Future Imperfect: preparing for the crimes to come

Paul Ekblom stresses the need for forward thinking to plan prevention against new developments in crime.

A borough introduces wheelie bins. Within weeks, burglaries have increased, because criminals are using them both to climb over garden walls, and to store loot until safe to collect. A change in housing allocation policy means that inadvertently, a particular high-rise is filling up with 'problem' occupants; combined with weaknesses in design, this means there will soon be a serious pattern of vandalism and conflict; and children brought up there are likely to be at particular risk of offending when older. Planning permission is granted to a new multiplex cinema and the design of the car park leads to conflicts over queuing at busy times; an incident of 'road rage' has already occurred. And among people visiting the cinema are a few burglars who use the opportunity to familiarise themselves with fresh homes to attack. A new national benefit system is introduced, but fraudsters discover loopholes to exploit. Likewise a satellite TV company starts drastically losing revenue and discovers that a rogue maths student has cracked the security code and spread the procedure on the Internet. Car thieves learn how to muffle a common kind of car alarm with quick-setting foam in a handy spray can. A new kind of universal socket spanner, the 'Gator Grip', is advertised in mail-order catalogues - and is a boon for thieves wishing to dismantle fittings in public buildings. Previously these had relied for their security on unusually-shaped bolts which ordinary spanners couldn't grip; now, they are vulnerable again and a whole strategy of target-hardening is defunct.

and 1999). In one way or another, all the examples of crime described above came about for the same fundamental reasons: a failure of people or organisations to think about future crime risks, or buried and untested assumptions about what causes crime. People need to be alerted to this need to 'think thief', motivated to make the effort and empowered to do it well.

Action on the 'crime futures' front is proceeding in a number of spheres: As part of the government's Crime Reduction Programme, a Crime Prevention Panel was funded in the Department of Trade and Industry's Foresight Programme. The panel's aim was to look ahead some 20 years to identify new crime threats and new preventive opportunities, to support both wealth creation and quality of life. Its report, *Turning the Corner* (available from *www.foresight.gov.uk*), recommends, for example, developing a hard science capacity in crime prevention and taking action to systematically introduce design against crime into the development of new products. A key function here is the development of wider methods of 'attack testing', as currently done on new

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Crime is always changing – as Ken Pease (2001) dryly notes, there were no car thefts recorded in the 1850s. Offenders adapt to countermeasures. Offenders misappropriate, mistreat or misuse new products, services and systems, and misbehave in new environments, as they emerge. New technology, social change and innovative business practices or government services mean that what once was secure against crime is now vulnerable, or what once worked in preventing it, is obsolete or irrelevant. And new products like mobile phones are designed without awareness of crime, a circumstance soon followed by a 'crime harvest' (Pease, 2001), and then attempts to retrofit security devices or compensate by inconvenient security procedures.

Reacting once crime harvests happen is the least desirable state of affairs. Scanning for new threats (like the emergence of a fresh kind of con trick) and reacting quickly to spread the alert is better than waiting for the future to take us entirely unawares. And anticipation – seeing the wave coming and taking avoiding action – is best of all.

While much everyday offending remains familiar – such as handbag thefts or pub fights – many kinds of crime offenders contend against crime prevention in a never-ending arms race. Move and counter-move are driven by accelerating change and diffused ever more rapidly and efficiently by electronic means or movement of people. Knowledge of 'What Works' becomes a wasting asset that needs constant replenishment.

Crudely put, if we don't innovate faster than criminals, crime will surely increase. (Examples of this evolutionary process, such as the co-development of safes and safe-crackers, are reviewed in Ekblom, 1997

