Risky or at risk? Young people, surveillance and security

Surveillance strategies need to focus more on young people as victims rather than potential criminals write **Denise Martin, Caroline Chatwin** and **David Porteous**.

Most of us experience some form of surveillance in our daily life, whether it is the CCTV camera in the shop where we buy our morning paper, the identify card we use to enter the workplace, or the software that monitors our PC to protect it from fraud. But not all forms of monitoring should be accepted uncritically. As Lyon (2001:4) suggests, there is more than one side to surveillance as it has the 'capacity to reinforce social and economic divisions, to channel choices and to direct desires, and even at its sharp end to constrain and control'. It is these different faces of surveillance that this article will discuss with a particular focus on the experiences of young people. Using a recent (unpublished) research study on crime and victimisation in an East London borough, it will argue that surveillance has varying consequences for young people, and that surveillance techniques

categorical surveillance which is five times the rate for the over 30s'. This was further confirmed by the East London research where young people saw themselves labelled as criminals. One school which participated in the research was located in close proximity to a major supermarket chain. Pupils indicated that they were refused entry to the store prior to, during and immediately after the school day. Identification was by means of a school uniform and security guards chased anyone out who dared enter the store.

School security strategies also illustrate a strong awareness of risk. All of the schools attended by the young people interviewed had CCTV cameras as well as a seconded police officer who patrols the grounds. Other policies include random knife searches and 'lock down', whereby at the end of the school day, sliding doors which give access

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reflect a view of them as a 'risky' group rather than a group at risk. This perception fails to recognise the reality and consequences of crime for young people. Nevertheless, despite these tensions, some young people view surveillance as necessary for their own protection.

Young people are often regarded as a group which is likely to engage in criminality, a notion reinforced by New Labour, which has eagerly pursued an agenda engaging with anti-social and disobedient youth (Muncie, 2004). This agenda corresponds with developments within the wider criminal justice system whereby whole groups of the population are being categorised as suspect, and behaviour previously defined as just problematic is criminalised (Hudson 2003). The upshot of this is these groups are monitored and possibly excluded from 'respectable areas'. For young people even hanging out on the street or at the shopping centre becomes 'deviant' activity. This has been confirmed by Norris and Armstrong (1999:114), whose research into targeted CCTV surveillance found that 'youth is treated as suspicious merely because it is youth. Thus two-thirds of teenagers were subject to

to corridors are secured and only staff with swipe cards are allowed passage. When young people were questioned about the effectiveness of these strategies it was clear that they saw them as monitoring rather than prevention tools. One group of boys described how, just yards from the school, they had been subject to a knife attack, but had not received any help until they had managed to return to the front reception desk. Another interviewee recalled being beaten by a group of boys in the playground. 'No-one came to stop it', he said, until eventually some other pupils intervened.

The categorisation of young people as a risky group ignores the reality of young people's experiences as victims of crime. Pain (2003: 165) suggests that young people's victimisation is endemic across spatial boundaries and that the places where they are likely to be subject to surveillance are the very places where they become victims of crime. This view was echoed by our interviewees who described a number of incidents occurring around the periphery of the school or on the journey home.

One boy had been mugged twice on the journey home, another reported being beaten up by a gang on a bus, others described conflagrations involving large groups of outsiders waiting outside the school gates at the end of the day. Moreover, it was reported that risks to their safety were sometimes magnified rather than reduced by school security measures. For example, a couple of girls reported how they were made to leave one of the schools through a rear exit which was dark in winter and could be particularly intimidating if you stayed late for any reason, as there were fewer people around. A number of young people also questioned the extent to which they were taken seriously as potential or actual victims. One of the most severe incidents reported was an attempted rape, which occurred just outside the aforementioned supermarket. The victim managed to reach the store and report the crime but after they called the police she was left sitting on a bench alone for almost an hour until they arrived.

As Hudson (2003) emphasises, once identified as a 'risky' group your rights as a victim diminish. This was confirmed by some young people who believed there was little point in reporting incidents when nothing was going to get done. Some young people had a negative view of authorities like the police as they 'moved them on' when they were in groups, possibly sending them to even more dangerous, unmonitored places. It should be noted that the schools involved did take bullying within the school seriously and young people who had been a victim of crime outside of school also reported their satisfaction with the school support.

Although some young people were indifferent to forms of surveillance such as the school police officer and CCTV cameras, others believed that increasing forms of surveillance were required in order to deal with crime. For example, a number of young people suggested extending the use of surveillance cameras to quieter streets whilst the most commonly cited suggestion for improving safety was an increased police presence. Many students also cited strategies such as not being out after dark or not walking home alone as ways they had found to improve their safety. Their actions suggest that while there may be a general call for increased surveillance to make an area safer, surveillance may not, in practice, be enough and other strategies need to be implemented.

In examining the experience of young people and surveillance a contradictory picture emerges. On one hand young people are viewed as a potential threat that requires monitoring, whether this includes cameras and security in schools or exclusion from consumer sites. On the other, the potential threat to them in some of the spaces they occupy is ignored, leading to a high level of victimisation that can have severe consequences for those involved. This needs to be further recognised by official bodies if the victimisation of young people is to be properly dealt with. Despite the discriminatory nature of surveillance, that some young people believed it offered them the best protection from future victimisation is a matter for further and continuing scrutiny.

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