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Understanding Crime Trends in Australia

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Much has been said and written in recent years about trends in crime in Australia, and about how accurately these trends are reflected in official statistics and reported in the media. This debate can become quite heated, with the various parties, including politicians, police, criminologists, victims and journalists, accusing each other of misinterpreting the few available facts. All too often, it seems that these arguments hinder serious debate about the objective we all have in ¾ development of successful policies for crime prevention and control.

This report demonstrates that much of the public concern about apparent rising increases in crime has been generated by over-simplistic interpretations of crime statistics in the last 20 years or so, and that many suggested crime strategies have been founded on a limited understanding of the profound changes that have occurred in Australian society in those decades.

What is required is much broader, better-informed and cooperative public action to achieve effective crime strategies. Such strategies cannot all be left to the criminal justice system. There is a role for other experts such as economists, town planners and educationalists, as well as a need to involve the wider community.

Paul Wilson
Acting Director

- Why is crime always increasing?
- Is Australia heading towards the sort of crime levels we used to only read about in other countries?
- What can be done about it?

One of the most commonly asked questions about crime is "Why is crime always increasing?" Certainly when we consider the rise in the number of crimes reported to police, there has been a dramatic increase. Reported crimes for Australia have risen by almost two-thirds, from 845,923 in 1980-81 to 1.41 million in 1988-89 (Mukherjee & Dagger 1990).

This rising level of reported crime has provoked reactions at many levels of society. Individuals react by showing increasing levels of fear and concern for their safety. A survey in Adelaide in 1985 found that 35 per cent of people in that city felt unsafe walking alone at night in their neighbourhood (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1986). Only three years later a similar question resulted in 42 per cent of Adelaide residents saying they felt unsafe in the streets at night (Frank Small & Associates Pty Ltd 1988). Some individuals react by taking more strenuous efforts

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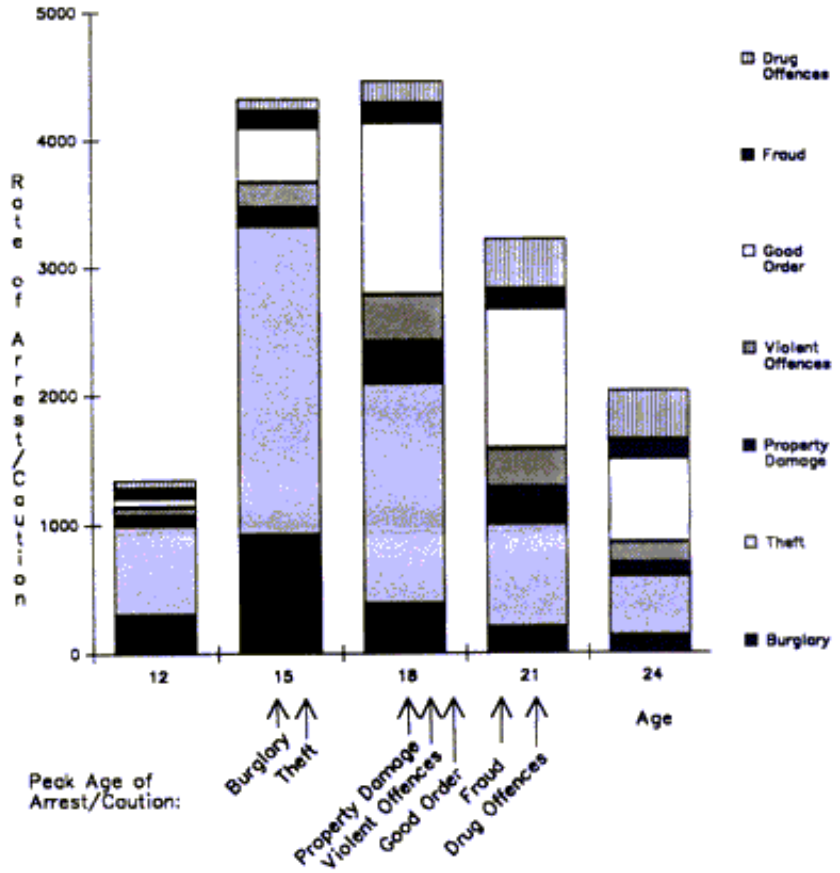
to protect themselves: self-defence classes for women are becoming increasingly popular. The apparent growth in the home security industry in recent years also exemplifies the rise in individuals' crime prevention efforts. Other measures, such as the proliferation of weapons in some countries (ostensibly for personal safety and home security), are arguably counterproductive in preventing violence.

