

*Preventing  
Criminal  
Victimisation: The  
case for an  
Intersectoral  
Response to  
Victimisation<sup>3/4</sup> a  
South Australian  
Perspective*

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Strong arguments have been raised to suggest that the police (in fact the whole criminal justice system) have tended to neglect crime victims. While this may have once been true, in the last decade or so, crime victims have gradually gained prominence through the efforts of victims themselves, victim support groups, concerned politicians and criminal justice practitioners.

At the outset, it is important to acknowledge that the concept of victimisation is complex, multidimensional, and even problematic. There is an infinite array of situations or circumstances that can lead to victimisation: the AIDS epidemic; the Balkan war; the Exxon-Valdez disaster; the Los Angeles earthquake; serial killings.

As the science of victimology has evolved and concern for victims grown, a range of strategies intended to reduce the incidence of victimisation and support, perhaps empower, victims has been devised. It is a shame, however, that such concern and concomitant strategies have not so readily extrapolated into 'substantial' community activity.

Often our understanding of ‘what is really going on’ is distorted. Certainly, this is a truism with regard to criminal victimisation and its prevention.

Of all forms of victimisation, criminal victimisation has probably attracted the most interest. Indeed to speak about preventing criminal victimisation has become quite fashionable. Moreover, in the United Kingdom, France, The Netherlands, the United States, Japan, New Zealand, and Australia (to name but a few) the prevention of criminal victimisation is a paramount concern.

Although identifying priorities and targeting efforts are essential components of any criminal victimisation prevention strategy, a major obstacle to prevention of criminal victimisation is the lack of cooperation between and within government and non-government agencies. To focus on the variety of interests that these agencies represent exacerbates the obstacle, whereas the identification and development of common purposes and functions lessens the obstacle.

Additionally, the challenge to reduce criminal victimisation, is not for government and non-government agencies alone, but must involve the community at large. For these reasons, this paper argues that the responsibility for preventing criminal victimisation has to be shared. ‘Strategic alliances’ will also enhance the prospect of not only devising creative measures to reduce criminal victimisation, but actually achieve a real reduction in crime, erasing fear of crime and minimising re-victimisation.

Importantly, this paper acknowledges the need to develop and implement creative ways to help solve criminal victimisation and related issues (including the alleviation or elimination of secondary victimisation). This view is predicated on the belief that criminal justice agencies and other service providers need to develop a relationship with the community, particularly victims, to allow these people a greater voice in setting priorities and involving them in efforts to address the root causes of criminal victimisation. It concludes that an inter-sectoral ‘community oriented’ approach both dispels many of the myths that plague the ‘crime prevention and control’ debate, and improves the ‘quality of service’ delivered to victims.

## **Defining Criminal Victimisation Prevention**

Crime prevention is not a recent innovation, and since the 1970s there has been a growing interest in anticipating, recognising and appraising crime risk and the initiation of action to remove or reduce that risk. This resurgence has been, and continues to be, manifest in public policy, public consciousness, and in many western democracies is evident by private security industry growth.

What is crime prevention? Crime prevention has traditionally meant providing advice on security and protective behaviours. The term crime prevention, however, embraces an array of concepts and connotations. It has come to mean all things to some people. Indeed, the lack of a precise definition may be an impediment in planning to prevent crime.

Weir (1984), for example, found himself compelled to provide a definition of crime prevention, which insofar as much crime creates victims, serves the purpose of this paper aptly. He stated:

*Crime prevention is the term applied to principles, policies and programs which aim to reduce law-breaking, through both formal and informal social controls which are acceptable in a democracy and respect basic human rights.*

Weir's definition places the prevention of criminal victimisation within the objective framework of the law. It presumes the inevitability of crime, thus lacks the idealistic belief that society can be completely rid of criminal victimisation. It presumes that principles must translate into policies, and policies into action. And, it acknowledges that both formal and informal social control contribute to the level of criminal victimisation.

Instead of crime prevention, several authors use the expression 'crime reduction' (Elias 1986; Hope & Shaw 1988). Elias (1986), for instance, has categorised 'crime reduction' strategies on the basis of purpose. Some strategies, he pointed out, are intended to increase victim participation, while others target victimisation avoidance, and others require greater law enforcement.

