

A Review of the Commonwealth's National Crime Prevention Initiative

Introduction

Crime and fear of crime is an issue within the community that receives great attention from the media, the public and government. The National Crime Prevention initiative (NCP) (formerly the National Campaign Against Violence and Crime) was created by the Commonwealth in response to this situation and has the broad objective of reducing crime and violence and the fear of crime and violence in Australia. This comment examines the work of the NCP with the aim of assessing the initiative's ability to introduce successful crime prevention programs into the community and improve the prospects for crime prevention as an alternative to criminal justice responses. Specific attention will be directed at the NCP's recent research into fear of crime.

Summary of the NCP

The NCP is a \$13 million, three-year strategic Commonwealth government initiative located within the Commonwealth Attorney General's Department in Canberra. The Campaign arose out of the Coalition's Law and Justice policy and was officially launched in June 1997 as the National Campaign Against Violence and Crime (NCAVAC) (Korn 1997b).

The objective of the NCP is 'to develop, implement and promote programs, policies and projects that prevent violence and crime and reduce the fear of violence and crime' (Tulloch et al 1998; NCP 1999a). It follows that the NCP has a crime prevention rather than law and order mission (Korn 1997a, 1997b). The NCP aims to stress the evaluation of programs for real targets — that is, measured decreases of crime — and not focus upon achievements. Achievements such as conference presentations, posters and brochures, partnerships established and so on, while encouraging, say nothing about the actual reduction of crime (Korn 1997a).

The NCP strategy comprises four steps (Korn 1997a):

1. Identifying the crime prevention issues correctly.
2. Identifying the right intervention program.
3. Encouraging cooperation between agencies charged with crime prevention to adopt the initiatives and avoid a 'we're different, it won't work here' attitude. Persuasion of state/territory bodies is a key role of the NCP.
4. Provide a database of programs for clients to adopt 'off-the-shelf'.

As the NCP has been structured, it has four streams (Korn 1997b):

1. **National initiatives:** A series of crime prevention programs to research and promote good practice and to persuade states/territories and local governments to implement the assessed programs. This coordination is being done in concert with the National Anti-Crime Strategy (NACS) and Commonwealth government departments. The NACS was created in 1994 by the Premiers and Chief Ministers from all states and territories as a

response to their responsibility for crime prevention, recognising its value in concert with the criminal justice system and the need for cross jurisdictional cooperation (NACS 1997).

2. **Capacity building:** Acknowledging the difference in the needs of states/territories and providing them with specific resources to improve crime prevention capacity.
3. **Communications and training:** Public relations and market research to 'sell' the NCP's crime prevention message. Parallel with this is a desire to ensure best practice in the training of crime prevention personnel.
4. **National coordination:** The coordination of crime prevention programs across the Commonwealth and where possible with the states/territories. Coordination aims to minimise duplication and gives the NCP a role as the national representative for crime prevention.

The NCP identified a number of priorities for national initiatives (Korn 1997b; Tulloch et al 1998). Each priority project is to comprise an audit of existing programs, a literature review and a pilot project in one or more locations (Tulloch et al 1998). There are thirteen projects funded at just under \$1 million being conducted by partnerships between Federal and state/territory bodies including projects on fear of crime, crime prevention training, domestic violence, homeless youth and crime prevention at public events (NCP 1999a; Korn 1997b).

As of June 1999, a number of projects have been completed or partially completed (NCP 1999a). Reports are available on crime prevention training and needs (Syme, Elkington-Smith & Millbank, 1997; Wyatt et al, 1998); domestic violence (Atkinson, Blagg & Indermaur 1998; NCP 1999b); fear of crime (Tulloch et al 1998) and young people and crime (White 1998; NCP 1999c).

Recognising the role of state/territory governments as the primary responsibility for crime prevention, the NCP is conducting capacity building projects where each state/territory has been offered \$100,000 to conduct a project within NCP guidelines that could be replicated in other states/territories.

An important feature of this aspect of the NCP is an emphasis on partnership. The NCP intends to include all parties whose activities may impact on crime whenever possible. This includes not just Commonwealth government and state/territory agencies but local government, non-government organisations, academic institutions, community groups and the business sector (NCP 1999a; Korn 1998). As to partnership between different levels of government, the NCP does recognise the difficulties of this approach. The Director of the NCP, Yvonne Korn has stated that:

I never argue with the fact that the states and territories have primary responsibility for preventing crime but I strongly dispute the assertion that they cannot be brought together to work cooperatively for the national good. (Korn 1998).

