Seeking Solutions to Violence.

Final Report • April 2013

Valuing Citizen Feedback

City of Rochester
Voice
of the CITIZEN

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Thomas S. Richards, Mayor
City of Rochester, NY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mayor Thomas Richards and Police Chief James Sheppard invited the public to participate in public sessions regarding "Seeking Solutions to Violence." Attendance was strong, with more than 400 individuals attending four sessions. Participation was active and engaging, the Mayor and Police Chief attended the full length of all four sessions in order to ensure they could garner the maximum input. Below are the four primary topic areas the public was invited to discuss, with a list of major themes from the community input. The body of the report contains more detailed data collected on each topic.

A. Open Air Drug Sales and Gate Houses
A1. Provide alternative activities to drug dealing for youth
A2. Change the Rochester Police Department (RPD) approach to the neighborhoods and the drug houses
A3. Enhance Neighborhood Associations and Block Clubs
A4. Establish a clean and safe environment
A5. Change the City's approach to vacant homes

B. Bullying and Truancy
B1. Need to hold parents accountable, and focus on the role of the family
B2. Bullying is a cause of truancy
B3. The Rochester City School District (RCSD) can play a role in reducing bullying and truancy through collaboration and increased teacher training
B4. The City can play a role in reducing bullying and truancy through collaboration and increased mentoring
B5. Social media plays a role in bullying

C. Gangs, Guns and the Culture of Violence
C1. Youth need positive activities to reduce the need for gangs to find a sense of belonging
C2. Develop opportunities for mentoring; consider the mental and emotional reasons for gangs and the choice to turn to violence
C3. The City of Rochester and RPD have a role to play to reduce the culture of violence through mentoring, changes in patrol, targeted services

D. House Parties
D1. Parents or party hosts should be held accountable
D2. Social media can play a positive or negative role
D3. The RPD and Neighborhood Service Centers have a role to play in enforcing existing laws, increasing interactions and education
D4. Need for more structured activities for youth

An open space conferencing process generated enthusiasm, extensive conversation and discussion around the topics, and yielded numerous excellent suggestions as well as sometimes conflicting opinions on how to address community violence. The Mayor expressed gratitude at the end of each session for the community's participation.

BACKGROUND

Voice of the Citizen

The City of Rochester has used a Voice of the Citizen (VOC) approach in recent years to identify citizen priorities, needs and concerns. This report and the presentation of data is not a reflection of City strategies or priorities, but rather a snapshot of community participants' perceptions and opinions on the topic of community violence.

PROCESS

An open space conference process was used to gather information because of the complexity of the topics as well as the number of people expected to attend. This type of conference provides opportunities for the community to share their thoughts on issues related to community violence and also to propose new ideas to the administration for consideration.

The Mayor provided a welcome and an introduction to the public forum. A presentation on crime and policing trends was given by Police Chief Sheppard. Participants were then invited to join facilitated breakout groups to further discuss the four topics outlined, or any other topic of their choosing.

Forty-five minutes were allocated for discussion followed by sharing of major issues from each of the four topics:

A. Open Air Drug Sales and Gate Houses
B. Bullying and Truancy
C. Gangs, Guns and the Culture of Violence
D. House Parties

At the conclusion of the open conferencing, the group came back together and facilitators reported out to the larger group on their group's main themes.

SCHEDULE

The public was invited by the Mayor to participate in one or more public sessions. Four meetings were held, one in each quadrant of the city:

Quadrant	Date	Location	Attendance
Southwest (SW)	12/11/12	Frederick Douglass Resource Center	105
Northeast (NE)	1/15/13	Carter Street Recreation Center	121
Northwest (NW)	1/29/13	Edgerton Stardust Ballroom	116
Southeast (SE)	2/05/13	Cobbs Hill Park, Lake Riley Lodge	75

Table Topic A: Open Air Drug Sales and Gate Houses, Questions asked

- Does your neighborhood have a problem with open air drug sales?
- Why do you think open air drug sales are so prevalent in your neighborhood?
- What would you like to see the RPD do about open air drug sales?
- What can you do to assist the RPD with open air drug sales?
- Do you know what a "gate house" is? If so, do you have them in your neighborhood?
- Why do you think there are so many gate houses in your neighborhood?
- What can the RPD do to shut down these gate houses?
- What can you do to help the RPD in shutting gate houses down?
- Do you think that gate houses and open air drug sales are leading to other crime in your neighborhood?
- What are open air drug sales and gate houses doing to your neighborhood?
- Are you aware of any tactics the RPD uses to combat open air drug sales?
- Do you know how the RPD currently deals with and shuts down gate houses?

