

Trends & issues

in crime and criminal justice



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Foreword | *Research from Australia and overseas consistently demonstrates that the effectiveness of many crime prevention initiatives is reduced by a continual lack of access to adequate crime prevention knowledge and technical skills. In particular, the internationalisation of crime has highlighted the need for renewed effort aimed at increasing the efficiency of knowledge transfer, skills development, project and program management ability, and performance measurement and evaluation capacity. This paper suggests the development of a comprehensive national framework for a technical support program. This will help improve the active dissemination of crime prevention knowledge, including research findings, evaluation and effective interventions; the development of physical and online resources, toolkits and other materials to assist in improving the skills and capacity of those engaged in crime prevention work; identifying and working with key training providers to assist in the development of appropriate content for training and workforce development relevant to the wide variety of crime prevention practitioners; and a program of research and evaluation work directed towards improving the evidence base for effective crime prevention interventions.*

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Improving crime prevention knowledge and practice

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Addressing the Security Council in 2004, the United Nations Secretary General observed that '[i]n matters of justice and the rule of law, an ounce of prevention is worth significantly more than a pound of cure...prevention is the first imperative of justice' (United Nations 2004: 1). In other words, the prevention of crime is a keystone requirement for the establishment of a safe and secure society, the achievement of which is a prerequisite for sound economic growth through continuing business investment as well as community wellbeing and cohesion.

Evidence from several countries indicates that implementing and sustaining effective and efficient crime prevention initiatives can contribute significantly to the achievement of safe and secure societies. For example, along with many other developed, Western countries, Australia has experienced significant declines in almost all categories of crime over the past decade. Recent figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) confirm a continuing decline in crime in Australia, with a drop of around 10 percent in most categories of crime from 2006 to 2007 (ABS 2008). The overall victimisation rate in 2005 was six percent, compared with nine percent in 2002 (ABS 2006). Significantly, the rates for a range of property crimes in Australia are now at their lowest levels since records were first collected (ABS 2008).

A similar picture emerges from other parts of the world. Canada, for example, is continuing to experience a decline in its crime rates. In fact, the most recent figures for reported crime in Canada indicate that the 2007 national crime rate is at its lowest for 30 years, with a seven percent decline during the previous year representing the third consecutive annual decrease (Dauvergne 2008).

Similar patterns exist in the United Kingdom, where figures show that crime in England and Wales has fallen by 42 percent, following a peak in 1995, such that the risk of being a victim of crime is now only 24 percent compared with 40 percent in 1995 (Kershaw, Nicholas & Walker 2008).

It is more difficult to make definitive statements about recent crime trends in the United States due to changes in data collection methodologies used for the *National Crime Victimization Survey*. However, it appears that violent and property crime rates in urban and suburban areas of the United States remained stable between 2005 and 2006 (Rand & Catalano 2007).

A report on the most recent *International Criminal Victimization Survey*, conducted during 2004–05, shows that crime levels in 2004 had declined to a level similar to that of the late 1980s (van Dijk, van Kesteren & Smit 2007).

These trends indicate that crime prevention work can be effective, as it is unlikely that all decreases in crime are solely the result of the strong economic conditions experienced until recently. This also points to the need to sustain an effective crime prevention effort. For example, the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) has estimated that the current cost of crime is \$36b per year (Rollings 2008), which suggests that as encouraging as recent declines in crime rates may be, there remains a considerable level of cost related to crime that can be reduced and/or prevented.

Recent Australian experience has shown how quickly social disorganisation and crime can develop to serious levels within otherwise 'normal' communities, to the point that it becomes necessary for governments to expend significant resources attempting to restore order and economic viability (eg Cabramatta in New South Wales during the late 1990s (NSW Health 2003) and the current Australian Government emergency response to address child sexual abuse in a number of Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory (FaHCSIA nd)).

