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Draft of a speech by Adam Graycar, Director,
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"Crime: trends and directions"

presented to Canberra Rotary, August 1999

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DRAFT

**Adam Graycar
Canberra Rotary
August 1999**

Crime: Trends and Directions

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The key task in criminological research is to work with abstract concepts of how people behave and live, and turn them into concrete - into practical, tangible principles that prevent crime and make for a better society for all.

Crime clearly affects us all in some way and equally it is in our interests to prevent crime and reduce our fear of crime, wherever possible. Crime consistently rates in surveys as among the main concerns of most Australians. It costs the Australian community many billions of dollars each year - about 5% of our Gross Domestic Product. Crime has an impact on investment decisions, tourism, property values, retail spending, health costs, environmental quality, individual achievement, and quality of life. While we have had some success in measuring the dollar costs, we can only guess at the unquantifiable emotional costs suffered by victims, and the wasteful loss of opportunity that is a perpetual consequence of crime.

We cannot understand crime without understanding the community we live in. We cannot underestimate the changes in the economy, in social policy, in technology, in family relations, and in particular the changes experienced by young people trying to sort out where they fit into a society in which the goal posts keep changing all the time.

In these changing times I'm reminded about the story of the economics graduate Tom who, 20 years after he'd graduated dropped by to visit his old professor. The professor had just finished marking the third year exams and showed Tom the exam paper and said "*How do you reckon you'd go at that?*"

Tom scanned the paper and said '*You know, these questions look familiar I'm sure they're the same questions you were asking 20 years ago.*'

'Yep, they are', said the professor.

'Well don't the students get previous papers and churn out the same old answers.'

"Won't help", said the professor, "*in economics the questions stay the same year after year - but we keep changing the answers!*"

In criminology the questions haven't changed a real lot - they've certainly been refined, - but they haven't changed in essence. We keep trying to unravel the changing answers which all too often seem to be tied up in knots.

We often hear laments for the 'good old days', when there was no crime. Every generation will tell their young that it was better in the old days - when you could leave your doors unlocked, sleep with your windows open, and leave your keys in your car (that's not going back too many generations).

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The society in which we live is a society that has come to value instant gratification, and our technology delivers this. We don't put an enormous amount of energy into feeding ourselves - from chopping wood for the stove through to preserving and drying. We don't bank during banking hours; we pay our bills by phone in the middle of the night if we want to; we use electronic mail so we can get instant replies, not wait for the postman; we have the phone instantly at hand with the 'mobile'.

Put this against a backdrop of violence and aggression in our entertainment and news media, in participant and spectator sport, and fierce competitiveness in many work practices, it is a wonder that there is not more widespread violence.

What this emphasises is that we are enormously adaptable. The overwhelming majority of our population does not behave badly; the overwhelming majority of young people whose education does not get them a satisfactory job do not behave violently; the overwhelming majority of middle aged people whose skills have been undermined, or rendered obsolete by technological change do not behave violently; the overwhelming majority of family heads who receive insufficient support to maintain their families do not behave violently etc. But some do, and cause enormous stress to the community.

Changes in our social and economic structure have left many people without traditional roles with which they feel comfortable, and valued, and this, of course, causes tensions. Australian social structure and economic life is undergoing change, the like of which we have not seen before. Old industries which used to offer lifetime secure employment are collapsing. Occupations are becoming obsolete, and the replacement industries and occupations are less labour intensive.

The globalising economy is driving the restructuring of Australia's economy. This is creating winners and losers. This has a profound impact on trends in crime and justice, and on social relations in the broadest sense - on how Australians live.

Winners will be those with skills that are adaptable and transferable, and which are in high demand globally.

Losers will be people who are victims of structural change and who are socially and demographically isolated - young people without skills, people with substance abuse problems, older people who find the new technology bewildering, - and building on cumulative disadvantage, Australia's indigenous people are likely to find the going even more tough. Significant among the losers will be a cohort of young angry males, unemployed, and quite probably unemployable, living for the moment, with no prospects for the future. Its members will seek gratification when and where they can obtain it.

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Strategies to improve community safety must target both the potential offender and the situation in which the criminal activity occurs. Our goal must be to reduce the supply of motivated offenders and to make crime more difficult to commit. Our endeavours to deal with these issues should incorporate:

- a crime prevention strategy
- a social policy strategy
- a partnership strategy

Facts and Figures about Crime

Today there are probably many many more opportunities than ever before for criminal behaviour, and one view is to argue that much crime may be the price we pay for living in a world which offers high material benefits and a very mobile lifestyle.

