

Newman Weekly

By Dr. Muriel Newman
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The New Zealand Centre for Political Debate

Solving Crime not Rocket Science

One of the core roles of a government in a democracy is to protect its citizens from crime. In 1999, New Zealanders were given the opportunity to send the government a message on that issue: by voting overwhelmingly in favour of Norm Withers' law and order referendum, the public indicated they wanted the justice system reformed and violent crime reduced.

That is why the shocking death on Monday of Kevan Newman, one of the three people stabbed by a mental health patient who went berserk with a knife, is so tragic: dreadful violent crimes committed by dangerously mentally ill patients are not uncommon, yet the government continues to fail to adequately address the problem.

The police warn that there is a significant danger to society from people with serious mental illness and violent tendencies who are living free in our communities. They say that if the public really understood the threat from those who live unstable lives of crime, laced with drug use and psychotic episodes, they would demand action.

Yet, in spite of serious overcrowding in hospital mental health units and a revolving door policy, that sees patients who should be hospitalised turfed out in order to admit more urgent cases, the government has continued to turn a deaf ear.

New Zealand urgently needs to follow the lead of Britain and the United States by funding patient care in 'sheltered villages'. These modern 24-hour residential care facilities are for people assessed as severely mentally ill and prone to dangerous psychotic episodes. Sheltered villages would provide quality living conditions for those who are not sick enough to be in hospital but are too sick to live without full supervision, as well as for patients in need of short term respite care.

Until now, the government has been strongly opposed to the establishment of sheltered villages, but

with support for the concept growing within communities and across the political spectrum, maybe this latest tragedy will be the catalyst for change.

Norm Withers 1999 referendum, also demanded more rights for the victims of crime, a cause widely championed by Garth McVicar of the Sensible Sentencing Trust. Garth is our guest columnist in this week's NZCPD Forum (www.nzcpd.com)

A great deal of research has been carried out into the causes of crime and what can be done to reduce it. It is not rocket science. Following are five steps that would help to make New Zealand a safer country.

Firstly, in the overwhelming majority of cases, crime starts in the home with children who become predisposed to criminal activity. While some hard-core criminal families teach their children how to commit crimes, it is usually the abuse and neglect of children by their parents that leads the child into a downward spiral of alienation, underachievement and crime. More often than not, welfare dependency, substance abuse, educational failure, violence, and family instability all form part of the mix.

With prison statistics showing that around three quarters of all sentenced inmates have never been married, it is clear that if our young men moving towards adulthood have attained a good education and have the prospects of a worthwhile career, they are far more likely to look to marriage and a family than crime.

That is why reforming the welfare system to eliminate long term benefit dependency, encouraging marriage and strengthening the family, as well as ensuring children succeed at school, play vital roles in reducing crime. Further, it is important that appropriate help and support are made readily available to parents at every stage of a child's development, starting even before the baby is born.

Secondly, since it is well known that young people who should be at school commit a large

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proportion of crime, the government needs to adopt a zero-tolerance approach to truancy. That means not only tackling irresponsible parenting head on by forcing parents to obey the law and send their children to school, but also ensuring that schools are playing their part by providing high quality teaching to their students.

The third step to reducing crime is to give the police the ability to do their job properly - boosting police resources and numbers (they would need 1,700 more police to match the policing rate in Australia), and undertaking a comprehensive audit of police practice and laws in order to eliminate the excessive time-wasting bureaucratic red tape that now keeps police behind their desks instead of out on the beat.

But most importantly, zero-tolerance policing should become standard practice getting tough on petty crime in order to prevent perpetrators graduating to more serious crime, cracking down on the small number of serious repeat offenders who are responsible for most of the crime in any community, and having a strong public presence to help reclaim streets for families and children.

The fourth step is to ensure that crime doesn't pay through tougher sentencing and -with almost 80 percent of violent offenders re-offending while on parole - abolishing parole. This should be done in conjunction with comprehensive prison reform: moving the 10 percent of prisoners who are seriously mentally ill into proper forensic institutions where

they can have access to appropriate treatment, and moving the 50 percent of low security prisoners into facilities where they can be used to provide contract labour to help pay for their keep. That would leave plenty of room in the prison system for the serious violent criminals who should be locked away, and who clearly need intensive rehabilitation and management if they are ever able to be successfully reintegrated back into society.

The final step is to provide better support for those people in society who, because of mental impairment, can become a serious danger to others. I have already outlined the sheltered village concept for the mentally ill who can become psychotic if they fail to take their medication, but more must be done for drug and alcohol addicts.

British research from the Home Office shows that while drug related crime has risen sharply over the last decade, other crime has remained relatively stable. That is probably the case here as well, but rather than reducing the problem by helping addicts to beat their habit, the government has not only been busy closing down treatment centres, but through a 'harm minimisation' strategy is teaching children how to use drugs, instead of how to avoid and reject them!

Dr. Muriel Newman is the director of the NZ Centre for Political Debate.

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