Importantly, Elias's contribution to the definition of crime prevention appreciates that victims have a post-victimisation role beyond simply reporting crime and appearing as State witnesses. That the failure to provide a useful framework which facilitates the 'recovery' of victims, and the failure to involve victims in the design, implementation and ongoing monitoring of such a framework are yet other sources of victimisation.

As mentioned above, criminal victimisation constitutes but one category of all victimisation, yet according to Fattah (1990), criminal victimisation 'embraces a huge variety of multifarious and heterogeneous behaviours'. Consistent with this, Elias (1986) has explained that particular types of crime 'capture' our imagination, yet these 'comprise only part of the victimisation we suffer'.

For many people, the so-called 'crime problem' is dominated by images of 'archetypal criminals' and similar stereotypes. Almost every day, these inaccurate impressions of crime are reinforced by the media.

Selective crime reporting in the media ensures that there are marked differences between the probability of criminal victimisation and the reality of the same. As a consequence, the media does not place the risks of criminal victimisation into perspective. Of particular concern is the resultant fear of crime which may be as debilitating as actual victimisation.

Strategies to prevent criminal victimisation must be driven by more than 'media headlines'. Instead, preventive strategies and activities should be founded on a clear conception of the causes of victimisation, and a realistic and informed assessment of the extent and nature of it.

Similarly, several writers have proclaimed the need for rigorous evaluation of prevention programs. Until recently, measurements of crime prevention programs were, for the most part, tentative even haphazard. In the United States, Lurigo and Rosenbaum (1986) have pointed to varying interest in presenting the 'hard facts' about the success or otherwise of crime prevention programs. Likewise, in Britain it was observed in a Home Office (1988) report that there had been 'an absence of detailed evaluation' and little monitoring to determine the effectiveness of crime prevention programs. And, in South Australia, Sarre

1990; 1991) has described the tendency to appraise crime prevention initiatives rather than engage in scientifically valid methodology.

Undeniably, past attempts to prevent victimisation, especially criminal justice reforms, have been largely unsystematic and uncoordinated (Clifford 1976). Victimisation prevention and criminal justice should not be treated as isolated problems to be tackled by simplistic, fragmentary methods but rather as complex and wide ranging activities requiring integrated strategies and comprehensive solutions.

Additionally, to proceed without knowledge of what victims need, or what victims perceive as their rights, would be insensitive and destined to failure. During the mid-1970s key South Australians realised that to make any progress at all, victims (or at the very least victims' advocates) had to be fully involved if significant progress was to be made in the delivery of justice.

It would be wrong to assume that moves to improve the position of victims and provide adequate services in South Australia have not been without controversy. But the transition toward a victim oriented criminal justice system has been aided by the willingness of successive governments and criminal justice agencies to consider and implement ideas and approaches proposed by victims themselves and their advocates. There has also been a preparedness to learn from other jurisdictions and adapt policies and programs to suit local victim needs.

Those seeking to prevent criminal victimisation need to be cognisant of the array of positive and negative connotations that are closely associated with criminal victimisation. These connotations may taint prevention strategies.

According to Hogan (1991), society appears to be engaged in a 'periodic search for someone to blame' for crime. Consistent with this, Walklate (1989) has identified 'victim blaming', 'offender blaming' and 'community blaming' crime prevention initiatives.

According to Walklate, 'victim blaming strategies' for the most part presume victims precipitate their victimisation, hence the emphasis is on expanding the role of victims in reducing the opportunities for victimisation to occur. 'Offender blaming', Walklate concluded, 'operates within a conventional criminology', and as such may facilitate retributive aspirations, whereas 'community blaming' focused on a conventional or 'fairly narrow' definition of crime.

The 'blaming' thesis of course needs to be placed in a proper context. Walklate's 'community blaming', for instance, is best understood in context of societal changes (Toffler 1970; 1980; 1990). Significantly, the growth in 'community oriented' activity is reflective of a growing reliance on self-help. The attribution of some criminal victimisation prevention activity is, on the one hand, a consequence of economic and philosophical ideologies, but on the other, an honest attempt to attend to rising demands and expectations of victims and victim advocates. Finally, it is axiomatic that preventing victimisation in a democracy must involve public participation.

