

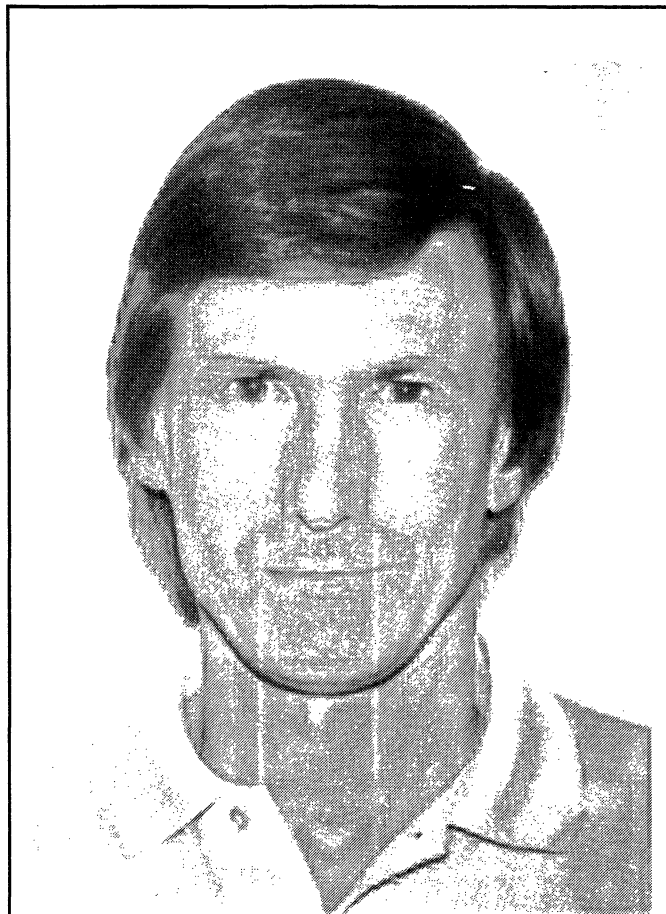
LOW LITERACY AND CRIME

A Case Study of the Relationship

A paper presented by Stephen Black to the
Australian Crime Prevention Council (N.S.W. Branch)
Seminar on Literacy and Crime.

State Office Block, Sydney

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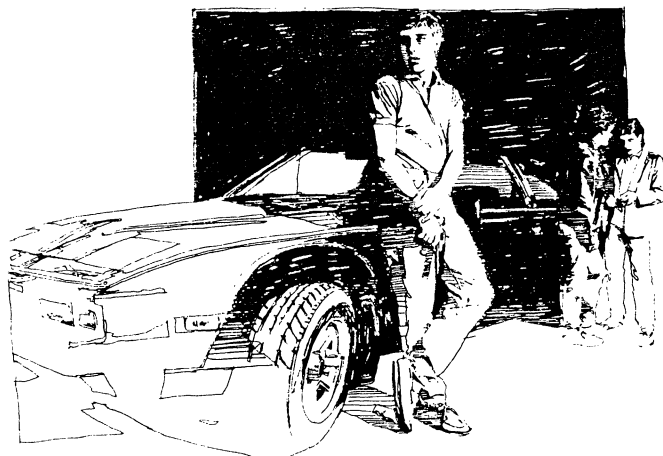


Mr Stephen Black

Mr. Stephen Black's study of the relationship between low literacy and crime was presented to a seminar conducted by the New South Wales Branch of the Australian Crime Prevention Council. The paper attracted much comment at the time and it is, accordingly, with much pleasure that we reproduce it here.

Mr Black is modest about his background, but we can say that he obtained a Bachelor's Degree in Education at the London University and a Master's Degree in that discipline at the University of New South Wales. He has worked as remedial teacher at the Long Bay Prison, a Senior Education Officer with the Department of Corrective Services in New South Wales and, latterly, for T.A.F.E. in the area of Adult Literacy. He has done much research in the area of literacy in prisons and has a special interest in making prison literacy programmes more effective.

His paper reflects his concern with these matters.



The main purpose of this paper is to present a case study of a prisoner for whom there appears to be some casual relationship between his low level of literacy and his criminal behaviour. By presenting verbatim extracts from a recorded interview with the prisoner, it is hoped to accurately portray his perspectives which may add to our understanding of the relationship which may exist between low literacy and crime. Before doing so however, a few general points will be made about low literacy in prison populations and its perceived relationship to crime.

