
A Portrait of Sustainable Crime Prevention in Selected Canadian Communities

Highlights of the Study

Report prepared for the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Working Group of
Community Safety and Crime Prevention

by

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INTRODUCTION

This document provides the highlights of a 2003 study, entitled *A Portrait of Sustainable Crime Prevention in Selected Canadian Communities*, conducted by Tullio Caputo, Katharine Kelly, Wanda Jamieson and Liz Hart on behalf of the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Working Group on Community Safety and Crime Prevention.ⁱ

BACKGROUND

Community-based crime prevention has been embraced and realized to different degrees in different communities across Canada. Some communities have been engaged in crime prevention through social development activities for long periods of time; many others are just beginning. Why is it that some communities have been able to carry on while other activities have failed? How have those communities that carried on sustained their efforts? What can we learn from their success and how can it help others?

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

The main purpose of this study was to explore lessons learned from six communities that have sustained crime prevention through social development activities over time, and to identify the factors that community members believe have contributed to the sustainability of these activities.

COMMUNITIES STUDIED

Six diverse communities from across Canada were studied, including:

- two urban neighbourhoods;
- two “communities of interest” located within urban areas;
- a series of rural communities in close proximity, which share a similar cultural heritage, and
- one northerly First Nations community.ⁱⁱ

SUSTAINABILITY AND CRIME PREVENTION: COMMON-SENSE NOTIONS AND ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

As a concept, the common-sense notion of “sustainability” relates to how community activities *persist over time*. However, a recent review of the sustainability literature and its relevance for crime prevention through social development suggests that sustainability has a more holistic, contextual meaning: it is about how community activities *take place within a web of social relations*.ⁱⁱⁱ In the context of crime prevention, the concept of sustainability is integrally linked to concerns about community development and encompasses:

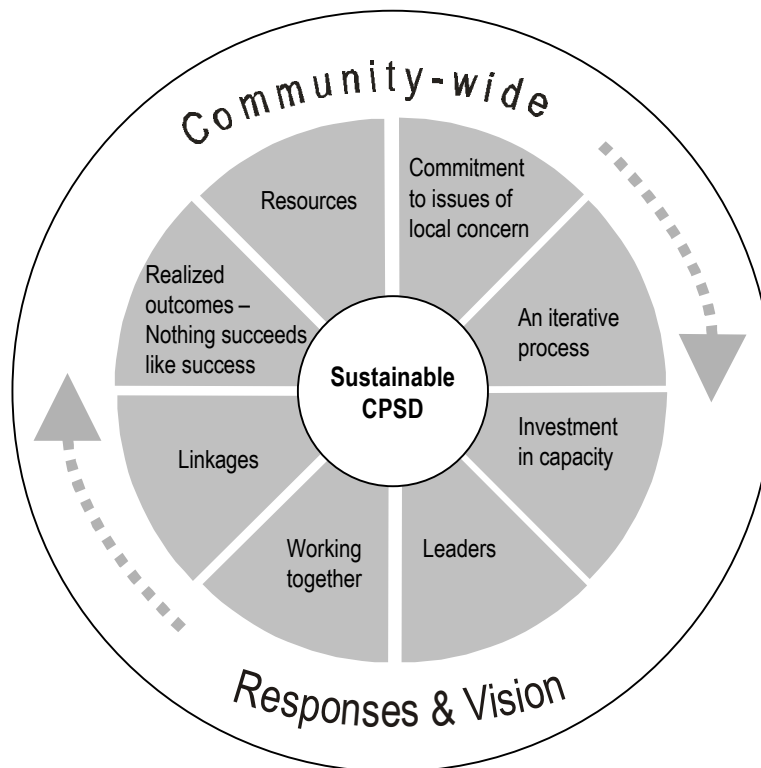
- the **capacity** of the communities to identify and respond to their own needs — including how that capacity is linked to the overall health and well-being of community members

- the **interconnection** among crime problems and other social factors — including, for example, local social and economic conditions and social connections among groups and individuals, or how collective action such as volunteerism becomes part of community life, and
- the **process** through which *private* concerns get translated into *public community-wide issues*.

THE COMMON ELEMENTS OF SUSTAINABILITY IN ALL SIX COMMUNITIES

This study examined what sustainability means “on the ground” in communities engaged in crime prevention activities. It was exploratory in nature and based on a purposive sample of communities that had a recognized level of success in sustaining community-based crime prevention initiatives. Although the sample size is small and should not be taken as representative of all Canadian communities, it does serve to highlight important patterns and themes related to the sustainability of community-level initiatives.