'Community oriented' prevention strategies in South Australia have been developed at a State and local level in consultation with key stakeholders. The promulgation of these strategies signalled a commitment to community problem solving; of being more concerned with the causes of crime and with crime prevention than with after-the-event activities.

At a local level, community policing is integral to the success of programs. Police and local citizens work together in identifying local needs and problems, and developing locally based activities to help solve contemporary problems related to fear of crime and criminal victimisation itself. On a state level, the success of crime prevention programs has been largely dependent on the cooperation and coordination, and the capacity of organisations to incorporate and carry out preventive strategies.

There are a considerable number of government and non-government agencies, academic organisations, and community groups that provide directly and indirectly a wide range of services to victims of crime. These key stakeholders include Victims of Crime Service, Australasian Society of Victimology, Attorney General's Department, Director of Public Prosecutions, Rape and Sexual Assault Services, Child Protection Services, and Neighbourhood Watch (and other like schemes). Generally, in South Australia there has been both formal and informal cooperation between these and other victim oriented agencies.

During the late 1980s a Victim Liaison Committee was established to ensure, among other things, a coordinated approach to the prevention of victimisation and to advise government on victim issues. Aboriginal people, people of a non-English speaking background, and victims of sexual assault, in addition to the traditional criminal justice agencies, are represented on the Committee. The Committee's membership fosters diversity and avoids uniformity. Moreover, the Committee provides a forum within which victim issues can be placed in a cultural and social setting.

The resolve to introduce and maintain a structured and consistent approach to addressing the needs of victims of crime in the immediate and long-term, whilst at the same time developing and implementing strategies to minimise the risks of victimisation may not be unique to South Australia. However, in some jurisdictions conflicting demands and objectives of those agencies involved with the criminal justice system have detracted from the opportunity to articulate a 'victim oriented' inter-agency network. Consequently, efforts to elevate the importance of victims' needs and preventing criminal victimisation have been thwarted.

South Australia's experience contrasts with observations gleaned from the *Economic and Social Research Council's Crime and Criminal Justice* research initiative of the mid-1980s in Britain (Sampson et al. 1988). According to Bottoms (1990), the research identified two dominant theoretical perspectives of interagency cooperation: the benevolent approach and the conspiratorial approach. Furthermore, differing perceptions; struggles for resources, power and prestige; and, ignorance were noted impediments to interagency programs.

Of particular concern was the propensity for client group needs, such as victims of crime, to be submerged below a facade of organisational anxiety. One solution proposed by Bottoms is to consult with targeted client groups as closely as possible.

## Causes of Criminal Victimization and Traditional Responses

In spite of the gains made for victims during the 1980s, a climate of intense public interest in law and order prevails. The 'problem' of criminal victimisation and its prevention too often falls almost totally upon the criminal justice system. Traditionally, the criminal justice system has functioned as an adjunct to informal social control. And, there are difficulties presuming that the criminal justice system can replicate the socialising forces implicit in informal social control.

Criminal victimisation appears to be an inevitable feature of social life. Indeed, both developed and developing societies suffer a 'crime problem'. Likewise, neither simple or complex societies; nor capitalist or socialist nations have been free of crime.

Reflecting on urban, western societies, Clifford's (1976) observation that the dimensions of crime are not only reflections of a disturbed society but indicative of the lifestyles and social contours particular to that society, appears well founded. He added that traditional responses to crime have validity in dealing with some crime, but such responses failed to address the basic causes of many forms of crime.

Similarly, in their discussion of 'the relentless upsurge of crime', Radzinowicz and King (1979) aptly stated: 'No national characteristics, no political regime, no system of law, police, justice, punishment, treatment or even terror, has rendered a country exempt from crime.'

A common list of criminogenic features from around the globe includes:

- under achievement in education
- boredom
- economic adversity
- inequity
- lack of employment opportunities
- increasing individualism
- weakening influence of traditional social institutions
- breakdown of the family
- lack of religious tolerance
- racism
- drug experimentation and exploitation associated with drugs

Confronting these criminogenic features requires more than a 'law and order' reformation. Criminal justice agencies and others must develop and implement more practical methods of problem solving within the community (Eck & Spelman 1987). These methods should be integrated with the justice system. There must be a concerted effort to provide quality service to all who come in contact with the justice system—victims and offenders—if criminal victimisation is to be truly reduced.

