SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IS CRIME PREVENTION
LASTING SOLUTIONS TO SAFER COMMUNITIES FORUM

Wayne N. Renke
Professor and Vice-Dean, Faculty of Law, University of Alberta
March 12, 2008

I've been asked to speak not because of who I am or because of what I've done, but because I was a member of a team - the Crime Reduction and Safe Communities Task Force.

And with respect to this Task Force, while I believe that its work was important, I can't claim that it has already had a dramatic impact on the way we approach keeping our communities safe.

At this point, all we can do is wait and see what effect the Task Force's work will have.

There is reason to be optimistic:

- The government has accepted 29 of our 31 recommendations (or "only" 29 of 31 recommendations, according to a local newscast)

- The government has already taken up one of our key recommendations and established a Safe Communities Secretariat, which will be headed by an Executive Leader.

- In the election, the Conservative party platform on crime sounded many of the themes raised in the Task Force Report

Given these indications, it's fair to judge that there's a solid prospect

that the types of approaches to crime prevention and reduction found in the Task Force report will be pursued in Alberta.

I think it's also fair to observe that the Task Force report has provided a focus and touchstone for provincial governmental thinking about crime prevention, and has helped to encourage discussion about the approaches that it advocates.

This Conference, in fact, is at least in part a response to the report.

My hope is that five years from now, the Task Force's report will be regarded as an important catalyst for change in Alberta.

I did say "catalyst" - what I mean is this:

Both on the level of ideas and on the level of practice, crime prevention work is happening and has been happening in Alberta. It's the work that many of you do and have done for years.

What the Task Force did was to listen, to gather, to reflect, to synthesize, and ultimately to present what it heard back to government and to the people of Alberta.

The report is designed to induce a reaction from government. If the report is successful, the result will be a more coordinated, integrated, and comprehensive approach to crime prevention by government, that builds on, develops, and supports the initiatives that you are already pursuing.

If you'll concede that this is at least one possible future for the Task Force report, you may be concerned about whether the report will elicit the right kind of reaction; you may be concerned that in attempting to reflect, the report may have distorted. You may be concerned that the

report will have an effect, but the effect will not support the type of work that you're doing.

To address those concerns, I'll review the Task Force's mandate, composition, and process; recount a few experiences the Task Force had while on the road; and give an overview of the main themes of the Task Force's report and our public consultations.

MANDATE, COMPOSITION, AND PROCESS

The mandate of the Task Force was straightforward, and was established in its terms of reference.

Its purpose was "To submit a report outlining cost effective solutions to prevent and reduce crime in Alberta, enhance community safety and improve confidence in the criminal justice system." Furthermore, it was "To ensure interested stakeholders and members of the public have a voice in the development of a provincial crime reduction strategy that provides an integrated response to crime, including: education and awareness, prevention, intervention, treatment and rehabilitation, enforcement and prosecution, and re-integration."

Who was sent out to do this work? Nine Albertans, with very different backgrounds and perspectives. I think you'll see that it was not a tame committee:

The Chair was Heather Forsythe, who'd been an MLA since 1993, and had served as Minister of Children's Services, and Solicitor General.

Michael Boyd, Chief of the Edmonton Police Service.

Rick McIver, a Calgary Alderman, member of the Alberta Urban

Municipalities Board of Directors, and a member of the Calgary Police Commission.

Susan Hughson, Crown counsel with over 17 years experience at all levels of court, including the Supreme Court of Canada, who's also been involved in justice education initiatives.

Karen Venables, whose son Devin was killed by a single punch after he walked away from a fight, who's director of a Foundation established to raise the awareness of youth about the consequences of violence, and who speaks at schools and conferences about her family's experience in losing a son and brother.

Jennifer Scheible, who had been a troubled teenager, became a drug addict and lived on the streets. She turned her life around, and is now the Executive Senior Peer Counsellor for the Alberta Adolescent Recovery Centre in Calgary.

Dwight Oliver, Reeve of Clearwater County and a third generation farmer, with 30 years experience on a variety of community boards and volunteer associations, including the Sundre RCMP Community Advisory Committee.

