



INTRODUCTION

Eric Pelsler

At first sight, the term 'crime prevention' seems simple enough. But ask a police officer, lawyer, social worker or development activist what it means and how it's done and you are likely to get as many different answers as the people you ask. Indeed, 26 years ago the term was described as "probably the most over-worked and least understood concept in contemporary criminology".¹ More recently, in 1999, a British academic described crime prevention as "a concept of almost unending elasticity".²

South African policy is typical of this. The 1998 White Paper on Safety and Security defines crime prevention as "all activities which reduce, deter or prevent the occurrence of specific crimes ...".³ But what are these activities? According to the White Paper, they could be the core businesses of the police, courts and prisons as well as the activities of other governmental and non-governmental role-players, which reduce "the socio-economic and environmental factors that influence people to commit crimes and become persistent offenders."⁴ But what are these socio-economic and environmental factors? Which of the activities of all these role-players actually impacts on criminal behaviour? How, exactly, does the criminal justice system prevent crime? The White Paper, like much other policy on crime prevention, does not provide answers.

The problem lies with the word 'prevention'. To prevent something means having the ability to predict its occurrence and then to actively intervene to stop it from happening. As Paul Eklom, a British policy analyst, puts it: crime prevention is "action prior to the criminal event that interrupts a chain of cause and effect which would otherwise have led to the event".⁵ This indicates the particularly problematic nature of crime prevention.

Firstly, predicting criminal activity is complex, difficult and ultimately, dependent on contested theories. Secondly, even when a theory may be to some degree correct in some of its hypotheses, there can be no guarantee that the right measures will be recommended to address the issue, or that the measures will be acceptable to the decision makers who are required to implement them or, if they are, that the measures will actually be implemented.

With regard to understanding and predicting criminal activity, there are a range of competing theories, the strengths of each supported by some research and the weaknesses of each exposed by other research. A comprehensive theory that covers all the bases convincingly appears out of reach. It has been argued that an holistic theory should be able to cover and deal with seven interrelated elements:

1. The wider social origins of the criminal act (a political economy of crime).
2. The immediate origins of the criminal act (a social psychology of crime).
3. The dynamics of the crime itself (an account of the social dynamics of the actual crime).
4. The immediate origins of social reaction to the crime (a social psychology of reaction to the crime).
5. The wider social origins of reaction to the crime (a political economy of social reaction).
6. The outcome of this social reaction on the offender's further action (a social psychology of multiple or repeat offending).
7. The nature of the criminal process as a whole (an account of the relationships between the first six components).⁶

While developing a theory along these lines may be fun for academics, and would almost certainly improve their chances of long-term tenure, we should spare a thought for the policy advisor or police officer who is asked by the Minister of Safety and Security: why do we have so much vehicle theft and what should be done about it?

The complexities of developing such a theory help to explain why more recent thinking about crime has moved away from the idealism implied in the holistic approach outlined above—it inhibits practical action. Thus current crime prevention thinking focuses less on understanding the underlying social factors thought to be generally conducive to criminality (such as structural inequality), and rather more on the practical management of specific risks and minimisation of damage. In other words, if vehicle theft is the problem, then there may be a lot of practical interventions that could be implemented before it becomes necessary to change the structure and nature of society.

This newer managerial approach began to develop in the early 1980s, a period in which generally increasing prosperity, at least in the developed West, was accompanied by increasing crime. It was based on an approach developed by Brantingham and Faust, from the public health field.⁷ The approach distinguishes between primary, secondary and tertiary prevention.

Primary prevention is aimed wide, at whole populations, and targets particular factors thought to be criminogenic. Secondary prevention is aimed at particular groups identified through demographic categorisation (as in age, gender, education, ethnicity or socio-economic situation, or a combination of these) to be most at risk of becoming either offenders or victims of particular types of crime. Tertiary prevention is focused on those who have committed crime, and aims, on the general assumption that those who have committed crime are likely to do so again, to prevent repeat offending and recidivism.

