

# Trends & issues

in crime and criminal justice



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**Foreword** | *In Australia, crime prevention is primarily the responsibility of state and territory governments. What is less well understood is the significant role of local government in developing and delivering crime prevention at the community level, although councils have long been involved in helping to create safer communities.*

*This research offers one of the first detailed insights into the valuable contribution made by local government within the multi-layered crime prevention strategies and initiatives which keep Australian communities safe. The Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee of the Parliament of Victoria carried out this research as part of an investigation into locally-based approaches to community safety and crime prevention in 2011. The results of a comprehensive survey of the crime prevention activities of local government authorities across Victoria are examined.*

*This study reveals the issues local government prioritises, the responses they deploy and the challenges that they face, such as gaps in capacity and the need to manage complex relationships between participants who work on local community safety. Findings reveal a system that, while highly variable in sophistication and reach, provides an important platform for improving local community safety. The study also identifies important gaps and opportunities to improve collaboration between government and the private and NGO sectors.*

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## Understanding the local government role in crime prevention

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Local government plays a central role in the design, management and delivery of crime prevention programs and policies in every Australian state and territory jurisdiction. This role has also been recognised at the national level with successive national crime prevention grants programs directing a significant amount of funding to local government (Homel et al. 2007; Morgan & Homel 2013).

Still, the role of local government in creating safer communities is frequently quite varied. There are many practical reasons for this, given the different governance arrangements and strategic priorities within the various jurisdictions. Overall however, the importance of local government as a key stakeholder and strategic player in making communities safer has often gone unrecognised or unacknowledged, has been misunderstood, is subject to inadequate or under-resourcing, and has suffered from a lack of coordination (Clancey, Lee & Crofts 2012; Anderson & Homel 2005; Shepherdson et al 2014).

Despite these difficulties, local government has continued to play a key role in crime prevention and community safety efforts for more than a quarter century (Homel 2005; Cherney & Sutton 2007). This reflects an implicit understanding that, since most crime of immediate concern to communities is local (eg property crime, antisocial behaviour, vandalism etc), then the primary focus for preventive action should also be local (Homel 2005; Homel 2010; Sutton, Cherney & White 2008).

The Australian approach to local community safety is similar in many ways to the international experience, particularly in developed Western countries. Similar approaches have been adopted internationally, including in the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand (Homel et al 2004; Idriss et al. 2010; ICPC 2008; NZ Ministry of Justice 2003).

Internationally, this generally involves central agencies being responsible for crime prevention policy—developing an overarching program, strategy or framework that outlines the overall goals and priority areas that need to be addressed. This is the basis for coordinated activity by multiple stakeholders (UNODC 2010). Central agencies often establish partnerships with

regional branches of government authorities, local government and non-government organisations to plan and deliver crime prevention initiatives, and to implement the national or state and territory strategy (Cherney 2004; Shepherdson et al 2014). In addition, a central agency may provide short-term funding and/or technical support to help local organisations to address the goals of the overall strategy (Henderson & Henderson 2002; Morgan 2011).

The specific focus on local government in creating safe communities and delivering community crime prevention action is generally attributed to Gilbert Bonnemaison, a deputy in the French national parliament and mayor of a town near Paris in post-WWII France. The Bonnemaison model (Sutton, Cherney & White 2008), as it came to be known, stressed that prevention strategies should focus on addressing the problems experienced by disaffected community members (eg young people, immigrants, unemployed etc) by striving to integrate them into their local communities thereby reducing the potential risk of them participating in crime (Crawford 1998).

Detailed local crime prevention plans were developed that emphasised agency-based prevention involving institutions such as schools, housing authorities and employment and youth support services working together with police and other groups. Crime prevention action itself was funded through a series of contractual arrangements between the national government and the local crime prevention committees that also incorporated the need for close interagency cooperation.

The Bonnemaison model soon became a prototype, albeit a flexible one, for local crime prevention action in many other countries across the world. Clear links can be found with specific crime prevention approaches developed over the next decades in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and some other parts of Europe such as Germany and Ireland (Homel 2009). Echoes of this approach can also be found in the

crime prevention work of the US Conference of Mayors and the National League of Cities and more directly in the National Crime Prevention Council in the United States, and through the creation of Local Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships in the United Kingdom and the UK's Crime Reduction Program (Homel et al. 2004). More recently, elements can be found in the approach to crime prevention taken by many Latin American countries, among others.

This has meant that those promoting crime prevention action, both in Australia and overseas have generally turned to local governments as a key resource for coordinating the delivery of local preventive responses. This has been based on the assumption that local government authorities are best placed to understand and reflect the particular needs and problems of their local community and are therefore also best placed to generate and/or deliver the most appropriate prevention interventions for their local communities (UNODC 2010).

This emphasis on the role of local governments in crime prevention is strongly encouraged by international organisations such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), UN-Habitat's Safer Cities Programme and the World Health Organisation (WHO) through its Safer Communities Programme. It includes three principle characteristics:

- using a comprehensive approach based on a detailed analysis of factors influencing crime and victimisation, including social, economic, environmental and institutional considerations;
- engaging key stakeholders at the local level; and
- acknowledging the importance of clear and consistent local leadership (ICPC 2008: 211).

The 2002 UN Guidelines for the Prevention of Crime outlined eight principles on which to base prevention. These provided a useful framework for assessing what has been done in Australia. They are:

*Government leadership*—at all levels to create and maintain an institutional framework for effective crime prevention.

