

8 State Welfare Policy and the Juvenile Crime Debate

Introduction

In recent years politics and public debate in Western Australia have been dominated by two topics: the various forms of political impropriety commonly known as 'WA Inc', and juvenile crime. It is an interesting conjunction. Both raise questions of personal and public morality; both require us to think hard about the structure and design of our social institutions. In the case of WA Inc the questions of personal and public morality have now been asked and answered—with general public approval—by the Royal Commission, though the institutional issues still require much further thought, of the kind pursued in this book.

There has been no 'Royal Commission' or anything like it into the juvenile crime question. A variety of parliamentary committees has considered aspects of the issue, but these have been superficial in both purpose and performance. Of course, the subject is not one which a Royal Commission could hope to deal with, since the issue is not one of the performance or abrogation of public duties. Nevertheless, public concern about the issue is in part a concern to see that we make clear the requirements of citizenship in our society and that we foster a culture and morality in which 'marginalised' young people both belong to and contribute positively to our shared social world. The first step by the Lawrence government in dealing with the problem, the 1992 Serious Repeat Offenders legislation, was a 'law and order' response, one which had widespread political and public support (protests from some in the welfare world notwithstanding). No-one feels comfortable about leaving the matter there, but once we move beyond that narrow focus the issues soon get lost in a fog of well-meaning woolly-mindedness.

Reform and Recovery

The argument to be presented in this chapter will be based upon a longer analysis currently in progress. In places it will be necessary to jump to conclusions which that analysis has not yet established. The justification for this is that in practical policy matters it is impossible to do nothing; to attempt to do nothing is to permit things to go on as they have been going on, which may well be worse than leaping to conclusions. Where such leaps are taken they will be signalled as such.

The topic under consideration has been introduced under the heading of 'state welfare policy and the juvenile crime debate'. Both terms require discussion. The scope and limitations of state welfare will be considered in due course. 'Juvenile crime' is a matter of public importance partly in itself, but mainly because the phenomenon is a symptom of larger social changes and problems. This chapter is mainly about those larger matters. 'Juvenile crime' is the starting point only; it is a justifiable starting point because crime data supply us with some important relatively hard evidence about the larger matters.

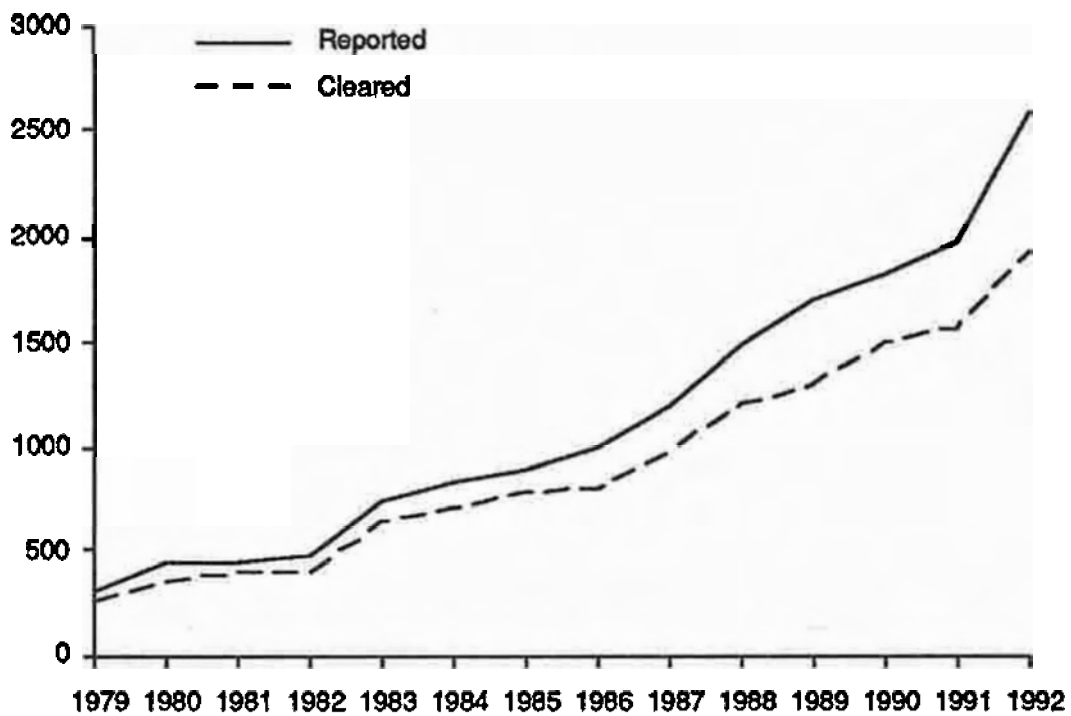
The Crime Evidence

As the accompanying charts show (see Figures 8.1–8.4), the common belief that Western Australia is experiencing a crime upsurge is correct. The evidence can be summarised as follows:

- In the last decade crime of most kinds has been increasing rapidly, according to police reports. Before 1984 the rate of rise was low. Since 1984 police reports of most types of crime have at least doubled; some have trebled; sexual assault reports have increased eight-fold. In 1991-92 alone, reports of sexual assault doubled. (By way of comparison, the state's population increased by only about 25 per cent in the last decade.)

