



## *Crime prevention starts at an early age*

### *Introduction*

Patterns of criminal behaviour and victimization often begin in childhood and adolescence. A number of risk factors are associated with vulnerability to victimization and the early onset of criminal behaviour. The interplay of these factors is complex, but community safety, secure family environments and the positive social development of children and youth are linked in many ways.

Children and youth are priorities for the National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention. The Strategy is part of an evolving approach that involves many players – including governments, First Nations, communities, non-governmental organizations, professional organizations, the private sector and individuals – in fostering the healthy, secure, prosocial development of children, youth and communities. Two policy frameworks developed for the Strategy assist the National Crime Prevention Centre in identifying, managing and providing funding for priority issues related to children and youth.

*This publication is part of the Caledon Institute's crime prevention series of community stories, produced in collaboration with the National Crime Prevention Centre. The series documents promising approaches to crime prevention through social development.*

### *A sound start*

The Policy Framework for Addressing Crime Prevention and Children Ages 0 to 12 is designed to foster action to prevent child victimization and reduce the likelihood that children living in situations of risk will engage in criminal behaviour in adolescence or adulthood. Early intervention is one of the most effective ways of preventing the emergence of problem behaviour. Programs that promote nurturing, safe and supportive environments for children – in families, schools and other institutions, and communities – can have significant influence in fostering healthy development, caring relationships, prosocial interest and engagement, and responsible behaviour.

The framework seeks to support communities in their efforts to address the factors and conditions that place children at risk. It aims to identify and promote promising practices that can reduce or minimize risk factors, and conditions that foster the development of prosocial individuals, families and communities.

### *A safe transition*

The Policy Framework for Addressing Crime Prevention and Youth Ages 12 to 18 seeks to foster community action and promote conditions that will prevent youth victimization and the probability of immediate or future criminal behaviour. Crime prevention efforts are intended to help youth make

the transition from adolescence to adulthood and self-sufficiency in a prosocial manner.

It is important to remember that the great majority of young offenders are involved in relatively minor property offences or fights. During 1997, only 20 percent of youth offences involved violent crimes; of these, half were common assaults in which no one was injured. Only a small proportion of youth who come into conflict with the law are persistent offenders. Community-based prevention and intervention approaches can yield significant benefits – if they are sensitive to the characteristics of youth, their families and communities; focus on the needs and abilities of youth; and foster youth engagement and participation.

### ***Community-based approaches***

The two policy frameworks emphasize community-based ways to address issues related to children and youth, and their families, living in

In Canada, children under 12 years of age who are involved in incidents reported to the police are considered to be under the age of criminal responsibility, and their problem behaviours are dealt with through provincial child welfare authorities. In 1997, 1.5 percent of incidents reported by police involved children under 12 years of age.

conditions of multiple risk. Risk factors present in the home may include violence and abuse; substance use and/or addiction; disorganized, unstable or criminal lifestyles of family members; and siblings who have demonstrated serious behavioural difficulties. Children and youth also are at risk if they live in situations of relative disadvantage, or are marginalized due to factors such as race, Aboriginal status, class background, disability, homelessness, and addiction or fetal alcohol effects.

Children and youth living in high-risk or high-need communities also are priorities under

### **National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention**

The National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention aims to reduce crime and victimization by addressing their root causes through a social development approach. Social development is a long-term, proactive approach directed at removing personal, social and economic factors that lead some individuals to engage in criminal acts or to become victims of crime.

With an investment of \$32 million annually, the National Strategy enables the Government of Canada to help communities develop projects and partnerships that will prevent crime. The strategy focusses particularly on children and youth, Aboriginal people and the personal security of women and girls. It includes the Safer Communities Initiative, a Promotion and Public Education Program and the National Crime Prevention Centre. The National Crime Prevention Centre is responsible for implementing the Strategy.

The Safer Communities Initiative is designed to help Canadians undertake crime prevention activities in their communities. It includes four funding components: the Community Mobilization Program, which helps communities develop approaches to crime prevention and undertake activities that deal with the root causes of crime; the Crime Prevention Investment Fund, which aims to establish reliable information on what works and what is promising in reducing the risk factors associated with crime and victimization; the Crime Prevention Partnership Program, which supports the involvement of organizations that can contribute to community crime prevention through the development of information, tools and resources; and the Business Action Program on Crime Prevention, which involves national and provincial/territorial business and professional associations in helping communities prevent crime, share information and encourage community mobilization.

### Guiding Principles

The policy frameworks for addressing crime prevention and children and youth are based on a number of key principles.

