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ASSESSMENT OF NEIGHBORHOOD SAFETY INITIATIVE IN MEMPHIS



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INTRODUCTION

One of many factors to increase community safety is citizen involvement. Within Memphis and Shelby County, many citizens have stepped up to help improve their neighborhoods and to assist with local issues. The Memphis Shelby Crime Commission (Crime Commission) recognized the potential crime prevention power of organized groups of citizens in the current Safe Community Action Plan. The plan aims to establish and maintain a “Neighborhood Safety Initiative” (NSI) to help address specific blighted properties perceived to be tied to criminal behavior by building and strengthening partnerships among neighborhood groups, law enforcement, and other city/county government agencies. Neighborhood watch groups (NWGs), for example, align themselves with their police precincts to help report unusual, and possibly criminal, activity. Police precincts also help educate neighborhood residents on how they can improve safety, not only in their communities, but also in their homes.

Another example of strengthening these partnerships with citizens is through monthly meetings of Police Joint Agencies (PJAs). Leaders of NWGs and other citizens get the chance to address specific concerns in their neighborhoods with numerous city and county agencies such as law enforcement, city/county code officials, and health officials. At the suggestion of the Memphis Police Department (MPD), the NSI effort has focused so far on the Austin Peay and Tillman MPD precincts. The objective of this assessment is to determine whether NSI is meeting the objectives outlined in the Safe Community Action Plan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Neighborhood Watch Group (NWG) Movement

Neighborhood watches developed out of an effort in the United States to increase citizen involvement in preventing crime (Titus, 1984). Through the growth of NWGs, various terms were used to describe these groups such as block watch, apartment watch, home watch, citizen alert, and community watch. The primary approach that these groups take to reduce crime is for residents to report any suspicious activities to

their police department in hopes of deterring future criminal activity (Bennett, 1990). One of the earliest evaluations of neighborhood watch groups within the United States was of the Seattle Washington Community Crime Prevention Project which started in 1973 (Cirel et al. 1997). This evaluation showed a greater reduction in burglaries in neighborhoods which had NWGs compared to those without. Since the early 1980s, there has been a continuous push for NWG expansion across the United States. According to *The 2000 National Crime Prevention Survey* by the National Crime Prevention Council in 2001, an estimated 41% of the American population resides in communities that have some form of an NWG. According to the report, “This makes neighborhood watch the largest single organized crime-prevention activity in the nation” (39).

Vacant/Abandoned Properties and Blight

Unoccupied and blighted properties in a neighborhood can lead to higher possibilities of unsafe environmental conditions. Approximately 15% of the land in United States cities has been deemed vacant or abandoned; this is roughly the same size of Switzerland. Over 11,500 square miles of useable areas remain neglected (Bowman & Pagano, 2010). Low-income neighborhoods are common areas of vacant and blighted properties and point to these properties as hazards to both health and safety (Garvin et al, 2013). Targeting these properties, especially in an urban setting, has shown to have effects on economics and crime (Wachter S, Wong G, 2008; Kondo M, South E, Branas C, 2015). Other studies have shown mixed results (Bogar S, Beyer K, 2016). For example, low-lying trees and other dense areas of vegetation have been associated with higher fear of crime. These areas limit visibility and can potentially hide possible criminals and other illegal activity (Gobster & Westphal, 2004). Urban context matters in regard to human behavior. Some studies have found that blighted properties, such as broken-down housing and high littered areas, can lead to higher violence and crime (Keizer, Lindenberg, & Steg, 2008; Harcourt & Ludwig, 2006). Branas and others (2018) found that residents near maintained vacant lots not only reported significantly reduced perceptions of crime and safety concerns but also had significant reductions in crime overall, including gun crimes, burglaries, and nuisances.

METHODS

During the time period covered by this assessment, a representative from the University of Memphis' Public Safety Institute (PSI) attended monthly NSI meetings to evaluate the meetings and ascertain the issues discussed. The NSI meetings are comprised of representatives of various public agencies ranging from law enforcement to code enforcement and the leaders of each of the four PJAs within the Austin Peay and Tillman precincts, which include Frayser PJA, Highland Heights PJA, Raleigh PJA, and the University of Memphis Area PJA. Steve Shular, assistant to the mayor of Memphis, chairs the NSI meetings. Attendance at the NSI meetings allowed the PSI to examine how city and county agencies handled issues brought to their attention by citizens.

