

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Chair:
Associate Professor Kenneth Polk

Participants:
Professor Lawrence Sherman
Dr Sandra Egger
Dr Don Weatherburn
Deputy Commissioner Bill Goedegebuure

THE CHAIR INVITED PARTICIPANTS IN THE FINAL PANEL DISCUSSION TO express their views on the question: *Where do we go from here?*

Professor Sherman opened the discussion by referring to his keynote paper and, in particular, two areas for focus contained therein: hot spots of violence, that is public settings where violent behaviour was commonplace, and chronically violent families. He observed that computerised police data systems were essential for the identification of both these problem areas and strategies requiring such identification could not be pursued until these data systems were in place. The Victoria Police, through its Family Violence Project Office, already recorded in computerised form police call-outs to domestic violence incidents, but the situation in other jurisdictions was not known. Professor Sherman stressed the importance of the database recording calls for service, rather than offence reports, as the likelihood of such calls generating a report was likely to vary markedly from officer to officer and area to area. Additionally they gave a clearer indication of chronically violent families and places.

Having in place a means of identifying chronically violent families provided an opportunity to consider whether police should respond to them differently from one-off cases: it may be possible to structure a range of reactive police responses and test the effectiveness of each. It also allowed for the possibility of various proactive police strategies for prevention, in conjunction with community resources, neighbours and others close to these families, rather than simply waiting for the next incident to occur.

Such a database would also provide the means for identifying infants being born into chronically violent families. Strategies for the special protection of such infants could then be tested: for example, they could be

subject to more frequent home visits by community nurses or by a roster of community volunteers. These ideas could be tested via a small trial initially, and then by controlled experiment.

Professor Sherman then turned to the issue of hot spots, which might include, not only violent pubs and clubs, but also convenience stores, automatic teller machines and bus stations. In responding to the problems of hot spots, the same kind of data system was called for—that is, calls for service for violent incidents by address in a single data file. The most violent addresses could then be identified on a regular basis. Such locations may require particular police responses. In any case it was extremely useful for operational police to know whether there have been calls to these addresses before. In addition, identifying these troublesome locations could be very valuable in deciding on allocation of police resources.

Professor Sherman concluded his remarks by suggesting that what was required was a marriage between criminology and practitioners in the criminal justice system to enable available data to be put to better use. He saw enormous opportunities for the formulation of useable, practical strategies through the joint efforts of police and criminologists, by bringing to bear a criminological imagination on police data sets.

Dr Don Weatherburn then made the following remarks concerning future strategies aimed at homicide prevention and control.

- The aim of such strategies in the Australian context was not so much that of reducing absolute numbers of homicides, but rather of reducing the risk where risk was greatest. Risk was very unevenly distributed, even within the single jurisdiction of New South Wales, and varied markedly by geographical location. Dr Weatherburn observed that it was of little comfort, for example, to Aborigines in the north-west to know that the overall homicide rate for New South Wales as a whole was only 2 per 100,000, when the risk that they faced personally was many times higher. He strongly urged that efforts for prevention and control be concentrated in those regions which historically had experienced high homicide rates.
- It was unrealistic to expect gun control measures to be effective in actually reducing Australian homicide rates. For example, to reduce the number of gun homicides in New South Wales by 25 per cent would require a theoretical reduction in the number of licensed gun owners by some 48,000 in that state alone: this is based on the assumption that all such homicides were committed by licensed gun owners, which was obviously not the case. It was evident that gun control was all about preventing a growth in the homicide rate rather than effecting a reduction. It was essential that this point be clear because otherwise there was a danger of misleading the political process and thwarting efforts directed at ensuring that firearms did not become any more accessible than they already were.
- Choices between policy options in the control of homicide depended on the type of homicide being dealt with. For example, vital though gun

control measures were for limiting an increase in homicides, they offered little prospect for reducing risk in Aboriginal communities, for example, where gun homicides were relatively uncommon, and where other options were needed.

- Domestic homicide should not be quarantined from other forms of homicide. Areas with high rates of domestic violence and domestic homicide also had high rates of violence between men, and there was good evidence that men who assaulted women also assaulted other men. There was a great need to look at the issue in a more general way. What was it that disposed some men towards violence, not only towards women but towards each other?
- Prevention strategies in non-fatal domestic violence were needed to address the issue of limiting repetition rates among offenders. The most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics Crime Survey showed that there were 10,000–11,000 households where female members of the household indicated that they had been assaulted at least once in the preceding twelve months (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1991, p. 2). The Australian Bureau of Statistics question regarding frequency of assault— notwithstanding every response over three being grouped into a three-plus category— revealed an absolute minimum of 19,000 assaults suffered by these victims. These data revealed that the need to understand the cycle of violence in some families, and thereby devise strategies by which it could be broken, was just as important as trying to limit the 'migration' of new recruits into violent behaviour.

