

WORKING TOGETHER FOR SAFE COMMUNITIES



Safe Communities Kit

**IDENTIFYING YOUR COMMUNITY'S  
CRIME PROBLEM:  
A Guide to Needs Assessment**



# Welcome to the Safe Communities Kit

This guide, *Identifying Your Community's Crime Problem: A Guide to Needs Assessment*, forms part of a series of booklets published for inclusion in British Columbia's Safe Communities Kit. The Safe Communities Kit was developed to assist communities and individuals in preventing crime and enhancing safety across British Columbia.

Other Safe Communities Kit booklets include:

- *An Overview of Crime Prevention and Community Safety Planning*
- *Getting Your Crime Prevention Strategies Underway: Project Planning Guide*
- *Splash and Ripple: Using Outcomes to Design and Guide Community Justice Work*
- *Working With the Media*

All of these booklets are available on the Safe Communities Kit CD-ROM, and can be downloaded from the Community Programs Division Website at:

[www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/community\\_programs](http://www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/community_programs).

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## Working Together For **SAFE COMMUNITIES**

**B.C.’s Provincial Safe Communities Working Group provided the expertise and advice needed to prepare this kit. The working group includes representatives from:**

- B.C. Block Parent Society
- B.C. Block Watch
- B.C. Coalition for Safer Communities
- B.C. Crime Prevention Association
- B.C. Association of Municipal Chiefs of Police
- B.C. Youth Police Network
- Children of the Street Society
- Community Programs Division, Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General
- B.C. Crime Stoppers
- B.C. Safe Schools and Communities Centre
- National Crime Prevention Centre
- RCMP “E” Division
- Union of B.C. Municipalities



# Identifying Your Community's Crime Problem

## A Guide to Needs Assessment

**Are you concerned about crime in your community? Do you want to make your neighbourhood a safer place to live? This booklet can help you get started.**

It describes the needs assessment process—a series of steps that will enable you to identify and describe your community's crime problems, so that you can plan an appropriate and effective response. It contains information on:

- What a needs assessment is
- How to begin
- What to do
- How to make your needs assessment project work
- What comes next

### What's a needs assessment?

#### A starting point for planning

To solve a problem, you must first know what it is. The first and most important step in any crime prevention activity is to fully understand the problem you want to address. A needs assessment helps you do just that. It's a systematic way of assembling the information you need to:

- Identify the crime problems in your community.
- Choose a crime problem to focus on.
- Analyze your target problem.

You'll gather this information from different sources, including community policing offices, municipal offices, and local residents. The information you collect will enable you to plan and deliver a targeted and effective response. Where possible, it is important to be creative regarding where and how you gather information. You may want to go beyond your immediate community.

#### An opportunity for community participation

A needs assessment is also a good way to spark people's interest, give them a chance to speak their

minds, and encourage them to get involved. When people are consulted about problems, they are more likely to participate in solving them. Experience has shown that crime prevention projects are more likely to succeed if they enjoy community support and participation.

#### A way to make sure you use your resources wisely

Careful planning will help ensure that the resources you invest in your crime prevention work are well spent. Money, time, effort, and the energy and goodwill generated by neighbours helping one another are valuable and shouldn't be wasted.



...Without planning and analysis, crime prevention works about as well as if we took an airplane full of prescription drugs and dropped them over the city. Citizens would take whichever drug they found on the ground whether they were sick or not, or whether the cure actually matched the disease. There is an incredible amount of energy going into crime prevention across the country. However, much of this energy is being wasted on programs that are not targeted on particular problems.

- Rick Linden

*What Works in Crime Prevention and  
How to Make Sure it Works for You (1998)*



# How to Begin?

**Before starting your needs assessment, make sure you know the community you are dealing with.**

When people hear the word “community,” they often think of a geographical area—a neighbourhood, a city, a reserve, an apartment complex. But “community” also refers to groups of people who may not live in the same area but share something in common, such as age, culture, profession, or interests.

A school is a community. Offices and other workplaces are too. If you have a small business, your community may consist of other merchants and storeowners along the same street. If you’re concerned about drug use taking place in the park where your grandchildren play, your community may be composed of the other people who bring their children to the same park.

Defining your community is important. It will help you decide who should be involved in your crime prevention efforts—who can help you with the needs assessment, who can provide information, who are affected by crime problems in your community, who can contribute manpower and other resources, who can bring

different perspectives and opinions to enrich your problem-solving process.

When you go to your community for help, consider approaching -

- People who know something about the issues
- People who are affected by the problem
- People who can provide political or financial support
- People who have a stake in making sure the project succeeds
- People who are genuinely interested and want to help
- People who come from different cultures
- People who have special needs
- People who work in the field of crime prevention





# What to Do?

**There are three steps in the needs assessment process.**

**Step 1:** Identify the crime problems your community faces. You can get information from different sources other people in your community, local police, your community policing office, schools, community crime prevention groups, local newspapers, and so on.

