MANAGING VIOLENT OFFENDERS IN THE CORRECTIONAL SETTING: A COORDINATED APPROACH

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VIOLENT CRIME IS AN ISSUE THAT ENCAPSULATES MANY OF THE PROBLEMS of the criminal justice system. Violent crime is perceived by the community to be the most significant form of crime. One that demands effective responses from government to minimise its occurrence, to catch and punish violent offenders and, if possible, to develop and apply programs that will prevent violent offenders from re-offending.

Regrettably, the development of methods to reduce violent crime has proven to be a particularly intractable one. Over the past five years, expenditure on the criminal justice system—police, courts and corrections—has increased by 75 per cent, from just over $500 million in 1984–85 to nearly $900 million in 1989–90. Over the same period, the incidence of violent crime in Victoria has apparently risen significantly. Apparently, because one of the problems that we face is that we do not really have a very accurate picture of the changes in violent crime rates over time, so we do not know whether our responses to it are successful or not.

Certainly, the level of community concern about violent crime is significantly higher than in the past. In addition, the extent of some forms of violent behaviour, such as sexual abuse of children and domestic violence, has only recently become apparent.

Nevertheless, it is worth putting violent crime into perspective, both in the context of the criminal justice system and more particularly the corrections system. Firstly, violent crimes—homicide, assaults, sexual assaults and robbery—only account for around 1.5 per cent of all reported crime.
Secondly, although most crimes are property crimes, the proportion of violent offenders who eventually receive a prison or community corrections sentence is relatively high. For instance, around 40 per cent of all homicide offences reported to the police, result in an offender going to prison. Approximately 20 per cent of all serious assaults reported result in a prison or community corrections sentence. If one looks at those assaults cleared by the police—that is, where an offender may have been brought before a court—about one-third of cases result in a correctional sentence. By contrast, for burglary offences, only about 1 per cent of all offences result in a correctional sentence, and for other common property, traffic or good order offences, the figure is even lower.

Thus, for the Office of Corrections, violent crime has an important impact on its prisoner and offender populations. Of the total prison population of 2,300, over 1,000 or 40 per cent of prisoners are serving a term of imprisonment for a violence related crime. Similarly, of a total community corrections offender population of around 5,600, over 15 per cent are serving a Community Based Order as a result of committing a violent crime.

Within the prison population, numbers are determined not only by the number of persons received but also by the average length of sentence. Although there are about twice as many prisoners received each year for assault than for sexual assault, there are approximately equal numbers in each category at any time because sentences for sexual assault are much longer than for general assault. For homicide, where sentences are longer still, this effect is even more pronounced. In community based corrections, the violent offender population is principally composed of persons convicted of assault, and more serious violent offenders are only present in relatively small numbers.

Apart from having a clear understanding of the profile of the offender population, it is also important to have some understanding of the more significant causal factors of violence. The National Committee on Violence summarised them as follows:

- child development and the influence of the family—with families being seen as the training ground for aggression;
- cultural factors which includes such issues as society values, economic inequality, cultural disintegration and gender attitudes;
- personality factors relating to past aggressive behaviour;
- substance abuse, due to the close association of some drugs and alcohol with violence;
- biological factors—while violent behaviour does not appear to be an inherited characteristic, it is notable that young men (15–30 years) have a much higher propensity for violence;
• mental illness—some forms of mental illness are associated with violent acts;

• media influences—television, films and videos may be associated with subsequent aggressiveness by some viewers; and

• peers—the company of delinquents of aggressive peers may influence individuals to become aggressive (see National Committee on Violence 1990, pp. 61–3).

As the Committee noted, however, it is invariably the complex interaction of these factors that are associated with violent behaviour.

For those involved in developing criminal justice programs to prevent or control violence, it is useful to note that most of the causal factors identified by the National Committee on Violence have their origin in the social and family structures of our society, or in biological or mental conditions. There are two important implications that flow from this:

• firstly, one cannot expect criminal justice programs in isolation to produce dramatic changes in people who one can reasonably say are among the most violent in our community; and

• secondly, for criminal justice programs to be as effective as possible, they must be integrated with the array of programs operating in the wider community. In many cases, the most appropriate response to current criminality may be to invest resources in preventative community programs.

