

Crime, Punishment and its Prevention In New Zealand

OPINION

By Dr Paul Hutchison, MP for Port Waikato



Part One

As this article goes to print, a further wave of horror has run through New Zealand after a 5 year old girl was abducted from in front of her home, and a Policeman was run down, killed by a maniac driver. New Zealanders, all over our country, want zero tolerance to violent crime. It MUST be curtailed.

In 2006 there was

a homicide every 4 days
a sexual attack every 3½ hours
a robbery every 3 hours

an assault every 17 minutes
a car stolen every 14 minutes
a burglary every 8½ minutes
a theft every 4½ minutes

As we all know, New Zealand is not the safe place it used to be. The recent murders in South Auckland within a few weeks of each other sickens every decent New Zealander. Navtej Singh was shot down by a drug crazed youth, Joanne Wang was run down in front of her child. How can human beings stoop so low when an innocent elderly lady, Yang Yin Ping, is brutally murdered in her own home?

It is frightening that here in Franklin, Waiuku, has some of the most serious crime statistics in New Zealand. When I wrote to the Minister of Police, Annette King, in December 2007, I pointed out that “of all the towns with similar populations, Waiuku has recorded the highest number of violent crimes, is second equal for crimes of a sexual nature and is in the top four in all other categories including drugs, property damage and dishonesty.”

Clearly this shows there is a desperate need for additional Police to be stationed in Waiuku.

Almost every six months since I have been Member of Parliament for Port Waikato I have written to successive Police Ministers asking for more Police and better resources in our area. It took until Election Year !!! Three more Police in Waiuku is a start, but it will not solve the problem of mounting violent crime in our beautiful country. Violent offences have steadily doubled in New Zealand in twenty years.

We need far stronger action at every level.

From a purely economic point of view, Treasury has estimated that the total cost of crime in New Zealand in 2003\2004 was \$9.1 billion, as a result of an estimated 1.8 million criminal acts in that year. The most common crime category is offences against the person (such as violence) contributing to 45% of the cost of crime.

Beyond the economic cost, becoming a victim of crime is an experience shared by a large number of people. It is estimated that there were 2,753,000 household and personal offences committed in 2005 against those aged 15 and over. The groups most likely to fall victim to crime are the less economically and social well placed. It is said that tolerance of an increasing crime rate is tolerance of continuing inequality in country.

New Zealand has the fourth highest number of prison inmates (per 100,000 people) amongst thirty countries of the OECD with the average number of inmates increasing by 89% from 1984 to 1999.

But what is worse is that the Department of Corrections reports that 42.6 % of inmates released from prison are reconvicted within a year, after 2 years 55.4% had been reconvicted. It's even

worse for our young offenders, after 2 years 82.4% of young offenders have been reconvicted.

I was astonished when I visited the country's newest jail at Hampton Downs, south of Pukekohe. Known as the 'Hampton Downs Hilton', the prison has beautiful mahogany-like desks in many of the cells and has one of the best gyms I have ever seen, along with a magnificent rugby field.

I have had one constituent's father come to me, asking for his son to be transferred there and another constituent tell me, that prison was the 'happiest time of his life'

One has to ask what would Gilbert and Sullivan think of New Zealand's prison system??- they certainly wouldn't be writing the lyric "awaiting the sensation of a short sharp shock from a cheap and chippy chopper on a big black block!"

The extremely serious side is that New Zealanders have had enough, some community leaders at a recent meeting called for a Singapore style justice system – and even the death penalty.

National has made it clear that we will be working on all aspects of crime from prevention to enhancing Police instruments to deal with crime.

- Introducing Tasers (if the Taser trial is deemed a success)
- Require DNA to be taken from people arrested from crimes that could lead to prison)
- Allow Police to issue on-the-spot protection orders to protect families
- Strengthen bail laws by overturning the 2007 amendments to the Bail Act

Clamping down on gangs

- Strengthen the law that makes it illegal to belong to a criminal organization
- Make it easier for Police to conduct surveillance on gangs
- Give Police more power to storm and remove gang fortifications
- Make gang membership an aggravating factor in sentencing.

Youth Justice

- Establish Fresh Start programmes for those who need a serious dose of intervention (boot camps!)
- Extend Youth Court powers, parenting orders, mentoring programmes and compulsory drug and alcohol programmes.

These are just some of the widespread actions that must be implemented if we are to make New Zealand a safer place, but perhaps more important than anything is to tackle the origins of crime, which in my view are the most difficult and usually start at birth.

Dr Hutchison's article continues in the next issue of eLocal – Tackling the Origins of Crime