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Crime and Social Capital

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Government takes a long time to achieve social results— its quicker and easier to build a road, build an airport, establish a digital broadcasting system or send a man to the moon. We do, however, have a network of trust and a network of goodwill to work on, but there are severe cracks in the façade. What we call society is a vast network of mutual agreements. We trust our lives to total strangers. In the last twenty-four hours I have trusted numerous strangers: airline pilots, air traffic controllers, taxi drivers, traffic police, cooks who certainly washed their hands, manufacturers and processors of goods – the list goes on. We unhesitatingly consign our worldly goods to banks and insurance companies.

If we ask hotel operators or restaurateurs how many people skip off without paying the bill, the answer would be about one half of one per cent. If this were ten per cent our society would rock – if it were twenty-five per cent it would explode – yet how many of us cherish the delusion that ‘you can’t trust anybody these days’.

The stock of social capital we have invested in our community contributes to the maintenance of social order, that is, to the prevention of crime. The fundamental task in crime prevention is to work cross-sectorally and one result might be to turn potential future offenders into good citizens. If they grow up to be offenders behind bars they cost the community in the order of \$50,000 p.a., not to mention the emotional and financial costs to the community in the course of getting them into prison; nor the likely social security payments after their release. Investing in appropriate developmental activities - primary health care, early childhood supports, education and training, is more likely to turn them into productive taxpayers.

Crime is an affront to our sense of democracy. The principles of democracy give us all certain freedoms, among which are the freedoms to go about one’s business and relationships without arbitrary and capricious interference. This interference may come from the state, or from strangers, or more contentiously, from people with whom one has a close relationship. When one’s person or property is invaded there is invariably distress, hurt and loss.

Liberal democracies are fairly new on the social spectrum (if one takes a long view of history), and essentially are bargains negotiated between the representative governments and their citizens, and a specific arrangement which regulates that bargain. Part of that bargain involves the development of a social framework that gives certain opportunities and protections to the citizens, and part of the regulatory arrangement gives power to the state to deal with transgressors.

Why do some people commit criminal activities which result in hurt, loss and distress? Should the focus be on individuals who might be deficient in cash, possessions or sexual gratification? But most people who don't have much don't take without asking, from those who can supply what they lack. Does the society fail to prevent predatory behaviour? Perhaps it doesn't have the tools - perhaps it uses the tools badly? These are issues continually at the forefront of social debate.

We hear of people who are afraid of venturing out among their fellow citizens. Every generation will tell their young that it was better in the old days - when you could leave your doors unlocked, sleep with your windows open, and leave your keys in your car (that's not going back too many generations). "*The whole city, My Lord, is alarm'd and uneasy. Wickedness has got such a head, and the robbers and insolence of the night are such that the citizens are no longer secure within their own walls, or safe even in passing their streets, but are robbed, insulted and abused, even at their own doors. . . The citizens are oppressed by rapin and violence*". Daniel Defoe wrote this in a pamphlet addressed to the Lord Mayor of London in 1730, and commentators ever since (and I'm sure, before) have written about how bad things have become.

My colleague at the Australian Institute of Criminology, Peter Grabosky published a book entitled *Sydney in Ferment* on crime in colonial Sydney, and showed it was a lot more dangerous in its early days than it is today. Using a number of indicators it appears that Australia may be a more violent place in the second half of this century than it was before the Second World War, but much less violent than the period from 1788 to Federation.

The history of humankind is a history of violence, and today we're probably more aware than ever before, and more committed to developing research evidence about violent behaviour and its contexts, and from that, public policy responses.

On a wider front, but in the so-called civilised world, the violence of ethnic cleansing in Central Europe this year; the unspeakable atrocities and random and callous violence inflicted by the Nazis on civilian populations - Jewish and others; the treatment of indigenous peoples by colonial conquerors over the past 500 years are all testimony to formal and officially sanctioned violence, perpetrated by supposedly ordinary, decent people! Things were pretty grim in the Middle Ages too. According to a historian of medieval England, 'Few self-respecting gentlemen passed through the hot season of youth without having perpetrated a homicide or two'. The level of violence was much greater