The comprehensive data for the analysis of this assessment were primarily attained from the monthly NSI meetings. These meetings were the focal point where key stakeholders were able to share information and concerns with local government leaders. The data collection from these meetings also included the attendance of the PJA/government leaders. Additionally, the assessment drew from in-depth interviews in which the PJA leaders offered their perspectives and feelings towards the subject.

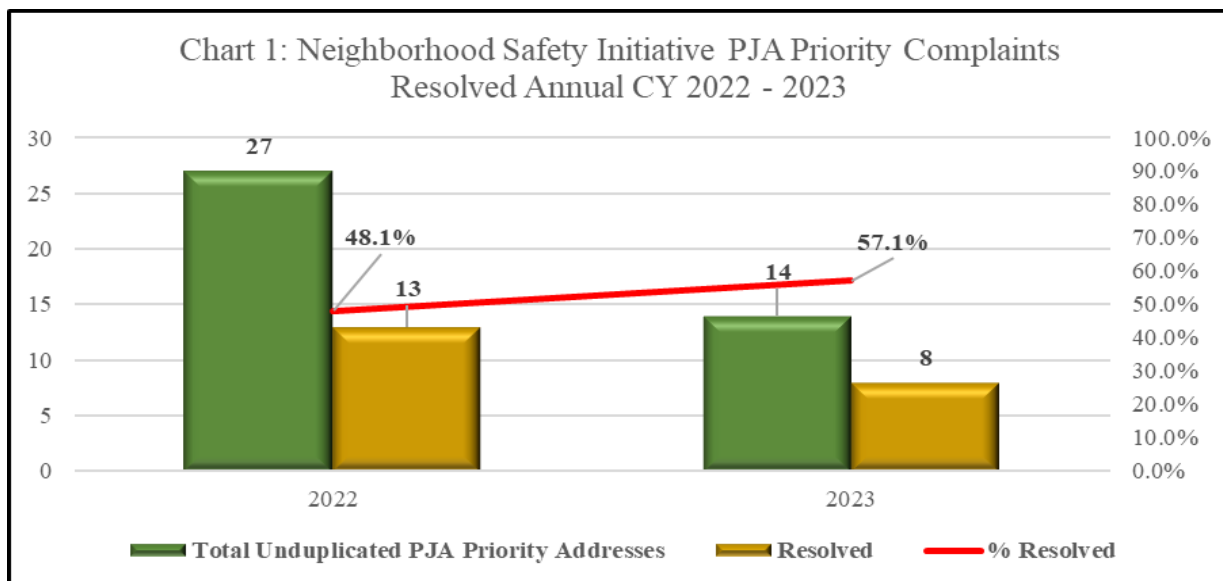
ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

