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Sustaining the Momentum: Crime Prevention at a Crossroads

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So near, and yet so far...

These words can conjure up a number of different images; in this case though, the reference is to crime prevention in Canada.

So near...On the surface, crime prevention in Canada has come a long way. For many, the major turning points were the *European and North-American Conference on Urban Safety and Crime Prevention* in Montreal in 1989, or the so-called Horner Report in 1993, or perhaps the launch of phase I of the *National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS)*, including the founding of the National Crime Prevention Council in 1994. In those early days, there was a great deal of energy and excitement about the promise of prevention, but little in the way of resources and supports. The launch of phase II of the NCPS tried to address that problem by investing over \$30 million per year in support of prevention initiatives, an amount that has since more than doubled. And there have been some successes. Much has been accomplished and crime prevention has become an aspect of the policies and practices of all orders of government, and has considerable popular and political support.

And yet, so far...There is a disquieting sense that crime prevention is now at a crossroads, and that its future is far from assured. The signs are numerous. At the federal level, the National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) has received significantly increased funding and has launched its new *Blueprint for Effective Crime Prevention* (2007) that will help it move in new directions in a number of areas. But there seem to be some growing pains, not the least of which is an inability to allocate all its funding (the NCPC lapsed close to half its

funds in a recent fiscal year). Some Provinces and Territories are developing coordinated crime prevention policies, and a number of cities are investing significant time and resources in the development of prevention initiatives. But, there is no real national strategy that integrates the approaches of all orders of government into a comprehensive and sustainable approach to the governance and administration of crime prevention and community safety in Canada.

Prevention is also running up against some significant sources of resistance. There continues to be an uncertainty about what prevention is meant to accomplish and about how this could be measured. More important is the lack of adequate and sustained resources – there seems to be a sense that crime prevention is a cheaper and more cost-effective way to go, but there is little indication of a willingness to develop and fund prevention in the same manner as we do with the other three pillars of the justice system (the police, the courts and the correctional system). Finally, the political winds may have shifted: the current economic crisis is making everyone more resistant to changes that might threaten their interests, and more cautious about committing significant permanent resources to new initiatives. The bottom line is that crime prevention is on the agenda, but not in a position of power and influence. The promise of prevention has not been sufficiently translated into effective and sustainable initiatives, and the future may not be as rosy as we hope.

A good part of the reason for this is that we still have not confronted and resolved three major challenges to the implementation and sustainability of a comprehensive and integrated approach to crime prevention and community safety. The papers and comments in this volume all address these challenges in one way or another.

The first hurdle is what I would call the *challenge of imagination*. The problem here is our inability to develop a common language around goals and indicators or to provide the data necessary to assess the nature and prevalence of problems, target our initiatives, and assess their impact. A number of the articles in this issue address this theme. The contribution of Holly Johnson and Jennifer Fraser focuses on the all too frequent failure to include a gender perspective in prevention planning and activities. They argue that we need to improve our ability to come to grips with the realities of violence against women and to appreciate women's experiences of victimization in different social contexts. They argue that we need to start with a commitment to gender mainstreaming in order to assure that the needs and experiences of women are central to all prevention planning and activities.

Three other articles focus on the relationship of youth violence and gangs, and insist on the importance of locating these phenomena within their social contexts and wider social and structural arrangements. Melanie Bania focuses on the impact of social disaffiliation and the perception of being excluded; Patrice Corriveau describes how gangs and youth violence are linked to the desire for protection and inclusion and the attempt of youth to construct a positive identity and self-concept; and Mark Totten addresses the crisis of violence among aboriginal youth gang members. The common thread is a conviction that for some youth, gang membership can be viewed as a solution to problems, and violence can be instrumental in advancing one's status and position. The implication is that even the most effective enforcement and concerted approach to addressing risk factors at the individual level will not be sufficient to deal with the problem of youth gang violence – a comprehensive approach also requires that we address the social origins of the phenomenon. This cannot be done within the confines of the criminal justice system or through short-term projects aimed at individuals.

The next hurdle is the *challenge of collaboration*. The fact is that the solutions we come up with will have to be as complex and complicated as are the causes of crime, victimization and insecurity. No organization, even if it is as well financed as the pillars of the criminal justice system, has the mandate or the resources necessary to take on the task all by itself. Partnerships are necessary, and the capacity to collaborate is the fundamental building block of success in this area. This in turn will depend on our ability to establish a common language, to come to agreement on goals and strategies, and to devise a common approach to evaluation and accountability. In addition, successful partnerships require governance and administrative structures that allow participants to get the job done efficiently and effectively, and an accountability process that gives people credit when due and assigns responsibility when things don't go as expected.

The articles by Julie Pehar and Christine Sevigny, as well as by Myriam Dubé and Raymonde Boisvert focus on this area. Pehar and Sevigny describe their experience with the attempts of two community collaboratives to enshrine gender mainstreaming in the planning activities of the government in Peel Region. Dubé and Boisvert describe the experience related to the development and implementation of an inter-agency protocol to guide collaboration in the provision of services to women who are victims of violence and to children who are exposed to conjugal violence. Both are eloquent about the challenges of working collaboratively, and about some of the sources of resistance that were faced in attempting to move forward. The bottom line is that this work is not easy, but progress can be achieved.

The final hurdle is the *challenge of implementation*. There is general agreement that prevention planning should adopt a problem-solving approach. There is also an emerging appreciation for the importance of responsibility centres in guiding and directing this work and facilitating the collaboration of all the participants. The problem is that crime prevention remains very much the “poor cousin” of the criminal justice system. It is one thing to set out to design and implement a comprehensive prevention strategy and to assess its efficiency and its effectiveness – it is an altogether different thing to try to do this “on the cheap”.

Fortunately, there is a growing body of knowledge and lessons that has emerged as a result of experiences elsewhere. Two of the articles in this issue, those by Peter Homel and by Enver Solomon, review recent experiences in England and Wales, Australia, New Zealand and the United States. Both authors provide insights on what to do and what not to do. Neither would assume that the programs from one place can be easily transferred to another. However, given the influence that initiatives in these countries have had in Canada (especially in the case of England and Wales), careful consideration should be given to the lessons they have learned and to the cautions they raise about going in the same directions.

We have attempted to launch such a discussion by inviting representatives from the federal, provincial and territorial, and municipal orders of government to reflect on what the work of Homel and Solomon might mean for Canada. We have also asked Margaret Shaw from the International Centre for the Prevention of Crime to assess how this work relates to what has been learned from other countries. Their replies are provocative, and they raise some concerns about whether Canada is going in the right direction.

In the end, and in spite of over twenty years of commitment and engagement in prevention, the potential for delivering on its promise still seems far away. Our hope is that the articles in this issue will contribute to more public and inclusive discussions and debates about how we can move forward toward an effective and accountable national crime prevention strategy. Such a strategy must concentrate our energy and resources where they are the most needed, provide adequate and sustainable resources to assure the work gets done, and engage the public in this work. Our hope is also that we do this before prevention gets permanently relegated to the fringes of social and justice policies and practices, and its promise gets swallowed by an over-zealous commitment to reactive approaches to crime and victimization.