



Connecting Crime Reduction and Neighborhood Revitalization: BCJI Sites Build Safe Communities

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There are established criminal justice theories that argue that criminal activity is more likely to occur in areas with signs of blight and neglect and less likely where clean, orderly streets and properties suggest that people are invested and involved in what goes on around them. Community development organizations understand this framework intuitively, as do the law enforcement officers who respond to the same problem locations many times over. The link between crime and place was especially apparent as foreclosures climbed across the country last decade. In “The Impact of Single-family Mortgage Foreclosures on Neighborhood Crime,” published in *Housing Studies* in 2006, the authors found that higher foreclosure levels contribute to higher levels of violent crime at the neighborhood level.

To make neighborhoods safer, overt partnership between developers, residents, and the police are transforming neighborhood conditions—filling vacancies, bringing commercial activity back to key urban corridors, increasing foot traffic, and changing perceptions about crime and safety. In other words, changing the place can change what *happens* in the place.

Around the country, BCJI sites are building on a rich history of practice in this area, including work supported previously under former Department of Justice (DOJ) initiatives, such as the Weed & Seed program and by LISC’s Community Safety Initiative, documented by the DOJ Office of Community Oriented Policing Services in the 2013 book, *Building Our Way Out of Crime*.

The BCJI Approach

These powerful themes run through all BCJI projects.

DATA-DRIVEN

BCJI targets crime hot spots – often streets, properties or public spaces in communities that have struggled with crime for years. Researchers are engaged in the day-to-day work, helping partners examine problems, assess evidence-based solutions, and monitor progress.



COMMUNITY-ORIENTED:

BCJI champions active roles for residents in identifying problems, selecting strategies and creating safe and healthy environments.



SPURS REVITALIZATION:

BCJI tackles problem properties, unsafe streets and parks, unemployment, transit barriers and service gaps related to crime.



BUILDS PARTNERSHIPS:

BCJI taps the resources of public, nonprofit and community leaders to bring more resources and different approaches to bear on longstanding crime challenges for lasting change.



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One of the hallmarks that distinguishes BCJI from the crime reduction efforts that preceded it is its emphasis on research and analysis. Part of the Bureau of Justice Assistance's (BJA) "[Smart Suite](#)" of evidence-based programs, BCJI supports local initiatives that include a research-practitioner partnership that use data, evidence, and innovation to create successful and cost-effective strategies and interventions.

Examples of BCJI initiatives around the country show how these partnerships integrate crime reduction efforts

with physical and economic revitalization, starting during the planning stage with taking stock of local crime statistics, physical and economic crime-drivers, and public perceptions of crime and safety. They enlist partners with the strengths, skills, and resources needed to affect change, deliberately focusing on opportunities for improvements to the built environment that afford potential for not only increased neighborhood investment and beatification, but strategically aligned actions that support the potential for significant crime reduction in the targeted areas.

Where to Find Data to Plan for Revitalization

Local governments are increasingly making a wide range of data available online. Common data sets that can inform analysis of physical drivers of crime include indicators about properties (vacancy, foreclosures) and conditions in a neighborhood (reports of graffiti, illegal dumping, broken street lights)

Often a city or county government website is the best place to start to find "open data," which is information that is free and available for use, reuse, and redistribution by anyone, gathered and in some cases analyzed by a government entity. To see if your local government offers open data, visit data.gov/open-gov/. Specific data sets that provide deeper understanding of local drivers of crime can include:

Property Crime:

Police departments provide reported property crime data that typically includes burglary, larceny, theft from motor vehicle, auto theft, and arson—often summarized online by police districts or for specific neighborhoods. These crimes do not involve the use of force or threat of force against a victim. Some cities, especially those with open data web sites, publish individual property (and other) crime records that can be downloaded, mapped, and summarized.

311 Calls for Service:

In many cities, a 311 system handles all municipal calls for non-emergency service requests, including, in some cases, via the web or through social media. Data from these requests can provide valuable information, such as the number of complaints about graffiti, littering, weeds/debris, illegal dumping, or damaged street lights. These data are usually provided with an address of where the incident is reported or a summary of the number of incidents in a neighborhood.

Code Violations/Code Enforcement:

Local governments investigate violations of city codes, such as residential or commercial buildings and properties that have unsafe conditions, including those that are vacant or abandoned. Some cities provide data about the type of code violation and address where the violation occurred.

