

Beginning to get it right - a partnership approach



Daryl Smeaton

A 'whole system' approach to dealing with crime issues, featuring involvement from a broad spectrum of the community and with support from all levels of government, is being recognised as the most effective way to combat crime.

In line with this philosophy, a campaign against violence and crime is being established by the federal government to develop best practice and policy in community safety and crime prevention.

The program will seek to foster a national community based approach to crime prevention and to include a wide range of both community and government representatives.

This approach to crime prevention in Australia was highlighted by executive member of the Commonwealth Law Enforcement Board, Daryl Smeaton, at the 17th biennial conference of the Australian Crime Prevention Council recently.

The speech also touched on the issue of gun control, which has since taken on a significantly higher profile in Australia since the Port Arthur massacre on April 28.

By Daryl Smeaton

We read or hear about various forms of crime every day in the media, and general community concern about law and order is high.

These issues frequently become the subject of competing claims to measures aimed at generating a safer and more secure community.

The media appears to dwell on crime, particularly the more 'sensational' cases which gives rise to a sense of fear among sections of the community, reinforcing the prominence of law and order as a political issue. We often see this cycle generating demands for tougher responses from the criminal justice system - more police, the creation of new offences, and harsher sentences.

This perspective is rarely balanced by a more rational analysis of the real crime picture, or of what might be the most effective strategies to deal with crime concerns.

Crime rate trends indicate that while homicide rates have remained relatively stable over recent years, there have been small increases in crimes against property and some forms of violent crime other than homicide. Statistics over the past two decades show similar changes in Australia and other comparable countries - New Zealand, Canada, England and Wales, West Germany and the USA, with the notable exception of homicide in the USA, where the rate is considerably higher than all comparable countries.

We also need to acknowledge that this is not an inevitable trend. The most recent national crime survey by the Australian Bureau of Statistics

to crime prevention



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showed that the rate of personal assault reported by survey respondents actually declined between 1983 and 1993. We also have examples at individual state and territory level where offence rates for certain crimes have declined in recent years. This year's Australian Bureau of Statistics Victorian crime survey reported a decline in the number of victims of burglary, car theft, and personal crimes from last year. We should also remember that matters which are now reported as crimes, such as domestic violence and serious assaults arising from drunken brawls, went unreported in years past.

I am not implying that crime is not an important issue. It is an unwelcome intrusion into people's lives and reduces the general well-being of the community. Even for those who have never been the victim of crime, fear of crime is often high and limits our use and enjoyment of what might be quite safe environments or activities. The level of a community's perception of safety is

an indicator of the quality of life that its citizens can enjoy. However, we need to consider this in perspective and to remember that crime is preventable and that crime trends are reversible.

The most effective and powerful approach to community safety and crime prevention is a 'whole system', one which co-ordinates the activities of communities themselves, the business and commercial sector, the three levels of government, and all public agencies – not only those organisations traditionally associated with crime, such as police services.

Community initiatives developed at the grass roots level can often provide the most effective approach in addressing crime concerns in the local community. Government agencies could assist and support such initiatives by participating in their development, refocusing programs and activities to help address those concerns, or by contributing resources. All three levels of government could also ensure policies and

directions support a joint approach to crime, or in some cases, by contributing funds to directly assist and support the development and establishment of crime prevention and community safety programs and research. The business and commercial sector could contribute not only through sponsorship, but also by participating directly in community-based programs, such as the West End Forum in Melbourne, a community wide crime prevention program in the western suburbs.

The Commonwealth is keen to facilitate action which helps prevent crime and promote community safety. While crime prevention is largely a matter for states and territories, there is clearly a role for all levels of government in a national community based approach to crime prevention.

To this end, the Commonwealth has established a national crime prevention program, Safer Australia, as a resource for research and information-sharing. The program also will help to co-ordinate activities when needed and facilitate developments in community safety, crime prevention and best practice and policy.

Plans are for the program to include the input of people from a variety of professional community and cultural backgrounds, the three levels of government, police services, the insurance industry, church groups, small business, the media, the non-English speaking community, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, the general community and crime prevention experts.

The program aims to:

- encourage innovative and effective approaches to crime prevention through a funding program which supports, evaluates and disseminates information about model community-based crime prevention programs of national significance;
- encourage a whole community approach to crime prevention, and programs which the community has a key role in defining, designing and operating;
- assist communities to understand the picture of crime in Australia today, through community safety surveys and information provision;
- address the risk factors in crime by sponsoring targeted programs to support the aims of the program;
- complement state and territory government policies, build on partnerships which have already been developed and integrate these into a national framework;
- encourage corporate sponsorship for community crime prevention programs;

- address the issue of the fear of crime by conducting community safety surveys designed to assess the community's concerns about crime and community-based strategies for addressing these concerns;
- work with the media to encourage more objective and balanced reporting of crime, thereby also helping to reduce the fear of crime in the community.

