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Commentary from the Co-Chairs of the National Municipal Network for Crime Prevention

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The articles by Homel and Solomon in this volume raise the question of what we can learn from recent experiences in England and Wales, as well as Australia and New Zealand. First, it should be noted that Canada is not a newcomer in this policy area. In fact, since the international conference on crime prevention in Montreal in 1989, many local authorities have taken leadership in the prevention of crime, victimization and fear of crime, and have encouraged multi-sector partnerships, citizen involvement, situational crime prevention programs, and social development approaches. But these initiatives tend to happen in isolation and to lack a broader political framework and orientation to establishing goals and objectives across all orders of government.

In this sense, Canada stands at a distance from the experiences of other countries where a national political commitment to crime prevention preceded the implementation of local programs and partnerships. When national priorities are established and include measurable targets of change, investments to foster and support local communities tend to follow more easily. This is crucial because municipalities are the order of government closest to the experiences of public safety and security of their residents. The top-down model of policy and programmatic change has the advantage of a shared vision, political commitment and focused investment. It also has some disadvantages, as demonstrated by both Homel and Solomon. The key is that

communities are more responsive to local needs and priorities, and central governments sometimes run roughshod over these concerns.

In England and Wales, as indeed is the case in Canada, the notion of Crime Prevention through Social Development (CPSD) has inspired many organizations. In many cases, CPSD has animated organizations to work together to develop partnerships and bring together people that formerly had little experience in sharing a vision, let alone information and resources. This approach “by and for communities” involves a process of empowerment, and can help build social capital in communities. But this process is not automatic, and there can be resistance from social and justice service sectors over resources and power. The challenge is to ensure that the goals of crime prevention are incorporated into organizations, and to sustain this long enough to be able to affect system change and measure impacts.

Both Homel and Solomon conclude that one of the conditions for effective crime prevention is the capacity to manage collaborative multi-agency actions. This begins with an agreement that enforcement alone cannot address the complex needs of the communities and families most at risk. While investments in reactive and enforcement-based policies and programs may be seen to be expedient, they cannot be expected to accomplish the work necessary for effective crime prevention in local communities. In fact, they may detract from other opportunities. Solomon outlines the drift of the British Labour government from a “tough on crime, tough on causes” approach to a mainly enforcement-based vision that criminalizes an increasing number of people, including children and youth. Such coercive measures can be counter-productive, both in terms of financial costs, and of the impact they have on the trust and confidence of the community.

Fourteen Canadian municipalities from coast to coast have come together, with the support of the Institute for the Prevention of Crime (at the University of Ottawa), to form the National Municipal Network for Crime Prevention. We would be well served to heed some of the conclusions that have been drawn by Solomon and Homel. Firstly, it can't be stated forcefully enough that political will is key for the success of crime prevention. Homel explains that “the focus on short term (seed) funding is premised on an anticipation that other agencies (...) will pick up any need for continuing crime prevention activity”. Of course, this is not necessarily the case because of competing demands or a lack of appreciation for their role in crime prevention. This means that local politicians must ensure “strong and consistent leadership and supportive governance structures” (Homel) and that “local

partnerships (...) be given space and authority, and encouraged to focus on local priorities” (Solomon).

These and other lessons from international experiences are already reflected in some Canadian crime prevention policies such as those of the Province of Québec¹ and, more recently, the Alberta crime prevention action plan.² Importantly, both of these policies recognize the leading role and responsibility of municipalities in crime prevention. These policies make a vital connection between crime prevention and interventions in response to local issues in public safety and security. But they cannot be accomplished without senior orders of government collaborating with and supporting local governments in their development efforts. Public safety and security need focused, committed, evidence based investments that support a vision of a reduction and prevention of crime, victimization and fear of crime for all.

For the National Municipal Network for Crime Prevention, a key lesson emerges from reflecting on the experiences of other countries: *the importance of dedicated and flexible resources*. Long term and sustainable resources are needed to implement significant projects in communities affected by crime, but we also need resources to evaluate what is being done in order to ensure efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability. Finally, these resources need to be based on a common vision of crime prevention while remaining flexible enough to be adaptable to local concerns. There must be “a much lighter touch from the centre” as Solomon says, but we cannot expect crime prevention collaborations and initiatives in municipalities to prevail without national and provincial commitment and support.

In many municipalities across the country, there is a clear dedication to public safety and security, but often the tools to accomplish the task are limited. What is now needed is a national strategy that acknowledges and supports the ground level while remaining flexible with regards to its application. We need a commitment from all orders of government to move beyond jurisdictional debates and focus on the vital impact that crime, victimization and the fear of crime have on the quality of life of all communities.

The fourteen municipalities that have come together to form the National Municipal Network for Crime Prevention have continued to exchange experiences. We have learned that we are more similar than different. Some actions are specific to the local context, but all speak to the vital need for

¹ See www.msp.gouv.qc.ca/prevention/prevention.asp?txtSection=publicat&txtCategorie=politique

² See www.justice.gov.ab.ca/safe/

a long term multi-sector vision that supports targeted local engagement and initiatives, monitors their impact and is resilient to political shifts. Dialogues between all orders of government are crucial for initiating and sustaining prevention approaches in communities across Canada. Based on the experiences of other countries, it seems likely that these conversations need local energy and commitment (bottom up) as well as a national vision and supports from central orders of government for local initiatives (top down). We are ready. Are you?