THINKING ABOUT PREVENTION:
ARE WE ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS?

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Minister Vanstone, Attorney Groom, friends and colleagues:

Thank you Yvonne Korn for your kind welcome; and thanks to my colleague Adam Graycar for his wonderful hospitality. I deeply appreciate the support my visit has received from your Minister for Justice, Sen. Vanstone, the National Campaign Against Crime and Violence and the Australian Institute of Criminology. Although I will be talking today about the importance of science in thinking about crime prevention, I wish to acknowledge the special power of the indigenous welcome offered by Ms. Ida West and the theatrical presentation by Big hART. Sometimes, history and art are more powerful than science.

I am very honored by the invitation to speak with you this afternoon at this Conference on Partnerships in Crime Prevention. I respect the work that you are doing here in Australia on the important topic of developing partnerships between all sectors of society to carry out the important task of crime prevention. It is my hope that I can learn from your efforts and can bring back to the United States some insights that will benefit a larger community of practitioners and researchers who are engaged in similar efforts in America. It is also my hope that I can make some modest contributions to the work of this conference by sharing some insights from the American experience. Our differences may be obvious to those who compare our two cultures and systems of justice; but, our commonalities are the more important point of departure. In addition to the time I am spending at this conference, I have been meeting with colleagues at the Australian Institute of Criminology, other government officials, and research colleagues and I hope that we can continue to build on those common experiences in the months and years to come.

Broadly stated, my topic is “Thinking About Prevention: Are We Asking the Right Questions?” I hope to make four points in the course of this talk. First, that an understanding of the prevention agenda first requires an understanding of the crime problem. Second, that prevention of crime should be viewed as more than the aggregation of crime prevention programs. Third, that development of crime prevention policies must be based on sound, scientific principles that reflect a broad conception of the many ways that crime is prevented. And finally, that the ultimate policy objective -- and the ultimate research challenge -- in the crime prevention field is the development of community resiliency.

I think it is imperative that we start any discussion on this topic by talking first about crime, before we talk about its prevention. Let’s focus on the broadest policy objective that I think we all share -- namely, that there be less crime. So the first task -- essentially, a research task, but one that should engage all sectors of society -- is to understand the nature of our crime problem, so that we can design policies to reduce the level of criminal behavior. Allow me to draw upon the recent American experience to underscore my point.

If we were to look at the broad sweep of crime rates in the United States over the past twenty years, we would see two distinct trends. First, the levels of property crime have been falling quite steadily for two decades. In fact, in 1990, the rates of
nonviolent thefts were higher in London than in New York City.\(^1\) Sydney, Australia and Los Angeles, California have very similar levels of nonviolent property crimes.\(^2\) Also, according to Jan van Dijk and Pat Mayhew, who studied the 1996 International Crime Victims Survey in their publication *Criminal Victimization in Eleven Industrialized Countries*,\(^3\) countries such as England, Canada, and the Netherlands experience higher rates of burglary than the United States. And England, Scotland, and France all have higher rates of theft from, and of, cars than the United States. So, in comparison with our counterparts in the Western world, the United States has a property crime rate that is quite average. Certainly, our property crime rate, standing alone, would not justify the fourfold increase in rates of imprisonment that we have experienced over the same time period. Nor would our property crime rate explain why crime ranked as the number one concern in public opinion polls.

Rather something has been happening with our rates of violent crime, and especially among juveniles. Over the past twenty years in the United States, robbery and burglary rates for juveniles have remained basically the same, but violence committed by juveniles has significantly increased. Between the years 1985 and 1992, after years of steady decline, the homicide rate for defendants under age 24 increased significantly, with the rate of increase inversely related to age. For defendants age 18, the rate doubled. For 20-22 year old defendants the homicide rate also increased significantly, while homicide rates for 24 year olds remained the same.\(^4\) During the same seven year period, the number of juvenile homicides committed with handguns also doubled.\(^5\) Finally, during the same period, the arrest rate for nonwhite juveniles for drug offenses more than doubled.\(^6\)

What happened in the mid-80's in dozens of American cities to explain these unprecedented changes in behavior? Professor Alfred Blumstein of Carnegie Mellon University has developed a hypothesis that, to me, has great facial validity, called the “diffusion hypothesis”: that, as new crack cocaine entrepreneurs were setting up business, taking over turf previously dominated by others, they recruited young people as sellers and middle managers, then these low level dealers needed handguns to defend themselves, and the guns, once in the hands of impulsive adolescents, quickly “diffused” into the youth culture so that everyday adolescent squabbles over girlfriends and valuable clothing got settled by gunfire.

