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Crime Prevention and Older People

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Thank you for inviting me to address this conference on Crime and Older People. It is a topical issue, as is the fact that we are an 'ageing' community - that is, our demographic profile is one of an increasing number of older people. This trend will continue well into the next century. Governments throughout Australia need to acknowledge, understand, and address this fact, in order to develop policies which assist older residents to enjoy an acceptable 'quality of life'.

At the same time as change to our demographic profile, crime rates have risen over the last forty years in Australia, and in most Western industrialised nations. The result of both these factors has had an impact on older peoples' attitudes, and clearly government and the community need to be mindful of and responsive to these changing needs.

There are two principal matters that need to be examined in order to deal with these issues of an ageing population and increasing crime rates, and so allow us to make some assessment of future directions: firstly, we need to examine the importance of community

safety as a contributor to quality of lifestyle, particularly the perceptions and reality of community safety within the older members of our community; and secondly, we should assess the way programs are developed and delivered, particularly those which are aimed at preventing crime and the abuse of older people. We need to be clear that both these approaches have a contribution to make; examining the extent of fear within the community, and making people feel more secure is not enough; we also have to address the actual reduction of crime itself through crime prevention.

Firstly then, the need to address community safety, and the fear of crime. It is the case that there is a general perception amongst service providers and others, and this would probably also be the view of the general public, that older people have a high level of fear of crime, and that this contributes in a negative way, to their feelings of community safety. This view is understandable, because many commentators suggest fear of crime itself can demoralise a community. Some would even say that it has a greater impact than crime itself.

Professor Ezzat Fattah has some interesting comments to make on fear of crime among the elderly. He raises a number of questions regarding its impact which makes us view the issue in a different light, and challenges our previously held assumptions. Even if, as I understand Professor Fattah will argue, fear produces caution which in turn assists crime prevention, there must still be a level of fear which on balance adversely affects a person's quality of life.

It has also been suggested that fear of crime amongst the elderly is not as different from that of the general population as is often assumed. Paul Thomas of the Office of Crime Statistics in the Attorney-General's Department suggests that although the elderly may fear crime, it is an over-generalisation to assume that all are living as 'prisons of fear' within their own homes. A survey of victims done by the Office of Crime Statistics in South Australia in 1990 also suggested that elderly victims were no more vulnerable to the effect

of victimisation than the general population, that is, that they were more resilient than generally assumed.

The importance of answers to these questions lies in their implications for reducing victimisation through crime prevention, a subject I would like to talk about generally, before moving on to its relevance specifically for older people.

Crime Prevention in its broadest sense is a relatively new area. As is the case in other western industrialised nations, Australia has relied on traditional enforcement procedures within our criminal justice system to address rising crime rates. The role of police, courts and correctional institutions continue to be the cornerstone of our criminal justice system. However, there is now a recognition within the United Nations, Australia and other western industrialised nations, that a new approach is needed. The role of crime prevention does not represent the abandonment of our traditional approaches - rather, this new direction should be viewed as complementary to the role of our criminal justice system.

But it is the case that our traditional responses to crime (police, courts, corrections) rely on enforcement of the law, and consequently, operate within a deterrent framework. Deterrence has its role in addressing crime, and sentencing options available to the courts should be wide-ranging in order to deal with the difficult situations often presented.

However, enforcement and deterrence is a blunt instrument in the reduction and prevention of crime, because it operates after the event. It concentrates on the offender more so than the victim. Crime prevention takes its starting point from the concept that we need to prevent victimisation in the first place by examining the underlying causes of crime, but also looking at where action can be taken by the victim and the community to minimise the chances of crime occurring. We need to examine and deal with the

complexities of social disharmony, so that we can promote the concept of community safety through crime prevention.

Crime prevention is a more subtle instrument than that of enforcement and deterrence. It can target particular offenders and particular victims and develop programs which are adapted to their circumstances. It involves members of the community working in partnership with government, police, local government, and service providers to develop a targeted approach to preventing crime. It is discriminating in the sense that it looks at crime issues, offenders and those 'at risk', and victims in order to focus on program development. By cultivating this approach, programs which address underlying causes can be promoted within local areas, and the community itself can be involved.

In order to develop an approach to prevent crime against the elderly there is a need for reliable data. Information exchange, responsible reporting, and crime statistics which identify emerging trends, are necessary. If there are to be effective crime prevention programs then they can only be developed on the basis of the best information available.

