

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside Community Development project: lessons for crime prevention and community safety

On May 26, 2003, a huge dinner took place at the Floata Restaurant in Vancouver's historic Chinatown. The event was organized by the Vancouver Chinatown Revitalization Committee to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Carnegie Centre and to raise funds for the Downtown Eastside Arts and Culture Trust Fund. Close to 800 people bore witness to the fact that meaningful change in Canada's most distressed neighbourhoods *is* possible.

To many of the people who live and work in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, this is a community of diverse neighbourhoods with rich histories, where difference is accepted, where belonging is possible, where residents and merchants want to do what they can to make it a better place to be. To many of the people who live and work outside of it, this community is known for containing the poorest postal code in Canada, for having an open drug market at Main and Hastings, and as the shameful part of a prosperous city where drug addicts, sex workers and poor people are thrown away.

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside is all of those things, and more. A mere three years before that fundraising dinner, it was also a community where opposing coalitions were clashing openly with each other and with the City, over Vancouver's proposed drug policy and health services in the area. There wasn't much meaningful dialogue between them, and there wasn't a lot of agreement on what needed to be done to tackle crime and improve community safety.

What happened to shift this seemingly stalemate situation to one where an incredibly diverse group of people could come together in the Floata Restaurant, across cultural, linguistic and philosophical differences as neighbours, friends, families, merchants, politicians and government staff, to share in the celebration of the future of this community? As with any complex situation, there is no simple answer. But what's clear is that the innovative crime prevention project known as the ***Downtown Eastside Community Development Project*** (DTESCDP) played a significant part.

*It is a
marathon,
not a
quick fix.*

Key Respondent
(Coyne, 2006)

Why this project now?

Over the years there has been growing recognition – across Canada and elsewhere – that comprehensive, integrated approaches to crime prevention and community safety have the greatest potential to prevent crime, victimization and fear in a sustainable way, and to contribute to safe, healthy and vibrant communities.

A safe community is not simply one where there is less crime, victimization and fear. A safe community is a healthy community, a vibrant community – a community where

citizens are participating and contributing, a community where citizens have a sense of belonging and stewardship.

More and more governments are recognizing that continuing to address issues only *after* they have reached crisis proportions – whether this is in the area of health care, or crime, or the environment - is not only incredibly costly, it is simply not sustainable. They are also recognizing that complex issues require complex solutions - no one community group, or sector, or level of government has all the skills, information and resources needed to successfully address the complex community issues that challenge us today.

This was certainly very clear to the City of Vancouver by the mid-1990s. As with many other cities across Canada, Vancouver had experienced a significant increase in homelessness, in poverty and in addictions in the early part of the decade, along with the accompanying increase in crime, victimization and fear in its most vulnerable communities.

The City was determined to play a leadership role in trying to address this complicated and complex situation through working comprehensively and strategically with all of the partners that would need to be involved in a concerted effort to create a vibrant, safe, and healthy Downtown Eastside community.

What was the project?

Part of that effort involved a five year (1999–2004) “crime prevention through social development” demonstration project which came to be known as the *Downtown Eastside Community Development Project*. Funding partners included the City of Vancouver, the National Crime Prevention Centre, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, Status of Women Canada, Canadian Heritage and the BC Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General (with resources from each partner dedicated to specific types of activities).

The purpose of the project was to mobilize the Downtown Eastside community and build capacity among residents, agencies, and business representatives to address some of the known risk factors for involvement in crime and victimization – such as poverty, homelessness, addictions and family issues – and to do this in a cohesive and collaborative way. The activities of the project were primarily conducted through five major components:

- *Community Directions*: focused on mobilizing and building capacity amongst the low-income community, particularly those who are often excluded from decision-making processes;
- *Vancouver's Chinatown Revitalization Committee*: formed to strengthen the capacity of Chinatown businesses, family associations and community agencies to play an active role in revitalization of their community;
- *Coordination and Community Cohesion*: sought to connect disparate parts of the community by linking various initiatives in the community, facilitating communication with the City and other partners, connecting the project

- components to each other, and supporting projects aimed at strengthening capacity;
- *Youth Employment*: provided training opportunities for youth at risk; and
 - *Communication*: played an important role in educating the broader community throughout Vancouver about the root causes of crime.

Why this approach?

A balanced approach to addressing crime recognizes that enforcement - while necessary – is costly and inefficient if used alone. The “crime prevention through social development” approach is based on the well-accepted premise that particular **risk factors** at individual, family and societal levels may increase both the likelihood of individual involvement in crime and victimization, and of the presence of crime, victimization and fear in a community. These risk factors include: lack of positive role models, low literacy, family distress, drug and alcohol abuse, as well as poverty, homelessness, and lack of services (social, cultural, recreational).

Conversely, the presence of particular **protective factors** can increase the resiliency of both individuals and communities. These protective factors include: positive adult role models, success at school, healthy prenatal and early childhood development, strong networks of friends and family, as well as steady employment, stable housing, and availability of services.

