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Safety in the Suburbs: Social Disadvantage, Community Mobilisation and the Prevention of Violence

Rebecca Wickes, Ross Homel and Renee Zahnow

Introduction

There has been a marked decline in violence in most advanced countries in recent decades (Goldberger & Rosenfeld 2008). This development could be viewed as a resumption, after a post-World War II disruption, of the downward trend in violence apparent in Western societies for hundreds of years (Pinker 2011). Australia, too, has witnessed a marked decline in some types of violence (Australian Institute of Criminology 2013a, 2013b). For example, homicide victimisation rates have dropped by 29% since the mid- to late-1990s (Australian Institute of Criminology 2013a). In the new millennium, the pattern for non-lethal violence does not follow the same trajectory. Disturbingly, Australian rates of self-reported violent victimisation are consistently in the upper half of the range reported when compared to other countries participating in the International Crime Victimisation Surveys (van Dijk, van Kesteren & Smit 2007). Additional evidence suggests that rates of assault have risen by an average of 2% each year since the early 2000s, even though the rates of other crimes have declined (Australian Institute of Criminology 2010).

Violence is not randomly distributed, but instead concentrates in particular types of places. In Australia, as is the case in many developed, Western countries, higher rates of violence occur in communities characterised by socio-economic disadvantage. Disadvantage directly impacts violence through increasing one's exposure to violence and victimisation (Bingenheimer, Brennan & Earls 2005), but its effects are also indirect. Poverty starts a cycle that undermines the capacity to come together to resolve local problems, which in turn sets in motion a range of problems that deepen and reinforce poverty and lower levels of social cohesion and trust (Sampson & Morenoff 2006).

In Australia, several cross-sectional studies demonstrate the strong relationship between disadvantage, social cohesion and violence (Mazerolle, Wickes & McBroom 2010; Vinson & Homel 1975; Weatherburn & Lind 2001). What is less well understood is the extent to which they influence violence over time. We argue a longitudinal approach is necessary to not only identify the key predictors of violence, but to better inform community crime prevention

this had dropped to 13%, while in the same period in the rest of Victoria the figure was virtually static at 17% in 2002 and 16% in 2012.

There is every likelihood that many *CTC* and related initiatives have increased levels of community cohesion and trust as a simple function of their effectiveness in building well-functioning and comprehensive local coalitions with demonstrable effectiveness, but the research to test this hypothesis remains to be done. Such research should include, in a longitudinal design, the measures of community structure and processes that we have identified in this chapter, alongside the well-established measures of risk and protective factors, coalition functioning, and impacts on community social cohesion and trust and rates of violence.

We recognise that experience over many years with community empowerment and crime prevention initiatives in disadvantaged, socially disorganised communities is not at all encouraging (Homel & McGee 2012; Wickes in press). This long history of failure leads us to temper our cautious optimism about new community prevention approaches with realism about the corrosive effects of poverty and increasing social inequality on the *capacity* of communities to focus on local problems and to get organised to address them effectively, even with external funding (Greenberg et al 2007). Nevertheless on the basis of our analyses and even more in the light of recent advances in prevention science (Spoth et al 2013), we propose that strategies to improve safety must combine the best insights from both collaborative community action research and prevention science (Weissberg & Greenberg 1998), using a community mobilisation approach. Specifically, we argue that aligning the fruits of the many years of social disorganisation research with the emerging science of prevention, using *CTC* which has been trialled in Australian communities or a similar model, holds the promise of taking community prevention research to a new level, especially if experiments are focused on socially disadvantaged communities. Such endeavours also hold the key to identifying both the critical mechanisms that allow for the development of social cohesion and the ways in which social cohesion manifests in activities that could lead to lower rates of violence in Australian suburbs.

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