

# **Crime Prevention and Local Government in New South Wales**

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This paper provides a descriptive overview of a pilot project on local crime prevention undertaken by two local councils in metropolitan Sydney. The two councils involved were Waverley Municipal Council and Fairfield City Council. In Waverley, the project was known as the Community Crime Prevention Project and in Fairfield, it was known as the Safer Neighbourhood Project. The project was jointly funded by the Commonwealth Office of Local Government, the New South Wales Law Foundation, the Criminology Research Council and the local councils. A full-time project worker was employed in each council area for a period of one year-the duration of the pilot project-and salaries constituted the largest item in the budget for the project. Reports dealing in detail with the project are available from each of the local councils. This paper concentrates on two areas-firstly, the major activities, or sub-projects, undertaken in each council area and, secondly, the major issues and problems raised by the project. There can be no blueprints for local government involvement in crime prevention but, as a pilot project of a quite novel kind in Australia, many of the most useful results or findings related to the process or methodology entailed in such projects: to obstacles, pitfalls and problems rather than effective measures that might be implemented elsewhere. Many of the lessons are negative as well as positive in their implications.

The author of this paper was one of the consultants to the project-the other was Michael Hogan from the Public Interest Advocacy Centre. Our involvement dated from the germination and funding of the project. However, the project in each council area was carried out by a full-time worker employed specifically for the task. The consultants provided periodic advice and various kinds of support. The following is drawn to a

considerable extent from the final reports of the project for each area, largely prepared by the full-time project workers.

### **Philosophy Underlying the Project**

Crime is a local issue in vital respects. Even under urban conditions, much crime is intra-community and intra-group in nature. Many of crime's most visible, detrimental effects-both direct and indirect-are experienced at a local community level: in the deterioration of local environments and public amenities (parks, railway stations, public telephones, and so on); in the desertion of public space engendered by widespread fear of crime; and in the felt need of residents in some communities to turn their homes into fortresses. Crime is a crucial symbol of the urban malaise-of a sense of powerlessness, isolation and anomie in the face of perceived alien, anonymous and unpredictable forces which are nevertheless close at hand. This may help to explain the level of popular anxiety crime generates, often seemingly beyond the scale of the threat it actually holds for particular communities and social groups.

At the same time, official responsibility for responding to the crime problem is vested in central institutions of government-primarily state governments in Australia. Popular influence and control over crime control efforts therefore tend to be indirect and limited by the increasingly remote and bureaucratic nature of modern democratic government. The very thing that crime symbolises-a widespread sense of powerlessness-tends to be compounded in crucial respects by the arrangements for responding to it.

The problem of how to respond to crime in the light of these factors throws us into the perennial dilemma of modern democratic government. This is the inverse relationship that frequently exists between participation and effectiveness. Political units small enough to allow and encourage direct participation by their members tend not to be large enough to allow effective authority to be exercised over many of those problems which necessitate action on a collective or government level (Dahl 1990). The slogan of some in the green movement-think globally, act locally-perhaps downplays the extent to which it is necessary (if hardly easy) to both think and act globally as well as locally if environmental problems are to be effectively addressed. The essentially utopian couplet of direct, local participation over decision-making and effective action applies to many other issues, including crime.

It is clear that many dimensions of crime problems do require responses at state and national government level, and in some cases at an international level. However, it is also clear that conventional responses to crime (almost entirely organised around the criminal justice system) have not been very effective at reducing crime or allaying popular fears and concerns. It is arguable that the constant public demand for effective action to deal with crime, coupled with the equally constant failure of traditional law enforcement responses to reduce the incidence of crime, has fuelled popular fear and disenchantment with the authority of government on this issue. One potential consequence of this widespread popular feeling may be a form of authoritarian populism. In what they see as the absence of effective social authority, people look for a surrogate in the form of the strong hand of government and powerful symbols of authority. The recurrent debates over

capital punishment could be regarded as a reflection of this symbolic affirmation of strong authority in the face of a widespread sense of moral and social decline.

