The Youth and the Law Project
Community Crime Prevention in Action

Youth and Staff from the
Youth and the Law Project
Campbelltown
New South Wales

The Youth and the Law Project is set in the Macarthur region, a region which incorporates three local government areas of Campbelltown, Camden and Wollondilly. The region is 60 km to the south-west of Sydney, and has developed east and west of the Sydney-Melbourne railway line from Liverpool to Picton.

The region was originally planned as a self-sufficient, satellite city of the Sydney metropolitan area, incorporating housing, schools, shopping centres, transport and employment for the expected 250,000 residents (by the year 2000). Unfortunately, the plans were not brought fully to fruition.

The landscape is currently a mixture of medium-density to low-density housing in the north, rural and bushland in the south and west. Industry has settled in the built-up centre of the region, but not to planned expectations. The development of public transport to the large housing estates east and west of the railway line has been haphazard and falls well below the transport needs of the local population. In its third decade of development, the construction of entertainment, cultural and sporting facilities is only just beginning.

The population of Macarthur is currently 130,000 and over 50 per cent of the local residents are under the age of eighteen. Half of the local population live in housing commission estates. There is a high population of single parent families. Many people commute to Sydney (an hour and a half journey each way) for both work and entertainment. For young people, entertainment includes sporting activities, the occasional youth club and hanging around the mall.

The young people of this region share, with their parents, the problems of being dislocated from their friends and networks, frustration with an unresponsive 'system', insecurity about the prospects of future employment (to a greater degree than the inhabitants of central Sydney) and boredom.

The New Approach

The Youth and the Law Project was developed through the interest of the Law Foundation of New South Wales in the region. The Law Foundation of New South Wales is a philanthropic trust, set up to fund innovative projects in the areas of legal education, access to legal services and crime prevention.
The Law Foundation was interested in providing funding for a pilot program to prevent youth crime in the region.

In December 1984 the Foundation invited Professor Duncan Chappell, now the Director of the Australian Institute of Criminology, to prepare a comprehensive report on youth crime in the region.

Recommendations to combat crime

Professor Chappell's findings showed that, in real terms the area's crime rate had been overstated by the media—violent crime was more marked in central Sydney. Most offences in the area were break-and-enters, car theft, and minor property crime. Truancy was high, as was child abuse, with many children running away from home and 'sleeping rough'. Relations between the community (especially young people on housing estates) and the police were poor, with claims that uniformed police harassed young people when investigating offences. Chappell found inexperienced legal practitioners defending children in court and the children themselves ill-informed about court processes and the consequences of a guilty finding. He believed too many children were brought before the courts and favoured more use of cautions and diversionary schemes.

The next three papers describe successful community crime prevention initiatives in the region.