

# The Ripple-Effect of Crime on our Community

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I will present a case study that represents an amalgamation of experiences of crime victims as **they** have told their story. I have been careful to disguise names and events to protect the innocent and preserve confidentiality.

What follows is an illustration of the **ripple-effect** of crime on our community. For some it is a violent shock and occasionally permanently debilitating; for others that are further from the epi-centre it is a gentle buffeting. As a community we are still a very long way from dealing adequately with the aftermath of violent events.

## THE FIRST 4 HOURS

It is an autumn morning:- sunshine, a breeze and there is a smell of rain in the air. In her post office Terese is unaware of all this as she prepares hurriedly for the days activities. She has arrived at work after farewelling her 2 young children at their school. Her partner Gerry had left for work an hour ago; he would be there by now she thought. Terese was also unaware of the two-tone green, late model Holden that had just drawn-up outside the office.

The doors of the post office were unlocked and Terese noted the incongruous coloured markings on the door jamb. They had been placed there, she recalled, 6 months ago by their security section, to be used in the event of a hold-up. The requests for security cameras and pop-up screens had been ignored.

There was a queue of people waiting to come in. With the doors open the regular customers filed in to transact their business. It was going to be a busy day, it was Wednesday, always their busiest day because of Social Security payments. The usual delivery of cash had been made earlier in the morning to top-up the reserves to cover today's expected payout.

Terese was counting out change for a customer when she heard a loud crash as the front door was thrust open violently. "Someone's in a hurry" she mused to herself and glanced up to see a clown mask staring back at her. She smiled and thought "what strange orange hair, what a funny thing to wear". The voice behind the mask was muffled and rasping and Terese had difficulty understanding what the man was saying to her. He had thrust a bag over the counter. And then she saw the sawn-off, double barrel shotgun pointing at her. Her mouth remained in a fixed grin while the blood drained from her face. All she could see now were the two round, black holes of the gun - they seemed to be as big as saucers.

Terese noticed out of the corner of her eye that a second person wearing a blue balaclava and carrying a hand gun, had jumped the counter and was barking instructions, laced with obscenities at her work mate, Gina. Things

were not going well at that end of the counter. Gina had frozen and balaclava was becoming very agitated. He was threatening to “blow her away” if she didn’t get a move on, he had the pistol to her temple.

Terese was brought back to her own plight by an instruction from clown to open the safe. Well surely he knew that this was impossible? The safe had only been closed less than an hour ago and it would be at least ½ an hour before it could be opened again. The only money available was that which was out in the tills. In explaining this to clown she felt a warmth spread down her legs and realised with horror that she had urinated. She thought of her two children and her husband and mentally said goodbye to them as she was certain that clown was not going to accept that he could not get the rest of the money and he would kill her for being obstructive. She had no protection; if the gun went off she would have a large hole in her body and she would die.

Terese filled the bag with as much money as her quivering hands could grab. Clown held the shot-gun to her head as he moved past her to get to the half-door that opened into the public area. Clown was yelling at balaclava to leave. Terese, leaned on the counter and held back her vomit. She glanced up to see clown and balaclava kick open the front door and leave. Clown was just below the red marker and balaclava was just above the red marker that put them at about 5’10” and 6’; the police could do the conversion.

Terese hit the duress alarm and helped Gina to her feet. There were 12 customers in the office and she knew she had to try and keep them all there. She closed the doors and put up the closed sign. She called her superiors.

The whole robbery lasted about 90 seconds.

#### THE POLICE

The police arrived and rapidly gained information that enabled them to set up a perimeter watch at a specified distance from the crime scene. They began taking statements. They asked many questions, most of which Terese could not answer. She felt extremely stupid by the end. She had been to the security training courses but she seemed to have forgotten it all... except that she **had** remembered their heights against the coloured markings on the door jamb.

#### THE PEOPLE

A 4 year old child who had come in with her mum was sitting in the corner near the pamphlet rack rocking back and forth; her mother was being interviewed by the police. Another customer, Bill, who worked evening shift at a service station was alternating between outbursts of crying and fits of rage. An elderly woman was groping in her handbag for some heart tablets. She had only come out today for a breath of fresh air and to say hello to Gina, she was looking very pale and unsteady. Terese noticed Jim from the local superdeli who delivers the previous days takings for his boss. He had been in a hold up six months ago at the deli she recalled; she wondered how he was coping this time around. Most of the customers, she noted were weeping quietly or just sitting staring. These were the regulars, people that Terese had grown to know over the years and feel as though she were part of their community.

## THE MEDIA

The media arrived and were filming through the window of the office. They attempted to interview people as they left the scene. The news of an armed hold-up was taken up by all media outlets. The thieves had escaped with a large amount of cash, the police had failed to apprehend them and this was news. Friends and relatives began to hear of the event via the media and had seen pictures of loved ones on TV and began frantically to ring the office, nearby shops and the police seeking information. Tempers flared as enquiries were frustrated by engaged lines, inaccurate information and lack of co-ordination.

## OTHER AGENCIES

The crisis unit and other trauma counselling services began to receive phone calls from members of the community who had experienced armed hold-ups themselves. Their past trauma had been triggered by the graphic description provided by the mother of the four year old who spoke about her terror that her child could be shot. She and her daughter had been separated when the robbers entered and the mother could not go to help her daughter who was crying in the corner.

As police finished with individuals they were allowed to leave.

