

“From the Director’s Desk”

Recent media reporting of crime and justice issues in New South Wales has demonstrated disturbing features of the contemporary criminal justice debate. Two trends in particular require the attention of those concerned to create an informed understanding of crime and justice issues:

1. *Fuelling the fear of crime.* It has long been recognised by criminologists that the socially debilitating consequences flowing from the fear of crime may be even more significant in some sections of the community than the impact of actual victimisations. Often those groups within society most fearful of crime (such as the elderly) are in fact less likely to suffer from the feared behaviours in situations which they apprehend than are those for whom the threat is represented as less significant. With some offence behaviours those involved in the perpetration of crimes may also be the class of society most likely to be victimised by them.

All too often the media chooses to distort the reality of crime across a range of communities in the face of empirical evidence which supports the alternative view. For example, a recent police survey in New South Wales suggested a high proportion of respondents from within the community which feared they might be victims of homicides. Not only do the facts show that the homicide rate in New South Wales has remained steady over the last century, but a comparison of homicides with other forms of assault, and the rate of homicide across the state population both indicate that victimisation is extremely unlikely.

The media not only seems happy to ignore facts about crime, facts in this state which are readily available and easy to access, but reporters and commentators seem to be creative and loose with language when it comes to representing “new” crime threats. An example of this has been the fear generated around what the police and the media have dubbed “home invasions”. The novelty of this offence behaviour may rest in little more than a shift in the class of victim, and the location of the offence. However, in most other respects it differs little from “break, enter and steal” or robbery offences which are a feature of most materialist urban societies. The media however have whipped up a degree of fear around this “new” crime so as to alter significantly the lifestyles and living environments of large sections of metropolitan New South Wales.

2. *The insidiousness of law and order politics.* The media should not alone take the blame for distortions about crime and criminal justice. Some of the press would argue that their style of reporting does little more than complement the political environment on crime prevailing at any particular time.

In New South Wales both sides of politics prefer views on crime, control and prevention, which not only exaggerate the crime threat, but imply that short term, and dramatic political responses are the answer. For example, the Government in New South Wales has recently legislated certain provisions which would enable the police to apprehend, investigate and detain young people in situations which may not be tolerated by other classes of citizen. These legislative initiatives are meant to suggest that through such action the state can control illusive criminal behaviours such as vandalism, and deny the meanings given to such behaviours by those who participate in them.

At times like these when misinformation abounds and law and order politics cuts across political divisions, organisations such as the Institute of Criminology have an obligation to call into question those who would “market” crime and justice for their own

ends. With this in mind the Institute is committed to continue a critical public education function throughout 1995. Essential to that function is the publication of this journal.

The contents of the present number of *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* demonstrate our concern to see the debate about crime and justice proceed in an atmosphere of knowledge and candour. Contributors to this issue explore:

- The problems and potentials associated with victim-based research
- The negative potential of the victims' rights movement
- The reality of victimisation within prisons
- Contradictions and conflicts of interest in policing public space
- Aspects of accountability for corporate crime
- Institutional responses to criminal enterprise
- The dangers inherent in stereotyping ethnic youth crime.

I am particularly pleased again to edit such a wide ranging and challenging number of *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*. This will be my last editorial responsibility for some time as I will soon be on leave from the Directorship to take up the Foundation Chair of Law at the University of the South Pacific. My years as Director have been both rewarding and challenging, and I wish the new staff and administration at the Institute all the best in meeting their significant responsibilities as a community information unit during a crucial period of the crime and justice debate in the State.

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Director