Point of View

Prevention is Better than Cure

Sir Robert Peel may have established the guiding principle of a preventative approach to policing back in 1829 when in setting up the Metropolitan Police, he said, "it should be understood at the outset that the object to be attained is the prevention of crime. To this great end, every effort of the police is to be directed."

In the two centuries since, the focus on this core objective from the 'founder of modern policing' still holds true, however the ability to achieve it has proved challenging. Around the world, reacting to crime after it has happened has often become the default mode of policing. It is easy to see why. There is an appealing clarity of mission for officers in focusing on tackling crime that has already been committed and for police managers in having an activity that can be more easily measured and managed than crime prevention.

Today, though, we are seeing a swing back to these principles. Countries are beginning to view prevention as “the primary purpose of policing”, placing focus on making committing crime in the first place as hard as possible. Several factors are now coming together to fuel this new approach.

A Global Focus

The emphasis on doing more with less, a mantra for police forces the world over, is no longer seen as a gimmick but as a policy focus that is here to stay. Also, countries like the US, with its focus on target hardening – pinpointing vulnerabilities and then strengthening them to make committing the related crime more difficult – are now spearheading the approach and other countries around the world are following suit. We are seeing numerous examples.

Across North America, we are seeing examples of a growing focus on crime suppression over recent years with the projected pay-off being a reduction in future levels of offending. Police have been employing a broad range of techniques designed to stop crime before it starts including street patrols; gaming and alcohol legislation aimed at preventing gangs ‘setting up shop’; hotspot policing targeting areas where crime is known to occur regularly and community workshops to spread the prevention message.

In South America, police have been tackling issues around border protection by using technology to better monitor federal highways and manage traffic. In Africa, forces are beginning to build crime prevention into their strategic approaches, with techniques used including more visible policing, better methods of crowd management and police dedicated to reducing road traffic accidents. In Asia, we have witnessed advanced analytic capabilities being integrated into CCTV systems to improve response times to public safety incidents.
Scoping the Benefits

In many parts of the world, this renewed focus on preventative policing directly reflects the ongoing emphasis on cost-effective policing as police in many countries continue to face budget cuts. In this context, preventative policing offers several key benefits.

The main projected benefit is in crime reduction – through target hardening (outlined above) and targeting hotspots – where additional resources can be deployed to deter crime.

The approach appears to be working too. Crime has been falling as the use of techniques like data analytics increases. Forces are increasingly using IT technologies to analyse the incidence of crime. In parts of Manhattan, this is reported to have reduced the robbery rate by over 95%. In 2012, there were 69 armed robberies of banks, building societies and post offices in England and Wales compared to 500 a year in the 1990s.

A further key benefit of preventative policing, albeit one that is difficult to measure is that it leads to enhanced quality of life. By cutting the incidence of crime, the approach inevitably also reduces the number of direct victims. At the same time, it also brings other less self-evident benefits. Anecdotal evidence suggests that reducing crime is likely to significantly improve the quality of life for people living in previously crime-hit communities. It also offers an opportunity for law enforcement to break the cycle of offending that can run in families where a propensity to criminality is passed down through the generations.

Additionally, there is a sense of the preventative approach building its own momentum. Forces across different regions and districts often feel a need to come together and engage in the process, if neighbouring forces have taken a preventative approach, as they can see the improvements that have been made as a result.

Crime prevention is not always prioritised in police training. In some forces, officers regard their primary purpose as catching criminals and reacting to crime after it has happened. Also, with budgets getting ever tighter in many countries around the world, forces are concerned about what may need to make way in order to fund a preventative approach.

Operational support is often lacking. Rectifying this often depends on how effectively technology is used within the police. The truth is that today technology is both a barrier and an enabler within many police forces. In the UK, as Tom Winsor identified in his 2013 speech to the Police Federation Conference, police effectively ‘feel handcuffed by IT’ rather than seeing it as a key enabler to modern policing.

