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"Crime prevention perspectives"

presented at the "Partnerships in crime
prevention" seminar, Hobart, 25 February
1998

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AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF CRIMINOLOGY



CRIME PREVENTION PERSPECTIVES

PARTNERSHIP IN CRIME PREVENTION

HOBART

25 February 1998

I

There are three strategic challenges in delivering crime prevention outcomes

- slowing the growth or escalation of crime
- reducing crime
- preventing crime from occurring in the first place.

Over the next few days, we will hear over a hundred presentations outlining programs and approaches that address these three outcomes.

Different parts of the crime prevention industry will prioritise these three strategic outcomes in different ways. Whichever way we look at it, we are looking at a set of partnerships, and these partnerships involve inter-sectoral and intra-sectoral co-operation, and a high level of co-ordination. These are easy words to say, but co-operation and co-ordination are not so easy to achieve. Empire builders, buck passers, and procrastinators all have different perspectives on co-ordination.

In recent decades our world has changed. We have all seen technical changes of astounding, stunning and overwhelming consequence. We can find technical solutions to many of our problems. We can think the unthinkable and do the undoable - yet are we a lot better off? We can do magic on our computers, investigate the mysteries of space. We have learned brilliantly the means of accomplishing scientific and technical advance. When we look at our present capacity to solve problems it is apparent that we do our best when the problems involve little or no social context.

We're skilled in coping with problems with no human ingredient at all, as in the physical sciences or in the technologies. We can send people to the moon, land a robot on Mars, analyse the gasses surrounding Jupiter, yet we can't find jobs for our young people; we can keep people alive for twenty to twenty-five years beyond retirement yet we can't ensure that they can live those years in dignity, we have developed the most amazing crime detection technologies with which to undertake electronic surveillance, match DNA, track down crooks in cyberspace, yet we can't always instil elements of tolerance and civility into the behaviour patterns of some young men and women.

There are three perspectives I want to focus on which might provide some conceptual shape to our work over the next few days

- A societal perspective - what is the nature of our society - the underpinning morality, the nature of tolerance and the threshold of harm to others that is tolerated.
- A knowledge perspective - what do we know and what don't we know about crime and crime prevention, and how can we find out.
- An organisational/institutional perspective which focuses on the structures that deal with crime prevention.

As I don't have time to give a full blown paper, I want to give just one example of each of these three perspectives - and you can add more in your discussions and deliberations.

II

SOCIETAL PERSPECTIVES

The one example I want to focus on here is the development and enhancement of civility.

Most Australians of my age would probably claim that our society today is less polite than it was when they were young. Others would say that nostalgia often triumphs over systematic, objective comparison. Whether one's idealised view of the past is accurate or not, civility, or more specifically, incivility, has significant implications for contemporary Australia.

Fear of crime is an important social issue and it should come as no surprise that Australians who perceive loutish behaviour in their neighbourhoods are more likely to be fearful of crime than those who have no such perceptions.

Women tend to be more fearful of crime than men - women who have been harassed, even more so. When women are unable to enjoy public places for fear of harassment or worse, society as a whole is diminished.

Another important link to anxiety about crime is the "Broken Windows" theme enunciated by the two American social scientists Wilson and Kelling in their seminal article of the early 1980s. Briefly stated, they argued that physical manifestations of incivility, such as broken windows, litter, abandoned motor vehicles, and general disrepair, communicate a message that no one is in control of a location and that no one cares what goes on there. This in turn tends to invite behavioural incivility; public drunkenness, rowdiness, harassment, which reinforce the message that crime can occur with little resistance and thus, they argued, disorder contributes to fear of crime; and it contributes to the actual incidence of crime.

The implications of these findings for public policy are quite significant.

The big picture issue is the social order. All societies must maintain some degree of social order, or they face extinction. Philosophers have debated the desirability of a thick social order - a general interest - for centuries, no, millennia. There are three means to developing and maintaining a social order:

- coercive means - use of police and prisons
- utilitarian means - economic incentives, public expenditure, infrastructure building, and
- normative means - appeals to values and moral education.

A society which relies on coercive means is a society lacking in trust and deficient in liberty. A large number of police officers, tax inspectors, etc., indicates a deficient moral order, though recent analyses have shown that increasing police numbers, contrary to earlier studies, have correlated with declines in crime.

For a social order to instil values of civility and abide by them means that most members share a commitment to a set of core values, and that most people, most of the time, will abide by them rather than being forced to comply with them.

This brings in all sorts of debates about tolerance and conformity, autonomy and diversity, multiculturalism and heterogeneity.

The challenge, then, appears to be twofold. First we should find a common ground where differences are tolerated, but standards are respected. Second, we should identify and vitalise the institutions best suited to achieve the desired outcome.