That low literacy is a major characteristic of prisoner populations appears indisputable. For example, the **functional illiteracy** rate for New South Wales prisoners, according to a number of studies and references, has been judged to be a high 30% *(Report of the Royal Commission into N.S.W. Prisons, 1978, 463; Dod 1980; D.C.S. Annual Report 1984, 22; Downes 1985, 7). Overseas the situation appears similar if not worse. In United States prisons for example, functional illiteracy rates for prisoners have been found to be as high as 40, 50 and even 60% (Bell 1979, 1984; Ryan 1982). And Kozol (1985,13) in a major U.S. study of illiteracy writes, "the prison population represents the highest single concentration of adult illiterates".

It may be interesting to note that such is the perceived extent of low literacy in Australian prisons that last year the

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Australian Bureau of Statistics instructed prison authorities to complete census forms for prisoners based on available prison records. The previous census had produced "some very incomprehensible results" due it seems to illiteracy among prisoners (Kent & Murray 1986).

In view of the extent of this prisoner characteristic of low literacy, it should not be surprising that some researchers perceive there to be a casual relationship between low literacy and crime. Kozol (1985) for example, referring mainly to the U.S. situation, see such a relationship:

While criminal conviction of illiterate men and women cannot be identified exclusively with inability to read and write, the fact that 60 per cent of prison inmates cannot read above the grade level surely provides some indication of one major reason for their criminal activity. (Kozol 1985, 13).

And Carol Dalglish in her English prisoner study suggests that illiteracy may have a bearing on certain types of crime such as those containing violence against property (Dalglish 1982, 24), and that illiteracy adds to the chances of re-offending:

A man leaving prison with the double disadvantage of being an offender and illiterate has little opportunity of going anywhere except back to prison. (Dalglish 1982, 3).

In Australia there has also been the occasional suggestion, sometimes from writers in the field of adult literacy of a casual relationship between low literacy and crime (e.g. Falkenmire 1978; Preen 1981). However, it is a contentious issue, and clearly very complex. There are many different types of crime, and many different factors perceived to be responsible, and it may be unrewarding to try to



generalise about the influence of just one factor in isolation, that is, low literacy. Semmens (1981, 14) for example, in a study of education in Australian prisons claims it is "poor logic" to infer that a correlation between illiteracy and crime is synonymous with cause. He in fact sees both illiteracy and crime being consequences of poverty, and he states that attempts to improve literacy in order to reduce crime usually end in disappointment in the long run.

In this paper no attempt is made to argue a general theory about a casual relationship between low literacy and crime. Instead, as indicated earlier, a single case study is presented which attempts to show how, for one individual, low literacy and crime may be related. More accurately perhaps, in this particular case study, it is a lack of formal education which manifests itself most clearly in the form of low literacy, which is central to the perceived relationship with crime.

The case study features Tony (not his real name). At the time of the interview he was 31 years of age and had just been received into the N.S.W. prison system for yet another sentence for stealing.

Tony presents very well. He is quite articulate, outwardly confident and he certainly does not fit the stereotyped image one may have of an illiterate 'crim'. The fact is he never went to school at all, because, as he explained, his father for some unknown reason just did not send him to school.

An essential point that comes out of the interview with Tony is his experience of extreme frustration and boredom which has resulted from most of his previous jobs, and which seems to play a major role in him returning to prison each time:

LOW LITERACY AND CRIME - Continued

I get bored very quickly ... I need things to stimulate me ... whether in gaol or outside gaol. I get tired of things, I have to have things that ... I need a challenge, and most jobs that need a challenge ... need an education ... I think today if I had had a good education, or reasonable, or even a normal education, I don't think I would probably spend as much time in here as I'm spending.

It's not that Tony is lacking in ability. He considers he has ability in areas such as mechanics and electronics, and he also has imaginative and creative talents:



I've got a flair about decoration... People often say that to me on the outside. I'm very imaginative, you know, interior decorating or something like that ... that fascinates me too.