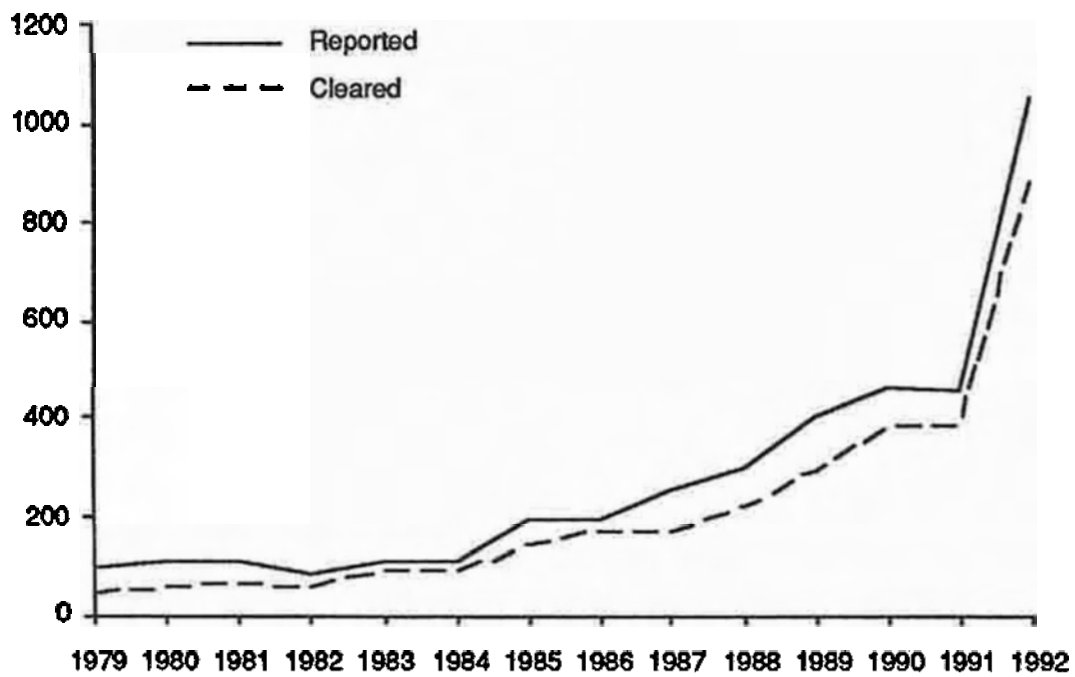
The real crime rate is of course not directly measurable. Reported crime is a good index of the real crime rate, so probably real crime has increased at much the rate that these figures suggest. Conviction rates are not a good index; for property offences, convictions by police have fallen well behind the reported crime rates. However, serious personal crimes are being convicted at a rate close to the reported crime rate, and vehicles reported as stolen are recovered at a rate close to the rate of reports; both of these facts indicate that reported crime corresponds to real crime.

Figure 8.1: Crimes Reported to Police—Serious Assault
(Year ended 30 June)

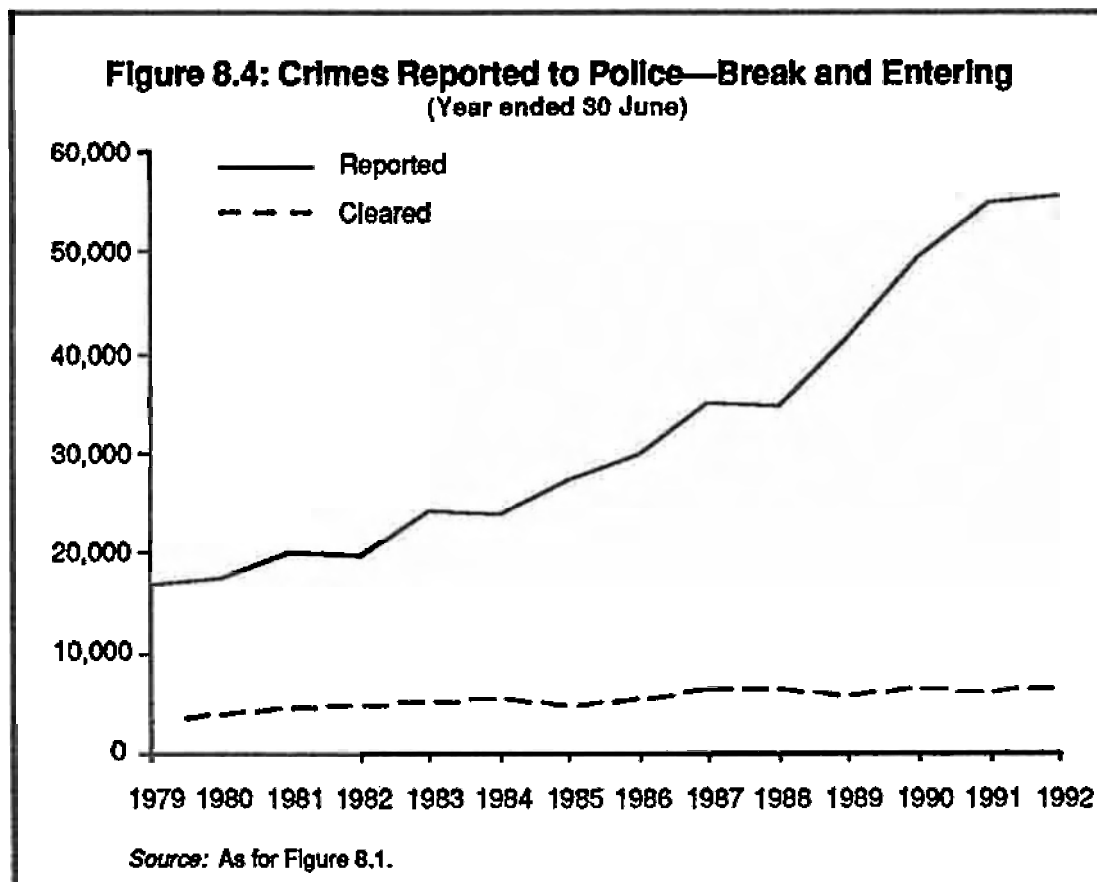
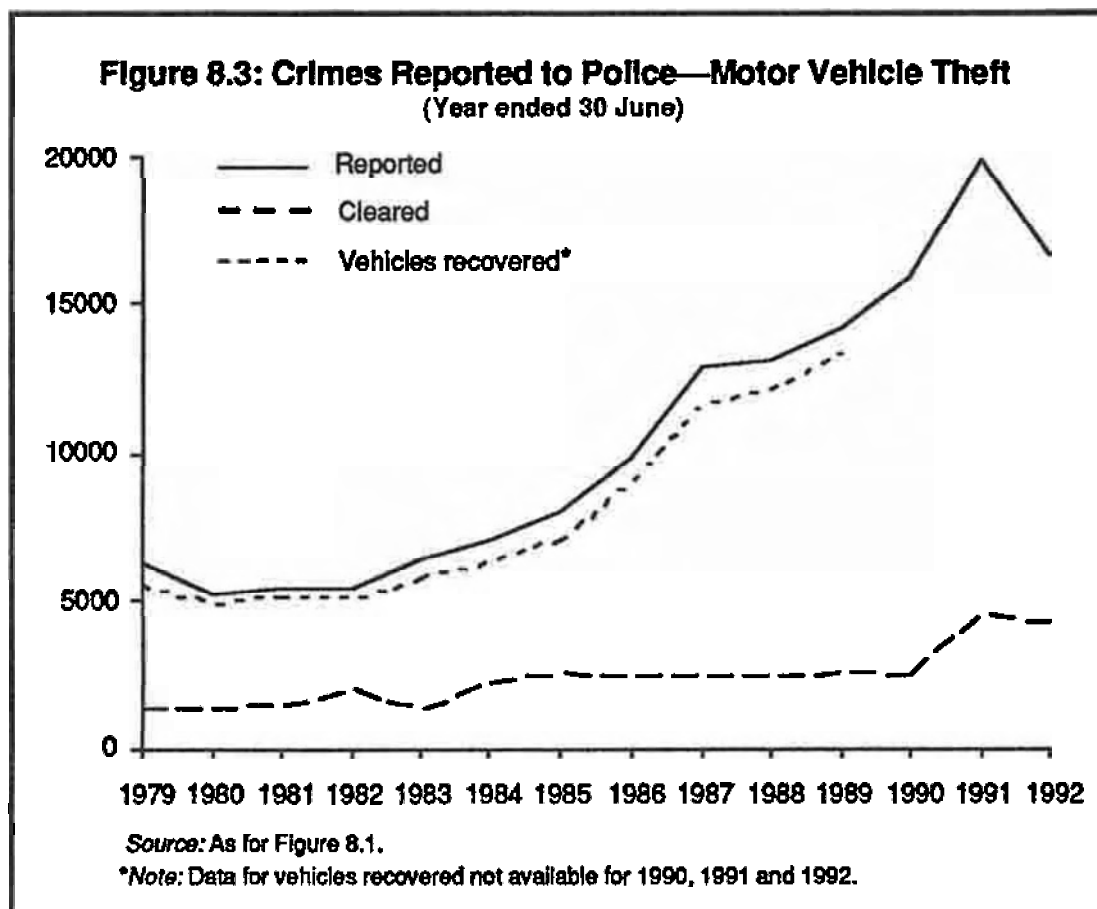


