

PROPERTY SAFETY*

Strategic Overview

Property crime has been declining in Canada, but it is still far too high. In 2007 there were 1.1 million property crimes reported to Canadian police departments and many more went unreported. However, there is strong evidence that if municipalities analyze their community's property crime problems, look at the evidence about works in crime prevention, and implement comprehensive prevention initiatives at a sufficient level of intensity, they can dramatically reduce the rates of these crimes.

Social development programs represent a short and long-term solution to property crime. Providing stronger communities with nurturing families and strong schools will reduce crime. However, these initiatives should be part of a comprehensive prevention strategy that also involves changing the built environment, implementing community programs and encouraging smarter use of police resources.

Municipal governments must be at the centre of property crime prevention initiatives. They are uniquely placed to plan, coordinate, and implement the programs that will bring rates of these offenses down. If these steps are taken, there is ample evidence that property crimes can be reduced.

What specific steps should you take in order to reduce property crime in your municipality?

Action for Municipal Stakeholders

1. Follow the systematic crime prevention planning process described in Series 1 *Invest Smartly in Safety for the City*;
2. Ensure that your prevention strategy is a comprehensive one (law enforcement, designing out crime, social development) and that the specific programs used are based on evidence concerning what works;
3. Stay focused on your specific problems and ensure that sufficient human and financial resources are allocated to your program to ensure that the problem is addressed successfully;
4. Find as many community partners as you can and work hard to ensure that efforts are coordinated across organizations;
5. Provide strong leadership to keep the program on track.

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Justification

Property crime has declined in Canada since the early 1990s, but it is still far too high. For some property offenses, including auto theft and break and enter, rates are higher in Canada than in the United States and in many other industrialized countries.

In 2007, almost 1.1 million property crimes were reported to Canadian police departments and many more went unreported. Over half were thefts under \$5000, many of which are shoplifting. The most serious common property offenses are break and enter (over 250,000 reported offenses) and motor vehicle theft (nearly 160,000 offenses). These two offenses will be discussed in this brief.

Patterns of Break and Enter

In 2007, over 250,000 break and enters were reported to the police. The majority of break and enters are residential and the most frequently stolen items were audio/video equipment and money, checks or bonds. The recovery rate for burglary is very low (12 percent). Only 16 percent of burglaries are cleared by arrest and young males are overrepresented among those arrested.

In 2004, the average insurance claim for a household burglary was about \$3600 and for a business was about \$6500. Burglaries also create fear among victims and potential victims. Many victims had trouble sleeping after the victimization and female victims had higher fear levels than males.

Patterns of Motor Vehicle Theft

In 2007, there were about 146,000 motor vehicle thefts. While most stolen vehicles are recovered, there are very few arrests (11 percent). Most of those arrested are young with a peak age of 15-18 years.

Motor vehicle theft does not cause as much fear as burglary but it is very costly. The financial loss is estimated at over \$1 billion a year. An average of about

40 people die each year and another 65 people are seriously injured because of vehicle theft.

Preventing Property Crime

One of the keys to successful crime prevention is utilizing different types of strategies. For property crime, some strategies are targeted at specific offenses, while others are directed at property crimes in general because most offenders do not specialize in one offense type, but commit a variety of different crimes.

The different categories of programs described in this Action Brief are: social development programs; Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) programs; and community programs. Other measures can also help reduce property crime — for example, some cities regulate pawn shops to reduce the fencing of stolen property while other jurisdictions have implemented mandatory prepayment systems to prevent drive-offs from self-service gasoline bars. Because addictions are factors in many property crimes, substance abuse programs can also be useful.

Crime Prevention Through Social Development

These strategies are aimed at reducing the pool of potential offenders by altering crime risk factors. These factors are not specific to property crime and include community disorganization, poverty, ineffective parenting, academic failure, and negative peer influences. Many effective programs can ameliorate these factors including parental training, youth employment, preschool programs, home visiting for newborns in high-risk families, recreational programs, and school completion initiatives. Some of these are described in other briefs, but it is important to emphasize that changing peoples' lives is not easy and social development programs must be carefully implemented and provided with enough resources to make a real difference.

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED)

CPTED means understanding the relationship between physical design and levels of criminal activity and then manipulating the environment to reduce crime.

Burglary and auto theft are often crimes of opportunity. Even sophisticated offenders who target specific homes, businesses, and vehicles prefer vulnerable targets. Environmental design changes that increase the potential offender's perceived risk of being caught should help to reduce these crimes.