**Step 2:** Choose a crime problem to focus on. When selecting your target problem, you'll have to weigh different factors. For example, how serious is this

problem compared with others? How important is it to your community?

**Step 3:** Analyze your target problem and assemble as much information about it as you can. Your problem description will help you decide on your crime prevention response.

Don't think you need to do all of this yourself. As you'll see later, you can get help.

## Step 1 - What Are The Problems?

**Identifying your community's crime problems is the first step. You may already have some idea of what these problems are, or you may simply want to make your community safer than it already is. In either case, you'll need to do some research.**

### Information to look for

- Facts and figures about crime in your community
- Community members' perceptions about these crime problems, their fears and concerns
- Any ideas for solutions and change
- A list of people and groups who can help

Solicitor General, Police Services Division web site ([http://www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/police\\_services/publications/index.htm](http://www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/police_services/publications/index.htm)).

### Where to go for information

- **Local police department.** The police keep records of all reported crimes. Their reports can give you a good idea of what crimes have taken place in your community, where they happened, and how frequently they occurred. They can also give you information on the impact of these crimes—the injuries and financial losses people and businesses have experienced. Many police departments have computer systems that can provide detailed crime statistics very quickly. Meet with your community police officer or a police department crime analyst to find out what information they can give you. Please note that you may have to work with a "Freedom of Information" coordinator to access police records. Municipal crime statistics are also available through the Ministry of Public Safety and

- **Schools, organizations, and agencies.** Not all crimes are reported to the police. However, community groups and community centres may keep records of their own and may be willing to help you compile information on unreported crimes. For example, small business owners usually document problems they've had with graffiti, shoplifting, and vandalism. School authorities will very likely keep files on bullying incidents and other forms of school violence. And crime prevention organizations can offer advice on local issues to examine and strategies that would be effective for your particular community.

- **Your community.** Your information won't be complete if you don't consult members of your own community. Gathering information from people is important because you need more than just statistics to tell you what your community really needs. There are many different questions you can pose:



- Do people feel safe?
  - What makes them feel unsafe?
  - What do they think the community's crime problems are?
  - Have they ever been victimized directly or indirectly by any of these crimes?
  - Which of these crimes has had the most impact on them?
  - How should the community deal with that crime problem?
  - What would make them feel safer?
- **Media.** Local newspapers carry articles on crimes and on public opinion about crime in the community. Crime victims often write letters to editors, expressing their concerns and sometimes their suggestions for solutions.

### How to get the information

At this point you're probably wondering how you will get the information you need from these sources. Besides reading police reports and newspaper articles, and meeting with crime prevention specialists, you can use the following approaches:

- **Surveys.** These are considered the most systematic way of gathering information from the community. You'll need to develop a survey questionnaire select a sample group (best if chosen randomly), decide how to distribute the questionnaires, and analyze the responses. Mailed questionnaires may be the

least expensive method of gathering information because you can reach many people with one mailing. The survey results are generally easy to summarize, and those who respond can be assured of privacy. However, response rates are usually low (about 20 to 50%). Also, since some people are more likely than others to return completed questionnaires, the responses you get may not be representative of the community.

- **Telephone interviews.** This approach is similar to the mailed survey questionnaires except that the information is gathered by phone. Response rates are higher because if the interviewers can't reach respondents right away, they can always call back. Organizing teams of volunteer interviewers will help you save on cost. However, your volunteers will need training and they must be willing to donate a lot of time for the project.
- **Face-to-face interviews.** These interviews can be done either one-on-one or in small groups (often called "focus groups"). They are more time-consuming than the other methods, but they can also yield more detailed information and more in-depth responses to your questions. Interviewers will definitely need training to conduct the interviews effectively and understand the results.



### Working Together For Safe Communities

Quantitative and qualitative data provide different perspectives, and both perspectives are valuable and should inform your response to your community's crime concerns. It is best to use quantitative data to place it within the relevant social context.

**Quantitative data** includes social indicators, information and fixed-response items (yes or no responses) from a survey or interview or your community service information. Quantitative data is information you can count or measure, such as the number of arrests for certain offences, the number of offenders, the number of times a community services is used, etc.

**Qualitative data** are generally obtained by way of open-ended questions through interviews or focus groups. Qualitative data provide a uniquely personal perspective that is difficult to capture. Qualitative information can be much more difficult to summarize. You will need to read every response carefully to extract the common themes from the responses.



