

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design

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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

“...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

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



Credit: Land Care

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:

the city received \$11 million in state funds to demolish over 450 vacant and abandoned homes,¹³ the Indiana National Guard tore down several homes that were attracting criminal activity,¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

*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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷*

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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ The intervention led to reductions in violent gun crimes, including as much as a 39 percent reduction in gun assaults.²⁰*

***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.²¹*

***Newburgh, NY**, and **Wilkinsburg, PA**, also use artistically painted boards.²² **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.²³*

Shining a light on high-crime areas

Gun crime benefits from darkness. Poor 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.²⁴ 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 Justice²⁷

*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.²⁵ Similar programs in **Atlanta, Milwaukee, Kansas City, and Fort Worth** have been associated with reductions in crime.²⁶*

¹ Bratman GN, Daily GC, Levy BJ, Gross JJ. The benefits of nature experience: Improved affect and cognition. *Landscape and Urban Planning*. 2015; 138: 41–50. South EC, Kondo MC, Cheney RA, Branas CC. Neighborhood blight, stress, and health: a walking trial of urban greening and ambulatory heart rate. *American Journal of Public Health*. 2015; 105(5): 909–913. Garvin E, Branas C, Keddem S, Sellman J, Cannuscio C. More than just an eyesore: Local insights and solutions on vacant land and urban health. *Journal of Urban Health*. 2013; 90(3): 412–426.

² Branas CC, Kondo MC, Murphy SM, South EC, Polsky D, MacDonald JM. Urban blight remediation as a cost-beneficial solution to firearm violence. *American Journal of Public Health*, 2016; 106(12): 2158–2164.

³ Branas CC, South E, Kondo MC, Hohl BC, Bourgois P, Wiebe DJ, MacDonald JM. Citywide cluster randomized trial to restore blighted vacant land and its effects on violence, crime, and fear. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. 2018; 115(12): 2946–2951.

⁴ Klineberg E. The Other Side of "Broken Windows." *The New Yorker*. August 23, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2BHhyx2>.

⁵ Ellen IG, Lacoë J, Sharygin CA. Do foreclosures cause crime? *Journal of Urban Economics*. 2013; 74: 59–70. Stucky TD, Ottensmann JR. Land use and violent crime. *Criminology*. 2009; 47(4): 1223–1264.

⁶ Branas CC, South E, Kondo MC, Hohl BC, Bourgois P, Wiebe DJ, MacDonald JM. Citywide cluster randomized trial to restore blighted vacant land and its effects on violence, crime, and fear. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. 2018; 115(12): 2946–2951.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Philadelphia Horticultural Society LandCare FAQs. <https://bit.ly/2layezA>.

⁹ Urban Creators. 2018 Annual Report. Published 2018.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Gary Counts. <http://garycounts.org/>.

¹² Gary Counts. Data & Reports. <http://garycounts.org/reports/>. Euvino S. Gary official sees vacant lots as opportunities for growth. *Northwest Indiana Times*. November 18, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2TLPnS5>.

¹³ Gary, Indiana, Redevelopment Department. Demolitions. <https://bit.ly/2FQOrpP>.

¹⁴ Cross L. Indiana National Guard partnering with city of Gary on demolitions. *Northwest Indiana Times*. August 1, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2FQrH9A>.

¹⁵ Euvino S. Gary official sees vacant lots as opportunities for growth. *Northwest Indiana Times*. November 18, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2TLPnS5>.

¹⁶ Mallach A, Steif K, Graziani K. Center for Community Progress. The reimagining Cleveland vacant lot greening program: Evaluating economic development and public safety outcomes. Published 2016. <https://bit.ly/2Un1Sb8>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Urban Neighborhood Initiatives. Youth Development Programs. <https://www.unidetroit.org/youth-development-programs.html>.

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- ¹⁹ Kondo MC, Keene D, Hohl BC, MacDonald JM, Branas CC. A difference-in-differences study of the effects of a new abandoned building remediation strategy on safety. *PLOS One*. 2015; 10(8).
- ²⁰ Branas CC, Kondo MC, Murphy SM, South EC, Polsky D, MacDonald JM. Urban blight remediation as a cost-beneficial solution to firearm violence. *American Journal of Public Health*. 2016; 106(12): 2158–2164.
- ²¹ Engh R, Harris SF, Nicodemus AG, Lewinski D, Allinger CA. Metris Arts Consulting & Center for Community Progress. Creative placemaking on vacant properties: Lessons learned from four cities. Published 2018.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Kondo MC, Morrison C, Jacoby SF, Elliott L, Poche A, Theall KP, Branas CC. Blight abatement of vacant land and crime in New Orleans. *Public Health Reports*. 2018;133(6): 650–657. <https://bit.ly/2pp2X01>.
- ²⁴ The City of New York, Office of the Mayor. Making New York City’s neighborhoods and housing developments safer. *Press Release*. July 8, 2014. <http://on.nyc.gov/1IUR46o>.
- ²⁵ Chalfin A, Hansen B, Parker L, Lerner J. University of Chicago Crime Lab New York. The impact of street lighting on crime in New York City public housing. Published 2017. <https://bit.ly/2lkCxax>.
- ²⁶ Clarke RV. The Center for Problem-Oriented Policing. Improving street lighting to reduce crime in residential areas. *Response Guide No. 8*. Published 2008.
- ²⁷ The City of New York, Office of the Mayor. Mayor de Blasio announces pioneering study on how outdoor lighting reduces crime. *Press Release*. March 11, 2016. <http://on.nyc.gov/1XsnxHO>.