- 1) Focus on children and youth, and their families, who are living in conditions of multiple risk.
- 2) Recognize and reflect the difference and diversity among children and youth, their families and their communities.
- 3) Integrate an understanding of the gendered dimension of risk, and work toward gender-sensitive solutions.
- 4) Engage children at risk and their families, and youth and their support systems, in the process. A respectful, participatory approach of empowerment is consistent with the principles of crime prevention through social development.
- 5) Engage and sustain community participation in crime prevention issues affecting youth and children at risk.
- 6) Strengthen collaboration across disciplines and sectors involved in the prosocial development of children and youth at risk.
- 7) Link with other frameworks, strategies or mechanisms that can contribute to the optimal social development of children and youth.
- 8) Strengthen the cohesion of the National Strategy. The frameworks focus particularly on the points of intersection among the target groups of the Strategy – children and youth, women and Aboriginal populations.

the two frameworks. These include communities in which personal security risks are high; rural or isolated communities in which the specific needs of children and youth have not been addressed or are only now emerging, or communities with few early intervention supports; communities that are experiencing rapid or disconcerting change, crisis or near-crisis; and Aboriginal communities.

Under the framework for children, priority is given as well to children whose behaviour suggests that they may come into conflict with the youth justice system when they reach adolescence. Behavioural signs may include the early onset of aggressive behaviour or bullying; early conflict with the law; association with peers and youth involved in gangs; or the presence of fetal alcohol effects. Similarly, the youth framework gives priority to youth who risk coming into conflict with the law. These may be youth who displayed problem behaviours such as bullying or aggressiveness as children and continue to do so in adolescence. Also included are youth who display

a late onset of aggressive behaviour, those with antisocial peers and/or association with gangs, and young offenders who are at risk of reoffending.

### *Investing in children and youth*

Both frameworks recognize the importance of public education to ensure that society appreciates the need for, and benefits of, investing in children and youth from a crime prevention perspective. The frameworks also recognize the need to support research and the development of knowledge about how to prevent child and youth victimization, and the onset and escalation of offending behaviour.

Projects funded under the Safer Communities Initiative are addressing the need for community development strategies and models of crime prevention targeted at children and youth in situations of multiple risk. For example, with support from the Community Mobilization Program, youths in

the Aboriginal community of Gespapegiag, Quebec, are learning about radio station management and broadcasting programs on crime prevention, drug and alcohol abuse, and staying in school. In Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, the Riverside Community School Association is building on its work with at-risk children and youth, training 10- to 14-year-olds to be positive peer leaders in the community. A variety of projects across the country are encouraging Aboriginal children and youth to learn about their culture and traditional practices, with the aim of building self-esteem and resiliency.

Comprehensive strategies and models of crime prevention are required – particularly for youth experiencing disadvantage or marginalization in ‘inner city,’ northern and isolated communities. Strategies and models are also needed for youth exiting from care and/or custody, as they often remain at high risk of victimization and of coming into conflict with the law. One example of work in this area is the ‘Building on Capacities’ project of the PEI Coalition for Youth, which is supported by the Crime Prevention Investment Fund. The project involves multiservice teams in three schools which include teachers, guidance counsellors, youth addiction specialists, public health nurses, mental health practitioners, police, and child and family services. These integrated teams reach out to youth aged 12 to 15 who are associating with delinquent peers, not attending school or at risk of early school leaving, abusing alcohol and/or drugs, using aggression in problem-solving situations, and experiencing long-term family problems.

Both policy frameworks recognize that communities need tools and resources to help at-risk children and their families, facilitate community development and reduce the likelihood that at-risk youth will engage in criminal behaviour in adolescence or adulthood. A number of projects supported by the Crime Prevention Partnership Program are developing such tools. For example, the Canadian Childcare Federation has created a

handbook for front-line staff confronted with children who exhibit challenging behaviours. The Society for Children and Youth of British Columbia is promoting the concept of ‘child and youth friendly communities’ and formulating tools to help communities improve the participation of children and youth in multigenerational activity and decision-making.

Many of the roots of crime – and of crime prevention – are found in the way we treat children and youth. With support from the Safer Communities Initiative, Canadians from all walks of life are helping to build a future in which children have the best possible start in life, and in which youth can grow to maturity in a safe and respectful environment.

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For more information on the National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention, call (toll-free) 1-877-302-6272 or visit the website at [www.crime-prevention.org](http://www.crime-prevention.org).

Limited quantities of this publication are available in alternate formats (Braille, diskette and audiotape).

*Cette histoire communautaire est également disponible en français.*

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