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Punishment & Society 2013 15: 534
DOI: 10.1177/1462474513504798

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://pun.sagepub.com/content/15/5/534
Reclaiming crime prevention in an age of punishment: An American history

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Abstract
Crime prevention has long figured prominently in the scholarly and applied traditions of criminology. Using a socio-historical approach, this article examines the developments of and influences on the concept of crime prevention in the USA over the last century. We argue that crime prevention is a unique social and environmental strategy for reducing crime and is distinct from crime control or punishment. Prevention’s main characteristics include a focus on intervening in the first instance – before a crime has been committed – and operating outside of the formal justice system. The historical record of the scholarship and practice of crime prevention in the USA embraces this view. A more current perspective sees crime prevention as the full range of techniques, from prenatal home visits to prison sentences, defined more by its outcome – the prevention of a future criminal event – than its character or approach. A return to the original meaning of prevention is considered.

Keywords
crime policy, crime prevention, criminological theory, history of criminology, punishment

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In one of the first scholarly attempts to differentiate crime prevention from crime control or punishment, Peter Lejins (1967: 2) espoused the following: ‘If societal action is motivated by an offense that has already taken place, we are dealing with control; if the offense is only anticipated, we are dealing with prevention.’ What Lejins was after was the notion of a ‘pure’ prevention, a view that had long existed in the scholarship and practice of US criminology, but was becoming confused with the use of the term ‘delinquency prevention’ within the juvenile justice system. Joseph Weis and David Hawkins (1981: 2) put it more bluntly: ‘Historically, what has been passed off as delinquency prevention within the juvenile justice system is basically delinquency “control,” simply because it has been implemented after the illegal behavior and even after a juvenile justice system reaction has occurred.’

Weis and Hawkins (1981) went on to differentiate between corrective prevention and preclusive prevention. The former was largely made up of system-level efforts designed to treat offenders so as to prevent them from committing further criminal acts. Preclusive prevention was considered the ‘purest type of prevention’, with the aim to “preclude” the initial occurrence of delinquency, primarily at the organizational, institutional, social structure, and cultural levels of intervention’ (1981: 3). Like Lejins, they too were trying to reclaim the original meaning of prevention by drawing a distinction between prevention – efforts designed to prevent crime from occurring in the first place – and control, or efforts aimed at preventing the recurrence of offending.

A more current perspective sees crime prevention as the full range of techniques, from prenatal home visits to prison sentences, defined more by its outcome – the prevention of a future criminal act – than its character or approach (e.g. Sherman et al., 1997, 2006). Here, programs and policies may include a police arrest as part of an operation to deal with gang problems, a court sanction to a correctional facility, or, in the extreme case, a death penalty sentence. These measures are more correctly referred to as crime control or punishment.

It is our thesis that crime prevention is best understood and utilized as a unique social and environmental strategy for reducing crime, one that is distinct from crime control or punishment. It is not the outcome (the prevention of crime), but the approach taken that characterizes crime prevention. In this article, crime prevention refers to efforts to prevent crime or criminal offending in the first instance – before the act has been committed. Crime prevention and crime control share a common goal of trying to prevent the occurrence of a future criminal act, but what further distinguishes them is that prevention originates outside of the formal justice system. Crime prevention necessarily takes place outside of the justice system because one of its goals is to prevent young people from coming in contact with the formal justice system. In this respect, prevention is considered the fourth pillar of crime reduction, alongside the institutions of police, courts, and corrections (Waller, 2006).

This distinction draws attention to crime prevention as an alternative approach to the more traditional responses to crime. Broadly, three main types of crime
prevention can be delineated. Developmental prevention refers to interventions designed to prevent the development of criminal potential in individuals, especially those targeting risk and protective factors discovered in studies of human development (Tremblay and Craig, 1995). Community prevention refers to interventions designed to change the social conditions and institutions (e.g. families, peers, social norms, clubs, organizations) that influence offending in residential communities (Hope, 1995). Situational prevention refers to interventions designed to prevent the occurrence of crimes by reducing opportunities for offending and increasing its risk and difficulty (Clarke, 2009).

To explore our thesis we have written about the history of crime prevention in the USA, a history that is largely unknown. We believe this to be important because crime prevention has long figured prominently in the scholarly and applied traditions of criminology. This contributes to the history of criminology as a discipline of which there is a robust body of scholarship (see, for example, Beirne, 1993; Laub, 1983; Laub and Sampson, 1991; Rafter, 2010; Rock, 2004; Schlossman, 2012).