The Australian Institute of Criminology's Conference series, and its publishing program, continue to contribute to the quality of debate within Australia on the many issues associated with crime. The role of such a central body is important in Australia and has a pivotal role in the exploration of the issues which deal with crime, across all States and at a national level.

We must also have access to reliable, regularly updated, statistics which can inform government, and contribute to clear decision making on crime issues. Regular victimisation surveys which are to be conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics will also provide high quality information on issues.

Reliable statistics in each jurisdiction are essential for the development of effective programs. Reliable and balanced reporting is perhaps more difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, issues raised by increasing crime rates cannot be ducked by the government or the community. We must have the information and make it available even if from time to time this involves sensational and inaccurate media reporting.

Community safety through crime prevention is important to the well-being of the community and the promotion of 'quality of life'.

The safety of the community is too important an issue to be the subject of narrow political point scoring and a bipartisan political approach should be encouraged. In South Australia, the opposition party participates on the Coalition Against Crime, a broad based body involving the Local Government Association, South Australia Council of Social Services, Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the courts, as well as police. The role of the Coalition Against Crime is to provide an overview, at the State level, on the development of crime prevention. As such, it is an example of a partnership arrangement which is the most effective instrument of crime prevention policy.

It is for this reason that the work of Senator Tate in fostering and developing a national approach to crime prevention, in the form of a National Community Safety Council through the Australian Police Minister's Council, should be applauded. At the National Conference held in November of last year, it was evident that this development holds real promise of promoting crime prevention to the national agenda. Most States have developed some crime prevention initiatives and in South Australia the Crime Prevention Strategy has been operating since 1989. However, a national consensus on the issue is clearly emerging. A number of States from differing political persuasions are very interested in the South Australian experience, and it is worth noting the Australian Police Ministers Council has endorsed the South Australian Strategy as a model for other States.

In this context then, the following quotation (*The Advertiser*, Adelaide) may be of interest:

The Government is showing monumental complacency in the wake of appalling increases in reported crime... These figures are a damning indictment of Government Policy.

This passage could have been uttered as a criticism of any political party (in fact, it is a quotation from Mr Barry Sheerman, the Opposition Home Affairs Spokesman, referring to the direction of the Thatcher Conservative Government in Britain) - but the point is that crime does not respect any boundary created by party politics. As an issue, it transcends narrow political considerations and needs to be dealt with in an open, bipartisan way. Within this context, the role and language of crime prevention and community safety should be cemented into the political landscape when discussing issues within the so-called 'law and order' debate.

Community safety and crime prevention have a clear association with fear of crime and whether they be older people or others crime prevention must be concerned with it. If a person feels safe within their immediate environment, their fear of crime, or particularly their fear of becoming a victim of crime, is decreased. In the older person, however, the issue may be more complex.

In order to explore this concept of fear of crime and its impact upon older people, there is a need to examine who are the older people, and where have they come from. Most reviewers tend to approach the issue from the starting question of why, in our current society, are older people fearful. (They tend to accept without question the premise that older people are fearful of crime.) Clearly, answers to this question of why older people are fearful, has a part to play in framing their solutions.

Their responses tend to include such concepts as increased vulnerability through decreasing physical strength; social isolation; a sense of losing control of their lives; and the overdramatisation of crimes by the media. This latter point was not overlooked by Professor Ron Clark in his address in Adelaide in June 1989 to the National Workshop on 'Crime and the Elderly'. He referred to the way the media portray crimes against the elderly, by selectively reporting cases because they are unusual. This results in such unusual incidents often being regarded as representative - a clear distortion of the facts of the matter. The only redeeming point which could be made here is that Professor Clark was referring not only to the Australian media, but reflecting on the level of media reporting within an international context. These points contribute to understanding why older people may be fearful and they give some insight into activities which could be developed to deal with the issue.

But fear of crime among the older person is undoubtedly more complex, and may vary from one locality to the next. We know that in a general sense older people are the least victimised group - studies done both here in South Australia and overseas confirm that finding. The South Australian Office of Crime Statistics study undertaken in 1990 clearly demonstrated the level of victimisation among older people (61+) for a range of offences (major assault, common assault, sexual assault, robbery, break and enter, unlawful use of a motor vehicle) was the lowest of all groups. The next lowest as the fifty-one to sixty age group (Gardner 1990).

An analysis of more recent surveys suggest that people, including older people, generally feel safer within their own local neighbourhood, than in the State in which they live. The presentation by Paul Thomas of the Office of Crime Statistics will discuss this issue in more detail, and particularly relate the findings to older people's feelings of safety.

