

# THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIPS

## REVITALIZING NEIGHBORHOODS THROUGH COMMUNITY POLICING HOUSES

RACINE POLICE DEPARTMENT, WISCONSIN

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- THE PROBLEM:** Neighborhoods troubled by crime and disorder suffered as enforcement alone proved ineffective.
- ANALYSIS:** A survey conducted by the University of Wisconsin–Parkside found that residents were dissatisfied with their neighborhood because of crime, litter, and rundown properties; 76 percent of the residents questioned the police department’s ability to control crime in the neighborhood.
- RESPONSE:** Joint police-community partnerships developed a variety of problem-solving approaches that involved cracking down both on gang and drug activity and on landlords who violated the building codes. The police department also developed a unique partnership with local business leaders to purchase houses located near the center of criminal activity and renovate them for use as community-policing offices.
- ASSESSMENT:** Statistics show that in two neighborhoods where community-policing houses were established, crime diminished and business owners and residents reinvested in the communities. Other areas of Racine are successfully replicating these two initial models.

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### SCANNING

The West 6th Street neighborhood in Racine, Wisconsin, is an older, residential area encompassing approximately 32 square blocks in the heart of the city. The area has little commercial activity and consists almost completely of wood-frame, single- and multifamily residences on standard city lots.

Residents of Racine considered the West 6th Street neighborhood the worst in town. Crime wasn’t the only problem. Rundown and boarded-up homes, abandoned cars,

litter, and debris plagued this deteriorating, low- to moderate-income area. Through both surveys and meetings, neighborhood residents revealed the community’s sense of frustration with these conditions and with government agencies’ lack of commitment to address them.

Crime statistics showed that, although the area is not geographically large, the incidence of violent and property crime was out of proportion to its population. The West

6th Street area represented 3 percent of the city's population, but accounted for 21 percent of the city's violent crime. Open drug dealing and gang activity fueled both violent and property crime, and area residents frequently were the victims. A number of large, unruly crowd incidents turned into confrontations with the police. Rock throwing, property damage, and injuries to citizens and officers were common during these disturbances.

Absentee landlords, who cared little about their tenant's quality of life or the condition of their properties, owned a substantial portion of the area's rental property. Building and health code violations were common. A 37-unit apartment complex in the middle of the neighborhood became a haven for drug dealers and addicts. Property values were declining. People were selling their homes and moving. Nonowners occupied 71 percent of the homes in the area.

The police department arrested dealers and raided drug houses, but once the arrests were made and the police left, the drug dealers returned. The police department's failure to effectively deal with the neighborhood eroded residents' trust in and cooperation with police officers. Arrests alone were no match for the West 6th Street area's wide variety of problems.

## ANALYZING THE PROBLEM

In 1992, Chief Richard Polzin chose to implement community policing and to analyze and resolve the myriad issues facing the West 6th Street area. To develop lines of communication between the police department and the community, the police department initiated meetings with residents. At first, only a few people attended. During the early meetings, residents recounted instances of indifference by government officials; it was apparent that they felt government services were beyond their reach—no government representative had ever taken a leadership role in addressing the neighborhood's problems.

## University of Wisconsin– Parkside Study

At the request of the police department, the University of Wisconsin–Parkside conducted a baseline study of residents' attitudes, perceptions, and concerns. Although approxi-

the police were respectful, helpful, and fair in their dealings with them, 76 percent expressed concern about the police department's ability to control crime. The study revealed that residents were very dissatisfied with their neighborhood because of the crime, litter, and rundown properties.

## RESPONSE

The West 6th Street Community Policing Project's goals were to organize neighborhood residents, maximize its own resources and those of other city and county agencies, reduce violent and property crime, improve residents' quality of life, and promote neighborhood reinvestment. The problem-solving strategy consisted of:

- n Developing a joint police-community problem-solving action group, made up of community-policing officers and neighborhood residents, to organize other area residents and direct community policing and other neighborhood improvement efforts.
- n Developing working partnerships with other city and county agencies to maximize resources and address specific crime and quality-of-life issues. In the past, there had been very little cooperation between different agencies of city government and no followup on citizen complaints.
- n Gathering intelligence on area drug dealers and gang members; establishing a highly visible police presence in the neighborhood by assigning officers to foot patrol, bike patrol, and mounted patrol; and targeting the primary neighborhood crime problems of gang activity and drug dealing through a focused

## Replicating Efforts at Mead Street

A year after efforts began in the West 6th Street neighborhood, the police department introduced community policing to Racine's Mead Street area. This area suffered from problems similar to those that plagued West 6th Street. The community is similar to West 6th Street in size, population density, housing stock, and economic standing. It had more business activity than the West 6th Street area, but the neighborhood was composed mostly of single- and multifamily residences.