*Socio-economic development and inclusion*—integration of crime prevention into relevant social and economic policies, focus on integration of at-risk communities, children, families and youth.

*Cooperation and partnerships*—between government organisations, civil society, 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.

*Differentiation*—respecting different needs of men and women and vulnerable members of society (UN ECOSOC 2002).

These UN principles are necessarily pitched at quite a high level and will inevitably require significant interpretation and adaptation to be implemented within a specific national, regional and local context. This is where the more locally focused tools provided by the UN-Habitat's Safer Cities Programme (nd) and the WHO's Safe Communities Programme (Spinks et al. 2009) are useful.

However, these still only offer a framework and a set of guiding techniques and approaches. As highlighted in Homel (2010), what can actually be done locally will be a function of available resources and the current governance arrangements. The importance of applying appropriate governance models for successful local implementation cannot be overestimated as getting this wrong can often result in

significant program or theory failure (Homel R & Homel P 2012; Idriss et al. 2010: 106).

Governance in this context refers to the processes and systems used by societies or organisations to make their important decisions, determine who has a voice, who will be engaged in the process, and how the account is to be rendered (Edgar, Marshall & Bassett 2006). Good governance combined with strong and consistent leadership provide the framework within which evidence-based crime prevention policies and programs can flourish.

## The current state of local government crime prevention – the Victorian experience

As noted, while Australia has a significant history of local government authorities promoting local community safety and working on preventing crime, the experience has been very similar to that in many other parts of the world in that the impact and effectiveness over time has varied greatly (Anderson & Homel 2006; Anderson & Homel 2005; Sutton, Cherney & White 2008; Morgan & Homel 2011). As has also been noted, the extent, quality and nature of local government engagement with the crime prevention process varies significantly across the country (Homel 2005). This is, to a large extent, a function of differing regional priorities and governance arrangements (Homel 2010).

This experience was one of the reasons that led the Victorian Parliamentary Committee on Drugs and Crime Prevention to commission a systematic survey of the current state of local community safety and crime prevention activity across Victoria. It was part of a wider-ranging inquiry into the role of local government in preventing crime. The committee wanted a survey that would help to address the first four terms of reference for its inquiry. Specifically, it would assess the nature of locally-based approaches to crime prevention and community safety that described:

- the breadth of locally-based groups and organisations involved, in particular local government and Neighbourhood Watch;
- approaches adopted to promulgate practices, programs or initiatives;
- the extent to which these organisations effectively engage with local and state agencies in developing policy; and
- the range of barriers or facilitating factors that contribute to the capacity of local groups to engage in developing community safety initiatives.

Full details of the survey methodology and a more extensive presentation of the survey results, together with the committee's full deliberations and recommendations can be found in their report (Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee 2012).

A self-completion survey was designed for distribution to all local government authorities (LGAs) in Victoria. The questionnaire was a modified version of a survey form developed by the International Centre for the Prevention of Crime (ICPC) for use in an international study of local government. However, the survey was modified to reflect the committee's needs and Victorian circumstances and included a mix of quantitative and qualitative items.

The questionnaire was divided into five sections covering:

- issues about crime and safety in the community in which respondents live;
- what planning processes and associated strategies, if any, were in place to prevent crime and enhance community safety;
- what crime prevention and community safety initiatives were being pursued in each locality;
- an assessment of what changes had been observed as a result of any existing or past local crime prevention initiatives and whether there had been any formal evaluation of these initiatives; and
- a set of questions about the extent and nature of any Neighbourhood Watch activity in the area (not reported on here).

The questionnaire also included questions that identified the LGA as being located in an urban, rural or urban fringe area. No analysis was undertaken in terms of individual LGAs.

Questions were also asked about the overall focus of their community safety and crime prevention programs or strategies as well as issues to do with perceived difficulties with implementing, operating and managing crime prevention and community safety programs in general.

The final version of the questionnaire was set up to be completed electronically using the Australian Institute of Criminology's (AIC) online survey facilities. However, an alternative version of the questionnaire was also made available to ensure a comprehensive coverage of respondents.

The survey was undertaken over four weeks in September and October 2011. All but one LGA responded (78 out of 79 LGAs) which means that the survey received results from LGAs representing around 93 percent of the Victorian population. Of these, 32 percent (n= 25) were urban LGAs; 56 percent (n= 44) were rural; and 12 percent (n=9) were in areas described as being urban outer fringes. When the responses were analysed in terms of whether they were received from an LGA that was in an urban, rural or mixed locality, there were few if any significant differences in the responses.

