The Good Neighbourhood Program in Victoria

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The bulk of people who make up our prison community still come, as they always have come, from the most deprived sections of society. The poor, the unemployed, the socially disadvantaged, the intellectually disabled and Aborigines are disproportionately represented in prisons. It is not because they possess some particular capacities for violent or unlawful behaviour, but for reasons of structural injustices which have existed in this community and which continue to exist.


The Good Neighbourhood Program (GNP) as its name implies, is a crime prevention approach through community and social development. The GNP has attempted to address the causes of crime at the local level and to develop ways of addressing them. In this paper, the origins of the GNP are briefly outlined; the way the GNP has operated across Victoria is described, as well as some of the issues and concerns which have emerged in its operation. Finally, some directions for the future are identified.

Origins

In September 1988, the Victorian government initiated a community-based crime prevention strategy known as the Good Neighbourhood Program (GNP). The program was designed around a partnership between state and local governments and the community. It was aimed at reducing and preventing local crime, in particular youth crime, as well as addressing community concerns and perceptions about crime.

The GNP borrowed elements from the French crime prevention approach (known as the 'Bonnemaison' approach) which grew out of the
recommendations of the Commission on Safety and Security in the Community (1982) chaired by Gilbert Bonnemaison, Mayor of Epinay-Sur-Seine and Member of Parliament. The Commission concluded that the causes of violence and criminal behaviour were complex and directly linked to living conditions, urban development and related socioeconomic factors. In response, the French government undertook a national initiative in which community-based committees were established through local councils. These local committees were funded to assess the causes of crime and violence in their area, and design and implement projects that were appropriate to local conditions through crime prevention contracts. What was important was the local assessment of the causes of crime and the subsequent development of a coordinated national and local approach which had high level political commitment. The key features of the French approach which have been adopted by GNP are:

- an acceptance of a causal link between crime and the issues of social inequality, urban living conditions and poverty;
- a commitment to increase community awareness about the problems and causes of crime;
- cooperative linkages between the different tiers of government;
- the coordination of resourcing strategies;
- the decentralisation of decision-making to the local level; and
- the active involvement of community and government in crime prevention.

In Victoria, the GNP has involved state government and non-government agencies, police, the private sector, representatives from the identified groups at risk and the community. Local committees have been established to analyse the causes of crime, develop a local strategy plan, and determine appropriate ways to address identified problems. As in France, the partnership between state government, local government and their communities-facilitated and strengthened through the local GNP committees-provided a local framework within which community-based crime prevention activities can occur. These committees have been auspiced by local councils.

Initially, the GNP was piloted in a number of urban and rural local government areas and subsequently expanded. This has enabled community-based organisations and groups to establish GNP committees covering more than fifty municipalities to develop and implement their own crime prevention strategies with considerable success.

**How the Good Neighbourhood Program Operates**

The objective of the GNP is to prevent and reduce crime through social and community development. This has been achieved by:
the development of local crime prevention strategies which are based on community knowledge about the nature and causes of crime and on the available resources for crime prevention in the local community;
• the improved integration of groups at risk of offending into the wider community;
• the identification and shared resourcing of pilot projects and activities which will increase the access of targeted groups to education and training; employment; cultural and recreational opportunities;
• the encouragement of young people at risk of offending to take more responsibility in crime prevention activities within a community development context; and
• the establishment of multi-agency networks for coordinating and addressing key issues in crime prevention at the local level.

The statewide framework for the GNP provided a number of crime prevention priority areas identified through research and consultation with government agencies, non-government agencies, police, a number of GNP committees, and through an appraisal of completed projects. These crime prevention priority areas for 1990/91 were:
• activities for young people at risk;
• education, training and employment;
• safety and security in the community;
• drug and alcohol abuse;
• minimising re-offending behaviour; and
• police-community relations.

Other considerations in the development of the GNP included:
• Level of funding: as funding available through the program has been limited, a range of options were developed that utilised existing resources as far as possible.
• Integration of activities and projects: the integrated development of social, recreational and work-related skills was encouraged. Projects that provided one-off experiences but neglected continuing needs (for example, holiday camps) were not perceived to bring about desired changes.
• **Scope of strategies**: these varied depending on local needs. Some strategies were specifically neighbourhood-based while others covered one or more municipalities.
• **Neighbourhood**: the neighbourhood was the focal point of the GNP which should encourage development and cohesion at this level.
• **Social Cohesion**: GNP committees were encouraged to cut across and encourage interaction between groups of different ages, gender and ethnicity. In addition, the participants were encouraged through activities to develop new practices that are appropriate to local needs and conditions.
• **Youth**: the involvement of youth was seen as critical, and the GNP attempted to use and develop their competencies in meaningful activities. Where possible, young people were to be paid for work done. Groups were to be of mixed gender, socioeconomic background, age and ethnicity.

