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Working with communities to prevent and reduce crime

Community crime prevention is a mixture of primary and secondary approaches. Typically a combination of developmental and situational crime prevention, it is intended to change the social conditions that are believed to sustain crime in communities. There are four closely related approaches to community crime prevention.

1. Overcoming community disorganisation: Under this approach, offending behaviour is seen as a result of the breakdown in community social order or organisations (usually maintained by institutions such as the family, church and school). Typically three structural factors are identified as giving rise to this disorganisation: low socioeconomic status, multiple ethnic groups and high rates of residential mobility.

Interventions take the form of the physical rehabilitation of disadvantaged areas through measures such as improving housing stock and so on, although more recently the emphasis has been on the empowerment or mobilisation of community residents to take preventive action to reduce crime in their neighbourhoods through the formation of local community action groups, for example.

2. Responding to community disorder: This approach is an extension of the first approach and is rooted in the “broken windows” argument—that is, physical decay attracts undesirables who commit crime. Disorder is considered to be largely an urban problem marked by social and physical dysfunction.

Interventions focus on efforts to tackle the disorderly behaviour/conditions before they take root in the community and lead to more serious offending and social decline. Preventive action often involves a partnership between police and local community residents.

3. Community empowerment enables residents to take part in decision-making processes and management of activities that impact, either directly or indirectly, those social conditions believed to sustain crime in residential settings.

Programs to empower communities can take many different forms, including services such as after-school recreation programs.

4. Community regeneration includes crime prevention as part of a concept of overall community “wellness”, particularly economic wellbeing. It involves warding off the onset of factors conducive to delinquency and crime, such as middle-class flight, economic disinvestment and increases in the number of rental properties.

A key goal of community regeneration programs is the transfer of a combination of economic and political resources to local institutions and residents as a way of contributing to the empowerment of communities, helping to integrate marginalised youth, and enabling the community to tackle key community-level risk factors of delinquency.

Further reading:

Welsh, B. & Hoshi, A. 2002, “Communities and crime prevention”, in L. Sherman, D. Farrington, B. Welsh & D. Layton Mackenzie (eds), *Evidence-Based Crime Prevention*, Routledge, London.

