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# CRIME PREVENTION AND COMMUNITY SAFETY IN AUSTRALIA

## Introduction

Crime prevention has a long history in Australia, and in other parts of the world. In all societies, people have tried to protect themselves and those close to them from assaults and other abuses. Every time someone locks the door to their house or their car, they practise a form of prevention. Most parents want their children to learn to be law abiding and not spend any period of their lives in prison. In Australia, at least, most succeed. Only a small minority of young people become recidivist offenders. In a functioning society, crime prevention is part of everyday life. While prevention can be all-pervasive at the grassroots, it is oddly neglected in commercial media and political discourses. This is despite the growing evidence that some forms of prevention are effective and have contributed to declines in some crime categories in various parts of the world (see van Dijk, Tseloni & Farrell 2012). When politicians, talkback radio hosts and newspaper editorialists pontificate about crime and possible remedies, it is comparatively rare for them to mention prevention. Overwhelmingly, emphasis is on policing, sentencing and other ‘law and order’ responses.

One aim of this book is to understand, and explore ways to overcome, this apparent conspiracy of silence. At various times over the last four decades governments in Australia and other countries have ‘rediscovered’ crime prevention and committed resources to its development and implementation. Many jurisdictions still have schemes in place, often having undergone numerous revisions and relaunches. Despite these efforts, prevention and community safety remain background tasks, as far as the mass media and government crime policy are concerned. Police and other criminal justice reactions to crime continue to command the lion’s share of attention and budget allocations.

Throughout this volume, we focus on arguing that prevention is ‘do-able’; that it works and that it can be far more cost-effective than criminal justice responses. We will show how prevention theory, properly applied, not only reduces offending but also can help make cities, towns, suburbs, streets, schools, workplaces, transport hubs, shopping centres and homes more liveable. We also argue that principles of prevention can be applied to persistent crime problems such as theft, armed robbery, various forms of violence, malicious damage to property, and emerging problems that face society, such as terrorism, environmental threats, and cybercrime.

However, we also acknowledge that ensuring prevention captures the public imagination will require more than building the evidence base through identifying ‘what works’. One of the key arguments of this book is that there is a political dimension to the development and implementation of strategies. Making crime prevention ‘work’ in political contexts entails more than ensuring that it is practically effective. It must also succeed at the symbolic – or, as Freiberg (2001) terms it, ‘affective’ – level (see also Ekblom 2010). ‘Law and order’ dominates policy and

media discourses and helps political parties garner votes because of the powerful messages that the apprehension, trial, punishment and other associated shaming of offenders conveys. Durkheim (1912) argued that punishment rituals redefine and reinforce a society's 'collective consciousness': the shared values and rules that help bind its members together. Crime prevention policy-makers and practitioners in Australia have tended to gloss over the symbolic dimensions, treating prevention as purely an instrumental task. We try to rectify this deficiency, and discuss ways prevention programs and practices might both feed into and help reshape the ways governments and communities respond to crime.

## The realities of crime prevention policy and practice in Australia and abroad

When examining Australian experience, it is important to locate it in an international context (see chapter 6). As a number of researchers (e.g. Crawford 1997; Hughes 1998; Sutton 1997; Homel 2005, 2009a, 2009b) have made clear, Australia was not the first country to endeavour to introduce crime prevention to the policy mix. Attempts by Australian state and Commonwealth governments to develop and implement prevention strategies in the late 1980s and 1990s were inspired by, and drew upon, experience in the United States and Canada, the United Kingdom, and France, the Netherlands and other parts of Europe during the early 1970s and 1980s. This dialogue between countries and across jurisdictions continues, with forms of crime prevention policy transfer persisting.

As highlighted by Homel (2009a, 2010), there are some consistent features that characterise modern crime prevention initiatives. These are based upon the experiences of many jurisdictions and can provide guidance for future policy developments in this area (see, for instance, the Victorian Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee 2012). The common programmatic features include:

- centrally developed and driven policies
- a commitment to evidence-based approaches (the professed commitment does not always equal reality, however)
- strategies built upon multi-agency or partnership approaches (e.g. whole-of-government/whole-of-community approaches)
- emphases upon local delivery (e.g. via local government)
- crime prevention/community safety plans
- a mix of social and environmental prevention

(See also Sutton & Cherney 2002; Crawford 1997; Homel 2006, 2009a, 2009b; Shaw 2001, 2009.)

