

**Rochester SACSI Research
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Maple Neighborhood Focus Group

A neighborhood focus group on violence in the Maple Section was held at the Enrico Fermi School (No.17) on Thursday August 9th from 6:30-8:30 pm. Prior to the meeting leaders of community organizations in the area were invited and given posters to share with their members and neighbors. The goals of the meeting were to share the data on homicide with the neighborhood and to gather information on the neighborhood's perspective on this problem and on resources to address it.

Karyn Herman of ABC, Hanif Abdul Wahid of RAIN and Alan Whitcomb of the Task Force to Reduce Violence played key roles in informing people about the meeting, as did Mr. Ralph Spezio, Principal of School 17. In addition, the murder of 10 year old Tyshaun Cauldwell in this neighborhood on June 29th served as a rallying call for the neighborhood. A mass email and phone a thon to remind or notify people about the meeting also paid off- a lot of the attendees were from the phone-a-thon and email/faxes.

1. Participation

Approximately 50 people attended the session. Most people were from the neighborhood others were involved with citywide organizations. Among those from the neighborhood approximately half were affiliated with a neighborhood or other type of organization. Many who spoke described themselves as long-term residents of the neighborhood.

Maple section is a very diverse section of Rochester in terms of ethnicity and economics. There are at least 7 recognizable neighborhoods in the section. The diversity of the section was well represented.

Attendance was very strong for this meeting especially when you consider that it was held on one of the hottest evenings of the year. The turnout clearly reflects the interests and efforts of a number of key people who are working to organize the community.

2. Neighborhood Organization

Much of the discussion centered on the need for and the virtues of organizing the community. The discussion tended to be quite general in that it often did not tie

organizing to any specific problems and it did not cover how organizing would produce specific solutions. However, three somewhat different but interrelated approaches to organizing seemed to emerge in the discussion. First, there was discussion of organizing for political power. In this approach neighborhood organization was seen as improving the ability of the neighborhood to compete for resources. A second form of organizing appeared to center on organizing for activism. That discussion seemed to center on increasing the capacity of the neighborhood to take collective action. The focus of that action mentioned most often was drug houses. Finally a more subtle form of organizing was discussed. This involved more of an asset building approach in which the neighborhood would be strengthened by increases in familiarity and recognition of shared interests amongst neighbors.

The discussion of organizing took place against a backdrop of the limited level of organization that currently exists. When compared with Clinton section, Maple section seems to have a smaller number of paid professionals in organizations. The section does, however, appear to have a significant number of voluntary associations and other similar organizations. The discussion indicated that many times these organizations are seen as quite parochial in their interests with each one carving out its own area of attention and with little in the way of coordinated effort. It is also clear that an effort is being mounted through School 17 and its Principal, Ralph Spezio, to address this problem.

There was little discussion about community organizations and crime or violence. Of the organizational efforts discussed only one appeared to be concentrating directly on these issues. Councilman Robert Stevenson described his efforts with PACTAC (Police and Citizens Together Against Crime). Mr. Stevenson is directly engaged in this effort which does afford opportunities for concrete action and observable results.

3. The Place of Homicide in the Neighborhood Agenda

Just a few weeks prior to this meeting Tyshaun Cauldwell, a ten year old neighborhood boy, was killed while standing in proximity to a drug house. In the year 2000 this neighborhood had the highest number of drug related rip-off homicides. We began the meeting with a review of those murders.

Discussion of the homicide problem, however, occupied relatively little of the meeting. Rather than a direct discussion of murder, the main focus was on the problem of drug houses and the quality of life issues that they raise. There was extensive discussion of the drug house problem and recommendations for increasing penalties and changes in laws were made.

