

Inquiry information

Crime in the community: victims, offenders, and fear of crime

Background to the inquiry

- 1.1 Many Australians have either been a victim of crime or know somebody who has. Being a victim of crime, and similarly fearing crime, can have a significant impact on quality of life and the way that people choose to participate in society.
- 1.2 Often, there is discrepancy between official crime statistics, media reports, public opinion and the personal accounts of victims and perpetrators surrounding crime within the community. The purpose of this inquiry is to gain a greater understanding of the community's experiences of crime and fear of crime in order to develop effective Commonwealth measures for dealing with these issues and for supporting victims.

Constitutional limitations

- 1.3 The Commonwealth does not have a general power to legislate with respect to crime in Australia. This is primarily the responsibility of the states and territories. As a Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament, the Committee's focus will be on the role for the Commonwealth and appropriate Commonwealth measures for addressing crime and fear of crime in the community. However the Committee is interested to learn of the experiences in the states and territories.

The types of crime committed against Australians

- 1.4 Crime can be loosely grouped into two categories: *crimes against property* and *crimes against the person*. Property offences usually refer to acts such as break and enter (burglary), motor vehicle theft, theft from motor vehicle, property damage, and graffiti and vandalism. Personal offences, on the other hand, include crimes such as homicide, assault, sexual offences, robbery, and theft from the person.
- 1.5 It should be noted that the above lists are not exhaustive lists of crimes committed within the community. Rather, they are categorised in this way to provide a general overview of the sorts of crimes to be examined by the Committee. The Committee is also interested in other crimes committed against people that may not be mentioned above.

Who are victims of crime?

- 1.6 Generally, victims of crime refer to people who have directly experienced crime. That is, they may have been subject to violence, assault or a sexual offence, or their property may have been stolen or damaged. However, the impact of crime usually extends well beyond the person who was subject to the act. Victims of crime may also include people—family members, friends, work colleagues, and people who witnessed the act—who have been affected by crime committed against another person/s.
- 1.7 According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, there was an increase in the number of victims recorded by police between 2000 and 2001 for all offence

categories.¹ Most notably, the largest increases were recorded for victims of blackmail/extortion (37%), robbery (14%), kidnapping/abduction (9%), and assault (9%).

- 1.8 The Committee is interested to receive evidence on the levels of victimisation among respective groups in the community. This includes the types of crimes committed against Australians—for example males, females, young people and older Australians—and where these offences take place.

Perpetrators of crime and motives

- 1.9 There are a few recognised facts about crime.² The first is that males overwhelmingly commit more crime than females. The second is that the majority of crime is committed by a minority of offenders. And the third, is that most crime is committed by young people.

- 1.10 People may choose to initially engage in crime, and continue to commit crime for a number of reasons. Of course, the Committee is aware that offenders may commit the same offence, or indeed different offences for very different reasons. A number of high-risk factors have been associated with the onset of criminality and particularly juvenile delinquency.³ It is important to note however that these factors are not necessarily those which may *cause* someone to engage in crime. Rather they are factors which may place someone at a *higher risk* of engaging in crime. These include:

- Familial factors (particularly factors associated with (poor) parenting and neglect)
- School based factors (eg intelligence, poor school performance and truancy)
- Peer group pressure and other peer influences
- Poverty and unemployment
- Substance abuse

- 1.11 More recently, it has been suggested that external stimuli such as violent movies, videos and games may increase the risk of young people committing crime.

- 1.12 The Committee would like to learn more about who commits crime and why. This includes the types of offences committed by different groups in society, the backgrounds of offenders, and what motivates people to commit certain offences.

Fear of crime in the community

- 1.13 Despite males experiencing higher levels of victimisation than females, research suggests that females continue to fear crime more than males. Similarly, while older Australians are the least victimised group in society, it is widely suggested that older people fear crime more than younger people.

¹ Although there was an increase in all offence categories, the specific offences of murder, manslaughter and driving causing death decreased in 2001. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002) Recorded Crime. Catalogue No 4510, Canberra.

² Weatherburn, D (2001) What Causes Crime? *Crime and Justice Bulletin*. NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.

³ Weatherburn, D (2001).

- 1.14 Fear of crime can be a complex issue. This is because what people actually fear and why is not always clear. Often, statements about fear of crime do not distinguish between perceptions of general risk, fear of being personally victimised, concern about crime as a public policy issue and anxiety about life in general.⁴
- 1.15 A number of factors have been associated with fear of crime. These include:
- Gender
 - Age
 - Income
 - Previous victimisation
 - Media exposure
 - Environmental considerations
 - Neighbourhood change
- 1.16 This inquiry seeks to examine a number of issues related to fear of crime. This includes who fears crime and why, the types of crime feared, where crime is feared, and the factors that contribute to fear of crime. The Committee is also interested in exploring the actual risk of crime for groups within the community.

Impact of being a victim of crime and fear of crime

- 1.17 Being a victim of crime and fearing crime can have a significant impact on the way people choose to participate in society. Not all victims will be affected by crime in the same way, and for some victims the effects of crime will be long lasting. Victims may experience a number of consequences of crime including:⁵
- Financial loss
 - Property damage
 - Physical injury
 - Death
 - Psychological and emotional effects
 - Behavioural changes
 - Changes to personal relationships
- 1.18 While many of these consequences are those associated with personal victimisation, it has been suggested that people close to direct victims of crime may suffer or react in a similar way. For both direct and indirect victims, a heightened sense of fear of crime may result.
- 1.19 Fear of crime may detract from a person's health and wellbeing, contribute to social isolation, and have a negative impact on business.⁶ For some people, there is great disparity between what is actually feared, and the likelihood of that particular act/incident occurring. Yet it is this fear of crime that contributes to many people feeling insecure in their own homes as well as in their communities.

