

# Lessons for Canadian Crime Prevention: Cultural Shifts and Local Flexibilities

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This volume of the IPC Review contains two very significant articles, written from the privileged position of hindsight by two very skilled observers. Peter Homel's *Lessons for Canadian crime prevention from recent international experience* and Enver Solomon's *New Labour and crime prevention in England and Wales: What worked?* offer a wealth of experience and advice based primarily on the recent history of criminal justice and prevention initiatives in Australia and England and Wales. In 2008, ICPC published its first *International Report on Crime Prevention & Community Safety*<sup>1</sup>, providing an opportunity to assess the evolution, maturation and growth of crime prevention internationally. These articles offer some valuable detail and commentary on some of the international trends identified in that report.

Enver Solomon is a political scientist whose analysis draws on his recent "independent audits" of *ten years* of criminal justice and youth justice reforms in England and Wales, under Tony Blair's Labour government. Peter Homel has the dual distinction of having undertaken a major evaluation of the Crime Reduction Programme in England and Wales, which formed a crucial part of Tony Blair's crime strategy, and of evaluating and observing many of Australia's recent crime prevention initiatives, as well as some of those in New Zealand and the US. This enables him to reflect on the comparative advantages and disadvantages of central government intervention in crime and its prevention.

In the late 1990's England and Wales was seen as a poster child for crime prevention in place of "endless law enforcement". The enactment of mandatory Local Crime Reduction Partnerships and Youth Offending Teams provided as

<sup>1</sup> Visit <http://www.crime-prevention-intl.org>.

Adam Crawford suggested, “a fertile soil in which a more progressive criminal justice policy (...) could begin to establish itself and flourish” (see Solomon, p. 49). What followed was, Solomon outlines, ten years of “hyperactive law making and endless policy strategizing”, with almost 50 pieces of crime-related legislation, four major criminal policy plans and numerous strategies affecting the police, youth justice, probation, community safety and anti-social behaviour.

Officially recorded crime has indeed declined markedly in England and Wales since the mid 1990's, but the decline began in fact before the advent of all this activity, and has occurred in most other Western nations as well. In 2006, England and Wales was spending more per capita on “public order and safety” than any other OECD country, and there has been a massive increase in the prison population and child and young offenders, and, especially since 2004, an obsession with “anti-social behaviour”.

Solomon identifies five core assumptions underlying all this activity:

1. Crime levels and trends are significantly influenced by the criminal justice system;
2. The criminal justice system needs to address a wider range of “crime-like” behaviours because of “changes” in society;
3. Criminal justice agencies need to expand their remit into non-traditional areas such as early intervention and “at risk” populations;
4. A welfare approach to children and young people should be replaced by one relying more on punishment; and
5. Systematic public managerialism, driven by national targets for crime reduction, is the best way to achieve efficiency and results.

His analysis concludes that a buoyant economy has probably been the major factor in the fall in crime over the ten year period (as was partly the case in the crime drop in America), although crime prevention has had some impact. A major characteristic of crime prevention in England and Wales, for a number of historical reasons, has been its focus on situational prevention. Utilized by local crime prevention partnerships, this has been effective in reducing residential burglary and car theft. The dominance of situational prevention, with its notions of rational choice and control, and the relative neglect of a more balanced approach to prevention, help to explain the failure to understand the behaviours of young people, and the obsession with anti-social behaviour. A more balanced approach, which gives greater attention to social and community interventions, targeting the conditions of poor and disadvantaged communities, might have reduced the need to enlarge the net of “crime-like” behaviours.

Solomon concludes that the current government now recognizes that a simple enforcement approach does not address the needs of families and communities, and that the Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO) is now seen as counterproductive. In effect there has been too great a focus on control rather than prevention, on being “tough on crime” rather than on its causes, and not enough expenditure on social interventions. The irony is that much international prevention with young people at risk is based on the principle of including excluded populations, and often working through informal social controls, rather than using coercion and further exclusion (ICPC, 2008).

Peter Homel's article starts from the premise that levels of reported crime and victimization in most developed countries, including Canada, have consistently declined over the past ten or more years, in parallel with the growth of interest and investment in crime prevention by those countries. He acknowledges the collective wisdom that perhaps some 20% of that decline can be attributed to prevention programs, and examines eight key characteristics of effective crime prevention strategies and programs in developed countries.

Essentially, these common components are about the *methodology* of prevention, including collaborative multi-agency action, partnership models, problem-focused and evidence-based approaches, and centrally driven and locally delivered practice. They have required the emergence of new governance structures for managing crime prevention, and a shift in traditional methods requiring pooled budgets, negotiated partnerships, greater client participation in service delivery, shared service responsibility, innovative community consultation, and the development of shared databases and viable performance measures.

