Reasons not to be cheerful: New Labour's action plan for targeting violence

Simon Hallsworth critiques the government's latest approach to tackling violent street crime.

It was always going to be interesting to see which direction the New Labour Administration under Gordon Brown would take on crime, and with the publication of 'Saving Lives, Reducing Harm and Protecting the Public', subtitled 'an action plan for tackling violence 2008-11', we get to find out (HM Government, 2008). The omens are not propitious, the rightward drift continues and in the direction of a technocratic, administrative criminology wholly devoid of social content and context.

The report prioritizes several issues that have, in recent years, made their way onto the political and public agenda, and it details what the government is going to do to confront them. These include a commitment to tackling violent crime, particularly that involving the use of weapons. The report also explicitly associates violent crime with gangs for the first time, and it identifies what it considers necessary to suppress them. In the report, the government reaffirms its commitment to confront domestic violence and increase the woefully low conviction rate for rape cases. The report identifies the scale of the problem posed by these harms; it develops a risk analysis framework for interpreting them; and this provides a blueprint for the development of a risk-management programme. In what follows, I will confine my remarks to examining the reports

interpretation and response to violent street crime or what, in its language, it terms variously, 'gun crime and gang related violence'.

The first chapter tackles the vexed issue of defining violence which 'can have any number of motivations'. Violent crime, we are told, covers a wide range of offences including 'homicide and serious wounding, gang related violence and offences involving guns and knives; hate crime; and sexual and domestic violence'. Violence is distributed between what the report terms public space and private space. It is in public space that they locate youth and gang violence 'which often involves the use of guns and knives' (HM Government, 2008:9), or so they say, though with no evidence adduced to support the statement. This kind of violence, the report argues, has bucked the wider trend which has witnessed diminishing rates of crime in recent years. While constituting only 1 per cent of offences nationally, the report recognises that in some areas violent crime has not diminished and poses serious risks to local communities.

While the authors are able to provide data that confirm why weapon use is a cause for concern, interestingly they make no attempt to define what they mean by gangs or establish quite why this feared unit is so serious that it has become a national priority. By leaving the term undefined, they can locate within it any and all groups that occasion

disquiet to someone. This can and does entail corralling into the term both serious organised crime and neighbourhood groups of young people—groups that really ought to be treated very differently. By continuously referring to the gang throughout the report, the authors appear to conveniently identify a suitable enemy which is presented implicitly as a net driver of urban violence. That there is no evidence provided to support this, nor any evidence adduced to prove the imputed connection between gun and knife use and gang membership, is a cause for concern. This is hardly evidence-driven policy. Just as the report provides no evidence to substantiate the gangland Britain thesis, it also fails to explain quite why the gang (and the violent gang at that) has arrived or mutated in ways that would lead it to become a priority issue. This is not, I should add, because the report does not deal in explanations, only the flat-earth crime science provided here studiously avoids any concern with aetiology. In this account, violence is explained by reference to an array of risk factors that some people appear to have a surplus of. These risk factors may be of the individual kind (the individual has various defects that make them prone to violence such as mental health problems); or which pertain to their relationships (having bad parents or associating with the wrong crowd). They can also be risk factors located within what the report calls 'the community'. Gangs are one such risk factor just as the availability of weapons is another. Poverty is also a risk factor at the level of community but only in so far as 'we know that offenders tend to come from poorer backgrounds, with low family incomes. Finally, society has its own risk factors. Inequality is cited as one, as are gender, race, and social exclusion. If citing terms like this may suggest some recognition of the inequitable nature of the free-market, dream on. These terms are cited but only in so far as they may help predict violence or victimisation in some way, which is to say they are not explanatory variables in their own right. Violent people are violent,

then, because they have too many risk factors, and that just about does it for violence. This interpretation then leads logically towards an intervention strategy. Map risks and get people to manage them.

Expecting to find some sense of social structure in crime science is rather like trying to find a nipple in the Daily Express. You certainly find all sorts of other 'hideous excess' (to use the poet John Cooper-Clarke's expression) but not this. Thus, in the one-dimensional flat ontology adopted here, poverty and inequality are simply two risk factors among many. And so they can all be listed together. That rising inequality and social exclusion help condition other risk factors and, therefore, are of a different order is not an issue crime science can comprehend precisely because it lacks the will, theoretical resources, and sophistication to do so.

This anti-social criminology must be very appealing to a post-ideological government like New Labour, precisely because it absolves it of those irritating issues that start to enter the picture when one starts to engage with old-fashioned Fabian concerns. This includes devastation free market capitalism imposes on the marginalised; the violence that emanates through social structures and which may provoke, in the fractured margins of our society, self-destructive violent adaptations, the kind of forces which, in a society of escalating inequalities, just might help explain why some young people group together in things called gangs.

Out with aetiology goes any concern to address the wider causes that might explain the urban violence. This is because explanation is evidently irrelevant. Out too, by

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implication, goes New Labour's old commitment to get tough on the causes of crime. There are no causes, just risks, and this is all we need to know. What comes in is something I find deeply sinister. A cold, soulless, administrative technocratic programme for mapping and managing risks wherever they appear: a post-welfare programme fit for the emergent national security state. The gang is identified as a risk and must, of course, be suppressed. Young people in gangs are to be subject to 'covert surveillance', and dedicated policing operations will be taken to 'crack down' on them. Leaving aside the vexed question of whether urban violence can be reduced to a question of gangs (it cannot), the idea that urban suppression through risk management will work without any commitment to change the social structures that produce the violence is frankly absurd. ∎

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References

HM Government (2008), *Saving lives, reducing harm and protecting the public: 'an action plan for tackling violence 2008-11'*. http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/violent-crime-action-plan-180208 (accessed 12 March 2008).