

# STREETS AHEAD - YOUTH SUCCESS IN NEIGHBOURHOOD CRIME PREVENTION

by Don Robertson

## Background Briefing

Redfern and Waterloo are two inner suburbs just south of the centre of Sydney. The community is represented by cultural groups almost too numerous to count.

There are some small park lands and one or two ovals, but the streets are a bland blend of houses and manufacturing or marketing industry.

There is a mix of high rise and tight tenement no rise housing. It is typical inner city dense urban living.

There is a population concentration of the elderly and the young. There is a high teenage population. There is high teenage unemployment. There is much youth boredom and there is a certain aimlessness and hopelessness particularly among the school leavers. Job prospects are few and life therefore is now.

Teenage crime rates are about average for the density of population and for the area. Police, education and local industry representatives are concerned however at the higher than average rate of property damage, car thefts and street assaults that make up most of the teenage crime that is reported.

There have been the occasional suburban summits on what to do to get the crime rate down and on how to keep it down. But there has been little co-ordination or real community involvement in that process.

## A Digression

*Countries and cultures have been recognising for some years now that crime prevention and crime control is best managed at the local (community neighbourhood) level. From the much talked about*

*French (Bonnemaison) approach, to initiatives in other western countries such as Canada, Holland and the U.K., including some limited Australian initiatives, there has been a gradual acceptance that the best way to deal with urban crime "hot spots" is to involve those who are actually on the spot in coming up with effective solutions. There is increasing agreement among a majority of practitioners that community participation in crime prevention is essential if the urban crime waves are to be rolled back.*

*In France, Gilbert Bonnemaison's original contention was:*

*"that the community must be the privileged place where prevention is put into effect. It is at this level that preventative action is to be taken in different neighbourhoods in respect of pre-deviant groups, by methods which bring together different administrative services and specialist associations that will have the greatest chance of success". (King 1987:6)*

*The Netherlands Ministry of Justice has since 1985 been embarking on pilot projects in crime prevention involving extensive community participation. That Ministry's Society and Crime document at the time enshrined a policy of funding community crime prevention initiatives over a five year period. The Dutch Government in continuing these local initiatives proclaims loudly that the fight against crime is not a matter for the police alone; it should be the responsibility of society as a whole. (Ministry of Justice, The Hague 1992:1)*

*In the United Kingdom there are a number of national and local strategies in place to facilitate innovative crime prevention programmes. The Luton Crime Reduction Programme acknowledges the value of involving its youth in those*

programmes. In its Annual Report of October 1990, young people were "targetted" for special attention.

Crime Concern is another U.K. initiative that realises the need to sponsor joint community projects between agencies, law enforcers, residents and industry. In its 1991 Annual Review it highlights a range of youth projects and youth crime prevention panels that have been a feature of Crime Concern's recent activities. Crime Concern's funding is almost entirely industry sourced.

The Canadian Council on Social Development believes that crime prevention is best managed through the developmental processes of communities. In an overview document the Council stresses the need for pro-active social development programmes that are delivered through a wide range of approaches involving the public, the voluntary and the private sectors. Increasingly, it says, consumers must become involved in the provision of community services and in the solving of community problems. (Waller and Weiler, 1984:12)

South Australia was the first Australian state to recognise the need for a governmental strategy to encourage community participation in crime prevention. Over recent years it has funded numerous local initiatives involving community groups interested in redressing community disadvantage; a well documented cause of crime.

In N.S.W. there are now a number of local councils developing community safety and community crime prevention initiatives. Two Sydney metropolitan councils, Fairfield and Waverly, have conducted crime audits with a view to increasing their efforts at community education in identifying crime problems and participating in solutions.

Wollongong City (80km south of Sydney) has gone one step further. Acting on a specific recommendation of the 1991 Australian Crime Prevention Council's National Conference, the City Council has recently established a Standing Committee of local government and community representatives, chaired by the Mayor with the specific charter of helping to make that city a safer place to live. The Committee's objectives include:

- identifying elements of urban design likely to impact upon crime and the perception of community safety.

- taking measures to remedy physical design characteristics of the city considered crime trouble spots.

- facilitating low cost local crime prevention projects with particular emphasis on youth and the elderly as initiators and implementers of those projects.

Generally however, the prevailing Australian community view is that those who are "on the spot" to carry out local crime busting should be the police. That view reinforces the belief that the greater the concentration of crime in a given area, the greater should be the concentration of police to deal with that crime.

At least within all three levels of government in Australia there is a growing contrary view that those best able to control crime should be the whole community working consultatively and co-operatively together; police, schools, local industry, other social groups and residents. But that is by no means the accepted thinking norm. Most local communities are a long way from getting involved in any form of identifying and participating in crime control or crime prevention programmes.

Even more "radical" is the notion that Australia's youth should participate in, or lead any co-operative community crime reduction initiatives. There is little support for that idea since most urban crime is youth generated. My experiential guess is that a majority of Australians believe that those who cause crime should be appropriately punished, while those who are affected by crime should demand from government more and better armed local law enforcers. There are some community leaders and residents who volunteer to meet and work with local police in "cleaning up" their neighbourhood but the entrenched community view remains that responsibility for crime control and crime prevention rests with the police and the courts almost exclusively.

## The Story Continues

Fortunately in those two inner Sydney suburbs of Redfern and Waterloo, the radical view of encouraging youth involvement in crime prevention has emerged. The Law Foundation of New South Wales recently sponsored an experiment with the local (South Sydney) Police Citizens Youth Club. The experiment went straight to the perceived heart of the

crime problem - the young people of the area; many of whom frequent the Club and many of whom have been heavily involved in street and property crime. The Club is something of a unique sanctuary for its several hundred members. It offers a range of active and passive recreation activities, 7 days a week in a fairly ordinary complex comprising outdoor space and indoor rooms for gymnastics, basketball, pool, videos, boxing and developing study skills.

