

# Community Safety Indicators: ‘what works, what doesn’t, what is promising’

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## ABSTRACT

Violence and fear of violence result in significant social and economic costs to Australians. Federal and state governments have supported ‘community crime prevention’ initiatives at the local government level as a way to prevent crime, violence, and fear of violence. The question of how these local initiatives evaluate their effectiveness, and the effectiveness of programs they initiate or fund, is the topic of this paper. Specifically, the paper focuses on community safety indicators as an evaluation tool for local government policies and programs.

The paper will cover three questions:

- How can previous experience with environmental indicators inform the development of community safety indicators?
- Are there Australian and international good practice examples of community safety indicators?
- What sort of community safety indicators remain to be developed, and what is the potential for this work?

## INTRODUCTION

The interest in monitoring environmental, economic, and social progress at the local and senior government level has increased exponentially in recent years. This interest has led to the development of evaluation techniques, including indicators that can be measured at regular intervals. The paper seeks to adapt lessons from the most developed forms of indicators, those relating to the environment, to perhaps more problematic indicators of social health and well-being known as community safety indicators.

## SETTING THE STAGE: THE PROBLEMATIC SITUATION OF COMMUNITY SAFETY INDICATORS

The development of social indicators derives from the mid-1960s, when NASA, the US space program, decided to investigate the effect of their work on the American public. The director of the project, Raymond Bauer, quickly discovered that there was an almost complete lack of data and methodology to develop “statistics, statistical series, and all other forms of evidence that enable us to assess where we stand and are going with respect to our values and goals” (quoted in Canadian Council on Social Development 1996: 7). The notion of social indicators spread quickly, with the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) beginning work on the issue in 1970, and the United Nations following suit soon after.

Like environmental indicators, social indicators are intended to help (1) inform people about trends; (2) predict future changes; (3) identify and monitor problems and priorities to address these problems; and (4) evaluate the effectiveness of policies and programmes (OECD 1997: 40). Good indicators tend to be simple, policy relevant, valid, replicable over time, available, and affordable (Hardi and Tsan 1997). The leading research institute on social indicators, the Campbell Collaboration, summarizes these functions and qualities as three questions: “What helps? What harms? Based on what evidence?” (Campbell Collaboration 2005). A similar formulation comes from the most influential recent report on crime prevention evaluation: “What works? What doesn’t? What is promising?” (Sherman et al 1997).

The ‘Sherman report’, as it is known, pointed out that the \$3.2 billion expended in the US in 1996, had not been based on evidence-based research of any impact on crime or social well-being, and thus was primarily going to programmes that at best were uncertain in their impacts, and at worst, were proven to be ineffective. Although the report evaluates many individual programs (from Neighbourhood Watch to sentencing, from street lighting to court-ordered interventions for men who batter their intimate partners), one of its strongest conclusions is that interventions in seven local settings are interdependent and thus locally-based coordination is one of the most potentially effective methods of reducing crime and violence. The seven settings are: communities, families, schools, labour markets, specific places, police, and criminal justice (ibid: 3-4).

The political impacts of the Sherman report have been limited in the US, but proved to be the basis for the UK Labour Party’s approach to a comprehensive evidence-based national crime prevention policy (Petrosino et al 2001). Further reports by the UK Home Office and the International Centre for the Prevention of Crime reiterated that the most effective approaches would be based in “strong local action involving multiple partners capable of tackling a variety of risk factors through actively taking part in a shared process of diagnosis of problems and in the development of a shared plan of action”. (Sansfacon et al 2002: 20). In turn, Australian Labour Party state governments have adopted much of their ‘modernizing governance’ rhetoric on crime prevention, local social indicators and place-based policies on experiences in the UK, the European Union, and to a lesser extent in the US (Reddel 2002).

Senior government agencies responsible for crime prevention, such as the Home Office in the UK, have supported the development of local government community safety indicators. These indicators are rarely provided in isolation: for instance, the UK ‘best value’ indicators cover corporate health, education, social services, housing, and environmental services as well as community safety (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2002 and 2003). In fact, community safety is usually seen as either a subset of health and well-being (eg., Abbema et al 2004), or social capital/ community strength (eg., Black and Hughes 2001). In the UK, there are ambitious national targets for burglary and motor vehicle theft reduction: 25% fewer burglaries in 2005 than in 1998/99, 30% fewer motor vehicle thefts in 2004 than in 1998/99. The national government does not, however, set targets for the reduction of violent crime or ‘racial incidents’, and previously measured indicators of fear of crime (as defined by the questions ‘how safe or unsafe do you feel walking in [locality or neighbourhood] during the day/ at night’) would appear to have been dropped in the most recent report cards (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2002 and 2003).

