

PREVENTION OF VIOLENT CRIME: THE WORK OF THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON VIOLENCE

**Duncan Chappell
Director
Australian Institute of Criminology**

IN 1987 IN MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA'S SECOND LARGEST CITY, THERE OCCURRED two mass killings, which resulted in the deaths of sixteen people and injury to many more. The random killing of strangers in an apparently tranquil and orderly city was seen to be an enormous indictment of the prevailing social climate and caused widespread anxiety.

The European settlement of Australia two hundred years earlier had been marked by extreme violence. The colony of New South Wales was established as a repository for the excessive number of convicted felons occupying British gaols (Hughes 1987). The suffering inflicted upon the indigenous Aboriginal population by the new settlers was enormous, and the consequences of that persecution remain with Australians today (Reynolds 1982).

Nevertheless, this brutal history seems to most Australians very much a thing of the past. The majority of the population of seventeen million live in large urban centres along the coast of a vast land mass. The two largest cities, Sydney and Melbourne, each have more than three million inhabitants: many of these are post-war migrants to Australia who came seeking freedom from violence, overcrowding and related problems which afflicted their homelands. Despite difficulties associated with absorbing large numbers of new arrivals and consequent rapid city growth, Australians felt that they had escaped many of the social ills which existed in other countries.

These beliefs had been tempered more lately by the expression of unease with growing levels of violent behaviour: a general perception was abroad that using public places and public transport, for example, was no longer always safe, and that as a consequence quality of life had diminished. In addition, some were drawing attention to the reality of family violence tolerated in Australian society and for so long ignored (Scutt 1983; Hatty 1986; Queensland Domestic Violence Task Force 1988).

These perceptions were confirmed by a recent cross-national crime survey (van Dijk et al. 1990; Walker et al. 1990), which had shown that Australia's general rates of victimisation for violent and property offences was more similar to North America than Europe.

The political response to these events was a meeting called by the Prime Minister at that time, Mr Bob Hawke, with all heads of government of the constituent states and territories which make up the Commonwealth of Australia. The ostensible purpose of the meeting was to discuss ways of dealing with the widespread availability of firearms in Australia.

Both the Melbourne incidents had involved high-powered rifles which were easily obtainable throughout most Australian jurisdictions: legislation governing gun control is largely a state/territory responsibility in Australia, as is every matter not explicitly referred to in the Australian Constitution as being a federal responsibility. In particular, principal responsibility for the enactment and administration of the criminal law is vested in the individual states and territories (Chappell & Wilson 1986).

The meeting between the Prime Minister and the heads of state and territory governments agreed that the problem of violence in the Australian community went far beyond questions about the availability and use of firearms. It was decided that a National Committee on Violence should be established to investigate violence from a wider perspective.

National Committee on Violence

The National Committee on Violence was asked to address a range of issues: in brief, it was asked to examine the level of violence in Australia, to review explanations for violent behaviour and to make recommendations for the control and prevention of violence.

Noted authorities with expertise in various areas of the Terms of Reference were appointed as members of the Committee, and I was appointed as chairman. Members were pre-eminent in the areas of forensic psychiatry, women's issues, child and family welfare, Aboriginal issues, and police. The breadth of knowledge encompassed by its membership was one of the great strengths of the Committee.

The secretariat for the Committee was located within the Australian Institute of Criminology, because of its ability to provide a range of services deriving from its position as the centre of cooperation between jurisdictions in the area of criminological and criminal justice research.

The Committee had much in common with similar enquiries which have recently been carried out in two other countries: the German Anti-Violence Commission, chaired by Professor Dr Hans-Dieter Schwind of Ruhr University, and the United States National Academy of Sciences Panel on the Understanding and Control of Violent Behaviour, chaired by Professor Albert Reiss of Yale University. Throughout its life, the Committee remained in close communication with researchers on these two enquiries.

The lifespan of the Committee was only fifteen months, for it was required to report to the Prime Minister by the end of 1989. During this relatively brief time, it generated a considerable volume of material on various aspects of violence. In its final report, entitled *Violence: Directions for Australia* (1990), the Committee set out in detail its response to the issues raised in its Terms of Reference.

Methodology in Information Collection

In considering how best to go about collecting the material needed for the determination of its recommendations for action, the Committee adopted several strategies.

Public consultation

First, it was decided that it was important to undertake consultation with members of the public, policy makers, professionals and representatives of interested organisations, in order to gain the broadest possible perspective of the issue of violence, and, in particular, its manifestations and effects at the grassroots level.

