

A Discussion Paper from Barnardo's CANDL Project

This is one of a series of discussion papers dealing with current and controversial questions for the church in modern society, and primarily distributed with our quarterly newsletter. Our aim in these papers is to provoke debate and action. As such, the views and questions expressed herein are sometimes quite deliberately blunt and to the point, but do not necessarily represent the policy of Barnardo's.

Gun Crime (Part 1): A butterfly has flapped its wings

Hackney is one of the top five boroughs in London for gun crime. The other four boroughs are Haringey, Lambeth, Brent and Southwark. During the recent gun amnesty these same five boroughs handed in the least number of guns. Hackney Police received approximately forty firearms, but that did include one bazooka. The Upper and Lower Clapton Roads have been notoriously dubbed the 'murder mile', owing to the proliferation of homicides along that main road and its adjoining streets. Most of these killings have been caused by gunfire. So what has happened in Hackney (and the other London boroughs mentioned) to cause such a dramatic rise in gun crime?

Nothing New Under The Sun

The problem of murder is not new to Hackney. The notorious Krays murdered Jack 'The Hat' McVitie in Evering Road, just one of the streets along the 'murder mile'. Since the Krays' life imprisonment for that crime in 1969 and the general demise of 60's style 'East End Gang' culture, the 70's, 80's and most of the 90's have seen relatively low levels of gun crime in the borough. In recent years, however, something seems to have caused a dramatic leap in gun crime, and a spilling out of such violence into the wider community.

Chaos theorists would argue that this huge shift is the result of a relatively small occurrence or even just a single factor. I think they could be right. After all, most of the social and economic factors that are paraded as underlying reasons for the increase in gun crime have been with us for decades. Unemployment, high returns on crime, peer pressure, and high levels of violence in the media have not just arrived on the scene. However, there is something that has - crack cocaine.

Notice that I specially cite crack cocaine. Cocaine has been used as a euphoric stimulant since before recorded history. Indeed, it is only a hundred years ago that Coca-Cola replaced cocaine with caffeine as the active ingredient in its caramel soft drink. However, crack cocaine has been with us for less than thirty years. Like all things new it needed a period of time to move from the 'pioneer' stage, to the 'early adopter' stage, until it eventually reached its "tipping point" and came into widespread use. For crack cocaine that tipping point was reached within the past three or four years, probably around the year 2000.

Crack Cocaine - the engine driving gun crime?

So why should crack cocaine be the engine driving gun crime? To understand this one needs to understand the nature of crack cocaine. The full technical name for cocaine is *cocaine hydrochloride*. Crack cocaine is *cocaine hydrochloride* stripped of its *hydrochloride* i.e. cocaine in a liberated base alkaloid form. This so-called '*free-base*' cocaine was first developed in the mid to late 1970's as a method of assessing the potency of shipments of cocaine to distributors. The intensity of the altered state of consciousness experienced by those testing cocaine in this way far surpassed the effect of ordinary *cocaine hydrochloride*. The news of this sensational 'high' spread, and the use of free-base cocaine through the practice of *free-basing* became popular. Still, as late as 1990 an academic article by P. Cohen (Centre for Drug research, University of Amsterdam)

reported that "A relatively rare way of ingesting cocaine is by smoking it free-based." Ten years later it would be a different story.

Free-basing was not without its practical dangers since extraction of *hydrochloride* requires that cocaine powder be heated to a temperature at which *hydrochloride* decomposes and vapourises. This was typically achieved by mixing *cocaine hydrochloride* with a solvent, such as ether, and then heating it to the requisite temperature. Some may remember that the American comedian Richard Pryor burnt himself, allegedly, in a free-basing accident.

Crack cocaine is produced by means of a less pyrotechnically hazardous method than free-basing. *Cocaine hydrochloride* is heated in a solution of baking soda, instead of a volatile solvent, until all the water evaporates and the *hydrochloride* decomposes and vapourises. The base-cocaine that is produced in this way makes a cracking sound when heated, this is where the name "crack" originates.

