Evaluation of the Making WAVES project in Liverpool, England: improving support for intimidated witnesses

Ian Warren
Centre for Public Health, Liverpool John Moores University
WHO Collaborating Centre for Violence Prevention
Background

- Witness intimidation:
  - ‘….may involve threats to harm someone, acts to harm them, physical and financial harm and acts and threats against a third party (such as a relative of the witness), with the purpose of deterring the witness from reporting the crime in the first instance or deterring them from giving evidence in court.’ (Home Office, 1998)

- In the UK witness intimidation is now a criminal offence

- Witness intimidation occurs in nearly one in ten reported crimes.

- Three types of intimidation:
  - Low-level harassment, non life threatening but serious intimidation, life threatening intimidation

- The cultural stigma of being a known ‘grass’ (informer) can be a powerful deterrent to reporting a crime, and can become a cultural norm within communities.

- Reduced levels of reporting due to intimidation
Making WAVES

- Making WAVES (Witness And Victim Encouragement and Support)
  - Breckfield, Liverpool, July 2007
- Breckfield is an area with severe deprivation, crime and unemployment.
Aims of the Breckfield Making WAVES pilot project:

- Bring together local support services in identifying and supporting intimidated witnesses through the witness pathway
- Improve levels of reporting of crimes
- Reduce witness intimidation, increase the number of convictions and reduce overall crime

Local project coordinator employed

- Based at the local community centre
- Act as focal point for intimidated witnesses
- Support witness progression through the criminal justice system

Training provided to local agencies to help them identify intimidated witnesses and respond appropriately

Multi-agency steering group formed locally to coordinate local agency actions in supporting intimidated witnesses

Pilot project evaluated by ourselves at the Centre for Public Health at Liverpool John Moores University
Evaluation methodology

- Community crime and witness intimidation survey
  - Pre and post project
- Case file analysis
- Interviews with intimidated witnesses supported through the WAVES project
- Interviews with multi-agency steering group members
- Analysis of multi-agency data (police, emergency services) to assess any changes in levels of crime over the course of the project
Findings

- Community crime and witness intimidation findings:
  - Residents felt less safe during the evenings
  - 75% of respondents reported being a witness whilst 58% had been a victim of crime
  - Witness intimidation a significant problem in the area
    - E.g. verbal abuse to property damage and threats

- Perceptions of the police
  - Not responsive to crime
  - Not approachable (45%), not helpful (47%) or not trustworthy (50%)

- Levels of reporting of crime and witness intimidation
  - Of those who had been victims of crime only half were reported to the police
  - Of those who had witnessed a crime only four in ten thought it had been reported to the police
  - Less than half of intimidation experienced by victims and witnesses was reported to the police
  - Fear of intimidation a significant factor in not reporting crime
Findings

• Project caseload (12 months)
  – 93 witnesses supported (82 cases). Six cases led to perpetrator arrest.
  – Over half of witnesses were provided with advice and support by the coordinator; many were referred to another agency.
  – Positive feedback from victims:
    – “Just the fact knowing that he’s there is a help.”
    – “We knew someone was doing something, because we did not know where to go for information or anything (before).”

• Impact on local agencies
  – Local agencies felt multi-agency working had been greatly enhanced by the WAVES project

• Impact on the community
  – Data from the crime and witness intimidation survey showed that the number of victims, witnesses and their family members who had been intimidated significantly decreased during the evaluation period.
  – Significant reduction in police recorded crimes (1,386 incidents prior to the project and 1,089 during the project).
Expansion

Alt Valley Making WAVES

Anfield Making WAVES

Breckfield Making WAVES

Princes Park Making WAVES

Speke Making WAVES
Summary

- Witness intimidation has devastating effect on both the physical and psychological well-being of victims, families and the community.

- Making WAVES aims to facilitate multi-agency working in supporting witnesses through the criminal justice system. By doing so the intention is to tackle witness intimidation and improve levels of crime reporting.

- In the Making WAVES project areas the project has brought together agencies to support witnesses and has supported dozens of witnesses and dealt with dozens of cases.

- There have been findings indicating reductions in both levels of crime and witness intimidation as a result of the WAVES project.

- Expansion across Liverpool …. Make it city-wide because of local variations in delivery.
Reports produced

Ian Warren
Centre for Public Health
Liverpool John Moores University
i.j.warren@ljmu.ac.uk