Many of these important writings draw upon our discipline’s early and famous pioneers, as well as sometimes the ‘half-forgotten and misunderstood’ (Rafter, 2004: 735) and the completely ‘forgotten’ (Sherman, 2005) figures, in an effort to situate their scholarly or applied influences during a particular period of time in the advancement of criminological knowledge or its lineage to the modern era. This makes for undoubtedly rich analysis and engaging reading. Less common are histories of criminological concepts or sub-areas of the discipline that are not framed around the biographical accounts of storied figures, men and women alike. This makes for no less penetrating analysis, but it does have the effect of introducing a wider cast of characters whose biographical details are sometimes left out of the narrative. Broadly speaking, this is our approach here.

In the tradition of the social-historical approach, this article examines the developments of and influences on the concept of crime prevention in the USA over a period spanning almost a full century. It is through this approach that we are able to situate our subject in the political landscape of the day and among the institutional influences that have come to shape criminological knowledge more generally (Savelsberg and Flood, 2004).

We begin by documenting the early conceptions of crime prevention in the USA, from the early 1930s to the 1960s. This is followed with analysis of the presidential crime commissions of the 1960s, the associated loss of faith in the criminal justice response to crime, the emergence of situational crime prevention, and the development of a new generation of early childhood prevention studies. Next, we examine a truly memorable development in the annals of US crime and justice: the 1994 federal crime bill. One of our interests here is in the debate, oftentimes vitriolic, that occurred between proponents of prevention and punishment, and how prevention came to be understood in the public discourse on crime. The modern movements of prevention science and evidence-based policy complete our coverage of the history of crime prevention in the USA.
Early conceptions of crime prevention

Historically, responses to crime in the United States have been influenced by theories and strategies developed in Europe, with a particularly strong influence from Britain. The history of crime prevention as a unique social concept in the USA can be traced back to the early 1930s, with Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay’s (1942) Chicago Area Project (CAP). The idea that crime prevention could take place outside of the formal justice system may have already been considered due to earlier influences, but the CAP was the first documented initiative in the United States that measured crime prevention. The CAP was designed to produce social change in communities that suffered from high delinquency rates and gang activity. As part of the project, local civic leaders coordinated social service centers that promoted community solidarity and counteracted social disorganization. More than 20 different programs were developed for youths, featuring discussion groups, counseling services, hobby groups, school-related activities, and recreation. There is still some question of whether these programs had a positive influence on the delinquency rate. Some evaluations indicated desirable results, but others showed that the CAP efforts did little to reduce juvenile delinquency (see Schlossman and Sedlak, 1983).

Another well-known program came to define the next period in the history of the concept of crime prevention. The program was the Cambridge-Somerville Youth Study, which was implemented in 1937 in these Boston-area towns (Powers and Witmer, 1951). Six hundred and fifty boys (325 matched pairs), who were on average 10 years old, were randomly allocated to an experimental group or a control group. The focus of this program was more on improving individuals than their surroundings. The experimental group boys received regular friendly attention from counselors and whatever medical and educational services were needed. The counselors talked to the boys, took them on trips and to recreational activities, tutored them in reading and arithmetic, encouraged them to participate in the YMCA and summer camps, played games with them at the project’s center, encouraged them to attend church, and visited their families to give advice and general support (McCord and McCord, 1959). The program lasted for five years. It was to have continued for another five years, but when the USA became involved in the Second World War, many of the adult counselors were drafted (Lundman, 2001).

The program seemed to have undesirable effects. Joan McCord’s (1978) long-term follow-up of the program, when the participants were about 45 years old, found that slightly more from the experimental group were convicted of serious crimes as adults (19 percent compared with 17 percent), and significantly more experimental group offenders than control offenders committed two or more crimes. More from the experimental group died early, had stress-related diseases, or showed symptoms of alcoholism, and fewer of them were married. At the time, McCord (1978) speculated that the program might have caused high expectations and dependency, so that there were negative effects when it was withdrawn. A more recent explanation for these iatrogenic results was that the program was carried out
in group settings. The group format was thought to have resulted in minor delinquents being influenced by more involved or serious delinquents (Dishion et al., 1999; McCord, 2003).

