

URBAN CRIME - CAN WE LEARN FROM THE DANES?

The Report on Urban Crime and Disorder* has not received the level of attention it should have, possibly because it is based on just one suburban area, Ronanstown in West Dublin. However it must be considered required reading for anyone concerned about crime and disorder in any local authority area.

One of the more interesting snippets in the Report is an account of Crime Prevention policy in Denmark. Over the past four years there has been a 33% decline in crime there involving young offenders. The driving force behind this achievement is the national Crime Prevention Council established in the early 1970s. It has 52 different bodies represented on it. Its executive committee includes three police chiefs, leading figures from the business world, and a leading criminologist. The Council receives annually £400,000 per annum from the state, and £100,000 from the business community. More significant support is provided through staff being seconded from the private and public sectors.

The cutting edge of the Crime Prevention Council is provided by local SSP committees. SSP stands for School, Social Workers, Police Co-Ordination. The SSPs initially concentrated on drawing up action plans for problem areas. Their main work now is to create projects for young people to divert them from anti-social activity. Where there is a problem in an area the police call in the local SSP to help them.

The police play a central role in crime

prevention programmes. They visit teenage classrooms. They organise projects to provide teenagers with some alternative excitement, including summer camps and even work experience stints for teenagers in police headquarters. They concentrate particularly on "problem families".

Not all is sweetness and light. The authorities target gang leaders, the "hard cases", and send them on long stay ship cruises where they have to work their passage. Less extreme are motor bike repair projects run by young offenders. There are closed institutions, but very few are sent there.

Two aspects of the Danish programme stand out. One is the scale and complexity of the crime prevention infrastructure, carefully built-up over twenty years. Although the cost is considerable, it is obviously only a fraction of the savings brought about by a 33% reduction in teenage crime.

The other interesting aspect of the programme is the heavy police involvement. Given that hostility towards the police provides a focal point for much urban disorder, the building of more normal relations between police and young people must be a priority area, and it is good to see this highlighted in our own Interdepartmental Group Report. In this context it is a great pity that in recent years, due to public spending constraints, there has actually been a cutback in community policing in some urban areas in Ireland. This is one cost-saving measure that could turn out to be very expensive indeed.

*Urban Crime and Disorder: Report of the Interdepartmental Group. Dublin. Stationery Office. November 1992. £6.50.