

GENERAL POLICY # 1

Invest in Safe Neighborhood Programs by Ensuring a Strong Police Presence and Fostering Good Police-Community Relations

Safe neighborhood programs are a holistic approach to improving high-violence communities. If successful, these initiatives can reduce youth crime and violence and increase community security by focusing on three objectives. The first objective is to implement problem-solving policing, in which citizens are involved in identifying community problems via participative diagnostics to help police focus on preventing rather than just reacting to crime and violence. Problem-solving policing is further characterized by community policing (see below), targeted police patrols in high-risk areas, and investments in local law enforcement to enhance both the presence and reputation of the police. A second objective of safe neighborhood programs is to offer an array of supervised activities for young people, including second-chance education, after-school programs, job and life skills workshops, and sports leagues. Third, safe neighborhood programs aim to strengthen much-needed basic services and infrastructure such as education, health, and water. Improvements to services and infrastructure also include community projects that increase security, such as improving street lighting, ensuring safe routes to school, removing graffiti, planting community gardens, and upgrading parks.

How Do Safe Neighborhood Programs Prevent Risky Youth Behavior?

Safe neighborhood programs can modify the environments in which young people act and interact in ways that are likely to prevent them from engaging in risky behavior. The programs work through many different channels to reduce youth crime and violence. For example, community policing, which aims to make policing more responsive and accountable to local communities, can create bonds of trust and reliance between communities and the police, increase crime reporting, reduce police abuses, revitalize existing police forces, and increase the public's perception of the safety of their environment. This more accountable police force can reduce the prevalence of firearms, drug trafficking, gang activity, and other forms of youth crime and violence that flourish in environments where authority is lacking, mistrusted, and/or corruptible.

Other safe neighborhood programs use prevention initiatives to address the underlying causes of risky behavior. Offering supervised activities for at-risk youth is one approach. While helping young people in school and in life generally, recreational activities are also healthy alternatives to crime and violence. Research in the United States shows that most risky behavior among young people occurs between the hours of 3 p.m. and 5 p.m. and that providing activities with an academic focus that are also fun can significantly affect a range of important skills and kinds of behavior, which then reduces the likelihood of young people engaging in crime and violence.¹ Another approach to preventing youth crime is to strengthen local services and infrastructure, and particularly important for this approach is the availability and maintenance of common and public spaces. Besides adding to a neighborhood's visible assets and increasing security, making incremental improvements encourages community participation, intersectoral collaboration, and civic spirit. Also, studies have shown that social cohesion can reduce violence even after controlling for poverty.² Finally, such projects create opportunities for young people to perform community service and gives them an incentive not to do anything to damage the community that they have helped to build.

Research Findings: Providing the Evidence Base

In the United States, the *Buffalo Weed and Seed Initiative* is a safe neighborhood program that is based on four components: law enforcement; community policing; prevention, intervention, and treatment of violence; and

neighborhood restoration. The *Weed* portion of the program is multi-agency and integrates federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies in combating crime, drug use, and gang activity in high-crime neighborhoods. The goal is to “weed” out crime and then to “seed” the targeted sites with a wide range of programs, including safe havens that offer young people educational, employment, health, social, and cultural activities. After only four years, the program was shown to have been a significant factor in reducing youth murder rates by 33 percent and youth crime rates by 41 percent in the area. Importantly, the neighborhood residents who launched the initiative through a local steering committee continue to be highly involved and committed.³

The *Birmingham Safer Neighbourhood Programme* in England operates in eight high-crime and deprived areas of the city. The program relies on a community problem-solving approach called “Audit to Action.” After a steering committee conducts a comprehensive audit of crime and safety problems in the area, action groups are formed to develop and implement solutions. As a result, community members collaborate with police officers in training sessions and mapping crime patterns; engage in community policing efforts; and provide a range of family, recreational, and educational activities aimed at at-risk youth. After two years, the program reduced youth crime by an average of 29 percent and crime in general by 14 percent.⁴

In the Dominican Republic, the *Mi Barrio Seguro (My Safe Neighborhood)* program is targeted to Santo Domingo’s highest crime and drug-trafficking areas. Because it takes a comprehensive approach to community upgrading, it requires intensive cross-sectoral coordination led by the Ministry of Interior in collaboration with the Ministries of Education, Health, Youth, and Social Protection; the police; and, most importantly, community leaders. The program consists of increased police presence, infrastructure improvements (for example, road entries/exits and public recreational areas), more community policing, neighborhood security improvements (for example, streetlights), new classrooms, literacy programs, and cultural and athletic workshops for young people run by neighborhood organizations. An initial evaluation showed that there had been a 68 percent reduction in homicides in the pilot neighborhoods after only six months of implementation. The program also generated an improved opinion of the police force in 12 high-violence neighborhoods, which contributed to a further expansion of the program to other neighborhoods and cities.⁵

