

MAKING 'EVIDENCE' WORK IN COMMUNITY CRIME PREVENTION

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Conference paper presented at:
Delivering crime prevention : making the evidence work
Carlton Crest Hotel, Sydney
21-22 November 2005



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Criminology



Crime Prevention Division
Attorney General's
department of nsw

This conference was organised by the Australian Institute of Criminology
in conjunction with the Crime Prevention Division of the New South Wales
Attorney General's Department.

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Making 'Evidence' Work in Community Crime Prevention

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Australian Institute of Criminology &
Crime Prevention Division, NSW Attorney General's Department
Delivering Crime Prevention: making the evidence work
21-22 November 2005
Sydney, Australia

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(The views expressed in this paper are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent those of the Queensland Government or the Department of Communities.)

The Queensland Government is implementing a *Strategic Framework for Community Crime Prevention*. The Strategic Framework is principally concerned with engaging the Queensland Government – through a partnership with local government – with communities, around concerns relating to crime and community safety.

The Strategic Framework reframes the way that crime is managed. Traditional management responses to crime through the criminal justice system will always be needed, but a community crime prevention approach recognises that the prevention of crime is fundamentally a whole-of-community (which includes Government) responsibility. Crime does not occur in isolation, but in a community or social context. As communities use relationships to minimise the risk factors which contribute to offending, and maximise the resilience factors which encourage more healthful coping strategies than crime, communities can contribute to a real reduction in crime. And furthermore, this reduction is diffused to other social benefits as well.

In this paper, I will first outline the ways in which the Strategic Framework translates identified good practice in the management of community crime prevention into governmental policy. However, the Strategic Framework gives only the 'framework', which has to be operationalised. The focus of the paper is the attempt to translate this good practice in research and policy into effective on-the-ground community crime prevention practice in the Mackay/Whitsunday region. I will examine three elements of local practice: use of a local evidence base, action planning, and evaluation.

The Queensland *Strategic Framework for Community Crime Prevention*

In 2001, Crime Prevention Queensland commissioned a literature review to document the features of good practice relevant to the role of central government in managing community crime prevention. In conducting the review, Monika Henderson drew from best practice both within Australia and overseas, and also considered cross-sectoral partnership approaches in addressing other social issues outside of the criminal justice arena.

Common features of good practice models of community crime prevention were found to be:

- An explicit commitment to a partnership approach between public, business and community sectors
- a focus on intervention at the local community level, targeting local needs and circumstances
- multi-agency coordination, at both strategic and operational levels, in planning and delivery of services relevant to crime prevention and community safety
- community participation in the identification of local problems and their solutions
- a central organisational structure at federal and/or state level providing strategic and funding support to community-based arrangements
- recognition of the pivotal role of local/municipal governments.

(Henderson 2001; Gadsden & Henderson 2003)

Each of these features was inbuilt into the Strategic Framework model.

- The implementation of the Strategic Framework is founded in partnerships between the Queensland Government, local government, and the local community.
- Local action teams, called BSCATs – Building Safer Communities Action Teams – are formed in each participating local government area, to identify the local incidence and causes of crime and community safety concerns, and develop and implement and evaluate local strategies to address those concerns. Members of BSCATs come from the local Council, Police, business, community services, community groups, and government departments.
- BSCATs are linked into Regional Networks comprising local MPs, managers of government departments, regional organisations, to assist local and regional coordination and collaboration.
- BSCATs collect and collate Local Area Profiles, comprising statistical and anecdotal data relating to local concerns. They consult their communities to fill gaps in available data. These Profiles provide a comprehensive and evolving evidence base upon which action planning and evaluation is founded.
- The Queensland Government provides continuing support and capacity building for BSCATs through the Department of Communities: through central strategic direction and coordination, regional Senior Community Support Officers (Community Safety) (SCSOCSs), an establishment grant, a Learning and Development Program for team members, access to research and knowledge, and improved coordination across government programs.
- Local governments have an ongoing and definite role in supporting BSCATs, as well as gaining benefits to their core business through better crime prevention practice in planning and development approvals, management of parks and amenities, and community development.

