Crime Prevention: A South Australian Perspective

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The issue of crime and its prevention has been on the South Australian agenda for a significant period. With its tradition of confronting challenging social problems, the state moved to address crime prevention in a strategic way in 1987. The Justice and Consumer Affairs Committee of Cabinet requested the relevant government agencies to examine the issue and develop an approach to crime prevention which incorporated a broader perspective than the traditional criminal justice system paradigm. The Crime Prevention Strategy (CPS) which culminated from this beginning represents the joint effort of five government departments: Police, Correctional Services, Community Welfare, Court Services and Attorney-General’s. Launched in August 1989, the CPS involves a shift from the sole reliance on police, courts and corrections to alternative methods of crime prevention. Although the CPS recognises the need to involve the traditional structure, it also promotes the concept of prevention from a social intervention perspective—at a local level as well as the state level. In this way, the CPS is more in-line with some of the developments on the international scene.

Clearly, South Australia has not been alone in confronting the issue of crime and its prevention, and the reasons which have put crime prevention on the national agenda are not difficult to find. The rise of crime rates in the western industrialised world over the last forty years has not passed Australia by. Consequently, the social and economic costs of addressing this escalation have also risen. The South Australian approach has recognised the need to address both these cost factors and undertakes to support activities aimed at crime prevention within a local community, and through the broader issues associated with social policy. The CPS is consistent with a new way of thinking about issues relating to offending patterns and is incorporated into a
framework which interacts with social justice initiatives and other areas of government policy.

At the launch of the CPS in August 1989, a commitment of $10 million over a five-year funding period was announced. This is a significant commitment and a recognition of the need to involve the community in crime prevention activities. However, it should also be seen in the wider perspective, where the South Australian Police Department’s budget in 1988/89 was $217 million, and $49 million was spent on adult corrections. Since the launch of the CPS, three main areas of activity have emerged as the cornerstones of the implementation process.

**Coalition Against Crime**

Firstly, a broad-based representative group was established which bears the title of ‘Coalition Against Crime’. This group comprises over forty people representing government agencies, peak community bodies, business interests, union interests, police and both sides of politics. The Coalition essentially provides a focus for discussion and development of crime prevention issues—particularly those issues which impact at the broad state level. The Coalition is chaired by the Premier—with the Minister for Crime Prevention taking the role of the Deputy Chairperson—and reports to Cabinet.

To assist the operation of the Coalition, four working groups have been formed. These working groups are issue-based and examine crime prevention topics which impact upon specific areas. While members of the Coalition are involved, the working groups also draw their membership from people who have a direct interest in the topics addressed by the group. The working groups are:

- Alcohol, Drugs and Crime;
- Urban and Housing Design;
- Community-based Crime Prevention; and
- Preventing Violent Crime.

A fifth group will be formed to address the broad issue of education, communication and the media.

Each of the working groups has taken its own direction in the way it pursues its work program. The Urban and Housing Design group, for instance, is currently addressing the impact of design on opportunity reduction, and assessing ways in which the community can be made safer through improved urban design. A proposal is currently being developed to pilot crime prevention design principles in new housing developments and in existing urban areas.

The Community-based Crime Prevention group is addressing the establishment of an inventory of crime prevention programs with a community development focus within South Australia and Australia. A review of overseas programs has been undertaken, and it is hoped this
information will provide a valuable resource for future community crime prevention programs.

The implementation of the recommendations of the National Report on Violence in Australia is the focus for the working group on Preventing Violent Crime. Together with the South Australian branch of the Crime Prevention Council, they aim to sponsor a seminar on alcohol and violence to raise awareness of issues relating to violence both in the home and in public places. A research paper on the facts surrounding the links between alcohol, drugs and crime is to be commissioned by this working group. In addition, through the involvement of the Hotel and Hospitality Industry Association, a ‘Responsibility in Service’ pilot program will be undertaken, with the aim of providing a model for licensed traders.

It is evident that each of the working groups has developed their own direction and methodology for pursuing their objectives. Funding from the CPS allocation supports these initiatives and members of the various working groups give their time-and in some instances, resource assistance-to promote the programs of the working groups.

**Government Agencies and Crime Prevention**

The second major direction for the CPS is through the development of programs undertaken by government agencies. While there is a clear role for agencies traditionally involved in the criminal justice system, the CPS recognises that other agencies are also important. This recognition may involve the provision of funding to agencies encouraging them to undertake programs which have crime prevention outcomes.

However, the economic environment of the 1990s contrasts to favourable situations which existed only a few decades ago. Governments are taking a more rationalist approach to resourcing programs, and crime prevention programs should be no exception. A central theme of working with government agencies, therefore, is to encourage better coordination and cooperation between agencies, rather than simply relying on the injection of more resources.

One of the key directions for the CPS is to ensure appropriate linkages are made with other government initiatives. For instance, the South Australian government’s Youth Strategy targets marginalised young people who have missed either educational or employment and training opportunities. Clearly, these young people may also become the client group of a crime prevention program, because they are seen to be an ‘at risk’ group. By effectively integrating programs targeting this group, positive outcomes may be achieved for these young people.

