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Approaches to understanding crime prevention

Effective crime prevention is any action that causes a reduction in the level of criminal activity and the resulting harm, or in the number of criminal offenders and their victims:

- the *focus* is on the causes of crime rather than its effects;
- the *goal* is to significantly reduce or eliminate the factors that can lead to crime.

Crime prevention can be described in terms of three stages or levels—primary, secondary and tertiary prevention.

Primary crime prevention is directed at stopping the problem before it happens. This could involve:

- reducing opportunities for crime;
- strengthening community and social structures.

Primary prevention focuses on *social* and *situational* factors.

Social crime prevention addresses factors that influence an individual's likelihood of committing a crime, such as poverty and unemployment, poor health and low educational performance. Examples of prevention include school-based programs (for example, truancy initiatives) as well as community-based programs (for example, local resident action groups which promote shared community ownership and guardianship).

Situational prevention addresses the environment (for example, the design of buildings and landscapes, and the products we purchase).

Secondary crime prevention seeks to change people, typically those at high risk of embarking on a criminal career. The focus can be on:

- rapid and effective early interventions (for example, youth programs);
- high-risk neighbourhoods (for example, neighbourhood dispute centres).

Tertiary crime prevention focuses on the operation of the criminal justice system and deals with offending after it has happened. The primary focus is on intervention in the lives of known offenders in an attempt to prevent them re-offending. Examples include community youth conferencing schemes, incapacitation and individual deterrence through community-based sanctions, and treatment interventions.

There are many refinements and variations on this simple model for crime prevention. The three levels of prevention are sometimes divided into four sub-categories:

- situational;
- developmental and early intervention strategies;
- community development initiatives; and
- criminal justice.

Future issues of *AIC Crime Reduction Matters* will cover these topics.





Further reading:

Pease K. 2002, "Crime Reduction", in M. Maguire, R. Morgan & R. Reiner (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 947–79.

Cameron, M. & Laycock, G. 2002, "Crime Prevention in Australia", in A. Graycar & P. Grabosky (eds), *The Cambridge Handbook of Australian Criminology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 313–31.

