

**Criminal Justice Coordinating Council**



# **CJCC Spring Public Meeting**



## **COMBATING NEIGHBORHOOD BLIGHT – AN ALTERNATIVE PUBLIC SAFETY STRATEGY**

Join us for a WebEx panel discussion on the relationship between neighborhood blight and violent crime. Learn how community reinvestment and “greening” activities can be used as alternative public safety strategies.

**May 9, 2023, 6-8pm  
WebEx**

## Background

On May 9, 2023, the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC) convened a virtual public meeting to discuss the connection between blight and crime. Abandoned, blighted and degraded properties often function as fertile environments for the commission of criminal behavior, i.e., drug distribution, gun violence, etc. The ensuing loss of safety in neighborhoods contributes to reduced tax revenues, depressed real estate values, community apathy, and general despair across different demographics, including residents, businesses, and consumers. Research has shown that efforts to curb blight result in reduced criminal activities, and several cities have implemented this approach in targeted neighborhoods.

The virtual meeting discussion covered how blight and abandoned properties are represented in neighborhoods, and how greening and artistic efforts can revitalize communities. The meeting touched on the importance of collaboration among community members, business improvement districts (BIDS), District agencies, i.e., Department of Public Works (DPW), Department of Buildings (DOB), Metropolitan Police Department (MPD), and non-profit organizations to promote the wellbeing and safety of residents.

Kristy Love, Executive Director of the CJCC, welcomed the attendees and introduced the moderator, Dr. Calvin Johnson, Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office of Research, Evaluation, and Monitoring at the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development.

## Panel Introduction

Dr. Johnson introduced the following panel members: Ian Callendar of Suite Nation; John MacDonald, Professor of Criminology and Sociology, University of Pennsylvania; and Melvyn Smith from the District Department of Public Works (DPW), Safety and Security Administration.

## Panel Discussion

Dr. Johnson asked the panelists to address theoretical and practical issues related to blight affecting crime, and particularly asked the panelists to discuss strategies to promote community engagement in enhancing community aesthetics, for the purpose of reducing crime and promoting public safety.

## Theories and Research

Dr. MacDonald noted that abandoned and blighted properties result in social withdrawal by community members, which is accompanied by individual and collective fear, culminating in reduced neighborliness. He mentioned experiments conducted in Chicago, Milwaukee, New Orleans, and Youngstown, Ohio, where lighting and greening efforts were undertaken in gun violence-ridden communities. The research showed that communities with active greening strategies experienced greater social cohesion and reduced violence, whereas in communities where blight and abandoned properties flourished, criminal activity and gun violence continued. Further, Dr. MacDonald noted that enforcement of code infractions improved overall community welfare and security.

## Community Revitalization

Mr. Callender highlighted community investment strategies throughout the District, in areas such as Buzzard Point, Navy Yard, H Street, NE, and Florida Avenue, and 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets, NW, that resulted in cultural revitalization. He considers it crucial to invest in areas primed for development and was personally involved in several projects in the District. Two such properties included Randall School, a previously dilapidated school in Southwest DC, which was transformed into a museum and apartment complex, and First Baptist Church which became a revitalized community fixture and hub of social activity.

Additionally, corporate partnerships helped beautify the community on Delaware Avenue, SW, where a project called Blue Rhino provided cash payments to residents for the purpose of beautifying the eternal façade of their homes. Mr. Callender emphasized that advisory neighborhood commissioners (ANC) are critical to getting community buy-in.

## Community Collaboration

The panelists emphasized interagency and cross-community collaborative efforts as a crucial part of transforming the physical landscape of communities, in addition to modifying the attitudes of community members. Dr. MacDonald pointed out that a boarded up or defaced building on an otherwise nice street invites loitering, trespassing, squatting, and criminal activity. To counter this, Mr. Callender stressed that community members must demonstrate that they value their neighborhood and will not tolerate blight. He suggested hiring local artists to paint murals over boarded doors, in addition to community clean-up efforts, including planting trees, cutting back overgrown bushes etc.

## Impact of Blight and Crime

Mr. Smith underscored that addressing blight and crime involves a cultural component. He lamented that community pride does not exist in some Wards. For example, some communities buy into the notion that living amidst blight and physical eyesores is a community legacy and there is no need to change. Further, sometimes ceremonial symbols (such as a pyramid of empty liquor bottles) are erected to recognize someone lost to violence. Those who construct the monuments in turn resent any efforts by others to remove the debris, necessitating a nuanced and negotiated settlement.

Some residents continue to live in communities where apartment buildings are riddled with bullet holes that remind them of the trauma they have suffered or witnessed. Consequently, many suffer with undiagnosed trauma and depression in blighted areas, leading to a circular effect of continued trauma.

## Cross-Agency Community Intervention

Many District agencies provide important services to maintain a safe and healthy urban environment.

DPW participates with other District agencies, i.e., Department of Buildings (DOB), District Department of Transportation, (DDOT), the Fire Department, MPD, and the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice to support targeted task force initiatives, including the Multi-Agency Task Force that sets up towing activities on Friday and Saturday nights in the H street, U Street, and Connecticut Avenue corridors.

Other agency efforts include a Thursday Georgia Avenue corridor cleanup activity in Petworth. Mr. Smith was asked what is the turnaround time for an agency response to a citizen complaint of abandoned cars and illegal garbage disposal. He said the agency strives to track and resolve reported issues within 24-48 hours.

Further, DPW enforces code violations by ticketing and towing abandoned vehicles and bolsters pro-social involvement by employing returning citizens.

