THE WALCHA RURAL CRIME REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

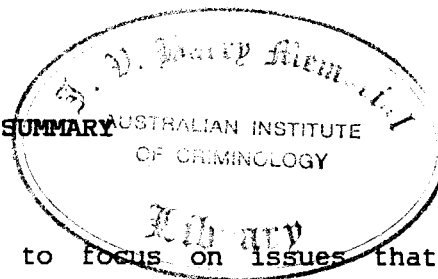DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
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Criminological studies have tended to focus on issues that have arisen out of, or have been closely related to, urban communities. This research is somewhat unique in that it is located in a rural community. It is distinctive in that the focus of the study is the community and then crime and not vice versa.

Chapter One Researching Rural Crime.

An extensive and wide ranging review of the literature has indicated that rural criminological issues have largely been ignored. The little research that has taken place has imposed theoretical and research concerns developed within an urban environment on the research. This has caused a number of theoretical and methodological problems that have largely been ignored. We argue that the focus on community, as the starting point of the research, and not crime, should help to overcome some of these problems. The rural-urban contrast from this position becomes an assessment of qualitative and quantitative differences between the two locales.

Chapter Two Walcha New South Wales.

In this chapter we discuss several significant aspects of Walcha, New South Wales. In particular, we focus on Walcha as a community, noting its history, socioeconomic structure and the nature of the locally based criminal justice system.

Several conclusions have been drawn from this material. Firstly, Walcha clearly fits the image of a rural Australian community. It is small, agriculturally based and has a population comprised of the traditional Australian anglo-celtic ethnic mix. In addition, many of the families in Walcha have been residing in the district for several generations. Secondly, Walcha has probably never had a serious crime problem, although the historical data does indicate that the criminal justice system has played a significant role in the community since its' early years. In some areas, such as public disorder, there are marked similarities between the official crime rates of this century and the last. In other areas, such as labour disputes, the role of the criminal justice system has changed considerably.

There are reasons to believe that the community is an important factor in local law enforcement. In particular, the statements of the Walcha police and our own observations of police-community interaction suggest that community is a critical concept for understanding crime and criminal justice in a small rural town and district.

Chapter Three Communalism.

Walcha has a distinct identification as a community. This was evident on an experiential level and was also indicated by the self reports of our respondents.

As a community it has several distinctive characteristics. Perhaps the most notable is the link with previous generations who have

lived in Walcha. This is evidenced by the large percentage of respondents whose families have resided in the Walcha district for several generations. This historical tie is complimented in many cases by the existence of extended family groupings presently located in Walcha. This attachment to community is in contrast to the more mobile lifestyles experienced by urban Australians.

Another significant characteristic of Walcha as a community was the high level of participation in local organisations and clubs. Walcha may be somewhat isolated from urban Australia, however, local residents have been very active in developing the social resources available in the community. In many cases this has taken the form of membership in community organisations and activities.

Most of our respondents perceived Walcha as a good place to live. In particular, most respondents had a high regard for the community facilities and government services and organisations that were available in Walcha. The main problem perceived by respondents was the lack of opportunity for young people. Like many country towns the absence of employment opportunities in Walcha means that many of its young people will eventually migrate to larger towns or cities.

Chapter Four   The Perception of Crime in Walcha, N.S.W.

In comparison with surveys conducted in urban locales, it would be safe to say that our respondents do not perceive crime to be a significant problem in their community. Consistent with these surveys, they also consider the 'problem' to be worse elsewhere. However, to assess our findings in this way may hide an important

point about public opinion on crime. In the first instance, while our respondents may not consider crime to be a serious problem in the sense that they perceive crimes to be occurring infrequently, the level of crime that does exist may be sufficient to make them attentive to, even somewhat disturbed by a level of crime that would possibly be regarded as insignificant in another locale.

It may well be that respondents are aware of the crime 'problem' elsewhere and therefore even slight changes in Walcha may initiate a response that links this with developments elsewhere. The results on drug use may be an example of this. Objectively the number of drug offences in Walcha is small. Nevertheless, one got the impression from observing the police and talking informally to community members that the occasional drug offences were indicative of how the crime 'problem' was coming to Walcha. Similarly, the low response to the incidence of juvenile delinquency and vandalism in Walcha appears promising in comparison with other surveys, but the community is not complacent about this. It is felt that there is a need to provide supervised activities for young people so as to keep them out of trouble; a view that is given support by the results on the quality of life in Walcha where the facilities for young people are criticised.

Respondents made a distinction between rural and urban crime patterns, both in terms of the extent and nature of the offences committed in the different locales. The rural-urban differences noted are very general, but it would seem that they might warrant closer scrutiny in future studies. Suffice to say, our rural respondents, while having a generally positive perception of the

crime situation in Walcha vis-a-vis other studies, in the context of their locale this perception may still represent a concern about crime.

Chapter Five   Concern and Fear About Crime in Walcha, N.S.W.