This raises the question of whether it is possible to restore any sense of local control and authority over local crime problems. Is this an entirely utopian prospect? For those concerned with the benefits of democracy and participation, Robert Dahl has suggested a useful guideline: confronted with a given issue, let it be dealt with by the smallest political unit consistent with effective action. From this vantage point it is almost certainly the case that there is an unrealised potential for effective local action to deal with many dimensions of crime problems. The logical starting point for exploring this potential is local government but, as with other issues, a longer-term and more radical perspective might see greater attention being given to the creation of and support for new political units below the level of local government.

This has clearly been realised in recent times in the spread of Neighbourhood Watch and other community policing initiatives, in the promotion of community justice centres and community aid panels, and in the growth and promotion of private security. However, as many of these developments suggest, we should avoid becoming starry-eyed about the concept of 'community'. It has a long historical association within the field of social problems (Dennis 1968). Its renaissance in recent years frequently serves to conceal rather than resolve many of the dilemmas of social policy (see Bryson & Mowbray 1981).

The major risk in the emerging trend toward community-based services and measures in relation to crime and other social policy arenas is that we might witness a form of devolution of responsibility without a corresponding devolution of resources and power. Crime prevention could thereby provide an apparently benign cover under which government sheds many of its traditional responsibilities, not just for social welfare provision, but also in the area of law and order. This could amount to an extension of the logic of privatisation into crime prevention and control, whereby security becomes a commodity to be purchased by those individuals and communities that can afford to do so. There is little doubt that there are elements of this trend to be found in the spread and influence of Neighbourhood Watch schemes.

Another point to make here, partly by way of contrast to the concern expressed immediately above, is that we need to recognise the extent to which the handling of crime remains, under modern conditions, a relatively private and informal matter. This is clear from the extent to which crime goes unreported. However, surveys of unreported crime, which are also becoming increasingly popular in Australia, implicitly treat the failure to report crime as a form of aberrant behaviour. It is assumed that victims (or other witnesses) will normally report crimes and their failure to do so is something that must be explained. An alternative way of analysing unreported crime was suggested by Hood and Sparks over twenty years ago:

perhaps the real value of hidden delinquency and victimisation studies is not to warn us of the evils lurking beneath the surface, or even to help us get into perspective our concern over published statistics of crime, but rather to

provide data to aid our understanding of the way in which deviance is perceived and dealt with in varying social contexts (Hood & Sparks 1970, p. 45).

This perspective suggests that individuals, households, communities and organisations have varying capacities for managing crime problems. 'Managing' may simply mean tolerating them and absorbing their costs in many cases. It obviously can mean a lot of other things as well, including those informal and formal measures of punishment, discipline, treatment, and compensation that are to be found in families, schools, corporations and professional associations. Little is known about these domains of private justice, despite their critical relevance to crime prevention. It is time to recognise that it is such institutions that constitute the 'community' and that may well provide the locus of effective crime prevention initiatives which avoids the problems of privatisation alluded to earlier.

### **The General Objectives of the Project**

The general objectives of the project are more in the nature of long-term objectives that derive from the concerns discussed above (see in particular Fairfield City Council 1991) and are listed as follows:

- to promote a better and more sophisticated public understanding of local crime problems through the dissemination of information about the nature of local crime problems;
- to encourage an appreciation of the role of local communities, and community institutions, not only as the locus of criminal victimisation, but as a reserve of untapped resources for more adequately responding to local crime problems;
- to encourage a recognition of the potential for devolving 'greater resources and authority to local communities . . .' so that they might respond to local crime problems more effectively through preventive measures;
- to explore the role that local government might play in pursuing such objectives as the agent of government in closest proximity to local crime problems, that is as a provider of services, a regulatory agency with regard to many local activities (in particular, planning), a catalyst for local community initiatives and an advocate with regard to other levels of government; and
- to promote an emphasis on crime prevention rather than the traditional preoccupation with reactive law enforcement measures.

