



# Remote control

Sparked by the double murder of two teenage girls, the run-down Birmingham suburb of Aston became the most watched corner of Britain. In the second of our drugs.uk series, **Steve Sampson** reveals the tactics and impact of an unprecedented drive to rid Aston's streets of drug dealers



Aston killer: **Letisha** (far right) and **Charlene** (second left) were murdered on New Year's Day

**T**HE video image is crystal clear: a male in his mid-30s wearing jeans, trainers and a hood assaults an elderly man and steals his pension as he leaves a post office in broad daylight in the second city's suburb of Aston.

As the mugger runs away the video stops and there is a cold silence among the audience of community leaders viewing footage from one of 41 cameras that now make Aston's residential streets the most watched neighbourhood in the UK, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

To an outsider entering Aston by foot its boundaries are unclear. What is clear is that it is inner city urban Birmingham. A mixture of back-to-back terrace houses, low-rise maisonettes and high-rise blocks that are home to some 29,000 people speaking more than 15 different languages. Aston's location, a mile from the city centre, between motorways and close to Birmingham International airport, is ideal for dealers. Police say the drug trade in Aston is "phenomenal", with dealers getting up to 300 calls in 24 hours on their mobile phones.

The bullet-proof cameras that played their part in convicting the heroin-using mugger captured in action, started rolling in May 2003 in the wake of the tragic gangland shooting of two teenage girls – Charlene Ellis and Letisha Shakespeare. They were gunned down outside a hair salon in Birchfield Road, Aston, in the early hours of New Year's Day, 2003.

Within a matter of weeks Home Secretary David Blunkett had effectively underwritten a £3m war chest to fund the murder hunt, upped the minimum sentence for gun possession to five years, announced a gun amnesty and put up a £1,000 reward for information leading to gun-related convictions. The police were on a mission to drive drug dealing off the streets of Aston – a scourge seen as the main cause of the girls' death.

by more than 100 officers watched over by ever-present helicopter surveillance. Two armed response units were on permanent patrol waiting for tip offs from a team of 30 undercover spotters posing as workmen and shop assistants.

An unprecedented blitz on Aston's dealers, funded by Aston Pride – a £54m community regeneration project to lift the area out of the doldrums – was launched. A battery of 41 fixed cameras, supported by six mobile cameras – the largest residential CCTV monitoring project in the UK – was set up in drug trade hotspots. Aston's community safety team put up 'name and shame' street posters chronicling the successful use of CCTV footage in bringing convictions. Cars driving around with more than three occupants were regularly stopped and checked in the area.

Hundreds of police officers carried out dawn raids on the homes and hangouts of dealers in March 2004 in the first wave of Operation Trap, a 12-month long police exercise targeting drugs in Aston which has so far resulted in more than 150 arrests, mainly for cannabis and heroin. Police predict around a third will be successfully prosecuted. In July further raids in Arden, Davey and Bevington roads saw four men arrested and bags of heroin seized with a street value in the region of £6,000.

A string of nightspots, bars, takeaways and restaurants with connections to drug dealing were shut down. One of these, the Piazza Cafe in Lozells Road, Handsworth had operated without licence for 15 years and was the scene of one of the 10 shootings that occurred in the eight months after the clampdown started. At the time of going to press, five defendants are facing charges relating to the murder of the two teenage girls.

## CLAMPDOWN

On the ground the area was swamped with high profile patrols, roadblocks and armed vehicle checks manned

## GUN CULTURE

"The New Year shootings exposed a highly complex and influential culture of drugs, gangs and guns that

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had evolved over the past decade in Aston," says Kirk Dawes, a former West Midlands Police detective who received a Queen's award for his pioneering youth work under a remit of gangs, guns and drugs in north west Birmingham. "Aston and its neighbouring wards have suffered urban blight since the Handsworth Riots in the 1970s. Issues surrounding gangs and drugs have not been resolved – the area started to be perceived as being very open to criminal behaviour."

Aston, probably best known as the home to Aston Villa Football Club and birthplace of Ozzy Osbourne, sits between Spaghetti Junction and the city centre at the heart of an area known as Birmingham's 'north west corridors', comprising Handsworth, Lozells and Newtown.

Unemployment rates in the area run at some 20 per cent higher than the city average, housing is poor and mainstream services struggle to cope. Research has revealed that 60 per cent of those living in Aston cite the drugs trade as their biggest fear. In an area that offers its youth few employment opportunities, the trade in drugs has filled the void.

### IMPACT

Since the clampdown, reported crime in Aston has fallen from around 2,500 offences in March 2003 to under 2,000 for the same period in 2004. Local businessmen and shop owners who had formerly been plagued by blatant street dealing and the threat of drug-related crime have widely welcomed the measures that have stabilised former hotspots such as Bevington, Victoria and Birchfield roads.

But in the wake of the blitz on dealers two years after the New Year's shooting, questions remain as to both its effectiveness in driving out dealers and over where those who avoided jail have gone. Have they all decided to give up their lucrative, dangerous careers to become social workers and child minders?

"To date we've made a dent, but we're not claiming to have cleared all the dealers out," says DI Dave Shergold, who is overseeing Operation Trap. "I believe we have reduced the fear of crime and disorder for Aston's residents, but you have to realise that while the demand for drugs remains it is impossible to stop it."

"I would expect that what has happened is that those street dealers who decided to continue trading in Aston have taken more covert approaches such as dealing from their own homes. It may be they have moved to other high crime areas outside the city."

But, according to DI Shergold this is highly dangerous for dealers who risk being shot. "In a trade which is by nature highly territorial, especially in north

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west Birmingham, setting up as a dealer in neighbouring areas like Handsworth isn't really an option."

Alongside the targeting of open-street dealing, police have also stepped up surveillance on properties and increased their network of informants. "As the dealing goes off the streets we are following it into premises," says Detective Inspector Dave Shergold. "We are led to a great extent on this by the community. To start with we were given information relating to those at the very bottom of the dealing networks. As time has gone on we have received information on more sophisticated operations and so the way in which we work has changed. As the dealers have got wise to the CCTV we've changed our tactics and become more sophisticated."

### GOING UNDERGROUND

Kirk Dawes says the current court case highlights the level of sophistication that the gangs have achieved in evading the law and in some cases laundering profits through apparently legitimate businesses.

"To hamper detection many are effectively using vehicles from a pool of cars that change hands between cities. There has also been a rise in the number of women acting as couriers for both drugs and guns on the assumption they have less chance of being stopped."

Despite the outrage at the teenager's deaths, police are still finding it hard to penetrate some parts of the community. One youth worker who asked not to be named said: "At every stage the bid by the police to bring the perpetrators of these crimes to justice has been obstructed by both a fear of reprisals and a reluctance of individuals to trust the police to protect them. Others in the community may feel that gangs bring some form of protection or have inadvertently become part of the payroll, being paid to store either weapons or drugs."

The New Year shooting court case has revealed established black and Afro-Caribbean gangs such as the Johnson Crew and Burger Bar Boys as kingpins, alongside smaller groups such as the Cash Money Crew, Pay As You Go Crew and South Aston Boys vying for business in a highly lucrative market with dealers reportedly earning up to £2,000 a day.

Out on the streets, the lure of the drugs trade is still very much alive and kicking. One established dealer said: "It's still pretty much business as usual, although we do have to be a bit more careful. The thing that you have to remember is that for every dealer taken off the streets another takes their place. The first is looked after in prison and returns to the fold on their release. Then we've got two men on the streets". ■



Dawn raid: police bust an Aston pub during Operation Trap