Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design

April 2019

In many cities, residents engage in grassroots efforts to reclaim space and participate in shaping engaged and safe communities. They hold weekend barbecues in newly greened lots, transform overgrown areas into community gardens, and help neighbors replace broken windows and old porch lights. City and nonprofit groups also spearhead initiatives to change spaces by altering the flow of foot and vehicle traffic and investing in greening projects and supporting resident initiatives.

The environment in which we grow up, live, work, and grow old can have a major influence on our individual actions, and research increasingly shows this has implications for reducing gun violence. Our surroundings—what researchers often call the “built environment”—changes the way we think, feel, and make decisions.¹

With this in mind, many urban programs have been carried out to reduce gun violence by reshaping public spaces. This work is often called “crime prevention through environmental design”—sometimes referred to as CPTED—as it involves deliberate efforts to change the built environment to reduce crime and increase community safety. Programs encompass a wide variety of approaches and efforts to rehabilitate areas and make violence less likely to occur. Violence can be discouraged by these visible signs that a community is cared for and watched over.

Because gun violence is so costly, and these simple fixes are not, communities save hundreds of dollars for every dollar that’s invested.² The following are some examples of successful and innovative programs in cities across the country.

Vacant Lots

Many interventions focus on vacant lots, as about 15 percent of the land in US cities is vacant or abandoned.³ These lots, as well as abandoned buildings, provide hiding places for guns and can contribute to the sense that police and government are not invested in a community.⁴ Because these sites often receive little public attention, they can foster illicit activity, including gun crime, away from the watchful eyes of community members or law enforcement.⁵

In Philadelphia, the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS) started the LandCare program to clean and green vacant lots. Over 12,000 parcels containing 16 million square feet of vacant land
have been cleaned up thus far. The contours of the program are simple: debris is removed, grass and trees are planted, and a basic fence is added. PHS contracts with landscape businesses, including minority-owned companies and community organizations, to regularly maintain the lots. The results are extraordinary: a 29 percent reduction in gun violence in neighborhoods below the poverty line, as well as a 13 percent reduction in crime overall and a 22 percent reduction in burglary.\(^6\) Individuals who live near the treated lots use outside spaces more for relaxing and socializing and report fewer safety concerns.\(^7\) The city’s support has been essential. The city provides all of the funding for the program, and City Council members recommend lots for cleaning and build support for the program in their communities.\(^8\)

Other efforts in Philadelphia are also leading to decreases in crime. Urban Creators, a community collaborative in North-Central Philadelphia, transformed a two-acre garbage dump into a farm called Life Do Grow. In the area surrounding the farm, violent crime has decreased by 40 percent.\(^9\) Urban Creators has also built two community gardens and nine school gardens and provided over 100 jobs to community youth.\(^10\)

City leaders, nonprofits, and residents all play a role in a successful crime prevention program.

In Gary, IN, Mayor Karen Freeman-Wilson has worked to address the city’s significant vacant and neglected buildings problem, a result of decades of population decline. Hundreds of residents, in partnership with the University of Chicago, took to the streets to collect information on the more than 58,000 parcels in Gary to measure the scope of the problem.\(^11\) They found that about one in five buildings in Gary are vacant and 44 percent of land parcels do not have a building or structure.\(^12\) Mayor Freeman-Wilson and Gary residents are hard at work to improve these lots:

“...if we didn’t have the City of Philadelphia backing us, I’m not sure we would still be doing this work.”

—LandCare Director, Keith Green
the city received $11 million in state funds to demolish over 450 vacant and abandoned homes, the Indiana National Guard tore down several homes that were attracting criminal activity, and other improvements have been made such as establishing a public garden in downtown and the planting of tulip poplars in partnership with a private group.

Reimagining Cleveland, a project of the Cleveland Neighborhood Progress, views vacant land as an asset that can help the city’s long-term success. Cleveland has nearly 28,000 vacant lots, a number that is expected to grow as the city continues to demolish abandoned buildings.

Through grant funding of nearly $2 million to more than 100 projects, Reimagining Cleveland is empowering local residents to participate in improving their community. Vacant lots have been transformed into pocket parks, community gardens, market gardens, neighborhood pathways, and orchards, among other projects. The program, however, has struggled to obtain funding for additional interventions, despite its success. Transforming vacant lots has been found to reduce aggravated assaults, including gun assaults, by at least 34 percent.

Arts and Culture

Art and cultural activities can be an important part of crime prevention efforts. Often called “creative placemaking,” this involves using art to increase public safety and engagement with public spaces. These interventions take a variety of forms, from temporary art installations, performances, and permanent artistic spaces to murals and sculptures. Creative placemaking has the greatest impact when combined with other strategies.

In Detroit, Urban Neighborhood Initiatives engages in a variety of activities to build safe and thriving environments. The Southwest Urban Arts Mural Project mixes arts programming with youth development: youth receive training from professional artists during the winter, and then are hired to design and paint murals in the summer. Residents, local businesses, and corporations can commission murals.

Improving the Look of Vacant Buildings
Often, vacant buildings have broken windows and doors or are boarded up with plywood. These are visible signs that the home is not cared for, and communities have developed creative strategies to combat this problem.

In Philadelphia, a local ordinance requires the owners of abandoned buildings to remove deteriorating plywood and install working doors and windows or face large fines. The intervention led to reductions in violent gun crimes, including as much as a 39 percent reduction in gun assaults.

Flint, MI, takes a different approach; they use artistically painted boards to cover the windows of vacant properties. The city’s Blight Elimination and Neighborhood Stabilization division works with local artists to design the boards.

Newburgh, NY, and Wilkinsburg, PA, also use artistically painted boards. New Orleans’ Fight the Blight Program works in partnership with Tulane University to rehab the outsides of abandoned homes and adjoining lots to prevent crime.

Shining a light on high-crime areas

Gun lighting makes witness identification more difficult and may make residents less likely to report or intervene in crimes. But there is a simple solution to this problem: improving lighting in areas with higher rates of gun crimes.

In New York City, violent crimes occur at higher rates in areas of concentrated disadvantage, including public housing developments. In 2014, the Mayor’s Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety (MAP) was launched, a partnership between the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice, the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), the police, and residents from 15 high-crime public housing developments. One element of the plan focused on the critical need for enhanced security lighting. Temporary lighting was installed in all 15 developments, and the city has since

“When we think about deterring crime, we need to pursue a broad range of strategies beyond traditional law enforcement. A well-lit street deters crime better than a dark alley, just as opportunities for work and play promote safety better than disadvantage and disconnection.”

—Elizabeth Glazer, director of the New York City Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice
installed improved permanent lighting in many of them to illuminate pathways, public areas, and doorways. The program led to a 5 percent reduction in felony crimes overall, including a 12 percent reduction in assault, homicide, and weapons crimes outdoors at night. Similar programs in Atlanta, Milwaukee, Kansas City, and Fort Worth have been associated with reductions in crime.


Ibid.


