Police Initiatives in Juvenile Justice

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This paper will look at the police organisation as a whole, how the police are perceived by the community, and how the police are attempting to change that perception and provide a service which is both cost-effective and sensitive to competing interests.

The Police Commissioner has established a mechanism for consultation with the community, called Community Consultative Committees. The author has had the opportunity in the last eighteen months to attend over one hundred of these committee meetings. A recurrent theme has been the policing of young people. The issue has been raised by both the community representatives as well as the police.

Perceptions of the Police

People feel threatened by youth, and most particularly by young people from minority groups. They express dissatisfaction with police expecting them to do something to allay their fears and make them feel safe again—like they used to feel!

Ask young people in New South Wales whether they regard police as people who will offer them protection—by and large they will say 'no'. In fact if anything they are wary of police and even afraid of them.

Children who have been, or are victims of crime—in particular sexual, physical or emotional abuse rarely turn to police for protection.

Ask young offenders in New South Wales and generally speaking they will tell you police are a pack of animals or something approximately that description. They all have stories of police or police harassment and have experienced or heard of police assaulting kids in custody or on the streets. It may seem to be stating the obvious but young people involved in crime do not see police as agents of protection.

The traditional police response to juvenile crime in New South Wales has been to charge the offender and have them put before the court. Many children appearing before the courts for the first time have never had the benefit of receiving an official Caution.

Police generally (along with the rest of the community) have not been sympathetic to the needs of young people, seeing the police role as one of law enforcers whose primary function is to apprehend the offenders and put them before the courts. It is then up to the
courts to decide what should happen. Of course it is not uncommon for police to express total dismay at decisions made by the courts and commonly talk of the courts letting them down or not supporting them in their quest to clean up the streets.

That is not to say that all police are like this. There have been police assigned special tasks regarding the policing needs of our young. Police Citizens Youth Clubs are one such example.

Police as school lecturers are another. In both these cases the mainstream police have regarded colleagues involved in these areas as plastic cops (and other more descriptive euphemisms). The Police Child Mistreatment Unit (investigating offenders involved in child abuse) are often regarded by their peers as ‘The Nappy Brigade’.

The picture being painted here is not a very positive one. To recap:

**The community:** older and middle-aged people feel threatened by young people, particularly when the latter are in groups. They express dissatisfaction with the police.

**Young people in general:** are wary and often distrustful of police.

**Young people as victims:** generally do not look to police for protection or as adults to whom they can disclosed.

**Young people as offenders:** dislike and distrust police and regard them as the enemy.

**Aboriginal youth:** Aboriginal juveniles have an ongoing and destructive relationship with police, which is only now being addressed by Aboriginal people and police.

As an organisation it would appear that we have concentrated on responding to juvenile crime at the expense of attempting to prevent it. Without wanting to be too critical it appears that we have stuck to the macho side of the job (responding to armed hold-ups, drug-related offences, property theft, traffic, homicides, and fraud) and avoided the more difficult area of crime prevention.

It should not surprise us, when we consider the police culture and how it has developed over the decades, together with community and government expectations of police that they have not taken a more sympathetic approach to juvenile offenders.

Having stated all of the above it can now be said that much of that is to some extent historical.

***A Change in Direction***

The New South Wales Police Service is changing. The strengths and weaknesses of the organisation have been analysed and decisions affecting structure and policy taken, which reflect a commitment to preventing crime as well as protecting life and property.

The government allocates a budget in excess of $800 million to enable to Department to achieve its mission (that is, to protect life, prevent crime, enforce the law, maintain peace and good order, safeguard property and ensure the safe and free movement of people and traffic).

There has been a recognition that if police are to be effective in preventing juvenile crime then they must understand what contributes to it. To do this they must have a constructive relationship with their ‘clients’, be they victims or offenders.

To be really effective we must begin with kids and act to intervene where necessary to offer them protection from crime and/or to be involved in rehabilitating them to ensure that they do not become recidivist offenders.
To achieve this, and more effective policing in general, the New South Wales Police Service under the leadership of its Commissioner, John Avery, has undergone (and still is undergoing) some dramatic changes in the last few years, in terms of policy, structure and practice.

The most significant element of this restructuring has been the flattening of the command hierarchy giving maximum authority to the Patrol Commanders. This now enables Patrol Commanders to direct people to take a problem solving approach to preventing and reducing juvenile crime and an increasing number of them are doing just that.

While many people in the youth area are still critical of police, the opportunity for them to work constructively with police is now a possibility.

It is more often New South Wales police who are taking the initiative in preventing and reducing juvenile crime rather than youth workers or other government agencies. No longer constantly having to toe the party line and defend their actions, police are accepting that mistakes have been made and that often their actions in enforcing the law did nothing to improve the situation. In many parts of New South Wales, police are challenging themselves and other players in the field to overcome their historical differences and work as a team to combat juvenile crime. The following are examples of what is happening.

The Department has recognised that young people exist and have special needs. To that end we have appointed a person with special skills to advise on a police response to youth issues, including ways to prevent and reduce juvenile crime.

A number of other priorities have been set which acknowledge the importance of prevention and the connection between social factors and crime. In the area of juvenile crime the Police Executive have established the following areas as corporate priorities: child abuse, domestic violence, property theft, drug abuse, motor vehicle theft, arson, street safety and speed reduction. Program coordinators have been appointed to act on behalf of these priorities.

The Child Protection Program has initiated a variety of activities aimed at juvenile crime prevention. These are patrol or locally based programs which are proof positive that where it counts, things are happening, such as:

**Crime prevention workshops**: These are three-day workshops which analyse the reported offences to the Patrol with year groups of school students and develop strategies to avoid becoming involved in antisocial and criminal behaviour. They also link into the Patrol's Community Consultative Committee, to ensure the relationship remains ongoing, and constructive.

**General duties youth program**: This program involves general duties police and aims to:

- take a problem solving approach to police/youth issues, advising the Patrol Commander on strategies to improve efficiency;
- act as an advocate for young people's issues (as victims and offenders) in the Patrol; and
- liaise with schools in the Patrol. The general duties youth officers are given the freedom to write their own job description in consultation with other police and the community, and to set their own rosters to enable them to achieve the aims of the program;

Within this program there are a variety of approaches being taken which reflect local needs. These police have been given the information necessary to appreciate the process of becoming a juvenile offender, and whilst targeting social factors are also spending them with recidivist offenders to explore ways of breaking the cycle.

**Underage drinking**: A document title 'A Police Response to address the unlawful Consumption of Alcohol by Juveniles' was circulated around the community and has resulted in a strong response from the community and the liquor industry. Presently the issue is being
pursued by our Department which is committed to raise the connection between alcohol consumption and crime, and do what it can to bring about more responsible drinking practices by our youth.

The above only covers a few of the initiatives being undertaken by the New South Wales Police Service. There is still an enormous way to go for there to be effective police involvement in preventing juvenile crime; however, the foundations have been laid for a combined police community approach to this issue in New South Wales and it is my belief that with the support of government and the community great things can be achieved.