

SAFETY DIAGNOSIS TOOL KIT
FOR LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Guide to Direct Observation of Community Safety

2nd EDITION

[charting a course > to safe living]

vol. 12

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*Institut national
de santé publique*

Québec 

In cooperation with:
• Ministère de la Sécurité publique

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Ce document est aussi disponible en version française sous le titre de Trousse diagnostique de sécurité à l'intention des collectivités locales – Guide d'observation directe du milieu au regard de sa sécurité – 2^e édition. Il est accessible dans chacun des sites Internet mentionnés ci-dessus.

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The [charting a course › to safe living] collection

This document is part of a collection prepared to foster and support safety promotion in life settings. Volumes 6 to 12 are the main components of a safety diagnosis tool kit developed for local communities. To date, the following volumes have been compiled for this collection:

Please note that the following list of volumes in the [charting a course to safe living] collection is different from the one provided in volumes 6, 10, 11 12 and 13, which were published prior to 2011.

VOLUME 1

Renée Levaque, Laurence Le Hénaff and Pierre Maurice. *Formation pour l'amélioration de la sécurité et la prévention de la criminalité à l'intention des collectivités locales*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2006.

VOLUME 2

Josephina Alvarez. *Réalisation d'un diagnostic de sécurité. Trousse à l'intention des collectivités locales – Les diagnostics locaux de sécurité : une étude comparée pour mieux comprendre et mieux agir*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2006.

VOLUME 3

Julie Laforest. *Indicateurs de vulnérabilité associés à la sécurité d'un territoire*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2007.

VOLUME 4 (forthcoming)

VOLUME 5

Louise Marie Bouchard, Monique Rainville, Pierre Maurice and Mélanie Tessier. *Survey on Personal Safety and Victimization in Life Settings - Questionnaires and Instructions for Using a Computerized Data Capture, Processing and Analysis Tool*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec (forthcoming in 2012).

VOLUME 6

Louise Marie Bouchard, Pierre Maurice and Monique Rainville. *Safety Diagnosis Tool Kit for Local Communities - Safety Diagnosis Handbook*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2011.

VOLUME 7

Louise Marie Bouchard, Pierre Maurice, Daniel Rochette and Robert Lavertue. *Safety Diagnosis Tool Kit for Local Communities - Guide to Developing a General Portrait of Life Settings*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2011.

VOLUME 8

Louise Motard. *Safety Diagnosis Tool Kit for Local Communities - Guide to Analyzing Crime Using Official Statistics - 2nd edition*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2011.

VOLUME 9

Catherine Goulet-Cloutier, Louise Marie Bouchard and Pierre Maurice. *Safety Diagnosis Tool Kit for Local Communities - Guide to Conducting Surveys on Personal Safety in Life Settings*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2011.

VOLUME 10

Monique Rainville, Louise Marie Bouchard and Pierre Maurice. *Safety Diagnosis Tool Kit for Local Communities - Guide to Organizing Focus Groups - 2nd edition*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2011.

VOLUME 11

Julie Laforest, Louise Marie Bouchard and Pierre Maurice. *Safety Diagnosis Tool Kit for Local Communities - Guide to Organizing Semi-Structured Interviews With Key Informants - 2nd edition*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2011.

VOLUME 12

Louise Marie Bouchard, Pierre Maurice and Monique Rainville. *Safety Diagnosis Tool Kit for Local Communities - Guide to Direct Observation of Community Safety - 2nd edition*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2011.

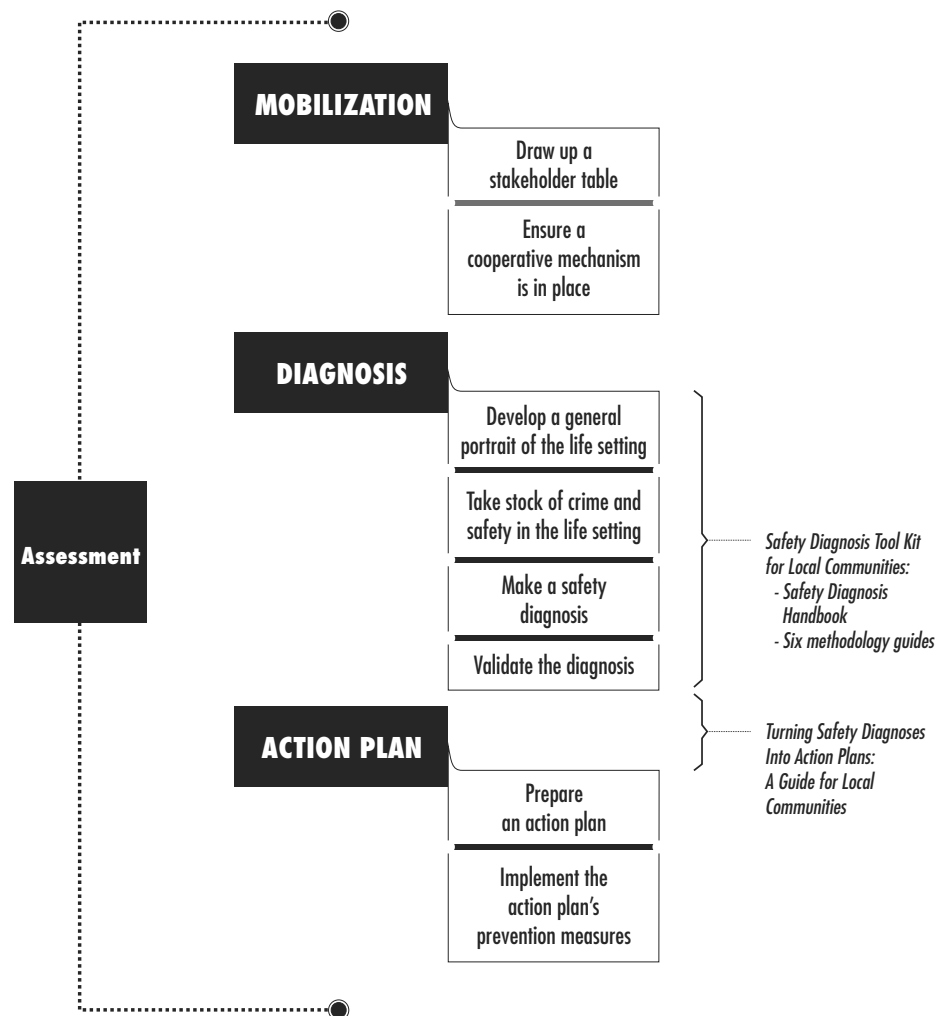
VOLUME 13

Julie Laforest, Louise Marie Bouchard and Pierre Maurice. *Turning Safety Diagnoses Into Action Plans: A Guide for Local Communities*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2010.

