



The Safer Communities Approach

Women and Community Safety Fact Sheet #3

What is a Safe Community?

The defining feature of a safe community is the ability of all of its citizens - regardless of gender, race, age, income, sexuality, language or ability - to participate fully and freely in all of its environments. This requires that citizens both feel, and are, safe, and that they have meaningful opportunities to participate in local decision-making processes.

Safety has many different meanings for different people, depending on who we are and what our personal, economic and social circumstances are. Communities from around British Columbia have offered many examples, including:

- A safe community is one where we feel safe
- A safe community is one where we feel safe out in public, both day and night
- In a safe community, women, children, seniors and other vulnerable people would finally be safe from violence and abuse from the people they know as well as from strangers
- A safe community is a vibrant and diverse community
- A safe community is accessible
- A safe community has good services and infrastructure
- A safe community has adequate housing for all
- In a safe community our work places are free from violence and harassment
- A safe community is one where everyone is valued and there is no discrimination
- In a safe community, all resources – human, physical and social – would be freed up for more productive uses

How can we achieve our goals for safer communities?

In order to address the full spectrum of crime, victimization and fear, and in order to build communities which offer equitable opportunities to women and other vulnerable groups in our society, issues specific to women must be fully acknowledged and be a formal and integral part of a comprehensive community approach.

Over the years, women's voices have been most likely to find space within the **safer communities approach to crime prevention**. This approach recognizes the critical importance of prevention, and the need to address factors of economic, political, and social inequality that lie at the root of crime, victimization and fear. To be most effective, however, the approach must also include a gender analysis of crime, victimization and fear, as well as of community planning and development.

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The Safer Communities approach to crime prevention was built on the recognition that focusing on women's personal security issues was not only necessary, but would lead to safer communities for **all** citizens.

Focusing on issues specific to women will ensure that communities will ultimately be safer for everyone. It is important to understand that the reverse does not hold true. For example, if we make all public buildings accessible for people with disabilities, we will also make them easier to access for seniors, people with baby strollers, and people with mobility challenges.

However, if we only make public buildings accessible for those without disabilities, then we will not make them easier to access by these groups. A gender-neutral approach to safer communities will fail because it does not recognize that particular groups are particularly vulnerable, and that it is from their perspective that communities need to be assessed.

The safer communities approach enables us to effectively address the complex nature of women's personal security issues through integrating a range of physical, social **and** institutional measures.

This approach recognizes that:

- the community is the focal point of effective crime prevention;
- the community needs to identify and respond to both short and long term needs;
- efforts should bring together individuals from a range of sectors to tackle crime;
- strategies for preventing crime should be supported by the whole community; and
- inclusion of gender is necessary for a full analysis of crime, fear and victimization.

Working for Safer Communities

It is essential that the work for building safer communities is carried out at the local level, and be guided by a collaborative community-based process. Local governments are uniquely placed to provide the leadership necessary for a sustainable, integrated community safety strategy that addresses women's personal security issues.

Indeed, all across Canada, local governments are increasingly recognizing that community safety is a fundamental quality of life issue - a safe community is a livable community, a healthy community, and an economically viable community.

Building and maintaining safer communities for women is a process that requires:

- solid leadership and a partnership effort involving the whole community;
- meaningful community involvement that highlights the perspective of those most vulnerable to violence;
- a comprehensive process of inquiring about women's needs and issues;
- safety audits of community environments; and
- an integrated strategy with supporting processes and mechanisms for implementing solutions.

A strong partnership between local government and the community is key to the development of an integrated community safety strategy that addresses women's safety concerns. Local government is in an ideal position to provide leadership and structure in this area.

Municipalities are the closest level of government to the citizen, so they are in the best position to work with local groups to establish effective community-based programs.

Federation of Canadian Municipalities. 2000

For more information, check out "Women and Community Safety: a resource book on planning for safer communities" available from the Women and Community Safety Project, or online at www.saferfutures.org.