The 1950s and 1960s ushered in a heightened interest in the prevention of juvenile delinquency. The first federal funding for research on delinquency prevention was provided by the Eisenhower administration (Sherman, 2005). Much of this interest was in programs based on social structure theories. This approach seemed quite compatible with the rehabilitative policies of the Kennedy (New Frontier) and Johnson (Great Society and War on Poverty) administrations. Delinquency prevention programs received a great deal of federal funding. The most ambitious of these was the New York City-based Mobilization for Youth (MOBY). Funded by more than $50 million, MOBY attempted an integrated approach to community development (Short, 1974). Based on Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin’s (1960) concept of providing opportunities for legitimate success, MOBY created employment opportunities in the community, coordinated social services, and sponsored social action groups such as tenants’ committees, legal action services, and voter registration. Unfortunately, the program was never evaluated to assess its impact on delinquency.

Improving the socialization of disadvantaged children to reduce their potential for future delinquency was also an important focus of other federally funded programs during the 1960s. The largest and best known of these programs was Head Start, a national preschool program that continues to this day.

**Presidential commissions of the 1960s**

Crime and crime prevention became notable political issues in 1964, when both Democrats and Republicans began to voice concern about ‘law and order’ (Walker, 1978). As a response, in 1965, President Lyndon Johnson established the first presidential commission to confront crime in the USA. The commission’s report, *The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society*, clearly made the case for a shift from focusing on punishment to prevention, arguing that prevention does not necessarily need to take place within the confines of the criminal justice system:

> Many Americans think controlling crime is solely the task of the police, the courts, and corrections agencies. In fact, as the Commission’s report makes clear, crime cannot be controlled without the interest and participation of schools, businesses, social agencies, private groups and individual citizens. (President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice, 1967: 38)

Although there was some academic support for the report’s conclusions about restructuring our collective conception of crime prevention and control, it was ill-received by many (Morris, 1968). Interestingly, for the next decade the report served as a basic reference work on the US criminal justice system and was widely used as a college textbook (Walker, 1978). However, the advice within
was ignored by policymakers to an extent that led Norval Morris (1968: 282) to conclude that ‘the political authorities in America do not wish to reduce crime in this country’. Against the backdrop of social unrest and violence in the streets, President Johnson, in 1968, formed another commission, the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (1969: xiii), to ‘determine the causes of violence in the United States and to recommend methods of prevention’. The Commission’s final report carried over some of the sentiments of the Johnsonian Great Society, in that it urged the new Nixon administration to increase federal funds allocated to general welfare in the USA, pinpointing underlying social challenges that were believed to be at the root of crime. Only a few years later, the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals (1973) sought to reaffirm the role of community in preventing crime. Operating outside of the purview of the justice system, crime prevention was viewed as an alternative means to reducing crime.

**A loss of faith**

The modern day history of crime prevention in the USA is closely linked with a loss of faith in the criminal justice system that occurred in the wake of the dramatic increase in crime rates in the 1960s. This loss of faith was due to a confluence of factors, including declining public support for the criminal justice system, increasing levels of fear of crime, and criminological research that demonstrated that many of the traditional modes of crime control were ineffective and inefficient in reducing crime and improving the safety of communities (Curtis, 1987). For example, research studies on motorized preventive patrol, rapid response, and criminal investigations – the staples of law enforcement – showed that they had little to no effect on crime (Visher and Weisburd, 1998). It was becoming readily apparent among researchers and public officials alike that a criminal justice response on its own was insufficient for the task of reducing crime. This was not limited to law enforcement, but also included the courts and prisons (Tonry and Farrington, 1995). Interestingly, this loss of faith in the justice system was not unique to the USA. Similar experiences were taking place in Canada, the United Kingdom, and other Western European countries, and for some of the same reasons (Bennett, 1998; Waller, 1990). Writing in the mid-1980s, the observations of Paul Lavrakas (1985: 110, emphases in original) capture this need to move beyond a sole reliance on the criminal justice system:

> Until we change the emphasis of our public policies away from considering the police, courts, and prisons to be the primary mechanisms for reducing crime, I believe that we will continue to experience the tragic levels of victimization with which our citizens now live. These criminal justice agencies are our means of reacting to crime – they should not be expected to prevent it by themselves.
Further contributing to the loss of faith in the criminal justice response to crime was a growing realization that the USA’s steadily rising prison population was doing little to reduce the nation’s crime rate. A number of expert panels, including the President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice (1967), the National Academy of Sciences Panel on Research on Deterrent and Incapacitative Effects (Blumstein et al., 1978), and (later on) the National Academy of Sciences Panel on the Understanding and Control of Violent Behavior (Reiss and Roth, 1993), agreed that prisons were not having any appreciable effect on crime rates or community safety. While these scholarly findings and public sentiments of the day would do little to curtail the prison expansion that was on the horizon, in a small way they had the effect of illuminating the need to move beyond a sole reliance on the crime control model.