Source: ABS Cat. No. 4103.5, *Compendium of Demographic and Social Statistics, Western Australia*, 1991, pages 90 and 91; WA Police Department, *Annual Report*, 1992, pages 26-28.

Figure 8.2: Crimes Reported to Police—Rape (Sexual Assault)
(Year ended 30 June)



Source: As for Figure 8.1.



Victim surveys tend to suggest that real crime levels are higher than reported crime levels (perhaps twice as high), but, even so, we can take the changes in the rate of reported crime as reflecting changes in the real crime rate.⁹³

- The crime rise has occurred among both adults and juveniles. Juvenile crime is merely more visible and publicly shocking than adult crime. Most crime is crime by teenagers and young adults, aged between 14 and 22.

The crime rise has occurred in both rural and urban areas, so it is unlikely to be a function of 'urbanisation'.

- Most crime—about 80–90 per cent—is male crime. The female crime rate is rising at least as fast as the male rate, though from a much lower base.
- Aboriginal youth is vastly 'over-represented' in the crime rise, and also in court appearances and the prison population.
- Some of this crime rise is by 'serious repeat offenders', but even if we deduct their contribution there is still a serious crime rise occurring.

Sentencing practices ('leniency') may or may not have permitted the growth in the crime rate, but they are not a basic explanation of the rise. It is unlikely that 'tougher' sentencing will go far towards reducing the crime rate, though it may halt the crime increase.

- Policing practices have changed relatively little in the 1980s, and so are unlikely to have contributed positively or negatively to the crime data. Police numbers have fallen behind somewhat in proportion to reported crimes, despite a fifty per cent increase in numbers since 1983.

The Social Background

Policy formation requires some account of the causes which lie behind these changes. If we misunderstand the causes, policy decisions may merely aggravate the problem. Good intentions are not enough; there is by now substantial evidence that government actions, most especially welfare policies, influence social life in all sorts of unintended ways. It will be contended here that well-meant but ill-con-

93 On crime measurement see James Q. Wilson and Richard J. Herrnstein, *Crime and Human Nature*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1985, pages 30–35.

sidered government interventions at both national and State levels have played a large part in creating the crime rise.

The (bi-partisan) Select Committee on Youth Affairs, in its 1992 Discussion Paper No. 3, *Youth and the Law*, includes a short discussion of 'Causes of Offending', based on public submissions to the committee. The paper lists eight possible causes: *family breakdown, unemployment, poverty, educational failure, child abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, underlying psychological or psychiatric conditions, and wardship*.⁹⁴ The list is a plausible one, as far as it goes, though other possibilities need to be considered. To think sensibly about this sort of issue we need to be able to distinguish between correlates, conditions, causes and consequences. And to do this we need to look at the trends through the late 1970s and early-to-mid 1980s, the crucial period in which the crime rise seems to be rooted.

We also need direct evidence on the lives and experience of offenders. This we now have, in a 1992 study of 409 young people in Longmore Remand and Detention Centre by psychologist Phil Watts, which was focused mainly on drug-taking behaviour and on suicidal tendencies, but which also collected data on family background. The study population was highly representative of young serious offenders: median age 15–16; 90 per cent male, 10 per cent female; 50 per cent Aboriginal, 50 per cent not; 18 per cent at school, 10 per cent working, 72 per cent unemployed. Although they are a young group, 34 per cent had been away from school for at least two years.⁹⁵