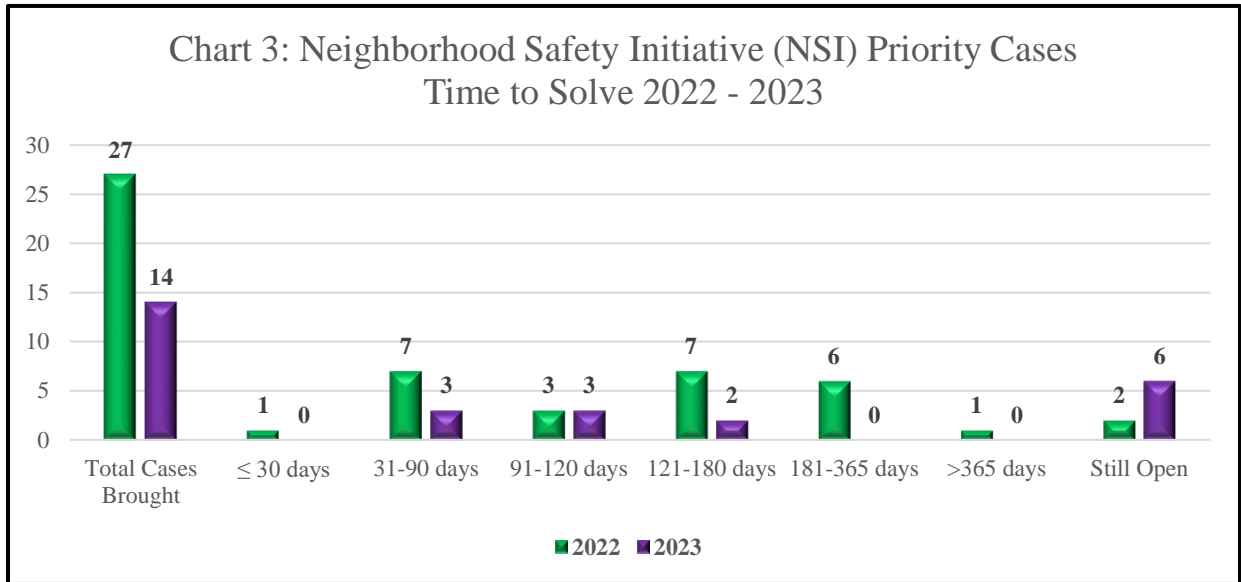
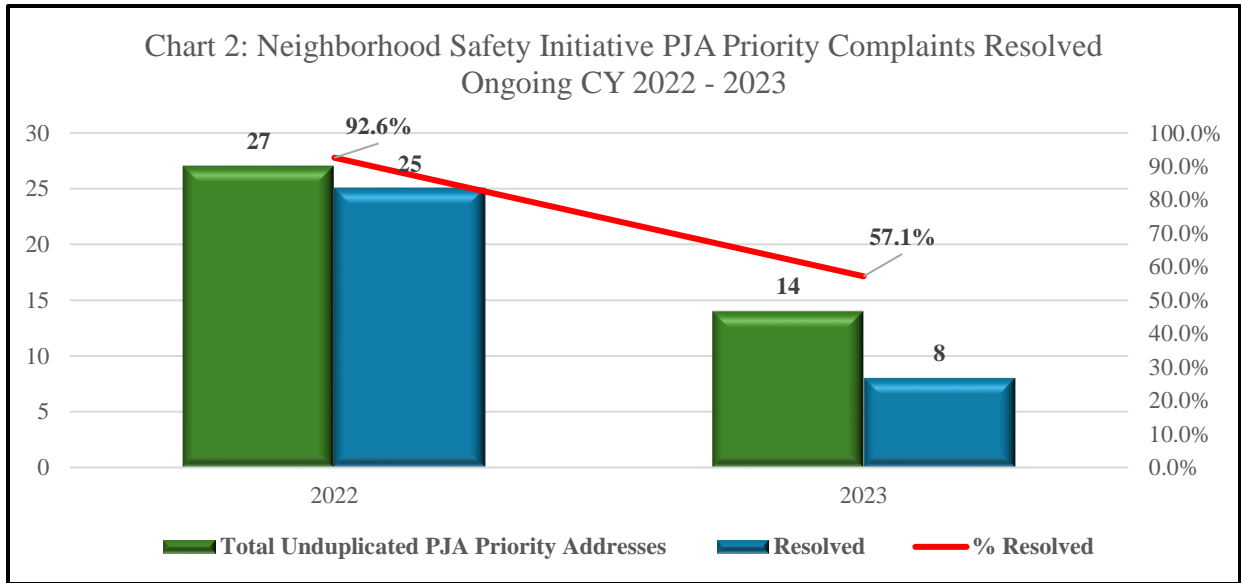
Desired Safe Community Plan NSI Outcome: On an annualized basis, at least 90% of complaints brought to the NSI as priorities will be resolved to the satisfaction of the PJA leadership.

For each monthly NSI working group meeting, the PJA leaders are asked to identify priority complaints from their geographic areas. Starting in 2022, there was a key shift in the NSI meetings to introduce a more targeted and comprehensive approach to addressing priority complaints. Previously, the PJA leaders could highlight any properties that were dealing with either crime or blight issues. Beginning in 2022, priority properties had to be based on a perceived link between both crime and blight issues. This modification was implemented to have a more integrated strategy and make sure that the NSI leadership and community partners are focusing on the worst of the worst properties.

