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Preventing Crime

What We Know, and What We Need to Do

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This book is dedicated to my late parents, Brian Robert Sarre (1927–2022) and Winifred Grace Turner Sarre (1931–2004) who gave me the educational opportunities I was fortunate to enjoy, both in Australia and in North America.

This book is also dedicated to the memory of sociolegal polymath the late Professor Roman Tomasic, a long-term colleague and friend. On July 14, 2022, I attended his funeral. His legacy, fortunately, lives on in the pages of the journals to which he contributed, in the words in the books he wrote, and in the lives of the students he taught.

Finally, I dedicate this work to the thousands of men and women in Australia who give their time professionally and voluntarily to the task of crime prevention. Bodies such as the Australian Crime Prevention Council (led by Auxiliary Judge and a former Master of the South Australian Supreme Court, Peter Norman) typify these organisations. These groups are committed to reducing victimisation in a range of ways. Their work is mostly unheralded, yet provides a valuable and ongoing service to the community. They deserve our praise.

FOREWORD

At a time where media headlines often scream the latest crime statistics or sensationalised criminal acts, it is easy to overlook the quieter, more subtle mechanisms that shape our society's relationship with crime.

This book delves into a realm less explored, yet equally vital: social crime prevention. In our, sometimes desperate, attempt to combat crime, we often focus on reactive measures—police patrols, judicial proceedings, and incarceration strategies. However, amidst the ongoing, resounding, clamour for security measures, there exists a profound truth often overlooked: true safety and security are not merely the absence of crime but the presence of trust, equality of opportunity, and robust social capital. This book illuminates this truth with the conviction that the author is known for. Tucked away in our communities lies a potent force. Social crime prevention is the collective effort of individuals, families, educators, community leaders, and policymakers to address the root causes of crime before they sprout into criminal behaviour.

This book shines a spotlight on the less obvious yet profoundly impactful strategies for preventing crime. It underscores that crime prevention is not solely the responsibility of law enforcement and the judicial system; rather, it is a duty that is shared by every member of society. From nurturing supportive family environments to fostering inclusive communities, from providing access to food, housing, quality education, and employment opportunities to addressing socio-economic inequalities, every action contributes to the intricate tapestry of crime prevention.

Drawing from the evidence, Rick Sarre's book justly argues that a safe and secure community is one founded on principles of trust, equality, and social investment. It articulates how the development of strong social capital and the investment in constructive pathways can reshape lives and fortify communities against crime. However, it also warns against the pitfalls of shortsighted spending cuts in crime prevention, cautioning that hastily bolstering police and prisons may compromise long-term safety and exacerbate societal inequalities.

In the Australian context, navigating the landscape of crime prevention presents unique challenges. The division of labour among government entities, with policing, prosecutions, courts, and corrections mostly falling under the purview of states and territories, exemplifies the need for a multi-level approach. While federal intervention is pivotal in addressing transnational crimes, much of the pain experienced by victims remains localized, demanding tailored local initiatives for effective prevention.

Indeed, the aphorism holds true: to prevent crime, we must shape our communities to discourage crime and intervene early in the lives of those at risk of entanglement in the justice system. This means not only addressing individual needs but also nurturing the socio-economic and cultural fabric of our society.

Over the past half-century, a wealth of research has documented and emphasised effective crime prevention strategies. Yet, the challenge lies not in the lack of knowledge but in its implementation. Effective policy-making demands well-informed debates free from the shackles of political rhetoric. This book serves as a beacon, signalling policymakers and citizens alike with the knowledge needed to navigate the complex terrain of crime prevention.

Over the past half-century, too, a raft of effective crime prevention strategies have been shown, time and time again, to work in various areas of our communities, focusing on a wide range of vulnerabilities, and social determinants of health and well-being. From Australia to Europe, Canada to New Zealand, South Africa to South America and Asia, the literature is already more than compelling. These initiatives have been documented, analysed, and scrutinised from multiple angles. Tough on crime should never be equated with soft on crime prevention and social investment.

Rick Sarre rightfully insists upon a long-term perspective necessary for effective social crime prevention. The fruits of these efforts may not be immediately apparent and may take a generation or two to manifest fully. But just as a seed planted today bears fruit tomorrow, investing in

social crime prevention today lays the foundation for safer, more resilient communities in the future. From little things, big things grow, as the song goes.

As you journey through the pages of this book, I urge you to consider the profound implications of social crime prevention. Let us not merely treat the symptoms of crime but strive to address its underlying causes, and recognize that crime prevention is not a task relegated solely to the realm of law enforcement. Rather, it should be a collective endeavour that requires the active participation of all members of society.

Ultimately, the message is clear. Crime prevention involves all of us, not just police and judges. It is about building communities where every individual can thrive, where opportunities abound, and where the cycle of crime is broken. Together, let us embark on this crucial journey towards a safer, more just society.

