# Criminal Justice

## The Crime Reduction Programme in England and Wales: Reflections on the vision and the reality

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# The Crime Reduction Programme in England and Wales
## *Reflections on the vision and the reality*

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## Abstract

The article contrasts the original vision behind the Crime Reduction Programme – an ambitious plan (initially intended to run for 10 years) to accumulate, disseminate and use research-based knowledge about the effectiveness of a wide variety of interventions – with the reality of the multiple problems experienced during its implementation in England and Wales between 1999 and its premature end in 2002. Ultimately, few projects were implemented as planned, with the knock-on effect of a dearth of conclusive research findings. It is argued that the Crime Reduction Programme benefitted initially from an unusual 'window of opportunity' when such a programme appeared attractive to politicians, administrators, practitioners and researchers alike, resulting in a level of funding for pilot projects and evaluation which was unprecedented in the UK in the crime reduction field. However, it was undermined significantly by inherent risks and tensions that became increasingly prominent as circumstances (and the political climate) changed. While initially conceived as research-driven, it was 'sold' to politicians as contributing to the government's challenging crime reduction targets, an aim which progressively took priority over research. It was over-ambitious in scale and raised unrealistic expectations of its outcomes. It suffered from major practical problems caused by unfeasible timescales, slow-moving bureaucratic procedures, and shortages of 'capacity'. Low commitment to project integrity, cultural resistance among

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practitioners, and insufficient attention to differences between academics' and policy makers' understandings of research, also contributed to its problems. While some useful outcomes can be claimed, the results of the Crime Reduction Programme as a whole were unquestionably disappointing. In the light of these experiences, it might be argued that – tempting as it was to seize the rare opportunity of major funding – the ideal of 'evidence-based policy' may be more effectively pursued as a quiet iterative process over the longer term, rather than through a risky investment in one high profile and rapidly implemented 'programme' which promises more than it can guarantee to deliver.

## Key Words

crime reduction • evaluation • evidence-based policy • what works

## Introduction

On the face of it, the Crime Reduction Programme (CRP), for which £400 million of public money was earmarked (though considerably less actually spent) between 1999 and 2002, represents the most comprehensive, systematic and far-sighted initiative ever undertaken by a British government to develop strategies for tackling crime. The government also backed up its stated aim of promoting 'evidence-based' policy and practice by allocating 10 per cent of the original budget of £250 million to evaluations undertaken by external researchers – an unprecedented amount of research money in the UK crime and justice field (indeed, an early plan was to evaluate *every* project). If the visions of its original designers and champions had been realized, we would by now be in possession of a library of dependable knowledge about the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of a wide array of interventions, and would be witnessing a systematic 'roll out' across the country of those strategies and methods found to 'work' best among the 1500 projects funded under the CRP.

However, the reality has been very different. The CRP came up against problems in virtually every aspect of its design and implementation, and (though some less immediately obvious lessons and benefits may emerge over time)[1] it is difficult to point to more than a handful of clearly successful projects, of conclusive research findings, or of national 'roll outs' of practices endorsed by research. This article offers some general reflections on the 'vision' represented in the CRP and the reasons for its frequently disappointing outcome.

It will be argued that the period in question – the optimistic early years of government by a party which had been out of power for 18 years, coinciding with a downward trend in crime rates – was a particularly

auspicious time for attempts to 'think big' and 'think long-term' about responses to crime. As a result, politicians were unusually open to the idea of investing significant resources to build new policies on a solid base of evidence and research, rather than simply reacting to 'events'. However, in the enthusiasm generated by this rare 'window of opportunity' (cf. Kingdon, 1995), lessons of history were forgotten, over-ambitious plans were laid, and too much was expected, in too short a time, of both the practitioner and the research communities (both of which were swept along on the tide of new funding and did little to inject the notes of caution which were, with hindsight, so clearly appropriate). When, as was almost inevitable, the 'window' began to close and familiar problems and tensions re-emerged, the CRP had delivered too few of its promises and had too few concrete achievements to sustain arguments for its continuation.

## The vision

The story of the genesis of the CRP, including the part played by particular politicians, civil servants, political advisors and academic consultants, has yet to be told (although Hope, this volume, offers some general – and often critical – thoughts about the nature of the networks involved). Nevertheless, looked at through a wider lens, it can be seen largely as the product of changes in thinking about crime policy, and about public service delivery more generally, that had been fermenting over several years and which were particularly in tune with the philosophy of the New Labour government which took office in 1997.

First of all, there had been growing challenges to the pessimistic view, prevalent in the late 1970s and 1980s, that there was relatively little that national governments could do to reverse the upward trend in crime that had been apparent since the mid-1950s in most western democracies (a view reflected in the endless repetition of Martinson's (1974) phrase 'nothing works', or in Garland's (1996) argument that conditions associated with late modernity – increasingly fragmented and unequal societies, combined with shrinking taxation to fund public services – were forcing the 'sovereign state' to accept the inevitability of high crime rates and its own reduced capacity to guarantee public safety). Such challenges were mounted through strong advocacy of a variety of fresh approaches to crime prevention, in many cases supported at least by 'promising' empirical research findings. There was particular Home Office interest in the crime reduction potential of multi-agency partnerships (a key source being the Morgan Report (1991), which though initially neglected, became increasingly influential); of situational crime prevention methods, particularly in relation to burglary (see, for example, Ekblom et al., 1996); of 'problem-oriented' and to some extent 'intelligence-led' policing (Maguire and John, 1995; Leigh et al., 1996; 1998); and of cognitive-behavioural programmes for offenders in prison or on probation, which had strong support from

North American research findings, based mainly on meta-analysis, suggesting that they could reduce reconviction rates by up to 15 per cent (McGuire, 1995).

Much of the relevant evidence was drawn together into an upbeat edited review of national and international research on the effectiveness of a wide range of 'ways of dealing with offending behaviour' (Goldblatt and Lewis, 1998), produced under the direction of Chris Nuttall, head of Home Office Research and Statistics.

The overall, optimistic message of this review was clearly attractive to government ministers, acutely aware as they were of the relentless media attention to, and growing electoral importance of, government action on crime (Downes and Morgan, 2002).