Contrasting these assertions, the law and order, or victim/offender, debate has been fuelled by concomitant demands for mandatory sentences, the removal

of the right to silence, reduced burden of proof, and so on. Several writers (Fattah 1992; Eijkman 1992; Harding 1994), however, have been critical of false allegations that have over-shadowed both the interests of offenders and the interests of victims.

In his review of Fattah's book, *Towards a Critical Victimology*, Harding (1994), for example, contends that there has been an 'overreach of the victimisation industry' in Australia and in North America. With 'missionary zeal' (to quote Fattah), Harding points out that some elements in the victims' movement, the media and some politicians have perpetuated images of 'unfair human suffering'. Inappropriately, such characterisations of victimisation are utilised instead of empirical research data when setting agendas such as law reform. As a consequence neither victims nor offenders benefit.

## **Punitive Prevention of Criminal Victimization**

Law and order reforms are essentially aimed at only a small proportion of criminals. Some research suggests that the deterrent effect of the threat of imprisonment is unstable. Some commentators go so far as to suggest incarceration does little more than temporarily protect society.

There is no denying, however, that prison prevents some crime. Imprisoned people do not commit more crimes in the community for the term of their imprisonment. Prisons (in conjunction with other corrective measures) may rehabilitate some offenders, although it is widely acknowledged that prisons are ineffective at rehabilitation.

In terms of re-victimisation, recidivist research has shown that knowledge of past offending does not provide accurate predictions about future offending. A Victorian study found that while the majority of violent offenders were reconvicted of some offence after release less than 30 per cent were reconvicted of a violent offence. Likewise, a South Australian study showed only 19 per cent of violent offenders were reconvicted for a violent offence (Police Commissioners' Policy Advisory Group 1992).

The principal objective in sentencing is to ensure an accused person is treated justly and fairly. In determining a sentence the four major criteria considered are: deterrence, rehabilitation, incapacitation, and retribution. Since the late 1980s in South Australia, the extent of harm on the victim has assumed greater prominence in sentencing decisions, and compensation and restitution for the victim have also be added to the sentencing options.

South Australia Police facilitate the provision of 'particulars' concerning the effects of crime to a sentencing court by either preparing, or coordinating the preparation of, victim impact statements. Once again the Police have been instrumental in establishing a network of victim services which help with the preparation of victim impact statements. Agencies which assist with victim impact statements include the Victims of Crime Service, Sexual Assault Services and Child Protection Services.

Pre-conviction, even pre-trial, diversion has been mooted as a viable alternative to post-conviction remedies, such as imprisonment. Diversionary programs are more likely to empower victims, enhance victims' feelings of

security, and enable victims to obtain reparation in more flexible and creative ways. Research in Australia and New Zealand involving mainly youth offender initiatives such as group conferencing shows diversion, unlike post-conviction remedies, facilitates victim/offender reconciliation.

In South Australia family group conferencing (as an alternative to court) has become an important aspect of juvenile justice. Preliminary data suggests family group conferencing is a viable assembly to attend to both the offender's and victim's interests. Certainly, these conferences have the potential to serve a broader range of victim interests than the court process is presently equipped to handle.

## **A Victim Oriented Police Service**

It is widely acknowledged that a lack of consideration for crime victims may influence the willingness of victims to report crimes. Considering, in the overwhelming number of cases it is the reports of victims which begins the criminal justice process, and that process continues to be dependent on the victims, it is now difficult to believe that victims' interests were neglected.

Additionally, often as a result of indifferent attitudes, victims frequently experience a second victimisation. As well as their feeling inferior, shame, even guilt, victims may be confronted by distrust and denial.

The plight of crime victims is now recognised as an important aspect of police service. That service extends beyond crisis intervention, and includes follow up visits and referrals to victim support agencies.