Realising the promise of crime prevention

For the promise of prevention to be realised, the range of necessary professional competencies needs to be articulated. Such competencies must reflect the complexities of the populations and issues intended to be served by preventive action, be they vulnerable populations whose victimisation is often hidden (eg abuse of children in their homes, spousal violence), or specific issues such as violence, high crime neighbourhoods, or trafficked persons.

At the same time, for crime prevention to be effective and efficient, it needs

to be designed and managed with a sophistication and maturity of vision that sees it planned and delivered in a systematic and integrated fashion. For too long, crime prevention has been approached as an activity that is an adjunct to the 'main game' of investigating, prosecuting and punishing crime. International research indicates that crime prevention is optimally effective when it is embraced as an activity in its own right with its own goals and objectives. These require high level sustained commitment and appropriate and adequate resourcing (Homel et al. 2004; Sherman et al. 2002).

To achieve this, thinking about crime prevention must move beyond specific short-term projects to embedded, long-term programs. This is because design and delivery of effective crime prevention outcomes is complex (Homel 2009) which reflects the complexity and multifaceted nature of the underlying causes of crime (Hope 1995; Sutton, Cherney & White 2008; Weatherburn 2004). Therefore, a good crime prevention program must be built on the use of multiple interventions to address linked problems; for example, the use of a mixture of public education, policing and physical design measures to control alcohol consumption in order to prevent public violence and related offences such as drunk driving. The specific activities that comprise each of these interventions should be implemented at the same time or in a very tightly organised, logical sequence. Within this example, it would be typical for the public education component of an alcohol and violence initiative to be simultaneously supported by changes to policing practice, as well as physical changes to drinking venues and immediate surrounding areas (Graham & Homel 2008).

To facilitate this, crime prevention managers should use collaborative multi-agency action, operating through partnership arrangements designed to achieve a range of shared outcomes (Homel 2009). Using the issue of alcohol-related violence as an example, such a partnership may be made up of concerned citizens, police, alcohol retailers, local and central government

representatives, other businesses local to the area affected by violent events, health and transport providers, and a range of other interest groups, including alcohol manufacturers and victims of violence. Each would have reasons for participating in any intervention designed to reduce and prevent alcohol-related violence and each would have their own goals they wish to achieve. For example, concerned citizens and local businesses may be primarily interested in action to improve general public amenity. For alcohol retailers and other local businesses, their participation may be driven by a commercial incentive as much as any altruistic motive, as a reputation for providing a safe environment has obvious benefits for public patronage and commercial viability. Police are interested in reducing crime associated with violence and transport authorities look at impacts on the safety of their employees, as well as potential for property damage. Health authorities (eg ambulance, accident and emergency etc) have an interest in reducing alcohol-related injury and victims, of course, are interested in preventing victimisation.

In the past, initiatives to address this sort of problem would frequently be seen in terms of short-term projects directed at specific 'one off' local issues. However, the widespread persistence and recurrence of crime problems of this nature have led those responsible for developing crime prevention responses to search for more systematic and comprehensive solutions that address the longer-term underlying causes of the problem. This results in looking to interventions that acknowledge the structural causes associated with the more deeply embedded social, economic and cultural dimensions, rather than just the immediate causes of the problem or the behaviour of individuals.

Further, experience has shown that crime prevention is often poorly or narrowly defined and understood, even by many working to achieve crime prevention goals (Anderson & Homel 2006; Homel et al. 2004).

At its most basic, crime prevention takes two forms: the *environmental* approach and

the *social* or *structural* approach (Sutton, Cherney & White 2008). While these two approaches are not in conflict and are often both utilised within specific crime prevention initiatives, they have some distinctive differences, which are reflected in the way responses to particular crime problems are perceived, and the type of interventions selected and applied.

