

Managing dangerousness

Terry Grange looks at the effectiveness of procedures to manage violent and dangerous offenders in the community.

That dangerous people can effectively be managed in the community is an interesting concept. It was brought about by legislation in 1997 and 2001 which introduced a Register of Sex Offenders and Multi Agency Public Protection Panels (MAPPAs). The Sex Offenders Register required only that a person placed on the Register attend a named police station and provide his full details, National Insurance number, address and a photograph. MAPPAs were put together to assess the risk posed by sex offenders and other dangerous people and seek to put monitoring, supervision or management regimes in place. What was not provided to the police service was any additional finance for what has turned out to be an expensive, risky and politically volatile requirement.

How has the Police Service managed this requirement, have we been successful? The answers are difficult to define. All measurements by the public, media and politicians in this area are measurements of failure. Annually, statistics are presented which show the number of sex offenders, the number that have breached their registration requirements and the number of serious further offences committed by those deemed to be higher risk.

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In 2005/2006 some 61 further serious offences were committed by people deemed higher risk. During the same period the Probation Service managed 150,000 people, of whom 0.04 per cent committed serious further offences. A statistician might view both these figures as success. The public and the media see at least one serious offence committed by a Registered Sex Offender per week and over 800 offences committed by people managed by the Probation Service. The converse case, that of the 29,000 Registered Sex Offenders, 0.3 per cent committed further serious offences, is neither mentioned nor seen as success.

Since the Sex Offender Register was formed, the Police Service has created small units to manage the task given to them. Note that I do not say 'manage the offender'. A regime has been created where home visits take place to see the offender and seek to assess their current situation and the current risk they pose. Given the number of offenders, those deemed high risk receive much more attention than those at a lower risk. Even

so, other than those who are seen to be posing an immediate risk the best that can be said of the practice is that they can be monitored. Where an immediate risk is presented, then closer supervision and surveillance may well take place. The idea that they are under 24 hour, 365 days' constant close supervision is not sustainable and it is this that the public fail to appreciate and, in many cases, accept. There are 140,000 police officers and 48,000 people on the Violent and Sex Offender Register.

Home visits have no legal basis as yet and challenges have been made using harassment legislation and the *Human Rights Act* to curtail the visits and to seek to manage the police away from paying close interest in the activities of Registered Sex Offenders.

To provide for better information-sharing, the police and Probation Service created the Violent and Sex Offenders Database (ViSOR). Every police force in the United Kingdom, including the military police forces, has this database. The Probation Service and Prison Service will have finished rolling it out by the end of 2007. It is, in the words of the Office of Government Commerce, "the state of the art intelligence system in this field in the world". Alongside this the Police Service has created other

means of finding and sharing information. Within the next eighteen months the Police Service will have the ability to share information with an officer in any force and to examine the database contained by another.

Major effort has gone into improving risk analysis. The Probation Service have developed risk of harm tools and the Police Service likewise. It is the case, however, that many are in their infancy and years of study will be needed before we can confidently claim to better understand the risks posed by individuals. In the meantime, there have been a succession of clear failures as known offenders have committed outrageous crimes.

Media pressure on the Government has led to constant pressure for changes in legislation and changes in practice which, at times, they have given in to.

Presently, a review of how child sex offenders are managed is being carried out and there is the potential for more change to take place. The



Government is in an impossible situation with the media and the public demanding absolute safety. The people released into the community are, in many cases, lifelong offenders and the risk they pose will never go away. The two do not mix, and the problem for the police and Probation Service is that no matter how much effort they put into seeking to control these people, no matter how much intelligence is gathered and ways of assessing risks are improved, as yet no-one can tell what is in somebody else's mind at any given time. That being so, it is impossible to state, with confidence, that the offender being managed will not commit a further offence. Anthony Rice was required to report in every two hours. He took the opportunity during those reporting periods to commit murder.

Our Government is the only one that has set out to try to manage the risk posed by dangerous people. Whilst others have offender registers and public access to the registers, they make no effort to manage the individuals. Our Government should be applauded for what they are attempting to do. It is the case that the necessary funding to carry out this task has not been made fully available. Arguably, you could never make enough funding available and the Government has to assess, amongst all its priorities, what it can provide. We have made great strides in understanding the dangerous people that we have to monitor or supervise or manage but we

can never promise absolute safety. Until we get the public to understand that, we will continue to be assessed by individual incidents where we have failed.

Terry Grange is Chief Constable, Dyfed-Powys Police.