

Reducing Street Level Prostitution, Community Partnerships and Intervention

Introduction:

Providence, Rhode Island is a city of approximately 180,000 residents, spread out over 18 square miles. While there were many neighborhoods to choose from the area of focus for this project was in the Olneyville Neighborhood. The Olneyville Neighborhood is home to approximately 6,000 residents or approximately 2,000 families. Olneyville is poor and crime ridden.

The neighborhood is roughly 60% Hispanic, 35% Caucasian, 15% black and 4% Asian. Some 66% of the neighborhood speaks a language other than English. The Average median household income was approximately \$20,000 a year less than the rest of the city, at around \$33,000 per year. 36% of the households in Olneyville had an average household income of less than \$25,000 per year. Where as only 25% of the households in Rhode Island make less than \$25,000 per year. The neighborhood is marred by numerous foreclosed and/or abandoned buildings. Litter is common and it is often an area that is used to illegal dump trash and construction waste.

Between 2010-12 while the rest of the city saw a 7% decrease in crime, Olneyville witnessed a 19% increase in crime. In 2015 Olneyville saw, a 150% increase in weapons offenses. Burglaries in were down in years 8% in 2014-15 but rose 18%. The violent crime rate in Olneyville between 2012-2013 was 100 times higher than citywide. Even though crime decreased in the city overall. Olneyville was no stranger to violent crime, the neighborhood had drug dealing, murder, robbery, assaults and domestic violence.

The Providence Police Department, in conjunction with Roger Williams University and One Neighborhood Builders applied for the DOJ Byrne Grant. As part of the application process they had to apply the SARA (Scanning, Analysis, Response and Assessment) model to the problems facing Olneyville. The *Scanning* was accomplished through a series of community meetings, surveys, knock and talks, street outreach and analysis of crime statistics. Despite there being plenty of violent crime, drug related crime the people of Olneyville identified, street level Prostitution as their priority concern. The *Analysis* portion was achieved by reviewing the data provided, conducting follow on interviews and interviewing the Police Officers who work in the area. The residents who had children were especially upset about the prostitution. *Response*, the Providence Police, One Neighborhood Builders worked in conjunction with Project Webber Renew developed a plan of action that involved Police and Project Webber Renew conducting Ride-Alongs in the target area once a week for 18 months. Additionally, Police proposed two Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) projects. Then the *Assessment* phased was conducted by resurveying the residents, conducting additional face to face meetings, crime stat analysis and follow up with all the stakeholders. Lastly Roger Williams University provided a comprehensive report on the project.

Description:

From the beginning the project in Olneyville was a collaborative effort between the Providence Police department, Roger Williams University's School of Justice Studies, Olneyville Housing project (later named One Neighborhood Builders), eventually Project Webber Renew was involved and the Woonasquatucket Watershed Council as well.

The initial *Scanning* was done by One Neighborhood Builders and the Providence Police. Initially it appeared that violent crime was the problem based on the crime statistics for the area. This was

coupled with a series of community meetings including Police and residents. What became overwhelmingly clear was that while Violent Crime was on the rise in Olneyville, Drug Dealing and property crimes were common, the residents in the area were most concerned about prostitution.

Prostitution while normally viewed, erroneously, as a victimless crime, had become a quality of life issue. It was identified to the OHC and the PPD by the residents themselves. The problem of prostitution in the community was selected because it was a universal theme that cut across a cross section of society. Business owners, real estate developers, residents were unhappy about the fact that Olneyville had a significant prostitution problem. Olneyville was a destination for prostitution in the city of Providence. Parents waiting with their children in the morning for the school bus, would see prostitutes flagging down clients every day.

Once the problem was identified as being critical to the community it was necessary to define the physical boundaries of the affected area. Police officers working in Olneyville (District 5) knew that the intersection of Atwells Avenue and Valley Street was the epicenter of the problem. It should be noted that Atwells Avenue is the border between two police districts.

