

Chicago Police and Community Reclaim a Neighborhood Park



**Chicago Police Department
Application for the 1997 Herman Goldstein Award**

Abstract

"Gang activity, drug dealing, shooting, prostitution ~ you name it, it was all coming from here." So said a frustrated Chicago resident. He was talking about Gill Park on Chicago's north side, which had experienced these problems for years. Parents had stopped letting their children play there. The physical layout of the park practically invited criminal activity. There were several hidden areas, and an empty, shallow concrete pool that invited loitering.

Anyone familiar with this picture of Gill Park would be astonished at Gill Park today. There is new lighting. The trees have been trimmed. There are beautiful flowers. A foot patrol officer walks the park during strategic hours. The secluded areas and concrete pool where so much criminal activity took place have been replaced by a baseball diamond. Parents and children have returned to the park, displacing the criminals who had controlled it for years.

These dramatic changes show what can happen when the community, the police, and other city agencies form a partnership to tackle community problems, using a systematic problem-solving process. Partnership and problem-solving are the core of Chicago's Alternative Policing Strategy (CAPS). The application which follows describes how these two elements of CAPS worked in the Gill Park transformation.

A. Scanning:

1. What was the nature of the problem?

The nature of the problem was entrenched gang-related activity at a neighborhood park (Gill Park) and the immediately surrounding community. This activity, which included drive-by shootings, drug dealing, and prostitution, had persisted in the area for generations.

2. How was the problem identified?

The problem was selected from a number of problems through a democratic process of brainstorming and voting. Factors considered in the selection were the number of people affected by the problem, the impact on those affected, and the prospects for solving the problem within a reasonable amount of time.

3. Who identified the problem?

Residents of the affected beat, working cooperatively with Chicago Police Department beat and neighborhood relations officers, identified the problem. Their forum for doing so was the beat community meeting, a cornerstone of Chicago's Alternative Policing Strategy: community residents and police on each of Chicago's 279 beats come together on a regular basis (often monthly) to identify and resolve neighborhood crime and disorder problems. Attendance at the Gill Park beat meetings typically ranged from 17 to 45 residents.

4. Far more problems are identified than can be explored adequately. How and why was this problem selected from among problems?

Residents were impressed by the chronicity of the problem, the level of danger it posed, and its pervasive impact on many segments of the community — children, families, the elderly, and merchants. Potential users of the park were unable to use it because of the high level of criminal activity. The park was not only a source of criminal activity, but also represented a valuable community resource going to waste.

5. What was the initial level of diagnosis/unit of analysis (e.g. crime type, neighborhood, specific premise, specific offender group, etc.)?

The initial unit of analysis was location — the park itself ~ because so much of the criminal activity occurring there could be related directly to its physical characteristics.

B. Analysis:

1. What methods, data and information sources were used to analyze the problem?

The community and the police analyzed the problem using the "crime triangle", whose sides include offender, victim, and location. They considered the personal testimony of victims and other affected parties, observations by beat officers, calls for service, crime statistics, and conversations with gang members themselves.

2. How often and for how long was it a problem?

The problem literally extended across generations, as parents who had been gangbangers in their youth passed on the ritual of gang membership to their children. Drug-dealing and prostitution were daily occurrences; drive-by shootings, while less frequent, were a chronic problem.

3. Who was involved in the problem (offenders, victims, others) and what were their respective motivations, gains, and losses?

Gangbangers and prostitutes were the principal offenders. The major benefit they received from Gill Park was access to secluded areas which concealed and facilitated their criminal activities.

The victims included children, families, the elderly, all of whom were effectively barred from using a valuable community resource. As a case in point, some 260 children lived in a high rise adjoining the park. Instead of being able to use a play area which was just outside their door, they were forced to use a more distant, and less convenient, facility. A private school within viewing distance of the park faced the irony of having no place to conduct outdoor team activities.

Property owners and merchants were also victims. Buildings near the park were devalued by the criminal presence there. Merchants in the vicinity believed their businesses were

adversely impacted by their proximity to the park. The Gill Park area was not a place to linger and shop if one had other options.

4. What harms resulted from the problem?

In addition to the harms mentioned in B.3, the problem generated a feeling of powerlessness in the community: here was a problem nobody could solve; a problem whose duration was measured in generations, not years; a problem with a major, adverse impact on quality of life.

5. How was the problem being addressed before the problem-solving project? What were the results of those responses?

The problem was addressed reactively, with police responding to an incident after it was reported to them. Arrests were frequently made, but were unsuccessful in reducing the amount or severity of crime in Gill Park. Cases were often dismissed in court because no witness would come forward. Evidence was hard to recover from the park because of the many hiding places the park afforded.

6. What did the analysis reveal about the causes and underlying conditions that precipitated the problem?

Analysis revealed that much of the problem could be attributed to the location, specifically, to the physical characteristics of the park. The layout of the park practically invited criminal activity. There were several hidden areas, overgrown trees and bushes, and an empty, shallow concrete pool. Lighting was poor. Evidence was easy to dispose of. If someone was standing in the pool, his hands were not visible to police patrolling from the street.