Chart 1 shows the resolution status of priority complaints within the year they were brought before the NSI. The chart represents the number of concerns that were successfully addressed and deemed resolved by the ending of their respective years. Cases involving blight or crime are reported by PJA leaders and are listed as “resolved” once they meet the respective PJA leadership’s satisfaction. For the 27 priority cases that were brought before the NSI meetings in 2022, 48.1% (13) were deemed resolved by the end of the year. In 2023, only 14 properties were brought up, and eight of them were resolved by the end of 2023. Chart 2, however, shows those same cases as ongoing past the year in which these properties were designated priorities. By the end of 2023, 25 or 92.6% of those priority cases brought in 2022 have been deemed resolved while 57.1% of those priority cases brought in 2023 had been resolved (with more cases likely to be resolved in 2024).

For those NSI priority complaints deemed resolved, Chart 3 shows the amount of time it took for resolution. At the end of 2023, 8 (19.51%, of the total) of the priorities brought to the NSI monthly meetings during 2022 and 2023 (two from 2022 and six from 2023). remained unresolved. As for the six unresolved priority cases in 2023, some of these priorities were brought during the latter months of 2023 and may not have had an appropriate amount of time to be resolved. For all the resolved cases brought up in 2022, they were resolved, on average, within 149.24 days. For those priority resolved properties brought up in 2023, they were resolved within 78.75 days. However, this is only for those properties that have been deemed resolved.





Desired Safe Community Plan NSI Outcome: Resolved properties will result in a reduction in crime in the hotspots.

Table 1 provides a detailed analysis of reported crime within a half-mile radius of priority properties (deemed hotspots) with relation to their resolution date. Specifically, the table captures the number of crimes reported to the MPD in the 90-

day period both before and after they were deemed resolved. This timeframe aims to offer a short-term impact of the effects of resolving priority properties connected to crime and blight. This data aims at allowing stakeholders to see not only patterns and trends, but the potential for improving the immediate area around hotspot properties.

The data that is presented in Tabel 1 demonstrates that there is at least some immediate impact of community intervention. Ninety days prior to these properties being resolved, there was an average of 143.45 crimes being reported within a half-mile radius. However, after being deemed resolved by the respective PJA leaders, this average dropped to 127.09 reported crimes, marking a considerable average decrease of -16.36 reported crimes.

Among the completed priority complaints another notable observation that emerges is that despite seeing an average decrease in reported crimes, only 12 of 22 properties saw a decrease. Interestingly, the majority of these properties were brought to the NSI meetings in 2022, suggesting a possible stronger correlation between issue resolution and crime reduction during that time.

Table 1: Reported Crimes 90-days Prior & After Resolution Within a Half Mile Radius

Hot Spot	Date of Notification	Date of Resolution	Days till Resolution	Reported Crimes 90 Days Prior to Resolution Within A Half Mile Radius	Reported Crimes 90 Days After Resolution Within A Half Mile Radius	Change
3100 Faxon Ave	August 5, 2020	January 5, 2022	518	213	157	-56
2855 Old Austin Peay	February 2, 2022	October 5, 2022	245	133	138	5
960 Sumter St	April 6, 2022	August 3, 2022	119	125	90	-35
916 Wingfield Rd	April 6, 2022	August 3, 2022	119	104	81	-23
400 South Highland	June 1, 2022	April 5, 2023	308	183	98	-85
3910 Hawkins Mill	August 3, 2022	September 6, 2023	399	89	56	-33
4290 Zelda	August 3, 2022	January 4, 2023	154	131	135	4
3580 Marion	September 7, 2022	December 7, 2022	91	199	134	-65
4593 Range Line	October 5, 2022	April 5, 2023	182	9	9	0
3252 Austin Peay	November 2, 2022	April 5, 2023	154	71	47	-24
3693 Dunn	December 7, 2022	April 5, 2023	119	108	45	-63
3794 Marion	December 7, 2022	May 5, 2023	149	121	117	-4
3666 Kearney	December 7, 2022	July 5, 2023	210	277	285	8
2632 Frayser Blvd	December 7, 2022	April 5, 2023	119	184	150	-34
2693 Socorro Cove	January 4, 2023	April 5, 2023	91	35	43	8
3480 Vernon	March 1, 2023	April 5, 2023	35	152	153	1
400 South Highland	May 3, 2023	June 7, 2023	35	227	288	61
2875 Old Austin Peay	May 3, 2023	August 2, 2023	91	106	89	-17
822 South Highland	May 3, 2023	September 6, 2023	126	257	259	2
414 Reese	May 3, 2023	September 6, 2023	126	232	249	17
2595 Twinmeadows Cove	June 7, 2023	September 6, 2023	91	144	85	-59
4100 Hitchcock	August 2, 2023	September 6, 2023	35	56	88	32
Average	-	-	160	143.45	127.09	-16.36