Moreover, the CRP as eventually launched chimed well with the broader New Labour agenda of 'modernization' (Cabinet Office, 1999; see also Hough, this volume) and contained several features of reforms that have been applied across a range of public services. These included efforts to 'join up' the work of different government departments and public sector agencies, as well as involving private and voluntary organizations; and an emphasis on the 'rational' use of resources and the pursuit of 'evidence-based' policy, including insistence on demonstrating 'cost-effectiveness' and on improving 'performance' through target-setting. The couching of the benefits of the CRP in such terms clearly enhanced its appeal to the Treasury and strengthened its case for large-scale funding in the Comprehensive Spending Review.

Capitalizing on the above advantages, the CRP emerged in 1999 in a form, and with a level of funding, which probably surpassed the expectations of those involved in its early design. Certainly, it was greeted with surprise and pleasure by many policy makers and academics working in the criminal justice field, who had become used to piecemeal reforms and modest funding for local projects or research. Although there had been sizeable anti-crime initiatives in the past (notably the Safer Cities programme in the 1980s), this one appeared radically different in several ways:

1. The scale of its funding was unprecedented among government programmes in the crime prevention field;[2]
2. It incorporated an unusually wide range of interventions, based on an eclectic mix of crime prevention theories and delivered in many different settings by many different agencies;
3. It assigned an exceptional degree of importance – initially, at least – to evaluation. It gave credence to the ability of researchers to determine which interventions had a significant (and cost-effective) impact on crime, and hence which should and should not be implemented on a large scale: a clear commitment to 'evidence-based' policy and practice. It also encouraged the notion of building up a store of 'scientific' knowledge about 'what works' which could be translated into reliable advice on 'best practice', disseminated to practitioners in user-friendly form;

4. Initially at least, it was planned as a long-term initiative, to run in some form for up to 10 years. This would allow an iterative process of testing, learning and feedback, and a staggered programme of 'roll out' in which those interventions identified as cost-effective would be gradually implemented on a national basis;[3]
5. It offered, for the first time, a prospect of genuine and sustained multi-agency work in the crime reduction field, underpinned by the statutory duty on all local authorities and police forces, under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, to set up formal partnerships (including other key agencies) to analyse and respond to local crime problems. These partnerships were to be centrally involved in the CRP through the design of local interventions, bidding for funds, and project management and delivery.

### Inherent risks and tensions

All of these features promised a great deal, and the original 'package' as a whole was unusually coherent in its conception. At the same time, however, it contained within it a number of significant risks – some might say the seeds of its own destruction. It posed daunting challenges in terms of its realization: it demanded the rapid identification, mobilization and co-ordination of large numbers of people and organizations with an array of skills in project design, oversight, management, monitoring and evaluation that were not in abundant supply within the criminal justice field. It also relied, implicitly at least, upon an assumed flexibility in professional cultures, whereby practitioners could be told or persuaded to work in new ways, not only within individual agencies, but also in the context of new forms of partnership between agencies unfamiliar with (and sometimes hostile to) each others' aims, assumptions and practices. Furthermore, the chosen strategy placed considerable faith in the capacity of a particular genre of quantitative research – often strongly reliant on officially recorded data – to provide definitive answers to questions about effectiveness. This posed risks in terms of evaluators failing to acquire sufficiently reliable data, or sufficient numbers of crimes or cases, for statistical analysis, leaving them with nothing useful to say about the effectiveness of the programme.

Equally important, the very scale and ambition of the enterprise, and the high expectations it raised – themselves features which had been intrinsic to the successful 'selling' of the package to the Home Office and Treasury – inevitably exposed it to the full searchlight of political attention. Like any initiative thus exposed, it was vulnerable both to the impatience for 'results' characteristic of government ministers, for whom (despite the early talk of a 10-year lifespan) the electoral cycle is obviously a key temporal framework, and to the unpredictability of political events and shifting priorities. In order to maintain the necessary level of political support, it had not only to demonstrate that it was progressing according to plan, but

also – at the very least – to deliver some 'quick wins' in terms of early demonstrations of effective crime reduction.

As will be described in more detail later, all of the above risks materialized as substantial problems, with serious negative consequences for the CRP. It might be argued that some of these could have been avoided by more effective risk assessment and management. Certainly, if keeping politicians 'on board' had required no more than evidence of competent administration and some 'promising results', it is possible that it could have been achieved by a combination of quicker responses to emerging problems, higher priority to schemes likely to provide early evidence of effectiveness, and (more cynically) more astute presentational management. After all, the Youth Justice Board, which managed a similar (if smaller) programme that came up against similar problems,[4] appears to have been much more successful in terms of creating a positive 'image' of its outcomes (see, for example, Wilcox, 2003). However, the problem for the CRP ran deeper than this. Fundamentally, it derived from a tension at the heart of the Programme as it moved from the 'drawing board' of its original, research-oriented designers into the reality of funding negotiations and control by policy groups with a more 'action'-oriented frame of reference. Although initially conceived essentially as a set of *experiments*, or pilot projects, the CRP was sucked even before it commenced into the wider government reform agenda and expected to contribute significantly (and quickly) to the achievement of *performance targets*. The Public Service Agreement between the Treasury and the Home Office (Home Office, 1999a: appendix) included highly challenging crime reduction targets such as a 30 per cent reduction in vehicle crime by 2004 and a 25 per cent reduction in burglary by 2005, and it was clear that something called a 'Crime Reduction Programme' with a budget of £400 million could not stand on the sidelines claiming to be simply a set of research experiments. Indeed, although the Programme's aims as articulated in 1998 and early 1999 referred only to its role in 'the *long-term* and sustained reduction in crime' (Homel et al., 2004a, my emphasis), the Government's Crime Reduction Strategy published in November 1999 (Home Office, 1999b) clearly envisaged at least one of the main strands of the CRP, the Reducing Burglary Initiative, as an integral part of plans to reduce crime within a much shorter time-frame.