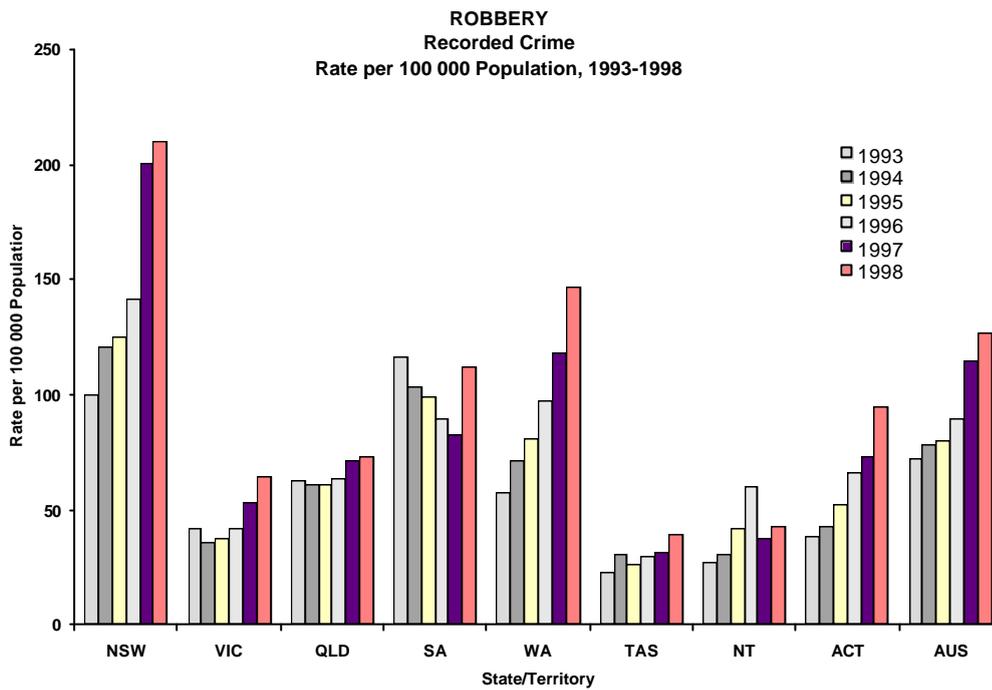
still in pre agricultural and pre urban times. And all of this long before there were TV programs and videos which we often blame for promoting violence.

One of the most interesting issues in the study of violence is the changing perception of public and private behaviour. In the mid 18th century magistrates in Britain treated assault as a civil rather than criminal matter. The media, government institutions, and bureaucracies found ways to make invisible the most prevalent forms of day to day violence. Civil courts regulated violence; charitable institutions sometimes offered support to those abused by family members or authority figures; and criminal courts became the last port of call for victims with grievances stemming from violence. This changed by the second decade of 19th century when assault became a matter for criminal courts.

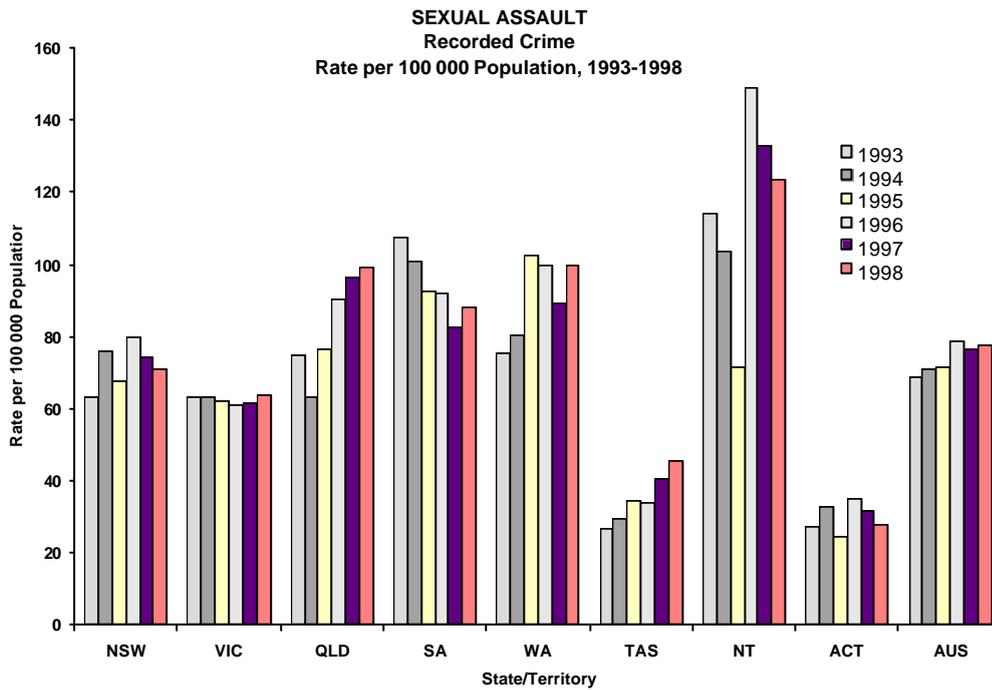
There is continual and historical debate about how to define the harm of violence in criminal statute. Today statutes are continually expanding definitions of violent behaviour - and law enforcement has expanded its scope, dealing seriously now with domestic violence, homophobic violence, and child abuse. The next targets may well be schoolyard bullying or elder abuse perpetrated by family members, and then again they may not!