Community groups react by persuading governments to take stronger measures against crime. The 15 years between 1973-74 and 1987-88 have seen a 59 per cent increase in the number of uniformed police officers in Australian police departments (Mukherjee & Dagger 1990). This continues into the 1990s, as shown by the New South Wales Government commitment to employ a further 1600 police (New South Wales Police Service 1989-90). State governments in recent years have also responded to calls for increased police coercive powers through new laws allowing the compulsory taking of blood samples and fingerprints (by force if necessary) and empowering police to direct persons to "move-on" (as in recent ACT legislation). In some states, perceived pressure on governments to "get tougher" in sentencing has resulted in increased prison terms served in an effort to deter criminals (for example, Queensland's 1985 increases in maximum penalties; NSW amendments to parole entitlements). Costly new prisons have been built to house the increase in prisoners, in spite of strenuous efforts to provide appropriate alternatives to imprisonment for a range of less serious offences. In view of the rather frightening trends in crime statistics, these appear to be perfectly reasonable community and government reactions.

But research conducted in Australia and overseas suggests that, although worrying, these rising crime figures may be due to a short-term trend in population growth, together with some familiar changes in society. If the changes were properly understood by governments, the media and members of the public, there would not appear to be the need for the draconian solutions that some people have suggested. Furthermore, the research conclusions argue that by placing greater demands on police, courts and prisons, at the expense of alternative strategies, we may be perpetuating the myth of ever-increasing crime.

Figure 1: **Comparative Rates of Arrest/Caution for Non-Traffic Offences Persons aged 12, 15, 18, 21 and 24 years (per 100,000 per annum)**



The Three Main Suspects

Demography

It is no surprise to most law enforcement personnel that the majority of non-traffic related offences are committed by the young. However, it may surprise the community to learn just how young. As Figure 1 shows, the peak age of arrest or caution for property offenders in Australia is only about 15 years. Violent offences peak at around 18 years of age. After the age of 21 even driving offences, which vastly outnumber other offences, begin to fall. This pattern is not at all unique to Australia. Equivalent figures for England and Wales confirm the pattern. Their peak ages of conviction/caution in 1986 were: theft 15 years; burglary 15 years; criminal damage 18 years; violent offences 18 years; fraud and forgery 20 years; drugs 20 years (Barclay 1990), and similar patterns have been found in many different times and cultures (Hirschi & Gottfredson 1983).

Analysis of general population data shows that in 1971 there were 465,153 15 and 16-year-old Australians; their numbers peaked in 1987 to 579,854 - an increase of 25 per cent. In 1989 their numbers declined to 544,021 and will continue to decline for some years. This is a direct result of the large post-war baby-boom and immigration in the late 1940s and early 1950s - the so-called "baby-boom echo". It is interesting to note the relationship between these population trends and crime. For example, Australia-wide, the number of reported larceny offences increased dramatically until

1986-87, when numbers remained stable for a year, and are now starting to decline.

Similarly, the number of reported burglaries in Australia increased steadily until 1984-85 when Neighbourhood Watch schemes were introduced in Victoria and New South Wales. After a two-year decline, the national figures resumed an upward trend, but at a lesser rate. In Victoria, however, the last two years have shown a declining trend. It is reasonable to assume that the introduction of Neighbourhood Watch affected the reported trends by raising expectations in the community: this appears to be confirmed since the percentages of burglaries reported to police increased from about 70 per cent in 1983 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1985) to almost 80 per cent in 1988 (van Dijk et al. 1990). So, bearing in mind this change in reporting practices, it appears that both burglary and larceny trends may be greatly influenced by the numbers of 15-16 year-olds in the community.

As these juveniles get older, a certain proportion will continue in their criminal careers. However, as they age, their pattern of offending also changes (s*ee* Figure 1). This results in peaks in arrest and caution figures for these offences as the group of offenders goes through their mid-teens. Firstly, they tend to restrict their activities to burglary, and other theft categories such as shop-stealing. More serious offences, involving violence, peak a few years later, as the teenagers experiment with alcohol, cars and sex. Later still, driving and job-related offences peak, as they adopt adult lifestyles. Then, as the baby-boomer echoes generation grows out of their teenage years, most will grow out of crime, particularly the types of crime which most alarm the community, like violence and burglary, and the trends in crime statistics will tend to be reversed.