Tensions such as these between the visions and priorities of researchers and those of politicians and policy makers, of course, are anything but unique, and much has been written by criminologists as well as academics in other fields about the problems of mixing research and policy, and the slippery concept of 'evidence led policy' (see, for example, Kogan, 1999; Hood, 2002; Parsons, 2002; Wilcox, 2003; Myhalovsky and Weir, 2004). While some argue that gradual progress towards better informed policy making can be made through dialogue and attempts to 'educate' policy makers to both the values and limitations of research, a view at the other end of the spectrum is that it is fruitless to expect serious commit-

ment to 'rational' or 'evidence-led' policy – let alone 'joined up' working – in a political, administrative and agency culture which is broadly characterized by reactivity and expediency, the pursuit of short-term gains, and 'silo' thinking.

However, an alternative view that seems to be supported by the experiences of the CRP (and which will be in articulated further at the end of this article) is that there are certain 'windows of opportunity' in political cycles when combinations of circumstances bring the aims and interests of (some) researchers and policy makers much closer together – one such being the period between 1998 and 2000 – but that these can close abruptly as the climate and circumstances change (a similar argument has been applied to policy-making more generally by Kingdon (1995)). It is important to note that such *rapprochements*, when they do occur, are not necessarily regarded by other academics or by front-line practitioners as benevolent or desirable. For example, as summarized by Myhalovsky and Weir (2004: 1061–2)), many sociologists have located 'evidence-based medicine' as part of the 'neo-liberal restructuring of the welfare state' and regard it as implicated in 'removing decision making in clinical practice from the discretionary power of individual physicians' and in 'the current rationalization of health care that is done in the name of cost-cutting and efficiency'. Similar conclusions might be drawn about the CRP, particularly in relation to the strong emphasis placed on the evaluation of cost-effectiveness and the idea of national 'roll outs' of crime reduction methods that may not be compatible with some local ideas or agendas. There is no space to argue this here, but the tensions between research and policy evident in the CRP, as well as an apparent collapse of interest in the cost-effectiveness evaluation, would seem to count against any simple 'read-across' of this kind of explanation.[5]

## The reality

The implementation of the CRP ran into major problems in a number of different areas, some of which are analysed in detail in other articles in this volume. Here the intention is to provide a broader overview of these problems, differentiating them in terms of the apparent reasons behind them, the extent to which they were predicted or managed, and the extent to which there was scope for other strategies that might have avoided them or ameliorated their impact more successfully. They are discussed under four main headings: practical implementation problems; cultural issues; political climate change; and research-related issues.

### Practical implementation problems

To anyone involved at the 'sharp end' of the CRP – whether front-line Home Office staff overseeing the design of projects, letting of contracts, implementation or evaluation, or staff from other organizations working as

project managers, practitioners or evaluators – practical problems loomed large from the beginning. At the simplest level, many of them seem to be best explained by the presence of a cocktail of three incompatible in-gredients: highly ambitious time scales, slow-moving bureaucratic proce-dures, and a general shortage of 'capacity'.

These problems surfaced at all stages of the project's creation and delivery process. First of all, despite the commitment to using and building on previous research knowledge about 'what works', relatively few projects were designed in the light of close attention to such knowledge. This was partly caused by the decision to distribute funds by a competitive bidding process, in which local areas were asked to design their own projects, rather than requiring them to conform closely to centrally designed models (as would have been necessary if it had been decided to base the evaluations on randomized control trials). The system chosen had the advantages of encouraging innovation and (in theory) the adaptation of established crime reduction approaches to local circumstances. However, it suffered in practice from a generally low level of local practitioner knowledge about crime reduction theory and research, combined with unrealistically short timescales for project design and the submission of bids, which precluded anything but the most rudimentary background reading and consultation. Consequently, the quality of many initial bids was poor. In some cases – notably the Reducing Burglary and Targeted Policing initiatives – 'experts' were appointed to advise those short-listed for funding, but these generally had insufficient direct contact with local areas to have much more than a cosmetic impact on the shape of their plans.[6] Moreover, strong pressure emanating from Home Office concerns to avoid Treasury censure and 'get the money spent' meant that many weakly designed projects were funded before necessary remedial work had been undertaken.

Secondly, once funded, many schemes took several months to get suitable staff into post, and even longer to begin operating at anything approaching their planned capacity (if they ever reached it). This was caused by a combination of slowness in the drawing up of contracts and distribution of funds to schemes (itself exacerbated by shortages of capacity to deal with the sudden expansion of such tasks within the relevant Home Office units), time-consuming procedures for advertising posts and ap-pointing or seconding staff, shortages of suitable applicants, negotiations and misunderstandings between agencies with different practices, and so on. The result was not only failure to meet proposed targets in, for example, numbers of referrals or numbers of homes protected, but – highly damaging in terms of political credibility – failure to spend major propor-tions of the agreed budget by the end of the financial year. The underspend was particularly dramatic in the first year of funding (1999–2000), when only 13 per cent of the budget was actually spent (Homel et al., 2004a), but the problem continued in reduced form throughout the life of the CRP, as new projects coming on stream each encountered the same kinds of difficulties and delays.

Thirdly, there was a general problem of failure to implement much of what had been planned and agreed. This emanated partly from the above-mentioned problem of weak and hasty project design, combined with insufficient early discussion with potential partners. Many projects had been grossly over-ambitious in their stated aims and – sometimes out of genuine enthusiasm, sometimes in order to 'sell' their bid to the funders – had promised types and levels of interventions that they simply could not deliver. For example, one Targeted Policing Initiative project in which the author was engaged as an evaluator had promised at least nine major strands of intervention, involving a wide variety of partner agencies, some of which had been given minimal information about the aims of the project or their proposed role in it. The lone police officer appointed as project co-ordinator had little knowledge of, or influence over, these other agencies (which included prisons and probation, health services and small voluntary organisations) and had immense difficulty in getting any of the proposed interventions that involved partners 'off the ground'.

Fourthly, the short-term nature of employment contracts meant that many projects suffered from a high turnover of staff, and in particular – due to the need to seek new jobs – an exodus of staff several months before they were completed. Projects were typically funded for a two-year period, and the latter problem, combined with the fact that it had often taken up to a year to recruit and fully train staff and establish stable ways of working, meant that many operated at full capacity for less than half of their allocated time scale. As a result, output targets (which anyway tended to be over-ambitious, as noted above) were not met, and allocated funds were further underspent.

