

The National Police Research Unit sets directions in law enforcement

By Bob Hamdorf

The AFP is responsible for the administrative arrangements of the National Police Research Unit and provides the employment framework for its 11 research and administrative staff. The unit's Director, Chief Superintendent Bob Hamdorf, is seconded from the South Australia Police Service. He outlines the unit's creation, history and current projects.

The National Police Research Unit began operations in Adelaide in February 1983 after a recommendation in 1978 by Sir Robert Mark, former Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police in England.

Sir Robert, who had been asked to review the organisation of police resources within the Commonwealth area, found there was a need for national bodies to deal with criminal intelligence, police management, education and research.

Its creation was ratified by an Australian Police Ministers' Council (APMC) agreement signed by all members on May 21, 1982.

The unit was established in Adelaide as part of a move to decentralise various national bodies and South Australia voiced its interest in providing a location for the unit. It has proved a worthy home providing a centralised position nationally as well as a sense of detachment from any one jurisdiction.

A Board of Control, comprising all Australasian Police Commissioners directs and controls the administration and operations of the NPRU. It is accountable, through the board, to the Australasian Police Ministers' Council.

Role and Functions

The approved 1996-98 NPRU Corporate Plan cites the unit's goals as: to provide leadership on critical research and forecast issues that may impact on policing in the future; to enhance strategic partnerships to improve the quality and range of research services; to identify and promote continual improvement in police practice; and to optimise the research capability

of the NPRU through the highest standards of management.

The principal role of the unit is to undertake research into policing issues which have an Australasia-wide significance. Although the unit has undertaken – by contracting to outside sources – drug-related research, the main focus is on big dollar human resource and operational management issues. Coupled with this is a technology forum program which has an important role in facilitating and co-ordinating sub-programs including vehicle fleet management; uniforms and personal issue; computer investigation techniques; and electronic surveillance.

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The NPRU staff members are Executive Officer Des Berwick; Senior Research Fellow Dr Jeanette Packer; Principal Research Officer Dr Carlene Wilson; Research Officers Karen Beck, Nadia Boni, Michelle McNeill and Amanda Kaczmarek who is also the librarian. Support staff include Wendy Bowes, Graeme Reynolds and Joanne Loades.

The unit's research has included: standardised



The NPRU's research covers many facets of police work.

ammunition for Australian police services; improvement of investigative skills in relation to computer crime (which led to the NPRU Computer Investigation Techniques program); national crime trend forecasting (which led to the formation of the National Crime Statistics Unit); de-institutionalisation of the mentally disabled and its impact upon police; police electronic surveillance units in Australia (this led to the NPRU Electronic Surveillance program); use of horns or electronic devices on police vehicles; vehicle stopping devices; urgent duty driving by Australian police; criminal victimisation of the aged and intellectually disabled; one and two person patrols; resistance encountered by police officers; police specialisation and job satisfaction; the risks of patrol work; and supervisory behaviour.

The unit's current research program includes the following various areas.

The development of organisational commitment.

Organisational commitment, or the degree to which individuals are committed to the goals and values of the organisation, has been shown to predict employee behaviours such as turnover, sick leave and job performance. Independent studies in three Australian police departments reported consistently low levels of organisational commitment. This research aims to examine trends in the development of organisational commitment across the career span of police

officers, and to identify factors that may influence these trends. Both organisational factors and individual officer characteristics are being examined.

National psychological screening for police applicants. This project, to be piloted soon, aims to identify a valid and reliable battery of psychological tests suitable for all Australian police services which effectively screens in applicants with the potential to become successful police officers and screens out applicants who are likely to become ineffective or undesirable police officers.

Establishment, maintenance and betrayal of police ethics.

The aim of this study is to identify the individual and organisational characteristics associated with ethical and unethical behaviour by police. The study focuses on corruptive influences and the identification of appropriate supervisory and educative responses. The project is being undertaken by a team of consultants headed by Professor K McConkey of the School of Psychology, University of NSW. Three in a series of five reports have been published with an edited version of the most recent on the following pages of this magazine.

Improving police supervision

Effective supervision is central to the operation of an effective and ethical police

service. This study aims to develop and evaluate a workshop based on behaviour management principles to enhance supervisory skills of police. The workshop aims to teach new supervisors effective supervisory tactics and refresh skills for existing supervisors. It follows earlier work on supervisory behaviour published by the unit.

Minimum national firearms training, 'less-than-lethal weapons' and incident management and operational safety

Reports on these topics are being combined to provide jurisdictions with a balanced approach to the management of incidents, conflict resolution and the use of force (including less-than-lethal weapons and firearms) to emphasise the need to consider and use, where appropriate, other alternatives before resorting to physical measures, particularly firearms.

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Risk management

The risk of physical abuse to officers on patrol is a major concern for police services worldwide. Research at the NPRU has established that risk to both officer and citizen is influenced by offender, officer, and situational characteristics. While the police organisation has little scope for modifying the risk by manipulating offender characteristics and behaviours, risk management can be attempted by focusing on situational and police influences. Three projects have examined these issues.

Australasian environmental scanning

To undertake effective strategic planning, police organisations need to identify emerging issues early. Given the complexity of modern society and the various relationships involved in policing, many external and internal variables need to be examined to predict with some confidence the extent to which issues will impact on policing in the future. Issues likely to have a major influence can be broadly categorised as demographic, social, political, economic, technical and industrial. The aims of this project are to conduct an Australasian scan of the environment facing policing up to 20 years ahead and develop guidelines to enable jurisdictions to conduct their own environmental scans.

National performance indicators for policing

As a Council of Australian Governments (COAG) initiative, working parties have been established to develop national performance indicators in several areas of government, including policing. The police working party is chaired by the Secretary of the NSW Treasury and includes a representative of each jurisdiction, the Industry Commission and the NPRU. The working party has developed effectiveness indicators for police across the nation and the first annual report of these indicators was published by the Industry Commission in December 1995. Work is currently underway in the development of efficiency indicators.

Police and public perceptions of the police role.

The NPRU has developed and circulated parallel surveys to identify police and public perceptions of the police role. The identification of any discrepancies between the perceptions of these two groups – the service providers and the clients – is essential to minimising any barriers to continual improvement in service delivery.

Development of national medical and physical criteria for police applicants

This aims to develop medical and physical entry criteria applicable to all Australian police jurisdictions that are legally defensible in regard to current administrative legislation (such as the Disability Discrimination Act 1992). The validation of these as appropriate selection criteria for police applicants will be undertaken also. A survey will be circulated to seek help from operational police.

Research data base

The NPRU maintains a national data base containing details of policing related research undertaken across Australasia. Hard copies of this information are circulated to all NPRU liaison officers twice a year. The data base includes information on research in other agencies and universities.

The unit is a formal research affiliate of the Flinders University of South Australia. However, a close connection has grown with the Universities of Adelaide, South Australia, Melbourne, New South Wales, Griffith University and others throughout Australasia. The unit supervises and co-supervises doctorate, masters and honors students and has provided policing related topics for students' theses.

For copies of NPRU reports first inquire at your library or if the information is unavailable contact the unit's AFP liaison officer, General Manager Professional Development Rod Leffers.