

IMPROVING THE EVALUATION OF CRIME PREVENTION PROJECTS

Paul Ekblom

a note for discussion 1993

The Government's Financial Management Initiative emphasised efficiency, effectiveness and economy, and above all value-for-money. This has given evaluation an important and central role in the policymaking and administrative process. An extremely wide range of activities is embraced by the label 'evaluation'. This note briefly describes the diverse functions and types of evaluation; records past progress in improving evaluation within the Office; and lists future initiatives which might be taken to foster that progress further. Many of the points made apply to evaluation across the board, rather than to evaluation of crime prevention alone. There is also an Annex addressing the question of whether crime prevention can bring quantifiable reductions to policing costs.

Evaluation - function and diversity

2. Evaluations serve to guide decision-making about **policy** or **practice**. The scale of these decisions can vary from **local** to **national** (including **programme evaluation**), and their scope can vary from **continuance** (should we keep funding this scheme?) to **reproduction elsewhere** (should we set up more schemes like this one?).

3. Different **types** of evaluation can be distinguished by the key questions they ask. The major distinction to make is between a focus on **implementation** of preventive action (ie 'what action was successfully put into place on the ground?'), and a focus on **impact** or effectiveness (ie 'what works?').

4. On the implementation side, we have **monitoring** (was the preventive action **targeted** on the right people or properties? did the scheme **deliver** appropriate activity to the targets?) and the more qualitative study of **process** (what were the **practical difficulties** and **problematic issues** raised in implementation?).

5. On the impact side, the key questions are '**was there a real fall in crime?**' as opposed to random fluctuation and the operation of background trends; and if there was, '**how much of the fall could be attributed to the preventive action?**' as opposed to the many other possible causes that are usually present; '**were there any side-effects of the action?**' (eg exacerbation of fear, displacement); '**what was the cost-effectiveness of the action?**'; and '**can it be reproduced elsewhere?**'.

6. While the questions that evaluation poses are simple, evaluation is an imperfect art which involves trade-offs between conflicting constraints - it is rarely possible to

have an evaluation that is simultaneously simple, quick, cheap and sure, however desirable this may be. Accordingly, evaluations have to be conducted in different ways, depending on the function they are intended to serve and how important it is to customers to maximise the chances of getting an answer to inform their decision-making that is accurate and fair, conclusive and sufficiently timely to be useful. In particular, evaluations can be carried out at different levels of **technical sophistication**, with more or less **resources** and over a longer or shorter **timescale**.

7. Within the Office, RPU has conducted or commissioned a wide range of evaluations over the last 2 decades, many of them on crime prevention or related topics such as racial harassment, truancy and intensive probation. So have PRG and its predecessor (CPU Research and Development section). PDU has now entered the field with evaluation built into its projects on criminality reduction and prevention of domestic violence. The work of the Central Drugs Prevention Unit is also being evaluated.

Past progress

In the course of this work, evaluations have already improved in a number of ways:

- * **Technical sophistication** has increased, drawing on steady developments in the discipline of evaluation, crime prevention theory, crime survey methods and computing.
- * A **better balance** has been achieved between excessive scepticism in evaluations (leading to the 'nothing works' doctrine) and excessive credulity about the success of preventive initiatives.
- * There has been an increasing awareness of the **diversity of evaluation** and the need to **match** the scale and type of evaluation to the scale and type of decision that it is intended to inform.
- * Increasingly, there has been a **sharing of experience** with Other Government Departments and agencies on the role of evaluation in informing policy and practice, and how best to foster it.

8. Formerly, evaluation was conducted within the context of one-off research projects. The working through of FMI has meant that evaluation has moved a considerable way towards being a systematic part of management, guiding decision-making at policy and practice, local and national levels and starting to bring evaluators, policymakers and practitioners closer together. There are ways in which this evolution can be further fostered.

Future initiatives

9. From the RSD perspective, it seems that the key to improving evaluation of crime prevention at the **policy** level currently lies in improving the **organisational context** in which evaluations are conducted and developing the **conceptual** side, as much as that of **technical improvement** (which is here taken for granted). Possible initiatives include:

- * Ensuring that **planning** for any new initiative (be it local scheme, project or major programme) considers evaluation as an integral part from the earliest stage.

- * Continuing to develop within the Office a **common framework of evaluation terms and concepts**, and a common commitment to making the **scale** of evaluation appropriate to the circumstances.

