Reducing urban violence

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Graffiti and marginalized people — increasingly common features of the world's large cities.

Healthy Cities all over California are rising to the challenge of preventing violence, using approaches that seek to reflect a comprehensive view of community health.

In recent years, the problem of violence in California has demanded the attention and resources of municipal leaders throughout the state. Community residents have grave concerns about their safety. The escalating incidents of violence increasingly involve young people. Today, nine of California’s 23 participating cities have violence issues on their Healthy Cities agenda. Their efforts are categorized under four headings: neighbourhood focus; community-wide initiatives involving youth; school-based efforts; and getting at the underlying causes.

Neighbourhood focus

Berkeley is transforming the Telegraph Avenue/South Campus area into a safe and economically vital neighbourhood. Lying south of the University of California campus, this area has been characterized by above-average prevalence of assault, drug-related and other violent crime, and high numbers of mentally ill and homeless individuals.

In August 1993, Berkeley launched a programme which united the city, residents, merchants, students, property owners, churches, the University and others in this effort. Activities include monthly "Cops and Shops" forums to promote public safety and maintain communication with Telegraph Avenue merchants; community meetings to develop common standards on alcohol sales; treatment and aftercare of adults with drug and mental health problems; and community celebrations which have attracted thousands to the area. Since the project started, arrests for assaults have fallen by 36% and arrests for violent crime by 47%.

Oceanside is conducting a community-wide effort to improve the appearance and safety of a demonstration neighbourhood through positive community-based projects. To curb graffiti, the city developed the slogan "Community begins with me!", sponsored a Community Awareness Day attended by 100 people and made a video for elementary schools called "You have no right to tag". Later, surveys carried out in Spanish and English among more than 200 neighbourhood residents found that there had been a 55% reduction in graffiti. Residents also reported greater participation in neighbourhood watch and clean-up programmes.

Community-wide initiatives involving youth

Ideas for Cathedral City’s initiative arose from its Gang-Related Activity Suppression Programme (GRASP), originally formed to fight gang violence, drug dealing and drive-by shootings. In carrying out GRASP, police officials learned that youth in trouble share one common characteristic — low self-esteem. By increasing self-esteem, Cathedral City’s goal is to reduce incidents of graffiti vandalism, drug-related crimes and violence in schools.

The programme kicked off with "I Like Me! Week" in cooperation with the Palm Springs Unified School District, in which 7500 students received lessons in problem-solving, conflict resolution and other interpersonal skills. Over 200 teachers and administrators later
gave a positive evaluation. Although this has been a Healthy City for only six months, it has already initiated many other activities, including leadership training for 18 young people; creation of a "warm line" for troubled youth needing support not available at home; "Club PM", which hosted 62 youngsters at its grand opening; and "Top Ten" groups, in which at-risk youth discuss personal responsibility, conflict and other relevant topics in their lives.

The town of Vista is expanding its youth mentoring programme "Club Challenge", using the premise that increasing self-esteem and a sense of belonging to the community will deter young people from gang involvement, substance abuse and other antisocial behaviour. A unique aspect of the programme is a signed contract in which each participant agrees to increase school attendance by 20%, decrease detentions and suspensions by 50% and participate in 18 productive community activities during the year. Community activities may include feeding the homeless, cleaning parks and streams, attending a City Council meeting or "shadowing" a mentor for a day.

Coachella's Bicycle Conversion Program provides at-risk youngsters with refurbished bicycles, which otherwise would be auctioned, in exchange for ten hours of community service in litter removal, graffiti abatement, assisting senior residents and other activities. The Coachella Police Employee's Association provided basic training in bicycle repair, so that repairs could begin on 12 bicycles. The City's goal is to have 100 young folk participating, ultimately enabling the City to reduce youth arrests, establish positive youth activities, and decrease graffiti and litter throughout the city.

Chino Hills established an initiative in partnership with the San Bernardino County Probation Department. The Chino Hills Advisory and Mentoring Program (CHAMP) pairs first-time juvenile offenders with adult mentors to help them with counselling, training, employment and recreation opportunities. Twenty-five volunteers have completed training, allowing work to begin with ten juvenile offenders. CHAMP was publicized through numerous community presentations, press releases, news articles, public service announcements and a press conference.

School-based efforts
Chico began "Healthy Chico Kids 2000" with a ten-month media campaign, posting billboards in strategic locations to reach a cross-section of the population, and completing conflict management workshops in four out of six targeted schools. Pre- and post-campaign tests will assess the success of these efforts.

To decrease the number of adolescents who fight and carry weapons in Pittsburg schools, 300 at-risk youngsters received education and outreach services to prevent gang-related activities. Another 300 participants – young people, adults and professionals – discussed how to develop a violence-reducing curriculum at a "Violence Prevention Summit". The city continues discussions with the schools aimed at reducing violence in school and is working with a neighbouring city, the local health department and others to sponsor a regional violence prevention programme.

Getting at the underlying causes
Escondido is undertaking an innovative strategy for reducing crime and violence by developing a "community prevention planning database" to identify indicators for alcohol-related crime and trauma in the context of community-wide planning. Escondido produced maps and graphics depicting alcohol-licensed establishments and their distribution in high-crime areas for use by community meetings. Ultimately, the database will allow the city to monitor and evaluate crime-prevention policies and strategies.

By working in partnership with other public agencies, the private sector and community residents, Healthy Cities all over California are rising to the challenge of preventing violence, using approaches that seek to reflect a comprehensive view of community health.

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