

# Helping Teens Take Charge of Community Issues

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## A Guide for Developing Successful Crime Prevention and Community Building Projects

**It's easy to believe that teens these days are committing all kinds of crime. It seems as though every time we open the newspaper or watch the news on TV, we read or hear about kids doing terrible things.**



Contrary to what the media tells us, only five out of 1,000 teens are arrested for violent crimes each year. Instead of committing crime, many teens are doing something about preventing crime in their communities. In fact, a survey conducted by the Gallup Organization for the Independent Sector reports that teens are volunteering in greater numbers than adults—59 percent of teens as compared to 49 percent of adults.

This paper will show you how to engage teens in community crime prevention efforts, where the end goal is to give teens the opportunity to take ownership of a project assisted and guided by adults. You will find that teens have much to offer—involve youth in community problem solving and they will bring their energy, talent, imagination, and enthusiasm to solving the issues that surround them. Teens are acute observers of the community and its workings. They can readily identify community problems and take the lead in addressing them, providing fresh ideas and innovative solutions to long-standing problems plaguing their schools or community. And by initiating or participating in community crime prevention efforts, young people gain practice in adult roles, interact with adults, and get the opportunity to connect with the community as individuals and as part of a group. In short, everyone benefits when teens get involved.

Before partnering with teenagers, it is important to think about how developing, implementing, and evaluating a joint effort will

benefit both the community and the young people who live there. For a project to be mutually beneficial, it should

- involve teens in each stage—identifying issues, planning activities, fundraising, carrying out and evaluating the project
- allow teens to take the lead, with adults providing support for youth efforts
- have a plan to attract participants and supporters
- address a problem or issue perceived to be important by teens as well as adults
- offer opportunities for teens to make their own decisions and deal with the consequences
- promote responsibility and enhance self-esteem
- encourage participation of all teens, not just those who are easily motivated
- build on teens' need for friendship—a central theme in their daily lives.

### A Starter List of Project Ideas

- ▶ Forums and discussions on community and youth violence and safety issues
- ▶ Anti-vandalism campaigns
- ▶ Victim/witness assistance, especially to peers
- ▶ Warm lines for children at home alone after school
- ▶ Substance abuse prevention education
- ▶ Plays, videos, raps, puppet shows as prevention education tools
- ▶ Teen courts
- ▶ Escort services for young children or senior citizens
- ▶ Tutoring for peers or younger children
- ▶ Home security surveys
- ▶ Anger management training and conflict mediation services
- ▶ Community clean-ups
- ▶ Arts and performance contests on prevention themes
- ▶ Graffiti paint-outs
- ▶ Youth law enforcement academies
- ▶ Intergenerational projects

## Step One: Assessing the Need

Work with teens to have them assess the community's needs. Keep in mind the term community refers to a group of people who share a recognizable affiliation—a neighborhood block, a retirement home, a school, or a group of young people with a common interest, for instance.

Teenagers should survey the community to find out its concerns. Canvassing the neighborhood door-to-door with a questionnaire is not the only means by which teens can gather important information. Informal discussions with residents about their perceptions of problems and issues in the community can also yield valuable ideas; so can reading local newspapers and opinion polls or examining police crime reports.

Brainstorm with teens potential partners and supporters for the project. Help them find out what groups are already active in the community—students, teachers, business owners, neighborhood residents, or senior citizens, for example. Who are the formal and informal leaders of these groups? Teens should encourage these leaders—student government

members, school administrators, block watch captains, mayors and council members, law enforcement, and others—to support the project.

Once teens have appraised the community needs, they can best decide what problem to tackle. The greatest chance of success lies in approaching the problem from the perspective of what solutions young people offer. Encourage youth to pick an issue that excites the most members of the group. This way the project will not lose steam half-way through.

## Step Two: Planning a Successful Project

One of your greatest challenges will be showing youth how important good planning is to any project. It's easy for teens, caught up in their excitement and enthusiasm, to want to rush straight into action. But to be successful, they will need to develop an operational plan. This plan will help them identify the specific tasks that need to be accomplished, determine how to delegate responsibilities, and develop and decide how to use resources. Although this part of the process can be the most time intensive, it will reward young people in the long term with a project that is more efficient and effective. Compare developing the operational plan to outlining a research paper—the bulk of the work is completed up front.

As teens develop their operational plan, they will need to

- identify the specific group or individuals the project will help
- spell out precise goals and objectives to help meet those goals
- choose strategies to help reach the objectives
- determine target dates and priorities
- divide up specific jobs and responsibilities for tasks
- recognize a means of evaluating the project.

The plan also will help teens stay focused and will help them meet deadlines.

