# Public Opinion and Crime Prevention: A Review of International Findings[1]

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### RÉSUMÉ

L'opinion publique exerce une influence significative sur le fonctionnement du système de justice pénale. Cet article résume les recherches ayant porté sur les connaissances et les attitudes des Canadiens et des Canadiennes à l'égard de la prévention de la criminalité de 1985 à aujourd'hui. Il vise aussi à replacer certaines de ces informations dans le contexte international. Les résultats démontrent que les Canadiens et les Canadiennes ont exprimé leur soutien pour la prévention de la criminalité de manière soutenue. Il est toutefois moins clair que ce soutien mène conséquemment à un engagement actif de la part du public en terme de participation et d'appui politique. Des pistes pour de prochaines recherches et des actions politiques dans ce domaine sont ainsi proposées.

### ABSTRACT

The views of the public exercise a significant influence on the functioning of the criminal justice system. This article summarizes research on the

knowledge and attitudes of the Canadian public on the topic of crime prevention between 1985 and the present. It also attempts to place some of this information in an international context. The review indicates that the Canadian public has consistently expressed support for crime prevention, but that it is less clear that this support has led to an active engagement of the public in terms of political support and participation. The article concludes by proposing steps for further research and policy action in this area.

## Introduction

It is a truism that the views of the public are critical to the effective functioning of the criminal justice system. This in part explains the voluminous literature on public opinion that has accumulated over the past 30 years in Canada and elsewhere. Much of this research has focused on public reaction to the criminal justice system in general, as well as its specific components (police; courts; corrections). This research has been reviewed in a number of publications over this period (see Roberts 1992; Roberts and Stalans 1997; Flanagan and Longmire 1996; Cullen, Fisher and Applegate 2000; Roberts and Hough 2002 and 2005). Researchers and pollsters in Canada and many other countries have also explored public knowledge of, and attitudes towards crime prevention. However, the only review article exploring this issue was published in the *Canadian Journal of Criminology* over 15 years ago (Roberts and Grossman 1990). Since then the field of crime prevention has evolved considerably, and a significant number of additional polls have been conducted. This article summarizes findings relating to the knowledge and attitudes of Canadians about crime prevention. However, since the issues are international in scope and polls have been conducted in many countries, wherever possible and appropriate we place the Canadian findings in an international context.

The review includes all research addressing the issue and published in French or English over the period 1985 to 2005. Several strategies were adopted to assemble the database of surveys. First, a systematic search of all relevant electronic databases was conducted for the researchers by the library at the Centre of Criminology, University of Toronto. Second, a search was conducted of library holdings at the University of Toronto and the Ministry of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness. Third, since previous research on public confidence and justice (see Hough and Roberts 2004) has revealed that some polls are never published in a scholarly journal, key informants were contacted in a number of jurisdictions including England and Wales, France and the United States and were asked to identify any relevant unpublished research.

Fourth, organizations active in the area were also contacted. Finally, we also undertook a comprehensive web-based search on the topic. Using this multi-stage approach we hope to have captured all principal research projects that have explored public opinion and crime prevention. Although the emphasis is upon representative surveys with known confidence limits, we also reviewed the limited number of qualitative studies such as Focus Groups and "Deliberative Polls". The focus is on national trends with respect to crime prevention and related issues. Readers interested in regional breakdowns of responses or demographic variations are advised to consult the original data releases.

The article addresses a number of important and related issues:

- levels of public support for crime prevention in general;
- levels of public support for different forms of crime prevention;
- comparisons between public support for crime prevention and punishment;
- comparisons between public attitudes in Canada and other jurisdictions;
- trends in support for crime prevention over time;
- knowledge of crime prevention programs in Canada; and
- ways to promote public support for crime prevention.

We pay particular attention to findings that have been replicated over time, and across different jurisdictions; such findings clearly reflect cross-cultural consistency. At the conclusion we identify areas and issues in the field of crime prevention that require further public opinion research, and make some suggestions for responding to public opinion.

## Public opinion and crime prevention

*"Effective crime prevention programs require widespread community support, and an informed public whose perceptions about crime prevention are based on the best available evidence."* (Solicitor General Canada 1984: 1)

As the quote above – taken from a report written over a generation ago – makes clear, the effectiveness of crime prevention programs depends upon the support of the general public. However, understanding public attitudes to crime prevention requires more than a straightforward review of polls that have asked respondents their reaction to the topic in general or to specific crime prevention initiatives. In this introduction we note two background considerations. First, some criminal justice surveys ask the public to choose between two alternative (and potentially conflicting) approaches to crime:

punishment and prevention. As we shall see, respondents in a number of countries often prefer the latter to the former, in part because people appear to understand the limited impact that punishment policies can have upon the crime rate. However, from the perspective of the public, the dichotomy is in reality a false one. When questions are appropriately constructed, people see an important role for both prevention and punishment. Thus, the public supports a wide range of programs and policies falling within the category of prevention, but also wants to see serious offenders punished for their offending.

