



**13th UNITED NATIONS CONGRESS  
ON CRIME PREVENTION AND  
CRIMINAL JUSTICE**  
Doha, 12–19 April 2015



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## **THE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC IN STRENGTHENING CRIME PREVENTION AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE**

To tackle crime effectively, communities need to be consulted on the problems they face and how to tackle them. Involving the public presents challenges as well as opportunities, but can lead to greater trust in the criminal justice system.

An increasing number of States have been adopting evidence-based, consultative and participatory approaches to preventing and reducing crime. They involve all sectors of society, including non-governmental organizations, academia and the private sector.

### **Key participants in crime prevention**

The police in particular have a key role to play in working with the public and communities to prevent and control crime, through community-oriented policing and similar approaches that encourage consultative and collaborative arrangements between police and citizens. Furthermore, courts play an important role through restorative justice. Prosecutors contribute to the prevention of crime by considering alternatives to prosecution, and legal aid providers, pro-bono lawyers and volunteers all assist with access to justice for those without the means to pay for a defence lawyer.

### **The role of social media and communication technology**

Social media tools are increasingly being used to engage the public in crime prevention and criminal justice activities and are likely to be even more predominant in the future. They offer enormous potential for positive change, but also present challenges to security and justice.

Rapidly developing information and communication technology has radically affected the way people live,

work and interact. Law enforcement agencies around the world have joined the dialogue, using social media platforms to strengthen relationships with communities and to communicate with the public for investigative purposes. It has become common for law enforcement to use public social media posts about a crime that has occurred or is occurring to obtain direct, first-hand information for an investigation.

### **National and local public participation**

Community participation in crime prevention and criminal justice involves the active cooperation of local residents and organizations and has a long history of accomplishments in many countries around the world. Governments are increasingly partnering with communities and civil society organizations to prevent crime and violence because of their knowledge of local problems and capacity to reach out to vulnerable, at-risk segments of society. In fact, community involvement has become an essential component of crime prevention in all kinds of partnerships involving municipalities, the police, schools, health and social services, and the private sector.

Communities can get involved in the treatment, rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders through programmes under which offenders are conditionally released or after they re-enter society. Prison overcrowding is a problem for many countries and there are high reoffending rates worldwide, so policies and measures for the social reintegration and rehabilitation of offenders are crucial. Partnerships and cooperation with communities, the business sector and non-governmental organizations to employ ex-prisoners are critical for reducing reoffending and for assisting with their social reintegration.

Community policing seeks to change the relationship between police and the community through dialogue. To be effective, it needs to respond to the specific needs of the most at-risk groups, such as women, young people, elderly people, ethnic minorities, migrants, displaced people and refugees. Approaches include foot patrols, neighbourhood police, consultative councils, police lectures at schools and universities, and specialized activities bringing together the police and the community, especially young people. Women's police stations or gender desks have been set up in some countries to improve the police response to the unique needs of women victims and witnesses of crime.

The provision of legal services is also of utmost importance as an essential element in a fair, humane and efficient criminal justice system based on the rule of law. In many countries, the growing number of community-based groups providing different types of legal services has helped to extend the reach of legal aid. In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the role of paralegals, especially where the number of lawyers is not sufficient for the population. They inform suspects and prisoners of their rights and help them navigate the criminal justice system, making it more accessible to the general public.

### Public information through the media

Media professionals can contribute to a better understanding of the economic and social roots of crime, educating the public on crime prevention strategies

and on how to recognize and address risk factors. However, the media may also negatively influence perceptions of crime. Biased or inaccurate reporting may not explain the underlying causes. If the media over-represents violent behaviour in a community, this may contribute to citizens demanding tougher measures.

### The role of victims in crime prevention

Lastly, victims of crime can hold offenders accountable for their actions, be involved in determining appropriate responses to crime, help to strengthen the rule of law and the accountability of criminal justice systems, and ultimately achieve reconciliation. Communicating the experiences of victims through channels such as victimization surveys, victim impact panels and restorative justice mechanisms can also strengthen crime prevention and criminal justice.

The protection of victims and witnesses of crime is vital, too. They are often intimidated, physically threatened and on occasion killed. To have more effective criminal justice systems, victims and witness protection programmes need to be strengthened.

### Need for United Nations guidelines

With many factors working against broad-based public participation in crime prevention and criminal justice, such as lack of knowledge of participatory processes and public mistrust of the government, the development of United Nations guidelines would be a useful tool to assist States and others in this area. ■