

# Are we letting social policy off the hook?

Tim Hope looks at recent government proposals regarding community safety and crime prevention, and offers three pointers for future practice.

The *Crime and Disorder Act*, which sailed relatively easily through Parliament in July, marks a watershed in crime control policy in Britain, creating a general duty on local government to take account of the community safety dimension in *all* its work (Section 17). Alongside duties already laid down in other legislation, e.g. the *Children Act, 1989*, local authorities are now also to take effective responsibility for the planning and administration of a youth justice system whose primary purpose is prevention. For the first time, then, the prevention of crime has been acknowledged as a purpose of civil government in Britain. Another first in the *Act* is the identification of "disorder" - by which is mostly meant "anti-social behaviour" by individuals - and the provision to curb this with a battery of orders and prohibitions. In sum, the watershed through which we are now passing is the *civilianisation* of crime prevention, to be delivered to the community through local government and its voluntary and commercial partners alongside the statutory services of police and criminal justice.

**"In sum, the watershed through which we are now passing is the civilianisation of crime prevention, to be delivered to the community through local government and its voluntary and commercial partners alongside the statutory services of police and criminal justice."**

## The paradox of crime control

Yet there is a paradox at the heart of what seems to be emerging in this new order. On the one hand, we are seeing more of the extension and devolution of responsibility for crime prevention away from the central State - what David Garland has called the *responsibilization strategy* (Garland, 1996). Yet, on the other hand, we are also seeing a further eclipse in our thinking about crime of what Garland has also called the *solidarity project* - the idea that crime is reduced or, perhaps more importantly, that order is produced, ultimately not by the disciplinary actions of the State but by its efforts to include all of its citizens in a fair and just society.

This paradox seems to be leading to a kind of schizophrenia in the way the New Labour Government is approaching the various problems of social order in contemporary Britain. At the same time as it has established a *Social Exclusion Unit*, with a tacit commitment both to reducing through social policy the harms caused by social exclusion and to encourage "joined-up" social policy-making in Whitehall, it is also enacting specific crime preventive legislation which on the whole fails to acknowledge, let alone provide a means to tackle, the social roots of such disorder. Indeed, draft guidance recently issued by the Home Office makes scant reference to what might have been referred to only a few years ago as the "causes of crime" (on which we are supposed to be tough) preferring to recommend a no-nonsense, pragmatic handbook which seems intended to help local authorities discharge their statutory duties as painlessly as possible (see Home Office, 1998, Section 3).

## Targetting risk

What then confronts "honest politicians" (central and local) concerned to take account of community safety in *all* their work? The other key crime reduction message emanating from government presently is the need to target programmes to prevent young people from offending in the first place (Audit Commission, 1996; 1998). Typically, the advice is to target "known risk factors"

and to devise local programmes which specifically address them (Graham, 1998). Since such risk factors are believed to be more predictive of subsequent criminality the more that they are present in a young person's early life, the advice is to devise approaches which tackle as many risks as possible, as early as possible. Yet of the numerous examples of programmes cited as good practice, few if any address a key, consistent risk identified in the research literature - poverty and poor housing - and there is the cautionary advice to "find the right balance" between targeting those most at risk while ensuring that "investment is not wasted by the need to re-establish social control in an area suffering from a breakdown of law and order" (Graham, 1998: 17).

But how do we ensure that effort is not "wasted" in this way, or that those most at risk of crime are not themselves wasted? Is not the precursor of specific crime prevention or discipline the removal of the roots of disorder, and would crime-specific measures benefit from being joined-up to broader social policy? There are, at least, three broad directions for strategic thinking which the Government might want to contemplate if it is to ensure that the crime control wing of its policies does not spiral-off into its own self-referential, and arguably ineffectual, world.

## Three pointers for the future

In the first place, the most recent review on the subject shows that there is now a substantial volume of reliable economic research, including that in the United Kingdom, pointing to the link between lowered economic circumstances and increased crime, whether for individuals or countries (Pyle, 1998). Regardless of whether one is talking about the effect of unemployment or disposable income on either criminal offending or victimisation, it now seems implausible to deny, as Margaret Thatcher once did, that there is a link between economic fortunes, inequalities, crime and social order. Whatever the causal pathways between economic circumstances and social



outcomes. this ought to be the starting point of a properly joined-up policy on crime prevention. And it seems no less plausible that we might identify and act upon such links than, say, we might do about the link between economic inequalities and health outcomes, where there is emerging a strong research and policy programme.

