

ENGAGE THE PUBLIC*

Strategic Overview

Series 1 *Invest Smartly in Safety for the City* has shown the need for elected officials and their senior managers to buy into the idea of crime prevention. It has highlighted the need for a sound and effective governance model to guide crime reduction and outlined a systematic planning and implementation process that will ensure that a municipality addresses its problems in an effective manner.

One key ingredient remains — that of public and community engagement. Simply put, the success of crime prevention programs depends upon the support and involvement of the community.

This Action Brief considers the question of how a municipality can foster public engagement and community participation in crime prevention initiatives. All too often the community does not get involved in crime prevention initiatives and the programs are unsuccessful.

If the community is engaged in the solution to its problems it will help to empower people by giving them more control over their neighbourhoods and to build the community capacity necessary to maintain a safe community in the future.

What have we learned from the research that has been done on engaging the public in effective crime prevention?

Action for Municipal Stakeholders

1. Communicate effectively with, and listen to, the public by providing the community with information about crime patterns, community issues, and the programs that are operating in the community;
2. Enlist the leadership of community groups who can help with crime prevention and provide them with sustained municipal support, particularly in high crime neighbourhoods where they do not have the resources;
3. Coordinate municipal services at the neighbourhood level and look at each community's assets as well as its needs;
4. Use new internet technologies and community media to foster debate, including social networking tools.

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Justification

The success of most crime prevention initiatives depends on the support and involvement of the community. However, this support and involvement does not just happen. Participation in crime prevention initiatives tends to be low, especially in high-crime neighbourhoods. In these communities fear of crime can lead people to keep to themselves and some residents who feel marginalized by race, class, or gender may feel their participation would not be welcomed.

In high-crime communities, the success of crime prevention programs may depend upon the support provided by municipal governments, social agencies, and the business community. Community engagement often requires a partnership between community members and those with access to power and resources, without which community groups have little chance of success.

We have learned that several factors will help to build public engagement. These include: effective communication; the need to listen to the community; the requirement to support community groups; the need to identify community assets as well as needs; the desirability of working with existing community groups where possible; and the need to allocate resources to maintaining established programs.

This brief will discuss how a municipality can foster public engagement and community participation in crime prevention initiatives.

Communication – Keeping the Public Informed

It will be difficult to get community engagement unless the public has access to timely and relevant information. An effective communications strategy can help develop and sustain support for your program. Communicating citywide and local information about **crime statistics and crime trends** on a regular basis is very important (Box 1). Municipalities can also conduct surveys that measure peoples' **perceptions**

of safety, particularly in public spaces such as parks, commercial areas and on mass transit and in relation to daily activities such as walking in the neighbourhood and travelling to work and to school.

Box 1 Crime Statistics on the Internet

The Winnipeg Police Service provides the public with timely crime statistics on the internet. Statistics on most major crimes are updated daily, and weekly, monthly and yearly trends can be obtained. Computer maps of these crime occurrences are available for each of the city's police districts. Anyone can access these statistics through the CrimeStat icon on the City of Winnipeg website (www.winnipeg.ca). Other cities, including Regina and Ottawa, also provide statistics online.

Municipalities can place crime data in a broader perspective. Making links between crime statistics and public health, housing, urban design, and neighbourhood vitality allows for a better understanding of the nature, impact, and causes of crime and disorder.

Municipalities also need to communicate the message that crime prevention can be effective and that everybody has a role to play in it. Surveys in Canada show strong support for a preventive approach to crime. However, crime prevention initiatives receive little media attention compared to punitive policies. Open communication with the public is a good way of motivating people and keeping them involved.

Crime prevention advocates should try to get positive stories to the media. Other methods of publicizing programs include: public service announcements on television and radio; posters in workplaces, schools, housing projects and apartments; and articles in community newspapers. In high-crime neighbourhoods personal contacts can be the best way of getting people involved, so knocking on doors and organizing local meetings are good ways to communicate information about prevention programs. New social networking technologies can also be applied to crime prevention.

Listening and Harnessing Public Engagement

Municipalities need to put into place effective consultative mechanisms to foster public participation. Traditionally, citizens and groups can make representations at city council or standing committee meetings. But establishing a fruitful dialogue on community safety with a broad range of stakeholders requires innovative approaches. Town hall meetings, task forces, working committees, workshops, and outreach campaigns are some of the tools that a municipality can use. Polls and surveys can also provide an opportunity for citizens to express their concerns and suggestions regarding community safety.

