

POLICING FOR SAFETY*

Strategic Overview

When governments decide to do something about crime, they often hire more police. This is an expensive way to address crime. Canadians spent \$10.5 billion on policing in 2007 and each additional officer adds about \$100,000 to police budgets.

Does it work? Does an increase in police numbers mean less crime or could the police do more with their existing numbers of officers? These questions are vital to municipalities trying to keep their citizens safe and their costs down.

Fortunately, there has been a good deal of research on what works in policing. This research shows that just adding more officers will not likely have much impact on crime. It also tells us that most efforts at community policing that are not problem-oriented have not made our cities safer. However, there are innovative police strategies that will have an impact on the safety of our communities. Smarter use of police resources should be part of any municipal crime reduction initiative.

The most promising strategies involve problem-oriented policing that focuses on high-crime locations (hot spots) and high-rate offenders as well as partnerships with social services and citizens (e.g. Strategic Actions for Community Safety in *Safe Streets*). These strategies are based on an analysis of the community and its crime problems and on a proactive effort to work with community partners to solve these problems.

Action for Municipal Stakeholders

1. Learn and adopt best policing practices;
2. Implement problem-oriented policing that is results oriented;
3. Utilize technology for crime analysis and for accountability;
4. Develop collaborative partnerships with a variety of community groups, based on mutual understanding, respect and getting results.

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Justification

When governments decide to do something about crime, they often choose to hire more police. This is an expensive way to address crime. Canadians spent \$10.5 billion on policing in 2007 and each additional officer adds about \$100,000 to police budgets.

Thus it is important to ask the question: Does it work? Does increasing police numbers reduce crime? Could the police do more with existing numbers of officers? These questions are important to municipalities trying to keep their citizens safe and their costs down.

Fortunately, there is research on what works in policing. This research shows that just adding more officers will not likely have much impact on crime, but that there are innovative police strategies that will have an impact on the safety of our communities. Smarter policing should be part of any municipal crime reduction initiative.

Increasing Police Numbers

Simply adding more police officers will have only a limited impact on crime unless the increase in numbers is unaffordably large. An expert panel of researchers reviewed a broad range of studies and concluded that **incremental increases in the number of police officers does not, on its own, reduce crime.** It is worth noting that the significant declines in Canadian crime rates during the 1990s occurred as budget cuts were reducing the number of police officers.

Community Policing

Community policing has been widely-adopted. However, there is **little evidence that it has had a significant impact on crime.** Some researchers have concluded that this failure is because community policing has never been properly implemented. In many municipalities community policing involved putting community offices into strip malls or adding some beat officers without integrating their functions

into the core activities of the department. Typically, community officers had little specific direction about what they should be doing. Not surprisingly this has not reduced crime and many police departments across Canada have moved away from their community policing initiatives.

Despite this history of failure, it may be too soon to reject community policing. Many of those who helped develop community policing agree that it should have three components:

- Problem solving – a proactive approach to community problems aimed at dealing with the problems underlying crime and disorder by using information to analyze problems and implement solutions.
- Decentralization – a recognition that ‘one size fits all’ policing cannot meet the needs of our diverse neighbourhoods and communities.
- Community involvement – the police work with the community to solve crime problems.

These three have rarely been put together in a well-managed program (See Box 1 for an important exception) and any attempt to revitalize community policing should begin with this framework.

Box 1 Successful Community Policing: Edmonton’s Neighbourhood Foot Patrol

This program was based on research showing that some places were crime hot spots. The Edmonton Police Department placed storefront police offices in areas that had the highest number of calls for service. The officers assigned to work from these offices were Neighbourhood Foot Patrol officers. Their duties included foot patrol and working with the community to help solve neighbourhood problems. The program accomplished its goals of reducing repeat calls for service, increasing citizen satisfaction with police services, and increasing the morale of the officers involved with the program. This demonstrates that community policing can work if it is well-planned, carefully-implemented, and managed through accountability mechanisms. Unfortunately, most community policing initiatives have not done these things.

Problem-Oriented Policing

While increasing police numbers is not an effective way to reduce crime and most community policing efforts have failed to make us safer, research shows that problem-oriented policing does work.

Most police work is reactive — citizens call 911 and the police send a car in response. **Problem-oriented policing is proactive.** Rather than waiting for calls, the police **analyze their community's crime problems and try to deal with the underlying conditions** that produce these problems. Problem-oriented policing can focus on **places** or on **offenders**.

