

**First Report of the Inquiry into Crime Prevention through Social  
Support  
Standing Committee on Law and Justice**

**December 1999**

# **Executive Summary**

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This is the First Report of the Inquiry in Crime Prevention Through Social Support. The Inquiry was referred to the Committee by the Hon Jeff Shaw, QC, MLC, Attorney General and Minister for Industrial Relations in 1998. The purpose of the report is to primarily stimulate interest and debate in crime prevention through social support in New South Wales.

Due to the extensive nature of the material submitted to this Inquiry, the committee considered that it would divide the report into two parts. Part One provides an overview of the major issues for this Inquiry. It includes issues relating to the risk factors associated with crime, a snapshot of crime in New South Wales and a guide to the key players in local crime prevention. Part Two of the report discusses specific target groups: children ages 0-5, local government and people with intellectual disabilities.

In the course of the inquiry the committee received 70 written submissions and heard testimony from 37 witnesses at seven public hearings. Members of the committee also made visits to Ballina, Moree and Merimbula. A conference on crime prevention in 1998, attended by over 180 participants, was also convened by the committee. Presentations were given from a range of local and international experts.

It is anticipated that further hearings will be conducted for the completion of this inquiry with further visits to rural New South Wales.

## **Crime Prevention in NSW**

*Chapter Two* of the report examines the interpretation and definition of crime prevention through social support. The committee believes that spending on crime prevention has been dominated by law and order approaches reliant upon more police and, ultimately, the building of more prisons. There is a great deal of evidence that crime can be effectively prevented by investing in social supports, particularly in the first three years of life, which can reduce the likelihood of children growing into juvenile and adult offenders.

Many programs at the moment prevent crime even though their stated objectives are "to improve childhood health" or "support intellectually disabled people to live successfully in the community", to quote two examples. The value of these

programs in reducing crime needs to be identified and recognised, and their success in preventing crime needs to be measured.

*Chapter Three* provides a brief overview of current crime statistics in New South Wales. It explains that the source of crime statistics is critical to their interpretation. Crime is predominantly committed by young male adults, who are also the most likely to be victims of crime. There is no evidence of a crime wave generally, nor is there evidence of a juvenile crime wave. Generally, juveniles offend only once, although some evidence suggest that this trend may be changing. Offenders and victims alike tend to be drawn from disadvantaged communities.

### **Risk Factors**

*Chapter Four* examines the theories, causes and risk factors associated with crime. It also looks at those protective factors which promote resilience and which can ultimately prevent offending behaviour.

Many causes and theories have been identified as contributing to crime. However, no one single cause can explain it, nor can one single solution address it. A range of risk factors are identified as being significant to offending behaviour. Among these are poverty, disadvantage, economic and social stress, childhood neglect, including poor parental supervision, educational difficulties, negative peer influence, drug and alcohol abuse, involvement with the substitute care system, intellectual disability, Aboriginality and over-policing in certain regions.

However the committee wishes to stress that, in the words of one witness, “risk is not destiny”. Included in Chapter Four is a discussion on protective factors - those factors that promote resilience in individuals, families and communities. These factors have been identified as countering the negative impacts of adverse life experiences. The earlier that protective factors are instilled in an individual, the greater the chances of preventing later offending behaviour.

Ideally, crime prevention should be about creating effective partnerships. *Chapter Five* identifies those departments and agencies which play a significant crime prevention role. Crime prevention is not just the sole responsibility of criminal justice agencies such as the Police Service, Corrective Services, Juvenile Justice and the Attorney General’s Department. Human services departments such as the Department of Community Services, Ageing and Disability, Health, Education and Training, and Sport and Recreation all have important roles to play in addressing the preconditions which lead to crime. Federal agencies, such as National Crime Prevention, non-government agencies and even the private sector all have a significant role.

### **Early Childhood Intervention**

The committee considers that early intervention and early childhood intervention is the key to effective crime prevention. Early intervention and early childhood intervention are examined in detail in Chapter Six. The US based RAND Institute found that certain early intervention and early childhood intervention strategies

can both reduce crime and be more cost effective than other more punitive measures. A number of programs are examined, including David Old's Elmira Home Visiting program, the Perry Pre-School program, child care, the Schools as Community Centres program, Parents as Teachers and NEWPIN. The committee recognises that the benefits of crime prevention programs can take time but can, in the long run, prove to be more valuable than those which have an immediate yet short-lived effect.