For example, the social/structural approach is most commonly directed at trying to influence the underlying social and economic causes of crime, while the environmental approach seeks to change the specific characteristics of the environment that causes criminal events. Environmental crime prevention interventions include, but are not limited to, activities such as improved security through strengthening locks and increasing surveillance. The social/structural approaches may include action to improve housing, health and educational achievement, as well as improved community cohesion through community development measures. The social approach also tends to focus on crime prevention measures that can take some time to produce the intended results.

Regardless of what mix of crime prevention approaches are employed and their relative merits, experience in Australia and overseas has shown consistently that the effectiveness of crime prevention initiatives are frequently reduced by practical technical problems associated with, among other issues:

- ineffective and inefficient processes for the transfer and uptake of available knowledge about good crime prevention practice and research, such that there is a failure to learn and apply valuable lessons;
- the absence of a skilled and professional crime prevention workforce;
- inadequate project and program management ability; and
- lack of knowledge and experience with performance measurement and program evaluation. (Homel 2006; Homel et al. 2004).

These were among the key issues identified in the review of the previous government's *National Community Crime Prevention*

Program (Homel et al. 2007), as well as in work previously undertaken in New South Wales (Anderson & Homel 2005), Victoria, South Australia and currently in Western Australia (Anderson & Homel 2006; Anderson & Tresidder 2008). These are also major themes evident in Canada's *National Crime Prevention Strategy* (Homel 2009).

The international crime prevention experience

During 2008, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) convened a meeting of technical experts for the purposes of strengthening UNODC's capacity to provide technical assistance in the field of crime prevention and the implementation of the crime prevention guidelines adopted by the Economic and Social Council (UNODC 2008).

The meeting provided input to the preparation of two practical instruments aimed at facilitating the implementation of crime prevention projects and other initiatives worldwide; namely, a draft crime prevention assessment tool and an outline for a manual on making the UN crime prevention guidelines work. In other words, the emphasis was not on what to do, but how to do it, and how to make it happen.

Knowing *what* to do has been well described. For example, the 2002 UN *Guidelines for the Prevention of Crime* outlines eight principles on which prevention should be based. These are:

- *government leadership*—at all levels to create and maintain an institutional framework for effective crime prevention;
- *socioeconomic development and inclusion*—integration of crime prevention into relevant social and economic policies, a focus on integration of at risk communities, children, families and youth;
- *cooperation and partnerships*—between government organisations, civil society and the business sector;
- *sustainability and accountability*—adequate funding to establish and sustain programs and evaluation, and clear accountability for funding;

- *use of a knowledge base*—using evidence of proven practices as the basis for policies and programs;
- *human rights/rule of law/culture of lawfulness*—respect for human rights and promotion of a culture of lawfulness;
- *interdependency*—take account of links between local crime problems and international organised crime; and
- *differentiation*—respecting different needs of men and women and vulnerable members of society (ECOSOC 2002).

In focusing on the task of making the UN crime prevention guidelines work, the UNODC experts meeting in Berlin in 2008 concluded that:

Crime prevention promotes the rule of law and human rights

Effective crime prevention contributes to strengthening the rule of law and enhancing human rights. In other words, the opportunity to live a life largely free of becoming a victim of crime is a basic human right.

Crime prevention is a cause-oriented solution

As opposed to specific criminal justice approaches, crime prevention addresses the underlying causes of crime, and as such, promotes long-term and sustainable solutions to threats posed by crime. This is particularly relevant when addressing crime networks such as youth gangs and organised crime.

Crime prevention pays

Studies suggest that crime prevention programs are economically viable and can achieve significant return on investment in terms of savings in justice, welfare, health care and the protection of social and human capital (Greenwood et al. 1998; Homel et al. 2006; Reynolds et al. 2001).

Crime prevention should be an integral part of economic, political and social development

Crime is a major impediment to economic, social and political development. As such, the donor community and international

development partners should integrate international cooperation in crime prevention into their overall efforts towards achieving the UN *Millennium Development Goals*. In particular, international cooperation in crime prevention should focus on youth in contexts of poverty and social exclusion.

