Crime Reduction and Prevention through Community Involvement

ABSTRACT:

Police play an important role in keeping our communities safe, but they can't be everywhere at once. It's important for all members of the community to take responsibility in contributing to community safety and crime reduction. Significant research in recent years reveals a great capacity for residents to contribute to the safety and well-being of their community through engagement in local activities. This has been shown through studies about the positive impact of community connectedness on criminal offenders, and the effects of recreational activities on youth as a deterrent for gang involvement. Opportunities for meaningful participation in the community for children and adults alike is shown to increase positive regard for the community, create trust and responsibility among its members, and motivate young people to make healthy choices. These outcomes contribute to building communities in which everyone works collaboratively to keep their neighbourhood safe.

WHY IS THIS OF INTEREST?

Everyone wants to feel safe where they live. However, crime reduction and prevention are complex issues with no single answer. Although there is no magic solution to ending crime, there are things that everyone in the community can do to help keep themselves and their community safe. Research is showing that one of the biggest ways community members can help reduce crime is simply by choosing to be involved in their community. Not only does this help address factors that lead to criminal activity, but it also builds a sense of belonging and connection between residents, which results in community members who look out for each other and care about other's well-being. This empowers members of local communities to actively contribute to their own safety.

"Crime prevention is about neighbours, businesses, and all levels of government in a community talking to each other and working together towards a common goal of preventing crime" (Government of Alberta, 2011, p.15).

WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY ABOUT THIS?

Relationship Skills and Belonging

Alberta's Crime Reduction and Safe Communities Task Force reported in 2007 that "teaching youth skills and expanding their capacity to manage relationships...has been shown to result in a 50 per cent reduction in bullying as a well as a reduction in illicit drug use and violence (especially against women)" (p. 37).

These statistics represent how instrumental relationship skills can be in preventing dangers in the community. Research supports that young people who participate in activities that require working together in groups, such as teams and clubs, have more opportunities to develop and practice these crucial interpersonal skills (Morrisey & Werner, 2005).

Additionally, it is has been found that "feeling or perceiving one's self to be connected (to self, family, and community) appears to create a protective shield of resiliency and strength to resist problem behaviors" (McKiernan et al., 2012, p.100). Therefore, relationships that provide a sense of connectedness with others in the community can prevent young people from becoming involved in risky behaviours.

Opportunities for Achievement

Research has also found that structured activities that provide young people with opportunities for leisure and recreation are effective at fostering personal and social strengths. Activities such as these provide the opportunity for children and youth to gain a sense of success, as well as to gain a feeling of connectedness to their community (Bhatt, Tweed & Dooley, 2010). Evidence suggests that the most beneficial activities for young people to participate in are those that "allow creativity and/or service to others, and build connection to adults in the community" (Bhatt et al., 2010, p.9).

One study that looked at the effects of community-based activities on Aboriginal and refugee children found that those who participated in recreational activities such as sports teams were protected against gang involvement and the potential criminal activities associated with gangs (LaBoucane-Benson et al.,2010).

Involvement in the community offers opportunities for all children and families to be motivated and engaged in meaningful ways. Being engaged in community activities builds leadership and character strengths but in a way that is fun and engaging (Bhatt et al., 2010).

Trust In Others

There is considerable evidence to suggest that young people who believe that other people care about them are less likely to act out violently; making this a crucial factor in crime prevention. Building confidence in the good will of others is developed through engagement with service providers and others in the community, which creates the sense of belonging and trust in other people (Bhatt et al., 2010).

In explaining how community-based activities foster a sense of trust in others, researchers said:

> The actions taken by the individuals and organizations to show these children that they mattered and the efforts to create opportunities for them to experience positive interactions with adults and peers cannot be discounted. The research is clear that such actions are important protective factors that help prevent youth involvement in crime and gang involvement (LaBoucane-Benson et al., 2010, p. 63).