The NCP is also investigating partnerships with the Association of Local Government Authorities and the business sector, though the NRMA appears to be the only present example (Korn 1998). At this stage, partnerships outside of traditional Federal and state/territory governments are for the most part only being talked about (see Korn 1998).

In summary, the NCP is a Commonwealth Government strategy that has been set the task of providing resources and partnership with state/territory governments to reduce crime and fear of crime. The NCP aims to take a rational approach to identifying crime issues, finding

the appropriate solutions and persuading those responsible for crime prevention to adopt them. A suite of national initiatives and capacity building programs has been developed in partnership with agencies throughout Australia to reach this objective.

Assessment of the NCP

With much of the three-year period of NCP passed there is as yet little in the literature reviewing its performance. The three main observations that have been made about the NCP are: its comparative lack of resources; its capacity for interfering with existing programs; and the need for evaluation to be a fundamental issue of crime prevention.

Indermaur (in press) notes that with a budget of \$13 million the NCP is overshadowed by the \$500 million Federal guns buy-back program, \$6 million in training programs and police information systems, and the \$18 million national suicide prevention strategy. Harding (1997) suggests that not only is increased funding necessary from the point of view of creating an effective campaign, it is also important in order to ensure that the NCP's approach does not become marginalised politically in favour of law and order responses. To be successful the NCP must have its reflection in policy structures for crime prevention. Such policy response is not apparent as yet (Harding 1997).

A more specific criticism is that while Federal and State policy can support local crime prevention, policy changes can seriously undermine the effectiveness of such programs: an increase in the law and order rhetoric at the Federal or State level can undermine local crime prevention initiatives (Cook & Ryan 1997). Cook and Ryan (1997) argue that the NCP 'should serve as a resource for local government' and 'add value to existing initiatives and encourage local governments to develop local community safety strategies', rather than persuading or dictating programs. On the other hand, national initiatives may be guided by welfare principles which are less popular for state/territory or local government implementation (Egger 1997).

The lack of evaluation is probably the strongest criticism of initiatives such as the NCP. The National Committee on Violence (1990) made evaluation a key recommendation for violent crime prevention at the beginning of the decade. Indermaur (in press) criticises the absence of evaluation and 'theoretical grounding' of contemporary violence prevention in Australia. The lack of evaluation and perhaps even the lack of recognition by government of the necessity for evaluated programs has been noted in the failure of crime prevention programs (Sutton 1997; Presdee & Walters 1997).

The desire to use empirical evidence, expert advice, evaluation, assessment and so on is a basic objective of crime prevention programs at all levels of government, from the United Nations (Clark 1994) to local councils (Cook & Ryan, 1997). Sherman (1997a, 1997b), in an evaluation of programs for the United States National Institute of Justice, insists upon strong, scientific, rigorous and independent evaluation that addresses how many crimes are prevented per dollar of taxpayers money invested — not achievements, intentions or methods. In the United Kingdom, Ekblom and Pease (1995) are damning of crime prevention practice. They see the lack of evaluation as self-serving to practitioners who need not justify the cost or results of their work and have been the strongest voice for evaluation to be conducted within crime prevention programs.

Ekblom and Pease (1995) divide evaluation of crime prevention programs into two methods. The first, 'process', tackles evaluation by measuring the level of consistency between objectives, underlying theory and activities of the program. The second approach

is based upon evaluating the outcomes of the project. Outcomes are the measurable desires of the crime prevention program and would usually be a specified reduction in crime rates.

Assessment of the NCP using Ekblom and Pease's (1995) 'process' evaluation reveals a number of shortcomings. First, the mission and objectives of NCP are not spelt out clearly. While its broad aim is to reduce violence and crime and the fear of violence and crime within the community, how its performance is to be measured is not clear. As NCAVAC, the NCP published a four page strategic plan in February 1997 (NCAVAC 1997). The contents of this document are very similar to the description of the NCP initiative in Korn (1997b) — organising priorities and projects — but it contains no mission statement, clear targets or objectives for crime reduction (NCP 1999a).

