Towards a National Approach to Crime Prevention

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Australia now faces the challenge of a genuine opportunity to work towards a truly national approach to crime prevention. Australians are witness to the growing maturity of a crime prevention sector which has reached a stage of development where there is:

- a degree of sophistication about theorising and debates on crime prevention—the models, issues and problems;
- a host of projects and initiatives around the country at local, regional and state levels;
- a growing body of literature, including some evaluative material;
- a series of major conferences over recent years;
- an interest and involvement indicated at all levels of government, statutory authorities, research and education institutions and non-government organisations; and
- a number of people who have made careers out of crime prevention work or advocacy for it.

These developments are occurring simultaneously with a fundamental reappraisal of the division of crime prevention responsibilities across federal, state and local governments under the banner of the so-called 'New Federalism'. This paper will extend the 'New Federalism' position: that is, if adequate and effective crime prevention measures are to be ensured in Australia, then a change in the roles of federal, state and local governments is required.

A period of recession and contracting government expenditure may not appear to be the best time to be advocating new official responsibilities with
significant resource implications. There is a danger of a retreat from even the existing limited Commonwealth and local government roles in crime prevention. However, it seems that there are graver dangers in this context-dangers of an expansion of poverty-related crime with all its costs, as well as a further shift of resources from social and community programs to law enforcement-that compels us to advocate a more sophisticated and systematic approach.

'New Federalism' presents bureaucrats, researchers and community workers with a 'window of opportunity' to convince government of a more rational, responsive, effective and equitable way of dealing with the problems and consequences of crime for individuals and the community.

Accordingly, this paper endeavours to address some of the structural and policy issues which might facilitate the development of a national approach to crime prevention in Australia, and to canvass some options for initiatives at a national level. The intention is not to review the many existing or potential crime prevention programs or projects across Australia, or to give a 'state of the nation'-type overview of crime prevention theory or practice: rather, the aim is to put forward one view of a path toward a more coherent and comprehensive structural and policy framework to crime prevention.

In doing this, the author will draw upon his experience of the Youth Justice Project in New South Wales a twelve-month Community Crime Prevention Project with Waverley and Fairfield Councils in Sydney.

Social Justice-A Policy Framework for Crime Prevention

At the launch of the Australian Institute of Criminology’s publication Young People and Crime: Costs and Prevention (Potas, Vining and Wilson 1990), the Federal Minister for Higher Education & Employment, the Hon. Peter Baldwin MP, said:

Social justice is a focal point of Commonwealth government policy and the principle that all Australians have equal right to access the benefits and opportunities offered by a caring, industrious and successful society is vitally important . . . There are still some young people who are not in a position to access education and employment opportunities because of other influences in their lives. In the interest of social justice we now have to turn our attention to these young people who are amongst the most disadvantaged in our society (Halstead 1991, p. vii).

The principles and objectives of ‘social justice’ strategies offer a sound basis from which to articulate a policy framework for crime prevention. Such an approach is entirely consistent with federal social policy, as articulated in Towards A Fairer Australia: Social Justice Under Labor (Australia 1988) and in The Youth Book 1989-90: The Federal Government’s Strategy For Young Australians (Australia 1989a). In the former, the achievement of a fair and just society has been said to be based on:

- equity in the distribution of economic resources;
- equality of civil, legal and industrial rights;
• fair and equal access to essential services such as housing, health and education;
• and
• the opportunity for participation by all in personal development, community life and decision-making.

At the Youth Crime Prevention Policy Forum, the Tasmanian state position paper explicitly located youth crime prevention measures in a social justice perspective (Vincent 1991). Social justice strategies have also been embraced in other states—Victoria, South Australia, Queensland and Western Australia—which gives considerable weight to a national crime prevention initiative within the framework of the Federal government’s own social justice policy.

In 1991, it could not be said that a coherent policy framework for crime prevention exists. This can be demonstrated by a number of observations.

First, there are as yet no national manifestos, Commonwealth/state agreements, or communiques from Ministerial conferences that might articulate a policy framework for crime prevention. There is no national strategy instrument as there is for the environment, women’s affairs or multicultural affairs, to name a few; and there is no Federal Minister with explicit executive responsibility for crime prevention. However, the South Australian ‘Together Against Crime’ and Victorian ‘Good Neighbourhood Program’ have laid much of the groundwork for a national crime prevention strategy.

Second, one of the supposed purposes of our criminal and juvenile justice systems is the prevention of crime, yet references to crime prevention in mission statements and corporate plans of law enforcement agencies continue to occur as little more than passing references in deference to custom rather than a clear and considered goal, policy or performance measure.