In 1987 the South Australia Police committed themselves to providing a consistent approach to addressing the needs of victims of crime; whilst at the same time developing policies and strategies to reduce actual victimisation and the risks of victimisation. It was also acknowledged that the Police had to consider the process of victimisation as a basis for developing crime prevention strategies.

In moving towards preventing criminal victimisation, it became obvious that some people have a greater probability of becoming a victim of crime. It was assumed that by targeting these groups for crime prevention programs and dissemination of information, the likelihood of victimisation and fear of crime at an individual level could be reduced.

South Australia Police formed a Victims of Crime Branch in 1987 whose charter remains to develop strategies and policies to meet the needs of victims. In addition, the Branch coordinates Police services with respect to training, research and evaluation, and liaison with other victim service providers. Branch staff have over the years prepared a comprehensive set of guidelines directed toward better service delivery for victims.

Since then the Police have appointed victim contact officers and a victim impact statement coordinator. Several Domestic Violence Units have been established in the metropolitan area of Adelaide.

A computer based Brief Enquiry Management System has been developed which provides police state wide with ready access to information about the progress of criminal proceedings. The System allows police to search for

particulars on victims as opposed to traditional police systems which are geared toward offender data. As a consequence, South Australia Police are better placed to meet victims' informational needs.

Finally, police at varying levels undertake victimological studies. The Recruit Training Programme includes a series of lectures and workshops dedicated to victims of crime. Prospective police supervisors must complete an Associate Diploma in Justice Studies which includes victimology as a compulsory core unit.

Various victim service providers and victims themselves participate regularly in the training and education of South Australia's police. The preparedness of these people to assist police is yet again a demonstration of the level of cooperation enjoyed in South Australia.

### **South Australia Police and the Victims of Crime Service**

As mentioned above, South Australia Police, in an attempt to address the physical and psychological needs of victims, has formed several 'strategic alliances' with victim service providers in both the government and non-government sectors. One such 'alliance' is that between the Police and the Victims of Crime Service. Indeed, since the Victims of Crimes Service was established in 1979 there has been a strong affiliation. Both the Police and the Victims of Crime Service (VOCS) have a clear picture of what each other does and what each others' priorities are.

An important aspect of the 'alliance' has been, and remains, the preparedness to resolve problems before they become entrenched. By cooperating, communicating and focusing on the same issues, but from different perspectives (yet conscious of the need to preserve these differences and realise the value of each others approach), creative ways to help redress criminal victimisation and minimise the 'second injury' have evolved.

Predicated on a similar philosophy, 'alliances' have also been formed with sexual assault services, child protection services and domestic violence services. Respect between agencies has ensured an environment where issues can be tackled constructively thereby providing timely and relevant victim service delivery.

### **Conclusion**

Since the 1980s the edict that the police cannot alone control crime has dominated the criminal justice reform agenda. Proponents of this view argue that active cooperation of government and non-government agencies, and the public is more likely to prevent crime. South Australia Police have not been opposed to collaborating with others to prevent crime, hence reducing criminal victimisation. Actually, the police have played an integral role in a range of, perhaps ambitious, programs to eliminate victimogenic features of the criminal justice system, reduce actual crime and alleviate unnecessary fear of crime.

In attempting to prevent victimisation those in positions of power must act as an enabling force or catalyst to bring about change. Service providers such as the

police must become problem solvers. And, agencies must engage in a concerted intersectoral effort to better deliver justice. The emphasis should be on social integration and social relationships (Bottoms 1990).

Finally, this paper has raised a range of issues which show that an intersectoral approach to preventing criminal victimisation is well founded. In my view South Australia's experience suggests that the key ingredients are:

- determination of the actual problem(s) by engaging in critical analysis;
- establishing the reasons for the initiatives in close consultation with the target group;
- ensuring a comprehensive knowledge of theoretical and humanistic perspectives;
- identification of key stakeholders and potential client groups;
- development of 'open lines' of communication and alliances founded on cooperation;
- preparedness to direct activities towards collective goals rather than individual goals;
- election of methods conducive to client needs rather than organisational needs;
- establishment of a useful client oriented network;
- provision for constant monitoring and evaluation; and
- recognition that there are both direct and indirect costs, and these costs are not simply monetary.

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