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Blueprint for Effective Crime Prevention in Canada: The National Crime Prevention Strategy

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The articles by Peter Homel and Enver Solomon describe some of the major international experiences in recent years in the design and implementation of national crime prevention strategies – they also provide a stimulating overview of what they feel can be learned from these experiences, and of what might be most relevant to Canadian practitioners and decision-makers.

Both authors attempt to identify some of the common themes in contemporary crime prevention, and some of the lessons from these experiences that could be applied to Canada's current situation. Homel assesses a number of national strategies, with an emphasis on recent developments in Australia and England and Wales. He identifies a number of features of modern prevention, including: multi-sectoral action based on the use of multiple interventions, focused analysis, and evidence based interventions with a strong outcome focus and an emphasis on locally "driven" initiatives. Solomon focuses primarily on assessing the UK's experience under the Labour government, which took power in 1997. He identifies a number of areas where Canada might profit from observing others. These include lessons related to: setting centrally directed targets, creating organizational silos within silos, using evidence-based approaches, attempting to balance enforcement and prevention and addressing the "implementation gap".

How do these international experiences apply to the Canadian situation or, in other words, what should Canada learn from others? In this context, it is useful to provide an overview of recent developments of the National Crime

Prevention Strategy, particularly its attempt to promote and support evidence-based crime prevention in Canada.

Crime prevention is a relatively recent policy and program domain in Canada. The National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) was established in 1998 as the responsibility centre in the Canadian federal government in crime prevention. Its main role is to develop policy knowledge and to administer funding programs under the National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS) which is the main prevention policy framework of the federal government. It is important to emphasize that the NCPS is not the only policy framework or funding program with crime prevention implications in the federal government: one could also think for example of the Family Violence Initiative (Public Health Agency), the National Anti-Drug Strategy (Justice and Health Canada), the Urban Aboriginal Strategy (Human Resources), the Youth Justice Initiative (Justice Canada) or many initiatives in the RCMP (for example, on youth intervention). While the NCPC has a mandate to coordinate and provide some coherence between these various initiatives, it cannot replace or act in lieu of these other sectors of government.

Furthermore, provinces have the possibility of adopting their own strategies. Some may complement the NCPS, but they need not necessarily as provinces have a direct responsibility for the administration of justice, health, education and social services. The province of Québec paved the way with the adoption of its city-focused strategy in the early 2000s. Other provinces, especially Alberta, Nova Scotia and British Columbia, have more recently adopted crime reduction and prevention strategies, sometimes more influenced by the UK experience in crime prevention, reduction and community safety.

There are national, provincial, territorial and municipal strategies and approaches to crime prevention in Canada. The positive aspects are that they all pursue a prevention agenda and that, when taken together, they may well have contributed to the overall decline in recorded crime rates in Canada since the early 1990s. The federal government, through the NCPC, provides national leadership, but there remains a great deal of variation between administrations and jurisdictions, and communities and practitioners may have very different views of what prevention is and of how it should be delivered on the ground.

The NCPS itself has changed quite significantly over the decade. Originally conceptualized as a broad Crime Prevention through Social Development (CPSD) approach that was largely based on community mobilization, it is now a more focussed and evidence-based strategy. In effect, the renewed National

Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS) is based on the following four principles described in its *Blueprint for Effective Crime Prevention* (2007)¹:

1. strengthening partnerships across all sectors and systematically integrating crime prevention with enforcement, corrections and other relevant interventions;
2. promoting effective crime prevention through the use of the evidence base;
3. focusing on specific priorities and groups; and
4. achieving measurable results.

More specifically, the NCPS aims to support evidence-based interventions that address modifiable risk factors known to be related to offending among those who are most at risk for delinquency. This translates in particular in a specific focus on: children between the ages of 6-11, youth between the ages of 12-17 and young adults between 18-24 who present multiple risk factors.

These directions were chosen based on evidence and demonstrable results for crime prevention, particularly in the areas of youth at-risk of offending. There is a good degree of agreement among crime prevention specialists in Canada and around the world that longitudinal studies following cohorts of children from birth, as well as rigorous evaluation studies, have helped identify risk factors for later delinquency. In particular, it is well established that early onset of delinquent behaviour, especially when combined with other risk factors such as having criminalized parents and/or being from a dysfunctional family, and early aggressiveness and problem behaviour in school, significantly increase the likelihood of being arrested at early adolescence; thus the need to focus on early prevention with children and youth aged 6-11.

