gain, such as cash and valuables in transit (CVIT) offences. The purpose of using a weapon is usually to maintain calm control over victims while managing the crime scene without any physical contact being required.

There is some suggestion that there is another cohort firearms offender sitting between gangs and organised crime groups. Research suggests that these offenders are likely to use a degree of planning but are characteristically impulsive throughout the offence, often losing control of the situation and displaying extremely aggressive and violent tactics to regain control, sometimes even enjoying the 'buzz' of victim intimidation (Alison et al. 2000, pp75-106).

This view is supported by other research (Hallsworth and Silverstone 2009, pp 359–377) which examined the culture of gun users. It concluded that there were two predominant cohorts: professional criminals and those 'on the road'. Those who could be described as professional were seasoned career criminals, with some degree of skill and who used firearms sparingly and instrumentally while 'doing business.' Those who were defined as being 'on the road' were often more volatile, and tended to be young men from excluded backgrounds within a culture of violence. This latter cohort were more likely to use firearms against similar offenders to settle disputes, or in order to commit street or local business robberies, etc.

When 'gangs' or 'on the road' groups come in to possession of firearms, there is research that shows they are likely to almost immediately act upon crime opportunities as they arise, such as vulnerable robbery targets (Kleck and McElrath 1991; and Sheley and Wright 1993 pp 669–692).

This finding suggests that prompt investigation and action in relation to intelligence that indicates such groups have access to firearms should be considered as a priority.

In addition to this cohort of offenders, there are those who operate on their own spontaneously, either in response to provocation, mental health issues, aggression or other motivating factors, or less spontaneously, motivated through their own values and beliefs.

The range of offender types is too complex to explore in any detail in this advice. It does, however, illustrate that there is an operational imperative for local policing to maintain a

detailed understanding of local gangs and organised crime groups and overlay any intelligence in respect of their access to firearms. This should be supported by prepare, prevent, protect and pursue strategies, in addition to individual offender management strategies.

### **1.2. Attitudes of young people in relation to firearm possession**

Despite some gang members citing protection as a reason or need to possess weapons, research shows that, generally, young people in the UK do not believe that possessing a gun is an effective method of preventing them becoming a victim of crime. In addition, young people from the UK, unlike the US, were far more inclined to believe that possessing a gun, was likely to have a negative impact on crime (Cooke 2004).

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