Some CPTED strategies are quite simple. Upgrading locks on doors and windows and taking other 'target hardening' measures can reduce burglaries. Other successful initiatives are far more complex than simply changing door locks. The Bushbury Triangle Project shows the need to consider the needs of the community and also illustrates the crime reduction potential of CPTED-based neighbourhood revitalization.

The Bushbury Triangle Project involved renewal of a public housing project in England. This entailed a modernization programme, home security improvements, and new fencing. During the modernization, planners realized that behaviour was not improving and that the project needed more consultation with residents so they would develop a sense of ownership of the improvements.

To facilitate this ownership, part of the estate, the Triangle, was designated a separate community, and physical changes were made to encourage pedestrian circulation within this area. Community activities were run by the residents from a newly-designated community house.

Subsequently, crimes reported to the police dropped by one third compared with other parts of the estate which had been modernized, but which

lacked the community component. Victim surveys showed substantial reductions in crime, and fear of crime declined by 50 percent.

Box 1 CPTED in Ottawa

In Ottawa, CPTED strategies have reduced property crime. The Ottawa Police Service randomly selected 10 existing locations where CPTED audits had been requested by the owners/occupiers and 10 locations that had a CPTED audit during the pre-building planning process. Where recommendations made at the planning stage were implemented, subsequent criminal activity was very low. However, the crime problems predicted by the CPTED analyst have occurred in locations where recommendations were not implemented. Similarly, where the owners of existing locations followed the recommendations of the analyst, crime decreased. If recommendations were not implemented, crime subsequently remained the same or increased.

Community Programs

Programs such as Neighbourhood Watch, Operation Identification, and Citizens on Patrol are carried out by individual community members, though municipalities typically play a central role in organizing and maintaining them.

Neighbourhood Watch

These Action Briefs advocate a problem-solving approach to prevention. A good example of this approach is a project that began with a study of burglary patterns which found that many residents in a public housing project were repeat burglary victims. The probability of a second burglary was four times higher than the probability of a first burglary elsewhere in the project. In response, the municipality improved security in burglarized homes and also established 'cocoon' Neighbourhood Watch programs involving the immediate neighbours of the victimized household. Burglaries declined by 53 percent after the implementation of the program.

This study is one of several positive evaluations of Neighbourhood Watch. However, many other evaluations have not shown positive results, typically because participation rates are too low. Some neighbourhoods will require a significant effort

to involve people in community programs such as Neighbourhood Watch, but without this effort the programs will fail.

Also, the successful project involved several different types of interventions, including improving home security. An evaluation of a multi-city Burglary Reduction Initiative in the United Kingdom found that **using a combination of several types of intervention** is more effective than single interventions. Another study of this Initiative showed that **the intensity of the crime prevention effort** is also crucial to success. Programs involving more intense activities reduced more burglaries than those with less program activity.

The lessons for Canadian municipalities are clear. Burglary reduction initiatives should:

- Be based on research on the nature of your community's problem;
- Involve a combination of prevention strategies; and
- Be intense enough to ensure the problem is addressed.

Preventing Auto Theft: A Comprehensive Prevention Initiative

The lessons learned from burglary prevention also apply to other property crimes. An auto theft prevention program in Winnipeg was based on detailed research into the nature of the problem. Planners developed a comprehensive program integrating policing, environmental design, and social development strategies. It had a strong community partner in Manitoba Public Insurance (MPI); effective leadership from government, police, and MPI; sufficient resources to ensure success; and a commitment to working together across organizations.

For much of this decade, Winnipeg was the auto theft capital of North America with theft rates about 4 times the national average. A program instituted in 2005 has led to dramatic reductions in auto theft. Rates dropped by 42 percent in 2008 and by March, 2009 were down 75 percent from the 2004 peak.

These reductions are the result of a multi-agency program called the Winnipeg Auto Theft Suppression Strategy (WATSS). WATSS is based on the best evidence about what works in reducing auto theft. The main program components are based on strategies that had been effective elsewhere:

- Intensive supervision of chronic auto theft offenders. Curfew checks are done as frequently as every 3 hours;
- Installation of electronic immobilizers in vehicles (mandatory for the most at-risk vehicles). These make it almost impossible to steal the vehicle without the keys; and
- A broad range of programs dealing with the root causes of auto theft.

Other programs which target chronic offenders have also reduced auto theft significantly in Regina and in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia.

Conclusion

The successful examples of property crime reduction discussed in this Action Brief demonstrate that something can be done about crime. It is up to municipal governments to put this knowledge into action in order to improve the quality of life in our communities.