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Restoring Rundberg: A Community-Research Partnership

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Introduction

Broderick James, better known as “The Running Man,” stands regularly on the corner of Rundberg Lane and Lamar Blvd. in Austin, Texas, spreading optimism and hope through the power of dance. He has been an informal promoter of community engagement for an improved Rundberg area for over seven years, and he dreams of a better Rundberg for the next generation. According to James, “the dream is when we bring this community together.”

That dream is shared by the community, local city and county government, university researchers, the Austin Police Department (APD), social service providers, and the residents and families that live in Rundberg. Today, the north-Austin Rundberg neighborhood struggles with high crime rates, prostitution, poverty, and exposed drug use. Kids feel pressure to join gangs and too often fall into the school-to-prison pipeline. Criminal activity coupled with poverty, disinvestment, and unemployment within the neighborhood discourage redevelopment and economic growth. Yet, this is in the face of substantial economic development even directly in these neighborhoods. As an example in the fall of 2013 Apple announced that one of its manufacturers, Flextronics Americas, would begin to manufacture a high end computer, the Mac Pro, initially employing 879 persons and perhaps adding an additional 815 more. A second example is the likely jobs that will come from firms attracted to the Rundberg area as Google begins to activate its high capacity fiber optic line, the second site for Google in the nation. However, while all of these jobs will be well-paying they will likely require post secondary education. Significant in the challenge of working with the cultural backgrounds of

many of the youth and young families in the Rundberg area is to keep children in school and provide both skills and attitudes for the requisite post secondary education that these very desirable jobs will require.

Researchers at The University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work and the Austin Police Department (APD) have partnered with community leaders and stakeholders to Restore Rundberg, which aims to “improve the quality of life, health, safety, education, and well-being of individuals living and working in the Rundberg neighborhood.” Sustainable and innovative community engagement is at the core of this effort.

Initial funding came in the form of a 3-year \$1 million Department of Justice grant – part of the Obama Administration’s Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative. Year one of the grant (2013) was the planning year, and years two (currently underway) and three are the implementation years. In year one, the research team recommended strategies that focus on addressing persistent crime, physical and social disorder, and youth issues by increasing community engagement and improving the community’s relationship with police. The aim is to see at least a 5% decrease in violent and property crimes by 2016.

The project attempts to be mindful of its existing residents, hoping to identify strategies that do not simply shift crime to other neighborhoods or invite gentrification. Strategies to revitalize Rundberg focus on five overarching areas:

- persistent crime
- physical and social disorder
- community engagement
- the community’s relationship with police

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- at-risk youth.

In this special issue, our team highlights some of the research taking place as a part of this collaborative community-research partnership, covering a range of issues and strategies, including: using hot-spot crime analysis to target policing and engagement efforts (see article by Whitt), developing an asset inventory for the community (see Pitzer), and creating a neighborhood survey to measure constructs such as collective efficacy and social cohesion (see Castro and colleagues).

A Snapshot of Rundberg

The grant area of Rundberg covers a geographic area of 5.74 miles that has incurred higher proportions of crime than would be expected for its 5% of city residents, including 11% of violent crime, 7% of property crime, 34% of prostitution incidents, and 9% of all Part II crimes citywide. Approximately 64% of the population speaks languages other than English and a large number of those individuals are classified as refugees.

Census data and city tax information shows that the residents of Rundberg are largely transient. The majority of the dwellings are rental units, either multi-family or single family. Thus, while crime may continue to plague the Rundberg area, many of its residents are constantly changing, moving in and out. Because of its affordable housing and proximity to downtown Austin, Rundberg is considered an entry destination to Austin housing but rarely a permanent home. Moreover, there exists a growing influx of immigrants from Mexico moving to Austin and settling in the Rundberg neighborhood. Indeed, the fastest growing population in the Rundberg area is the Hispanic population, with concentrated growth in young children between the ages of birth to 9 years. The majority of students (95%) enrolled in school are considered economically disadvantaged, 59% have limited English proficiency, and 75% are identified as at-risk for dropping out. Restore Rundberg calls for an overarching focus on youth development to decrease risk factors and enhance protective factors through a range of community- and school-based programs, youth

mentoring, and youth gang prevention and intervention programs.

Given the constant turnover in Rundberg's residents, a place-based analysis for crime prevention seemed the most appropriate approach (see Weisburd, Groff, & Yang, 2012). In simplest terms, while people change, crime stays the same and this necessitates the need to look at not just people but also the place – what are the characteristics of place that make it more susceptible to crime? This "criminology of place" (Sherman, Gartin, & Buerger, 1989) provides a new way of exploring the problem of crime in certain areas.