Closely related was Robert Martinson’s (1974) claim that nothing works in prison rehabilitation. That this assertion would somehow be associated with a renewed interest in crime prevention may seem a bit far fetched. Yet, it was acknowledged that more needed to be done to keep people from engaging in criminal behavior and ending up in prison (Visher and Weisburd, 1998).

The realization that the era’s crime control efforts were ineffective, coupled with recommendations of the presidential crime commissions, ushered in an era of innovation of alternative approaches to addressing crime. A focus on neighborhood, family, and employment was at the heart of this new approach to addressing crime, with a special emphasis on the most impoverished inner-city communities. Non-profit organizations were the main vehicle used to deliver programs in these substantive areas. A number of environmental or opportunity-reducing measures were also implemented to ensure the immediate safety of residents. Some of these programs included neighborhood patrols and block watches (Curtis, 1987: 11). By some accounts, this urban crime prevention and reconstruction movement produced a number of models of success and many more promising programs (see Curtis, 1985, 1987).

This mode of crime prevention also came to be known as community-based crime prevention, an amalgam of social and situational measures (see Rosenbaum, 1986, 1988). This approach was popularized with a number of large-scale, multi-site programs referred to today as comprehensive community initiatives (Hope, 1995). The roots of this comprehensive approach – on the social side at least – go as far back as Shaw and McKay’s Chicago Area Project in the early 1930s. Although a few large-scale initiatives came to represent community crime prevention during this time (e.g. Neighborhood Watch, Operation Identification), thousands of prevention programs were implemented, ranging in size from small groups of concerned neighbors to city-wide campaigns. Notably, a great many of these programs received federal funding, primarily through the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (Hope, 1995). This increase in funding of crime prevention programs, many of which operated outside of the formal justice system, was seen as a milestone development in US crime prevention (Gest, 2001), the likes of which we have not seen since.
Situational crime prevention

Environmental or opportunity-reducing measures were also emerging during this period of time. Particularly influential were the works of Jane Jacobs (1961), who drew attention to the role of good visibility combined with natural surveillance as deterrents to crime, Oscar Newman (1972) on defensible space, and C. Ray Jeffrey (1971) on crime prevention through environmental design. The latter two physical redesign concepts would become instrumental to the intellectual development of situational crime prevention, which can be traced back to the work of Ronald Clarke and others at the British Home Office in the 1970s (Clarke, 1992).

Also important to the intellectual as well as practical development of situational crime prevention, although occurring somewhat later, was problem-oriented policing (Clarke, 1992). Developed by Herman Goldstein (1979, 1990), problem-oriented policing represented a new mode of policing that relied on a problem-solving process that was directed at the problems that lie behind crime incidents rather than the incidents themselves. For Goldstein (1979: 236) the process required the following elements:

- identifying these problems in more precise terms, researching each problem, documenting the nature of the current police response, assessing its adequacy and the adequacy of existing authority and resources, engaging in a broad exploration of alternatives to present responses, weighing the merits of these alternatives, and choosing from among them.

Later iterations popularized the problem-solving model as a four-step approach known as SARA – for scanning, analysis, response, and assessment (Moore, 1992).

Situational crime prevention stands apart from the other crime prevention strategies by its special focus on the setting or place in which criminal acts take place as well as its crime-specific focus. No less important is situational prevention’s concern with products (e.g. installation of immobilizers on new cars in some parts of Europe, action taken to eliminate cell phone cloning in the USA) and large-scale systems such as improvements in the banking system to reduce money laundering (Clarke, 2009). It has been defined as a ‘preventive approach that relies, not upon improving society or its institutions, but simply upon reducing opportunities for crime’ (Clarke, 1992: 3). Reducing opportunities for crime is achieved essentially through some modification or manipulation of the physical environment in order to directly affect offenders’ perceptions of increased risks and effort and decreased rewards, provocations, and excuses (Cornish and Clarke, 2003). These different approaches serve as the basis of the highly detailed taxonomy of situational prevention, which can further be divided into 25 separate techniques each with any number of examples of programs (Cornish and Clarke, 2003).