Finding a Solution

Cultural barriers to preventative policing and issues around the way the approach is viewed and prioritised within the police will ultimately only be addressed by a shift in mindset throughout police forces. In some cases, this will entail changes in strategic focus at the highest level with mission statements modified and adapted accordingly.

A process of education is also required - and training can play a key role here - in ensuring that police officers ‘buy in’ to the preventative approach and understand its benefits. But in moving from the principles to effective implementation of the approach, cost-effective and accessible technology is the crucial ‘missing cog in the wheel’.

When used appropriately, technology provides the key to making the most of a preventative policing approach. It needs to become an enabler of the preventative model, allowing forces to use their budget and resources to proactively address these issues, rather than a barrier. Equally, it needs to provide vital operational support to forces as they push forward with a more preventative approach.

Police need to be given better access to data that will drive actionable intelligence and free up time to concentrate on investigating crime on the front line rather than having to deal with time-consuming administrative tasks behind the scenes.
Data Analytics is Key
Data, if analysed and utilised to its full extent, is potentially law enforcement’s greatest asset. Around the world, law enforcement is increasingly making use of data and applying advanced analytical technologies to it to drive crime prevention.

Analytics can be defined as the scientific process of transforming data into insight for making better decisions. In the context of law enforcement, it has the potential to enable police to achieve a truly preventative approach, getting new understandings from data, identifying and recognising suspicious behaviour and activities and enabling officers to get a head start on the criminals.

Getting it to the Frontline
Of course, no matter how effectively a force is able to manage, process and analyse data, it will count for little in terms of prevention if forces are not able to get intelligence to officers in order to drive informed decision making.

A future key area for police is to successfully push data exploitation to the frontline and operationalise analytics. It is about feeding police the information they need in real time when they need it and where they need it in the right format. A great example is enabling officers to use that information to ensure that they focus their patrols on those areas within the community where crimes are most likely to occur based on variables like time of year, or school holidays.

In spite of ongoing budget restrictions, officers today increasingly have access to the latest in-car screens, handheld devices and other gadgets which enable them to access data out in the field and use that data to help prevent crime. Police can be provided with information about repeat offenders for example, or if a given householder has access to a gun or knife. They can and should be prompted to take the most appropriate action to address such scenarios and stop incidents happening at source.

With information sharing added to the mix, details about prisoners on parole and conditions attached can be provided to front line officers, for example, helping to prevent crime. It should also be as easy as possible for all police staff to report crime and add it into the system and for information to be provided in real-time to front line staff to help them focus more effectively on prevention.

Why a Preventative Approach Matters
Prevention is becoming a higher priority for police forces the world over as they increasingly understand and focus on achieving key benefits of the approach from enhanced quality of life for the community to reductions in the cost of crime incurred.

In executing this strategy, technology that utilises data is key. The technology must be able to process and analyse data and deliver it in a timely fashion to police on the front line in order to drive crime prevention.
Forecasting: Know Where and How to Allocate Officers

Western Australia Police needed a solution that would support better policing outcomes by more accurately forecasting how and where to allocate resources. Using SAS Analytics, Western Australia Police has been able to forecast, within 1.5 percent, the likelihood of particular crimes occurring in specific areas. This enables the police force to effectively allocate the most appropriate policing resources where and when they’re needed.

“Intelligence-driven policing means looking at the analytical side of things. Not only where crime is happening, but how much of it is happening, who is likely to be involved in it, and how many police officers are going to be available to deal with it.”

Shaun Hodges, Western Australia Police

The Solution: Western Australia Police use business intelligence to build up a picture of crimes committed over the previous five years. The information is fed into GPS maps of the state, resulting in forecasting with relative accuracy where crimes are going to happen. They combine data from other government agencies to identify areas of social disadvantage, and use the information to assign patrols to hotspot areas in a bid to decrease response times when a crime occurs.

SAS facts

- SAS intelligence management solutions are used by more than 170 public security clients on six continents
- SAS has more than 38 years of experience supplying public security solutions
- SAS invests approximately 23 percent of its revenues in new research and development