

Computers do not help crime detection

TWO INTERNAL Home Office reports obtained by the *New Statesman* say that it is impossible to show that police 'criminal intelligence' computer systems have any value in fighting crime.

The reports obtained by the *New Statesman* include the initially highly confidential and critical evaluation of Britain's first-ever computerised criminal intelligence system at the Kidlington headquarters of Thames Valley Police. The controversial trial computer system, known as the 'Collator Project', was installed at Home Office expense during 1976/77. The evaluation was made in 1980 and 1981.

Local alarm has been caused by the rapid growth of personal records on the computer. An initial 33,000 personal records in 1977 quickly grew to encompass details, by December 1980, of more than 25,000 vehicles, 111,000 non-crime 'occurrences', and 135,000 people — many of them victims of crime. The total number of personal dossiers may now have reached nearly 250,000, according to internal Thames Valley Police statistics.

The evaluation report (*Home Office Scientific Research and Development Branch report no 13/82*) is blunt about the effectiveness of the computer in combatting crime: 'It is impossible to detect any change in the crime statistics that can be unambiguously attributed to the presence of this system.' No 'strong direct effect' in reducing crime has resulted from the use of the intelligence computer, it concludes, adding that if such an effect existed, 'it is unlikely it would have been overlooked'.

According to official figures, the crime detection rate in the Thames Valley area in 1975 was 45 per cent. In 1979, after the computer had been in full operation for 18 months, the detection rate was slightly poorer. The report states that the problem of assessing whether criminal intelligence computers are of any value in clearing up crime is 'intractable'.

The widespread belief among police that criminal intelligence systems help catch criminals is also debunked. Many police forces, it says, 'seem to place a great emphasis on indirect retrieval' where the computer is asked to search for some unknown person or event with specified special features. The Home Office team say that as few as 1 in 3000 crimes may have been solved in this way and only then in cases where the offender had been seen at the time of the crime. Moreover, such searches were hampered by the

'inaccuracy and incompleteness of the recorded data'.

Ironically, the new Data Protection bill currently in Parliament and due to become law before the summer recess specifically exempts such intelligence systems from controls, in the interests of 'the prevention and detection of crime'.

The report claims that putting police intelligence files on computer may actually *prevent* the police from recording unverified personal information because of concern that sensitive or potentially embarrassing data might be seen by a large number of police officers.

Thames Valley Police Authority members have now been provided with copies of the evaluation report. But they were not able to discuss the report's findings until after they had voted to buy the police a larger computer system.

Another Home Office Scientific Research and Development Department report obtained by the *New Statesman* also reveals that it is impossible to find out if such computers are useful in detecting crime. The report *The police research programme for 1984/85* says that 'quantitative measures of benefit of computers are as elusive as ever'.

Yet the document lists a number of surveillance methods designed to feed the burgeoning police computer and intelligence network: 'An area of work which has mushroomed over the last two years concerns the enhancement of signals from audio and video tapes. The audio tape laboratory at Sandridge now offers a limited operational service to police forces but is unable to cope with all demands.'

The 'automated number-plate reader project', a secret camera system which scans the number plates of cars travelling on the M1 and checks them against stolen vehicles or surveillance records on the Police National Computer is to continue operating despite adverse publicity when the *New Scientist* discovered the location of the controversial camera system, close to Luton. The report says that further development of the scanner 'is still required if the equipment is to meet the severe test of multi-lane high speed motorway traffic.'

There has recently been suspicion that the equipment may have been used to monitor the miners' vehicles. By apparent coincidence, the automatic numberplate scanning system was first installed on the Dartford Tunnel.

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