Crack has a number of major attributes that make it a narcotics entrepreneur's dream product. Firstly, because base-cocaine vapourises at a low temperature, it is a smokeable drug. Yet it delivers the sort of "flash" effect sensation that is usually associated with intravenously administered *cocaine hydrochloride*. For its part *cocaine hydrochloride*, if smoked with tobacco, would simply burn up with no effect. The intoxicating vapours of crack cocaine, however, are absorbed through the lungs into the bloodstream and transported to the brain within 10 - 15 seconds, and the effects of one inhalation will usually last between 10 -15 minutes. The effects of *cocaine hydrochloride* are said to be not comparable to the effects of crack cocaine. This is how one web site describes the crack cocaine sensation:

Crack cocaine delivers the intensity of pleasure completely outside the normal range of human experience. It offers the most wonderful state of consciousness, and the most intense sense of being alive, the user will ever enjoy... Groping for adequate words, crack-takers sometimes speak of the rush in terms of a **whole body orgasm**.

www.cocaine.org

This combination of smokability and 'super-sensation' is the major USP (unique selling point) for crack cocaine. Most people remain squeamish when it comes to injections; they also associate needles with "*real drug takers*". Smoking, on the other hand, is perceived as being cool, and somehow natural.

Secondly, there is now no need to process ordinary *cocaine hydrochloride* in order to get crack cocaine, the dealers supply it ready processed. Crack cocaine is now a packaged and target marketed drug. It is becoming the drug of choice for many night clubbers as dealers orchestrate sales by offering small amounts, so-called 'clubbers rocks'. Dealers have been known to claim to have run out of *cocaine hydrochloride* powder, in order to introduce crack cocaine to new buyers. Often in such cases first time buyer discount deals are done.

Thirdly, crack cocaine is a product that has repeat business hard wired into it. It is highly addictive, pathologically and psychologically. In animal tests pathological addiction has been shown to be all consuming. Animals will press a bar 10,000 times for a single injection of cocaine, and choose cocaine instead of food and water, even when subject to punishment for doing so. The psychological effects of crack cocaine include "feelings of well being and a grandiose sense of power... As the drug wears off, these temporary sensations are replaced by an intense depression, and the "drug abuser" will then "crash"..." Apparently, the first time a person takes crack they achieve a 'high' that they are never able to obtain again. Their subsequent psychological addiction is thereafter based on the quest to once again experience that first 'high'.

Fourthly, crack cocaine is (relatively) cheap. Cocaine in its *cocaine hydrochloride* form was traditionally a 'rich man's drug'. That is no longer the case for crack cocaine. According to Adam Frankland of the drugs charity **Turning Point** the price of crack has more than halved in recent years and can be bought for as little as £30 per gram.

Crime Pays

It is not particularly politically correct to say that crime pays. However, the truth is that the crime of dealing in crack cocaine pays handsomely. According to Chief Inspector Neil Seabridge of Hackney Police's Problem Solving, Partnership & Community department "lower level street dealers have been known to earn as much as £4,000 (four thousand pounds) per week." Never has there been a more lucrative street crime. With income levels so high, celebrity life-styles can be aped and even surpassed to the point that celebrities begin to ape the crack dealer's life-style. Hence, the 'Gansta Rap' image of groups such as So Solid Crew. Wealth is equated to worth, and ostentatious jewellery or 'Bling' is the order of the day. Once a dealer has established his £200,000 per annum tax-free life-style, the idea of losing it becomes an anathema.

Three things jeopardize the dealer's income, each of which are customarily dealt with through gun violence. The first is non-payment for supplies. One Hackney based detective told the Observer newspaper that "Owing £200 to your crack dealer is enough to get you beaten up. And it doesn't take much more of a debt to be shot." Secondly, other dealers encroaching on a dealer's sales area, which lead to so-called 'turf wars', is the cause of many of today's shooting incidents. Thirdly, getting caught by the Police. Whilst direct gun attacks on the police are virtually unheard of, police informants are not afforded any such grace.

