

Executive Summary

This is the Second Report of the Inquiry into Crime Prevention Through Social Support. The Inquiry was referred to the Committee by the Hon Jeff Shaw, QC, MLC, the former Attorney General, in 1998. The Committee's work on this reference ends with the tabling of this Second Report.

The Committee received 72 written submissions and heard testimony from 58 witnesses at ten public hearings. Members of the committee travelled extensively throughout NSW to meet with local councils, community leaders, state government agencies and members of the public. Areas visited included Moree, Dubbo, Ballina, Merimbula, Kempsey, Newcastle and Lake Macquarie. While gaining evidence for this Second Report the committee was able to receive useful feedback on its First Report.

This Second Report takes as its theme crime prevention in disadvantaged communities. Poverty and disadvantage are becoming increasingly localised. The committee believes crime prevention in disadvantaged communities should take the form of community renewal through the provision of effective social supports. Throughout the report crime is addressed as a problem for whole communities not just the immediate victims, offenders and the police.

PART ONE: Crime Prevention and Community Renewal in Disadvantaged Communities

Chapter Two: Housing

Poverty in Australia is increasingly a geographic phenomenon. In Chapter Two the committee examines crime prevention in localised areas of disadvantage, with a focus on public housing and low income housing areas. The committee notes that the high rate of NSW home ownership, stable since the 1940s, has declined significantly in the last ten years. There is an increase in low income groups seeking to rent but fewer low rental properties available. Public housing stock has not increased, with changes in Federal policy favouring rental assistance payments over funding of new public housing stock.

Welfare recipients or low income earners are increasingly concentrated in local areas with high rates of unemployment and other social problems, including crime. This concentration of poverty is increasingly leading to social exclusion, with lack of access to employment, transport and service. This carries the potential to create inter-generational cycles of alienation and crime.

The committee had the opportunity to visit several areas of high crime where a combination of factors had contributed to community renewal. The most dramatic turnaround was seen in the Proctor Way public housing estate in Claymore. Previously this estate was a graffiti scarred landscape littered with abandoned stolen cars, and suffered daily crime problems. A responsive community based management and the entry of new residents combined to substantially eradicate the crime problem in less than two years. A cohesive community spirit has developed, including a substantial communal garden and a tenant based employment scheme. There is now a 12 month waiting list for a tenancy at the estate.

Based upon this and other examples the committee has seen in Kempsey and Dubbo, the committee has developed principles for those wishing to prevent crime in economically deprived areas. These include:

- community participation in all stages of any intervention;
- locally based management rather than a distant bureaucracy;
- community ownership of improvements, so that it is seen as the community's achievement;
- adequate resources for improvements; and
- effective sanctions against disruptive members of the community.

The committee recognises some of these principles are used more generally by the Department of Housing and by the Premier's Department Strategic Projects Division. The committee sees a need, however, for the State government to develop a crime prevention strategy for areas with significant numbers of public housing dwellings which also have a significant crime problem. Each area should develop its own crime prevention plan, and the communities should be assisted in this by an easily accessed grant program providing small scale funding to local councils, community groups, chambers of commerce, local police or others in the community. These local plans need to include a "get tough" strategy on those minority of tenants who are engaged in criminal activities which impact on surrounding residents.

Chapter Three: Aboriginal Communities

Aboriginal communities in NSW suffer from much greater collective social and economic disadvantage than any other group. This disadvantage greatly increases the risk of offending, with the criminal justice system becoming the gatekeeper when social supports fail. Despite being only 2% of the population, Aboriginal persons in NSW are:

- one third of juveniles in detention;
- one in four female prisoners; and
- one in seven males in prison.

The committee emphasises the importance of applying self determination in crime prevention in Aboriginal communities, as there is little evidence of success of programs imposed from outside their communities. Self determination includes ensuring Aboriginal communities have input into the program from its beginnings through to implementation. The committee sees the need to strengthen the role of authority figures in Aboriginal communities, such as Elders. Recommendations include involving Aboriginal leaders in police cautioning of young offenders and consultation in decisions about interventions in families where there are claims of neglect.