Themes from Forum Participants

Conversations around open air drug sales and gate houses covered many different subtopics, but nonetheless several themes emerged. Five themes are described further in this section.

A1. Provide alternative activities to drug dealing for youth - Participants felt that fewer young people would become involved in dealing drugs if they had alternative activities available, particularly alternatives ways to make money. Some feel that drug sales are caused by a "lack of social activities for citizens (especially youth)." Others felt the community must "provide employment and educational incentives to city youth to discourage them from looking to drug dealing as a way to make money." Some felt this could be achieved through community-based organizations such as Teen Empowerment, Center for Youth, Boys & Girls Club, all programs "that work very well to help kids stay off streets." (SW)

- "Provide employment opportunities for convicted felons" (NE)
- "Drug dealers need jobs, a reason to not deal drugs" (SW)
- "Need more positive images of young men/women so young people see potential" (SW)
- "We should smile at and engage youth on our blocks" (SE)
- "Get RPD more in the loop with [community-based organizations] listed above for a more comprehensive approach to the drug dealing problems" (SW)
- "Create more activities to bring communities together" (SE)
- "Police could hand out information to loiterers on education and job opportunities, [and programs like] PRIME (Providing Real Incentives to Maintain Employment), CDC (Community Development Corporation), IBERO, restorative justice" (NW)

A2. Change the RPD approach to the neighborhoods and the drug houses - (SE) participants asked the RPD to look at best practices for dealing with drugs and gangs in other cities, while those in other quadrants asked officers to spend more time getting to know the neighborhoods and their residents.

- "RPD should have a person to speak with citizens and engage [them]" (SE)
- "RPD should take pictures of loiterers to keep track of suspicious persons" (SE)
- "RPD should not show up at house of person making a drug complaint (fear of retaliation)" (SE)
- "RPD should have undercover cops working with landlords" (SE)

- "Look at cities in the Pacific NW like Salinas, where they have dealt with drugs and gangs more effectively" (SE)
- "Incorporate "jump-out" tactic being used in Washington and Virginia to aggressively target problem areas" (SW)
- "Officers should get out of cars and interact with the community and people" (SW)
- "Business owners would like more direct interaction with the police" (SW)
- "Improve police presence on street corners where drug sales occur" (NE)
- "Police assignments to neighborhoods turns over too frequently; keep officers in same area longer to maintain relationships" (NW)
- "Police look the other way when called to a [problem] corner" (NW)

A3. Enhance Neighborhood Associations and Block Clubs - Many participants indicated that neighborhoods need block clubs and community groups. Some individuals stated that the City should provide more funding and other resources to these groups. Many participants listed specific addresses or businesses that they feel should be targeted; the neighborhoods want to work directly with RPD to effect change at certain addresses. Participants in the SW group listed at least four specific addresses that need more attention from the police and community.

- "Greater collaboration between neighborhood associations and the RPD to regain control of neighborhoods" (NE)
- "Greater funding from the City for neighborhood associations to provide resources to address criminal activity" (NE)
- "Greater City promotion of Police and Citizens Interaction Committee (PCIC) and neighborhood association meetings" (NE)
- "RPD should have staff, in addition to Crime Prevention Officers (CPOs), who can engage with citizens as a means to create genuine interaction" (SE)
- "We should have our neighborhood associations work with CPOs to coordinate community activities" (SE)
- "People would be more involved if they knew how to be involved (e.g. block clubs, PCIC, Neighborhood Service Centers (NSC)" (SE)

A4. Establish a clean and safe environment - Comments around this theme ranged from improving or repairing street lighting to improving streetscapes, to ensuring garbage is picked up to create a clean physical environment. Some referred to the NYC effort years ago to reduce minor petty crimes, in an effort to in turn reduce the bigger crimes that build from small ones.

- "Enforce noise ordinances" (SE)
- "Take care of garbage on the streets; a clean environment=a clean mind" (SE)
- "Need to get street lights working - and repair the ones that aren't" (SW)
- "Improve street lighting and streetscapes to discourage open air drug markets (NE)
- "Better light, trim trees, pick up litter" (NW)
- "Provide capital investment in neighborhoods" (NW)

A5. Change the City's approach to vacant homes - Some participants feel vacant homes should be more quickly condemned and demolished, while others indicated the structures should be rehabilitated.

