

'Technocorrections' and the future of crime control

Craig Patterson examines electronic monitoring and the forces pushing forward crime control technologies.

Since the early 1990s there has been an increasing focus upon new 'technologies of control' or 'technocorrections' that decrease reliance upon labour intensive (surveillant) forms of policing whilst enhancing the ability to manage social groups deemed to be disorderly or 'at risk'. Electronic monitoring (EM) represents only one part of this growing technocorrections industry through which commercial organisations have obtained a foothold in the workings of contemporary crime control and raised questions regarding the role played by corporate governance in the expansion of crime control technologies. The vast majority of the 10,000 offenders electronically monitored at any one time in this country are monitored through the use of Radio Frequency (RF) technology. However, the recent commencement of satellite tracking pilots that target prolific offenders, sex offenders and those suitable for new domestic violence programmes present the potential for much more intensive forms of monitoring. Consequently, it has become essential not only to understand what factors are pushing developments in EM technologies but also whether this growth will be led by the needs of crime control or the potential of commercially developed technology.

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David Blunkett's declaration that new satellite tracking pilots provide a 'prison without bars' highlights the government's continuing strategy to increase the use of EM as part of a broad range of attempts to manage disorderly populations. Contemporary developments in modes of crime control have increasingly focused upon new ways of controlling the spatial distribution of individuals and groups. The growth in anti-social behaviour orders, the expansion of CCTV and the development of EM are all examples of attempts to restore order in problem neighbourhoods. Despite debate concerning the types of offenders that *should* be made subject to electronic monitoring, a scattergun approach has been adopted in targeting offenders (Whitfield, 2001) that focuses upon the 'usual suspects' and recipients of crime control strategies – those individuals living in the most deprived areas of inner cities. As the crime control apparatus continues to pluralize and expand, new questions arise concerning what role is played by commercial organisations in these attempts to assert authority and control over disorderly neighbourhoods.

The growth of the private security industry since the Second World War and within criminal justice since the beginning of the 1980s has arisen as a result of the growing importance

placed upon economic rationalities of crime control (Garland, 2001). The reassertion of the role of the market within criminal justice is representative of broad changes in societies that have moved from an inclusive focus upon welfarism towards strategies of social management associated with the neo-liberal ethos of combining 'market competition, privatised institutions, and decentred, at-a-distance forms of state regulation (Braithwaite, 2000). Within this context a growing emphasis has been placed upon the importance of cost and encouraging other agencies that operate at a distance from central government to take a more direct role in crime control.

One area of growth has occurred within the EM industry where a small number of commercial organisations, currently Group 4 Securicor and Premier-Serco, have benefited from a climate within which central governments are increasingly sub-contracting the provision of security to the commercial sector. It seems in these circumstances that the responsibility for controlling spatial and social management is being sub-contracted to private security companies who take on this traditionally state function. Organisations such as Group 4 Securicor and Premier Serco have benefited from these global changes and have been able to develop business interests across

the world in what has been referred to as a 'corrections-commercial complex' (Lilly and Deflem, 1996).

With this background knowledge it becomes clear that the development of EM at the local level needs to be programmed rather than technology or industry-led, as it is at the global level. Initially, electronic monitoring had remained an 'equipment in search of a program' (Whitfield, 2001) and this lack of clarity restricted its development. Substantial growth in EM since 1999 has arisen with the success of post-release programmes and their potential to relieve the burden on the country's overcrowded prisons through the Home Detention Curfew (HDC). The introduction of the HDC has meant that around 3,000 offenders at any one time can be released from prison into the community under supervision.

The initial success of the HDC in providing 95% completion rates has resulted in the length of the programme being extended and used as a release valve for overcrowded prisons. This was highlighted in December 2002 when the HDC period was extended up to 90 days in order to deal with a crisis in prison numbers that had resulted in around 199 prisoners a month being held in police cells. The growth and development of court-ordered EM programmes has taken much longer although there



has also been a substantial increase in the use of curfew orders in courts since 2002.

The targeting of persistent young offenders and juveniles through the Intensive Control and Change Programme and the Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme has helped to secure EM's position as a component of high-tariff community sentences. The success of these programmes and the HDC provide an evidence base that both legitimises and justifies growth in EM, although it should be noted that no Home Office research has been completed on the effectiveness of the HDC since it was extended beyond the initial 60 day limit (the current limit is 135 days).

While the early days of EM seemed to lack clarity and guidance, as highlighted by spurious offender targeting and underdeveloped programmes, the current situation is more positive. The introduction of satellite tracking pilots presents a further test for the development of electronic monitoring in England and Wales. Specific offender targeting will hopefully avoid the pitfalls experienced during the 1989 EM pilot and the constant threat of a high profile failure or breach is likely to place restrictions on the corporate drive for unrestricted growth.

The recent publication of 'Crime, Courts and Confidence' (Rethinking Crime and Punishment, 2004) has highlighted the fragile nature of public trust in EM. If this initial mistrust of EM as a governmental tool was coupled with technological or offender targeting failures, then it is possible that a similar experience to the 1989 bail trials could ensue, whereby no further development took place for six years. As a consequence of this, the drive towards satellite tracking can be seen as evolving through

central government and its desire to politically toughen-up community penalties whilst managing the prison population, with commercial organisations providing a broader push for growth at the global level. Although echoes of the privatisation debate of the 80s and 90s still remain, New Labour's 'joined-up' approach to crime control has moved onto subcontracting certain sovereign powers to the commercial sector, in particular, the spatial management of 'at risk' populations. Despite the role of EM being translated through governmental language into operating as a 'prison without bars' what we really see is a means of managing offenders in the community through an intensification of surveillance; it is this cost-effective method of social management and control that is likely to ensure its continued growth. ■

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References

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