Three Hot Spots of Persistent Crime

In order to utilize Weisburd et al.'s (2012) approach, we identified three hot spots of crime in the Rundberg area. These hot spots were determined using police crime data (911 calls and police-generated reports) over the last seven years (2007-2013). We initially limited our hot spot analysis to Part I crimes as these "violent" crimes are often used to determine the overall safety of neighborhoods. However, we did run a second mapping exercise with Part II crimes and found the hot spots unchanged.

In the initial hot spot analysis, the entire Rundberg area mapped out as one giant hot spot. Upon further investigation, we found that the coding of certain addresses and types of crime were diffusing the hot spots. To address this, we controlled for property crimes in large commercial spaces (e.g., Walmart and a local grocery store). With these crimes controlled for, we were able to identify 7 potential hot spots in the grant area. We chose three hot spots, one in each of the smaller neighborhood teams that joined in the overarching revitalization plan for the Rundberg area. The remaining four areas will be used as comparison hot spots to measure the impact of our proposed strategies and to gage displacement effects.

All three hot spot areas have a concentration of Part I as well as Part II crimes. The crime problems have remained consistent over the last seven years. Residents and direct observations confirm the areas look and feel unsafe with all three backed by vacant lots, persistent drug and prostitution activity, litter and garbage, oddly placed

pay phones, drug paraphernalia, poor parking conditions, graffiti, and loitering. Small businesses in the hot spots cater to quick encounters and thus are susceptible to criminal activity, with in and out access (gas stations, convenience stores, smoke shops, liquor stores). (For a more detailed exposition on the hot spot analysis, see the article by Whitt in this edition.)

Consistent with the research to support community-based policing, APD is employing two innovative policing approaches to the Rundberg area and specifically, to the three identified hot spots. The goals of the overarching crime prevention strategy are to utilize Sherman et al.'s (1998) evidence-based approach to guide program development and implementation. Using Sherman's refined Triple-T strategy of policing (2013), we aim to target, test and track the impact of our efforts.

Triple-T: Targeting, Testing, and Tracking.

1. Police should conduct and apply good research to target their scarce resources on predictable concentrations of harm from crime and disorder.
2. Once they choose their high-priority targets, police should review or conduct tests of police methods to help choose what works best to reduce harm.
3. Once police agencies use research to target their tested practices, they should generate and use internal evidence to track the daily delivery and effects of those practices, including the publicly-perceived legitimacy of policing. (Sherman, 2013, p. 5).

Having already determined our place-based strategy and three hot spots, central to our development of any crime prevention strategy was to acknowledge the input of the community and the constant concern of highly visible crime. For many residents, this high visibility of crime was indicative of lack of police presence. With this in mind, the strategy developed needed to account for the visibility issue. In addition, we acknowledged the lack of community engagement within

the targeted hot spots. Residents have been slow to cooperate with police, have a general mistrust (creating hot spots of distrust) and are likely not reporting the extent of crime issues within their areas. Thus, we determined that a two-pronged approach was needed to address the overriding concerns: visibility and engagement.

Community Engagement

Besides the high visibility of criminal activity, the apparent indicators of disorder in the Rundberg hot spots are issues for both the police and community. The problem as already described is engaging residents that are largely transient and have little interest in an area they may see as only a temporary abode.

We know that we can't arrest our way out of this situation. The Austin Police Department has adopted a community policing strategy for the area's crime hot spots, meaning that police will enhance their visibility and community involvement through the use of increased foot and bike patrols. We are also working to deploy officers in a way that builds relationships with the immigrant community. We want residents to get to know Austin police officers and see them as allies toward creating a safer and stronger community.

Theorists of community engagement posit that communities with a high degree of community efficacy experience lower crime rates (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999). Community efficacy refers to the degree to which people trust their neighbors to provide a sense of safety, and to intervene if something problematic happens. The concept is similar to social capital where findings are that when there are high levels of trust among members of a community, crime is significantly lower, (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000) This, combined with social cohesion (i.e. the sense of community shared by individuals in a neighborhood) helps decrease crime rates and creates a community approach to policing which can have a significant impact on areas with poor trajectories in terms of crime and overall disorder (Uchida, Swatt, Solomon, & Varano, 2013). We build on the Institute for Community Peace's (as

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documented by Bowen, Gwiadsa and Brown's, 2004) theory of change to mobilize the community from within to address persistent crime issues. We believe that for real community engagement to occur, someone from within the community with a perceived legitimacy and connection to the people living within the hot spots is needed. We agree that proper support is required to allow for community engagement (financial, technical and evaluation assistance) and that capacities and skills will need to be developed to affect change. The overarching rationale behind the strategy is to begin to build a foundation for greater community engagement over time.

We acknowledge that with increased presence of uniformed officers in the Rundberg neighborhoods, that there are likely to be increased arrests as fewer undetected and unreported crime will occur. Increased trust may also cause increased reporting; however, we anticipate a curvilinear relationship with fewer crimes been seen, reported and documented by the third year.

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