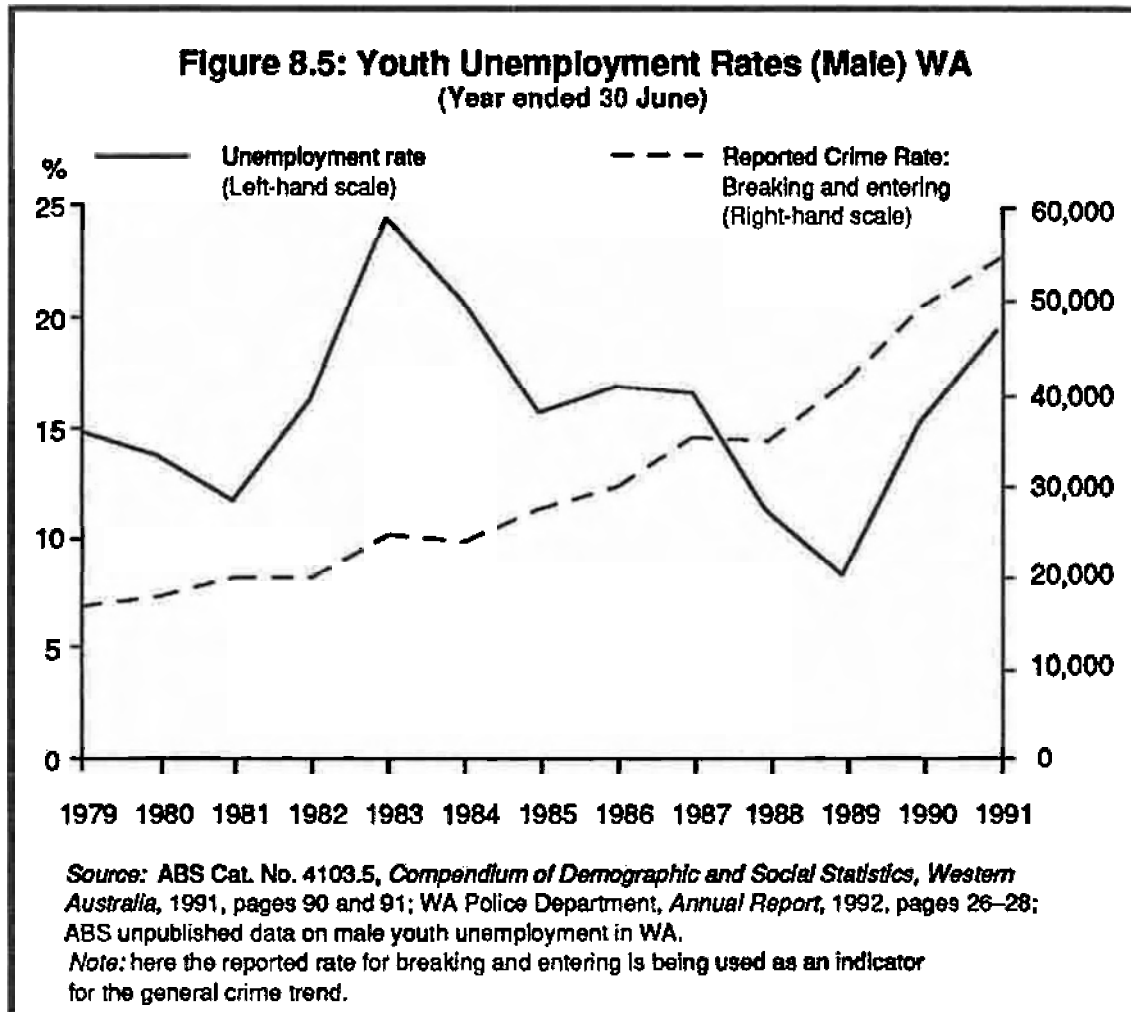
In this present discussion, two assumptions will be made: that the 1992 Longmore group is typical of all serious juvenile offenders of the past decade; and that older offenders are similar to this group in most respects. Many of today's older offenders are of course the young offenders of yesterday; some are the older brothers and cousins of today's Longmore group.

Watts' study shows very high levels of *unemployment* (72 per cent), though such a young group would not normally be expected to be in the workforce. We can assume that most older offenders are also unemployed. Does this make unemployment an important cause of offending? Analysis of the period shows that, contrary to common belief, youth unemployment trends bear little relation to crime rates.

94 Select Committee on Youth Affairs, Discussion Paper No. 3, *Youth and the Law*, 1992, pages 10–13.

95 Phil Watts, *Youth in Custody Project: A Profile of Juvenile Offenders' Drug Use Patterns*, Longmore Remand and Assessment Centre, DCS, May 1992, page 6.

As Figure 8.5 shows, in 1982–84 crime was low while unemployment was high. Between 1983 and 1988 unemployment fell as crime rose.



To say this is not to downgrade the importance of employment. Clearly, since so many offenders are unemployed and since being employed makes people feel valued and part of a social order, it is a significant background condition to the problem. But to describe it as a background condition is to say that by itself it could not and did not produce the crime upsurge. The unemployment of the offenders may itself be a product of other factors; they may be—as many have said they are—unemployable.

The facts about *poverty* are open to debate. On this subject we have to work from Australia-wide data, but on most such matters Western Australia is fairly typical. ABS data on changes in (pre-tax) income distributions in the 1980s show two trends: rapid gains by the highest income decile only; and heaviest losses to middle-income groups. The two lowest income deciles lost income share slightly, but their loss was only half that of the third and sixth deciles, and only a

third that of the fourth and fifth deciles. In other words, bottom income groups gained at the expense of the middle, and all lost against the highest.⁹⁶ Taxation, of course, will tend to level off these apparent disparities, as also will non-cash benefits to pensioners and beneficiaries, making the lowest income deciles relatively better off. In general, since the mid-1970s welfare payments have more than held their value against inflation, while wages have made little or no real gains. All of this does not add up to a picture of increasing immiseration of the poor.

Youth incomes did fall in the 1980s, but since most offenders were unemployed this fall is irrelevant to them. The income fall will have raised the relative value of unemployment benefits, making welfare subsistence more tempting. The replacement in 1988 of Unemployment Benefit for under-18s with a Job Search Allowance of lesser value may have lowered the incomes of some young people, but it comes too late to explain the mid-1980s crime rise. In the mid-1980s young unemployed were eligible for substantial benefits; this did not prevent a rapid upturn in the juvenile crime rate.

There is a very strong correlation between *educational failure* and youth crime. Only 18 per cent of the Longmore survey group were attending school; 34 per cent had not attended for two years. A Department for Community Services survey found that '87 per cent of the children of compulsory school age who had appeared in court five times or more had not been at school for a year'. It is said that most young offenders are unable to read or write.⁹⁷

Some hold that this failure is being brought about by processes in the schools; others that it has its origin outside school, mostly in the family. It is said by those of the first view that 'the education system through large class sizes, inappropriate teaching methods and lack of individual support leads to poor achievers falling behind', causing them to give way to despair and anger.⁹⁸ Was support for such students withdrawn in the 1980s? It would seem not. Expenditure per secondary student per year did not fall; class sizes did fall. Retention rates rose dramatically (for males as well as females) between 1980 and 1991—just when offenders were dropping out of school.⁹⁹ No-one thinks that school standards and expectations rose much in this period; many think that they fell, so offenders are unlikely to have

96 ABS, *Social Indicators 5*, Table 6.1.1, page 244.

97 *Youth and the Law, op. cit.*, page 11.

98 *Ibid.*, page 12.

99 ABS, *Social Indicators 5*, Figure 4.1.3, page 120.

been 'pressured' out of the school system by excessive academic demands.

The alternative view is that a new population of students arrived in the schools in the late-1970s, who for non-school reasons found themselves unable to cope with school life. As one submission to *Youth and the Law* put it, 'These children have not acquired the life-skills which are informally part of the school system and, therefore, they cannot participate in a classroom setting'.¹⁰⁰ A Deputy Principal of a primary school described a playground world of gangs, vandalism, verbal abuse and violence, adding that 'The majority of these children's parents acknowledge their children's antisocial behaviour but have lost control in directing them due to inconsistent measures of discipline and parental supervision'.¹⁰¹ These parents had had advice and assistance from the local social worker, the school guidance officer and the police community liaison officer, to no apparent avail.

