

Getting Together To Fight Crime

Something may be wrong in your neighborhood. There's too much violence, or there's an ever-present threat. Perhaps a child you know was robbed. Maybe you've seen signs of drug dealing. Maybe a string of break-ins has you wondering what's coming next. You're uneasy -- even frightened -- for yourself and your family. Perhaps nothing violent has happened, but you see warning signs -- such as graffiti, vandalism, abandoned cars, loitering, litter -- that crime and violence may be reaching your neighborhood soon.

You **can** change things by getting together with neighbors who share your worries. There are two things you need to do: look out for your families and yourselves, and get involved in your community.

People just like you have cleared drug dealing out of their neighborhoods, made parks safe for children and sidewalks secure for play, curbed assaults, reduced muggings, eliminated rapes and murders, wiped out graffiti and vandalism, started programs for teens.

What Kind of Neighborhood?

The neighborhood may be a development of single homes, a row of townhouses, a commercial corridor, an apartment complex, or even a school. Crime may be right there scaring everyone off the streets, or just looming on the horizon. Whatever your neighborhood's like, getting together to fight crime, violence, and drugs can help create communities where children can be children and people once isolated by crime and fear can enjoy being a part of a thriving neighborhood.

Things May Look Fine, But...

Whether it's a quiet neighborhood where teens haven't much to do, or a rural town that's been stable, even communities that seem calm can be facing a crime threat. Things may be OK now, but how do you keep them that way?

Everyone can see the early warning signals -- the little worries that alert you to the need to prevent bigger problems. The trick is to swing into action at the first sign of trouble, not to wait until it comes to your front door. Abandoned autos, people loitering, vacant homes, graffiti, a rash of break-ins, or other signs of possible trouble should be a clue to act now. Acting right away on small problems can prevent big ones later.

It's Too Rough for Me To Get Involved

Maybe crime has a strong grip in your neighborhood -- street violence, muggings, drug dealing, shootings. People see the situation as out of hand. Some people are scared that the criminals will take revenge if they act.

There are at least three ways to counter fear. First, join together. There is strength in numbers. Most criminals attack victims who are alone -- not in groups. And groups can rally, march, and hold vigils to demonstrate their commitment. Second, you can work with the police to set up a system that lets people remain anonymous and still report crimes. Third, you don't have to meet where the problem is. In one neighborhood, people met several blocks away at a local church. No one felt singled out, and everyone gained as crime was slowly but surely driven out.

Start Something!

First, find out what's already going on. Groups that are already working against crime and drugs will welcome and help you. Ask the local police, especially the Oklahoma City Police Department Community Relations Officers, Neighborhood Alliance and other civic groups as well as clubs to help you out.

Is there an existing group that **ought to be** involved in preventing crime? A home-school organization like PTA; a tenants' group; a fraternity or sorority; a community service club such as Lions, Rotary, or JayCees; a social club; a church; a mental health association; a taxpayers' or homeowners' association -- these are just some kinds of groups that can be a base for action.

No group ready to adopt crime prevention? Start a group in your neighborhood -- even if it's just on your block. You don't have to be the leader, but you could organize the first meeting.

Getting Neighbors Together

You've already talked with some neighbors -- at the grocery store, on the sidewalk, over the back fence, at the bus stop, across the kitchen table. You know people are unhappy about the way things are, that they'd like to see something done.

The next step -- make that discussion a bit more purposeful and organized. Set up a meeting to decide how you want to change things. Here are some tips for that first session.

- Be sure it doesn't conflict with other important events.
- Make sure there is enough room at the meeting place for everyone to be comfortably seated. Not enough room at a home in the neighborhood? Maybe a church basement, a school classroom, or a business or community meeting room is available.
- Plan to keep the meeting fairly brief -- less than two hours is probably good. Have an agenda prepared for the group's approval.
- Invite people in person, by phone, by flier -- whatever's most appropriate. Knock on doors, send notes, or make phone calls to remind them.
- Invite schools, businesses, and houses of worship to send representatives. Ask local officials -- law enforcement, elected officials, social services, others -- to send someone who can explain how they can help.
- Share the work so that people work together from the start. One person can organize refreshments; another can be in charge of reminder calls. Someone else can set up the room. Someone can take notes and write up your group's decisions. Another neighbor can be the "researcher," gathering information in advance. Another can lead the discussion.
- Allow people to share their concerns. You'll be surprised how much you all have in common. But don't get caught in a gripe session.
- Remember, you're there as a group to decide what problems you'll tackle and what actions you'll take, not just to talk. Everyone should have a chance to take part, but be sure the group makes some clear decisions.