A Statewide Coordinated Approach to Violence Prevention

In developing and applying measures to prevent violence, it is important for agencies in the criminal justice system to understand that they are not working in isolation. As a result of growing disquiet about the perceived level of violence in the community, the Victorian state government is developing a coordinated approach in an endeavour to effectively tackle the issue of violence on a number of fronts. Key recent government initiatives include:

• National Committee on Violence—implementation in Victoria of the report's recommendations;

• Social Development Committee of Parliament—an inquiry into strategies to deal with the issue of community violence;

• Community Council Against Violence—an inquiry into violence in and around licensed premises, sexual assault, family violence and programs for perpetrators;
• Victorian Law Reform Commission—recently prepared a report on reforms to rape law and procedures;

• Safety, Security and Women Working Group—an interdepartmental group focussing on issues relating to women's safety and security.

All these recent initiatives are now being brought together as part of the state's new integrated anti-crime strategy. Responsibility for developing and monitoring the strategy will be the responsibility of the Public Safety and Anti-Crime Council chaired by the Premier. The role of corrections is central to the state's approach in tackling the crime problem.

**A Coordinated Correctional Response to Violent Offending**

Over recent times, the Office of Corrections has adopted a more coordinated management approach for the treatment of violent offenders.

*Unit management*

Traditionally prisons have been recognised as places where violence has been commonplace. With the construction of four new prisons over the last three years, the Office of Corrections has taken the opportunity to adopt a completely new way of managing prisoners known as unit management.

Unit Management encourages self-responsibility and determination and is targeted to meet the individual needs of prisoners by providing new facilities and improved prisoner management approaches. Already there has been a noticeable decline in the level of violent incidents in Unit Managed prisons.

*High security units*

For the few violent prisoners who continually are disruptive in mainstream prison life, several high security units are available to ensure their effective management. Unlike past practice these units are being developed along Unit Management lines. Staff and prisoner interaction remains important but management of prisoners will occur in small groups only.

*Treatment models for violent men*

Treatment programs for men who are violent vary enormously in their content and conduct. The Office of Corrections has adopted a range of programs including individual therapy, anger management groups and coordinated programs involving group treatment and community intervention.

**Individual therapy.** Individual therapy is probably the most common and most traditional form of treatment for men. The Office's seven psychologists provide a counselling service to individual prisoners. While they establish a supportive relationship they ensure that offenders are confronted with their crimes and do not perceive that their behaviour is being condoned.
Anger management programs. Anger management group programs are probably the most common of all of the newer breed of psycho-educational/psycho-therapeutic approaches to violent men. Anger management programs in prisons provide participants with a range of relaxation strategies and may require participants to maintain an 'anger log' so that their emotional patterns and 'triggers' may be easily identified and controlled. Anger management programs may also provide participants with assertiveness skills training.

Group programs for violent men—the 'Alternatives to Violence' program. The Office of Corrections has developed and implemented a pilot group program for violent men who are in prison or under the supervision of community based corrections. The prison-based program is conducted on a voluntary basis and is only mandated to the extent that parole at the earliest eligibility date may be at least partially dependent on completion of the program.

Violent men under the supervision of community based corrections may be required to undertake the program as a condition of their Order.

As a crucial focus for the program, men are not permitted to divert responsibility for their crimes away from themselves. In order to achieve this, the Office of Corrections utilises professional psychologists and other appropriately trained staff to facilitate the programs and actively confront and challenge men's notions of 'justifiable violence'.

Staff conducting the programs have been required to undertake specific training prior to conducting any group sessions and are required to attend on-going professional supervision while the programs are underway. Staff are also required to monitor their own and each others' reactions to the justifications used by men to ensure that they do not unconsciously endorse sexist notions.

The program comprises a range of elements that teach men new ways of relating that are non-violent. Anger management training, relaxation therapy, communication skills, cognitive restructuring and behavioural strategies are included as are modules on denial of responsibility, developing empathy and gender socialisation.