This approach can be differentiated according to who or what the primary focus or target of planned activity is. The most common distinction is made between focusing on victims or potential victims to reduce potential or repeat victimisation; focusing on localities or communities; and focusing on offenders to reduce repeat offending. These approaches have been combined and categorised into an accessible typology that indicates how these approaches motivate particular kinds of interventions.⁸

Target/focus	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
Victim-oriented	Target hardening, awareness campaigns and 'designing out crime'.	Prevention measures for 'at risk' groups, risk prediction and assessment.	Repeat victimisation measures, victim support, compensation, and reparation.
Community or neighbourhood oriented	Increased informal and natural surveillance, neighbourhood watch and other watch schemes, architectural design and environmental planning.	Targeting 'at risk' groups/places and sources of conflict with the community, leisure facilities, community mediation.	Targeting communities with high levels of crime ('hot spots'). Prevention as urban regeneration.
Offender oriented	Citizenship programmes, education and socialisation, target hardening through increasing the required effort, increasing the risks and reducing the rewards of crime.	Work with those at risk of offending: particularly youths, and the unemployed.	Rehabilitation, confronting offending behaviour, aftercare, and diversion programmes.

More recently, a further distinction has been made between situational crime prevention (often referred to as crime prevention through environmental design or opportunity reduction) and social crime prevention. Situational crime prevention focuses on the "management, design or manipulation of the immediate physical environment so as to reduce the opportunities for specific crimes" or raise the opportunities of detection if a crime is committed.⁹ Social crime prevention is most commonly aimed at addressing particular risk factors associated with criminal motivation and community complicity in crime. These approaches too have been overlapped and categorised to indicate the intended focus or target of interventions.¹⁰

	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
Social	Education and socialisation, public awareness and advertising campaigns, and neighbourhood watch.	Work with those at risk of offending: youths, and the unemployed, as well as community regeneration.	Rehabilitation, confronting offending behaviour, aftercare, diversion, and reparation.
Situational	Target hardening, surveillance, opportunity reduction/ removal, environmental design, and general deterrence.	Target hardening and design measures for 'at risk' groups, risk prediction and assessment, and deterrence.	Individual deterrence, incapacitation, assessment of 'dangerousness' and 'risk'.

Given that within these typologies there is ample room for competing theories regarding what should be done and why, it is clear that despite the greater emphasis on practical intervention, crime prevention remains "a diffuse set of theories and practices".¹¹

If crime prevention theory appears problematic, the practice is more so. This is because the connection between theory, policy and practice is seldom, if ever, straightforward. As Downes and Rock note:

The extent to which theories are 'taken up' in practice depends only in part on the energy and commitment of the theorist, the degree of empirical support for the theory, or the ease with which the theory can be translated into policy terms. The salience of a theory for policy makers may have as much to do with the scope of the proposals for action, the resources required, the extent to which significant interests are engaged as parties or adversaries, and the likely ratio of costs to benefits. Even these factors are likely to be secondary to the correspondence between the theory and the policy makers' timetables and rhetoric.¹²

Daniel Gilling puts the analysis more succinctly:

Even in the unlikely event that the theoretical prognoses were wholly accurate ... it does not follow automatically that the correct form of intervention would be selected, or even if it were, that it would work. This is because the gap between prediction and intervention is filled by the very human process of implementation, in which the politics of policy making is encountered, where intended and unintended consequences collide, and where unanticipated barriers manifest themselves.¹³

While these critiques may be valid for any policy processes, they are especially relevant to the field of crime prevention. This is because of the range of agencies required to co-operate or participate in either planning or implementing interventions. This stems from the recognition, common to all approaches, that the means of crime prevention are situated across a variety of sectors and agencies working within these sectors. Indeed, if there is a single consistent component to the various approaches to crime prevention, it is that collaborative, multi-disciplinary, multi-agency partnerships work best.

However, collaboration in partnerships is often simply assumed and the requirements for establishing working partnerships are seldom considered. Thus, the dynamics of managing differing political agendas and perspectives, competition between agencies, power relations and authority within and between agencies, access to decision making processes, different working procedures and accountability, are often ignored. Goodwill, it appears, is assumed to be enough.

This, certainly, has been South Africa's experience.

