



CANDID CAMERAS

Evaluating CCTV: some cautionary tales

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Closed-circuit cameras have proved they can work, so we need more of them where crime is high... I have no doubt we will hear some protest about a threat to civil liberties. Well, I have no sympathy whatsoever for so-called liberties of that kind. (John Major, speaking at the 1994 Conservative Local Government Conference)

It is essential at the outset to assess the crime and other problems to be addressed and to examine the range of responses, which might include CCTV. Avoid falling into the trap of thinking you should use CCTV just because it is available and neighbouring towns seem to be planning to do so. (...) Don't assume that CCTV will by itself solve all of your problems. To be successful CCTV needs to be carefully planned, competently managed, generally introduced as part of a package of measures. (Home Office, 1994:9)

The Prime Minister emphasises that CCTV works and derides the civil liberties argument. The official Home Office publication - described by the Home Secretary as the 'authoritative guide' - is much more cautious. Gaps between Ministerial soundbites and the published advice of officials pose some questions which will be addressed in this article through a brief review of the literature. It concludes with a provocative suggestion.

Spy?

One reason why the Prime Minister can set aside the civil liberties arguments is the widespread acceptance of CCTV. Honess and Charman (1992) conclude that there was: good public awareness of CCTV installations - though usually of the most high profile sites; little public concern about CCTV - between 16.6% and 1.8%, depending on site; a perception - in descending order of frequency - that CCTV was to 'catch criminals' (92%), 'scare off potential offenders' (79%), 'make people feel safe' (57%), 'stop trouble' (57%), 'check up on the general public' (39%) and 'spy on people' (32%); there were also high levels of perceived

effectiveness - 'very' or 'quite effective' as 'crime detection' (74%), 'crime prevention' (62%) and 'making people feel safe' (53%).

"Why CCTV?" (Home Office 1994:11)

Such is the support for CCTV - compared, for example, with the speed and traffic light cameras - that public consultation may seem unnecessary. However, the Home Office recommend - but do not require - consultation in their guide *CCTV Looking Out For You*. It suggests that the problem is examined, possible solutions sketched out and data collected before deciding on the actual solution which might include CCTV. For instance, damage to cars in one town was shown not to be the result of vandals. Research into which days and times the damage occurred showed it to be caused by careless market traders as they set up. CCTV would have been an expensive and unnecessary way



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to have controlled this. Similar doubts about the methodological basis for the political and commercial hype of CCTV have been raised by Groombridge and Murji (1994a, 1994b).

Newcastle-upon-Tyne

The scheme in Newcastle-upon-Tyne is frequently cited as evidence that CCTV works yet a more nuanced picture is given in the guide. The headline figures of 13,500 crimes in 1991 reduced to 9,000 by the end of 1993 are clearly good but the case study also shows that at the same time a comprehensive Pubwatch Scheme, Bouncer Registration Scheme and a more pro-active style of policing were all implemented. CCTV was seen to contribute in 2,381 offences either as a management tool in pro-active policing or encouraging suspects to plead guilty. Nothing is said about the use of police discretion which alone is also capable of raising or lowering the figures. Self-report, victim surveys and ethnographic research are needed too.

The Home Office have not yet published an evaluation of a town centre

scheme. Tilley (1993), however, shows that CCTV can reduce a variety of car crimes in car parks but it is not possible to judge what it is about CCTV that worked nor gauge the extent of displacement. He conjectures that high tech cameras and swift deployment of staff had little impact on car crime through deterring or removing offenders but that CCTV can alter the patterns of perceived opportunity particularly if applied with other measures including overstating the success of the scheme. However, all these measures are fragile and need reinforcing and restating because the effect wanes.

This short review shows that the Home Office's own publications invite caution about the claims made for CCTV and show both how to assess whether CCTV is needed and how to evaluate it.

Open Circuit TV?

Political control over CCTV may yet become the police accountability issue of the late 90s. Solutions might include greater public access rather than increased security and bureaucratic control of tapes and access. Local cable TV or the Internet might carry a live feed enabling the public to see what it is the police see (Groombridge, forthcoming). Couch potatoes guard the guards.

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