(Qld Govt 2002)

To quote from the Strategic Framework, “BSCATs provide the opportunity for communities to take positive action to prevent crime, working with and supported by the Queensland Government. ... This includes

- the opportunity to contribute to local, regional and statewide action on crime prevention
- building relationships with others who share the same commitment to crime prevention
- recognition as part of a statewide network of BSCATs ...
- being part of a problem-solving approach
- access to training and communication resources ...
- access to small grants, and
- increased potential to access relevant funds in related local, State, and Commonwealth crime prevention funding programs.

(Qld Govt 2002:7)

The Strategic Framework provides a good policy framework for community engagement for the practice of community crime prevention across Queensland. It was initially implemented as a pilot program for three years. This expired in June 2005, and the Government has proceeded to the full implementation of the Framework across Queensland. Notably, during the pilot phase,

- responsibility for the Framework transferred from the Department of the Premier and Cabinet to the Department of Communities,
- the responsibilities and staff of Crime Prevention Queensland were divided across three Directorates in the new Department of Communities, and
- responsibility for the regional implementation of the Framework was devolved to regional management.

BSCATs in Mackay/Whitsunday

Thus far, four BSCATs have been established in the Mackay/Whitsunday region: at Whitsunday, Mackay, Bowen and Sarina. Each Team has completed a Learning and Development Program which sets the boundaries, methodologies, and directions of the Team and builds team cohesion, each has developed a local evidence base of their area and identified the most important local issues, and each is now heavily immersed in planning and implementing strategies to address those issues. Only one Team, the Mackay CCPAT, has thus far conducted an evaluation of one of their projects.

Across the four BSCATs, there are some common priority issues across several local government areas, and there are also some differences.

- Family and domestic violence (which includes child abuse/neglect), perceptions of community safety in public spaces, and alcohol and drug misuse, are more frequent concerns.
- Offending by young people and property crimes are rating higher in some areas than in others.
- Importantly, some issues which appear regularly in the media or are popular with television dramas, are not being listed as priorities: for example, personal safety amongst elderly or frail people, sexual offending, and the release of ex-prisoners to the community.

With four BSCATs in the region, a Regional Building Safer Communities Network was established to enable communication and collaboration between BSCATs on regional issues. In the Mackay/Whitsunday region, the Network is taking on much greater responsibilities than those intended in the Strategic Framework: including knowledge management and capacity-building around good practice in community crime prevention, and joint problem-solving across BSCATs. In addition, the Regional Network and BSCATs have built alternative means to dialogue with Government on regional issues – through the Queensland Government's Ministerial Regional Communities Forums – and to seek action on cross-departmental issues – through the Regional Managers' Coordination Network.

Through these means, the BSCATs have a structure through which they can potentially be effective. This has taken three years to evolve since the employment of the regional Support Officer, and two years since the commencement of the first BSCAT. This suggests a second critical factor emanating from our experience in Mackay/Whitsunday: the need for time to grow relationships, test assumptions, build knowledge and skills, and develop direction, both organisationally and personally.

Knowledge Management and Local Evidence

BSCATs are required to 'develop a crime prevention profile for the local community with the assistance of the local Police'. (Qld Govt 2002:9) To my knowledge, these local area profiles are the most comprehensive of any profiling undertaken in community crime prevention programs nationally and internationally.

Local profiles are developed out of Unit 3 of the Learning and Development Program, in which the SCSOCS presents an initial draft profile from demographic and economic statistics, crime and anti-social behaviour statistics, and local crime prevention/management resources. Statistics are shared from the Police, other government departments, and local services.

Having received the initial draft, BSCATs dissect the material to identify what information is missing. Members contribute information and perceptions from their own sources, and conduct interviews with key community personnel to gain further information to make the picture as complete as possible. After the BSCAT has adopted the finished profile, issues and gaps relating to local crime and safety concerns are identified and prioritised. Each BSCAT identified about six high priority concerns.

The profile is updated as new information becomes available, for example from BSCAT projects. It is updated on an annual basis for new statistical information from government departments. Updating the profile is the responsibility of the SCSOCS.

