

# It Takes a Village

## Communities Tackle Crime

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To achieve safety improvements that are sustainable, residents, developers, and police must work together to mobilize neighbors and transform places.

“One of the greatest threats to community revitalization is crime. And the big generator of crime is community disintegration.”<sup>1</sup>

Those words of Bill Bratton, former police chief of Los Angeles and New York, capture the challenge of rebuilding neighborhoods where vacant, blighted properties are often a breeding ground for crime and disorder.

In many ways, the day-to-day work of community developers is about fighting that disintegration. Whether organizing neighborhood associations or replacing problem properties with beautiful, new housing, community developers wield powerful tools to create safety. The Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) and its partners are using those tools to turn problems into opportunities.

### Collaborating

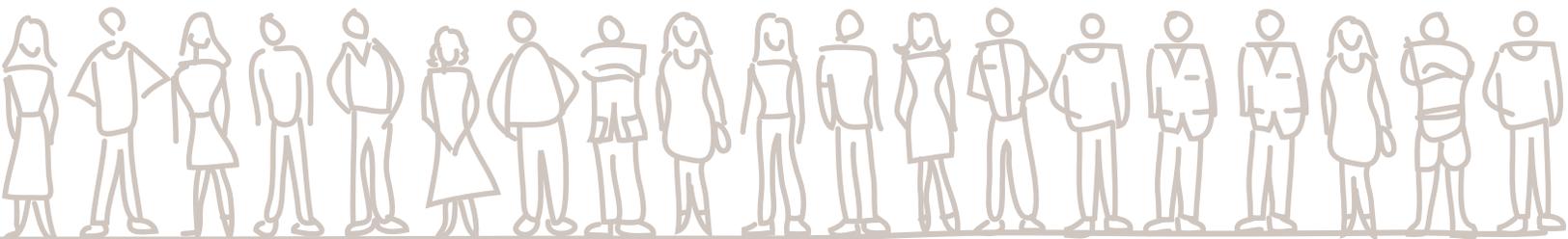
There are valid reasons why few communities tackle crime head on. Drug markets and long-standing gang feuds feel intractable. Mutual distrust between communities and police abounds. Even community developers who want to partner with law enforcement are fully occupied with their more traditional work, and getting to know po-

lice culture and language is challenging. Moreover, what to do together is not always clear.

Experience shows that expecting police to get a handle on tough neighborhoods before community groups step in does not work. Police chiefs are among the first to say they cannot arrest their way out of crime problems. And no one can afford the social and economic costs of mass incarceration.<sup>2</sup>

LISC has embraced the challenge of bringing community developers and neighborhood representatives to the table with police and criminal justice leaders. Over the 18 years of its national Community Safety Initiative, LISC has learned what works and what does not from a host of tenacious developers, police, residents, and other leaders. The key insight: A collaborative approach to addressing crime can yield remarkable, sustained reductions in crime. It also can produce new housing, businesses, and parks in places where such investment was previously unthinkable, transforming troubled places into vibrant, connected communities.

The strategy is quite straightforward. To tackle crime from multiple angles, you need a team and a plan, preferably one founded



on solid information about the genesis of a problem and the conditions keeping it alive. As team members act on the plan, they need to hold each other accountable. They also need to be agile and to correct course as they learn from what happens. When they achieve a win, they need to celebrate—sharing the credit—and then apply the learning to the next challenge.

### **Building a Strong Team**

In the shadow of the vacant Winchester Repeating Arms gun factory in New Haven's Newhallville neighborhood, a group of residents and faith leaders have joined forces with the New Haven Police Department and New Haven's Neighborhood Housing Services (NHS) to try the collaborative approach, with support from Connecticut LISC.

Historically, Newhallville has seen some of New Haven's worst violence. In early 2011, four of the city's 10 homicides occurred there. Local leaders recognize that the crime challenges stem from the interconnected problems of blight, fear, drug dealing, and gang activity, so they are pursuing an array of mutually reinforcing solutions. Pastors have launched the Promise Land Project to bring intensive services to Newhallville, including a street-lighting effort called Project Lighten Up.

The New Haven team is composed of people who collectively have a powerful mix of resources to tackle crime. NHS is expert at changing the physical environment, with a 30-plus year history of rehabilitating vacant and blighted properties into quality affordable homes. NHS is committed to revitalizing some of Newhallville's most troubled blocks through a cluster-development strategy.

Meanwhile, local faith leaders are mobilizing community residents to share information with police, clean up their properties, bring their neighbors to events, and otherwise take back their streets. This work is complemented by progressive policing. With the ardent support of Police Chief Dean Esserman, New Haven police are available to coordinate enforcement actions and share their own ideas for problem solving.<sup>3</sup>

The Center for Problem Oriented Policing highlights as a best practice the ability to strategically coordinate interventions related to the place, the victims, and the offenders.<sup>4</sup> The alternative? Heavy enforcement by police that calms the streets only until officers must move elsewhere. Or redeveloped properties standing vacant because prospective renters and homeowners are reluctant to live in an area that that seems unsafe. Both scenarios are avoidable if there is collaboration from the get-go among all stakeholders.

### **First a Diagnosis, Then a Plan**

Before they dive too deeply into any one response, the New Haven team is taking care to examine what is really going on in Newhallville—who is involved in crime, where and when problems are most severe, and why things happen as they do. Such careful analysis is rare in communities but essential for informed decisions on how to invest time and money.