The Committee's limited budget meant that it was not possible to hold formal public hearings, but instead it was decided to hold a series of community forums in each state capital city and Alice Springs in central Australia. In addition, Committee members visited four Aboriginal communities in northern and central Australia: many of these communities have special problems with violent behaviour, and were too distant from the locations of the community forums to attend them.

The Committee secretariat contacted a large number of relevant organisations and individuals prior to each of these forums. Included were those involved in health and welfare policy and service delivery at the government level, police, academics, legal aid, the courts, victims' organisations, youth workers, sexual assault and domestic violence workers and other community groups. Representatives of the major political parties were also given the opportunity to speak. Advertisements were placed in the local press inviting interested members of the general public to attend and participate.

Over two hundred people, representing a wide variety of organisations, elected to give a presentation at the forums, and numerous others attended and took part in discussion.

Expert briefings

The Committee chose to invite to its own meetings a number of experts in various fields, so that members could be briefed in issues which had been identified as particularly important. These invitees included experts in the areas of domestic violence, Aboriginal issues, child abuse, racial violence and media violence. These informal discussions were very useful to members in gaining a perspective on the diversity of issues in violence with which they were faced.

Review of the literature

In addition to the information collection activities of the Committee itself, its secretariat undertook a thorough and critical literature review of published research, both Australian and overseas, on the subject of violence generally. The breadth of this coverage, ranging from biological factors, through child development issues, the effects of alcohol and other drugs to larger social and cultural factors, was reflected in the scope of the Committee's final recommendations.

Major conference

In order to provide an opportunity for academics and policy makers to express their views and discuss their research, the Committee hosted a major four-day conference on violence. This was a particularly useful event in terms of information collection. The conference covered seven main areas:

- contemporary and historical perspectives on violence;
- the epidemiology of violence;
- the causes of violence;

- strategies for mitigating the effects of violence on its victims;
- treatment of violent offenders: society's response;
- the prevention and control of violence: exploring policy options;
- an international perspective on Australian violence.

This last area was addressed by Professor Albert Reiss of Yale University and Professor Hans Joachim Schneider of the University of Westphalia, who were able to talk of the activities of the American and German inquiries into violent behaviour and to put violent behaviour in Australia into a broader context.

Selected papers presented at this conference have now been published in a volume entitled *Australian Violence: Contemporary Perspectives* (Chappell et al. 1991): some of these report on new and original research in the area of violence in Australia, whilst others represent state-of-the-art summations in particular areas of expertise. Together they represent some of the best work on violence yet undertaken in Australia.

Consultation with local government

Finally, the Committee decided to contact directly each of the almost one thousand local government authorities in Australia. It believed that local governments, which are the level of government closest to the everyday lives of most Australians, are in an important position to contribute to the prevention and control of violence within their respective communities. Facilities for families under stress, reactions to graffiti and vandalism, decisions about town planning and design are all local government responsibilities which have a large impact on community safety.

Local governments were asked about activities and programs they had developed in response to public concerns about violent behaviour, both public and private. Some very interesting activities were found to be in place: some were particularly conscious of the principles of crime prevention through environmental design (Geason & Wilson 1989); others with large populations of young residents sponsored a variety of alcohol-free recreation and entertainment activities, which they had found to be the most effective strategy for preventing problems of vandalism and violence.

The Committee observed that most of the successful programs in the area of youth involved close consultation with the potential users of the facilities or programs offered, to ensure that they had genuine input into their planning; it also observed that it was not effective to plan such activities specifically for youth 'at risk', for young people thus identified were not likely to respond positively to the perceived stigma (National Committee on Violence 1990). The Committee was glad to be able to communicate these ideas and experiences to other local authorities around Australia.

Prevention Strategies

The Committee observed that the causes of violence are complex, and the factors contributing to violent behaviour occur not in isolation but in interaction with numerous other forces. For this reason it is necessary to resist the temptation to rely on simplistic solutions, and to recognise that the prevention and control of violence is a challenge which confronts not only a wide variety of agencies across all levels of government, but non-government organisations and, above all, the individual.

In framing its recommendations, the Committee identified three major objectives:

- the adoption of a national strategy for the promotion of non-violent attitudes;
- the reduction of factors which aggravate the risk and extent of violence;
- an improvement in the availability of accurate information about the extent and nature of violence so as to provide a proper basis for decision-making.

