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The war on knife thugs starts in the womb;
The man tackling Scotland's violent tendencies tells Gillian Bowditch why
the mothers are a vital target

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John Carnochan is that rare being - a charismatic senior police officer who speaks plain English and has little interest in meeting targets or ticking boxes. After 30 years policing in Strathclyde, most recently as deputy head of Strathclyde's CID, the job he left in 2004 in order to establish Scotland's **Violence** Reduction Unit (VRU), he is still as bamboozled as the rest of us as to why the west coast Scottish male has evolved slower than the rest of humanity when it comes to aggression.

He cites a recent World Health Organisation report which states that the main cause of death for young men in three Glasgow wards is homicide involving a knife.

"This is 2008. How can that be?" he asks. "We have opera, we have Kelvingrove Art Gallery. How can this level of **violence** co-exist in the same city?"

His incredulity masks a detailed exploration of **violence** and its causes. Detective Chief Superintendent Carnochan and his team have visited Boston and Chicago to see how they deal with gangs. He is also a keen student of the effects of deprivation on the infant brain.

"I've thought long and hard about why the West of Scotland is so violent," he says. "The homicide rate for young Scottish men is 5.3 per 100,000. In England and Wales it is 1 per 100,000. The Scots are an aggressive bunch anyway but we are more aggressive in the west. We just seem to be aggressive in everything we do, even in the way we speak to people. We're thrawn too. We don't give in. We're not good at just walking away. The respect thing is big with us. We're a bad bunch for that." The VRU's remit is Scotland-wide but the focus is Glasgow. "Strathclyde accounts for 55% of the **violence**," says Carnochan. "If we can fix it here, we can fix it anywhere."

Glasgow is stuck in a time warp. Attitudes to women and attitudes to domestic **violence** have changed little, he says. He quotes research carried out in Lanarkshire monitoring young men's attitudes to **violence** against women. Most

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said it was unacceptable but when faced with a range of scenarios, the men said it was acceptable to hit their wives or girlfriends if they were disrespectful of their mother.

Despite heading numerous murder inquiries over the years, it is only since starting the VRU that Carnochan has analysed the **violence** that has been a leitmotif of his working life. "When you're fighting it, you don't really think about it," he says. "You're too busy dealing with it. I've gained more knowledge in the last three years than in the previous 31. I feel a bit like Homer Simpson. It's that 'doh' moment. It seems to me now, on reflection, that we've spent decades trying to find clever, intelligent answers to complex problems.

"Often you need a simple solution. We've forgotten how important certain basic things are. Parenting is one of them."

For Carnochan, the big, simple idea came after his deputy Karyn McCluskey visited Professor David Kennedy at Harvard University to hear about the so-called 'Boston miracle'. In 1996 a concerted effort by the authorities dramatically reduced the level of gang **violence** in the city. When she returned, McCluskey outlined the strategy to the Glasgow team. Gang members were called to a meeting with police, told to stop the **violence** and threatened with harsh jail sentences. Services were set up to give them alternative things to do.

"I was waiting for the next bit," says Carnochan. "But Karyn said, 'That's it'. I said, 'You're joking'."

Nevertheless, he agreed to implement the strategy in the badlands of Glasgow. Carnochan's critics see the initiative as yet another nail in a coffin of failed projects from Frankie Vaughan's knife amnesty to the introduction of mounted police in Easterhouse but Carnochan argues that it is radically different to anything that has gone before.

"We've never done anything like it," he says. "We've always dealt with incidents after the event. We dealt with the accused and the victims in isolation but never with the behaviour leading up to it. We didn't even have a gang strategy. Now we recognise the gangs and deal with the gang as a whole, as opposed to the individual elements."

The result is the Community Initiative to Reduce **Violence** (CIRV) which had a high-profile launch in Glasgow less than a fortnight ago. It is a risky strategy. Carnochan and his team have staked their reputations on it. Critics are already accusing them of "rewarding" criminals.

After eight months of planning, which mainly involved ensuring all the necessary services were in place and that the local sheriffs were onboard, 200 gang members aged between 12 and 26 were invited to a series of summits at Glasgow Sheriff Court. About 70 professionals, including Stephen House, the chief constable of Strathclyde Police, the procurator fiscal, teachers, doctors and social workers attended, along with Rob Yanders, the basketball player and Jack Black the motivational speaker.

"We kept the message simple: stop the **violence**, do something else. We've had enough," says Carnochan. "The chief constable gave them the big stick. He said: 'I have 8,000 police officers. We will haunt you. We will oppose bail. We will keep you in custody, photograph you, fingerprint you, take your DNA -- the whole nine yards.'"

