

Safety Audits and Beyond

Round Table

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Summary

Pilot projects are being implemented in Kitchener (Canada) based on community-driven research and safety audits commissioned by the city's Safe and Healthy Community Advisory Committee. Projects consider both private property and public concerns - ex., standards for new street lighting and retrofitting (adapting) old lighting were not just based on traffic requirements but also on pedestrian experience.

While local research on the economic impact of crime has persuaded some politicians and planners to "revitalize" downtown city cores, resources for research and safety audits remain scarce.

Recommendations for forming partnerships with universities to pool resources and reduce costs:

- Offer to present information to urban planning students or to supervise their theses. Offer practical experience to social research methods students to get programs evaluated or surveys completed.
- Assist with audits of campuses, residences, school routes.
- Suggest your local university apply for funding under the Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) Program.

Suggestions for "infiltrating" Municipal Government to gain support and resources:

- Invite politicians and management staff to participate in safety audits and training; present safety audit findings and recommendations directly to the Mayor.
- Build partnerships with other citizen-based committees that advise City Council.
- Incorporate safety audit recommendations into departmental work plans so that recommended work will be included in budgets.
- Ask that contractors tendering urban development bids and landscape maintenance workers be made aware of safety audit principles; ensure that planning documents such as design guidelines for private and public sites incorporate safety audit principles and standards.
- Develop programs addressing specific concerns identified through a safety audit (ex., community-awareness campaign, community gardens, youth grants).

Discussion

Beyond using safety audits, what are possible next steps for action? More effort must be put into identifying and sharing best practices. Continued network-building to involve new partners is essential. Social services - especially in isolated communities - need to be better coordinated to meet women's safety needs.

The term "gender" and the promotion of a "gendered" approach or perspective have not been well-received by local governments. There is a resistance to consider problems viewed through a gender "lens" in government decision-making and planning of safety policies and programs.

A UN-Habitat representative confirms that resistance to women's issues is especially strong in developing countries. Furthermore, cities in the South have completely different social and economic realities and priorities from those in the North. Priorities in large slum areas are more focused on improving basic living conditions and providing clean water and

electricity/lighting and resources for conducting safety audits and implementing recommendations are nearly non-existent.

A participant from the South African Department of Justice shares that, although safety audits have not been conducted in the city of Pretoria, an emphasis on women has generally been accepted and there have been improvements to women and victim's services. However, using safety audits as a tool to mobilize women and key actors is quite difficult in rural communities and urban slum areas where literacy and resources are severely limited. In these areas, police are more preoccupied with trying to catch people who steal electricity.

No safety studies have been conducted in Russia and there are very few crisis centers. If safety audits are conducted, lack of justice system support will be a main challenge to ensuring the implementation of safety audit recommendations. NGOs have however been networking to create holistic educational partnerships with law enforcement and grassroots organizations in different cities and regions.

Highly-regulated government procedures can hinder the success of grassroots action since they slow sanctions and the transfer of funding. Communities need to be given the information and tools to take strategic action.

One participant asserts that the benefits of institutionalization of safety audit practices certainly outweigh the disadvantages. She says that even if safety audits are being conducted by, for example, young (male) law enforcement cadets, at least audits are being conducted. The challenge is to encourage whoever is conducting the audit to put themselves in the position of more vulnerable citizens.

This is contested by another participant who raises the issue of assessment: How, and by whom are safety audits to be evaluated? Whose perceptions are to shape recommendations for action? Women's concerns may be overlooked or lost if audits and evaluations become so

institutionalized that they are completely taken over by "officials" or "experts" who exclude women and are not sensitive to their unique safety concerns and recommendations.

Conclusions

- Funding can "dry up" when pilot projects finish. Efforts must be ongoing to identify possible resources to sustain initiatives.
- Presenting safety audits as a community issue generally generates more acceptance. Lobbying may be better received if presented in non-gendered terms - ex., using the buzzword "community" instead... although it also increases the risk of reducing emphasis and attention paid to gender specificity of safety and risk.
- Cities in the South have completely different social and economic realities and priorities from those in the North. For this reason, economic logic and strategies used to address and generate empathy for women's safety in developed Northern countries cannot simply be transferred and realistically implemented in Southern countries.
- Local communities need to be given the information and tools to assess their unique problems and develop strategic community-based action.
- Developing partnerships with police services can help local committees and community groups "navigate" the bureaucracy of institutional police services. Police chiefs can pressure politicians to work with community groups to solve safety problems.

Recommendations

- Systemic racism and sexism in public services must be addressed if they are to become partners in improving women's safety.
- Women's groups must form partnerships and share responsibility with other committees that work with and advise municipal government, planners, and workers.
- There needs to be efficient follow-up on municipal government's implementation of safety audit' recommendations.
- Safety audit tools and planning must be expanded to consider the needs, perspectives, and recommendations of increasingly diverse women. Efforts must be made to continually reach out to vulnerable, marginalized, or excluded groups and to seek their participation in proposing solutions and recommendations for action.
- The distinct challenges to conducting productive safety audits in developing countries must be addressed - for example, the need to first address inadequate basic living conditions; to use safety maps or verbal presentations instead of written reports to communicate safety audit findings and recommendations to illiterate citizens.
- The media should promote citizen participation, partly by covering "good" (positive and inspiring) stories rather than generating fear by emphasizing negative events.