Dr Sandra Egger, in her remarks, took the opportunity to remind participants that there was a responsibility to respond to changes in our society with changes in policies and in legislation. Australian society was now highly urbanised, but firearms remained highly available. It was imperative to avoid the situation which had developed over the past decade in the USA. Effective controls were needed on gun availability, and the question of access to semi-automatic weapons especially needed to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

In conclusion, Deputy Commissioner Goedegebuure said that he agreed with the remarks of the other panel participants. He wished to add only that, from the police practitioner's point of view, the underlying causes of homicide appeared to be closely linked to the level of acceptance of violent behaviour within our society, together with the effects of alcohol. He believed that it was necessary to effect changes at an early age if these attitudes were to be changed, and cited the effective work being done at the school level by police and others.

The Chair thanked the Panel and suggested that as a way of focussing further debate, the Panel and audience might adopt the suggestion of Dr Egger that a Conference communique be devised, setting out the agreed recommendations of the Conference.

After discussion, the following recommendations were agreed:

1. All Australian police agencies should move as quickly as possible to computerise their databases on both calls for service and criminal offence reports, in order to make possible the identification of sites of chronic violence.
2. The Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) should be funded to assist in developing the software and analytic programs necessary for accomplishing Recommendation 1.
3. The AIC should be commended for its implementation of the National Homicide Monitoring Program, which further demonstrated the necessity for maintaining and strengthening the AIC in its fight against violent crime.
4. The recommendations of the National Committee on Violence with respect to firearms should be endorsed by Australian governments as soon as possible. (Representatives of shooting organisations present abstained from voting on this recommendation).

In his summing up, Professor Polk observed that one of the most valuable aspects of the Conference was the opportunity it had provided for bringing together both practitioners and researchers in the criminal justice field, so that a number of views could be put concerning patterns and trends in Australian homicide and opportunities for prevention and control.

Professor Polk commented that the systematic gathering of reliable data on the characteristics of homicide was essential to the understanding of its dynamics and to the development of successful intervention strategies. It could only be achieved through the cooperative effort of both practitioners and researchers: a clear example of the success of such cooperation was the AIC's National Homicide Monitoring Program, whose work the Conference warmly endorsed. Furthermore, this Program provided the means for discerning emerging patterns and trends in homicide. For example, is robbery of elderly people increasing? Are different weapons, such as pistols or semiautomatic weapons becoming more prevalent? Is fatal child abuse on the rise? Heather Strang's paper outlining the Program's findings to date had provided a useful framework for subsequent discussion; more detail had been provided by a number of researchers investigating particular kinds of homicides. Papers by police officers from several jurisdictions had also helped to complete the picture of the character of Australian homicide.

Professor Polk observed that it was important to remember that there was no such thing as 'homicide in general', that different dynamics operated in different circumstances, and each required quite different strategies. Even the category of 'domestic' homicide was too broad to encompass the variations which existed in domestic incidents and the wide range of possible dynamics at work therein. Here, as in every other class of homicide, successful strategies in terms of prevention and control would vary with different scenarios. Research was clearly needed to find out what worked and in what situations.

The Conference was not able to address all categories of homicide. For example, there were many issues concerning child homicide which needed urgently to be addressed; predatory crime, especially robbery, needed further research; and homicides resulting from negligent work practices were an important area for investigation. However, Professor Polk stressed the need to avoid moral panics about homicide—it must be placed in the context both of other offences and other kinds of violent death.

Professor Polk then reviewed the ways in which Professor Sherman and Professor Homel had tackled the question of prevention and control strategies. Both had discussed policing strategies for dealing with hot spots, and Professor Sherman had also addressed particular issues in the policing of domestic violence. Practical opportunities for intervention described in these two presentations should be high on the agenda for implementation, for when fatal violence occurred it was so often in these two settings.

Important questions had been addressed in the segments of the Conference dealing with Aboriginal issues and with psychiatric issues: the latter had included discussion both of the mentally-ill and intellectually-disabled offenders. There had also been a comprehensive discussion of issues of gun control throughout the course of the Conference.

Valuable papers had been presented on aspects of the prosecutorial process in homicide cases, coronial issues and the question of mandatory life imprisonment. However, Professor Polk observed that there were limitations in the criminal justice approach for preventing homicide: the motivations involved frequently were not susceptible to the deterrent aspect of sentencing and penalties generally. However, gun control was an important policy issue—a complete ban on the availability of firearms would result in reduced numbers of homicides, but such a move was not a realistic, nor even necessarily a desirable, objective even though the American situation was clearly one to be avoided at all costs.

Finally, Professor Polk stressed that masculinity, and perceptions of what masculinity means, remained a central issue in homicide, though little was being done to address it. There was a level of acceptance and condonation of violence in some sectors of our society, both as a manifestation of masculinity and as a legitimate means of solving problems, which ensured the continuance of violent behaviour, including fatal violence. Associated with this was the growing problem of people permanently on the margin—people with little stake in society who might well become responsible for increasing numbers of predatory crimes, including homicide.

Professor Polk concluded by congratulating all participants on the high quality of the papers presented, and expressed appreciation for the AIC's role in contributing to knowledge and debate on these important issues.

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics 1991, *Crime and Safety, New South Wales*, Australian Bureau of Statistics New South Wales, Sydney.