

Reflections of a retiring bobby

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Horizon-scanning has long had a chequered past, but nowhere more so than in policing. Many anticipated threats fail to materialise and many unforeseen crime opportunities are duly exploited. I, too, am no Nostradamus. On joining the Metropolitan Police Service in 2012, I had a vision of what the future of crime and policing in London would be like. Fifty years on, on the eve of my retirement – we retired younger back then! – it is amusing to reflect on how wrong I was.

I'll begin with cycle theft. Traditionally, cycle theft was considered a low police priority. Many stolen cycles were never reported to the police, few cycle thieves were caught and, frustratingly, many recovered bikes failed to reach their rightful owners, because most cyclists were unable to provide sufficient proof that they owned the bike in the first place. Then came Boris. In an attempt to reverse the spiralling obesity rates and pollution levels at the time, the then Mayor of London (and latterly England's First Minister) embarked on a sustained effort to promote cycling as a healthy alternative to motorised transport. The pro-bicycle trend continued and cycling flourished, so much so that the London of today reminds me of the Amsterdam of yesteryear. If only London had heeded the maxim 'think thief'. Even then there was strong evidence that bicycle ownership is positively correlated with levels of cycle theft, but commensurate security measures to guard against theft increases, such as the provision of secure parking facilities and robust locks, came much later. Cycle theft grew considerably and remains the scourge of present-day London. As a cyclist myself, theft is an unfortunate occupational hazard. Re-cycling acquired a new meaning when theft victims would quietly visit places like Brick Lane market to acquire a replacement of uncertain provenance, and even occasionally their own stolen model.

Cycle theft is an example of how changes in London generated opportunities for crime. Commodity theft is an example of how opportunities for crime generated changes in London. The term 'commodity theft' did not even exist when I joined the force in 2012. Metal theft was admittedly a problem, particularly the theft of copper cabling from the railway network. The recurrent explanation was that increases in the price of metals, in response to global demand exceeding supply, increased the profitability of stealing metals. That imbalance was never redressed. Thus came the now much-storied spates of petrol thefts (2020s), aluminium thefts (2030s) and so on. At the

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time, identifying cost-efficient, functional alternatives to the widely-used (and widely stolen) metals and fuels was, excuse the pun, a pipe dream. But as human society repeatedly shows, science and engineering found a way. London is now awash with fibreglass manhole covers, fibre-optic cabling, etc, that stand in stark contrast to their metal-clad forebears. A large part of this change can be attributed to the debilitating effects of commodity theft on London's infrastructure. And most importantly to me, the change meant that opportunities for commodity theft were rendered (virtually) obsolete, with little displacement to the non-metallic substitutes.

We used to have a saying in the police, 'oh to be young, and to feel the *cops*' keen sting' (the author and correct wording escapes me). There was some truth to the statement in my formative years, with recorded crime statistics confirming that those aged 16 – 24 both perpetrated and experienced disproportionately higher rates of crime. But London then was a young city. Now it is old. I say that not as a long-in-the-tooth sourpuss—which I admittedly am—but on the basis of evidence. London, like many industrialised cities, witnessed huge shifts in the age structure of its population, facilitated largely by myriad improvements in medical science. Crime changed too. Most obviously, crime on the whole reduced, as the proportion of London's population became older (cycle theft excluded). Moreover, scanning through last year's recorded crime figures for London, I see that there are more over-65s in Brixton prison than there are 18 – 24 year olds. If I had quoted these figures in 2012, my colleagues surely would have laughed at my expense, believing instead that I had confused a prison roll call with that of a retirement home.

And the single greatest change? Not crime, but the way we respond to it. I joined the Met at a time when so-called *predictive policing* was gathering momentum. The principle was sound: research evidence consistently demonstrates (it still does!) that prior victimisation is the best predictor of future victimisation, both to the victim and to comparable targets nearby. Elevated risk gradually diminishes over time, however. Predictive policing harnessed these recurrent patterns, using sophisticated computer algorithms to identify the geographic areas where, probabilistically on the basis of previous evidence, crime is most likely to occur. Early demonstration projects in Manchester and Los Angeles were promising, and were later confirmed by similar efforts internationally. What was fledgling is now commonplace. What was predictive policing is now, simply, policing. And the London Met is arguably its most adept practitioner. For the last decade or so, the lion's share of decisions regarding the deployment of police resources and personnel in the capital has been informed by PRECRIM (PREdictive Crime Risk Models); the Met's supercomputer named to honour researchers at the University College London Jill Dando Institute, who were pioneers in the application of predictive policing. Implementation was slow and resistance was staunch, with many senior police officers viewing the innovation as an insult to their expertise and discretion. The resistance proved unfounded. The growth of predictive policing no more did away with police officers than the advent of laser-optic surgery did away with surgeons. The relationship is mutually beneficial. The tipping point was performance. The police, rightly or wrongly, have always been measured on their performance. We perform better with PRECRIM. The change? After decades of attempts and exhortation, science and the scientific method has finally replaced the tyranny of tradition, divination, hunches and folk wisdom. And London is better for it.