**Management**

The management of the GNP has occurred at several levels. The Crime Prevention Division of the Ministry for Police and Emergency Services (MPES) has coordinated the GNP at the statewide level. Its role has been to process submissions for funding allocations; develop and review policies relating to the GNP projects; provide and disseminate appropriate information to GNP committees; develop and monitor the guidelines for the GNP; ensure compliance with the projects briefs and funding agreements; monitor and evaluate the implementation and outcomes of the GNP projects and the general functioning of GNP committees; facilitate the development of jointly funded projects; support the establishment of GNP committees and operate as an ex-officio member of GNP committees.

At the local level of management, the government invited local councils to play a special role in the implementation of GNP. The local council's role in auspicing the GNP was not to take ownership of the program, but to play a leadership and developmental function. The role was to manage and be accountable for the resources allocated to the projects; to establish and support the local GNP committee; to provide opportunities for people/organisations to register interest and participate in local GNP activities; to ensure local networks, organisations and people were made aware of the GNP, its objectives and principles; to endorse and auspice local GNP committee's recommendations and to contribute to the resourcing of projects.

GNP committees, in general, had representatives from local councils, and other government and non-government agencies active in the delivery of services to the community. The police, crime prevention organisations, the private sector and identified groups at risk were also involved.
Establishment of the GNP committees

The three factors which were taken into account in the establishment of GNP committees were:

- indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage (the Ross Index and the Youth Disadvantage Index have been used);
- levels of reported crime; and
- community assessment of need.

Functions of the GNP committee

The functions of GNP committees were as follows:

- analyse local crime using statistics and other information (such as that gathered from interviews and consultations with schools, youth groups, other agencies and community groups);
- assess the causes of crime in local neighbourhoods;
- assess the availability and adequacies of local services and programs in the area that contribute to crime prevention; and
- develop a local strategy plan which identifies the perceived causes of crime, and groups at risk of offending and priorities for action; and
- invite or develop submissions for projects linked to the crime analysis and strategy plan and assess these submissions for recommendations to the Crime Prevention Division of MPES for funding.

The GNP committees also played a key role in monitoring the implementation of projects and activities, evaluating completed projects and disseminating information about the GNP. This process helped to increase community awareness of the local crime problem and informed the community of how the problem was being addressed at the local level.

Funding

The crime prevention priority areas mentioned previously were used as a guide in the assessment of the GNP submissions for funding under the Crime Prevention Program Grants. The following principles were applied in the funding of these grants:

- GNP funding should provide opportunities to foster and pilot new and innovative approaches to crime prevention at the local level;
• community expertise and knowledge should be used to design, develop and implement appropriate and effective strategies to prevent and reduce crime at the local level;
• liaison and coordination with government and non-government agencies should be an integral component of strategy plan and project development and implementation;
• GNP projects submitted for funding should be based on the GNP committees’ local crime analysis and strategy plans;
• identification of alternative sources of funding for the longer-term should be incorporated in the development of projects and their subsequent evaluation.

Funding arrangements of GNP through the Crime Prevention Program Grants have been in two stages. The first stage of funding was through a seeding grant (average amount: $5,000) from the MPES to cover the GNP committee formation, the analysis of the local crime profile and the completion of crime prevention strategy plan. The second stage of funding was for approved pilot project(s) which should be matched on an agreed cash or kind basis by the auspicing council(s) or other agencies.

Funding for GNP projects was non-recurrent and could include general expenses, running costs, staff costs and equipment purchase and maintenance. The funding period for GNP projects was on an annual basis.

For the 1990/91 period, over ninety GNP projects were funded (average amount: $7,528) which enabled a wide range of activities and projects to be implemented through local GNP committees. In 1991 there were twenty-four GNP committees functioning. Some covered large groupings of local councils (for example, Geelong, La Trobe Valley), while others were based within a single local government area.

