

REPORT BY EVAN MORRIS

As a member of the Society of Evidence Based Policing I received an invitation to the Institute for Global Policing annual lecture at University College London on 29 November 2018.

The lecture was given by the eminent criminologist Professor Susan McVie titled “Changing Patterns of Violent Crime: The impact on policy, policing and digital transformation”.

Professor McVie opened by stating that the UK has experienced a remarkable phenomenon. Since the mid 1980s, violent crime has halved-we are at an all time low.

Overview

The UK has seen a dramatic fall in crime since the mid 1980s. This includes violent crime, burglary and homicide. European figures show a similar reduction. Whilst media reports repeatedly suggest crime is increasing, the data is far less dramatic over a longer timescale. The media use data on far shorter timescales to generate headlines.

What the data is actually telling us.

Crime data suggests that there has been a fall in offenders under 24 and a rise in single offenders especially females.

There is also a significant rise in offenders known well by the victim and a rise in violence in the place of work.

Overall a reduction in violent crimes involving a weapon.

A reduction in crimes involving alcohol and domestic abuse.

A greater proportion of crime is taking place in the day.

Crime remains stubbornly prevalent in certain communities rather than across the board.

The Scottish experience tackling violent crime.

Professor McVie then went on to explain circumstances in Scotland which saw the formation of the Violence Reduction Unit (VRU). This has seen very significant reductions in violent crime. Professor McVie put this into context. Historically Glasgow and areas of Strathclyde were identified as the most violent community in Europe and as such started from a far higher threshold.

From the outset the strategy was to develop an “all systems multi agency approach”.

One main target was tackling street related violence and knife crime.

This included Operation Blade and operation Spotlight with increased use of stop and search. Importantly across all agencies, this was presented as politically appropriate intervention.

A public health approach was adopted using an epidemiological approach (Use of data to develop strategy and approach).

This also included the “No lives better lives:” and “Backing second chances” schools programme, and a schools inclusion programme. Professor McVie stated “ There is no more damaging thing you can do to a young person than exclude them from school, this was a key element of the preventative strategy. The programme led to a 57% reduction in exclusions.

Also the VRU launched campus cops which aimed to develop relationships and greater confidence between police and young people.

Developed community mentors, ex gang members relating experience and working with young people.

The VRU working with the criminal justice system brought about an abandonment in punitive youth justice measures.

The strategy also focused on community engagement with high risk communities. This highlighted that it is far better to localise problems and not make broad brush solutions. In Scotland as in all of the UK the media focus on short term statistics, this remains a major problem which in turn generates greater public anxiety.

Professor McVie stated a major weakness was that this approach had not received proper academic evaluation.

Whilst Scottish violent crime and homicide started from a very high point, the homicide ratio in Scotland is now lower than England per 100,000 population. Glasgow has historically seen the most violent communities in Europe. An all systems public health approach to tackling violent crime has seen major and sustained reductions in violence, where London boroughs have not.

Evan Morris