At this point, the youth group may decide to partner with another organization to carry out the project. Are the Boys & Girls Clubs already engaged in a program similar to the group's proposed project? Perhaps a joint partnership with the Boys & Girls Clubs might be the best action. On the other hand, it may be that the group's plan is unique and bringing in members from outside organizations will create just the right mix of talents for a successful crime prevention project.

## Step Three: Developing Resources

Money isn't the only thing needed to carry out a successful crime prevention project. When helping teens plan a project budget, have them look at the potential costs in terms of goods and services needed as well as cash. Youth and adult volunteers, materials and services, and skills are examples of valuable resources community members can provide.

One of the most significant resources for any community problem-solving effort is volunteers. When recruiting volunteers, it is important to ask the volunteer personally for help. Most people are willing to get involved if they are asked. Teenagers involved in the project should ask friends and other students to participate. New skills developed, new friends, and a sense of accomplishment result from volunteering for a crime prevention project.

As volunteers are recruited, teens will need to think about the role each person will play. It seems obvious, but it will make a big difference if volunteers are matched with their interests and skills as closely as possible.

Crucial to the volunteer structure are community partners. These partners, usually made up of adults, assist with many of the duties for the crime prevention project. Consider the following community partners:

- law enforcement agencies
- schools
- businesses
- print and broadcast media
- faith-based institutions
- colleges and universities
- public housing authorities
- service clubs
- youth-serving organizations
- park and recreation departments
- health and mental health care providers
- fraternal and civic associations
- community and neighborhood associations.

Support from key adults, such as school administrators, police chiefs, city officials, and business leaders helps meet the goals set by teens. These adult/teen relationships also help change stereotypes, promote communication, and foster respect between adults and youth. It gets teens and adults communicating with each other. What once may have been an adversarial relationship can develop into a supportive, productive team effort.

Other resources for teens to consider are the materials and services that will be needed to complete the project, such as food, printing, and transportation, including some sort of thank-you to participants. That thank-you can be as simple as pizza and sodas at the end of a park clean-up or as involved as an awards ceremony hosted by the mayor of your town.

Once volunteers and other resources are determined, a final cost of the project needs to be assessed. Help teens identify what needs to be purchased and what items can be donated. Encourage teens to think creatively about how to get the items they will need. Examples include asking a local printer to donate printing of fliers, having a special event to raise funds and awareness for community issues, or asking a school or public library to donate meeting space.

Community-building projects also require publicity. If people don't know your group is starting a tutoring program for elementary school-aged children, they won't be able to support it. Getting the word out about the project can be as simple as putting up signs at schools and making announcements on the school public address system. Help teens develop a plan for publicity for the project.

Volunteers may need training in order to complete the project. Training can help ensure that volunteers understand the goals and objectives of the project, that the information volunteers provide about the project is correct, that they have the necessary skills, and that they know what to do if there is a problem. Work with teens to determine the amount of training their crime prevention project volunteers will need, and help them estimate the amount of time this training will take.

### **Step Four: Take Action**

This is the good part—actually getting out there and getting to work.

Most good projects usually have good leaders. Good leadership will keep teens motivated and help keep volunteers committed and working together. Remember that leadership

is a skill that is learned, not inherited, and it takes practice. Since the teens are the leaders of the crime prevention project, it is important to help them learn and practice good leadership skills.

Here are some tips on good leadership to pass onto teens.

- Lead with care—understand the needs of those you work with.
- Lead positively—let others know you appreciate their efforts.
- Lead by using the leadership style needed at the time. Some situations require a rapid decision with little chance of consulting others. Other situations require working together to reach a consensus.
- Don't be afraid to delegate authority to others to get something done.
- Ask for help. Don't try to do it all yourself. You will get burned out very quickly.
- Help determine clear, responsible roles for teen and adult volunteers.
- Initiate activities to earn publicity, goodwill, and more teen and adult volunteers.
- Screen and carefully select volunteers.
- Provide supervision and direction.
- Monitor and evaluate.
- Act as a spokesperson for your effort.
- Take responsibility when the project may take a wrong turn and try to find a solution.
- Promote successful activities, results, and benefits.

## Step Five: Evaluate the Project

While teen and adult volunteers may feel very good about the project, it is important to show what has been accomplished. Evaluation can help do that if it is planned for from the beginning as part of the measurable objectives of the plan.

The evaluation might show that the project produced some or all of these results:

- reduced crime
- reduced fear of crime
- costs less than the benefit it brings
- attracted support and resources
- made people feel safe and better about being in your school or community.

There are many different ways to evaluate a project. A survey of the target audience, asking whether or not certain conditions have improved as a result of the program, may be a good place to start. Or count things—did the project reduce fights in school? Count how many there were before the project and how many there are now.