On a per capita basis considerably fewer people today appear before the courts than 100 years ago. Of those who do, fewer go to jail. But today, women who appear topless on the beach don't find themselves before the court, men who have sex with other consenting men don't find themselves before the court, but they did a generation ago. But men who bashed their wives and/ or children a generation ago did not find themselves before the court, but they do today. A generation ago crimes like Medicare fraud, credit card fraud, hacking, were not part of the criminological lexicon.

But if we stick to good old fashioned violence and property crime - assault, robbery, and somebody stealing your car or coming through your window to nick your VCR or laptop, then the numbers are higher than 20 years ago.

I have seven charts covering the major offences: homicide, robbery, assault, sexual assault, unlawful entry with intent, motor vehicle theft, and other theft which is stealing without the use of coercion, eg. pickpocketing, stealing of stock/ domestic animals, and theft of things like bicycles.

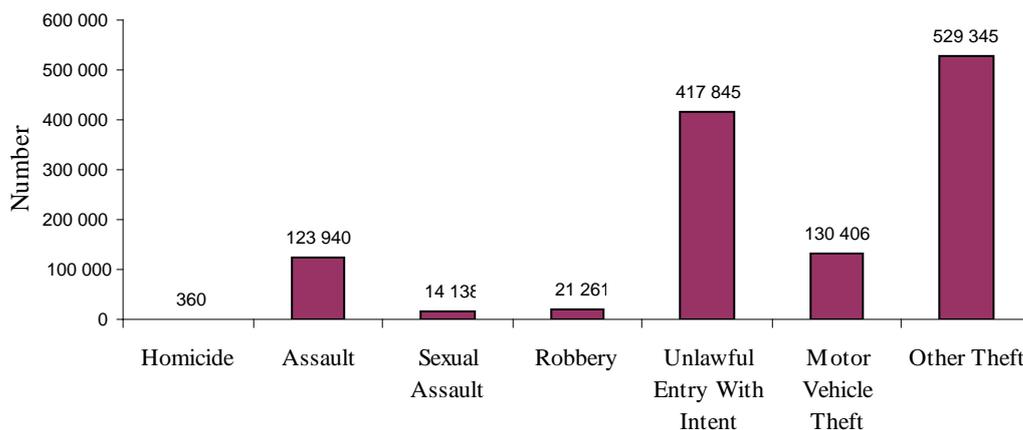
But first to put the number of crimes committed into perspective I have included a chart of the number of crimes recorded by police for 1997 nationwide.

Number of crimes recorded by police, 1997

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As the graph shows, 88 per cent of major crimes are property crimes.

The **homicide** rate in Australia is now at the same level as a century ago. Because the figures are low, the chart shows clearly the variability from year to year in some states.

Robbery: In 1997 police recorded 21 261 robbery incidents in Australia, with 115 victims per 100 000 population. Of these incidents, 58% were unarmed robberies, 32% were committed with a weapon other than a firearm, and 10% were committed with a firearm. In the ACT the rate of robbery has increased from 38 in 1993 to 75 in 1997 per 100 000.

In 1997 there were 123 940 incidents of **assault** in Australia: 669 victims per 100 000. In the ACT the rate is slightly lower at 540 per 100 000.

The ABS Women's Safety Survey revealed that only 15% of women who had experienced **sexual violence** in the last twelve months reported the incident to police, therefore this chart may not reflect the true extent of the crime. In line with national figures, there has been an overall slight increase in the number of incidents of sexual assault reported in the ACT since 1993.

Against the national trend, the ACT has shown a marked decline in the number of crimes of **unlawful entry with intent**. There were approximately 5700 incidents (1900 per 100 000 population) reported in 1993 and by 1997 this had fallen to 4381 (just over 1400 per 100 000 population).

The rate of **motor vehicle theft** in the ACT has also declined: in 1993 there were 1678 reported incidents and in 1997 there were 1562. Nationally, motor vehicle theft has remained relatively stable over the past three years and is considerably lower than at the start of this decade.

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Other theft is the crime most commonly recorded by police. A little over one 'other theft' occurred every minute across Australia in 1997. Residential locations were the scene of 22% of cases of this crime.

Drug Use

Drug use has enormous economic, health and social impacts on Australian society. Almost one in five deaths in Australia is drug related. Smoking is the primary cause of premature and preventable death and disease in Australia, followed by alcohol. Three per cent of preventable deaths are attributable to illicit drug use. In response to community concern about the disproportionate number of deaths caused by illicit drug use, governments are placing greater emphasis on illicit drugs, while maintaining their focus on tobacco and alcohol.

