Community Perspectives on Readiness and Social Drivers of Crime

Joseph Blow, Sandra Lister, Andranell Williams, David Zimmel, Mary-Ellen Brown, Katie Cotter Stalker, and Birgitta Baker

A community-based crime reduction initiative was launched in 2017 in a mid-sized city in the southern U.S. The target neighborhood has been described as experiencing concentrated poverty, high crime rates, and limited opportunities for economic mobility and healthy life outcomes. In this first person account, residents and stakeholders involved in this initiative offered their perspectives at the onset of the project regarding the extent to which the community was ready to undertake the project.

"If What We Were Doing Was Easy … Someone Would Have Done It Already"

I am a member of an interdenominational Christian community that discerned a call to move into the neighborhood in 2002. As a volunteer missionary, I spend a lot of time meeting people in the neighborhood: listening to stories, growing in friendship, and supporting folks as we strive to follow God together.

When I heard about the project, I was initially very skeptical that it would be worth my time. While for several decades, our neighborhood has had a reputation of being the most dangerous and unwelcome place to live in the city, I didn't (and still don't) think that "reducing crime" is the most important problem to focus on in our neighborhood and wanted to hear why someone thought it was. At the first meeting however, I was pleasantly surprised to find that the folks running the meetings were not only open to feedback and possible criticism of their ideas, but were looking for residents to help direct the process. People openly recognized that crime is often more of a symptom than a problem and indicated that this initiative was broad enough in scope to potentially include looking holistically at the real problems in our neighborhood.

Are we ready? Honestly, I think our chances are slim. I don't think I could yet articulate what the problem is that we are trying to solve. I think in many cases, we don't have a problem knowing effective solutions, we have a problem executing them. If I were to brainstorm a list of things that would indicate a neighborhood community was ripe for such a process it would include things like a common vision for change, strong existing neighborhood communities, investors willing to take a risk with a new venture, or at least groups of people dissatisfied with the status quo and open to change. These are not our strengths. For most of us, we are too busy to open up our door and meet the person who just moved in across the street.

But I do have hope. If what we were doing was easy or likely to succeed, someone would have done it already. I have learned from my evangelistic and community building efforts that the process is as important to consider as the goal. I am sure that nothing will happen if in the face of difficulty or crime, we do nothing. Nothing will improve if we remain locked in our houses and waiting for someone else to solve our problems. So I want to do something, hoping that our actions will be like that of a farmer who plants seed expecting a harvest even though he doesn't know everything about why plants grow. And even if this initiative is not as successful as expected, I am looking forward to meeting more people, hearing their stories, and working together.

Identify the Assets as Well as the Needs

I was born in the city where this neighborhood is located and I moved away from this city many years ago when the economic conditions here were bad and obtained employment in another city. I retired about four years ago and decided to move back to my native city in order to be near most of my family and enjoy a quieter life that has the advantages of both city and rural life. I am a member of the health ministry at our church located in the community. We sponsored a Health Fair this past summer where I met the Project Coordinator. Since then, I have been participating to learn more about the crime reduction initiative.

It is my belief that the overriding problem in this community is caused by poverty. Crime is just one of the ills that accompany it along with constant stress, depression, isolation medical problems and family difficulties. I know personally of individuals that are addicted to drugs, youths that are running rampant with no supervision that are in and out of jail. I also know seemingly hard-working people who are in the criminal justice system for various reasons. In many cases the crimes they committed are frivolous and the punishment seems harsh. The sad fact is that these scenarios permeate the landscape of the city. This casts a shadow over our community where some of the residents have little self-respect and make it undesirable for businesses and people who would like to move here.

I think that the community is ready to tackle the issue of crime and other ills that go along with poverty. They have shown a love for the community and the desire to keep it intact by resisting the interstate interconnect that might go through. I think we just need to get more of them enthusiastically involved.

We need to correctly identify the needs of the community to avoid spending resources on things that don't make a difference. This includes identifying the assets as well as the needs. I think we might agree that suitable employment can help solve a lot of these problems. But before many people can take advantage of this, there are many underlying issues that need to be resolved. There might be need for transportation, on-the-job skills training, daycare support and basic computer skills. They may have alcohol or drug dependency and mental health issues. We need to approach this problem with the intention of providing a safe nurturing environment, while some of the basic barriers are eliminated and large amount of self-sufficiency is attained. I think that this project could be successful if all partners in this effort are committed to working to its completion or until we see positive results.