Dr. Chester Cunningham, founder and executive director of what's known now as Native Counseling Services of Alberta, who's set up numerous programs in the criminal justice system including alcohol education programs, liaison programs in provincial and federal prisons, and courtworker programs.

What did this group of nine do? It went on the road. Fourteen Alberta communities in 28 days:
Banff
Brooks
Calgary
Edmonton
Edson
Fort McMurray
Grande Prairie
High Level
Hobbema
Lethbridge
Medicine Hat
Red Deer
St. Paul
Wainwright

At each community, we listened to stakeholders, and we listened to members of the public.

We read research material provided by our Alberta Justice support staff.

We attended presentations by Dr. Irvin Waller.

We attended a two-day symposium held in Calgary.

We reviewed the results of an online survey set up for the Task Force and submissions to the Task Force.

Finally, over a series of meetings, we met, discussed what we had learned, and produced the report.

EXPERIENCES

The experiences I and the other Task Force members had over the course of this process were both immeasurably rewarding and humbling. We all got a crash course in grass roots social engagement in Alberta.

I'd just like to mention a few of these experiences:

In High Level, a group of us took a ride with the officer in charge of the RCMP detachment. He took us through various areas in and around the town, pointing out the hot spots, and discussed issues respecting street people. He stopped and talked to groups of young people; he knew some by name and learned others' names. That he cared about the people in his community was evident. He provided a model of community policing.

In Brooks, we heard from a high school principal who told us that over 70 languages were spoken by his students. He talked about the stresses created by massive immigration into that small community. He talked about the complex tensions that existed not only between long term residents and the newcomers, but between different groups of newcomers, who were at odds in their countries of origin. He talked about the responsibilities of employers who bring workers into their communities.

In Lethbridge, we heard from a father whose son was in and out of court on over 40 charges. The father thanked the police, the courts, and corrections for finally getting his son into programs that allowed him to get a grip on his problems and straighten out his life. What struck me about this father's story was the complete absence of any mention of any defence lawyers playing any part in the solution for his son. Of course, we don't know what the facts were. I'm not saying that the lawyers did anything wrong. No doubt they were doing what they had been taught,

in the traditional arenas where they practice their craft. No doubt they were doing their jobs well by the rules that apply there. But this account made me wonder how well my Law School is preparing our graduates for some of the newer non-traditional means of dealing with social issues in the criminal context.

We travelled to Hobbema. I do not wish to exaggerate or oversimply the conditions there. What is true is that there are some areas that are grim - which I know could be said of many other communities. Some of us visited a rec centre that offers programs for young people. A young woman who worked there told us about finding weapons in the van she used to transport children, and of being threatened with weapons. Yet for all that - which would have been enough to drive many of us away after a single incident - she got up every morning and went to work and did good in her community. Despite the gangs and the graffiti and the knives, she was there making a difference, day in, day out. And for her it was no big deal - just another day at work. Her everyday courage was both remarkable and inspiring.

Finally, a corporate or merged experience: at every stop, we heard from groups of Albertans who were involved in various crime prevention initiatives - rural crime watch, victim services organizations, organizations dealing with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, family support groups, police officers, members of drug or violence action committees. The sheer quantity of crime prevention work that is already been done in Alberta is staggering.

as for THEMES

We travelled, we heard from Albertans - what did we learn? The details are in our report: we established five priority areas - drugs and alcohol, the justice system, families children and youth, policing, and community action - including action in and with Aboriginal communities. We set

out our recommendations under those headings - I won't repeat those.

But there are six main themes at work in the report and in what we heard from Albertans. And please note that this is one professor's identification of overarching themes, based on the report and my experience - this thematic account has not been vetted by the other Task Force members - although I do hope they'd agree with me.

First, what we heard across Alberta was a focus on prevention. That may seem unsurprising, hardly worth the price of a bus ticket, let alone a Task Force. There was, though, a singular lack of emphasis on desert, on just deserts, on proportionality, or on making the punishment fit the crime - an almost complete absence of the rhetoric of retribution and denunciation.