About this guide¹...

Promoting safety and preventing crime through a setting-oriented approach requires a structured procedure for planning the various activities to be carried out. The procedure involves mobilizing the population and intersectoral partners, making safety diagnoses and drawing up action plans. The *Safety Diagnosis Tool Kit for Local Communities* was prepared to assist with this procedure. It comprises several tools, including the *Safety Diagnosis Handbook* and six methodology guides. The document *Turning Safety Diagnoses Into Action Plans: A Guide for Local Communities* was prepared in addition to the tool kit, to facilitate the process of translating diagnoses into effective action plans.

Structured activity-planning procedure



1. The content of this guide is based on electronic documents concerning observation put out by the Walloon Region of Belgium. Since these documents were housed on a Web site that has not been accessible since 2008, readers who wish to obtain copies are invited to contact the authors of the present guide (see the "Contact Us" page on the CRPSPC Web site: www.crpsspqc.ca). The checklist for planning observation activities in Appendix 2 is based on the following document: http://www.integration-projects.org/tools/Methodologie_du_focus_group_FR.doc.

The present document,² *Guide to Direct Observation of Community Safety – 2nd edition*, is one of the six methodology guides included in the *Safety Diagnosis Tool Kit for Local Communities*. Dealing with direct observation of life settings, it is intended to provide a framework for gathering meaningful information with a view to identifying characteristics or situations with nuisance potential (e.g. disorder, incivility and deteriorated physical environment). This type of information will lead to a better understanding of problems noted, particularly by the population, in certain private or public places; for example, around high-density family housing, in the vicinity of shopping centres or districts, and in areas next to bars or other establishments that serve alcohol.

Although not discussed in the present guide, exploratory walks are another method that can be used to gain a first-hand understanding of the safety situation in a life setting. Such walks are designed to assess urban environments (neighbourhood units, streets, blocks, etc.) from the standpoint of users. Contrary to direct observation, which is aimed at detecting concrete manifestations of safety problems in a setting, exploratory walks are primarily intended to determine how a setting affects a population's feeling of safety and to gauge the extent to which people feel they are at risk of being assaulted. Exploratory walks are designed to establish whether the setting's characteristics foster a feeling of safety, in that they enable people to see and to be seen, to hear and to be heard, to know where they are and where they are going, and so forth. The method for doing exploratory walks is explained in the documents listed in the footnote below.³

-
2. The first edition of this guide was written by Michel Ouellet, Monique Rainville, Louise Marie Bouchard and Catherine Belley.
 3. To learn more about exploratory walks, please see:
 - *City of Toronto: Safety Audits Home* <http://www.toronto.ca/safetyaudits/index.htm>: an exploratory-walk-type tool is also available at http://www.toronto.ca/safetyaudits/pdf/scarb_safety_checklist.pdf.
 - *Guide de réalisation d'une marche exploratoire : carnet d'enquête*, Ville de Lévis http://www.ville.levis.qc.ca/Fr/Pdf/GuideEnquete_marche_exploratoire.pdf.
 - *La marche exploratoire... Une façon simple d'améliorer la sécurité dans votre milieu*, Ville de Québec http://www.ville.quebec.qc.ca/publications/docs_ville/guide_marche_exploratoire.pdf.

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Direct observation of community safety – A general overview

In making safety diagnoses, it is sometimes useful to estimate or quantify certain behaviours or environmental features through direct observation of life settings. This observation method makes it possible to gather and analyze information on a series of problem safety situations related to the characteristics or behaviour of individuals (incivility) or to certain characteristics of the physical environment (disorder). Generally speaking, it requires the use of an observation log for entering information on the safety situations under study.

Even though it is difficult to foresee all of the problem safety situations that can arise in life settings, we have singled out a certain number on the basis of the scientific literature. All of these situations¹⁰ are included in the observation log proposed in Appendix 4:

- A. Aggressive, intimidating or annoying behaviour by certain individuals.
- B. Congregation of young people or adults who engage in annoying behaviour (disturbing the peace, loitering, etc.).

Definition of disorder and incivility⁴

The terms disorder and incivility refer to actions, conditions or behaviour that adversely affect public order, that is, actions, conditions or behaviour that are perceived as annoying, potentially threatening⁵ or visibly abnormal⁶ by the people who live in, pass through, study or work in the life setting concerned. Disorder and incivility are expressed in a multitude of ways that can usually be observed by the population of a life setting.

Disorder differs from incivility in that it designates **physical signs** that can be observed in the built environment (e.g. graffiti on buildings or public works, garbage on roads or in public spaces, abandoned or dilapidated buildings, syringes left in public places). The signs of physical disorder are fairly stable over time.⁷

Incivility refers to disruptive **behaviour** that goes against the customary rules of life in a community, particularly in public spaces (e.g. disturbing the peace, loitering, using drugs in public places). These rules may be official regulations (municipal by-laws, etc.) or they may reflect cultural factors specific to the life setting concerned, with the result that something that is acceptable in one community is absolutely prohibited in another (e.g. spitting on the floor). Unlike the signs of physical disorder, the manifestations of incivility usually appear on an occasional,^{8,9} but repetitive basis.

