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Towards More Comprehensive Approaches to Prevention and Safety

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There is little doubt among either researchers or practitioners that significant and sustainable reductions in crime and victimization will require more comprehensive and better financed long term initiatives than is usually the case now.

It seems that the popularity of the notion of prevention, and the siren call of community mobilization, have seduced us into thinking that progress would be relatively rapid: it only required good faith and a rational approach to gathering and disseminating sound evidence on what works and how to implement it. It appears we were somewhat naïve. Progress has been halting and sporadic, and successes have been difficult to sustain. In addition, it seems that, to some extent, the tide has turned and that more reactive and punitive approaches are gaining new momentum, at least in the political sphere and among the public.

The purpose of this volume is to begin addressing this situation. Our goal is threefold:

1. We hope to inspire, by providing some concrete examples of success stories;
2. We hope to inform, by describing some processes and tools used in successful efforts to mobilize communities, and some evidence on the impact of the programs in question; and
3. We hope to guide, by trying to identify some key ingredients of success and some of the pitfalls and challenges that others may have to avoid.

This volume begins with an article by Wanda Jamieson on the potential and the limits of community mobilization for prevention. Her argument is that, given the shortage of good evaluation research in this area, we are still largely working on the basis of faith in the idea of the power of communities. There is still little agreement on how to define and operationalize the concept of ‘community’, especially in terms of needs, capacities and responsibilities. There is also much to be learned about what exactly communities can and cannot do. The result is that our policy expectations may be unrealistic and even unfair to the very communities we are trying to assist and support.

The next two articles report on two examples of the exciting work on community mobilization in Quebec in recent years. The first by Pierre Maurice, Julie Laforest, Louise Marie Bouchard and Monique Rainville, reports on some of the work by the Institut national de santé publique du Québec (INSPQ) and their attempt to assist in developing a holistic approach to community safety. The basic premise is that many health and safety problems share common risk factors, and that a comprehensive response is required if communities are to succeed. The article describes some of the tools developed by the INSPQ to help communities mobilize effectively using a setting-oriented approach, and provides three concrete illustrations of local successes and challenges to date.

The article by Sylvie Hamel, Marie-Marthe Cousineau and Martine Vézina focuses on a specific case of mobilization against gang activities in three communities in the Montreal area. Their argument is that a key challenge in mobilizing local communities is to overcome the suspicion and mistrust of locals about intervention from outside or about who will win (or lose) from a new initiative. The article emphasizes the key role of local liaison officers in this process. They are essential in establishing the credibility of an initiative and its proponents, taking on the administration of an initiative, assuring conflict resolution when necessary, building partnerships and sustaining momentum. These agents are critical to bringing communities to a point where they are willing and able to participate.

The next three articles report on specific programs or initiatives. Robert Flynn’s work discusses *Communities that Care* (CTC), and their attempt to help communities plan, implement and sustain multi-level initiatives that address multiple risk and protective factors among youth in order to promote their positive development. The article reviews the theoretical basis of CTC, describes their five stage implementation process, and reviews the available evaluation research on CTC processes and outcomes, with a particular focus on work in Canada. The results to date are very promising.

The article by Claire Crooks, David Wolfe, Ray Hughes, Peter Jaffe and Debbie Chiodo reviews the *Fourth R* (R for relationships), a comprehensive school-based program aimed at addressing violence, substance abuse and sexual health by helping young people develop better relationship and decision-making skills. The focus of the article is on the development of the curriculum-based program and the evidence-based principles upon which it rests, and on the implementation of the program in Canada to date. It describes some of the promising results so far regarding both the implementation of the program and its impacts, and discusses future plans for the program itself and the research designed to assess and support it throughout Canada.

The final article by Mark Bellis and Karen Hughes describes a public health approach to addressing and reducing alcohol related violence in public places in the United Kingdom. The premise of the approach is that alcohol and violence are interconnected and share common risk factors. A comprehensive response is therefore required, one that uses a “life course” approach and combines targeted early interventions with environmentally-oriented situational measures. Obviously, such an approach requires effective intelligence and partnerships. Readers will be particularly interested in the innovations in the UK that might be adapted elsewhere, and in the overviews of both the literature in this area and of examples of specific programs.

In spite of the diversity of goals and approaches, the articles in this volume do coalesce around a few key issues. The first is the imperative to better target interventions and to pay more attention to assessing their impact – we need to get better at knowing who can benefit, how they can be helped, and where and when interventions will have the most impact. This requires agreement on the indicators of success (or failure) and on the types of data that will allow us to assess our progress in different areas. A key dimension in this area is the challenge of balancing the right to privacy with the desire for the information required to identify high risk situations or individuals, and to maximize the effectiveness of interventions and the efficient use of resources.

At the same time, there is an ongoing debate about the relative value of “targeted” as opposed to “universal” interventions that are offered more widely. The nature of the distribution of risk and protective factors suggests that universal approaches may be required, especially since the reactive nature of the criminal justice and other systems can result in many high risk individuals either being missed or being identified too late for current prevention efforts to be effective. A related concern is the issue of consent: targeted initiatives require more active consent from participants and may run into resistance at this level.

Universal initiatives, on the other hand, require only passive consent but may result in resources being directed to people who do not necessarily need the “help”. This is a political issue of considerable importance, and it requires a great deal more debate in both the academic and the political sphere.

A related issue is the need to balance the desire to assist communities (especially those identified as “high risk”) with the concern to avoid the negative stigma that can often accompany being identified as a target of intervention efforts. The reality is that most communities are suspicious and even resistant to outside intervention, and there are a number of important issues to keep in mind, including some ethical considerations.

These issues only scratch the surface of the articles in this volume, and we are confident that readers will find much to inform, inspire and guide future efforts.