It should not be surprising that the demographic effects are so clearly seen each year in the crime figures. High rates of crime in particular regions of Australia, such as the Northern Territory and many of the outer suburbs of our capital cities are clearly related to their high proportions of adolescents; high crime rates amongst the Aboriginal population are also partly explained by their high proportion of young people. There are many other visible consequences of the baby-boom echo in other areas. For example, the booms and busts of the housing industries over the same period are related to trends in family formation. We are also familiar with the enormous pressure on our primary schools during the early 1970s, which shifted to the secondary school system as these children grew older. Now, many primary schools have too few children, while the secondary system seems also to have reached, or just passed, its peak. Our universities currently shoulder the burden - together with the unemployment queues.

Opportunity - the Careless Generation

Other societal factors tremendously amplify the criminogenic effect of demographic change by providing greater opportunities for crime. During the past two decades, for example, it has become the norm for both parents to work: the proportion of working-age women who go out to work increased from 36 per cent in the 1960s and 1970s to 52 per cent in 1990 (personal communication 1990, Department of Employment, Education and Training). Town planning policies of the 1970s simultaneously ensured that residential areas were carefully separated from commerce and industry. The net effect of these two societal trends is that whole residential suburbs are now deserted for much of the working day, creating a vast range of "job opportunities" for burglars. Arguably, our schools timetable, which is still arranged as if mother is at home all day and allows children home a full two hours before their parents leave work, compounds this problem. Ample opportunities are provided, as in the recent ACT example where two youngsters allegedly burgled and then set fire to an unattended home during the day, causing $130,000 of damages. Furthermore, the separation of jobs from residential areas, which we found so attractive when we flocked to the new suburbs, ensures that we all drive to work each day, leaving our cars and their contents unsupervised in city car parks all day - creating ample job opportunities for car thieves too. Finally, when we are all back home from work, we leave our commercial and industrial areas totally deserted overnight, because no longer do we allow business people or caretakers to live on the premises - more job opportunities for criminals.

The 1970s and 1980s also saw a major change in our shopping centres. Two decades ago, most of our shopping would have been done in small owner-operated businesses in which carefully laid out shelves of goods would have been watched over by an eagle-eyed proprietor. Now most of our shopping is done in vast supermarkets with comparatively little security, and not surprisingly, shop-stealing offences have increased. Computer technology has ironically compounded the problem by making many of our expensive household electronic goods smaller and more portable.

Perversely, however, in an area which really matters - youth employment - we have moved in exactly the other direction. Since 1975, in order to remove perceived wage-discrimination against young people, Commonwealth governments have amended legislation covering juvenile wage rates, with the effect that juvenile wages have been increased. Many employers, however, have reacted by selecting the older and more experienced of applicants. In 1990, therefore, in contrast to the 1975 situation and despite government attempts to limit overall unemployment levels in Australia, unemployment is now much more concentrated amongst school-leaver age groups - precisely the age groups who are most liable to turn to crime out of idleness and boredom. The unemployment rate amongst 15-19 year olds increased by 3.6 per cent

between 1975 and 1990: 50 per cent more than the increase in the overall unemployment rate in spite of a growing tendency of young people to delay their entry into the workforce by staying on longer at school (personal communication 1990, Department of Employment, Education and Training).

Furthermore, as a consequence of the increasing use of the "user pays" principle, many of the educational and recreational facilities which used to be provided free of charge or at very low rates, such as after-school activities, public libraries and swimming pools, are now obliged to recover costs from users, which makes them far less attractive to parents already burdened with the high costs of raising teenage children.

The last two decades, therefore, have seen a variety of massive job-creation schemes for offenders, combined with a significant relative decline in legitimate job and recreational opportunities for juveniles.

The Community, Media and Governments' Reactions to Reported Crime Statistics

The reactions of the community, media and government also shape crime trends, mainly through affecting perceptions about crime that in turn amplify reported crime statistics. For example, media dramatisation of high profile violent crimes and increased media attention given to violent crime generally leads to a community perception that violent crime is "out of control". This perception lowers the threshold of sensitivity to violence so that there is a greater likelihood of the public reporting minor violent crimes that might previously have gone unreported (for example physical bullying; a punch-up at the local pub). In addition, in response to these community concerns, police may be more likely to deal with borderline cases as serious assault rather than minor assault, or may charge with minor assault rather than proceed with a discretionary warning. In this way, feedback processes amplify real crime trends through community and police reactions.

