

Essay

How I Would Spend \$100 Million to Reduce Crime: A Reaction

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Introduction

When first asked to provide a reaction to Rick Sarre's comprehensive essay on how he proposes to spend \$100 million to reduce crime, of course I obliged. However, upon further reflection, it seemed like a potentially bad idea. I thought through the opportunity and reflected that assuming this role would be a bit like criticising Gandhi — given Rick's status in the field. As a leading academic in crime prevention, among other areas, a former President of the Australian and New Zealand Society of Criminology, and a highly respected scholar, there is arguably little that I could add to this issue. I recognised that providing a discerning reaction would be difficult and would carry some degree of risk as it would require some very keen observations to provide insights over and above what could be expected from the ideas and interpretations provided by Rick. Indeed, I can think of very few criminologists and social policy thinkers in Australia who have contributed more to broadening our understanding in the crime and justice and crime prevention field than Rick Sarre. And while I acknowledge the risks, I am pleased to proceed given the opportunity to provide a few insights on Rick's substantial thoughts on this important topic.

Investing strategically to reduce crime: Why this is important

Let me begin by acknowledging the importance of this topic. It is important for criminologists and justice officials and the general community to be aware of the costs of crime and justice and the likely benefits associated with investing wisely in areas that can better foster crime prevention and improved crime and justice outcomes (Greenwood and Welsh 2010). Having access to reasonably reliable and valid data is fundamental to inform policy discussions and to develop some principles for guiding substantive investments in strategies to prevent and reduce crime across the community.

Criminologists and justice policy officials have long been encouraged to invest in programs that are demonstrably effective (Andrews et al 1990; Welsh and Farrington 2011). Moreover, given the finite nature of investments both in preventing and responding to crime, it makes good sense that what we do invest in, given a choice, is informed by evidence of its effectiveness, and is instrumental in its intent and purpose. In other words, we need structures and systems to maximise the utility and impact of public investments in crime reduction, to ensure that public monies are invested wisely, and to ensure that such investments can foster public confidence in the criminal justice system.

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Rick correctly acknowledges that, faced with an approximate \$15 billion crime and justice annual spend (which is a conservative estimate) (Productivity Commission 2016), a \$100 million investment appears hardly a drop in the bucket. However, as he identifies, there are a number of key areas that require further investment to foster crime prevention. The challenge lies in ensuring that the impact of the investment makes a material difference in reducing crime across the community. Hence, the need to be strategic and targeted in developing an effective investment portfolio.

Assessing the investment portfolio

As outlined in his essay, Rick proposes to distribute the \$100 million across the following nine areas:

- 15 per cent or \$15 million across pre- and post-release programs and prisoner rehabilitation;
- 10 per cent or \$10 million for expanding diversionary and therapeutic models of justice delivery (including things like restorative justice and problem solving courts);
- 5 per cent or \$5 million on training to foster improvements in policing, in particular procedurally just policing;
- 10 per cent or \$10 million on fostering crime prevention partnerships between government and the private sector;
- 10 per cent or \$10 million on Indigenous community justice initiatives, including \$7 million on educational initiatives and \$3 million on implementing specialising Indigenous-run justice facilities;
- 15 per cent or \$15 million for women experiencing domestic violence to be spread across non-government services, specialised police units, and specialised police training;
- 10 per cent or \$10 million aimed at early intervention and developmental transitions to foster protective factors and better outcomes for young people via a range of community-based strategies informed by experts;
- 20 per cent or \$20 million aimed at efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect spread across implementing effective programs, as well as funding some new innovative pilot programs; and finally
- 5 per cent or \$5 million dollars to be spent on public education programs via public advertising, as well as an evaluation of the \$100 million investment to assess its impact on reducing crime and victimisation among other areas.

Clearly a great deal of careful thought and consideration went into to designing this investment portfolio. In assessing these options, I considered the following key questions:

1. Is there a good balance between front end responses and back end reactions to crime?
2. Are resources directed into areas that have an opportunity or likelihood to reduce or prevent crime?
3. Does the proposed portfolio provide opportunities to leverage the investments to create multiplier effects?

4. Are the investments sufficiently targeted into areas that can act as levers for addressing crime origination and crime continuation? In other words, do the investments sufficiently target criminal onset and persistence or recidivism?

Is there a good balance between front end responses and back end reactions to crime?

On the first question, Rick's portfolio demonstrates a roughly 70:30 split between front end and back end of the system investments. Back end investments can be very expensive and have effects that are hard to discern or realise, while front end, longer-term preventative efforts are often less expensive, and can function to divert people from the criminal justice system and from subsequent offending (see Welsh 2012; Welsh and Farrington 2011). The point is that preventing delinquency and crime in the first instance can be highly beneficial in terms of an overall crime reduction strategy (Dodge et al 2015; Farrington and Welsh 2007). At the same time, ensuring that criminal behaviour, when it occurs, does not escalate or persist over time also has crime reduction benefits across the community (Mazerolle 2013). Overall, Rick's approach on this score illustrates a wise investment approach.

Are resources directed into areas that have an opportunity or likelihood to reduce or prevent crime?

