



GOVERNMENT OFFICE
FOR THE SOUTH EAST



Crime is falling: why does nobody seem to believe it?

Address given by Hugh Marriage OBE^P
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It's a great pleasure to be here today at this conference on developing crime and disorder partnerships.

I want to speak about credibility, which relates to trust, reassurance, the fear of crime and a number of public issues which tax most partnerships and which certainly tax me. Why is it that, when crime is coming down, the public doesn't seem to believe it and fear of crime remains as high as ever? And what should we be doing about that?

This is the right time to raise these issues. Crime in Britain has fallen every year since 1995. Crime has reduced by 25% since 1997: burglary is down 39% to a 17-year low, violence down 24% and vehicle thefts down 31%. The chances of being a victim of crime are at their lowest for 20 years. The average household is a victim of burglary only once in 50 years; of vehicle crime, for those who own a vehicle, only once in 67 years; and of theft from the person, also only once in 67 years.

As John Denham used to say when he was a Home Office Minister, we are targeting prolific offenders, we are spending record amounts of money on drug treatment, the prisons are full, crime is coming down, we must be doing some things right. The only trouble is that nobody seems to believe it.

I will try to tackle the reasons for this credibility gap under seven headings and then go on to suggest how each and every CDRP can do its bit to help turn the tide.

1. We don't have confidence in the criminal justice system (CJS)

For most of the 36 years that I have been in the Home Office, the loudest voices have been those which say that the CJS is useless. You will be familiar with this approach. It generally starts off with the statement that, for every 100 crimes which are committed, only two are brought to justice. Therefore, the argument goes, the CJS is only scratching at the surface of some iceberg and can never have a serious impact on crime or criminals.

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It's easy enough to see that this is nonsense. For a start, if the Chief Constable were to announce today that no crimes committed in October would be prosecuted then, if the CJS really had no impact, this dramatic announcement would make no difference to the level of crime in this part of the world. Do we believe that?

The error of all this lies, of course, in muddling offences and offenders, or more precisely, confusing failing to detect offences with failing to catch offenders. It is true, and always will be, that no CJS will be able to bring to justice every offence. But that does not mean that it is impossible – or even difficult - to bring to justice the vast majority of active offenders, which is what I believe we do.

We can see that from many different angles. If you are a probation officer, you have the devil's own job keeping offenders out of the courts. If you are in the courts, you can see that almost all the offenders coming before you have lists of previous convictions the length of their arms. If you are in prisons, you are continually reminded of the depressing post-release reconviction statistics. All the evidence is that active offenders are repeatedly getting caught about every 18 months to two years.

Now there's a different view of the CJS! One in which we recognise that the courts are handling most active offenders every year or so, that there are not many who are getting away with it. That's a view which should change how each of us does our business – indeed, I would argue, it should change the nature and structure of sentencing, but that is a debate for another time.

Most of all, for our purposes, it's a view which should encourage CJS professionals to walk taller, to realise that it is worthwhile coming to work, to appreciate that we really can have an impact and have increased confidence as a result.

But the real mischief of not seeing the impact of the CJS correctly is that it strengthens offenders in their belief that they can get away with it, when they can't and they don't. It's not unlucky to get caught, it's virtually inevitable, but that's not the impression which everyone gives them. So offenders are encouraged to persist and we get more crime as a result. Lack of confidence in the CJS increases crime: that's what troubles me. If we see the CJS correctly, confidence will grow and crime will come down.

2. Apart from the Government and the police, nobody wants crime to come down, including academics

We next have to face up to the fact that, apart from the Government, nobody has much vested interest in crime coming down, including academics. It's strange that one has to spell it out.

You can see this when Criminal Statistics are published each year. There's no rejoicing at the reducing trend. There is no professor on the box saying that his or her theory has been proved and crime is reducing as a result. Indeed,

it's not clear that criminology has itself the confidence to put crime reduction at the centre of its priorities (except, of course, in places like this), preferring to spend so much of its time ploughing some pretty impenetrable furrows.

In addition, fairly obviously, there are people who would be disappointed at any reduction in crime. Opposition politicians (of whatever party) always talk of rising crime: particularly when money is tight, the police have been known to play up the increasing dangers of crime: and media critics find it easier to crank up rather than play down the fear of crime. In any case, pessimism tends always to be less intellectually demanding.

If nobody really has that much interest in seeing crime come down, it's going to be difficult to convince the public. And we have the entertainment industry to tackle next.

3. Crime is entertainment: the media need it to maintain sales

If we ever doubt that there are serious vested interests in keeping up the perception of crime, we have only to look at the proportion of television and tabloids devoted to crime. I believe that there is an average of 12 shootings a night on terrestrial television. They seem commonplace, almost routine. Yet the reality is that a shooting in this country is, mercifully, a rare event.