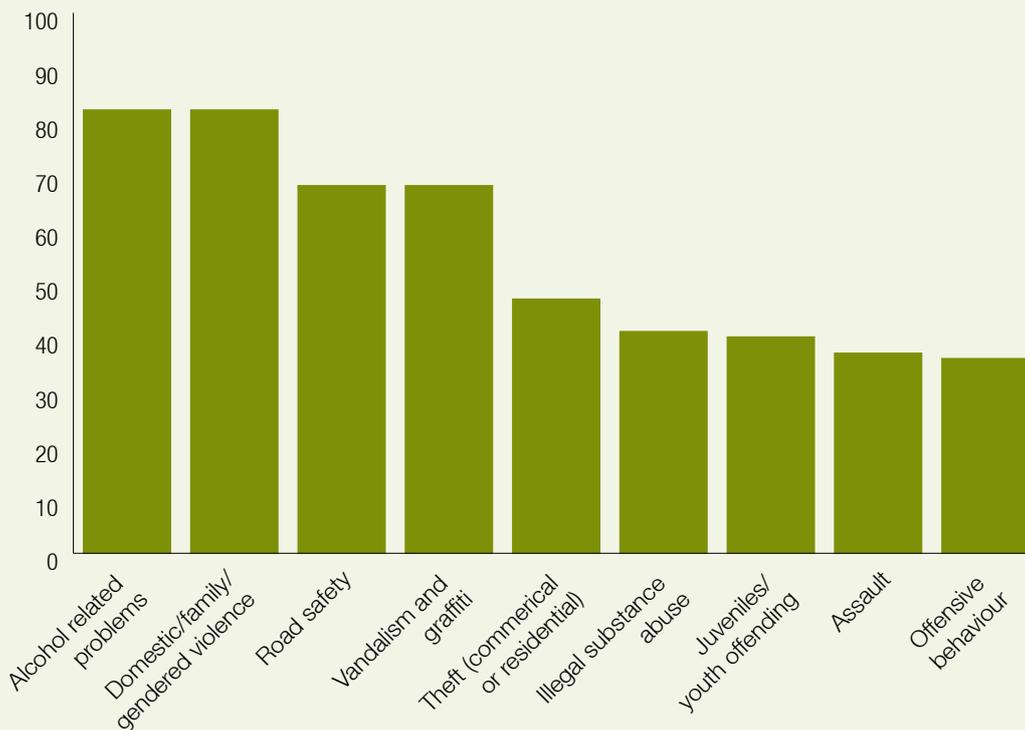
The primary analysis was conducted using STATA 12 statistical software. Due to the categorical nature of survey data, where applicable, a Pearson's Chi Square test with Fisher's exact test of relationship was used to test for any statistical differences in the responses. Any such differences are noted in the results reported below.

## Results

### The nature of locally-based approaches to crime prevention and community safety

Respondents were asked to identify the main crime and community safety issues in their LGA. The most common of these are summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Crime and safety issues in Victorian LGAs (%)



Note: Multiple responses were allowed and this summary does not include issues where the response is less than 30 percent.

Alcohol-related problems and domestic and gender-related violence were both identified by 81 percent (n=62 of 76) of respondents as the two most important crime and safety issues in their LGA, followed by road safety (68%; n=52) and vandalism and graffiti (68%; n=52).

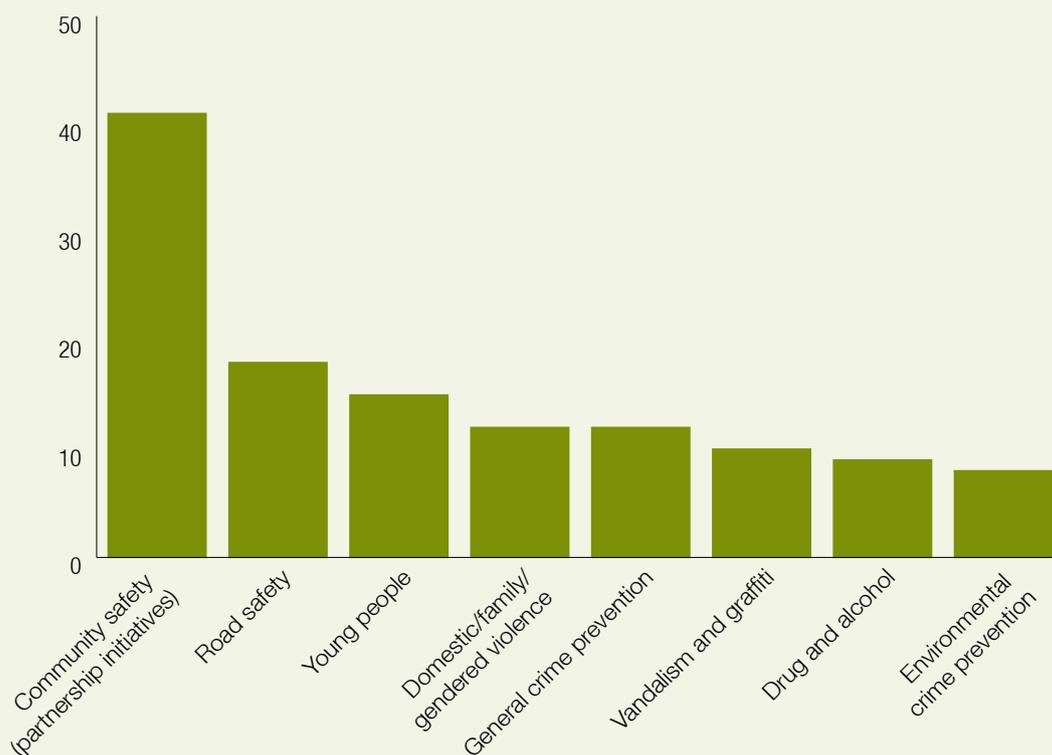
It is likely that the frequent mention of road safety issues by many of the respondents is the result of many local authorities having been involved with the WHO’s ‘Safer Communities’ program. As explained by

Cherney (2004), a previous crime prevention program in Victoria, known as the Safer Cities and Shires Program, encouraged a broad safety focus on issues including injury prevention and public health. Heavily informed by the WHO’s Safer Communities approach, this program has clearly had a significant long-term impact on the orientation of crime prevention work in Victoria. It is here that crime prevention and community safety is considered to be just one aspect of reducing and

preventing a wide range of intentional and unintentional injury that can occur within a community. These forms of injury can include such things as burns, sporting or other recreational accidents as well as traffic accidents. Within this approach, preventing any forms of injury, be it crime-related or not, is seen as part of the task of creating a safer community.