## Remediation, Abatement, and Intervention Strategies

The panelists emphasized that remediation, abatement, and beautification efforts need not be expensive. Dr. MacDonald commented that it is cheaper to green a vacant lot than to continue to suffer the costs of crime.

There are over 4,000 abandoned and blighted properties across the District. In some instances, the owners are absentee private individuals. The current steps taken by the District government to address this issue are primarily financial: abandoned property owners are fined at a 5% rate, and blighted properties are taxed at 10%. However, there are potential homestead tax benefits to assist individual property owners who owe fines and can't pay them.

Mr. Callender suggested that some requirements, such as "clean hands" provisions requiring small business owners to satisfy all fines with the District government before they can execute business activities, while aimed at promoting good citizenship and preventing absentee ownership, may discourage entrepreneurship.

Dr. Johnson commented that his agency, HUD, administers Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds to support evidence-based gun violence reduction initiatives in public housing. He commented that 15 cities around the country are targeted to receive funding to eradicate violence using best practice intervention strategies. When asked whether the District is a targeted community, he offered that the city would be welcome to participate in the program.

## Risk Terrain Modeling

David Marimon, a Policy & Research Analyst with CJCC's Statistical Analysis Center, provided an overview of how Risk Terrain Modeling (RTM) can be used to reduce criminal activity. RTM is a predictive tool that looks at spatial relationships between certain place types and crime and makes a prediction based on past data as to where crime is most likely to occur. This makes RTM a valuable tool in determining where crime is most likely to happen and addressing any blight concerns in that area. RTM also can determine the areas and location types for outreach, patrol, community engagement, or civil and criminal enforcement.

2018-2023 Risk Terrain Modeling: District-Wide Risk Factors for Shootings						
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
2018	<b>Gas Stations</b> Density Increased Risk: 10.37 Times	<b>DCHA Public Housing</b> Proximity Increased Risk: 4.7 Times	<b>Liquor Stores</b> Density Increased Risk: 4.4 Times	<b>Retail Wine and Beer</b> Density Increased Risk: 4.1 Times	<b>Blighted Properties</b> Proximity Increased Risk: 2.8 Times	<b>Vacant Properties</b> Proximity Increased Risk: 2.7 Times
	<b>DCHA Public Housing</b> Proximity Increased Risk: 9.3 Times	<b>Liquor Stores</b> Density Increased Risk: 6.7 Times	<b>Retail Wine and Beer</b> Density Increased Risk: 3.3 Times	<b>Vacant Properties</b> Proximity Increased Risk: 2.4 Times	<b>DCHA Residential and Private Owner</b> Density Increased Risk: 2.4 Times	<b>WMATA Bus Stops</b> Proximity Increased Risk: 2 Times
2020	<b>DCHA Public Housing</b> Density Increased Risk: 7.2 Times	<b>Vacant Properties</b> Proximity Increased Risk: 4.8 Times	<b>Liquor Stores</b> Density Increased Risk: 4.6 Times	<b>HUD Housings</b> Proximity Increased Risk: 3.1 Times	<b>DCHA Residential and Private Owner</b> Density Increased Risk: 1.6 Times	<b>Blighted Properties</b> Proximity Increased Risk: 1.4 Times
	<b>DCHA Public Housing</b> Density Increased Risk: 6.5 Times	<b>HUD Housing</b> Proximity Increased Risk: 4.3 Times	<b>Carryout's</b> Proximity Increased Risk: 4.6 Times	<b>Vacant Properties</b> Proximity Increased Risk: 3.1 Times	<b>Liquor Stores</b> Density Increased Risk: 2 Times	<b>Gas Stations</b> Proximity Increased Risk: 1.4 Times
2022	<b>*Illegal Dumping Locations (311)</b> Proximity Increased Risk: 6.6 Times	<b>DCHA Public Housing</b> Density Increased Risk: 4.2 Times	<b>*Abandoned Cars (311)</b> Density Increased Risk: 2.9 Times	<b>Gas Stations</b> Proximity Increased Risk: 2.9 Times	<b>Stores Accepting WIC</b> Proximity Increased Risk: 2.8 Times	<b>Carryout's</b> Proximity Increased Risk: 2.1 Times
	<b>Carryout's</b> Proximity Increased Risk: 4.6 Times	<b>*Abandoned Cars (311)</b> Density Increased Risk: 3.5 Times	<b>*Illegal Dumping Locations (311)</b> Proximity Increased Risk: 2.9 Times	<b>HUD Housing</b> Proximity Increased Risk: 2.1 Times	<b>Fast Food</b> Density Increased Risk: 2	<b>*Affordable Housing (DMPED, DHCD, DCHFA &amp; DCHA)</b> Proximity Increased Risk: 1.8 Times
2023 (Jan-June)						

By using RTM to determine what areas need to be addressed, a local government can quickly identify which agencies need to be involved and what resources are needed to achieve the desired clean-up and crime abatement results. For example, the graphic above revealed that during the period of January-June 2023, the risk of shootings increased by 3.5 times where there was a high density of abandoned cars, and the risk factor for shootings increased by 2.9 times when considering proximity to illegal dumping locations. The data cited assists agencies such as DOT and DPW to prioritize and allocate resources to specific areas. Urban planners can similarly identify areas that could benefit from investment in the built environment, additional foot traffic, improved lines of sight or efforts to rehabilitate, remediate, or repurpose spaces in the highest risk areas.

## Conclusion

Executive Director Kristy Love thanked everyone for attending the public meeting and participating in an expansive conversation. She acknowledged the valuable insights offered by the panelists, and commented that interagency efforts are occurring to address the issues discussed.