### **Specific Objectives**

Given that this was a pilot project, working with limited resources and within a tight time frame, and attempting to traverse wholly novel ground in

the Australian (or at least the New South Wales) context, many of the concerns were exploratory and many of the more specific objectives could not be expected to be achieved in any simple and straightforward sense. The specific objectives were:

- gather more adequate statistical and other empirical data on crime problems and trends in the local government areas of Fairfield and Waverley;
- explore the prospects for a more coordinated and planned approach to local crime prevention to be pursued under the leadership and direction of local government;
- explore the resources within the local communities relevant to responding to local crime problems;
- initiate specific crime prevention strategies and projects on the basis of a knowledge of local crime problems and the local resources for responding to them;
- explore the potential for local community participation in defining and responding to the local crime problems they confront;
- 'increase understanding and use of crime prevention as a relevant assessment criteria in the processes of local government decision-making with regard to the licensing and operation of commercial activities, and within the broader area of physical development and social planning generally' (Fairfield City Council 1991, p. 8); and
- undertake an educative role within council and local communities with respect to local crime problems and the nature and potential of community crime prevention.

The general backdrop to the development of the project was undoubtedly the growing influence of crime prevention ideas in Britain and many European countries. Of particular importance was the growing literature on situational crime prevention and crime prevention through environmental design.

### **A Summary of the Main Initiatives Taken as Part of the Project**

Although there was considerable cooperation and exchange of ideas between the two council areas, the projects in each area pursued quite divergent paths, influenced by their different local settings, problems and opportunities. The result was quite a diverse range of sub-projects.

The two major areas of commonality and cooperation were in relation to the gathering of local crime statistics and the conduct of two seminars on crime prevention, one in each area.

### *Data on local crime problems*

This was intended to be a largely preliminary exercise intended to inform the direction of the project in each area. However, the gathering and preparation of data on crime reported to the police in each Local Government Area (LGA) proved to be a difficult and lengthy process, indicating yet again the generally limited nature of official crime statistics for even the most rudimentary of purposes.

Whilst the statistical data collected was useful for providing an overview of crime trends in each of the LGAs, it was inadequate for any more-focussed analysis of local crime problems necessary for developing crime prevention strategies. In New South Wales, official crime data has traditionally been collected by the police for specific purposes. The data as it is currently collected and compiled does not begin to meet crime prevention needs. Quite apart from the deficiencies in the data collections, there are other political, bureaucratic and logistical obstacles to efficient use of police data.

If crime prevention strategies, whether undertaken at local government level or not, are to be encouraged this will require an appreciation by the agencies currently responsible for collecting statistics of the ways in which these collections might be improved to meet crime prevention needs.

The available statistical data was supplemented by the informal gathering of information from police, youth and community workers, local organisations and council workers about local crime problems. Focussed survey research was also carried out in each LGA.

### *Council projects*

It is difficult to draw a sharp distinction between those projects which involved direct council initiatives and the many other activities undertaken by the full-time workers, such as assisting and resourcing other local, community-based organisations and committees. The major projects were as follows:

#### Fairfield City Council involvement in the administration of Community Service Orders

This involved the development of a cooperative arrangement between the local Probation and Parole Service and Fairfield City Council's parks engineers involving the latter in the provision of supervised work for a small group of offenders sentenced to community service orders. Although this was not an area of priority in the original design of the project, it proved to be an area where the council's services and organisation could be readily adapted to a concrete need, which brought the council into a cooperative arrangement with another local agency.

#### The preparation of a Development Control Plan (DCP) for community crime prevention in Waverley

A DCP is a council policy which is used by the council in assessing development applications. It is prepared under the Environmental Planning

and Assessment Regulations 1980 (NSW) and is recognised by the Land and Environment Court. The major components of the DCP are as follows:

- the provision of guidelines for developers for the appropriate design of buildings and their surroundings aimed at minimising crime opportunities;
- the promotion of Council initiatives to address crime prevention in the maintenance of its public buildings, parks and gardens; and
- advice to residents in relation to the maintenance of the physical environment in order to discourage local criminal activity.

This was a major achievement of the project in Waverley, indicating the potential for a lasting shift in the perspective of the council as regards the relevance of crime prevention to its responsibilities in local planning and development processes.

#### The development in Waverley of a kit to be used for older persons self-protection groups

This was a response to the high level of local concern of the elderly about crime and the consequent interest in self-protection. This is something of a growing industry, one with many dangers and pitfalls. The kit was developed out of an ongoing monitoring by the crime prevention officer of local activities and services affecting the elderly and in conjunction with the elderly services worker in Waverley Municipal Council, a local neighbourhood centre. This also led to a local survey of crime victimisation and fear amongst the elderly.