And then there are the fictional portrayals of police officers, prisons, probation officers and even - I add as someone who used to be one - a forensic psychologist. The chances are that the public derive their view of these services from television shows. I've even heard a serious debate about whether *Porridge* or *Bad Girls* gives a more accurate view of prison issues. A similar intellectual struggle could take place in respect of police programmes.

The answer is that they are all entertainment and we should not be confusing fiction and reality. It's OK that *Hamlet* or even *Julius Caesar* are not historically accurate: but they are played on stage. Television and radio enhance the realism and immediacy and so increase the risk of confusion. Getting the rather duller and more complex reality across becomes that much more of an uphill struggle. I'll return to this again in a minute, with an example which may surprise you.

4. We can't point to any people who haven't been victims

One group of people who would be really interested in crime coming down is victims, the neglected *raison d'être* of the CJS. But, sadly, we can't point to any people who haven't been victims, or who would have been victims were it not for our success in reducing crime.

It's so unfair. Hospitals can point to the people their new procedures have cured. Schools can point to the number of additional pupils who have passed their A levels. Local authorities can point to the number of additional people they have rehoused, or whatever. But the criminal justice system can never identify the people who would otherwise have been victims. As a student,

I used to rattle a tin for Oxfam in Earls Court. Someone asked for whom I was collecting. "The starving millions" I replied in typical 1960's speak. "Name one" came the reply.

We are only a few miles from Slough. Last year, crime came down very significantly in Slough, with one of the biggest falls in the South East and the country. That's an excellent result – and it needs to fall much further - but it is a real success story for the CDRP, Slough Council and Thames Valley Police. Nevertheless, we can't name a single person who has been stopped from being a victim of crime, so we can't identify a happy and satisfied cadre of people to stand against cynicism, or who will campaign on behalf of the CJS or anyone else.

5. There are always very serious crimes and new crimes

Nothing, of course, has as much impact on public consciousness as a high-profile, very serious, crime. They are always disturbing and always shake our faith in the goodness of society. The pain, particularly for the parents of murdered children, is easy for us to feel and to share.

Sadly, we can too easily see these ghastly crimes as confirmation that we were right all along, that crime isn't getting any easier and that we should reinforce the steps we take to protect ourselves against crime.

In reality, such crimes are not increasing, we are clearing up more of them, more quickly. The way to protect our families better does not lie in forbidding our children to walk to school. It lies in measures like ensuring better protection for children in certain homes and the proper supervision and support of sex offenders in the community - which is something public opinion can make really difficult.

New crimes can really unsettle us. Recent examples might be internet crime – including internet paedophile groups on which this Centre has done so much work; the violence associated with mobile 'phone theft; and crack and all that comes with it. New crime will always be in the public consciousness as it can't take off unless there is a chink which can enable it to remain unchecked at least at the beginning; because we can't detect it; or don't understand it; or even - in the case of much internet crime - simply don't believe it, until it stares us in the face.

This seems to me to be another area where confidence – in ourselves and the technologies at our disposal – is especially important. The challenges of international crime and drugs gangs, or terrorist groups, are daunting. We will undoubtedly lose some of the battles, but there is no reason to think that we will lose the war. The development of crime-fighting technology – CCTV, DNA, ANPR to take some initials at random - seems to me to mean that we are solving more old crime than new crimes are appearing. We have to get that message across. The weakness of all criminal activity is that the people taking part are offenders, and offenders are not usually free from imperfections which, ultimately, will give them away.

6. Nobody trusts the Government, civil servants, even the media

More eloquent people than me, particularly Onora O'Neill in her seminal 2002 Reith Lectures, have spoken of the breakdown of trust which seems to have taken place over the last few years.

This is not meant as a frivolous comment, but I blame *Yes Minister*. Like everyone else, I enjoyed it hugely. It had close connections to Number 10 and it reflected brilliantly the comedian's view of the civil service. My main objection - and I say this as someone who worked on the *Dangerous Dogs Act 1991* - was always that it was nothing like funny enough.

But the civil service was then, as it is today, although the *Hutton Inquiry* may be changing this, largely a closed book to many people. They had nothing else to judge us by. Increasingly, as time went by, I became alarmed as new ministers seemed to have formed their ideas about the business of government and the civil service from *Yes Minister*. And then it dawned on me that the public were seeing us through the lens of a comedy show as well and there was even some self-parody by civil servants themselves.

This is the *Porridge* and *Bad Girls* debate again. The effect has been that it became noticeably more difficult to do the business as the representative of the Government, which is what I am, and the trust has progressively ebbed away.

It doesn't help that, whilst confidence in Government and the civil service may have waned, as Onora O'Neill points out, it has plummeted in the media, which has become the least trusted group of all. That will make them, perhaps particularly sections of the national media, strident and striving for public attention and recognition. That's bad news because their major focus will become spreading cynicism and suspicion. If the national press condemns, people will go along with them: but if they reassure, people will not believe them. We lose either way.