The fact that older people are inclined to feel safer within their local neighbourhood than within their State presents a new dimension to the issue. It tends to suggest we have

overestimated the level of fear of crime within the older members of our community. This is I consider a very worthy contribution to the debate, but it does not give us cause to dismiss the issue. In fact, it raises a very interesting question - why are older people fearful of crime, particularly when they are the least victimised group, and when they feel relatively safe within their local community? There are two complicating factors in this question: firstly, crime research demonstrates that victims are often known by the offender (particularly relevant to violent offences); and secondly, there is also general agreement that crime (particularly petty or street crime) tends to be committed within communities by local people.

Part of our difficulties in coming to terms with the experience of fear of crime among older people may revolve around difficulties associated with developing our understanding of the older community itself. We ourselves have not experienced what it is like to be an older person - yet. We can only extrapolate on how it might be, and try and understand the dynamics of being an older person in Australia in the 1990s. As with other sectors of the community, different socio-economic circumstances, lifestyles, ethnic background, make generalisation a hard, if not futile task. However, it may be possible to get some clues on this issue of fear of crime among older people if we attempt to understand the times during which older people formed their views.

Older people in our community were born in the first twenty five years of this century, and have experienced significant changes during their lifetime. They have lived through two world wars, and some may have lived through other conflicts within their 'homeland'. This century has also seen dramatic developments in technology, and the change this has made to peoples' lives. Rapid advances particularly in communication and transport have eroded the concept of 'community', which many older people consider a cornerstone to their understanding of their world. The older members of our community also grew up at a time when families depended on each other, and the extended family concept was an intrinsic part of this dependence. Stable family and community environments were also

common, where older people were respected and seen as important members who had a contribution to make. Respect for elders, and the wisdom of elders, was usually accepted without question.

In other words, the older people of today are the generation for whom 'traditional values' holds more meaning than just merely a set of words. These values incorporated a clearer understanding of the role of the family, the role of the community and the church, and the role of the instrumentalities of the State. In relation to their understanding of criminality, this State instrumentality was their local police officer, who walked around the district and knew most people by name.

But during the past sixty or seventy years, these notions have changed, sometimes for the better, sometimes the worse. Western society has restructured its social values, as a result of a complex set of social factors. Technology has significantly changed society; televisions, radio and daily newspapers bring the world, our nation, and our own State, much closer to our individual experiences, and right into our own lounge rooms.

Transport changes have resulted in small communities being incorporated into larger urban conurbations. One of the complexities of urbanisation is an increasing sense of social isolation among some sectors of society.

Family relationships have altered, to the extent where family structures now are often different from those of the past. The number of 'traditional' family units (that is, two biological parents living at home with their children) continues to decline. With both parents often working, a family member as care-giver to the older person is removed. The role of older people within the family is, generally, not as highly valued as in the past, and in fact, their interaction with other generations of the family has been reduced. And of course, the diversity of family groupings varies according to different ethnic backgrounds.

Western civilisations have also decreed that older people should 'retire' at the age of sixty-five. While this notion may have originated for very good reasons, the unintended consequence may be that older people come to regard themselves as being useless, and an encumbrance on society. They are unable to contribute, despite the fact they feel they still have a good deal to offer; but even more, within the language of 'economic rationalism', they may now be persuaded that they are a financial burden on the State. South Australia will in fact abolish the principle of a 'retiring age' in keeping with equal opportunity, and movements in social attitudes.

We can argue with some validity that older peoples' experiences of life, and the changes they have lived through, are not only significant, but without parallel. For instance previous changes in Western cultures (for example the Industrial Revolution) resulted in major shifts in society, but life expectancy was much shorter, and so the problems confronting older people with respect to change and adaptation, simply did not arise.

Consequently, it should come as no surprise that some older members of the community feel vulnerable, and less in control of their lives. Changes within our community are difficult for all sectors to understand and adapt to. Given that older members have undergone such significant shifts over the period of their lives, and seen the gradual erosion of what they regarded as 'traditional values', then their levels of fear of crime become more understandable, despite the actuality of their level of victimisation and feelings of safety within their local area.

It is then, the role of government and the community, to consider these issues, and develop practical ways to overcome the difficulties confronting older people. We should in fact, approach this with some confidence. Given the experiences which older people have encountered during the course of this century, there is every reason to believe the complex issue of fear of crime within the older members of our community can be addressed. Indeed, it can be argued that this wealth of knowledge and experience among the older

members of our community places them in a unique position, enabling them to deal successfully with changes to their lives which others less resourceful than they, could deal with. Indeed it might be this fact which results in those surveys finding less fear of crime than is commonly assumed.