4. A more detailed definition of disorder and incivility can be found in Appendix 1 of the *Safety Diagnosis Handbook*, one of the volumes making up the *Safety Diagnosis Tool Kit for Local Communities* [www.crpspc.qc.ca].
5. Ralph B. Taylor, "The Incivilities Thesis: Theory, Measurement, and Policy," in Robert H. Langworthy (ed.), *Measuring What Matters: Proceedings From the Policing Research Institute Meetings*, National Institute of Justice and Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 1999, p. 65-88.
6. Stéphane Leman-Langlois. "Le maintien de l'ordre," Course No. 8, *Sécurité intérieure : nature et missions*, SIP 1000, École de criminologie, Université de Montréal, pages retrieved on September 28, 2010, [http://www.crime-reg.com/police/sip1000_cours08.htm].
7. Robert J. Sampson and Stephen W. Raudenbush, "Systematic Social Observation of Public Spaces: A New Look at Disorder in Urban Neighborhoods," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 105, No. 3 (November 1999), p. 603-651.
8. Ibid.
9. W.G. Skogan, *Disorder and Decline. Crime and the Spiral of Decay in American Neighborhoods*, University of California Press, 1990, 218 pages.
10. J.E. Eck, "Preventing crime at places," in L.W. Sherman, D.P. Farrington, B.C. Welsh and D.L. MacKenzie (eds.), *Evidence-Based Crime Prevention*, Routledge, London, 2002.

- C. Activities related to the sale or use of drugs and the repercussions of these activities on the life setting where they occur.
- D. Prostitution activities and their repercussions on the life setting where they occur.
- E. Lack of cleanliness in certain areas (presence of litter, syringes, pieces of glass, etc.).
- F. Graffiti on buildings or equipment.
- G. Other signs of vandalism on buildings or equipment (bus shelters, benches, play equipment, telephone booths, streetlights, etc.).
- H. Other signs of vandalism in outdoor public spaces (on trees, landscaping, etc.).
- I. Abandoned or dilapidated buildings.
- J. Poor or defective lighting (broken or out-of-service lights) in public places.

Main characteristics of direct observation carried out within the context of safety diagnoses

Objectives

- Obtain information on certain characteristics of a life setting's physical environment, without intermediaries.
- Obtain information on certain behaviours in a life setting, without intermediaries.
- Obtain more detailed information on disorder and incivility in certain areas, taking into account the characteristics of the built environment and the use of certain areas.

Advantages

- Makes it possible to obtain more explicit or more meaningful information from concrete examples observed in the field.
- Provides more in-depth understanding of the situation in the field.
- Produces less biased and subjective results than consultations with individuals, due to the lack of intermediaries.
- Can be carried out at little cost.

Disadvantages

- Can be used to explore only a limited number of topics, primarily the built environment and disorder and incivility.
- Can be used to study only situations that occur in areas accessible to the general public.

Comments

- Entails variable costs depending on the number of observation sessions held.
-

Organization of the guide

THIS GUIDE IS DIVIDED INTO THREE PARTS.

The first part discusses the steps involved in planning direct observation activities.

1

PLANNING

The second part explains how to carry out the planned activities in order to obtain the desired information.

2

IMPLEMENTATION

The third part explains how to process and analyze the data gathered in order to identify key findings.

3

ANALYSIS

The guide concludes with suggestions for additional reading, a checklist for planning observation activities, an exercise for selecting observation topics, a sample observation log, a sample summary sheet and a few ethical considerations.

APPENDICES

Planning observation sessions

The success of direct observation activities in life settings depends in part on how well these activities are prepared. Basically, to effectively lay the groundwork for direct observation, you must determine the objective of the observation sessions, decide how they will be carried out, select the means to be deployed, draw up a data collection log and an observation summary sheet, and draft instructions for observers.

OBJECTIVE OF SESSIONS

To avoid misunderstandings, it is important that all participants have a good grasp of why direct observation is being used as a data collection method. Therefore, we strongly recommend that you define an objective on which everyone can agree. The objective must stipulate the reasons why direct observation is being employed, and describe the target life setting.

Why have you decided to use direct observation?

To define the objective of the observation sessions you are planning to undertake, you must first ensure that the reasons for employing direct observation are clearly understood and approved by all participants.

Safety diagnoses can provide insight into a wide range of safety problems (see the section “Topics covered by the tool kit” in the *Safety Diagnosis Handbook*). Direct observation, on the other hand, can target only a limited number of problems, primarily those associated with disorder and incivility (reread the definition given in the present guide in the section “Direct observation of community safety – A general overview”). It is important to discuss this issue with the members of your working group, as some may have expectations that cannot be fulfilled by this data collection method. You must make sure that everyone has the same expectations as to what direct observation can achieve

In this guide, we have identified a number of situations or topics that might affect the safety or the feeling of safety of the members of a community. These situations, which have been taken from the scientific literature, may or may not apply to the setting you wish to study. If they do not apply, you may decide to explore other situations. In other words, you must reflect on what situations will be observed prior to conducting your sessions, not only to adapt the list proposed in this guide to the setting under study but also to ensure that all participants have the same understanding of the problem situations that will be observed. This can be done through group discussions or a structured exercise. Appendix 3 presents an exercise performed for this purpose in a community in Québec that wanted to do a safety diagnosis using direct observation.

Where do you want to conduct the observation sessions?

It is important to define the area in which the direct observation sessions will be held. For example, you have to decide if you will target an entire life setting or only certain parts of it. Conclusions drawn from information gathered with other methods, such as focus groups, interviews with key informants, surveys or documentary research, may help you to make a decision in this respect.

Regardless of the area selected, you have to define it as precisely as possible. If necessary, you can do a reconnaissance tour for this purpose.

Once you have defined the study area, you will be ready to define the objective of using direct observation to identify safety problems in that area. The objective should reflect the decisions made with regard to the two questions asked above.

The places most frequently said to pose safety problems in the scientific literature are as follows.^{11,12,13}

- *high-density multi-family housing;*
- *shopping centres or districts;*
- *the areas around bars or other establishments that serve alcohol;*
- *places that provide access to public transit;*
- *parking lots;*
- *public places such as parks;*
- *public places with poor lighting;*
- *the areas around high schools.*

Example

The example of Saint-Gelais

Owing to the large number of complaints received from people in the South District of Saint-Gelais, the town's safety committee decided to do a safety diagnosis using direct observation. The committee's objective was as follows:

Gather information on the South District's physical environment and on the disorder and incivility problems that gave rise to the complaints. The following observation sites were selected on the basis of the complaints received: the commercial district (especially the main street), the park and the streets next to the comprehensive school.

11. J. Laforest, *Indicateurs de vulnérabilité associés à la sécurité d'un territoire*, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, Québec, 2007, 79 pages [http://www.inspq.qc.ca/pdf/publications/721_indicateurs_final_crpspc.pdf].