Clearly, many of the above problems should have been anticipated, not least because they are familiar from previous experience in social programmes in a variety of fields, including earlier crime reduction pro-grammes such as Safer Cities (Knox et al., 2000). Careful risk assessment and pre-planning, including rigorous review and revision of project plans and partnership agreements, could have filtered out some of the most unrealistic proposals and avoided many problems later. However, this was made virtually impossible by the core problems of time pressure to 'spend the money' and shortage of capacity for the task. Equally, slippage on delivery might have been significantly reduced through closer oversight and monitoring of individual projects by either the Home Office or staff working under the Regional Crime Directors to whom this task was latterly devolved. Such monitoring proved successful in some of the Probation Pathfinders projects, for example, where specially appointed central staff frequently visited individual areas and convened regular meetings for representatives from the participating projects (Lewis et al., 2003). How-ever, this was the exception rather than the rule, and in some cases it was only through information from evaluators, who were becoming concerned about the lack of sufficient data to analyse, that Home Office managers learned of the scale of so called 'implementation failure'. Like many other

aspects of the CRP, the monitoring of delivery was severely handicapped by capacity issues, including staffing cuts which affected the Home Office in the first year of the Programme (Homel et al., 2004a) and a general lack of experience among both Home Office and regional staff in these kinds of tasks.

Finally, it is worth noting the contradiction between, on the one hand, the political (and Treasury-driven) demands for unusual speed in the processing of tenders and bids, production and signing of contracts, distribution of funding, monitoring and 'trouble-shooting' of problems, and so on, and on the other the slow-moving bureaucratic machinery of a central government department such as the Home Office, which was designed for quite different purposes. This, of course, raises broader questions about the most suitable location for the central management of such an ambitious programme – in particular, whether it might have been better to devolve responsibility and control over the design and implementation of the CRP to an independent body (probably one specially created for the purpose) which could be both more 'nimble on its feet' and less directly influenced by short-term political concerns.

### Cultural issues

Successful implementation of a programme of the scale and vision of the CRP requires not only a high level of planning and organization, but has to take account of 'cultural' factors, which can easily undermine it. The CRP encountered a variety of problems of this kind, but few systematic efforts were made to counteract them.

First of all, it came up against a culture which has become increasingly prominent among public and voluntary sector agencies as budgets have been tightened and tied more closely to performance: this may be characterized as 'project opportunism' (a similar point will be made later about university departments). In essence, many local managers – for whom resource issues are a daily concern – remain on constant alert for any potential source of extra funding, and are geared to respond rapidly with a bid couched in the kind of language which they believe will give them the most chance of success. Such bids, they are also aware, often improve their chances if they include participation by partner agencies, and networks of contacts are frequently used to acquire agreement for such involvement (though not necessarily with much detailed discussion of how the partner agency will actually contribute to the project). Moreover, funding bids are often seen as way of continuing or expanding existing projects, or even of acquiring more staff for mainstream activities, and consequently the 'art' of bidding (which in some cases is delegated to specialist fundraisers or consultants, rather than operational staff) is to persuade the funder that the activity for which the bidder really wants resources fits neatly within the aims and objectives of the funding exercise.

While none of this is necessarily undesirable – indeed, the generally rapid

and abundant responses to the CRP's tendering exercises were helpful to the Home Office's immediate needs – the risk is that, once the funds are granted, the organisation treats them partly as a 'windfall' to contribute to its pre-existing plans, rather than fully embracing the outlook and intentions of the funder. Such cases can on occasion involve blatant diversion of funds, but more often the process occurs gradually and in subtle ways, as project staff are given extra tasks, or the project as a whole experiences 'drift'. This is particularly likely in projects lacking in clarity in the initial design, with confusion about their precise goals and methods. If the manager or co-ordinator (who may well have had no involvement in the original submission) does not have a clear vision or understanding of the project's purposes, or its relationship to wider programme goals, the core focus can soon be lost. An example in this category was a project with intensive interventions aimed at children at high risk of offending or going missing, where after a time the manager decided (for defensible reasons, though contrary to the 'crime reduction' aims of the project) to concentrate resources on those at only medium risk.

Secondly, as might be expected, cultural problems were prominent in the multi-agency element of the CRP. It was as yet 'early days' in the formation of Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) – indeed, in some areas joining the Reducing Burglary Initiative they existed as yet on paper only (Millie and Hough, 2004) – and it was unwise to assume that co-operation with crime reduction projects could readily be obtained from agencies for whom crime was not a focus of their mainstream activities. Projects in which the police were the 'lead agency', in particular (notably within the Targeted Policing Initiative), quite often experienced reluctance on the part of agencies such as health and social services to share information, while non-police members of local steering groups sometimes expressed concern about the tendency of the police to 'dominate the agenda', in the sense of prioritizing enforcement over 'softer' methods of crime reduction. Such problems were usually eased or resolved over time, but caused delays, changes or omissions in the planned implementation of multi-stranded projects.

Thirdly, most projects involved activities that were not entirely new, and in many cases overlapped with the responsibilities of other units or other agencies (and in some cases, other temporary projects funded from different sources!). In such cases, the CRP project was the 'new kid on the block', and it took time to establish its place in the local jigsaw of service provision, including informing practitioners in other agencies of its aims and services and, for example, persuading them to refer suitable offenders. The author also observed one case where the new project was regarded as a threat by a pre-existing project, and in direct competition for 'its' cases. Again, these problems were eventually resolved, but by then there was relatively little of the lifetime of the CRP project remaining in which to take full advantage of the increased flow of referrals.

Finally, some projects were designed on the assumption that staff could be quickly trained or persuaded to work in ways not traditional in their occupational culture. A good example is the Pathfinder projects piloting cognitive-behavioural programmes for offenders on probation, which demanded the application by staff of a time-consuming new form of assessment (OASys), psychometric testing, motivational interviewing techniques, strict rules of referral to the programmes, and so on. Such changes were strongly resisted by many probation officers, who regarded them as reducing their level of professional discretion, as well as dubious in terms of the theories of criminal behaviour on which they were based (see Mair (2004) for broader discussion of such criticisms; see also Mykhalovsky and Weir (2004) for examples of similar resistance to 'evidence-based medicine'). While such programmes are now much more widely accepted, the above problems contributed significantly to high levels of 'attrition' among offenders selected to attend the programmes, which in turn rendered research findings on their effectiveness largely unreliable by exacerbating the problem of selection effects (see Raynor, this volume).

