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Speech by Adam Graycar, Director,
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"Home ownership: an investment in crime
prevention?"

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AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF CRIMINOLOGY



Home Ownership: An investment in crime prevention?

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Your invitation to speak at this conference started me thinking about the links between your area of interest, home ownership and mine, namely crime. To anyone who's ever been unfortunate enough to come home to find their front door ajar and their CD collection missing the links are perhaps obvious. But I am interesting in considering what effect, if any, home ownership has on the incidence of crime and on crime reduction.

When we raise the topic of crime and justice, people think of a wide range of things - murder and murderers, guns and knives, drug traffickers and addicts; car theft, burglary, rape and robbery; juvenile delinquents, violence in videos and on the screen, alcohol and crime; white collar crime, tax evasion, money laundering, organised crime; domestic violence, environmental crime; superannuation fraud, child abuse, - the list goes on and on.

Australia is one of the safest countries in the world. Australians can go about their daily lives with little chance of their becoming the target of a criminal attack. But it does happen - and the prospect that it might happen worries a lot of people. And although most of Australia is comparatively safe, the incidence of crime is much greater than it was 20 years ago. Criminal activity hurts and outrages people, and costs the community billions of dollars.

Different people have different explanations for increases in crime. Some blame permissiveness, bankrupt moral values, contempt for authority, inadequate penalties, while others blame poor social conditions, unemployment, lack of life chances, poverty traps, deprivation, limited educational opportunities etc.

Viewed from a different perspective, there are probably many many more opportunities than ever before for criminal behaviour, and a lot of crime might be the price we pay for living in a world which offers high material benefits and a very mobile lifestyle. Put that against a context of tremendous social and technological change, and we have a different ball game to what we've ever had before.

If you're as old as me, you might remember that we got our music out of a radiogram - a piece of furniture made of polished timber that weighed half a ton. If you were particularly affluent, you might have had a 3 in 1 with a built in telly as well. If a villain wanted to nick your stereo and records, he needed a removal truck, not just a backpack. In those days both computers in Australia filled whole rooms, and there was no second hand market and of course, no laptops. Today, you can get a lot more of value into a backpack and through a window than you could get into a removal truck a generation ago. Add that to the need for quick cash that drug dependent burglars may have, and we have a very different dynamic to what we had not all that long ago.

Australia is a much less violent society than it was 100 years ago, but more violent than it was 20 years ago. The most significant indicator of violence, homicide, has not changed much over the past 80 years, but most homicides occur in the home.

While Australia is a much safer place than many comparable countries, three crimes of great concern to all have **skyrocketed** over the last 20 years. Burglary rates have increased by 111% since 1978; robbery rates by 255%; and motor vehicle theft rates by 103%. While the rates are much worse than 20 years ago, burglary rates and motor vehicle theft rates have not increased much in the last five years, and we also find very great differences among the states. The rate of burglary in Victoria for example, is about half that of Western Australia.

We know that crime patterns vary from **metropolitan to non- metropolitan**. In NSW, inner Sydney had considerably higher rates than the rest of Sydney, or the rest of NSW of homicide, assault, sexual assault, robbery, m/v theft, break and enter, stealing from a retail store. Regional NSW had **considerably lower** rates of robbery, break and enter (dwelling), motor vehicle theft, theft from a retail store, fraud, but **considerably higher** rates of sexual assault, cannabis use, offensive conduct, breach of an apprehended violence order, and driving with a prescribed alcohol content.

We know that many crimes are not reported, very few lead to an identification of the offender and a negligible proportion of crimes ever end with a conviction.

Whatever these differences between different locations there has been research over many years that demonstrates that people want to conform with the dominant values in their neighbourhoods. If you own your own property, you have good reason to keep it clean, safe, secure and valuable. You also pay more attention to the neighbourhood. American victimisation surveys have shown that home ownership is linked to low crime risks. Those parts of cities with higher home ownership rates repeatedly are found to have lower crime rates. There are American research studies which have documented this consistently from 1931 to the present day.

Another way of cutting the pie focuses on stability of the neighbourhood. The longer that people have been at the one address, the less likely they are to be victims of crime. Renters too, develop a stake in the area and lower their risk if they are in the one place long enough.

Of course, renters may also live in a place for a relatively long period but it is more common for owners to do so.

There are other variables that are of interest. Many people have focussed on density, with the view being the higher the density, the higher the crime rate. There is no obvious link here. Japan has much higher population densities than Australia, but much lower crime rates. New York has higher densities than American mid-Western and Western cities, but lower property crime rates.

Burglary, for example declines as density increases. This is not a good story for the Australian detached house on a quarter acre block. Most burglars come through a rear window or door, or through a side window or door, and least likely through the front, where they can be observed from the street. In low density, and often nice suburban

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areas, trees and bushes help block the view of doors and windows, especially around the back. A leafy back yard is the burglar's best friend.

Overseas studies of rape and assault, also show that low density assists villains. Rapists can pull victims into bushes or find victims in the course of a burglary, though sexual assault patterns in Australia rarely involve strangers.

According to a survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4% of homes owned had been victimised in the previous twelve months, compared with 5.8% of homes rented. So the risk of a renter becoming a victim of a burglary is half as great again as a homeowner.