Stay Alive is a safe neighborhood program in the most violent slum areas of Belo Horizonte, Brazil. The program uses scanning, crime mapping, and analysis and assessment of priorities. A local Community Forum organizes monthly meetings to discuss crime-related problems and coordinate strategies with the police. While the program trains both the police and some community members in activities aimed at crime and violence prevention, military police are assigned to patrol hotspots. For young people, the program offers social support, as well as educational, leisure, and sports components, including workshops on violence, drugs, sex, STDs, arts performance, and computers. After 30 months, it was shown that the program had led to a 47 percent decrease in youth homicides, a 65 percent decrease in attempted homicides, and a 46 percent reduction in instances of bakery robberies (that is, people breaking in to steal food) in the targeted slums (this was during a period when there was an 11 percent increase in violent crime in the typically nonviolent areas of the city). In addition, the Community Forum has diminished residents’ fears of crime and has mobilized the community to solve local problems. Because of these successes, the government has expanded the *Stay Alive* program to four other clusters of violent slums in Belo Horizonte.⁶

Moving Forward: Factors for Success

- Successful safe neighborhood programs include three key factors: problem-solving, community-based policing initiatives with supervised youth activities, and improved public services and local infrastructure.
- A committed core of neighborhood residents must directly participate in the program by identifying problems, recommending solutions, and implementing actions.

- Steering committees or local groups are good forums for community involvement and give local people a role in developing policies while maintaining a working relationship with law enforcement officials.
- Safe neighborhood programs must be viewed as long-term interventions. They must therefore set benchmarks to ensure that their objectives are being met and be prepared to develop and redevelop strategies over time. The impact of behavioral changes must also be carefully monitored (such as the frequency of youth crime and violence incidents in the targeted zones both before and during the implementation of the program).
- For community policing, full-time community foot patrol officers must be assigned to work closely with residents. These officers must become acquainted with the residents, regularly attend community meetings, and prioritize resident-identified problems. It is important for officers to be open-minded, unbiased, and sensitive to the concerns and problems of others.
- To promote community-based programs for reaching at-risk youth, it is important to use existing public spaces such as schools or other community centers (building special youth centers is not cost-effective).
- Strong collaboration among the relevant sector ministries at the local level is imperative.

Endnotes

1. U.S. Department of Justice. 1999. *Report to Congress on Juvenile Violence Research*. Washington, D.C.
2. Sampson, R., S. Raudenbush, and F. Earls. 1997. "Neighborhoods and Violent Crime: A Multi-Level Study of Collective Efficacy." *Science* 277: 918–924.
3. U.S. Department of Justice. 2004. "Weed and Seed Best Practices: Evaluation-Based Series, Volume 2." U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Washington, D.C.
4. International Centre for the Prevention of Crime. 2005. *Urban Crime Prevention and Youth at Risk: Compendium of Promising Strategies from Around the World*. Montréal, Québec, Canada: International Centre for the Prevention of Crime.
5. World Bank and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). 2007. *Crime, Violence, and Development: Trends, Costs, and Policy Options in the Caribbean*. Report No. 37820. Joint report by World Bank and UNODC.
6. International Centre for the Prevention of Crime 2005.

Key Implementation Considerations	
Anticipated Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater citizen trust in local law enforcement, leading to an increased willingness by residents to report crimes and rely on official sanctions rather than street justice, resulting in reductions in general levels of conflict and aggression in the community as well as in specific criminal acts. • Targeted police patrols in areas with high rates of youth crime and violence must increase consequences and reduce crime. • Supervised activities for young people must serve as alternatives to crime and violence. • More and better basic services, public order, and overall security.
Secondary Effects	Increased social capital and possible increases in business development within the community
Responsible Agency	Ministry of National Security, Ministries of Health, Education and Public Works; local governments; local communities
Targeted Risk Group	Types I and II
Targeted Age Group	12–24
Cost Elements	Initial investments in such programs can lead to significant community savings in costs of crime (the £600,000 investment in the <i>Birmingham Safe Neighbourhood Programme</i> led to an estimated £6,406,840 in savings after only one year of operation as a result of lower crime rates). ^a
Necessary Initial Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities must feel able to trust in the honesty and fairness of the local police force. In communities where perceptions of police favoritism are high, it is not advisable to have the same police officers working the same shifts but rather to rotate shifts and responsibilities. At the same time, the program should find ways to increase public support for and trust in the police. • A confidential system for the public to lodge complaints against the police for corruption or misuse of power is necessary. • Community involvement is also critical, which can be fomented through existing community organizations or by establishing a steering committee.
Specific Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • United States: <i>Buffalo Weed and Seed Initiative</i> • England: <i>Birmingham Safer Neighbourhood Programme</i> • Dominican Republic: <i>Mi Barrio Seguro</i> • Brazil: <i>Stay Alive</i>
Level of Effectiveness (Strong Evidence or Emerging Evidence)	Strong evidence, if the program attends to local concerns, incorporates the three key principles (problem-solving, community-based policing initiatives with supervised youth activities, and improved community infrastructure) and is well implemented
Issues to Consider for Replication and Sustainability	It can be difficult to introduce community policing and citizen complaints into a hierarchical police culture.

Source: a. International Center for the Prevention of Crime 2005.