Second, it is important to consider the role that the news media play in forming public attitudes to crime prevention. Little is known about media treatment of the issue of crime prevention. One reason for this is that crime prevention policies and programs do not have the high visibility of punitive responses to crime. In general, punitive crime policies attract far more attention from the media. For example, "Three strikes" mandatory sentencing laws have an eye-catching appeal, based in large measure on their simplicity. This helps explain, in part, the widespread popularity and proliferation of such sentences across western nations (see Roberts, Stalans, Indermaur and Hough 2003).

In contrast, prevention programs are far less visible, and do not generate the kind of material considered newsworthy by the media. As well, news stories about crime and punishment tend to focus on high profile cases and this usually means the most serious crimes of violence. Crime prevention has less relevance to such crimes once the accused has begun his journey through the criminal process. Accordingly, crime prevention accounts for far fewer media stories. Since the media constitute the primary source of information for the public, it would be unreasonable to expect people to be as familiar with prevention initiatives as punishment policies. Despite this lack of profile, as will be seen in the course of this report, the public around the world remains supportive of crime prevention strategies.

At this point we turn to review the findings from empirical studies.

## Findings

### *Responsibility for preventing crime seen as lying outside the criminal justice system*

One of most frequently posed questions in the area asks respondents to identify the group, agency or part of society that is most responsible for preventing crime. The findings emerging from the polls are remarkably consistent. The public in

Canada (and other countries) sees the *primary* responsibility for preventing crime to lie outside the criminal justice system. A good illustration comes from a poll conducted by Environics in 1997. Canadians were asked to identify the primary cause of crime. "Poor parenting" headed the list – identified by approximately two thirds of respondents. In fact, the public has always seen parents as the main source of crime prevention. As long ago as 1947, when Americans were asked to identify the causes of crime, "lack of parental control and supervision" headed the list (supported by almost half the sample (47%); see Erskine 1974). More recently, when asked to identify the most effective steps to preventing crime, most Americans (66% of the survey sample) identified teaching young people responsibility and having after school programs to keep children off the streets (Peter D. Hart Research Associates 2002).

This finding is echoed in polls conducted in other countries. For example, a survey conducted across 15 European countries in 2003 found that four out of five respondents agreed with the statement that: "young people would commit less crime if they were taught better discipline by their parents" (European Opinion Research Group 2003). In Britain, when respondents were asked to identify the most effective crime prevention measures, 60% of the sample cited "better parenting" (Esmee Fairburn Foundation 2004). A poll conducted in Canada by Ekos Research Associates in 1999 generated a similar result. Respondents were asked to identify the "most significant factor producing crime in Canada". While "a lenient criminal justice system" was identified by approximately one third of respondents, two thirds of the respondents were considering measures outside the criminal justice system. Thus 30% cited poverty, 21% difficult family situations, and 11% inadequate social programs or services (Ekos Research Associates 1999). However, it is worth noting that there appears to be variation across Canada with respect to this issue. A poll conducted in Alberta by Angus Reid West in 1999 found greater support for tougher sentencing than crime prevention.

The durability of public support for non-punitive responses to crime[2] can be demonstrated by reviewing responses to a poll conducted by the Canadian Sentencing Commission fully 20 years ago. Respondents were asked to identify "the most effective response to crime" and were given a list of possible options, some of which were punitive (e.g., make sentences harsher), some of which were more preventive in a general sense (e.g., reduce the level of

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2 Except, that is, for serious crimes of violence, and especially offences of sexual aggression; these forms of offending have always elicited a more punitive reaction from members of the public, both here in Canada and elsewhere (see Roberts and Stalans 1997, for a review).

unemployment). Respondents were asked to choose one of the options. The public clearly regarded the non-punitive options as being more effective: slightly over half the sample chose reducing the level of unemployment or increasing the number of social programs (Roberts 1988).[3]

### Choosing between prevention and punishment

**Given a choice between punishment and prevention, Canadians have always supported prevention**

A number of polls have asked respondents to make a choice between two responses to crime: punishment or prevention. As noted in the introduction, this is a rather false dichotomy, as the justice system attempts to prevent crime, and also hold offenders accountable through the imposition of legal punishments. Nevertheless, responses to questions requiring respondents to make this choice can provide important insight into public reaction to crime prevention. In 2003, Canadians were asked to identify "the main goal of the criminal justice system". Their responses indicate that there was more support for prevention (41%) than for punishment (23%), deterrence (19%) or rehabilitation (16%) (Ekos Research Associates 2004a). This pattern of findings is consistent with responses when the question was asked in 2000: 44% of the sample supported prevention, 19% favored punishment (Ekos Research Associates 2000).