The department followed the West 6th Street area model, using the same tools to evaluate the area and a similar problem-solving approach. The police and community partnered together in the 2nd District Coalition, an organization that became a powerful influence in neighborhood affairs.

The police chose to build a house for community-policing efforts on a vacant city lot directly across the street from a park that was at the heart of the community's problems. Gangs had taken over the park, and drug deals were conducted out in the open. Residents regularly dove for cover from gunfire between rival gang members.

A three-bedroom ranch house cost approximately \$55,000. Chief Polzin made fundraising presentations at every possible community function and to private foundations. In the end, the Racine Community Foundation provided \$35,000; the department obtained the remaining funds from a variety of other sources. The Outpost again managed the funds.

In early 1996, the new community-policing house became a reality. The Mead Street house, like West 6th Street, became a combined police station, neighborhood gathering center, and outreach location for many of the same agencies that used the West 6th Street office.

### Mead Street Assessment

The following patterns are emerging in the Mead Street area:

- n Violent crime (homicides, sexual assaults, robbery, and aggravated assaults) fell 53 percent from 1991 to 1998.
- n Property crime (burglary, theft, auto theft, and arson) fell 48 percent from 1991 to 1998.
- n Part 2 offenses (crimes not listed above) decreased 4.5 percent from 1991 to 1998.
- n Calls-for-service dropped 15 percent from 1991 to 1998.

Neighborhood pride is becoming more evident as housing improvements are made. Reinvestment already has begun, as owners have reopened and renovated previously boarded-up buildings. The park is now the site of Boy Scout campouts and other child-related activities, rather than a gathering place for gangs and drug dealers. The Mead Street community-policing house will some day be sold to a low-to-moderate income family, and the proceeds used to build another community-policing house elsewhere.

assault on these activities. To demonstrate the police department's commitment to solving the neighborhood's problems, captains and lieutenants began walking a beat twice a month in the targeted area.

- n Targeting landlords and homeowners who refused to comply with health and building codes, organizing area residents to clean up public open areas, assisting residents in accessing government services, and developing strategies to promote neighborhood reinvestment.

### A Community Mobilizes

The department opened the first community-policing office in the West 6th Street neighborhood in 1993. Although the police department did not have the resources to lease an office, a neighborhood landlord with an empty apartment provided the unit rent-free. Officers and citizens donated furniture and other items. Chief Polzin sought officers who were interested in community policing to volunteer for the full-time assignment of operating the office. That officer became an advocate for the neighborhood and set about orchestrating the delivery of government services to address crime and other quality-of-life issues.

Area residents began to attend meetings and, reluctantly at first, began to volunteer. The partnership evolved into the West 6th Street Association, which has become a cohesive voice for change in the neighborhood and the strongest neighborhood advocacy organization in the city.

This joint effort has attracted both the interest of the business

community and the attention of the media. S.C. Johnson & Son, a major Racine-based corporation, provided a \$28,500 grant to help community policing in the West 6th Street neighborhood and a similar initiative in the 18th and Mead Street neighborhood. In the West 6th Street neighborhood, the funds were used to renovate and establish the community-policing office and purchase furniture and office supplies.

## Operation Crackdown

Armed with information from neighborhood residents and surveillance activities, officers identified and targeted drug dealers and gang members. A joint effort of the Racine Police Department and the Wisconsin Department of Justice Narcotics Enforcement Division, known as Operation Crackdown, became the largest focused assault on drug activity in Wisconsin history. At its conclusion, 92 felony arrests were made and the principal West 6th Street drug dealers were sent to prison. The effort broke the backs of the drug rings and gangs that had plagued the neighborhood.