Focusing on Places: Hot Spot Policing

Some places have more crime than others. Some police departments have used their knowledge of crime patterns to **focus their crime reduction activities on places that generate or attract crime.** Consider an apartment complex that generates dozens of calls for service each week. Reactive policing would continue to send cars to the complex and deal with each of these incidents. A problem-oriented police service would analyze the factors that are contributing to the high volume of calls and work with community members to deal with these factors. For example, if burglaries are high and analysts found that locks on doors and windows were inadequate, the police could try to encourage the apartment complex managers to install better security hardware.

Hot spot policing is made easier by computer mapping technology that allows police to see where particular types of calls are concentrated. Research supports the effectiveness of hot spot policing. There are concerns that the approach will just displace crime to nearby areas, but this has not been a major problem.

Focusing on People: Offender-Oriented Policing

Policing can also **focus on offenders.** Programs like the Serious Habitual Offender Comprehensive Action Program (SHOCAP) for juveniles are utilized in many communities. These programs identify the most serious offenders, regularly monitor these offenders, and offer a broad range of social services to help move them away from their criminal activities.

In Winnipeg, the most serious young auto theft offenders have been identified and when they are in the community they are monitored by the police Stolen Auto Unit and by a special unit within Probation Services. They are checked as often as every three hours and those who violate release conditions such as curfews are apprehended. Probation officers work with the families and schools of the young offenders to help them move out of the auto theft subculture. This program has been extremely successful in reducing auto theft.

Private Policing

Private security personnel outnumber the public police in Canada. There is also an overlap in functions. The public police do foot patrol in Toronto, while in Toronto Community Housing a private patrol officer does the same thing and in Ottawa RCMP officers guard embassies while the Commissionaires guard federal office buildings. Municipalities should recognize the interdependence of public and private policing and encourage them to work together. For example West Edmonton Mall Security personnel work very closely with the Edmonton Police Service. This relationship enhances mall safety and reduces public police costs because Mall Security does some tasks that would otherwise be done by the Edmonton Police Service.

An Optimistic Picture and a Word of Caution

Smarter policing can reduce crime, particularly when combined with other initiatives. However, many researchers have urged a note of caution. Some new police strategies are proactive and highly focused. Accountability mechanisms such as CompStat have put pressure on police supervisors to reduce crime numbers. In some communities including New York City this has led to accusations that policing is discriminatory and too aggressive. Where the police have gone too far, relationships with the community have become strained.

Guidelines for Effective Policing

Research provides Canadian municipalities with guidelines to improve policing effectiveness. Some of these have been adopted by police departments, but practices vary widely from city to city.

- Police should **adopt evidence-based best practices**.
- Policing should be **problem-oriented**. Resources need to be moved from call response to addressing problems proactively. Crime analysis is an important part of this — the more we know about a problem the easier it is to develop crime reduction strategies.
- **Technology** is an important policing tool. Information technology enables effective crime analysis and crime mapping as well as increased accountability.
- Build **accountability** mechanisms into policing. CompStat has been adopted by many departments and is a vital component of problem-oriented policing.
- **Develop comprehensive strategies**. There is no simple solution to crime and the police cannot stop crime by themselves. However, police play a key role in broader crime reduction strategies.
- **Partnerships** are a key to effective crime reduction. Partnerships are needed at many levels. Different units within police departments must work with each other and with other police departments. It is important to work with other parts of the justice system to ensure a coordinated response to crime problems as well as with the community. One of the most notable gang prevention programs, the Boston Gun Project (discussed in the Action Brief on *Safe Streets*), is a successful example of a collaborative offender-oriented policing project.
- **Community involvement** must be enhanced. The police should **develop partnerships with community groups that are focused on the community's problems**. The police need to go beyond traditional notions of the community to identify agencies, groups and individuals who can help with crime reduction. Consider the innovative strategy of the Toronto police officer who contacted Bill Gates to enlist the support of Microsoft to help police prevent internet child pornography. Manitoba Public Insurance provided funding and staff to help reduce vehicle theft in Manitoba. Ottawa has partnered with property developers in the Crime Free Multi-Housing program that incorporates crime prevention strategies in the design and management of apartment buildings. Edmonton and Waterloo police work closely with social agencies in innovative elder abuse initiatives. These initiatives go far beyond simply setting up a community police office and expecting the public to drop in and help with crime prevention.