Street crime: Blair's wild card

Marian FitzGerald argues that the Street Crime Initiative was an unsustainable short-term policy, more suited to grabbing headlines than to addressing the causes behind youth crime and violence.

The original targets set by the government for reducing domestic burglary and motor vehicle crime were unscientific in that they were identical for all police forces. They were, however, realistic in that both types of crime had been steadily falling in recent years. So a further fall of 25% over the next five to six years was attainable and, since these were 'volume crimes', meeting the targets would enable the government to claim during its second term that it had significantly cut crime overall since coming to office.

New Labour, that is, was looking for big wins in tackling the crimes which directly affected voters rather than more impersonal, business-related crimes. For, even though commercial burglaries were about as numerous as domestic burglaries, these were not included in the target. Yet it was also focusing entirely on reducing property crime rather than crimes of violence – with one exception. A robbery reduction target of 14% was also set over the same period, albeit only for five forces. Unlike domestic burglary and motor vehicle crime, robbery was seen as a highly localized problem in a limited number of urban areas. Its reduction would make very little difference to crime overall since, even in these, it accounted for no more than about 4% of the total; and a further difference was that the trend in robberies had steadily been upwards in recent years.

From the outset, the robbery figures started to move obstinately in the wrong direction. An overall increase of 26% between 1998-99 and 1999-2000 was followed by 13% in the following year, driven almost entirely by the rise in personal rather than commercial robberies. Three years into office, New Labour could no longer blame most problems on its predecessors, and sections of the popular press were now running a steady stream of robbery stories which conjured up readers' worst fears of random, violent attacks by strangers. Yet analyses of police data and research by the Home Office itself (Harrington and Mayhew, 2001) had already confirmed that, contrary to these lurid headlines, much of the increase was effectively an extension of traditional bullying. Whereas previously young victims who had 'lost' their bus fare or dinner money would never have featured in the crime statistics, they were now being relieved of their new mobile phones and parents were reporting these robberies to the police.
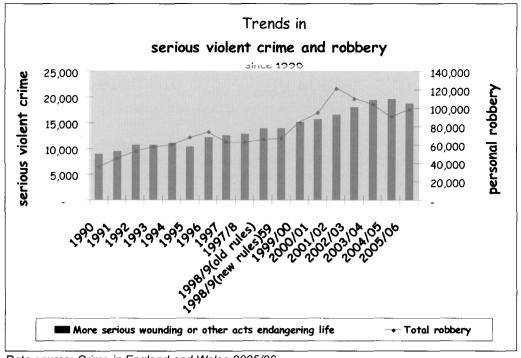
Nonetheless, in March 2002, before the publication of crime figures which would show a further 31% year-on-year rise in personal robbery, the Home Secretary announced a major Street Crime Initiative (SCI). In terms which echoed the media stories, he referred to the need "to reclaim our streets for the decent law-abiding public... to live peacefully and to go about their business freely, untroubled by the fear of attack". The Prime Minister, he announced, would personally oversee the initiative and the latter, in turn, promised to have the problem 'under control' by September.

The initiative

There were numerous, proliferating strands to the SCI – from work with mobile phone companies to make stolen handsets unusable, to a major new programme to put police officers back into designated secondary schools with an explicit emphasis on their operational rather than any educational role. The term 'street crime' was progressively expanded to include 'car-jackings' and firearms offences, although it continued to be presented both in the media and by politicians themselves largely in terms of 'muggings'. The initiative was driven by cross-departmental meetings held in the Cabinet Office Briefing Room (COBR), which was normally used for co-ordinating the response to terrorism or civil emergency. Here the number of police forces regularly called to account for delivering results had doubled to cover the ten forces which, together, recorded 80% cent of all robberies. £67m of government money was found to support the initiative directly, although this was often accompanied by expectations of matched funding from local sources; and with this came an implicit assumption that when the government money ran out, local initiatives would either come to an end or continue to be supported entirely by local agencies.

Throughout the initiative, questions were being asked on the ground about the extent to which other local priorities were being subordinated to this politically driven imperative and resources diverted from other work because the Prime Minister had chosen to put himself personally on the line in this way. By early September, though, the Home Office took other partners by surprise with the high profile release of 'interim results' showing the SCI had already been a resounding success; and the symbolic importance of the initiative to the Prime Minster himself was left in no doubt. In his subsequent New Year's message, he urged Britain to have the courage to rise to challenges – including the use of force to disarm Saddam Hussein of his 'weapons of mass destruction' – arguing that "the 16% cut in street crime following the Street Crime Initiative shows what can be done".

Trends in serious violent crime and robbery

since 1990

Data source: *Crime in England and Wales 2005/06*

Research funded by the Home Office itself, however, while acknowledging that the SCI had delivered 'radical change', was by now referring to questions over its sustainability and issues around "balancing the need to tackle levels of robbery and street crime with other force commitments and priorities" (Burrows *et al* 2003). This was followed in July 2003 by an extensive joint inspectorate report on the initiative (HMIC 2003). The issue of sustainability was again a major theme; and the inspection also identified a large number of other questions raised by the initiative – from the issue of why the Prime Minister had chosen to elevate young people's theft of each others' mobile phones to the status of a 'national emergency', to the perverse effects of the 'strong pressure at all levels for success'. One consequence of this, it said, was reports 'upwards to key stakeholders', which spanned those which were 'selectively accurate' to others euphemistically characterized by 'optimistic assessment' through to some which were little more than 'aspirational' (or wishful thinking?).

Meanwhile, a further study for the Youth Justice Board into the reasons for the increase in young people's involvement in street crime (FitzGerald, Stockdale and Hale 2003) identified a number of core factors which were unlikely to change in the short term. Key among these was the issue of relative poverty among young people – especially in areas where their paths crossed with other, more affluent individuals. The latter had increasingly begun to carry portable and miniaturized objects of desire which, ten years previously, would only have been accessible in their homes. The status attached to possessing these objects made them not only desirable in their own right but also a valuable commodity in an expanding juvenile market for stolen goods.

Therefore, despite the claims made for the Street Crime Initiative at the time, the problem did not go away and is now on the increase again. Its upward trajectory was briefly interrupted by an intensive and unsustainable commitment of resources; but it seems inherently to be pegged to a long-run increase in violence more generally, including serious violence which, although relatively rare, has also been rising steeply

(see figure). Meanwhile the number of less serious woundings in 2005-06 was more than five times the number of personal robberies; and these had increased nearly three times faster since 1998-99.

Arguably, violent crime triggers deeper levels of public 'fear' than property crime; and not only did media representations of the rise in robbery tap into these fears, the government's response to the problem played on these fears as well, in the context of a rise in violence more generally which it appeared not to have addressed. Yet an evidence-based approach to tackling the issue would have recognized that long-run trends in any form of violence are not determined by criminal justice policies: they are related to underlying social and economic developments.

The recent United Nations report (Unicef, 2007) has highlighted the particular problems experienced by young people in Britain; and as long as they continue to live in an economically polarized society where their sense of self-worth is over-dependent on their ability to consume the latest gadgets, the problem of street crime will not go away. Like the story of King Canute, the Street Crime Initiative should serve as a cautionary tale to any future politician who is tempted to promise that they can solve the problem of violence in society with short-term, police-led headline grabbing solutions and to compound these with overstated claims of success.

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