Issues and Future Directions

The GNP was an example of the new trend in crime prevention which has emerged during the 1980s. It represented an attempt to move the emphasis of crime prevention away from traditional approaches. While the GNP has had a more sophisticated conceptual base-in that it rejects the simplistic view that crime rates can only be reduced by more resources for the criminal justice system or by improvements in welfare services-it presented major challenges and encountered significant difficulties in its implementation.

At a general level, problems arose for several reasons. Firstly, there is still an unresolved debate in the community about what has led to increasing crime rates over the last twenty years and what strategies are most effective in addressing the rise in crime. Realistically, it is unlikely that there ever will be a community consensus on these matters. Secondly, the necessary infrastructures and the will of the decision-makers to end the debate (rather than resolve it) has not been strongly in evidence. This made the implementation of the new approach presented by the GNP a particularly complex task. Effective intersectoral structures linking the Federal
government (they have a key role to play), state and local governments have been almost nonexistent in the crime prevention area. Strong impetus from leaders in key areas (such as mayors) has also been generally absent. This has hampered efforts to enable closer collaboration between the various agencies and the community.

It is not surprising that the GNP in Victoria has, since its establishment in August 1988, encountered problems and been subject to criticism. It should be expected that innovative approaches will meet some barriers to successful implementation. A number of specific issues have been identified at both the local and central level regarding the implementation of the GNP. Some of the issues relate to what can be described as ‘program drift’ as displayed through the considerable interest at local level in the funding of long-standing individual initiatives rather than seeking to implement the details of the local strategy. The explicit crime prevention aim of the GNP program had become secondary in some instances to the local government/community’s desire to attract funds for general youth programs. Other concerns were about the role of the local councils and other participants who auspice the GNP at the local level. At the central level, issues emerged which related to program accountability, communication with and support for the local committees, as well as the general profile and visibility of the program.

The pivotal role of local government comes from the adoption of the ‘Bonnemaison’ model developed in France. Excellent support from some councils has been, in some cases, matched by a marked lack of interest by others. In a few instances, there has been active opposition, as the program is regarded as ‘one more thing imposed by the state government’. There have been requests from committees to fund GNP coordinators to manage the implementation of the local strategies and support the work of the local committee. In most areas this role has fallen to the local council’s Youth Services Coordinator, and may have been regarded as an imposition. However, in other areas, the council and council workers have welcomed their involvement.

The GNP committees have not always sought the involvement of local police and groups such as Neighbourhood Watch, although this has been changing. The Victoria Police became more supportive of the GNP program over time and were encouraged by senior police to actively participate. The role of GNP committees has not always been clear with respect to monitoring and evaluating the projects in the local area. This requirement has been addressed in the revised guidelines for the program and all funded projects have been required to submit interim and final evaluation reports. The Crime Prevention Division of MPES provided support to the committees to meet this requirement.

The accountability requirements of the program have been made more rigorous and the MPES’s capacity to monitor it was increased to ensure that these requirements were met. Treasury requirements in relation to grants programs were built into the procedures. They included the adoption of detailed funding agreements, a standard project brief for funding submissions, documentation of funding decisions and the approval process.

Other improvements included more frequent visits to local areas by field officers from the MPES to support and advise the development of projects and the activities of the local committees. Greater clarity on a number of
policy issues (for example, on the funding of camps and graffiti art projects) also occurred through policy position papers. The interface between central coordination of the program and the local committees has also been addressed through a statewide workshop held in Berwick in March 1991 and several other meetings. It is hoped that there will be further opportunities to exchange information and address common concerns through a planned schedule of visits by Crime Prevention Division field officers and the organising of regional and statewide GNP forums, single issue forums and a regular GNP Newsletter.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be noted that the MPES has been developing in conjunction with Victoria Police an integrated anti-crime strategy (VICSAFE). The GNP forms an integral part of this new strategy-the objectives of which mesh with those of the GNP. The strategy embraces the multi-agency approach and partnership with local communities in obtaining commitment and action for crime prevention.

The achievements of the GNP have been considerable given the limited resources and lack of infrastructure. The government has been courageous in attempting to approach the crime problem through a community development framework. The task has not been easy and the results have not been immediately tangible. Nevertheless, the community development approach is likely to be an integral component of any strategic action to prevent and control crime in the long term.