The theoretical origins of situational crime prevention are wide-ranging (see Clarke, 2009; Newman et al., 1997), but it is largely informed by opportunity theory. This theory holds that the offender is ‘heavily influenced by environmental inducements and opportunities and as being highly adaptable to changes in the
situation’ (Clarke, 1995a: 57). Opportunity theory is made up of several more specific theories, including the rational choice perspective, routine activity theory, and crime pattern theory.

Interestingly, situational prevention did not immediately take hold in the USA. Some scholars argue that situational crime prevention did not fit well with the sociological traditions of US criminology (Laycock and Clarke, 2001). Another related argument is that US criminologists were less willing to embrace a paradigm shift from focusing on criminal actors to criminogenic places (Clarke, 1995b). There have also been concerns raised about social harms associated with situational prevention (Garland, 1996; von Hirsch et al., 2000). Recent developments on research and policy fronts suggest that progress has been made in attending to some of these concerns (see Clarke, 2009; Welsh and Farrington, 2009). Theoretical and empirical advancements in the study of crime at place have served as key building blocks to these developments. Importantly, evidence-based policing strategies like ‘hot spots’ policing and problem-oriented policing more generally have incorporated situational measures with much success (Braga and Weisburd, 2010). The Internet-based Center for Problem-Oriented Policing (www.popcenter.org) plays a major role in furnishing the law enforcement community and crime prevention practitioners in general with information and guidance on developing and implementing effective situational crime prevention practices.

**Early childhood studies**

Around the same time that crime prevention was experiencing a surge in political and policy interest in the USA, owing largely to the presidential commissions and the loss of faith in criminal justice, a somewhat serendipitous development was taking place in the broadly defined field of early childhood development. This development was a decision by early childhood researchers to begin to measure crime outcomes as part of long-term follow-ups of intervention studies. These studies proved all the more important when they started to show some rather impressive effects on delinquency and criminal offending. While the prevention of crime was considered a spin-off benefit of these early studies, they quickly became associated with crime prevention (Tremblay and Craig, 1995). Key studies of the day included the Yale Child Welfare Research program (Seitz et al., 1985) and the Syracuse University Family Development Research project (Lally et al., 1988).

The most famous of them all is the Perry Preschool project carried out in Ypsilanti, Michigan, by Lawrence Schweinhart and David Weikart (1980). The project has become synonymous with early crime prevention (Farrington and Welsh, 2007). Perry was essentially a Head Start program for disadvantaged African American children. A sample of 123 children was allocated (approximately at random) to experimental and control groups. The experimental children attended a daily preschool program delivered by professional teachers, backed up by weekly home visits, usually lasting two years (covering ages three to four).
The educational approach focused on supporting the development of the children’s cognitive and social skills through individualized teaching and learning.

In 1980, the High/Scope education company published the findings of its age 15 follow-up of the Perry Preschool project (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1980). It showed that the experimental group members, compared to the controls, had significantly better school achievement and classroom behavior and lower rates of delinquency. Further follow-ups at ages 19 and 27 showed that the program had lasting benefits. By age 40, the most recent follow-up, which included 91 percent of the original sample (112 out of 123), program group members, compared to their control counterparts, had significantly fewer lifetime arrests for violent, property, and drug crimes, and were significantly less likely to be arrested five or more times (Schweinhart et al., 2005). Improvements were also recorded in many other important life-course outcomes.

Despite these impressive results, Perry was just one study based on a rather modest sample size and conducted under laboratory-like conditions. That there were only a handful of early childhood studies that measured offending outcomes has been lamented by many (see Greenwood, 2006; Tremblay and Craig, 1995). But the effects on crime showed by Perry along with the other studies further solidified the view of crime prevention of the day. In many respects, these studies came to signify the notion of a pure prevention advocated by Lejins (1967). There were of course many more missed opportunities. Farrington (1996) reminds us of the 10 Head Start projects that were followed up by the Consortium for Longitudinal Studies (1983); not one of them measured offending.