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PREFACE

I have long been interested in crime prevention. On my shelves are many books that have ‘crime prevention’ or ‘crime reduction’ in the title, among them Shaftoe (2004), Fleming and Wood (2006), Moss and Stephens (2006), Sutton, Cherney and White (2008), Tilley (2012), Welsh and Farrington (2012), Schneider (2015), Prenzler (2017), Petersen and Das (2018), Sutton, Cherney, White and Clancey (2021), and most recently Lab (2023). This interest stemmed from my taking the opportunity to complete a graduate program in criminology at the Centre of Criminology at the University of Toronto four decades ago. At the Centre I was exposed to sociological and political theories that challenged my (then) world view: a world view that told me that crime was caused by aberrant individuals who were best dealt with by legal systems meting out legal sanctions. It soon occurred to me that this view was seriously limited and led, more often than not, to a downward spiral in the lives of those caught up in the justice system (and their families, especially their offspring). Moreover, it did nothing to stem the flow of new ‘recruits’ to the business of crime. Time and time again my teachers also pointed out to me that the way the law is constructed, written, and enforced must be considered when one is thinking about crime causation and prevention. Focusing on the individuals who had exhibited the criminal conduct in order to limit or forestall criminal conduct was useful and necessary, but not sufficient.

This book presents my ideas concerning what we now need to do to prevent crime. The selection of the topics is not designed to be comprehensive. It is guided by the fields I have studied and in which I have published. It is modelled obliquely on the watershed work from Norval Morris and Gordon Hawkins (referred to me many years ago by my friend Greg Crafter) entitled *The Honest Politicians' Guide to Crime Control* published in the USA in 1970 (and discussed later in this book). Norval Morris (1923–2004) was an Australian-educated US law professor, criminologist, and advocate for criminal justice and mental health reform. Gordon Hawkins (1919–2004) was an Australian criminologist and director of the University of Sydney's Institute of Criminology from 1981 to 1985. More than five decades ago, they set out a range of reform imperatives that they believed would forestall crime and limit the rising crime rate. My ideas are similarly focused, albeit across my own somewhat limited selection of topics. Like the target audience of *The Honest Politicians' Guide to Crime Control*, I, too, want all politicians to read this book.

Pleasingly, there is great news for those people who want information and commentary on the subject of crime and its control: there is currently a wealth of research evidence. The findings emerging from public and private sources, academic work, and doctoral theses are phenomenal. Russell Smith explored the vast panoply of these sources in two recent research volumes (Smith, 2021; 2023). The material emerging from the Australian and New Zealand Society of Criminology expands exponentially each year too. Its 50th anniversary volume of contemporary research (Deckert and Sarre, 2017) runs to over 900 pages. Since 1986 the Australian Institute of Criminology has been producing succinct research reports known as *Trends and issues in crime and criminal justice*. There are almost 700 of these reports on the Institute's website, www.aic.gov.au. In its first fifty years, the Australian Institute of Criminology produced over 1,800 reports and papers, and its library holds over 100,000 items (Smith, 2023). Since 1997, Tony Doob of the Centre of Criminology at the University of Toronto, with the support of the Department of Justice, Canada, has been collating abstracts from published research papers that he deems worthy of circulating more widely in an accessible (website and email) and succinct form. Over a thousand such abstracts have been collated and published under the title *Criminology Highlights*.

The bottom line is that we are now blessed with an enormous range of criminological resources, policy recommendations, and evaluations. And the number is growing by the day.

Despite this cornucopia of peer-reviewed information and evidence, the public (and the people they vote into office) too often retreat to ‘solutions’ for the crime problem that have been debunked again and again. How is it possible that we can know so much and yet act as if we know nothing? It is time for our policymakers to act upon the evidence rather than simply pander to those with the loudest voices in the community, voices that typically allege that the only way to stop criminal behaviour is to strengthen the state’s policing systems, and put more offenders behind bars (and for longer). My modest proposals in this book are designed to challenge this view. I trust that they can be persuasive in the minds of the people who hold the relevant legislative power and executive purse-strings.

A NOTE ON WHAT IS NOT UNDER DISCUSSION

There are a number of topics in this book which I am not discussing in any depth. This is not because they are not important; rather, they have not been the focus of my research.

The first topic not under discussion is drugs policy. The topic of illicit drugs (possession, use, and supply) has long been an issue of contention in any discussion around crime prevention around the world (United Nations, 2010). There are strong views for and against decriminalisation (the removal of criminal penalties for the personal use of drugs) and legalisation (the removal of justice attention generally, including penalties for the personal use of drugs and the supply of drugs), views and opinions that vary with the type of drug and the age and vulnerability of its suppliers and users. Currently there are no noises towards legislative legalisation of drugs in Australia. However, since the mid-1980s, changes to laws and practice have led to every State and Territory adopting if not a *de jure* (at law) decriminalisation of some drugs (principally cannabis), certainly a *de facto* decriminalisation. There are countries around the world that have engaged in experiments with legalisation and decriminalisation (for example, Portugal, Spain, Netherlands, Canada, and some States of the USA), preferring approaches based upon harm minimisation and public health priorities. Some studies show little or no evidence of consequential increased consumption and drug abuse. The literature