The DTESCDP used a crime prevention through social development approach to complement the enforcement and other types of initiatives that were operating in the Downtown Eastside at that time.

What were some of the successes?

Some of the successes outlined in the independent evaluation report¹ included:

- **Increased employment opportunities**
 - a community development corporation – EMBERS – was developed and supports residents to develop businesses;
 - unemployed youth were trained and supported to find employment and go on to further education;
- **Improved quality of life**
 - 65% of key respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the quality of life in the community had improved since the project began ;
 - access to sport for low-income children had increased and parents were now more involved supporting their children in team sports;
 - the First Nations working group successfully established the Aboriginal Front Door, a First Nations traditional culture and healing centre;

- **Increased citizen participation**
 - a broad range of community members had actively participated in developing community plans with respect to key issues such as housing, alcohol and drugs, services for children and families, and community economic development;
 - 85.2% of key respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that First Nations participation had been strengthened by the project;
- **Collaboration and cohesion**
 - 84% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that understanding among community groups had been strengthened;
 - groups that had not previously worked together were now collaborating on community initiatives;
 - the Chinatown community was now working together effectively to revitalize their community, and with other neighbouring communities to address common issues;
 - government representatives indicated that they were working differently with community as a result of this project; and
 - there was collaboration on the part of all three levels of government to implement health initiatives, undertake public realm projects in Chinatown and Victory Square, support the development of the Aboriginal Front Door, coordinate economic development planning and invest in low threshold employment and business development.

Key factors that combined to create the project's success include: the investment of adequate time and resources; using a population-centred approach to community mobilization; the involvement of skilled practitioners; the use of creative and varied educational and communication strategies; and the connectedness of the project at many different levels. For a full discussion of these, as well as lessons learned, please see City of Vancouver (2006b).

Did the project reduce the crime rate?

A reduction in particular types of crimes was indeed reported during the project's tenure (e.g. Homicide and Attempted Murder was down 50% from 1999-2002²); however, given the numerous other initiatives taking place at the same time, it is difficult to attribute these changes to *this project alone*. There are also many other indicators of a reduction in crime and increase in community safety. The project clearly addressed the known *risk and protective factors* related to crime and victimization, particularly through: building individual and community capacity; fostering partnerships between community groups and governments; promoting community cohesion; and bringing different neighbourhoods together to create a common vision to bring back the health and prosperity of the Downtown Eastside.

Further, a follow-up evaluation conducted some two years after the project ended found that many of the outcomes had been sustained and are clearly "continuing to contribute to ripples of change in the community"³. Not only are key project initiatives such as

Vancouver's Chinatown Revitalization Committee, the Aboriginal Front Door, MoreSports, and EMBERS continuing to operate and evolve⁴, but the use of inclusive processes and community based approaches has been institutionalized as evidenced in many major initiatives including the 2010 Olympics and Paralympics.

Ultimately, the long-term potential of a crime prevention project like the DTESCDP is perhaps best captured in the words of one of the residents: *I dream that the people will have opportunities to work, be recognized for their gifts and talents, and be able to live in a secure place of a healthy community.* The DTESCDP demonstrates that a long-term, solid investment with committed partners and meaningful community involvement can help make that dream a reality.

We are doing fundamentally different work than we were before...this came about because we were able to have a five year dialogue about solutions...the lasting legacy is that doors opened and...there was joint ownership of problems and of roles and responsibilities.

Key Respondent
(Coyne, 2006)

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¹ For more detailed project and evaluation reports, as well as articles focussing on different aspects of the project, see the following documents online at <http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/dtes/project.htm>
City of Vancouver (2006b) *Vancouver's Downtown Eastside Community Development Project: lessons for other governments*
City of Vancouver (2004). *Report to Council on the Downtown Eastside Community Development Project.*
City of Vancouver (2002). *Building Community: Profiles from Community Directions & the Downtown Eastside Community Development Project*
Coyne, Kathy (2004a) *Fostering Change From Within: A community capacity building approach to crime prevention in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.* Downtown Eastside Crime Prevention/Community Development Project Evaluation. Final Report 1999 – 2004
Coyne, Kathy (2004b) *Fostering Change From Within: Summary of the Final Report 1999-2004*
Riaño-Alcalá, Pilar et al. (2004) *Communities, Community Workers and Local Government: Challenges Faced and Lessons Learned in a Community Development Project in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver.* School of Social Work and Family Studies, University of British Columbia.

² See the annual DTES Monitoring Report at <http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/dtes/index.htm>

³ See Coyne and Associates Ltd. (2006) *Ripples of Change: Community Capacity in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside* online at <http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/dtes/project.htm>

⁴ For an engaging discussion of the project by key participants at all levels – its successes, challenges, strengths, and the lessons learned – watch the video *Building Community* (City of Vancouver, 2006c) Available online at <http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/dtes/project.htm>