

THE FUTURE IS FOR THE OPTIMISTS

Kevin Heal is Assistant Secretary at the Police Department of the Home Office and is Head of the Crime Prevention Unit. We asked him for his own view of the world of crime prevention.

In some respects crime prevention has thrived for the wrong reasons. Crime prevention is frequently seen as being benign (everyone's in favour of it), cheap, simple and capable of bringing immediate results. But it is not necessarily any of these things - just ask anyone who has been directly responsible for a major local crime prevention initiative. However, for those who persevere, crime prevention can work.

But what does that mean? What is successful crime prevention? Again the answer is frequently oversimplified - it's not sufficient to claim success if crime falls in area 'X' only to go up in 'Y'. However, whilst accepting that a degree of uncertainty in any evaluation is inevitable, there are some benchmarks against which crime prevention can be assessed. There are, for example, some situations which are obviously 'wrong' from a crime prevention perspective and which can be put right by preventive intervention. For example, the old fashioned prepayment gas and electricity fuel meters were an invitation for the burglar, and not infrequently a problem for the householder or tenant too. Card or token meters simply removed the problem. There are similar examples where changes in the design of goods or in management or accounting practices of organisations make it impossible for a particular crime to occur.

Alongside the 'commonsense' criterion of success, there is of course the rigorous evaluation of the impact of preventive activity on crime. Such research is always subject to a degree of uncertainty, but is extremely useful in helping to increase our understanding of the problem being addressed. The evaluation by Paul Ekblom of measures to protect sub post-offices from attack is a good example (CPU paper No. 9).

Success can also be assessed in terms of the community as a whole. While the Home Office 'Five Towns' crime prevention initiative can be criticised for a lack of research evaluation, the communities within which the projects were located judged them to be successful - they must have done as each project was able to secure additional funding when Home Office support ended. In this context, prevention is 'successful' if there is less fear, if people move more freely about the streets, and believe in the steps being taken to improve their surroundings.

Crime prevention is not new. Gloria Laycock reminds us of the property marking skills of Palaeolithic man (CPU paper No. 3) and Edward I's fortresses in Wales have yet to be equalled, while closer to our own time, the 1960s saw a modest renaissance of crime prevention activity - albeit short lived. The current wave of activity, starting as it did in the early 1980s, is now well underway. During these years, the task of the Home Office has been to prise crime prevention out of the back water where it had come to rest in the mid-1960s and get it into the main stream of activity against crime. With this task in mind, the Crime Prevention Unit (CPU), was formed within the Home Office in 1983.

The breadth of preventive activity is now wide. The notion that crime prevention is locks, bolts and bars has been broadened to include the design of vehicles and property and improved management practices in hospitals, schools and factories. But the key question of why some individuals chose to exploit opportunities for crime while others do not, has pushed open the crime prevention door still further. The social aspects of prevention point to the need to look also at the prevention of crime from the offender's perspective.

Within any discipline or endeavour, there is always the danger of schism. Seeing one approach as more valuable than another can create a creative tension and can take thinking and practice forward. But creativity can readily give way to embattled positions and sterile, over-

rehearsed arguments and counter-arguments. Crime prevention came close to this but was saved by the lessons learned from projects such as those established in the Five Towns initiative, Kirkholt, Knowsley and more recently in the Safer Cities areas. Commonsense lead to the fusion of crime prevention ideas each reinforcing the other.

This integration is to be welcomed but there is more to be done before the future of crime prevention is secure. We have yet to see, for example, the extent of private sector commitment to crime prevention; and we have yet to confront the emerging argument that attempts to prevent crime merely stimulates unwarranted fear of crime - as disabling a phenomenon as crime itself.

Then, of course, there is the problem of displacement: crime prevention, so the argument runs, does not stop crime, it merely pushes it around. To date, the extreme pessimists of the world have tended to have the loudest voice in the debate; assuming a high degree of plasticity in behaviour, they have argued that blocking one crime opportunity merely diverts the offender to another. The optimists take a different approach, arguing first that much opportunistic crime can be stopped without displacement and, moreover, if one looks at some of the problems associated with crime (debt, drugs, family breakdown, and boredom) and tackles these, the offender and potential offender can be directed into positive areas of activity. Fortunately the future is for the optimists; the pessimists simply don't bother.

