

## DECENTRALISATION AND LOCAL CRIME PREVENTION POLICY PLANS

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### Abstract

This study presents the crime-preventive value of local crime prevention policy plans based on the notion of decentralisation, as demonstrated by international experience, which are part of a participatory crime prevention policy focused on the local community and its development. The framework for the involvement of local society in crime prevention actions is approached not as something static and unchanging, but as a dynamic process that responds to changing needs, as well as to social, environmental, cultural, political and economic issues, which are in constant interaction with each other.

**Keywords:** Crime, participatory crime prevention policy, local crime prevention policy plans, community-centred crime prevention, decentralisation

I. We live and move within specific local societies, and it is within these societies that we encounter situations created by criminal activity. For this reason, local communities should actively participate in formulating and implementing crime prevention policies at a local level (Zarafonitou, 2003; Zarafonitou, 2003a; Zarafonitou, 2011).

However, the framework for involving local communities in crime prevention initiatives should be viewed as a *dynamic process* that responds to constantly interacting social, environmental, cultural, political and economic issues. This enables it to address the conditions and issues that constitute the social landscape and the specific characteristics of each region's living space. Therefore, emerging crime prevention policy issues should be approached as constantly changing situations resulting from the interaction of various living space parameters and their constituents.

The philosophy of participatory crime prevention policy is based on a holistic approach to living spaces and the factors and conditions that influence the quality of life in cities. Therefore, the rational implementation of participatory crime prevention measures can only be achieved in decentralised governance. Such a system operates at the local level (e.g. municipal), interacting with regional and national levels. The latter

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two acquire an executive character to varying degrees within the framework of a democratic constitution, structure, and operation.

In this context, the concept of decentralisation in crime prevention policy is approached primarily in *political terms*, relating to parameters such as social participation and planning, and the utilisation of economic, natural and human resources.

**II.** Local crime prevention policy plans are part of a participatory policy that focuses on local communities and their development. Along with substantial and active local societal involvement, these plans ensure the responsible participation of citizens in the formulation and implementation of crime prevention policy. This achieves co-production, co-management and co-responsibility at the local level in the basic treatment of so-called minor and medium-severity crime (Zarafonitou, Karagiannidis & Kontopoulou, 2022).

Local crime prevention policy plans are at the opposite end of the spectrum from the traditional, state-centric, centralised model of organising crime prevention operations and action. These plans are based on comprehensive, collective citizen action and their activation and participation at a community level. Rather than focusing on crime itself, the preventive strategy prioritises developing the local community. This approach combines administrative decentralisation with the transfer of essential responsibilities to local government organisations, alongside citizen involvement in problem management within a participatory democratic framework (i.e. a policy of proximity, partnership, co-management, and community crime prevention).

**III.** Conversely, progress in criminological knowledge involves proposing intellectual resources and practices that contribute to democratic crime prevention policy formulation and implementation processes (Young, 1995; Christie, 1998). Citizens themselves, particularly those in socio-economic *exclusion zones* who experience the socio-economic crisis acutely, should have the opportunity to participate in the development and execution of crime prevention policy. Victimisation takes on a different meaning in exclusion zones, which are inhabited by the poorest and most marginalised members of society (Silbey, 1996). These are the people whose lives are most affected by the consequences of crime.

Conflict situations are their property and domain (Christie, 1977). Therefore, Roche's (2002) proposal for the *socialisation of conflicts*, with the aim of adopting a visionary crime prevention policy, is more timely and feasible than ever. This remains the case despite the inevitable difficulties arising from the weakening of the social welfare state, the destabilisation of living conditions, and the strengthening of criminal-repressive mechanisms. The social dimension of crime prevention policy remains unclear and must finally be given clear and substantial content.

This challenge must be successfully managed by realistically addressing the criminal phenomenon and proposing the implementation of preventive social measures.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect is determining the method of containment by providing convincing counter-arguments to the detainees' suggestions for achieving 'order and security' (Manoledakis, 2005; Antonopoulou, 2010).

IV. In this context, the active participation of local communities in crime prevention can limit the repressive and punitive measures often prescribed by central administrations at a national level and encourage the adoption of structural solutions to crime. Local projects are particularly useful for implementing participatory crime prevention policies at a community level, i.e. at city or neighbourhood level, where problematic social situations related to crime arise and develop (Karagiannidis, 2011).

In our opinion, it goes without saying that the local community should be actively involved in formulating and implementing crime prevention policy, since community members are able and willing to contribute to crime prevention from the moment they live or work in a specific area — after all, they are the primary victims or potential victims of crime. Furthermore, the life, form and rhythm of social coexistence within the local communities are shaped by its members, who know the area's needs and particularities better than anyone, and who can propose sustainable solutions for reorganising the environment and addressing the conditions that cause crime (Alexiadis, 2011).

Local crime prevention policies ensure that public spaces regain their purpose as places of integration and social cohesion, fostering a sense of identity and social responsibility. Additionally, by accepting the equality of citizens' political and individual rights, crime prevention planning gains prestige and credibility. The organisational and administrative effectiveness of crime prevention planning is also enhanced by allocating key responsibilities to institutional structures that are closer to citizens, such as Local Crime Prevention Councils (LCPCs), housing and social services, organisations that protect vulnerable social groups, counselling centres and services provided by the public health and social solidarity systems (Karagiannidis, 2022).

V. In particular, adopting and implementing forms of participatory crime prevention policy, such as Local Crime Prevention Councils (LCPCs) or, at policing level, 'Neighbourhood Police' (Zarafonitou, 2019), could gradually weaken the currently dominant centralised administrative model and reinstate communitarianism. This is a political tradition in which the local community plays a central role and social community welfare is emphasised, even when this takes the form of decentralised crime prevention and social solidarity among its members. A community-centred crime prevention model (Zarafonitou, 2003; Karagiannidis, 2011), involving the implementation of local crime prevention policy plans, has yielded successful crime prevention results in countries where it has been adopted (Karagiannidis, 2022). Strengthening forms of collective action and implementing practices based on the principles of social ecology, cultivating community bonds, and reassessing the value of

collectivity in public life can prevent citizens from becoming passive spectators of social events.

In the case of our country in particular, intensive study, planning and continuous effort are required to adapt the principles of participatory crime prevention policy centred on the local community to Greek reality. This will constitute the central element of a new, comprehensive, realistic and feasible crime prevention policy with a long-term perspective. To this end, social dynamics must be established that encourage social responsibility and participation in the fight against crime, transitioning to a participatory model of social policy that addresses social problems.

**VI.** Local crime prevention policy plans, as international experience has shown, constitute a more effective, less costly, more decentralised and more democratic form of practical crime prevention in relation to the criminal repressive function of the state. Crime prevention policy in the context of participatory crime prevention planning is dominated by the necessity of meeting the real needs of the population, of intervening in the causes of individual and collective critical issues and of creating conditions for social participation and active intervention of the local community (Panousis, 1993).

However, taking into account the Greek reality, we find that, in the context of the country's administrative structure at the local level, the concept of decentralisation is understood exclusively in technical, rather than *political and social*, terms. In other words, it does not encompass the creation of political conditions for social participation, transparency, and social control. This means that the pathologies of the central political system, such as centralism and opacity, are reproduced at the local level, with all the negative consequences for democratic functioning, transparency and local social development.

Therefore, in order to develop decentralised crime prevention policies, institutions and actions at the local level, the concept of decentralisation must be given concrete meaning. This should emphasise ensuring the conditions and institutions necessary for decentralising power, decision-making processes and actions, and for strengthening democratisation, social participation and social control in the process of social development.

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