Crime Prevention Policy and Government Research: A Comparison of the United States and United Kingdom*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Garland’s (2000) view that both the United States and United Kingdom have fundamentally similar approaches to the prevention of crime. Whilst conceding their superficial similarity, we argue that the U.K. policy was driven by research on situational crime prevention, whilst the U.S. federal research agenda has been more supportive of policy than formative, and has invested relatively little in situational studies. We describe the ways in which U.K. research influenced policy, and consider the structural and philosophical reasons why a similar approach would be more difficult in the United States. We note, however, that the pressure on both policy makers and practitioners to deliver outcomes may lead to increasing interest in bringing the U.S. federal research agenda closer to policy development. If this happens then the U.K. experience may become more relevant in the United States.

Introduction

In two important articles, Garland (1996, 2000) has described the recent emergence of new strategies of crime control in both the United Kingdom and the United States. His second paper is concerned with shifts in social structure and cultural sensitivities that helped bring about the policy changes. Garland (2000) argues persuasively that in both countries crime control now “exhibits two new and distinct lines of government action: an adaptive strategy stressing prevention and partnership and a sovereign state strategy stressing enhanced control and expressive

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punishment” (p. 348). According to his view, these strategies were formulated because high crime rates led to the “penal-welfare” policies of both societies falling into disrepute; they had failed to deliver adequate levels of security.

Garland’s (1996) first paper is focused on the role of governmental agencies and political actors in the policy shifts, but it does not analyze the role played by government-funded research. This is the subject of the present paper, written by two authors who were employed within the Home Office (the U.K. government department responsible for crime policy) for much of the period covered by Garland’s analysis. One of us (R.V.C.) left the Home Office more than 15 years ago and the other (G.L.) is presently on an extended leave of absence, based at the U.S. National Institute of Justice. We hope that our current situations, somewhat distant from the Home Office, allow us to be more objective than we might otherwise be.

We focus specifically on the first of the new policy directions, which Garland calls the “adaptive strategy,” but which we will characterize as “crime prevention.” We will argue that government research in the U.K. made a material contribution to the formulation and delivery of crime prevention policy, whereas in the U.S. its contribution was both more modest and supportive rather than formative. This has resulted in quite important differences of emphasis in crime prevention policy. In the U.K., this policy is conceived of being delivered through “multi-agency partnerships” and the technology of situational crime prevention, whereas in the U.S. it is conceived of being delivered by “community policing.”

We begin by describing the development of crime prevention policy in the U.K., focusing on the role of government research and the reasons for its success in influencing policy. We then discuss the role of government research in the U.S. from this comparative perspective and try to explain why it has had less policy impact than in the U.K. We conclude with some general observations, resulting from this comparison, about the relationship between research and policy.

**Crime Prevention Policy in the United Kingdom**

Crime prevention has been a defined function of the U.K. police service since its inception, but it was never seen as real policing. Although its profile was raised in the 1960s, with the creation of crime prevention officers (CPOs), it remained an unattractive option for the ambitious young officer. The posts tended to be filled by older officers when the contacts they could make were helpful in finding post-retirement work in the private security industry. The service offered was reactive — security surveys were carried out at the request of small businesses and the general public — and much of the training, which was carried out at the Home Office Crime Prevention Centre in Stafford, concentrated on target hardening. One or two (of the 43) police forces took what was for them a radical approach and operated