Assault, rape, robbery and homicide have remained key classifications for violent crime. Interestingly, for these four crimes in Australia, assault and robbery have increased in the past few years, while sexual assault has remained constant, and homicide is at its lowest level for a decade, and the rate is the same as it was a century ago.

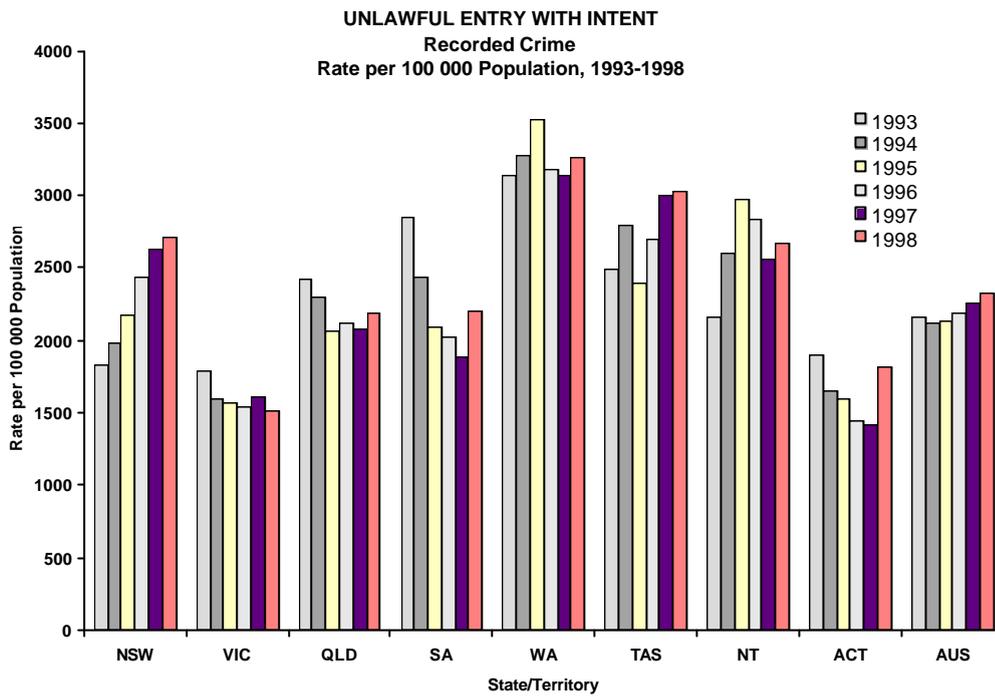
Looking at the data for the last few years tells us two things. There's more of most now than a few years ago. It varies a fair bit around the country.



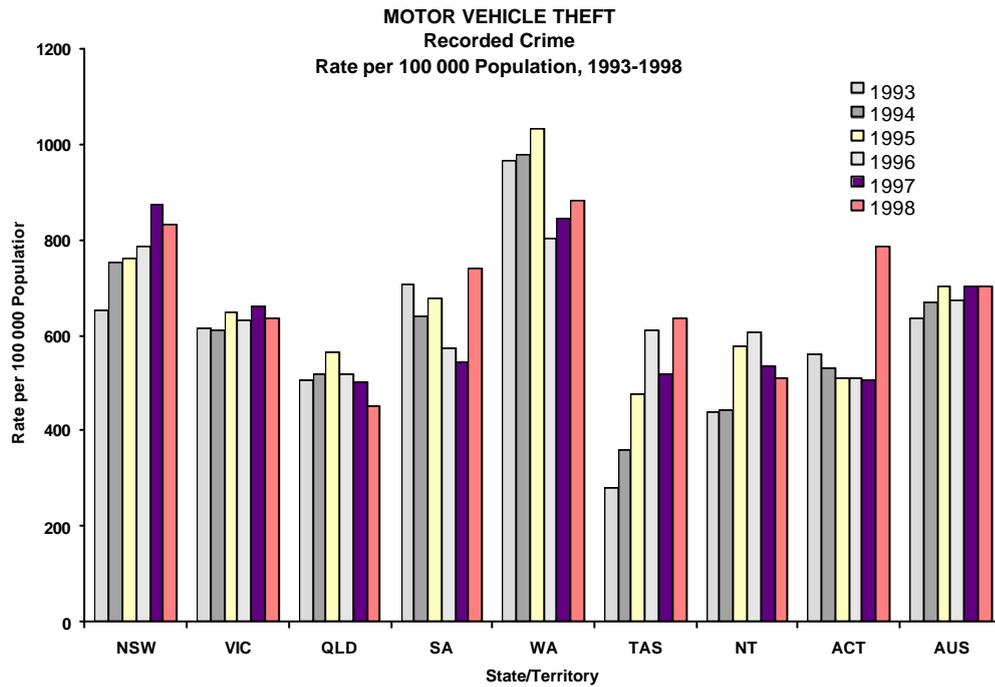
Source: Calculated from *National Crime Statistics/Recorded Crime, 1993-1998*. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Catalogue no. 4510.0.



