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Building Between The Lines

a guide for those working to build
healthier, more caring communities

This guide and **Living Between the Lines** are part of a larger kit called **Between the Lines**, designed to raise public awareness and stimulate social action towards caring, safe, literate communities. **Between the Lines** was produced by

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You can get a copy of the complete kit by contacting NAACJ at the above address.

Please feel free to photocopy and share these materials

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The Links Between Literacy and Crime Prevention

The booklet **Living Between the Lines**, and the entire **Between the Lines** kit, highlight some important links between literacy and crime prevention. While no-one would claim that literacy training and better education are the whole answers to preventing crime, research done in Canada and internationally shows that low literacy levels and high drop-out rates from school are two of the factors that contribute to crime.

Unemployment and poverty are two more factors that help crime thrive and they are connected to low literacy and education levels. Low literacy and formal education levels can reduce job choices and make it harder for people to break out of the cycle of poverty.

While most people with literacy problems lead a crime-free life, many people who come in conflict with the law do have trouble reading and writing. According to figures provided by the Corrections Services of Canada, about 65% of those people entering prison for the first time can't read or write well. Low literacy skills along with the frustration and low self-esteem which often accompany them, make it harder for people who have been convicted of offences to make choices that do not involve criminal activity.

But perhaps most importantly, in this time when everyone is looking for solutions to crime, and when people so often feel like nothing works, linking literacy training and crime prevention provides some practical ways all of us can do something to prevent crime and make our communities better places to live. Many communities have found that offering literacy training, improving educational opportunities and making our services and communities more accessible to people with low literacy skills, help get at the factors which make crime thrive by giving people opportunities:

- to upgrade their education,
- to meet neighbours while they learn;
- to get more involved in their communities;
- and to have more choices and control over their lives.

In other words, understanding literacy issues, providing literacy training, and creating services and environments that do not exclude people with low literacy skills, not only helps people who are at risk of committing crimes, it helps bring people in the community together. It helps create the kind of awareness, involvement and support that reduce fear and prevent crime.

Another booklet in the **Between the Lines** kit, **Working Between the Lines**, contains examples of how some communities have made the link between literacy and crime prevention work for them.

Some Practical Ways Understanding Literacy Issues Can Help Strengthen Your Crime Prevention Programs

Understanding literacy issues and making sure your program(s) and materials do not exclude people with low literacy skills can help ensure that more people in your community can read and understand the information you provide on crime, the legal system and crime prevention. Understanding can reduce fear and help motivate people to get involved.

Working to make your organization and community “literacy friendly” can help reduce fear levels in other ways too. We know that fear levels are heightened when people feel isolated from their neighbours and their communities. Literacy upgrading programs, homework assistance services for students, English or French as a Second Language classes can all help people get to know and understand others in their community while they learn. This can be an especially important factor in diverse communities where people may feel divided and isolated by racial, cultural or language differences.

Literacy training can give people who are at risk of coming in conflict with the law more choices and control over their lives. The learning opportunities that literacy training provides help the learner as well as his or her family and friends see that change is possible. This realization alone sometimes can help them break out of cycles and patterns which are destructive to them and to the wider community.

Understanding literacy issues and making your community more accessible to people who are illiterate or who have low literacy skills can also make young people, even those on the fringes of society, feel more like part of their community – like somebody cares.

Libraries and community centers where literacy training is provided can become safe places for people from different backgrounds to meet, to learn, to talk, to explore choices and opportunities.

If police and other people involved in crime prevention become part of literacy training programs and literacy awareness programs, they can build new relationships with people and their communities. The community can see crime preventers in a more human and positive way, as people concerned about making their lives and their communities better, safer and more caring.

When services and programs are accessible to people with low literacy skills, people in your community can learn more about the social, health and legal supports and services available to them, so they can turn for help before they turn to crime.

Understanding and acting on literacy issues is not a magic formula for crime prevention, but it is an essential piece in solving the crime prevention puzzle in a way that will let people in your community know they can make a difference. Literacy awareness programs, literacy training and the community building they inspire can open doors to a wide range of individual and community options that can make your community healthier, safer and more caring.

