

BACKGROUND PAPER: WHY CRIME PREVENTION?

2001

The rationale for the St. Leonard's Society of Canada to supporting Prevention, in all forms, is irrefutable. St. Leonard's Society of Canada's affiliates have been providing services to their local communities for over thirty years. The bulk of the Society's services focuses on the delivery of interventions designed to promote the safe reintegration of incarcerated offenders. Next to preventing offences from occurring in the first instance, preventing those convicted of offending from repeating their criminal behaviour is a well-accepted crime prevention strategy. The challenges associated with successfully promoting the reintegration of the offender, particularly one who may have experienced many years of institutional living, are many. Equally challenging are the efforts necessary to prevent the youthful offender from adopting a pattern of behaviour that places the community at risk. The experience gained by the St. Leonard's Society points to the need to promote crime prevention on all fronts.

Our experience at St. Leonard's repeatedly exposes life stories where the best efforts of the criminal justice system have failed to achieve the ultimately desired outcome: a restored victim, a rehabilitated offender and a safer community. It is, therefore, clear that it is preferable to prevent the criminal act in the first place.

The costs associated with the criminal justice system are beyond calculation. The trauma experienced by a victim or victim's family, may last a life time. People may feel less safe in their neighbourhoods, their homes, their schools or their workplaces. In economic terms the National Crime Prevention Council has published an estimate of the total cost associated with crime in Canada to be \$46 billion annually.¹ The Council arrived at this figure by taking a comprehensive look at the cost of crime, including factors such as: property loss, private security costs, the justice system, medical care and costs associated with lost opportunity and community decay.

The cost attributed to the operation of the Criminal Justice System (police, courts and corrections) is approximately \$10 billion nationally. Current strategies to increase efficiencies within these systems may ease upward pressure on costs; however, potential savings may be more than consumed by the pressure to 'crack down' on crime and 'get tough' with criminals. Unfortunately, the evidence appears to suggest that an increased reliance on the punitive measures of the system, which are also the highest cost measures, will yield no overall improvement in our efforts to better respond to crime.

Almost always an "official" response to crime is after the fact. Yet, when seeking crime reduction, it is understandable that the public does focus much of its attention on the justice system. From uniforms to impressive buildings coupled with daily media exposure, the criminal justice system is highly visible. Additionally, the criminal justice system has accepted and may actively seek responsibility for community safety.

Unfortunately, crime is a fact of life; therefore, our efforts to address criminal behaviour in the most effective means possible must continue. However, given the senseless human suffering and incomprehensible financial costs associated with crime, our society must make a more concerted effort at prevention.

Where the formal Criminal Justice System is easily identified, where its activities and its results are relatively immediate and quantifiable, prevention strategies are nebulous and abstract. Prevention initiatives may be immensely broad in scope and require years, if not generations, to realize full benefits.

Borrowing from experience in other fields, such as Public Health, the literature subdivides crime prevention into three areas of concentration: Primary Prevention, Secondary Prevention and Tertiary Prevention. ²

PRIMARY PREVENTION

Generally speaking Primary Prevention comprises a vast array of initiatives that contribute to the development and maintenance of a safe and healthy community. Primary Prevention efforts may support communities as a whole or respond to large segments of the population such as youth or seniors. Through the Society's contributions to the development of effective legislation, policy and practices which support crime prevention, St. Leonard's promotes primary prevention principles. In addition, the Society participates in a range of information sharing and education initiatives which promote primary prevention programs.

Most often, Primary Prevention efforts are part of a broader strategy and crime prevention is one of many desired outcomes. For example, our societal investment in recreation centres and parks greatly enhances the overall quality of life in our neighbourhoods. It is also generally accepted that these facilities contribute to the prevention of crime. Current literature encourages directing Primary Prevention strategies toward the family and engaging the high-risk family at the earliest opportunity. Primary Prevention programs may also be more targeted but continue to offer a broader community benefit. Again these initiatives are intended to contribute to the general wellbeing of the community; but, may have a more readily identifiable crime prevention benefit. Street lighting and environmental or product design are also examples of applications of primary prevention.

The most popular theme associated with Primary Prevention is that of Community Development. Community Development encourages communities or neighbourhoods to support their members, promote a sense of belonging and be empowered to address their concerns. The National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention has prepared a comprehensive plan promoting community development as a Primary Prevention initiative. These initiatives attempt to strengthen communities by addressing weaknesses identified by community members. John McKnight, a community development theorist from the U.S.,³ advocates community development and the promotion of healthy communities by building on the strengths or "gifts" residing in each community rather than focusing on deficits or perceived problems and weaknesses.