The program has as its charter:

Australians are all concerned about crime. We should be able to live in communities where we can go about our daily lives free from fears for our own safety and the safety of our family, friends and neighbours.

The program will promote research on best practice in crime prevention and assist in developing effective approaches to crime prevention and community safety.

The program invites all Australians to contribute to creating safe and supportive communities.

The program's priorities initially will be house burglary, violence in aboriginal communities, and young people and crime.

There are three areas of concern where I believe the 'whole system' approach to crime prevention can lead to positive initiatives which can help us create a safer community. They are drug law enforcement, firearms safety and responsible media reporting of crime.

Drug law enforcement

It is stating the obvious to say that we have a drug problem in Australia. Despite eight years of the National Campaign Against Drug Abuse and great efforts by police services all over Australia, we are still experiencing more and more of our young people becoming involved in drugs.

Recent surveys show that many young people have tried or regularly use marijuana; the number of people who have used or continue to use heroin has doubled over five years and the abuse of amphetamines across the community is growing.

A study by Dr Don Weatherburn of the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research concluded that law enforcement efforts have not affected the price, quality or quantity of heroin on our streets to any significant degree, and it

appears that the bulk of our police resources devoted to drug law enforcement are still aimed at the consumer end of the market.

I do not advocate an end to our national prohibition and harm minimisation policies in trying to stem demand for illicit drugs. Nor am I totally pessimistic that the war is lost. I do believe that drug abuse is a generational phenomenon and I am optimistic that our national anti-drug educational strategy targeted at our children from kindergarten onwards can succeed in reducing demand. It is not just a simple 'say no to drugs' message, but a more comprehensive one, including broader health and physiological issues.

At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that there are victims of drug abuse who need and deserve our sympathy and support. That is the basis of harm minimisation which is in turn only part of the national strategy which combines demand reduction with supply reduction. In my experience, no other country has as comprehensive or co-ordinated a strategy as Australia.

However, our drug problem continues to grow. We cannot be, and are not, complacent and we must do more to attack the supply end of the market. Concentrating resources at the demand end has not produced an effective outcome. We have to work smarter and harder. Governments need to recognise that the war against drug trafficking must be fought where the money is - in our financial system, at the importing level, and in the boardrooms. We have to attack the profit hungry, not the drug hungry. The war is not on the streets - only the victims are.

Gun control

For every gun homicide there are another seven deaths through accidents or suicides using guns. There were 435 gun suicides in Australia in 1993, 18 deaths from gun accidents, and a comparatively low 64 gun homicides.

Firearms regulation is not about disarming the community. There are legitimate uses for firearms, but it should be harder to obtain a firearm for those legitimate purposes. Every licensed gun owner should be trained to safely use the firearm they own and ensure safe storage. Ammunition sales should also be stringently controlled. The primary aim of firearms regulation should be to reduce the number of unnecessary firearms in our community and promote public safety. Achievement of such an objective cries out for a partnership approach.

In the vast majority of cases, firearms owners are responsible people who, like governments and the community at large, want safer use of firearms. Together, we can achieve that aim.

Fear of crime

The fear of crime can be just as damaging to our way of life as crime itself. While we can argue about whether or not crime is really increasing, there is no doubt that the fear of crime has increased. Current research indicates that the fear of crime comes not from the actual experience of crime - as relatively few people are victims of crime - but from a person's perception of crime reported in the media, from social contact, or from their perception of their local environment.

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The level of fear of crime in this country is primarily caused by sensationalised media reporting. The media must accept that accompanying the right to report 'the news' is the responsibility to give a balanced, accurate and comprehensive presentation. They must represent crime, particularly violent crime responsibly to ensure they do not create unintended negative effects such as fear and intolerance.

Although not a violent country, Australia has had its share of violent incidents. A person's chance of becoming a victim of crime is relatively low but we have an unacceptably high rate of victimisation. Our streets are safe, but prudence is always a virtue. It is not a matter of reclaiming our streets because they are, and will continue to be, ours. Yet, if like more than 80 per cent of Australians we watch the nightly dose of the 'violence reports' that masquerade as news, we can be forgiven for thinking that crime is rampant, that we are next, or that the streets are unsafe.

Hundreds of good things happen in our community daily. I am not advocating a good news approach - just a balanced one.

Crime prevention is everybody's business. It's yours and mine. It is a common responsibility, a partnership in which everyone must be involved. Only together can we build a safer Australia.