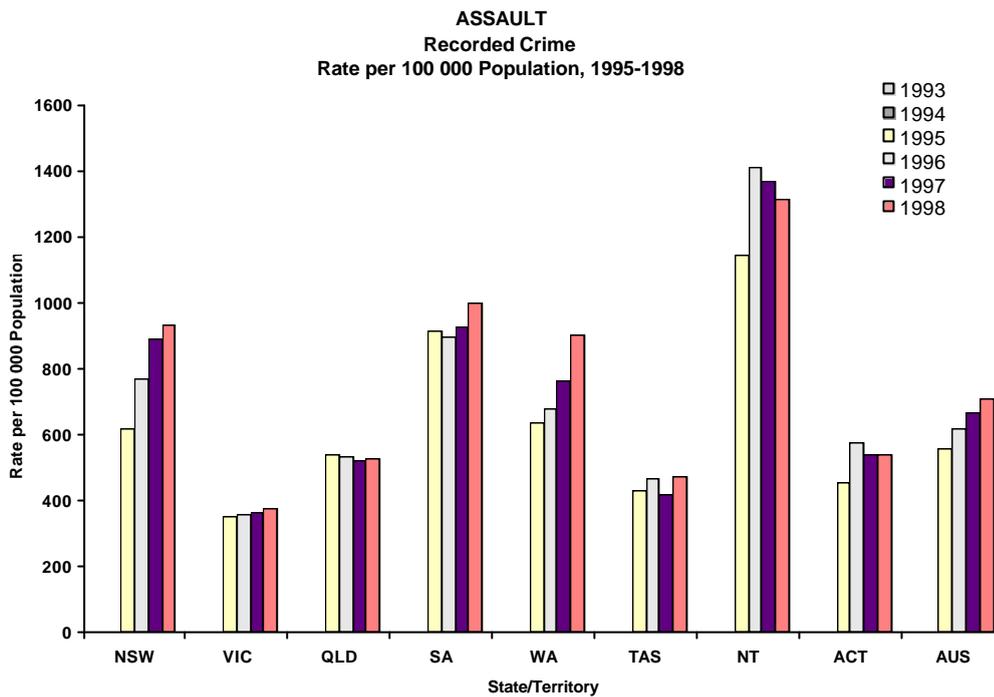
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Two states stand out, Victoria and Tasmania. Within the Australian context Victoria is a rich state while Tasmania is a poor state. My speculation - and it is only a speculation as I do not have any real evidence, but have had many conversations with people who might know, is that these states do social capital better than most others. Their crime rates, we could speculate, are not about how rich or poor they are, but about how well they do social capital.

Social Capital

What is social capital? Frances Fukuyama describes social capital simply as “society's stock of shared values”. To Robert Putnam it is the “networks, norms, and trust that enable participants [in a society] to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives”. How is this relevant to crime? Many have argued that today's society is lacking in social capital and that this is a major reason why the crime rate has increased since the 1960s.

Most Australians of my age would probably claim that our society today is less polite than it was when they were young. Others would say that nostalgia often triumphs over systematic, objective comparison. Whether one's idealised view of the past is accurate or not, civility, or more specifically, incivility, has significant implications for contemporary Australia. A society that is rich in social capital is a civil place in which to live.

People are social beings who are bound together in communities. People create a set of values and rules in order to communicate with each other. There is nothing “natural” about these values and rules but they must be accepted by the society in order for the society to be a civil place in which to live. Although people place primacy on their rights as individuals and their freedom to choose how to live, this is done within a social context. Freedom in which a person has no responsibility to the community around them and hence no links to the society in which he/she lives is not a goal for which people strive.

