As noted in the previous chapter, crime prevention has always been a difficult concept. Much of its opaque nature derives from the difficulties presented by the idea of crime itself, and the range of theoretical and conceptual disputes that permeate its study. This chapter intends to offer a set of tools for working with the idea of crime prevention, in order to contextualise the discussions that follow. The objective is not only to offer some organising frameworks, but also to briefly introduce some of the central questions and debates that influence the crime prevention enterprise.

What is crime prevention?

For Pease, crime prevention “involves the disruption of mechanisms which cause crime events”. The main body of crime prevention literature attempts to define what mechanisms may cause crime events and consider how

Box 1: United Nations Guidelines for the Prevention of Crime, that describe crime prevention

Crime prevention encompasses a wide range of approaches, including those which:
(a) promote the well-being of people and encourage pro-social behaviour through social, economic, health and educational measures, with a particular emphasis on children and youth, and focus on the risk and protective factors associated with crime and victimisation (prevention through social development or social crime prevention);
(b) change the conditions in neighbourhoods that influence offending, victimisation and the insecurity that results from crime by building on the initiatives, expertise, and commitment of community members (locally-based crime prevention);
(c) prevent the occurrence of crimes by reducing opportunities, increasing risks of being apprehended and minimising benefits, including through environmental design, and by providing assistance and information to potential and actual victims;
(d) prevent recidivism by assisting in the social reintegration of offenders and other preventive mechanisms (reintegration programmes).

system in relation to crime prevention. This monograph deliberately seeks to take as broad a view of crime prevention as possible and therefore examines any or all actions taken by the government departments under review that may result in the reduction of crime. The criminal justice process will be included in this assessment.

The second framework was developed in the public health sector and provided the basis for earlier thinking about crime prevention. It organises crime prevention interventions in terms of the typology provided in Box 2.

The third framework takes a broader view of crime prevention and builds on the model above, recognising that interventions could be of a social or situational nature (Box 3).

Key issues when considering crime prevention

Why prevent crime?

While the answer to this question may seem self-evident, it is important to note that a range of concerns may motivate the need to prevent or reduce crime. Safeguarding the lives and bodily integrity of individuals, protecting property, improving quality of life, increasing access to livelihoods, enabling people to access services, and enabling the exercise of basic rights, are all examples of these concerns. Given that the outcomes of initiatives may differ from the original intentions, making these motivations for crime prevention more apparent often enables one to explore the political nature of crime prevention.

Disaggregating ‘crime’

As stated earlier, the difficulties related to defining crime complicate the discussion about crime prevention. Probably the only common characteristic shared by behaviours labelled as ‘criminal’ is their prohibition by law. Given that laws serve different purposes, and that they change over time and place, ‘crime’ is not a particularly useful concept to work with when it comes to developing interventions.

One approach is to dissect ‘crime’ into manageable pieces. One may focus on specific kinds of behaviour that are deemed to be problematic, e.g. particular kinds of violence, and then consider what needs to be done to
reduce their occurrence. Other ways to do this may be to focus on certain target groups known to be vulnerable to offending or victimisation, e.g., children. While this kind of disaggregation may produce new issues to resolve, it offers greater opportunities to understand the mechanisms that result in a criminal event, referred to earlier by Pease.

It should be noted at this stage that, internationally, little work is available relating to the prevention of some kinds of crimes. Problems such as corruption, fraud, and organised crime, for example, have received relatively little attention and this kind of disaggregation may also draw attention to this problem.

Aims vs. outcomes

Probably one of the most exasperating aspects of the crime prevention enterprise is acknowledged by Sherman in his statement: “crime prevention is defined not by its intentions but by its consequences.” This refers to the fact that many different activities or interventions may result in the prevention or reduction of crime. The analogy used by Sherman is instructive:

Flame is a result. Matches are only one tool for achieving that result. Other tools besides matches are well known to cause fuel to ignite into flame, from magnifying glasses to tinder boxes.

This raises interesting questions. First, if we accept that many different actions or combinations of actions may result in the prevention of crime, how can we analyse policy and say with any level of confidence that some actions will prevent crime above others? Second, how do we avoid the problem at the other end of the spectrum, where just about anything may be considered to prevent crime, and what stops us from defining just about everything as crime prevention? These problems apply directly to the analysis of government service delivery. The answers lie in developing a broader vigilance of all kinds of social interventions, and focusing on intentions and methods as well as results.

It should be noted that defining crime prevention outcomes is also a difficult and value-laden process. Aiming for zero property crimes is obviously unrealistic, but how does one decide what are ‘acceptable’ levels of property crime in a neighbourhood? And when it comes to young offenders, would a programme that reduces the number of burglaries committed a month from ten to two be considered appropriate and successful?

Crime prevention and criminological theory

It should also be noted that one’s perceptions of crime are shaped by the particular theoretical paradigms to which one subscribes. Criminological theory offers views on a range of issues, including the causes of crime, how the state is understood, the role of civil society, and most importantly, how criminal behaviour may be resolved.

This is important because different theoretical views may offer radically different responses to the very same set of behaviours. Theft may be understood as the result of a rational choice made by the offender to benefit him/herself, while it may also be understood as a natural behavioural response in a society with high levels of income inequality. Depending on which theory is favoured, crime prevention interventions may be very different.

