Evaluating the Success of a Crime Prevention Strategy Targeting Community Capacity and Participation

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Abstract

Funding of many community programs is based on the assumption that support of local groups leads to the formation of social capital and subsequently to an improved quality of life in the community. This paper describes an evaluation of a 'Community Safety Week' program which funds 300 community organisations in Victoria. The paper describes the results of a quantitative (survey) and qualitative (focus groups) review of (a) current and past recipients of funding from the program; (b) the value of participating and (c) the contribution of the program to the formation of social capital in each community. The results have implications for the design and development of other community based programs.

Key Words

Crime prevention, community capacity, community participations

Introduction

The mode of evaluation of government programs is usually determined by the users of the information. At a strategic level evaluation is conducted for accountability purposes, often by external evaluators. The data collected reflects outputs and performance. At program level the interest of program implementers is usually on how the program can be improved, i.e. formative evaluation. For small programs, where the budget is less than perhaps $200,000, the evaluation is often internal, usually supplemented by an external evaluation after 3 years. The purpose of this external evaluation is usually a mixture of accountability and finding independent answers to particular evaluation questions that are not easily addressed by an internal evaluation. However, rarely are evaluators asked to look behind the program and examine the validity of the assumptions on which a program was designed. The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the assumptions on which a crime prevention safety week program is based.

Crime prevention generally refers to preventing crime and anti-social behaviour before it occurs. Crime Prevention Victoria, (CPV, 2002 p.10) defines crime prevention as "any public or privately based initiative or policy aimed at reducing or eliminating criminal behaviour, violence and fear of crime or violence in the community". There are two broad approaches to crime prevention: opportunity reduction and social prevention ([McMillan, 2002 #28]McMillan & Murray, 2002).

Opportunity reduction or situational crime prevention refers to programs developed to meet local priorities such as urban planning and design initiatives. Initiatives in this area are the designed to increase the apparent effort required to commit a crime, increase the perceived risks associated with committing a crime or being violent, reducing the anticipated rewards of committing a crime and removing the excuses for committing crime or violence. The emphasis is on creating friendly and safe space in shopping centres, railways, recreation areas, etc. Social prevention is based on the premise that effective crime prevention strategies must deal with social causes and early preventions (McMillan & Murray, 2002). The strategies appear to have at least two prongs.

One is to promote social inclusion through measures designed to reduce social marginalisation and at the same time enhance opportunities for law-abiding behaviour. Another is based on attitudinal and/or behavioural change by potential offenders, actual offenders, prospective victims or actual victims. For example, at the prospective victim level, promoting safety and preventing crime could take the form of locking doors and cars or not keeping drugs on premises.

Rather than seeking to implement a single program, social crime prevention strategies promote multi-agency collaboration between government and non-government agencies such as justice, health and education, youth affairs and local community bodies. A principle underlying the programs is the promotion of "community involvement and ownership which permits evidence-based solutions to be formulated or adapted to meet local conditions and needs" (CPV2002, p.14). Community Safety Week is one of the CPV programs designed to promote community participation and local involvement in crime prevention strategies.

The social disorganisation model of crime (Sampson & Grovers, 1989) emphasises the role of communities in preventing local crime. Carach and Huntly, (Carcach & Huntly, 2002) showed that crime rates are lower in local areas with high levels of participation in community-orientated activities. The model also suggests that low participation in local activities affect a community's capacity to reduce local crime.

Community capacity is what makes well functioning communities function well (Chaskin Robert, Brown, Ventkatesh, & Vidal, 2001). As Chaskin et al (2001 p.7) concluded from their literature review:

> *Community capacity is the interaction of human capital, organisational resources and social capital existing within a given community that can be leveraged to solve collective problems and improve or maintain the well being of that community. It may operate through informal social processes and/or organised efforts by individuals, organisations, and social networks that exist among them and between them and the larger systems of which the community is a part.*

Chaskin et al (2001) propose three interrelated dimensions that specify community capacity:

Fundamental characteristics:
sense of community (connectedness, common norms, values and vision),
commitment (participation),
ability to solve problems and influence funders and policy makers,
access to resources (economic, human physical, political) at both local and state levels.