**Crime prevention is seen as being more cost effective than law enforcement**

The same survey provides further insight into public support for crime prevention. Respondents were asked to state whether crime prevention or law enforcement represented the more cost effective way to reduce the economic and social costs of crime: over two-thirds of the sample favoured crime prevention, less than one third selected law enforcement as the most cost effective response to crime (Ekos Research Associates 2004a). In a similar fashion, when respondents to the same survey were asked to rate the effectiveness of crime prevention programs, over half the sample rated these programs as being very effective[4] (Ekos Research Associates 2004a).

In fact, Canadians have always preferred to spend money on addressing social problems rather than on more policing. A typical question is the one posed in the Legal Research Institute Survey conducted over a quarter of a century ago (in 1980; see Moore 1980). Respondents were asked: *"Do you think more money should be spent on strengthening police forces to crack down on crime, or should more money be spent on trying to improve the economic and social conditions underlying social problems?"* Less than one quarter favoured strengthening police forces; over half the sample favoured what may be termed the "crime prevention through social development" response to crime (21% endorsed both options; Moore 1980). This strong public support has emerged from all polls conducted in Canada since 1980.

Clear evidence of Canadians' preferences for spending money on prevention rather than punishment emerges from more recent research reported by Doob, Sprott, Marinos and Varma (1998). Respondents were asked whether the government should "build more prisons or invest in crime prevention". Half the sample was asked about adult offenders, the other about juveniles, but the pattern of responses was the same: almost nine respondents out of ten (89% of the juvenile group, 86% of those asked about adults) preferred the government to spend money on crime prevention rather than on prison construction (Doob et al. 1998).

Another way of approaching the question is to ask respondents to identify the area in which "more emphasis is needed", and to give them the choice between crime prevention and law enforcement. Four polls, conducted between 1994 and 1998, found significantly more support for the former. The results can be seen in Table 1. Crime prevention consistently "out-performs" law enforcement in each poll. Averaged over the polls, 66% of respondents favoured prevention and 29% law enforcement (percentages exclude 'don't know' responses; Environics Research Group 1997).

*Table 1: Percentage of respondents supporting prevention vs. enforcement*

|                     | 1994 | 1997 | 1997[5] | 1998 |
|---------------------|------|------|---------|------|
| **Crime Prevention** | 73%  | 61%  | 73%     | 57%  |
| **Law Enforcement**  | 22%  | 35%  | 22%     | 37%  |

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3 The only time that the public assign a lower priority to crime prevention is when they are asked to choose between prevention and an issue that creates great outrage, or fear. Thus in 1998 Environics found significantly less public support for crime prevention than for "increasing sentences for violent youth" (Environics 1998). This result must be seen in the context of the widespread public concern at the time about violent crimes committed by young offenders.
4 Respondents were given a seven-point scale; 51% chose the two highest response options.

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5 In the second poll conducted in 1997, the choice was slightly different. Respondents were asked to choose between 'crime prevention measures' or 'police and correctional services' (see Environics Research Group 1997).

The latest exploration of public attitudes towards crime prevention (conducted in 2004) generated a similar pattern of results. Respondents were sensitized to the cost implications of crime prevention programs and were then asked about the degree of emphasis that governments should place on crime prevention initiatives. The specific question was the following: *"Bearing in mind that most crime prevention programs are funded by tax dollars, what emphasis should governments place on crime prevention?"*. Over half the sample held the view that more emphasis should be placed on crime prevention; only 6% believed that less emphasis would be appropriate (Ekos Research Associates 2004a).

The second cost related question was the following: *"Currently the Federal Government spends about $2 per Canadian per year on crime prevention (or $64 million per year). Do you think the government should invest more, less, or about the same?"*. In response, approximately two-thirds favoured spending more, only 4% favoured spending less (31% responded "about the same" and 1% responded "don't know"); (Ekos Research Associates 2004a). Taken together these findings demonstrate that public support for crime prevention is not undermined by considerations of costs.

Finally, in 1997, respondents were asked the following general question with respect to crime prevention: *"The National Crime Prevention Council believes that on the basis of experience and research, that the best way to prevent crime is to focus on children and families and to provide them with educational and social programs which help break the link between negative childhood experiences and criminal behaviour. Do you strongly approve, somewhat approve, somewhat disapprove or strongly disapprove of this focus?"*. The inclusion of the phrase "on the basis of experience and research" makes this a somewhat leading question; nevertheless, it is worth noting that approval levels were high. Thus 94% approved, 61% of whom strongly approved. Only 4% disapproved of the approach advocated by NCPC (Environics Research Group 1997).