A Twist in the tail

At the nexus of crack cocaine dealing and gun crime there lays a devastatingly violent phenomenon - the dealer/user. In the words of Chief Inspector Seabridge, "Those at the end of the [crack cocaine dealing] tentacles dabble, those at the higher end are too clever to use."

If we recall the psychological effects of crack cocaine we will note that crack gives a "grandiose sense of power", often described as a feeling of invincibility. Unlike empathogens such as 'ecstasy' which promote sociability, the high amounts of dopamine that crack cocaine releases causes it to promote selfishness, agitation and paranoia in the user. Put a lot of money and a gun in the hands of such a person and you have a recipe for murder. But not just murder relating to dealing.

Bad company *kills* good characters

It used to be the case that only villains needed to worry about being shot. Crack cocaine has changed that. The psychological disposition of the dealer/user has given rise to a new homicidal phenomena – "*Dis Shootings*". When a crack cocaine user is armed and in an "invincible, selfish, agitated, and paranoid" state, a wrong word, a disparaging look or an accidental collision can be interpreted as disrespect and be sufficient to trigger a shooting. These *dis shootings* are becoming increasingly common, and are a particular concern to the police and community alike. It is now the case that simply frequenting the places that are popular with cash rich dealers could cost you your life.

Gun Fashion

Villains have always had certain allure for the rest of the population. It is as if their criminality provides catharsis for our own latent propensity toward crime. We have been happy to be voyeurs,

even living vicariously through exploits we would not dream of actually performing ourselves. As for people in general using firearms to shoot another human being, even in wartime, it is not as common as one might think. As theologian Walter Wink notes, "General S. L. A. Marshall discovered that even in veteran units with good morale, it was rare for more than 25 per cent of frontline soldier to fire their weapons *once* during a battle in World War II, and 15 per cent was the more common figure." Yet, today, for some in Hackney and other inner city areas the gun has become a fashion accessory. How and why has this happened?

Whether it is the Windsor tie knot, the Beatles mop-top hair style, or So Solid Crew's *gansta rap* image, fashion has always been led by celebrities. Celebrities by their nature present to their audience role modelling. The 'bad boy' image has always been one of the range of celebrity stereotypes offered to the public: Errol Flynn, James Dean, Mick Jagger, Johnny Rotten, the list goes on from generation to generation of stars who set the 'bad boy' gold standard. Faithfully, fans follow their lead. However, the standard has been raised (or lowered depending on your viewpoint) to be a 21st century 'bad boy' celebrity you must augment all the usual excesses with a possession of a gun.

In a recent interview former rap star L.L. Cool J, commenting dismissingly on the 'bad boy' image of his 'S.W.A.T.' co-star Colin Farrel, said "I come from a rap environment where they ask 'How many guns did they catch you with?'" The inference being that binge drinking, and womanising associated with Colin Farrell is simply not enough to register as real celebrity 'bad boy' behaviour; *there must also be guns involved*. This is the message that is being sent to those who seek to ape the celebrity 'bad boy' image. The message is being acted upon. Young men are now obtaining firearms to complement their bling jewellery accessories, whether converted replica pistols or one of the many firearms entering the UK country from Eastern Europe. Add this firepower to the sense of invincible power gained through crack cocaine and murder is not too far away.

End of Part One

I have offered no solutions in this first part of a two part discussion paper of 'Gun Crime'. I believe that it is essential for the background to the current problem be posited, and hopefully accepted, before any meaningful discussion on a solution to the problem of Gun Crime can be offered. According to the European Union Drugs Agency, young Britons top the European Union cocaine league. According to Hackney police 70% of all acquisitive criminals test positive for crack or heroine, 40% test positive for both. My argument is simple: The development of free-base cocaine in the mid 70's has been like the proverbial butterfly that flapped its wings and caused a storm on the other side of the world. In Hackney we are facing that storm.

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If you want to respond to any of the above points, or follow-up any of the ideas, please do get in touch with us at CANDL.

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