Theory also emerges as an important concern when designing crime prevention programmes. It has been noted that a weakness in South Africa has been the inability of practitioners to articulate the theoretical premises upon which their interventions are based. Practitioners are unable to say what assumptions they have made about the crime in question, and what characteristics of their particular intervention will lead to crime being prevented or reduced.

Crime causation and crime prevention

As illustrated in the discussion above, crime prevention interventions are often defined and dictated by one’s theory of what causes crime. Changing the often deep-seated causes of crime may, however, not be possible for many practitioners. Tackling the causes of crime is therefore, just one way to approach the task of prevention. Another possibility is to intervene in the situation or environment where a crime could occur, and attempt to make it more difficult for the crime to be committed. This is the primary difference between the social and situational interventions described in Crawford’s model above.

Context and crime prevention

Context and crime prevention relate in profound ways. Firstly, context dictates the range of interventions that are available, and this is often a contested area. In South Africa, for example, deterrents to criminal behaviour
such as the death penalty and corporal punishment are excluded under the Constitution. Other strategies are not directly prohibited but may raise some debate if considered as a crime prevention measure e.g. chemical castration of sex offenders.

Secondly, context is a critical factor in dictating the outcomes of crime prevention interventions. Much has been written about strategies that may work, but outcomes are context-bound and the result of various factors at play in a particular location. These factors could include everything from the individual personalities involved in implementing an intervention, to the characteristics of the beneficiaries, to the geography of the terrain involved. This implies not only that programmes may be difficult to replicate, but also that programme design and evaluation have to be fairly sophisticated in order to understand the effects and impact of interventions.

Thirdly, in relation to context, are the complexities that result from the fact that a criminal economy may exist wherever crime prevention interventions are implemented. The complex system of risk and reward that relates to the criminal economy is often the least understood aspect of community-based interventions to prevent crime, yet often represents the strongest set of factors that maintains crime levels.

**‘Actual’ vs. perceived levels of crime**

A great deal of criminological research indicates that while crime is a problem, public perceptions about crime is a phenomenon that must be considered independently from actual levels of crime. The fear of crime is one aspect of this complex phenomenon. It has been noted that fear of crime is often far in excess of actual crime levels and is experienced by many people who may never become victims. Given that these perceptions about crime (and about government responses to crime) drive the behaviour of citizens, it is argued that crime prevention efforts should prioritise these perceptions as much as they do the actual levels of crime.

**Crime prevention and human rights**

Situations in which the reduction of crime are urgent or a high priority for government are likely to threaten the human rights of those who have committed crimes or who are accused of committing crimes. This is due to a number of factors such as the need to respond quickly to public pressure, the need to ensure punishments that are believed to sufficiently deter (harsh prison sentences, the death penalty), and the need to ‘avenge’ the crime (also through harsh penalties).

Research indicates that high crime environments are likely to result in the erosion of human rights as efforts are made to reduce criminality. This is particularly the case when tough law enforcement approaches – which most readily respond to public and media sentiment to ‘get tough’ on crime – are used to the detriment of other prevention approaches.

**Interventionism vs. ‘doing nothing’**

Like all work that takes place in the social sphere, crime prevention interventions may have a wide range of effects. They may reduce crime, they may create new problems, they may exacerbate current problems, they may displace problems, or they may have no effect at all. The tendency to become interventionist in relation to crime must be tempered by the recognition that all interventions have unintended consequences, some of which may be disastrous. This demands that all problem solving in relation to crime should consider all the options first, including the option of doing nothing, before leaping in to intervene. This requires that we draw on our ability to predict and project the range of outcomes of interventions; and that we actively apply this learning to future activities. This kind of knowledge comes only from careful monitoring and evaluation of all crime prevention interventions.

**Crime prevention vs. crime reduction**

Speaking about the ‘prevention’ of crime presents a significant problem in relation to measurement. In terms of evaluating impact, it requires that researchers count events that have not happened—an impossible task. The term ‘crime reduction’ comes to the rescue in this regard, as it enables one to count crime events before and after an intervention and to allocate any positive effects. For the purposes of this monograph, no serious difference will be attributed to these terms and they will be used interchangeably.

**Using information in crime prevention**

The discussion thus far has pointed to the contested and complex nature of crime prevention, raising the need for great care when working with...
the idea. As a result, it is critical that information relating to crime prevention is generated and used in a systematic and sustained way. This has, however, emerged as a significant weakness in crime prevention interventions in South Africa thus far.\textsuperscript{11} While this may be a general malaise, its importance cannot be overemphasised if we are to see returns on crime prevention investments.

**Risk and resilience**

One of the dominant international tools for working with crime prevention interventions is the idea of risk and resilience. This approach suggests that there are a number of individual, social, environmental, economic and political factors that, alone or in combination, result in individuals or groups being at higher risk of becoming offenders or victims. For example, risk factors for youth crime include family disruption, violence, poor parenting, poverty, inadequate housing and health conditions, and poor schooling.\textsuperscript{12}

This approach holds that there may also be factors that promote resilience among individuals in high-risk situations. These are referred to as ‘protective factors’. Using this approach, crime prevention may be thought of as the successful reduction of risk factors, and the strengthening of protective factors.

The chapter argues that, as social policy, crime prevention is a precarious endeavour, requiring that we hold many ideas in tension, and that we maintain open and inquiring minds. The intention is not to scare off potential crime prevention entrepreneurs, as creative action in this field is desperately needed.

**Notes**


9 Ibid.

