

FOURTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON  
SPECIAL EQUIPMENT FOR THE POLICE  
CANBERRA, THURSDAY 18 OCTOBER 1979

UNIFORM CRIME STATISTICS FOR AUSTRALIA

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Chairman of the Australian Law Reform Commission

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THE LACK OF UNIFORM CRIME STATISTICS

I want to speak briefly about a serious matter which is, I believe, consistent with the theme of this important international conference.

There is no doubt the demands that are being placed and that will be placed upon police services in every country are on the increase and will not abate. Society makes unreasonable demands upon its police. Parliaments daily impose new duties upon police. I have previously said and I repeat that increasing attention will need to be paid to the intellectual and emotional qualities that are required for the performance of modern police duties. Rudimentary educational qualifications will simply not be adequate in a society that looks to its police service to guard it against computer crime, white collar crime, environmental crime and other modern wrongs against the community.

A superficial glance at the subject matter of your conference indicates the pace at which times are changing in the police service :

- \* The use of radar
- \* Interfacing telephone systems to police vehicles
- \* Remote controlled robots for siege situations
- \* Use of surveillance cameras

- \* Position location in drug law enforcement
- \* Speaker recognition by computer
- \* Detection of mail bombs
- \* Airport X-ray systems

and so on demonstrate beyond doubt the impact of science and technology on your vital discipline.

One of the chief driving forces for reform of the law is the course of science and technology. Almost every one of the tasks given by the government to the Australian Law Reform Commission involves a consideration of the effect which new scientific developments have on old laws.

But keeping abreast of new technology and equipment is only one urgency facing police today. The subject I want to address relates to the auditing, as it were, of police performance and the assessment of the effectiveness of police personnel and equipment in leading society's war against crime.

One of the tasks given by the government to the Law Reform Commission involved the review of the laws and practices of sentencing of Commonwealth and Territory offenders in Australia. In the course of our work on this reference, in which we are being led by Professor Duncan Chappell, a criminologist of international reputation, we have been surprised by the lack of uniform crime statistics in Australia. It is to that subject that I want to speak for a few moments and I will hope you will not think it irrelevant to the theme of your conference.

#### LACK OF UNIFORM STATISTICS

I find the lack of uniform statistics and other information on crime rates in Australia quite astonishing. Some of our guests from overseas will know that agreements have already been reached that has led to quite detailed, uniform crime statistics in the United States, Canada, Britain and many of the countries of Europe. It is a reproach to our country that Australia is still, basically, talking about the subject.

I believe that the delay in introducing uniform crime statistics in Australia is impeding an effective national attack on crime and its causes. Equally important, I am sure that the lack of detailed information in the form of uniform crime statistics is depriving police, governments and Parliaments of important data upon which improvements in criminal law and procedure could be designed.

As I have said, they have significant uniform crime statistics in great detail in the United States. This is despite the 15,000 police forces of that country and the 50 States of the Union. These statistics also provide a basis for comparison of clear-up rates and trends in crime and crime prevention.

In Australia, progress towards truly comparable national crime and police statistics is happening at a snail's pace. Although it is heartening to citizens of Australia to know that its police forces are examining at this conference urgent modern police problems, the failure of police forces to agree on such a rudimentary matter as uniform crime figures, and the fact that the Bureau of Statistics, in the past, did not assign a high priority to this matter, is a reason for the most profound disappointment.

Many of you will know that the first decision to move towards national and comparable crime figures took place in this country in 1961 at the Australasian Conference of Police Commissioners. That it took 60 years of Federation to reach such a point is itself a sobering reflection on the occasional torpor of Federalism.

Although some uniform crime figures have been published by the Bureau of Statistics since 1964, the number of crimes so far described remains very few, at present only 7. The seven crimes included omit theft which constitutes, I am led to understand, about 75% of reported crime. Furthermore, the basis for comparison and the delay in the supply of figures is also of continuing disappointment.

VALUE OF UNIFORM FIGURES

Every Australian present will know that crime in this country does not conveniently recognise State borders. Crime and its increase is a national concern which can only be tackled by co-operative national approaches. The establishment of the new Australian Federal Police Force will, I hope, provide an opportunity for new initiatives in co-operative federalism in police and crime prevention matters.

Just as any businessman worth his salt needs the most accurate up-to-date comparative information to test the effectiveness of his enterprise, so Australia's police forces should be content with nothing less than the most informative national crime statistics.

There are many reasons why the need for uniform, national information on crime is urgent. I list just a few reasons for securing uniform crime figures :

- \* They would allow comparisons between the crime rates in different parts of Australia
- \* They would allow accurate comparison in the "clear-up rate" of different crimes and different police forces
- \* They would show trends in crime, including problem areas of "new crime" such as drug offences and corporate crime
- \* They are a tool in police planning and allocating police resources to maximum advantage
- \* They would permit comparison with surveys of the victims of crime, to see just how many people are reporting particular crimes to police, with what effect
- \* They would facilitate research into the causes of crime
- \* They would permit international comparison in the nature and extent of Australia's crime, when contrasted with developments in like countries
- \* They would help in the assessment of various law reform efforts in different States, and their impact on crime and its punishment

NEED FOR CARE

Now, I am fully aware of the need for care in approaching uniform crime figures. Critics of uniform statistics, point to such considerations as:-

- \* Different definition of offences
- \* Different definitions of "clear-up"
- \* Different population features
- \* The risk of facile misinterpretations

But to use these reasons as an excuse for delaying national agreement on uniform, comparable crime figures is a negation of proper, modern managerial responsibilities. Just as the most modern equipment must be used by police, so they must use computers to help assess their effectiveness in leading society's war on crime.

Sir Robert Mark in his fascinating book "In the Office of Constable" has put it well when he declared that :

"In the absence of factual information, political pressure groups, politicians and others with vested interests are able to indulge in generalisations and accusations which no-one could disprove"

Adopting Sir Robert's pungent language, I declare that in the age of the computer, the time for generalisation and guesswork about patterns of crime has long since passed. The time for interstate rivalries and fears of comparisons between different Australian police forces should be put firmly to one side, in the national interest.

SOME PROGRESS

The lack of uniform crime statistics was noted by the Law Reform Commission in its work on the reform of sentencing of federal offenders. When Senator Durack, the Attorney-General of Australia, asked us to look at this subject, we found that, outside the area of drug offences, there was simply no worthwhile statistical information, in any detail, on the kinds of federal offenders and trends in federal crime in Australia. Such information as existed

was not with the Bureau of Statistics but with the Commonwealth Police. It was not readily and publicly available.

How, in these circumstances, Ministers and the Parliament can assess the trends in federal crime and the effectiveness of the laws they pass, baffles me. The day when we can just pass laws and hope or expect that they work has, I am afraid, gone forever. What we need is a more scientific approach to lawmaking and law enforcement.

Although there have been discussions between Police Commissioners and their representatives on the one hand, and the Australian Institute of Criminology and the Bureau of Statistics on the other, progress towards comparable national crime figures in Australia continues to progress at an extremely slow pace. But there is hope. Within the last few weeks the Australian Bureau of Statistics has put forward proposals for a revised series of national crime and justice statistics. But to be adopted, these expanded statistics will require the support of police forces throughout the country, before they can be introduced.

Can I therefore be permitted to use this occasion to make an appeal which is put forward in a positive spirit and is, I believe, consistent with the themes you have been discussing. In addition to concentrating on fascinating new equipment, I can suggest no task more worthy of the attention of modern police than the agreement on a new initiative in collecting and presenting comparable and national figures on crime and the effectiveness of police measures against it.