Since 1985, when the National Campaign against Drug Abuse was introduced, Australia has pursued an approach that aims to manage the diverse health, social and economic consequences of drug use through policies of harm minimisation and demand and supply reduction.

Many commentators claim that 80% of crime is drug related, however, research by staff at the AIC questions this figure. Based on self-reporting surveys, less than half of drug users commit crimes to support their habit. Drug use may be a major factor for some property offenders, but not for others. Drugs and crime have been an "issue" for law enforcement in Australia since the 1960s, yet we still do not have a series of credible national monitoring programs designed to inform operational and strategic policing. Recent funding under the Prime Minister's National Illicit Drug Strategy initiative has financed a pilot study, coordinated by the Australian Institute of Criminology, to monitor illicit drug use and offending among arrestees. This is a step towards improving our capacity for evidence-based policy making within law enforcement. It is based on the highly successful Drug Use Forecasting Program in the United States and the successful completion of the pilot phase in the United Kingdom.

Fear of crime affects the well being of neighbourhoods. Figures released by the Productivity Commission in February show that of all Australians:

- 93% feel safe or very safe in their house during the day;
- 80% feel safe or very safe in their house at night;
- 68% feel safe on public transport during the day;
- 21% feel safe on public transport at night;
- 88% feel safe walking/jogging during the day;
- 38% feel safe walking/jogging at night.

People living in the ACT indicated feeling safer in each of these situations than the national average.

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It has long been asserted that **older people** are more fearful of crime than younger people, although official crime statistics show that people over the age of 65 are the least likely to be victimised. When an older person is victimised in a horrible or brutal manner, this invariably receives publicity leading some to believe that this is the continuing way of the world and the daily activity of villains.

Older people, like all others, are at risk from 4 main sources:

1. Family members, friends and acquaintances, who may assault or steal from them
2. Strangers who may victimise them
3. Commercial organisations or “white collar” criminals who would defraud them
4. Carers with whom they are in a “duty of care” relationship and who may neglect or abuse them

Who are the Victims?

We know that crime is not an equal opportunity predator. The chance of becoming a victim depends on where you live, how you live, who you are and whom you know. The older you are the less likely you are to be a victim of crime, and the richer you are the less likely you are to be a victim of crime.

Victims of violent crime often know their attacker. This is most likely the case in homicide and assault, and around one half of robbery victims know their attacker.

We know that many people are victimised in their homes, and that one’s home is not the safe haven that we would wish it to be. While the overwhelming majority of robberies occur outside the home, the majority of sexual assaults occur inside the home, as do the majority of homicides. So too, do a variety of violent crimes that are loosely described as child abuse, elder abuse, and domestic violence.

We know that males are twice as likely to become **victims of assault** as are females. Unemployed people are twice as likely to be victims of assault as employed people.

We know that households comprising couple families with or without children had the lowest risk of **burglary**; one-parent households had the highest risk of burglary.

We know that more crime is committed **against business** than against individuals or households. Burglary affects one quarter of all businesses, as does theft by customers, followed by fraud, vandalism and assault on staff.

We know that **victims invariably feel isolated** from and disparaged by the criminal justice system. Several States have legislation on victims’ rights and compensation, but victim support agencies cannot meet the demand on their resources.

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Who are the Perpetrators?

There are no definitive answers as to why individuals commit crimes. We do know that participation in crime declines with age. It is commonly asserted that property crime arrests peak at age 16, and drop to lower than half that by age 20. Violent crime arrests peak at age 18. However, young people who become involved in crime at the earliest ages - before they are 14 - tend to become the most persistent offenders, with longer criminal careers.

What we do know about criminals refers mainly to street criminals and repeat offenders. Sophisticated and white-collar crime is a vast playing field and we don't know very much about who criminals are, apart from the tiny minority who are caught. One Western Australian entrepreneur who is presently doing time was convicted for one fraud, the value of which equalled the value of all the household burglaries in Australia for 84 weeks.

Crime prevention

The three principal tenets involve:

- increasing the effort
- increasing the risks
- reducing the rewards

The general strategy is to set out to make the crime too difficult to commit, mostly by closing off opportunities, and also not making the activity worthwhile.

This involves great skill in design, and in planning. It involves the very fabric of our urban design, and the creation of harmonious patterns of human interaction. At another level it involves things such as: better locks; screens; security cameras etc.

Increasing the effort involves hardening targets. This can be done at various levels. One way is to use our design skills to make access and egress much more difficult. If there are 10 ways to leave a housing development or a cul-de sac, that's a lot less effort than if there are only two! There are planning decisions about the design of space, the configuration of public places, and the siting of buildings.