All societies must maintain some degree of social order or they face extinction. Philosophers have debated the desirability of a thick social order - a general interest - for centuries, no, millennia. There are three means to developing and maintaining a social order:

- coercive means - use of police and prisons
- utilitarian means - economic incentives, public expenditure, infrastructure building, and
- normative means - appeals to values and moral education.

A society which relies on coercive means to maintain social order is a society lacking in trust and deficient in liberty. A large number of police officers, tax inspectors, etc., indicates a deficient moral order, though recent analyses have shown that increasing police numbers, contrary to earlier studies, have correlated with declines in crime. A key question is whether the police and inspectors are regulators more than enforcers.

Robert Putnam gives some thought-provoking accounts of the promotion of civic life in different communities. First, he looks at Italy where in some regions the people have strong links with their communities. There is a great deal of trust and people are engaged in public issues – social and political networks are organised horizontally, not hierarchically. In other other regions of Italy there is limited engagement in community

affairs, the social structure is hierarchical. People do not obey the laws and there is a great deal of fear and little trust. He tells how Italy around 1000 AD was a very unpleasant place to live – social life was anarchic. People only grew enough grain to feed themselves because the risk that it might be stolen was so great. They did not go to market for fear of being robbed on the way.

Two different solutions were found. In the South of Italy, a feudal system was established in which the knights protected the peasants, the baron kept the knights in line, and the barons were controlled by the king. Zero tolerance was the name of the game. The rule was authoritarian but it was better than no rule at all.

In the North, small groups of neighbours formed mutual self-protection pacts. Each member agreed that if any of them was attacked, the others would come to their defence. Contracts were drawn up, outlining their mutual obligations. These groups formed alliances and soon towns began to grow. Town governments were formed out of these horizontally –organised associations. The pattern was copied elsewhere. In economic life, guilds were formed. Religion also adopted the same pattern. These communal republics soon created remarkably advanced systems of government.

By comparison with the rest of early mediaeval Europe, southern Italy seemed advanced, but the communal republics of the North soon gained dominance economically and also in the development of art and high culture. Robert Putnam uses the creation of choral societies in these communities as symbols of the engagement, trust and reciprocity that existed. He found that if we draw a map of Italy in 1993 according to wealth, we will find that communities with many choral societies are also more advanced economically. But it is not because the communities are wealthy that they have time for choral societies – they are wealthy because they have choral societies – and having choral societies is related to lower crime rates.

Robert Putnam also tells how of a neighbourhood of San Jose, Costa Rica, which now has a reputation for being a safer and more pleasant place to live in spite of being in a high crime area and being no more affluent than the surrounding neighbourhoods. This neighbourhood made an investment in social capital when it was agreed that people leave for work early to take time to get to know one's neighbours – to say hello to people they pass in the street on the way to work. This informal norm soon built ties of friends and mutual solidarity among the previously anonymous residents of the neighbourhood. Once these ties were established, it was relatively easy to agree on practical crime-fighting steps.

In her series of Boyer Lectures, Eva Cox made the same point when she advocated people being penalised for working longer than an eight-hour day, so that they have time to fulfil their responsibilities to public affairs.

Social Order

One has to be careful when assessing the deterioration in the social order. Any historical analysis requires a starting point which affects the insights and conclusions that follow. Society may look more or less orderly if a particular time period is taken as the baseline, eg. the 1950s may seem more orderly now but was this true at the time when people then were looking back to earlier times? In the 1950s indicators of antisocial behaviour may have been lower or were they just concealed? People's choices were much more restricted by a less tolerant society than today.

Individuals require some order in the society in which they live so that there is a frame of reference to guide their behaviour. Social order is better maintained through the use of incentives than penalties for causing disruption in a society. That is, the less coercion needed the more effective will be the results, and the less diminution of autonomy. For a social order to instil values of civility and abide by them means that most members share a commitment to a set of core values, and that most people, most of the time, will abide by them rather than being forced to comply with them.

Let's look at the freedom from interference by others. Citizens have the right to be protected by the law from the predations of others. So how far should the law be able to intrude into a person's life? Should activities such as phone tapping and fingerprinting be accepted as legitimate ways of reducing crime? Do the social benefits of increased safety through a reduction in crime justify the costs involved? Many such interventions if well-regulated could be greatly beneficial.

