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Preventing Victimization: Public Health Approaches to Fight Crime

Social network analysis maps relationships between people. Here, nodes are 2,003 individuals, ties are 5,715 co-arrests, and red nodes are people who were victims of homicide or non-fatal shootings. Image courtesy of Andrew Papachristos.

A new idea is catching across the United States: crime and violence spread like viruses do, and a person's overall health is deeply intertwined with a person's safety. Living in a violent neighborhood can wreak havoc on physical and mental well-being, and poor health can, in turn, lead to dangerous behavior.

If dangerous behavior is like a contagious disease, perhaps positive relationships can serve as an antidote. Like inoculations against illnesses, some cities are finding that treating a few key carriers of harmful behavior or altering a few environments where the "illness" of disorder thrives, can increase the health and safety of an entire community.

Similar Problems, Similar Solutions

The problems that public safety and public health agencies aim to address, as well as the types of strategies employed, overlap in key aspects. Community problems—gun violence, for example—have required the development of both reactive approaches that respond to existing problems, as well as preventive approaches to stop future problems before they start. In both areas, data analysis, collaboration, and community engagement are key strategies.

For example, police developed the four-stage scanning, analysis, response, assessment (SARA) model of problem-oriented policing, while the public health approach also consists of four basic elements:

(1) defining and monitoring the problem; (2) identifying risk and protective factors both for victims and offenders; (3) developing and testing prevention strategies; and (4) assuring the widespread adoption of strategies to grapple with complex problems.¹

Because reactive approaches to crime tend to focus first and foremost on offenders, victims can sometimes be seen as just a part of an offender-focused process. But when it comes to addressing violence, victims can provide a wealth of information, not just about the incident or the offender, but about the neighborhood and the community.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control has found that violence

can have a devastating effect not only on victims, but on whole communities. Violence reduces productivity, decreases property values, and disrupts social services. Tactics like greening vacant urban lots can reduce violence and lead to safer and healthier communities, which benefits everyone.²

At a roundtable exploring opportunities for partnering between public health and law enforcement, cosponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice's Community Oriented Policing Service (COPS) Office, The California Endowment, and the Center for Court Innovation, one participant, then-chief Noble Wray of Madison, Wisconsin, recalled meeting with residents from a "very stressed neighborhood" and felt that they were exhibiting symptoms of clinical depression: "They described being isolated. They described over-medicating with drugs and alcohol. They described not being able to focus on problems, individually or collectively. They described just a whole host of things that really was clinical depression, but we were treating it with law enforcement."³

Addressing problems like these requires cross-sector interventions. This article tells the story of two such efforts. One project, in New Haven, Connecticut, focuses on at-risk individuals and improving connections and relationships in the community; the second, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, focuses on places and improving public spaces to change the dynamics of public safety. In both cases, law enforcement agencies are collaborating to use public health tactics.

Connecting People in Connecticut

Dean Esserman, police chief of New Haven, who recently reintroduced community policing strategies to a city that has been struggling with violence for years, says that cities are at war with themselves.⁴ Chief Esserman is exploring new ways to look at persistent problems, which is why he teamed up with sociologist Andrew Papachristos, associate professor at Yale University, who uses social network analysis to study crime, as well as Professor Tracey Meares and Professor Tom Tyler at Yale Law School.

"Epidemics of any kind are not random," said Papachristos, "so it is with gun violence. There are patterns of transmission in the United States that go beyond aggregate factors such as race, age, gender, and income. On an individual level, social networks—the people one hangs out with—can predict a given person's likelihood of being shot and killed."⁵

Social networks are ways people connect and interact; Papachristos bases his research on mapping these relationships between people. "You don't catch a bullet like you catch a cold," said Papachristos. "It's not just any disease; it's a blood-borne pathogen."⁶

"The traditional view of who is a victim is being challenged," said Esserman. "It's not just the person who got shot who is a victim, but that person's family, the neighborhood, that person's friends at school, and the people in the community who hear the shots fired."⁷

New Haven has been struggling with high levels of violence. A report issued in 2011 found that assaults are as significant a cause of premature death as cancer and heart disease, and that black males and Hispanic males age 15 to 39 are particularly at risk.⁸

The Idea

Esserman, who was appointed New Haven police chief in November 2011, has reinstated a community policing strategy, requiring new officers to spend their first year walking a beat in New Haven's neighborhoods. Esserman also wanted to take measures to dissuade at-risk individuals from engaging in violence. This is where Project Longevity comes in.