Supporting Community Work

If volunteers are going to be involved, someone will have to organize and coordinate volunteer networks. If communities are going to be consulted, someone needs to facilitate and to structure the consultation. Many high-crime communities cannot do these things on their own, at least not initially. Thus municipalities must help out by offering technical and financial support to community organizations and NGOs. Local capacity can also be enhanced by using practical tools such as safety audits (See Box 2) and local safety diagnosis kits and training sessions. These tools empower local stakeholders by giving them the capacity to understand the factors contributing to crime and insecurity in their neighbourhoods.

Municipal government must also ensure that community efforts are coordinated. A wide range of government departments, community groups, NGOs, and private businesses and business associations may be working in the same neighbourhoods, but without coordination their work will likely have limited impact. Crime prevention requires a focused effort — one of the lessons learned from crime prevention evaluations is that puny interventions will not work. Coordination helps to ensure that a critical mass of resources is brought to bear on crime problems (See Box 3).

Box 2 Regina: Using CPTED to Engage the Community

The Regina Police Service and the city's Department of Community Social Development have used Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) to increase community engagement with neighbourhood improvement and crime prevention. In two high-crime neighbourhoods, the Regina Police Service has trained the members of two community associations in CPTED. After this training, residents are put into teams with people with CPTED expertise and asked to conduct safety audits in their communities.

CPTED audits are a good way to start mobilizing communities. Residents can easily understand the process and their input into the audits is very important. The audits enable them to learn what is going on in their neighbourhoods and to identify areas of concern. The city can quickly take some initial steps such as improving lighting by cutting away tree branches so the community can see tangible signs of improvement. These actions will involve several municipal departments, so these departments will also become part of the crime reduction effort. CPTED can also lead to other approaches to crime prevention. For example, in one Regina neighbourhood a youth employment group was formed and then hired to do some of the work recommended by the audits.

Try to Involve Existing Groups

Crime prevention practitioners have learned that it is almost always better to work through existing community groups such as neighbourhood associations than to try to build new groups around the issue of crime prevention. Although crime prevention may not be the major focus of existing groups, their structure, their credibility, and their knowledge of the community is invaluable.

If you need to organize new groups, you will need resources. Part of the mandate of the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy was to facilitate community participation by holding monthly 'beat meetings' across the city. This did help build linkages between the public and the police, but in some neighbourhoods the police had to hire civilian community organizers to get people involved and to organize local problem-solving activities.

Identifying Community Assets and Community Needs

We often see the problems of high-crime neighbourhoods and miss the fact that these communities also have many strengths. If we think only of needs [unemployment, poor housing, crime, family problems, school failure, poverty] we run the risk of creating ‘client neighbourhoods’ where residents think of themselves as people who must be helped by outsiders. However, if we also see the community’s strengths and assets [local leaders, businesses, churches, residents’ associations, cultural groups], we begin to see how the community can help itself. Providing residents with the responsibility and the resources to change their communities is the best way to strengthen local leadership and to build the neighbour-to-neighbour links that are so important to healthy communities.

Sustaining Prevention Programs

Maintenance strategies must be part of any prevention initiative because crime problems are often deep-seated and require sustained intervention. Community members may lose interest or drop out of programs because of competing demands for their time or because they move. Our cities have high rates of residential mobility, particularly in high-crime areas where most people are renters. There is also turnover within organizations and agencies so new people must be convinced that they should continue with the activities initiated by their predecessors.

The best maintenance strategy is a well-planned and carefully-implemented program in which volunteers play a meaningful role. Successful crime prevention initiatives are the most likely to recruit and to retain volunteers. If people know they are making their communities safer for themselves and

their families, they will be more likely to continue to participate. One proven strategy is to “organize people around issues that are immediate, concrete and achievable” and use initial successes to motivate people to take on larger issues. Training can motivate volunteers by educating them about the project and by giving them the expertise to make their work more productive and enjoyable. Newsletters, awards dinners, and other types of recognition all help to maintain volunteer support.

Effective Delivery and Coordination of Services

Community engagement is fostered by effective delivery and coordination of municipal services and programmes at the neighbourhood level. Ideally, this will balance traditional police intervention with innovative problem-solving and community participation approaches that utilize different municipal services, social agencies, and business and community organizations. This approach helps to develop local capacity and to adapt programs to the characteristics of each neighbourhood.

Box 3 Delivering Community Safety at the Neighbourhood Level

In Winnipeg **Community Resource Coordinators** are deployed in seven designated areas (one of which is devoted to the Aboriginal community). They help to coordinate actions, do outreach and facilitate partnership opportunities.

In Vancouver, **Neighbourhood Integrated Service Teams** composed of City and other community agency employees work across organizational boundaries to help communities solve problems.