Also:

Find out if your community has an organization that participates in the [National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership \(NNIP\)](#). In 30 cities across the country NNIP partner organizations maintain a robust inventory of national and local data and are experienced in working directly with communities to make data useful for community building and local policymaking.

Vacant and Abandoned Properties:

The Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development provides data to governmental entities and nonprofit organizations on addresses identified by the Postal Service delivery staff as having been vacant for 90 days or longer, as well as "No-Stat"—an address under construction and not yet occupied or identified as not likely to be active for some time. Registration is required to access the data, which can be downloaded at www.huduser.gov/portal/usps/index.html

Foreclosures and Tax Delinquent Properties:

Data on distressed properties—which may be at risk of becoming vacant through tax delinquency or foreclosure—vary greatly by city or community. A Property Assessor's Office may have information about tax delinquent properties, but because the foreclosure process has multiple stages, the data typically exists across multiple agencies. Municipal departments of planning, housing, or community development also are likely to be tracking distressed properties.

Land Use and Features:

Many local governments provide data online about the commercial, residential, and industrial land in a community and on the location of public parks, schools, and public transit stops, typically by the Department of Planning or a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Department. Open data web sites often have these data as well.

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Milwaukee, Wisconsin

The City of Milwaukee secured a BCJI grant in 2012 for the Washington Park neighborhood, which had significantly higher rates for poverty and crime than the city as a whole. A team consisting of Washington Park Partners (itself a collaborative of residents, businesses, and organizations working to improve the community), the Milwaukee Police Department, and researchers at University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee (UWM) joined forces to change the nature of Washington Park.

At the outset of a six-month planning process, the partners analyzed police data to identify crime hot spots and organized a series of 10 focus groups of residents living in or adjacent to the target areas. They asked about the causes of criminal activity in the neighborhood, which issues were most pressing, and what should be done to address them, as well as for feedback on the Milwaukee Police Department and the community agencies that served the area. A comprehensive neighborhood survey provided additional data from residents and business owners.

Notably, what the residents described aligned closely with what police were seeing and crime data supported: prostitution, drug use, and vandalism topped a list studded with a number of disorder and nuisance challenges. The places where these problems were most prominent had many blighted or abandoned properties.

To change the characteristics of these locations, the Milwaukee BCJI team selected strategies that intentionally integrated law enforcement and revitalization efforts: more community problem solving sessions, nuisance abatements, code enforcements on both residences and businesses, block organizing, and monthly planning and reporting across all participating agencies.

Using City maps and with the support of the Mayor's Safe Neighborhood Initiative and the Department of Neighborhood Services and Public Works, the partners identified a relatively short list of the most problematic properties and the landlords who could have the highest impact for change. They solicited resident opinions to ensure that the neighborhood supported targeting these properties and owners and launched a "Landlord Compact" to encourage strong property management

practices and give responsible owners a way to communicate with each other. In just a few months, 28 landlords, who collectively owned 122 properties in the target area, joined the Compact, which was coordinated with resources from one of the BCJI partner organizations.

The BCJI team also worked with housing developers to acquire and rehabilitate clusters of properties at sites that were determined to have the greatest potential impact on crime and its drivers. Milwaukee Habitat for Humanity, looking to focus on a specific community and collaborate with a variety of partners on comprehensive community development, selected Washington Park for a concentrated, \$20 million, five-year "Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative" that brought new homes and rehabilitation construction for existing units.

For their part, Milwaukee police deployed beat officers and bike patrol officers in and around Milwaukee Habitat's build sites to foster community-police trust through informal interactions with citizens. The local district station also opened its doors to house various partners, including agents from the Wisconsin Department of Corrections (probation and parole), inspectors from the City of Milwaukee's Department of Neighborhood Services (housing inspection), and a domestic violence advocate from the Sojourner Family Peace Center. This dynamic cross-sector partnership was replicated across multiple near-north side neighborhoods through a privately funded, \$1.5 million, three-year safety initiative.

Milwaukee's five BCJI target area hot spots realized a 23 percent reduction in Part I crimes from 2013-2015, compared to a 1 percent increase across Milwaukee during the same time. Captain Jason Smith, the former commander of the MPD's District 3, described the BCJI grant work as "becoming the business plan for our district and beyond."