The results suggest that in terms of avoidance, worry about property crime and perceived safety in the community, respondents in Walcha experienced quite a low level of fear when compared with respondents in other crime surveys[1]. This is true for both male and female respondents. It suggests that concern and fear of crime are responsive to the actual and perceived crime situation in a particular locale.

Chapter Six   Victimisation in Walcha, N.S.W.

In previous chapters it is argued that Walcha does not have a "crime problem". This argument is based on our own observations as well as the comments of the police and our respondents. However, while Walcha may not have a "crime problem" in a sense of being a community where social life is threatened by crime, clearly there is crime in Walcha. According to the reports of our respondents, approximately fourteen percent had been victims of crime in the preceding twelve months. Of this fourteen percent, twenty five percent reported that they were victims of multiple offences, either at the same time or on a subsequent occasion.

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1. Kinsey, 1985; Wilson and Brown, 1973; Young et al., 1985.

These figures are comparable to those found by the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1983 Crime Victims Survey[2]. While the victimisation figures produced by our study and those of the ABS cannot be directly equated due to different response formats, it is obvious that Walcha does not represent an island of crime free life in a society experiencing an increasing crime problem.

Nevertheless, the extent of the "crime problem" in Walcha should not be exaggerated. Many of the crimes reported by our respondents were of minor importance. In many cases they did not even lead to contact with the police. The most socially disrupted crimes – crimes against the person – constituted only 15.8% of all victimisations.

Chapter Seven Images of Crime, Criminals and Source of Crime News.

Respondents have a general image of the criminal as a young male, most likely to be unemployed and single. Poverty/unemployment is the main reason selected by respondents as the cause of crime. While a large majority of respondents read the local paper and watched/listened to the news on television or radio, crime did not appear to be a frequent topic of conversation. When crime was discussed, the source of news comes from gossip rather than the media.

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2. ABS, 1986.

Chapter Eight   Policing in Walcha, N.S.W.

The unique characteristics of policing in Walcha are outlined. The daily routines of policing in Walcha are reviewed and the major roles of the police in the community are examined. This analysis highlights the distinctive nature of rural policing in one locale in New South Wales. Despite the organisation and training of police outside the community, and the mobility of police personnel, it is evident that the police in Walcha were influenced in their day to day routines by the community they served. In turn the community expressed a very positive attitude toward the police, with over ninety percent of our respondents rating the police as very good or good. One could hardly expect a higher response from a random sample of community members anywhere in Australia. Police-community contact was high, with one fifth of our respondents indicating that they met the local police very often or often. Our observations indicated that the interaction was both cordial and friendly.

Chapter Nine   Conclusion

From our review of the literature we conclude that:

(1)   there has been little research on rural crime here or overseas.

(2)   the research that has taken place has generally replicated urban research.

(3) the replication of urban research or the borrowing of criminological theory based on urban research has meant that the distinctive nature of rural locales has been ignored.

(4) there are a number of myths about rural areas, particularly the arcadian perspective that has worked against studying rural crime and criminal justice issues.

(5) Public opinion research in particular has been atheoretical and derived from concerns developed from urban crime situations.

(6) these developments have led to the imposition of urban based crime control programmes, such as neighbourhood watch, centralised policing strategies and practices, even the imparting of official news on crime, in an incritical manner to rural locales.

To redress these developments we have sought to place the focus of the research on locale and community.

The implication of the research results for public policy in criminal justice issues is that locale is clearly a significant independent variable and that strategies and practices in the criminal justice field must take this into amount. We discuss its possible effect on policing and crime prevention.

Finally, the research has indicated:

(1)   the need for locale based studies.

(2)   the need to direct research toward rural criminal justice issues. This has been neglected and that neglect may lead to developments in criminal justice policy that will positively work against these small rural locales.

(3)   the richness of data that flows from more open ended questioning of respondents. It has highlighted that public opinion research on criminal justice issues is not to be misconstrued as market research.

(4)   the need for a combination of research techniques, in order that a more comprehensive perspective is gained.

(5)   the need to develop techniques for surveying victimisation that account for the 'rural' type of victimisation, such as theft from mail boxes, trespassing and spotlight shooting.

Following on from this

(6)   there is a need to develop target hardening and preventive advice directed precisely at the 'problems' experienced by residents in particular locales. There was some evidence that the police were felt to be powerless, or have no ready solution, to some of the problems experienced. This was

not a criticism of the police, but some respondents felt that their problems could not reasonably be expected to be the concern of the police, nevertheless, they were disruptive/disturbing to their lived experiences in the community.

(7) that respondents did have a particular view of the police. What that view is has hardly been touched upon and if community policing is to be developed then what respondents consider to be the police role, not simply what they think of the police, should be investigated. We would expect that this varies by locale.

(8) that most of the issues dealt with in this study could have been researched in more depth. This is always a problem with research, what to put in and what to leave out, but out approach has indicated that researching criminal justice issues requires in depth analysis.

Because crime is so topical, our mass media is full of it and it does impinge on people's lifestyles, respondents tend to have no difficulty in responding to general questions. This may give a false picture as to the level of consensus/agreement if the research does not seek tolocate the issues in terms of the respondent's own experiences.

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