In developing the program a key factor has been to ensure that the program's availability is part of the valid penalty for the criminal offence rather than a substitute for a higher criminal penalty.

Sex offender programs—the psychosexual therapy unit. Alongside the program for violent men, the Office has established prison and community-based treatment programs for men who have committed sexual crimes against women and children. In the prison, the Office has recently established a ten bed unit dedicated for the treatment of sex offenders.

Although their actions are, by definition, violent towards women and children, sex offenders who are classed as 'paraphiliac' require different treatment approaches than men who are rapists. This program will be used for the treatment of child molesters as well as rapists where there is clear clinical evidence that the program is the appropriate form of treatment for such offenders. There is a strong emphasis on victim empathy and facing up to the effects of the offenders violent crimes on the victim.
These programs also employ mechanisms to ensure that offenders take full responsibility for their actions.

**Support and empowerment for women.** The Office is also establishing a range of strategies to provide support and empowerment to women offenders in prison and under the supervision of community based corrections. Based on what is known about the prevalence of offences against women, a significant number of women offenders will have been victims of male violence at some time in their lives.

The program aims to ensure that women offenders are able to more assertively deal with the men they live with, and with the world at large, through education, training and employment opportunities, through parenting education for women who are mothers, and through better access to a range of programs to address their offence related needs and to enhance their capacity to live a crime-free lifestyle.

**Intensive Correction Orders.** Finally, as part of the new *Sentencing Act 1991*, a new penalty, the Intensive Correction Order, has been introduced which is designed as a direct alternative to imprisonment of offenders currently receiving sentences of twelve months or less.

Offenders undertaking the Intensive Correction Order will be required to undertake unpaid community work and participate in drug, alcohol or psychiatric treatment programs if considered appropriate. As well offenders may be required to participate in special residential or intensive community based treatment programs in areas directly related to their offending behaviour.

**A coordinated community approach.** Ultimately, the purpose of running programs for violent offenders within the corrections system is to return these offenders to the community at the end of their sentence with the minimum likelihood that they will commit further violent offences. Even if the corrections programs that this paper has described are genuinely effective in changing offenders' violent behaviour or attitudes, there are a number of additional conditions that must be satisfied if we are to have a real chance of producing lasting change in offenders. And it is in satisfying these additional conditions that our management of violent offenders must be a genuinely coordinated strategy.

We know that the most difficult part of serving a sentence for many, if not most, prisoners is returning to the community. Ex-prisoners can face extreme difficulty in re-establishing themselves: finding accommodation, getting a job or arranging benefits, and re-establishing contact with their family and friends. These are not tasks that are made any easier by being removed from the community for a long period. Failure to successfully reintegrate into the community almost inevitably means a return to offending.

The corrections system is poorly placed to help prisoners return to the community. We have limited expertise and are required by our legislated mission to focus on custodial and supervisory goals. The Office of Corrections does run a Community Integration Program that assists prisoners to prepare
for release and our community corrections staff provide assistance and support to released prisoners during their time on parole.

Even so, many prisoners do not recognise the need to prepare themselves for release. More importantly, once their sentence is finished most prisoners want nothing more to do with the corrections system. Effective assistance needs to come from within the community itself.

There are a number of organisations in the community that already do a tremendous job in providing assistance and services to ex-prisoners. Nevertheless, with more resources and greater community support, they could do even better.

A second aspect of a truly coordinated approach to the management of violent offenders is to ensure that the Office of Corrections strategy is linked to the overall state government strategy for reducing violence. One aspect of this is to provide offenders and ex-offenders with access to community programs and services for violent people so that there is continuity between corrections and community programs. Unfortunately, offenders tend to be difficult and unreliable participants in community programs and may be seen as undesirable or disruptive clients. Nevertheless, we have to overcome these problems if we want to maximise our chances of changing violent offenders.

**Conclusion**

Violent behaviour is the consequence of extremely deep-seated attitudes and values about personal and social relations. Changing the behaviour of the most violent members of the community may be the most difficult task facing the corrections system today. If it is to be done successfully, then it will require great commitment and support across the criminal justice system and the community.

**Reference**

National Committee on Violence 1990, *Violence: Directions for Australia*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.