To guide their diagnosis of Newhallville's problems, the New Haven team has drawn on training provided by international crime prevention expert Gregory Saville, with support from LISC. Saville teaches SafeGrowth, an approach based on the principles of Crime Prevention through Environmental Design. SafeGrowth champions

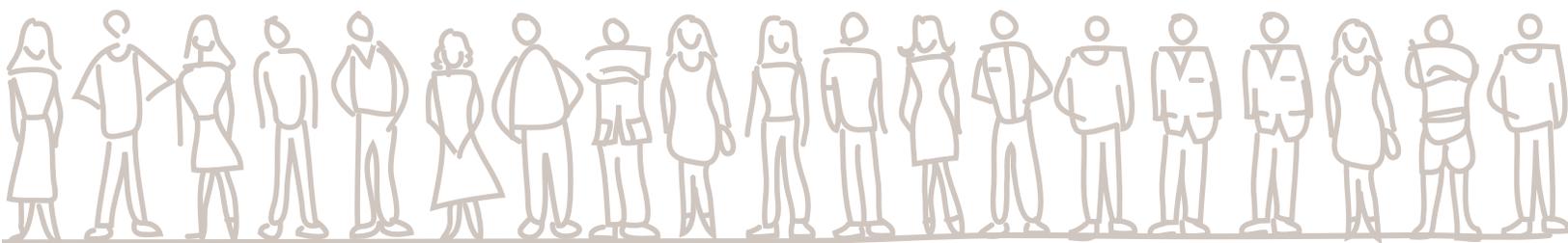


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a process by which neighborhood leaders, planners, police officers, and others work together to weigh how factors in the physical, social, and economic environment might be altered to make places safe and vibrant.<sup>5</sup> Using that framework, NHS and its partners are focusing on Lilac Street, a particularly troubled block.

“Overwhelmingly, residents expressed that it’s so dark over here,” said Alan Kendrick, who coordinates Project Lighten Up. “Lilac happens to be one of the darkest streets in the city.”

As part of SafeGrowth, Kendrick and other NHS team members have conducted multiple safety audits of problem spots. They have convened residents to talk about persistent issues and have invited input from a journalist familiar with the area. The information complements traditional crime data in painting a picture of problems, including hints at why crime in Newhallville has not yielded to prior interventions. Dissecting the findings as a team means members share a common language and understanding from which to develop a data-driven plan.

The team’s actions have already contributed to a 50 percent drop in crime by improving lighting and sight lines on Lilac Street. Recently members secured an agreement with the City to add another 230 lights—a sign of how well joint community-police plans are received by municipal decision makers. In addition, members are exploring new organizing strategies, including a neighborhood watch and walking groups that increase “eyes on the street” and on properties slated for NHS rehabilitation. New Haven Police are backing the effort with beat officers assigned to Newhallville, and they are getting to know more residents every day.

The Newhallville team is mindful of lessons culled from the experiences of practitioners in LISC’s national network. First, the importance of short-term wins like the lighting initiative, which will continue to build buy-in among institutional partners and trust with community members.

As NHS executive director Jim Paley put it, the lighting effort was “very well received by residents, giving them a tangible sign that the neighborhood is improving and encouraging neighbors to get out at night for a stroll and to connect with each other.”

Second, focusing on specific problems and projects will help the Newhallville team maintain its commitment to keeping the work bite-sized and achievable, even within the context of the grander, shared vision for revitalizing Newhallville in the long term. It will also make it easier for the members to coordinate, as they carefully time block parties with milestones, and crime-reporting campaigns with enforcement actions. This strategy produces syn-

ergistic results while helping to keep partners accountable to one another for doing their part.

The Newhallville team also has the tools to evaluate results, including any unintended consequences. Given concerns about displacing crime from one part of the neighborhood to another, ongoing assessment using the same diverse data sources that informed the original diagnosis and plans will help ensure that the gains move the whole community forward.

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Newhallville offers just one example among many in which community residents, developers, and police are working together to reduce and prevent crime. To those who might say that such approaches are too complex to be realistic in resource-strained times, LISC’s response is: We can’t afford *not* to leverage each other’s strengths, especially given the interconnected nature of safety and revitalization. Dozens of police chiefs have gone on record in agreement with Bill Bratton, saying that collaborative approaches like those championed by the Community Safety Initiative save officer time and resources. This work also improves quality of life and brings new energy into neighborhoods. Our hats are off to the local leaders who make it happen.

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#### Endnotes

- 1 William J. Bratton and Paul S. Grogan, “New Synergy of Community, Developer, Police,” *Providence Journal*, March 27, 2006.
- 2 Todd R. Clear, *Imprisoning Communities: How Mass Incarceration Makes Disadvantaged Neighborhoods Worse* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2007).
- 3 Mamie Marcuss, “Dean Esserman: Community Policing in Providence,” *Communities & Banking* (January 2005), <http://www.bostonfed.org/commdev/c&b/2005/winter/Esserman.pdf>.
- 4 See Center for Problem Oriented Policing, [www.popcenter.org](http://www.popcenter.org).
- 5 See Gregory Saville and Mona Mangat, “SafeGrowth: Creating Safety & Sustainability through Community Building and Urban Design,” <http://www.lisc.org/csi>.

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