The chapter also includes a detailed discussion of the NSW Government's new Families First program. The committee believes the program is a welcome initiative despite some criticisms made by the non-government sector. Recommendations regarding Families First focus on the need to evaluate the effectiveness of the volunteer component of the program and the need for improved consultation.

### **Local Government**

*Chapter Seven* examines the relationship between local government and crime prevention. Local government has a responsibility to contribute to the improved safety of the communities it serves, although the committee does not support a mandatory crime prevention role being imposed on councils. There is growing interest in crime prevention by local councils. The committee was particularly impressed by the holistic planning undertaken by several urban and rural councils.

Despite the excellent work undertaken by these councils and the Crime Prevention Division of the Attorney General's Department, the committee is concerned that most councils are still locked into seeing crime prevention as predominantly law enforcement. This has led some councils to pursue inappropriate strategies such as employing law enforcement officers. The committee believes there is a need for a communications strategy, driven by State Government in consultation with local councils, to promote the effective work undertaken by some councils, and stimulate further interest in crime prevention at a local government level.

The committee believes programs such as the Families First program, the Department of Education and Training's Schools as Community Centres program and the place management experiment being conducted by the Premier's Department all provide potential opportunities to enhance crime prevention at a local government level. The Government needs to examine whether an increase in resources for the Crime Prevention Division of the Attorney General's Department is required given the increasing interest in local government crime prevention. In addition a strategy is required to raise awareness of alternative sources of grant funding for one-off crime prevention initiatives at a local level.

The committee has visited two of the four areas in which the *Children (Protection and Parental Responsibility) Act 1997* has been made operational. It has been impressed with the way the Act has contributed to leading councils to holistic crime prevention planning. Night bus services operated by youth services and an Aboriginal community group have been used to reduce the need for direct confrontations with police in the implementation of the Act in Ballina and Moree.

The committee is concerned that other councils, and local Police and Community Services staff, may have rejected the model based upon misconceptions about the Act imposing a heavy handed law and order approach.

### **People With Intellectual Disabilities**

*Chapter Eight* addresses issues relating to people with intellectual disabilities. People with intellectual disabilities are a group which can be particularly helped by crime prevention through social support, both as victims and as perpetrators. Almost one in five of the current prison population has a moderate to borderline intellectual disability, despite being only 2-3% of the population. This over-representation has risen over the last 10 years.

The committee notes that some improvements have been made in the co-ordination of human services and criminal justice agencies since the release of the highly critical NSW Law Reform Commission Report in 1996. However, it is concerned that witnesses were not able to provide specific examples of programs where intellectually disabled persons with challenging behaviour are enabled to live successfully in the community with appropriate supports. To remedy this the committee recommends a project which identifies such services, evaluates them and uses this as a way to advance crime prevention in this area.

The committee supports the current policy of closure of large institutions, as it believes this could reduce crimes committed against people with intellectual disabilities. However, the policy needs to be supported by a significant increase in funding of support services to avoid a continued rise in the over-representation of intellectually disabled persons in prisons. There is a risk that without adequate social supports being provided, closure of large residential facilities may simply lead to some intellectually disabled people being housed in the even harsher prison institutions.

The committee also identifies areas where support programs are currently lacking for those in the community, and the need for “risk of offending” to be a criteria for provision of services. Currently the level of disability determines service provision, where as crime is generally committed by those at the more moderate level of the disability spectrum.

The committee is concerned that police and courts may not detect a disability in many instances, and recommend increased training and use of screening tests.

### **Evaluation**

The importance of evaluation to determine the effectiveness of crime prevention programs is discussed in *Chapter Nine*. There have been rigorous evaluations overseas which have proven that crime prevention through social support, such as preschool programs and home visiting are effective in reducing later juvenile offending. The committee believes there is a need to develop a greater body of local evaluation. While many of the recommendations of the report are to this end, the committee also recommends the Premier’s Council on Crime Prevention

initiate a project to consult outcome evaluations of major funding initiatives, such as the Families First program, and programs which have potential to be expanded.

**Future Work**

In *Chapter Ten*, the committee identifies the areas which it anticipates addressing in a later report. These include children and young people in care and state wards, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups, policing and crime prevention, employment, housing, sport, mental illness, juvenile offending, and prisoner recidivism.