7. What did the analysis reveal about the nature and extent of the problem?

Analysis revealed that the problem impacted many segments of the community; that it was long-standing; that it was dependent on specific features of the location where it thrived; that it was not solvable by traditional police intervention, i.e. rapid response to a specific incident, followed by an arrest.

8. What situational information was needed to better understand the problem?

The manner in which the location contributed to the problem (B.6 above) was the most critical situational information. It was also important to know the time of day at which the problem occurred; whether park staff were taking measures to combat it; and if so, whether these measures were effective, and could serve as building blocks for further measures. The problem was discovered to be most frequent in the afternoon and late evening. Park staff were not taking measures to address the problem, because they, too, were intimidated by the gang presence in the park.

9. Was there an open discussion with the community about the problem?

Yes. The community had identified the problem as a priority issue at their beat community meeting (A.3 above), and played a critical role in every phase of its analysis and resolution. Community discussion is what made the entire project come together. Door-to-door flyers, and press releases, were used to announce community meetings about Gill Park.

C. Response:

1. What possible response alternatives were considered to deal with the problem?

The alternatives considered were:

- closing down the park.
- implementing a controlled access system, which would require an ID for entry into the park.
- stationing police in the park on a 24-hour-per-day basis.
- modifying the physical characteristics of the park, to make it less hospitable to criminal activity and more hospitable to legitimate use.

2. What responses did you use to address the problem?

Modifying the physical characteristics of the park was the principal response. City crews trimmed the trees and installed more lighting, giving criminals fewer places to hide. Residents secured approval from the Chicago Park District to renovate the park and

eliminate the concrete pool and other troublesome back areas. A neighborhood architect donated plans for the park's renovation whose central feature was a baseball diamond.

The Chicago Cubs ~ whose Wrigley Field is in the same community as Gill Park -- contributed \$20,000 for the new sports field, and their generosity prompted contributions from other businesses and organizations toward the renovation.

The Chicago Police Department instituted foot patrols in the park, and aggressively ' ' enforced curfew and loitering laws.

3. How did you develop a response as a result of your analysis?

The analysis clearly implicated the physical characteristics of the park in the problem, and the response directly followed from the analysis.

4. What evaluation criteria were most important to the department before implementation of the response alternative(s) (e.g. legality, community values, potential effectiveness, cost, practicality, etc.)?

While legality was a threshold issue — i.e. any response to the problem would have to be legal — the choice of response was based on potential effectiveness and on the opportunity to create an affirmative benefit for the community: a more attractive, better-maintained park with enhanced recreational opportunities.

5. What did you intend to accomplish with your response plan?

We intended to reduce the incidence of gang-related crime and disorder in Gill Park, and to increase the use of the park by legitimate users. Gang-related crime would be measured by calls for service and incident reports. Use of the park would be determined by observation.

6. What resources were available to help solve the problem?

- A neighborhood architect donated plans for the park's renovation.
- The Chicago Cubs and local businesses contributed funds for the renovation.
- The Chicago Park District trimmed trees and installed new lighting in the park.

- A nearby school adopted the park, and its students undertook a major flower-planting project.
- Residents of the high-rise adjoining the park specifically agreed to keep watch on the park from their apartments, and to report any suspicious activity to the police.

7. What was done before you implemented your response plan?

The plan was presented to community organizations and the community at large for final review and comment. A civilian liaison for fundraising coordinated the solicitation of funds from local businesses.

8. What difficulties were encountered during response implementation?

It was necessary to overcome the defeatist thinking which caused some residents to believe that closing the park was the only solution. This thinking was understandable, insofar as all previous efforts to curb the problem had failed. But while closing the park might have eliminated the problem, it would not have allowed the community to reclaim a valuable resource.

9. Who was involved in the response to the problem?

- **Chicago Police Department:** Facilitated beat community meetings where the problem was identified, analyzed, and the response formulated. Instituted foot patrols in Gill Park, aggressively enforced curfew and loitering ordinances.
- **Neighborhood Architect:** Donated plans for renovation of the park.
- **Chicago Park District:** installed new lighting in the park, trimmed trees and bushes to reduce opportunity for criminal activities. Undertook physical renovation of the park once funding had been secured.
- **Community fund-raising liaison:** Coordinated the fund-raising effort among local businesses. This individual was a community resident; Chicago Police Department members are barred from soliciting funds.
- **Chicago Cubs:** Donated \$20,000 to build a new sports field in Gill Park.
- **Local businesses:** Made financial contributions to the renovation.
- **Students of a nearby school:** Adopted park, which led to its students undertaking a major flower-planting project there.

- **Residents of high rise adjoining park:** Used their vantage point to keep watch over the park and report suspicious incidents.