The evidence sketched here does not strongly support the thesis that the schools themselves are failing their weaker pupils. It tends to point to prior causes, causes which operate earlier and deeper than school practices (though obviously school discipline failures can make matters even worse).

Child abuse and neglect was also considered a contributing cause to the crime rise. There are a number of difficulties in discussing this claim. One is a paucity of evidence: Western Australia has no publicly available long-term analysis upon which we can draw. Another is the elasticity of the concepts. All will agree that rape or persistent and pointless beatings are forms of abuse, but the surrounding penumbra of possibilities is a very grey area. A parent trying to keep a child in line with physical punishment may well be doing the best he or she knows, and using methods accepted by peers and the child. Welfare professionals who would prefer some other forms of control may simply be reflecting nothing more objective than their own judgement and *milieu*.

The absence of evidence makes it impossible to say whether serious abuse or neglect of children increased in the early 1980s. Submissions to the Select Committee are not reported as noting child abuse as a significant causal factor in Western Australia, with the exception of one youth worker from Karratha who commented on a high incidence of sexual abuse as a cause. The Longmore survey has

100 *Youth and the Law*, page 11.

101 *Ibid.*, page 12.

Reform and Recovery

nothing to say on the subject, but Phil Watts' personal view is that quite a few girls who end up as serious offenders have suffered sexual abuse in the past.

Child abuse seems to be a very much smaller problem than juvenile misbehaviour. Thorpe's study of reports of child maltreatment in four months of 1987 found that 672 reports were made, of which 228 were found to be substantiated and a further 108 thought to be 'at risk'.¹⁰² This would suggest an annual figure of about 700 substantiated maltreatment cases and 324 'at risk' cases, or somewhere around 1000 in total. By contrast, in the year 1986–87, juveniles were convicted of 33,000 offences in the Children's Court.¹⁰³ We do not know how many distinct individuals committed these offences. If, on average, offenders committed five offences, there would have been 6,600 offenders. Unless the incidence of crime is very much higher than this, juvenile offenders seem to outnumber child maltreatment cases quite substantially. It seems to follow that relatively few juvenile offenders can have become so as a result of parental maltreatment.

The Western Australian government's 'Advisory and Coordinating Committee on Child Abuse' holds that international studies show a strong link between child abuse and delinquency. Reviewing this literature, James Q. Wilson and Richard J. Herrnstein conclude that 'There is strong evidence that abusive homes produce more aggressive children, and there are good reasons for supposing that early aggressiveness in the family is associated with later aggressiveness outside the family', but an abusive home is 'only an imperfect indicator of the existence of a complex array of factors that contribute to criminality.... Some abusive parents will teach their children to express their frustrations by resorting to violent action, but the object of the child's later violence can vary greatly depending on other aspects of the family experience and on the situation in which he finds himself'.¹⁰⁴ To evaluate the child abuse thesis takes us into the wider question of parenting practices—a question too broad to be dealt with here.

The Longmore survey has established beyond all doubt a very strong correlation between *drug and alcohol abuse* and crime. Most of

102 David Thorpe, *Patterns of Child Protection Intervention and Service Delivery. Report of a Pilot Project*, University of Western Australia Crime Research Centre, April 1991, Table 2, page 9.

103 ABS Cat. No. 4103.5, *Compendium of Demographic and Social Statistics, Western Australia*, Table 8.4, page 92.

104 Wilson and Herrnstein, *op. cit.*, page 261.

the survey group were found to have high levels of abuse: daily cannabis use (25 per cent), weekly binge drinking (28 per cent), daily (10 per cent) or regular (33 per cent) amphetamine use, and regular LSD-type drug use (27 per cent). Nearly half used at least one drug (other than tobacco) daily; two thirds used one or more drugs at least once a week. Nearly half of the 281 alcohol users reported usually drinking more than a bottle of spirits or twelve cans of beer in a single session.¹⁰⁵

We have no proof that total drug and alcohol abuse amongst the young grew rapidly in the early eighties. It does seem likely that the intensity of consumption by some groups grew, for there are no reports of such intense consumption before this one. Some drugs are new arrivals on the scene, most especially amphetamines and glue-sniffing. No-one doubts that drugs and alcohol are the proximate causes of much crime. We need to look deeper, however, before we can count this consumption as a cause in its own right.

Behind this intense consumption is a strong desire 'to escape reality and stress', as Watts puts it. It is obvious that this self-destructive behaviour is closely related to family experiences. Watts concludes that 'Whilst it is uncertain whether the family situation is causing drug taking or vice versa, the results are clear—drugs are not a problem isolated from the families of juveniles'.¹⁰⁶ Research into drug addiction seems to show that drug risk is almost entirely predicted by family factors.¹⁰⁷ Equally certainly, juvenile offending is closely related to both the drug abuse and the family failures. Furthermore, 'The strong association between family dysfunction and drug use ... means that family interventions should be an integral part of the [drug abuse] treatment process. Without the family therapy component, treatment is likely to have reduced efficacy'.¹⁰⁸

One deeper kind of cause might be *psychological or psychiatric conditions*. Almost one quarter of the Longmore sample were rated as clinically depressed; quite a few had suicidal tendencies. To disentangle these mental problems from the drug-taking or from other social problems is obviously no easy matter. One might also note that 'only' one quarter were rated as clinically depressed—the rate is

105 Watts, *op. cit.*, pages 8–12.

106 *Ibid.*, page 17.

107 See Richard Blum and associates, *Horatio Alger's Children*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1972.

108 Watts, *op. cit.*, page 19.

Reform and Recovery

surely much higher than that of the general teenage population, but it is not very strongly correlated with crime.

Wardship, as such, is unlikely to be counted as a cause of juvenile offending, though it does seem to correlate somewhat with offending, particularly serious repeat offending. Children become wards as a result of family failure to care and protect them, and it is this prior failure which is likely to be the basic cause of subsequent criminal behaviour. Often neither foster homes nor Departmental hostels can control such youths. *Youth and the Law* reports a submission which speaks of young people in hostels who 'offend as regular as clock-work, because they are all mixing with each other'—not a good reflection on the Department's achievements.¹⁰⁹

Between 1984 and 1989 the number of young people in substitute care fell by 40 per cent.¹¹⁰ The trend is running in the opposite direction to what we would expect if it were a cause of crime; if anything, it seems to suggest that reduction in substitute care may have contributed to the crime rise. However, we have no independent reason to assume that to be the case.

Family Breakdown

Having considered all but one of the possible 'causes of offending' listed in *Youth and the Law*, we can turn back to the one cause which it lists first but deals with most peremptorily: *family breakdown*. Here the evidence of a causal relation to crime is strong—though perhaps not quite complete or conclusive—at both the macro and the micro levels.