models of car at the Association of British Insurers' laboratory at Thatcham. Also funded under the Crime Reduction Programme, the Design Against Crime Initiative involving the Home Office, DTI and the Design Council fits closely with the Foresight approach. Under development are systematic guidance materials and case studies to help designers systematically 'think thief' when designing new products, systems and services. Information on this initiative can be found at *www.designagainstcrime.org* and *www.designcouncil.org.uk*. New guidance on planning and crime is due to be produced in 2002 by the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions and the Home Office. Interest is developing at European Union level in 'crime proofing' new legislation in all policy areas to assess potential impact on crime. For example, a new law on tobacco duty might have a knock-on effect on smuggling, and a further impact in creating viable niches for organised crime to flourish. Finally, all practitioners in local crime reduction and community safety will be familiar with Section 17 of the *Crime and Disorder Act* 1998, which requires that each relevant authority exercise its various functions with regard to the likely effect on, and the need to do all
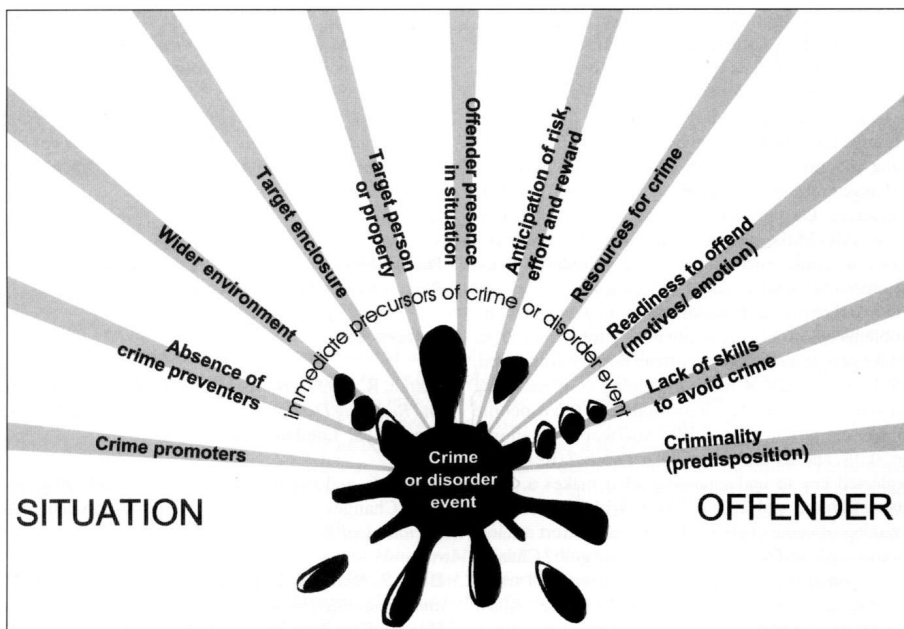
CCO: Conjunction of Criminal Opportunity

that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area. According to Pease and Moss (1999) this provision is a 'wolf in sheep's clothing', which has enormous potential to change how local government thinks about crime, and acts against it.

These diverse activities have two common themes: anticipating changes in the outside world which threaten to raise the risk or seriousness of familiar types of crime, or introduce entirely new ones; and anticipating the crime consequences of the changes which a particular department in national or local government, the EU or a private company is itself planning to introduce. The first is risk or threat assessment; the second, crime impact assessment of a kind resembling its environmental or health equivalent. Of course, hardest of all is anticipating how new external threats might intersect with proposed new initiatives. It is easy to speculate about future crime, but how might we proceed more systematically and rigorously? Perfection is impossible except with hindsight, but being caught unawares and false alarms can both be costly. Methods for assessment of crime risk and crime impact are various. (More generic approaches to 'futures' are reviewed under 'strategic futures' developments within the Cabinet Office Performance and Innovation Unit - *www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/innovation/2001/futures/main.shtml.*)

On the crime risk side, empirical predictions rest on the familiar identification of trends, cycles, and correlations with leading indicators such as the predicted numbers of (high-offending) teenagers in the population in years ahead or the state of the economy. Many of these factors have been considered in combination by a sophisticated time-series model predicting crime on the basis of changes in the economic cycle (Dhiri *et al.*, 1999). Interestingly, property and violent crime tend to go in opposite directions and with different lags following economic changes, principally in the amount of personal disposable income. Of course, 'linear' predictions such as these

are of a very general nature (e.g. 'expect more property crime') and they are vulnerable to 'non-linearities'. These are developments which are entirely unexpected on the basis of past patterns. Most of the opening examples were nonlinear. Many stem from adaptive and ingenious humans spotting and seizing new opportunities for crime. How might we meet the nonlinear challenge? We need to be able to 'think thief' - to spot these opportunities like the criminals themselves (but unlike them, of course, to resist temptation!). And more generally we must be able to think systematically about causes of crime - hence the importance of tested theories which can be applied, generatively, to new contexts and in new combinations.