D. Assessment:

1. What were the results? What degree of impact did the response plan have on this problem?

The cycle of gang activity was reduced drastically, as gangbangers moved out of the park. Use by law-abiding individuals and families increased. A soccer league and a teen club established themselves at the park. In the warm weather months (April-September), when street crime is at its highest, reported offenses on the Gill Park beat dropped from 928 to 802 between 1995 and 1996, a decrease of 14 percent. The response plan thus had a substantial impact on the problem.

2. What were your methods of evaluation and for how long was the effectiveness of the problem-solving effort evaluated?

The methods of evaluation included before-and-after comparisons of police statistics (calls for service, incident reports) and park use. Monitoring of police statistics and park use remain in effect to this day.

3. Who was involved in the evaluation?

The police and community residents who play a leadership role in beat or district affairs were involved in the evaluation.

4. Were there problems in implementing the response plan?

Aside from the morale issues noted in C.8 among some residents, there were no problems in implementing the response plan.

5. If there were no improvements in the problem, were other systemic efforts considered to handle the problem?

Not applicable.

6. What response goals were accomplished?

As noted in D.1, gang activity was virtually eliminated from the park and environs, and legitimate use of the park increased.

7. How did you measure your results?

As noted in D.2, before-and-after comparisons were made with respect to police statistics and use of the park.

8. How could you have made the response more effective?

The response could have been more effective with more media coverage. Although notices of meetings were routinely sent to the media, no one took on the responsibility of keeping the media informed of the actual work in the park.

9. Was there a concern about displacement?

There was a concern about displacement, and some displacement has occurred. However, the gangbangers' new site is a small apartment building which does not afford the same opportunity for criminal activity as the park did. Police have followed the gangbangers' migration, and they are closely monitoring the building. The amount of gang-related activity there is considerably less than it was in the park. The beat on which the building is located has an active beat club, and citizens may well respond to the problem as they did in Gill Park.

10. Will your response require continued monitoring or a continuing effort to maintain your results?

Gill Park remains of great interest to the community, and continues to be monitored for that reason. The changes there have been so profound, however, that a recurrence of the problem is not anticipated. If, despite expectations, the problem does recur, there will be an opportunity to respond to it earlier. This is because of the foot patrol that was instituted in the park, and the new vigilance of park employees.

3. AGENCY AND OFFICER INFORMATION

1. At what level of the police organization was this problem-solving initiative adopted?

The initiative was spearheaded by a neighborhood relations officer from the affected district, then passed on to beat officers on the beat where Gill Park is located. Chicago's community policing strategy generally calls for the identification and resolution of neighborhood problems at the neighborhood (i.e. beat) level, where the problems are most familiar, and the solutions are likely to be the most effective.

2. Did officers or management receive any training in problem-oriented policing and/or problem-solving before the project began or during its execution?

Yes. Chicago's alternative policing strategy is (CAPS) a philosophy of policing that impacts the way all members of the Department do their job. Training is critical for ensuring that everyone understands — and is able to fulfill — his or her role in the strategy.

To date, all officers in the Patrol Division — some 9,000 officers, including beat and neighborhood relations personnel -- have received extensive training (both classroom and roll-call) in police-community partnerships and a systematic approach to solving problems. In addition, members of the community surrounding Gill Park received problem-solving training as provided by an independent, not-for-profit agency which served as the Department's training partner.

3. Were additional incentives given to police officers who engaged in problem-solving?

No formal incentives were given, insofar as problem-solving is now a routine expectation for Chicago police officers. However, officers and community members involved with Gill Park were featured on the Department's cable TV program and in other media.

4. What resources and guidelines were used by police officers to help them manage this problem-solving initiative?

Working with the community, police officers followed the five-step problem-solving process that was part of their training. The steps are:

- Identify problems and select a priority problem.
- Analyze the problem selected using the "crime triangle", whose sides include offender, victim, and location. Answer the questions of who, what, where, when, and why for each side of the triangle.
- Design strategies, ideally addressing at least two sides of the crime triangle.
- Implement strategies.
- Evaluate results and take further measures as appropriate.

5. What issues/problems were identified with the problem-oriented policing model or the problem-solving model?

Under the CAPS model, the partnership between police and community is intended to generate new roles and responsibilities for each group. Evaluation studies have shown, however, that police and community continue to hold traditional expectations for each other. The police expect the citizens to report crime, and citizens expect the police to prevent and solve crime ~ the "you call, we haul" model.

The Gill Park experience shows what can happen when each group acts "out of the box." The partnership then gains in strength and effectiveness. It is now a training priority to get each group to think more broadly about the other's responsibilities under CAPS.

6. What general resource commitments were made to this project, and of those resources, what went beyond the existing department budget?

The district commander freed up time for the neighborhood relations officer to attend numerous meetings about Gill Park.

7. Project Contact Person:

Charles E. Ramsey, Deputy Superintendent
 Bureau of Staff Services
 Chicago Police Department
 1121 South State Street, Room 105
 Chicago, IL 60605
 Phone: (312) 747 - 6203; Fax (312) 747 -1642
 E-mail: rdcpdchi@ais.net