Desired Safe Community Plan NSI Outcome: Ensure that community partners regularly attend the monthly NSI meetings.

The NSI meetings experienced great participation from most governmental agencies, with consistent attendance observed in the majority of meetings as shown in Table 2. It should be noted that in 2022 there were only eleven meetings. This high level of engagement displays a level of commitment to the efforts of this group. One agency, the District Attorney’s Office, attended the majority of the meetings in 2022 but only appeared to one meeting in 2023.

An interesting pattern appeared regarding the attendance of the PJA leadership within different neighborhoods. Notably, the leadership of the Frayser PJA continued their strong commitment to the meetings while attending almost every meeting for the past two years. However, a conflicting trend was shown with the leadership of the Raleigh and Highland Heights PJA leadership. While attending 33.33% and 41.67% respectively, neither PJA had representaiton at any of the NSI meetings in 2023.

Organization	2022	2023
City Attorney's Office	83.33%	90.91%
City Code Enforcement	66.67%	100.00%
City of Memphis Mayor's Neighborhood Program	100.00%	100.00%
County Code Enfrocement	100.00%	90.91%
District Attorney's Office	83.33%	9.09%
Memphis Shelby Crime Commission	100.00%	100.00%
MPD	91.67%	100.00%
Public Works	83.33%	100.00%
Shelby County Sheriff's Office	91.67%	100.00%
PJA Leaders		
Frayser	91.67%	100.00%
Raleigh	33.33%	0.00%
Highland Heights	41.67%	0.00%
UoM	25.00%	27.27%

Police Joint Agency Leaders Interviews

An additional layer of data was gathered through a series of interviews with several of the PJA leaders. These interviews were aimed to serve as a valuable way to gather the perspectives, opinions, and feedback of the directly involved stakeholders within the NSI process. Through this engagement PJA leaders were given the opportunity to talk about their experiences, challenges, and successes with the current and former format of the NSI meetings. By adding a more qualitative component to this assessment, it aims to create a more holistic evaluation of the entire process, ensuring that the missions of the NSI monthly meetings are thoroughly explored.

One of the recurring themes that emerged was that the leaders consistently highlighted the fact that these meetings have not only positive momentum moving forward, but there are tangible benefits for being a part of the process. PJA leaders discussed that these meetings created a platform that would open communication directly with community partners which makes it easier to push efforts to improve community safety. This positive feedback supports that the NSI framework is not only beneficial, but also pushes for a continuation of collaboration with the communities and agencies involved.

One area of concern that was voiced by the PJA leaders was the perceived limitations in the support that is being received from the court's side of these issues. According to their feedback, there is a feeling from the community that the judicial system is not fully aligned with the cause and mission of the NSI platform. PJA leaders expressed frustration over what they see as a hindrance to resolving cases in a timely manner. As pointed out by the leaders, the court often grants many continuances during these cases which not only drag out the disposition but make it difficult for the PJA leaders to keep up with the current standing of the cases. Another shared concern was that the court, at times, appears to come off as lenient towards repeat offenders. In other words, there are little to no consequences for property owners who allow their properties to fall back into a blighted and crime position after meeting the requirements set forth by the court.

Another area of notable concern was focused on the heightened criteria for listing a property as a priority within the new framework. They pointed out that mandating that properties have to exhibit both a blight and crime issue has created new hardships for identifying properties, often feeling that they're allowing a property with

only one of the two issues to sink into further trouble before being able to bring it up during the meetings.