In subsequent years, a number of other important early childhood studies were initiated and have shown impressive crime prevention benefits, including the Seattle Social Development Project (Hawkins et al., 2008) and the Nurse–Family Partnership program (Eckenrode et al., 2010). While each of these studies is relevant to their own discipline (i.e. social work and public health), they, like their predecessors, have become an important part of the history of crime prevention in the USA. Tellingly, the crime prevention opportunities of these studies have also become embedded in these other disciplines.

**Midnight basketball and the 1994 crime bill**

The 1990s marked the time when prevention and punishment were arguably most at odds in US history. It should come as no surprise that this was associated with the height of the ‘tough on crime’ movement. Public opinion was interpreted as calling for harsher and more emotionally driven crime policies, which certainly did not include preventive measures, and politicians responded. As Michael Tonry (2004: 3) notes, “‘soft on crime’ was a label few politicians dared risk during the 1970s through the 1990s, and many supported policies they believed unwise or unjust rather than risk losing an election’. The purposeful polarization of punishment and prevention laid the groundwork for a massive and expensive crime bill that was being deliberated.
The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 is by far the most voluminous and expansive crime bill in US history. It greatly expanded the federal death penalty, provided funding for 100,000 new police officers, added $9.7 billion for new prisons, and provided $2.6 billion in additional funding for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Drug Enforcement Agency, and various Justice Department agencies. In addition, the crime bill dedicated $6.1 billion for prevention programs. This bill, passed by Congress and signed into law by President Bill Clinton, brought crime prevention into the national spotlight, but it was not well received by all.

From the bill’s inception, crime prevention, and especially programs for at-risk youth, was heavily criticized. One error may have been that neither President Clinton nor any other crime prevention advocate ever explained how these measures could work in tandem with more punitive measures. In the end, although well intentioned, these measures, and in particular midnight basketball, became a scapegoat for critics who wanted to oppose crime prevention measures. These programs, they argued, were soft on crime. Prevention, then, was characterized as a waste of taxpayer dollars. This reception had a substantial effect on crime prevention and the way it was understood following the 1994 act. That is, although it received a good amount of money under the bill, crime prevention was sidelined in the public discourse and the public understanding of crime (Mendel, 1995). Critics ‘indicted delinquency prevention as a wasteful, even ridiculous, response to youthful violence’ (Mendel, 1995: 13), and these criticisms seemed to resonate with voters. No better was this expressed than in a statement by the Republican Texas Representative Lamar Smith:

Over $9 billion is included to finance such stringent anticrime measures as arts and crafts, self-esteem enhancement, and midnight basketball. All this on the theory that the person who stole your car, robbed your house, and assaulted your family was no more than a disgruntled artist or a would-be NBA star. (as cited in Mendel, 1995: 13)

Proponents and politicians lauded those bill components that were ‘tough on crime’, but experts understood that the punitive nature emphasized at the expense of more moderate approaches would be detrimental to crime control and to the USA’s collective understanding of crime in general. In a critique of the act, Elliot Currie (1994: 118) wrote that, ‘the worst feature of the bill...is the stunning imbalance between punishment and prevention’. He describes the act’s preeminent focus on strengthening our prison system, and makes a case for this approach’s cost in terms of prevention programs.

With a large amount allocated to increase the size and complexity of the US prison system, Currie (1994: 119) points out that, ‘in contrast to the hastily conceived giveaways to the correctional establishment, the bill’s provisions for anything resembling crime prevention are slim to the vanishing point’. He explains that although there are a few promising crime prevention ideas mentioned in the bill, they are largely buried under other law-enforcement measures. The brief proposal
for an ‘Ounce of Prevention’ fund, which would support different youth-related activities, was buried in the community-policing section and slated to receive just $75 million out of the $9 billion designated for new police officers. Currie (1994: 121) concludes, ‘Prisons, our most spectacularly failed social experiment, get a free lunch; prevention gets the shaft, forced again to fight for every penny year after year, even though we know it can work.’

From a theoretical and conceptual perspective, the lasting legacy of the 1994 crime bill is that it further solidified the contrast between prevention and punishment. Whether it is in the language in the bill itself or Currie’s scathing critique, there is no mistaking that crime prevention is distinct from crime control or punishment. Though disregarded and defunded at the time for being ‘soft on crime’, prevention was still articulated as a unique strategy for reducing crime.

