

The Shooting Sports Trust

Home Office Research Study 298 of 2006.

Gun Crime

The market in and use of illegal firearms

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A Critique by Colin Greenwood

Summary

I. Home Office Research Study 298 of 2006 was conducted by researchers from Portsmouth University commissioned by the Home Office and thus has official status, despite formal disclaimers made in the document.

II. Findings appear to conform precisely with pre-existing Home Office policies and views.

III. Research is confined to a group of 80 prison inmates who fall into a small identifiable sub-group which is not fully representative of armed offenders. Whilst the Report presents valuable social and demographic facts about the group, it is able to probe the market in firearms used in crime only at the very lowest point in the supply chain. It adds little or nothing to pre-existing knowledge of the supply aspects of the market.

IV. In contrast with previous Home Office commissioned studies, the researchers for this study appear to have confined their prior study to texts which have previously been cited by the Home Office, rejecting important studies from various countries, but particularly from the USA, that deal with the basic principles on a global basis.

V. Without providing supporting evidence or argument, they assume that existing legislation designed to control access to firearms has had a substantial beneficial effect. They appear also to endorse unquestioningly proposals in current legislation (The Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006) that is not yet fully in effect.

VI. They conclude that the subjects in their study obtained their illegal firearms within a closed market, from criminal contacts with whom they had a close acquaintance or an introduction. They offer no real evidence of the original sources of those weapons and cannot take the supply chain back beyond this last transaction.

VII. Despite an absence of evidence of sources, the authors compile a list of mechanisms by which firearms enter the criminal market. Many of the eight items are vaguely described, but all appear to be based on speculation. Some of the sources seem self evident, for example where imitation firearms are subject to no legal controls and may be purchased in the High Street, but in others they make unsupported assumptions, as when they repeat many times the implication that shotguns used in crime are stolen during residential burglaries. Better evidence of the sources of at least some of these weapons was available from firearms examiners and other existing sources.

VIII. There is a conclusion that the shotgun is a weapon of choice for *serious* armed robbers, despite the fact that pistols are used by robbers much more frequently than shotguns. They do not suggest how a serious robber might be distinguished from non serious robbers. The fact of the matter is that the shotgun is the chosen weapon some robbers, but many more choose to use a pistol.

IX. The researchers note that some offenders who used imitation firearms did so from choice when they could have obtained real firearms. They do not explore this theme further and, in particular do not quantify it. Previous research suggests that 95% of those who used imitation firearms in robbery did so from choice and 75% claimed that they could have obtained real firearms. That finding has major implications for the value of current legislation seeking to ban the sale etc of imitation firearms.

X. Forays into the realms of the cost of firearms, and more particularly ammunition, on the illegal market drift into the fantastic and a ready acceptance of vague statements and elaborations makes it impossible to accept the findings as adding anything to existing knowledge.

XI. For reasons that may reflect the policies of those who commissioned the research, the paper might be misinterpreted as using almost subliminal propaganda techniques to create an impression that the legitimate market in shotguns and their ammunition must be further restricted.

XII. There is a failure to appreciate or articulate the most important potential finding of the research which is that criminals not only obtain firearms as and when they want them, but obtain the type of weapon of their individual choice, whether that be a sub machine gun, a modern pistol, a shotgun or an imitation firearm. Policies pursued to date and policies proposed in this paper have had, and apparently will continue to have, no effect.

XIII. Proposals aimed at preventing gun crime include educating criminals about the dangers of converted imitation firearms; ambivalent references to imitation firearms that do not recognise the total impracticality of current proposals or the dangers that they could pose; proposals for new legislation on components of ammunition, aspects of which have either been enacted or rejected; further unjustified restrictions on shotgun ammunition that do not evaluate either the practicality of the restrictions or their likely effectiveness; more reliance on Independent Advisory Groups without any attempt to consider whether such groups are effective; concern that armed police might shoot armed offenders; a proposal for mediation between criminal gangs that may be in conflict with each other; a proposal that police protection, including safe houses, might be provided for criminals in danger because they have incurred drug debts; making changes to statistical recording methods. They have no suggestions about improved policing or enforcement.

XIV. The Report suggests, with possible self interest, that further research is needed in a number of areas. Unlike some other studies in this field, this costly study does not appear to have added anything much to the body of available information.

Finalx