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The public health approach to crime prevention

Programs to prevent and reduce violence often adopt a public health approach to crime prevention. Such an approach does not replace criminal justice or other crime prevention approaches. Rather, it complements them by bringing a different view and other important players, tools and resources to the task of preventing and reducing crime.

Public health focuses on the health of communities and populations as a whole. Wherever possible, interventions focus on populations at greatest risk of disease or injury. The public health approach aims to preserve, promote and improve health. It places an emphasis on preventing disease or injury from occurring or reoccurring, rather than treating the consequences.

Traditionally there are four key steps in designing a public health response to any threat to wellbeing. These are:

- defining and monitoring the extent of the problem;
- identifying the causes of the problem;
- formulating and testing ways of dealing with the problem; and
- applying widely the measures that are found to work.

Public health interventions are traditionally described in terms of three levels of prevention: primary, secondary and tertiary. When applied to the prevention of violence, these levels of intervention can take the following forms:

- **Universal interventions**—approaches aimed at large groups or the general population, without regard to individual risk. Examples might include violence prevention curricula delivered to all pupils in a school, or community-wide media campaigns.
- **Selected interventions**—approaches aimed at those considered to be at a heightened risk of perpetrating violence (having one or more risk factors for violence). An example of such an intervention is parenting skills training provided to low-income single parents.
- **Indicated interventions**—approaches aimed at those who have already demonstrated violent behaviour, such as perpetrators of domestic violence.

Research shows that emphasis should be given to primary prevention measures and that many different sectors and agencies should collaborate on prevention activities.

Further reading:

World Health Organisation 2002, *World Report on Violence and Health: Summary*, WHO, Geneva.

Moore, M. 1995, "Public health and criminal justice approaches to prevention", in M. Tonry & D. Farrington (eds), *Building a Safer Society. Strategic Approaches to Crime Prevention*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 237–62.