Functions:
sustaining capacity (for example: planning, providing mechanisms of social control, information) or specialised aims (such as promoting job opportunities, or advocacy for a specific policy)

The levels of social agency:
individual (skills, knowledge and resources of individuals);
organisation (schools, community organisations, businesses providing facilities (e.g. banks));
networks which through collaboration and relationships among individuals organise resources for the local production of public goods and services and link residents. The networks of positive social relations that provide a context of trust and support that represent access to resources (information, connections, money) are termed 'social capital'.

The design of the Community Safety Week program is based on these propositions. Local organisations are invited to make submissions for funds to implement local safety initiatives that involve a broad range of local 'partners', and target local crime problems. The proposals usually come from the Police Crime Prevention Officers or Local Government Health or Safety Officers but may also come from school councillors or officers attached to residential housing estates. The funds are generally small but sufficient to pay for some time for organisers for a few weeks, a local

advertisement, a safety kit or a demonstration on fire safety measures to a meeting of local residents.

The focus of the program is:
          local safety measures that
          prevent the opportunity for crime,
          promote the growth of local community capacity, and
          promote a whole of government approach.

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│ participation    │
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│ Local leadership │
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┌──────────────────┐      │ Implementation:  │      │                  │
│ Local needs      │ ───► │ Safety           │ ───► │ Crime reduction  │
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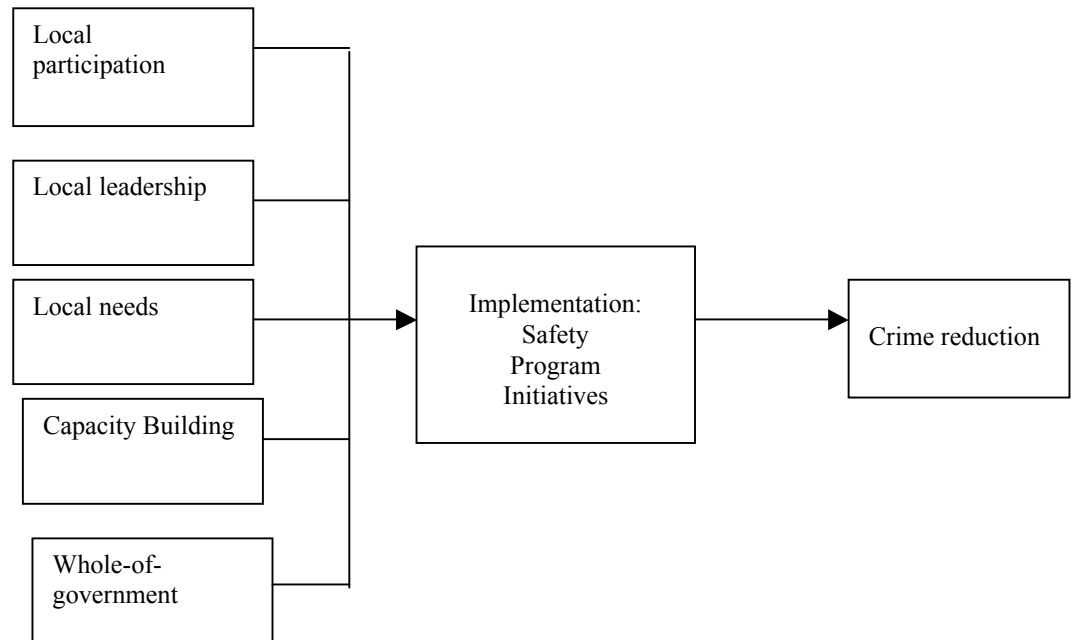
Figure 1. Program Logic

The argument in the program logic is that the Safety Week Program provides the impetus for the local community to take advantage of the opportunity to respond at the local level to local needs and that the subsequent local safety initiatives lead to a reduction in crime.

Internal evaluation of Community Safety Week has been undertaken each year. The present study was undertaken to provide an independent external focus to the evaluation.

The research question addressed by this paper is:
Does community safety week promote community participation and build community capacity?