We can begin with the 'micro' evidence of the Longmore survey. When the 409 youths were asked their current address on admission, it was found that only twenty per cent of these young people were living with both their parents, and only 56 per cent were living with any of their parents. Three quarters were not living with their father; half were not living with their mother. Twenty per cent were living in a two-parent family; presumably even less than twenty per cent were living with both their biological parents. In answer to the question 'Are your parents still together?' 68 per cent answered No, 32 per cent answered Yes. This implies that of the 44 per cent living with neither parent, only 12 per cent had a two-parent family to which they might return.¹¹¹

109 *Youth and the Law*, *op. cit.*, page 11.

110 Department for Community Services, *Annual Report 1990*, page 14.

111 Phil Watts, personal communication.

These remarkable facts about family structure are not exactly matched by the youths' perceptions of family relationships. Asked whether their parents had a good relationship, half said No, half said Yes, which does not fit well with the fact that 68 per cent of parents were not living together. However that question had a high level of invalid answers (78, or 20 per cent), possibly because the question made little sense to those whose parents had little or no relationship.

The question 'How well do you get on with your mother?' resulted in 64 per cent answering 'good', 22 per cent saying 'OK', 10 per cent 'bad' and 5 per cent 'no relationship'. For fathers the response was worse: 46 per cent 'good', 28 per cent 'OK', 13 per cent 'bad' and 13 per cent 'no relationship'.¹¹² This suggests more positive contact between the youths and their parents than is indicated by the family structure questions. On this point Phil Watts remarks that people generally tend to report themselves as having better family relationships than other measures would indicate to be the case. It would be interesting to compare the responses here with responses from a random sample of the same age group.

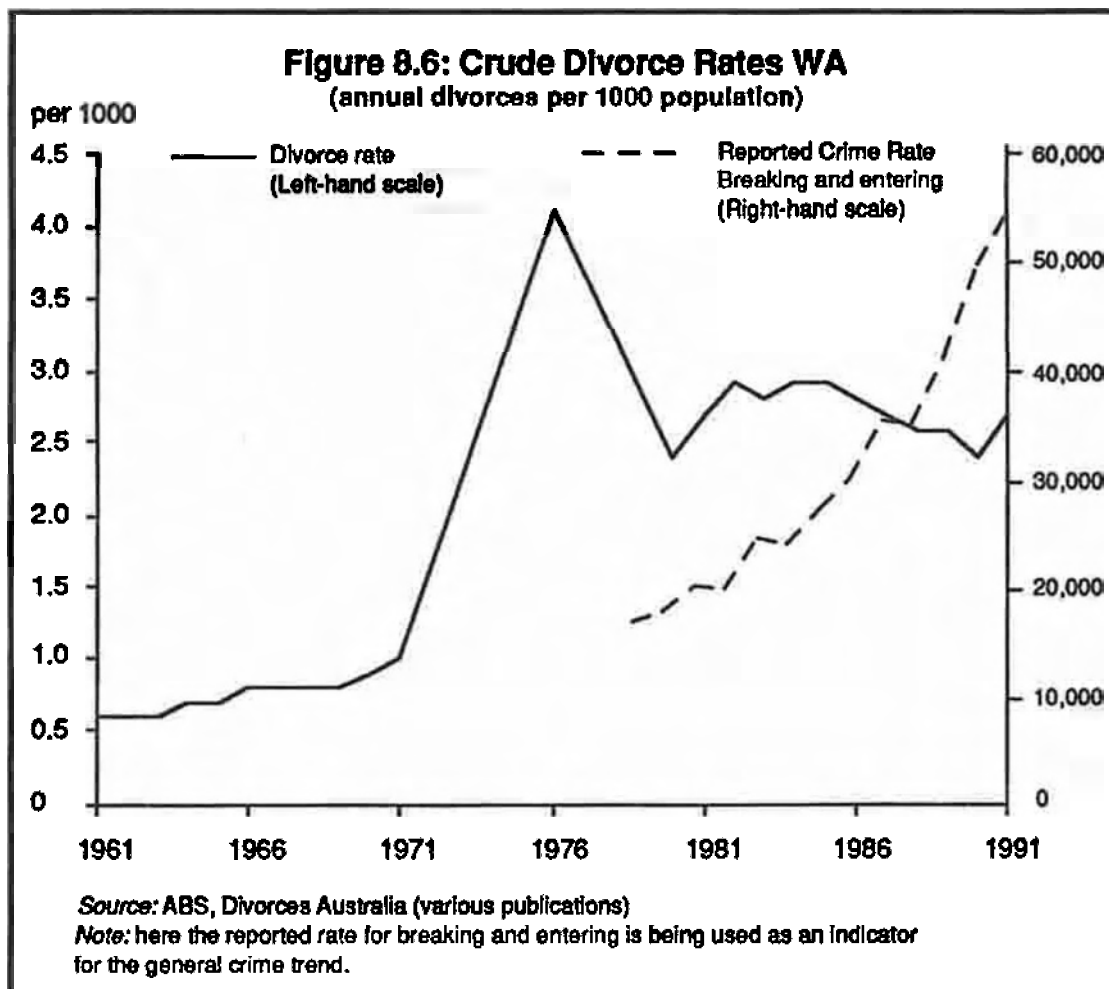
We know that, in the general population of 15-year olds in Western Australia in 1986, 77.3 per cent were living with both natural parents, compared with less than 20 per cent in the Longmore sample. 14.5 per cent were living with one parent only and 8.3 per cent with one parent and a step parent.¹¹³ If these census figures are accurate then the number of 15-year olds in the general population living with neither of their parents is statistically insignificant, yet in the Longmore sample it amounts to no less than 44 per cent.

The 'macro' level shows very high levels of family breakdown. By far the most striking change in family life in Western Australia in recent times is the rise in the divorce rate. Before 1971 the divorce rate hovered around 4 divorces per year per 1000 married persons; since 1976 it has levelled off at around 12. Twelve per thousand may not sound much but it amounts to a divorce rate for newly-formed marriages of one in three, as against one in ten for marriages in the previous generation. (See Figure 8.6.)

