

THE ROOT CAUSES OF CRIME

CS&CPC Statement on the Root Causes of Crime approved in 1996

Overview

Individuals need to be responsible for their own actions. An understanding of root causes cannot and should not be seen as a way to absolve us from personal accountability. However, while individuals have an obligation to act responsibly and with respect for their fellow citizens, communities have a responsibility to address those conditions, which hinder healthy development and can become the breeding ground for crime. The root causes of crime are well documented and researched. Crime is primarily the outcome of multiple adverse social, economic, cultural and family conditions. To prevent crime it is important to have an understanding of its roots.

These are complex and interrelated, but can be summarized in three main categories:

- Economic Factors/Poverty
- Social Environment
- Family Structures

Economic Factors/Poverty

In addition to lack of financial resources, poverty manifests itself in a lack of educational opportunities, lack of meaningful employment options, poor housing, lack of hope and the prejudice against persons living in poverty.

Social Environment

Our social structure mirrors to citizens and communities what we value and how we set priorities. Social root causes of crime are: inequality, not sharing power, lack of support to families and neighborhoods, real or perceived inaccessibility to services, lack of leadership in communities, low value placed on children and individual well-being, the overexposure to television as a means of recreation.

Family Structures

The CSCPC believes that families are uniquely placed in contributing to raising healthy responsible members of society. But the task of putting children first goes well beyond the family to include communities and society. Dysfunctional family conditions contribute to future delinquency.

These conditions include:

- Parental inadequacy
- Parental conflict
- Parental criminality
- Lack of communication (both in quality and quantity)
- Lack of respect and responsibility
- Abuse and neglect of children
- Family violence

Crime prevention must focus on improvements in all three areas.

From Reaction to Prevention

Crime can be closely linked to the conditions for children in our community. There is a strong link between reducing risk and building resilience in children and decreasing crime. Problems arise when the larger social, political and economic systems within which children live jeopardize the family's resources and create stress on the family unit. As a result, the provision of appropriate care and required resources to all children will have great significance for their long term physical, intellectual, and emotional well-being and their development into independent, healthy adults.

The offender of tomorrow is often the vulnerable child of today.

Vulnerable children are those at risk for significant and enduring social, emotional, or behavioural problems. These children are more likely to be dependent on public resources over the course of their development, particularly through the child welfare, social assistance, corrections, or mental health service systems. All children are potentially vulnerable and may develop emotional or behavioural problems when their own physical or emotional resources are unable to meet the challenges of their social and physical environment.

There are three levels of prevention:

1. Primary Prevention

Primary prevention efforts try to ensure the health of the community as a whole by attempting to stop adverse conditions from developing in the first place. Programs which address parenting, family support, adequate housing, etc. could all be considered primary prevention if they are universally accessible and offered before any difficulties are identified. Primary prevention can be the most cost-effective method of dealing with a problem because it can reduce costs in many

different areas over the long term. Universal programs are only ever as effective as their ability to include and support populations at risk.

2. Secondary Prevention

Secondary prevention attempts to stop a crime from occurring after certain "warning signs" have appeared. An example might be programs, which focus on a specific problem or problem group. Anti-social or delinquent behaviour (e.g., disrespect for school staff; spray-painting slogans on buildings) can often be stopped through early intervention in problem situations before they become more serious and lead to a life of crime or victimization.

3. Tertiary Prevention

Law enforcement efforts generally fall into the category of tertiary prevention. Sentencing a person to prison ensures that they will not commit a crime while serving their sentence. This is crime prevention after the fact because the person is known to the community and has already broken the law. While these measures ensure (for a time) that an offender cannot commit another offense they cannot reverse the effects of the original crime.

Fundamental to prevention is a commitment to the essentials of adequate care for all children. The CS&CPC is a proud partner of the Alliance for Children and Youth of Waterloo Region. The Alliance emphasizes strengths based approaches.

Preventative efforts strive to achieve the following goals:

- Reduce the incidence of serious, long-term emotional and behavioral problems in all children.
- Promote the optimal social, emotional, behavioral and cognitive development in children at highest risk.
- Strengthen the ability of communities to respond effectively to children and their families in social and economic need.

Successful prevention programs share many of the following characteristics:

- Enhance children's mental health and promote a healthier environment for children.
- Are freely accessible to all children
- Do not single out or stigmatize individuals, families or communities
- Focus on education, building competence and skills
- Actively include families and communities in development and implementation

- Maximize the likelihood of positive outcomes and produce cost-savings when compared to treatment

Risk Factors

When several risk factors are combined, there is a higher probability that crime occurs. "Root Cause" is not the most accurate term when talking about risk factors. In fact a cause-effect mindset makes it too easy to assume that the existence of a risk factor inevitably leads to criminality. For example, the research literature overwhelmingly points to poverty as a factor in criminal behaviour. However, many poor people do not engage in crime. A great deal of research and study has taken place in the field of criminology over the past 50 years. The data is supported by life-cycle studies in other disciplines including health, education and social science. Research from studies in Europe, Canada and the U.S. examined personal characteristics of convicted offenders, relationships with family and peers, self reporting data, neighborhood characteristics and other data to come to four major conclusions:

Occasional and Persistent Delinquents

We need to distinguish between occasional and persistent offenders. For example, 81% of adolescents commit a criminal offence at some time during their adolescence (e.g. mischief, experimentation with drugs, shoplifting, etc.); 9% of adolescent offenders commit serious offenses. In economically disadvantaged areas, 7% of men are responsible for over 50% of all offenses. Persistent offenders engage in criminal behavior earlier and continue longer.