### Political climate change

As stated earlier, the very scale and ambition of the CRP drew it firmly into the political spotlight, thereby making it vulnerable to any significant change in the political climate, focus of debate, or order of priorities. Indeed, the early months of the programme coincided with an unexpected increase in the overall recorded crime figures, which had previously been consistently falling, and a consequent increase in concern among ministers about criticism from the press and the opposition. This in turn led the Home Office to put more pressure on the CRP to deliver tangible crime reductions, at the expense of longer-term pay-offs in terms of research knowledge.

The change in climate manifested itself in a number of ways. Crucially, control of the Programme, in which it had originally been envisaged that the Home Office Research and Statistics Directorate would play a significant role,[7] was assumed almost exclusively by a high level policy unit. One result of this was the cutting back of plans to fund projects with innovative ideas and approaches,[8] in favour of those based on well established methods; and likewise a stronger focus on acquisitive ('volume') crime, which was the main driver of the increase in recorded crime figures. But perhaps most importantly, the central focus of the CRP began a clear shift away from the need for good research evidence about 'what works', towards an emphasis on delivering crime reduction outcomes as soon as possible (Homel et al., 2004a). To this effect, significant 'roll outs' of interventions began before research results had been received. In the case of the Reducing Burglary Initiative, for example, the second phase was brought forward in time. More dramatically, the CRP budget was increased by the addition of £150 million solely for projects involving the installation

of CCTV. This seems to have been decided partly on the basis of 'commonsense' faith in the crime reduction potential of CCTV (despite a lack of evidence to this effect – see Welsh and Farrington (2003) for a broad review) and partly on the grounds that it is popular with the public.

Subsequent manifestations of the increasing drive for tangible 'results' include the increasing pressure put upon the National Probation Service to process large numbers of offenders through accredited programmes (an unrealistic target was initially set of 60 000 programme and community service completions by 2004) – pressure which was also felt on the Joint Accreditation Panel, which gradually lowered its requirements for empirical evidence that programmes 'worked' and introduced a system of 'provisional' accreditation, under which programmes could be 'rolled out' before full accreditation had been awarded (Correctional Services Accreditation Panel, 2003; Rex et al., 2003; Mair, 2004). Again, towards the end of the CRP in early 2002, a sizeable 'blip' in street robbery figures persuaded the government to set up the centrally directed Street Crime Initiative (Home Office, 2002), in which 10 police forces were suddenly presented with challenging short-term reduction targets and virtually compelled to divert major resources into a concentrated attack on the problem. While the initiative appears to have been quite successful in meeting these targets, it undoubtedly disrupted pre-existing crime reduction plans and projects in the selected forces, including some that did not believe they had a significant robbery problem (John and Maguire, 2003). This was a clear signal that the concept of evidence-based practice was taking second place to a perceived need to react decisively to short-term changes in crime rates.

By that time in fact, a further important change in political attitude towards the CRP had already occurred, as the scale of the implementation problems – and their negative effect on attempts at evaluation – began to become clear. Concern on this score led to considerable cutting back on the numbers of projects deemed worth evaluating and undoubtedly contributed to the eventual decision to bring the CRP to a premature end.[9] The vision of a 10-year lifespan for a systematic programme of experimentation and staggered roll-out of crime reduction strategies which have proved their effectiveness, was thus well and truly dimmed.

The CRP officially came to an end in March 2002, although several of its more promising projects, as well as the associated evaluations, received extensions to their funding for up to another year. The CRP was replaced by the relatively poorly funded 'Safer Communities Initiative', under which funds were to be distributed to local partnerships by the 10 Regional Crime Reduction Directors (now called Home Office Directors, or 'HODs'), based in the Government Offices of the nine English regions and in the Welsh Assembly.[10] In most cases, the funds were distributed simply on the basis of population or crime rates, rather than bid for to support specific projects or activities, and relatively few independent evaluations were conducted. However, receipt of these and other funds which have since been added to the HODs' 'pots' is now increasingly dependent upon the 'performance' of

CDRPs in reducing local crime rates, and any partnerships which are perceived on the basis of their crime figures to be 'failing' are likely to receive unwelcome visits not only from their regional HOD, but from members of a Home Office monitoring unit. While the notion of 'evidence-based practice' remains very much part of these new performance regimes, in general it is based less upon continuing research and evaluation than upon sets of simple precepts about how to analyse and respond in the short term to local crime problems (typically, through the use of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders, target hardening, targeted policing, or surveillance by CCTV). Such a culture inevitably tends to focus the attention of managers on the achievement of narrow short term goals and on a few sets of key performance statistics, and is hardly conducive either to innovation or to efforts to investigate in more depth how and why particular strategies are or are not effective in particular contexts. It is also likely ultimately to reduce their commitment to longer-term strategies such as improving parenting skills, providing diversion activities for potential offenders, and so on, which were intrinsic to the original philosophy of the CRP.

Finally, it would be remiss to exclude from a discussion of political climate change the impact of 11 September 2001 and the continuing concern with the prevention of terrorism. Another major set of preoccupations has also developed around asylum-seekers. These concerns have together led to major shifts in Home Office priorities – and concomitantly in funds – towards dealing with the problems they present. Correspondingly, the accumulation of research-based knowledge about the most effective means of crime reduction, although by no means 'dead', has slipped down the list of priorities and levels of funding seem likely to continue to decline in the foreseeable future.

### Research-related issues

As already emphasized, the original vision behind the creation of the CRP had at its heart a belief in the possibility of a productive, harmonious and lasting 'marriage' between research and policy making, summed up in the ideal of 'evidence-based' or (more ambitiously) 'evidence-led' policy. Indeed, the network of research-oriented civil servants and policy-oriented criminologists who played a key role in its conception (see Hope, this volume) drew confidence and optimism about the project from their own shared goals and experiences of comfortable cooperation – including in some cases, movement back and forth between university and civil service posts.