The service station attendant crashed on the way home.

A number of customers went home to an empty house, with no one to share their pain with, no one to talk to and provide support.

A speed camera on Anzac Highway clocked Jim travelling at 87 km/h.

There was no offer of counselling or debriefing made to customers. Terese and Gina were offered counselling but Gina refused.

## A WEEK LATER

As the numbness of the first shock gradually wore off the local medical clinic noted an increase in appointments from people suffering sleep disturbances, nightmares and vivid flashbacks. The common denominator was the hold-up that happened 200 metres away. One of their patients, an elderly woman with a heart complaint died on the sixth day after the hold-up.

Terese returned to work but was easily startled. She was shocked one day when a customer raised his hand in the shape of a gun and said laughingly: "Stick 'em up - this is a hold-up". She angrily told the very surprised customer to get out.

The local school noticed that two of their students had been arriving late or not turning up at all. When they were in class they seemed distracted and irritable. Their father worked shift work at a service station and an arrangement was made for him to come and talk with the two teachers.

Jim from the superdeli was suffering a severe guilt reaction; he felt responsible for the money his boss had entrusted to him and which the thieves had stolen. Initially his boss was OK about the \$900 that was stolen, it was, after all, insured. But Jim was reacting severely to the hold-up and had to take time off work. His boss offered him \$200 not to put in a Workcover claim. Ultimately Jim was sacked and he became reliant on a reduced wage from Workcover.

Security companies recorded a slight surge in demand for window screens, security doors, light sensors and alarms.

Local businesses, conversely, showed a drop in patronage as ten local families limited their movements outside their houses to a minimum.

### **AT TWO MONTHS**

During her counselling session Terese related an experience that had scared her; she thought she may be cracking under the strain and that she was going crazy. She had been in a haberdashery shop and had suddenly started feeling panic stricken and began physically shaking for no apparent reason. The counsellor inquired in detail about her experience and was able to help Terese make a connection between the orange hair of the clown mask and a skein of wool of a similar hue in the shop. "How many other customers" mused Terese "would be suffering in silence with similar reactions."

Terese would have been relieved to know that some of the customers **were** settling back into more normal patterns. Gina however resigned from her job. She was unable to maintain her concentration at work. Her sleep patterns resembled those of a torturers regime. Her nights were filled with terror. Gina moved to Tasmania, it was the middle of winter and snow was thick on the ground in her mountainous retreat. On the day that she called in at the local hardware store she could not have been prepared for the profound shock of being confronted by a man, warding off the cold, clad in a balaclava. Gina ended up in hospital where she remained for three weeks.

### **AT SIX MONTHS**

The evening TV news was full of the dramatic capture of a gang of armed robbers. They had been arrested after a high speed chase and were charged with a number of robberies including the one at Terese's office. Five times Terese was contacted by different media outlets, five times she had to decline their offer to relive her trauma. This did not save her from viewing file footage of herself taken at the time of the hold-up. She remembered the smell of urine: the smell of fear.... she ran to the bathroom and vomited.

Jim was summonsed to appear in the Magistrates court as he had forgotten to pay his speeding fine. On the day of the case he again had forgotten to turn up.

### **12 MONTHS**

Autumn had returned to Adelaide. The District Court was preparing to hear the trial of clown and balaclava. In the week prior to the trial Terese went into the Department of Public Prosecutions and was "proofed"; tested by the crown lawyers to see if she could stand up to the rigours of court and to see what sort of a witness she would make. Terese had spent a year trying to put the memories behind her. Now she was being asked to remember everything in fine detail. She wept at the recollection of her own near death but the lawyers seemed satisfied with her tears.

Court was set for the 15th, exactly a year to the day since the hold-up. Terese awoke on that day feeling as though she had been run over by a steamroller. She remembered something that her counsellor had mentioned - some

people have an anniversary reaction. Other people remember anniversaries as well. Journalists keep a “death calendar” that reminds them of the anniversary dates of murders over the years. On this day they referred to the calendar and were reminded of a stabbing murder of a woman two years ago. This was topical since there had been four similar stabbings since then. They traced the widower and sent a reporter to interview him. His name was Bill, he worked as a service station attendant and he had two children at primary school. The reporter tasked to do the “death knock” did not return with the story she expected. ***Dual Tragedy Strikes Lone Father*** read the newspaper article.

Terese met Jim at court where she learned that he had been arrested a few weeks ago and had spent the night in jail awaiting his case to be heard the next day. When the robbery trial was finished the jury returned a verdict of “not guilty”. There was not enough evidence that linked the men to that armed hold-up. Although the police had a video taped confession it was ruled inadmissible as evidence and was never heard by the jury. The police had found a balaclava at one man’s house and his voice was identified as that of one of the robbers and he was about the right size but this was not enough. The money was never recovered.

Jim was furious, he argued that he had spent more time in jail than the people who had threatened death and stolen large amounts of money. Despite being informed that the three accused had been held in custody at the Remand Centre his faith in the Criminal Justice System was shattered for ever.

Terese had a similar reaction but her anger was deeper, almost volcanic. The anger that she and her counsellor had been working on could barely be contained. On her arrival home she unleashed her fury at her husband and children.

A violent event that lasted 90 seconds will, for many people take more than a year to resolve. For some, the damage is permanent.

In 1994 there were 467 armed robberies in South Australia; this represents approximately 2,500 direct victims and countless indirect victims.