High Crime Areas

Crime rates differ markedly within cities as well as different areas across Canada. For example, northern communities in Canada have substantially higher violent and property crimes than the national average. Police forces everywhere can point to neighbourhoods and urban areas which experience higher crime rates.

The Criminal Justice System

There are many regional and area differences: dismissal of charges, reporting criteria for crime, media attention to certain crimes are not consistent across Canada. It can also be difficult to obtain an accurate picture of crime because many criminal offenses are not reported. Conversely, policies of zero tolerance in schools can significantly "increase" reported crime statistics, and public perception of the problem.

Multiple Factors

Risk factors combine to make the probability of criminal behavior more likely. No one variable should be considered in isolation. Following are the major risk factors supported in research.

Many persistent offenders begin their involvement in anti-social activities before and during adolescence. Age alone is not a risk factor. It must be looked at in context of poverty, racism, family violence, parental and community neglect and problems at school. Research into persistent offending has emphasized the need to focus prevention efforts on early childhood years. Birth to age 5 is the most critical time for healthy social and emotional development.

Gender

While crime rates for females have increased in recent years, males are much more likely to be involved in crime. The research points out that crime usually involves aggression, risk taking and predatory behavior.

Social and Economic Disadvantage

In Canada, aboriginals represent a disproportionate number of those incarcerated. This situation, in reality, is the consequence of people being kept at a social and economic disadvantage. These factors combined, greatly increase the risk of turning to crime.

Low family income and poor housing often amplify poor parental supervision, marital disharmony, inconsistent care, poor nutrition, chronic health care problems, poor school performance and psychological disorders. Unsatisfactory living conditions are particularly stressful during pregnancy. Fetal development is negatively affected by maternal stress. Such stress has shown to be closely related to ill-health, neurological problems, slow development and behaviour disturbances in children. While there is not direct cause and effect relationship between poverty and crime, the conditions arising out of poverty combine to create "high" risk populations who are over-represented in the criminal justice system.

Persistent Unemployment

Many studies find that a high number of youth and adults admitted to correctional facilities are unemployed. Persistent unemployment often creates a sense of despair, particularly amongst youth and can provoke angry expression including theft, substance and alcohol abuse, as well as child and family violence. Similarly, unemployed men released after terms of incarceration are more likely to re-offend. Failure in school and an unstable job situation can combine to continue an individual's involvement in crime.

For more information, please see the [National Council of Welfare](#) report "Justice and the Poor" (Spring 2000) written by Louise Delude.

Another related website is [Opportunities 2000](#)

Home Environment

There is a direct link between the abuse of women and child abuse and future delinquent behavior. This link is well researched and documented and shows that over 50% of violent young offenders witnessed wife abuse in the home. Physically abused children are five times more likely to be violent adults. Sexually abused children are eight times more likely to be sexually violent as adults.

It has been estimated that up to 80% of incarcerated males have experienced some form of physical or sexual abuse as a child.

Lack of parental supervision, parental rejection and lack of parent-child involvement are consistent indicators of delinquent behavior. Parenting that features inconsistent, incoherent, overly punitive or too permissive methods of discipline also increase the risk of delinquency. Studies show that unwanted pregnancy and teen pregnancy create higher risk factors towards criminality. Ineffective parenting encourages youth to associate with peers who are involved in criminal activities. At the risk of oversimplifying a complex problem, research suggests that there is a direct link between dysfunctional parenting and the tendency for the youth to associate with delinquent peers.

As children, offenders are less successful in school, have lower attendance rates and are more likely to leave school early than their peers. Early school leavers experience many difficulties, the most obvious being unemployment or under-employment. Canadian studies show that 40% of federal inmates have a learning disability which remained undetected throughout their childhood.

Substance Abuse

Alcohol and substance abuse are often associated with criminal behavior. Many offenders are under the influence of drugs or alcohol when offenses are committed. Regular alcohol use during adolescence can lead to higher conviction rates in adulthood. To a lesser extent, research speaks of the influence of television and other multi-media on the behavior of children. There is also some evidence that there are links between diet and violent behavior.

The research has been compiled from a variety of empirical studies, organizations, task forces and government reports and is consolidated in a publication by The John Howard Society of Alberta "Crime Prevention Through Social Development" 1995.

Some related websites

[John Howard Society of Canada - www.johnhoward.ca](http://www.johnhoward.ca)

[Canadian Council on Social Development](#)

[Caledon Institute](#)