It seems apparent that what Tony seeks is some degree of job satisfaction, but his lack of education always lets him down:

I would love to have had that sort of job (interior decorating). To go to work and just be there, for the sake of a wage ... is what puts me back here ... because, basically it's survival ... um ... I go to work and most of the jobs I've done I don't like but I've done these jobs



because of no education ... I have to wash dishes or whatever.

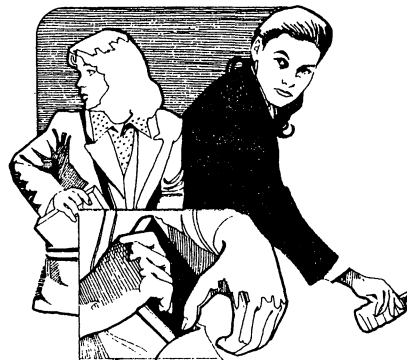
His low level of literacy presents particular problems. Job application forms for example, which are preliminary to obtaining any reasonable jobs, have to be overcome. Tony is adroit at bluffing his way around these problems, but they must cause him some anxiety:

I get someone else to fill it in ... Well I just say to them, I use the excuse that um, I need glasses or I didn't have my glasses today, or my contact lens... may I bring this back tomorrow fully filled in? ...

In Tony's case answering questions on job application forms creates special problems:

... that stuffs me you know, how am I going to tell them when I left school? What school did you go to? What level did you get to? I mean, you've got to con your way through, you've got to lie ... you can't go along to a job and say you've never been to school ...

Tony's criminal problems seem to be bound up with his feelings of self worth, his self esteem. He knows that he has abilities, and that in his opinion, he is worth more than is credited to him from his usual jobs. Unskilled work quickly becomes boring. He's sick of washing dishes. He gains no sense of achievement or recognition of worth or value by others and ultimately he turns to get-rich-quick solutions (i.e. he steals):



I've been to gaol quite a few times. It's always basically 6 months here, 5 months there, and it's always stealing for money, to survive, because, you know, like ... I get bored with a job because I don't want to wash dishes ... I just feel that, I'm not feeling snobby but, I feel that it's a little bit beneath me sometimes ... I think, you know, this is so boring, I know I could do more, and I'd like to do more. I'd like to be able to express myself a bit more ... If I can go to someone's house, it gives me a buzz to be able to do something, and someone to say 'Hey doesn't that look good. Geez, doesn't that look good'.

Tony as he gets older, is becoming, more reflective about his situation and his future. He doesn't want to keep coming back to prison. He knows he has to change:

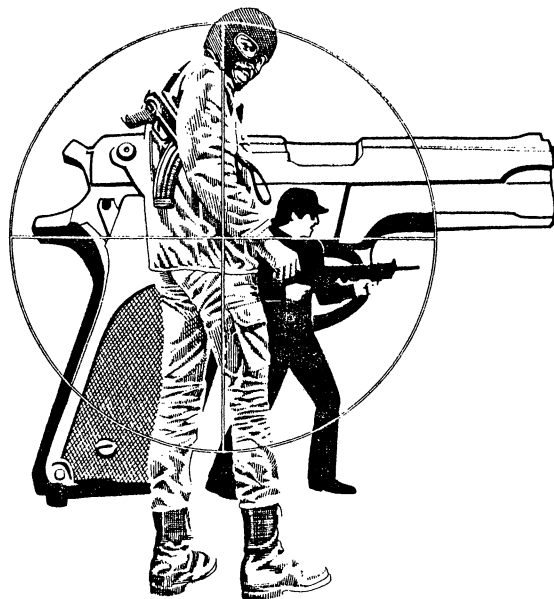
I think about it a lot more now. I think to myself what's my future going to hold for me? You know, like, I'm nearly 32 and before I know it I'll be 40 ... I don't want to be 40 years of age and still washing dishes ... I'd like

to be able to get a job that I can say I've worked at for a few years, so that I can stop coming back to this. An improved education would give me a lot of things that would keep me out of gaol, hopefully ... I'm not saying it will keep me out of gaol ... hopefully would be better, because when I've had employment I've never been interested in stealing because I've had an income ... I seem to have a better value for money ... If I steal money I have no value for it ... If I've worked for it, it seems to mean more to me...