In particular:
          Is there local involvement? Who organises the Safety Week initiatives and who are
          involved?
          What kinds of activities are there?
          Does the program build local capacity? For the purpose of this study, local community
          capacity is encouraged by access to resources, an organiser who takes responsibility for
          the initiatives and involvement of more than one community organization in local
          partnerships.
          Does the program promote a whole-of-government approach?

Methodology

The evaluation consisted of two stages. Firstly a questionnaire survey to the representatives of organizations who participated in Community Safety Week 2001. The second stage consisted of a series of Focus Groups for people from participating organisations who, on their survey form,

indicated their willingness to participate in a focus group. The evaluation used both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Survey

The questionnaire used in the internal evaluation survey in 2001 was modified for the 2002 external evaluation. This questionnaire was sent to 262 organisations on the database that presented an activity during Community Safety Week. A research consent form accompanied the questionnaire, as did an explanatory letter. A stamped, addressed envelope was also enclosed. All questionnaires were returned to Victoria University.

The questionnaires were mailed in early March 2002. Respondents were given 2 weeks to complete and return the questionnaires. The research team telephoned each organisation that had not returned their questionnaire by the return date, to encourage more returns.

A total of **101** questionnaires were returned giving a return rate of **38%**.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were organised to confirm or extend some of the issues emerging from the survey. Subsequently a teleconference was arranged to suit a number of people who could not be at either of the previous focus groups.

It was originally hoped that separate focus groups could be organised for new Community Safety Week participants, existing Community Safety Week participants and those 2001 Community Safety Week participants who had decided not to participate in future. However, the majority of those who indicated that they would participate in a focus group were, understandably, those who had always participated in Community Safety Week. Therefore the majority of the members of the focus group and teleconference were continuing Community Safety Week participants with a few new 2001 participants.

Results

The evaluation questions addressed the program objectives: Did community safety week build local involvement in Community safety Week? What kinds of activities are they involved in? Does the program encourage the development of local partnerships? Do these represent a whole-of-government approach?

The results show that the Crime Prevention Victoria objectives for the encouragement of a whole-of-government approach to community safety through partnerships and building networks with other partners; were largely met. Over 83% of organisations had activities with other partners, including local government, state government and other community groups.

Table 1. Organisations involved in partnerships

State Government	25	(29.5%)
Local Government & State Government	17	(20%)
Other Community Groups	12	(14%)
State & Community Groups	11	(13%)
Local Government & Community Groups	5	(6%)
Private Organisations	2	(2.5%)
Local Government, State Government and Community Groups	1	(1%)
Total	**85**	**(100%)**

Overall, the participants in Community Safety Week were very positive about the formation of partnerships and the advantages of operating together. For a great many organisations, Community Safety Week enabled the strengthening and consolidation of existing partnerships. It also increased the participants' own local knowledge.

Figure 1. The major aims and objectives of Community Safety Week activities
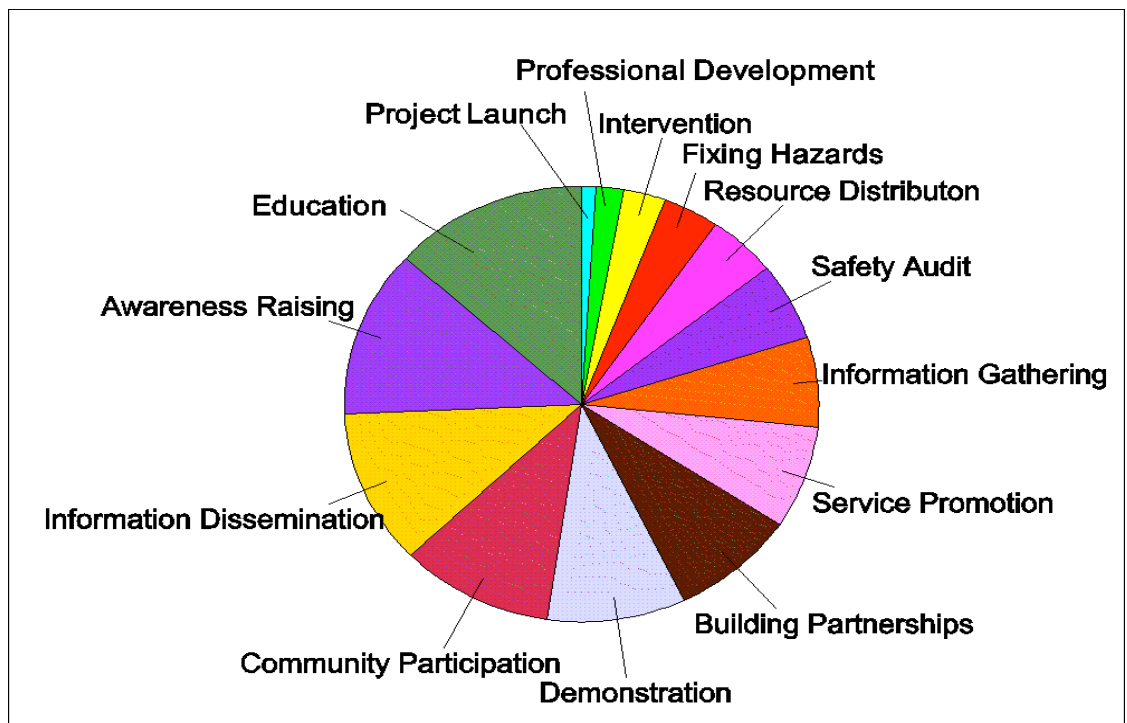
The focus of individual Community Safety Week activities was varied (Figure 1). Those categories receiving the highest number of entries were, home safety, safety for older Victorians, safety in public places, road safety, injury prevention, fire safety, home security, crime prevention, confident living, child safety and anti-theft.