Adolescents who have been in contact with the police prematurely (before age 10), who have delinquent friends, or who have problems related to substance use and abuse are at higher risk to become adult offenders; thus the focus on the 12-17 age group, especially if they have already been in contact with the justice system. And young adults 18-24 who, in addition to these past experiences, are under-educated, unemployed, and demonstrate addictive use of substances are at significant risk of entering a lifelong criminal trajectory. Preventing these at-risk children and youth from entering a life of crime is the overarching goal of the NCPS.

These directions were also established on the basis of reliable evidence with respect to promising interventions. Many different institutes around the world

¹ See www.publicsafety.gc.ca/prg/cp/_fl/ncps-blu-prin-eng.pdf

have identified such programs through meta-analyses of evaluation studies of their effectiveness. For example, for children below the age of 12, Stop Now and Plan (SNAP) or the Boys and Girls Clubs' mentoring programs have been recognized as model programs. For adolescents, Multisystemic Therapy (MST) and Fast Track are examples of promising interventions. And for young adults, Quantum Opportunities is an example of a promising intervention. On the basis of an analysis of the existing scientific literature, and considering the Canadian context, the NCPC has decided to give priority to funding twelve model or promising programs that target these groups and address known risk factors associated with crime and offending.

This said, very few of these interventions have been rigorously tested in Canada, so their impacts are not well known. Furthermore, evaluation studies have not always identified the key elements of the processes that make these programs work. For example, more needs to be learned about the specific characteristics of successful interventions (context, duration, intensity) or the type of professionals or organizations required to deliver them and, in particular, what and when to adapt them to best respond to the needs and priorities of local communities.

Having adopted a strong focus on demonstrable results, and being very conscious of the need to build longer-term sustainability for the most effective programs, the NCPC has built an internal evaluation capacity to oversee multi-site evaluation studies of the priority model and promising projects. These evaluation studies, using the most rigorous available designs (whenever possible a quasi-experimental design with comparable control group and longitudinal follow-up of the clients) will aim to measure the effectiveness (impacts) and cost-effectiveness (in selected cases) of these interventions. Once effectiveness has been well established and more is known about "the how", the NCPC will work with its partners to identify appropriate ways to ensure that these interventions are sustained.

A good policy translates into concrete and effective action, so bridging the "implementation gap" is possibly the most challenging task in crime prevention. Adopting an evidence-based strategy presents many challenges for communities and practitioners: the knowledge base may not be accessible to them and they may not have the tools or experience to implement model and promising programs; they must also overcome the traditional resistance to adopting models that do not have local roots. As such, active knowledge transfer and dissemination of practical knowledge on effective crime prevention practices are fundamental elements of the NCPC's focus and activities.

More specifically, the NCPC conducts a series of activities designed to promote, disseminate and foster the successful use of the knowledge base of effective practices. The NCPC will continue to build its knowledge base, from research reports reviewing the knowledge in a given domain, to fact sheets on evaluated programs designed to inspire practice. But publications, whether physical or electronic, can only go so far in helping to build the capacity of practitioners and communities. In response, the NCPC also organizes a series of interactive knowledge transfer and dissemination activities aimed at its own program managers (who work directly with communities), its provincial and territorial partners, and community-based organizations.

The implementation of the NCPS rests in particular on funding purposefully selected promising and model programs in multiple sites, and the NCPC is keenly aware that practitioners require information and support. So the NCPC: makes available detailed information to funding recipients on these promising and model programs (implementation fact sheets); organizes very focused training sessions steered by a duo composed of a developer and a deliverer of a given promising or model program; ensures that the funding agreement includes a provision for in-depth training and continuous follow-up of the service providers; orchestrates communities of practice both for program managers within the Centre, and for recipient organizations in order to ensure that practitioners in various parts of the country benefit from the experience of others; and schedules yearly knowledge to practice seminars on specific issues such as youth gangs, evaluation in Aboriginal communities, and youth at-risk.

In conclusion, the NCPC remains committed to continuing to play an active and collaborative role in the development and implementation of a national crime prevention strategy for Canada, and to continuing to work in partnership with the Provinces and Territories, municipal orders of government, and with communities and organizations interested in contributing to the goal of a safer and more secure Canada. The National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS) is attempting to address the challenges and difficulties described by Homel and Solomon in a number of ways including the development of effective crime prevention policies, a commitment to evidence-based practices, selective interventions, a focus on evaluation, and by achieving strategic partnerships and local collaboration to deliver good and sustainable crime prevention.