12. W. Spelman and J.E. Eck, "Sitting ducks, ravenous wolves and helping hands: New approaches to urban policing," *Public Affairs Comments*, 35(2), 1989, 1-9, cited by J.E. Eck, "Preventing crime at places," in L.W. Sherman, D.P. Farrington, B.C. Welsh and D.L. MacKenzie (eds.), *Evidence-Based Crime Prevention*, Routledge, London, 2002, p. 242.

13. Ibid.

PROCEDURE AND MEANS

Direct observation sessions should be held at predetermined times and in a predetermined sequence. Moreover, you have to tailor their duration to what is being observed and to the realities of the life setting concerned. You also have to recruit and train observers to conduct the sessions, and ensure that they have access to the necessary data collection material and equipment.

Number, timing and duration of observation sessions

It is a good idea to plan on holding more than one observation session in each sector or site. Moreover, you must plan the sessions bearing in mind that some problems manifest themselves only at certain times of the year. Depending on the context, you will have to decide if the sessions will be held at different times of the day or week or if, on the contrary, they will always be held at the same time (e.g. after dark, on the first or last day of every month, etc.).

Observation sessions may last from one hour to two and a half hours depending in part on available resources. In addition, the number and optimum length of sessions will depend on the sector or site that is being observed and the objectives pursued. Indeed, their number and length will vary according to whether the overriding goal is to gather information on the physical environment of a site (relatively stable observation situations over time) or to study the site's different uses (occasional, but repetitive situations). In the latter case, several, possibly longer sessions should be held as the phenomena to be observed are not always present.

Under optimal conditions, the most useful concept for determining the number and length of sessions is "data saturation", or the point where the information collected is repetitive or does not provide any new or additional insights. Once data is saturated, the observation phase is complete.

To make it easier to estimate the number of sessions required and their duration, it can be a good idea to visit the site or do quick tour of the sector.

Necessary resources

Observation can be done with a fairly limited number of human and material resources:

- one or more observers on each observation site;
- one or more observation logs adapted to the objectives pursued (see the sample observation log at the end of this document);
- paper, pencils and rigid pads for taking notes;
- a list of instructions for observers;
- camera equipment, if necessary (see "Taking photographs" below).

1

PLANNING

Selection of observers

It takes a good memory and attention to detail in order to be a good observer. It also requires a good understanding of what has to be observed. In addition, observers must use observation tools systematically so as to be rigorous and impervious to prejudice. At least two observers should be assigned to each sector or site in order to enhance the quality of observations. Ideally, both observers should hold their sessions at the same time so that they can discuss and validate their observations. However, depending on the availability of resources, they can also hold their sessions at different times.

There is no easy answer to the question of whether observers have to be well-acquainted with the life setting to be observed. A person who already knows a setting well can begin the observation process sooner. On the other hand, it may be harder for him or her to have the detachment and objectivity needed to be an effective observer. Observers can be recruited from among the paid employees of a municipality (e.g. park superintendents), volunteer citizens (e.g. the members of a golden age club) or the members of a safety committee.

Access to sites

Generally speaking, observers should not have any problems gaining access to sites. However, when the places to be observed are private property, you must obtain authorization from the appropriate authorities. If possible, you should try to obtain the authorization in writing. When the places to be observed are public property, you may decide, depending on the context, to inform the appropriate authorities about the planned observation activities. In any event, it is important to reassure them that the confidentiality of sources will be respected.

Taking photographs

Under Québec law, people cannot be photographed without their consent. Therefore, observers should take only a limited number of photographs, bearing in mind the way in which they will be used (e.g. if and how they will be disseminated, etc.) and respecting the private character of the places and buildings photographed (see "Taking photographs in public places" in Appendix 6).

Itinerary

Some of the situations that are to be observed will probably require observers to move from one site to another. The extent to which they have to move around will depend on the objectives pursued and the size of the area under study. For example, if the goal is to observe night-time lighting in a municipality's public places, observers will have to visit each place individually. The route they are to follow should be determined in advance, and a decision should be made, based on the area's size and the accessibility of the different sites, as to whether they will travel on foot, by car, by bicycle, etc. When cars are used, observers may take the time to walk around the various sites in order to enhance the accuracy of their observations.

DATA COLLECTION LOG AND OBSERVER INSTRUCTIONS

One of the problems observers often face is how to effectively zero in on what should be observed. Therefore, it is important to provide them with a standardized observation log that will serve as a guide, enable them to conduct their sessions systematically and help them to take notes. A sample observation log is provided in Appendix 4. Since several observation sessions will probably be held in the same sector or site, it is necessary to prepare an observation summary sheet for compiling all of the observations made (see the sample summary sheet in Appendix 5). An explanation of the different fields of the

summary sheet and how to fill them in is provided in the next section of the guide. Before the observers begin their observation sessions, you must give them time to familiarize themselves with the observation log and the observation summary sheet.

We also recommend that you prepare a list of instructions for the observers, particularly to remind them of the attitudes they should adopt while observing sites and to summarize how they should collect the data. To prepare these instructions, we suggest that you refer to the section “Guidelines for conducting observation sessions”. Providing the different observers with the same set of instructions will ensure a degree of consistency in the way they proceed.

Observers must also be made aware of the ethical issues associated with observation activities so that they can learn how to behave in certain situations. For example, it is important to discuss the attitude that they should adopt when they see an offence being committed or are confronted with a dangerous situation. Appendix 6 discusses in detail the ethical issues that should be considered in gathering information. Insofar as possible, the instructions given to observers should contain rules on the behaviour and attitudes required to conduct observation sessions.

Example

The example of Saint-Gelais

In view of the safety objective formulated by the town’s safety committee and in the wake of a quick tour of the South District, the committee decided to plan the observation sessions as follows:

- The sessions would be concentrated in three areas: on Main Street, in the park, and in and around the comprehensive school.
- At least two observation sessions would be conducted in the daytime during the week and in the daytime on weekends and at least four sessions would be conducted in the evening, preferably on weekends. The sessions would be postponed if it rained.
- Two observers would be recruited: one female and one male, if possible.
- Both observers would hold their sessions at the same time, if possible.
- Since the sites to be observed were public, no authorization would be needed. Nonetheless, the municipal authorities and the police department would be informed of the committee’s plans.
- The observers would be equipped with a camera for illustrating their observations; however, they would be able to use the photographs they took only if the people shown on them could not be identified.
- The observers would be required to move around the South District during each session and spend about 30 minutes on each observation site.
- Each observation session was not to exceed a total of two hours.
- The observers would receive training a few days before the first observation session.
- They would use the observation log and the observation summary sheet proposed in this guide.
- The observers would be given instructions for conducting the observation activities and to ensure the sessions ran smoothly.