## First Community Policing House

One Halloween, James Dickert, a local realtor, donated \$500 to the police department so it could purchase Halloween candy to pass out to area children. But city regulations required the department to appear before three different committees and to solicit bids before it could purchase the candy. Dickert became discouraged when he realized the length of time and amount of resources involved before the police department could put his donation to use. He approached Chief Polzin about his frustration. When Chief Polzin discussed with him the department's community-policing efforts, Dickert offered to help. He organized a group of community business leaders to form a nonprofit organization known as the Racine Community Outpost that would provide direct financial assistance to the department for its community-policing efforts.

During the course of Operation Crackdown, the owner of the house next door to the neighborhood's primary drug house put the house up for sale. Working with Chief Polzin, Dickert and the Racine Community Outpost began raising money for the police department to purchase the house and renovate it for police use. Another community group, the Racine Community Foundation, provided an \$8,000 grant; S.C. Johnson & Son donated another \$25,000. The department also received grants from the State of Wisconsin.

When city attorneys balked at the unprecedented idea of a police department owning a house, the Racine Community Outpost stepped in, bought the house, and leased it back to the police department. The city attorneys accepted this plan. The city forgave the back taxes due on the house, and the community-policing officers moved in next door to the area's major drug dealers. This strategy had the desired effect: members of the drug-dealing family who were not arrested and sentenced to prison soon moved out of the neighborhood.

## Cleaning Up the Neighborhood

Following the first year of increased police presence in the neighborhood, the violent crime rate dropped 60 percent. Once the major crime problems had diminished, the police and the community began to focus on the homes in various states of disrepair, the unkempt yards, abandoned cars, and accumulation of junk. This effort required city agencies to cooperate. Officers organized a neighborhood cleanup, during which officers and residents walked the public areas and vacant lots cleaning up garbage and debris. The Department of Public Works provided dump trucks and drivers to haul trash away. With the rest of the neighborhood cleaning up, residents with collections of junk felt pressure to clean up their yards. Abandoned and junk cars were removed from neighborhood streets and private property. This effort encouraged neighbors to meet and converse with one

another, furthering a sense of community in the neighborhood. In an area where police were once greeted with rocks and bottles, officers could now be found sitting on porches talking to people during foot patrol.

### Combating Exterior Building Code and Health Violations

Many absentee landlords who owned property in the area responded to police and resident requests to repair their properties and bring them up to code. But others either ignored the requests or refused to comply. City officials cited and fined those who refused. This action brought more landlords into compliance, but others still held out.

Finally, the department compiled a list of the 25 worst properties in the neighborhood, presented it to the Public Safety and Buildings Committee, and encouraged the city to respond to building code violations. The minutes of the committee are public record and the local newspaper printed the list of properties with the owners' names. The list stirred controversy among landlords, who said that the police were targeting them unfairly and that they were not in violation of building codes. As a result, the mayor dispatched building and health inspectors and said that if they did not find violations, the police would be required to apologize publicly to the landlords.

When the inspectors returned, they told the mayor there were no violations. The police responded by recording violations in the neighborhood on videotape. When this information was presented to a meeting of the mayor and building and health inspectors, police learned that the inspectors had conducted their inspections by driving down each neighborhood block at 35 miles per hour because they were afraid to leave their cars. As a result, inspectors teamed up with community-policing officers to conduct inspections and issue citations. As the number of citations increased and the fines mounted, some of the landlords gave up and sold their properties.

### Encouraging Neighborhood Reinvestment

Another project goal was to encourage neighborhood reinvestment and home ownership. The police department and the Racine Community Outpost wanted to accelerate this process. After the Outpost refurbished the former drug house next to the community-policing house, the organization sold the house to a low-income homeowner who agreed to occupy the residence. Since then, the Outpost has purchased several more houses, refurbished them, and sold them to low-income families who also agreed to occupy the houses. The Outpost uses the money earned from the sale of each house to purchase a new house to refurbish.

Additional properties put up for sale by the troublesome landlords are being purchased by organizations that cooperate with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and various city and State programs to offer low-cost loans and promote home ownership in the neighborhood. The sale and renovation of the properties have led to visible improvements in the condition of neighborhood housing stock.