Third, as was stated in Kids In Justice: A Blueprint for the Nineties, Overview and Full Reports of the Youth Justice Project (Youth Justice Coalition 1990), society’s approach to crime should be based on both a clear conception of the causes of crime and a realistic and informed appraisal of the extent and nature of crime. However, governments continue to introduce measures without having a clear picture of the dimensions of crime, and without having a comprehensive evaluation of the range of policy options available. Directions have, in some jurisdictions, been driven more by headlines in the tabloid media than by systematic and planned crime prevention approaches.

Fourth, policies have often been contradictory in their aims, implementation and outcomes. One obvious and serious contradiction is the pursuit of law and order policies—policies which emphasise greater control and punishment, as against those promoting support services and (legitimate) education and training opportunities. The Youth Justice Project noted a shift in public expenditure from education and welfare to law enforcement in New South Wales in recent years (Youth Justice Coalition 1990), as had occurred in Queensland in the 1980s (O’Connor & Callahan 1989). The Federal government has also attempted to address the problems of homeless youth, and emphasised increased provision and coordination of support services (Australia 1989b). On the broader macro-economic level, young people face an exceedingly tough an uncertain future, yet in the years prior to 1991 there
has been shift in youth policy responsibility from the government to young people and families (Eckersley 1988; Polk & Tait 1990; Maas 1990).

Fifth, there are tensions within the currently dominant, conservative approaches to issues of crime and its prevention and punishment. On the one hand is 'law and order' paradigm which emphasises retributive punishment and compels an expansion of incarceration. On the other, economic rationalism compels a greater reliance on economical community corrections and smaller government.

Sixth, the demands, languages and goals of the key agencies in criminal justice systems are frequently conflicting. Amidst the politics and shifting balance of power, duties, rights and responsibilities of the criminal justice system personnel-the police, officials, magistrates, lawyers, welfare and community workers—there is precious little dialogue, let alone consensus, about what action is to be taken.

Seventh, agencies alternate their crime prevention views from one extreme to the other—from seeing crime as largely society’s fault, to seeing crime as solely a matter of individual free-will and hence culpability. The periodic search for someone to blame is also witnessed. In the case of juvenile crime, the Youth Justice Project argued that neither the extremes of changing ideological fashions nor the pursuit of scapegoats offer an adequate policy framework for the serious problem of juvenile crime (Youth Justice Coalition 1990, p. 34).

Finally, the role of the media in constructing public opinions and shaping political action on crime and justice issues is generally destructive of informed debate and policy making.

With these observations in mind, a crime prevention policy might begin to be constructed. This will involve building a consensus about acknowledgments such as:

- that crime is a complex social and economic phenomenon—with links to a multiplicity of factors such as social change, urbanisation, power differentials, poverty, difficulties in integration, exclusion from the mainstream, lack of opportunities, gendered differences, increased temptation of but lack of access to disposable goods, economic crises and the exigencies of ‘growing up’;
- that there is no single explanation for crime—none of the many theories about the causes of criminal behaviour are conclusive, although each has something to offer to our understanding and responses (Borowski & Murray 1986);
- that crime is not one monolithic entity—the prevention of different types of crime in different contexts may be responsive to specific management strategies;
- that there are host of agencies, programs, strategies and professions—from the police to architects, planners, teachers, child care workers and community workers—which have something to contribute to crime prevention.
Such acknowledgments are not new, but they are not followed through to their logical conclusion. For example, crime is rarely mentioned in the formulations of social and economic policy. It is not known how to ‘factor-in’ to the national accounts the consequences of crime created by burgeoning unemployment. The shifts between crime-related and other public expenditure across the country—or the shift in fiscal burden in this regard from Federal government to state governments—is not known with any certainty. The social and economic costs to the community of an individual criminal career, nor the savings from effective and early prevention, are also not known.

If it is accepted that crime is part of society not something outside it, then crime prevention policy must be seen as social policy. The starting point of a comprehensive policy framework for crime prevention should be an attempt to incorporate measures in areas such as employment and industry policy, urban planning and the environment, education, transport, housing, childcare, and child, family and youth support services.

The state position papers and other papers on crime prevention measures presented in Youth Crime Prevention: Proceedings of a Policy Forum (Halstead 1991) indicate the broad range of approaches being pursued. These approaches are positive steps toward a comprehensive, coherent and integrated policy and structural framework. The failure to develop a such a framework is not only inefficient but extremely costly in economic and human terms.

In the United Kingdom (UK) the failure of ‘law and order’ policies to reduce crime and public disorder, and the social consequences of reducing welfare services have been well-documented. In order to avoid repeating the mistakes of the UK, those agencies responsible for dealing with crime need to re-stress the importance of paying attention to social and economic crime prevention strategies alongside the containment and control of individual actions. Law and order policies appear to have been overtaken in the UK by more constructive approaches. Through the efforts of the Home Office and organisations such as Crime Concern, NACRO and the Safe Neighbourhoods Unit, the UK is light years ahead of Australia in the theory and practice of ‘purpose-built’ crime prevention programs and structures as, it appears, is much of Western Europe (Wilson & Geason 1988; King 1988).