### Strong support for prevention rather than punishment in other jurisdictions

The positive public response to crime prevention is not restricted to Canadians. Americans also share this preference for prevention over punishment for most forms of offending. In fact the views of the public in the two countries are remarkably similar. When provided with same prevention/ punishment choice, 39% of Americans chose prevention, and

21% punishment (Peter D. Hart Research Associates 2002). A number of polls over the past decade have posed the following question to respondents: *"Which of the following approaches to lowering the crime rate comes closer to your own view – do you believe that more money and effort should go to attacking the social and economic problems lead to crime through better education and job training or more money and effort should go to deterring crime by improving law enforcement with more prisons, police and judges?"*. Although somewhat different from the wording used in Canada, this question still requires a choice between a preventive approach and a punitive response that relies on deterrence. As can be seen in Table 2, Americans also see more promise in prevention rather than punishment, and this has been true throughout the 1990s.

*Table 2: Attitudes toward approaches to lower the crime rate (US)*

|      | Attack social problems | More law Enforcement |
|------|------------------------|----------------------|
| 1989 | 61%                    | 32%                  |
| 1990 | 57%                    | 36%                  |
| 1992 | 67%                    | 25%                  |
| 1994 | 57%                    | 39%                  |
| 2000 | 68%                    | 27%                  |

*Source: Adapted from Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 2004.*

### Movement away from punishment to prevention

Several researchers (e.g., Peter D. Hart Research Associates 2002; Roberts and Hough 2002) have documented a public movement away from deterrence based or punitive crime policies towards preventive approaches. One manifestation of this trend is the declining public support for punitive responses (such as mandatory sentencing) and the rise in support for preventive options. This is true in a number of jurisdictions, including the United States. In 1994, the American public was divided in its response to the prevention/ deterrence dichotomy; approximately equal proportions of respondents supported these two options. However, recent research demonstrates that the public in the US favours dealing with the roots of crime (rather than stricter sentencing) by a margin of two to one (65% compared to 32%; see Peter D. Hart Research Associates 2002).

### Public awareness of crime prevention programs

As noted in the introduction, crime prevention initiatives and programs do not attract the same degree of media attention as more punitive responses to crime such as mandatory sentences of imprisonment. For this reason, one impediment to the successful implementation of crime prevention initiatives has been limited public awareness. This problem was noted in the earlier review of public opinion findings (see Roberts and Grossman 1989).

Matters appear to have deteriorated. This point can be made by examining data from 20 years ago. Canadians were asked to state whether they had heard of a series of crime prevention programs as well as whether they participated in these programs. Participation rates were low: 8% in Operation identification and less than 3% for other programs. However, awareness of crime prevention programs was widespread. For example, 48% of the sample reported being aware of the Block Parents program, 41% of Operation Identification, 38% of Citizen Patrols and 28% of Neighborhood Watch (Brillon, Louis-Guerin and Lamarche 1984).

A similar pattern emerges from the responses of members of the public in seven cities (the Canadian Urban Victimization Survey (CUVS) conducted in the early 1980s). Awareness was high for the three programs included in the survey. As with previous research, the rate of people participating was lower. The CUVS only provides participation statistics for one program. Although 42% of respondents were aware of Operation Identification, only 15% reported participating (Solicitor General Canada 1984). Data from a survey conducted in 1990 by Angus Reid again indicate that awareness levels were high for all the programs included in the poll. Almost nine respondents out of ten were aware of Block Parents, Crime Stoppers and Neighbourhood Watch. These data are summarized in Table 3.

*Table 3: Awareness and participation in prevention programs, 1984 and 1990*

| Program | % Aware 1984 (CUVS) | % Aware 1990 | % Participating 1990 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Block Parents | 73% | 89% | 14% |
| Crime Stoppers | No data | 86% | 12% |
| Neighborhood Watch | 42% | 88% | 28% |
| Operation identification | 51% | 62% | 20% |

*Sources: 1984 data from Solicitor General Canada; 1990 data from Angus Reid.*

### Recent trends in public awareness of crime prevention

Public awareness of crime prevention programs and strategies has been measured in a number of ways. If the public is asked whether they are aware of crime prevention strategies – a general question – the results suggest high levels of awareness. For example, a survey conducted for the Alberta Community Crime Prevention Association asked respondents to agree or disagree with the following statement: *"I am aware of crime prevention strategies and apply them in my home"*. Fewer than 10% disagreed; sixty percent of the sample was in agreement (Anderson-Draper Consulting 2004). A similar trend emerged when respondents were asked to respond to the same question, but applied this time to the workplace (Anderson-Draper Consulting 2004). However, general questions of this nature may reveal more about attitudes than actual awareness, as respondents were not asked to identify the specific strategies of which they were aware, and which they applied.

Two systematic nationwide surveys, conducted in 2000 and 2003, shed light on the issue of public awareness today (see Ekos Research Associates 2001 and 2004b). Respondents were asked first whether they were aware of any crime prevention programs in their neighbourhood. In response to this general awareness question, less than half the sample (43%) responded affirmatively.[6] These respondents were then asked to name one of these programs. Table 4 summarizes results from 2000 and 2003.