Figure 2 summarises information related specifically to the focus of crime prevention and community safety programs.

Figure 2 Focus of crime prevention and community safety programs (%)



These results reflect an apparent tendency for local councils to adopt, implement or endorse programs with broad ‘safety’ goals. Specifically, 41 percent (n=89 of 215) of the programs reported by the LGAs had community safety/partnership development as a key or secondary focus. Programs with a community safety focus tended to involve significant partnerships with external stakeholders. Examples of initiatives with a community safety focus included the development of community safety committees, ‘Streetwatch’ teams, community safety months, lighting upgrades and information kits on topics such as how to run safer parties, and car safety.

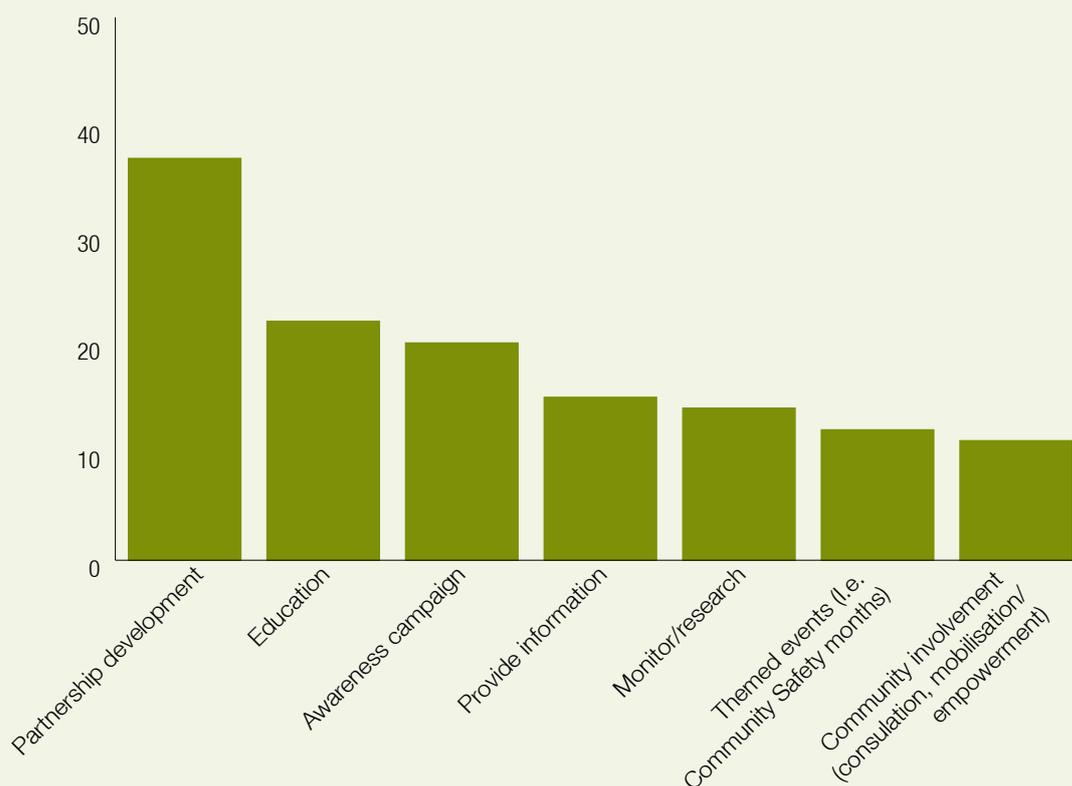
This reported emphasis on general community safety issues most probably reflects a realistic assessment of the appropriate role local government can best fulfil in contributing to local crime prevention goals when in partnership.

Research into the most effective forms of local community partnerships suggests that groups such as local authorities are generally best placed to coordinate and facilitate by helping to mobilise local resources; facilitating participation and access to informal networks; helping to establish flexible structures and procedures; providing a closer understanding and emotional commitment to community issues and concerns; and promoting a community-based self-help attitude (Edgar et al. 2006).

When comparing the information presented in Figures 1 and 2, there is an apparent discrepancy between the focus of councils’ programs and initiatives and identified crime and safety issues. Though alcohol-related problems and domestic, gendered and family violence were viewed as significant problems, only a handful of LGAs had programs and initiatives that specifically focused on these issues.

However, while this may appear to be a discrepancy, it is more likely a reflection of the limitations in the ability of local councils to lead and be responsible for some specific crime prevention action. A common view is that crime prevention is primarily the responsibility of other specific agencies, in this case police and/or human services agencies. Ninety-nine percent of respondents reported that police (n=77 of 78) were responsible for crime prevention and community safety in their area, followed by community associations (62%; n=49) and schools (62%; n=49). Therefore, an alternative explanation is that local councils view their role in such issues as involving less ‘frontline’ prevention activity and more of supporting the work of justice and human service agencies while improving the wider set of protective factors within their local community.