Neighbors are KEY to Controlling Community Crime

I'm a member of the Neighborhood Assistance Team of the Police Department's Community Oriented Policing Bureau. Over the past 12 years, I've serviced this neighborhood. My mother and other family members have lived in this community for approximately 60 years. The issues we are trying to address with this project are crime prevention through education; bridging

the gap between the Police and community; and promoting neighborhood watch programs.

I've found that many citizens commit crimes not knowing they are breaking the law. We introduced a program called "The Law and You." We explained what the law says regarding certain crimes. We found that once the individual understood what the law means, we saw a reduction of certain misdemeanor crimes. Community Policing involves building relationships with citizens while still maintaining law enforcement. It builds better communication when officers and citizens engage in conversations and know who belongs in their communities. While canvassing the neighborhoods, we see people working in the yards, or sitting outside, or just hanging out. We stop and engage in friendly conversations. For example, Community Policing challenged a group of youth to a friendly basketball game, "Spirt of the Community." When the game was over the young men of the community found that police were not just the uniform but human. This experience allowed others to see that police have the same goal as others faith, family and community.

Some citizens are afraid to start Neighborhood Watch Programs because of fear. Neighbors should have the confidence in each other to know that they are the KEY to controlling crime in the community. If neighbors work together, they can force crime out of their community. I feel that some blocks in the community are willing to embrace the ideals. There are many that are not willing to be part of the solution because of fear. I think the project should be a reminder that police are here to help. Police can't report what they don't see. The project should advise them that communities fail when they stop communicating with each other.

Residents Need Hope and Connection to Feel Safe

I am a product of the target community. My grandmother lived on a street in the neighborhood until the day she passed away. I lived with my grandmother for the first 2 years of my life in the neighborhood. I can remember all of my neighbors that surrounded my grandmother's home and have seen most of them pass away just as she has. My grandmother's front porch had a steep hill that I can remember running down or rolling down into a heap of raked up leaves from the big oak trees that lined the streets. Things were simpler then. Just as I have done, many of the children I once played with have left the area or only to come and

visit on special occasions. The neighborhoods that once had manicured lawns and well-kept porches are now run down or even boarded up.

What I see as issues that need to be addressed for the community is neighborhood revitalization and improving overall community morale. Crime is in this community, and people know it. Many people are turning a blind eye, and that needs to change. The community needs to be pulled together again. Now, when I go to my grandmother's home, I do not feel the safest. I once could play outside with no problem or be presented with issues that made me feel uncomfortable. Now being a mom, I would never let my nine-year-old son play by himself in the front yard in the neighborhood. I used to walk home from an elementary school in the neighborhood every day of my 3rd grade year. I never felt unsafe. It was MY neighborhood. Now, I am not sure I could walk that same street and have those same safe feelings.

Do I feel the community is ready to address the issues? I feel that there are a few that are ready to address the issues, but there are many more that are not ready. They are not ready by no fault of their own. They are not ready because they are just trying to survive, and they might not have much hope. The community will need to first come together and try to give people help with the basic needs, so they can see that there is much more to their community.

I feel that the first thing we need to do is get the word out more and not just to the higher-level people of the community. We need to speak to the discontented, the homeless and disenfranchised. We need to help give them a voice. There are also silent people who see their neighborhoods changing around them but may not know what to do and we need to be a voice for them also. I think we should take our current volunteers or champions for the community and try to add to that group by creating relationships with all people. Showing people that there are others that really care may encourage those who do not care, to maybe start to care.

Concluding Remarks

Key takeaways suggest that in order for a community to be ready to undertake action activities to achieve positive community change, project leadership must make a concerted effort to engage *all* community members, to increase community morale, and to engage leadership and increase involvement of community members. As community readiness involves both the belief that change is possible and the belief that the community has the capacity for change, these accounts indicate that both beliefs are present in the community to a degree. However, it is evident that the project leadership should be prepared to meet people where they are, as some residents may not have "hope" that change is possible.

Acknowledgements

About the Authors

Joseph Blow, Sandra Lister, Andranell Williams, and David Zimmel are community partners and were research team members for the initiative described in this article. Mary-Ellen Brown is an associate professor and the Josleen and Frances Lockhart Memorial Fellow for Direct Practice in Social Work at the University of Texas at Austin's Steve Hicks School of Social Work. Katie Cotter Stalker is an assoicate professor and director of field education for the School of Social Work at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York. Birgitta Baker is an associate professor in the Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Management at The Pennsylvania State University.