The apparent reason for this reluctance to set targets is that the information behind most violence indicators, police statistics, is fundamentally flawed. To give one example, only one tenth of Australian women who were sexually assaulted by a man, and only one fifth of women who were physically assaulted by a man reported their last incident to the police (McLennan 1996), and these statistics are mirrored internationally (Smaoun 2000). It is thus an aim of many authorities, including Victoria Police, to increase reporting of violent crimes, particularly in the field of domestic violence. As for fear of crime, which for women tends to be the fear of rape and for men

the fear of assault or robbery, the questions of the mechanisms by which fear might be reduced are complex and difficult to measure (Grabowsky 1995), and there are very complex relationships indeed between fear, risk, and use or avoidance of community resources such as public transit or evening courses (Tulloch et al 1998). This is probably the reason why there are no evaluations of fear of crime reduction strategies in the Sherman report, the Campbell Collaboration website, or the UK community safety research database.

Aside from the problems in measuring violence reduction and fear of crime reduction, some problems common to all indicators are particularly acute in relation to crime prevention indicators. Both Reddel (2002) and Martin (2002) draw attention to the potentially competitive relationships set up between different arms of civil society and government in evaluating grants programs, problems that are also evident in the relationships between local and senior governments. In the case of both transfer payments to community agencies and between governments, flexibility and diversity in approaches is encouraged. However, an increasing emphasis on 'the bottom line' may disadvantage both communities and specific agencies that are less able to prove their effectiveness. The challenge is compounded by the longitudinal nature of crime prevention, the 'statistically insignificant' small samples used in research on intensive interventions, the mismatch between perceptions and crime statistics, and the sheer complexity of interactions that lead to criminal and violent behaviour (Petrosino et al 2001). One of the few studies that attempted to track individual outcomes of a two-year comprehensive socioeconomic health inequality reduction project, in which both personal safety and traffic safety were priorities, found that the short intervention period, the diffuse nature of the interventions, and trends outside the study area may all be factors in the lack of a measurable positive impact on health indicators (Abbema et al 2004).

## **ENVIRONMENTAL INDICATORS: WHAT THEY MIGHT HAVE TO TEACH COMMUNITY SAFETY INDICATORS**

In an attempt to learn from what works, we will now turn to a successful environmental indicators project that is now in its eighth year of continuous annual reporting. The Environmental Indicators for Metropolitan Melbourne (EIMM) is published annually in hard copy and on the internet reporting on each of the 31 municipalities in Metropolitan Melbourne (Australian Institute of Urban Studies 2005). Seventy two indicators are published in two sets on an alternating bi-annual basis and are grouped under the 11 themes of Air Emissions, Air Quality, Beach and Bay, Biodiversity, Buildings, Greenhouse, Litter, Open Space, Transport, Waste, and Water. The indicators are mostly descriptive or interpretive and are complemented with case studies.

The project began in 1992 as an initiative in of the Australian Institute of Urban Studies (AIUS), City of Melbourne and the then Victorian Office of the Environment. This was one of the first and probably most ambitious urban environmental indicator projects in Australia, although the city of Brisbane and Shoalhaven Shire had already set baselines for monitoring their own local ecosystems. The gestation phase of the project also coincided with the radical redefinition of the local perspective in 1994-95 when the Victorian State Government implemented a comprehensive re-structure of local government creating new, larger municipalities through amalgamations. As it happened, this provided a more conducive setting for a local government indicators project. As Executive Officer of the Victorian Local Government Association Mike Hill (2002) observed:

“pre-amalgamation, many councils tended to be clubbish, closed and parochial. Some of the emerging local governments have not escaped from this stereotype. However, most of them are now more strategic; they plan for their long term financial, infrastructure and social needs with a greater sophistication.”

Most local governments now had the resources to develop and support a more pro-active environment policy.

The indicator bulletin, as it evolved, has been produced by a collaborative of mainly government environment officers at a local and state level, convened by AIUS. This is a practical, effective arrangement for gathering data and sharing work load. But such a makeup necessarily brings a heightened sense for issues of political sensitivity and organizational loyalty. This was explicitly acknowledged in 2004 in determining to avoid a league table approach with its implied critical, comparative perspective and instead adopt a collective and consensual approach that emphasizes difference of local perspectives and responsibilities.