On the second question, the answer is yes for the most part as there are some areas of the \$100 million investment that target opportunities for reducing and preventing crime. I believe this is most clearly illustrated with the reference to the early intervention developmental prevention programs, the restorative justice programs, the specialised police units for domestic violence and in fostering procedurally just policing. Where there is ambiguity is in relation to some of the identified programs for addressing Indigenous community justice and prevention, child abuse, and domestic violence services in the community. We simply do not know enough about the effectiveness of programs in these areas, which is ironic, given the pressing needs for effective crime prevention and reduction responses in these areas. In sum, the investment portfolio on this question is somewhat mixed.

Does the portfolio provide opportunities to leverage the investments to create multiplier effects?

On the third question, there is scope to consider how these investments could be expanded or leveraged in both scale and scope. Rick touches on this when he identifies the need to invest to address the effects of mental health and acquired brain injury among the offender population. With the development in Australia of the National Disability Insurance Scheme, his investments could ideally be leveraged with this important insurance scheme to assist many more offenders with mental health and associated disabilities.

A similar approach may be able to be used in the child abuse area, perhaps by leveraging investments from industry and the philanthropic community. This also applies to the community-based prevention programs in Indigenous communities. In short, there are very good leverage opportunities available to stretch the scale and impact of Rick's investments. Illuminating worthwhile areas of investment for reducing crime can and should attract funds from multiple sources and, at the same time, when paired with other investment opportunities (for example, NDIS etc) can make a more enduring cumulative impact.

Are the investments sufficiently targeted into areas that can act as levers for addressing crime origination and crime continuation? In other words, do the investments sufficiently target criminal onset and persistence or recidivism?

On this final question, the portfolio is somewhat mixed. Clearly some of the investments address delaying and reducing the likelihood of involvements in delinquency. The early intervention investments address that issue. Investing in areas that reduce the likelihood of criminal onset makes a good deal of sense (Moffitt 1993). However, there is perhaps a missed opportunity in not targeting resources to a much greater extent toward repeat offending, persistent offenders or the so-called 'chronic' offenders (Wolfgang, Figlio and Sellin 1972). Very good evidence demonstrates their disproportionate influence in generating crime (Moffitt 1993; Piquero, Farrington and Blumstein 2003; Wolfgang et al 1972) and therefore it would make sense to expand resources, both preventative and system based, toward this group.

Closing thoughts

I believe the final paragraph of Rick's essay is especially important, where he identifies that we can only really be successful 'if we trumpet our successes, acknowledge our limitations, clearly and succinctly communicate our findings, and continue to develop our evaluative capacity' (Sarre 2017:348). In so doing, he challenges us all to be honest about what we do not know, to develop a culture and commitment to evaluation (and that therefore means evidence accumulation) and to communicate our findings to key audiences. These are indeed important challenges for the field and in particular for scholars interested in shaping or informing the direction of policies aimed at reducing crime and criminal behaviour.

In closing, I have three final reflections on Rick's essay and considerations for areas that require attention and investment. First is the need to invest further in education and skills. I think there is good evidence to show that education and skills — both as a front end preventive solution as well as back end rehabilitative option — are worthy of investment (Yoshikawa 1994). On the front end, efforts to prepare children for the transition to school, for succeeding in school and for staying in school appear especially protective against delinquency and crime (Homel et al 2015; Yoshikawa 1994). At the same time, there is good evidence to show that prison-based education and training projects can assist in the rehabilitation and desistance process (Andrews et al 1990).

Second is the need and opportunity to invest to foster a cultural change across crime and justice agencies toward embracing evidence-informed responses to crime and justice. Rick touches on this by identifying the need to build an evaluation focus for the \$10 million investment and the system more generally. At issue is the need to foster greater capacity across the system to embrace evidence as a means for informing strategies and practices, and embrace evaluations in an effort to become learning organisations. What this means in practice is that crime and justice organisations should to a greater extent embrace bibliotherapy — they must be taught to read and understand evaluations and identify the difference between methodologically rigorous versus weak studies (Mazerolle 2014). Part of this investment would, in time, increase the chance that criminal justice officials could support evidence-informed practices but, more importantly, would help guard them against the ideological and politically driven common-sense revolutions in crime and justice policies we have seen rear their head from time to time across the world (Gendreau et al 2002). As a

community of crime and justice professionals we need to be at the forefront of fostering respect for research evidence, supporting bibliotherapy for crime and justice officials, making evidence about scientifically supported programs accessible to practitioners, building trust between researcher and practitioner communities and building a shared commitment for effective social policy development and implementation.

A final reflection for further investment — and this may be blue-sky or pie-in-the-sky thinking — but with a small investment, why not establish a new political party dedicated to *evidence-informed policies*, the ‘EIP party’. Rick is no stranger to political parties, but with his knowledge, values and commitment we could make a real go at this. We know that Australia has a myriad of political parties — the Australian Sex Party, the Animal Justice Party, the Australian Motoring Enthusiast Party, the Outdoor Recreation Party, the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party, the Pirate Party Australia, and many more. We need to avoid the various criminological abominations political parties have brought through very bad policy decisions that have fostered harm to the community. Establishing a political party dedicated to fostering evidence-informed policies might be just the approach we need, and having Rick Sarre leading the way would no doubt leave us all in good stead.

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