Introduction

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As Lab (this issue) acknowledges, there is nothing new in the concept of auditing criminal justice agencies. What was, however, new about the processes set in train by the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act in England and Wales, was the establishment of local multi-agency crime and disorder groups, with the expectation that they would produce regular audits of crime and disorder and use these to inform strategy. The first audits and strategy documents were produced in 1998–1999; the second in 2001–2002. This anniversary provides an ideal opportunity to evaluate this cornerstone to government policy on community safety. The six articles included herein provide this timely overview.

In the first, Hughes provides a critical overview of the way in which community safety has been reshaped since the Act. A key point is the way in which the broader mandate of ‘community safety’ has been narrowed since 1998 to a more restrictive emphasis on ‘crime and disorder’ (Hughes 2000). More generally, Hughes critiques ‘the closely intertwined dominant audit culture and the “what works” paradigm of policy and practice’. Setting the creation and operation of Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) in the context of developments in the early 1990s, Hughes reviews the lessons to be learnt from the first round of audits and looks to the future.

The next two papers follow Tierney (2001) in providing an evaluation of the audits conducted in phase one. Bowers, Jennings and Hirschfield review Crime and Disorder Audits produced in the north of England, using a survey of the partnerships and an analysis of the content and design of the audit documents themselves. Deehan and Saville’s paper is slightly different, concentrating as it does on one specific issue, the relationship between alcohol and crime. Although the research evidence suggests a link between alcohol and various types of crime, there are no official statistics collected systematically that allow us to gain a true picture of the role of alcohol in crime at a national level. Local crime audits could, therefore, fill this void. However, while the authors note that the issue was raised in a majority of audits and strategy documents, it received considerably less emphasis than drug misuse, and not one partnership surveyed had a strategic priority that focused on alcohol as an issue in its own right. Following Hughes, one might also speculate that alcohol misuse was seen as primarily a crime and disorder issue, rather than one of community safety.

Evaluations of the first round of audits have primarily focused on identifying best practice and using the experience of the first audits to build on for phase two. As Garland notes in a review of Internet sources, government agencies, among others, have provided a wealth of information and advice to local partnerships. At the same time, early optimism that audits might prove a mechanism for promoting local accountability (Loveday 2001) is endangered where advice is translated into instruction. Garland’s overview raises the question of whether, while the amount of central support has improved markedly, there is a danger that local partnerships will address the issues ‘suggested’ centrally, rather than the issues raised within local communities.

It is too early to judge the outcome of the second phase of audits. However, Mawby provides a brief account of the 2001–2002 auditing process and findings from the Isles of Scilly, the smallest

CDRP in England and Wales. The audit there utilised police data, other agencies' records, and postal surveys conducted with local residents and the business community. While crime rates have risen on the islands, and crime and disorder are particular problems during the tourist season, crime rates are low by national standards, and fear of crime is also negligible. However, public awareness of the requirements of the 1998 Act and of the audit process was low, even in this close-knit community, raising doubts on the extent of true local accountability in more urban areas.

Nevertheless, Lab's 'Letter from the United States' provides a reminder that there is a danger in being over-critical of measures in one's own country that were not as radical as one had hoped. Lab points out that in the US there is no equivalent requirement and that the only audits that are carried out are agency-specific, and argues that auditing by local partnerships is a step in the right direction, even though it may not be the panacea for all societal ills.

The authors included here thus represent a broad range of views on the topic. At the same time, they combine to provide a comprehensive overview of the creation of CDRPs and the production of audits and strategy documents. The eventual publication and dissemination of the audit documents, facilitated by the Internet, will allow for a more detailed exploration of crime and disorder issues at local level. Whether it also enables a better understanding of the causes of crime, and results in the development of more appropriate and effective ways of dealing with it, is a question that needs to be addressed in the future.

Notes

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