- Your group should consider surveying neighbors, either in person or by phone, to get a better idea of the range of their problems and concerns.
- Don't plan to tackle every problem at once. The group should identify one or two issues that need immediate action -- but keep track of (and get back to) other problems. For instance, parents and youth may need drug prevention education, but the more immediate problem might be closing down drug sales in the neighborhood.
- List next steps and who will take them. Try to get everyone to commit to helping with your plan. Agree on the next time, date, and place for a meeting and the subjects that should be covered.
- Unsure about how to run a meeting? Talk to a member of the clergy, a local civic leader, a business person, the League of Women Voters, or the Chamber of Commerce. One of them will be glad to share experiences in making meetings effective.

Everyone Can Do Something

As you get under way, it's important to enlist the help of as many people as possible from your community. There's something each person can do to help. Anyone can hand out educational brochures. Young children can pick up litter or learn to settle arguments without fighting; older youth can teach younger ones about preventing violence or organize positive activities like concerts that can replace drug traffic in a nearby park. Caring adults can help troubled youth; families can help each other. Business people can help manage programs and raise funds; civic activists can round up local agencies to meet needs like recreation, housing, or education. Many things help cause crime, violence, and drug abuse problems in a community; many kinds of activity will help to end the problems. Some may be more direct than others, but all will help.

Anyone -- and everyone -- can take the most basic actions, like reporting suspicious behavior or crimes in progress to the police. Whatever the contribution of time, energy, talent, and resources -- small or large -- it will help.

Getting Organized To Get Results

Your group has gotten together. You've picked a problem to work on that's important to many of you. Maybe it's keeping children safe going to and from school. Perhaps you want to do something to stop fights that keep breaking out among youth. Maybe you've decided to try to close a drug house. Everyone's agreed to take a part in the work. You're ready to act.

- Agree on what to do about the problem, picking one or two approaches or strategies at most. Ideas from existing programs may help. Neighborhood Watch, for instance, can reduce burglaries and help keep a lookout for suspicious activity. It can also be the base for other programs.
- Decide whose help you'll need or want. How will you approach these people for assistance? What do you want them to do? Think about contacting police crime prevention specialists, who have lots of ideas and expertise. Child protection agencies, drug prevention organizations, community development offices, public health offices, the local library, and many others can lend a hand. Enlist these groups early -- if they help in identifying problems and developing solutions, they'll be more committed to getting the job done. What you really want is to build partnerships.

- Sometimes the solution comes from the problem. What if everyone's concerned about the teenagers "hanging out" at the corner? Ask the teens what they'd rather be doing instead. Ask them to help plan ways to do those better things. Check with after-school programs, local youth clubs, and similar resources to see if they can join in your creative problem-solving.
- Agree on who will take what roles, how tasks will get done, and how you will coordinate efforts. Build in some checkpoints to be sure all is going well or can be fixed or changed as needed.

Some Ideas From the Experienced

Here are some things that people have found important in carrying out activities.

- **Contact Neighborhood Alliance** (405) 528-6322: Ask for their help in organizing your crime prevention strategy. We will contact the OKC Police Department to help schedule a training if necessary.
- **Keep it simple:** If you want to get rid of graffiti, why not just paint over it (with the owner's OK)? Sometimes the quickest and most obvious route is the best.
- **Invite everyone to get into the act:** People will do things if they're asked, and the more people you recruit, the more come along as volunteers.
- **Follow through:** If you promised to discuss a problem at the next meeting, do so. If you announce a rally, hold it. If an official promises action or a report, keep asking for it, and go higher up if necessary.
- **Start with success:** A small success -- a goal that's quickly reachable -- can boost enthusiasm, confidence, and willingness to tackle tougher tasks that take more time. One example of a short-term goal: hold one well-attended anti-violence rally. Success builds group confidence and attracts new members. Everybody wants to work with a winner.
- **Say thanks:** Congratulate each other for progress, even if only with a round of applause. Taking before and after pictures can help you appreciate the difference your hard work has made. Acknowledge officials, agencies, and groups that have pitched in.
- **Build leaders:** "Volunteer leader" should not be a life sentence. It's bad for the group and the leaders. If people think one leader always controls everything, they may not join. And leaders get tired. Divide up the work. Make sure all leaders get praise and recognition. This way, you help train new leaders and make use of everyone's talents.
- **Be flexible:** Hold meetings when and where people can attend -- weekends instead of week nights, at church instead of someone's home, during the day rather than in the evening if many people work shifts or if seniors are involved.
- **Build links:** Work on common concerns with government and other agencies, establishing a positive climate of trust which can lead to strong partnerships to help your neighborhood.
- **Keep in touch clearly, often, and in different ways:** You may get so busy that you forget to let others know what's going on. Suddenly fewer people come to meetings;

there aren't as many volunteers. A newsletter, fliers on special events, news releases to local media, a telephone network of members -- these all help keep everyone interested and informed. And accurate information helps reduce fear.

- **Check on where you are:** Your real goal may get overlooked in the bustle of "doing something." You may stick with a goal only to find out it's outdated. You can reduce these risks by setting up some checkpoints. Decide in advance how you'll know if you're headed in the right direction. What changes should you expect? If you're not on target, rethink either the goal or the activity. Your group's energy is too important to waste.