Mapping the causes of crime

Causes of crime range from those which are remote from the actual commission of the crime (such as unfavourable upbringing of children or elevated prices for car spares) to the immediate (which centre on the motivated and resourceful offender in the vulnerable and tempting crime situation).

No matter how complex or distant, the remote causes must always act through the immediate. The latter can be captured under eleven generic headings, reflecting the necessary conditions that must come together for crimes to occur - the 'Conjunction of Criminal Opportunity' (CCO - see illus.). Related to causes are 'risk factors' (Farrington, 2002) – which are empirical correlates of offending, usually childhood circumstances of potential criminals such as poor parenting, which may or may not be causal but which it is prudent to address. This conceptual framework, which I developed by widening and deepening Cohen and Felson's (1979) 'Routine Activities Theory', also maps the generic kinds of crime prevention as intervention in the same eleven causes. It deliberately aims to bridge the 'cultural divide' between practitioners who focus on situations and those who focus on

offenders. It has a wide application in education and training of practitioners, design of knowledge bases and helping practitioners through the steps of the 'Preventive Process'. A summary of the framework is available at www.crimereduction.gov.uk/cco.htm.

In the futures context, CCO can help us 'think thief', both for assessing incoming risks from social, technological or economic change or the crime impact of any proposed new law, policy or practice. On the offender side, it asks if the new development will: Make people more likely to develop a predisposition to crime, such as particular attitudes, values, habits and emotional tendencies? Deny people the personal resources to avoid crime, such as skills at cooling an argument, solving problems constructively or organising their lives to get to work? Make people more ready to offend through frustration, stress, poor housing, lack of money, ongoing conflicts, drug habits and other current life circumstances? Give people resources for crime such as tools, software, weapons, knowledge, skills, and access to criminal networks? (Resources are the neglected key to understanding what makes a crime opportunity – Ekblom and Tilley, 2000). Will it: Encourage crime by making offenders believe the risks and effort are low and the rewards high, and minimising shame and guilt? Channel offenders into potential crime situations by patterns of travel and other routine activities, or encounters in cyberspace? Allow offenders to clear traces of their presence and activity from their preparations for crime, the crime scene itself, and the resale and laundering that follow?

On the situational side, will the new development: Channel human or other targets of crime (products, information, services) into potential crime situations, and make them more vulnerable, provocative and attractive to offenders? (Ron Clarke's influential contribution to the prediction of targets of theft centres on 'hot products', those which are 'Concealable, Removable, Available, Valuable, Enjoyable and/or Disposable: CRAVED). Will it: Make target enclosures such as safes, firewalls, secure buildings or compounds more vulnerable and attractive for offenders to enter, and easier and less risky to move about in? Make wider environments (like neighbourhoods, town centres or electronic financial networks) more attractive and favourable to offenders – e.g. by concentrating wealth, making concealment easier and pursuit harder, or bringing parties into dispute over noise or land use; and make them less attractive and favourable to those who might prevent crime? Alert, motivate and empower crime promoters – people who through carelessness or design make crime easier by supplying information, tools, weapons or encouragement to offenders before the crime happens; and buying stolen goods, neutralising security functions, concealing traces and laundering money after the event? Or lull, discourage and weaken crime preventers (private individuals exercising informal self-protection or social control, employees or police doing their jobs) who through surveillance, intervention and response to crimes could make life harder, more risky and less rewarding for offenders?

To conclude, I hope that I have made a convincing case that the application of futures approaches to crime reduction cannot just be an occasional peep over the horizon to head off a few limited or temporary crime problems introduced by new technology and new policies. It must become a permanent, systematic and rigorous capacity, because crime will exist, and take new forms, wherever there is conflict between individuals or groups; and wherever there are concentrations or flows of wealth, goods and services that criminals can safely tap to yield a richer or more enjoyable living.

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