



Avenue Mont-Royal in Montreal, a car free zone

Building a Safer City

It's a well-known fact that our city council throws a lot of money at the police in their efforts to keep us safe. But is more investment in policing and surveillance cameras really the only way to create a safer city or is it just the easy, "I don't have to think about it too hard" way to reassure the populace that something's being done to protect them?

I think it's the latter, and so do a lot of social and urban planning experts. And as it turns out, more money for the police hasn't made Winnipeggers feel a whole lot safer. In fact, only 12% of us feel safe walking in the downtown city centre at night, and 8 out of 10 of us feel that our city is less safe now than it was just 3 years ago.

So how, exactly, do we fix that?

Well, tackling the social ills that contribute to criminal behaviour – things like addiction, homelessness, lack of education and training and a largely retributive justice system – should all be top priorities.

But after doing a bit of reading, what I also discovered is this – it's not just the way we run our cities, but the way we build and sometimes neglect them, that can make them unsafe.

So, for example, we have hundreds of boarded up vacant buildings and more than 300 vacant lots in Winnipeg. 23 of those vacant buildings can be found on some 9 streets in the

downtown neighbourhood of Spence. And guess what? The property and violent crime rate there is a whopping 47% above the national average.



Winnipeg has 600 abandoned buildings

So, is there a correlation between that high crime rate and all those neglected vacant buildings?

You bet there is.

In fact when the city of Pittsburgh tracked the impact of foreclosures, officials discovered that within just 12 months, crime rates suddenly jumped by as much as 20% in areas where foreclosed buildings were left vacant.

But unattended and boarded up buildings aren't the only problem. Researchers have also found that if you don't create urban spaces that are lively and welcoming for pedestrians and cyclists, you wind up with largely deserted, unsafe streets.

So, for example, if your downtown features 6 to 8 traffic lanes - think Portage Avenue - with narrow sidewalks, it's not perceived as a safe or welcoming place to hang out. In essence, it's a space for lots of cars, not lots of people. A place for opportunistic crime, not safety.

That's why some cities are focused on *reducing* road space, repairing and widening sidewalks and creating car-free zones to lure people back into city centres that were once seen as dangerous. And a growing body of evidence suggests that those actions don't just

help to reduce crime. They can also reduce pedestrian-vehicle collisions by as much as 40%.

Not to mention the additional bonus of reducing carbon emissions.

More surprising still, some city planners maintain that avoiding urban sprawl can also have a big impact on safety. That's because an ever expanding city often means an ever-expanding debt to service outlying suburbs. Which results in little or no money to invest in the inner city educational and recreational programs that deter crime, by keeping kids off the street and giving them a leg up.

Even more unexpected, it turns out that the more greenspace you have, the safer your neighbourhood is. Indeed, a study of 301 major cities in the USA revealed that communities with more greenspace experienced less crime than those with little or none.

And amazingly, it's resident led greening efforts - whether tree planting, park maintenance or reclaiming vacant lots for community use - that seem to make the biggest difference. In fact Chicago proved that with a simple but innovative plan, when it announced that local residents could buy the vacant city-owned residential lots in their neighbourhoods for a dollar and turn them into side yards or pocket parks. Within two years, crime rates fell in those areas.

Similarly, in Flint Michigan, in areas where community members were engaged in greening vacant lots, violent crimes dropped by a staggering 40%.



Greening Vacant lots has multiple benefits

So, why is that? Why is crime reduced when residents take back their greenspaces or reclaim vacant land?

Well, the evidence suggests that communities that work together to create or maintain common spaces for communal use and enjoyment, also build stronger social bonds and provide a kind of informal surveillance system that helps to reduce crime.

So what's the moral of all these stories? No matter how you cut it, investing in what we have and putting the needs of people first, ahead of concrete and cars, makes cities more welcoming, and ultimately, a whole lot safer.



Barcelona's Superblocks where residential streets are closed to traffic