While the project is in progress and when it is finished, there needs to be a way to check to see that it is reaching the goals teens set. Have them use project goals and objectives as their guide to measuring results. Was crime reduced in the school or neighborhood? Were all the persons in the neighborhood reached? How many elementary school children received the information that was provided?

The project may not meet every goal and objective. No project can be perfect. Remind teens that the whole point of evaluation is to learn from the experience. Finding out what worked and what didn't will help them improve their efforts for the future.

## Step Six: Celebrate!

After a great deal of hard work, a crime prevention project needs to be celebrated. Not only does this give your volunteers a chance to be proud of their hard work, but also gives them

a chance to get to know each other in an informal setting. The celebration acknowledges the work that went into the project. Your celebration can be as simple as donuts and cider at the end of a meeting or as involved as a community block party celebrating the reopening of a park or playground. Remember to involve the media in publicizing your successes.

A nationwide program, Teens, Crime, and the Community (TCC), links crime prevention education with action projects in the community. Young people learn how to protect themselves and others from crime and then design projects to help prevent crime in their own schools and neighborhoods. Both a classroom textbook and *Community Works!* (community-based sessions) help youth learn about crime and its prevention. Youth-led projects have included teen courts, mediation, cross-age teaching, child abuse prevention campaigns, and a wide variety of other strategies to address local needs. Evaluations have found that TCC helps youth feel safer, reduces delinquency-related behavior, increases self-esteem, and enhances ties with the community. This program has been implemented successfully in settings including middle and high schools, juvenile justice facilities, and community organizations.

## Resources

### AmeriCorps hotline

800-94ACORPS  
Web site: [cns.gov/ameriCorps](http://cns.gov/ameriCorps)

### Barrios Unidos

1817 Soquel Avenue  
Santa Cruz, CA 95062  
831-457-8208  
Web site: [barriosunidos.com](http://barriosunidos.com)

### Boys & Girls Clubs of America

1230 West Peachtree Street, NW  
Atlanta, GA 30309-3494  
404-815-5700  
Web site: [bgca.org](http://bgca.org)

### Boy Scouts of America

1325 West Walnut Hill Lane  
PO Box 152079  
Irving, TX 75015-2079  
972-580-2004  
Web site: [bsa.scouting.org](http://bsa.scouting.org)

### Camp Fire Boys and Girls

4601 Madison Avenue  
Kansas City, MO 64112  
816-756-1950  
Web site: [campfire.org](http://campfire.org)

### Center for Youth as Resources

1700 K Street, NW, Suite 801  
Washington, DC 20006-3817  
202-466-6272  
Web site: [yar.org](http://yar.org)

### Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America

901 North Pitt Street, Suite 300  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
703-706-0560  
Web site: [cadca.org](http://cadca.org)

### Girl Scouts of the USA

420 Fifth Avenue  
New York, NY 10018-2798  
212-852-5000  
Web site: [girlscouts.org](http://girlscouts.org)

### Mothers Against Drunk Driving

511 East John Carpenter Freeway, Suite 700  
Irving, TX 75062-8187  
214-744-MADD  
Web site: [madd.org](http://madd.org)

### National Crime Prevention Council

1700 K Street, NW, Second Floor  
Washington, DC 20006-3817  
202-466-6272  
Web site: [ncpc.org](http://ncpc.org)

### National 4H Council

7100 Connecticut Avenue  
Chevy Chase, MD 20815  
800-368-7432  
Web site: [fourcouncil.edu](http://fourcouncil.edu)

### Points of Light Foundation

1400 I Street, NW, Suite 800  
Washington, DC 20005  
202-729-8000  
Web site: [pointsoflight.org](http://pointsoflight.org)

**Police Athletic League**

618 North US Highway 1, Suite 201  
North Palm Beach, FL 33408-4609  
561-844-1823

**Teens, Crime, and the Community**

1700 K Street, NW, Eighth Floor  
Washington, DC 20006-3817  
202-466-6272  
Web site: [nationaltcc.org](http://nationaltcc.org)

**United National Indian Tribal Youth, Inc.**

PO Box 25042  
Oklahoma City, OK 73125  
405-236-2800  
Web site: [unityinc.org](http://unityinc.org)

**Youth Crime Watch of America**

9300 South Dadeland Boulevard, Suite 100  
Miami, FL 33156  
305-670-3805  
Web site: [ycwa.org](http://ycwa.org)

**Youth for Justice**

c/o Street Law, Inc.  
1600 K Street, NW, Suite 602  
Washington, DC 20006  
202-293-0088



National Crime Prevention Council  
1700 K Street, NW, Second Floor  
Washington, DC 20006-3817  
202-466-6272  
[www.weprevent.org](http://www.weprevent.org)  
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