III

KNOWLEDGE PERSPECTIVE

Research is our core business at the Australian Institute of Criminology and our knowledge base is our currency. We are building a data warehouse and a vast amount of data will soon be available on the world wide web. It will be an important national resource. But data on its own doesn't mean a lot. It is the way in which we use data to explore and analyse concepts, theories and practices that gives us a better policy base for crime prevention.

At a recent National Institute of Justice seminar, a famous American criminologist, Wesley Skogan, made the observation that "probably the most

important criminological insight of the decade has been the discovery in a very systematic fashion of repeat multiple victimisation. This has tremendous implications for criminological theory and practice in the field.”

We have done a very sophisticated statistical analysis of repeat victimisation in Australia and while it will come as no surprise to note that crime is not an equal opportunity predator - that who you are, where you live, and who you know affect your chances of victimisation. We have, in this new report, modelled victimisation patterns.

28 percent of victims of property crime experience about half of all victimisations - that is, these 28 percent experience two or more incidents. 10.3 percent of all victims experienced 3 or more incidents, and they accounted for a quarter of all incidents.

Turning to personal crime, 41.3 percent of victims were repeat victims, and they experienced two thirds of all incidents. While the analysis found a range of demographic characteristics of repeat victims - age, marital status, employment status, and housing type - the significant finding was that those who are victimised on multiple occasions do not differ demographically from those who are victimised only once.

Understanding multiple victimisation is important, but preventing victimisation is even more important.

Working through the mass of data, the most recent Crime & Safety Survey revealed that 8.3 percent of all households were victims of burglary or motor vehicle theft while 2.4 percent were victimised more than once. If as a crime prevention measure we randomly target 1000 unvictimized households we can expect to prevent, on average 83 household crimes. But if we select 1000 previously victimised households, we can expect to prevent 286 household crimes.

The policy implications of a good knowledge base are very evident.

IV

ORGANISATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Respect for institutions allows us to harness their persuasive or authoritative deliverables. Utilising the skills of the frontline workers enhances the outcomes. The literature on crime prevention almost never mentions the correctional services system.

Incapacitating offenders who will continue to commit crimes at a high rate and who are not at the end of their criminal careers is effective in reducing crimes in the community. Lock away the really bad eggs! Studies investigating the effectiveness of these incapacitation techniques show there are advantages in locking up the high-rate career criminals who commit serious crimes. The difficulty is in identifying who these high-rate offenders are, and the diminishing return on invested dollars with the increased incarceration rates. However, locking up those who are not high-rate, serious offenders or those who are at the end of their criminal careers is extremely expensive and counter-productive.

While I pointed out a moment ago that a minority of victims experience a majority of the victimisations, a minority of offenders commit the majority of offences.

Apart from the most effective crime prevention tool - early intervention in families, and family support, the research provides evidence that crime in the community is reduced, among other things, by rehabilitation programs with particular characteristics.

There is now substantial evidence that rehabilitation programs work with at least some offenders in some situations. Those most likely to succeed are structured and focused, use multiple treatment components, focus on developing skills (social skills, academic and employment skills) and use behavioural (including cognitive-behavioural) methods (with reinforcements for clearly identified, overt behaviours as opposed to non-directive counselling focusing on insight, self esteem, or disclosure).

For every offender in prison in Australia, there are more than 3 who are serving community orders (probation or parole).

We have an enormous pool of talent within our community corrections workers - a pool of talent which is largely untapped in crime prevention activities. While a lot of our focus, quite properly, ought to be at the stage well before somebody is in the clutches of probation and parole services, nobody knows offenders better than community corrections workers.

In Japan, for example, probation has an explicit crime prevention role, and there are successful examples in Australia of community corrections preventing re-offending.

The South Australian Department for Correctional Services (South West Community Correctional Centre) has published a report documenting a reduction in re-offending through a set of group work interventions. Another part of the Department has a crime prevention program called STRAIGHT TALK, an

information and education program (not to be confused with prison visiting programs such as SCARED STRAIGHT) which paints a prison portrait for at risk young people. Other projects focus on the concept of responsibility within the criminal justice system.

Not all of these have been properly evaluated to test their effectiveness as crime prevention activities, but the point I wanted to make was that our institutional structures are significant points on the crime prevention spectrum.

V

The simple point I wish to make is that crime prevention occurs across a wide spectrum, takes many forms, focuses on many targets, and operates in a variety of community settings.

My call today is in three parts:

- First,** A national stated commitment to decency and civility in our public and private lives. We have a great deal to learn from our Asian neighbours who commit and reaffirm, through public and private behaviour, tenets and practices of civility and respect
- Second** Crime prevention activities should be built on knowledge derived from research, and that crime prevention activities, wherever they take place, should be accountable, and their impacts subject to rigorous assessment.
- Third** We must use all the resources in our community with whom we can forge partnerships in developing crime prevention strategies.

Our practice will be greatly enhanced if we focus on civility and respect as building blocks, utilising our knowledge base rather than going by gut feelings, and seeking out personnel not normally thought of as part of the crime prevention spectrum to be part of the larger endeavour.