Crime prevention should be integrated with other areas of prevention

The objective of crime prevention can best be achieved in close cooperation with other areas of prevention. Crime prevention strategies and programs therefore need to create professional interfaces, promote reciprocal understanding and acceptance of different prevention objectives, methods, technical expertise and standards, including in the areas of health, education and environmental protection.

Crime prevention is a responsibility concerning all of society

Effective crime prevention policies need to establish channels of communication, and platforms of exchange, aimed at actively involving individual citizens, non-government organisations, private relief organisations, professional and religious associations, and the private sector in determining how to make society collectively safer through civic commitment, democratic participation and civil courage.

Crime prevention should apply the principle of subsidiarity

Crime prevention takes place at different levels: local, sub-national, national and international. The division of tasks and resources should be structured in accordance with the subsidiarity principle; that is, the investment of authority with ensuing resources and responsibilities at the lowest possible level of government, usually the level of local or municipal government.

Crime prevention requires socio-cultural sensitivity and interdisciplinary approaches

Effective crime prevention policies need to apply the UN guidelines for the prevention of crime appropriately for different socio-cultural contexts. Police, justice, school,

health care, and juvenile and social authorities, rank among the central services and occupational groups in local networks for crime prevention. The police have a special role in this network, as successful crime prevention cannot be carried out without their active cooperation.

Crime prevention needs diagnosis/ audits, benchmarking, monitoring, evaluation and exchange

Projects and programs on crime prevention should be designed based on the results of participatory diagnosis or participatory local safety audits, be grounded in sound theoretical methods and be monitored and evaluated systematically. A process of open exchange of relevant ideas and experience between all participants in the planning, delivery and review process should be encouraged. Good practices should be identified and widely promoted through research projects, interdisciplinary workshops and conferences, and other methods such as awards.

Crime prevention requires increased technical assistance

Funding crime prevention is a way to develop pre-emptive measures and to ensure the proper utilisation of resources for the delivery of justice. Consequently, relevant technical assistance projects should contain budgetary provisions to enable the integration of crime prevention measures. This includes the promotion and incorporation of measures to ensure that funds made available to deliver crime prevention activity are not misappropriated or redirected away from their intended purpose, that is, the prevention of crime.

Crime prevention should become a professional field in its own right

Specialised further education and advanced training programs have been developed in several countries for both full-time employees as well as volunteers in various fields of crime prevention. At this stage, there is a need to engage universities and other actors for the development of specific training, professional certification and standard setting in crime prevention.

Crime prevention requires tools and instruments

For the implementation of effective crime prevention, many countries will need specialised guides, tools and other materials.

What action is needed in the Australian context?

Taken together, these points provide significant guidance and support for the development of a comprehensive Australian national strategy and process for delivering technical assistance to what is a diverse crime prevention workforce in order to improve performance and effectiveness on a number of key dimensions. The following section provides a basic outline of how this might be achieved in Australia.

First, experience with reviews by the AIC of crime prevention work in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Queensland, Western Australia and the recent *National Community Crime Prevention Program* has established that there exists a clear need to invest in a strategic technical assistance program for the dissemination of good practice approaches to crime prevention and the promotion of innovative crime prevention among the wider crime prevention workforce. This investment will need to be undertaken over a number of years in order to enhance the effectiveness of existing crime prevention activities as well as preparing for new and emerging issues. This position is reinforced by the analysis of a number of other prominent Australian crime researchers including Weatherburn (2004) and Sutton, Cherney and White (2008).

This view is echoed by the experience of the panel of experts established to assist the UNODC implement the UN crime prevention guidelines and other international experience with countries in similar situations, such as Canada (see Homel 2009) and the United Kingdom (Solomon 2009). Furthermore, the increasing internationalisation of crime and the growth of transnational criminal activity are defining a new set of challenges for ensuring a technically-skilled, crime prevention

workforce capable of delivering the best, most cost-effective interventions both for Australian practitioners and internationally through the need for cooperative training and exchange programs.