*Table 4: Awareness of crime prevention programs, 2000 and 2003*

| Program | % Aware 2000 | % Aware 2003 |
|---|---|---|
| Neighborhood Watch | 21% | 15% |
| Block Parents | 5% | 13% |
| Crime Stoppers | 4% | 4% |
| Community Policing | 4% | 3% |
| Youth Centres | 2% | 2% |

*Source: Ekos Research 2001 and 2004b.*

As can be seen, there has been a decrease over the three-year period in the proportion stating that they are aware of Neighbourhood Watch, but an

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6 Seven percent of the sample responded affirmatively when asked whether they could identify a crime prevention program but were unable to do so. It seems more reasonable to consider these respondents along with those who responded negatively to the question.

increase in awareness of the Block Parents program. However, overall levels of awareness are still fairly low, and much lower than the levels recorded in the 1980s and 1990s. These national statistics mask a considerable degree of variation. For example, of the people who stated that they were able to name a crime prevention program in Quebec, only 6% cited Neighbourhood Watch. In contrast, 20% of respondents in British Columbia were aware of this program.

Although the awareness question was somewhat different, similar trends emerge from the survey conducted in Alberta by the Alberta Community Crime Prevention Association. Respondents were asked to identify the "top three crime prevention organizations actively involved in the prevention of crime within your community?". The responses provide important insight into public awareness of the parties actively engaged in crime prevention. Police services (including the RCMP and municipal services) accounted for the highest percentage of respondents (26%). The RCMP was the agency that attracted the single highest percentage (19%).

The only other alternatives that received the support of more than 10% of the sample were: Rural Crime Watch (13%), and Citizens on Patrol (12%). It is somewhat surprising that Block/Neighbourhood Watch were identified as being active in crime prevention by only 8%, while Block Parents were cited by an even smaller proportion (6%; see Anderson-Draper Consulting 2004). This may reflect relatively high levels of participation among rural residents for whom more urban types of programs may be less relevant.

### Rates of awareness of crime prevention programs higher in US

It would appear that rates of awareness of crime prevention are higher in the US. A survey conducted in 1999 found that over half (53%) of respondents were able to name a crime prevention program, and of these almost half (45%) identified Neighbourhood Watch.[7] This is significantly higher than the 15% of Canadians who reported knowing about this program in 2003 (see above). Similarly, almost one respondent in five (17%) was aware of Crime Stoppers; this compares to less than 5% of Canadians who were aware of the program.

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[7] Seven percent of the sample responded affirmatively when asked whether they could identify a crime prevention program but were unable to do so. It seems more reasonable to consider these respondents along with those who responded negatively to the question.

### Public sees an active role for federal government in many areas of crime prevention

One final point is worth making regarding the issue of public awareness. Canadians clearly see a leadership role for the federal government. The 2004 Ekos survey asked respondents to rate the appropriateness of a number of roles for the federal government. The data indicate that significant majorities of respondents see a number of roles as being highly appropriate for the federal government to play. More specifically, support was expressed for the following federal roles (Ekos Research Associates 2004b – data indicate percentages seeing the role as highly appropriate):

- Funding and supporting crime prevention programs in communities (78%);
- Raising public awareness of crime prevention across Canada (77%);
- Evaluating the effectiveness of crime prevention programs (66%); and
- Conducting research to further knowledge on crime prevention (65%).

### Intention to participate

An interesting finding emerges when people are asked about their level of interest in participating in crime prevention programs. In 2003, respondents were asked whether they were not very interested, somewhat interested or very interested in participating in crime prevention programs in their community. Despite the low levels of awareness, reported interest was high: nationally almost half the sample stated that they were very interested in participating in crime prevention programs. A further 30% were somewhat interested and less than one quarter (24%) responded that they were not very interested (Ekos Research Associates 2004a). Of course, not all respondents who state that they are very interested in participating are actually going to participate. Nevertheless, we see this pattern of findings as very encouraging for those crime prevention initiatives that rely upon the active participation of the community. This outcome establishes the clear bedrock of support on which crime prevention initiatives may draw.

### Rates of participation in other jurisdictions

It is important to point out that low rates of public awareness or participation are not restricted to Canada. Research in the US, the United Kingdom and other countries has consistently found the same reluctance to participate in community based programs (see Knowles 1979; Hough and Mayhew 1985 and discussion in Roberts 1992). A 2001 survey conducted in the US

examined the extent to which Americans participate in crime prevention activities. Overall, less than one resident in five reported participating in a crime prevention program. This level of participation marked a decline from the 1999 administration of the survey when almost one quarter of respondents reported participating (The Wirthlin Report 2001).

Community or Neighbourhood Watch generated the highest rate of participation: 40% of respondents reported participating; crime prevention programs based in schools attracted the lowest participation rates (9%; The Wirthlin Report 2001). A similar pattern emerges from polls conducted in South Africa. Although Neighbourhood Watch and similar programs exist in that country, only 15% of respondents to a survey knew of any crime prevention initiative operating in their area (Masuku and Maepa 2004). With respect to the United Kingdom, data from the 2000 British Crime Survey (BCS) reveal a participation rate of over one quarter of all households, an increase of several percentage points since 1992 (Sims 2001).