However, development of a crime prevention agenda in the United States during the late 1980's and early 1990's did not directly respond to the changing nature of crime, perhaps reflecting our relatively poor understanding of the juvenile crime

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2. Ibid.
trend at the time. Neither the police nor youth-serving prevention programs offered plausible, timely strategies that reflected the seriousness of the crime problem. This lack of response was rightly be seen, by the public, as a failure by our larger society to address the crime problem that they were experiencing. This historical observation should remind us of the critical need to develop public support for a crime prevention agenda -- support rooted in an understanding of the crime problem.

This need to understand the crime problem before designing a prevention agenda is not limited to an examination of the crime problem at a national level -- I think the same maxim holds true for the development of a local crime prevention agenda. Allow me to draw on two other American illustrations. During the early 1990's, the City of Boston experienced a sharp rise in juvenile violence. Research conducted by the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University found that three-quarters of the juveniles involved in this violence -- either as perpetrators of violence or as victims of violence -- were under juvenile court probation at the time of the incident. And most of them were involved in juvenile gangs so that an incident of violence often triggered a retaliatory act of violence by a rival gang. This empirical understanding of the exact nature of the crime problem provided a firm foundation for the development of a highly successful crime prevention strategy.

A second example, on an even smaller scale. The town of Lowell Massachusetts was concerned about a rise in assultive behavior among young people. An analysis of these incidents showed that a small number of individuals, who had been brought to the attention of the court authorities on numerous occasions, accounted for a large percentage of the incidents. Again, the prevention strategy developed by that town focussed on these individuals and their treatment by the court system. To reiterate my first point: if we start our discussion about prevention with an understanding of the crime problem experienced by our communities, we invariably develop prevention strategies that are quite different from those that emerge from an un-focussed set of interventions.

The second point I wish to make is that the prevention of crime is more than an aggregation of crime prevention programs. We need to make some linguistic and conceptual distinctions when we talk about the prevention of crime. I have adopted a very broad definition of crime prevention -- that is, any activity, public or private, that has the result of reducing the incidence of criminal behavior.\footnote{At-Risk and Delinquent Youth: Multiple Federal Programs Raise Efficiency Questions. 1995 U.S. General Accounting Office. Washington, DC.}

Without establishing the outer boundaries of this broad definition, we can agree that some public and private activities that, to me, should fall squarely within our definition. Certainly, we should define crime prevention as including programs that seek to rehabilitate offenders. Not everyone would agree with this characterization, since rehabilitation comes after the original offense. Yet, on their own terms, these programs seek to change the behavior of criminals to reduce the likelihood that they will violate our criminal laws. If successful, such efforts prevent crime. The first cousin to rehabilitation programs are classic prevention programs -- those interventions that work with young people who, because of their life circumstances or their
individual behavior, are considered to be on a path to delinquent or criminal behavior. Successful interventions with these young people -- even before the onset of a criminal career -- will prevent crime.

But a variety of other activities have similar results. A community’s decision to increase the lighting around a public park may reduce crime. A police department’s decision to close a drug house may reduce crime. A state’s decision to increase incarceration of individuals in their high crime prone years may reduce crime. If we push this definition of crime prevention, some of our colleagues may disagree with the characterization, yet in my view these examples reflect a potentially very diverse array of government and neighborhood efforts that are intended to prevent crime and, after careful evaluations, may be found to have achieved that intention.

So, my second point is that we should not think of crime prevention -- the effort to avoid the next crime -- as limited to rehabilitation of offenders, nor as limited to efforts to intervene in the lives of those whom we think are at high risk of becoming offenders, nor as being juxtaposed against the efforts of police and the impact of incarceration. The choice between prevention and police and punishment -- which is the way our policy choices are often framed -- are false choices. Police and prisons can and do prevent crime. And sometimes, the most effective way to prevent crime is by reducing opportunity -- by placing lights in the park.