In some cases, the community has chosen to encourage the reporting of crimes to police - for example in the cases of sexual assault and domestic violence - so that the statistics of crime increase. Bashing your wife when your football team loses is no longer acceptable behaviour, yet more of these crimes are probably reported than in days gone by, giving the impression that it is more prevalent.

Similarly, judicial and government responses to certain crimes can have a self-fulfilling prophecy effect. For example, in response to apparent community concerns about the rise in child sexual assault, courts may react by handing out more severe penalties, as both a deterrent to other would-be offenders, and also to indicate abhorrence of such crimes "in the eyes of the community". Over time, these longer prison sentences result in more prisoners held on any single day in prison for such offences. Researchers examining prison trends over time identify a growth in prisoner numbers for this offence, mistakenly arguing its increasing prevalence in the community. The community calls for stronger measures to be taken. Courts hand out longer sentences, and so on.

Assembling the Jigsaw Puzzle

Phase 1: Early Teens - the Wave of Property Crimes

Figure 2 shows how demographic and societal changes have combined with some of the "logical" community responses to them. For example, between 1980 and 1985, as the baby-boomer echoes reached their early teens they caused a rapid rise in the figures for property offences such as burglaries and shop-lifting. Public reaction to this, influenced by the usual "shock-horror" treatment by the media, resulted in great concern to "do something about it". This concern was echoed by police spokespersons, who quite correctly said that they were virtually powerless to do anything about it. (Crimes in unpopulated residential areas or unsupervised shops are rarely solved, owing to the lack of witnesses.) Nevertheless, public pressure will have some effect on even the tightest political purse-strings. Funding was found in every jurisdiction for increased police resources, and changes were made to police operations or sentencing legislation in an attempt to catch or deter the offenders. For example, it was in this period that the Neighbourhood Watch movements were established in Australia to assist police in combating property crime. The nature and extent of those additional resources or sentencing changes depended upon the political colour of those in government in each jurisdiction; however, one almost inevitable result of greater police resources and community involvement is that there is an increase in public confidence in the police: more people think it worthwhile reporting offences if they think the police can do something about it (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1985).

Again this will inflate the figures of crime reports, reinforcing the cycle of cause and effect created by the initial increase in crime figures. Circular chains of causation like these are called self-reinforcing "feedback loops", to use some appropriate jargon from the world of electronics. They are not at all uncommon in society at large (Forrester 1969), but very commonly misinterpreted.

Phase 2: Late Teens - the Wave of Violence

A few years later, the older members of this cohort are reaching their late teens, when they are quite suddenly expected to behave as adults. This includes being allowed to drive, to drink alcohol in pubs and night clubs, to try to earn a living independently and last but not least, to choose their own partners and friends. Some, inevitably, are ill-prepared for these activities. Many fail to find satisfying employment - particularly when jobs are scarce. Many are unaware of the

degree of self-control required to handle motor cars, or alcohol or drugs, safely and properly. Most difficult of all, many fail to treat other people with respect, and this often leads to violence. Simultaneously, the criminal justice system begins to treat them as serious criminal rather than as juvenile welfare cases, which further inflates crime trend statistics, and fills the courts and the prisons, in another feedback loop.

The types of crimes which older teenagers commit are frequently alcohol-related, and often classified as "violent", although typically the violence is directed at others of the same age or at the figures of authority - usually police - who are responsible for maintaining order. For example, reported serious assault rates have shown dramatic increases in at least the two largest jurisdictions over recent years. Analysis of police statistics shows that one of the major contributors to this trend has been violence in and around discos, pubs and clubs (Ministry for Police and Emergency Services and Victoria Police 1989; New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 1988), exacerbated by crowding, limited facilities and poor crowd control techniques.

The increase in violent offences reported to police is accompanied by the presence of young people in the streets around meeting places. This feature of city life is significant in people's perceptions of crime in their neighbourhood (Skogan & Maxfield 1981; van Dijk et al. 1990). Fear of violent crime, whether it is a justified fear or not, is a powerful stimulant to community groups and activists, and in recent years there has been considerable pressure on governments to devote more resources to combat violent crime and to punish offenders more severely. Politicians, naturally, want to be seen to be doing something, and, unfortunately, the automatic "law and order" reaction is often simpler than the lengthy process of setting up constructive counter-crime preventive measures.