The Law Foundation's Youth and the Law Project (YALP) had been trialed successfully in an outer Sydney region and the South Sydney Police Citizens Youth Club (Police Youth Club) wanted to see whether the concept of youth initiated action against crime would work for them. Their Club had been repeatedly vandalised as had local shops and some of the nearby industrial complexes.

Essentially the YALP concept has young people "owning", designing, monitoring and evaluating crime prevention strategies, with the support of the adult community. It is a method that is action oriented and that gives young people responsibility for initiating projects that have community safety, community development and crime prevention as their focus. Young people identify the issues. They accept responsibility for designing and implementing strategies that will directly and indirectly reduce local crime. This means that young people can have a positive and lasting influence over the way their community functions and tracks.

"The approach, tested and honed over seven years, has proven effective with young people from all backgrounds: people from all backgrounds: school attenders of low, medium and high achievement; young people of non-English speaking background; street-kids and young offenders. They all discover they have aptitudes and capabilities for practical skill development which equip them for doing more in their community. They learn quickly from their peers and display a more positive attitude in their dealings with society in general. Most importantly, the young people who go through this experiential learning process seem naturally able to apply their new found skills in other facets of their lives - making them truly equipped for active citizenship in the future." (YALP Brochure 1992).

The method is high risk and is not popular with adult crime fighters. The method employs a three stage process:

- First, teenagers from a nominated urban area voluntarily come together to identify and discuss crime concerns.
- Second, they are encouraged with adult support to generate ideas and implement solutions from those ideas.
- Third, they seek out local people and property resources and they develop their own skills in managing the implementation process.

Is this approach succeeding in South Sydney? Has the method worked out in reality? What has been achieved? Have the aims matched the results?

A little over 12 months ago, the South Sydney experiment began along these lines. Local high school students were canvassed, some of whom were members of the South Sydney Police Youth Club. A day was organised to outline the youth-to-youth crime prevention concept and to seek a response. Only a handful (about 30) of participants turned up. They were Years 8 to 10 (13 to 15 year olds) from 3 local schools. At the end of a day of difficult and, at times, disorganised discussion and workshopping, a project group of 6 young people agreed to take on the seemingly (to them) crazy idea that they could, plan and actually do something that might benefit themselves, their friends and the wider community.

Their suggestions and achievements were intended to have a positive impact on community safety and on the reduction of local crime.

The group sought the help of older adolescents who had territorial clout and whose involvement would give any proposals peer respectability.

After an uncertain start, in December 1991, the project "group of 6", using the YALP model, decided to test whether police staff at the Club and other adults would give them the

opportunity to actually own and operate two recreation strategies that the group had thought up.

### **Strategy 1:**

The group organised a regular basketball competition at the Police Youth Club inviting rival so called colour gangs from neighbouring inner city suburbs to participate. That sounds an easy and relatively unspectacular assignment. However, a number of factors increased the risk of the strategy's likely failure:

- the organisers were young people - who thought up the idea who agreed to manage it and who agreed to own the outcome.
- the project group had to co-operatively arrange teams, venues, times, equipment and transport themselves.
- staff and volunteers of the Police Youth Club were to assist the group in the organisation process but essentially the basketball competitions were to be a youth-to-youth initiative.
- the competitions, would bring cultures and rival groups together with the obvious risks of aggressive or explosive behaviour that had been forecast.

There have been minor hic-ups but no failures and the strategy has lasted six months so far.

### **Strategy 2:**

The project group organised a fortnightly dance party rivaling other adult run discos in the district. They needed a venue, they needed music, they needed publicity, they needed transport, they needed parental co-operation and they needed to "police" the disco participants. There were to be no drugs and no alcohol. The whole operation was to be their responsibility. If the discos were popular they would be held regularly on a Friday

night, (a traditionally active street crime night) and youthful energies would therefore be channelled into a crime free fun activity. They needed to attract around 200 to 300 to each disco.

The strategy met with some skepticism by the local police patrol. The police working at the Youth Club who backed the strategy were also skeptical. Again....

- The organisers of the entire venture were a small group of older adolescents.
- They arranged everything - music, transport, publicity, security, food and ..... the venue, the greatest problem.

Finding a venue proved extremely difficult. Even with Police Youth Club staff backing, hall owners were reluctant or were unable to assist.

There were large open spaces at several of the local industries; spaces that during the week were used for parking, packaging or delivery of goods. One such industrial site was owned by a local meat exporter whose premises incidently over the years had been subjected to repeated vandalism. He had already established a connection with the Police Youth Club working with the staff and club members in an effort to reduce the graffiti focussed vandalism, by encouraging known "offenders" to develop their various graffiti styles into a useful art form.

The exporter was approached and agreed to make his premises available at no charge, every second or third Friday night as the disco venue.

Eight discos have successfully been held to date. The venue has proved popular and the discos continue to meet their targetted numbers of between 200 and 300 participants each time. The exporter is keen to continue the venue arrangement for as long as the strategy survives. He is on record as saying that the organisational and motivational skills of the group have impressed him beyond his expectations.

Profits of around \$1000 per night have been used to purchase equipment for the Police Youth Club and to help pay for much needed building renovations.

The success of the youth-to-industry connection so far is likely to prompt more local industries to consider inviting the young crime fighters to share some other ideas they might have on making their community a much safer place for residents and workers alike. Individuals from local industries are also looking for ways to more practically assist the local Police Youth Club who rely on community support to meet their weekly programme costs.

The experiment continues.

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