Homel sees the Boston youth homicide reduction project, and the ongoing Australian Pathways to Prevention project, as illustrating the power and effectiveness of such methodological approaches. However, he also provides clear analysis of the implementation failure of the world's most ambitious central prevention initiative, the Crime Reduction Programme (CRP) in England & Wales. These included: the lack of suitably qualified staff; high staff turnover; inadequate technical and strategic advice from central government; and inadequate project management, competency and skills. What is encouraging is his assessment that these lessons about implementation and process have influenced subsequent national crime prevention programs, notably the recent National Community Crime Prevention Programme in Australia which has avoided such implementation failure and maintained good central – regional relationships.

The slippery concept of evidence-based policy has also been shown, argues Homel, to be much more complex than its initial proponents suggested, since it entails agreements on the nature of evidence, and strategic ways of creating and measuring it. In the CRP, there was too great an emphasis on formal research evidence, rather than on other types of evidence about how programs worked, and what their outcomes were. He makes a useful distinction between performance measurement and evaluation as two valuable aides to informing crime prevention policy and practice: the former assists with the day-to-day management of programs, while the latter informs overall decisions about programs and policies.

There are a number of strategic lessons from these experiences that are important for Canada. For example:

- A strong deterrent justice system is not sufficient to prevent crime – an effective and well-funded justice system does not guarantee reductions in crime or increased community safety and quality of life. The economy, social and environmental conditions and other factors are also important and likely to impact crime levels, and responding to those will save justice and social costs. The experience of South Africa provides a stark example of a country living under extreme security conditions, and with tough and deterrent criminal justice, which has so far failed to impact the levels of serious violent crime over the past twelve years. The recently launched *Action for a Safe South Africa*<sup>2</sup> argues that the justice system would collapse if all crimes were dealt with, and a broader preventive approach is seen as the only solution.
- The dangers of target-setting and managerial approaches are well demonstrated. They can be counterproductive, and reduce flexibility and professional judgment.
- Too much focus on crime can contribute to increasing anxieties and expectation of the government's role and capacity to intervene – crime in England and Wales is down, but levels of fear remain high.
- The focus of crime prevention policies should be on *creating safe communities* rather than reducing or deterring crime. This requires long-term funding, not just pilot or demonstration projects.

- “Imposing civility by coercion”, as in the case of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders in England and Wales, is a mistake which has been costly in terms of increased justice interventions, as well as going against principles of inclusion. The City of Bogota, by contrast, has clearly demonstrated how a culture of civility can be created through the use of innovative and participatory approaches, including clowns. The use of social mediators in public spaces in France offers another example. International standards are being increasingly applied in many countries. The *UN Guidelines for the Prevention of Crime* (2002) stress the importance of the inclusion of young people, especially those most likely to be involved in the justice system, not their demonization.
- Governments can learn from the experience of other countries. While policy does not always travel well, and it is important to look at and adapt programs to local contexts and circumstances, some good lessons about process, implementation, and evaluation have been learnt from recent experiences.
- Other countries and regions with rather different experiences from developed countries, such as South Africa, Brazil, Columbia, Mexico, Trinidad & Tobago or Chile can provide some valuable lessons about good practices.
- It is important to innovate, and to set realistic expectations about the likely impacts of interventions. As Homel points out, research evidence is just one source of knowledge; the messiness of actual project implementation, the knowledge and energies of practitioners, and the timelines of policy makers also affect outcomes and impacts. There should still be room for innovation, not just replication of proven “examples”.
- The growing importance of modern “tools” for data collection and analysis, such as observatories of crime and social problems, and the use of local community safety audits to support local and regional multi-sector partnerships and coordinating bodies.
- Crime happens locally – the importance of the principle of *subsidiarity* – of the devolution of both powers and resources to local levels. This has been very effectively demonstrated in Colombian and Brazilian cities, but with strong central government support – financial, technical, and normative.

Much of the experience distilled in these articles, and ICPC's (2008) International Report, points to the learning curve of governments trying to work in very different ways from the past, after centuries of national

<sup>2</sup> See [www.safesouthafrica.org.za](http://www.safesouthafrica.org.za)

responsibility for crime and safety. It underlines the emergence of a quite different way of looking at, and responding to the individual, community, social and economic problems which can lead to crime and victimization, and of understanding the complexities of working out that new approach. As ICPC's (2008) International Report underlines, there is very clear progress in understanding the need for crime prevention internationally, and how it can be undertaken. Prevention is not a static concept; it is constantly evolving and it requires the continuing development of a widening range of sectors, professionals, practitioners, communities, and tools.

There is some irony in the fact that Solomon suggests that part of the failure in England and Wales to tackle youth behaviours and offending is because there has been too little emphasis on addressing its underlying structural causes (until recently the major objective of the federal Canadian approach), and too much focus on reducing victimization and re-offending (closer to the current federal Canadian approach). Peter Homel makes a similar point that the National Crime Prevention Centre's 2007 *Blueprint for Effective Crime Prevention* places greater stress on risk factors rather than underlying causes. While it adheres to some of the principles outlined in the 2002 *UN Guidelines for the Prevention of Crime*, not all those principles are included, nor is the emphasis in both the 1995 and 2002 UN guidelines adopted by ECOSOC, on the importance of local government, and the role of local actors, including city governments and the police, in partnership with local populations.

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