

Successes and failures in neighbourhood crime prevention

Concern about rising crime since the early 1980s has prompted growing interest in improving physical security and other crime prevention measures, particularly on council estates. A report by Steve Osborn and Henry Shaftoe from the Safe Neighbourhoods Unit considers the successes and failures among a range of different initiatives.

- f** Although crime prevention activity has tended to be biased towards physical security and design measures, there is little evidence that these alone lead to sustained reductions in crime.
- f** Many initiatives that lead to a fall in local crime statistics are short-lived and may 'displace' crime from one area to another or change the nature of criminal activity (for example, a switch from burglary to street crime).
- f** The predominance of property offences within recorded crime statistics has led policy-makers to underestimate the potential impact of violence on community life. The fear of crime for many estate residents is, in reality, a fear of violence.
- f** Where a broader package of measures is introduced, including improvement in housing management and youth and community initiatives, the impact on crime appears to be more sustained.
- f** Crime reductions have sometimes proved hard to maintain in the long term because of the short-term nature of the interventions – and often because local action is unable to alter social and economic conditions largely determined by national policy.
- f** The researchers conclude that there is a strong case for holistic approaches to crime prevention, with greater emphasis on social, economic and family-based interventions.

Crime in Britain

Crime rates have risen sharply, although the rise has not been uniform across Britain. Whilst crime rates in England and Wales doubled in the 1980s according to police statistics, much smaller increases were recorded in Scotland. The British Crime Survey indicated a smaller (50%) but still substantial rise in England and Wales but hardly any increase at all in Scotland.

The pattern of risk is also far more clear-cut in England and Wales. For example, according to the British Crime Survey, about one in six households in 'high risk' areas such as the 'poorest council estates' experience a burglary or attempted burglary each year and about one in 25 people experience robbery or theft from the person. Some groups, such as ethnic minorities and poorer people, also suffer disproportionately. There has been less research into the Scottish situation but it is apparent that the same kinds of distinctions between different neighbourhoods and tenure groups do not exist.

Crime prevention explosion

The 1980s and 1990s have been periods of intense crime prevention activity characterised by:

- major government programmes, some wholly focused on crime prevention (e.g. Safer Cities programme) and some partly (e.g. Estate Action programme and City Challenge);
- innovation from the voluntary sector (e.g. National Association for Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NACRO) and Crime Concern);
- substantial increases in local government activity involving the creating of numerous community safety posts and teams and development of district-wide partnerships between the statutory, voluntary and private sectors;
- community action, most obviously through Neighbourhood Watch schemes;
- a boom in the security industry, estimated to be worth £2,000 million a year.

The approaches

A variety of approaches to crime prevention has been adopted. These include:

- Legal remedies – the use of injunctions against individuals on estates, such as those used by Hackney Council on the Kingsmead Estate as a prelude to investment in community facilities;

Kingsmead Estate, Hackney

Injunctions against specific individuals and repossession orders against persistent offenders were followed up by a programme of activities for young people. Crime rates dropped sharply. For example, burglaries on the estate fell from 340 in 1992 to under 50 in 1993. The police and council together collected more than 300 statements from residents on the estate about the activities of gang members. The Chair of the Community Trust stated that all this work "has been vital in helping Kingsmead to combat crime by giving young people self-esteem and a strong sense of belonging to their community"

- Design changes – the removal of overhead walkways and defensible space measures for high-density estates of flats, such as those adopted by Westminster Council on the Mozart Estate;

Mozart Estate, Westminster

Following the removal of overhead walkways and other design changes on the estate, residents were divided over whether the changes had been worthwhile. Research in 1993 found that the changes had not brought about reductions in burglaries and the need for additional improvements, including economic and social regeneration, was highlighted.

- Community security businesses – to protect empty properties from vandalism and theft, such as that on the Possil Park Estate in Glasgow;

Possil Park Estate, Glasgow

A community security business was established to look after empty dwellings on the estate, after a number of unsuccessful private contracts, and to provide a 'street warden' service. The Council's evaluation concluded that the scheme had saved £250,000 in reduced costs of vandalism to and theft from empty dwellings in one year.

- Youth projects – to provide recreational opportunities for young people, such as the NACRO project (now closed) on the Golf Links Estate in Southall and Bristol City Council's summer play programme in Southmead;

Southmead, Bristol

Recorded crime fell 29% during the summer activity for young people on the estate during July and August 1992. The sharpest reductions were in domestic burglary (64%) and theft from motor vehicles (68%). Housing department repair orders were also down 50% in this period. The programme has been repeated, with a further 20% reduction in recorded crime in 1994.