## The costs of crime prevention

### Canadians support devoting public funds to crime prevention initiatives

Members of the public have become increasingly concerned about getting value for money for their tax dollars. However, one of the most robust findings in the research literature is the strength of public support for spending money on crime prevention initiatives. This has been demonstrated in a number of ways. Let us begin by noting important findings from over a generation ago. In 1980 the Legal Research Institute Survey asked Canadians how much effort the government should put into a number of activities. Respondents were additionally told that: *"Remember that putting more effort into one of these areas would require a shift of money from other areas or an increase in taxes"*. Thus the choices that respondents were being asked to make had cost implications.

In 1980, crime prevention emerged as the second most important priority, ahead even of addressing the unemployment problem. It was perceived to be a much higher priority than prison reform (fourth), law reform (sixth) or law enforcement (eighth), the other criminal justice activities in the list. This pattern of findings demonstrates the long-standing support for crime prevention in this country. One other feature of these trends is noteworthy. Interestingly, addressing health and medical care was seen as a low priority back in the

halcyon days of the early 1980s. Today, this item displaces all others on the list. However, as will be seen in the following table, crime prevention continues to attract strong support across the country, notwithstanding the changes in other priorities. Thus in 2003, when Ekos Research Associates asked a sample of the public to assign a priority to a number of important social issues, crime prevention held its own, remaining as the number two priority, although on this occasion health care has replaced controlling inflation as the number one priority (see Table 5).

*Table 5: Ranking of public priorities, 2003 and 1980*

| Priority | 2003 | 1980 |
|---|---|---|
| **Health care** | 1 | 10 |
| ***Crime prevention*** | 2 | 2 |
| **Environment** | 3 | — |
| **Poverty** | 4 | 7 |
| **National debt** | 5 | 1 |
| **Unemployment** | 6 | 3 |
| **Tax cuts** | 7 | — |
| **National unity** | 8 | — |
| **Aboriginal issues** | 9 | — |

*Source of 2003 data: Ekos Research Associates 2004b; Source of 1980 data: Martin 1982*

In 1984, a sample of Canadians was asked whether they would be in favour of increasing taxes for a number of initiatives. There was a high level of support for developing crime prevention programs (73%), while only 18% supported building more prisons (Brillon, Louis-Guerin and Lamarche 1984).

Another way of exploring public attitudes to crime prevention is to ask respondents to allocate resources. This approach was adopted in two surveys conducted by Ekos Research Associates in 2000 and 2003. Since the pattern of results was similar over the two administrations, we summarize only the findings from the most recent poll. Table 6 reveals that preventive measures generally attracted more support than punitive crime prevention strategies such as increasing the number of prisons to permit more and longer sentences of custody. Even an option such as increasing the number of police officers (that typically attracts a high degree of public support) received far less support from respondents (see Table 6).

*Table 6: Public support for crime reduction strategies*

| Strategy | % Support |
|---|---|
| Expand youth literacy and training programs | 65% |
| Increase early childhood intervention programs | 58% |
| Expand parenting programs | 58% |
| Expand youth recreational activities | 57% |
| Develop public education programs | 55% |
| Increase community policing | 46% |
| Develop substance abuse programs | 45% |
| Expand community-based surveillance programs | 43% |
| Hire more police officers | 32% |
| Expand prisons to allow for longer sentences | 18% |

*Source: Ekos Research Associates 2004a.*

The degree of public support for preventive rather than punitive responses to crime emerges from many polls in Canada and elsewhere. For example, a recent poll in the US asked the following question: *"Which of the following options would you most want your tax dollars spent on: building more prisons so that more criminals can be locked up for longer periods of time, or programs that try to prevent crime through early intervention in the lives of youth?"*. In response, 81% of the sample chose the crime prevention option, 11% prisons (Sims and Johnston 2004). Finally, it is worth noting that the public sees a particular benefit to crime prevention initiatives when they are targeted at specific, vulnerable populations. Ekos Research Associates (1998) asked respondents whether the government should invest more in crime prevention programs to help prevent violence against women, and Aboriginal communities. Very high proportions of the public responded affirmatively (89% and 75% respectively).

### Support for different forms of crime prevention

What kinds of approaches to crime prevention find most favour with the Canadian public? The question has not been systematically explored; however, a survey conducted by Angus Reid in 1997 described two approaches (crime prevention through social development; and crime prevention through community crime prevention programs). Respondents were then asked whether these forms of crime prevention should be assigned a higher, lower

or the same level of priority. First though it is important to note that most Canadians favoured assigning a higher priority to both approaches; only 16% favoured assigning the same or a lower priority. Crime Prevention through social development attracted more support: 51% of the sample favoured assigning a much higher priority to this approach, compared to 36% who favored community crime prevention programs (Angus Reid Group, Inc. 1997). When asked to identify the best example of crime prevention, members of the public were clearly influenced by their intuitions that crime often originates in poor parenting, or misspent childhoods. Thus 60% identified programs that support parents, and programs that provide recreational activities for children as the best example of crime prevention that they could think of (Ekos Research Associates 1999).