Phases 3 and 4: The Ebbtide and the Crystal Ball

If most of this picture looks familiar as we enter the 1990s, the remaining part of the cycle is not, because today we stand at the beginning of Phase 3. The large cohort from the baby-boom echo is beginning to enter its twenties, when they expect to find jobs, settle down with a family and a mortgage, and become fine upstanding citizens. They are already well beyond the peak ages for burglary and theft, so these offences are declining. Soon, even the wave of violence is likely to subside (Victoria's recently announced crime statistics for 1989-90 already show reductions in both property and violent crime rates, for the first time in 15 years). Those involved in crime prevention and penal policies no doubt deserve some of the credit for these "successes", but the consequences of some of the tough penal policies adopted during Phase 2 will continue to haunt us. Prisoner numbers will remain high as offenders serve out their long sentences, and taxpayers may regret their enthusiasm for such lengthy and costly sentences. As the 1988 Thatcher government Green Paper put it, "overcrowded prisons are emphatically not schools of citizenship", and there is much evidence to suggest that the use of imprisonment is actually counter-productive in many cases, resulting in alienated prisoners returning to more serious crime after their release.

More subtle changes will occur in the crime statistics: while overall violence will decline, domestic violence is liable to increase as the baby-boomer echoes pair off; while total property crime declines, employee crime and credit card frauds may increase as the population wave goes through its working life. Remember also that this generation about to enter the workforce is by and large a computer-literate one, and their crimes at work and in business may often be computer assisted. Our crystal ball cannot tell exactly how technological and related societal changes will determine crime trends, but these appear to be some of the most likely areas of change.

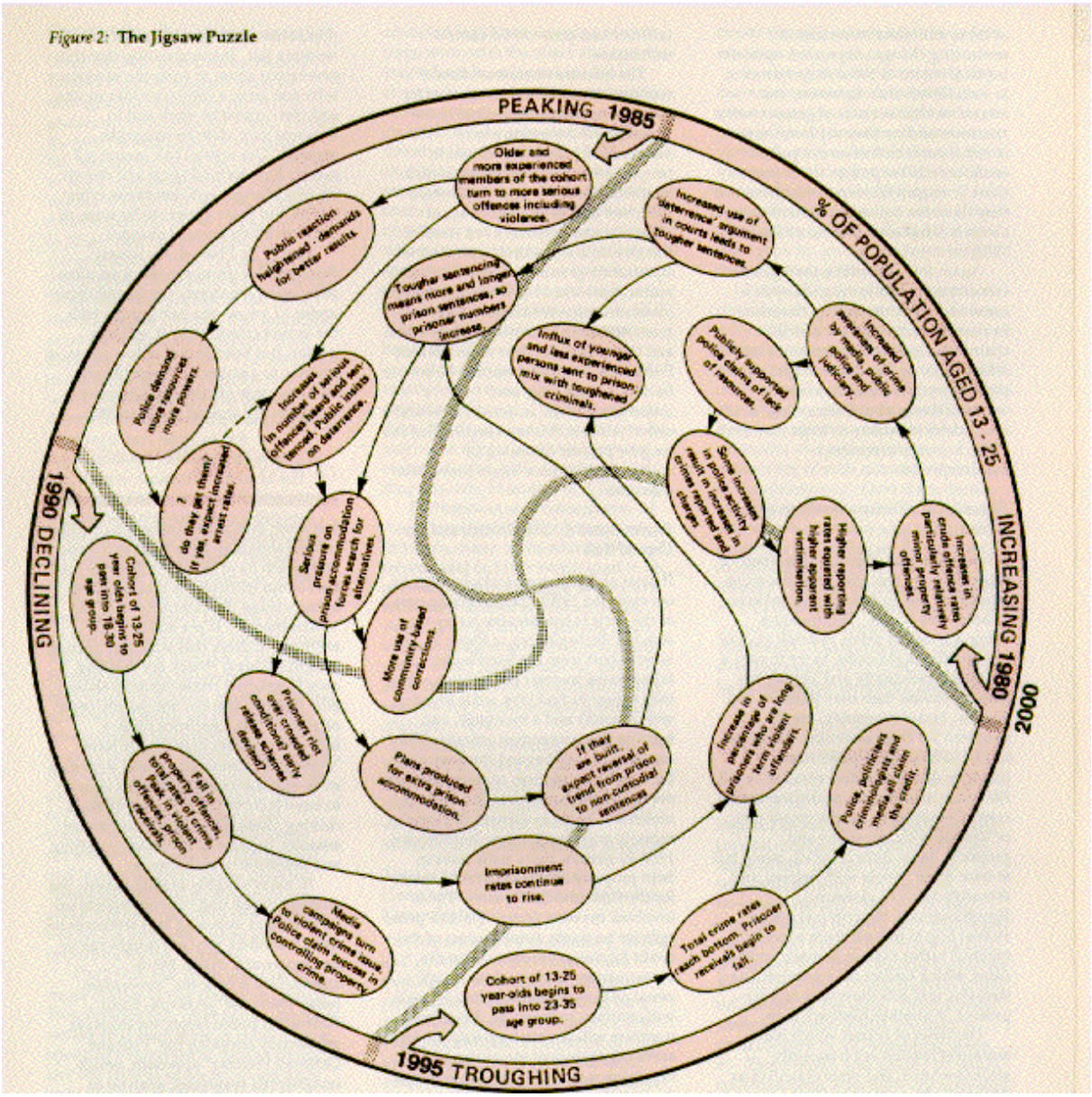
Finally, in Phase 4, the largest demographic groups in the Australian population are those over 30 and those under 12 — two groups with the lowest crime rates. It will be a golden, but brief period of low crime — a prelude to another demographically inspired cycle of crime and reaction, commencing around the year 2000.