Clearly this is a massive change, in its own way quite as striking as the rises in the crime rate about seven years later. The obvious

112 Phil Watts, personal communication.

113 The Office of the Family, Government of Western Australia, *Families in Focus in Western Australia*; ABS Cat. Nos 4105.5, 1988, Tables 8.d and 8.e, pages 33, 34.



question is: are they related? Is the divorce boom a major cause of the crime wave? There are two ways of showing connections between them. One is to argue that no other changes occurred in the relevant period—the early 1980s—which could possibly account for the rise in crime. We have shown that most of the possible causes listed in *Youth and the Law* cannot be causes.¹¹⁴ The other is to show directly that the juvenile offenders of the late 1980s came from families which had broken up in the divorce boom. The Longmore survey seems strong evidence that this is the case. In Figure 8.6 the relation between the divorce rise and the crime upsurge is indicated, showing a seven-year time lag between one rise and the other. Such a lag is as one might expect, if divorce is a cause of crime, for on this view the

114 Child abuse may be a cause but it may also be a by-product of family breakdown, since most child abuse involves sole parent and 'blended' families. Thorpe found that of 672 reported abuse cases only 30 per cent involved children living with both of their biological parents; 49 per cent involved sole parent families, and 18 per cent blended families (Thorpe, *op. cit.*, Table 4, page 12). However, we do not know what percentage of abusers are members of the child's family, so nothing much can be said about the processes at work here.

disruptive effects on a young child's development will be likely to manifest themselves in the social arena at adolescence.

Interestingly, the figures on ex-nuptial births in Western Australia show no sudden rise in the 1970s, but rather a steady progression from 5.6 per cent of all births in 1961 to 22 per cent in 1989.¹¹⁵ There is here no dramatic change capable of accounting for the suddenness of the mid-1980s crime rise. Most unmarried mothers identify a father on the birth form for their children, though of course it is questionable how stable these relations are in reality. Teenage ex-nuptial births are even less suited to explaining the crime rise: the numbers rose from 610 in 1966 to 1,033 in 1971, *dropped* to 971 in 1976, then rose again to 1,057 in 1981 and 1,120 in 1986.¹¹⁶ The changes here are not great and the numbers are insufficient to account for any great changes in overall juvenile behaviour. In 1986 only about 3.5 per cent of all 17-year olds would have been born to unmarried teenage mothers, no great increase on the percentage in 1981. By contrast, in 1986 22.7 per cent of all 15-year olds had experienced the divorce or separation of their parents.

Welfare Dependency and the Underclass Hypothesis

Another possible cause of the crime boom is *welfare dependency*, which has risen dramatically in the relevant period. We have seen that income poverty is not a cause of crime, but it remains possible that the cause is to be found in 'underclass poverty', poverty which goes with long-term welfare dependency, and which seems to lead to anti-social behaviour problems. Can it be shown that underclass poverty is strongly associated with crime and that it rose in ways which might have caused the recent crime increases?

There is no doubt that long-term adult welfare dependency rose rapidly in the 1970s and 1980s. Both long-term unemployment and long-term sole parenthood increased vastly in this period. Between 1971 and 1986 the number of long-term unemployment beneficiaries (over six months on benefits) rose from about 300 to about 25000 (at the height of an economic boom period).¹¹⁷ Today, with unemploy-

115 *Families in Focus in Western Australia*, Chart 7.3, page 26; *Compendium*, Chart 2.2, page 27.

116 Calculated from *Families in Focus in Western Australia*, Table 7.h, page 25.

117 Estimated from the Australian figures given in Bettina Cass, *Income Support for the Unemployed in Australia: Towards a More Active System*, Social Security Review, Canberra, AGPS, 1988, pages 67-8, 177, assuming that the Western Australian figure is one-tenth that for Australia.

Reform and Recovery

ment nearly twice the 1986 level, the number is certain to be very much higher.

Similarly with sole parents (again working from Australia-wide figures). In June 1974 there were 105,000 sole parents receiving welfare payments in Australia; in June 1986 the figure was 268,400. In 1986, 34 per cent of Class A widows (most of whom were not widows but divorced or separated women) had been on the pension for 5–10 years; 16 per cent had been on the pension for over ten years. Although sole parent pensions became widely available only in 1973, already by 1982 13 per cent of sole mother beneficiaries had been receiving the benefit for more than five years; by 1986 that figure had risen to 17 per cent. In 1986 the official median durations were 5.7 years for Class A widows and 2.8 years for female SPB recipients.¹¹⁸ Actually the real median durations are probably much higher than this, because these figures refer only to median durations for each period of receipt, not to median durations per total period of receipt for each recipient (this figure is not made public). No doubt many recipients went on and off the pension a number of times. Taking this into account could well boost the median durations quite considerably.

The underclass hypothesis holds that a life of welfare dependency distorts the social experience and attitudes of those who fall captive to it. Far from welfare support integrating such families into the community, the overall effect is disintegrative, breaking up couples into non-working males and struggling sole mothers, with children who are loosely controlled and poorly socialised. The children of such families tend to feel little sense of obligation to the society which 'supported' them. Rather, they often fail to learn the habits required to become economically productive; they feel acute anger, boredom, envy and exclusion; they can see no future for themselves in mainstream society. Some have no respect for either public or private property. To protect their fragile egos they unite into militant gangs such as 'the KGB'. Like little children they desperately need the attention of mature adults but they cannot handle one of the basic messages of adult society, which is that they should 'get a job' and become self-supporting. Consequently their attention-seeking becomes a dangerous game in which they set out to break the rules of society (particularly through such activities as high-speed car chases in which the

118 Judy Raymond, *Bringing Up Children Alone: Policies for Sole Parents*, Social Security Review, Canberra, AGPS, 1987, pages 51, 62.

police can be engaged and targeted) while learning to plead innocent and victimised when brought to account for themselves by society's authorities. Their lives become a mixture of depression and false bravado, in which drugs and alcohol mask from them their real predicament while also providing the temporary illusion that they are powerful and important.

The basic problem with these children seems to be that they have never enjoyed the pleasures and the hard lessons of structured family life, a form of life characterised by 'a pragmatic blend of love and discipline' (to use John Embling's very apt phrase).¹¹⁹ Both in their families and in their relations with the wider community they have failed to learn that with rights go responsibilities (also an Embling motto).

This is a familiar and all too plausible story, though we lack some of the direct evidence needed to fully test the hypothesis. In particular we have no direct evidence connecting juvenile crime with welfare dependency. All we can say about this is that family breakdown, which is connected with juvenile crime, itself tends to lead to welfare dependency, through dependency on sole parent benefits. A study, along the lines of Watts' work, of the welfare history of juvenile offenders and their families would go a long way towards settling this issue.

At its core the underclass hypothesis asserts a statistically strong connection between four phenomena:

- (1) unbalanced state welfare incentives or poorly designed welfare eligibility criteria;
- (2) high levels of sole parenthood, unstable *de facto* relationships, and long-term unemployment;
- (3) poor quality parenting practices;
- (4) high levels of anti-social behaviour such as crime, drug addiction, voluntary unemployment and school truancy.