The elements that contributed to sustainability in all six communities are depicted in the following diagram:



A Commitment to Issues of Local Concern: In every community, the first step involved identifying the issue(s) of specific concern to the local community. Community members came together — in kitchens, schools, community centres and other locations — to share their concerns and ideas. Depending on the community, the initial focus was on one or more of the following personal or community safety and security concerns: violence and abuse, substance abuse, drinking and driving, bullying and/or public disorder. Often, the rallying point was a concern about children, youth and families.

An Iterative Process: Each community employed an iterative process to identify, articulate and take action on their issues. They identified their concerns, considered potential solutions and decided on specific actions. They also explored all of the potential resources — human, financial and other — that could help them achieve their goals (including, but not limited to, sources of project funding). Each community engaged in some form of ongoing community consultation, communication, information sharing and feedback. In some cases, the process was informal (learn as you go), while in other cases it was more structured (e.g., community forums). Some communities used specific tools such as asset building, workshops, surveys, focus groups and action planning. All processes involved coordination. As activities unfolded, the focus typically *changed* from concern with one specific issue to interest in a wider set of community concerns. If, for example, the first step was a community event for young people, the focus would eventually shift to the broader needs for youth programming in the community.

Community members' level of commitment to taking action on these issue(s) — and the issues of concern themselves — evolved over time.

Investment in Capacity: From the outset, communities had differing levels of community capacity to address the issues of concern. Every community, however, took steps to further develop their capacity: they did this by acquiring additional knowledge about the issue(s), by obtaining human resources to play key roles (e.g., a coordinator), and/or by applying for funding to implement specific project(s).

Leaders: In each community, leaders were crucial. Leaders were individuals — or in some situations, groups of individuals — who had a thorough knowledge of the community and its concerns, and were personally connected to the community. In every case, the effectiveness of these leaders was based on their commitment, their trust in others, and their ability to build alliances/partnerships.

The following claim was made in every community: "If it hadn't been for [name of local leader(s)], this initiative would never have 'gotten off the ground'."

Working Together: In all of the communities, the process of working together required an ongoing — and often challenging — effort to bring people together to raise their awareness of issues, reinforce their sense of community ownership of the problem and take action.

Over time, as individuals continued to work together, relationships gradually emerged. As organizational barriers — or "turf" concerns — became less significant, mutual respect and trust developed.

Linkages: Connections between individuals and groups *within* a community — as well as with others *outside* the community — were very important. Within communities, these horizontal linkages increased trust, generated creative ideas and solutions, encouraged the pooling of knowledge, skills and expertise, and offered a support system. Vertical linkages, particularly to government officials and agencies, also provided important resources and support. Leadership and the level of community commitment to the issue were key components in maintaining these connections. Liaison and coordination mechanisms (committees and coordinators) were also crucial.

Realized Outcomes — Nothing Succeeds Like Success: Each community achieved an early success or tangible achievement, such as a successful community gathering, camp or event. These successes helped to further stimulate community interest and involvement in efforts to address the issue(s).

Resources: Communities utilized many different types of resources to address the issues of concern. People were the core strength of these efforts. In particular, having a coordinator was invaluable. However, obtaining funding for a coordinator was one of the most challenging issues communities faced. Material resources, including funding from internal and external sources, were important. Having a physical space gave groups visibility, a sense of place and belonging, and provided community members with a point of contact and easy access to what was being offered.

Access to knowledge and ideas about innovative and effective approaches, tools and programs that could be applied to their local situation was also very important.

LESSONS LEARNED

These findings lead to a number of lessons about how crime prevention through social development activity can be sustained:

- 1. Local Meaning:** Sustainable community activity begins with local groups and organizations identifying needs, problems and solutions that are meaningful for them.
- 2. Local Connection:** Sustainable activity connects individuals and groups who share a concern about a specific problem. It is through these connections that individual/private concerns become community-wide/public issues.
- 3. Local Ownership:** Sustainable approaches are shared: the problem(s) — and their solutions — are owned by the community, rather than a single individual or group. Effective leadership and coordination is necessary to find shared solutions.
- 4. Community Vision:** Sustainable activity may begin with the identification of a single issue but broader needs and issues will emerge over time. Sustaining crime prevention activity means developing and retaining a focus on the bigger picture — a vision of where the community is going — while simultaneously working step by step on projects and specific issues.

5. Non-hierarchical (bottom-up), Integrated and Diversity-sensitive approach:

Community activity is more likely to be sustainable when it is premised on a non-hierarchical (bottom-up), integrated and diversity-sensitive approach. This contributes to the flexibility to respond to demands in the local context that emerge over time.

6. Community Capacity-building: Sustainable initiatives build on existing community capacity to a) identify problems and b) mobilize communities to respond. This includes making investments in knowledge, coordination and project implementation.

7. Coordination and Communication: Sustainable action requires coordination and communication. Coordinators are crucial because developing connections and maintaining communication between community partners, and establishing links with governments (municipal, provincial/territorial and federal) is critical.