Positive relationships with adults in the community help young people develop trust, and motivate them to make good choices in order to maintain these relationships.

Research Byte

HOW DOES THIS CONNECT TO START SMART STAY SAFE?

Start Smart Stay Safe (S4) is a strengths-based educational resource utilized by police officers, teachers, and schools in building resiliency and capacity in children and their families. One of the aims of Start Smart Stay Safe is to help children and families understand the role we all play in keeping our communities safe.

The Start Smart Stay Safe philosophy is made up of four cornerstones: significance, self-awareness, success, and service. Families and communities are encouraged to consider these four areas in order to enhance their capacity for meaningful involvement in the community. By promoting a sense of belonging and significance in children and families, fostering self awareness to make healthy choices, creating opportunities for achievement and success, and being encouraged to serve others, all members of a community can discover their capacity for contributing the safety and well-being of their community.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

The benefits of participating in community activities are not just true for young people. Parents and other adults who get involved in the community help contribute to creating a positive environment by showing commitment and caring toward the rest of the community. This sense of collaborative responsibility for community safety ensures that all members understand their role in maintaining the well-being of the community (Fulton, 2012).

Families especially can play a role in community involvement by guiding and supporting participation in local activities. Research shows that children who feel supported by their families are more likely to partake in activities long enough to benefit from them (Morissey & Werner-Wilson, 2005).

It doesn't take a huge commitment to be involved; everyone can find a way in their day-to-day lives to contribute to the community through small acts of kindness, which build upon each other to create a sense of trust and responsibility for everyone.

"The power and effectiveness to create change is amplified when individuals are connected to each other around common interests and goals." (LaBoucane-Benson et al., 2010, p.66)

"It is individuals in the community, whether they are acting as 'soccer moms', soccer coaches, library program staff, or executive directors of non-profit organizations, that hold the knowledge, skills and know-how to create change in the community - and ultimately to prevent crime and make our communities safer and healthier for everyone." (LaBoucane-Benson et al., 2010, p.66)

Key Terms

Community Involvement: Participating in, or contributing to, opportunities and activities in the geographical area in which an individual resides, or with a group of people with which the individual identifies, through cultural or other social factors.

Community Safety: Every person in the community plays a role in keeping it safe. This approach addresses crime prevention as well as other things that may threaten safety, such as discrimination, pollution, and social exclusion.

Connectedness: "Feeling emotionally close, cared about, and listened to in one's family, with significant others outside of our family, and with others in the broader community." (McKiernan et al., 2012, p.100).

Crime Prevention: An approach to addressing crime, which considers people or areas not yet affected by significant criminal activity and finds ways to reduce or eliminate opportunities for crime before it happens.

Crime Reduction: An approach that addresses criminal activity that has already occurred, by developing strategies to decrease the opportunities for crime and minimize the impact of the activity on the local community.

Pro-social behavior: The act of helping other people without expecting compensation or reward in return.

Protective Factor: "Positive influences that can reduce the risk of criminality and improve the lives and safety of individuals, children, youth, families, and communities" (Government of Alberta, 2011, p.11).

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

In a call to action to the citizens of Alberta for the reduction of crime in our communities, Alberta's Crime Reduction and Safe Communities Task Force (2007) said:

> Each of us must take personal responsibility for our safety and the safety of the members of our community. Each of us must decide that we are willing to be part of the solution. We have lost our connections. We have lost our commitment. We must find them again. **We must get involved**. This means making the effort to meet and know our neighbours...It means supporting our not-for-profit community agencies that are being crippled by the steady decline in volunteers...We understand the pressures. We understand the stresses that everyone is operating under. However, one person **can make a difference**. Hundreds of thousands **can effect great change**. Be a mentor. Coach a sports team. Work with at-risk youth in your community. Start or support your local neighbourhood patrol. Incorporate volunteerism as a family activity (p.73).

"We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give."

- Winston Churchill

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