That (2) and (4) are today real and important social phenomena can hardly be denied by anyone acquainted with the evidence. The truth

¹¹⁹ John Embling, *Fragmented Lives: A Darker Side of Australian Life*, Ringwood, Penguin, 1986, page 100. The importance of family in forming character is in some ways obvious, in other ways often wholly ignored. It is nicely brought out in M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled*, London, Rider, 1985, and Paul Pearsall, *The Power of the Family*, New York, Bantam, 1991. Moira Eastman's work is a valuable survey of the research into these questions and its many ramifications: see her *Family. The Vital Factor*, Melbourne, CollinsDove, 1989. Peck, Pearsall and Eastman all show that belief in the importance of family is in no way a matter of exclusively 'middle-class' values.

of (1) is controversial, but the accumulated evidence is substantial.¹²⁰ (3) is a more difficult matter, since social research has no very good access to people's private lives, and what counts as good parental behaviour is somewhat—though not endlessly—debatable.

The underclass hypothesis is relatively strong on three out of four of its components. As for internal correlations, we have seen a strong correlation between (4) and (2), and it is possible that (4) and (2) correlate strongly with welfare dependency, which is in turn likely to be a product of (1). The evidence presented here suggests a causal sequence from (1) to (2) to (3) to (4). The case is not conclusive, particularly in relation to (3). But even without (3) we still have a moderately strong claim to consider. It is strengthened by the evidence of a time lag from (1) to (2) to (4), with the temporal direction indicative of the causal process. If this evidence is moderately strong then it will need to be taken into account in the way we design our welfare institutions, policies and practices.

In a fuller analysis it would be necessary to discuss the relation between the underclass hypothesis and Aboriginality. There is little doubt that Aboriginal people are more welfare-dependent than the rest of the population. In the 1986 census Aboriginal people were found to have an unemployment rate of 39 per cent, compared with 9.4 per cent for the total population.¹²¹ Aboriginal families with dependent children also showed relatively high levels of family breakdown. According to *Families in Focus*, in 1986 there were 4130 two-parent and 2242 one-parent Aboriginal families with dependent children in Western Australia—about 35 per cent sole parent families, compared with about 16 per cent for the rest of the population. The ratio in Perth was 65:35; in the agricultural areas it was 72:28; in the pastoral regions it was 67:33; so there is no great variation between regions of the State.¹²²

These broad figures are consistent with what we would expect on the underclass hypothesis, if we are trying to explain Aboriginal 'over-representation' in crime. But other explanations may be poss-

120 See, for instance, Alan Tapper, *The Family in the Welfare State*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1990, pages 63ff. Detailed analysis of sole parent pensions and average two-parent family incomes, taking into account taxation, welfare fringe benefits and family size, seems to show that the pensioner family is little, if at all, worse off than the average two-parent family. With Homeswest housing the pensioner will be distinctly better off. An analysis of this sort is forthcoming.

121 ABS, Cat. No. 4107.5, *Aboriginals in Western Australia*, 1989, Table 5.1, page 26.

122 *Families in Focus*, Table 2.b, page 7.

ible or necessary. The difficulties of Aboriginal historical dispossession and the possibility of racial discrimination need also to be taken into account. We are hampered in doing this because census data on Aboriginal people are poor, making trends difficult to trace. (There is plenty of first-hand evidence to suggest that many Aboriginal people are doing very well, in education and the workforce and in their families, at a time when the Aboriginal crime rate also appears to be rising.) Testing the underclass hypothesis also requires us to compare like with like. It is at least arguable that the Aboriginal crime rate is no higher than that of non-Aborigines with the same levels of employment, education, income, welfare dependency, and family breakdown. The complexity of these issues and the paucity of good evidence makes definite judgements impossible at this stage.

Forming Some Policy Guidelines

On the evidence presented here, the key to reducing youth crime and disaffection seems to be to help keep families together and to increase parents' work commitment. To achieve the first of these we need to make government-funded sole parenthood financially less attractive and to require some work commitment. This can be done with no injustice to sole parents, since sole parents can fairly be expected to participate in the workforce at least at the level typical now of married mothers. The incentives in favour of separation are now very considerable: fiscal incidence analysis by the ABS (counting all taxes and all social expenditure) shows that in 1988–89 governments in Australia gave sole parent families an average net support of \$224 per week, or \$11,648 per year; two-parent families, on the other hand, were net losers of \$62 per week, or \$3,224 per year.¹²³

To increase work commitment more generally, welfare benefits for the unemployed need to be tied to a work or vocational training requirement. The assumption that welfare payments are a 'right', involving no reciprocal commitment to the community, was never plausible and is no longer widely shared. Commitment to the community can be demonstrated by workfare, which is widely used in Scandinavia and coming to be accepted in the US. The rationale for workfare—making welfare conditional upon acceptance of work offered or of vocational training—has to be cultural, not economic,

123 ABS, Cat. No. 6537.0, *The Effects of Government Benefits and Taxes on Household Income*, 1992, Table 5, page 19.

for it is not cheap to administer. Its value is that it does seem to increase the self-esteem of long-term welfare dependants, it makes them far more marketable in the labour force, and it reduces counter-productive and self-destructive behaviour such as crime.

Some of these general policy strategies may be adopted in some small degree in the future. A Coalition Federal government might increase work requirements for sole parents with children over the age of 12. A work-for-benefit scheme is also being proposed, on a two-days-per-week basis for those who have been unemployed for nine months. State politicians might lobby for such schemes in Canberra, but State-level policies need to be devised which might succeed without support at the Federal level. To do so, however, will require considerably more clarity of purpose than is presently evident in Department for Community Development publications. In turn, State welfare authorities should accept that income support is a Federal responsibility, that current income support levels are at least adequate (sometimes making recipients better off than they would be if married or in the workforce), and that the State government's role is to cope as best it can with the behavioral problems which follow from the sort of Federally-funded welfare state that we have.

Much of what has been implicitly argued thus far is quite in accord with the Department's official goals. These include 'maximising opportunities for those with serious welfare problems to resume a constructive role in the community', 'minimising the impact of those conditions that generate community needs for welfare services', and 'strengthening the capacity of those individuals, families, groups and communities experiencing difficulties or problems to resolve them at an early stage'.¹²⁴ At this level of generality there is little disagreement; the Department's critics, however, doubt that in practice it has done much towards realising these goals.

Institutional design

DCD is a large organisation, with a staff of 1,600 and a budget in 1990-91 of \$110m. Its expenditure for that year breaks up into the following categories (showing in brackets the proportion which is spent through non-government agencies, which totals \$28m):

124 *Annual Report 1990, page 1.*

