

Are we still 'Flying Blind?' Crime Data and Local Crime Prevention in New South Wales

Abstract

Numerous authors and commentators have highlighted the importance of crime data for effective local crime prevention planning, practice and its evaluation. Understanding the exact nature of a crime problem is central to preventive efforts and determining the success of associated interventions. Despite the significant amount of data provided by the New South Wales (NSW) Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, access to relevant local crime data continues to be an impediment to effective crime prevention planning practice in NSW. Data is often only available at the local government area level, which is generally too large for effective crime prevention planning. Spatial, temporal and other critical data is also often unavailable. Further, police are generally cautious about providing crime data to external agencies. In the continuing absence of a data sharing protocol or framework, local crime prevention efforts will continue to 'fly blind' (Weatherburn 2004) in New South Wales.

Introduction

The Sydney Institute of Criminology (University of Sydney) held a Crime Prevention Master Class on 24 November 2010 (facilitated by the author). Of the 26 participants in attendance, 16 were local government Crime Prevention Officers (or similar titles/roles) from local councils across New South Wales (NSW). The other participants generally came from policing backgrounds (sworn and unsworn personnel). Most of the participants had previous work experience in crime prevention and related fields (i.e. policing, local government, community development, youth work), some with in excess of 30 years in their chosen field and up to 15 years working specifically in crime prevention.

A key theme that was explored in the Master Class was the importance of accessing crime data for crime prevention planning. Despite the general agreement of the importance of accessing appropriate crime data, many of the Master Class participants expressed frustration with their inability to access relevant crime data for their particular areas, prompting this contemporary comment.

Crime Data and Local Crime Prevention Planning

Leaving aside the well documented debates about the accuracy of crime data (Black 1970; Graycar and Grabosky 2002) and the validity of crime data as a measure of crime (Watts et al 2008), it is self-evident to assert that crime data is critical to effective local crime prevention planning. Attempts to prevent crime require a detailed understanding of the crime problem (Goldstein 1979; Ekblom 2011; Weatherburn 2004; NSW Crime Prevention Division (unpublished); Ratcliffe 2009; Wortley and Mazerolle 2008; Chainey and Ratcliffe 2005; Tilley 2009; US Justice Department 2005; Cherney 2006).

Goldstein's seminal article on improving policing stated that:

[...] it seems desirable, at least initially in the development of a problem-solving approach to improved policing, to press for as detailed a breakdown of problems as possible. In addition to distinguishing different forms of behavior and the apparent motivation, it is helpful to be much more precise regarding locale and time of day, the type of people involved, and the type of people victimised. Different combinations of these variables may present different problems, posing different policy questions and calling for radically different solutions. (1979:246).

While Goldstein's interest was in the context of improving police practice, the sentiments resonate with crime prevention practice.

Eckblom's 5Is (2011) framework (Intelligence, Intervention, Implementation, Involvement, Impact) also seeks to guide crime problem-solving and crime prevention planning. The first of Eckblom's 5Is—Intelligence—focuses on analysis of a crime problem and includes the following considerations:

- 'Types of offenders involved.
- Modus operandi, tools, weapons, skills, 'script' and other resources used by the offenders.
- Target goods typically stolen or damaged.
- Target homes or business premises that were burgled.
- Owners or managers of the homes or goods.
- Target persons who were assaulted.
- Immediate physical and social context of the criminal events (type of street, shop, station, etc.).
- Wider physical and social context of the criminal events (town centre, residential area, etc.; demographic features, e.g. social deprivation).
- Wider crime and disorder context in which the specific problem is addressed.
- Timing of criminal events during the day, week or year.
- Whether crime problem is recent or long-standing.
- Whether repeat victimisation is significant, and if so, any specific pattern of victims'. (Eckblom 2011:177-8)

This lengthy list of variables associated with the dynamics of crime again suggests the need to gather and analyse an extensive amount of data from various sources before devising methods and strategies to prevent crime. Reliable crime data are thus key to good 'intelligence'.

Evaluating Crime Prevention

Not only is access to crime data critical for effective crime prevention planning, it is equally important for determining the success of particular interventions. At a time in which policy development is meant to be driven by an evidence base, it is essential to measure the impacts of crime prevention interventions and programs. The generally poor track record of evaluating crime prevention interventions in Australia (English et al 2002:121) can only be improved if there is greater access to and analysis of crime data following a particular intervention. Rigorous evaluations can demonstrate both the positive ('diffusion of benefits')

and 'anticipatory benefits effect') and negative outcomes of crime prevention initiatives ('displacement' and increased offending).