As Janine Rauch shows in the second chapter of this book, South Africa's overarching crime prevention policy, the National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS), was compromised at its inception in 1996 by the differing political needs of the new politicians and bureaucratic competition in the newly created Department of Safety and Security. Further, assuming spontaneous co-operation between government departments, the NCPS did not provide a detailed implementation programme, nor did it allocate dedicated funding for implementation. So, as it became more a statement of vision than a strategy, it is no surprise that it was side-tracked from the start. Rauch also shows that the 1998 White Paper on Safety and Security, which provided for an integrated or "inter-locking" approach to policing and crime prevention and the institutional reform required to effect this, has largely been ignored at national level, where attention has been focused on tough law-enforcement strategies. Indeed, Rauch indicates that it is the operational plans of the police that now drive crime prevention in the country.

Nevertheless, the sentiments of the NCPS and some of the provisions of the White Paper have been taken up in South Africa's major cities. As Ingrid Palmay indicates in chapter 3, many sporadic interventions have been implemented in the cities with the assistance of donors and private sponsorships. Here too, though, the success of these interventions and the implementation of others has been inhibited by internecine tensions in the city bureaucracies, and issues related to authority, 'ownership' and co-ordination of various programmes. Most interventions have as a result focused on the easier-to-do and politically rewarding target hardening associated with situational crime prevention: CCTV, improved visible policing and the enforcement of by-laws.

The challenges facing major cities appear less evident in South Africa's smaller towns, where a lack of resources and capacity mean that municipalities are only just beginning to engage with the role outlined for them in the national policy. Crime prevention interventions, where they exist at all, tend to be small-scale and driven independently of the local government—often at the initiative of donor agencies. As Sibusiso Masuku and Eric Pelser show in the fourth chapter, more integrated interventions are driven by agencies outside of the municipality which report through various structures to the Council. If this approach can be considered a 'partnership', then it is one in which the key partner has been the silent one.

Nevertheless, there have been dedicated attempts to facilitate and enhance co-operation and co-ordination between various government departments and other agencies. These are described in the contribution by Sean Tait and Dick Usher on the Community Safety Forums (chapter 5) as well as the evaluation of the Partners in Policing Programme in the Eastern Cape (chapter 10). These projects succeeded in bringing role-players together as potential partners and in providing a valuable means of sharing information about crime and how to address it. Considering the range of views on crime and its causes, and the emotion associated with the subject, these projects have made a significant contribution to understanding crime reduction in South Africa. Given South Africa's political history, the importance of sharing information between government and civil society should not be underestimated. The KwaMashu Gang Monitoring Project, discussed by Anton Pestana in chapter 7, again demonstrates the value of information networks.

The effectiveness of these partnerships, which by and large were based on goodwill (and some donor funding), was however inhibited by a lack of careful assessment of what was required to make the partnerships work. So the purpose of the partnerships quickly became ensuring wide-ranging participation and consensus, rather than actual implementation of crime prevention projects. These issues are outlined in the project evaluations in chapters 9 and 10.

The difficulties of establishing working partnerships are also relevant to more focused crime prevention interventions. This is discussed in Margaret Roper's chapter on approaches to developing safer schools (chapter 6). These initiatives face a number of challenges, for example resource constraints and the participation of parents and pupils. However, without substantial improvements to the management of schools and the administration of South Africa's schooling system as a whole, resolving prevention-related challenges will be difficult, if not impossible. Roper's contribution indicates that the overall effectiveness of the safer school projects would be enhanced if due consideration were given to these issues before the initiation of the specific projects.

Indeed, there can be little doubt that much crime prevention practice in South Africa would be improved by prior assessment of what is actually required to make individual projects work. However, such prior assessment is difficult, given the shortage of dedicated project evaluations, and the lack of dissemination of the lessons learnt when evaluations are done. This is taken up by Bill Dixon in chapter 8. Dixon points out the mistaken perception that evaluation is too difficult and too expensive to undertake, and often too negative in approach. This perception is not likely to change while the results of project evaluations are kept under wraps by those who commission them and by those responsible for project management.

This book attempts to reverse this trend and the editor is grateful to the individual authors for frankly documenting the strengths and weaknesses of the projects they have worked with. The lessons drawn from these contributions are detailed by Eric Pelser and Antoinette Louw in the final chapter.