Some crime prevention initiatives developed here in South Australia over the last three years have illuminated the degree to which the issue of fear of crime can be addressed. The South Australian Crime Prevention Strategy, launched in 1989 as a five-year program with an allocation of \$10m, stresses the need to develop and encourage community based approaches to crime prevention. The strategy emphasises that we should not continue to rely solely upon policing and traditional criminal justice responses to address crime, and crime prevention. As outlined earlier, a pluralistic strategy is required, involving both a deterrent, and a preventative approach.

Since its inception in 1989, the Crime Prevention Unit has developed twenty-three local crime prevention committees. Each committee examines its own local crime problems, based on an assessment of its issues. Committees involve local government, police, local residents, neighbourhood watch, service providers and local agencies in partnership together. Each committee develops its own crime prevention plan, based on an assessment of local issues, and then receives funding to implement that plan over a two-year period. The issue of fear of crime, and security for older residents, emerge consistently as an issue the local crime prevention committee regard as important to address.

Approaches which committees have adopted range from providing better and more accurate information to the local media; to developing programs involving a positive interaction between younger members of the community and the older members. Examples of this include the 'Bridge the Gap' program in Salisbury, where young people from the local school assist older people in household repairs, shopping, cleaning and so on. An 'Oral History' project in Whyalla is another example, where younger people learn

from the local experiences of the older community members. The benefits of these types of approaches is twofold: firstly, the promotion of a better understanding between older and younger members of the community; and secondly, older people become more interactive within their community, and hence less isolated.

The HOMEASSIST program in South Australia is a further example of the partnership concept. Funded as a joint Commonwealth and State HACC project, Local Council and Police assist older residents by providing home maintenance and security assessments. In some instances, a subsidy is provided to older people for the purchase of locks and security devices. The target group for this program is the older and frail aged members of the community, and it has been implemented in forty-three Local Government Areas across the State.

The Victims of Crime Service has also developed an innovative approach to working with the older members of the community. Through their CIPE program (Crime Information and Prevention for the Elderly), weekly seminars are held for older residents over a four-week period. Participants are informed on the level of victimisation of older people, and their low level of risk at becoming a victim of crime. Prevention programs which are available in their local area are covered, particularly HOMEASSIST, and the work of Local Crime Prevention Committees. By being involved over a four-week period, the participants are provided with a network of other older members of their local community, and become more involved in their local area. During the course of the program, they are encouraged to be aware of household security, and self protection.

Perhaps one of the most interesting projects to be funded under the Crime Prevention Strategy has been the exemplary project located at Aldersgate Village, a retirement village in the near north-eastern suburbs of Adelaide. The project was developed in conjunction with the Adelaide Central Mission, and had two principal aims. Firstly, it addressed crime prevention by involving the residents in a pro-active way. And secondly, urban design

and crime prevention in retirement villages was assessed as part of the project, with the intention of informing other retirement villages and developers of the role of design and planning. The model of involving the residents in their own safety and security program can be transferred and applied in other retirement villages, and it is from this 'case model' project that we have gained some insight into the issue of fear of crime among older people. A presentation on this project and its outcomes is included at this conference, and it has interesting lessons for service provision, management, planners of retirement villages, and not least, the residents of such villages.

Clearly, all of these programs have provided valuable information in addressing the level of fear of crime among older people.

It is, however, the case that a common thread exists throughout all of these programs - and that is that older people are a valuable resource within our community. The best and most effective crime prevention programs for this group are those which involve them actively as participants, rather than as passive recipients. The experience of Aldersgate suggests that, in the past, we may have underestimated the ability of our older generation to cope with change. Older people can not only cope, but they can make a positive contribution. This realisation has provided us with some insight into how we, as a community, may have inadvertently contributed to the level of fear of crime among older people, by underestimating their abilities, and excluding them from program development.

Most older people are active, resourceful and resilient. Their lifetime experiences are salient reminders of their abilities.

In summary, this paper has raised some issues pertinent to older people's attitudes to crime including their life experiences and the changes in society and posed some questions in particular about the fear of crime which can be further examined during this conference. We must emphasise the importance of flexible crime prevention programs which are

informed and adaptable enough to deal with diverse categories of offenders and victims and given some examples of crime prevention initiatives in this State specifically designed for older people.

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