Figure 3 Types of crime prevention and community safety programs implemented by local councils (%)



The most common type of initiatives and programs involved developing partnerships with key stakeholders (37%; n=79 of 215).

The following examples show various ways in which local authorities reported that partnerships were developed in crime and community safety programs;

- Eastern Regional Family Violence HELP Card Project 2010–11: six eastern metropolitan region councils worked together with other agencies including the Department of Health to put together information cards regarding family violence. The cards were then used across each council's local area.
- Local Safety Committees: the composition of the committees varied between local government areas however common members included the council, police, emergency services, and representatives from agencies such as VicRoads and Neighbourhood Watch. The role of the committee varied as well, though a common duty included guiding the council response to specific crime and safety issues in the area.

- Youth drug and alcohol awareness campaigns: in order to teach young people about drug and alcohol safety, many councils implemented awareness programs that partnered with local schools, community health workers, community services department and, in some instances, local businesses.

Other programs implemented by local councils focused on education (22%; n=47 of 215), awareness campaigns (20%; n=43), providing information such as flyers or kits (15%; n=32) and monitoring, researching crime prevention and community safety issues (14%; n=30). Some initiatives involved both education and awareness, such as the domestic violence help cards. However, education programs involved some form of skill or information acquisition such as teaching newly arrived refugees to swim, or strategies for bushfire safety. Altogether though, the types of programs highlighted by respondents suggest an emphasis on improving underlying social factors that can lead to victimisation or offending, such as a lack of awareness of, or education about, crime-related issues.

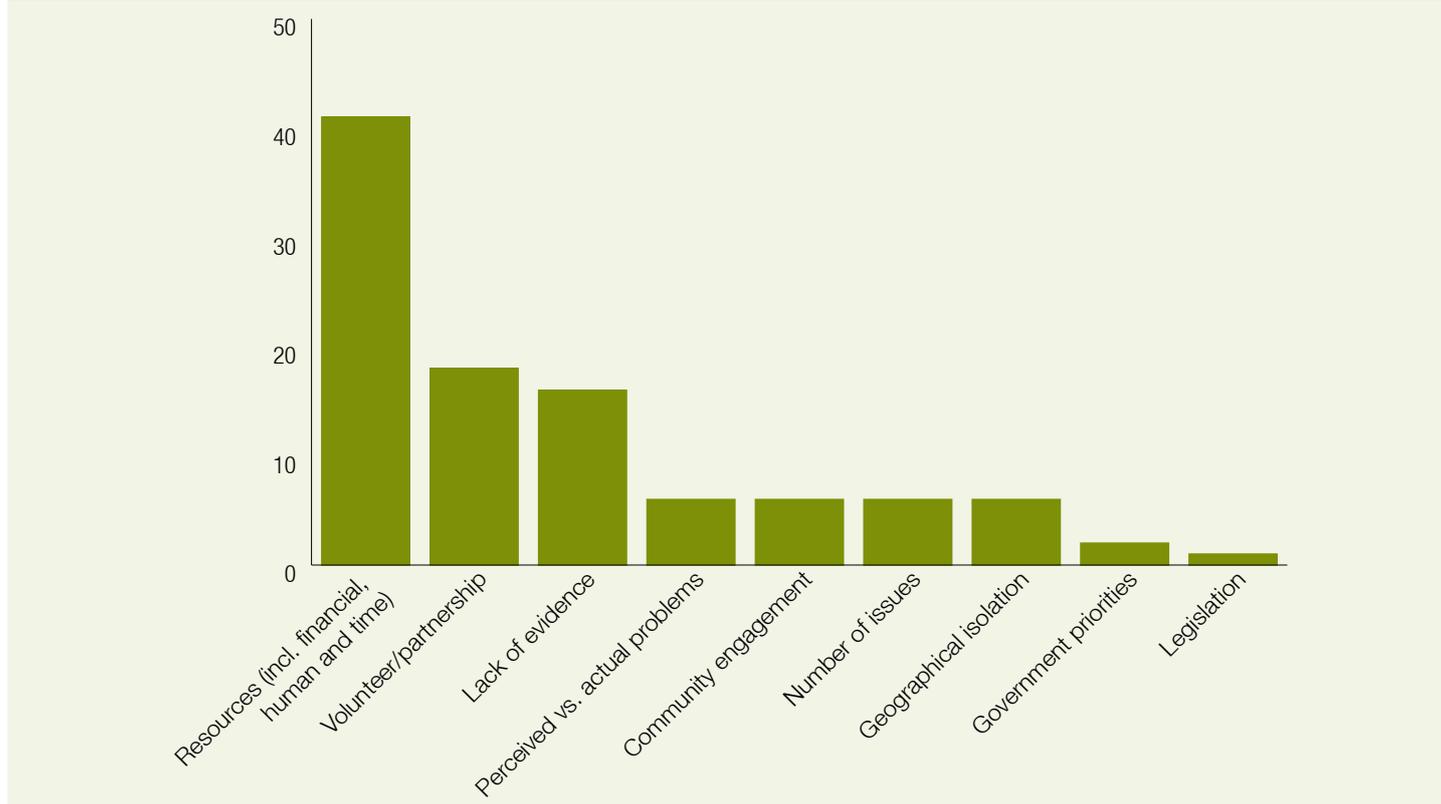
Based on the program descriptions provided by respondents, partnerships were primarily used to form committees that focused on community safety. The role of these committees varied between programs, with some created to guide long-term community safety objectives, while others functioned as more transient forums to discuss and consider strategies and responses relating to specific issues. A key aim of many of the committees was to raise awareness of safety issues, such as organising safety audits or community safety awareness months.