8. Linkages within Communities — and Beyond: Sustainable activities build relationships within the community that are based on trust, mutual respect, and a shared interest in and commitment to the well being of the community. Connections with others outside the community can provide resources such as funding support, knowledge, and a link to wider values and norms (e.g., social justice and human rights). Such relationships benefit participants both in their capacity as individuals who care about communities and as professionals working in communities.

9. Opportunities for Early Success: Early successes enhance further commitment and capacity building. Communities that begin with limited capacity can use early successes to build momentum.

10. Project Funding: Project funding offers opportunities for early successes, which in turn build commitment and momentum. Project funding can also help build community capacity in specific areas. Project funding alone, however, will not sustain activity; it must be viewed as one component in a larger community vision or initiative.

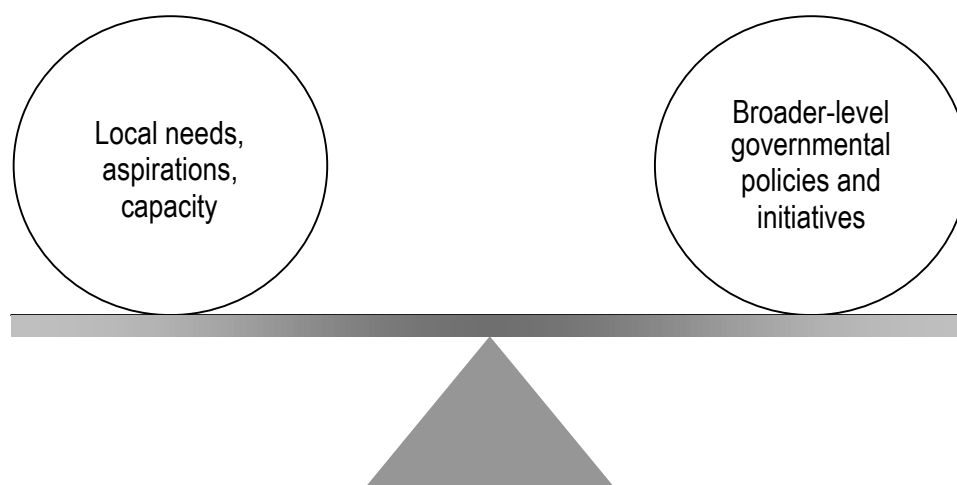
11. Resources: Sustainable responses require financial resources for infrastructure and to support coordination and communication, including a coordinator position. “In-kind” resources, especially volunteer labour as well as other donations, both sustain activity and build community ownership.

STUDY IMPLICATIONS: FINDING THE BALANCE

The need for multi-dimensional responses to local problems provides a set of complex challenges for policy makers at all levels. In particular, there is a fine balance between:

- strengthening the capacity of communities to address their specific needs, and
- implementing governmental policies and initiatives that are broad enough to encompass the diversity of Canadian communities, yet specific enough to have a meaningful local impact on crime.

Finding the Balance



Actions that may prove helpful to finding the right balance to sustainable crime prevention activity include:

- Ensure ongoing dialogue with communities to identify problems, priorities, approaches and solutions
- Apply a proactive and integrated approach to policy development, rather than a “stove-piped” approach
- Use communication and coordination mechanisms that facilitate integrated approaches
- Build practical bridges and partnerships that foster and sustain activity
- Share information and develop knowledge about effective approaches, tools and programs
- Invest in community capacity, in particular in areas such as leadership and human resource development
- Recognize the *value added* of the voluntary sector and the *value* of shaping opportunities to build on that strength.

In terms of investment, this study found that project funding contributed to flexibility and local innovation but on its own is not sufficient to sustain activity. Infrastructure funding, multi-year funding strategies, and diversification of funding sources are some examples of how stability and capacity for long-term planning could be maintained at the community level. Greater harmonization in funding processes across various initiatives would also contribute to sustainability by streamlining the ways and level of effort that communities must exercise to access funding. These are significant challenges that require coordination and cooperation among funding partners and between stakeholders involved in community-level initiatives. Indeed, they reflect many of the same challenges that communities have to address in order to ensure the sustainability of their efforts at the local level.

Endnotes

- i This study was undertaken through the Centre for Applied Population Studies, Carleton University, with funding provided by the Crime Prevention Partnership Program of the National Crime Prevention Strategy. The full report is available online at www.prevention.gc.ca.
- ii The communities are not identified by name in the Report.
- iii Tullio Caputo and Katherine Kelly (2001) *Discussion Paper on the Sustainability of Social Development Activities in Canada: Some Implications For Crime Prevention* Ottawa: prepared under contract to the National Crime Prevention Centre, Department of Justice Canada.