

Chapter Two

Crime Prevention: An Overview

2.1 Social support

The shorthand title for this reference has been “Crime Prevention through Social Support”. While the committee has received submissions and evidence from many different perspectives and organisations most have had no difficulty in understanding the meaning of this reference. By providing support to families and communities in the form of social programs, training or resources, governments should be able to prevent crime: this much is understood and agreed. Most of the debate during this inquiry has been about *how* to deliver the “social support” and to whom.

The committee has interpreted “social support” in its widest sense – it encompasses urban planning such as design of public housing through to health services such as home visits for new parents. The term can cover most activity by the government or other sectors which aims to produce positive social benefits. Much of this social support is directed primarily at achieving outcomes other than crime prevention, yet has the direct or indirect result of making a community safer.

The committee’s only limitation of the terms of reference for this inquiry has been to exclude detailed consideration of the other main alternative form of crime prevention, that is prevention through law enforcement. This inquiry has not considered, for instance, the effectiveness of so-called “zero tolerance” policing. Where policing is considered in this report it is part of a wider program of social support, such as how police in Ballina or Moree co-operate with other agencies and local councils in developing crime prevention plans.

Crime prevention through law enforcement can complement other crime prevention strategies, and for some types of crime it is the most effective strategy, at least in the short term. The committee is concerned however that in the competition for scarce public resources the short term response of “more police, more prisons” is often seen as the only option for political decision makers considering the prevention of crime. If expenditure on social support is intelligently directed it can complement policing and reduce the difficulties faced in future policing. The NSW Police Service supports this view:

“While police have an important crime prevention role, the reality is that a large part of law enforcement work involves responding to reports of crime rather than dealing with the causes of crime. Given that police often only deal with one aspect of the problem, they cannot be the total answer and can only play their part in a broader crime prevention approach. Such an approach should be based within a collaborative and whole of government framework that incorporates the community.

There is clearly a need to look beyond “get tough on crime” strategies, such as harsher penalties and sentences for offenders, to longer term strategies that address the underlying causes of crime. These underlying causes – including poverty, homelessness, discrimination, child abuse and neglect, family breakdown, mental illness and substance abuse – are highly complex and require a multi-faceted approach. It is also important that the limited resources available be invested in those crime prevention strategies that are proven to work.”¹

Speaking at the Law and Justice Committee conference of October 1998, Assistant Commissioner Christine Nixon expressed a similar view:

“..my experience in policing has covered a variety of countries and types of crime. This broad based exposure to criminal activity and community disharmony has led me to a firm conclusion that insufficient funds are spent on social causes of crime and preventative measures. If we applied more attention and resources to crime prevention I am convinced the downstream effect would be considerable savings to the community in both money and reduced psychological trauma.”²

A helpful analogy can be drawn from the area of public health. Doctors and hospitals are essential at times of critical illness. Preventative measures, such as good nutrition and healthy lifestyle, however, lessen the need for later medical services. Early intervention by medical professionals in illnesses also prevents more extensive treatment required later. Investment in social support to prevent crime has the same advantages as preventative health measures. It also suffers from the same struggle to obtain adequate funding for many of the same reasons.³

2.2 Crime

Criminologists have argued for many years on how crime should be understood. Chapter Four will examine some of the theories of the causes of crime, because the views held as to the causes of crime clearly influence the crime prevention approach taken. All of these theories as to the causes of crime have at least some validity. The committee in this report, however,

¹ *Submission*, 11/11/99, NSW Police Service, p 1.

² Standing Committee on Law and Justice, *Proceedings of the Conference on Crime Prevention through Social Support*, Assistant Commissioner Christine Nixon, p 251.

³ For further see Tomison AM, *An Audit of Crime Prevention Programs in NSW*, NSW Child Protection Council 1997.

does not support any one theory. Rather, it wishes to examine crime prevention from the perspective of which strategies are most useful for policymakers and those responsible for preventing crime. This will involve examining which strategies have successful outcomes, whatever theory as to the nature of crime underpins the strategy.

Drug-related crime can illustrate the pragmatic approach taken in this report. There is little argument that illegal drug use is one of the major sources of crime in New South Wales at present. In 1999, the debate over whether to treat drug addiction as a crime or a public health issue was highlighted by the NSW Government's Drug Summit, held at Parliament House on the week of May 17-21. There are important arguments to be had over whether treating drug use as a crime is appropriate. However the advantage of effective crime prevention through social support is that reducing crime is just one of many outcomes. Policies introduced now to make children more resilient and less likely to become addicted to drugs will be just as beneficial to the community in 15 years time whether narcotic drug use is seen as a crime or only as a public health problem.