Given this commonality in the way crime prevention has been designed and delivered by state and local governments, it is not surprising there are also consistent problems that plague the implementation of crime prevention strategies (Clancey, Lee & Crofts 2012; Homel 2006, 2009; Homel & Homel 2012; Shaw 2009 – see chapter 5). However, when considering how countries have developed crime prevention programs and the lessons that might be learnt from these efforts, it is important to be mindful of broader pressures affecting governments and how they might influence the emphasis placed on any particular approach to strategy design and implementation.

It is no accident that in many democracies crime prevention began to emerge as a distinct policy theme during the final third of the 20th century. This was when ‘welfare’ models of governance came under pressure, with central states urged to rein in taxation and public sector expenditure in order to ensure that national and regional economies could compete globally. Theorists such as Garland (2000, 2001) and O’Malley (1994) in fact see crime prevention as part of attempts by central authorities to divest themselves of direct social control roles, and shift more and more of the community safety burden to individuals and groups at the local level. Drawing on Foucault (1991), they see this trend towards individual and community ‘responsibilisation’ as characteristic of the indirect and dispersed ways power is exercised in the late modern era.

It is true that, in most Western jurisdictions, a key factor prompting governments to explore crime prevention has been the hope that it will help curb escalating outlays on police, prisons and other criminal justice institutions (and tackle perceived high and rising crime rates). However, Garland and O’Malley go too far when they imply that there is no more to contemporary crime prevention than an attempt by the centre to back away from aspects of its protective role and compel individuals, organisations and communities to take greater responsibility for their own safety and security. We argue that such an account ignores the fact that, rather than crime prevention being something entirely new, the ‘rediscovery’ of crime prevention involves belated acknowledgement of an ongoing reality.

Part of this reality involves the realisation that crime prevention is about reforming and augmenting how agencies and groups go about their daily duties and routine activities (see chapter 2). It requires that governments and police alter and rethink how they have traditionally gone about addressing crime, and involves efforts to enhance the existing capacities of third parties – constituted of individuals, families, businesses and communities (who always have had a role in this sphere) – to operate and function in ways that preclude crime. This means that some sections of society are far more likely to benefit from prevention than others. Australian data consistently reveals disproportionately high rates of violence and other victimisation among

the economically and socially disadvantaged, in particular many Indigenous communities. Governments that genuinely want these groups to be more effective in prevention need to find ways to ensure that they are not deprived of the material and cultural resources and skills they need to make their lives more secure and their communities more liveable. At various points in this book we argue that this requires reassessment of the classic neo-liberal doctrine that competitive market forces invariably generate the best social outcomes – a trend that has gathered apace across the three editions of this book.

## Crime prevention as an alternative to ‘law and order’

‘Law and order’ attracts people because it seems to tackle crime at its most direct and obvious source, the offender. In chapter 2 we point out, however, that factors contributing to the occurrence of any single offence are multiple and complex. One of the advantages of prevention policy is that it moves beyond a fixation with deviants and deviance and begins to address all the contributing elements. This is why, as criminologists, we are convinced that governments would be well advised to spend more of their resources on prevention. However, our commitment is based on more than technical assessment. Democratic societies that devote excessive resources to the ‘tough on crime’ approach risk more than wasting money. They also risk damaging the social fabric.

In our view, ‘law and order’s’ domination of contemporary policy and media discourses threatens a 21st-century equivalent of the ‘tragedy of the commons’ fable: the tendency for ‘rational’ choices made by individuals in isolation to combine to destroy an invaluable and irreplaceable collective resource (Hardin 1968). In the crime policy case, however, the collective resource is social as well as physical. In many parts of the world there is a growing tendency for citizens to live in gated communities (Atkinson & Blandy 2005), work in secured office blocks and find leisure and recreation in similarly controlled and patrolled enclaves (Davis 1990); while their governments rely more and more on aggressive policing tactics to maintain order in what remains of the public domain. For individuals exposed to the benefits and disciplines of the market and with access to economic and other resources, physical segregation from – and lack of tolerance for – potentially disruptive ‘outsiders’ might well seem a rational choice. For some members of the stigmatised and excluded ‘communities of fate’ generated by such choices, however, an equally rational response might be to strike out through crime and other predatory behaviour (Jordan 1996; Wilkinson 2005). The burgeoning of private security (Zedner 2010) and increased emphasis on ‘law and order’ in market-based democracies

characterised by significant levels of inequality can lead therefore to heightened levels both of unease and fear (Atkinson 2006, p. 180; Low 2003) and of crime itself.