According to the same survey, homes that were occupied for a relatively longer period, say 5 years or more, were victimised less often than those occupied for a shorter period, say less than one year. 3.8% of homes occupied for the longer period were victimised compared with 4.9% of homes occupied for the shorter period. Similar results have also been obtained in Britain (with the help of British Crime Surveys) and in the United States (US Department of Justice victim surveys 1995).

In a recent study in South Australia it was found that crime rates were lower where there were higher percentages of affluent families, higher education levels, higher percentages of married people, residential stability, higher housing quality, and higher percentages of owner-occupiers and owner-purchasers.

The chance of becoming a **victim** depends on where you live, how you live, who you are and who you know.

We know that **victims of violent crime** often know their attacker. This is most likely the case in homicide, where two thirds of victims are killed by a family member or an acquaintance; most assault victims know their attacker, as do around one half of robbery victims.

We know that many people are victimised in their homes, and that one's home is not the safe haven that we would wish it to be. The majority of sexual assaults occur inside the home, as do the majority of homicides. So too, do a variety of violent crimes that are loosely described as child abuse, elder abuse, and domestic violence, and these have no link to home ownership.

There is less data available about the characteristics of offenders, but the data that is available suggests that children who move frequently are often at a higher risk of becoming delinquent.

Notwithstanding the low density issue, there is evidence that home-owners are less likely to have their houses broken into as well as evidence that people are less likely to become victims or offenders the longer they live in one place.

At first blush it appears we may have stumbled upon the solution to crime and violence, and the basis of a new publicity campaign 'buy a house and prevent crime'.

But unfortunately the answer is not that simple. In a similar way it may well be possible to prove that people with good teeth are less likely to be victims of crime, or to commit street crime. But a correlation between good teeth and low crime doesn't mean that regular flossing is the answer to preventing crime.

As you may have guessed, home ownership (and dental health) are often a product of other characteristics which influence whether or not someone becomes an offender or a victim. In other words, home ownership is a symptom or an indicator of other factors which may be some of the causes of crime. For example it is well recognised that crime prone neighbourhoods are likely to be characterised by high levels of economic stress or disadvantage. This economic stress is usually measured by rates of unemployment and/or low average levels of household income.

However, home ownership may be another way of capturing those areas of low economic stress or low disadvantage where crime rates are normally lower. If crime rates are higher in areas of economic stress then you might predict that a higher proportion of offenders would come from rented homes. And given offenders tend to commit crime in their local area you could also predict that a higher proportion of rented homes would be victimised.

Tracing the causes of crime doesn't stop there. Home ownership may be an indication of the level of economic stress, but there are also family issues that have to be considered. Research consistently shows the fundamental importance of a person's family in determining whether that person goes on to commit crime. That is why the family should be an important focus for anyone interested in preventing crime.

So in looking for the causes of crime we have started at home ownership and ended up at parenting skills.

But let's go back to home ownership. Arguably home ownership may have an effect of its own, over and above parenting, on crime prevention. Home ownership may promote crime prevention in two ways.

The first way focuses on the effect of a potential offender becoming a homeowner. Our community regards many types of criminal behaviour as shameful, and members of our community choose not to behave in such a way in part, because they do not wish to suffer the shame of their community. The extent to which this shame discourages a person from committing crime depends upon the extent to which a person feels part of the community, or has a stake in the community. The higher a person's stake in the community the greater the shame of criminal behaviour, the more a person has to lose by engaging in crime (Toby, 1957). On the other hand if someone does not feel part of a community that community's shame is unlikely to have any bearing on whether a person engages in criminal behaviour. He or she has nothing to lose.

Obviously people can have a high stake in the community without owning a home, but owning a home may for some people, increase their stake.

The second way that homeownership may prevent crime is by altering the circumstances in which crime is committed. Why is one neighbourhood at risk more than another? One explanation is that informal surveillance by people helps prevent crime.

Home ownership may increase the potential for informal surveillance. In Australia home owners are more likely to stay longer in a neighbourhood than renters. When a neighbourhood consists of long-term residents neighbours get to know each other better. This means that your neighbour can recognise whether the wrong person is driving away in your car. Homeowners are an example of what one researcher (Eck 1995) calls “place managers” whose presence helps discourage various types of crime. Again of course it is not only homeowners who can play this role but a home owner is arguably more likely to play this sort of role.

One limitation in trying to prevent crime by increasing surveillance (whether formal or informal) is that it may only displace crime to areas where there isn't the same surveillance. This is one problem that research into the Neighbourhood Watch scheme has revealed. The solution then is to make use of these approaches but to recognise their limitations and combine them with crime prevention strategies which focus on the root causes of crime (such as parenting skills, which I mentioned earlier in my speech).

So homeownership may itself help prevent crime by promoting stability which in turn may increase an individual's stake in the community and the potential for informal supervision.

Where does this leave us in understanding the links between home ownership and crime? I'd like to answer that by reference to a recent report to the United States Congress on crime prevention which concluded that there was widespread agreement between criminologists that: “strong parental attachments to consistently disciplined children in watchful and supportive communities are the best vaccine against street crime and violence” (Sherman et al, 1998). In the context of our culture, home ownership may be both an ingredient in the vaccine as well as a symptom that the vaccine is working.