Good practice requires that local initiatives be based in a local evidence base, and that movements in the local evidence base help in tracking the impacts of projects. Despite the comprehensivity of the profiles, this has proved difficult to achieve in practice. The profile was the basis for prioritising local issues, but has proved cumbersome in trying to link evidence to action and evaluation planning.

In an attempt to streamline this connection, I have negotiated with BSCATs to re-write their local profiles for the 2006 update. At present, information is collated in a social profile, crime and community safety profile, and community resources profile; and a discussion section analyses the links between the three sub-profiles. This means that members need to look in four places to collate the available information on any issue.

Under the re-written profile, the social and crime profiles will provide only statistical information with little commentary. The discussion is deleted as a separate section. The resources profile is broadened such that, under each focal issue, data is collated from the social and crime profiles and juxtaposed against current resources, research findings as to 'what works' in addressing that issue, and local gaps and issues. In sum, for any issue which the BSCAT addresses, the key material is available on two pages within the local profile. BSCATs will reconsider and reprioritise identified gaps and issues as part of their planning for 2006.

Later next year, I will be assessing, in conjunction with BSCAT members, whether the new order of presenting the local area profile is more effective in 'making the evidence work'.

Knowledge Management & Action Planning

BSCATs are required to 'develop local crime prevention action plans'. (Qld Govt 2002:9)

- How does one get from a 'good idea' to an 'effective project'?
- There is a lot of information out there: on what basis does one separate the quality information?
- How does one find out 'what works' in addressing an issue?
- What if there is conflicting advice about 'what works' – as there is in many fields of community crime prevention – or the available research is not asking the same questions as the BSCAT?
- Some issues, e.g. family violence, are extremely complex and there is already a lot happening. How does the BSCAT identify which of the myriad of 'handles' available to them to pull for the greatest return on investment?

Unit 4 of the Learning and Development Program of the BSCATs provides some useful guidance in addressing these questions. The Program recommends a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis of the capacities of the BSCAT to address the issue, from which possible strategies are brainstormed. Ideas are analysed and the best chosen.

This method proved effective in developing strategies to address community safety issues in 'hot spot' locations, including alcohol-related offending, and burglary reduction – issues around which there is some consensus around what works. All BSCATs have conducted safety audits of local hot-spots in their communities, including city and town centres, and presented the findings of their audits to local Councils and businesses. Three BSCATs have established local working groups with licensees, security providers, and transport operators, to address alcohol-related issues around licensed premises – with generally successful reductions in both incidence and seriousness of offences. Bowen BSCAT has developed some strategies to promote property security.

Three difficulties have arisen in following through on these processes:

- in developing the action plan, BSCAT members can be frustrated by a lack of specialist knowledge around local implementation
- as the action plan is implemented, stakeholders who previously supported the objectives of the project may not follow through during the implementation phase
- the method proved ineffective in addressing issues where there is not a consensus around 'what works' – in this case, preventing family violence – or in addressing issues where a lot is already happening – as in preventing juvenile re-offending.

In response to the first two difficulties, I have developed, from the Learning and Development Program, a pro-forma to streamline the action planning process. The first action plans developed by BSCATs have been comprehensive strategies designed to address issues on several fronts at the same time. Under a new proposal, once BSCATs have determined a strategy, a working group is formed to develop the action plan around that strategy. This means that stakeholders are invited onto the working group to participate in the development of the action plan from the beginning. The draft action plan then comes back to the BSCAT for ratification. It also means that action plans are smaller in their intent and comprehensivity, easier to implement, and subject to greater ownership within the working group.

The re-writing of the local area profiles is designed to dovetail with the new action planning process.

The other difficulty – of how BSCATs worked in very complex arenas with no clear direction on 'what works' – has proved more difficult to work through. On both examples given – preventing family violence and preventing juvenile reoffending – the difficulties arose because of the complexities of the issues, the myriad of 'handles' which could be pulled to generate an effect, and difficulties in determining which strategy might produce the best impact for the scarce resources available to the BSCAT.

