

REGIONAL CITY ADOPTS TEAM APPROACH TO CRIME PREVENTION CHALLENGE

by Frank Hayes AM

The 15th Biennial Conference of the Australian Crime Prevention Council was held at Wollongong in N.S.W. in September 1991 with the theme "Community Fear or Community Safety".

Eighteen months on, Wollongong has set up its own local government backed community safety team. Its aim is to work towards reducing the fear and reality of crime for the regions' population that now exceeds 200,000.

As one of the N.S.W. Conference organisers, I was keen to push for Wollongong as the venue. It was the first time that the Crime Prevention Council had held such a conference outside an Australian capital city. I recall that Wollongong was chosen because of its traditional sense of community. Its citizens have a strong sense of identity, there is a pride in regional achievements and there is added strength in the multi-cultural cohesion that has been a feature of Wollongong since the post war years of the 1950s.

At Wollongong, we were intent on challenging all conference participants that issues of community safety and crime prevention could best be managed at the local level. Our two international visitors, Nigel Whiskin, Chief Executive of Crime Concern in the UK and Jean Pierre Plantard, Procureur General, Cour D'Appel, Versailles, France, encouraged the development of local crime prevention initiatives as the most effective way of involving communities in solving crime-related problems.

Nigel Whiskin stated that while crime prevention policy is co-ordinated by the UK Home Office, safer cities programmes have become the responsibility of various local Council's in partnership with local industry, community groups, clubs, churches and concerned individuals. Nigel was encouraged to learn of the progress made so far by one or

two local government Councils in Sydney and by a larger number of Councils in South Australia.

Nigel saw Wollongong as an ideal regional centre for the creation of a range of low cost, effective crime prevention programmes that could be channelled through the arm of local government to those neighbourhoods where the fear of crime was of greatest concern.

He targeted five key elements in coming up with a safer community strategy.

"First, we need to look at what we can do to reduce the opportunities to commit crime. This means upgrading household security, it means getting business to adopt crime prevention strategies, local authority departments to adopt crime prevention strategies, and so on.

Second, we need to look very hard at what we can do to prevent criminality and to introduce a broad range of measures designed to remove crime from the agenda of the next generation. We know from the work in North America of the value of targeted pre-school education opportunities in high risk crime areas. We know much can be done through effective management of schools. We know how much can be done by improving housing, opportunities, positive parenting programmes, improving access to training opportunities, education opportunities, and work opportunities. We know what can be done to improve leisure and recreation opportunities for young people.

Third, we need community development. We know there are a large number, (we estimate in Britain about 600) high crime residential areas, and we know that these areas can be turned around by involving local people in redesigning the physical, economic and social infrastructure. There is a need to systematically work at these high-crime areas which produce not only a disproportionate amount of crime, but significantly a disproportionate number of offenders.

Fourth, we need to do more about the care and resettlement of offenders in the community, particularly high-risk youngsters and those returning to the community from prison. We spend a great deal of time arguing about the need to reform the

prison system, we have not spent the same amount of time setting up planning and experimenting with measures which can hold this difficult group of people in the community, and reduce the number of offences which they commit.

Fifth, we need to do a great deal more to support the victims of crime. We can learn a lot from victims about how to prevent crimes recurring, both to them and other people, and we can do a great deal more working back from the victims' experience to tackle some of the most vulnerable groups in the community - young people, children, violent crimes against women, and the pernicious effects of racist crime".

[Nigel Whiskin - 1991]



Nigel Whiskin
Crime Concern UK

At the conclusion of the Wollongong Conference, a number of us accepted the challenge of approaching Wollongong City Council to see what could be done.

The Council's response was extremely positive. Under the guidance of Superintendent Bev Lawson, Patrol Commander, of the Wollongong Police, and with the full co-operation of the Lord Mayor Alderman David Campbell, arrangements were made for our small post-conference group to address Council with their proposals.

Council unanimously endorsed the plan to formerly establish a Committee under Section 530A of the Local Government Act, 1919 (as amended). The Committee to be known as the Wollongong Safe Community Action Team would thus have legislative backing to initiative a comprehensive community generated crime prevention strategy for the city, utilising the good will and expertise of its residents aimed at making Wollongong a safer community in which to live.

The team called for industry and community nominations for its sixteen strong membership, under the Chairmanship of the Mayor, Alderman Campbell. The Wollongong Safe Community Action Team (SCAT) was formally constituted by Council late last year. Its objectives are:

1. To develop and implement both short term and long term plans so that people will feel safer in Wollongong.
2. To identify and analyse the extent of crime and community concern about safety in Wollongong.
3. To reduce generally the community's fear of becoming a victim of crime.
4. To encourage the development of policies by Local Government and other appropriate Authorities which complement anti-crime strategies.
5. To empower community groups to initiate and participate in making Wollongong a safer place.
6. To make recommendations and representations to Local, State and Federal Governments on issues of community safety.

The hard work now begins. I and the Australian Crime Prevention Council congratulate the team on its initiative. We value the leadership and support of the Wollongong City Council and we look forward to hearing of successful projects in the near future.

(Frank Hayes is a member of the NSW ACPC Executive)