- **Meetings** with key persons and community groups. You can also meet with community leaders who can give you information on the “big picture” and speak for the community as a whole. These include local government officials, leaders of ethnic groups, representatives of civic associations, and criminal justice workers, among others. One advantage of meeting with community leaders is that you can learn about initiatives they are involved in that may be helpful to your crime prevention project. They may also be able to help you contact agencies and groups who can support your efforts.
- **Community forums.** Aside from meeting with community leaders, you can invite local residents and representatives of community groups to a forum to talk about their safety needs, how these needs can be met, and what they can do to help.
- **Community Field Observations.** People can describe a situation to you but no amount of information can equal the insight gained by experiencing a situation as it unfolds. Field

observations - visiting the site or environment where the problem is occurring or the population impacted by the problem - will help you gain that insight. They can also be used to confirm information you’ve obtained from community members, view other issues or situations that may contribute to the problem, and elaborate on issues which may be unclear from statistics or surveys alone. When collecting field observation data, it is important to have some background knowledge on what to expect once you arrive at this site. You will need to know where to go; what time of day or night is best to complete your observations; and whether there are any safety issues or other matters you need to be aware of. If there are safety concerns, you may wish to conduct your field observations during a ride along with local police. Think about the best way to record your information before arriving at the site. For example, taking pictures of graffiti, counting discarded beer cans or taking written notes are effective ways to record your field observations.

## Step 2 - Where Should You Focus Your Resources?

**Now that you have an idea of your community's crime situation, what do you do with all this information? In Step 2, you'll use the information to set priorities.**

As much as you may want to, you can’t deal with all your community’s crime prevention needs at once. You will need to choose one crime problem to focus on. Consider two main factors: how important the issue is to your community, and your capacity to deal with it. Here are some questions to think about:

- How serious is this problem compared with others?
- Have incidents of this type been occurring more often over the past several years?
- Do community members see this issue as a priority? Is this what they are most concerned about?
- What impact has it had on the community? Has it

resulted in injury to persons or loss of property or both?

- Are others already adequately addressing the problem?
- How easy would it be to prevent?
- Will you be able to gather the volunteers, funds, time, and other resources required to deal with this problem? Are there issues that stand out because of public interest/public profile, funding availability, and skills in the community?

To make sound decisions in setting priorities, your working group will need to review the results from your data collection in Step 1, such as statistical records, field





observations, and opinions expressed in interviews, surveys and focus groups. Your working group will also

rely on its members' experience, judgement and knowledge of the community.



### Working Together For Safe Communities

**Sometimes you can establish priorities by looking at opportunities.**

For example, your working group may have identified two significant problems. One problem is very challenging and the other involves implementing a quick, relatively straightforward solution that requires limited funding. It might be wiser to focus your efforts immediately on the problem with the straightforward solution and then begin a long-term plan to address your challenging priority once your working group has gained more experience. By doing this, you will be able to quickly improve safety or eliminate problems and provide your working group with a sense of accomplishments early on. In addition, by first tackling the problem with a straightforward solution, you may facilitate movement on the more challenging priority.

## Step 3 - What do You Know About Your Target Problem?

**When you've selected your target problem, you'll need to spend some time analyzing and describing it in detail. A detailed description will help you plan an effective crime prevention response.**

Review all the information you've gathered so far and see whether you have enough data on the factors listed below. If not, you may need to collect more information.

- Who are the victims? (Age, sex, race, ethnic group, occupation)
- Who are the offenders? (Age, sex, race, ethnic group, occupation, criminal history, possible motives)
- When were the crimes committed? (Time of day, month, year)
- Where were they committed? (To or from school, around the local store, etc.)
- Was there anything distinctive in the way they were committed? (For example, home invasions)
- What factors created an opportunity for the crimes to be committed? (For example, poor lighting around victims' homes; neglected or unstable neighbourhoods; lack of supervision for children and teens)

**Analyzing the target problem also means asking why. In other words, look into the root causes of the crime.**

For example, a community is concerned about young people hanging around a local park at night, making noise and vandalizing property. The crime prevention committee's initial perception is that the problem is caused by the lack of lights around the park. But lack of lighting may not be the only cause. A less obvious reason may be that the youth have nowhere else to hang out and have fun in a constructive way. If the committee builds its response around increased lighting without addressing the lack of recreational opportunities, its efforts may fail to have an impact on the problem of late-night noise and vandalism. Carefully analyzing the problem will help you develop a more effective response.

Crime prevention efforts can focus on defending against crime or tackling the social and economic conditions that are most likely to create offenders. Both



approaches work, but crime prevention experts agree that it is more effective to invest in programs that deal with the root causes of crime. This may seem like a complicated and difficult task, but as long as your

community understands that change takes time and requires a long-term commitment, the effort and resources you invest will pay off in a safer community.

## Developing Recommendations

Once you have analyzed your priority crime problem, your working group can begin to develop recommendations. These recommendations will help guide the development of a crime prevention response after your needs assessment is completed.