Conducting observation sessions

Basically, this step involves gathering information through the observation activities planned during the previous step. Each observer records, in the observation log, the observations that he or she makes in the field. To fill out the log proposed in this guide, the observer must first clearly identify the sector or site under study and enter the date, his or her name and the time of day. He or she must then write down each of his or her observations, specifying in each case the topic or situation concerned, the exact location where the observation was made, the reason why the phenomenon observed constitutes a safety problem, and the problem's level of importance.

The situations or topics recorded in the observation log will vary depending on the context and the objectives of the observation activities. In fact, the log should not be reserved simply for collecting information on the situations listed in it, as problems may be noted during the observation sessions that do not correspond to any of those situations. It can be useful, therefore, to allow observers to comment on other situations.

As mentioned above, it can be a good idea for observers to explain the importance of each of their observations with regard to the safety of the community under study, and to rank their observations' importance. The latter can be measured by the frequency of the situation and its direct or indirect repercussions on the population (death, disability injuries, perceived insecurity, economic losses, major infrastructure damage, etc.). The importance of each observation can be ranked as it is recorded, or simply at the end of the session when the observer has a general picture of the sector or site under study.

A new observation log should be filled out for each session in a particular sector or site, regardless of whether the same or different observers are involved.

GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING OBSERVATION SESSIONS

In addition to applying the aforementioned procedure, observers should adhere to the following guidelines in conducting their direct observation sessions.

Identify the best observation points

- Decide which are the best observation points for gathering information.
- If you are conducting the observation session with another observer, decide whether you will both use the same observation point or whether each of you will use a different one.
- Depending on the situations or topics under study and the characteristics of the sector or site to be observed, decide whether it is preferable to conduct the observation sessions from a fixed location or from several different spots in the area concerned.

Make sure that you are safe

- Make sure that the person in charge of the activity knows the time and place of your observation session.
- Make sure that you can be seen during observation sessions conducted after dark.
- Keep a communication device within easy reach (cell phone, walkie-talkie, etc.).
- Do not intervene in illegal situations or fights, unless a person is in imminent danger.
- If someone is in imminent danger (e.g. a child might hurt himself or herself with a dirty syringe), consider going to their assistance only if your own safety is not at risk.

Respect the life setting

- Adopt a neutral attitude and avoid influencing local dynamics.
- Do not damage the sector or site under study or interfere with the regular activities that take place there.
- Identify yourself to the authorities when you arrive in the sector or site and take a copy of any written authorizations you have obtained.
- To avoid negative perceptions, it is sometimes advisable to explain why the observation sessions are being held and how they will proceed.
- Build and maintain a climate of trust, if necessary, with the users of the sectors or sites to be observed.

Observe the code of ethics applicable to safety diagnoses

- Observe the code of ethics presented in Appendix 6, particularly as regards:
 - respecting the confidentiality of information sources;
 - managing sensitive information (on crime, illegal activities, etc.);
 - taking photographs.
- You are not responsible for reporting criminal acts or offences.¹⁴ You must simply record the behaviour observed in such situations, making sure you comply with confidentiality rules. You should focus on the situation rather than on identifying the people who are committing the criminal act or offence.

Make sure that you are comfortable

- Be sure to dress for the weather and according to the amount of time you will be in the field.
- If necessary, bring along a chair or stool that can be carried around easily.
- Make sure that you have any other equipment you need.

14. However, under section 39 of the *Youth Protection Act*, anyone who has reasonable grounds to believe that the security or development of a child is in danger due to physical or sexual abuse (subparagraphs *d* and *e* of the second paragraph of section 38) must bring the situation to the attention of the Director of Youth Protection without delay.

Example

The example of Saint-Gelais

The observers decided to conduct their observation sessions as follows:

- ❑ They would move around the sites to be studied rather than stay in one place.
- ❑ They would walk from one site to the other.
- ❑ For safety reasons, they would work together during observation sessions conducted after dark.
- ❑ They would carry a cell phone with them during the sessions.
- ❑ They would systematically inform the police representative on the safety committee prior to each session, to make it easier to obtain the cooperation of the police, if necessary.
- ❑ They would wear clothing that was neutral, but also readily visible after dark.

2

IMPLEMENTATION

Processing and analyzing the information gathered

Once all of the observation sessions planned for a particular sector or site have been completed, you have to process and analyze the information gathered. This should be done in a group if several observers were involved, in order to arrive at a consensus.

COMPILING AND CLASSIFYING MEANINGFUL INFORMATION

This is an essential step that must be carried out shortly after the information has been collected. If several observers took part in the observation sessions, they will have to discuss the information, primarily to decide which observations are meaningful for the sector or site under study. To that end, they must first group the observations and, in cases where the latter are redundant, they will have to choose only one. And if several of the observations selected are similar, the observers must then summarize them as effectively as possible in one meaningful observation. They must also decide if all of the observations are pertinent enough to keep. This can be done by reviewing the observation log, primarily to see why the observations were said to be important for the safety of the community under study and what level of importance was assigned to them.

When a meaningful observation summarizes several observations dealing more particularly with behaviour, it should indicate when the observations were made so that trends can be detected in time and space.

Once you have a list of all the meaningful observations formulated for a particular sector or site, you must enter them on an observation summary sheet (see the sample summary sheet in Appendix 5). You should also provide a brief description of the sector or site concerned and of how the observation session was conducted. In addition, it is a good idea to classify the meaningful observations by location and topic, as this will help you carry out the next step, which consists in identifying key findings.

3
ANALYSIS

ANALYZING MEANINGFUL INFORMATION IN ORDER TO IDENTIFY KEY FINDINGS

Key findings reflect important realities that should be singled out. The importance of these realities derives from their frequency (the number of times they occur and their repetitive nature), the perceived seriousness of their consequences, the fact that they represent a trend (e.g. an ever-growing problem), their unusual nature and so forth. A key findings statement can be formulated in different ways, referring to the When? What? Where? Who? or How? It can thus reflect one or more pieces of meaningful information. When several pieces of meaningful information about a particular sector or site are linked to the same topic, it is often a good idea to summarize them in one key findings statement.