There were a number of other projects initiated in both areas which did not come to fruition by the time of the completion of the pilot project, for one reason or another. In Waverley, a considerable amount of work was done in laying the foundations for the development of a Server Intervention Program (SIP). SIPs are aimed at promoting more acceptable models of drinking and behaviour on and around licensed premises by encouraging hotel managements to adopt a relevant 'house policy' incorporating a statement of responsible practices and conducting in-service training for staff on how to more effectively intervene to pre-empt antisocial behaviour associated with intoxication. This was a response to a widely expressed concern in the Bondi Beach community with alcohol-related violence and other antisocial behaviour associated with one particular hotel.

In Fairfield the rudiments of a strategy for responding to car theft (a major local problem) were developed, encompassing attention to public awareness and education; guidelines for carpark design and management; advocacy of manufacturing standards relating to tamper-proof locking devices to federal government; coordination and upgrading of local public transport, and stolen vehicle retrieval services. This was put to Fairfield City Council but not subsequently developed.

### *Resourcing community-based initiatives*

As important as those areas in which the councils were led to take some direct initiative were some of the ways in which the project in each area resourced other committees and organisations.

In both areas the project worker became involved with community-based groups providing services in relation to domestic violence. In Fairfield this led, amongst other things, to the development by the project worker-with the assistance of the local Domestic Violence Committee (an inter-agency committee)-of a compact information guide to be used and distributed by police and other local agencies to victims of domestic violence.

In Waverley, the project worker's involvement with other local agencies involved in the provision of family services led to a council grant directed at assisting the development of a local domestic violence support group to enhance local services in this area.

A focus of attention in the Fairfield project was one of the 'high crime' estates in the area. The project worker undertook an enormous amount of community development work with both residents (in the shape of the Tenants' Association) and other community workers associated with this estate. The aim of this activity was to secure much needed services for the estate from other agencies. These included childcare services, upgrading community worker services, parent support services and after-school activities programs. This aspect of the project in Fairfield presented the greatest challenge to a project of this type and highlighted most clearly its limitations.

In addition to these more active support and resourcing activities, the project workers in each area participated in a range of other local committees, such as Police/Community Consultative Committees and (in the case of Waverley) the Waverley Council Precinct Committees. This enabled an awareness of crime prevention issues to be introduced to the work of such committees.

### *Research*

Systematic survey research was undertaken in both LGAs. In Fairfield, a community survey on victimisation, fear and perceptions of the local crime problem was undertaken. This was centred on the 'high crime' estate referred to above and involved structured interviews with 180 residents living on or in the vicinity of the estate. A separate report of the survey was produced.

In Waverley, a survey of elderly residents was undertaken which explored their experience of criminal victimisation and perceptions of, and attitudes (including fear) to, local crime problems. It was sought to consider these in relation to other aspects of the lives of the respondents, including their networks of social and familial support and degree of isolation. The findings are not conclusive on the relationship between fear of crime (and its consequences) and social isolation. Most of the respondents were long-term residents of the area, were strongly integrated into networks of neighbourhood interaction and community activities, and had a positive view of their neighbourhood. Perhaps surprisingly, the respondents did not express high levels of fear about crime or feel that their lives were seriously circumscribed by the threat of victimisation. This is in complete contrast to

the findings of the survey in Fairfield. It is possible to hypothesise that at least part of the explanation for the findings in the Waverley survey is the high level of stability and community integration that characterised the respondents. This is in sharp contrast to the estate surveyed in Fairfield.

## **Problems and Lessons**

This may be the most important body of issues for others interested in the prospects for local government involvement in crime prevention. It is only possible to list some of the major problems here. More attention is given to these matters in the final reports of the projects for each Council (especially the Fairfield report). It should be noted that there are inherent limitations on a pilot project with fairly limited resources and a short time span.

### *Lack of understanding and sympathy for the approach*

This was encountered to varying degrees inside and outside the Councils involved. It raises a 'chicken and egg' problem. The very body of attitudes (the commonsense about crime and law and order) that the pilot project aimed at changing constituted a major obstacle to effectively developing and implementing the practical measures envisaged by the project. It is hardly surprising that people working in town planning, engineers and departments within councils might not see the connections between crime prevention and their work. This problem highlights the importance of political commitment and leadership and adequate advance education of the target groups in such a project.

