Speech presented by Adam Graycar, Director, Australian Institute of Criminology:

"Conference opening comments"

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Crime affects us all, and we all want to know more about it so as to put in place the best preventive and reduction activities, and do it as efficiently and effectively as possible.

A simple statement like that has a myriad of challenges - what is crime? What do we refer to when we talk about the crime rate? Nothing very tangible! We know that we are faced with terminological confusion about what crime is, about how it is measured, how crimes are ranked and about who suffers most, and who commits it.

Before we start trying to work out what we are going to do about “it” there are 2 basic questions

• what do we want to know?
• how do we find out?

That’s what we are going to talk about over the next 2 days

• what do we want to know?
• how do we find out?

In these two simple questions there is a ton of technique, and a mass of judgement passing - skill of a high degree, and the ability to make sense of it, not just methodologically, but programmatically. It is all aimed at policy and practice - and making sure they our policies and practices are working - and working well.

We’re here over these 2 days to examine and share ideas about the systematic accumulation of data for providing information about the achievement of policies and programs.

In simple terms we always used to say the our colleagues at the ABS collect, and we at the Australian Institute of Criminology add value. But of course its not so
simple - collecting and adding value, need to be closely in harmony with each other.

We’ll debate whether as evaluators, we’re engaged in a scientific activity or a judgement passing activity - a means to guide the way, or knock off programs that don’t meet the judgement test.

We’re involved in more than fact finding - we’re continually asking how good is the program? – do we have enough data to know? Do we have the measurement skills the data gathering, monitoring, cost analytic techniques? Will it lead to theory building?

How about our social and political contexts - they’re pretty big drivers, and sometimes they overwhelm the science.

Recognising that we haven’t got, and probably never will acquire the necessary methodological tools in most circumstances to produce unequivocal, non-trivial findings concerning crime problems we always have to make sure our work is a rigorous as possible. That’s a most important start.

There is often a gulf between social scientists and policymakers. Social scientists can provide policymakers with theories about people and society, they can provide data, and they can propose socio-technical solutions. Policymakers are under no obligation to accept any of this, and whether they do depends on their values, their theories about cause and effect, and the facts available to them.

We have both researchers and policy makers here with us today, in this wonderful building, and I hope that you all have an opportunity to engage scientifically and vigorously.