The Australian Government is presently seeking to introduce CrimTrac to assist the police in solving crimes. CrimTrac is a database containing such information as the DNA profile of all criminals and would be accessible by all police throughout Australia. Because a large number of crimes are committed by a small number of criminals, once criminals have their DNA profile recorded on the database, police will be greatly assisted in their identification of offenders. DNA records have also been useful in proving the innocence of some people who were accused of crimes. In Australia, half of all sexual assault offenders have previous convictions for assault-

records of previous offenders will be available to all police stations and this will facilitate the solving of many of these crimes.

The use of fingerprinting as a means of identification is opposed by civil libertarians generally. There is a stigma attached to having one's fingerprints taken because of its association with criminal activity, however, if it were to become more commonplace this image would fade.

The important thing is to get the balance right between intrusion into an individual's privacy and public protection. It is necessary to establish codes of practice so that infringements of a person's liberty are minimised, while their autonomy is enhanced.

Crime Prevention

We need to be clear about the type of crime that we wish to see reduced. There are activities that offend people, and there are activities that hurt people. In the latter group there are property and violent offences, burglary, assault, robbery, sexual assault, homicide. There are a bundle of different reduction strategies for each of these, and there are some common crime prevention strategies. Reducing crime through changes in legislation, pressuring the judiciary to give longer sentences and constructing new prisons will not necessarily reduce the hurt and harm to people. What is needed is the creation of an environment in our society where conflicts are settled in a civil way. The policy issue at stake is developing a public commitment to **civility**, trying to make this spill over into private behaviour, while not intruding into private behaviour and having the state being an undesirable thought controller.

There are also many different types of crimes that hurt people - different to the burglaries and assaults etc. At the Australian Institute of Criminology we have just published a book entitled *Crime in the Digital Age* which analyses cybercrime. New technologies, new scams, plastic card fraud all has an impact on Mr and Mrs Ordinary Citizen. I often say that elderly people are more likely to be mugged electronically, than mugged on the street. It is often said that crime knows no boundaries, but law enforcement does.

The key aims in developing a strategy against crime and disorder in any community focus on

- reducing the community's vulnerability to crime and violence

- diverting potential offenders into more constructive activities
- supporting and empowering those who have become victims of crime

The two key features are

- The involvement of community members and workers in projects, strategies, networks, and committees to prevent violence and crime; and
- the creation and expansion of opportunities for all people to live, work, socialise, and play without feeling threatened or harassed.

Any community, whether it be a municipality, a neighbourhood, an entertainment area, a school or university can devise their own community safety strategy, and work with the other players, police, health workers, private businesses, community groups etc. to create a safe community. This is a form of developing social capital. To do so involves having a very realistic understanding of the community, its dynamics, and its changes; as well as the mechanism for undertaking safety audits, and strategic responses to the results of any such audits.

We cannot understand crime without understanding the community we live in, and the dynamics and changes which lubricate and confront it. We cannot underestimate the changes in the economy, in technology, in family relations, and in particular the changes experienced by young people trying to sort out where they fit into a society in which the goal posts keep changing all the time.

We often hear laments for the “good old days” when there was no crime; when young people supposedly behaved better and showed more respect for their elders. These “good old days” have been embellished somewhat, and we simply cannot step back in time to an earlier era in which the patterns of work, housing, technology, family structure, domestic arrangements, financial dependency and sexual activity were as they were 100 years ago, or even 40 years ago.

Changes in our social and economic structure have left many people without traditional roles with which they feel comfortable and valued. The mismatch between young people’s natural abilities and tasks and roles available for them undermines social control and cohesion and inhibits the development of social capital. As

adolescents develop and grow they have increased stamina and activity levels, an interest in sex, and the development of reproductive capacities. They are full of energy, have trouble sitting still, need something to do; they have a lot of sexual energy and are physically prepared for two traditional and serious human tasks, doing work and raising a family.

Not very long ago teenagers would use their physical stamina and strength in their everyday work lives (because there were jobs) and home lives (because they lived with their parents). They left school, got jobs, married and had children in very quick succession - often well before a young person today would be halfway through a university degree.

Today many of the social institutions are no longer effective but they have not yet been replaced by others that are. We need to act positively to reconfigure our social organisation to cater for the new social structure. Take, for example, the rearing of children. Although this is still regarded as one of the primary functions of the family, the structure of the family has changed considerably. Much of the activity of family life has moved outside of the home and this increasingly includes the nurturing of children. The childcare centre and the school now have a much greater role to play in childrearing than previously. These institutions need to recognise this role and need to be restructured so that the socialisation of children into mature adults with bonds to the community are a part of their core activities (Coleman).