Second, the theory behind the NCP is not clear. It seems to be one of putting faith in expert analysis. The process appears to be: *given* a national body to coordinate and develop programs, partnerships between crime prevention stakeholders, and an identification of real crime issues, *then* the programs developed for their resolution by experts in the field of crime prevention will be taken up by State and Territory governments. By evaluating the results of the programs they can be assessed for their success in addressing crime problems and for cost-effectiveness.

Third, there are a great many inconsistencies between the broad objectives of the NCP and its theory. A significant criticism is the apparent inconsistency between the goal of evaluated crime prevention programs and State projects such as 'pcCops', newsletter production, secretariat support and so on that seem to offer little to other states for reducing crime in any evaluable manner.

Outcomes evaluation is confounded by the NCP's failure to identify target areas, target reductions or controls for their program. To date, evaluation by the NCP of its activities has been limited to market research on the effectiveness of NCP communications, conducted by Keys Young Consulting. This apparent single investment in NCP's self-evaluation is not of crime prevention *per se* but of NCP public relations effectiveness. This is exactly the kind of pseudo-evaluation that Sherman (1997a, 1997b), Ekblom and Pease (1995) and even the director of NCP herself (Korn 1997a) warn against — measurement of crime prevention by achievements rather than reductions in crime and fear of crime.

Prospects for the NCP

In spite of problems with the lack of clarity in its underlying philosophy and mission, the NCP can have positive outcomes for crime prevention. Opportunities for the NCP to change the way the public and government think about crime problems could result from:

- research that it funds in crime issues that can act to dispel myths, show crime prevention programs as an effective and acceptable solution to crime problems and improve the image of crime prevention through improved training standards by practitioners;
- its national perspective and ability to be a media presence and voice for crime prevention;
- initiating partnerships between agencies that are involved in crime prevention by providing them with guidance and specific programs for consideration.

There are obstacles to these achievements. Aside from the internal problems already discussed, the NCP may be facing problems outside of its influence. As already mentioned Federal law and order programs overshadow NCP funding such that crime prevention policy may be marginalised. The lack of political commitment — or lack of political

commitment beyond face value — has been the downfall of previous crime prevention initiatives in Australia (Sutton 1997; Presdee & Walters 1997). The abandonment of crime prevention values in favour of high profile initiatives and public relations exercises is a symptom of such malaise (Sutton 1997; Presdee & Walters 1997) and may be an issue for the NCP. The evaluation of the NCP communications program by Keys Young, mentioned above, is an example.

The natural cynicism of other levels of government towards the NCP will also need to be overcome. Changes in policies of the State and Federal government are a continual threat to local crime prevention initiatives (Cook & Ryan 1997). There is also justifiable criticism that what the NCP talks about doing is what local government are already doing. For example, while the NCP is theorising about how partnerships can be created between government and other sectors of the community for crime prevention, local government is actually already doing this. One example is Darebin, Victoria, where McDonalds, Timezone and Telstra are involved in local projects (Cook & Ryan, 1997).

A resolution of these issues in such a way to allow the NCP to display real success in crime prevention may bring about the wider acceptance of crime prevention within government and the community. Sherman (1997b) suggests that as empirical analysis of crime prevention programs grows so will the symbolic acceptance of crime prevention by government and community. He concludes that the US Federal government role in crime prevention should be to provide local crime prevention with better knowledge about program effectiveness, funding and particularly evaluation. Simply put, the Federal role should be to advise local government on crime prevention programs (Sherman 1997b). Such an approach may be warranted for the NCP and can be demonstrated by the NCP's research into fear of crime.

The NCP's Fear of Crime Initiative

The NCP fear of crime initiative began in 1997 as a joint project between the NCP, NACS and the Crime Research Centre at The University of Western Australia. It has two major stages. The first stage, already completed and published as Tulloch et al (1998), involved a review of literature, an audit of fear of crime reduction programs and a series of interviews and focus groups. This fed in to the development of strategies for dealing with fear of crime. Stage two builds upon this research to develop, implement and evaluate pilot projects for fear of crime reduction in Tasmania, NSW and the ACT (Brown 1998; Tulloch et al 1998).

The completed first stage had the principal objective 'to explore the ways in which people conceptualise and manage fear, especially in relation to becoming a victim of crime' (Brown 1998). The research was qualitative, attempting to provide an insight into how people construct their fear of crime rather than simply quantifying the degree of fear in what may be only hypothetical circumstances.