As such, the focus and method of crime prevention and community safety are generally geared towards strengthening community ties and promoting community awareness, rather than undertaking more targeted crime prevention measures traditionally pursued by criminal justice agencies such as police.

### Barriers to effective crime prevention implementation

All respondents were asked to identify barriers to successful crime prevention and community safety activity action. This information is summarised in Figure 4.

Figure 4 Identified barriers to effective crime prevention and community safety activity (%)



One of the most consistent issues identified by the LGAs was that they did not feel adequately equipped to make informed decisions about crime prevention and community safety (41%; n=32 of 78). This was not just about the lack of adequate financial resources, although this was a problem identified by many, but also about a lack of skills and technical capacity for maximising the potential benefit to their communities when they do manage to get crime prevention and community safety programs going.

Among other issues, 18 percent (n=14) of respondents indicated that they had difficulties dealing with volunteers or partnerships. This included issues such as not enough partners or volunteers to adequately meet the needs of the program, lack of engagement with partners, and differing priorities regarding roles and philosophy.

While the main issue of resources centred on funding (16% of the LGAs; n=12), the second most common resource problem related to a lack of skilled and qualified

staff (5%; n= 4). A shortage of skills negatively impacts the ability of LGAs to implement strong crime prevention and community safety initiatives. Often councils relied on volunteers (whose time is limited) or on a single council staff member whose priorities were spread over a number of different areas.

Further, the issue of the absence of suitably qualified or skilled staff is compounded by its relationship with another commonly cited barrier to effective crime prevention activity—a lack of available data and evidence to inform locally-based prevention initiatives (16%; n=12). This lack of evidence is directly related to a shortage of staff with adequate training and/or qualifications to lead and manage crime prevention and community safety. Addressing this skill deficiency would help to improve the quality of the initiatives implemented by LGAs in Victoria.

However, the lack of skilled and qualified staff is not the only explanation for the difficulty in accessing necessary data. As work in New South Wales documented by

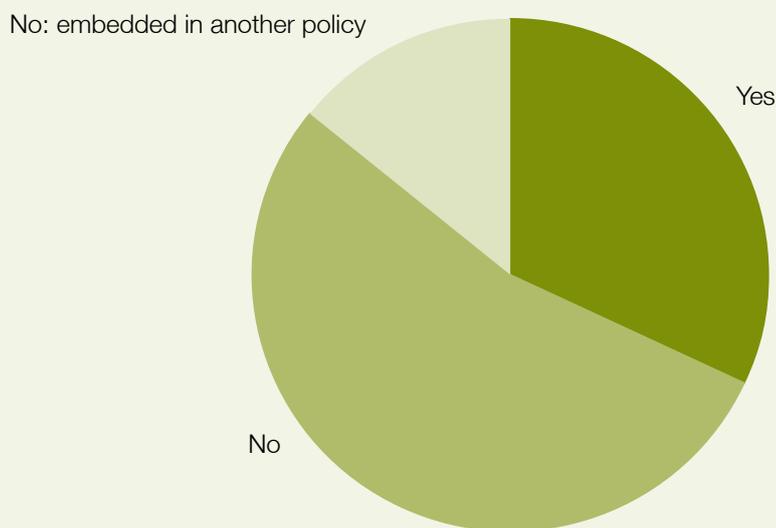
by Shepherdson et al. (2014) and Clancey (2011) indicates there is also evidence to suggest that another key barrier to accessing necessary data can be a lack of willingness by state and Australian Government bodies to share data with local authorities.

### The role of a crime prevention and community safety strategy

As has been noted, one of the key functions highlighted by the international agencies offering guidance for the development of effective local crime prevention practice, was the need to develop a local crime prevention plan or strategy and to use that plan to provide leadership and direction for all key stakeholders and relevant players (UN ECOSOC 2002; UNODC 2010).

Respondents were asked to indicate if their council's approach to crime and safety was built on a formal strategy. This question was used as a way of gaining some insight into the influence, if any, that the presence of a formal crime prevention strategy has on local crime prevention and community safety activity.

Figure 5 Crime prevention and community safety strategies in place (%)



N=76

While it was clear that most Victorian LGAs are committed to playing a significant role in developing, coordinating and delivering crime prevention and community safety policies and programs in their local area, only a minority reported having specific strategies to guide their activities (ie 32% or 24 of 76).

However, a further 14 percent (n=11) indicated that crime prevention strategies were incorporated into a wider local

government community welfare or health strategy which was formally operating in their council area. A small number (around 5) suggested that they are currently developing such strategies.