Instead, the emphasis was on action rather than reaction, on stopping problems before they occur, rather than in engaging in a moral accounting later. The emphasis was pragmatic and empirical, on blocking or minimizing concrete harm through real-world actions, and not on any metaphysical balancing of harms.

The second theme of our recommendations and of what we heard from Albertans is that crime prevention or reduction is a pan-systemic goal, or a goal at each stage that leads to and through the criminal justice system. If you are not burdened by a law degree, this too may seem completely unsurprising. If you are burdened by a law degree, you may have a tendency to view problems as legal problems, or treat circumstances as problems only when they can be fitted into a legal perspective. A lawyer (such as myself) might have expected the prevention discussion to focus on the criminal justice system.

In fact, there was far more discussion of issues relating to families and parenting, children's education, health and wellness issues - including the availability of treatment facilities and trained professionals -, homelessness, and community integrity. Problems generated by the resource boom, including the influx of transient populations and the growing disparity between rich and poor figured prominently. There was a strong emphasis on supporting families and on supporting children at home and in school, so that their living conditions and persons around them would not dispose them towards criminal activity. There was an emphasis on creating conditions in which gang membership would not appear attractive or would not appear to be the only viable career choice. There was an emphasis on treatment for individuals with addictions or psychological challenges that may dispose them towards contact with the criminal justice system.

Across Alberta there was a strong emphasis on limiting drug and alcohol abuse. Problems radiate from this abuse. The destructive consequences of alcohol abuse are manifold - it contributes to family violence and family breakdown; it thereby puts children at risk, both environmentally or developmentally - as in the case of FASD; those who are drunk or stoned increase their chances of committing offences; addicts may steal to pay for their habits.

On the supply side, the purchase of illegal drugs puts money in the pocket of organized crime. It's an investment in criminality.

Between the consequences and supply lies demand: we heard repeatedly of the need to reduce the motivation to abuse drugs or alcohol - although this is a very hard problem to solve.

The prevention perspective persists at the point where individuals do come into conflict with the law.

On the one hand, targeted police activities were supported, to prevent the minority of offenders who commit the majority of crimes from preying on communities. Targeting by police was also recommended for "hot spots", areas in communities that have abnormally high levels of anti-social activity. Even more basically, the report and Albertans supported hiring more police officers, particularly to service areas outside the big cities. More police officers should mean better enforcement and greater deterrence through their presence.

On the other hand, there was significant support for diverting individuals who can be helped and are willing to make changes out of the traditional justice system processing.

For those who are processed through the justice system, there was support for the establishment or maintenance of streams of therapeutic courts - whether specializing in mental illness, drug addiction, or family violence.

For offenders who proceed to sentencing, there was an emphasis on dispositions that would be meaningful for the offenders and their communities. Sentences served in the community should have appropriate conditions imposed and should be tightly supervised. Failures to comply with conditions should have consequences.

For offenders who have been incarcerated, there was concern for the establishment or maintenance of programs to assist in their rehabilitation, and to ensure that they have a fighting chance of making the transition back to life in their communities.

The prevention perspective also embraced traditional litigation processes. A refrain common to the report and to submissions by Albertans was that the justice system operates too slowly. The concern was not to "hang 'em quick," but to ensure that there is a reasonably proximate relationship between the alleged commission of an offence or arrest and the social response to that act, as administered by the courts. If I may assume that we're dealing with a person who did commit a crime, the longer the gap between a crime and punishment, the lower the deterrent effect, both for the particular offender and others. And the longer the gap between the crime and punishment, the lower the impact on the public. Delay can lower the estimate of the effectiveness of the justice system; and the lower that estimate, the less likely that the threat of criminal justice processing will deter offending.

Prevention is the constant goal.

The third theme of the report and of what we heard was that this pan-systemic prevention is inherently interdisciplinary. Solid prevention at each stage requires team work. Prevention works in the law and with the law but is not the work only of the legally-trained. Physicians, nurses, psychologists, social workers, educators, counsellors, community leaders, and sometimes just people who care must be involved in prevention efforts, along with the police, lawyers, and judges.

This interdisciplinarity also requires cooperation and coordination between various governmental ministries - and indeed, between municipalities, the provincial government, the federal government, and first nations governments.