Another important focus is ensuring crime prevention programs are accessed by the Aboriginal community. The fact that Aboriginal people are over-represented in the criminal justice system is undeniable. The reasons for this over-representation are complex and have much to do with the lack of understanding of Aboriginal culture by white society over a long period. History has demonstrated that the Aboriginal people receive little benefit from the mainstreaming of services for their community. An integral part of the CPS is to ensure that Aboriginal people have access to, and responsibility
for, programs that address issues which contribute to minimising their involvement in the criminal justice system.

Other avenues for developing a coordinated approach to crime prevention issues are being examined by a special Ministerial Committee on Crime Prevention. Specific issues which lend themselves to this direction include vandalism and graffiti; housing and tenancy policy; and safety on public transport to name a few.

**Community Development Program**

This Community Development Program is the third direction which the implementation process of the CPS has undertaken and is in many ways the most important. The underpinning philosophy of the development of the CPS has been to involve the community more directly in crime prevention activities. The French experience has been drawn upon to provide a lead in how this can be effectively encouraged, and the establishment of local crime prevention committees has become the ‘modus operandi’.

The first task in the establishment of local crime prevention committees was to ascertain the areas which had a proportionately significant crime rate and which could take a community-development approach to the crime problem. It is important to clarify at this point that the offences which can be addressed by this approach are limited to those offences which essentially occur within a community. For example, property and street offences, vandalism, graffiti, illegal use of vehicles, as well as safety in public places and in the home appear to be the offences which are most usefully targeted in a community development approach. Fear of crime can also be addressed through this approach. It is equally important to recognise that one of the inevitable tensions in the community development model is that some issues which can impact on the crime rate are outside the control of the community. A meaningful example of this is unemployment, which in the macro sense, is clearly outside the possible control of local initiatives, but can impact on the community in a negative way in terms of offending patterns.

The second step in promoting a community development approach was to embark on an awareness program which would encourage these communities to participate in crime prevention activities. In just over twelve months, local crime prevention committees have been established in twelve areas of the state, with another five areas developing their submission to become established. Essentially, a local crime prevention committee will develop their crime prevention approach in four distinct phases.

The first phase involves the formation of the committee using local service networks. It is expected that a core of service providers will be involved in the committee, with the other interested members being those with a commitment to crime prevention programs. Core service providers include local government, police, government agencies, and neighbourhood watch where possible. Other members may include non-government service providers, and residents organisations. The Crime Prevention Unit is involved in providing advice on the establishment process and assists the committee in understanding the basis for developing a crime prevention program or plan. The emphasis of this plan will be to encourage a cooperative approach between service providers in the community, and to provide
resourcing for innovative programs which target discreet issues identified by the community.

At the second phase of development, funding is provided to the committee from the crime prevention allocation for the development of a crime prevention plan. A project officer is employed to undertake this task, and assistance is given by the provision of information relating to crime data for the area. The plan is then taken through a consultation process, which can include public meetings, individual consultation with service providers, and workshopping particular issues. At the conclusion of this process (which can take between three to six months), a final plan is submitted by the committee for funding particular programs under the plan. Some programs may be funded by other sources identified by the community, and other community-based organisations may contribute to the overall plan by being an implementation agency, or providing resources ‘in kind’. Plans are expected to be undertaken over a two-year period, as it considered this is a reasonable time frame in which to assess the efficiency of the plan.

The third phase of the process is the implementation of the plan developed by the committee. The Crime Prevention Unit will provide assistance during the course of the plan, as well as ensuring procedures relating to accountability and monitoring the process are carried out. Finally, evaluation of the plan will be undertaken in outcome terms by means of process evaluation.

Conclusions
Since the launch of the CPS just under two years ago, it has developed from a philosophy addressing both the causes of crime and crime prevention approaches within the government sector, to a range of inter-related programs and the emergence of an understanding that the ‘welfare’ model is not the most effective way to address crime prevention. Pouring more resources into a problem does not necessarily provide the best and most effective outcome. Furthermore, in these times of economic stringency, the community can no longer afford this luxury approach. By assessing the crime problem in a coordinated way, the most effective way to ensure inroads into the problem of crime and its prevention can be achieved.

Nevertheless, there are still some issues which need to be addressed. One of these is the development of appropriate performance indicators to monitor the variety of programs promoted by the crime prevention committees, as is the most effective way to evaluate all programs. There is no doubt that these issues must be addressed. Circumstances can change and our approaches may need to be modified or changed during the course of a program. We should be in a position to respond to a different set of dynamics and, in addition, to contribute in the most positive way to the development of a wider debate on crime prevention.

A second issue is to encourage the development of a wider public debate on the so called ‘law and order’ issue. Law and order as it is currently portrayed in the media is concerned with traditional criminal justice responses to increasing crime rates—the need for more police, harsher penalties and longer sentences. Issues surrounding the very essence of maintaining ‘law and order’ very rarely figure in this debate. Consequently,
the need for crime prevention programs, much less the possible advantages of these programs, do not receive the attention they deserve. Our media must bear some of the responsibility for this, but it should also be ensured that the media has access to a range of information so that a wider debate is promoted. At the same time, community education programs must be encouraged to take up the task of educating the wider public on crime prevention.