

## **A Fighting Chance**

*As Jack Straw hones his Crime and Disorder Bill, Rob Allen suggests that lessons can be learned from new forms of US community policing aimed at helping potential juvenile offenders*

By Rob Allen

The United States is not the most obvious place to seek constructive responses to youth crime. There is much, of course, for those who favour a repressive approach, and the so-called penaholic society offers imprisonment on a scale five times as high as the record levels in Britain. But police, prosecutors, even judges and correctional administrators are now as likely to talk about prevention as punishment, while interest in restorative justice — in which offenders pay back to victims and the community — is burgeoning across the country.

The Federal Department of Justice has taken an important lead. Its Juvenile Justice Action Plan and Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent and Chronic Juvenile Offenders, published last year, both stress the importance of early intervention in the lives of potential offenders and the need for communities to build-up resistance to crime at local level.

Tens of thousands of additional police officers deployed as a result of the 1994 Crime Bill are involved in community policing. Juvenile justice systems are being encouraged to adopt a balanced and restorative philosophy which gives priority to protecting the public, restoration to the victims of crime and educating offenders.

The neighbourhoods of northeast Washington DC are among the most violent. In the sprawling apartment complex of "Paradise at Parkside" the police have turned not to aggressive zero tolerance measures pioneered in New York City but to the ultimate in community policy, whose origins lie in Japan.

Worse yet, crime has been exacerbated by a "vast and shameful inequality in income, wealth and opportunity," the report said, noting that more than one quarter of U.S. children live in poverty.

Three police officers live and work in a so-called Koban, a ministration located in one of the apartment blocks, in an area which five years ago was one of the city's most notorious drug markets. Officer William Jackson, born and bred in the low-income area, has returned with his wife and young family to take part in a radical experiment, designed as he says to "put the neighbour in the hood."

When Johnson originally created the commission, he tapped Milton Eisenhower--diplomat and brother of former President Dwight D. Eisenhower--to head it and charged the panel with investigating the strife and violence that culminated in Robert F. Kennedy's assassination in 1968. The commission's 1969 report offered chilling predictions of urban residents trapped in "places of terror" and heavily armed suburbanites living in "fortified cells."

One of seven pilot schemes across the US, the idea is for the police to serve the whole community as neighbours, friends and mentors rather than merely responding to crisis calls. Under the supervision of a civilian director, they run a range of early intervention and youth work activities targeted specifically at 50 eight-to 17-year-olds at risk of becoming offenders.

Sports, drama and music activities are all organised out of the Koban, which is also a safe haven where young people and their families can obtain counseling and advice. Woman police officer Mona Lynch runs a girls' leadership project, encouraging young women to take control of their lives and thereby reduce the incidence of teen pregnancy. A fatherhood programme aims to keep families together.

One underlying Koban theme is the need for responsiveness to the needs of the community. Two years ago, the Koban arranged daytime activities for a boy suspended from school. Today it provides the official suspension programme for the two junior and one senior high school serving the area. Increasing rates of suspension mean that up to 25 local pupils attend during the day.

Results from the pilot schemes are encouraging; emergency calls are much reduced. So too are arrests, although the downward trend in crime was underway at Paradise in Parkside before the Koban.

The Koban initiative was the idea of the Washington-based Eisenhower Foundation, which took a group of police chiefs to Japan and pulled together the funding needed to turn their enthusiasm for what they saw into action. The Federal Housing and Urban Development Agency has put in resources as have the local housing department and charitable funders.

According to Eddie Banks of the Eisenhower Foundation, fewer than 10 percent of residents resent the police presence. The principle of putting police and community together is becoming increasingly attractive. Last month, President Clinton announced a measure to enable 2,000 police officers to buy inner-city homes at half-price. A small investment, but one which could pay considerable dividends in terms of crime prevention.

It is possible that such individual examples of good practice are operating in spite of, rather than because of, broader policy. Certainly there are dangers that some forthcoming changes at the macro level will have a negative impact. Experts suggest that welfare reform could plunge a further seven million American children into poverty. A bill currently before Congress would require states to waive many more young offenders out of the juvenile and into the adult courts as a condition for receiving financial assistance from Washington. The bill would sweep away existing criteria requiring states to reduce institutionalisation and disproportionate ethnic confinement. If the President signs it, it will serve to move increasingly scarce resources away from providing community initiatives into prisons.

Clearly, there is much for the Government here to learn as they prepare the Crime and Disorder Bill and advise the best way to spend the windfall tax.

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