

Rochester SACSI Research
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Genesee Neighborhood Focus Group

A neighborhood focus group on violence in the Genesee Section was held at the James Madison School of Excellence on Tuesday August 14th 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.

Pat Jackson of South West Area Neighborhood (SWAN) was extremely helpful in organizing this meeting. A mass email and phone a thon to remind or notify people about the meeting also was useful.

1. Participation

Twenty-seven people attended the session. Most people were from the neighborhood, others were involved with citywide organizations. Among those from the neighborhood most were affiliated with a neighborhood or other type of organization.

Genesee section is a diverse section of Rochester in terms of ethnicity and economics. The diversity of the section was well represented.

2. Reactions to the data

The meeting began with a review of the data on homicide. That data shows that Genesee section has ranked closely with Clinton and Maple section in terms of the annual number of homicides over the past decade. Genesee section, however, had lower homicide numbers in the past two years.

Member of the group focused on the past two years of data to argue that this area did not share a homicide problem similar to that in other parts of the city. Some respondents argued that the discussion of homicide focused on the negative and that even the demographic data showing high homicide rates for young African American and Hispanic males overstated the problem.

Throughout the discussion there was a general disagreement among participants- with some addressing the data on homicide and such topics as gun carrying and arguments and others focusing on the view that this area has made considerable progress

and did not have the type of problems the data suggested. It was also suggested that what problems do occur are often the result of people coming in from outside the neighborhood.

The group did not reach a point of discussing specific issues of homicide such as disputes and drug house rip-offs but instead the conversation often turned to the success of the community in dealing with quality of life issues.

3. Neighborhood Organization

Participants pointed out that this section has a long history of effective neighborhood organization that is in evidence today through such organizations as SWAN, the 19th Ward Association and the area's PACTAC program. It was pointed out that, unlike the Maple Section, this area is currently rich in effective organizations. This was attributed to the high quality of leadership that had emerged in this section of the city. Those leaders were described as committed and persistent.

It was also pointed out that the organizations here have worked especially hard over the past 7-8 years to improve the neighborhood. Specific factors were mentioned including wide participation in PACTAC, a code of conduct for businesses and the "uplifts" that brought in a wide range of agencies and resources to target specific problem areas. It was also noted that this community has a wide range of services available for youth.

Discussion of solutions to any perceived problems also focused on organization. Participants argued that the area was successful in pulling together appropriate neighborhood resources and in utilizing government resources to address problems such as drug houses and nuisance properties including vacant buildings and corner stores believed to be sites of illegal activity.

4. The Place of Homicide in the Neighborhood Agenda

When it came to the specific problem of homicide there appeared to be two separate and generally unrelated conversations occurring at the meeting. In one of those conversations the problem of homicide was subsumed under larger issues of neighborhood organizing and in the other violence was recognized as a distinct and immediate problem.

In other section meetings there was often a view that homicide and other forms of violence were the result of root causes that were difficult or impossible to address. In this section root causes such as poverty were acknowledged but speakers often argued that major problems could be and were being overcome by neighborhood organization and activism.

In that conversation there was little discussion of the specific problems of homicide or of its victims or offenders. Efforts to discuss the dynamics of homicide events, such as gun carrying or the nature of disputes, yielded little because of the strong belief that community organization addresses underlying issues of cause. The idea of looking for interventions geared to prevent specific types of events here and now found little place in that discussion. Instead, speakers focused on their view that the neighborhood was addressing underlying problems through its organizing efforts. Widespread pride in what the neighborhood was doing had an important place in that conversation

The parallel conversation about homicide was quite different. In it a young girl noted that men often carry guns in the neighborhood for protection. Others argued in favor of early family intervention to address expectations of failure. There was also discussion of drug houses and drug problems.

One speaker argued that sustained community outrage over some events such as homicides was needed but not present in the neighborhood. Without it “kids were out of control.” But, he noted, efforts to engage role models to address young men were limited in their success. The speakers here provided a specific focus on the problem of violence in the neighborhood as well as an effort to analyze it and think of interventions to address it.

To the extent there was a bridge between these conversations it was presented by Hanif Abdul Wahid of RAIN, who has been present at each of the sector meetings. He supported the view that organization in Genesee section had yielded some important results and was continuing to do so. He also focused on the current state of young people and argued that the community needed to create a sense of belonging among them, and he spoke about the need for active intervention in places and with people engaged in violence. Those points seemed to connect the issues of organizing with those of engaging in specific interventions.

5. Conclusions

The group in this section was composed of many people who have made a commitment to the neighborhood through their activism in the community. They represent the formal and informal leadership of the community. As such they are in a unique but not necessarily representative position to identify, analyze and resolve neighborhood problems. While recognizing these limitations of the focus group process the following tentative conclusions seem warranted.

1. Leaders of the neighborhood have great pride in what appears to be real accomplishments in addressing quality of life issues in the Genesee Section.

2. There is a strong organizational structure of a kind that was not seen in the other sections where these meetings took place.
3. The problem of homicide is not widely defined as a critical issue in this neighborhood.
4. Participants believe that the organizational structure of the neighborhood has had an impact on homicide through its attention to quality of life issues.
5. For many, analysis of the specific problem of homicide is unnecessary given their belief in the power of community organization to address problems that are regarded as more fundamental.
6. That organizational structure of this neighborhood may provide a useful example for others but it also has historical and geographical roots which makes it unique and not likely to be easily transferred.
7. In the absence of defining homicide as a critical issue, the organizational structure of this section, which seems to provide an effective way of addressing mid range problems, may impede analysis and development of short-term interventions to address homicide.