If we recognize that crime prevention is a result, not an intention, the scope of crime prevention programs is broad indeed. Allow me to use a very commonplace example to make this point. You may be familiar with home nurse visitation programs. Under these programs, an individual, sometimes a nurse, sometimes a trained child care paraprofessional, visits the homes of new parents, or parents with pre-schoolers, to help them with child rearing. They provide the family with information about services; they impart skills in child rearing; they provide emotional support to new or young parents. The evaluation studies on these programs have shown quite impressive results. Prenatal and early childhood home visitation by nurses can reduce the number of subsequent pregnancies and the use of welfare on the part of low-income, unmarried mothers for up to 15 years after the birth of their first child. But, interestingly, these programs have also been shown to be highly effective at reducing child abuse in those families and, as importantly, reducing the later onset of delinquent and anti-social behavior by the children. Now, these programs did not think of themselves as crime prevention programs, but they have had that impact. So, our definition of crime prevention must include those interventions that are designed to principally produce other socially desirable results -- healthier individuals, healthier families, higher educational attainment, decreased dependence on illegal drugs, more attachment to the world of work, etc. -- because these programs, if successful, are likely to also have the effect of reducing crime.

This second point was forcefully presented in a recent report commissioned by the National Institute of Justice, at the request of Congress, and carried out by the

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Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Maryland. In 1996, Congress required the Attorney General to provide a “comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness” of the over $3 billion spent annually by the Department of Justice in grants to state and local governments. In carrying out this assignment, the University of Maryland decided to adopt this broad definition of prevention -- looking at results, not intentions -- and to review all of the known evaluation reports examining those programs. The result was a massive, landmark report -- over 500 pages, reviewing over 500 program impact evaluations. They organized their inquiry by examining the “domains” in which prevention occurs --- and came up with seven -- communities, families, schools, labor markets, places, police and criminal justice -- and then they reviewed the entire evaluation literature in each of these domains. I recommend this report to you -- both for its rigor and for its originality.

This approach -- one that examines results, not intentions, to understand prevention -- also leads to another form of inquiry -- cost-benefit analysis. As you know, this is very difficult research to undertake. The research must make assumption upon assumption, all the while fearing that the entire house of cards constructed in the analysis may tumble down if a major assumption is poorly grounded. For example, how should we measure the benefit of the home nurse visitation program I just mentioned? How can one quantify the healthy life? Yet, for all the inherent weaknesses, the cost-benefit approach is absolutely necessary if one is to bring research about prevention into the public policy arena.

In our field, we celebrate evaluation studies that are rigorously conducted and show positive impact. In part, our celebratory response to findings of program effectiveness must be understood against the backdrop of a history of findings of no impact -- remember, the last generation was raised on the literature of “nothing works” that dominated the field in the mid-1970’s. Robert Martinson’s often-cited article, “What Works? -- Questions and Answers about Prison Reform,” reviewed the most effective means of rehabilitiating prison inmates, and found that “with few and isolated exceptions, rehabilitative efforts had no appreciable effect on recidivism,” a conclusion that was widely interpreted in scholarly and policy communities as “nothing works.”

But in larger part, our celebratory response to findings of positive impact, particularly in the field of rehabilitation programs, must be understood against the current public mood. There are few public advocates for the notion that criminals are deserving of our attention and our efforts to improve their lives -- so every research finding of positive impact is the equivalent of lighting a candle in the public policy darkness. But we rarely ask the tough next question: what dosage of intervention was required to produce this result? What was the cost for that benefit? And, even more important, what public policy options were available for investing the marginal crime prevention dollar? If a minister, or state, or city council, had one million dollars to spend on crime prevention, what would be the best investment in terms of the crime reduction return? Few researchers are willing to take on this challenge. The RAND

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Corporation has conducted important and provocative cost benefit analyses that match one prevention policy against another in terms of yield on investment or, in a path-breaking study, comparing the cost benefit of mandatory minimum sentences against treatment in reducing drug consumption. Even fewer communities are willing to adopt this approach to budgeting scarce dollars to reduce crime. I believe firmly that this is an area where the research community must demonstrate leadership and the policy community must demand program accountability for results.

My third point is that we need, desperately, to advance the knowledge base on the effectiveness of these policy interventions. I find it shocking in the United States that we do not subject crime prevention efforts to sufficient rigorous evaluation research. Of the 500 or so evaluations that were reviewed by the University of Maryland, they found that only 79 had been conducted using classic random assignment or comparison groups. And a recent review of the research literature conducted by the National Academy of Sciences in its landmark assessment of the effectiveness of interventions in the area of family violence -- including child abuse, spousal abuse, and elder abuse -- found that there were only 114 rigorous evaluative studies completed. While the nation spends billions of dollars each year to curb family violence, most of the money supports an array of treatment and intervention efforts that have not been evaluated for their impact and effectiveness.