The Youth Justice Coalition (1990) argues that the basis for re-appraisal and restructuring of the juvenile justice system must be one of social justice. Its report sets out, in a detailed way, both a critique of existing approaches and a comprehensive package of recommendations to incorporate a social justice approach into our laws, policies and programs for responding to youth crime. The Coalition’s report makes 233 recommendations for reform and restructuring of the New South Wales juvenile justice system and its findings and suggestions have an application well beyond the borders of New South Wales. The following summarises the policy directions advocated by the Youth Justice Coalition: The Youth Justice Project proposes a joint approach, a combination of social and situational crime prevention measures working hand in hand with law enforcement agencies. We must turn our back on solutions which see crime and criminals as separate from the problems that beset society. We should develop proposals that encourage social harmony, that improve the physical
and social environments of urban and rural areas, that increase the equity and participation of young people in society, that enhance family life, that re-establish the conditions for informal community controls, that allow for self-determination of minorities, that mobilise, involve, support and empower young people, and that support victims.

We require a juvenile justice system that involves all elements of the community, that is accountable to the public and its users, that coordinates and integrates all levels and arms of government. This is unashamedly ambitious. We must set high goals and standards, otherwise we condemn society to perhaps a spiralling problem of juvenile crime (Youth Justice Coalition 1990, pp. 10-11).

The Federal Role

Apart from the sponsorship and participation of the Australian Institute of Criminology in bringing people together for a national overview of crime prevention, there has not been presented to this conference a view on behalf of the Federal government about its current and future role in relation to crime prevention.

The Federal government already has a substantial and important-albeit a largely unacknowledged-stake in crime and crime prevention. In direct terms, the Federal government expends considerable resources on legal aid and family mediation; criminal justice research and data collection; the investigation, prosecution and punishment of Commonwealth offences; and on the prevention of damage and repairs to damaged Commonwealth property. The Federal government’s social security, employment, education and training programs, the general grants to the states, the tied grants for accommodation, health and other such services, and its international and domestic human rights promotion and monitoring are all of indirect relevance.

In particular, in addition to the work of the Australian Institute of Criminology, the Federal Office of Local Government is providing funds for local government to run innovative community development programs, such as the crime prevention pilot programs being undertaken by Waverley and Fairfield Councils. Whilst the Commonwealth Youth Bureau provides funds through the Australian Youth Initiatives Grants Scheme for youth crime prevention projects and their evaluation.

As yet, there has been no serious suggestion that the Commonwealth should take over the field of criminal justice or crime prevention from the states and territories. However, the Commonwealth has already proved willing to coordinate and promote the activities noted above, as well as lead Australian participation in the development of relevant international instruments such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) adopted by Australia in 1981; the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice, the UN Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of Their Liberty, and the UN Rules for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency.

Proposals for an expanded role for the Federal government in the juvenile justice field again provide a useful analogy. The Australian Law Reform Commission’s Research Paper, Sentencing Young Offenders proposed that:
the Commonwealth should now take a greater role in relation to the sentencing of young offenders. It should do so, first, to fulfil its leadership role in giving effect to international agreements and standards and to facilitate and coordinate efforts at reform within Australia. Secondly, to promote consistency in the treatment of the young offenders (against Federal law) for whom it has primary responsibility. Thirdly, because the effort which the Commonwealth has put into sentencing law reform would be unrealised if an essential group were omitted from any proposed Federal sentencing statute (Freiberg, Fox & Hogan 1988, p. 217).

In addition, the Research Paper concluded that:

- any Federal sentencing commission should have a mandate which includes review of sentencing of juveniles;
- the current changes to juvenile justice throughout Australia present an opportunity to institute comparative evaluative studies;
- the UN Beijing Rules (to which should be added the Draft Rules referred to above and the UN Convention) should be referred to the Australia Institute of Criminology as the basis for formulating Australian guidelines;
- the lack of policy making or coordinating structures at a national level should be addressed by the utilisation of the relevant standing Ministerial Councils, national conferences, and ongoing consultative mechanisms to link the various agencies;
- greater Commonwealth intervention was needed to ensure significantly upgraded and better coordinated statistical and research efforts in relation to juvenile justice systems for public policy to develop on an informed basis (Freiberg et al. 1988).