During visits to rural areas with high Aboriginal populations the committee gained an appreciation of the practical importance of reconciliation as a starting point for effective crime prevention. Following an example in Kempsey, the committee recommends the government work with the Local Government and Shires Associations to encourage local councils to sign reconciliation statements with their local Aboriginal community.

Employment is a major problem in Aboriginal communities. In some towns less than a handful of Aboriginals work in private businesses, and almost never in shops or customer service roles. The committee believes improvements would assist to reduce crime. Employment programs need to consider barriers to employment particular to Aboriginal peoples. The most effective example of this was run in Moree by a cotton growers' association. This has successfully placed many locals in private sector jobs and successfully negotiated substantial numbers of positions for Aboriginal persons in a new supermarket opened in Moree. The committee recommends the government establish a task force, comprised of industry and Aboriginal representatives to encourage an increase in private sector employment of Aboriginal men and women in rural areas, with a specific industry focus.

PART TWO: Young People and Crime Prevention

Chapter Four: Young People and Juvenile Justice; Young People at Risk

The potential for effective crime prevention among young people is high because of the very low rate of re-offending of young people compared to adult offenders. The majority of young people who offend do so only once and then desist. The numbers of young people held in detention have declined over the last five years, currently numbering around 350. However the recidivism rate for this small core of young people is around 80%, in contrast to the majority of young offenders.

The *Young Offenders Act 1997* allows police to issue formal cautions if a young person admits to a minor offence, or involve the offender in a community youth conference. The committee supports this policy because it reduces the "contamination" effect of contact with the criminal justice system. However, cautioning should be used alongside positive programs and incentives to reduce offending behaviour. It is being used less frequently by police for Aboriginal young people than the rest of the population. The committee was impressed by the programs of the Department of Juvenile Justice and its proactive approach to working with young people.

Young people with a mental illness are at particular risk of contact with the criminal justice system. They are also vulnerable to becoming victims of crime and becoming homeless. The situation in rural areas is particularly acute, with jail sometimes being the only institution available with facilities for the mentally ill. This is an illustration of how inadequate social supports leave criminal justice agencies as a dumping ground for social problems.

There is evidence that many state wards have drifted into the juvenile justice system, "graduating" to adult prison. There was dispute during the inquiry as to the extent of this drift, with estimates ranging from 2.3% to 17% of young people in juvenile detention centres being state wards. The most important risk factor is the harmful effect of multiple placements with different carers. Children who have moved three or more times have arrest rates almost twice as high as those wards who had fewer than three moves. The committee recommends reviews of the current Wards Project of the Department of Juvenile Justice and Community Services; an evaluation of the effectiveness of respite care in reducing the number of placements; and implementation of several Community Service Commission recommendations.

Chapter Five: Young People in Public Space

All citizens, young or old, have the right to use and enjoy public space, they also have the responsibility not to interfere with the enjoyment of that space by others. The committee cites examples of shopping centre management, local councils and young people successfully negotiating shared use of public space in a way which accommodates the needs of young people while considering crime prevention factors. This contrasts with approaches aimed at driving away young people, such as playing classical music or using fluorescent lighting. The committee supports approaches which integrate rather than alienate young people. It recommends the Department of Urban Affairs and Planning develop a strategy to promote its planning guidelines for young people as a crime prevention measure able to be used by local councils.

The committee has seen several examples of effective youth work contributing to crime prevention during the inquiry. However it is concerned that youth work overall is ad hoc, under-funded and lacks integration into other structures. The committee recommends a government review into how youth work can make a more strategic contribution to crime prevention. The committee believes sport and recreation programs can successfully be used with at risk youth. The work of the Police and Citizens Youth Clubs and similar groups can be expanded to provide programs for community service orders in country areas. Transport, particularly at night, also has an important role in reducing the likelihood of young people offending or being victims of crime.