The State benefits from strong social capital, from having all its members making a positive contribution to society, as it is the state that ultimately pays for those who cannot support themselves, those whose lifestyles incur medical costs, those who engage in criminal activities, and it is the State that suffers the loss of income tax which would otherwise come to it.

Early intervention in families has shown positive signs of reducing the likelihood of those families producing young offenders. But the problem with that approach is that the results will not be seen for fifteen years or so. One of the justifications for early intervention in families with young children is the building up or establishment of social capital. In fact, the role of the professional who enters the lives of stressed families could be described as filling in a gap left by a decline in social capital.

A recent study of child abuse by Tony Vinson and Eileen Baldry, published by the Australian Institute of Criminology, found that within an area that had generally been

designated as one with high child abuse numbers, there were in fact small pockets within that area where child abuse was much more highly concentrated, and that these pockets were areas which were regarded as being low in social capital. That is, people had greater fear of victimisation and were more distrustful of their neighbours, were less likely than in lower risk areas to intervene if they observed children behaving in a disorderly way in the neighbourhood, and there was greater social mobility (those that could, left the area rather than investing effort in improving it).

Rising crime is seen by many as a result of the weakening of criminal sanctions. What may be more relevant to understanding a sudden upsurge in crime is changes in mediating social institutions such as families, neighbourhoods, schools, and work that were taking place at the same time as the crime rate was increasing.

Is today's society experiencing the ill effects of the "me generation" of the '60s. Those of us who were young adults in the '60s were brought up by parents who lived through the Depression of the 1930s and the second world war. The goal of our parents was to make a good life for their offspring. Did they do the job too well? - so that those approaching adulthood in the '60s were able to think only of themselves and enjoy a carefree life. Parents who had been forced to leave school to help support their families now basked in the success of their children as they took advantages of the opportunities that their parents never had. The problem was, however, that this success was focused on the individual. There were far fewer demands on these children to spend their time in the working of the household or assisting nearby family members or neighbours. They were in effect relying on the social capital which was supporting them but without reinvesting in it to the same extent.

When the young adults of the '60s became parents, instead of imitating their parents in the time they invested in their children, these parents continued pursuing their individual goals, believing that life was so good that their children did not need the nurturing they had been provided with as children themselves. The emphasis was on the freedom of the individual to make his/her own choice. As a result the bonds between young people, their families and the communities of which they are a part has been weakened - there has been a depletion in social capital. Of course, in making these kinds of statements one has to remember that this only refers to a very small section of the population. There are only a very small number of people who have been served so ill by society that they engage in anti-social behaviour - for many others, there is a non-committal apathy.

Robert Putnam lays the blame for a loss of social capital on the television set. Surveys conducted in America indicate that since 1965 time spent on informal socialising and visiting is down, and time devoted to clubs and organisations is down even more. Participation in many conventional voluntary associations has declined by roughly 25 to 50% over the last two to three decades. There have also been steep declines in many measures of collective political participation, attendance at meetings on town or school affairs.

Putnam also argues that people who watch a lot of TV tend to believe there is more crime than there is and that the resultant fear of crime may lead people to reduce their contact with strangers. He points, however, that social values can influence the effects of technology, and that the possible negative effects of the technology overwhelm the positive ones of increased opportunities and better communications.

One of the explanations for the increased crime rate is simply demographic, strongly related to the number of young males aged between 14 and 24 - it is this group who commit the majority of the crimes. Should we therefore just build more prisons with the intention of converting them for some other use when this bulge in the demographics passes, as it will?

The increase in crime rates lead people to call for greater police powers and harsher sentences. Being “soft” on criminals, trying to rehabilitate offenders - the approach of the 1960s and 70s has been blamed for the current increase in crime. This belief relies on the argument that criminals act in a rational manner, that they weigh up the rewards obtainable against the risk they are taking. This is a flawed assumption both because there is evidence that criminals act on impulse and because only a relatively few number of crimes that are committed result in the offender being caught. This is for a number of reasons: many crimes are not reported; often there is not sufficient evidence; or the offender cannot be identified. While I don't wish to undermine the role of the criminal justice system, it is not through its operation alone that crime can be prevented. We must look at the bigger picture of society to find ways in which crime may be prevented.