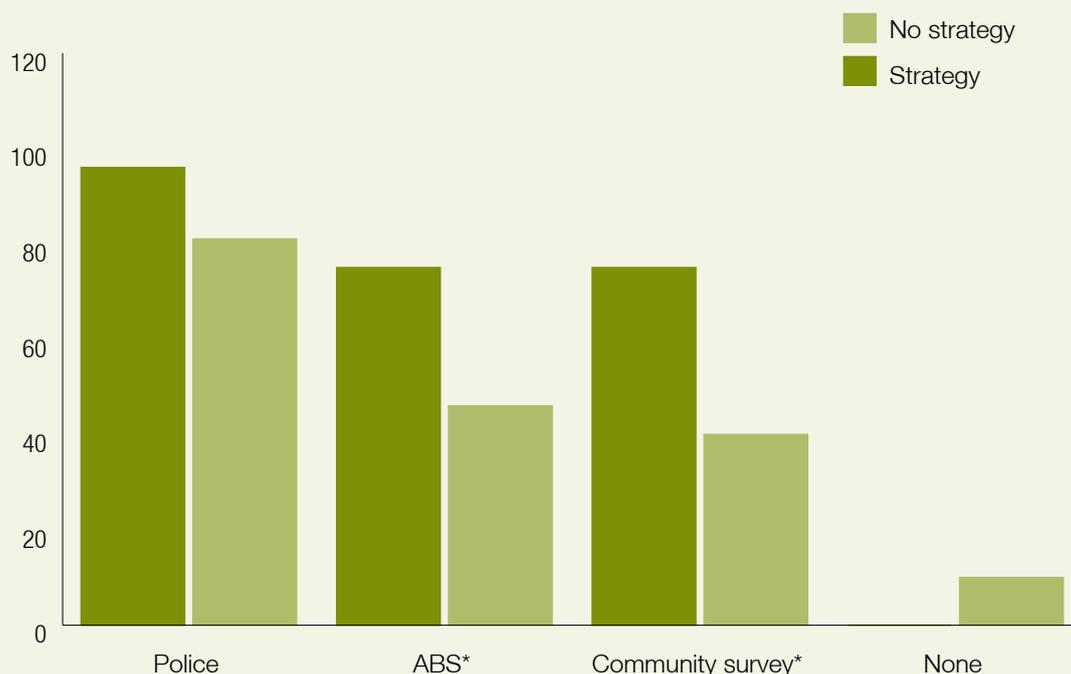
However, this left more than half (54%, n=41) who indicated their local council did not use a formal crime prevention or community safety strategy. The reasons councils gave for not having a formal strategy included a lack of resources

needed to develop and implement one and the view that crime was not considered a major issue in their local area.

#### How evidence informs a crime prevention strategy

Though not directly assessed in the survey, indicators within the results suggest that having a formal strategy in place produces a more informed and tailored approach to crime prevention and community safety.

Figure 6 Data sources used to inform crime prevention and community safety issues, by formal strategy (%)



\*indicates a significant relationship

Analysis found significant associations between whether a formal strategy was in place in a particular community and the type of information used to identify crime prevention and community safety issues and then plan for responses. For example, there was a significant association between an LGA having a formal strategy and using a community survey as part of their planning process ( $\chi^2(1)=7.88, p<0.01$ ). This seems to suggest that councils with a formal crime prevention strategy were more likely to directly consult the community in a systematic and structured way when identifying crime and safety issues.

Similarly, during the development of the strategy, local councils reported high levels of external stakeholder input. Ninety-one percent (n=22 of 24) of respondents reported consulting with external stakeholders while the strategy was being formulated and 71 percent (n=17) engaged in jointly implementing the strategy, although

only eight percent (n=2) received any type of funding for this activity. Further, 96 percent (n=23) of respondents rated external stakeholder input at this stage as either very useful or useful.

Results also indicated that 83 percent (n=20) of local councils sought input into their strategy through consultations with the community or targeted populations. In 75 percent (n=18) of cases input came from conducting a community survey and in 71 percent (n=17) this input was obtained through public meetings.

On a more general level, it appears that around half of all 78 councils (49%; n=38) reported difficulty in accessing useful data for community safety planning, and 78 percent (n= 61) had difficulty in collecting and collating the data they did have access to. These data access difficulties were then reflected in the fact that only 40 percent (n= 31) reported that they had systems in

place to monitor, refresh and update this information.

In addition, few LGAs reported undertaking any form of evaluation with only 12 councils (15%; n=12) indicating they had conducted an evaluation. Whether or not it is reasonable to expect LGAs to be undertaking formal evaluation work on their own strategies and activities, this lack of critical review and assessment potentially inhibits the growth of an already limited knowledge base about effective strategies for local community crime prevention. This in turn has a direct impact on the ability of other local councils to implement their own crime prevention strategies using the formally evaluated experience of others. Furthermore, the lack of robust strategic evaluations means it is difficult to determine the specific and general efficacy of local crime and safety programs.

## Conclusions and discussion

It is clear that most LGAs in Victoria are committed to playing a significant role in developing, coordinating and delivering crime prevention and community safety policies and programs in their local area. While only a minority have specific strategies to guide their activity, a number of others have embedded this strategic process into wider community welfare or health strategies. A small number (around five) suggested that they are in the process of developing such strategies.

For some other LGAs, crime prevention and community safety remains a relatively low priority, being seen as the responsibility of other agencies, such as police. This may be a quite reasonable position when viewed from the perspective of relatively low crime rates in many communities. However, when viewed through a prevention lens, it is more problematic. Crime prevention is essentially about being able to anticipate emerging problems and being prepared to take action to prevent those problems developing and becoming entrenched.