Formulating key findings statements requires the ability to synthesize information, as well as good judgment and in-depth knowledge of the life setting concerned. Therefore, it can be useful to enlist the participation of several people. The observation summary process described above should be repeated for each of the sectors or sites observed. It can also be interesting to analyze the meaningful observations and key findings for the sectors and sites as a whole in order to pinpoint common features and decide whether new key findings statements need to be formulated.

Combining all of the key findings derived from direct observation sessions with those that have emerged from information gathered with other methods, where applicable, will make it possible to arrive at a safety diagnosis for the life setting under study. Transversal analysis of all the key findings will enable you to highlight the main problems that should be singled out in the diagnosis (see the section "Take stock of crime and safety in the life setting" in the *Safety Diagnosis Handbook*).

The number of pieces of meaningful information provided in the fictitious example in the next few pages has been limited for practical reasons. In a real observation situation, there would no doubt be more.



In short...

Direct observation is designed to gather meaningful information that will lead to a better understanding of the problems associated with the physical environment and with disorder and incivility in public spaces. Moreover, it is a method that can be applied within a fairly short time frame and at relatively little cost. However, direct observation must be carefully planned and systematic if the information it collects is to be summarized objectively. In addition, we strongly recommend that it always be conducted in a group because of the type of information involved, the method used to analyze it, and safety considerations.

Example

The example of Saint-Gelais

The following table presents the results of observation sessions held in the South District’s commercial district and park, as well as on the streets next to its comprehensive school. The sessions were held in the daytime and after dark during the week and on weekends. Once all of the sessions had been held, the two observers got together and grouped all the observations they had entered in their observation logs for each of the sectors or sites studied. This enabled them to reach a consensus on what information was meaningful for analysis purposes and to highlight key findings on safety in the South District.

Summary of the key findings derived from direct observation in Saint-Gelais

SECTOR: South District

MEANINGFUL OBSERVATIONS	EXACT LOCATION	TOPIC ¹⁵	KEY FINDINGS
There are several signs of deterioration in and around an abandoned building located at 427 Main Street: broken windows, graffiti, foul odours, garbage, etc.	Main Street	J, F, G, H	Built environment in a poor state (abandoned buildings, lighting, graffiti, etc.) and disruptive behaviour along the western part of Main Street. [O]
The access to the building at 427 is unsafe.	Main Street	J	
The barriers limiting access to the remains of a burned-out building at 438 have been destroyed, and there is a large amount of graffiti on the façade.	Main Street	J, G, H	
Numerous pieces of glass are found next to abandoned buildings.	Main Street	F	
A number of people were seen coming and going at 427 and 438 during one of the observation sessions held after dark. Some of them seemed to be young people.	Main Street	J	
The western part of Main Street between 398 and 508 is poorly lit.	Main Street	K	
Young people were seen drinking alcohol and smoking drugs in noisy groups near abandoned buildings in the western part of the street during one of the observation sessions held after dark	Main Street	B	

3

ANALYSIS

Example

MEANINGFUL OBSERVATIONS	EXACT LOCATION	TOPIC ¹⁵	KEY FINDINGS
Numerous broken beer bottles can be seen around the playground.	Park	F	Badly maintained and poorly used park. [O]
Young people congregate in noisy groups around the playground after dark on weekends.	Park	B	
Few families go to the park during the day.	Park	L (Other)	
There is a great deal of broken play equipment.	Park		
Over 50% of the park benches are unusable because of vandalism.	Park	H	
Squeegees operate at two busy intersections in the South District (Main Street and 2 nd Avenue, and Main Street and 6 th Avenue), despite a by-law prohibiting such activities.	South District	A	Numerous instances of inappropriate behaviour (rudeness, intimidation, failure to obey municipal by-laws, etc.) in the South District. [O]
Certain people begging on Main Street and in the park display intimidating and insistent behaviour.	South District	C	
During the day and after dark, pedestrians are prevented from circulating freely in front of certain stores in the South District (grocery store, tobacco shop and bakery) by young people congregating on the sidewalk.	South District	B	
There is a large amount of graffiti on the walls of the comprehensive school and of nearby buildings.	Comprehensive school	G	Major graffiti problem in and around the comprehensive school. [O]

15. The letters refer to the situations or topics described in the observation log in Appendix 4.

Appendix 1

Suggested additional reading

Suggested additional reading

Laperrière, Anne. "L'observation directe," in *Recherche sociale. De la problématique à la collecte des données*, collective work edited by Benoît Gauthier, 2nd edition, Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1993, p. 251-272.

Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada. *Evaluating Crime Prevention through Social Development Projects. Handbook for Community Groups*, [http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/prg/cp/_fl/Evaluation_handbook-E.pdf], Module 4, 2006, p. 79-80.

Appendix 2

Checklist for planning observation activities

Checklist for planning observation activities

Activity	Content	Proposed time frame
Plan observation sessions.	See the section “Planning observation sessions”.	6 weeks before the sessions
Get to know the sectors or sites selected.	Explore the places selected and record any information that will be useful for planning the observation sessions.	6 weeks beforehand
Obtain authorization, if necessary.	Meet with the owner or the person in charge of the study area to explain what the observation sessions will involve and to obtain the necessary approval.	5 weeks beforehand
Prepare a list of instructions for the observers.	Explain how to fill out the observation log, take additional notes, and so forth, and provide certain guidelines for conducting the sessions.	5 weeks beforehand
Choose the observers.	Identify people who are most likely to be effective observers and contact them.	5 weeks beforehand
Assign the sectors or sites to be studied to the different observers and draw up a schedule.		3-4 weeks beforehand
Organize the logistics.	Car pooling, meeting places, note-taking material.	2 weeks beforehand
Recontact the observers.		1 week beforehand
Train the observers.	Make sure the observers understand the observation log and how to fill it out. In addition, discuss certain ethical issues.	A few days beforehand
Hold the observation sessions.	Suggested length: one hour to two and a half hours.	
Have the observers pool their observations and fill out a summary sheet for each sector or site.	Enter all meaningful observations on a summary sheet, grouping them by topic, clientele and place.	As soon as possible
Derive key findings from the meaningful information.		As soon as possible
Send a letter or word of thanks to the observers.		During the week following the observation sessions

Appendix 3

**Exercise for identifying situations or topics related to disorder
and incivility in the life setting under study**

Exercise for identifying situations or topics related to disorder and incivility in the life setting under study

This exercise was developed from a training activity that was used to familiarize the members of the public safety committee of a community in Québec with the content of the present guide. The goal of this exercise is to adapt the topics contained in the observation log presented in the guide to the realities of the life setting under study. It enables participants to reach a consensus on which topics will be explored during their direct observation sessions and to acquire a shared understanding of the underlying issues.