On any given day or night, any season, in all but the worst weather, 3-10 prostitutes could be found loitering in the one block area between Valley Street and Barstow Street and Cutler to Newark streets. Prostitutes were taking clients to the nearby Doningian park to engage in sexual commerce. This was particularly problematic as the park was used by many children and families.

Residents conveyed to ONB and PPD not just that the prostitution was pervasive but that they were worried about the type of people that were coming to Olneyville specifically use Prostitutes. Men were coming from other neighborhoods and other towns in the state. This brought ancillary criminal activity such as drug use, drug dealing, larcenies and robberies as well. The fact that the residents of Olneyville identified Prostitution as a key problem and the fact that they were so vocal about it lead to its selection for special attention.

Analysis:

One source of data utilized during the Analysis phase was the examination of Crime Statistics relating to Olneyville. This was used in conjunction with the historical knowledge of the area. One Neighborhood Builders (ONB) conducted a number of surveys that were handed out in both English and Spanish, in the community, as well as leading a number of Focus Groups. Also, Tina Sheppard, the Executive Director of ONB and Providence Police Lieutenant Richard Fernandes literally went door to door in the neighborhood meeting residents in what "Knock and Talks". Officers in the district would conduct business checks to speak with local business owners and employees.

Prostitution has been a problem in the Olneyville for several decades. The problem coincides with the closing of the textile mills, "white flight" and rising crime. The problem of prostitution in Olneyville was a constant problem. Prostitutes often as many as ten at a time could be found in the area of Atwells Avenue and Valley Street. This intersection has a great deal of vehicle traffic heading into Down City Providence (Down Town) and also to the Northern portion of the city. The traffic lights at this particular intersection are long lights and the roads are wide which both contribute to the flagging down of cars. Prostitutes plied the area morning, noon and night in all but the most extreme weather.

Prostitution in the area was almost entirely driven by drug addiction, either to Crack Cocaine or Heroin. 99% of the prostitutes that the action team dealt with in the area were drug addicts. Their sexual commerce was done to acquire drugs, food, shelter and clothing after that. The need for Crack Cocaine and heroin was greater than any other thing in their lives. It outweighed simple things as maintaining their hygiene or it robbed them of things such as the ability to be with their children. The only exception to this were T and M, a mother and daughter, who were addicts and prostitutes in the area who would work together. There are those that will try to put forth the theory that prostitution is a victimless crime. That is fallacious. The prostitutes themselves are the victims. They are frequently beaten, raped and robbed.

The biggest and most important harm that resulted from Prostitution in the neighborhood is that it made the residents feel as though they lived a lawless and crime ridden area. The flagrant prostitution and the related crimes/criminal activities that went with it made the residents feel as though the area was more dangerous than it was. Also, robberies of "clients" were common as well as drug dealing, drug use and petty theft. Occasionally there were disputes about territory between prostitutes.

The way the problem was addressed prior to the project was not a viable solution; officers on either side of the district boundaries would simply tell the prostitutes to cross the street. Due to the verbiage of the Rhode Island General Laws it is very difficult for a patrol officer to make an arrest for prostitution. Most arrests of prostitutes in the area were either for drug possession or for a warrant. Baring that encouraging them to cross the street into another district was the answer. Neither arrests nor the push the problem to the either side of the street were effective responses. Prostitutes still plied their trade in the area. Before the problem-solving project the problem was being addressed by Patrol officers on their post or by sweeps by the Narcotics bureau. The Patrol officers would make arrests for drug possession and/or warrants. The sweeps were for Loitering for indecent purposes. In either case the problem prostitution was not impacted in the area.

The analysis of the problem revealed that the problem was pervasive and deep rooted. There were, in fact very few approaches that were working. The causes of the problem were drug dealing and the fact that the neighborhood in question was already high crime area. Getting the feedback from the residents was a game changer. In the past the assumption was that the prostitutes were mostly harmless and that no one was really being hurt by their presence. The community felt very differently. The other group that was invaluable to understanding the scope of the problem were the Police officers from each shift in each area.