Too often, considering the need for developing and implementing a crime prevention strategy is the result of community concern about existing crime problems. If appropriate preventive action had been taken beforehand, these problems may have been prevented from emerging. This is another argument for local government authorities taking the lead in developing a comprehensive crime prevention strategic plan for their communities as a part of their normal social planning processes. These plans should be regularly updated to reflect changes in the social, demographic, economic and crime characteristics of their communities as well as to accommodate developments in state and national crime prevention priorities.

This is consistent with the finding that the most common and probably the most significant function that LGAs fulfil in their crime prevention and community safety role is to coordinate and facilitate, although it is clear that many also have a significant role

in direct service delivery. The coordination and facilitation role is critically important as it provides a focus for local leadership on issues concerning the community, something that has been identified internationally as a vital function for effective and sustainable crime prevention action.

However, one of the most consistent issues identified by the LGAs was that they do not feel adequately equipped to make informed decisions regarding crime prevention and community safety. This was not so much about the lack of adequate financial resources, although this was a problem identified by many. It was more about a lack of skills and technical capacity to obtain the maximum benefit for their communities when they do manage to get crime prevention and community safety programs going. Unfortunately this is not a new problem, having been identified more than a decade ago in a review of crime prevention work in the United Kingdom (Homel et al. 2004).

This is highlighted by two related findings. First, it was reported that it was very difficult to access useful and valuable crime-related data and examples of relevant successful initiatives to draw on when planning local crime prevention activity, even though attempts had been made to access this material. The second point is the almost complete lack of any effective evaluation and performance monitoring work for existing initiatives. As has also been highlighted internationally, the absence of good assessment work inhibits ongoing learning and program development and, ultimately, the ability to improve service (ICPC 2010; Morgan & Homel 2013; Homel et al. 2004).

Combining the lack of evaluation and access to data more generally with the apparent absence of effective local mechanisms for accessing good practice advice, inevitably means that the effectiveness and efficiency of local crime prevention action will be compromised and less than optimal. As highlighted by Edgar et al. (2006), responsibility for overcoming this problem must be shared as different

stakeholders will be able to provide access to the different parts necessary for solving the crime prevention puzzle.

This highlights the critical role of effectively managing partnerships and of working collaboratively. The survey has revealed that LGAs see this as one of their potentially most important contributions to local crime prevention and community safety. Yet it is one of the most difficult tasks to deliver effectively. Partnerships, if managed badly, can be costly and extremely ineffective (Homel 2006; Cherney 2004).

While this study was deliberately limited to the role of Victorian local government authorities in promoting crime prevention and community safety in Victoria, based on a 2011 survey, it does highlight the importance of local government in this process more generally within Australia. It also highlights the problems that can emerge from the absence of a consistent framework that local authorities can turn to for planning and implementing their crime prevention action. Fragmentation and inconsistency of the approaches is costly in terms of skills and other resources. It inevitably impacts on the quality of the programs delivered.

National and state policies and programs around crime prevention and community safety are frequently silent on the role of local government authorities, or see them merely as funding recipients and program delivery agents (Weatherburn 2004). As this survey demonstrates, this grossly underestimates the capacity and potential for local government to play a pivotal role in creating safer communities in Australia. As described by the UNODC through its publication Handbook on the crime prevention guidelines—making them work (UNODC 2010), crime prevention:

- should be integrated with other prevention work in areas such as health, education and other social issues;
- is the responsibility of all of society;
- requires an interdisciplinary approach;
- should be an integral part of economic, political and social development;

- requires tools, instruments and support; and
- should apply the principle of subsidiarity.

As this study has shown, local governments in Australia are able to contribute significantly to all of these essential elements if given the opportunity and capacity to do so. In particular, they demonstrate repeatedly that they are almost uniquely placed to address the subsidiarity principle. This is the principle that matters ought to be handled by the smallest (or the lowest) competent authority, in other words, the investment of authority at the lowest possible level of an institutional hierarchy. What this means for governance is that wherever possible, powers are given to the least aggregated level of government; only when a particular task cannot be undertaken adequately by a low level of government will it be handed up to a higher level.

The potential capacity for greater and more effective crime prevention action at the local government level is further highlighted by the fact that Australia is one of the most urbanised countries in the world. According to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs estimates for 2011, 89% of our population live in urban areas and Australia ranks as the 16th most urbanised country in the world, immediately behind Japan and ahead of Chile (UN ECOSOC 2014).

This emphasises the need to better recognise and strengthen the potential of local government to prevent crime. Or, as Muggah (2012: 68) puts it, '...oddly, the central place of cities is only very slowly being recognized by governments and agencies involved in promoting security and development ...'. Cities themselves are starting to create and maintain networks to promote and support each other to gain safer communities (eg the European Forum for Urban Security). Similar networking groups exist in Australia such as the NSW Local Government Community Safety and Crime Professionals Network, the Victorian Local Government Professionals Special Interest Group on Community Safety, as well as a special interest group within the Western Australian Local Government Association.

While cohesive within their own jurisdictions, they do not have extensive or ongoing connections with each other. Nor do they have access to an ongoing professional development network. These challenges require more recognition and engagement from state and national governments to ensure that the Australia's local community safety concerns are better addressed through the existing capacity and resources of local government.

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All URLs were correct in (14 May 2015)

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