**Prevention science and evidence-based policy**

Prevention science and evidence-based policy are two contemporary developments that have further shaped the concept of crime prevention in the United States. Both are best understood as frameworks that can be applied across a wide range of contexts, settings, and populations. At their core, each is concerned that the highest standards of science are used to advance knowledge and improve public policy.

Prevention science has its roots in public health, and begins with a commitment to prevention that is grounded in the developmental epidemiology of specific health or social problems. In the case of youth violence prevention, for example, prevention science provides a ‘bridge between an understanding of how chronic violence develops and how prevention programs can interrupt that development’ (Dodge, 2001: 63). The idea of an alternative, non-criminal justice response to the prevention of delinquency and offending is a crucial element to prevention science’s mission. Its influence on crime prevention can be found in its adherence to the highest scientific standards, its effort to link prevention to epidemiology, and its focus on the process of taking prevention programs to scale and how to mitigate attenuation of program effects (Welsh et al., 2010).

An evidence-based approach to crime policy embraces prevention science’s commitment to the use of the most scientifically valid methods to evaluate programs. What it adds is the utilization of accumulated research evidence on effectiveness. It seeks to increase the influence of research on policy or, in a manner of speaking, put systematic research evidence at center stage in the policy-making process. Of course, it is recognized that the linkages between research and policy are sometimes less than clear, with evaluation influence on policy taking a number of different routes (Mears, 2010; Weiss al., 2008).

The US interest, as well as the interest of many other western countries, in an evidence-based approach to crime policy was advanced with the release of *Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn’t, What’s Promising*, by Lawrence Sherman and his colleagues (1997). This report was commissioned by the US Congress as an independent, scientifically rigorous assessment of more than
$4 billion worth of federally sponsored anti-crime programs. Using a scientific methods scale to rate more than 500 program evaluations combined with a vote-counting review method, conclusions were drawn about the effects of the full range of crime prevention and criminal justice measures in seven major settings: communities; families; schools; labor markets; places (e.g. urban centers, homes); police agencies; and courts and corrections. The report concluded that there was sufficient scientific evidence to establish a provisional list of which program modalities worked, which did not, and which were inconclusive but showed promise in reducing crime. The report also called for more impact evaluations using high-quality designs to aid policymakers in arriving at scientifically informed decisions about crime prevention expenditures.

The evidence-based approach has had some interesting influences thus far on how crime prevention is viewed in the USA. The Preventing Crime report and its subsequent public and scholarly attention served to (ever so slightly) shift the debate away from the perception that support for crime prevention is tantamount to being soft on crime, which was at the heart of the opposition to the prevention spending in the 1994 crime bill. The report put the focus squarely on what scientific evidence had to say about effectiveness. It made no room for moralizing about crime or politicizing what works or does not work; it sought to make the facts – arrived at by scrupulous evaluation – the centerpiece of the policy-making process. Of course, it would be misleading to suggest that all viewed it and its follow-up studies in this favorable light (e.g. Haggerty, 2008; Pawson, 2006).

At the same time, the evidence-based approach with its singular focus on scientific evidence of effectiveness has had less to say about the distinction between crime prevention and crime control. Here, crime prevention is defined more by its outcome – the prevention of a future criminal event – than its character or approach. It is seen as a continuum of techniques, from prenatal home visits to prison sentences. It is important that a focus on the scientific evidence not obscure the distinct nature of crime prevention or its role as part of a larger effort to reduce crime in society.

**Discussion and conclusions**

In embarking on this project we were struck by how little has been written about the history of crime prevention in the USA. For sure, there are some rich studies on one component or period of time in crime prevention’s history (see Curtis, 1985; Liss and Schlossman, 1984; Schlossman and Sedlak, 1983) as well as the wider political context (see Gest, 2001). Beyond general interest to address this dearth of knowledge, our research was guided by several key issues that we believe underlie the importance of charting the history of crime prevention in the USA. One is a desire to address what has been coined as ‘presentism’ in the field of criminology (Laub, 2004: 1), or a tendency for change in the field to reflect only recent developments rather than building upon the long and rich history of the discipline of criminology. Crime prevention’s history is an inexplicable part of the history
of criminology. Closely related is that crime prevention is important to the scholarly and applied traditions of US criminology. Also, it seems especially relevant – to the discipline and crime prevention itself – to develop an understanding of the social and political influences that have shaped the concept of crime prevention over time. This historic narrative illustrates that while our collective faith in crime prevention as a strategy for reducing crime has wavered throughout time, it has at least received consistent consideration alongside – and distinct from – other crime control strategies since the 1960s. Crime prevention plays a crucial role in modern US crime policy and viewing it in historical terms may contribute to a more informed dialogue about how best we should address crime.