In determining the structure of the recommendations, the Committee decided against basing them according to problems areas—street violence, child abuse, violence in Aboriginal communities and the like. Instead, in the interests of facilitating implementation, it was agreed that they should be structured according to portfolio responsibility, that is, by type of government department.

Because, as mentioned earlier, responsibility for the prevention and control of violence does not lie exclusively with government, the structure also included relevant non-government organisations. The Committee specifically noted that, in deciding on this structure, it did not seek to absolve individuals from their responsibilities, both in terms of acting non-violently and in condemning acts of violence when they occurred.

The Committee's recommendations numbered 138 in total. They varied from the very specific, as was the case with firearms regulation, where almost twenty specific recommendations were made, to the more general, as for example in the areas of housing, employment and training.

It is not appropriate to discuss here the intricacies of the Australian system, but we mention them only to illustrate the need for the shape of government organisation to be taken into account in structuring recommendations about issues that cross jurisdictional boundaries.

Evaluation

In formulating its recommendations for action, the Committee was conscious of the necessity for programs and policies, whose aim was the prevention and control of violence, to be subject to rigorous, independent evaluation. It specifically recommended that provision for such evaluation should be incorporated in the design and budget of the program in question. The Committee observed that good intentions are never a sufficient basis for the expenditure of public funds.

However, the Committee itself has no power to ensure implementation, and the Federal government has no means of requiring compliance from state and territory authorities in respect of those recommendations which fall within their areas of responsibility. Nevertheless, the objective is, by consultation and cooperation, to encourage these authorities to implement, and this has in some measure been successful.

As far as the federal government's responsibilities are concerned, two major initiatives flowing directly from the Committee's recommendations have been announced: a three-year national campaign against child abuse, and the establishment of a Violence Monitoring Unit within the Australian Institute of Criminology.

The Violence Monitoring Unit aims to establish a consolidated body of data about trends in violence and to provide an information service and other practical assistance to organisations and individuals working on programs which impact on levels of violence. Its functions also are to ensure that non-government organisations are aware of those Committee recommendations relevant to them, and to facilitate exchange of information between jurisdictions about initiatives being taken within individual jurisdictions.

The Australian Institute of Criminology itself has been able to implement one specific recommendation of the Committee, and that relates to the systematic collection of

information, on an ongoing basis, concerning the nature of homicide in Australia and the characteristics of victims and offenders. It is anticipated that analysis of these data will, over time, provide the kind of information needed for the rational formulation of public policy in areas such as family law, child protection and firearms regulation.

It is also hoped that this National Homicide Monitoring Program may be used as a model for the investigation of other categories of violent offences; the methodology employed in dealing with relatively small numbers involved in homicide may be adaptable to larger classes of offence such as serious assault.

Conclusion

The National Committee on Violence, with few resources compared to those major studies undertaken in the United States and Germany, produced during its brief life a very substantial amount of useful information on many aspects of violent crime. Its Report, with its 138 recommendations, constitutes a blueprint for action which the Committee was confident could make a real difference to the level of violence in our community.

References

- Australia, National Committee on Violence 1990, *Violence: Directions for Australia*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.
- Chappell, D. & Wilson, P. (eds) 1986, *The Australian Criminal Justice System: the Mid 1980s*, Butterworths, Sydney.
- Chappell, D., Grabosky, P. & Strang, H. 1991, *Australian Violence: Contemporary Perspectives*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.
- Geason, S. & Wilson, P. 1989, *Designing Out Crime*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.
- Hatty, S. (ed) 1986, *National Conference on Domestic Violence*, vols 1 & 2, Seminar Proceedings No. 12, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.
- Hughes, R. 1987, *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia*, Collins Harvill, London.
- Queensland Domestic Violence Task Force 1988, *Beyond These Walls*, Report to the Minister for Family Services and Welfare Housing, Brisbane.
- Reynolds, H. 1982, *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, Vic.
- Scutt, J. 1983, *Even in the Best of Homes: Violence in the Family*, Penguin, Ringwood Vic.
- van Dijk, J., Mayhew, P. & Killias, M. 1990, *Experiences of Crime Across the World*, Deventer Netherlands, Kluwer Law and Taxation Publishers.

Walker, J., Wilson, P., Chappell, D. & Weatherburn, D. 1990, *A Comparison of Crime in Australia and Other Countries* in Trends and Issues no. 23, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.