Project Longevity is a program that was inspired by Professor David Kennedy of John Jay College of Criminal Justice and adopted by the U.S. Attorney of Connecticut, the governor, and the City of New Haven that brings community members, social service providers, and police together to fight gun violence. The project analyzes social networks to determine the individuals most at-risk for committing

crime—who are also, Papachristos has found, those most at-risk for being victimized. These individuals are invited to participate in "call-ins," where they meet with law enforcement and community leaders. The call-ins deliver a message that violence is unacceptable and serve as a gateway to services and positive social connections.

How It Works

To find the individuals most in need of interventions, Papachristos and Esserman use information in new ways. They conduct what's called a "gang audit." Instead of just looking at how many incidents occurred and where, a team of detectives, academics, and activists studied the perpetrators and victims of the worst violence in New Haven. The team examined five years of police records and interviewed police officers working the neighborhood, probation and parole officers, federal agents, and family members.⁹ They looked at relationships between individuals and asked questions like: Who else was with you at the time of the crime? What was your relationship with the victim before the shooting?

Starting in November 2012, Project Longevity—which is part of the National Network for Safe Communities and uses David Kennedy's focused deterrence model—brought in alleged gang members for a two-hour meeting; sent customized, individual letters; and visited high-risk individuals. They displayed a "table of organization" they had created—a map of relationships that visually linked each person in the room. The team's message was clear: any group member committing violence will get the full attention of local, state, and federal law enforcement. These words of warning were accompanied by offers of help. Links to housing, job training, and other programs were made available to all.¹⁰

Eventually, the interventions will include house visits highly tailored to at-risk individuals. The customized intervention group for house visits will involve someone the at-risk individual knows personally from the community—like the family's priest or minister—as well as service providers and police.

Results

While it is still too early to assess the impact of Project Longevity's focused deterrence approach, the shift in strategy is already being felt. Project Longevity has expanded the scope of police work from individual offenders to social networks.

According to the New Haven Police Department, homicides in New Haven dropped 46.2 percent during the January to October period from 2011 to 2013. During the same time span, the number of nonfatal shooting victims fell by 49 percent, and the number of shots fired fell by 44.1 percent. There is not yet research to demonstrate that these drops are due to shifts in strategy, but the reductions do offer encouragement.¹¹

Going forward, a team of researchers from Yale and the University of New Haven, led by Papachristos, plans to determine whether there is a statistically significant reduction in shootings and arrests for violent crimes—and whether this reduction can be tied to Project Longevity.

While Project Longevity's official evaluation is still three years away, Chief Esserman is already positive about the project's potential. According to Esserman, "Project Longevity is born from good, rigorous thinking. It doesn't address all violence in a community, but it addresses what in most cities is the overwhelming source of violence: young men in groups."¹²

The Grass Is Greener in Philadelphia

Where New Haven is focusing on changing the behavior of people to improve the city, Philadelphia is focusing on improving city spaces to change people's behavior.

The city of Philadelphia has found that empty lots strewn with debris and trash bring a feeling of disharmony and disarray to a community. Maintaining these spaces can help restore order, safety, and a feeling of ownership.

