



News

Mark Carroll: Counting the beat

THERE is no such thing as an oversupply of police, says Mark Carroll.

Mark Carroll
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0 comments

THERE is no such thing as an oversupply of police, says Mark Carroll.

THE public hates to be misled when it comes

to essential services, particularly policing.

And sadly, from recent discourse about police budget cuts, almost nothing but misinformation has emerged about police numbers.

To believe that SA enjoys the services of 320 beat cops for every 100,000 people - as the *Sunday Mail* reported last Sunday - is to accept a complete falsehood.

Public misunderstanding abounds because the Productivity Commission includes an abundance of non-operational police officers in its definition of "operational".

Before the 2010 State Election,

the Police Association secured commitments from both major political parties to recruit 313

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extra police by 2014. The Labor Government has unwisely delayed that recruitment.

And it had insisted in 2010 that it wanted to "drive crime rates even lower to make our communities safer and that's why we will recruit an extra 313 sworn officers over the next four years".

Also in 2010, the government proudly declared its investment in extra SAPOL resources and a fall in recorded crime were no coincidence. Now, however, it does not intend to meet its police recruitment pledge by 2014, owing, it says, to the need for cost-saving.

Indeed, Premier Jay Weatherill said last month that the government would "be insisting on the (\$150 million) savings targets".

At the same time, Commissioner Gary Burns said those targets would have to be significantly reduced to guarantee police numbers.

An added burden on the numbers issue is that current budget-savings measures include the maintenance of 25 full-time equivalent vacancies of up to 12 months.

In the past few years, the government has introduced extensive legislative change, which has come with

a heavy impact on police workloads.

Just two

of the many new police responsibilities brought about by the change are vehicle impoundment and barring orders. Police impound around 8000 vehicles per year, and the task consumes more than 5000 hours of their time.

To the job of issuing a barring order, police officers commit around one hour - 5000 times per year.

And for a police officer to charge an arrested suspect, he or she must comply with 128 pages of protocols and responsibilities. Charging one suspect takes up to two hours.

Yes, these duties are necessary, but they keep police off the beat for thousands of hours every year.

The rapid growth of electronic crime is another cause of increased police workloads. Six new positions have had to be created for officers to deal with the requirements of this field of investigation.

And technological advances are as labour intensive as they are helpful to police gathering evidence.

In a case in which police seize

a computer that holds a terabyte

of information, resources - that is, people - have to be assigned to examine it.

Other impacts on police workloads relate to immigration, in terms of responding to detention centre disturbances.

The royal commission into child abuse, which has now begun, will clearly come with an impact as well. Disclosure, too, as it relates to court matters, today requires police to submit full briefs from the outset of a case. And this burden is massive.

Clearly, as parliaments increase police workloads through legislative change, governments must increase police numbers accordingly. And just to add one extra 24-hour patrol to a police local service area requires 12 officers.

To see the police numbers issue in its proper perspective, one must compare like with like. Police

forces around the country organise themselves and use sworn police officers differently.

Other forces have larger public service components than does SA.

And those who back police budget cuts always avoid mentioning the Northern Territory, which has 697 "operational" police officers per 100,000 people.

Demography, population figures and policing structures make the comparison meaningless.

No such thing as an oversupply of police, as suggested in the *Sunday Mail*, exists anywhere in Australia. The opposite is the case, and it comes with an impact on the public.

Stretching the contingent of operational cops too thinly increases police response times. And if the media thinks we have enough or even too many cops, how will they explain to their consumers the cause of delayed responses?

The public rightly expects governments to deliver on their promises. So the onus is on the Weatherill government to indicate specifically those police services SAPOL is to cut in order to meet budget requirements.

Significant now are the words

of Premier Weatherill back in February. He said there would be no cuts to police numbers and no impact on front-line services.

"We'll be insisting on the savings targets," he said, "but the position I made the other day is very clear, that we'll also be pursuing the increase in police numbers that we're committed to."

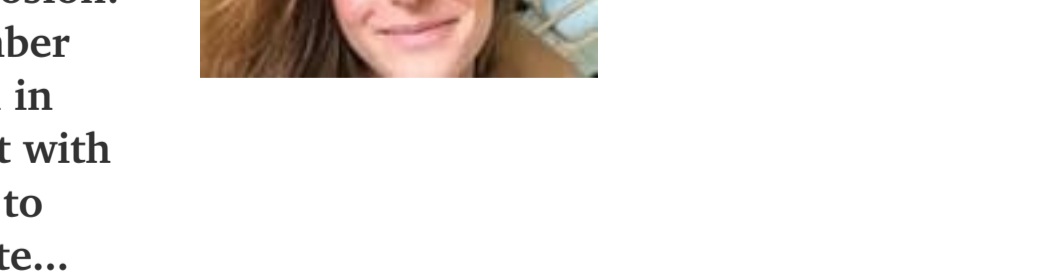
But let there be no public misunderstanding about the numbers of truly operational

police who are available to respond when the community most needs their help.

Mark Carroll is the president of the Police Association of South Australia



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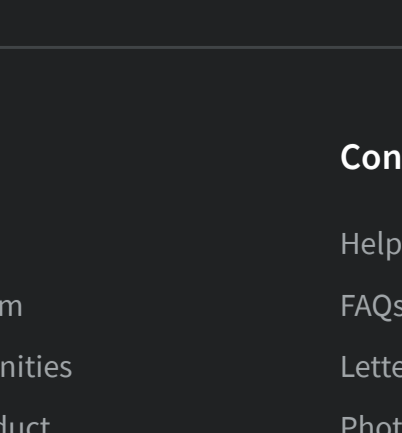
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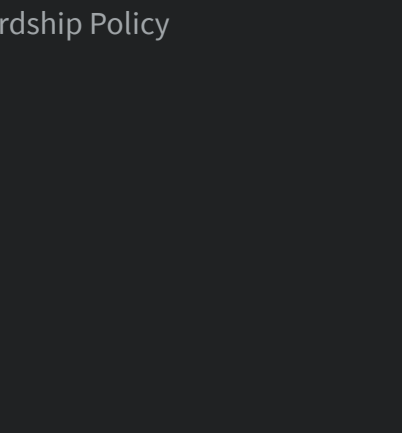
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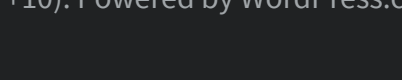
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