



Cracking down

Police crackdowns may bring short-term gains but Alan Wright and Ken Pease believe a more strategic approach could offer a longer-term solution to crime reduction

More than 12,000 police officers from 40 forces were reportedly involved in a crackdown against suspected burglars in December 1995. Operation Christmas Cracker aimed to combat an expected seasonal rise in burglaries and 3,000 raids were carried out, resulting in more than 2,000 suspects being arrested. Property said to be worth £1.5m was recovered. The police claimed the operation was very successful.

The crackdown was widely reported in the media. *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Times* all carried extensive reports the day after the raids.

However, against the satisfaction expressed by the police were some commentators reflecting a contrasting mood of scepticism. Nick Cohen in *The Independent* suggested that publicity was the most important output from the operation with burglary suspects not being arrested until media coverage of the operation could be orchestrated.

'While the press is being squared and targets collected, burglars are protected like grouse in the close season,' he wrote.

In television interviews, criminologists pointed to the difficulties which were likely to arise from the potential overload to the criminal justice system.

Even for those well informed about

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In the crackdown-consolidation cycle, any increases in crime levels trigger action to return them to a specified target

the policy implications of crime control, the issues are not clear cut. On the one hand, the police believe crackdown operations produce a substantial return for the investment of resources.

Evaluation of the widely-publicised Operation Bumblebee in London, Operation Gemini in Gloucestershire and other long-term initiatives has shown that publicity emphasises the risk of arrest, transferring the fear from the victim to the offender.

The contrary view maintains that games get played with crime statistics and that, in any event, there is only a tenuous connection between police enforcement activity and levels of crime. The limited likelihood of conviction is said to mean that the emphasis on tough policing and tough sentencing will not cut crime.

The basic point to make about crackdowns is that they do work to reduce rates of crime in the short term¹ but the effect erodes as time passes, enthusiasm wanes, organisational constraints set in, or new prolific offenders mature.

in crime levels trigger action to return them to a specified target level.

In brief, a crackdown is planned, and local partners (local authorities, the business community and the like) are informed that crime is likely to go down, and that they will be able to divert some of the resources they hitherto lost to crime in new ways.

Plans are drawn up about how this may best happen. The crackdown then occurs, and given the anticipated decline, the consolidation phase kicks in. As part of this planning, the police agree that if and when the targeted crime creeps up to, say, 90 per cent of its level prior to the first crackdown, then a second crackdown will take place.

The second crackdown is followed by consolidation which is refined (in collaboration) from the first phase and which hopefully lasts longer than the first consolidation period before the rate moves up to 90 per cent of its pre-project level, and so on.

Central to this strategy in the police

crackdowns can finance proven crime prevention/community safety measures in a sustainable programme which will reduce the specified crime to the chosen target level. Because resources are used intensively over comparatively short periods, the payback is high and the time before fiscal neutrality is reached is very short.

- The sense of community empowerment that crime can be controlled may lead to ever longer periods between crackdowns and the articulation of ever more ambitious targets. Even if the target remains constant, against the background of ever more criminal opportunities, it becomes increasingly stringent.
- Very often, excellent police practice is swiftly forgotten. It has been said that the police's institutional memory is about two years long. Locking a police unit into a continuing and developing cycle of crackdown and consolidation makes it more likely that yesterday's good practice is developed, rather than dropped as 'something we don't do any more'.

What are the criticisms of the approach, and how might they be answered?

- Crackdowns can be criticised on human rights grounds. This is always true, but less true when they are triggered by crime levels and after local consultation than by unilateral police action. One of George Kelling's central observations is that the first thing the police must do in addressing crime and disorder is to gain the moral high ground through consultation and data².
- Why should local partners spend anything when they know that a police action will bail them out when crime increases again? This could be addressed by having a maximum frequency of police crackdowns, and/or specifying that crackdowns cannot become more

on crime

However, the transient nature of their effects is no reason to forgo the respite that they afford to hard-pressed communities.

What we propose is the use of crackdowns as the first part of a cycle of change. The advantages of crackdowns are that they can yield substantial effects quickly.

Their disadvantages are that they are transient and are vulnerable to criticism that they are more concerned with thief-taking than community protection.

Our development of the crackdown approach is the crackdown-consolidation cycle. This assumes that crime levels are controllable within a wide range. To reflect this in strategy, any increases

context (although commonplace in industry) is its starting point - the prior specification of a target level of crime, followed by effort being deployed in relation to movements above that target.

The advantages of this approach include:

- That police involvement in consolidating community safety answers criticisms about the alleged police interest being restricted to clearances, and the fact that crackdowns are triggered by crime levels and are not the result of arbitrary police action.
- That the savings generated by

frequent. It does not feel naive to say that the kind of focus on partnership which the cycle supplies will be the most powerful incentive to collaborate.

- Will it not restrict operational freedom of commanders on the timing of crackdowns? It will and should, if police action is to be geared to real local crime problems rather than commander preferences.

What would be required to validate the effectiveness of the crackdown-consolidation approach?

First, it would be necessary to specify the target level of a selected crime type. Movement to a level of, say, 25 per cent below the original, would be achieved by a well-publicised crackdown, not unlike that in Christmas Cracker and other similar operations.

However, the important difference is that when the target 25 per cent level is reached, the crackdown is replaced by a

consolidation phase involving intensive crime prevention work.

If the level of crime moves to a previously specified amount above the target level, a second crackdown takes place until the target 25 per cent reduction is re-established.

The approach is thus a strategic

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crackdown-consolidation cycle over a longer term. Movement through the cycle hopefully would be ever slower, as criminal networks were progressively disrupted and consolidation techniques refined.

The 25 per cent criterion is not sacrosanct and would need to be negotiated on the individual sites. It would require a local police commander prepared to relinquish operational power to the extent that the timing of a crackdown would be determined by factors to some extent out of his or her control.

If we are right about the virtues and promise of the crackdown-consolidation approach, it provides a new series of opportunities for crime reduction. The only way in which it can be objectively validated, however, is through research.

If Christmas Cracker (and the controversies which surround it) has helped to put this debate on the agenda, it will have been one cracker well worth pulling.

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For references, see page 50

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4. See for example, Police Foundation/Policy Studies Institute (1996) *Report of the Independent Committee of Inquiry into the Role and Responsibilities of the Police*. London: Police Foundation/PSI

Distance learning

1. 'Distance learning' and 'self-teach package', as used in this paper, are taken to have the following meaning - 'A technology that enables learners to learn without the direct help from a teacher

or trainer, usually with the aid of packaged materials.

2. The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act became law on November 4. i 1994.

3. It is known that some research has been carried out into the effectiveness of the open and distance-learning phase of the Criminal Investigation Foundation Course, the findings have not been released for general perusal. Validation was also carried out on the distance learning phase of the new sergeants course. However, during the pilot, somewhat surprisingly, sergeants were allowed to complete the package during a week spent in a classroom. Therefore any conclusions have to be viewed with some scepticism.



4. The present system of probationer training has been in place since 1989. The latest review has been carried out as a result of concern over the effectiveness of certain parts of the training programme. The review has attempted to identify where 'new legislation and procedure' should fit into an already full curriculum.

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