The Youth Justice Coalition put these ideas into more concrete terms and in its report recommended that:

R.16 The Commonwealth government should take a more substantial role in undertaking and stimulating national action on juvenile justice issues. This should include:
- establishing an office to initiate and coordinate Federal endeavours on juvenile justice matters;
- Establishing a national advisory body on juvenile justice;
- establishing funding programs in relation to:
  - local community crime prevention projects;
  - diversion programs;
  - institutional programs;
  - advocacy programs;
- commissioning Standards projects;
- developing model legislation;
• targeting some employment, education and training programs to young offenders; and
• integrating data collection and analysis.

R.25 The Commonwealth government should establish a National Juvenile Justice Consultative Council to bring together relevant Commonwealth and state officials, judicial officers, academics and advocates to provide advice and assistance to the Federal and state governments on juvenile justice issues.

R.36 The Commonwealth government should give consideration to identifying and differentiating that part of its funding to states which is used by them for juvenile justice programs, and making receipt of continued funding conditional upon agreed Standards. This might be done in the context of existing and new Commonwealth/state Funding Agreements.

R.37 The Federal government should commission a National Juvenile Justice Standards Project involving the Australian Institute of Criminology and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and relevant state departments and non-government organisations. The project should be undertaken as a comprehensive consultative exercise, and take into account the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice, the UN (Draft) Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of Their Liberty, and other relevant UN and overseas instruments (Youth Justice Coalition 1990).

Towards National Strategies and Structures

It is time for a national approach to crime and crime prevention. Crime is costing Australia too much money and is wasting scarce human and economic resources. There is too much inequality and inequity in the treatment of people between jurisdictions and there are international obligations to be fulfilled. There is much to be learnt from the lessons of the rich diversity of schemes at state and local levels and much to be gained from a coordinated, comprehensive, and cooperative venture.

There are plenty of precedents for a Federal government role as envisaged here—the joint arrangements such as the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program and Home and Community Care Programs; the national standards for nursing homes; tied grants in relation to health and education; and a host of national advisory bodies, from the National Health and Medical Research Council to the National Women’s Consultative Council.

The following direction outlines might be worth considering: some might sound fanciful—and they are by no means fully-developed proposals—but they could provide an agenda for a national approach to crime prevention in the 1990s.

First, the exercise of some executive responsibility within the Federal government is required. It would seem logical for the Attorney-General or Minister for Justice to take an overall coordinating responsibility—perhaps even as the Minister for Crime Prevention—and hopefully together with other relevant Ministers in a specially convened Cabinet Sub-Committee.
Second, in consultation with colleagues at state, territory and local government levels, a National Crime Prevention Strategy should be produced. This strategy would articulate the driving crime prevention principles and goals, specify the potential roles of various agencies, and announce some program initiatives.

Third, a central body is needed-comparable to the UK Home Office Crime Prevention Unit or the central authority responsible for implementing the Bonnemaison Report in France-to implement the strategy. Australia has a National Crime Authority, why not a National Crime Prevention Authority? Such an authority could incorporate professional and non-professional groups, victim and offender support organisations, government and non-government agencies, community, trade union and employer groups.

Fourth, just as the Economic Planning Advisory Council has produced a study of the national impact of immigration, a national study on the impact of crime and criminal justice would be extraordinarily valuable.

Fifth, some form of funding program should be established-possibly a joint Commonwealth/state initiative which would consolidate, promote and expand upon the existing funding efforts. This program should encourage the ‘bottom up’ approach of local initiatives and contain a solid commitment to evaluation. There is a Commonwealth-sponsored Healthy Cities Program which takes a broad and prevention-oriented primary health care approach. Why not devise a Safer Cities Program which likewise encourages inter-sectoral cooperation in the task of improving the social and physical environments of urban areas to make them safer and more habitable?

Lastly, the Australian Institute of Criminology is well-placed to build upon its research, program evaluation, data analysis, education and training in the crime prevention field to fulfil the role of a National Clearinghouse for Crime Prevention.

Conclusion

A systemic approach to crime and its prevention is required. Australia needs a national approach which incorporates the roles for Federal, state and local governments and the non-government sector. This framework must be structured around integrated and planned measures and should encompass the crime preventive functions of all aspects of social policy and programs, as well as ensure targeted crime prevention measures.

This may be an ambitious plan, but the first steps have already been taken. The ‘New Federalism’ offers an opportunity to achieve fundamental restructuring of methods of dealing with crime. If social justice is to mean anything for those at risk or already caught up in the welfare and justice systems, to those victimised or whose lives are otherwise inhibited by crime both directly and indirectly, to the citizens and taxpayers of this country, and if we are to be true to the potential of national overview conference, a national approach to crime prevention needs to be high on all our agendas.

References


Youth Justice Coalition (NSW) 1990, Kids In Justice: A Blueprint for the Nineties, Overview and Full Reports of the Youth Justice Project, Youth Justice Coalition, Sydney.