This report will contain many examples of studies which have shown how crime prevention interventions aimed at individuals and families can produce a range of positive outcomes. Because the causes of crime are complex and often interrelated, preventing crime through social support will have many flow on benefits beyond the area of behaviour specifically targeted.⁴

Chapter Three of this report contains an analysis of crime trends in New South Wales. Chapter Four examines the multiple causes of crime and discusses the reasons why some people do not offend or re-offend. The rest of this current chapter describes how crime prevention can be understood by the groups or individuals to whom the strategies are targeted, and by the types of models of crime prevention strategies used. For much of what follows the committee is grateful for the contribution made by Mr Peter Homel, Director of the Crime Prevention Division of the NSW Attorney General's Department during his evidence on 17 June 1999.

⁴ See *Pathways to Prevention* March 1999, National Crime Prevention for a more detailed survey of the literature.

2.3 Crime prevention

Crime prevention seeks to reduce the risks of criminal events and related anti-social behaviour by intervening in their causes.⁵ This can mean intervening at a macro level, influencing institutions and geographic regions, down to targeting individuals or small groups. Crime prevention can:

- anticipate future crime and plan to reduce it, such as through early intervention and family support; or
- respond to current crime by intervening in the environment, such as by improving lighting and surveillance in public areas or changing liquor licensing regulations.

The desired outcome of crime prevention is that the quality of life of individuals and their community improves because of greater community safety. Crime and related anti-social behaviour produces pain and suffering and economic loss, and the fear of crime erodes the morale and cohesiveness of a community. Successful crime prevention builds communities.

To understand the variety and complexity of crime prevention strategies two methods of classification will be used in this report. These ask the questions:

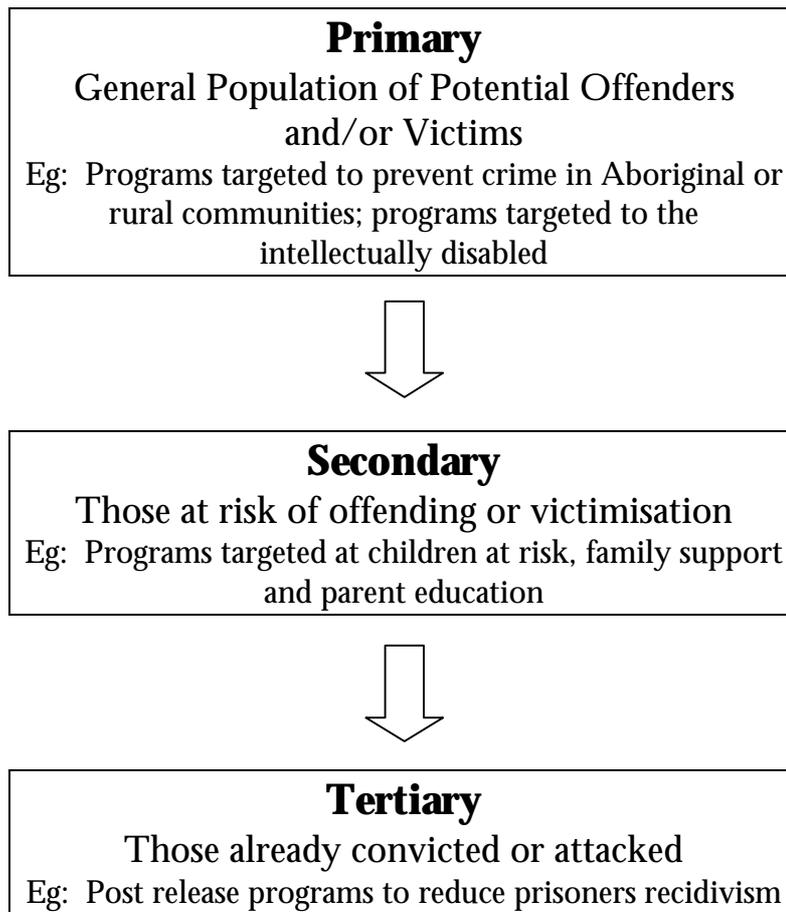
- “to whom is the crime prevention targeted?”; and
- “what model of crime prevention is to be used?”