"You can bring all the resources in that you want," said Captain Mike Cram, Philadelphia Police Department, "but if you don't tell the community that they have to take ownership of the neighborhood, it won't work." Captain Cram stressed that the police need to establish themselves as "a tool in the community's toolbox," rather than an antagonistic authority or a fix-it-all force. "We started by having a community fair, which becomes a community-run event for which the police becomes a partner," he said.¹³

When Philadelphia began a new initiative in 1999 called PhillyRising, Captain Cram's 26th precinct signed up. Among partnerships with a range of city agencies, the PhillyRising initiative partnered with the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, which would green vacant lots identified as dangerous spaces by the police and the community.

The Idea

The treatment of vacant lots echoes the "eco-epidemiology" movement, which suggests that changing an environment can have similar prevention impacts as changing individual behaviors. Because it can be



Before and after pictures of a lot greened by the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society's Philadelphia Land-Care Program in conjunction with the Philadelphia Office of Housing and Community Development.

easier to change spaces than to change people, programs that focus on enhancing places may have a greater influence for longer time periods than programs that focus only on individuals.¹⁴

One way to change a place is to address disorder and neglect. This approach is similar to the "broken windows" theory, which suggests that law enforcement must address symbols that a neighborhood is in disarray and that no one is in control. Under this theory, continued disorder creates a permissive environment that may lead to more dangerous criminal behavior.¹⁵

Charles Branas, of the University of Pennsylvania's Perelman School of Medicine, has been working to show that beautification is about a lot more than beauty. Research by Branas has documented that greening vacant lots affects community health and safety, adding to a growing body of evidence that environmental interventions change the way communities function. According to Branas, violent crime may simply be discouraged by the presence of well-tended lots that signal someone in the community cares and is watching over the space in question. In addition, vacant lots often serve as a storage spot or disposal point for illegal guns—options that are greatly reduced when lots are cleaned, greened, and maintained.¹⁶

How It Works

Philadelphia used cross-agency partnerships, led by the Philadelphia Office of Housing and Community Development, to share data and identify locations associated with crime and disorder for interventions. A master database of over 50,000 vacant lots in Philadelphia from 1999–2008 was assembled from Philadelphia Bureau of Revision of Taxes and Philadelphia Department of Licenses and Inspections records. This database was separated into lots greened by the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society and lots that were not yet greened.

Philadelphia police officers also played a role in identifying and reporting the vacant lots as they did their patrol work across the city. Many other lots were identified by community members through the PhillyRising initiative and other sources. The Philadelphia Police Department provided researchers with the dates and locations for many types of crimes and arrests from 1999 to 2008: aggravated assaults, aggravated assaults with guns, robberies, robberies with guns, narcotics sales and possession, burglaries, thefts, vandalism and criminal mischief, disorderly conduct, public drunkenness, and illegal dumping. The Philadelphia Health Management Corporation provided community-level health data.

Often, when a lot was identified, police officers joined up with community members and the Pennsylvania Horticultural

Society and got their hands dirty, cleaning, planting trees, and installing fences. Across Philadelphia, nearly 4,500 vacant lots totaling over 7.8 million square feet, received this treatment from 1999 to 2008.¹⁷ Captain Cram stressed that appointing ongoing community leaders to organize the continuing maintenance of the lots helps keep the community involved in the spaces and the safety of the neighborhood.

This represents the gold standard of community policing, the Philadelphia Police Department has found. Cleaning and greening a lot is a project that takes days—but maintaining the lot and using it for community gatherings, sports, and just plain fun, is how residents truly invest in their neighborhood, demonstrating that everyone has a hand in maintaining public safety.¹⁸

Results

Branas and his team analyzed the impact of this program over the course of a decade, using a statistical design that considered various health and safety outcomes.

A first study, conducted by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine and released in 2011, found a significant reduction in crime over 10 years in areas that had greened lots compared with areas where vacant lots had been left in disarray.¹⁹ A second study, also from the University of Pennsylvania, found that community members that lived near the greened lots felt safer.²⁰

"Police like the greening project," Branas said, "because it saves them both money and resources. The vast majority of the community is positive about it, too."²¹ Where some are concerned about gentrification stemming from these safer spaces, Branas stresses that there are successful solutions the city has begun to implement, like rent controls and control of property taxes, which prevent longstanding residents from migrating out of their neighborhoods.