Response:

The project goals were simple, the first goal was to reduce the presence of the prostitutes in the area. This meant that when officers were on patrol they should notice a reduction in the numbers of prostitutes in the area. This would be measured by comparing the surveys conducted during the Analysis face to surveys conducted at the end of the project. One of the oddities that was revealed was that most prostitutes in the area were not arrested for Prostitution therefore what should have been an easy metric related to the problem didn't exist. Simply put, the arrest data was not a good point of measure because most prostitutes in the areas were arrested for other things.

The first and most obvious alternative to the status quo was to increase the amount of patrolling done by patrol officers. This was hampered by personnel shortages and high call volume. A solution was found

using overtime to bring in additional officers to conduct additional patrolling just focusing on Prostitution. The solution was to develop a two-officer action team and have them conduct additional patrols. The other alternatives that were considered was partnering with outside organizations to provide services for the prostitutes. Also considered was the use of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) to make the areas where prostitution and related acts were occurring, less hospitable.

The biggest single thing learned from the Analysis phase was that everything that had been done in the past wasn't working. Prostitution was not only not being impacted but that the current approaches were again to beating the ocean with a stick in an attempt to move it from the shore. The giant take away from the analysis was that the neighborhood residents were more upset about the prostitution than drug dealing, violent crime or property crime. This was a shock given that this was one of the few neighborhoods in Providence where not only did crime not go down with the rest of the city but it actually was on the rise.

Additionally, the Providence Police Department was able to work with Project Webber-Renew as a partner. PWR sent outreach workers who would ride with Police during occasional four-hour patrols. The outreach workers were women who had been prostitutes but had managed to get out of the life. PWR outreach workers could speak to the prostitutes and communicate with them in ways that the officers involved would never be able to.

The model that was eventually standardized would be two officers on a four-hour patrol. The four-hour patrol was dispersed through out the month to cover all three shifts. Usually an outreach worker from PWR would accompany the officers. Officers would patrol and if they saw a prostitute(S) they would get out and conduct a field interview. These interviews were very publicly conducted and officers would check NCIC to see if the subject they were speaking with was wanted. If they had a warrant they were taken in and PWR was contacted so that they could reach the person in prison or court. If the subject had no warrants they were offered services through PWR. If PWR was with officers, then after they completed their field interview they would give PWR and the subject space to talk. PWR would offer services.

On average each field interview took 15-20 minutes. These were much longer than the average field interview conducted. These were done in highly visible areas and drew negative attention to the prostitutes. Officers began to get feedback from the subjects they were talking to that it was becoming harder to ply their trade in the target area due to the presence of officers. It should be noted that these patrols only constituted four additional hours a week for two officers.

Officers proposed to CPTED plans to impact to high prostitution areas. One of the areas was an abandoned lot and portion of city street that had been blocked off to deny illegal dumping (a problem in Providence). Ultimately this plan was not feasible. The second CPTED (see photos below) plan however dealt with the area around a public bike path that wound through Donigian Park. The bike path ran parallel to the Woonasquatucket river and there were several berms (low hills) that were the result of construction work.

Police developed a plan to flatten the berms and open up the area to create better visibility and to deny areas for people to engage the services of prostitutes. Removing the berms would also cut down on other ancillary crimes in the area such as public drinking, drug use, illegal dumping and greatly cut down

the potential for robberies to occur. Police partnered with The Woonasquatucket Watershed Council (WWC), the Department of Environmental Management (DEM), the city parks department and the real estate developer whose land it was. The berms were eventually flattened by the parks department in conjunction with DEM.

The responses considered were directly driven by feedback from the community. The surveys, meetings and Knock and Talks conducted by ONB were the driving factor in the approach taken. The residents of Olneyville communicated that their lives were being impacted by street level prostitution, therefore that became the team focus.