Both these questions need to be asked in determining effective prevention strategies.

2.4 Crime prevention – target groups

In public health, distinction is made between primary, secondary and tertiary prevention. This is useful in understanding how crime prevention can be targeted. The diagram below presents this classification in its simplest form:

⁵ Ekblom 1996 in Bright *Turning the Tide* Demos 1997 p 8.



The terms of reference for this inquiry follow a similar structure:

- “the impact of changes in social services on criminal participation rates” is mainly concerned with primary prevention;
- “support programs to prevent people from developing delinquent or criminal behaviours” is mainly secondary prevention; while
- “the type and level of assistance and schemes needed to change offending behaviour” expresses the aims of most tertiary prevention.

This report in later chapters will focus on target groups for crime prevention strategies, such as the intellectually disabled. While this is useful as a starting point, as with any classification system the reality is messier, with much overlap. As an example, children of prisoners are a very at-risk group,⁶ so tertiary prevention strategies aimed at prisoners are likely to overlap with secondary prevention measures. Crime prevention in residential supported accommodation for the disabled can simultaneously

⁶ Standing Committee on Social Issues, *Report on Children of Imprisoned Parents, July 1997*.

assist victims and potential perpetrators, who are often the same individuals.⁷

2.5 Crime prevention – models of crime prevention

Just as important as knowing to whom crime prevention will be targeted is what type of strategies should be used. The basic models are summarised in the table below:

Model	Description	Types of Programs	Specific Examples
Early Intervention/ Developmental	providing support at critical times in individuals social, physical and mental development to prevent later offending	perinatal home visiting programs, family support childcare respite care	NSW Govt's Families First Program Benevolent Society's Early Intervention Program
Community Development	combination of programs aimed at building up communities to deal with their own social problems	local government crime prevention plans, place management	Canterbury Council's Community Protection Committee programs; Premier's Department Cabramatta Project
Situational/ Environmental	Programs to improve the physical environment in which people live and reduce opportunity for crime	street lighting, improved building security, formal and informal surveillance	Neighbourhood watch, reconstruction of the Dept of Housing's Villawood public housing estate
Law Enforcement	investigating and arresting offenders to prevent repeat offending and deter potential offenders	community policing; problem orientated policing	NSW Police Service community liaison officers; police operations in high crime areas

This report will not concern itself with the law enforcement model for the reasons stated above (2.1).

None of these models are mutually exclusive, they can complement or contradict each other depending upon the circumstances in which they are used. For example, the Schools as Community Centres program run by the NSW Department of Education is, in part, an early intervention model, assisting children and families at the crucial transition between home or childcare to the primary school system. However, it also pursues a

⁷ Submission, 4/12/98, Community Services Commission, p 5.

community development model, using the local school to extend links between families and other agencies and activities in the area.

The models of crime prevention can be a hotly contested issue. This is because the differing understandings of the causes of crime lead to different preferred models of crime prevention. Someone who has a strong belief in crime as a rational choice will favour models which increase the cost of offending to the offender, such as situational crime prevention. If crime is understood primarily as a consequence of social alienation the preferred crime prevention model will emphasise community development.

Most practitioners use a combination of models, and the committee believes all have a valid role to play. The committee would go further: to consistently prefer one crime prevention model over all others is to jump to the solution before considering the problem. To illustrate:

One of the committee members and a crime prevention expert visited a coastal town in Southern New South Wales in mid 1999. The town was experiencing a sudden increase in violence and anti-social activity in a walkway and park behind a shopping centre. Crowds were gathering, many of which seemed to be new to the town, and causing disruption. Shopkeepers and local residents had solutions but admitted to confusion as to the causes of the crime they wished to prevent.

Consultations with local Aboriginal elders revealed a surprising cause: the disruption was not due to drugs or declining parental authority but rather the cutting down of a tree. A willow tree had been cut down several months earlier as an environmental hazard. For a generation this tree had been the meeting point for new Aboriginals coming to the town: if someone wanted a place to stay or food they met at the willow tree.

The resulting trouble in town was partly the result of anger at the destruction of this focal point for their community; and partly the result of transient populations relocating their meeting place to a much more visible and potentially disruptive location.

The key to effective crime prevention initiatives is that they approach preventing crime as a problem open to many solutions. The variety of programs and perspectives in the second part of this report are an illustration of some of the solutions that require consideration by governments and others who wish to prevent crime through providing social support.