Crime prevention can help break this cycle. This is one reason why, throughout this book, we follow the Dutch researchers van Dijk and de Waard and define crime prevention as: 'The total of all private initiatives and state policies, other than the enforcement of criminal law, aimed at the reduction of damage caused by acts defined as criminal by the state' (van Dijk & de Waard 1991, p. 483).

Readers should be aware that in defining crime prevention this way we make a value judgement. Not all criminologists and policy-makers accept our view that crime prevention should be treated as a conscious alternative to policies that emphasise the privatising of policing and other security and harsher criminal justice responses to crime. As noted, Garland and O'Malley's *responsibilisation* thesis assumes that prevention simply will complement increased punitiveness in late modern states. At a more pragmatic level, researchers such as Ekblom (1994) and Weatherburn (2002) point out that the van Dijk and de Waard approach ignores research evidence that arrest, imprisonment and other criminal justice-based initiatives also deter and reduce offending.

A problem with these objections is that they fail to locate the renaissance of crime prevention and community safety policy in relevant historical, cultural and political contexts. As chapter 6 will point out, one of the key reasons governments in Western democracies, such as France and the Netherlands, began to develop relevant strategies during the 1980s – and Australian state governments began to emulate them – was concern about the economic and human costs of over-reliance on 'law and order'. Policy-makers who advocated crime prevention in these countries were not simply looking for forms of social control that would 'work' better in a pragmatic sense; they were striving to develop policies and programs that were more compatible with their ideals of a good society. Experience over the last three decades has shown, moreover, that once the vision faded, and governments in these and other countries began to treat crime prevention as a purely administrative challenge, even the most generously funded programs lost impetus and direction (Hough 2006; Homel 2010).

It is possible for crime prevention to be deployed as an adjunct to 'law and order'. A mix of punitive measures and investment in social infrastructure can produce an extremely law-abiding society as demonstrated by Singapore in the 1990s (Clammer 1997). In present-day China, extensive CCTV systems have been deployed throughout the country, targeting what the government regards as internal terrorist threats (Soufan 2019). Depending on the context, citizens can pay a high price in terms of individual rights and liberties when crime prevention is combined with law enforcement in particular ways.

Our point is that criminologists who want to assess prevention purely on an instrumental basis and ignore its expressive and political dimensions gloss over the fact that decisions relating to social control are critical for determining the quality of

life any community enjoys. For high-crime areas in particular, commitment to crime prevention and community safety also involves recommitment to investing in physical infrastructure and social capital.

Throughout this book, relationships between prevention and other dimensions of social control policy are treated as more than technical. In advising on and devising ways for human behaviour to be restrained and redirected, it is not just appropriate but also obligatory that researchers and policy-makers always also consider the types of communities that might result (Hughes 2007). Singapore's elites have used both crime prevention and 'law and order' to produce and sustain a society that is highly prosperous and consumerist, but at the same time distrustful of outsiders and with minimal tolerance even for comparatively minor deviance. We do not see such an approach as appropriate for other countries.

Our view is that when governments make prevention part of their crime control repertoire, they should avoid doing it in ways that simply try to suppress every symptom of difference, diversity, surprise and disorder. Good crime prevention should be relevant to how people live their everyday lives, yet – in its own way – be more or less innocuous. Our preference for defining prevention as a distinct alternative, rather than as a mere supplement, to 'law and order' should be understood in this context.

## Chapter themes and outline

In the field of crime prevention there has been much debate about whether it would be better to focus on environmental – or as Clarke (1997) terms it 'situational' – or social prevention. Situational prevention, which in essence focuses on reducing opportunities for crime rather than trying to change the disposition to offend, has long been criticised by advocates of social prevention as 'commodified control' (Garland 2001, p. 200), more likely to simply displace crime than eliminate it (Halsey 2001). After reading our summary of relevant approaches and frameworks in chapter 2 and our more detailed assessment of various schools in chapters 3 and 4, we hope readers will realise that taking sides in this debate is neither necessary nor helpful. 'Common-sense' assumptions that social prevention schemes are more likely to generate outcomes that are consistent with ideals of social justice simply are not supported by the research evidence. In fact, unless carefully managed, even the best intended social programs are likely to have stigmatising and damaging effects (see chapter 3), while situational initiatives can be implemented in ways that avoid these problems and generate broad social benefits (chapter 4).