There are many possible explanations for this reluctance to subject crime prevention programs to rigorous evaluation research. Certainly, we often fault the public and the politicians for their seeming indifference to learning what works in the field of crime control and prevention. Yet I think that we -- all of us in this room -- also bear some responsibility for this lack of empirical basis for our policies. People who administer prevention programs are too often unwilling to allow for the possibility that their program does not make a difference. Police administrators who think that any enforcement of the law is beyond question are not willing to allow for the possibility that a more complex response to crime might be more effective. Those who advocate for drug treatment are often unwilling to allow researchers to study the basic logic of their intervention. And, even when a program is demonstrated to have some level of effectiveness, we are frequently unwilling to engage in a debate over the value of investing a crime prevention dollar in program A versus a more powerful program B. If we are sincere in our view that all prevention efforts -- including enforcement, prisons, rehabilitation, and adolescent development -- should be subjected to rigorous evaluations, then we have to be willing to follow the findings wherever they may lead.

The fourth point I would like to offer requires us to step back from individual programs -- even when most broadly defined to include something like home nurse visitation programs -- and to ask a more fundamental question: “What forces create law-abiding behavior?” I think we are living in a period of history that requires us to ask this more fundamental question. We are witnessing record declines in violent

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crime rates in some, but not all, United States cities. The declines are greatest in the larger cities, and greatest in those that have also experienced downward trends in use of crack cocaine. Some of the declines are nothing short of breath-taking. In New York City, my home, the number of homicides has dropped from 2,245 in 1990 (when New York City started to increase its police department by nearly 20%), to 767 in 1997, a 66 percent drop over seven years. On a national level, the level of victimization reported in the crime victims survey is the lowest since 1972, the first time such a survey was conducted.

How are we to understand these drops in crime? Certainly, if we were “program-centric”, we would have a very hard time arguing that a large number of highly successful crime prevention and rehabilitation programs combined to produce this result. Changes in crack markets and crack use would apparently explain much of the reduction, but in some cities such as Boston the decline in homicide appears to be more related to changes in juvenile behavior unrelated to crack. More likely, it seems to me, is a hypothesis that states that, once anti-social behavior reached a “tipping point” where communities, young people, criminal justice professionals, educators, police and others involved with community well-being basically said “enough”, then a combination of a number of factors --ranging from problem solving, community-oriented policing to maturation of illegal drug markets -- kicked in and, in a short time, the norm structure of a community started to change. Certain behavior was no longer acceptable. And those norms were reinforced by police and community alike.

So, my point is that, ultimately, we must understand crime prevention as being an integral part of the character and personality of a community. We have long known that “strong parental attachments to consistently disciplined children, in watchful and supportive communities are the best vaccine against street crime and violence... Each person’s bonds to family, community, school and work create what criminologists call ‘informal social control,’ the pressures to conform to the law that have little to do with the threat of punishment.” What we do not yet understand adequately is the mix of social policies that strengthen those informal social controls.

Allow me to draw upon some work being conducted in Chicago and funded by the National Institute of Justice, the Mac Arthur Foundation and several other federal research agencies. This research effort, called the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, is the most ambitious study of the relationship between community, crime, delinquency, family and individual development now underway in the United States. At the community level, the Project has surveyed more than 8,700 adult residents in 343 neighborhoods throughout Chicago. In addition, researchers have identified 80 neighborhoods as the focus for a longitudinal cohort study to be conducted over the next eight years. As part of the first wave of this longitudinal study, researchers have conducted interviews with 7,000 children and adolescents and their primary care givers.

Over the next several years, we will be reaping the rich rewards of this ambitious research project. This past August, the research team, headed by Dr. Felton Earls of the Harvard School of Public Health, published their first findings in *Science* magazine. They reported that the largest predictor of violent crime rates was “collective efficacy” -- a term they used to mean a sense of trust, common values, and cohesion in a neighborhood. They found that there are lower rates of violence in neighborhoods that have a strong sense of community and values, where adults are likely to intervene when children are missing from school or scrawling graffiti.

According to Professor Robert Sampson, a co-author of the report, “cohesion, or efficacy, seems to be a shared vision, a fusion of shared willingness of residents to intervene and social trust, a sense of engagement and ownership of public space.”