It would seem that Tony's first step to redressing his situation is to improve his literacy skills. With better literacy skills job application forms may cease to be such a barrier and Tony may have access to jobs, or at least the training for jobs, which provide greater satisfaction and status.

So what prevents Tony in prison from immediately effecting a change and starting to improve his literacy skills? According to Tony it's the embarrassment factor. He just cannot face exposing his literacy weaknesses to others in a classroom situation, and especially to other prisoners:

I think what puts me off doing education of any kind is being in a room with other people ... I think it's just the fact that, well it's embarrassing ... to be 30 years old and put in a room with other people trying to learn what is basically basics ... when you see 6 year old kids getting up on T.V. and reciting things and, you know, off a piece of paper, and they can write and read ... do all these things at 6 years old, and here you are ... old enough to know a lot better and you can't even do the basics ... I'm too worried about other people seeing me go into that classroom ... knowing that it's for literacy ... I don't want people to know, especially in gaol, that you're illiterate because people will make fun of you.



Tony wants and needs individualised 1 : 1 tuition to improve his literacy skills:

I would like to be put in a room with maybe a teacher solely, so if I made a fool of myself it's not quite so bad...

At the very time of this interview with Tony 1 : 1 literacy tuition was available at the low security institution to which it was most likely he would soon be classified. The prognosis therefore appeared good, especially as Tony indicated he was concerned to change the direction of his life:

I'm extremely unhappy with my life. I suffer from boredom. I think a lot of it's what I've said to you before ... I think it's wanting to do something more, you know ... I'm tired of doing the same things that I've done for so many years ... I'd like to be able to do something where I can express what I feel I want to do ... and I'd like to do it in the next few years because I don't want to leave it too late ... and now I feel like I want to really settle down and get into something that will benefit myself and maybe others as well ... If I can do a job where I can make other people happy as well as myself and still be paid for it ... I think that's half the battle, you know, so many people do love what they do.

It seems the learning readiness is there, and Tony is adamant that he doesn't want to waste his current time in prison. He wants to put it to good use:

I don't want to get out of gaol in 12 months and someone to say to me 'What did you achieve in those 12 months?' and I can say 'nothing' ... I mean, I've never achieved anything before ... I don't want to sort of go to M.T.C. or something and push a broom around, or work at the Officers' quarters like I did before .. and get \$12 a week, and then get out after that period of time .. and a whole year is gone.

Finally, Tony explains his desire to be able to write better,



to be able to express his feelings. The motivation to improve his literacy skills thus appears particularly strong at this time.

I mean, I'd love to be able to write ... flow write ... to be able to sit down and write a letter, you know, I get so much inside of me that I want to put on paper, but I can't express it ... I'd like to be able to flow them, make them all come out onto paper. I think it would probably change me a lot if I could do it, because I think it would let off what has been bottled up inside me for such a long period of time ... it's just totally frustrating.

POSTSCRIPT

Two years have passed since that initial interview with Tony, and he has now been out of prison for some months. As it turned out, he did waste that year in prison. He did end up working in the Officers' quarters, earning his \$12 a week and gaining no useful skills. And he did not progress in his efforts to become more literate. As luck would have it, at the very time of his transfer to that low security prison with the 1 : 1 literacy tuition, that tuition was itself being disbanded. Not that 1 : 1 tuition wasn't working, far from it, there were many individual successes, but it appears that complaints were made from the custodial side of the prison about such tuition being wasteful of resources, and education in prison acquiesced. Tony did actually meet with the literacy teacher on a number of occasions, but not surprisingly, he couldn't handle the newly instituted group tuition which replaced the 1 : 1 tuition, and he simply dropped out. There is though some encouragement in the fact that since leaving prison, Tony has contacted that same prison literacy teacher, and he now receives regular 1 : 1 tuition from her at the local TAFE college. To date his progress has been exceptionally good, but how far he will go, and to what extent this will influence his lifestyle or reduce his criminality remains to be seen.

* One has to treat functional illiteracy statistics with caution as there is no generally accepted criterion of functional illiteracy. For example, three of the N.S.W. studies cited reached a figure of about 30% but were based on three different criteria: School grade attainment, psychological test scores, and a

readability index borrowed from an English prison literacy study, and it could be argued that none satisfactorily measures the ability to 'function' in society.

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