### Public is sensitive to research evidence

In most western nations considerable emphasis is placed on evidence-based crime policies. It is clear that the public is also interested in research evidence. The 2003 Ekos Research poll found that fully four out of five respondents agreed with the statement that *"If I saw research evidence that crime prevention works, I would be a lot more likely to support public funding for it."* (Ekos Research 2004a). This finding underlines the importance of conducting empirical research on crime prevention and also of conveying the results of this research to the public at large. Promoting an evidence-based approach to crime therefore should include a public outreach component. Proponents of crime prevention would be well advised to devote more attention and resources to this area.

### Crime prevention is not perceived as a soft response to crime

Punitive responses to offending – including mandatory sentencing and flat time (no parole) sentences of imprisonment – have the advantage of appearing to represent a rigorous response to crime. Politicians often use this perception to promote these policies. Indeed, one explanation for the slow onset of restorative justice programs and policies in some jurisdictions has been that they have been perceived by the public to be a 'soft' response to crime (see Roberts and Stalans 2004). When Canadians were asked about this issue, they were significantly more likely to disagree than agree with the statement that: "if Canada puts more emphasis on crime prevention, we will get soft on crime"[8] (Ekos Research Associates 2004a). This is an important finding

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[8] Thus 50% disagreed with the statement, 29% agreed, and 19% neither agreed nor disagreed.

and suggests that policy makers should promote crime prevention initiatives without fear of a public backlash that these programs represent a less rigorous approach to offending.

### European attitudes to crime prevention

The strong support for crime prevention in Canada is also found in other jurisdictions. Table 7 summarizes public reaction to a number of crime prevention issues, as measured by a poll conducted across 15 European jurisdictions in 2002 (European Opinion Research Group 2003). Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with a number of statements pertaining to crime prevention. As can be seen there was strong public support for crime prevention as well as strong public faith in the efficacy of specific prevention programs.

*Table 7: European Union attitudes to crime prevention (all countries combined)*

| | % Agree | % Disagree |
|---|---|---|
| Measures such as burglar alarms and locks can reduce crime | 75% | 19% |
| Neighbourhood Watch can reduce crime | 65% | 27% |
| Police should share responsibility for crime prevention with local and national government | 76% | 12% |
| Police should share responsibility for crime prevention with private individuals | 60% | 28% |
| There should be more crime prevention programs targeted at young people | 85% | 8% |

*Source: Adapted from European Opinion Research Group 2003. Table does not include "don't know" responses.*

## Discussion

This review makes it clear that there is considerable public support for crime prevention. This has been true for many years in Canada and elsewhere. Nevertheless, there are a number of implications of these findings that merit further consideration. For the purposes of further discussion we conclude by identifying a number of knowledge gaps, as well as steps that should now be taken.

### Expand the crime prevention component of the GSS

As indicated throughout this article, there is considerable support among Canadians for crime prevention in general, as well as specific programs.

However, it also appears as if this support may be eroding, so one should be cautious about drawing too much comfort from the indications of general support. For one thing, the record of findings is somewhat sporadic, so it is difficult to trace the linear development of the knowledge and attitudes of Canadians in this area. In this article we have drawn on surveys conducted in Canada over the past 25 years. However, no continuous record is available to examine public attitudes and behaviours on a regular basis. We suggest that consideration be given to placing a set of questions relating to crime prevention attitudes (and behaviors) on each administration of the General Social Survey (GSS). Such a step would be most beneficial in determining the extent to which attitudes towards, and participation in, crime prevention programs are evolving.

### Create a searchable public opinion database

It is equally important to consolidate the public opinion research record that is now available in Canada. We propose the creation of a searchable public opinion database that would permit policy makers, researchers and other interested parties to access previous research with a view to developing a better understanding of current trends. Whether levels of support for crime prevention are high or low is to some degree a judgment that can only be made by considering current findings in a historical context.

### Consolidate citizen engagement

Crime prevention efforts are inextricably linked to public confidence in criminal justice. In light of the strong support for crime prevention initiatives in Canada, there is reason to believe that confidence in the criminal justice system will be bolstered by a systematic effort by the government and the criminal justice system to engage in such activities. To date the two fields (public attitudes to crime prevention; public confidence in criminal justice) have developed separately. Important conceptual links exist between the two and these relationships need to be recognized.