- * Ensuring that those responsible for implementing preventive initiatives have **realistic expectations** of evaluations, know their potential and their limits and are **sufficiently familiar** with basic concepts and distinctions to collaborate with evaluators in setting up and properly using the results of evaluations.

- * Raising **mutual awareness** of the perspectives of the different participants in evaluation: commissioners/customers, those in HO responsible for implementing the initiatives, local project coordinators (such as in Safer Cities), implementors of funded schemes on the ground etc.

- * As evaluators and evaluated work ever more closely together, ensuring that the **independence** and critical detachment of the evaluation is nevertheless maintained.

- * **Improving information about the costs of crime and the cost-effectiveness of other approaches to crime control** (eg law enforcement) in order that results of the evaluation of crime prevention activity can be properly compared with the alternatives in guiding decisions about resource allocation (see Annex).

- * Devising a clearer '**customer structure**' for big programme evaluations. Such a structure has to be independent of the policy division responsible for implementing the project or programme. In major evaluations such a customer has to commission the evaluation, jointly set its parameters (eg with regard to timescale and resources) with the evaluators and implementing division, monitor progress, receive results and follow up whether the results had been taken account of in subsequent decision-making.

- * Continuing to explore the extent to which it is possible to **guide and support practitioners in the conduct of self-evaluation** on a scale that is modest, but sufficiently good for their own needs and that of their management.

10. RSD recently held a small conference on Programme Evaluation, which it is hoped has begun to foster an internal debate on these issues both with respect to crime prevention and other areas of HO activity.

Paul Ekblom

Research and Planning Unit

November 1992

ANNEX

Can crime prevention bring quantifiable reductions to policing costs?

In principle, it is a reasonable assumption to expect 'knock-on' savings of this kind: for example, the widespread use of effective vehicle immobilisers might be expected to produce a significant cut in car crime, which in turn could significantly cut police (and CJS) time spent attending incidents, dealing with offenders etc. RSD is currently obtaining some of the necessary information to enable such questions to be answered - for example by conducting research (stemming from s95 of the Criminal Justice Act) into the total CJS costs of dealing with car theft offenders.

2. In practice, however, there may be difficulties in transforming crime prevention successes into savings on policing costs, and in measuring any such trade-offs sufficiently well to guide resource investment decisions in anything other than very general ways. The following paragraphs suggest ways of overcoming such difficulties.

- i) The possibility of displacement means that the total net reduction in crime due to preventive efforts may be less than the sum of individual localised gains, and difficult to measure. **More definitive studies of the net impact of crime prevention over wide areas need to be done to get an idea of the scale of the problem.** Supplementary analysis of the database from the Safer Cities Programme evaluation may throw some light on this.
- ii) Savings at the margin may not occur in the costs of policing (or the rest of the CJS) until very large and stable reductions in crime have been achieved through prevention. Complement, buildings, the patrol car fleet etc could not be reduced in response to small reductions in workload and particularly not to short-term fluctuations. **It would be a useful exercise to identify just how great, and how stable, reductions in crime have to be before marginal savings in police/CJS costs can practically be made.**
- iii) The police currently offer a mainly 'demand-led' or reactive service to the public and any savings in one type of demand (calls to deal with criminal incidents, which constitute only a proportion of all calls) may be neutralised by the potential 'bottomless pit' of demands that remain. **Savings might be realisable if the police have a clear call-screening or 'prioritisation' policy, together with a well-planned and structured set of activities for proactive operations to enable them to put any time and resources saved to good effect.** Cash limiting and OMPIS may help.

- iv) Finally, much of the crime which may be prevented might not have come to police attention had it actually happened - it might not have been reported by victims. This would amount to a real gain from crime prevention which would not be reflected in police savings. **British Crime Survey data might be used to estimate this 'invisible' gain.**

Wider trade-offs

- v) A fuller picture of trade-offs between prevention and reaction than that offered by the financial side alone would obviously be important to have to hand in choosing between investment in police and CJS versus investment in prevention. Here, gains from crime prevention might include avoidance of confrontations occurring during police operations; on the social prevention side, many of the preventive strategies would have wider benefits than purely crime reduction (eg improving schooling, family support, leisure, employment prospects). Likewise, non-financial costs of police reductions might include the loss of the declaratory value to society of the visible police presence upholding the law. Needless to say, gains and losses would be hard to measure and trade-offs hard to weigh - but very important not to ignore. **A first step would be to draw on existing research and practical experience to try to set out all the non-financial trade-offs that are plausible.**

Paul Ekblom

Research and Planning Unit

November 1992

Doc 302