- "What does it take to get them condemned?" (SW)
- "Open air drug sales are caused by vacant houses" (SE)
- "Initiate a house buying program for locations in the city" (SE)
- "Involve city youth in renovations [of vacant city homes]" (NE)
- "Need board-ups and demos" (NW)

Table Topic B: Bullying and Truancy, Questions Asked

- Do you think that bullying is an issue in your neighborhood?
- Have you witnessed bullying or what it does to kids?
- What do you feel bullying does to a neighborhood?
- Do you think that bullying leads to violent crime?
- Do you feel truancy is an issue in your neighborhood?
- Why do you think truancy is such a problem?
- What can the RPD do to help with the truancy problem?
- Do you know of any programs offered for bullying or truancy?
- Do you think bullying is primarily a school or police issue to deal with?
- Do you feel the RPD has done enough to try and stop truancy and bullying?

Themes from Forum Participants

While bullying and truancy can be discussed as two distinct topics, many participants indicated bullying is an underlying reason why some students miss school. Participants in all quadrants indicated the RCSD must return to neighborhood schools, and all discussed a need for more targeted resources for parents and grandparents who are struggling due to poverty, lack of education, single parenting, and other challenges.

B1. Need to hold parents accountable, and focus on the role of the family - Parents and grandparents raising grandchildren face challenges and may need increased support. At the same time some participants feel parents should be financially penalized through fines or reduced DHS benefits if their children are truant.

- "Bad parenting is a cause of bullying" (NE)
- "Empower parents; government and schools assume what should be parental duties" (NE)
- "Grandparents raising grandchildren may find it difficult to attend meetings at children's schools" (NE)
- "Get the parents engaged" (NE)
- "Determine what is behind the bullying - home issues, emotional, mental and psychological issues" (NE)
- "Why do families with truant kids still receive DHS benefits?" (SW)
- "Fine the parents of truant students" (SE)

B2. Bullying is a cause of truancy - Youth, particularly refugee or immigrant youth, are bullied at school or en route to school, and choose to be truant to avoid this.

- "Students skip school because they find it boring, are self-conscious, and are bullied" (NW)
- "Ensure RPD is aware of different programs that release students at different times of day" (NW)
- "Refugee students in NW Rochester are bullied violently and tormented; they respond passively and are seriously hurt" (SE)

B3. The RCSD can play a role in reducing bullying and truancy through collaboration and increased teacher training - Many participants believe the RCSD and the City should be collaborating more formally, while others believe teachers should live in city neighborhoods, or that neighborhood schools should be re-implemented. Participants described a need to make children and youth feel valued and supported at school through day care programs, more training on urban topics for teachers, or resources for parents in crisis.

- "Improve collaboration between RCSD truancy officers and RPD" (NW and SE)
- "Hire more African-American and Hispanic teachers. White teachers do not have a vested interest in the education of the city school children" (SW)
- "Provide day care at high schools to decrease truancy and dropout rates of teen mothers" (NW)
- "Provide incentives for teachers to live in city neighborhoods" (NW)
- "Provide City School teachers with more training on topics related to urban issues and problems facing kids today" (NW)
- "Implement a uniform policy at all city schools to reduce bullying" (NW and SE)
- "Ensure students feel they are valued regardless of what they participate in at school" (SW)
- "Find ways to make kids love their school - technology, extra-curricular activities, career days" (NE)
- "Bring back neighborhood schools" (NW, SE, NE, SW)
- "Need resources easily accessible for parents in crisis; need more home visits" (SE)
- "There should be female truancy officers assigned to deal with female students" (NW)

B4. The City can play a role in reducing bullying and truancy through collaboration and increased mentoring - Collaboration with the RCSD is needed, as well as improved mentoring opportunities and resources.

