

Book launch “Crime in Rural Australia” 26.4.07

**Edited by Elaine Barclay, Joseph Donnermeyer, John Scott
and Russell Hogg**

- It’s good to see three academics from the University of New England edit this important book with the help of Adjunct Professor Joe Donnermeyer who has visited our campus so often he could almost be considered a local.
- The book is important for many reasons but its very presence indicates a new focus on the nature of rural crime as distinct from urban crime which traditionally has been considered the norm. The contributors to these chapters have also made it clear that rural towns and societies are themselves not homogenous and there should not be a one size fits all approach to some new category labeled “rural crime”.
- Our very location in the country is associated with problems such as distance, isolation, lack of services, and smaller populations including in some cases a larger Aboriginal component which defines our difference from metropolitan centres. As this book shows it also defines the levels and types of crime experienced by rural communities.
- Crimes in rural areas are less likely to be reported to police. Driving related crimes and offences related to public order and justice procedures are higher in some rural areas compared to the state average. Crimes of violence are higher in regional areas and growing at a faster rate. This is unfortunately attributed to higher numbers of aboriginal people in rural areas.
- As this book points out, alcohol abuse is a major problem. I attend regular Police and Community Team meetings throughout the Northern Tablelands and I can tell you first hand that alcohol fuelled crime and domestic violence, which often go hand in hand, are still the most intractable crime issues we confront. Specialist drug and alcohol services not widely available in the country and people are often reluctant to engage these services.
- Two contributions in this book had great resonance for me. The chapter on Youth Crime by Bernie Shakeshaft draws attention to the complex sociology of rural youth crime. It is closely associated with issues such as lack of education, employment, recreation, health and community services as well as access to drugs and alcohol. The police alone do not have the solutions. We need to adopt a whole of community approach including well managed intervention programs like those Bernie has mentioned in Alice Springs which have engaged these at risk and offending young people in work with National Parks and Wildlife, Bush Fire Brigades and Green Corps. Closer to home we have the example of proactive programs such as Youth Links and Iron Man Welders in Armidale with which Bernie Shakeshaft is closely involved.
- Lastly I would like to refer to the final chapter by NSW Magistrate David Heilpern who writes about the over representation of aboriginals and high percentage of young people appearing before our courts and the dearth of sentencing options available. He says that in the city magistrates have many options and can refer offenders to the Drug Court, Magistrates Early Referral into Treatment Program, home detention, periodic detention, sex offender programs, the Childrens Drug Court, mental health pilots or anger

management programs. This range of options is not available in the country but as he points out in all places prison is available. I quote :“At every court in NSW the most draconian measure is available and yet many of those that come below that in the sentencing calendar are not”.

- As Mr Heilpern explains it is unfair that a defendant in a crime committed in a country or coastal area has less sentencing options than in Sydney. He goes on to say that we should have same crime, same time everywhere. No one should be sentenced to imprisonment if there are sentencing options suitable to the person but that are not available because of where they live. The whole aim of the criminal justice system is to stop people from committing crimes and to tailor sentences appropriate to the crime and the individual.
- I am a great advocate of circle sentencing for Aboriginal offenders which was introduced to Armidale last year and is already producing good results. I strongly supported the appointment of Rural Crime Officers who are attached to country police stations who specialise in theft of stock and from farms.
- I will use this book as a reference as I continue to press the government to extend programs and services to combat crime and anti-social behaviour in rural communities. Congratulations to all those involved in the research and creating greater awareness of the issue of crime in rural Australia.