“Data is often presented by local government area. This is not for the purposes of direct comparison, because each local government area and its community are unique and will have its own priority issues and means of tackling them. We do hope however that this information is useful for Councils and communities in monitoring environmental trends and assessing the impacts of the many very positive projects that are being undertaken to contribute to environmental protection and enhancement” (Australian Institute of Urban Studies 2004)

Has the project been successful? A big achievement has been the EIMM’s longevity – sustained reporting, managed by a cross government collaborative over seven years. A good indicator project needs to be regular and sustained. And it has taken time to evolve. Despite extensive preparatory research and planning it was necessary to make ad hoc adjustments through trial and error to find the right suite of indicators. Some indicators that initially looked good such as ‘Noise’ turned out to be either too difficult or not useful to report on and then data sets altered as some local government operational processes changed such as waste collection. The current stable of indicators finally settled only after the third iteration (years 5 and 6).

There have been the predictable problems with data quality, availability and alignment with policy objectives. Also the Pressure-Condition-Response model adopted as the indicator framework has sometimes been too simplistic in interpreting the complex hybrid human/natural ecology of urban environments.

But there have also been some perhaps unintended effective outcomes. With the 1994-95 Victorian local government amalgamations came the requirement that local government develop comprehensive, integrated and consistent policy including accounting for achievement of policy objectives. The EIMM has been a very cost effective and reliable means for local government to pool their resources and so acquire an annual local state of the environment report. Also the collective task of the steering committee producing the annual bulletin has itself provided a valuable ongoing forum for those working at the coalface for sharing knowledge and expertise, developing skills and debate about both philosophical and nitty gritty issues from the local perspective.

The annual bulletin now provides a consistent framework for accounting for the state of the environment across all the local government areas (LGAs) and an overall trend indicator. No benchmarks are set and no pointed comparison between LGAs is presented. It is left to particular municipalities to use the data to compare or benchmark their performance. Also the data as presented doesn’t preclude individuals or organizations developing a stronger comparative critique.

But the main question about effectiveness is after seven years reporting have there been tangible improvements ‘on the ground’. There has been no structured, comprehensive review of the EIMM and no methodical re-evaluation of the indicators and their use and application. Such a review would be needed to confidently identify causal links between the use of indicators and improvements to the local environments. One of the issues here may be that there are a very broad range of indicators. A more specialized set of indicators combined with well defined benchmarks linked explicitly to policy would be more effective in tracking actions and outcomes ‘on the

ground' at both the local and senior government levels. These are possible developments for the future.

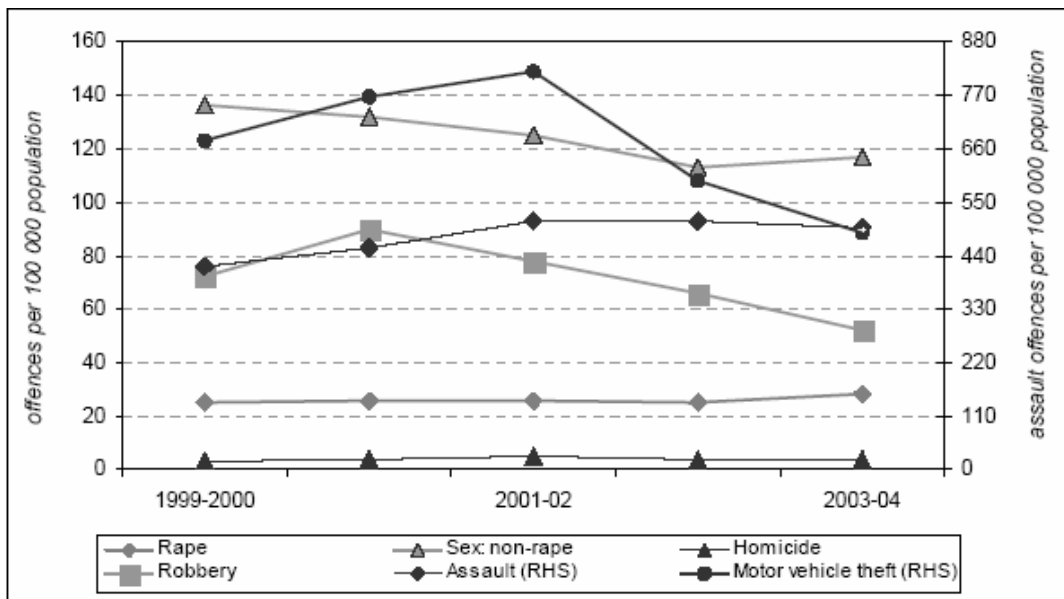
So what are the lessons from environmental indicators to social indicators, in particular, community safety indicators? The development of the indicators by a partnership of local and state government together with an independent convenor (the AIUS) has meant considerable buy-in from both government and community advocates, as well as useful organizational networking between the participants. The sharing and development of local government policy and project initiatives, particularly through the case studies, has helped support good practice. Local communities and government have become better informed about their own locality in relation to the metropolitan area. Individual motivation within government and the wider public has been nourished, and environmental theory and policy has become grounded in comprehensive local profiles that are also informed by a global perspective.