Community policing, as an evolving practice, has manifested in different ways. Some police departments increase foot patrols or community meetings. However, without any real collaboration or long-term prevention strategies, community policing approaches can miss opportunities for meaningful impact. But when a project allows residents to be personally invested and active in public safety, community policing can make a long-lasting difference.

Looking Ahead

Across the United States, researchers and practitioners alike have been exploring how to merge the efforts of public health with police. Public health agencies and police departments in communities have traditionally been siloed. It can be difficult to work out the logistics of communicating

regularly, sharing information, and deploying new, joint strategies to fighting community problems, but partnerships are a key ingredient for doing things differently. By forging new relationships with community members and local organizations, police departments can develop a better sense of where problems originate—whether in people or in places—and how prevention efforts can be deployed.

Budgets across the United States have tightened, so it can be a challenge to find the funds to start new initiatives, even if they hold the promise of saving time and money in the long run. One way to meet this challenge is to see if there are researchers at local universities who might be open to studying the results of a new project that uses a public health approach to crime prevention. If a researcher is on board from the beginning, the project will be better equipped to demonstrate its outcomes and apply for longer-term funding.

Once a project has become part of the department's general practice, it is important to think through sustainability, particularly given the reality of changing leadership. Once a police department has built connections with a local health department or university, memoranda of understanding can help ensure a long-standing partnership.

"At early community meetings over some shootings in our neighborhood, I said, 'This is the last time I'm going to be the one to call a meeting—what are *you* going to do about your neighborhood?' And then I make it clear that the police are there to help," Captain Cram said. This way, rather than being victimized, communities can start taking back some power over their neighborhoods. "Every community is different. But once you establish those leaders in the neighborhood and start reaching out to them," Captain Cram said, "that's where it starts."²² ♦

Notes:

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⁴Nick Defiesta, "Urban Violence 'Disease' Dissected," *New Haven Independent*, October 15, 2013, http://www.newhavenindependent.org/index.php/archives/entry/esserman_talks_urban_violence_disease (accessed November 7, 2014).

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⁷Dean Esserman (police chief, New Haven, CT, Police Department), telephone interview with Sarah Schweig, May 23, 2014.

⁸Mark Abraham et al., "New Haven Map and Infographic: Who Lives Near Homicides?" *DataHaven DataBlog*, January 28, 2013, <http://www.ctdatahaven.org/blog/2013/01/new-haven-infographic-homicides> (accessed November 6, 2014).

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¹⁰Project Longevity, "New Haven," www.project-longevity.org/home/new-haven (accessed November 6, 2014).

¹¹Cynthia Hua, "Crime on Decline in Elm City," *Yale Daily News*, October 7, 2013, <http://yaledailynews.com/blog/2013/10/11/crime-on-decline-in-elm-city> (accessed November 6, 2014).

¹²Dean Esserman, telephone interview with Sarah Schweig, May 23, 2014.

¹³Michael Cram (captain, Philadelphia, PA, Police Department), telephone interview with Sarah Schweig, June 19, 2014.

¹⁴Branas et al., "A Difference-in-Differences Analysis of Health, Safety, and Greening Vacant Urban Space."

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¹⁶Penn Medicine, "More Green, Less Crime: Rehabilitating Vacant Lots Improves Urban Health and Safety, Penn Study Finds," press release, November 16, 2011, http://www.uphs.upenn.edu/news/News_Releases/2011/11/more-green-crime (accessed November 6, 2014).

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²¹Charles Branas (University of Pennsylvania, Penn School of Medicine), telephone interview with Sarah Schweig, July 2, 2014.

²²Michael Cram, telephone interview with Sarah Schweig, June 19, 2014.

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