Furthermore, the PJA leaders voiced dissatisfaction for the perceived lack of accountability for government agencies during the monthly meetings. In particular, they highlighted the concerns about representatives from these agencies not meeting the expectations that have been set in place. PJA leaders mentioned that having consistent engagement from these agencies is crucial to the NSI initiative.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on analyses of all available data as described above, as well as observing the process used at PJA meetings, the PSI provides the following conclusions:

- 1) PJA leadership emphasized the benefits that come from being an active participant in the NSI process. Despite the issues that they raised, they expressed that being a part of the NSI framework brings about significant advantages to their communities. PJA leaders acknowledged that the process as a whole has become an important tool for addressing community concerns as a group, bridging the gap between community members and government agencies.
- 2) The assessment reveals a promising short-term impact on crime reduction within a half-mile radius following the resolution of priority properties through the NSI process. On average there were 16.36 fewer crimes being reported within that half mile radius of those properties after they were corrected. While the long-term sustainability of these effects would require an additional analysis, the short-term reduction does help push the potential of the NSI process as a whole. However, only 12 of the properties saw a decrease of reported crime after being resolved.
- 3) The shift in focus to properties exhibiting both crime and blight within the NSI framework does introduce some issues, in particular slowing down the resolution timeline. However, this is unsurprising knowing that these properties are facing multifaceted issues. The acknowledgement of a slightly slowed

down process aligns with the challenge of addressing properties with dual concerns.

- 4) There are mixed results when examining the agency participation with the monthly NSI meetings. While some community agencies have demonstrated consistency by being present in most, if not all, meetings, others have shown signs of little involvement, and some have gone completely absent. There should be a push for the importance of having better consistency and accountability for these agencies, encouraging them to be active and present at the meetings to help push the NSI mission and show the community their willingness to help.

The PSI has developed the following four recommendations:

- 1) Better Support for PJA Leadership. To enhance the NSI process and the effectiveness of the PJAs, there is an opportunity for the NSI leadership to provide additional support. Actionable items would include offering assistance during leadership transitions to ensure that the new leadership of the PJA (or their representative at the meetings) has a good foothold with how the NSI framework is set up. Additionally, NSI could offer PJA leaders with updated lists of appropriate contacts within the community agencies, hopefully streamlining some of the issues the PJA leaders run into by getting them to the appropriate person instead of waiting for the next meeting.
- 2) Agency Accountability. Public agencies are not required to have representatives attend PJA meetings or to be prepared if in attendance. Often some agencies which do have representatives present are not prepared to discuss matters on the agendas even though agendas have been provided beforehand to help insure preparation. *Some sense of accountability should be implemented in order to ensure that agency representatives are both present and prepared.* There should be a section added to the survey of citizens participating in the NSI meetings asking them if they felt the agency representatives were prepared for the meetings. In addition, there needs to be a commitment by various agencies to fast track priority complaints brought to the NSI working group. There needs to be a sense of urgency in addressing these priority complaints.

- 3) Community Partnerships. More community agencies and organizations should participate in NSI meetings, especially NWG leaders. Inviting more community leaders, such as business owners, could help bring in resources to solve some of the community issues. Some examples of agencies who should be brought into these meetings would include the Health Department, Memphis Gas, Lighting, and Water (MLGW), and Solid Waste.
- 4) Better Tracking of Priority Properties. Another recommendation for improving the NSI process would be the implementation of better tracking tools for these priority properties. Some of these tools could be programs such as digital dashboards that allow real-time updates on property status and interventions undertaken. Another helpful tool could be using geographic information systems (GIS) in order to help identify any other factors that may be making these priority areas have higher crime or blight issues. Clearer tracking would provide PJA leaders with more up-to-date and detailed information about the progress of these priority properties. Items such as the specific actions taken by the appropriate public agencies and a clear understanding of the properties' status within the court process would be helpful. This recommendation aims to increase transparency, accountability, and help contribute to a more efficient process.
- 5) The Expansion of the NSI Process. An important recommendation from this assessment is the necessity to expand the NSI process beyond the PJAs in the Austin Peay and Tillman Precincts to encompass other parts of Memphis. While the current framework has shown some valuable insights and positive outcomes, it could foster a better approach to community safety with more PJAs.

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