According to Dr. Earls, the most important characteristic of “collective efficacy” is a “willingness by residents to intervene in the lives of children.” Dr. Earls is referring to a willingness to supervise, or step in, and monitor children in a neighborhood.

This finding of collective efficacy is important standing alone, but it is doubly important when placed in context. Collective efficacy, when assessing predictors of violence, has an impact OVER AND ABOVE traditional predictors such as race/ethnic composition, poverty and residential instability.

For me, the importance of the Chicago study is that it understands communities as independent forces for social well-being. In other words, communities may be our most powerful crime prevention “program”.

At the National Institute of Justice, my colleagues and I are thinking about the implications of this research for our own research strategy -- How would one test the notion of collective efficacy? How would one try to strengthen community infrastructure? How would one build criminal justice responses that have as one of their purposes creation of a stronger community? These are fundamental challenges to the research enterprise.

I think the poverty we must address, now, is not a poverty of program design -- rather we must recognize that we suffer from a poverty of research design. We have insufficient measures, over an insufficient length of time, with insufficient willingness to try more than one intervention at one time. In short, we are not able to conduct research in a way that reflects the complexity -- and the potential power -- of real life and real communities. We should not abandon the medical model of evaluation research; on the contrary, we need to geometrically increase our investment in testing research hypotheses using the most rigorous research designs that can be implemented in real world settings. Yet, let’s imagine that we could mount all the classic control group experiments that could be designed by the best practitioners and academics in the country, would we have a complete understanding of the broad enterprise of crime prevention that we defined at the outset of this talk? I think not -- so we need another

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set of tools in our toolbox. We need to ask a different set of questions about prevention -- questions that can only be asked at the community level.

The findings of the Chicago research project also have profound implications for the world of practice. I would like to suggest three. First, the theory of “collective efficacy” provides conceptual support for the need to assess community resiliency as part of a larger community safety initiative. The work of Catalano and Hawkins from the University of Washington, who have developed the “Communities That Care” model for assessing risk and preventive factors at the community level, is particularly important in this regard. Their approach provide communities with a self-assessment tool to look at the assets and deficits of the community infrastructure -- a report card on the social forces that encourage or inhibit crime.

Secondly, the Chicago study provides support for the development of comprehensive, community-wide strategies against crime. Many of you in this room are national and international leaders in this field. You have developed initiatives that ask each sector of society, What can you do to reduce the incidence of crime, or a particular sort of crime. There are illustrative histories of success in this arena. I count the long-term effort to reduce the incidence of domestic violence as a success story. The police, the public health community, feminist organizations, legal scholars and others have combined to accomplish a fundamental shift in our thinking and our practice in this area. I believe that the Australian experience with drink driving represents another success story on comprehensive campaigns, combining public education, criminal justice response, and shifts in cultural attitudes.

Yet, notwithstanding these successes, I am sure you would be the first to acknowledge that this is very, very difficult work. Indeed, Yvonne Korn has entitled her address, “Partnerships: can’t live with them, can’t live without them”, which accurately reflect the real world dilemma of this work. We should recognize that the community strengthening efforts such as “Communities That Care” and comprehensive community efforts such as your drink driving campaign are rare. So, in my view, the Chicago study offers a third challenge to the world of practice. I submit that EVERY crime prevention effort should ask itself, “What are we doing to strengthen community?” This is the core challenge of community policing -- finding ways to strengthen community so that the community is a co-producer of safety. This is the core challenge of what, in the United States, we are calling the “community justice movement”. In this area of exciting innovation, we are watching as community courts, neighborhood-based public defenders, community prosecutors and community corrections are asking themselves, “How would we carry out our work differently if we seriously opened up our processes to involvement and partnership with the community? How can we use the inherent strengths of the community to achieve more just outcomes?” This is the core challenge of the restorative justice innovation -- at the diversionary conference I attended last night with Prof. John Braithwaite in Canberra, the real work underway was to build upon the strength of family bonds and community ties to achieve a just and lasting result.

I think this is the core challenge facing the work of crime prevention as well. Every program represented in this room has the opportunity to ask itself, “Have we built upon the strengths of the community, and have we left the community
stronger that it was before?" To meet this challenge, we need to look beyond our walls, to see assets rather than deficits in others and in communities, to share power to achieve the greater good, and to serve the people with whom we are in community.

I wish you every success in your important work and thank you again for the invitation to learn from your conference.