The “zero tolerance” approach has received a great deal of acclaim because it has been credited with the increased civility of New York, if that's not a contradiction in terms. It is claimed that New York now has a lower violent crime rate than many major American cities, because of the New York mayor's decision to adopt an

aggressive policing approach to minor crimes. Any visitor to New York cannot fail to notice the transformation which the city has undergone. Whereas ten years ago the underground rail system was a dirty, deserted and dangerous place to be, it is now clean and safe and buzzing with people going about their daily routine. There is no longer the fear of being mugged on the streets that there once was, although many argue there is still the danger that you may fall victim to an over-zealous police officer, particularly if a member of a minority group. There is a place for aggressive policing, particularly in targeting areas with high crime rates, but it must be recognised that this approach does little to change the behaviour of the majority of offenders, although it does deter some; many studies have shown that the displacement of criminal activity is not total. Some potential offenders desist from criminal activity when it becomes too risky in their "patch", rather than moving on to another patch.

Another strategy which has been shown to be effective, and may be used in conjunction with aggressive policing is situational crime prevention. That is, making a place less attractive for criminal activity. This, like an aggressive policing approach, has an immediate effect in reducing criminal activity. Most places have no crime, and most crime is highly concentrated in a relatively small number of places. Some shops have no robberies, while a few have lots. A few entertainment venues have a lot of problems, most have none. Even in high burglary neighbourhoods most residences have no burglaries, while a few suffer from repeat burglaries. Understanding clustering and repeat victimisation and crime "hot spots" is very important in striving for both efficiency and effectiveness. Blocking criminal opportunities takes place by understanding place, and strategies that are appropriate for houses, flats, shops, warehouses, factories, public transport, parks, pubs etc. Designing out crime is a technical activity that impacts on our dealings with others and our democratic interactions.

Conclusion

We know that the good old days when there was no crime are a figment of fiction, and we shouldn't try to bring them back. This would involve swimming against the tide. Ideally we swim with the tide, or if we are interested in good public policy, ahead of the tide, and this brings to the fore tensions in the balance between leadership and democracy.

The society in which we live is a society that has come to value instant gratification, and our technology delivers this. We don't put an enormous amount of energy into feeding ourselves - from chopping wood for the stove through to preserving and drying. We eat when we want to. We don't wait for our favourite movies - we

watch them on video when we want them; we don't bank during banking hours, we bank when we want to; we pay our bills by phone in the middle of the night if we want to; we use electronic mail so we can get instant replies, not wait for the postman; we don't wait until we get home to make our phone calls, we make them instantly on the mobile etc.

Put this against a backdrop of violence and aggression in our entertainment and news media, in participant and spectator sport, and fierce competitiveness in many work practices, it is a wonder that there is not more widespread violence.

The overwhelming majority of our population does not behave badly; the overwhelming majority of young people whose education does not get them a satisfactory job do not behave violently; the overwhelming majority of middle aged people whose skills have been undermined, or rendered obsolete by technological change, or who have been made redundant do not behave violently; the overwhelming majority of family heads who receive insufficient support to maintain their families do not behave violently etc. But some do, and cause enormous stress to the community, and keep the criminal justice system in business.

Today when we ask the general public about crime, their instinctive response is to call for longer prison terms. Their frustration is understandable, and they are unlikely to be responsive to arguments based on cost-effectiveness. To be sure, the use of imprisonment will remain an important part of our response to crime, but we must strive to use it in a discriminating manner. What we should try to do is to enlist community resources and energies to reduce crime through arguably more important upstream intervention.

No one sector alone can prevent crime - a partnership is needed, government, business, community and family. This is the strength of a democracy building upon social capital - pulling all of these together in harmony.

We need to maintain education, knowledge and awareness of the harmful effects of aggression, violence, drug and alcohol usage etc.

We need to:

- tackle the causes of crime
- reduce opportunities for crime to be committed
- tackle specific crime problems

- help victims of crime, and reduce the fear of crime

We know that investing heavily in the first three years of life makes good crime reduction sense. It can yield enormous benefits down the track in savings in health expenditure, income support expenditure and criminal justice system expenditure. But there are some difficult social policy issues in knowing how to target these expenditures, and fixing limits to ensure optimum benefit.

Crime and safety issues are complex, interdependent and embrace the activities of all government agencies at the national, State and local levels. Issues such as employment, education, health, welfare, and economic and fiscal policy, how cities are designed and managed, how our homes and cities secured, and how we treat offenders and their victims, can all directly or indirectly affect criminal behaviour, perceptions of safety and willingness to participate in society.

We all have a role to play in building the partnerships to meet the emerging challenges for community safety. The safest communities are not those with the most police and prisons but those with the strongest community structures, including socialising institutions, families, and economic opportunities.

By investing in social capital, by nurturing our communities and understanding what makes them tick, and making people proud to be part of them we are on the way to a more harmonious, more civil and more comfortable Australia.

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