



www.accpa.org

From the Desk of Dr. John Winterdyk, Interim President
Some reflections on preventing crime and reducing its 'footprint'

Those who do not prevent a crime when they can, encourages it....

First, thank you for visiting the ACCPA website and the launching of this new column which we hope will become a regular monthly feature.

As this is the first entry, please allow me to provide a more general introduction to what has inspired ACCPA to become an association that strives to strike a balance between conventional formal criminal justices responses (i.e., police, courts, & corrections) to evidence-informed alternatives generally referred to as crime prevention strategies and initiatives.

As much as crime is a social construct that is reflective of the norms and values of a society, it also speaks to the social ills within a society. That is, there is a rich body of research which suggests that we are essentially social beings who strive for a sense of belonging, a sense of communalism, and being empathetic towards others. As the saying goes: 'no man/woman is an island unto him/herself'. However, when people are confronted with challenges of acceptance, assimilation, or simply access to equitable opportunity this tends to promote dis-ease not only within individuals-but also within societies. This sense of dis-ease increases the risk of possible rebellious, anti-social behaviour – and in some cases behaviour that is proscribed as illegal in accordance with the Canadian Criminal Code.

In spite of what official statistics might tell us about the ebb and flow of crime trends and patterns, crime is omnipresent. Who does NOT know someone who has been a victim/survivor of a crime – be it theft, break-and-enter, vandalism, fraud, etc.? When was the last time you watched/listened to the news without hearing about a crime being committed somewhere?

The fact that Canada's criminal justice (CJ) budget has seldom, if ever gone down from one year to the next, and this in spite of the fact that the crime rate and Crime Severity Index has declined since the mid-1990s, is a compelling indication that as a society we value safety, security, and a sense of freedom to come and go without fear, or risk, of being victimized.

- In 2008–09, the Government of Alberta's expenditures related to public security and corrections totalled approximately half a billion dollars – Alberta Crime Reduction Framework, 2010.

- The Alberta Crime Prevention Framework also noted: “it is estimated that the loss, fear, trauma, and long-term physical injury related to criminal victimization in Alberta equals about five billion dollars a year.”

In 1980, our CJS budget was around \$4.0 billion and by 2006 it had more than doubled to just over \$9 billion. In 2006, it represented the 10th consecutive year that the CJ budget had increased. The most recent estimates peg the criminal justice budget to be around \$13 billion a year – that is roughly \$371 per person/year! What the budget does not take into account is the collateral costs in terms of health, mental health, property, etc. On an optimistic note, the CJ budget has provided us with more sophisticated crime fighting equipment and technology, we have better trained law enforcement and corrections officers, more secure prisons, and we continue to refine and expand the judiciary (e.g., drug courts, mental health courts, peer courts, etc.) in an effort to accommodate the diversity and presenting issues of the offending population. Yet, while police-reported crime data has been declining since the mid-1990s, self-reported victimization and fear of crime data show that rates of victimization have been fairly stable for over a decade and fear of crime over a five year period also hasn't changed significantly. These types of incongruencies have been the focus of numerous research projects but in essence it has been generally acknowledged that the average Canadian is relatively naive about crime and the criminal justice system in general. For example, what is the difference between parole and probation, what is the difference between summary conviction and indictable offences? Is Canada more punitive than other Western countries? Most of what the average Canadian knows about crime is derived through the mass media and the news which is disseminated is often skewed. For example, we are more likely to read/hear about violent crimes but not the number of grow ops or break-and-enters, or acts of vandalism. We are also more likely to learn about cases involving human trafficking, major violations by large corporations, etc. which although having a potential significant impact on society, are comparatively infrequent when compared to conventional crimes (e.g., property crime, robbery, personal offences, etc.). If the incident rate of crime is truly declining, why do we continue to invest multiple millions of dollars on home security, personal safety devices, have multiple levels of security for our personal accounts, etc.? How has embracing a 'fortress' mentality and/or getting 'tough on crime' enabled us to address the root causes of the problem?

Nevertheless, the conventional criminal justice system (CJS) serves a vital function in being the formal mechanism for the state to hold people accountable in a fair and equitable manner. Yet, even if the police are quick to apprehend an offender, it can often take several years before the person(s) are brought to justice. Furthermore, the more complex the crime, the more difficult and costly to exact justice.

All these conventional measures share one approach in common – that is, the CJS is *reactive* in its' response to crime. The CJS responds action only after a digression has happened. Fortunately, our human rights convention provides protection against unfair and/or unjust

treatment but as has also been well documents, once someone 'gets away' with something that is questionable the odds of repetitive behaviour increases the more often you get away with it!

So, is there a legal alternative which is more cost efficient, more cost effective, and less intrusive, and one that can thwart conventional and unconventional crime? Ironically, we know and have used the alternative in a wide range of iterations for generations. It is crime prevention.

To paraphrase a Canadian colleague, we are in dire need of a paradigm/ideological shift from 'paying for law and order' to 'investing in public order'. More specifically but not exhaustively, that means we need to invest in our children, or as a friend recently said to me "never give up on a child!"; invest in educating people about identity theft, fraud, risk of domestic violence, property crime, gang related homicides, personal violence, sexual assault and exploitation, the disproportionately high rate of victimization of Aboriginal people, etc. We need to invest in evidence-informed *proactive* strategies that can move us towards improving the quality of life and the safety of future generations of Albertans.

To this end, ACCPA's mission is to continue to evolve to be the leader in crime prevention knowledge, dissemination, and innovation. Evidence clearly points to the fact that prevention is not only more cost efficient and effective but that it enlivens a sense of community support and participation and ultimately reduces the burden on an already overworked and expensive crime control model whose track record is modest at best.

In future columns we will focus on specific issues but we also welcome suggestions or requests, and if you feel so inclined, submission. If so, all entries should be limited to no more than 1,000 words and will remain the discretion of the Board as to whether it is suitable for the ACCPA website.