PROCEDURE

1. Form groups

- Divide the participants into two equal groups.
- Assign the following question to each member of Group A:
Can you tell me which characteristics or behaviours (incivility) of people are likely to affect the safety of the life setting and why?
- Assign the following question to each member of Group B:
Can you tell me which characteristics of the physical environment are likely to affect the setting's safety and why?

2 Gather information

- Each member of Group A must meet with a member of Group B in order to ask him or her their assigned question. The person who asks the question has to compile the answers. For practical reasons and to ensure that answers are spontaneous, a time limit should be set for this part of the exercise. Twenty minutes may be amply sufficient.
- Ideally, participants should change partners once the allotted time is up, so that the members of Group B can put their assigned question to the members of Group A. Once again, it is important not to exceed the time limit.

3 Ask the participants to return to their respective groups

- At the end of the data collection phase, the participants are asked to return to their respective groups and to compile a list of the answers they obtained to their assigned question.
- Both groups must try to reach a consensus on which topics or situations best apply to the life setting under study. For this purpose, they must: a) eliminate topics that cannot be studied through direct observation; b) group answers that are similar and reformulate them, if necessary; and c) eliminate topics that would be studied more effectively with other methods.

4 Obtain a consensus on which topics or situations will be included in the observation log

- Both groups must present the topics or situations they have decided to include in the observation log.
- We suggest that the groups list them in a table that can be read by everyone in attendance.

- It is probably worthwhile at this stage to review the characteristics of the sector or site that is to be studied through direct observation, as well as the definition of disorder and incivility given in the section “Direct observation of community safety – A general overview”. The participants must then discuss and reach a consensus on the topics or situations that will be included in the observation log, making sure they choose only those that can be explored through direct observation. They must also group topics or situations that are similar and combine them, if necessary, into a single statement.

The following table illustrates the kind of situations or topics that might be selected through this exercise, as well as the way the statements chosen to describe these situations or topics might be worded in the observation log.

RESULTS OF THE EXERCISE

Topics or situations submitted by both groups	Comments	Final wording selected for the observation log
Drinking alcohol and taking drugs in public/private places		Use of drugs and alcohol in public places
Drug trafficking	This type of activity is not easy to study through direct observation.	
Parental negligence (unsupervised young people)	Direct observation is not the right method for gathering information on this type of problem.	
Disruptive behaviour by street youth		Congregation of young people or adults with disruptive behaviour
People congregating in private and public places		
Violent behaviour by people with a judicial record	A person’s prior convictions cannot be determined through direct observation.	Aggressive or disruptive behaviour
Suspicious behaviour		
Legal and illegal gatherings		
Disruptive behaviour by marginal people		
Failure to obey traffic rules by both pedestrians and drivers	After discussing this topic, the participants clarified and reworded it.	Off-road operation of motor vehicles

Topics or situations submitted by both groups	Comments	Final wording selected for the observation log
Loose animals		Loose animals
Strained relations among neighbours	Direct observation is not the right method for gathering information on this type of problem.	
Vandalism		Vandalism/graffiti
Vagrants		Vagrants
Theft	Direct observation is not the right method for gathering information on this type of problem.	
Night life – human activity in wooded areas		Nuisances caused by night-time activities
Feeling of insecurity due to known criminal behaviour	Direct observation cannot be used to detect this type of feeling. Therefore, it is not the right method for gathering information on this type of problem.	
Lack of cleanliness in public places		Lack of cleanliness in public spaces
Poor maintenance of public places		
Unsanitary conditions in certain public and private places		
Poor lighting		Unsafe public places and facilities
Unsafe public places		
Lack of housing – overcrowded housing	Direct observation is not the right method for gathering information on this type of problem.	
Poor maintenance of the road network	Information on this topic can be or has already been obtained through other methods.	

Appendix 4

Sample observation log

Sample observation log¹⁶

Code	Topic
A	Aggressive, intimidating or annoying behaviour by certain individuals.
B	Congregation of young people or adults who engage in annoying behaviour (disturbing the peace, loitering, etc.).
C	Activities related to the sale or use of drugs and the repercussions of these activities on the life setting where they occur.
D	Prostitution activities and their repercussions on the life setting where they occur.
E	Lack of cleanliness in certain areas (presence of litter, syringes, pieces of glass, etc.).
F	Graffiti on buildings or equipment.
G	Other signs of vandalism on buildings or equipment (bus shelters, benches, play equipment, telephone booths, streetlights, etc.).
H	Other signs of vandalism in outdoor public spaces (on trees, landscaping, etc.).
I	Abandoned or dilapidated buildings.
J	Poor or defective lighting (broken or out-of-service lights) in public places.
K	...

Name or number of the sector or site: _____

Date of the observation session: _____ / _____ / _____ (year/month/day)

Location or address of the sector or site: _____

Name of the observer: _____

Length of the observation session in minutes: _____

Time of day: daytime after dark

Day of the week: Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday Sunday

Use only one copy of this page per observation session.

16. This observation log is available in MS Word format on the Web site of the Québec Safety Promotion and Crime Prevention Resource Centre/Centre québécois de ressources en promotion de la sécurité et en prévention de la criminalité (www.crpspc.qc.ca).

Appendix 5

Sample observation summary sheet

Sample observation summary sheet¹⁸

This summary sheet can be used to compile the meaningful observations of all the observers assigned to the same sector or site. Once the observers have filled it out, they should have a list of meaningful observations on which they have all agreed, as well as key findings for each sector or site.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SECTOR OR SITE STUDIED
(name, limits or description).

SUMMARY OF THE OBSERVATION SESSIONS IN THE SECTOR OR SITE
(number of observers, time of year, time of day, day of the week, and approximate duration of the sessions as a whole).

