

# Declining crime rate: good news is no news

On Monday 15 September 2003 the NT Attorney General, Dr Peter Toyne, published the *NT Quarterly Crime and Justice Statistics*, which were issued by the Office of Crime Prevention, Department of Justice. It was an important announcement.

It should be noted that upon taking power the NT Labor Government established this important Office, which has the responsibility of gathering relevant crime statistics from across the Territory.

For years, the Criminal Lawyers Association has complained to previous governments that the creation of such a body (of which there are equivalents in every state and territory across Australia) was essential to allow the establishment of a proper debate concerning law and order issues and its important attendant; sentencing.

That aside it is the substance of these statistics that is important.

The statistics dealt with the type, number and location of offences committed in the Northern Territory over a 12-month period. The data therefore provides an effective representation of crimes committed in the Territory and from that "trends" can be drawn.

These statistics revealed a clear and important fact. **Crime in the Northern Territory is on the decline.** It is dropping consistently and markedly. The data informs the NT public that over the last twelve months (June 2002 to June 2003):

- \* Unlawful entry of houses dropped by **32 per cent** (in Darwin **39 per cent** and in Alice Springs **40 per cent**);
- \* Unlawful entry of commercial premises dropped by **16 per cent**;
- \* Car thefts and related offences dropped by **21 per cent**;
- \* Assaults dropped by **2 per cent**; and
- \* Sexual assaults dropped by **16 per cent**.

Importantly these figures are also consistent with the equivalents from the previous twelve months; in other words, the Northern Territory has experienced **two years of significant, consistent reduction in the commission of crime.**

Of course that trend is to a degree general. The statistics further revealed that there have in fact been increases in assaults in Katherine and Tennant Creek. However there is no getting around the fact that:

1. Crime is far from being on the increase (never mind out of control!); and
2. The NT crime rate is dropping and has been dropping significantly for two years.

This is important stuff, if for no other reason than it flies in the face of the NT population's perception of crime in our community.

However, these figures did not contain all good news.

Some aspects revealed in the data are highly damning. The greatest calumny the statistics revealed is that, incredibly, more than 20 years after the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, the number of Aboriginal people in jail has significantly increased. This is despite claims from previous governments that the Commission's recommendations had been implemented. In the last 12 months the number of Aboriginal people in Territory prisons has increased by an incredible **34 per cent!** Crime drops, yet more and more Aboriginal people are imprisoned.

Associated with this shameful state of affairs is the shocking fact that the Territory's jail population is higher than it has ever been. Bearing in



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mind the Territory has historically jailed more people per head of population than any other Australian state or territory, this state of affairs is a disgrace and one which needs to be addressed directly and immediately. Incredibly, Aboriginals make up **78 per cent** of the Northern Territory's prison population - which is more than in 1989 when Justice Muirhead was briefed to inquire into the deaths in custody situation. One glaring trend which emerges is that despite a significant and consistent drop in the crime rate in the Northern Territory, Aboriginal people are being increasingly jailed.

To return to the fact that Territory crime is clearly dropping, it is extremely telling to see how those facts were reported by our media. These facts fly in the face of popularly held beliefs as regards the Territory's crime rate. It is highly likely the majority of Territorians consider crime is on the increase. The main reason for this is the way our media irresponsibly, yet deliberately, reports crime.

New stories about crime and resultant court sentences invariably sell a theme of inadequate sentencing. News stories create an atmosphere of dissatisfaction in regards to the way criminals are dealt with in the justice system, particularly through sentencing.

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## Declining crime rate: good news is no news cont...

dissatisfaction and fear is created, cultivated and encouraged. The politicians also embrace populism on law and order issues resulting in party X claiming that "hanging is too good for them", while party Y responds by promising to "throw away the key". This was illustrated by the CLP's disastrous introduction of mandatory sentencing laws. Current criminal statistics show that during the mandatory sentencing period property crime rose, while since its abolition property crime has steadily and consistently decreased.

So how did our media report the general trend of crime rate reduction in the Territory as unequivocally established by these statistics published on Monday 15 September 2003?

The ABC television news ran it that night as the lead story. It presented a fairly thorough break down of the statistics as well as allowing the politicians their respective spins on the

issue. Not so for *Channel Nine* television. The story ran as number three on the evening news, with analysis that lasted less than two minutes.

The *NT News*' coverage the next day was entirely predictable. Now if these statistics had revealed in any way, shape or form an increase in crime in the Northern Territory it would have undoubtedly taken front page. On Tuesday 16 September 2003, the *NT News*' front page featured a crocodile story and a lead story about someone who had found packets of needles/syringes on Nightcliff beach! (Who says the *NT News* encourages anxiety?)

The statistics on the NT crime reduction made it onto page four! Of course it had to be reported; it was reported, but page four says it all.

The media has to be brought to book; it has to be called to account for why it reports crime in the negative way in

which it does. Of course this is a chicken and egg situation; is society's angst legitimately there or is it created by the media? Newspapers in many respects are like any other product; they are driven primarily by the profit motive; negative stories regarding crime sell better than positive stories about crime. Presumably, that's the reason why newspaper editors choose to present the news in this fashion.

However, in regards to crime rate levels dropping, good news is no news.

### Editor's Note:

*The Law Society, in conjunction with the NT Legal Aid Commission and Neighbourhood Watch, are conducting community education workshops on sentencing..*

*The Judgment Day workshops are being held in Darwin, Palmerston/Litchfield, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs throughout October and November.①*

## Pre-admission education cont...

expenses including the costs of a lecturer working part time, is awaiting the approval of the Attorney-General. The course also requires accreditation through the CDU Council. Work is just beginning on adaptation of material – this could be a progressive process.

The Law Society is working closely with CDU, ANU and the Admissions Board on this project which will benefit those seeking admission, local firms and ultimately the public.

One further advantage is that the CDU resources will be able to be used for CLE for the profession.

The process is still in its formative stages and a lot of work remains to be done to get things up and running by next year. More detailed explanatory material will be issued shortly. ①



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