Alternative Strategies for Crime Control

It is often difficult to know which crime control strategies have been successful and which have failed. Perhaps at least part of our difficulty is that we fail to acknowledge the complexities of the "crime-model". It is a mistake, for example, to think that strategies such as Neighbourhood Watch are working only if reported crime statistics show a fall. Equally, it is not necessarily proof of success if the statistics show a fall - the problem may simply have "moved on". Some successful strategies even increase crime figures, as appears to have occurred in the cases of drink driving, domestic violence and sexual assaults, because of increased reporting and detection of such crimes.

In today's highly mobile society, the strategy of reacting to every individual incident and imposing stiff sentences on those offenders who are caught can be ineffective and costly. Many alternatives invoke the "prevention better than cure" principle. Some Australian police forces, for example, are already adopting the "Problem Oriented

Figure 2: **The Jigsaw Puzzle**



Policing" approach, which involves the systematic analysis of patterns of incidents, and the development of actions required to solve the underlying problems which precipitate them.

It is a mistake, however, to think that the police, the courts and the prisons should or could shoulder the entire burden of crime prevention and control. For example, this paper has argued that whereas previous generations took care not to leave property unattended, today we often choose, in effect, to pay the criminal justice system and the insurance industries to look after it for us. Alternative strategies might involve reversing this trend by making changes to the way we plan or populate residential and business areas to encourage cooperative surveillance, or changes to working arrangements to allow more of us to work at home.