### Promote existing crime prevention programs

The information on knowledge and attitudes that is available is also at a very general level. We know there is a great deal of support expressed about prevention in general, and about crime prevention through social development more particularly, but we know relatively less about what specific groups think and feel in this area. Moreover, crime prevention appears to have receded from

the public horizon, and an attempt should be made to restore it to public view. The evidence for this can be found in the declining – or low – levels of public awareness. In addition, greater efforts need to be devoted to promoting awareness of specific crime prevention programs. There is evidence in the literature that promoting awareness of crime prevention programs carries benefits beyond preventing offending. This would require, at a minimum, a consideration of the question of the types of messages, and the types of media, which are most effective for delivery knowledge and changing attitudes among different types of audiences.

A good example of an intervention in this area comes from the Netherlands. A multimedia campaign was launched to increase implementation of effective preventive behaviour. Over a nine-week period an awareness campaign was conducted in a single province. The objective was to raise interest in crime and crime prevention, and to disseminate information to the public. The mode of delivery included advertisements in local media as well as specific activities, some involving a "crime prevention van" which was installed in over forty locations. An evaluation of the effectiveness of this campaign found that attitudes about the justice system became more positive. Of particular interest is the finding that attitudes shifted among members of the general public, not just the specific individuals who had been exposed to some element of the information campaign (see Kuttschreuter and Wiegman 1998). This suggests that increasing public knowledge of crime prevention initiatives carries a more general benefit, namely changing attitudes towards the justice system.

There is a final issue of concern in this area: the public seems to be most supportive of the types of programs that the evaluation literature suggests have relatively little overall impact on rates of crime and victimization. One example is Neighbourhood Watch (especially in Europe). This program continues to be both well known and popular, even though experts agree that it generates few actual benefits, especially in high-crime areas with high levels of poverty (see for example Rosenbaum 1987; Sherman, Gottfredson, MacKenzie, Eck, Reuter and Bushway 1998; Welsh, Farrington, Sherman and MacKenzie 2002). Another example is the Block Parent program which is becoming increasingly difficult to implement and sustain, especially in heterogeneous urban areas, and a number of cities have cancelled it or are considering doing so. In addition, many of the "popular" programs are either police-based or police-initiated, and tend to involve alternative approaches to delivering traditional policing services – these are not usually CPSD types of programs. The one encouraging note in this area is that the public seems to be open to evidence-based research results – these must to be used more systematically.

We need to give consideration to how the results of research and evaluation in crime prevention (evidence-based crime prevention) can best be integrated into public education campaigns and initiatives.

Finally, there is some indication that levels of knowledge about some programs are higher in the United States than in Canada. This may, at least in part, be a result of successful media campaigns such as those of the US National Crime Prevention Council (for example, McGruff the Crime Dog, and the "Take a bite out of crime" slogan that is associated with him). The McGruff campaign appears to have had a positive effect on public knowledge, attitudes and behaviours (see Rosenbaum, Lurigio and Davis 1998). We need to examine the success of crime prevention marketing campaigns elsewhere, and identify the lessons that might be transferable to the Canadian context.

### The link to action

The link between the knowledge and attitudes of the public and their active engagement in crime prevention remains problematic and insufficiently explored. One would hope that awareness of a program, and a positive attitude about it, would translate into relatively high rates of support and participation. However, this does not seem to be the case; reported participation rates are low, and may even be declining in some cases.

There are three dimensions of engagement or participation that are worthy of further examination. The first involves the implementation by individuals of the types of techniques (usually drawn from the situational crime prevention or victim-risk management approaches) that can help reduce the risk of crime or the exposure to victimization. In general, research indicates that compliance and implementation rates for these tactics are very low – as a result, they tend to have little impact on overall rates of crime (see Rosenbaum 1987; and Rosenbaum, Lurigio and Davis 1998). It would be useful to know more about the profile of Canadians who engage in personal crime prevention behaviours, and about the factors that contribute to attitudinal and behavioural change.

Another dimension involves participation in what might be called collective crime prevention activities. These can include participation in community crime prevention programs (such as Block Parents or Neighbourhood Watch), or in Crime Prevention through Social Development (CPSD) type programs (such as mentoring or organizing recreational activities for youth). The evidence is that participation rates are higher in neighbourhoods characterized by homogeneity and stable patterns of residency (low proportions of transients), high levels of

education and home ownership, and a sense of collective responsibility (see, for example, Rosenbaum 1987). Such neighbourhoods tend to have high levels of community capacity, and probably experience relatively low levels of crime and insecurity. Voluntary participation tends to be much more problematic in high needs low capacity communities – in other words, the communities that need help the most. It would be useful to know more about the types of individuals who participate, either individually or collectively, in crime prevention in high needs areas. This is particularly true of CPSD type programs that require active and sustained engagement over relatively long periods of time. We need to consider engaging in research into the factors that contribute to the successful recruitment of participants in collective crime prevention activities (especially CPSD activities). This work should include a focus on the role of external agencies, the identification and/or development of local leadership, and the capacity to sustain activities over extended periods of time.

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