- Pre-school education schemes – although not established to reduce delinquency, they have the potential to do so; for example, the East Moulsecomb scheme in Brighton;
- CCTV schemes – providing surveillance in town centres and estates, such as the King's Lynn town centre scheme;
- Multi-focused schemes – bringing together housing management, policing, physical security, social and economic measures, such as on the Alma Road Estate in Enfield, the Pepys Estate in Deptford and the Mitchellhill Estate in Glasgow.

Mitchellhill Estate, Glasgow

A mix of measures was introduced to the estate including a concierge service at the entrance to blocks, tenant participation initiatives and physical security measures. Recorded crime fell by 54% following the improvements and the cost of repairs to communal areas fell by 41%.

What works?

Single measures such as putting locks on doors tend to have a limited and brief impact and may lead to a 'displacement' of criminal activity to another area. Displacement from one type of offence such as burglary to another such as street crime is at least as worrying as geographical displacement.

There is evidence that, where a mix of measures is introduced (including housing management, design, physical security and social measures), overall crime levels fall – not just levels of particular crimes, such as burglary – and stay down longer.

There are, however, signs in many of the areas covered by the best schemes that crime problems begin to emerge again after a time. In some cases this is because a key element of the initiative is abandoned.

There will also be limits to what can be achieved at the local level if the national context is wrong. Local projects cannot change the framework of social and economic policy which governs most people's lives.

Bias towards certain kinds of measure

Notwithstanding rhetoric about the need for broad-based approaches, there is still a tendency to focus crime prevention efforts on physical security measures.

A 'project' approach to crime prevention favours 'instant' measures with short-term outputs, such as home security schemes, and militates against educational or social measures which require a long-term commitment before yielding results.

Linked to this, there is also a general bias towards property crime. Given that burglary and car crime dominate criminal statistics this may be understandable. Violence is far more widespread than the statistics show, and for many residents 'fear of crime' is in reality 'fear of violence'. Ignoring this fact is leading policy-makers to underestimate the potential impact of violence on community life.

Conclusions

There have been both positive and negative developments in policy in recent years.

- Broadening the approach – although it is now widely accepted that crime prevention is about more than locks and bolts and design changes, this needs to be translated into a greater number of social, educational and family-based schemes on the ground.
- Developing partnerships – it has been recognised that the statutory, voluntary and business sectors need to work together, but the emergence of separate initiatives tackling individual topics can quickly lead to 'partnership fatigue'. There is a strong case for city/town partnerships encompassing all topic areas such as crime, economic regeneration and the environment.
- The Children Act – the legislation places greater emphasis on family-based interventions, including efforts to prevent delinquency. However, the necessary resources will need to be forthcoming before real advances can be made in realising the full potential of the Act.
- Economic polarisation – the increasing gap between the prosperous majority and a growing minority who have not shared in the benefits of economic growth has, in the view of many observers, contributed to escalating crime problems.
- Housing policy changes – the likely re-centralisation of housing management may lose the benefits of local offices providing services which are responsive to residents' needs and concerns.

- Decline of youth services – the impact of cuts began to be felt in the early 1990s but the full consequences of this may not yet have been realised.

The future

Commentators have recently argued that crime prevention policy has reached a crossroads. There are decisions to be made about the future balance between law enforcement and efforts to prevent crime and criminality. There are also important choices to be made about the way that crime prevention initiatives are targeted.

On the one hand:

- The current bias towards physical crime prevention measures might not only continue but become focused on a 'drawbridge strategy' – protecting the most stable and prosperous communities against the criminally-inclined residents of poorer, less stable neighbourhoods.
- There could be increasingly punitive emphasis on incarcerating known offenders – building more prisons and introducing more intensive social policing.

Alternatively:

- Policies could be directed at minimising harm to potential victims of crime and offering protection and support to the most vulnerable in society.
- Crime prevention policies could be based more soundly on a community reconstruction approach that recognised the need for a longer-term investment in social and economic development (and may require strategic changes in national policy).

About the report

The report was written by Steve Osborn and Henry Shaftoe from the Safe Neighbourhoods Unit (SNU) and was based on 15 years of experience of crime prevention policy and practice in Britain.

Further information

Further information and copies of the report *Safer Neighbourhoods? Successes and failures in crime prevention* are available from SNU, 16 Winchester Walk, London SE1 9AG (Tel: 0171 403 6050).

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- 106** The purchase and management of leasehold flats by residents (Sept 94)
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- 124** The management of leasehold flats by residents (Sept 94)
- 132** Tenant involvement in estate regeneration (Nov 94)
- 133** The feasibility of 'Residents' Democracy'

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Published by the
Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead, 40 Water End
York YO3 6LP
Tel: 01904 629241 Fax: 01904 620072
ISSN 0958-3084

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