One of the recommendations for strengthening community participation was that local government should be encouraged to recognise and commit resources to Community Safety Week, and as well, act in a coordinating capacity which could reduce uneven participation particularly in rural areas. This could also avoid duplication of effort. It could also assist smaller organisations that have limited resources and are often struggling to organise events. The results suggest (Table 2) that organizations other the CPV contribute funds and staff time to the promotion of safety during Community Safety Week, 53% of the programs involve volunteers and approximately 1000 staff from participating organizations are directly involved.

Table 2. Summary of resources expended and the perceived benefits of Community Safety Week (CWS) by participants

Resources used in CWS

Funding contributed by other organizations to CSW (not staffing costs)	$135,773
In kind contributions (venues, staff, goods etc)	5%
Volunteer use by organisations	53%
Number of staff directly involved in CSW	1000 approx

Benefits of CSW

Number of types of activities in CSW	30
Activities met objectives	94%
Safety awareness raised	91%
Community education	19%
Promotion of safety message	69%
Networks and partnerships	25%
Perceived as cost effective	79%

Almost all representatives of participating organisations reported (Table 2) that the Community Safety Week activities met their objectives (94%), raised safety awareness (91%) and were seen as cost effective (79%). Twenty five percent were involved in partnerships with other organizations. This is an acceptable level given that some activities, by their nature focused on specific activities for their organisation such as individual schools and resident complexes.

Conclusion

In assessing the results in terms of Chasin et al's framework for community capacity, it appears that the Community Safety Week program exhibits the fundamental characteristics for build capacity though commitment, demonstrated through participation, and the ability to solve problems and access resources; functions to provide a wide range of activities including information and community education; and is organised through all levels of social agency, individual through decisions by individual organisers, various organisations identified above and networks of community organizations, government Agencies and volunteers.

The results of the study suggest that Community Safety Week activities do address local needs, participation is widespread, the onflow of participation in various organisations is wide, there is a great deal of cooperation between local organisations, (particularly local government, police, fire and education officers), community capacity reflected by access to resources was stimulated by the program and if not a whole-of-government approach, the program demonstrated a wide range of cooperation between government agencies. The opportunity provided by the Safety Week Program initiative appears to promote the development of community participation and capacity. The question of whether it leads to a reduction in crime is not addressed here. Another issue that has not been covered here is that communities with capacity to make a submission for funds, are the ones more able to take advantage of the program. Those with fewer resources and limited expertise often miss out, or do not make the effort. This paper is limited to exploring some of the processes implemented to achieve the objectives of the program. It does not report the results of the program, whether it reduces crime, nor the cost-benefits of implementing such a program. However, it is an example of how some of the underlying assumptions of a program can be evaluated.

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