

# WELCOME ADDRESS

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ON BEHALF OF THE AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF CRIMINOLOGY (AIC), I want to extend to all of you a warm welcome to this Institute-sponsored conference on the topic of 'Homicide: Patterns, Prevention and Control'.

It is perhaps fitting that this conference should be held in Melbourne—a city renowned, in general, for its tranquillity. Regrettably, this tranquillity was shattered in 1987 by two mass-shootings which have become known as the Hoddle and Queen Street massacres. These two incidents, which occurred within a short time of one another, shocked the nation.

In December 1987, following these tragedies, the then Prime Minister convened a special meeting of the nation's leaders to consider the need for gun control and other measures. One of the proposals that was to flow from this summit was the establishment of a National Committee on Violence (NCV) to review the state of violence in the country, to examine the causes of this violence, and to make proposals for preventing and controlling violent behaviour. The NCV, which I had the privilege of chairing, was established formally in October 1988 and reported its findings to all governments in February 1990.

The genesis of this conference can really be found among the recommendations made by the NCV. Broadly, these recommendations call for three policy directions for governments and for individual Australians to work towards reducing violence in our society.

First, there is a need to adopt a national strategy for the promotion of non-violent attitudes. The degree to which many Australians continue to condone the use of violence in many aspects of their lives is one of the major impediments to achieving a non-violent society.

Secondly, there is a need to reduce factors which aggravate the risk and extent of violence. The Committee identified several factors, such as alcohol consumption and the use of firearms which, whilst not directly causing violence, aggravate its incidence and severity. The Committee also identified a number of measures aimed at mitigating the effect of these factors, including policies to better regulate the ownership of firearms.

Thirdly, the Committee stressed the need for an improvement in the availability of accurate information about the extent and nature of violence so as to provide a proper basis for policy making and for a reduction in the fear of violence.

In a variety of ways this conference addresses each of these three broad policy directions. As the most serious of all forms of violence, homicide has an extremely high profile in our society. All too often, media portrayals suggest that the ultimate solution to a range of problems is the use of extreme violence, including the taking of the life of other human beings. It is to be hoped that this conference will assist in dispelling any romantic beliefs that the community may have about homicide. We will be discussing the ugly realities of the killing of fellow human beings, often by people who profess to love, respect and protect those they slay. What we will be examining in the next three days is far removed from the slick portrayals of murder and mayhem that so frequently appear on our television and cinema screens.

In regard to the reduction of factors which aggravate the risk and extent of violence, this conference will, among other things, look at the vexed question of gun control. The NCV made a number of detailed recommendations about this issue in its final report. Following the further tragic mass shooting that occurred in the Strathfield Shopping Plaza in Sydney in August 1991, there have been some promising moves towards the adoption of these recommendations. However, the agreed upon uniform approach to gun laws adopted at the Special Premiers' Conference in November 1991 still falls short of the proposals made by the NCV.

In particular, we still seem unable to agree on the need to establish a national firearms register, and also on the need to begin to reduce the arsenal of weapons existing in this country. Although a cap has been placed upon the availability of military style assault weaponry of the type used in the Hoddle Street/Queen Street and Strathfield killings, many thousands of these weapons remain in the hands of our citizens. Just who has these weapons and where they are located remain largely unknown because of the absence of a national firearms registration scheme. In these hard economic times governments are also reluctant to incur the substantial costs that would be involved in any firearms buy-back program.

However, the problems of preventing and controlling homicide are obviously far more complex and difficult to solve than through gun control alone. Many forms of violence that may eventually lead to a killing may be traced to attitudes and behaviours that were instilled at childhood. The NCV report emphasised that families can just as easily be the breeding ground for aggression as they can be for nurturing. Changing these early learning experiences represents a major challenge. In the context of the homicide statistics there is perhaps no more chilling fact which points to the need for such change than the NCV's finding that the single most vulnerable age group for homicide victimisation were infants under the age of one year.

It is in the third policy direction—that associated with the provision of accurate information about the extent and nature of violence—that this conference can probably make the greatest contribution. The NCV found that there was a dearth of accurate and reliable information about all aspects of

violence in Australia, including homicide. The Committee recommended, among other things, that this information deficiency should be remedied by the establishment of a national homicide monitoring program within the AIC.

As part of its response to this and other NCV recommendations, the Federal Government has provided funding for this monitoring program within the framework of a broader Violence Prevention Unit, located at the AIC. Last year the AIC published the first of an ongoing annual report on Australian homicide, based on its monitoring of this crime. Heather Strang will report to this conference about the outcome of the second year of this monitoring program.

As Heather Strang will confirm, the good news is that Australians have not experienced the dramatic increases in homicide that have occurred over the past decade or so in countries like the USA. As I am sure another of our distinguished speakers, Professor Lawrence Sherman, will emphasise, the United States provides a frightening example of a nation whose homicide rate continues to escalate. A graphic illustration of the differences between the homicide rates in the USA and Australia can be found by examining certain absolute numbers—in recent years in this country there has been on average about 350 homicides, while in Washington DC alone last year the number of homicides approached 500.

Australia still has no grounds for complacency. Our rate of homicide is above that of many European nations and certain parts of the country experience rates which approach those encountered in American cities. The level of homicide and associated violence experienced by certain Aboriginal communities in this country is especially disturbing.

I am sure that you will find the discussions over the next three days to be stimulating, informative and at times controversial, and I welcome you to this conference.