

Locking up the victim – domestic violence policy looks in the wrong direction

Greta Squire argues that the benefits to domestic violence victims of 'sanctuary schemes' and 'panic rooms' in their own homes have been exaggerated.

The increase in situational crime prevention methods is seen by some as a benefit to modern life and, as a practice, it has arguably become the premier way to 'deal with' crime. However, it is not a panacea for dealing with all crime-related problems (Lyon: 1994) and, for preventing domestic violence, is inappropriate and ineffective. Domestic violence is the latest crime 'problem' being targeted by increasing security within the victim's home. This is provided through the 'sanctuary schemes' or 'panic rooms' initiative. These are secure rooms inside the victim's home which are fitted with state of the art security and surveillance hardware. The addresses

government can claim that it protects the victim and maintains family stability, whilst unburdening local authority Housing Departments responsible, under the Housing Act 1996, for securing 'suitable' accommodation for applicants who are eligible for assistance, unintentionally homeless and who fall within a priority need group, of which victims of violence is one. The financial benefits of the sanctuary scheme can be seen in the government's own literature where they state that 'the cost of installing a sanctuary scheme is considerably less than placing a victim and any children in temporary accommodation' (Local Government Association 2006).

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of safe rooms are registered with the police so if an incident occurs there can be a rapid response to any alarm call. Ruth Kelly, formerly Communities Secretary for the government, claimed this was 'a major new drive to...prevent victims of domestic violence...being forced out of their homes' and earmarked £74 million to fund the construction of these 'panic rooms' (Communities and Local Government News Release). However, this article will argue that the introduction of increased crime prevention techniques through sanctuary schemes are inadequate in terms of protecting women from violent partners.

The government's guidance for the scheme states that 'panic rooms' should only be constructed in locations and accommodation which are 'safe and appropriate' and in situations where the violent partner no longer lives in the accommodation. Supporters emphasise the benefits of this to the victim by claiming that providing security and surveillance within the victim's home means they won't have to uproot families from their support networks. Thus, by creating a scheme where the victim is able to continue to live in relative safety within their existing home, central

Financial considerations aside, the key question remains: will the introduction of increased security and surveillance through sanctuary schemes improve the lives of domestic violence victims? This initiative reflects New Labour's approach to crime prevention generally which is based on (i) taking the responsibility for personal safety away from the state and placing it back on the victim and the community in which they live; and (ii) promoting a situational technology-based scheme, focusing on the site of the crime rather than addressing the offender's motivation, thus promoting an individualised, situational approach to personal safety. Panic rooms are simply an extension of this, and concentrate on the location in which the crime of domestic violence is committed, and the role of the victim in ensuring their own safety, rather than controlling the actions and motivations of the perpetrator. Whilst the rooms will provide some form of safety if they can be accessed in time, there are two inherent weaknesses: firstly, because the woman is remaining in a known location her whereabouts and movements become both knowable and predictable. Secondly survivors of domestic violence are being charged with the

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responsibility to protect themselves against attacks. Ultimately, therefore, the victim can only be 'safe' when they are in the confines of their house. If the perpetrator is not provided with either a prison sentence or rehabilitative services then the victim remains in danger once they leave their property, as Sandra Horley, Chief Executive of Refuge states 'some of these men think nothing of beating their partners black and blue; is a mortice lock really going to stand in the way? What is going to happen when a woman wants to leave her house?' Research has shown us that women are at a greater risk of death at the point of separation or after leaving a violent partner. (Lees, 2000 and Mirrlees-Black: 1999).

Whilst the focus of panic rooms is on providing increased security for survivors within their own home, the scheme does not deal with the perpetrator's offending behaviour. Surely the government should be concentrating on programmes to deal primarily with the location and motivations of the offender in the same way that known sex offenders are monitored. If the perpetrator is not in prison, accessing rehabilitative services, or has an order to re-locate, the victim remains in danger as soon as they leave home. If schemes designed to aid the victims of domestic violence do not include an increase in services to reduce perpetrator violence, then rather than being an improvement on the traumatic and unsettling experience of being forced to leave the family home and live in a refuge or temporary accommodation, it is in reality a continuation of power and control by the perpetrator. The victim could find themselves imprisoned within the home; a far step away from Ruth Kelly's rhetoric that 'sanctuary schemes are giving people the security and confidence to stay in their own homes' (Communities and Local Government News Release 2006).

Situational crime prevention techniques have increasingly become part of our everyday existence and have become central to the state's response to crime. However, with regard to domestic violence, employing security and surveillance as the main policy response is flawed: the focus needs to be placed on the offender and not the victim. Sanctuary schemes are essentially a short-term, 'easy' response, part and parcel of the government's reliance on security/surveillance culture.

The 'panic room' scheme does not deal with the motivations of the perpetrator; it is a cynical scheme, which places the responsibility for safety upon the victim gaining access to a secure space and allows the offender's movements to go unchecked. I would suggest the scheme is more about continuing the government's love affair with technology-based

crime prevention methods and reducing the financial burden on local government than addressing the needs of domestic violence victims.

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