

Letter to the Editor, Ballarat Courier August 2008

Understanding Real Crime Trends

Your article "Crime on the Rise" (*The Courier 19 August*) talks about bucking statewide "trends".

Indeed the crime statistics from Victoria Police do show an overall reduction in the crime rate of 1.9% in the past financial year despite robberies and theft of motor vehicles being on the rise.

Statistical experts may well disagree what period a meaningful trend should comprise. All would agree that one year's figures do not represent a trend.

In any field of statistics trends over many years will be subject to annual fluctuations which defy an overall trend. A trend needs to be assessed over many years.

Your report for my own municipality of Central Goldfields Shire shows that in the 07/08 year crime against the person is up (66.4%) crime against property is up (35%) drug offences are down (-34.1%) and an "other" crime is up (55.3%).

Before we jump to adopt this as a "trend" let us compare these figures with those of the previous year to see the clear established direction. For the 06/07 year crime against the person was down (-39.1%) crime against the property was down (-10.6%) drug offences were down (-14.6%) while "other" crime was down (-20.5%). This resulted in a total reduction in crime for the 06/07 year of -18.4%.

These wildly different results show the importance of medium to long term assessment and avoiding reactions based on one year's figures.

Certainly in our Shire we are aware as a Council of the impact of economic and social change and dislocation on our community such as the impact of the national decline of regional manufacturing. This structural change causes economic hardship including poverty which shows as social and health stress and can contribute to higher crime rates.

As Central Highlands Superintendent Allen has said in your article, crime management and prevention requires a whole of community response between many partners and agencies.

We need to start in the early years with solid educational and health support services for our very young children. We then need to instill in young people a commitment to life long learning. We need to understand the problems and challenges of youth including the lack of activities which regional and rural communities are able to provide in relation to large cities.

We need to work with disadvantaged and disempowered communities and effectively engage them on their goals and aspirations and provide range of integrated whole of community services to support that process.

Critically we need to manage the transition to a new age economy and ensure effective training and employability skills for our workers and those unemployed.

Finally we need to work closely in partnership with the Police and the Courts system as Superintendent Allen proposes to actively seek to prevent crime and rehabilitate offenders.

Progress and success is measured over many years and not one year, recognising systemic change is always a medium to long term proposition. However, we do need to start now.

Central Goldfields Shire Council has in its "Go-for-Gold" program an ambitious, comprehensive and innovative whole of community approach to tackle, head on, the social inclusion issues in our Shire and to ensure every resident can contribute to the great and bright future we all envisage.

We are seeking a whole of government response from the State and Commonwealth governments for assured funding and program support to ensure we truly make a difference in this area. We estimate this will be a period of eight years or more based on available research. Perhaps this is the period of time we should be looking to monitor changes in the crime rate.

Changes in the crime rate over a one year period may make for a good lead article but do little for the underpinning public policy debate which needs to drive sustained improvement and change.

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