How Living Between the Lines Can Help You in Your Crime Prevention Work

People working to prevent crime today face a tough challenge. Everyone is concerned about crime. Newspaper headlines, T.V. shows and movies scream out messages of “runaway crime”. People are afraid and they want effective, immediate solutions to crime. They want to know that their families will be safe. Reassuring words that “things aren’t so bad”, or that the media is escalating our fears, just don’t ring true when people are faced with real-life stories of tragedy, suffering and terror.

To make things worse, fear and frustration are closing people off from one another, and setting up different, rival camps concerning the most effective and appropriate solutions to crime. Everyone has a strong view on what should be done to prevent crime. But people are not listening to one another. In this climate, people working to prevent crime often find themselves caught between hostile, rival groups, trying to please everyone, but pleasing no one. It’s a no-win situation that can undermine our progress in preventing crime.

The booklet **Living Between the Lines** and this partner guide have been created to help people with different views on crime and crime prevention:

- listen to each other,
- talk to each other,
- think about crime and crime prevention in new ways,

- and get involved in cooperative efforts in their communities, so that together, we can find better solutions to crime and to related problems that make us feel afraid and angry.

Living Between the Lines is a tool to help you raise the level of understanding about crime that can reduce the fear and anger that challenges our crime prevention efforts.

Living Between the Lines uses real-life stories to create understanding as well as hope and to stimulate communities to make the changes necessary to bring about effective and meaningful crime prevention.

Why We Have Used Personal Stories

All of the stories provide glimpses into real lives. You, your colleagues and members of your community may not like all the people portrayed in these stories. You may not agree with all their ideas. You may feel angry at some of their opinions. We hope you will feel a range of emotions as you read the stories. We don't expect you to agree with everyone in these stories, any more than you can agree with everyone who is part of your community. We aren't trying to create agreement. We are trying to create the kind of understanding that will help us look at the problem in new ways – ways that can help us come to better solutions.

These are true stories of a range of different experiences with crime and literacy problems and with the social conditions which can contribute to crime and low literacy.

We have tried to show how these experiences point to different ideas about how to prevent crime. We hope that people who read these stories will see that, despite differences among all the people in the stories, there are many similar feelings, similar hopes and similar ideas for change. We hope that people who read these stories will connect some of the experiences and ideas with their own lives and opinions. We hope that people who read the stories will connect some of the ideas and situations with other people in their past and in their present communities...people they disagree with, people they blame for the problems in our society, as well as people they admire and agree with.

The overall goal of **Living Between the Lines** is to help people learn more about those who are different from themselves, including people who commit crimes and people who take responsibility for preventing crime. By learning more about the actual experiences of very different people, by looking at what we have in common as well as how we are different, we can begin to look at the very real problems we have in our society with new eyes that can also focus on what we can do about these problems. We can start moving away from who is right and who is wrong to what we can do about our shared problems. Instead of looking only at the source of the problem, we can start working on the roots of the solution.

How “Living Between the Lines” is different from other Crime Prevention Resources

Living Between the Lines is different because it doesn't pretend to tell you how to prevent crime in your community. Instead, it provides a tool to help you involve the people in your community in discovering and creating the best ways to stop crime where you live. It uses real-life experiences, information, action ideas and discussion questions to help people stop fighting over who has the best answer, and instead to find approaches that work for all of us.

If you turn to **Living Between the Lines**, you will see that it is made up of short stories or “letters” by anonymous people. Each story was actually created from one or several real-life stories. The words of different people were combined to provide a glimpse of different experiences, and different views of life.

The experiences chosen all relate in some way to crime prevention and to literacy. The stories give real-life examples of situations that can contribute to crime and to low literacy. They also provide insights and practical ideas to create the kind of healthy, caring, involved communities where crime does not thrive.

A few of the stories describe the lives of some people who have been in conflict with the law. They share their experiences and their frustrations. But they also share their

ideas around what could have made a difference in their lives. In others, the authors have had friends who have been in conflict with the law. In one, a mother worries that without help her small child will be in trouble when he gets older. In other stories, the people telling the story work to help people “at risk” of coming into conflict with the law, turn their lives around.