A history of criminology would be remiss without paying due attention to the major criminological theories that have been advanced over the years. That the beginnings of crime prevention were founded upon some of these theories, including Shaw and McKay’s (1942) social disorganization theory and Cloward and Ohlin’s (1960) differential opportunity theory, draws attention to the shared history of crime prevention and criminology. More recent theoretical contributions, including the social development model (Catalano and Hawkins, 1996) and the rational choice perspective (Cornish and Clarke, 1986), which have also spawned any number of crime prevention models and programs, provides further support for this connection.

From its earliest conceptions, crime prevention was seen as clearly distinct from crime control or punishment. It is a unique social (and now also environmental) strategy that emphasizes prevention in the first instance and is distinct from the formal justice system. This view wavered somewhat over questions about the meaning of delinquency prevention as it was applied within the juvenile justice system. Scholarly writings of the day (i.e. Lejins, 1967; Weis and Hawkins, 1981) set out to reclaim the notion of a pure prevention.

Between the 1960s and 1990s, a number of key social and political developments took place that reaffirmed prevention as an alternative – in some cases as a socially progressive one – to the traditional criminal justice response. These included the landmark presidential commissions of the 1960s, the associated loss of faith in the criminal justice response to crime, and the passage of the 1994 federal crime bill. Other significant developments included the growth of situational crime prevention and the emergence of a new generation of early childhood prevention experiments that were beginning to show long-term desirable effects on criminal offending.

In more recent years, prevention science and evidence-based policy have helped to give further shape to the concept of crime prevention in the USA. While it is doubtful that we are past the days of calls for the next magic solution or panacea to our latest crime problem, there is a growing sense that facts rather than opinions, beliefs, or conjecture should be given greater weight in the formulation of crime policy. Rational crime policy needs to pay attention to the scientific evidence on effectiveness. It also needs to pay attention to the mix of strategies.

The matter here is not about a disagreement over the definition of crime prevention. Rather, there is a pressing issue facing the effectiveness of modern
crime policy: the need to strike a greater balance between prevention and punishment. This balance acknowledges the need to curtail the development of offenders and their subsequent flow into the system, strengthen communities and local social institutions, and reduce opportunities for crime. A real and sustained focus on the front end will also reinforce efforts to repeal punitive practices. Importantly, this pressing issue also captures instrumental and emotional-symbolic dimensions of responses to crime and punishment (Frieberg, 2001; Garland, 1990). How we respond to crime says a great deal about us.

A number of criminologists, economists, and other social scientists have written about the need to find the right mix of strategies in reducing crime and hence, striking a greater balance between crime prevention and punishment (see Cook et al., 2011; Donohue and Siegelman, 1998; Vila, 1997). Overcoming this imbalance will not come easily, and it will involve a number of key efforts. Building upon the evidence-based movement, one of these efforts involves making systematic research evidence central to the policy-making (and political) process. Also important will be the need to continue to challenge the view that a politician’s support for crime prevention is tantamount to being ‘soft on crime’. Encouragingly, the evidence-based movement may go some way toward breaking down this concern. Instead of emotions and opinions, facts and evidence are becoming the new currency in federal, state, and local debates about crime policy (Greenwood, 2006).

Crime prevention, whether it is in the form of developmental, situational, community, or some combination of these three approaches, is an important component of the needed mix of strategies in today’s crime policy. It is often pitted against punishment. This seems to be a fair and beneficial distinction, not to mention a historically accurate representation of crime prevention in the United States.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the editor and the anonymous reviewers for helpful comments.

Notes

1. Crime prevention programs are not designed with the intention of excluding justice personnel. Many types of prevention programs, especially those that focus on adolescents, involve justice personnel such as police, prosecutors, or probation officers. In these cases, justice personnel work in close collaboration with those from such areas as education, health care, recreation, and social services (see, for example, Wright et al., 2012).
2. See Laub (1983: Appendix B) for a rich accounting of the social and political events leading to the development of the CAP and its crime prevention activities between the 1930s and 1960s.

References


President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice (1967) 


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