Truancy is a risk factor for offending. Causes of truancy vary, but can include undiagnosed learning difficulties, parental neglect, avoidance of bullying and a delinquent peer group. The committee was amazed at the extent of absenteeism in some towns it visited, with one school having a third of the school population absent on the day of a truancy survey. The committee believes current programs to reduce truancy do not appear to be working in some areas, and recommends the Premier's Council on Crime Prevention examine this issue as a priority.

During the inquiry the committee received evidence that Federal changes to the Youth Allowance were creating hardship, with instances of homeless people wrongfully being denied benefits by Centrelink. The committee is concerned that the implementation of Federal policy in this area, if not the policy itself, may be contributing to the potential for youth crime.

PART THREE: Prisoner Recidivism and Prisoner's Return to the Community

Chapter Six : Recidivism and Programs within Prison

There is ample evidence that crime prevention is most effective when interventions are made early, long before offending leads to a prison sentence. Prison is generally not an effective way to prevent offending behaviour, and should be used as a last resort. Repeat offending is very high, with 39% of prisoners re-offending within two years of their release. These prisoners are typically from disadvantaged backgrounds, with 60% not functionally literate, 48% unemployed and very high representation of people from Aboriginal or non-English speaking backgrounds.

The numbers in NSW prisons significantly increased in 1998/99, with an increase of 12% in that year. The committee is concerned that even before this increase there were too few places available in prison for programs to reduce drug and alcohol addiction, education skills and mental health programs. The committee recommends increases in funding for these programs to keep pace with the increases in prison numbers. If a prisoner returns to the community

without effective treatment of their drug or alcohol problem their prospects for re-offending are very high.

The committee is concerned that the Department of Corrective Services may currently be under-estimating the numbers of the prison population with an intellectual disability, and recommends addressing this in case management of prisoners.

Chapter Seven: Post Release Programs and Families of Prisoners

The great majority of prisoners return to the community after their sentence. The way in which they make this transition will very much influence whether they re-offend. Equally, if not more important, is that prisoners are able to maintain or re-establish links with their family or the wider community.

The Probation and Parole Service currently supervises 13,700 offenders in the community. The costs of managing offenders in this way, including community service orders, is around \$3.50-\$5.50 per day compared to \$160 per day for imprisonment. The committee recommends an evaluation of the success of these programs in preventing recidivism, and to identify any weaknesses in current parole procedures.

The committee is concerned that too many prisoners are released into the community without adequate preparation such as identification, bank accounts and accommodation options. Releasing a prisoner into the community without proper preparation greatly adds to the prospect of their re-offending. The committee is concerned that a low priority is given to funding of community groups to support ex-prisoners. The Community Grants Program receives only \$1.8 million, less than 0.35% of the Department's total budget. The committee recommends a significant increase in funding levels to assist in reducing recidivism.

The majority of women and a substantial proportion of male prisoners are parents. Preserving links between prisoners and their families can greatly assist the prisoner's integration into the community. It may also prevent the beginning of an inter generational offending cycle. The committee recommends increased input by prisoners and prisoner's families into policies and programs of the Department aimed at preventing recidivism.

During the inquiry several problems were raised regarding the impact of changes in Federal welfare policy on prisoner recidivism. Prisoners upon release are forced to survive for four weeks on the equivalent of three weeks social security, at a time when they are at most risk of re-offending. There are also said to be problems in Centrelink staff wrongfully cancelling parenting payments to families of prisoners. Also, since the Jobs Network was established there is no specialist service assisting ex-prisoners obtain employment.

The committee concludes the report by stating that there is persuasive empirical evidence that spending on early intervention, particularly in childhood, is as effective and much cheaper than law and order approaches to crime prevention. NSW will benefit far more from assisting a neglected, at risk two year old today than it will by giving him or her a long prison sentence in twenty years time.