

A reflection

Can locality-based strategies genuinely open up life opportunities for children in disadvantaged areas?

Will areas of concentrated crime and delinquency yield to orthodox policing and crime control measures? In the early 1970s that was the expectation behind Australian policy makers' use of the then fashionable term social defence to describe ways of reducing the occurrence of crime. There was no denying the need for more effective policing. Yet metaphors that conjured up visions of combat and suppression did not easily equate with the complicated social circumstances of many offenders and their families that had challenged the conventionality of my own approach as a young parole officer. It was one thing to literally chase and apprehend a frightened parolee who could not maintain the compensation payments that were a condition of his early release from prison. It was quite another to then witness the man's six children, including a pregnant fifteen year-old, eating bread and dripping for dinner in a home devoid of the modest comforts of that era. Instead of returning to Head Office with reassuring news for the Attorney-General of the day that the money owed had been extracted, I could only report that the family had so many inter-locking health, financial and social problems that the local business people I approached on their behalf had taken around the hat to support them. A few years later the family scraped together enough to buy an old car described by police as a 'rust bucket' when it exploded on impact with another vehicle wiping out the family.

The circumstances and fate of this family was only a sadder and more dramatic version of a theme that seemed to run through countless similar cases. It was commonplace to be departing a client's home only to pass another representative of a health or welfare agency on the way in. I also wondered why when searching for a client's home, my colleagues and I instinctively knew that we were in the right neighbourhood, the right street. What did all this mean for the life prospects of the children of those we were supervising?

More than thirty years ago several of the

foundation staff of the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, of which I was privileged to be Director, saw the investigation of these issues as a necessary complement to the narrower 'law and order' perspective underlying the notion of social defence. We chose the city of Newcastle as a base for our research partly because of its manageable size and because we believed that it was reasonably representative of other Australian cities. It was also helpful that 72 'minor suburbs' of Newcastle were aligned with Australian Bureau of Statistics boundaries. That meant that we could combine 'indicators of disadvantage' from the census with data directly compiled by the Bureau of Crime Statistics (including psychiatric hospital admissions, truancy, low birth weight babies, court convictions and the clientele of the major relief agencies). Appropriate rates could then be calculated taking account of the different populations of the minor suburbs.

The geographic concentration of disadvantage revealed by the Newcastle study and a census of agency clients and services that followed, was so marked as to constitute a compelling argument for including locality-based strategies within society's approaches to crime control and prevention. We employed some quite sophisticated statistical methods to analyse the data but you only had to see the pattern of re-occurrence of the same suburbs on each of the rankings to gather that a major proportion of the strands of disadvantage were concentrated within seven suburbs representing 5.5 percent of Newcastle's population. Criminal convictions were concentrated in these same areas.

A modest beginning was made to deal in a more comprehensive way with the problems besetting the identified suburbs and appropriately enough it concentrated on opening up opportunities for children and young people. But the deep-rooted social accompaniments of delinquent behaviour proved a little too disconcerting for the official mindsets and institutional practices of the time for much change to occur at the policy level. Over the

ensuing thirty years a succession of similar studies in Newcastle have shown that the same areas identified as highly disadvantaged in 1972 have generally remained so not only in the context of their region but the whole of South-eastern Australia. In Newcastle and elsewhere the same set of factors – interrupted schooling, unemployment, low work skills, disability and sickness, financial hardship and crime – play a major part in defining areas of concentrated social disadvantage.

My enthusiasm in 1999 for encouraging the location of a NSW Government Strengthening Communities project in a disadvantaged area in southern Newcastle was driven by memories of those successive generations of children to whom the baton of disadvantage had been routinely passed. But there was also a keen desire on my part to see whether entrenched disadvantage can, in fact, be turned around. Many practitioners share the conviction that we have no choice but to try and assist change locally as well as at macro-economic and governmental levels. Theoretical insights into how this might be attempted are more refined now than they were three decades ago. Nevertheless, even a fairly pragmatic approach within the framework of the government sponsored Hunter Community Renewal Scheme afforded an opportunity to see whether substantial social improvements could be made, especially by way of providing better beginnings for children and young people. A Coordination Management Group developed a Renewal Strategy and a wide range of state agencies, including the health, housing, community service, education and training, regional development, sport and recreation and police authorities participated. Also involved were the regional council, the Two Bishops' Trust and Jesuit Social Services.

A wide-ranging three-year Action Plan (2000 – 2003) addressing employment and social needs was prepared and a 'Place Manager' engaged for the period of the plan. Space does not permit a detailed account of the Plan but its implementation is reflected in some of the illustrative achievements during the three years in question:

- Twenty five jobs and nine new start-up businesses were created,
- Twenty seven local women trained in an Assistant in Nursing course provided by WEA,

- Forty people undertook volunteer training and became actively involved in the project,
- A local newspaper was created and distributed to all households,
- A 'School as Community' Centre was established at the local primary school with programs that included: parenting classes, the staged introduction of pre-school aged children to school, exercise-cum-sociability groups for some isolated mothers, the identification of talented youngsters and the provision of academic extension opportunities, the engagement of some fifty fathers in making various contributions to the life of the local school and a generally increased involvement by parents in school committees, and a Shop-Smart (nutrition) program,
- Increasingly satisfactory attendance by all students over the last two years at the local schools and a more supportive relationship between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous parents,
- More positive perceptions of their suburb by residents following physical improvements to the area,
- The introduction of a Domestic Violence Agency Referral Scheme that resulted in 57 referrals to services for support,
- Five outdoor camps for women that contributed to stronger relations between women of the area, and
- An inter-agency group to foster better partnerships between local service providers.

The sad thing about all these initiatives is that they occurred within a limited period determined more by political imperatives than the scale of the challenge involved. Problems that had become entrenched over at least the thirty years the area had been studied were unlikely to be set right by a mere three years of attention. Yet the equating of political kudos with the number and spread of community interventions constantly endangers the sustained effort needed to provide real opportunities in our most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. This is not a uniquely Australian problem. The current expansion of the innovative and comparatively well-funded UK Sure Start project from 524 to 2,500 localities may reflect the same imperative to 'roll out' programs to encompass more and more communities while in the process diluting the effort

made where it is most needed.

In Southern Newcastle it remains to be seen how effective the transfer of management responsibilities from the Place Manager to line agencies, and the creation of a local Board of Management, a resident-run collective, will prove to be. Meanwhile there is some encouraging evidence of the potential benefits of even short-run attempts to turn-around the life prospects of the residents of the area, especially the very young. Social indicator data collected on 578 NSW postcodes in 1999 placed the locality in sixth rank position on rates of child maltreatment but a similar study in 2003 saw the area ranked 454th (out of 587 postcodes) on the same variable. The other early childhood indicator, low birth weight, saw a similar change in fortune from 15th rank position in 1999 to 462nd position in 2003. Other influences beside the renewal scheme may have played their part but changes of this magnitude are very rare in the type of study conducted.

This evidence of the potential helpfulness of serious and sustained support for our most disadvantaged neighbourhoods comes too late to benefit the family that gave me my first practical grounding in cumulative social disadvantage. However, I trust that it will not take another thirty years before our society fully accepts its responsibility to temper ideas of defence and the preservation of privilege with an equal determination to ensure the well being and development of all of our children.

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