By contrast, however, much of the literature on the relationship between research and policy sees this as a deeply problematic alliance, arguing that, while they quite often work together in a superficially collaborative way, most researchers and policy makers ultimately inhabit worlds which differ significantly in terms of aims, values and interests. The discussion rightly tends to focus on independent research by academics, in relation to which

such differences are most acute, but gulfs in mutual understanding can even open up between policy and research units within the same organisation. To grossly oversimplify, it has been variously argued that:

- Researchers tend to problematize concepts, goals and definitions; policy makers seek to keep them simple, fixed and operationalizable (Goldson, 2001);
- Researchers tend to think in terms of longer term strategies and 'solutions', as opposed to the 'quick fix' which is often the preference of policy makers;
- (Most) researchers aim to complement statistical findings with qualitative understanding of processes, participants' attitudes and so on; policy makers prefer 'painting by numbers' (Maguire, 1997; Crawford, 2001);
- Governments tend to use and promote those research findings which fit policies already decided upon (in extreme cases 'burying' evidence which seriously challenges such policies), so that the role of research is more often one of *legitimizing* policy rather than 'driving' it (Kogan, 1999; Wilcox, 2003). This is summed up in the cynical phrase 'policy-led evidence';
- Perceptions of how research 'knowledge' should be shaped and disseminated tend to differ substantially: the world of research reports, academic papers and seminars is very different to that of 'guidance notes', 'toolkits' and 'training'.

In such accounts, the relationship between research and policy is seen as an inherently difficult one. What one might call the 'normal state of the affair' can be characterized as one in which both parties recognize that they 'need each other' (and it is this which has kept them together so long) but also that they 'do not really understand each other' and hence, while co-operating in their mutual interest, generally keep a wary distance and engage in frequent sniping.

However, it is argued here that, as in any long-term relationship, there are periods when circumstances combine to produce unusually auspicious conditions for collaboration and the inherent differences appear to recede. The early years of the 1997 New Labour government represent such a period: a new government with a large majority, having spent many years in opposition, was eager to engage in significant public sector reforms and open to supporting 'big ideas'. Moreover, unlike governments throughout most of the previous 40 years, it was also benefitting from a steady fall in crime rates, which temporarily lessened some of the normal media pressures for immediate, 'crisis' responses to crime problems, leaving it exceptionally receptive to long-term thinking and planning. In such a climate, the notion of 'evidence-based' policy was unusually attractive to politicians, Home Office administrators and researchers alike, and many of the kinds of differences and difficulties identified in the above-mentioned literature – like the practical and organizational problems experienced in previous programmes, as discussed earlier – were simply forgotten or ignored.

There is no space here to catalogue all the research-related problems that arose. Clearly, questions about the evaluation methodologies promoted by the Home Office are of major importance in this regard, but as this topic is discussed in some depth in the articles by Hope and Tilley, only brief comment will be made later. The main focus will be instead upon problems associated with the relationships between evaluators, civil servants and practitioners, and the thorny issue of dissemination and publication.

First of all, a valid criticism that can be laid at the door of most evaluators, myself included, is that they did little (in the early days, at least) to warn the Home Office that too much was being expected of the research it was commissioning. As a general rule, those bidding for research contracts had played no part in the design of the projects they were to evaluate, and the broad shape of the suggested methodology had already been spelled out in the Invitation To Tender. In many cases, there were fairly obvious weaknesses in both respects, sometimes to the extent that there were clear risks that the evaluation would not achieve the expectations placed upon it (in crude terms, to determine whether the interventions in question 'worked' and whether they were 'cost-effective'). However, few research bids – or, at least, few of those that were successful – appear to have emphasized concerns of this kind. On the contrary, evaluators generally appear to have been caught up, along with policy makers, Home Office research staff and local practitioners, in the over-ambitious, over-optimistic and (with hindsight) indefensibly uncritical mood of the time. Whether the role of researchers in this phenomenon is better described as 'delusion' or 'collusion' is difficult to say. Understandably, many were genuinely enthusiastic about the sudden surge in importance and status accorded to their 'trade', which had had relatively little influence on government for many years, and about the chance to play a real part in shaping criminal justice policy: rather than risk being left out, many were willing to suspend their doubts in the hope the potential problems could be overcome. At the same time, it has to be recognized that – as with practitioners bidding for funds to set up projects (discussed earlier) – they were under institutional pressures of their own, a 'key performance indicator' and mark of esteem for university staff being success in obtaining external research funds.

Secondly, this problem was indirectly exacerbated by one of the consequences of the decision – totally defensible as this was in principle – to instruct evaluators to maintain distance and independence from the management of projects and to avoid influencing their direction (in other words, it was made clear that this was not 'action research'). Unfortunately, in reality it was often only the evaluators who were fully aware of the degree of 'implementation failure', 'project drift' and 'slippage' that was afflicting many projects. Hence, evaluators of seriously badly implemented projects were quite often put in the invidious position of having to decide either to maintain a strictly 'hands-off' position and save any comments for

formal reports – with the likely consequence of obtaining insufficient data to conduct valid statistical analysis – or alternatively to 'interfere' by proffering advice or by conveying their concerns to the Home Office, thereby risking upsetting project managers with whom they had established relationships of trust. Of course, the poor delivery would eventually come to light in interim evaluation reports or through other monitoring arrangements, but this might be too late for remedial action to be taken. Different evaluators dealt with such problems in different ways, but most appear to have adopted a 'hands off' approach, with the result that the full scale of the problem nationally did not come to light until at least a year into the CRP. In many cases, too, it was too late to rescue the situation in terms of producing the necessary quality and quantity of data.

