Gun crime is a serious and high priority crime in the UK, but media coverage on the consequences of firearm violence often obscures the highly successful story that recorded gun crime in England and Wales has fallen by nearly 50 per cent during the past decade. One University of Brighton academic has been at the heart of the gun control and crime debates for 20 years, directly influencing new legislation, policy guidance and policing innovations to tackle gun-related violence.

Professor Peter Squires, a criminologist at the University of Brighton’s School of Applied Social Sciences, has played a central role in advising the Home Office, the European Union and many law enforcement agencies, as well as helping to shape public debate over gun crime and violence.

Professor Squires noted that “because gun crime was relatively uncommon until the 1990s, our understanding of how criminal supply and demand operated and how illegal gun markets interacted with various legal and ‘grey’ supply chains was little understood.” Intelligence-led policing has since moved on in leaps and bounds; we now know the sizeable contribution made by air weapons and replica firearms to the rapid growth in recorded gun crime in the late 1990s, and we have a much better understanding of the markets in converted, reactivated and ‘antique’ firearms – what Professor Squires has called the “junk gun” markets. The introduction of the National Ballistics Intelligence Service (NABIS) has greatly enhanced the police ability to forensically examine firearms and ballistic materials from crime scenes, and to trace active criminal firearms.

Professor Squires’ research made big impacts in the wake of the 2010 Cumbria shootings, when the Home Affairs Select Committee undertook an inquiry into firearms control. His evidence submitted to the committee on the role of legal weapons in domestic violence and the role of ‘readily convertible’ weapons (such as replicas and starting pistols) in firearms supply was considered particularly important.

Subsequently, a new UK government Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Bill included recommendations based on this evidence for a new offence of ‘illegal firearm possession with intent to supply’. This Bill was passed and came into effect during 2014. Professor Squires’ evidence on the use of firearms in domestic violence was also part of the evidence base for new Home Office proposals on the need to consider domestic violence risk when granting gun licenses that were included in the Guide on Firearms Licensing Law 2013 distributed to all police forces to guide their determination of firearm licence applications and renewals.

Further research at the University of Brighton on the complex area of domestic violence to being undertaken by Dr Paula Wilcox who has received a €750,000 European Union grant to examine child to parent violence in Bulgaria, Ireland, Spain, Sweden and the UK.

Following appointment in 2013 to the UK Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) National Independent Advisory Group on Criminal Use of Firearms, Professor Squires continues to contribute to policy and practice debates in these areas, he said: “If we want influence in areas of social problems like this, we need to take the opportunities to communicate when they come along.”

Photograph: Part of a cache of 70 firearms (rifles, handguns and sub-machine guns) recovered by Sussex Police from a private house in Brighton in 2014. Many were in full working order with ammunition. © Sussex Police.

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