In developing recommendations for action your working group will want to ensure that you:

- **Become familiar with existing services.** The solution may lie in a more creative use of existing services or you may need to create something new.
- **Research what other communities have done.** You can learn from the experience of others, both successful and unsuccessful efforts. There has been lots written on 'best practices' approaches that have been tried and have been successful in dealing with many crime problems. For more ideas visit the National Crime Prevention Strategy's

website at [www.prevention.gc.ca](http://www.prevention.gc.ca).

- **Assess the need for new funding or the likelihood of receiving funding.** There are many ways to gain community support for your crime prevention strategies. Your business community may be able to provide assistance, either financial or in-kind support. Grant funding programs are also available. See *Getting Your Prevention Strategies Underway: Project Planning Guide* for more information.
- **Expand your team.** Review who needs to be involved in the implementation of your crime prevention strategy and include those who may be in a position to help you address the problem or the solution. These people may be different than your existing working group members.

## Preparing a Description of Your Target Crime Problem

A written summary of your needs assessment and a detailed description of your target crime problem will help guide you in planning your response. Your report should include:

- **Background.** Outline why you completed a needs assessment and what you wanted to accomplish. Describe the events or reasons that led to your needs assessment and the people involved in completing it.
- **Methodology.** Describe the methods used to collect your information; types of information collected and methods used for analysis and summary. It is important to explain these details for all types of information you have collected,

including quantitative and qualitative data.

- **Findings.** Summarize the overall findings and outline your priorities, including the target crime problem you have chosen to address, or the order in which you will address a series of problems.
- **Recommendations.** Provide a summary of your recommended crime prevention strategies.



# Making Your Needs Assessment Project Work For Your Community

**To complete a needs assessment, you will need some help. You will also need a plan.**

## Getting organized

Invite members of your community to form a working group for the needs assessment project. At your first meeting, talk about the following:

- The role of the group
- What the group needs to do its job
- How the tasks will be divided among group members
- A way of keeping records of your decisions and activities

When your group is organized, schedule another meeting so that you can prepare your needs assessment action plan.

## Preparing a plan

- Your plan doesn't have to be a complex document, but it should contain all the information you need to move from one step to the next. Work on this plan as a group, and make sure everyone has a copy.
- Identify the people or groups whose input you want. Make sure you have their contact information.
- List the questions you want to ask and the information you need to collect.
- Decide what approaches you will take: meetings, surveys, interviews, and so on.
- List the resources you'll need to carry out your needs assessment activities: volunteers, funding, materials, technical help, and so on. Decide how and from where you will get these resources.
- Draw up a schedule of activities. Make sure to assign a reasonable deadline for each activity.

## Getting started

Here are some tips to help you conduct a successful needs assessment:

- Make sure all group members know what they are supposed to do and when it needs to be done.

- Gather resources before they are actually needed.
- Use a monitoring chart to keep track of tasks that must be finished by a certain deadline. Checklists, schedules, and brief reports can also help.
- Keep records. Invoices, receipts, and other financial records should be properly filed and kept in a safe place.
- Encourage everyone involved to give feedback. Make changes to your plan as needed.
- Once you complete all your needs assessment activities, schedule a time for your group to review the data.

## Accessing resources

Funding support is available for community needs assessment projects. Two examples are the *Community Mobilization Fund* of the National Crime Prevention Centre and the *Safe Streets and Safe Schools Fund* of the Community Programs Division, Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General. If you would like more information, contact these agencies directly:

### **National Crime Prevention Centre Justice Canada**

900 840 Howe Street  
Vancouver, B.C. V6Z 2S9  
Telephone: 604-666-3686  
Fax: 604-666-9955  
Web site: [www.prevention.gc.ca](http://www.prevention.gc.ca)

### **Community Programs Division Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General**

201 4180 Lougheed Highway  
Burnaby, B.C. V5C 6A7  
Telephone: 604-660-2605  
Toll free: 1-866-668-2137  
Fax: 604-775-2674  
Web site:  
[www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/community\\_programs](http://www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/community_programs)



# What Comes Next?

**As discussed on page 9, the final product of a needs assessment is a detailed description of your community's target crime problem. This statement will be the foundation on which you can build an effective crime prevention response.**

The next phase of your work is preparing an action plan to address the crime problem you've chosen. This is followed by implementation and evaluation of the plan. The evaluation will tell you whether your crime prevention efforts have been successful.

Information on planning and evaluating community safety projects can be found in the following Safe Communities Kit booklets:

- *Getting Your Crime Prevention Strategies Underway: Project Planning Guide*
- *Splash and Ripple: Using Outcomes to Design and Guide Community Justice Work.*

If you need help at any point of the needs assessment process or in analyzing the information you have gathered, contact the Community Programs Division, Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General at:

604-660-2605

1-866-668-2137

SGCPD@gems2.gov.bc.ca



