

# Taken in by CCTV Technology

Nic Groombridge argues that CCTV should not be such an important part of current crime prevention strategy.

Modern CCTV cameras have full zoom, tilt and pan functions, colour and increasingly digital recording. No doubt some are 'HD' (high definition)-ready. But, however poor the previous technology, they've always had 'spin'. Early, and more recent, research shows the picture presented by the media and ministers on the effectiveness of CCTV is questionable. While there have been some clear detection successes there is no hard evidence that CCTV is an economic or efficient crime prevention device. But CCTV makes for good publicity and provides material for crime reality shows.

Thirteen years ago Karim Murji and I published a series of articles that raised doubts about the success of CCTV (Groombridge and Murji 1994a & 1994b and Groombridge 1995). These made the point that many of the successes were overstated, that failures were not looked for and that instead of the installation of CCTV being part of a strategy it had become 'the' strategy. The articles originated in a failed attempt to evaluate a system. It was clear that the successes claimed were not those that the scheme had originally aimed for. Furthermore, those claims preceded our work and formed part of the ruling group's successful local election strategy.

We argued then that 'CCTV now seems set to achieve the status of an article of faith in popular crime prevention discourse'. We felt the debate around civil liberties obscured, 'the rather more prosaic question about whether CCTV really works or not, its financial costs and potential 'dis-benefits'' (1994b:283).

We briefly cited Burns, then Deputy Under Secretary at the Home Office (in Tilley, 1993), but the full quote is worth revisiting:

'The results are encouraging and suggest that CCTV can, in certain circumstances, make a useful contribution to crime control. But perhaps one of the most valuable lessons from the report is the illustration of the need to consider the precise reasons why CCTV might help to prevent crime in a particular case. As the report shows, even with a relatively simple measure such as CCTV there are a variety of ways in which it could contribute to crime control. Which of these ways is most relevant will often depend on local circumstances and the nature of the local car crime problem. This thought provoking report valuably brings out the need to consider these interactions carefully if value for money in crime prevention is to be achieved and if we are to learn from experience.' (author's emphasis).

Burns drew his conclusions from Tilley's work on the use of CCTV in car parks. Two specific objectives were cited for the scheme: to tackle robberies from

Asian women at bus stops and reduce car crime. However, success was claimed because the scheme had assisted traffic management; no mention was made of crime.

We concluded, 'CCTV can only ever be a tool, it is not a panacea' and that assessing whether a scheme was efficient, effective and economic 'would require data on the setting of objectives, the establishment of measures of those objectives, the sustained collection of data for those measures, and evaluation and feedback' (1994b, 288). Those measures were not spelt out, but the objectives necessarily would go wider than simple reduction of crime figures.

Welsh and Farrington (2002) attempted a meta-analysis of 46 schemes in the USA and UK but only 22 met their criteria (none involved randomised trials and a further four failed to provide data). They found 11 had a 'desirable effect' and five an 'undesirable effect' and five a null effect and one 'uncertain'. The total reduction in crime was said to be 4%; the bulk of that from successful car park deployment. All of the 'desirable effect' trials analysed, were in the UK.

Gill et al (2005) looks at 14 case studies of a variety of CCTV systems in the UK. Gill and Spriggs (2005) is an elaboration of those case studies into an assessment of CCTV. The cheapest capital scheme was 'Dual Estate Area B' at £43,237 and the most expensive 'Hawkeye' at £3,381,572. Ongoing running costs were approximately 10% of the capital cost. Of the fourteen schemes they examined only one showed a decrease in crime that was statistically significant which might plausibly be related to CCTV. Only one other scheme showed a statistically significant fall and many showed rises. Their conclusion is that:

'The belief that CCTV alone can counter complex social problems is unrealistic in the extreme. At best CCTV can work alongside other measures to generate some changes, but it is no easy panacea, and there is a lot still to be learnt about how to use it to best effect. (Gill et al, 2005:36).'

These arguments are taken up by Gill and Spriggs (2005). In their extensive concluding remarks they say:

'It would be easy to conclude from the information presented in this report that CCTV is not effective: the majority of the schemes evaluated did not reduce crime and even where there was a reduction this was mostly not due to CCTV; nor did CCTV schemes make people feel safer, much less change their behaviour. That, however, would be too simplistic a conclusion ...' (2005: 115).

They are right, it would be too simplistic and they



*CCTV has not been found to be a panacea for crime prevention.*

offer a number of reasons why this is the case before moving on to put the most positive spin on their findings. Like Welsh and Farrington they counsel the need for better evaluation.

So over the years we have learnt that CCTV is no panacea, that the world is complicated and that public and politicians like simple solutions, but we cannot deliver or properly evaluate even those. Home Office civil servants and advisors, such as Burns and Tilley, were rightly cautious about the potential of CCTV, yet hundreds of millions of pounds have been spent on them and some thousands on the further research cited. The Home Office has not hidden the work of Welsh and Farrington or Gill and others but the publicity, the spin, from central and local government and in local and national media, has been entirely positive. The visual nature of CCTV output is alluring but it is a mirage. Cameras may not lie but their supporters are very economical with the truth.

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