Formulating an adequate response to these issues involves two main tasks:

- improving workforce skills and organisational development; and
- strengthening and improving the effective dissemination of the crime prevention evidence base.

Skill deficits within the crime prevention workforce are the major contributor to current difficulties in the capacity to deliver effective crime prevention programs. This is, in turn, a major hindrance to achieving the long-term sustainable prevention of crime.

Research has demonstrated just how debilitating these problems can be on the effectiveness of even large-scale programs. For example, a review of the UK's *Crime Reduction Programme* during 2001–02 showed that between 25 and 50 percent of the 1,500 individual initiatives that made up this four year, £400m program had varying levels of significant implementation failure within the first three years. This was due to a number of closely related factors, the most important of which were:

- ongoing difficulties recruiting suitably qualified and skilled staff;
- high staff turnover, particularly as a result of competition for the few highly skilled staff available;
- generally inadequate technical and strategic advice from the central agency guiding implementation, as well as intermediate agencies; and
- inadequate levels of project management competency and skill, particularly around the management of finances (Homel et al. 2004).

Clearly, these are not new issues. A detailed Australian Government funded project in the late 1990s also highlighted the need for 'an integrated national training framework for crime prevention to ensure any training is of high quality and is effectively targeted'

(Wyatt et al. 1999: 1). However, it is clear that the need remains unsatisfied and there is still a need to develop some options to redress this deficit.

One approach could be to establish a crime prevention technical assistance fund, managed through a suitably supported, high-level advisory body. The function of this fund would be to sponsor relevant and appropriate professional training, promote the development of events and processes, as well as guide the growth of a more effectively disseminated crime prevention evidence base.

There would be a need to create mechanisms at the national level to assist in developing and delivering these capacity-building resources in a way that enabled better performance and goal achievement. Without more strategic coordination, the currently modest and largely uncoordinated levels of investment in capacity building provided through the states and territories, as well as via key national agencies, runs the risk of remaining ineffective.

The brief of the crime prevention technical assistance fund would be to coordinate and support the development of strategies and activities to:

- promote the active dissemination of crime prevention knowledge, including research findings, evaluation and effective interventions;
- guide the development of physical and online resources, toolkits and other materials to assist in improving the skills and capacity of those engaged in crime prevention work;
- assist in identifying and working with key training providers to assist in the development of appropriate content for training and workforce development relevant to the wide variety of crime prevention practitioners;
- advise on developing a model performance measurement and evaluation framework to be used as a tool for assessing progress and emerging priorities for the provision of technical support to the crime prevention field; and

- steering the development of a program of research and evaluation work directed towards improving the evidence base for effective crime prevention interventions.

Clearly, the proposal for a crime prevention technical assistance fund is just one way to address these needs. However, it reflects an acknowledgement that there are large numbers of different professional and non-professional groups engaged in the task of trying to prevent crime. Within each of these groups, there will be a specific range of skills and form of knowledge that will need to be addressed. Identifying, sorting and responding to these in a strategic way will be essential to knowing where assistance should be most effectively and efficiently targeted (Ekblom 2007).

Fortunately, a range of sector-specific agencies dedicated to enhancing skills and knowledge relevant to improved crime prevention practice already exist and their knowledge and expertise can be drawn upon to make this task manageable. For example, within policing alone there are numerous bodies. Some qualified agencies will also exist among other sectors such as local government, social work, housing, health and education. As such, it will be necessary to develop a detailed plan linked to a set of national goals for crime prevention. Properly implementing these goals will require an adequate level of consultation and engagement with critical groups in order to formulate an appropriate model, framework and implementation plan. This will take time and will need to be done with sensitivity and professional respect.

Overall, however, if crime prevention is to develop beyond a disconnected series of innovative initiatives into a strategic program of work that is capable of effectively contributing to long term improvements in community safety, then this is a task that needs to be addressed as soon as possible.

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