In stage one, participants were asked about their feelings of safety or danger rather than their fear of crime specifically as fear tends to be 'loaded' and is quite a different process to risk assessment (Brown 1998). This led to an initiative in the study to ask more realistic questions. For example, there is no point in asking older people how safe they feel walking alone at night if in fact these people never go out alone at night anyway (Brown 1998).

Unfortunately the research has a fundamental flaw. The participants in the interviews and focus groups were not organised to be a representative sample of the population. Therefore the results cannot, statistically speaking, be considered representative of the Australian population. Any policy developed upon the basis of this research would have the

inherent bias of the selection criteria for the participants: from only NSW and Tasmania, *known to assistants in the research program* and in preconceived, though not necessarily ill-conceived, groups (Brown 1998).

Some conclusions of the report (which need to be considered carefully given its non-representative sample) were:

- Results tended to be myth debunking; for example, older people were found not to be as afraid of crime as previously thought while younger people are more fearful than expected.
- While the media is an important source of information for constructing fear of crime and may in fact be a cause of fear, most participants were sceptical of the accuracy of the media.
- Incivilities are probably more significant in the construction of fear of crime than reported crime. Anything from bumping, intimidation and even 'looks' were quoted as being disempowering by various groups.

Despite the caveats upon the extrapolation of these results to the whole community, they do tend to be presented as representative by implication in the resulting reports and even more so in media releases (see Vanstone 1998).¹ Further, while these conclusions are presented as myth debunking and as original findings in fear of crime research, the results are in fact mostly in accord with previous research. For example, in 1987, Smith provided a brief summary of research in the United States and the UK that had similar results to Tulloch et al (1998) (Smith 1987). In Australia, the National Committee on Violence (1990) had identified victim lifestyle as critical for risk of violence and found similar at risk groups eight years earlier than Tulloch et al (1998).

In spite of these criticisms, this research could be used as a means to influence Australian governments and communities about crime prevention. Putting the general findings of fear of crime in local context and providing information on the reasoning behind this fear (as anecdotal and unrepresentative as this may be) should be useful in demonstrating the value of crime prevention and may provide an antidote to media distortion of crime in the community.

In summary, despite problems the NCP may encounter because of its own lack of focus, by providing guidelines, obtaining effective funding and recognition of crime prevention and in its partnership objectives, it may achieve success. The fear of crime initiative illustrates how the NCP is able to sponsor research that can be used to debunk myths and focus on the real issues in crime within the community. The results of the fear of crime report can be used in the media to reduce fear of crime and as a means to focus on applying crime prevention funds where crime is a real issue.

Conclusion

A cynic might suggest that the NCP has positioned itself in the ideal position for a crime prevention program within the Australian government. It has Commonwealth backing to provide advice on conducting crime prevention to its partners and clients – effectively State and Territory governments – without actually having to do (or pay for) the work or evaluate results. In this way, the NCP is in the enviable position of being able to take credit for the successes of its partners without having primary responsibility for crime prevention. And

1 See also media releases from the Department of the Attorney General dated 25 February 1998 and 6 May 1998.

no matter the outcome of any programs it develops, the Commonwealth government is seen to be a leader in crime prevention.

A more optimistic outlook might be found in the importance that the NCP places upon partnership roles between government at all levels, the private sector, academia and community groups. This, and its aim to take a rational approach in identifying crime issues, finding or researching solutions, and persuading clients to adopt programs are fine goals. The crime prevention research and projects being undertaken through a series of national initiatives and state/territory based capacity building projects are examples of such cooperation.

Presently, what the NCP lacks is a clear mission, identifiable goals and unequivocal crime reduction targets. As it stands, the NCP's objectives and underlying theory are not spelt out – and what has been written is broad and inconsistent. Further, action by the NCP is often contradictory to those objectives that are stated. But despite these problems the NCP may be able to provide effective guidelines for crime prevention and obtain funding and recognition for crime prevention within government. The fear of crime initiative illustrates how the NCP is able to sponsor research that can be used to debunk myths and focus on the real issues in crime within the community. By leveraging this approach and integrating it with local needs, scientific evaluation and the development of a clear mission, the NCP might act as an effective voice for prevention as a response to crime and violence in Australia.

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