Thirdly, such a situation produced further problems in terms of the dissemination of results. In essence, the Home Office was flooded with a series of research reports documenting 'implementation failure' in rich detail, but very few able to conclude whether or not the methods piloted in the projects had any impact in terms of reducing crime. The original assumption – though never a guarantee – had been that most reports that satisfied the Home Office's quality control procedures (which include academic peer review) would be published in full. However, in the end very few were published in full, and many of those that did reach the public domain were published electronically in much shortened form (for example, so called 'Development and Practice Reports'). These outcomes were explained to researchers (including myself) as partly due to major reductions in the publications budget, partly due to mounting evidence that few practitioners (one of the main target audiences) read research reports, and partly due to a conclusion that many of the reports were not of sufficient quality or interest to merit publication. While these arguments may all be defensible, the decisions caused considerable anger among evaluators who had assumed that their work would be published by the Home Office (and in some cases saw this as important to their overall research profile). Moreover, suspicions were expressed that the few reports which *were* published – mainly those where the sample sizes and quality of data had been sufficient for analysis and where the crime reduction results were most promising – had been 'cherry-picked' with the purpose of presenting the CRP in as favourable a light as possible. More seriously, there have been arguments about the re-analysis and re-interpretation of some evaluators' data, again involving accusations that this has been undertaken with a view to producing more palatable results (see Hope, this volume). Finally, even where results were either eventually published by the Home Office or permission was granted for the evaluators to publish them elsewhere, there were often inordinately long delays before they were 'cleared', rendering some badly out of date in terms of current practice. As with many other problems in the CRP, this may be largely explicable in terms of shortage of capacity (in this case among the Home Office research staff who had to process the large numbers of reports that were submitted in 2002 and

2003), but such delays did little to allay suspicions about the 'suppression' or 'spinning' of results.

Such problems and concerns, it should be emphasized, are not unique to the CRP (for example, see Wilcox 2003 for a description of efforts by the Youth Justice Board to present the results of a particular research report in the best possible light). They also reflect what are very real problems for administrators, including the need to find effective ways of communicating lessons from research to large numbers of practitioners, as well as a perceived need to ensure that the 'messages' sent out are clear, consistent and as far as possible positive. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge examples of publications involving Home Office staff which present CRP research results – including many negative findings – in imaginative and educative ways, notably an edited book to which several evaluators contributed chapters on particular aspects of their research on the Targeted Policing Initiative (Bullock and Tilley, 2003). Even so, it is difficult to avoid the overall conclusion that the handling of publication issues arising from the CRP was poor.

Finally, regarding methodological issues, which are dealt with extensively elsewhere in this volume, only two general points will be made quickly here:

1. Although specific methodologies of assessing effectiveness (as opposed to cost-effectiveness) were not rigidly imposed on evaluators, the method generally encouraged was some form of quasi-experimental research, based on looking for statistically significant differences in crime rates or reconviction rates, either 'before and after' interventions, or between intervention areas/groups and control or comparison areas/groups. At the same time, evaluators were rarely pressed to analyse contextual factors in order to explore *how* any apparent effects are generated (Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Tilley, this volume). Over-reliance on this narrow methodology entailed a substantial risk that if the available data were insufficiently reliable, or contained too few crimes or cases for valid statistical analysis, the evaluator would be left without anything useful to say about the effectiveness of the programme. In many cases, these problems materialized, and unpublished reports are replete with inconclusive findings based on small samples.

   Moreover, even where valid statistical analysis was possible, there was a risk of these leading to premature conclusions couched in black-and-white terms – 'it works' or 'it doesn't work' (as if this were true for all time and in all conditions). However attractive to busy policy makers, such conclusions can lead eventually to very expensive mistakes;

2. The one aspect of the evaluation that was rigidly imposed by the Home Office was collection of data for cost-effectiveness (and ultimately cost-benefit) analysis (Dhiri and Brand, 1999). The aim was to collect data from all projects in standard form, in order to produce eventually comparisons of cost-effectiveness across virtually every project in the CRP. However, the exercise suffered from a variety of problems, partly caused by delays in

producing and distributing templates, partly by the unreliability and un-availability of cost data, but most of all because the projects were so diverse that the templates could not be sensibly applied to many. This raises once again the dilemma of whether to seek data which are in theory directly comparable across all areas but in practice likely to produce distorted pictures of many, or alternatively to tailor evaluation methods to local circumstances and the nature of particular projects.

## Conclusion

The CRP was ambitious and idealistic in its conception, and emerged at a time when politicians and policy makers were particularly responsive to the idea of 'evidence-led' policy in the response to crime. However, while for the combination of academics and research-oriented civil servants involved in its creation it was primarily about the systematic production and dissemination of knowledge, which could be put to practical use in the medium to long term, for policy makers and government ministers it was also about a contribution to the achievement of challenging crime reduc-tion targets in the much shorter term. An inevitable corollary of its success in attracting financial support on such a large scale was its vulnerability to changes in the political urgency of delivering these reductions. Hence when, very early in its implementation, national recorded crime rates rose un-expectedly, control of the CRP passed to a high level policy unit in the Home Office, and its more 'idealistic' elements (such as the search for innovative strategies and methods, and the overriding importance attached to evaluation) soon receded in the order of priorities. Moreover, when it emerged that many projects were suffering from 'implementation failure' and that few conclusive results were emerging from the evaluations (largely as a consequence of these 'failures'), politicians were quick to lose patience with the Programme as initially conceived, and, although some of its elements live on in transmuted form, it was essentially brought to a close after three years rather than the 10 years originally envisaged. Sadly, despite an unprecedented investment in evaluation, it has so far left behind relatively little new learning about the effectiveness of particular inter-ventions (though there may be some findings to build on). Instead, the main research lessons have been about weaknesses in project planning (and in some cases project management) and the frustrations of attempting to get projects 'up and running' to tight time scales in the face of difficulties in recruitment, bureaucratic delay and negotiations with partner organiza-tions.

Some responsibility for this situation must be shared between all the main participants in the CRP. For example, senior civil servants largely failed to anticipate major practical problems (such as shortages of capacity, and inevitable start-up delays), which had emerged in several previous

government programmes; authorized the funding of poorly designed projects in their haste to spend allocated funds within the financial year; and failed to set up adequate monitoring systems to identify implementation difficulties. Local managers often failed to implement projects as planned and agreed, either ignoring or being unaware of the needs of evaluators for systematic data and sufficient cases to allow statistical analysis of outcomes. Evaluators, while also quick to bid for the generous new streams of research funds and to promise the conclusive results expected by policy makers, were generally slow in drawing attention to the weaknesses in project design, implementation and data quality that made such promises virtually impossible to keep.