### *Bureaucratic structure of local councils*

This directly follows on from the first issue. The purpose of such a project is to influence Council in a wide range of areas of responsibility. The vertically integrated, bureaucratic structure of councils may not provide a very sympathetic environment for getting the message across. In both council areas, the project worker was located in Community Services departments. Not surprisingly, it was perceived by other departments as a community services issue rather than an issue touching on the other council departments. Moreover, the resources were not allocated to other departments to permit them to take crime prevention initiatives relevant to their areas of professional expertise. This again emphasises the importance of understanding, commitment and leadership from the top so that communication across bureaucratic structures can be encouraged and facilitated.

If projects such as this are to be undertaken in future it is also important to consider where crime prevention workers should be located within the structure of local councils. This points to another more general issue raised in the final report of the Fairfield project:

A general issue . . . is the link between 'crime prevention' and good 'social planning' or 'community development work' and whether it is desirable or appropriate to consider 'crime prevention' as a special area of activity and

resourcing or whether it should be integrated in all social assessment and planning processes (Fairfield City Council 1991, p. 20).

The objective is indeed to connect crime issues to the range of other social policy arenas which are relevant to crime prevention rather than simply promote a new specialism. Of course, the problem lies in finding the means of making that connection, of ensuring that, for example, crime impacts are routinely appreciated as one of the important social impacts within the planning process.

#### *Funding crime prevention strategies and measures*

There are obvious limitations in a twelve-month pilot project with resources limited to essentially funding a full-time project worker. This means that what can be achieved is limited to what the worker her/himself can actually directly do and/or the changes and measures that can be initiated which either require no significant resource commitment or which can be funded from other sources. There is a danger, and one which was apparent in this project, that the project worker may be relegated to the job of making funding applications to state and Commonwealth government bodies to support a variety of council and community-based measures relevant to crime prevention. This problem transcends the particular limitations of a pilot project.

Many of the problems identified by the project related to the areas of responsibility of state and Commonwealth government departments, for example, problems on housing estates. It is a mistake to over-emphasise what local government can do given its limited powers and resource base. Initiatives at local government level must be complemented with initiatives at other levels of government.

There are also the problems of raising expectations which simply cannot be met without state and/or Commonwealth government support. The level at which the problems can be effectively identified and articulated is not the level at which resources are allocated to deal with them.

This indicates the need to be appropriately modest about what can actually be achieved at local government level in the way of new programs and services. This does not mean that a crime prevention perspective cannot be brought to bear on the existing responsibilities of council, as the actual activities and achievements of the pilot project indicate (in areas like planning, for example). In relation to many other local problems, however, councils must become an advocate for the local community in relation to such issues at other levels of government.

#### *Objectives and resources*

More careful decisions at the outset about specific objectives which are achievable within the resources and time frame available to the project are important to determining other features of such projects. Apart from those mentioned, such as the location of the worker, this planning is important for making decisions about such matters as the composition of steering committees and other working committees designed to monitor or participate in the project.

### *Research and action*

The mixture of research and practical action is always a problem in such projects. Research is time consuming and costly. People involved on a day-to-day basis with major and urgent social problems are understandably impatient with research. There are also the dangers of labelling and stereotyping particular communities with the sort of research entailed by projects such as this one.

There is no sure way around these tensions. The researchers have to demonstrate that research is not simply a theoretical luxury and that it can do more than confirm what is self-evident to community workers and residents. This is not always the case, of course.

A particular problem arises with a project like this one and that is, what is the right combination of skills needed by the project workers and where can you find them combined in one person? It is fair to say that in Australia at the present time, with few exceptions, they do not exist.

### **Conclusion**

Many more lessons of importance could be drawn from the experience of this pilot project. Interested readers are referred to the reports of the projects available from the councils involved. This paper has indicated that there were a number of (possibly lasting) achievements that came out of the project for the two councils involved. It is fair to say that the project has greatly assisted in putting crime prevention on the political agenda in New South Wales, both at local government level and more widely. It remains to be seen what long-term prospects there are for a law and order politics that gives greater weight to crime prevention.

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