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The following three papers were presented as commentaries to papers given at a public seminar entitled "Crime and the Recession" convened by the Institute of Criminology at the State Library of New South Wales on 15 April 1992.

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### CRIME AND THE RECESSION

Good news is good news no matter what the underlying explanation for it is. The Minister for Justice has correctly, as far as I can see, drawn attention to the decreasing number of young people committed to prisons and institutions in recent years in New South Wales despite some increase in the number of charges laid. The numbers of young people placed on various alternative programs has risen, although its worth noting that the daily rate of detention of juveniles has dropped a bare 3.2 per cent since February 1987.

The Minister attributes these changes to his Government's policies — an approach with some appeal to both sides of politics when things appear to be going favourably? It would be irresponsible to discourage the Government from continuing on a positive course in the field of juvenile justice, a course which is all the more surprising because of its creation within the same period of monstrous growth in the size of the adult prison population. It would be equally irresponsible to allow a fuzzy understanding of the changes that have occurred in the juvenile field to provide false comfort that similar initiatives will inevitably be taken to reduce the rate of adult imprisonment.

My reading of the institutional and prison figures for juveniles is that what has happened since February 1988 has essentially built upon a trend that was becoming strongly established before that time. For example, between 1986–87 and 1987–88 there was a large (21.6 per cent) reduction in the number of juveniles institutionalised or imprisoned. In the following year, the first full year of the present Government, there was a further reduction of 15.7 per cent followed in the next year by an increase of 3.8 per cent. The Minister has quoted figures, not yet publicly available, which imply further reductions up to the present. This is good news which amounts to the sustaining of a trend apparent from the mid-1980s.

What lies behind that trend? Both sides of politics have 'talked tough' about sentencing over the period in question. Perhaps the greater discretion being shown by magistrates in the use of detention for juveniles is a reminder that sentencers also play a part in the shaping of policy. We can be grateful that that role modifies the worst excesses of political rhetoric. Local Court statistics provide some support for this view. From the mid-1980s, in the face of an increasing volume of cases presented, the trend has been for magistrates to sentence a decreasing proportion of offenders to terms of imprisonment, *especially in 1989 and 1990.*

Despite these trends Governments, as they should, play a dominant role in determining policy. Nothing I have said should be interpreted as other than a recognition of some present favourable trends and a hope that the Government will continue to promote them, but not at the expense of comparable changes in the adult sphere. Clearly this is not an either/or situation. One can laud commendable efforts at early intervention — yes, kids do

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deserve a 'second chance' — without turning a blind eye to the Government instigated and Yabsley implemented folly known as the New South Wales prison system.

A section of the Minister's paper which I thought was particularly helpful was his elucidation of the connection between unemployment and other economic hardships which may encourage people's involvement in crime. The Minister mentioned high density living, dilapidated accommodation, a lack of recreational, educational, vocational and support facilities. These factors, and others, can have demoralising effects on individuals but can also affect home environment and the relations between adults and children.

These observations connect with and help explain some of the links between unemployment and crime presented in Dr Weatherburn's excellent paper.<sup>1</sup> It may take time for the adverse social and personal reactions to unemployment to have their effects. The emotional reserves of individuals and families may counter the short term consequences of economic hardship. However, if the hardship persists then the lives of those affected may, in a very real sense, begin to drift. I will attempt in a moment to explain what I mean by this reference to 'drift'.

First, let me say it is fascinating to see that studies conducted almost 20 years apart under the auspice of the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research show the same general coincidence of crime and social disadvantage in local areas. I congratulate the Bureau on again picking up this type of local area based research. When Ross Homel and I undertook similar research in the 1970s, first in Newcastle and later throughout New South Wales, we found two things:

- (i) official crime and delinquency figures showed that both juvenile and adult offenders were, to an extraordinary extent, concentrated in a very small number of local areas, typically representing about 5–6 per cent of a city's population;
- (ii) the location of high crime and delinquency levels overlapped to an equally remarkable extent with a high incidence of medical and social problems such as infant death and 'premature' birth, admission to mental hospital, school dropout and poor school attendance, lack of physical fitness, dependence on relief agencies and unemployment.

The net effect, it seemed to us, of all these difficulties was to constitute what we called a 'web of disadvantage' — progress on one front, for example, a child going to a better school, would be countered by the pull of countervailing disadvantages. There was some evidence available that the suburbs in question were ecological sink areas to which the most disadvantaged individuals and families, including single parent families, were pulled.

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1 Paper presented at a seminar entitled "Crime and the Recession", held by the Institute of Criminology, Sydney University, at the State Library of New South Wales on 15 April 1992, and published in *Trends and Issues* No 40, Australian Institute of Criminology, August 1992.

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Dr Weatherburn comments that it is difficult to say why disadvantage in an area increases the proportion of offenders. He offers some possible suggestions. I want to add another based on the findings of our final, unpublished study in Newcastle. Obviously none of these explanations is complete in itself.

I take as my point of departure a sentence of Don Weatherburn's paper, "We have, then, what looks like a clear demonstration of the fact that those who are economically disadvantaged are more likely to turn to crime". Our findings suggest a possible re-phrasing: "State agencies turn to the economically disadvantaged to find those who commit crime."

With all the precautions that were possible, we sampled groups of Newcastle boys in suburbs that were representative of 'socially advantaged', 'average' and 'disadvantaged' areas of the city. These gradings were determined by each suburb's vulnerability to the problems, including crime, that we had surveyed. Remember, the areas we designated 'high risk' usually had rates of medical and social problems, including crime, that were two to three times higher than for the rest of the city.

Our sample was of modest size (a little over 100) but our results were startlingly clear. Asked to indicate the breaches of the law in which they had been involved during the preceding year, we found not a skerrick of difference in either the types or number of crimes committed by the boys from the three areas. The only difference we uncovered was in the attitudes of youth from the disadvantaged areas — they had negative attitudes towards authority figures like school teachers and the police.

Perhaps part of the explanation of the socio-economic disadvantage–crime connection lies in the social conditioning of those whose unenviable job it is to track down offenders. Areas of concentration of the unemployed and poor apparently loom as a productive starting point.

*Professor Tony Vinson\**

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\* Dean, Faculty of Professional Studies, University of New South Wales.