

Needle-Moving Community Collaboratives

Case Study: Memphis

Collaborating to accelerate social impact

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In 2005, Memphis ranked number two of the country's metropolitan areas for violent crime, including homicides, rape, aggravated assault and robbery. Officials in the city of Memphis and Shelby County decided that something had to be done to reverse the tide.

That “something” wasn't obvious. Memphis lacked the kind of renewal forces, such as nearby suburban affluence and gentrification by young professionals that had helped lift other cities. To find a solution, public- and private-sector leaders came together to create Operation Safe Community (OSC), a 15-point research-based, crime-reduction plan. The initiative was led by then-District Attorney Bill Gibbons, and sought to combine the efforts of local law enforcement and other community sectors in a comprehensive plan. The initial response was heartening—and so have been most of its results.

More than 50 leaders worked on OSC's implementation and strategies ranging from toughening gun laws to juvenile offender re-entry programs. And as the five-year plan comes to a close, Memphis has achieved dramatic declines in major violent crime and property crime. For example, comparing the first seven months of 2011 with those of 2006, major violent crime fell by 27 percent. Major property crime tumbled 32 percent during the same period. And, in early 2011, the Memphis murder rate dropped to its lowest point in 30 years.

Amid these successes, however, youth violence continues to be a special concern. In 2009, more than 54 percent (1,462) of those arrested for committing a violent crime were 24 years or younger with some offenders as young as nine years old. As a result, the collaborative's work is evolving. It has developed a new comprehensive Youth Violence Prevention Plan that will serve as the foundation for Operation Safe Community Phase 2, Memphis's new five-year plan.

Fast Facts:

- **Community:** Memphis, TN
- **Problem:** Worst violent crime rates in country
- **Results:** 27% reduction in violent crime in the five years from 2006 to 2011
- **Differentiating Feature:** Operation Safe Community's three-tiered structure, which consists of dedicated collaborative staff, a high profile board of directors and 15 distinct strategy teams, fosters long-term involvement from a broad group of stakeholders.
- **Leaders / Lead Organization:** Shelby County Mayor, District Attorney, Memphis Shelby Crime Commission
- **Philanthropic Support:** Memphis Tomorrow, a group of local business leaders, leverages relationships with the private sector to raise funds.

Five key things have made the Operation Safe Community collaborative successful:

Clear plan rooted in strategy: *shared vision and agenda*

Operation Safe Community has always been crystal clear about its vision. From the start, it has aimed to “make Memphis and Shelby County one of the safest communities of its size in the nation by the end of 2011.” That aspiration was backed up by a 53-page strategic plan, called Operation Safe Community Strategic Agenda, which specified the initiative’s goals, baseline data on crime levels, and 15 detailed plans of attack. Each of the strategies lists lead partners, key success measures, specific action plans and the rationale behind the particular approach.

County-wide engagement: *community members as partners and producers of impact*

The broader community contributed to the vision in a variety of ways. During the planning stages, more than 800 attendees participated in town hall meetings, focus groups, work sessions and a final full-day Crime Summit. In addition, the Memphis Shelby County Youth Congress solicited feedback from 100 youths through postings on the Youth Congress Electronic Forum.

Three-tiered structure: *dedicated capacity and appropriate structure*

Operation Safe Community has a three-tiered structure that includes dedicated collaborative staff, a high profile board of directors and 70-plus stakeholders, who volunteer on 15 distinct strategy teams. The Memphis Shelby Crime Commission (MSCC) has a lean three-person team dedicated to the Operation Safe Community collaborative, comprised of an executive director, a marketing and community relations manager and an administrative assistant.

Operation Safe Community was started by high-profile county leaders, including then-Shelby County Mayor A. C. Wharton, Gibbons, Sheriff Mark Luttrell, Memphis Police Director Larry Godwin, U.S. Attorney David Kustoff, top business leaders from a group called Memphis Tomorrow and the University of Memphis Center for Community Criminology Research. Though the leadership has changed somewhat over the years, MSCC’s 50-person board of directors remains a “who’s who” of Memphis from both private and public sectors.

The real people power behind the OSC strategies, though, is the 70-plus stakeholders who volunteer their time. OSC engaged 20 “strategy leaders” (who are also board members) to head up the effort’s 15 initiatives. For example, the anti-gang initiative includes members representing the U.S. Attorney’s Office, the Juvenile Court of Memphis and Shelby County, JustCare

for Kids, law enforcement, education, school security, employment agencies and other social service agencies. There's even a criminology professor on the board. And they get down to work. "We make sure decision-makers are in the meeting from each organization. If a backup is sent, they need to have the power to make decisions," says Michelle Fowlkes, the executive director of MSCC.

Research-based strategies: *deliberate alignment toward what works*

Operation Safe Community utilizes 15 research-based strategies as a roadmap for achieving its aggressive goals. The strategies evolved out of a partnership with the University of Memphis' Center for Community Criminology and Research. Each strategy grew from careful research and is rooted in a proven approach. For example, the recommendation to toughen state laws for gun crime is modeled after reforms in Florida and New York. Similarly, the initiative's work to expand data-driven police deployment in Shelby County is based on recent research by the National Academy of Sciences' National Research Council.

Accountable to data: *use of data to set agenda and improve over time*

Operation Safe Community's tracking and use of data is exemplary. Memphis not only collects information on different types of major violent and property crime at a granular level but it publicly reports on progress against baseline levels on a monthly and annual basis. Results are posted on the OSC website in the form of straightforward scorecards. This level of transparency reinforces the collaborative's sense of accountability. The sophisticated measurement approach grew out of a partnership between the Memphis Shelby Crime Commission and the University of Memphis Center for Community Criminology and Research. Through this alliance, the Crime Commission is able to provide the citizens of Memphis and Shelby County with timely crime trend analysis.

Up-to-date information on crime is also actively used to continually shape OSC partner interventions. A key strategy was to adopt a data-driven approach to policing, an initiative called Blue CRUSH™. Through it, the Memphis Police Department (MPD) monitors hot spots and then deploys police officers accordingly. Michelle Fowlkes, the executive director of MSCC, explains that "data allows MPD to focus resources on the most critical areas." Data is even pushed out to community members through CyberWatch, a daily email reporting crimes, sex offenders and outstanding arrest warrants tailored to an individual's location. OSC uses these crime trends and statistics to measure the effectiveness of the MSCC's five-year crime reduction plan. And, through ongoing updates, the collaborative can systematically compare current crime statistics with those of 2006 as a benchmark for success.

SOURCES

- Conley, Chris. "Memphis leads U.S. in violent crime." *The Commercial Appeal*. September 2007.
- Operation Safe Community. *Memphis Youth Violence Prevention Plan*. Consilience Group, LLC. April 2011.