

Why Is It Important for Congregations To Be Involved in Crime Prevention?

Crime and the Community

Crime affects the community as well as the individual. A community can be a classroom, a place of worship, a neighborhood, a city, or a county, for example. In each of these types of communities, the effect of crime is evident:

- People grow fearful and distrust outsiders and even their neighbors.
- Environments begin to deteriorate. Public spaces are surrendered to criminals.
- Insurance and operations costs increase as money is spent to repair or replace property damaged, destroyed, or lost because of criminal activities.
- Taxpayers foot the bill for increased security costs, as well as the costs of sending criminals to court and to jail.
- Individual freedom is curtailed either because people are afraid or because rules and regulations (such as curfews) have been imposed to prevent or limit criminal activity.
- Businesses may close or relocate.
- Property values decline in areas where crime occurs.
- The strength and spirit of the community are damaged as neighbors become more isolated from each other.

We can't know the exact cause of any particular crime, but we do know that crime can be prevented if everyone works together. There are several strategies that will help curb crime in your community:

- Educate the community about crime.
- Remove or reduce the opportunity for crime to be committed.
- Report crimes to the police.
- Serve as a good role model for younger kids, friends, family, neighbors, and congregation members.
- Build community support and cooperation in organizing crime prevention activities.

Here are some examples of crime prevention programs and the benefits they offer to a community:

- Block or Neighborhood Watch (and other variants): Safer streets, more secure homes, child protection
- Community cleanup campaign: Increased pride in the community, increased property values, reduced vandalism
- Afterschool program: Reduced juvenile delinquency, increased child safety
- Teen employment program: Reduced dropout rate, reduced juvenile delinquency, increased self-esteem
- Teen victimization prevention course: Reduced crime against teens

- School crime prevention program: Safer schools, increased school pride, reduced school vandalism

Role of Faith-based Institutions

Most communities of faith include in their mission the call to serve those in need—the unprotected, the forgotten, the abandoned. Social justice is a cornerstone of many faiths. Teen victims are an underserved part of many communities. Faith institutions can play a major role in sharing information about teen victimization with the public and helping and advocating for the young victims in their communities.

The first step in preventing crime is often acknowledging that there *is* a crime problem. Once this has been done, members of the community can work together to come up with creative solutions to the problem. Faith-based institutions can provide the forum for these types of conversations. Places of worship are a part of the life of a community, and members of the faith community are active outside the place of worship—congregations are often a microcosm of the community. The pulpit is a good place to start conversations about crime prevention and the local community.

A major concern at many faith institutions is attracting young people to worship services. If teens feel that they are an important part of a congregation, that they are cared for and understood, they are more likely to attend services. There is no better way to make them feel included than to ask them about crime in their community and what they can do to prevent it. Let them work with adults to come up with solutions, and they will see their faith in action. If youth are to be the future leaders of your faith community, it's vitally important to encourage them to take leadership roles today. Keeping them connected to your congregation by addressing issues of interest to them and trusting them to come up with good solutions is an important part of their development—and of that of the faith community as well.