

## 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.

#### 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 automatically. Participation in crime prevention initiatives tends to be low, especially in the highest-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.

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When members of these communities are willing to participate, their success will depend upon the support and encouragement they receive from municipal governments, social agencies, and the business community. Community engagement often requires a partnership between community members and those who have access to power and resources, without which community groups have little chance of success. We have learned several things about what works in building public engagement.

These include: effective communication; the need to listen to the community; the requirement to provide support to 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 programs once they have been established.

This brief will consider the question of 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 important recommendation to the Mayor's Roundtable in Halifax was that the municipal government "should develop a communications strategy that provides proactive, comprehensible, contextual and useful information to citizens on crime and violence; the strategy should involve a wide range of key players, entail the municipality coordinating the public awareness of local programs and initiatives to make sure these 'solutions-oriented' messages reach the larger community, establish a 'safe community citizens' website', and use paid advertising in the conventional media to communicate to get quality information on violence and public safety to the citizenry" (Clairmont 2008: 62).

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 (see Box 1). Municipalities can also carry out surveys that measure peoples' **perceptions of safety**, particularly in public spaces such as parks, commercial areas and 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 is one of the few Canadian police departments to provide 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](http://www.winnipeg.ca)). Other cities, including Regina and Ottawa, also provide statistics online.

Larger municipalities also have the capacity to place crime data in a broader perspective. Making links between crime statistics and public health, housing, school attendance, family cohesion, urban design, and neighbourhood vitality allows for a better understanding of the nature, impact, and causes of crime and disorder.

Along with crime information, municipalities need to ensure that they 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. A policy of open communication with the public can be a good way of motivating people and keeping them involved.

Crime prevention programs can be publicized through a variety of communications media. Advocates need to work to get positive stories in all the media. Other methods of publicizing programs include; public service announcements on television and radio; posters in workplaces, schools, playgrounds, housing projects and apartments; and articles in community newspapers. In high-crime neighbourhoods personal contacts can be the most effective way of getting people involved in crime reduction activities, so knocking on doors and organizing local meetings is a good way to communicate information about prevention programs.

### 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 views, 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 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 analyze and to understand the factors contributing to crime and insecurity in their neighbourhoods.

Municipal government must also ensure that efforts in the community 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 worked with the community associations and has trained their members in CPTED. Once community members have been trained, they are put into teams with people with CPTED expertise and asked to conduct safety audits in their communities.

CPTED audits can be a good way to start mobilizing communities. It is easy for residents to 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 things that concern them. 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.

Box 3:

#### **Community Engagement in Toronto's Priority Neighbourhoods**

Toronto has developed processes that encourage community engagement in its 13 priority neighbourhoods. The first step was to establish Neighbourhood Action Teams of city and board staff to coordinate a municipal plan with the help of community development officers. The teams had the task of dealing with local needs by coordinating services and enhancing community capacity. The teams have evolved into Neighbourhood Action Partnerships that also have representatives from school boards, police, public housing, community agencies and local residents. The coordination provided by municipal staff has helped to ensure coordinated services and has helped to bring extra resources into the priority neighbourhoods. Significant social infrastructure funding has been brought into the neighbourhoods and the partnerships ensure that funding priorities are established with the full participation of residents and community organizations.

### 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 these groups, their structure, their credibility, and their knowledge of the community is invaluable.

If you need to help organize new groups, resources must be available to help with this task. 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 (Skogan et al. 2000).

### 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. Involvement in crime prevention is a good way for communities to become involved in improving their neighbourhoods. 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

You must sustain your prevention activities over time because crime problems are usually deep-seated and require sustained intervention. This means that maintenance strategies must be part of any prevention initiative. Community members may lose interest or drop out of programs because of competing demands on their time. They may also leave the area. 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. These 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” (Diers, 2004:26) and use initial successes to motivate people to take on larger issues. Effective 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. Many municipalities have organized activities to promote civic engagement and have developed awards programs that pay tribute to individuals and organizations that have contributed to crime reduction in their community.

### Effective Delivery and Coordination of Services at the Neighbourhood Level

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 has many advantages:

- Actions of municipal services and other agencies are coordinated and focused on local problems and issues.
- Service delivery is adapted to the characteristics of each neighbourhood.
- Strong action-oriented partnerships are established.
- There is better interaction and communication with the citizens and the communities, enhancing civic vitality.
- Local capacity to plan, manage and deliver programmes is developed.

Box 4:

#### **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 try to engage neighbourhoods and communities in collaborative processes and 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. Their goals are to create safer neighbourhoods, involve the community and facilitate access to information about City government.

In Montreal, the **Programme in Support of Civic Action on Urban Safety in the Boroughs** contracts with local NGOs to implement crime prevention programmes, according to the needs of each neighbourhood. Over the years, these local organizations have developed expertise in the area of community safety and prevention. Its annual budget is \$1.8 million.

### **References**

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