

Rochester SACSI Research
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Clinton Neighborhood Focus Group

A neighborhood focus group on violence in North East Rochester was held at the Martin Luther King School (No. 9) on Wednesday June 6th from 6:30-9:00 pm. Prior to the meeting leaders of community organizations in the area were invited and given posters to share with their members and neighbors. An effort was made to canvass major roads in the neighborhood with information regarding the forthcoming meeting.

Twenty people attended the session at which data on violence were reviewed and discussed with the group. The discussion was generally well focused and informative.

1. Participation

Twenty people attended the session. With few exceptions these were individuals who had long-standing commitments to the community and were active in community organizations including anti-violence efforts.

Although the turnout from the neighborhood was disappointing it is itself important information. It is consistent with a concern raised frequently in the discussion. Several speakers made the point that they believed there was an acceptance and complacency about violence levels in the neighborhood. One speaker described violence as a norm that is accepted and maintained in the neighborhood.

2. Neighborhood Organization

During the discussion several participants described the neighborhood as weak and lacking effective organization. They described the neighborhood as limited in the ability to engage residents collectively, and to get things done. They also noted that the high proportion of rental properties contributed to a lack of sense of community. Furthermore they noted that many small business and landlords had little real connection to the neighborhood and thus tended not to respond to neighborhood interests. Others extended the point by saying that the lack of a sense of community meant that neighbors exercised little control over children and young adults in the area. Some looked to the possible role of local churches in efforts to strengthen the community but they felt that these institutions were not currently making significant contributions to these efforts.

Participants described a sense of hopelessness that they believed was widely shared among the residents of the area. They did not feel that local government, religious institutions or neighborhood organizations were succeeding in responding to the problem. And, perhaps most striking, participants described the central issues as a lack of will in the neighborhood to affect real change.

This concern is consistent with research on violence that indicates that the strength of neighborhood organization is related to level of crime and violence. High crime neighborhoods tend to have weak neighborhood organizations and weak informal mechanisms for social control.

Crime reduction strategies that depend on neighborhood organizations are not likely to succeed unless they also involve efforts to strengthen neighborhood organizations. Research on community organization has shown that to be a difficult task. The view that the level of organization of this neighborhood is weak is particularly disappointing since the city of Rochester has made such efforts to organize neighborhood through such efforts as the NET program Neighbors Building Neighborhoods (NBN). It is also disappointing because the section of the City has a fairly large number of community organizations and other non-profit organizations.

One other important finding is clear from the discussion. The data on the geographic distribution of homicides in Rochester was striking and also consistent with participants' experiences. That led to wide support for concentrating resources in this area and considering intensive special interventions to address the problem.

3. Attitudes toward the Criminal Justice System

Participants in the meeting were largely ambivalent about the criminal justice system. They described a strong sense of dependence on the police and the rest of the criminal justice system to solve their problems but did not think the system was responsive enough and also did not, for the most part, see themselves as taking an active role with the criminal justice system to address the issues. Overall, the discussion suggested a strong sense of dependence on the criminal justice but not a strong interest in engagement with the criminal justice system. With few exceptions the neighborhood did not appear to have groups or individuals who would be strong partners in criminal justice system responses to violence.

One general exception to that appeared to be with the representatives of Rochestarians Against Illegal Narcotics (RAIN) who were present at the meeting. Members of Rain expressed a strong commitment to an active agenda that was largely consistent with the expressed interest of residents and the criminal justice system.

Finally, on this subject there was some disagreement about the potential deterrent effects of criminal justice interventions. One speaker in particular, felt that young men did not fear the CJ system because it was not regarded as having real teeth. That is, in

this speaker's view, the CJ system failed to provide certain and severe sanctions. Others at the meeting, however, felt that the large volume of arrests, convictions and sentences was evidence of sanctions but that even severe sanctions were not enough to address the problem.

4. Root Causes of Violence

There was considerable discussion of the root causes of violence in the neighborhood. Problems with the local schools were highlighted. Poverty and the lack of economic strength in terms of local ownership of homes and businesses were discussed. Similarly, a sense of alienation was discussed as participants noted that ownership of local business and housing is often in the hands of people, outside of the neighborhood, who some felt had little commitment to the area.

There was also discussion of the problem of drugs. This subject was approached in much the same way as the discussion of root causes. Participants identified drugs as a major issue underlying violence. They did not however, discuss it in terms that lent themselves to interventions but rather saw general and long-term approaches as needed.

The discussions of root causes of violence seemed reasonable and consistent with data on social conditions in the neighborhood. It did not, however, lend itself to discussion of specific strategies and particularly to strategies that were likely to have an immediate impact or impact in the near term.

5. Manageable Aspects of the problem

In contrast to the discussion of root cause issues there was a group of participants who emphasized the manageability of the problem of violence in the North East. Members of RAIN led this discussion. The conversation contrasted sharply with some of the discussion noted above.

The discussion leaders made several key points: 1) the geographic concentration meant a small area and small number of people were involved. 2) The data provided significant direction for intervention. While drug house robberies may require complicated efforts to intervene, (3) disputes should be easier to deal with. In fact, participants argued, neighborhood leaders should be able to work with young men to identify and intervene in disputes. They suggested a very hands-on approach to the problem.

6. Conclusions

Focus groups methods can provide useful data, however, they also have their limitations. We cannot claim that our group was representative of the North East

neighborhood, but the group was made up of people who made a deliberate decision to participate and most of whom had established records of commitment to the neighborhood. While recognizing the limitation of the process the following tentative conclusions should be considered.

- a. In general, the neighborhood seems to have little ability to define the current problems of violence as a critical issue or to muster resources to address the problem in a clear and urgent manner.
- b. Strategies that depend on strong community organizations are not likely to succeed in this neighborhood. There may be many reasons to work to increase the strength of community organizations but given the current state of the neighborhood, those efforts are likely to be long term and are not likely to have an immediate impact on the problem of violence.
- c. The apparent dependency on the criminal justice system and the recognition that special resources should be focused on this neighborhood suggest the community may be supportive of significant criminal justice led interventions to reduce violence. The neighborhood seems ready for such interventions although it is not organized to make significant contributions to them.
- d. There is a substantial interest in root cause issues and some potentially useful activity directed at addressing those issues. The root cause interest, however, is not consistent with triage approaches and possible interventions responding to violence as a crisis. Representative from RAIN, however, seemed attuned to defining the problem and intervening in that manner. Neighborhood churches may also contribute to understanding the issue in this manner.
- e. SACSI partnerships should probably focus on organizations with the most potential for crisis-oriented approaches. Participation of other groups should involve encouraging a crisis orientation.

7. Suggested Areas for Additional Research

The focus group process suggests the following areas for additional research.

- a. An inventory of all neighborhood organizations, not-for profits and other organizations and agencies housed or working in North East Rochester. That inventory would focus on identifying programs and activities aimed at reducing violence. It would distinguish between programs with a long term or root cause focus and those with potentially immediate effects.

- b. Interviews with leaders in these organizations to determine why violence levels are not perceived as critical and what might be done to change that and what resources might be available if violence were defined as a crisis in the neighborhood.
- c. Use of standardized observation and measurement methods that would allow comparisons across neighborhood in Rochester and across cities.