Throughout the book we use the general term 'environmental' to refer to any approach to prevention that focuses on modifying the physical environments in which offences can occur (e.g. by making targets less accessible or by improving



guardianship – see chapters 2 and 4). However, we reserve the specific term ‘environmental crime prevention’ to refer to attempts to reduce offences against the environment (e.g. air or water pollution). As indicated in chapter 9, the principles reflected in crime prevention generally can also be applied to the specific area of environmental threats and harms.

A key theme of this book is that crime prevention is simply not a technical task. Hence a key emphasis in chapter 5, on implementation and evaluation, is that not only do we need to know whether a prevention strategy or program ‘has worked’ but also we need to ask and answer a series of subquestions, such as: worked for whom, worked in what circumstances and in relation to what problems, and worked in what ways? Evidence-based approaches to crime prevention and community safety involve systematically unpacking and responding to each of these demands.

In deciding on ways to improve crime prevention and community safety, context is as important as technique. This is the principle informing chapter 6, which moves from crime prevention and community safety theory to politics and practice. We commence by reflecting on experience since the 1970s in the United States, the United Kingdom and other European countries, and of course Australia. Various lessons can be drawn from this history. One is the need for prevention to be implemented through local or regional plans rather than as discrete projects. Another is that to avoid problems such as program drift, large-scale crime prevention and community safety strategies require more than technical expertise. They also must be informed by a strong sense of vision and purpose, and must facilitate dialogue between central and local agencies about priorities and resource allocations. In the absence of such vision and dialogue, local implementation invariably becomes dogged by conflict and division.

Chapters 7 to 9 discuss approaches to preventing particular crime types and issues, with a heavy emphasis on how prevention operates in practice. Chapter 7, preventing violence, considers some measures adopted to prevent alcohol-related crime and family and domestic violence. By reviewing numerous approaches to preventing violence, this chapter highlights the diversity of actors involved, the potential ideological conflicts arising from opposing views on how best to prevent these crimes, and highlights some of the challenges of developing an evidence-base. Chapter 8 extends these themes through an analysis of counter-terrorism and crime prevention. This chapter, in addition to defining terrorism and the practice of terrorism practice, highlights the important but conflicted role played by police and draws on earlier chapters (specifically chapters 3 and 4) to highlight social and environmental crime prevention approaches adopted to prevent terrorism. Chapter 9, preventing environmental crime, considers approaches to preventing eco-crime, with particular focus on preventing illegal fishing and tackling organised environmental crime. Together, these three chapters engage with the complexity of crime prevention practice in various domains and illuminate some common themes associated

with the practice of crime prevention. While these chapters showcase numerous crime prevention policies and programs, we want to stress that a key to crime prevention, as we see it, is to embrace difference, spontaneity, the unexpected and the ambiguous rather than to reject every apparent symptom of disorder as ‘threatening’. Preventing crime is important and can reduce victimisation and criminalisation, but we should never lose sight of the wider implications of attempts to prevent crime on the way we live. Being conscious of trade-offs in the pursuit of prevention should always be at the forefront of policy-maker and practitioner minds. Crime prevention, we argue, ought to be informed by principles of social inclusion and popular participation. But crime prevention is not only about social inclusion as a *goal* (i.e. to foster policies and practices that ensure people are included in most facets of social life). Crime prevention is also about a *process* that is socially inclusive.

We end in chapter 10 by discussing the future of crime prevention. In particular, attention is drawn to contemporary trends influencing and shaping crime prevention, including the need to prevent cybercrime, the rise of ‘big data’, nudge theory and prevention science, and how considering crime prevention as a form of human service opens up opportunities to consider policies and trends influencing the delivery of human services. By providing a brief synopsis of these contemporary trends and challenges, we hope to provoke consideration of how crime prevention will continue to evolve and how it will continue to be important to clearly articulate the values informing and vision of crime prevention.

Case studies are used throughout the book to illustrate important points. This first case study (1.1), ‘Preventing family and domestic violence’, highlights themes that run through the book: why prevention is critical, some of the ideological and political tensions associated with forms of prevention, the diversity of actors engaged in prevention, the importance of coordinated approaches, and the complexities of evaluating the effectiveness of prevention programs.

## CASE STUDY 1.1 PREVENTING FAMILY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

It is now widely accepted that family and domestic violence is prevalent in Australia with devastating, and frequently lethal, consequences for victims (predominantly women and their children, who observe violence perpetrated in the home) (Chung & Wendt 2015; Royal Commission into Family Violence 2016). Recognition of the prevalence and impact of these crimes is a relatively recent development. Family and domestic violence was long considered by police and criminal justice agencies to be a ‘private’ matter and not the responsibility of criminal justice agencies.