Evansville, Indiana

ECHO Housing Corporation is a nonprofit community group providing housing and services to homeless families and veterans in Evansville, a small city in southwestern Indiana. In 2013, ECHO launched a comprehensive, resident-led quality-of-life planning

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process in Jacobsville, one of Evansville's most persistently distressed neighborhoods. The initiative, which came to be known as Jacobsville Join In, was spearheaded by a cross-sector team of city government, housing agencies, residents, and, critically, the Evansville Police Department. In October 2013, the partners secured a BCJI Enhancement grant for Jacobsville Join In.

Extensive research into the real and perceived crime in Jacobsville showed the neighborhood harbored a disproportionately high concentration of the city's total crime and that the poverty rate among the community's youngest children was nearly 71 percent. Empty lots and dilapidated structures riddled the landscape: 21 percent of the community's homes were vacant.

Following a model crafted by the Indiana Association for Community Economic Development, the BCJI team, including research partner Diehl Consulting, held more than 25 in-depth interviews with residents, business-owners, and community-based workers, using a thorough questionnaire to gauge stakeholder experiences and attitudes on crime and community conditions. At a three-day series of community discussions to review the team's findings, the police contributed a breakdown of crime statistics by type and address, and the City's Council's far-reaching Quality-of-Life Plan added further information.

Through this work, the BCJI planning process identified 22 hot-spot blocks plagued with a mix of issues: frequent crime and safety challenges; drug and alcohol use, abuse, and sales; high vacancy rates; many blighted properties; and high numbers of disorder violations.

To address these concerns, the team's early response strategies in the BCJI target area included physical improvements to the environment— examples include lighting improvements and beautification projects—and support for residents, such as tenant screening and application assistance for rental property owners and an increase in collaborative services and supports for youth and families. The Evansville Police Department's Crime-Free Multi-Housing officers recruited new partners to provide services to local residents, and police increased bike and foot patrols, too.

Team partners also launched an ambitious, two-pronged agenda to improve and renovate the area's built

environment. Residents worked with Jacobsville Join In and cross-sector partners to secure \$13 million from the City of Evansville for a complete streets project to overhaul North Main Street, a key commercial corridor in the BCJI target area and magnet for crime. Projected for a ribbon cutting in the fall of 2017, traffic and sidewalk patterns will be restructured to make downtown 100 percent bikeable, and the project is intended to remove blight, attract private investment, and bring renewal to a key part of the neighborhood.

The second component was a property rehabilitation and infill program that targeted new housing to Jacobsville's most troubled blocks in partnership with Habitat for Humanity and other developers. ECHO Housing Corporation received \$800,000 in Low Income Housing Tax Credits and a commitment from the City for \$500,000 for Garfield Commons, a new supportive housing project in the BCJI target area.

From 2013 to 2015, Evansville experienced a 42 percent drop in the number of crimes reported in the community. Leveraging the lessons and momentum of BCJI, the ECHO Housing Corporation earned a federal Promise Zone designation in 2016. Targeted investment is bringing new homes that help stabilize the community, providing a compelling example of how federal place-based programs can work in tandem with neighborhood planning to extend the life of community partnerships and federal investments.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Residents of the Mantua neighborhood in West Philadelphia grapple with entrenched poverty. More than 30 percent live at or below the poverty line, a quarter of housing units are publically subsidized, and the neighborhood is marred by more than 700 empty lots and another 350 vacant structures. This bleak backdrop is brightened by the dedicated work of a seasoned neighborhood housing organization, Mt. Vernon Manor, Inc.

In 2011, We Are Mantua, a project of Mount Vernon Manor, spearheaded a Choice Neighborhoods planning effort to tackle the community's most pressing issues. A year later, building on that work, We Are Mantua secured a BCJI Enhancement grant with the Philadelphia Police

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Department (PPD) and neighboring Drexel University as the project's research partner.

With significant support from People's Emergency Center, another community organization based in West Philadelphia, the team tallied and analyzed more than 300 completed surveys that assessed resident attitudes toward crime, the police, and local service availability. The partners also convened two widely attended focus groups to talk about a broad range of political, social, physical, economic, and cultural issues.

Four important issues emerged: 1) a high number of robberies, tied to short residencies in Drexel University student housing; 2) drug use and dealing in the vacant lots and abandoned properties; 3) poorly maintained existing properties; and 4) a need to empower residents through increased block organizing and sharing information that would help change both the realities and perceptions, not only *in* Mantua, but also *of* Mantua.

