CRIME & VIOLENCE
city case studies

Hong Kong: The world's safest city?

This bustling, heavily populated metropolitan jewel on the south China coast today enjoys the reputation of being perhaps the safest city in the world at the dawn of the 21st century, says the *Global Report for Human Settlements 2007*.

Compared to other cities in Asia and further afield, Hong Kong's crime rate is very low as shown by regular crime and victimisation surveys conducted by both the government and the United Nations. According to the Seventh United Nations Survey on Crime Trends and the Operations of Criminal Justice Systems, in 2000 the overall recorded crime rate per 100,000 population in Hong Kong was 1,185.7, lower than Singapore (1,202.6), Japan (1924.0), Republic of South Korea (3,262.6), Italy (3,822.8), France (6,403.8), Canada (8,040.6) and England & Wales (9,766.7).

The latest Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index ranks Hong Kong at 15th among 163 countries surveyed in the year 2006, putting it ahead of all of Asia except for Singapore which came in at fifth place. Hong Kong's anti-crime efforts and support of law enforcement are reflected in the relatively high incarceration rate (176.8 per 100,000 individuals in 2005) and a large police service (486.6 police per 100,000 individuals in 2000). An average of 10 per cent of public expenditure is devoted to security. But the reasons are many and complex.

For more than a generation, there has been a hard-hitting anti-corruption campaign which has led to increases in the *reported* crime rate during this period. Crime rates, however, reached a plateau during the 1980s and thereafter have generally declined. In the 1970s the police were transformed from a force that served mainly British colonial needs to one that served the Hong Kong community. Since the 1997 handover to China, the Hong Kong Police has operated in the context of the "one country, two systems" arrangement for Hong Kong.

Another major factor is the pervasive family-oriented traditions of the Chinese whereby public attitudes favour a government hostile to crime and corruption. It is a culture generally supportive of severe punishment to adult offenders. Confucianism also privileges order over individual rights and thus promotes *comunitarianism*, where the emphasis is on collective interests.

Although the death penalty was abolished in 1992, Hong Kong had been a *de facto* abolitionist jurisdiction since the 1960s. Nevertheless, many offences, such as those involving firearms, often result in lengthy sentences when compared to sentences given in Western countries. Furthermore, strict gun control laws have effectively reduced firearm robbery to fewer than five events per year, and not a single incident of domestic violence was perpetuated with a firearm during the past five years.

The overall reduction in the official crime statistics matched the declining population group aged 15 to 29 that mainly accounts for crime. The densely populated nature of urban high-rise living in Hong Kong also provides higher levels of natural or informal surveillance. The city also teems with private security officers (1,872 per 100,000 individuals), and advanced crime prevention technologies, including CCTV, are everywhere. This has however been combined with various measures bringing the public and the authorities together in fighting crime. These have been successfully implemented since the late 1960s. Key among these are the establishment of community police centres throughout Hong Kong and special training to ensure that policing is entrenched as a public service.

Enhancing Urban Safety and Security: Crime and Violence

"Keeping Hong Kong's status as one of the safest cities in the world is a public priority for us," said Hong Kong's Chief of Police Mr. Tang King Shing in a television interview in July 2007 marking the 10th anniversary of the handover to China. The low crime rate is a complex mix of cultural traditions, proactive crime prevention and the emergence of a legitimate "consensus" style of law enforcement.

Toronto: Making a city safer through innovative solutions

In 2004, the City of Toronto established a Community Safety Plan which takes the position that community safety is not just the absence of violence but also community well-being. Sherry Phillips, a Community Development Officer at Toronto City Hall, says safety initiatives must be directed at reductions in violence (particularly gun-related violence) and boosting community well-being.

The plan is guided by the three principles of balancing enforcement and prevention, investment in youth, and building on the strengths of neighbourhoods and communities. Inter-related elements of safety include a Mayor's Advisory Panel, a Community Safety Secretariat, neighbourhood action, and programmes and services in 13 priority areas of the city. These also entail the development of innovative programmes to combat gun use and gangs, engaging the corporate sector in developing and increasing employment opportunities for marginalized youth, advocacy with senior orders of government regarding required legislation, and the expansion of the Community Crisis Response Programme.

In early 2007, the city has identified several priorities that build on the Community Safety Plan and advance the work initiated in 2004. In the context of *Making a Safe City Safer*, efforts will be aligned to focus specifically on key partnership initiatives related to anti-violence intervention, public interest partnerships for youth employment, expanding training apprenticeship and education opportunities for young people, and creating a centre of educational excellence.

The Community Crisis Response Programme works across the city to provide immediate follow-up and longer term support and resources to communities hit by a violent incident. Immediate supports include mobilizing local City and community resources to address individual and group needs; facilitating or coordinating community meetings; and providing financial support for short-term, one-off activities aimed at addressing a community's approach to healing from a violent incident.

In 2005, the Community Safety Secretariat set out to establish community-based crisis response teams in each of the 13 priority areas. This objective was formed out of recommendations that had emerged from discussions held earlier in the summer, during the first Community Crisis Response conference. The 2005 conference examined crisis response from various ethno-cultural perspectives. Recognizing that the process of establishing and sustaining effective, community-based crisis response teams would require a collaborative process, the Community Safety Secretariat has been collaborating with a number of non-profit groups and agencies, along with other City departments to develop a longer-term strategy that builds on assets and strengths already found in communities.

Funding is being sought to establish a four-year *Gang Intervention and Exit Programme* to assist young people most likely to turn to gangs. The idea is to provide individual support for better self esteem, life skills, leadership development, employment, education and training, housing and the promotion of family backup and cohesion. Prevention strategies will focus on young people who are beginning to be influenced by or attracted to the gang image. Working with schools, community and recreation centres the initiative will provide youth engagement opportunities to counter the gang attraction.