It has been observed that, in some situations, the positive effects of a crime prevention intervention spread beyond the site of the intervention. This is known as the 'diffusion of benefits' (US Justice Department 2005). Measuring any diffusion of benefits requires access to location-specific data, not just where the intervention is deployed, but surrounding areas (in the case of place-based intervention). Research reviewing the impact of crime prevention interventions has also found that, in some cases, crime falls before the actual crime prevention intervention commences, which is known as the 'anticipatory benefits effect' (Smith et al 2002:73). Crime data must be made available prior to, during, and after an intervention to determine if there is any evidence of the anticipatory benefits effect.

Attention to negative unintended consequences of crime prevention interventions must also be considered. Displacement of crime to other areas outside of an intervention site, to different times of the day or to different crime types are examples of negative unintended consequences of some forms of crime prevention (see US Justice Department 2005, for a detailed discussion of forms of displacement). Moreover, some crime prevention interventions have been shown to increase offending behaviour of program participants - the exact opposite of the intended outcomes (see McCord 2003). Consequently, access to crime data that enables rigorous evaluation of crime prevention programs is needed to determine the efficacy (or otherwise) of these interventions.

Main Sources of Crime Data in NSW

According to the NSW Crime Prevention Division's *Guidelines for Developing a Crime Prevention Strategy* ([http://www.crimeprevention.nsw.gov.au/lawlink/cpd/ll_cpdiv.nsf/vwFiles/Guideline_for_developing_a_crime_prevention_strategy.pdf/\\$file/Guideline_for_developing_a_crime_prevention_strategy.pdf](http://www.crimeprevention.nsw.gov.au/lawlink/cpd/ll_cpdiv.nsf/vwFiles/Guideline_for_developing_a_crime_prevention_strategy.pdf/$file/Guideline_for_developing_a_crime_prevention_strategy.pdf)), there are two major sources of crime data in NSW: the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) and the NSW Police Force (NSW Crime Prevention Division (unpublished):2).

The NSW BOCSAR provides a wealth of freely available crime data, much of which is easily accessible from their website (<http://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/>). The online data tools provide interactive search options. For example, the 'LGA Ranking' tool provides crime data that enables comparison of the number and rate of particular crimes between a selected local government area (LGA), neighbouring LGAs and NSW as a whole. The 'Crime Trends' tool provides capacity to chart trends over periods of (currently) up to 12 years for particular crime types for each LGA in NSW. Further to these interactive tools, it is also possible to download crime map reports and now, hotspot maps for some LGAs. These reports show crime hotspots for particular offences across the relevant LGA. Together, the information that can be generated or gleaned from these tools and publications provides a comprehensive picture of crime across the State and at the LGA-level. These tools and publications represent a substantial improvement in access to crime data in NSW in recent years.

Beyond this freely available information, crime data can also be purchased from BOCSAR. The BOCSAR *Information Service Policy* (2010) outlines the nature and type of data that can be purchased, the conditions of use, the associated fees and the timeframes for

provision of the data. For current purposes, the most relevant aspect of the *Information Service Policy* is the provision that data can be purchased (where it 'does not pose any privacy concerns') by postcode. This means that there is some scope to drill down lower than the LGA-level.

The data provided by BOCSAR is based on data collected and stored by the NSW Police Force. The NSW Police Force holds vast amounts of important data on crime, including on offenders, victims, locations of offences (where known), time of offence (where known), weapons used, items stolen or damaged (in cases of property theft or damage), child at risk notifications, infringement notice penalties, bail determinations and court outcomes (amongst other things). Data is routinely transferred from the NSW Police Force to BOCSAR, enabling BOCSAR to analyse and report crime statistics for NSW.

Relevance of and Access to Crime Data in NSW

While there have been significant improvements in the amount and type of data available to local government crime prevention practitioners (and others) in NSW in recent years, some problems linger. BOCSAR's *Information Service Policy* states that 'Local Government Area data is the standard geographic unit used by BOCSAR' (BOCSAR 2010: 10). Consequently, much of the crime data freely available from BOCSAR is presented by LGA. While data of this nature can be useful in highlighting trends, it is not especially helpful for the purposes of crime prevention planning and evaluation. Many LGAs in NSW cover many thousands of square kilometres (the Wentworth Shire Council area is greater than 26,000 square kilometres, for example). Many of the LGAs within the wider Sydney area are in excess of 50 square kilometres (the Fairfield City Council area is approximately 100 square kilometres, for example). Few crime problems or prevention initiatives would ever operate across areas of this size. Thus, data presented for an LGA can ultimately be of little utility for the purposes of crime prevention planning.