The response to the problem predominantly involved the officers from the Providence Police Department (PPD) and PWR. ONB was involved but this response was part of a larger program to reduce crime in Olneyville. Eventually WWC, DEM and City Parks were also involved.

The decision to use utilize the response was driven mostly by community feedback. Olneyville is an impoverished and mostly minority community. Olneyville is an area that due to call volume and high crime has had a robust and aggressive police presence over the years. This has lead to tension at times with the residents of the neighborhood.

Also due to staffing constraints it was important that whatever was implemented with a small number of officers. Officers involved in this response were also conducted community outreach in conjunction with ONB's larger project. There was a conscious effort to soften the police image. This played into the fact that rather than just rounding up and arresting prostitutes, police were observed talking to them in a non-punitive manner. The whole time, working with PWR the focus was on trying to help the prostitutes, get them linked up with services and out of the life.

Additionally, the small footprint, working with PWR was cost effective. It was an inherently legal approach to the problem, all the more so as it was not arrest focused. The stakeholders felt that it mirrored community values as it focused on the problem but also did not utilize the traditional police response. It also didn't overwhelm a community that regularly saw a lot of police presence. This was aided by the project being renamed CaPA, The Community and Police Alliance.

The project had resources available through ONB, PWR and the PPD. Additionally overtime patrols were paid for through a grant from the DOJ. Officers involved in the patrolling were provided vehicles to use, data analysis and other bureaus cooperated in providing feedback as to the success of the project.

The single biggest difficulty encountered during response implementation was the stubbornness and resistance of the prostitutes themselves. 99% of the prostitutes dealt with were hardcore drug addicts. One of them had relapsed after years of being clean and off of the streets. No matter what they can be offered, threatened with or cajoled by nothing will have the hold on them that their addictions will. One prostitute was not an addict and did it to provide for her family and her day to day survival. Some were openly hostile toward the police and others were assaulted for talking to police. But at the end of the day the biggest impediment to the success of the project was their drug addiction.

Assessment:

The response goals were achieved. The action team noticed a drop in the number of prostitutes in the area within a few months of implementing the response. This was across all three shifts. A year into the

project it was possible to see only a single prostitute in a single four-hour tour and sometimes none. Police then conducted several business checks and found out from business owners that there was a marked decrease in the number of prostitutes in the area.

The impact was a perceived or real reduction in the number of prostitutes operating in an area was described as a destination for prostitution. Prostitutes were less visible during all three shifts that officers were working. Follow up surveys, business checks and knock and talks indicated that there were less prostitutes operating in an area was referred to as “a destination for prostitution”.

The results were measured by all of the above-mentioned surveys, business checks, knock and talks, and anecdotal evidence from Police and residents. Unfortunately, there is not a great deal of statistical data to measure this problem. The arrest data was flawed in that most prostitution arrests were done by undercover detectives doing prostitution sweeps. If Patrol officers were making arrests they were for crimes other than prostitution.

The results were measured for a few months after the project was implemented. The evaluations were conducted by the action team and ONB. If there were problems that affected the project outcome they had to do with the difficulty fighting an activity that is driven by hardcore drug addiction.

The response might have been more effective if more patrols had been utilized or if the project could have run longer. It might have been more effective if a second team of officers and outreach workers could have been utilized to double the amount of time and increase exposure. Also, if Probation and Parole could have been incorporated into the project that might have also had some impact.

There was evidence of displacement. Officers from other districts observed prostitutes from the Olneyville area in their districts. Additionally, PWR stated that they observed prostitutes from Olneyville working in other neighborhoods. Interestingly, while crime was not necessarily lower because of the response or the diffusion from it, residents reported that they felt safer or that the neighborhood had improved.

The response will require continued monitoring and continued effort. Street level prostitution is addiction driven, without a constant effort to address it and the underlying factors it will always exist. For the response to be maximally effective it would require constant implementation and support.