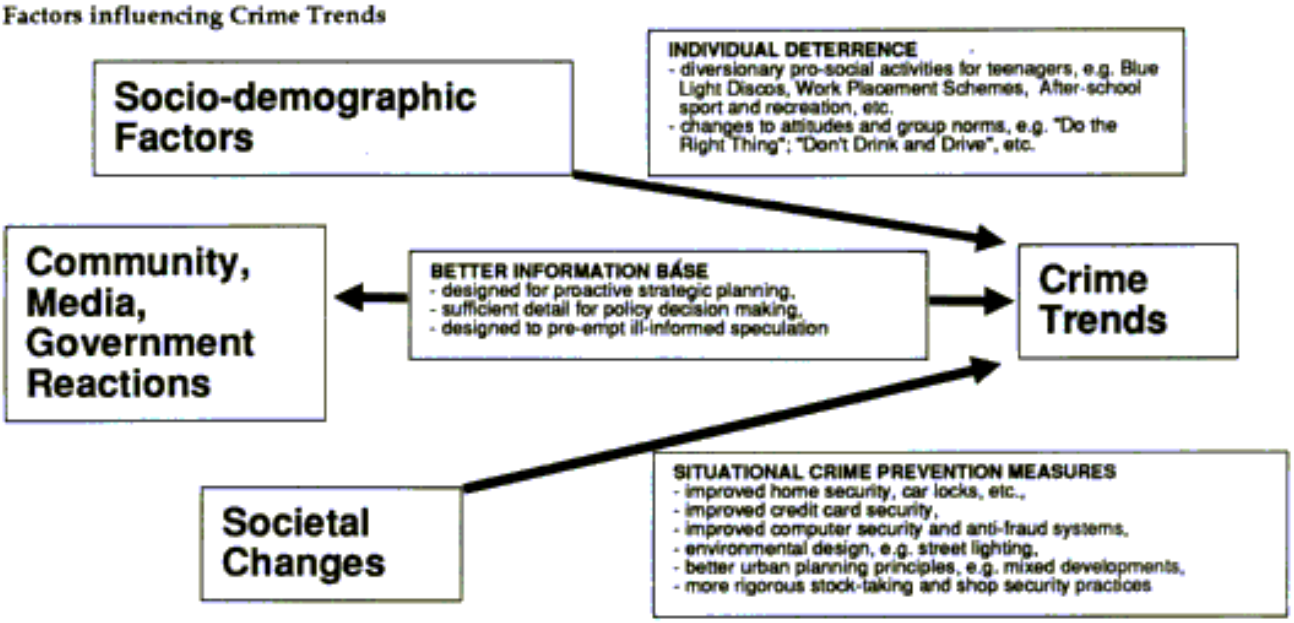
Much of the crime prevention emphasis to date has been on situational crime prevention factors such as improved home security. (The Australian Institute of Criminology has published a range of reports relating to different crime prevention issues: *see* list at the end of this paper). Less attention seems to have been focussed on what can be done to make an individual turn from crime. However, these "individual deterrent" factors may have as much if not more potential for impact on future crime trends (*see* Figure 3). The data in Figure 1 clearly show how much crime could be prevented if people were "turned off" at an early age. Yet another consequence of modern lifestyles is that we spend less time with our growing children than previous generations. Recidivism research (and operational experience of many criminal justice system practitioners) suggests that the age at which the individual commenced criminal offending is a critical factor in determining the extent of the criminal career (Barnett et al. 1987; Hirschi & Gottfredson 1983). Some countries, particularly in Europe, have taxation and other incentives to encourage parents to spend more time with their children, and perhaps there are benefits in this approach in terms of crime reduction.

In this context, it is interesting to note the trend in recent decades for much of the responsibility for training in moral and ethical standards of behaviour to be transferred from parents, churches, schools and other, mainly voluntary, community organisations to law enforcement agencies. This is evidenced by the need for (and popularity of) the "Police in Schools" and "Blue Light Discos" programs both in Australia and elsewhere. While the police are to be commended for their initiatives, these programs have become necessary because modern lifestyles make it difficult for communities to attend to such needs themselves. Responsible parents are not helped, either, when subsidies are withdrawn from local authority services such as libraries and swimming pools. Children who cannot afford to pay wander around shopping centres instead. Ratepayers still end up footing the bill, but the money is spent on cleaning up graffiti and other forms of vandalism instead of on maintaining a public facility.

Young people may also have difficulty in recognising the bounds of good behaviour because of the ambivalence they see all around them. They see speed limits which are only observed by a tiny minority of adults; employees who consider the office stationery cupboard as the provider of their private and home needs; adult smokers who do not regard a discarded cigarette butt as litter and a potential bush fire; blatant violence being applauded and approvingly replayed by adult sports commentators and film-makers, and so on. In recent years, the educative powers of the media have been used increasingly to promote community-minded attitudes ("Do the right thing"; "Don't drink and drive"), and perhaps there is scope for even greater use of this technique.

There is no single "best solution" to the crime problem. Effective strategies need to be targeted at prevention and ideally be based on a holistic approach that incorporates situational crime prevention strategies

Figure 3: **Factors influencing Crime Trends**



as well as individual deterrent programs. And we need to plan these strategies to take account not only of prevailing crime trends but also to counter emerging ones. As an additional bonus, the resources to establish and maintain such strategies are not necessarily large. The best and most innovative programs make use of existing and often underutilised community resources and services.

Conclusion

The ideas in this paper should not be taken to imply that apparently rising crime trends can be viewed with no concern. What should take place is a balanced consideration of the various reasons underlying such trends (and what they mean for future trends), which allows a more reasoned consideration of appropriate policy responses to the problem, particularly where alternative ways of allocating resources to prevention and intervention may result in a better rate of return for the increasingly rare criminal justice system dollar.

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