Consistent with the tenets of environmental criminology, crime problems tend to arise in very specific areas within a LGA and preventive efforts will be directed to targeted areas (Brantingham and Brantingham 1981; Chainey and Ratcliffe 2005; Wortley and Mazerolle 2008). Consequently, crime data should be available for much smaller geographical units for the purposes of crime prevention planning and evaluation. Take for example a crime problem arising in the vicinity of a train station. To plan a prevention strategy effectively, it would be helpful to understand the number and nature of the offences occurring in that area; the persons of interest involved in these offences; the targets (people or property) of the offending; the temporal and seasonal trends of the offending and whether particular weapons or instruments are used in their offending. Freely available data from BOCSAR will provide aggregate crime data for the LGA and BOCSAR crime map reports and hotspot maps will show spatial clustering of crime. It is not possible to access data that links offenders, with targets/victims, temporal and spatial trends and various other pertinent features of crime associated with the train station. Consequently, little can be derived about the dynamics of the offending occurring within the particular location from reviewing BOCSAR data. Moreover, any attempt to evaluate the success of any intervention(s) applied to the location will be confronted with the same challenges.

As has been stated, it is possible to purchase postcode-level data from BOCSAR. BOCSAR's *Information Service Policy* states that 'NSW annual crime data by postcode is

available on disk as a complete set (including all NSW postcodes) at a cost of \$1056 (inc. GST). The data set contains monthly data for all offence types for each postcode, an annual total and a rate of offending per 100,000 population for postcodes with a population over 3,000 persons' (BOCSAR 2010:10). While this partially overcomes some of the problems associated with data presented by LGA, it does pose three potential problems: 1) a postcode can still be a very significant tract of land, which might still not be appropriate for crime prevention planning purposes; 2) this data will not help to link information about victims, offenders (or persons of interest), time of offending, location of offending, etc.; and 3) local councils are not listed as one of the organisations exempted from payment, as outlined in section 12.3 of BOCSAR's *Information Service Policy* (2010:16-7), which potentially poses financial barriers to access to information.

Crime map reports produced by BOCSAR have been a welcome advance in recent years. The first year that crime map reports were made available was for the 2006 calendar year. Initially, crime map reports were generally about 40-pages in length and included kernel density crime maps, temporal data covering day of week and month of year, and data on victims and persons of interest for key offences. These publications were released for some NSW LGAs. Since these initial crime map reports were produced, there seems to have been a shift in policy, resulting in only hotspot maps (approximately 13 pages) now being provided. The temporal data and aggregated information about victims and persons of interest are no longer provided. In essence, the hotspot maps are no longer accompanied by the more descriptive temporal, seasonal, victim and persons of interest information and data. The loss of this information is an unwelcome development, as temporal trends potentially alerted crime prevention practitioners to peak offending times and periods when particular responses might well be mounted. Moreover, crime map reports and hotspot maps are only published for 12-month periods, making comparisons of hotspots over shorter periods of time difficult, and the reports are generally published 9-12 months after the close of the calendar year for which the data is being reported. This time lag reduces the utility of the crime map publications.

Despite these challenges, BOCSAR is really the only agency who provides publicly available crime data in NSW. The *Guidelines for Developing a Crime Prevention Strategy* helpfully suggests that:

Your Police Local Area Command can complement [BOCSAR] data with details of key locations for crimes within the LGA; the factors that contribute to the occurrence of the crime; and a profile of who is involved in this crime, considering both offenders and potential victims. (NSW Crime Prevention Division (unpublished):2).

Without any clear direction for or guidance to the NSW Police Force in relation to the circumstances in which information of this nature can be released, the strength of local relationships and the views of senior local police will often determine what, if any, data will be released. This leads to disparate practices and can impede crime prevention activities in areas where relationships have not matured or flourished, or where senior police assume a hard line on releasing data.

A Crime Data Sharing Protocol – A Possible Solution

Weatherburn, has argued that, 'within the constraints set by the need to maintain the privacy of individuals and the need to protect key sources of intelligence, information about the

distribution and character of crime in local communities should be made as freely available as possible' (2004:171). It seems that only small improvements have been made in this area in NSW since Weatherburn made these comments. Consequently, it is perhaps instructive to look elsewhere for mechanisms that have enabled appropriate crime data to be routinely shared for the purposes of crime prevention.

There has been considerable attention given to addressing similar problems with the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships in England and the Community Safety Partnerships in Wales. The introduction of the *Crime and Disorder Act 1998* in England and Wales had a significant impact on local crime prevention planning and has received considerable commentary in recent years (see for example: Hughes 2002; Phillips 2002; Gilling and Barton 2005; Hope 2005; Hughes 2007; Ellis et al 2007; Edwards and Hughes 2009, amongst many others). Apart from numerous significant changes emanating from this Act, provision was made for the sharing of crime data. Section 115 of the Act allows information to be shared for the purposes of community safety between a number of relevant authorities (including police forces, the equivalent of local councils, probation, health authorities and transport providers). The inclusion of this section of the Act not only acknowledges the importance of sharing data, but also recognises that mechanisms have to be established to support the exchange of crime data.