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Appendix:

Data was derived from the Final Evaluation of the Byrne Criminal Justice Innovations Grant Program: City of Providence, RI Prepared by: Sean P. Varano, Ph.D. Stephanie P. Manzi, Ph.D. Roger Williams University School of Justice Systems.

Table 1

	2012	2013	2012-2013 Difference
Aggravated Assault	589	609	3.3%
Robbery	408	426	4.2%
Weapon	309	343	9.9%
Burglary	1976	1893	-4.4%

Table 2

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2013- 2016 Comparison	2010/2013 Avg - Comparison
Agg. Assault									
Citywide w Olneyville	647	649	589	609	490	588	580		
<i>% Change</i>		0%	-9%	3%	-20%	20%	-1%	-5%	-7%
Citywide, No Olneyville	605	598	550	544	451	546	539		
<i>% Change</i>		-1%	-8%	-1%	-17%	21%	-1%	-1%	-6%
Olneyville	42	51	39	65	39	42	41		
<i>% Change</i>		21%	-24%	67%	-40%	8%	-2%	-37%	-17%
Robbery									
Citywide w Olneyville	455	480	408	426	309	308	344		
<i>% Change</i>		5%	-15%	4%	-27%	0%	12%	-19%	-22%
Citywide, No Olneyville	430	439	364	391	284	278	328		
<i>% Change</i>		2%	-17%	7%	-27%	-2%	18%	-16%	-19%
Olneyville	25	41	44	35	25	30	16		
<i>% Change</i>		64%	7%	-20%	-29%	20%	-47%	-54%	-56%

Weapon		334	309	343	267	284	391		
Citywide w Olneyville	312								
% Change		7%	-7%	11%	-22%	6%	38%	14%	20%
Citywide, No Olneyville	301	309	298	322	248	274	366		
% Change		3%	-4%	8%	-23%	10%	34%	14%	19%
Olneyville	11	25	11	21	19	10	25		
% Change		127%	-56%	91%	-10%	-47%	150%	19%	47%
Burglary		2521	1976	1893	1724	1364	1250		
Citywide w Olneyville	2081								
% Change		21%	-22%	-4%	-9%	-21%	-8%	-34%	-41%
Citywide, No Olneyville	1973	2390	1889	1802	1647	1292	1165		
% Change		21%	-21%	-5%	-9%	-22%	-10%	-35%	-42%
Olneyville	108	131	87	91	77	72	85		
% Change		21%	-34%	5%	-15%	-6%	18%	-7%	-18%



Ground Zero for Prostitution Atwells Ave. and Valley St. There is a Shell Station on Atwells Ave. opposite from the Mobil.



The Mobil station was relatively free of crime because it was where PPD fueled its cars until 2017.



The View outbound on Atwell Ave. to the immediate right is the Shell station. If this picture was taken four years ago there would be prostitutes in it.



Cutler St. and Atwells Ave. this corner and the stoop in particular were a mecca for prostitutes.



The bike path bridge leading from Greco Ct. to Donigian park, then Cutler St. and Valley St.

The underside of the bridge where Prostitutes and “dates” would go.



Area by bike path and river.





WWC in action.

Before and after CPTED





Before and After CPTED.



A Powerful Care Partner



HOW YOU CAN HELP

We've shared with you why Project Weber/RENEW is different. We've shared our powerful impact helping people who live outside the mainstream, change their lives for good.

We haven't shared that being different and innovative presents unique fund-raising challenges. A core group of pioneering companies, foundations and individuals are supporting our current work. We still need to do more. We need YOU!

If you believe in just ONE of the tenets of our manifesto, you believe in our mission.

WE
BELIEVE
THAT EVERYONE HAS
THE RIGHT
TO A SAFE PLACE,
FREE
FROM JUDGEMENT,
AND THAT WE ALL
HAVE THE POWER TO
CHANGE
WEBER*RENEW