However, at a deeper level many of the problems that have been catalogued in this article are tied up with broader tensions and contradictions inherent in the differences in cultures, perceptions and time-frames of policy makers and politicians, practitioners and academics, including differences in their understandings of the nature, purposes and reliability of 'research' itself. As previous writers have pointed out, the notion of 'evidence-based' policy – at least, as that term is understood by most academic researchers – does not sit easily in a political culture that is driven to a large extent by expediency, reactions to events, and relatively short term goals and targets. In such a culture, any 'window of opportunity' for persuading politicians of the value of large-scale investment in research is unlikely to last long, and it is readily understandable why so much haste was apparent in the launching of the CRP.

Equally, evaluations aimed at answering difficult and complex questions about the impact of specific (often multi-stranded) interventions do not fit easily with agency cultures which have increasingly taught local managers to place primary importance on the achievement of narrow targets, measured by crude statistical indicators, and hence to regard any new source of 'project' funding as simply an extra means to this end. Moreover, despite lip-service to the ideal of 'partnership', the performance target culture tends to push managers back towards 'silo' thinking, as most targets are agency-specific and do not reflect partnership work. Together with the practical problems around staff recruitment and retention, and bureaucratic delay, these two facets of local agency culture go a long way towards explaining the frequency of 'project drift' and of failures to deliver what was proposed in project plans.

Finally, despite the inevitably negative tone of much of this article, it is important to end by emphasizing that the CRP has by no means sunk without trace, and that some of its elements have not only produced useful research results but spawned new thinking and new practice initiatives. This is visible particularly in areas where investment in projects continued into a 'second phase', where there has been evidence of major improvement in project design and implementation as those involved have learned from previous mistakes. A good example is the Probation Resettlement Pathfinders (Lewis et al., 2003; Clancy et al., forthcoming), where the second

phase proved much more successful in terms of project integrity, numbers participating, data recording, levels and quality of post-release contact, and so on, which greatly enhanced the prospects of conclusive findings in the evaluation and hence the chances of the research eventually influencing policy and practice. Such experiences support the view that, had the CRP been maintained as a 10-year programme as originally planned, it would have eventually overcome some of its worst problems and borne considerable fruit in terms of both knowledge and improved practice. It is to be hoped that at least some of the better practice developed in the more successful projects will re-emerge in new guises. Equally important, it is to be hoped that the negative experiences of the CRP do not lead policy makers to re-adopt crude assumptions associated with the 'nothing works' era and consequently, for example, to withdraw investments in the more expensive interventions (an obvious example being offending behaviour programmes) simply on the grounds that they are 'unproven' and there are cheaper alternatives. As has been pointed out elsewhere in this volume, evaluating the 'effectiveness' of interventions is one of the most difficult of all research tasks, and it takes a long time and many studies before any faith can justifiably be placed in statements about how, when and why a particular response to crime or offenders is likely to produce an impact. Given this, and given all the problems described earlier, it is tempting to conclude that the ideal of 'evidence-based policy' may be more effectively pursued as a series of quiet iterative processes in individual corners of the criminal justice arena, than through one large-scale and high profile 'programme'.

## Notes

1 For example, the CRP played an important part in accelerating acceptance of the idea that partnership has a crucial role to play in crime policy. It also helped to increase familiarity among practitioners with approaches based on 'problem solving' and the use of crime analysts to assist targeting and prioritization. More broadly, much was learnt 'between the lines' of the formal evaluations, and the academics involved may use the qualitative data they collected to develop further ideas about crime reduction.

2 However, it was still small in comparison with other social programmes such as the New Deal for Communities, which were launched around the same time. Indeed, it accounted for under 7 per cent of government expenditure on area programmes in 2001–2 (Homel et al., 2004a).

3 The most systematized example of this approach was found in the 'corrections' field, where an expert panel, the Prison Service/Probation Service Joint Accreditation Panel (later renamed the Correctional Services Accreditation Panel), was set up to act as a quality control 'filter' for the design and delivery of offending behaviour programmes. In essence, programmes were not to be accredited or 'rolled out' nationally until the Panel was satisfied that they were well designed, that they incorporated a coherent

'model of change', and that there was sufficient empirical evidence that they would reduce reconviction if properly delivered (Correctional Services Accreditation Panel, 2003; Rex et al., 2003).

4  Between 1999 and 2002, Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) received funding from the YJB's Development Fund for over 250 individual projects. As with the CRP, a proportion of the funding for each project included provision for evaluation.

5  In fact, such interpretations might fit better with the 'aftermath' of the CRP, as the emphasis in Home Office relations with CDRPs has shifted from the encouragement of innovation and evaluation to the encouragement of standard responses to crime problems and performance monitoring and management based on crude indicators such as short-term changes in recorded crime rates.

6  Indeed, it is clear from conversations with those involved that some were less confident of the reliability of the 'knowledge base' than others, and focused their attention on the general coherence and feasibility of the proposals, rather than giving concrete advice on the use of specific methods.

7  It had also been expected that a number of different government departments would play a regular part in guiding and controlling the CRP, but by this time control had passed almost exclusively to the Home Office (Homel et al., 2004a; 2004b).

8  It was originally planned to spend £32 million on an Innovation Fund (Homel et al., 2004a), but little of this money was allocated to projects of this kind.

9  More recently, too, some disappointing findings on the outcomes of offending behaviour programmes both in prison and in the community (for example, Friendship et al., 2002; Cann et al., 2003; Roberts, 2004) appear to have reduced the level of enthusiasm for the expansion of such programmes, as well as for the work of the Correctional Services Accreditation Panel in developing evidence-based practice (see also Raynor, this volume).

10  Most of the Directors had been in post during the final 18 months or so of the CRP, and had in 2001 taken over from the central Home Office responsibility for the monitoring of CRP projects in their regions. However, they also suffered from major capacity problems during this period, and had insufficient resources to make much impact on the Programme's continuing 'implementation failure' problems (see also Homel et al., 2004a).

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