SECONDARY PREVENTION

Similar to Primary Prevention, Secondary Prevention has evolved into a wide array of strategies and interventions. Secondary Prevention is more focused or targeted than Primary Prevention. Secondary prevention attempts to address those individuals, most often youth, who are "at risk" of engaging in criminal activity. These persons have not yet been in conflict with the law; however, they are believed to be at risk.

Programs that support inner city youth, “Head Start” programs for low income families or the Perry Preschool Study in Ypsilanti, Michigan are examples of Secondary Prevention. The Perry Preschool Study, approaching 30 years in operation, has suggested that for every dollar invested in prevention, the taxpayer saves over seven dollars in social, health and justice services. A program in Hawaii is taking the Perry Project a step further. In Hawaii, all teenage pregnancies are considered high risk. The young woman receives a range of volunteer and professional supports to assist her with all aspects of pre-natal health. Researchers believe that this intervention will promote more successful outcomes for both mother and child. Reduced criminal behaviour is one of many desired outcomes.

Programs that educate youth and attempt to deter unsafe or unhealthy lifestyle choices have a Crime Prevention component. Impaired Driver programs, school based antiviolence programs and anti-drug programs are examples of Secondary Prevention programs that address high-risk groups.

Not all strategies are well thought out or empirically sound. The “Scared Straight” program out of Rahway State Penitentiary in New Jersey attempted to “scare” high-risk juveniles out of their life of crime. The program had public appeal based on a reasonable measure of face validity. Currently validated Canadian findings by researchers such as Paul Gendreau, Don Andrews and James Bonta indicate that what works does not include the use of scare tactics by prison inmates to deter youth at risk of criminal lifestyles. In fact, crime rates for some youth participating in the study exceeded “normal” expectations for their cohort.

Current research, including the US Surgeon General’s year 2000 report, supports the concept of “resiliency or protective factors” that help some children cope successfully in the face of considerable adversity. These factors include:

- the formation of a close bond with a competent role model,
- association with friends from stable families,
- participation in school,
- the opportunity to help others, and
- a strong sense of hope.

Primary and Secondary crime prevention strategies often overlap. Community development and targeting high-risk youth in a subsidized housing development are both primary and secondary prevention activities and highly appropriate as part of an integrated approach.

An increasing number of St. Leonard’s affiliates are providing services that constitute Primary and /or Secondary Prevention services.

TERTIARY PREVENTION

Tertiary Prevention includes all the services and strategies directed toward persons convicted or found guilty of an offence. The court’s objective in passing sentence includes general and specific deterrence and rehabilitation of the offender. Delivering services that reduce recidivism has a prevention function. Such programs as substance abuse, employment skills, cognitive and life skills which address those factors identified as having a correlation to the commission of the criminal act perform a prevention function by enabling people to live without crime. Additionally, Diversion programs are also included, although the individual may not be found guilty or

convicted, because avoidance of the formal criminal justice system or at least limiting contact with it has been found to reduce recidivism. Most St. Leonard's affiliate services fall within the scope of Tertiary Prevention. Nationally, the Society consistently promotes tertiary prevention by contributing to the dialogue within government about effective post-incarceral strategies, supporting and promoting the impact of such programs, and encouraging their acceptance by the public sector and communities.

As is the case in the health field, Tertiary services are by far the most costly and occur after significant damage has already taken place both to the individual and the community. Nonetheless, they serve an important role in creating a comprehensive prevention framework of service provision. St. Leonard's affiliates offer a growing array of services that address the Tertiary Prevention needs in their local communities. Effective and efficient services that reduce the likelihood of recidivism will always be a requirement of a progressive justice system and of benefit to our communities.

POTENTIAL POLICY OPPORTUNITY

1. To reinforce St. Leonard's Society of Canada's Mission Statement advocating Crime Prevention.
2. Further, to support the St. Leonard's Canada's Policy Statement in support of "community-based social justice" which promotes crime prevention.

ENDNOTES

1. *Safer Communities, A Parliamentarian's Crime Prevention Handbook*, National Crime Prevention Centre, Department of Justice, Ottawa
2. In the health care field, prevention efforts have a similar three pronged approach. Firstly, general preventative messages and information are widely disseminated through the population; secondly, high-risk groups receive a more targeted message; and, thirdly, active treatment is directed toward patients. The effort to curb the spread of AIDS follows this course.
3. *Building Communities from the Inside Out*, Kretzman and McKnight, ATCA Publications, Chicago, Illinois, 1993