One link between the drug house problem and homicide was suggested. Several participants argued that poverty lay at the root of the neighborhood's problems. Drug

selling was seen by some as a response to that poverty, and homicide was seen as a byproduct of the illegal economy

One interpretation of the limited attention to homicide at the meeting might be that dealing with drug houses, community organizing, and other topics such as home ownership and children's issues all reflect a focus on long term solutions to current problems, including murder. Some people in attendance appeared to reflect that perspective. But perhaps equally apparent was the view that quality of life concerns are widely shared among residents while homicide was mostly seen as a criminal problem most affecting people who were not viewed as legitimate members of the community. With the exception of Tyshaun, homicide victims, and offenders seemed to be regarded as members of a lost generation with whom the neighbors had little interest or concern.

For the most part the meeting attendees spent little time discussing possible short-term solutions or even direct interventions to address homicide. There was no separation of the problems of homicide and drug houses or alternately there was little concern with the problem of homicide. Instead, the main interest was in organizing and in long term solutions to neighborhood problems.

4. The Drug House Focus

The problem of drug houses occupied considerable attention. Drug houses were regarded as the most significant problem faced in the neighborhood. The most common suggestions for dealing with this problem came from a traditional police perspective. The view was prevalent that drug houses could be closed by the police and that citizens should be more active in reporting drug activity. Even after it was mentioned that at least 108 drug houses currently exist in the section there was a call for more police and more arrests. It was also noteworthy, however, that there was no criticism of the police during this meeting.

For the most part the drug house problem was presented as a traditional criminal justice problem. One participant, however, did remark that drug houses were a misnomer and the issues were people and not houses. Another remarked that the occupants and customers of drug houses were the fathers, brothers and sons of the neighborhood.

One different and noteworthy view of the problem was presented. Hanif Abdul Wahid of Rochestarians Against Illegal Narcotics (RAIN) noted that drug houses often contained a wide range of problems including unsupervised children or health problems and that perhaps focusing on those problems rather the drugs directly could be more productive.

5. Conclusions

Focus groups methods can provide useful data, however, they also have their limitations. We cannot claim that our group was representative of the Maple section, but the group was large and diverse and composed of people who made a deliberate decision to participate. While recognizing the limitation of the process the following tentative conclusions seem warranted.

1. A sense of frustration (but not hopelessness) with quality of life issues was clear throughout the meeting. The frustration, however, was not with the police, but rather with the lack of effective neighborhood responses to problems.
2. There was a strong sense of the neighborhood being in transition and there was shared belief that “legitimate” residents need to do a better job in managing the neighborhood.
3. There is significant interest in community organization in this neighborhood. These efforts do not appear to be directly linked to violence but rather they discuss recent violence as a rallying point.
4. The first task in organizing may be to deal with the existing fragmentation of organizations and the perception of parochial interests.
5. Most community organizing efforts appear to be geared at long range solutions to unspecified problems. These efforts might benefit from greater specificity of goals.
6. The one clearly specified effort to address crime and violence was the PACTAC effort discussed by Councilman Stevenson. Few others picked up on this discussion, however, and support for further organizational efforts with PACTAC would seem beneficial.
7. There was little interest in understanding or addressing homicide as an independent problem. Homicide was not widely recognized as an urgent or critical problem. There seemed to be limited resources in the neighborhood for addressing homicide in that manner.
8. There was great concern over drug houses. This was described as the primary source of quality of life problems. The problem was generally defined in antagonistic terms in which there was only begrudging recognition that those involved with drug houses also had some other ties to the community. The favored approach seemed to be for a police and criminal justice response. There was limited discussion of alternatives to the law enforcement approach.
9. There appear to be a variety of individuals who are resourceful in pursuing organizing which may offer a means to impact crime and violence. Key among

those are School 17 Principal Ralph Spezio who is working to organize the neighborhood and Karyn Herman who is working to strengthen the neighborhood through an ABC sponsored effort.

10. People working to respond to crime and violence issues more directly include Councilman Stevens who is actively engaged in direct action through PACTAC and Hanif Abdul Wahid who is engaged in action through RAIN and who can suggest alternative approaches to problem solving in this area.