An important component of the partners' strategy was recruitment and training of 30 new block leaders, who then organized greening, weatherization, public safety, and service committees. Partnering closely with Philadelphia police community relations officers, the public safety committee members pursued civil remedies to address negligent landlords, increased targeted foot patrols, and worked with the housing authority to improve maintenance on housing authority properties. The Philadelphia Police Department's 16th District precinct meetings are now held in Mantua, with block leaders in attendance to compare notes and talk through goals and action steps.

Other efforts are making tangible differences in the neighborhood. A graffiti removal program targeted four buildings that had been a magnet for taggers. Drexel University has stepped up to the plate, lobbying successfully to keep a K-8 school in the neighborhood. Plans for a multi-mile greenway are afoot. Preliminary analysis by the partnership shows notable reductions during the first two years of the project for assaults (20 percent), robberies (32 percent) and homicides (75 percent), including 12 months without a homicide in the neighborhood, a stretch longer than anyone in the area can remember.

Analysis of the geographic concentration of crime in Mantua also show a decrease, especially for more serious

crimes, including assault burglary and robbery. Mount Vernon Manor is poised to evolve into a more broadly engaged community developer, and residents now say that they are seeing a transformation in Mantua.

Dayton, Ohio

The East End neighborhood in Dayton is in a period of transition, with changing demographics and increased poverty impacting a once stable community. The BCJI target area, which includes the Twin Towers neighborhood, also suffers from systemic challenges, including a rapidly declining population and economic base, high levels of blight and housing vacancies. Discussions around crime issues with the community focused on theft, burglaries and prostitution and how drug use and abuse tied into these crimes.

By the mid 1990s, Xenia Avenue, once a prominent East End business district, was riddled with drug dealing, prostitution, and crime associated with the drug trade. The foreclosure crisis a decade later spurred a dramatic increase in abandoned properties and empty lots, and the city designated the East End area a "Neighborhood Revitalization Zone."

Fighting these conditions are the collective BCJI efforts of the community-based nonprofit East End Community Services, the Dayton Police Department, and Dayton University (the project's research partner). These efforts started strong and continue to grow.

In planning to better understand the challenges in the East End Neighborhood Revitalization Zone target area, the BCJI partners met with more than 30 community and neighborhood organizations to vet the issues and review crime data generated by the police and the local courts. For example, although Twin Towers represents just 2 percent of the city's population, it was responsible for 10 percent of East Dayton's total felony arrests, and three key business corridors in the area accounted for more than 55 percent of total prostitution arrests city-wide.

Drawing on promising hot-spot policing techniques, youth mentoring, and service models from other cities, the partnership created a multifaceted strategy and targeted it to the most problematic blocks in the Neighborhood Revitalization Zone.

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Working with the city and two private property developers—and with strategic input from the Dayton Police Department—East End Community Services acquired and redeveloped 84 new homes in Twin Towers, remediating 70 percent of that community’s vacant and deteriorated parcels. The partners also secured a five-acre plot for urban agriculture and a weekend farmers market. With a U.S. Department of Labor grant, the BCJI team created a “green” building trades training program that served more than 340 unemployed residents, of whom 166 were placed in permanent jobs. East End Community Services and Dayton Police also worked with a range of other agencies to develop a pocket park and a targeted graffiti removal/public art initiative.

The partners’ strategy also targeted liquor sales, successfully lobbying to rescind licenses at five of seven stores in the area that were associated with intoxication and nuisance behavior. One former bar that was particularly dangerous was acquired and turned over to the local school board so the property could be included in the expansion of an adjacent school facility.

The Dayton Police Department’s Community Problem Response Team prioritized immediate responses to citizen complaints, and, according to Major Brian Johns, “our place-based policing has become fully

aligned with the stresses and opportunities in the Neighborhood Revitalization Zone.” Together with its partners, the police department has helped drive crimes against people within East Dayton and the Twin Towers neighborhood. The three-year average of crime during the implementation period (2013-2015) has decreased 26 percent versus the average crime totals in the five years before BCJI. This decrease bettered citywide totals by 1.5 percent.

Conclusion

The four case studies in this paper are from widely divergent environments, each with its unique challenges and actors. But what unites them is also what makes them successful. In each case, there is strong collaboration between law enforcement, residents, and an array of community development organizations that are highly invested in the health and well-being of their neighborhoods.

Each of the partnerships designed a plan of action that included not just policing, but comprehensive strategies aimed at transforming their communities. In each case, the partners understood that place matters in crime prevention and reduction, and by changing the place they were able to change what happens there.

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