Use only one copy of this page per sector or site.

18. This summary sheet is available in MS Word format on the Web site of the Québec Safety Promotion and Crime Prevention Resource Centre/Centre québécois de ressources en promotion de la sécurité et en prévention de la criminalité (www.crpspc.qc.ca).

Appendix 6

Ethical considerations in safety diagnoses

Ethical considerations in safety diagnoses²⁰

Four guiding principles govern the various activities involved in the data collection and processing phase:

- PRINCIPLE 1** Everyone has the right to privacy, even if he or she is in a public place.
- PRINCIPLE 2** Everyone has the right to respect for his or her image.
- PRINCIPLE 3** Observers must never confuse their job with that of the police or other service providers.
- PRINCIPLE 4** Committees and people in charge of conducting direct observation sessions must promise to respect the confidentiality of sources.

OBSERVING PRIVATE OR COMMERCIAL SPACES

If observation sessions are to be held in private or commercial spaces such as shopping centres, it goes without saying that the authorization of the owner or manager must be obtained. However, obtaining such approval does not exempt observers from having to adhere to the principles listed above. In particular, they must make sure that their notes do not contain people's names or allow people to be identified.

TAKING PHOTOGRAPHS IN PUBLIC PLACES

Taking photographs during observation sessions should be guided by principles 1 and 2:

- Observers should always obtain prior approval from people they wish to photograph if the people will be able to be identified on the photograph.
- Photographs of places or buildings should not adversely affect the image or reputation of the owners or occupants. Therefore, if photographs of places or buildings are to be published they should not show any street names or civic numbers.
- Dissemination of photographs should be planned carefully, subject to principles 1 and 2.

20. The content of this appendix is based on a talk given by Robert Roy, associate professor of the Chair of Applied Ethics at the Université de Sherbrooke, during a meeting at the ministère de la Sécurité publique on May 22, 2007.

PROTECTING OBSERVERS AND VICTIMS

Due to the nature of the topics dealt with during safety diagnoses, observers may hear about criminal or illegal activities from participants or other people they encounter; in addition, they may even witness such activities. They may then be faced with the dilemma of deciding whether or not to report the activities. The choice is particularly difficult when the person who has confided in them is a victim of the activities in question. Therefore, people in charge of collecting data or making safety diagnoses must think about these issues beforehand and decide on how to deal with them. Moreover, they must discuss the approach that is to be followed with the observers before the observation sessions begin, to enable them to remain calm if such situations occur. The safety of citizens, be they witnesses, victims or observers, must never be jeopardized during a safety diagnosis.

Unfortunately, it is not possible within the scope of this guide to propose concrete solutions for all of the situations that can arise in the field. Nevertheless, here are some guidelines for reporting problem situations, particularly with respect to the circumstances under which such situations should be reported, the people who should be contacted and how to proceed. In addition, observers must be made to realize that they should not try to act as specialized service providers if a person in distress confides in them. The appropriate course of action is to refer the person to the right resource.

WHEN SHOULD INFORMATION OF A CRIMINAL NATURE OR INFORMATION DEEMED SENSITIVE BE DIVULGED?

When criminal or sensitive information is gathered during a safety diagnosis, it should first be reported to the person in charge of the diagnosis. He or she can then submit a private request to a member of his or her safety committee (e.g. police officer, CLSC representative) for assistance in examining the problem. The following questions and statements can serve as guidelines for deciding whether or not to report criminal or delicate situations. They raise several issues that should be taken into account in determining whether reporting is the best option under the circumstances and whether it can be done without adversely affecting the safety and reputation of the people and life settings concerned.

Useful questions for guiding decision making on the reporting of criminal or sensitive information:

1. Why does the situation observed or disclosed pose an ethical problem (moral dilemma)?
2. Is there a legal obligation to report the situation observed or disclosed? Under section 39 of the *Youth Protection Act*, anyone who has reasonable grounds to believe that the security or development of a child is in danger due to physical or sexual abuse (subparagraphs *d* and *e* of the second paragraph of section 38) must bring the situation to the attention of the Director of Youth Protection without delay.
3. Is there a formal agreement about the confidentiality of the information divulged to the observer? If so, the agreement should prevail except under exceptional circumstances where the life of someone is at risk (suicide or death threat).
4. Will reporting the situation observed or disclosed put the observer, witness or victim at risk of reprisals? If so, the victim or witness should be asked why he or she did not file a complaint.
5. Does the situation observed or disclosed concern people or property? In the hierarchy of crime, the safety of people takes precedence over that of property.
6. Is there a chance that the situation observed or disclosed will reoccur?

7. Is the victim vulnerable because of isolation, a disability, illness, age or other factors?
8. Did the situation disclosed actually occur or is it merely suspected or assumed to have occurred? Does it reinforce a prejudice of the observer or the people in charge of the safety diagnosis?
9. For what reason was the situation disclosed? What are the expectations of the person who described it? Does he or she really have any expectations or is the observer simply projecting his or her own values onto that person (e.g. regarding the need to lodge a complaint)? To find out, it is recommended that the person be asked whether he or she is at ease with the idea of filing a complaint.
10. Would revealing the situation interfere with a police investigation that is under way?

WHO SHOULD CRIMINAL OR SENSITIVE INFORMATION BE REVEALED TO AND HOW SHOULD IT BE REVEALED?

Once a decision has been made to divulge such information, the latter should be transmitted directly to a police officer or to the chief of a police department, especially if a crime against a person is involved. This must be done even if it is likely that the information divulged is already known to the police. Moreover, it must be done confidentially so as to avoid jeopardizing the safety of victims and witnesses, disrupting an investigation under way or tarnishing the reputation of someone if the claims are unfounded.

USE OF CRIMINAL OR SENSITIVE INFORMATION

When criminal or sensitive situations are brought to light, they may provide pertinent information for developing local action plans based on a better understanding of the life settings involved. It is up to the people in charge of the safety diagnosis to decide how the information will be used for analysis purposes and how to incorporate it into the final report. The information and statements included in the various documents prepared in order to make a diagnosis must never allow the sources to be identified.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCE

Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada. *Evaluating Crime Prevention through Social Development Projects. Handbook for Community Groups*, [http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/prg/cp/_fl/Evaluation_handbook-E.pdf], 2006, p. 147-156.

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