One major problem remained. Though the police had driven the drug dealers and addicts from the 37-unit apartment complex in the heart of the neighborhood, the building remained a rundown eyesore. After a local newspaper ran a story about the once-elegant building, several developers inquired about renovating it. Chief Polzin reassured developers that community policing was a long-term effort in the West 6th Street area. Developers purchased and renovated the apartment complex at a cost of nearly \$2 million. Today, there is a waiting list for apartments in the building.

### Empowering Residents

The West 6th Street Association's focus turned to improving residents' accessibility to government services. The police depart-

ment offered space in its community-policing house to a number of social service agencies. The response was enthusiastic. Among the organizations that used the facilities at the West 6th Street community-policing house were:

- n Children and Family Resources, a child health and social services program that became so widely relied upon it eventually moved into its own house two doors away.
- n Racine County Human Services Department.
- n Racine Health Department.
- n Lutheran Social Services.
- n Probation and Parole Division of the Wisconsin Department of Corrections. Probation and parole officers used the house to meet with clients during the day, before afterschool programs began.
- n Reading tutoring services for children and adults during afterschool and evening hours.

The service organizations encouraged neighborhood residents to drop in, and the house eventually became an unofficial community center, helping to further solidify the neighborhood.

Once area residents and the police department are satisfied with the progress and stability of the area, neighborhood reinvestment plans include selling the West 6th Street community-policing house to a low-income owner-occupant. Proceeds from the sale will be used to establish another community-policing house in another area of the city.

## ASSESSMENT

How well did community policing work as a catalyst for change in the West 6th Street community?

- n Violent crime (homicides, sexual assaults, robbery, and aggravated

## Successes Build More Support

The number of requests for a community policing presence in other city neighborhoods has exceeded available resources. Chief Polzin approached the Racine City Council, requesting that a surcharge be added to city ordinance fines to help pay for community policing activities. The city granted the request and also gave the police department part of an \$810,000 settlement paid by a local company to use for Weed and Seed efforts.

### Geneva Street Area

The police department selected the Geneva Street area, on Racine's north side, for its third community-policing house. For many years, the only new structure that had been built in this neighborhood had been a prison. With a combination of funding sources, the effort proceeded much the same way the Mead Street project did. A local community group adopted the project, providing all the labor to landscape the yard. The Geneva Street community-policing house opened its doors in 1998, providing a variety of services to area residents. Crime rates are down after the first full year of operation, and other neighborhood improvement efforts are progressing.

Stapp Builders, the company that built the Geneva Street house, decided that the successes associated with the Racine Police Department's approach to community policing deserved support. Stapp representatives championed the community-policing effort at a meeting of Racine and Kenosha, Wisconsin, builders. To date, that group has donated more than \$100,000 in labor and materials toward building more community-policing houses.

assaults) fell 70 percent from 1991 to 1998.

- n Property crime (burglary, theft, auto theft, and arson) fell 59 percent from 1991 to 1998.
- n Part 2 offenses (crimes not listed above) fell 32 percent from 1991 to 1998.
- n Calls-for-service dropped 35 percent from 1991 to 1998.

In the same time period in the city as a whole, violent crime dropped 28 percent, property crime dropped 28 percent, and calls-for-service dropped 19 percent.

The number of owner-occupied homes in the West 6th Street area has increased. Additional reinvestment in the neighbor-

hood, similar to the \$2-million apartment house renovation, has occurred. The physical appearance of many neighborhood properties has improved.

### Follow-Up Study

The United Way conducted a survey in 1996 and asked 250 West 6th Street residents to name the leaders in their neighborhood and the organizations that had been most helpful to themselves or to their families. Many respondents listed police officers as valued leaders (second only to Family Resource and Health Department home visitors). The community-policing house and the Racine Police Department, combined, were listed as the leading resource organization in the neighborhood.

The police department has established three additional community-policing houses in

the Racine neighborhoods of Mead Street, Geneva Street, and 10th Street, the latter of which opened its doors on December 1, 1999. (See “Replicating Efforts at Mead Street” and “Successes Build More Support.”) Racine’s experiences show that over time, continued attention will be needed to sustain positive results in these once-struggling communities. The residents of these communities are unwilling to lose what they have fought so hard to gain.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information about the Racine Police Department’s problem-solving efforts, contact Chief Richard Polzin, Chief of Police, Safety Building—730 Center Street, Racine, WI 53403; phone: 414-635-7704; fax: 414-636-9332.