Second, what also seems to be influencing government thinking in other areas of social policy, yet again noticeably absent in its response to crime, is the analysis of the growth of income inequality since the 1970s (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1995). Notwithstanding how we might be faring internationally, within our society there has been a rapidly growing gap between rich and poor, both between income/tenure groups and between the communities in which they respectively reside. Such inequality is mirrored, indeed coincides with, a growth in inequality in the distribution of harm from crime. For instance, while half the country only experiences about 15% of property

crime recorded in the British Crime Survey, barely a fifth of communities in England and Wales nowadays suffer *over half* the total. And community-level inequalities in crime victimisation have been increasing since the early 1980s, not least as a consequence of the relatively dramatic growth of poverty within the social renting sector, and its social and cultural segregation from the rest of the community (Hope, 1998).

Third, the necessity for joined-up policy, especially at the local community-level, is underscored by the "ratchet" of social inequality and neighbourhood destabilisation. The experience of destabilised neighbourhoods caught in a spiral of economic and social deterioration is increasingly one where adverse circumstances ratchet together to produce compounded social dislocations which have knock-on effects on the institutions of the community, which themselves might comprise some of the social defences against disorder. Severe economic decline and resource inequality may be

**"Indeed, draft guidance recently issued by the Home Office makes scant reference to what might have been referred to only a few years ago as the "causes of crime" (on which we are supposed to be tough) preferring to recommend a no-nonsense, pragmatic handbook which seems intended to help local authorities discharge their statutory duties as painlessly as possible."**

producing a vicious spiral in which not only does disorder impinge on the effectiveness of schools, youth services and voluntary organisations but also cripples their ability to provide the kind of framework of order which, ironically, the government envisages as the principal bulwark against youth crime. Unless joined-up intervention is made to tackle the causes of neighbourhood destabilisation, neither the aim of controlling disorder nor that of preventing crime seems likely to be achieved, particularly where they are needed most.

### Advancing the solidarity project

This is not, yet, a counsel of despair. Much might be done to release the ratchet of social dislocation by the various New Deal programmes, most recently that For Communities, especially if prosecuted on a sufficiently broad scale. And the existing resources of spending, including the Single Regeneration Budget, if properly targeted may also help stem the tide. Comprehensive community efforts aimed specifically at social inclusion in some other countries, including France, also offer some encouraging models for action to reduce crime (Pitts and Hope, 1997). But the danger is that if the remedy for preventing crime in the community comes to be seen politically and exclusively as that which is embodied in the letter and spirit of the *Crime and Disorder Act*, then there may be even less prospect of advancing the solidarity project which surely underpins the social order upon which even the *Act* itself presumes to draw its legitimacy.

*Tim Hope is Professor of Criminology at Keele University.*

#### References:

- Audit Commission. *Misspent Youth* (1996). *Misspent Youth '98* (1998). London: Audit Commission for Local Authorities and the National Health Service in England and Wales.
- Garland, D. (1996) 'The limits of the sovereign state: strategies of crime control in contemporary society'. *British Journal of Criminology*, 36, 445-471.
- Graham, J. (1998). 'What works in preventing criminality?' In *Reducing Offending: an assessment of research evidence on ways of dealing with offending behaviour*. Home Office Research Study 187. London: Home Office.
- Home Office (1998). *Guidance on Statutory Crime and Disorder Partnerships*. At <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk>.
- Hope, T. (1998). 'Community Crime Prevention'. In *Reducing Offending: an assessment of research evidence on ways of dealing with offending behaviour*. Home Office Research Study 187. London: Home Office.
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation (1995). *Report of the JRF Inquiry into Income and Wealth*. Volumes 1 and 2. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Pitts, J. and T. Hope (1997). 'The local politics of inclusion: the State and community safety'. *Social Policy and Administration*, 31, 37-58 (reprinted in Jones Finer, C. and M. Nellis (Eds.) *Crime and Social Exclusion*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Pyle, D. (1998). 'Crime and unemployment: what do empirical studies show?'. *International Journal of Risk, Security and Crime Prevention*, 3, 169-180.