Overcoming Reluctance and Fear

Not everyone will join up. A very few people just don't care; some people don't think they have anything to offer. Some think they can't make a difference. Some think it will take too much of their time. Others are afraid of failing. Some may be afraid of retaliation.

There are ways to overcome these roadblocks. For starters, assume that everyone can, should, and would like to help. Many people will help readily if you ask for a skill you know they have or offer to teach them. Someone who's housebound can watch the neighborhood from a window, reporting suspicious or criminal activity to the police. Challenge the neighborhood gardeners to organize kids to spruce up the vacant lot. Ask a business person to help with planning.

Fear of crime can block participation, deprive you of volunteers, cut into community liveliness, and create unhealthy tension. To conquer fear, the group needs accurate facts (what's true, what's rumor?), a sense of control over the situation (one reason early successes are important), and action by groups rather than individuals (safety in numbers).

You don't have to tackle the scariest problem first. Start where the group is comfortable. If people are afraid to be on the street in the evening, a residents' patrol is probably not a good first move for your group. Working toward better street lighting and arranging free home security surveys by police may be better starting points. And success helps overcome fear, so your next action can be more direct.

Key Partners

Police and sheriffs are where people generally look first for help in preventing crime. It's logical; preventing crime is their primary job. Increasingly, they focus on helping neighborhoods solve problems that interfere with security and well-being, not just responding when trouble's already struck. Police have the facts about the crime situation in your area; they can help you pick effective strategies for prevention. Most police departments have a crime prevention officer, who can help in many ways.

Other government agencies, social service organizations, and community associations can also help. There's often more than one way to get the job done. Nuisance abatement laws, public health regulations, housing codes, fire codes, and building codes all can be used to drive out drug dealers and other criminals. Occupancy permits, liquor licenses, business permits, and vendor licenses can be revoked if a "business" is a hazard to the community. Work with the people in local government who issue the permits and enforce the codes.

Schools, libraries, public transit, housing, public works, recreation, health, social services, and other groups can all help solve neighborhood problems. Enlisting them early can help build

stronger relationships and better results, because they see themselves as part of the solution. Besides, these agencies have useful information that can help identify solutions and resources.

Resources To Get the Job Done

Preventing crime doesn't start with spending cash. Four out of five Neighborhood Watches rely on volunteers, but these no-cost (or very low-cost) programs work. Residents say their communities are safer than ones nearby with no Watch.

What if you pick a problem that requires skills or materials that you can't find for free? Take another look. You might be surprised at what's available from your own group. Or you can often trade or borrow to get materials and services you may need -- printing your newsletter, supplying refreshments for a meeting, even designing and analyzing a survey.

If you've chosen a strategy that does require a lot of cash, you'll need to do some research on sources of funding in your community. Locally based foundations and corporations (or local offices of national corporations) frequently have special funds for local groups. Local and state government (and possibly federal agencies) may be sources of funds for your project, through departments of community action, drug prevention, public safety, public housing, neighborhood revitalization, or economic development. Local libraries often have information on funding resources in your community, and special resources such as **The Foundation Directory**. The Chamber of Commerce, the economic development office, or your congressional representatives may have some excellent suggestions. Such programs as VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) or AmeriCorps may offer "free" staff.

Don't overlook local talent. Work with and learn from groups from other neighborhoods, community-wide groups, special focus groups, and agencies that work on these issues. A ministers' alliance, a mental health association, a civic club (such as Exchange Club, Kiwanis, League of Women Voters, or JayCees), a veterans' group, or a school might be glad to help.

Think creatively about solutions, based on resources. If your neighborhood worries about latchkey kids, talk with libraries that offer children's programs or discuss setting up special schedules with local schools; check with recreation directors about attractive programs; set up a warmline with friendly teens or adults whom kids can just talk with; investigate daycare programs that might offer a group discount.

Celebrate!

Part of the reason for all your hard work was to create a neighborhood you all could enjoy. Remember? Give each other rounds of applause. Take time for a picnic or block party; recognize achievements with certificates or ribbons to your volunteers and to outsiders who helped. Buy "team" T-shirts. Use your newsletter to say "thanks" in public to policymakers, funders, and others who've helped. Celebrate the small victories. Each success builds the strength and commitment of your group.

- Celebrate all kinds of good news -- kids' poster contests, a new youth center that offers positive choices, a park now buzzing with honest activity, any sign of progress. Don't forget to tell the local news media. Publicity -- local newspaper stories, radio reports, TV news clips -- can help spread the word about your success, attract new members, and build your group's credibility with partners and funders.

- Celebrations not only are fun; they give you the chance to step back, realize how far you've come, and revitalize the whole group for the work ahead. Plan for them, learn from them, enjoy them.
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