When I searched normal sources for inspiration, I did not find much comfort. For example, the evaluation of the UK Crime Reduction Program – a much better resourced program than Queensland's Framework – found that the Program started out with five high ideals, one of which was 'working with families, children and schools to prevent young people becoming offenders of the future', but had shifted its main focus to 'driving down volume crimes such as domestic burglary'. (Homel Nutley Webb Tilley 2004:vi&vii)

Thus far, Mackay CCPAT has developed a 'walk away cool down' initiative which encourages perpetrators to take responsibility and 'walk away' when they start to feel inclined towards violence – whether in a domestic or other situation. Bowen and Whitsunday BSCATs established Child Friendly Communities working groups around promoting Child Protection Week and child safety. Mackay CCPAT is also developing a model for integrated case management of known young offenders across community and government agencies.

What is the capacity of these projects to target 'prevention' *per se*?

One of the factors causing difficulty was the formation of BSCATs as local teams: which brings both strengths and weaknesses. No single Team had sufficient expertise and energy to go these projects alone. The Regional Building Safer Communities Forum has provided a breakthrough in negotiating this impasse. The Regional Network was established earlier this year as a basis for communication and collaboration between BSCATs. The first Forum considered how this might be done. Members requested more content focus within Forums, and following this lead, the Forums were developed as a mechanism for capacity building and joint problem-solving, as well as communication and collaboration. Members chose 'preventing family violence' and 'preventing juvenile reoffending' as the two topics for the second Forum two weeks ago.

54 people attended the Forum, comprising 28 BSCAT members, 12 regional stakeholders with specialist knowledge in the two topic areas, and 14 local supporters invited by BSCAT members. The day-long Forum heard from two keynote speakers with statewide expertise – one from each topic – and a panel of regional stakeholders, before two BSCAT workshops on the topic areas. The focus of the workshops was to define the gaps/difficulties experienced by the BSCATs, draw useful information from the presentations, and identify areas where BSCATs might collaborate in learning from each other's experiences or in developing regional strategies to implement through local BSCATs.

The Forum was successful in generating ideas for initiatives, which are now being taken back to BSCATs for their endorsement and activation. The process of combining broad research and practice expertise, and regional experience, with communication and collaboration, has proved fruitful. One cannot assess whether any of these initiatives might prove outstandingly successful, but the BSCATs now have another 'tool in the box' for gaining traction and forward momentum.

In the words of a staff member from the Queensland Centre for Domestic and Family Violence Research, "Having community based action groups, like the BSCATs, keen to address domestic and family violence is pretty exciting."

Knowledge Management & Evaluation

As Ron Clarke has said, "Without evaluation, crime prevention cannot be improved, and without hard evidence about effectiveness, reliable information about best practice cannot be disseminated." (2001, quoted in Leonard Rosario Scott Bressan 2005:236)

BSCATs are required to 'evaluate the outcomes of their action plans'. (Qld Govt 2002:9) Unit 5 of the Learning and Development Program introduces BSCATs to evaluation planning, and I have incorporated evaluation planning within the action planning pro-forma outlined above. However, evaluation is not generally part of the accepted culture of community organisations, and evaluation planning has proved an arduous and difficult chore for BSCATs. But we persist. As the evaluation of the Canadian National Crime prevention Strategy states, "Although planning an evaluation can be time-consuming and complex and may create tension, evaluation is a vital element of success in the development, implementation, and sustainability of effective crime prevention." (Leonard et al 2005: 244)

Applying good policy processes to itself, the Queensland Government is committed to a rigorous evaluation of the *Strategic Framework for Community Crime Prevention* after a period of implementation – now due towards the end of 2006.

Evaluation is important to the future of community crime prevention: in providing feedback to participants, in informing whether an activity is worth continuing, in demonstrating outcomes, and equally importantly, in contributing to the body of knowledge of 'what works and when' in community crime prevention. Evaluation planning ensures that needed records are kept and maintained as projects are implemented, so that the data is available when the evaluation is undertaken. (Johnson 2004:3; DP&C draft 2004)

So far, only one BSCAT has produced a written evaluation of one of its projects: the Mackay CCPAT's evaluation of its partnership with BarLink in addressing alcohol-related incidents in and around licensed premises. This project kept good records during its implementation. Police statistics demonstrate significant reductions in assaults and good order offences near licensed premises since the BarLink initiatives were introduced. As such, the evaluation report tracks valuable links between implementation and impact.