Crime Prevention: A Shared Responsibility

The message of shared responsibility and shared benefits for crime prevention and literacy promotion is central in this booklet. The people in the stories who harm other people or damage property generally take responsibility for their actions. The discussion questions and action ideas that follow the stories explore responsible ways of acting on the ideas presented. But the stories as well as the questions and facts that follow each story also point out the part played by conditions in society which take away the choices people have and encourage them to act in harmful ways.

The authors of **Living Between the Lines** are trying to use understanding to move past unproductive blaming to constructive responsibility. Yes, people who commit crimes must take responsibility for their actions. But all of us also have a responsibility for building the kind of communities and offering the kind of support people need so crimes and other kinds of harm will be reduced.

Building a strong base of shared responsibility is encouraged

by challenging people to think and talk about factors that determine:

- what actions are reported as crimes and what harmful actions are overlooked or dealt with as community or family problems instead of crimes;
- which young people are arrested and which young people the police take home to their parents;
- when communities take responsibility for dealing with their problems together and when they decide that the police and other authorities should take the sole responsibility for crime prevention.

The stories in this booklet emphasize personal experiences with crime, literacy problems, crime prevention and literacy training, but these stories are presented along with questions, facts and figures and action suggestions to help people see that individual experiences and lives take place in a broader context. A central message of **Living Between the Lines** is that if we want to change individual experiences and lives we must look not only at the individual, but also at the values, rules, organizations, ways of living and expectations of the communities and societies in which people live. In other words, crime prevention is not only about changing individuals who commit crimes, it requires social change to make our communities fairer and more caring.

How You Can Use “Living Between the Lines” in your Community

Living Between the Lines can be used in many different ways. Use your imagination. Here are a few ideas to get you started.

I. You can pass it out to people working in crime prevention for their own personal reading and reflection. By looking at the problems and solutions related to crime prevention through different eyes, we can all get fresh ideas and renewed energy. Please feel free to photocopy and share these materials.

II. Organize “kitchen table” or informal discussion groups with:

- colleagues in your organization;
- other people working to prevent crime in your community;
- service clubs;
- a parent-teacher association;
- an agency working with young people;
- a church group;
- your neighbours;
- family and friends,
- any other group you are associated with.

You can start discussion with this resource in many different ways. Here are a few suggestions.

i) You might choose one story, present the facts following the story and use the suggested discussion questions.

Perhaps you would want to add local information that relates to the story. You may want to include additional discussion questions that come to mind, or that relate to your own situation. If you want to read more about the “facts and figures” that follow each story, you can use the books and articles in the resource list at the end of the booklet.

ii) If your group is interested, you may schedule weekly discussion groups taking one story a week, and building links with stories you have already read as you go along. You will see there are discussion questions after each of the stories which relate to particular themes or experiences raised in that story. On pages 18 to 20 of this guide, you will find a list of questions you could use with all the stories. You may want to keep track of points raised in discussion around these more general questions on flip chart paper and bring them to your subsequent discussion groups. Let the group compare their ideas coming out of different stories. Do they have different reactions to the same questions, depending on the story? If they do, what does this tell them about how they see crime and crime prevention? How can these insights help guide you in your crime prevention work?

III. Use “Living Between the Lines” to help people know their community better:

You will notice that after each story in **Living Between the Lines**, there is a page or two of discussion questions, facts and figures and action ideas. At the end of the section on action ideas, there is a box with blank spaces for local numbers. In order to make the booklet relevant for people living in communities right across Canada, when we have encouraged people to get involved with a service or a program, we have provided a national contact only. It's up to you to make the action ideas relevant to your community.

Get a group of people involved to discover and insert in the booklet your local contacts for the organizations listed in the “Ideas for Action” sections. In the process, you will probably find other organizations, services and individuals that are valuable resources. Add them to your booklet as well.

If you get really enthusiastic, you may even want to make up your own community brochure of resources to make your community healthier, safer and more caring.

IV. Plan a workshop:

If you are already planning a conference or a symposium, you may want to use **Living Between the Lines** as the basis of a workshop discussion. You can use the same ideas presented under section II on **Informal Discussions** in this guide or those found under Section VIII. Or you may decide to present two or more of the stories by having each read aloud by different workshop participants, and then planning discussion questions around themes they have in common. For example, many of the stories include statements that stress the importance of feeling loved, of feeling important to someone, of feeling like you belong. Perhaps you could organize a discussion to explore how crime prevention programs can promote these experiences by choosing stories that emphasize this theme. Similarly you can choose themes like:

- the effectiveness of broad-based community involvement;
- the importance of multi-dimensional approaches that address economic and social inequities;
- how literacy awareness and training can enhance crime prevention efforts;
- how parenting support and education programs can help reduce crime;
- the benefits of using schools and libraries as community-based learning and meeting centres, etc.