### **WHAT POTENTIAL IS THERE FOR A BETTER APPROACH TO COMMUNITY SAFETY INDICATORS? CASE STUDY: VICTORIA**

When the current Labour government was elected in Victoria in 1999, one of its commitments was to 'whole of government' priority actions, accompanied by demonstrable progress measures. One of the 11 priority issues is "safe streets, homes, and workplaces," and the initial progress measures were that "violent crime and fear of violent crime will be reduced by 5 per cent" and "road accidents and deaths will be reduced by 20 per cent over the next five years [ie., 2003 to 2008]". While road accidents are easily measurable, as discussed above, violent crime and fear of crime are much more difficult to measure. The state government developed two policy documents specifically dealing with crime and violence prevention: *Safer Streets and Homes: a crime and violence prevention strategy for Victoria 2002-2005*, administered by Crime Prevention Victoria, a division of the Department of Justice (2002), and the *Women's Safety Strategy: a coordinated approach to reducing violence against women*, another three year strategy administered by the Office of Women's Policy, a division of the Department of Victorian Communities (2002). Both initiatives stressed the importance of coordinated local government action to prevent crime, fear, and violence, and made links between violence on the street and violence in homes. Both initiatives have now come to the end of their mandate, and as of October 2005, there are no new policy documents to suggest the next steps, nor evaluations of the programs' effectiveness.

The latest progress report on *Growing Victoria Together*, the overarching policy document for the state government (figure 1), indicates declines in reported motor vehicle thefts and robberies over the five years between 1999/2000 and 2003/2004, a stable and low rate for homicide, a slight decrease in non-rape sexual assault, a slight increase in rape, and slight increases for assault. The report acknowledges that there is an effort to increase reporting of sexual offences, which probably has an impact on the rates. There appear to be small decreases in rates of fear of crime (Department of Premier and Cabinet 2005).

**Figure 1. Rates of Reported Crime in Victoria 1999-2004**



Source: Victoria Police

Crime Prevention Victoria developed Local Safety Surveys with information for every LGA annually from 1999 to 2001. The surveys provide a more detailed set of indicators, including burglary, car theft, drugs, property damage, and assault; perceived crime problems in the community; whether crime problems had increased or decreased in their community over the past five years; perceptions of crime involving knives and syringes; perceived safety in various locations (public transport, streets, homes, shopping centres); perceptions of road safety; and knowledge of community safety events. The most recent survey, in 2003, is only now being released to local councils. Victoria Police, in October 2005, released community safety snapshots for every LGA in Victoria, with overall crimes, crimes against the person, residential burglaries, community satisfaction, and perception of safety as its six key indicators. It has accompanied these snapshots with local policing initiatives and community safety forums to discuss these initiatives, suggesting that it wishes to take the lead in community safety organizing, rather than Crime Prevention Victoria or the individual LGAs.

The state government and VicHealth, the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, has also funded a number of projects to develop capacity in terms of indicator development, such as the *Victorian Community Indicators Project* (2005). This project has not thus far has not specifically addressed community safety indicators, but it has assisted in the Moreland indicators project (see below).

A group of Carolyn's students, under the direction of David, conducted an April 2005 survey to all members of Crime Prevention Victoria's Local Government in Community Safety Network on their use of indicators, which yielded only six responses, and thus had to be supplemented. A review of all 31 Metropolitan Melbourne Council websites, with follow-up telephone interviews, discovered 22 councils with published community safety plans, and three others in the process of developing community safety plans. However, while almost all municipalities addressed crime (along with traffic safety and injury prevention) in some way in their community safety plans, only ten of the councils had fear of crime reduction strategies, only seven discussed specific violence prevention strategies, and only five addressed violence in private space (ie., domestic violence) in some way. There are no common sources of data in these municipalities, and the Local Safety Surveys provided by Crime Prevention Victoria seemed not to be incorporated into most data sets, perhaps because they had not been updated since 2001 (it is too early to tell whether Victoria Police's community safety snapshots will be used in this manner).