7. We simply don't believe that crime can come down

The last of my seven points may be no more than the sum of all that has gone before. But it has to be faced. As things stand at the moment, the public may simply be unable to believe that crime can ever come down.

We need to tackle this directly. Firstly, by being confident about our use of best practice. That is a speech on its own. But, for example, we are better at preventing repeat victimisation in crimes from vehicle theft and burglary to domestic violence.

We have demonstrable results of addressing hot spots or long standing problems. For example, South Bucks, just down the road, has been a burglary and car crime black spot for 25 years or more. Yet last year, for the first time for many years, crime there was reduced dramatically. I am sure that those

people who are here who contributed towards that are equally determined to keep those reductions coming year on year.

South Bucks and Slough are just two of this region's 12 crime priority areas where we devote our most intense crime reduction effort. Last year, in the 55 CDRPs which are not crime priority areas, recorded crime stayed pretty level, after adjusting for the new recording rules. In the 12 crime priority areas, where crime is the most difficult, it reduced by 7%. That must be one of the reasons why the South East has become the safest part of England and Wales.

Then there is the performance of CDRPs. I notice that the conference flyer betrays a whiff of cynicism about the success of CDRPs. Although I would not claim to be an impartial observer – after all, I was responsible for implementing the *Crime and Disorder Act 1998* – I am in absolutely no doubt that CDRPs are one of the Government's unsung success stories. In only a few years crime reduction has been mainstreamed across local authorities and a number of partner agencies. In only a few years, the police, local authorities and other partners are co-operating in ways which would have been unimaginable five years ago. And there is clearly no going back on this. The partners are too committed, too bound in to the process.

All of which brings me to my concluding comments, about what CDRPs can do about the issues I have raised and, indeed, the whole reason why I put this two-pennyworth into this 5½p conference. There are three main things which CDRPs can do to turn the tide.

1. Confidence

First, every CDRP can address its own lack of confidence, examine why it sometimes does not have the nerve to think that what it is doing might not be working, or might not be worthwhile. The end result will almost always be a boost in confidence, and identification of things which could be done better and a promotion of trust in the partnership. The confidence comes from working with colleague agencies and organisations, from knowing that they will help you if you are having difficulties, rather than blame you if things go wrong. The CDRP will immediately begin to punch above its weight.

2. Prolific offenders

Second, it follows from what I said about the CJS being effective in tackling the vast majority of offenders, that a major task for CDRPs locally is the handling and management of its own, home-grown, prolific offenders. Across England and Wales, the Home Office estimates that there are only about 1.25m active offenders and that a mere 100,000 offenders account for 50% of all crime.

Don't blame neighbouring districts, or tourists, or lads with baseball caps reversed slipping off the motorway in rusting red Astras. Look at your own prolific offenders. They are responsible for much of local crime. Most burglars

live within two miles of their victims. Communities, CDRPs, need to consume more of their own smoke.

That may involve really tough local decisions. Catching offenders can sometimes look like all high-tech, blues and twos, DNA and CCTV. But keeping prolific offenders out of trouble is about keeping them in drug treatment, or work, and not allowing them to continue their lifestyle of self-exclusion; making sure they are sensibly housed - sometimes giving them priority or at least giving them different attention. None of this is necessarily politically attractive until you are absolutely clear that you are doing this, not primarily for their benefit but to protect the community at large. The scope of the agenda here is huge - schools, health, summer activities, employment, housing, social services.

Anti-social behaviour (ASB)

But there will also be public local successes. When ASBOs first came on the scene, not many people believed they would work. The problematic behaviour they were designed to address had defeated us for too long. But now things are different. Good CDRPs have good ASB procedures – for instance, Southampton is using its mediation service for neighbour disputes and stopping a lot of ASB at source. These developments are mainly preventative rather than punitive and in three quarters of the cases we are seeing a marked change in ASB.

Third, and finally, every CDRP can then address its media handling and the public presentation of how it does its business in partnership. The CDRP can then show how it is stopping crime, detaining offenders, resettling them and preventing such crimes happening again. I suggest that this is best done by a full and frank local CDRP website, run with puritanical integrity.

The website is a key way to promote understanding both of our business and of the fact that we aren't bit actors in a comedy show. We are dealing with crime which affects quality of life in the real world. If you take only one message home today, it is that CDRPs should grip their media strategy, including a proper website. We are providing some help from GNN in GOSE for this.

The confidence and the ability of all partners to work together supportively will then come through convincingly. The public will respond and we will send the most important crime reduction signal of all - that the only way for an offender to stay out of trouble is to stop offending, and that we will do everything reasonable to help offenders down that path. That's powerful stuff.