

Prevention diaries by Larry Cohen

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Larry Cohen is well known to the injury prevention community (eg, American Public Health Association (APHA)'s Injury Control and Emergency Health Services section has awarded him the Public Service Award). Larry has fought for bicycle and motorcycle helmet laws and for strengthening child and adult passenger restraint regulations. He has been a leader in helping define violence as a preventable public health issue.

In *Prevention Diaries*, Larry has written an inspiring and very personal book. He writes about public health and his work in promoting prevention and also provides many personal recollections and anecdotes from both his work and personal life. When he was 9 years old, a neighbourhood friend died in a biking incident; it was so difficult for Larry when he would see the mom in the grocery store—and he began to recognise both the permanence and poignancy of death. As an adult, he was robbed at shotgun-point. For a long time, he was afraid to go home after dark and even to go to sleep. He says he initially did not share the story; he felt embarrassed. He was ashamed that he was still scared. When he finally began telling the story, a parent whose son had been shot thanked him. “It validated our feelings and humanizes every one of us”.

Prevention Diaries tells Larry's story. His work has been broader than injury and violence prevention—it has encompassed the full range of public health, including lead poisoning, obesity, smoking and medical care. Reading the book can help remind injury researchers of the larger context of our work. Lessons learnt in one area of public health can be applied to other areas.

Larry discusses what is meant by the public health approach, and his work has illuminated that approach. His job is not to tell people to be healthy but to help create the atmosphere and opportunity for good health. He personally has helped shift the notion that violence is solely an individual choice. Indeed, he decries the overemphasis on personal responsibility alone, and argues that personal responsibility and community conditions go hand in hand. Much of his life's work has been to foster a sense of community and to mobilise the community for beneficial action.

As founding Director of the Contra Costa County Prevention Program, Larry showed that in his county the number of gun dealers exceeded the number of gas stations and fast-food restaurants combined. More important, extremely few of the dealers were

law-abiding (eg, having a business licence, meeting zoning requirements, paying sales tax). Publicising such information created the impetus to close many of these questionable dealers.

In 1984, he convened a coalition to propose the first countrywide regulations banning smoking in restaurants, workplaces and other public spaces. Victories against the tobacco lobby in Contra Costa were helpful in creating a grass-roots revolution in smoking prevention. Larry argues that a key to many public health successes is when unhealthy and unsafe norms are no longer considered as inevitable and unbreakable.

I am an economist by training, and one of the principles economists are taught is to recognise that many policies have ‘unintended consequences’. For economists, these are almost always bad unintended consequences. A few years ago when I wrote a book on success stories in injury and violence prevention,¹ one of the (many) things I learnt was that injury prevention successes often had beneficial unintended consequences. Motorcycle helmet laws reduce injury and they also reduce motorcycle theft. Mental health treatment aimed at reducing male suicide in the military also reduced intimate partner violence. *Prevention Diaries* has more examples, which Larry calls ‘two-for-one benefits’. Environmental modifications that improve pedestrian safety can increase exercise and reduce obesity. Curb cuts improve wheelchair access and can benefit elderly walkers, bike riders and parents pushing strollers.

I recommend this book highly. It is inspirational and an easy read. It is filled with interesting stories. If nothing else, it brings together many useful maxims for public health: ‘No epidemic can ever be solved by paying attention to the affected individual’; ‘The most difficult thing is the decision to act: the rest is merely tenacity’; ‘It always seems impossible until it's done’.

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- 1 Hemenway D. *While we were sleeping: success stories in injury and violence prevention*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009.



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