

Harper's Crime Strategy: Closing the Doors on Youth

On November 12th, 2010, the federal government announced an investment of \$45 million to increase the number of beds in Manitoba jails. Steven Harper's Conservative government has made it well known that getting tough on crime is a top priority. While there is evidence that crime rates in Canada are lower than they have been in decades, it is also true that violent crime remains a very real problem and especially so in neighbourhoods with high rates of poverty. The correlation between crime and poverty tells us that attending to the root causes of crime is an essential component of a crime reduction strategy. Yet the Harper plan centres on an increase in punitive measures as a method of deterring criminal behaviour, while at the same time cutting funding for successful crime prevention programs. This move is contrary to a long list of longitudinal research posted on the federal governments website that shows crime prevention through social development to be effective.

According to the recent CCPA national report *The Fear Factor*, Harper's tough

on crime agenda stems from a report of the Correctional Service Canada Review Panel in 2007, called *Roadmap to Strengthening Public Safety*. The report recommended tough measures with no recognition of human rights or the negative implications of such policies; the report provided little rationale for this drastic change in the direction for the way the government deals with crime. It is clear that Harper has embraced the punitive recommendations made in *The Roadmap* by proposing and implementing legislation such as mandatory minimum sentences, ending the "double-time" credit while in pre-trial custody, abolition of statutory release, abolition of faint hope, tougher young offender laws, and limiting the use of conditional sentencing.

At the same time Harper's government gets tough on crime, it has cut back on supports to programs aimed at keeping kids safe and out of trouble. This is

the case in Winnipeg's inner city. Within the past five years, five successful programs were implemented in Winnipeg to address the needs of inner-city youth and to prevent their participation in gang activities. But the new federal policy direction has shifted the interest away from prevention, and federal funding for each of these programs will end in March 2011.

Each of these programs has shown to be an important resource for youth and

a benefit to the broader community. **West Central Youth Outreach**, run by the Spence Neighbourhood Association, helps youth

in the West End and Spence neighbourhood to steer away from engaging in gang activities. The program provides youth with mentoring, outreach, and support circles for youth and their families. **Circle of Courage**, run by Ka Ni Kanichihk, works with youth to deter gang activity in the Centennial neigh-

"...the evidence shows that prevention works..."



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bourhood. Youth involved in this program develop life skills, resiliency, are provided with counselling and education supports, and become involved in cultural reclamation programming.

Project O.A.S.I.S., sponsored by New Directions for Children, Youth, Adults and Families, specifically helps African refugee/newcomer youth who are at high risk for gang involvement. This program provides education, employment, and recreation resources, and works closely with families and meets the additional needs of youth who often have experienced considerable violence in their home countries. **Turning the Tides** is run by Ndinawemaaganag Endaawaad Inc and works with gang-involved youth in the North End. The program provides mentoring and life skill development through engaging the youth in community services and paid employment programs. The **Just TV Pilot Project**, sponsored by the Broadway Neighbourhood Community Centre, works with gang-involved youth in the West Broadway neighbourhood. Participants are provided with social resources and the opportunity to express themselves creatively through music and video programming. The elimination of federal funding puts all five programs at risk, closing yet another door for inner-city youth.

The positive effects that these programs have must not be underestimated. First and foremost, these programs provide a safe place for young people. Program staff have been able to build relationships, trust, and confidence with kids who are, because of the poverty-related circumstances in which they grow up, instilled with the

belief that the social system is completely untrustworthy. As one program leader noted, these programs “have taken the place of family for some kids” and this is critical to help them resist the lure of gangs.

It is important to note that vulnerable youth are not the only ones who benefit from preventative programs. Steering kids away from crime keeps us *all* safe and saves us money. Prevention approaches give kids the tools they need to resist the lure of gangs and make better choices. Incarceration can have the opposite effect, strengthening their ties to the criminal world.

Cutting funding to programs like West Central Youth Outreach, Circle of Courage, Project O.A.S.I.S., Turning the Tides and Just TV Pilot Project makes no sense. As noted by one program leader, “dropping the programs defeats what they wanted us to do in the first place”, which is to prevent kids from becoming involved in street gang activity. By cutting funding to the programs they are throwing the kids back into lives of violence and crime. And that costs us all in the long-term. As described by Mark Totten (2008), in the report *Promising Practices for Addressing Youth in Gangs*, the best prevention programs are not only more effective over the long term, they are far less expensive than incarceration. The average annual cost of incarceration in federal prisons is now \$100,000 per inmate, according to the most recent report by Howard Saper, Canada’s Correctional Investigator. By comparison, the programs described above cost between \$9,507 to \$19,645 per

person each year. And this doesn’t include the long term economic benefits that result when we steer youth in a positive direction. If even one child is steered away from a life of crime, prevention vs. detention is cost effective.

The evidence shows that prevention works. But the Harper government has chosen to ignore the evidence, opting for more jails and tougher penalties while at the same time cutting back on programs that give young people hope.

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