The students were further directed to canvass potential sources of indicators, and to look at national and international best practice in the development of indicators. Using the criteria of availability, replicability, and relevance, a number of potential alternative indicators were developed, including burden of disease reports from health providers, child protection agency data, and local hospital/drug and alcohol centre data.

Locally, the best practice is undoubtedly the City of Moreland, which with help from the state government and Victoria University has developed *Indicators for Health, Safety and Well-being* (City of Moreland 2004). The project is intended to provide a sense of “where we are, where we are heading, and what we might do to get there”. The indicators are tied to both the Municipal Public Health Plan and the Council Plan, whose vision is:

“an environmentally sustainable and liveable city, where people can shop, work and socialise locally. A city where a car and a high income are not necessary for a rich and rewarding quality of life. A city which will continue to provide a range of opportunities and choices for a diverse and prosperous community.” (City of Moreland 2004)

The indicators were developed by (1) deciding on a vision, (2) brainstorming on potential indicators, and (3) narrowing down the potential indicators using criteria such as validity, reliability, relevance, and accessibility. They cover such themes as transportation, political participation, housing, and education, as well as “personal well-being and safety”. Within that last theme, drug overdoses, life expectancy, the proportion of people who believe their local area was improving in terms of safety, and the percentage engaging in physical activity is calculated.

Internationally, Seattle, a city in the northwest United States, has developed well-known *Indicators of Sustainable Community* (Sustainable Seattle 2004), which like the EIMM, combines statistical data with case studies of successful initiatives. The indicators measure rates of juvenile misdemeanour and felony filings with the police, but not adult reported crime rates. They also measure ‘neighbourliness’ (knowledge and trust of people in the local area) as a factor that enhances a sense of safety and the ability to find help in criminal situations. Black and Hughes (2001), in their comprehensive overview of Australian indicators of community strength, stress the importance of both bonding (knowing family and friends) and bridging (knowing people who are different to them in some way) social capital in developing networks of trust and confidence that might support a sense of safety, one of seven primary aspects of well-being which have been shown to have a significant relationship with overall life satisfaction. They recommend the question “how satisfied are you in your safety in the community” (Black and Hughes 2001: 131-133), with the precaution that individual personality (eg., optimist or pessimist) might have a large impact on the answers.

## CONCLUSION

As this overview should make clear, community safety indicators are at a far less developed state than environmental indicators, both within the state of Victoria and internationally. A recent international focus on ‘what works, what doesn’t, and what is promising’ as a basis of action, has not yet translated into consistent and effective evaluation techniques at the local level. The state of practical local knowledge on indicators is at yet underdeveloped, in Victoria and elsewhere.

To focus on Victoria, while there is a consensus that local action is most effective, both in terms of a coordinated response and a response sensitive to local issues and conditions, there is at present very little coordination between local community safety initiatives on common goals, evaluation techniques including indicators, and learning from good practice. Despite the existence of Crime Prevention Victoria and the Victorian Safe Communities Network, a strong commitment from

Victoria Police to community safety, and “safer streets, homes, and workplaces” being a priority of the state government, there has been an almost total disconnect between the State government emphasis on violence prevention and LGAs’ emphasis on almost everything except violence prevention.

Like environmental indicators, community safety indicators could potentially include a plethora of data, and there is no consensus on what the most appropriate data might be. Numerous international studies agree that indicators should be related to goals or vision for a project, should be available at the LGA level or at an even finer grain (since there are large disparities within many LGAs), should be checked on an annual or biennial basis, and should be provided to the public in an easy to access format (such as a well-designed website). Supplementing statistical data with ‘success stories’ seems to be a good model.

The EIMM provides an example of a mutual learning process between LGAs, agencies, and state government that could be replicated for community safety indicators. The strengths of the model is that it provided opportunities for LGAs to network amongst themselves, and to develop indicators that met their needs but also fit in with the priorities of state government. The existence of a neutral convenor meant that the usual turf wars between the levels of government were minimized. Although there were ongoing issues with funding, the sustainability of the project over a long period of time means that lessons were not lost. These lessons can now be transferred to another issue that has an impact on the health and well-being of individuals and communities.

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