Despite this legislative guidance on data sharing, it was not a panacea to data sharing impediments (Brookes et al 2003). According to Brookes et al (2003), disparate data sharing practices prevailed even after the introduction of the *Crime and Disorder Act 1998*. In response, Brookes et al (2003) and Moss and Pease (2004) outlined different options for establishing better conditions for data exchange. Since the publication of these articles, the Home Office has released the *National Support Framework – Information Sharing for Community Safety: Guidance and Practice Advice Report*. This 60-page report demonstrates how systems can be established for the exchange of information for the purposes of local crime prevention efforts. Clarity is provided by articulating what information can be routinely shared to aid local crime prevention efforts, while ensuring the relevant legislative protections are maintained. Perhaps most usefully, this framework establishes minimum datasets that should be expected by the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships or Community Safety Partnerships. Establishing such arrangements provide much greater likelihood that parity will be achieved across the 338 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships and the Community Safety Partnerships operating in England and Wales as of May 2009 (Strickland 2009:5).

While the focus here has been on data pertaining to incidents of crime, it is worth noting that the *National Support Framework—Information Sharing for Community Safety: Guidance and Practice Advice Report* also deals with data held by agencies other than the police that is beneficial to local crime prevention activities. These data are classified according to sensitivity and the way that it will be provided to the relevant inter-agency groups. A portion of the data included in the minimum datasets is listed below:

- Council-related incidents of anti-social behaviour and environmental crime (depersonalised data);
- Fire and Rescue Service deliberate fires, malicious calls and assaults on staff (depersonalised data);
- Probation assessments (depersonalised data);
- Youth Offending Service assessments (depersonalised data);

- Prolific and other Priority Offenders (sensitive personalised data);
- Prison releases (personalised data);
- Young Offender Institution releases (personalised data);
- Drug treatment (depersonalised data);
- Admissions to Accident and Emergency departments for injuries sustained from an assault (depersonalised data);
- Admissions to hospital for drugs and alcohol related harm (depersonalised data);
- Crimes on overground trains or at stations (depersonalised data); and
- School exclusions (depersonalised data) (Home Office no date, 29-42).

Information of this kind would enable thorough crime prevention planning and provide a more accurate understanding of crime in local areas. With data provided on risk factors (school exclusions, drug treatment) and offenders (young and old), it would be possible to devise longer-term interventions and to take a more holistic perspective of offending behaviour. Having equivalent agencies in NSW routinely contribute data of this nature is almost beyond the dreams of even the most optimistic crime prevention practitioner.

Conclusion

Weatherburn noted that:

In many respects...crime prevention has, in effect been “flying blind”. Lacking detailed information about crime, crime prevention agencies have often found themselves promoting options for crime prevention without any real capacity to say precisely where and when the implementation of these options might pay dividends. (2004:162-3)

The lack of access to detailed crime information has, in Weatherburn’s view, hampered attempts to prevent crime in Australia.

Key crime problem-solving models, various texts, manuals and authors have highlighted the critical importance of crime data to effective crime prevention planning. A failure to access data to illuminate local crime issues, might result in radically different preventive strategies being implemented (Goldstein 1979: 246). Moreover, recent advances and developments in crime prevention have been driven by advances in crime data analysis and mapping. The ‘discovery’ of repeat victimisation encourages analysis of locations and individuals who suffer a disproportionate amount of crime (Farrell and Pease 2008). Measurement (of the various forms) of displacement and diffusion of benefits can only be achieved with access to crime data that highlights changes in crime following the introduction of a particular or set of crime prevention strategies. Similarly, the ‘anticipatory benefits effect’ associated with publicity campaigns accompanying some crime prevention initiatives, will not easily be established if crime data is not accessed to demonstrate the levels of crime in a particular location over a particular period. In short, many of the more recent developments in crime prevention will not be readily adopted or benefits expounded if crime prevention practitioners do not gain access to fine-grained, inter-connected, local crime data. Moreover, the ability to demonstrate the success of a local crime prevention initiative relies on access to appropriate crime data. Failure to access relevant data can result in promising initiatives being undermined due to unquantified, or unquantifiable, success. In this evidence-based policy era, such problems might prove fatal for initiatives with great promise (or conversely, might enhance the longevity of unsuccessful or harmful initiatives).

Access to crime data rightly raises concerns about safeguards, the protection of identity, stigmatisation of particular areas or neighbourhoods and (amongst other things) the accuracy of crime data. These important concerns deserve due consideration and appropriate protections. However, these concerns should not prevent greater debate regarding ways that crime data can more easily be accessed by agencies engaged in crime prevention. The *National Support Framework – Information Sharing for Community Safety: Guidance and Practice Advice Report* developed by the Home Office for Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships in England and Wales demonstrates that it is possible to ensure appropriate protections are provided, while still granting relevant agencies with appropriate crime data. Such a framework is needed in NSW to ensure that crime prevention efforts do not continue to ‘fly blind’.

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