BSCATs are expected to conduct other evaluations in 2006. Some of these may prove interesting, as I am not sure of the extent of documentation around some projects. 'Making the evidence work' around evaluation is largely an untested area of BSCAT activity, and I expect there is extensive learning and innovation to be explored in making evaluation relevant to BSCAT experience.

Key Learnings

I have outlined an evolutionary learning process amongst BSCAT members, and for the Department in resourcing and supporting local BSCAT activity in community crime prevention. This is understandable: community crime prevention is a relatively new area of deliberate activity, and although it has proven effective in many different contexts and

environments, community crime prevention has yet to become established practice within the management of crime. Van Dijk (2004) suggests this may be because community crime prevention is so 'fundamentally political' in its goals and operations, although Sherman (1997) has reflected on a paucity of quality evaluations.

I want to draw some observations from my experiences as an on-the-ground practitioner in community crime prevention. I believe these observations are pertinent to researchers and policy makers interested in 'making evidence work' on-the-ground.

1. A program approach is best for community crime prevention. Community crime prevention is attempting to address risk factors which have built up over a long period of time, sometimes inter-generationally. Such factors are not going to be effectively addressed within 12-month or 3-year projects. The need for continuity in strategic direction and program management is paramount to community crime prevention.
2. Community crime prevention is founded on relationships: organisational relationships and personal relationships. Relationships need time to establish and grow and mature, frequently through adversity and conflict towards resolution, as trust and confidence is built.
3. Good policy for community crime prevention recognises the value of a partnership approach between central government, local government, business and community. Partnership entails shared ownership, shared resourcing, shared problem-solving, and shared celebrations. (Homel 2005b)
4. Good policy for community crime prevention also recognises that community crime prevention is inclusive: it reaches out to the marginalised and vulnerable on the fringes of community, it respects and affirms different viewpoints, and it maintains accountability with the community. It recognises that both processes and outcomes are important to success.
5. Delivery of community crime prevention requires support from government centrally to deliver regionally. Although implemented regionally, leadership and coordination, and technical and strategic advice, may still be needed from the centre. Clarity in delivery arrangements between the centre and regions helps facilitate community action.
6. The delivery of community crime prevention requires specialist crime prevention knowledge and specialist community development skills. Both of these can be learned.
7. The Building Safer Communities Learning and Development Program – which takes six months to deliver – proved valuable in providing BSCATs with a sound base for evidence-based action and evaluation planning.
8. Time and resources allow Team processes to evolve and grow, for different approaches to be tried and succeed or fail without penalty, and for Team members to learn and gain confidence. Community crime prevention is not a straight line from idea to success, there is no single solution to crime, and there are many different and inter-linked success factors.

9. Finally, rigorous and independent evaluation is vital to the growth of the knowledge base of community crime prevention as to 'what works' in what environments, and to governments and departments in determining the best value for the scarce investment dollar. Evaluation which is truncated to meet the needs of only one of these purposes is a misuse of resources. Good research and good policy are vital ingredients to good practice.

None of these observations is unique to Mackay/Whitsunday; nor do they constitute 'rocket science'. In evaluations of crime prevention or reduction programs elsewhere in Australia and overseas, the same lessons are apparent. (UK – Homel et al 2004; Canada – Leonard et al 2005; Australia – Homel 2005a&b; Queensland – Henderson 2002; United Nations – Van Dijk 2004) In addition, numerous speakers at this year's UN Conference on Engaging Communities listed similar qualities as needed for effective community engagement in any field. (Williams; Lasater; Wilson; Anderson; Twyford) The value of the Queensland Strategic Framework is that, in many respects, the difficulties were diagnosed when the policy blueprint was put together (Henderson 2002): the challenge is to operationalise the solutions.

Thus the Strategic Framework allows for the achievement of each of these observations in intent. However, the implementation of the Strategic Framework in Mackay/Whitsunday has demonstrated that the achievement of that intent is dependent on the development of systems and structures (Homel 2005a), and the willingness of practitioners and stakeholders to do the hard yards to 'make the evidence work'.

ENDS (3,900 words excl. references & title page)

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