V. Plan a Reader's Theatre Event

You might also consider using this booklet in a more dramatic way. Have all the stories read by different people. If you have an amateur theatre group in your community, or some undiscovered actors in your crime prevention group, you may want to approach them to be readers. You could heighten the dramatic effect by having the stage in darkness and having the readers come up one by one with a lit candle to sit on a stool in the centre of the stage while they read or "tell" their story. You might audiotape or videotape the performance to create your own local tool for future discussion groups. If you choose this dramatic approach, you may want to embellish the stories. Plan an audience participation time at the end.

VI. Use **Living Between the Lines** with other parts of the kit

Living Between the Lines is only one part of a larger kit called **Between the Lines**, to promote links between literacy awareness and training, and crime prevention. See the pamphlet "**Read me First**" for ways to use different resources in the kit together.

VII. Tell another person, organization or community about the links between literacy and crime prevention.

Let them know they can get their own copy of the kit by contacting NAACJ at the address on the inside cover of this guide. Spread the word that we can make a difference!

VIII. General Question Guide for Use in Discussion Groups and Workshops

This question guide is based on principles of Popular Education. Popular Education theory tells us that adults learn best through a process which includes:

- i) **discussion**,
- ii) **critical reflection** (which means thinking about and analyzing what you have learned in terms of the bigger picture which includes social, political and economic realities), and
- iii) **action**. Action can include finding out more about an issue, talking to different people, setting up or working in programs or cooperating for change.

This process encourages people to discover insights for themselves. The suggested steps and questions that follow will give you one way of stimulating a discovery process. Use your imagination to expand or change these ideas.

Discussion:

1. Read the story together. Sometimes by having different people read the same story out loud, people will hear a different “twist” on the same words. Just by reading the story in different ways, people can discover that different people see the same “facts” in different ways.
2. Encourage the group to identify the problems. Some questions you might use follow.

What really happened?

How does each person in the story feel?

What are facts and what are opinions in this story?

How do you feel about the other people and about what happened?

3. Make a chart listing some different opinions about an issue in the story.
4. List all the conclusions that can be drawn from the information in the story.

Reflection:

5. Ask the people in the group if they or someone they know has shared any of the experiences described in the story. If group members are not comfortable with each other, you may want to limit this question to “someone they know” and not encourage sharing of personal

experiences. However, you may be surprised to discover how ready people will be to share their own experiences.

6. If people do recount stories of others who have had similar experiences to the people in the stories, ask them to expand on how these situations and the feelings they created were different from or similar to the situations and feelings described in the story. Ask them why they think these differences and similarities occurred.

7. Then ask the participants to think of different endings to the story.

8. Challenge them to put these individual stories in a broader context. You might want to ask questions like those that follow.

- What would have helped things turn out differently?
- Are there social, political or economic factors that influenced the ending?
- Did anyone benefit from the problems described in this story?
- What could people in the community have done to reduce the problems described in this story?
- What does this story tell us about the roots of crime?
- What does this story tell us about the roots of the solution to the problems described in this story?

Action:

9. Then take the first step toward action by asking: “What more would you like to know in order to solve the problems described in this story?”

10. End with:

- How can the insights we have shared in this discussion help us make our crime prevention strategy more effective?
- What can we do to translate these insights into action?
- Can literacy awareness and training play a role in our plans?

Did you find *Living Between the Lines* and this Guide Useful?

If you decided to use *Living Between the Lines*, we would love to hear how you used it and whether or not you found it useful. If you decided not to use it, after looking at the booklet and reading this guide, we would also like to hear why you did not find it useful.

Can you drop us a short letter at the address provided below, fax us a note at 613-761-9767, or call NAACJ at 613-761-1032 to share your experiences and your suggestions for change? Thanks so much for being a part of our nation-wide dialogue on Literacy and Crime Prevention!

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