

Reducing victimisation and focusing public spending where it works

Irvin Waller sets out why prevention is always more effective than deterrence.

‘Tough on crime, tough on causes’ sounded good 10 years ago. Jack Straw and his policy makers were going to use the science-based recommendations of the Audit Commission (1996) and the Home Office (1998). That is, they planned to invest in programmes proven to reduce crime effectively, including those focusing on preventing youth offending. But with the exception of ‘youth inclusion projects’, this was not the case.

Instead, from 2000 onwards, Labour expanded the number of police officers by 10% and the number of prisoners by 25% at an extra annual cost to taxpayers of close to £4 billion. That is, they did exactly what the Audit Commission described as ‘misspend’. Now, 10 years later, advocates (National Accounting Office, 2005) of this profligate spending on law and order (and CCTV) are triumphant that these are the principal reason for the 35% reduction in victimisation rates in England and Wales. While most of the reductions in volume crime seem real, this confidence in the contribution of law and order to those reductions is misplaced according to the independent audit (Solomon et al., 2006) which called the claims ‘mixed’ or ‘misleading’ and questioned the value for money.

I have reviewed the US experience and research on the impact of large increases in expenditures on law and order on decreasing rates of victimisation over the same time period, and come to similar but less tentative conclusions (Waller, 2006). The impact of law and order on crime trends is exaggerated by politicians. The expenditure was not good value for money. But they were also lost opportunities because those increased funds could have been spent on policies that would have provided large reductions in property crime and violence – over and above the trends due to favorable socio-economic conditions. The implications are that Whitehall should face facts and shift from over-reliance on law and order to strategic investment in tackling the multiple causes of crime through ‘smart’ partnerships.

Sophisticated analyses of the reasons for the US decline in victimisation point to socio-economic trends such as increases in employment, more young men going to college, improvements in socio-economic status of women, and decreased use of liquor, and so on (Waller, 2006). True, the massive increases in incarceration from 200 per 100,000 – (the current rate for England and Wales is 150) – to 700 per 100,000 also contributed.

The evidence brought together by the Audit Commission and the Home Office in the 1990s led to clear recommendations that were never implemented. Recent reviews of the research by the World Health Organization and the US National Research Council agree with those recommendations but add more, including problem-solving partnerships tackling the multiple causes of crime and ‘smarter’ policing (Waller, 2006). Investments in programmes based on that knowledge would reduce crime in a sustainable way by much more than that 35% if socio-economic conditions stayed steady.

Violence is not a problem in all areas and so the strategies must be targeted. Prevention science points to affordable and effective solutions that are targeted rather than universal. For instance:

- 5% of children born each year account for 50% of the offences committed by all of those children when they are teenagers.
- 4% of addresses account for 44% of the victimisations.

A successful integrated and evidence-based violence reduction policy will work by tackling the concentrations of risk factors and life experiences that lead in different ways to persistent offending and repeat victimisation. These policies will be more cost-effective over time as they will reduce the number of individuals who become prolific offenders and at the same time the number of persons who are victims.

Regardless of socio-economic trends, those children growing up with more negative experiences – particularly from their parents and from school – are much more likely to become persistent and prolific offenders. Evaluations of projects that have been set up to tackle these risk factors have proven that they have reduced crime. These include programmes that help:

- small children in disadvantaged situations to develop successfully in their early years (public health nurse visitation);
- at risk teenagers to complete school (quantum opportunities) and avoid social exclusion (youth inclusion projects);
- school children to avoid violence, particularly

against women by teaching both youth generally and also youth at risk the skills and capacity to manage relationships better (4th R, Roots of Empathy, Olweus anti-bullying);

- youth to avoid abuse of alcohol and drugs by learning life skills and social competency (life skills training).

Problem-solving partnerships between different agencies, citizens and researchers who have focused on solving a crime problem have succeeded too. The proof of their success is not as irrefutable but their potential for England and Wales may be greater. These include reducing:

- crime across local government areas in a process similar to Crime and Disorder Partnerships but focused on social risk factors (Birmingham, Bogotá);
- high crime in neighbourhoods by helping social services, neighbours and police to solve problems jointly (Boston 'ceasefire' and social services, Chicago Alternative Policing);
- car theft and break-ins by getting police, citizens and others to tackle multiple risk factors (Manitoba Car theft, Seattle CCP, Kirkholt);
- multiple risk factors by mobilising social sectors using proven methods and measuring outcomes (Communities that Care).

In 2003, the UN adopted new standards called the Guidelines for the Prevention of Crime, renewing guidelines from 1996. Essentially these suggest that England and Wales would prevent and reduce crime and violence – more than occurs through positive socio-economic trends – if they:

1. Established a high level 'responsibility centre' in central government to direct this work;
2. Concentrated resources where they are most needed to solve crime problems, including for the prevention of violence against women and children;
3. Invested in widespread use of what *has* worked in crime prevention;
4. Supported research, development and training as well as local diagnostic tools and data collection;
5. Provided an adequate and sustained level of support to prevention practitioners (beyond primary policies such as education and health);
6. Engaged political leaders and the public in understanding and doing what has worked and why.

These recommendations should achieve some reductions in crime in targeted areas over a two to four-year period with broader reductions over a 10-year period. These strategies provide sustained benefits by not only reducing crime and violence but also investing in young people, women and neighbourhoods.

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