Interdisciplinarity, however, poses very significant organizational challenges. Our various occupations and professions and organizations tend to have been developed separately; we work in our own silos. We often speak different languages, and use different assessment criteria. The problems are compounded for aboriginal communities, which must contend with jurisdictional issues among federal, provincial, municipal governments and their own governments. While interdisciplinarity may be required, it isn't easy.

A fourth theme is that this pan-systemic interdisciplinary prevention is not opposed to traditional policing, lawyering, or justice processes. It draws traditional mechanisms into a broader context, and simply asks that these traditional mechanisms be applied when they are appropriate - as opposed to their being the only tools used. For example, if an individual is a prolific offender - one of the small number who commits the majority of crimes - legal steps should be taken to maximize the probability that he or she will have bailed denied, that he or she will be convicted, and that he or she will receive a significant carceral sentence, so at least for that period he or she will be incapacitated from committing crimes.

If an accused is not a candidate for diversion or for a specialized type of court proceeding, then traditional court processes are for him or her.

That is, the traditional systems should be used in appropriate circumstances and not used in inappropriate circumstances.

But this leads to the fifth theme - for how do we distinguish appropriate and inappropriate circumstances?

The fifth theme returns to the first: we should decide what tools we should use pragmatically, based on real-world experience - not based on speculation or moral intuition. Prevention must be "evidence based." We can choose between prevention initiatives if they have been tested. We can safely adopt an alternative to traditional processing when it can be demonstrated that the alternative actually works. We can learn from what has in fact worked in Alberta communities. With allowances for cultural and other differences, we can learn from what has in fact worked in other countries. We can learn from research.

Finally, the sixth theme of the report and of what we heard, which also returns to the first: if our focus is on prevention, across a wide range of circumstances, who will do the work, how will the work be supported, and how will it be decided what work to do? That is, how should crime prevention be organized?

The first part of the answer is this: What we saw across many communities in Alberta is that the primary drivers of crime prevention are local groups. They know the problems and are aware of the resources available in their regions. They have a good idea of what works and what doesn't work in their communities - they don't need to be told by outsiders. In many areas, we saw that groups worked together, and formed coordinating committees.

What communities do need is adequate funding. The concern for better funding was universal. We heard constant appeals for more funding and better funding processes.

However, there is a second part to the answer to the organizational question. Some communities may need assistance in coordinating their local services. There may also be virtue in coordinating services among several communities or areas, or even across the province. A

government agency can facilitate this sort of coordination. The inherent interdisciplinarity of crime prevention requires the involvement of various government ministries: a government agency can broker the necessary relationships. A governmental agency can also assist in providing good information to community groups. Community groups may not be aware of best practices that they may use in their circumstances. A governmental agency can survey or commission research, and disseminate results. It can ensure that community group members receive appropriate training. In some instances, local organizations may pick the wrong fight; a governmental agency can assist in identifying problems that may have been missed. A governmental agency can ensure that crime prevention efforts in one area do not have unintended and undesirable consequences in another area. Moreover, a governmental agency can establish or aid in establishing crime prevention priorities for the province as a whole.

So, the answer to the organizational question is two-fold: we need strong community organizations but we need work to be done by a central agency.

The organizational model entailed by this answer cannot be top-down and hierarchical. Instead, action and decision must take place at both local and central levels, depending on the issues involved. The organization must be flattened: The approach must be one of dialogue, rather than command and control.

These issues, of course, are going to have to be worked out by the new Executive Leader and the Secretariat established by the government.

CONCLUSION

SO: That is what we heard, that is what we said - from a high level perspective - through 31 recommendations.

I believe you'll find that our report is consistent with the types of crime prevention programs and innovations that you'll be discussing at this conference. You and we are pulling in the same direction.

My hope is that our report will contribute to a more coordinated, integrated, and comprehensive crime prevention strategy for Alberta, and improved support for the groups and individuals who are doing the hard work of crime prevention.

If our report succeeds in this, Alberta will be safer. The contribution of the Task Force may be very small, but magnified through your work, the benefits may be immense.

It was a great privilege to serve on the Task Force, and it was an honour to speak to you tonight. Thank you.