While the chief constable was speaking, screens showed all the intelligence they had on the gangs, pictures of the members, their territory, where they fought. There was film of police raids on gang members' homes. Policemen in riot gear stood at the front of the court to reinforce the point. Doctors from Medics Against **Violence** told gang members that while the average ambulance took nine minutes to reach the scene, they would bleed to death in eight.

Each gang member was given a card with a freephone number, manned by four people 24 hours a day and Black, in a highly emotive pitch, challenged them to be man enough to use it. So far 70 of 150 attendees have called the line.

Carnochan's aim is to have a youth worker visit the gang member within 48 hours of receiving the call.

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Within a week, a programme tailored to the individual will have been devised. John Wheatley College has made places available, and the Venture Trust, the Prince's Trust, The Army, Career Scotland, NCH and CanDo are all involved. Black, a former social worker from the East End of Glasgow, has offered to conduct a two day 'Mindstore' workshop with 180 gang members.

The corollary is that if gang members don't sign up to the programme or if they are involved in **violence**, they will be pursued ruthlessly. The whole gang will be questioned and if necessary hauled in. Any minor offence will be prosecuted. Crucial to the success of the CIRV will be the ability of other agencies, such as social services, to fulfil their end of the bargain.

St Andrew's University and Caledonian University are involved with devising the evaluation process. Carnochan believes that if it works there could be a knockon effect for generations. "It should be possible to monitor these guys through the health system. If we change their behaviour now, in 15 years' time they will be drinking less, they will have fewer convictions and they will be in longer term relationships."

But by his own admissions some of those who have phoned the helpline have a string of serious previous convictions and will be extremely hard to place in work. How much faith does he have that that initiative will work?

"I absolutely believe it will work," he says. "In two years I think we will have it pan-Glasgow. **Violence** will be significantly reduced. We already have injury surveillance in the hospitals so we will be able to measure it.

In stopping gang **violence** we will improve communities. My hope is that communities will reduce their tolerance to **violence**."

The gang summit is just one of a number of initiatives pioneered by the VRU. Perhaps most controversially, Carnochan would like to get to the putative gang members while they are still in the womb.

"The most important four years of a child's life are up to age three," he says. "We know that domestic abuse increases during pregnancy. A mother living in an aggressive environment cannot provide a safe haven for her baby.

"Research shows the effects stress hormones such as cortisol have on the foetus's brain are as profound as heroin. So when the baby is born it is fractious, hardwired for an aggressive environment. The mother then has a fractious baby and an aggressive partner."

He would like to see young mothers in aggressive households delineated as an "at risk group" and given much great attention. In particular, he thinks health visitors should be more proactive and visit much more often than they do at present.

"Nobody starts off wanting to be a bad parent," he says. "But we have lots of people who haven't been parented and they don't know how to do it. People talk about social engineering as if that's a bad thing."

His passion in dealing with gangs may be because he sees something of his younger self in the youths. Born into a working class family in Motherwell in 1952, he hated school. Carnochan, the youngest of four children, had a father who drank heavily. He fell into a series of casual jobs before joining the force. "As soon as I walked in the door, I liked it."

He rose quickly through the ranks. Carnochan now has two grown-up daughters, one of whom is a police officer. She finds herself arresting the sons of the men Carnochan arrested years before.

His team may be focused on the Glasgow gangs but Carnochan is interested in **violence** in the wider context. He believes we are more tolerant and have commercialised it.

"They've just made Saw 5," he says. "Saw 5 is about torturing people to death as was Saw 1, 2, 3 and 4. You

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wouldn't give your six year old a bottle of Buckfast to drink but some people will expose children to very violent videos or television."

The day after we meet, the figures for violent homicide in Scotland are released. More than two people a week were murdered last year and almost half of them - 55 - died at the point of a knife.

But rather than be deflated, Carnochan says he would like to see the violent crime statistics in Scotland rising. "A good performance indicator would be to increase the amount of **violence** that gets reported to us."

If he is successful, he could change the face of Glasgow, a city that has glorified its reputation for **violence**. There are many who doubt that it will ever change.

What he is certain about is that the old system of locking up and releasing violent offenders without tackling the cause of the **violence** is no longer viable. "The police and criminal justice system should be the agency of last resort but for a whole host of reasons we've become the agency of first resort," he says. "More cops, more courts, more prison and more legislation. That's fine but you have to understand what you are getting with that. You'll get some short-term respite and the satisfaction of seeing someone get the jail but preventing it is the real prize. This is not a police issue. It's not a health issue. It's our issue."

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GRAPHIC: Carnochan, right, says children have to be saved from turning to **violence**
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