Another level is to do things such as installing bandit screens, using toughened glass, tamper-proof locks; it involves access control, such as locking gates, PIN numbers, ID badges. Let me give one simple example of increasing the effort. An up market boutique had tens of thousands of dollars worth of dresses ready to be lifted off the racks by a thief, but the staff had every second hanger facing the other direction. Not only did this increase the effort, it increased the time required to complete the theft, and the theft failed.

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Increasing the risks can be part of a planner's work. It involves planning for surveillance through good design. This can include everything from lighting design to shrub management, and screening and surveillance - as well as things like having alarms, police and security patrols - anything that makes it more risky for a villain to go about his (or her) business.

Reducing the rewards involves making it less worthwhile, reducing the amount of cash around (time delay safes), transacting more business using EFPTOS or plastic, marking property, PIN numbers for radios etc.

For our crime prevention activities to work they must be evidence based and built on knowledge derived from research, rather than gut feelings, about what works, what doesn't and what's promising.

Dynamics of Crime in Neighbourhoods

Let's start with a simple observation.

Most places have no crime, and most crime is highly concentrated in a relatively small number of places. Some shops have no robberies, while a few have lots. A few entertainment venues have a lot of problems, most have none. Even in high burglary neighbourhoods most residences have no burglaries, while a few suffer from repeat burglaries. Understanding clustering and repeat victimisation and crime 'hot spots' is very important in striving for both efficiency and effectiveness.

Blocking criminal opportunities takes place by understanding place, and strategies that are appropriate for houses, flats, shops, warehouses, factories, public transport, parks, pubs etc.

Partnerships

Responsibility for putting into place the necessary means to prevent crime is usually beyond the scope of any one agency or sector, and least of all, the criminal justice system. The broader community must be encouraged to accept ownership of, and show leadership in community safety and crime prevention.

A key development in urban crime prevention is the promotion of partnerships among stakeholders. The traditional way of thinking about crime prevention - with the police as the only preventers of crime and the courts as the first stop rather than the last resort - just doesn't work well enough. This, as you would realise is not to diminish the work of the police and the courts. It is simply a recognition of the increasing complexity of life as we near the end of the twentieth century and the need to find all-rounded responses to complicated problems.

Most crimes are not reported to the police and of those that are, most do not result in an arrest. The criminal justice system reacts after a crime has been committed. Its success in reducing crime through the use of deterrents is mixed. Deterrents are unlikely to be influential in crimes of passion, adolescents who believe in their

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invulnerability, to those who feel they are outcasts from society anyway, ie. they have no stake in the community, or on professional criminals who accept the costs as part of the risk (Hahn).

Community safety must not be seen as a concept separate from other mainstream government and community activities such as education; family and youth support services; alcohol and drug programs; law enforcement; employment programs; urban planning and design; health and welfare services; and so on. Community safety is rather a key input to, and output of productive economic and social activity - central to our social policy. For example, proprietors of licensed premises now have to be made more aware of the risk of litigation if they knowingly allow persons to become drunk and injure others; businesses and schools must similarly protect against bullying.

Australia is one of the safest countries in the world. Australians can go about their daily lives with little chance of their becoming the target of a criminal attack. But it does happen and when it does it devastates people - and the prospect that it might happen worries a lot of people.

The true extent of crime has been distorted by an increase in the reporting by the media of criminal events. Far more coverage is given to violent and extreme incidents than in the past - far more than any increase in the crime rate warrants. Modern communications have made the world a smaller place and we now hear of violent crimes being committed on the other side of the world and react almost as if it had happened in our neighbourhood.

Conclusion

We know that investing heavily in the first three years of life makes good crime reduction sense. It can yield enormous benefits down the track in savings in health expenditure, income support expenditure and criminal justice system expenditure. But there are some difficult social policy issues in knowing how to target these expenditures, and fixing limits to ensure optimum benefit.

The aim is to work cross-sectorally to turn potential future offenders into good citizens. If they grow up to be offenders behind bars they cost the community in the order of \$50,000 p.a. Investing in appropriate developmental activities - primary health care, early childhood supports, education and training, is more likely to turn them into productive taxpayers.

We all have a role to play in building the partnerships to meet the emerging challenges for community safety. The safest communities are not those with the most police and prisons but those with the strongest community structures, including socialising institutions, families, and economic opportunities.

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Those opportunities exist and can be moulded. Human beings, who are almost unique in having the ability to learn from the experience of others, are also remarkable for their apparent disinclination to do so, but I am sure that does not apply to those of us here today.