Root Causes of Crime

What is Crime Prevention?

"Crime prevention" is any initiative or policy which reduces or eliminates victimization by crime or violence. Organizations like the Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council work collaboratively to address the many risk factors known to be at the roots of crime. Extensive research has allowed us to categorize these risk factors – or 'root causes of crime' — into four broad areas: Individual; Family; Social/Community; and Economic.

"It is easier to build strong children than to mend broken adults."

Risk Factors

There is no single risk factor which leads to criminal behaviour. However, the more risk factors present in a person's life, the greater their risk of becoming criminally involved and/or a victim of crime. Risk factors may include:

Individual
- Age*
- Gender*
- Problematic drug and alcohol use
- Poor social skills
- Low sense of self-worth
- Low educational attainment

Family structures
- Experiences of abuse and neglect
- Exposure to violence in the home
- Lack of parental supervision
- Inconsistent or overly permissive or punitive parenting

Social/Community
- Isolation or exclusion
- Belonging to a delinquent peer group
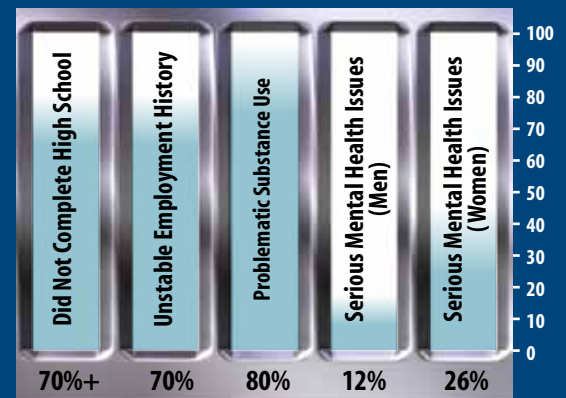- Experience of being bullied
- Stigmatization

Economic
- Low family income
- Inadequate housing
- Persistent unemployment/ underemployment

When several risk factors are combined, there is a higher probability for someone coming into conflict with the law. For example, a person who comes from a low income home and socializes in peer groups where drug and alcohol use is tolerated is more likely to engage in criminal activity.

While we are all responsible for our own behaviour, attention to root causes does provide a critical starting point for designing social and community interventions that reduce risks and in turn reduce crime.

Trends
Risk Factors of Offenders Entering Prison

Did Not Complete High School	Unstable Employment History	Problematic Substance Use	Serious Mental Health Issues (Men)	Serious Mental Health Issues (Women)
70%+	70%	80%	12%	26%

Source: www.mooddisorderscanada.ca

* males between the ages of 15 and 24 tend to engage in more risk taking behavior than females and other age groups.

www.preventingcrime.ca

Prevention that works…

- Is intensive not ad hoc
- Happens in natural settings
- Is long term focused
- Starts as early as possible
- Places a high value on future generations
- Is multi disciplinary
- Encourages citizen engagement and leadership
- Is based in good research and community wisdom

Crime Prevention

While risk factors describe negative influences on a person or community, **protective factors** speak to positive influences and opportunities to improve the lives of individuals and community safety overall. These protective factors include:

- Schools that work for success of all students
- Good parenting
- Strong social supports
- Positive peer group/friends
- Positive relationship with an adult role model
- Healthy prenatal and early childhood development
- Stable housing
- Steady employment
- Strategic poverty reduction
- Opportunities for community engagement

These protective factors, also known as **"primary prevention efforts"**, focus on the health of a community as a whole and seek to stop negative social and community conditions from developing in the first place. Primary prevention efforts are universally accessible and are the most cost-effective approach over time. Social determinants of health and root causes of crime often call for the same type of intervention approaches.

Secondary prevention efforts attempt to reduce crime after certain warning signs have emerged. Such signs might include anti-social or delinquent behaviour, persistent mistrust of persons in authority or disregard for other's property (graffiti). Secondary prevention programs focus on a specific problem, population or geographic area and have an equally important role to play in preventing more serious crime in the long term.

Tertiary prevention efforts usually involve law enforcement, justice methods and corrections. By this point, an offender has already been identified to the community and he/she is prevented from committing further crimes. This is an example of crime prevention "after the fact". It is most commonly confused with crime prevention overall when in fact it is just part of the continuum of prevention.

What Can You Do?

Based on an understanding of risk factors, communities can set priorities in pursuit of a healthier environment and improved quality of life. Communities can undertake measures that:

- Reduce poverty
- Reduce school dropout rates
- Invest in comprehensive childhood development initiatives
- Provide affordable housing
- Increase access to rehabilitative programs
- Support literacy

Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council
Together for a Safer Community

519-883-2304
www.preventingcrime.ca

Region of Waterloo