⁴ Grabosky P (1995) Fear of Crime and Fear Reduction Strategies, *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice* No 44, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.

⁵ Cook B, David F, and Grant, A (1999) 'Victims' Needs, Victims' Rights: Policies and Programs for Victims of Crime in Australia', *Research and Policy Paper* No 19, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.

⁶ National Crime Prevention (1998) *Fear of Crime*.

- 1.20 The Committee would like to learn more about the impact of being a victim of crime and fearing crime. This includes how these experiences and feelings have changed people—their lifestyle, quality of life, behaviours, and attitudes.

Strategies to support victims and reduce crime

- 1.21 Supporting victims in our community will go a long way to minimise many of the problems associated with the experience of crime. In addition, reducing crime will not only reduce the number of victims within our community, but it will also increase feelings of safety and security for all. There a number of strategies that can be implemented to support victims and prevent crime.
- 1.22 Strategies to support victims of crime may take the form of:
- Legislative and social reform
 - Restorative justice approaches
 - Compensation for victims
 - Counselling and other support services for victims
- 1.23 On the other hand, strategies to reduce crime can be categorised into four broad areas of crime prevention:
- Opportunity reduction approaches
 - Developmental/early intervention approaches
 - Community/social crime prevention
 - Criminal justice system approaches
- 1.24 This inquiry will examine the types of strategies available to support victims and reduce crime as well as their effectiveness.

Apprehension rates

- 1.25 Apprehension rates refer to offenders being detected and arrested by authorities. Unfortunately offenders are not always caught in the act by police. More often than not however offenders may be seen committing a crime by a member of the public. Alternatively, members of the public may come to learn about the particulars of a crime either as a victim, as someone close to the victim or perhaps as someone who knows the perpetrator. Generally, authorities are more likely to learn about crime when it is reported to police.

Reporting crime to police

- 1.26 Surveys conducted in Australia and overseas suggest that victims only report about 40 per cent of crimes to authorities.⁷ Under-reporting of crime not only contributes to an underestimation of crime within the community but it reduces the risk of offenders being detected and apprehended by police. It also does little to facilitate support for victims in need.
- 1.27 There are a number of reasons why victims may choose not to report crime to authorities. These include:
- The perceived seriousness of the offence
 - Personal and public attitudes towards police and their effectiveness
 - Past experiences of victims
 - The relationship between the victim and the offender

⁷ Australian Institute of Criminology (2002) *Australian Crime: Facts and Figures*, Canberra.

- Fear of reprisal
 - The likelihood of compensation or a successful insurance claim
- 1.28 For people who have been a victim of crime on a number of occasions (ie a repeat victim) the decision not to report may be largely influenced by past experiences. Particularly, if repeat victims were unsatisfied with the response from police, and/or if they have learnt to adopt their own coping strategies for dealing with victimisation.
- 1.29 The Committee would like to know why people do and don't report crime to police; and particularly, if there are any differences in the reporting rates of groups within the community. In addition, the Committee would like to know which crimes are more likely to be reported, and how reporting rates as well as the apprehension rates of offenders can be improved.

Effectiveness of sentencing

- 1.30 Based on the annual prison census survey undertaken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics,⁸ on 30 June 2001 almost 60% of prisoners (58.4%) incarcerated across Australia had a known previous period of adult incarceration. Prison is one of a series of sentencing options available to judges and magistrates when dealing with offenders. This inquiry will examine the range of sentencing options available to judges and magistrates as well as their effectiveness in deterring offenders from crime.

Community safety and policing

- 1.31 Australians want to feel safe in their own homes and in their own communities. A major factor in community safety is policing. It is reasonable to expect that a community will feel safer when there is a visible police presence, and when offenders are detected and apprehended by police. Police have an important role to play in preventing and controlling crime. This inquiry will examine the policing of crime and measures to enhance community safety.

Reading and resource material

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002), *Recorded Crime, Australia* Catalogue No. 4510.0, ABS Canberra.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (1999), *Crime and Safety Australia*. Catalogue No. 4509.0, ABS Canberra.

Australian Institute of Criminology (2002) *Australian Crime: Facts and Figures 2001*. AIC, Canberra.

Australian Institute of Criminology (1999) *Victims' Needs, Victims' Rights: Policies and Programs for Victims of Crime in Australia*. Research and Policy Paper No 19, AIC, Canberra.

Weatherburn, D (2001) *What Causes Crime*. Crime and Justice Bulletin No 54. Contemporary Issues in Crime and Justice. New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.

⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002) *Prisoners in Australia*. Catalogue No. 4571.0, Canberra.

Internet sites

- House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs: www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/laca
- Commonwealth Attorney General's Department: www.ag.gov.au
- Australian Institute of Criminology: www.aic.gov.au
- NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research: www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/bocsar1.nsf/pages/subject_list

Submissions

The Committee welcomes submissions from interested organisations and individuals. Submissions addressing one or more of the terms of reference should be sent by **2 August 2002** to:

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For information on preparing a submission to a parliamentary committee see www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/documnts/howsub.htm