- "Conduct workshops at Recreation Centers to improve self-esteem of youth; this could reduce bullying. (NW)
- "Create mentoring programs for students to improve their self-esteem" (SE)
- "Look at best practices communities like Cleveland and Houston" (SE) "...and San Antonio" (SW)
- "Have all social, human, municipal, and educational services plus RPD and RCSD teachers and administrators come together to openly discuss and resolve truancy" (NE)

B5. Social media plays a role in bullying

- "Block Facebook access in libraries" (NE)
- "Teach kids that once something is out on social media, it is permanent" (NE)

Table Topic C: Gangs, Guns and the Culture of Violence, Questions Asked

- Do you think the city of Rochester has a gang problem?
- Do you think gun violence is an issue in your neighborhood?
- How would you like the RPD to eliminate the culture of violence?
- Do you think your neighborhood has a culture of violence?
- Why do you think there is a gang issue in the city of Rochester?
- Are there gangs in your neighborhood?
- What would you like the RPD to do about gangs in your neighborhood?
- Do you know of any programs to get kids out of gangs?
- Do you know of any programs to stop gun violence?
- What can the RPD do to get guns off the streets?
- What would you like to see the RPD do to stop gang violence?
- What can you do to help the RPD with gang violence and gun violence in the city?
- Are you aware of the current programs and tactics that the RPD uses to combat gang violence?

Themes from Participants

C1. Youth need positive activities to reduce the need for gangs to find a sense of belonging - Youth join gangs to find a substitute family. Instead they need more structured activities and opportunities to connect with neighbors. More jobs and more opportunities are desperately needed for youth.

- "Create more positive activities for youth: arts and culture, sports, exposure to role models" (SW)
- "Safe Sex Inc is an organization that employs youth and provides opportunities" (NW)
- "Hold block parties to learn the names of neighborhood youth" (SE)
- "More structured activities for teens - music, arts, business - not just athletics" (SE)
- "Reductions in recreational spending has impacted youth" (NE)
- "Create direct bus routes so youth don't have to transfer downtown; and create neighborhood schools" (SW)
- "JOBS. More jobs, more opportunity will allow kids to say 'no' to gangs" (NW)

C2. Develop opportunities for mentoring; consider the mental and emotional reasons for gangs and the choice to turn to violence.

- "Community needs a better understanding of the "gang" situation in Rochester and how to prevent youth from entering [gangs]" (NW)
- "Mental health and self esteem issues need to be addressed" (SE)
- "The culture of violence and gangs are a neighborhood issue and should be addressed by the people of the neighborhood as a group" (NE)
- "Gangs form a sense of belonging" (NE)
- "Mentoring, ideally by someone of the same race, should be provided for parents and teens together and separately" (NE)
- "Teenage pregnancies are not acceptable...tell them "don't get pregnant in the first place" (NW)
- "Strong parental involvement is key" (NE)

C3. The City of Rochester and RPD have a role to play to reduce the culture of violence through mentoring, changes in patrol, targeted services.

- "Expose more kids and police to [interacting with one another]" (NW)
- "Introduce elementary age children to RPD" (SE)
- "Need more minority representation among police officers and intervention specialists" (SW)
- "Practice Restorative Justice - fosters dialogue between victim and offender - teaches people to be aware of their impact on others" (SE)
- "Have more officers walking beats in neighborhoods" (SE)
- "Increased patrols truly have helped reduce gang violence" (NW)
- "Need to bring back PACTAC (Police and Citizens Together Against Crime) and have more volunteers" (NW)
- "Have police assigned to smaller areas; concerned about assaults on new immigrants" (NW)
- "Determine how we compare to other cities" (NW)
- "Increase use of Pathways to Peace to help remediate incidents" (NW)
- "Address violence on RTS (Rochester Transit Service) buses and downtown" (NW)
- "Interpreters needed for RPD and 911 for immigrant population in NW; also, in their home countries police are corrupt and these immigrants are accustomed to bribing officers; they need to be educated on how our system works" (NW)

Table Topic D: House Parties, Questions Asked

- Do you think that house parties are an issue that the RPD should address?
- What should the RPD be doing to stop house parties?
- Do you think there is violence associated with house parties in your neighborhood?
- What issues do you feel house parties are creating?
- Do you have a problem with house parties in your neighborhood?
- How do you think party goers learn about house parties?
- Do you think the RPD should be doing more about house parties?
- What can you do to help the RPD prevent house parties, which can end in violence?
- Do you know of any programs or tactics the RPD uses to stop house parties?

Themes from Participants

Participants shared that while some house parties, in which the invitation list is kept private, can be successful and safe, in other cases social media or word of mouth results in attendees who engage in unsafe activities. Social media presents mixed outcomes as it is one way that youth hear about parties and can lead to over-attendance. Simultaneously, social media can be used to educate youth and parents about the applicable laws (noise ordinance, parking laws, underage drinking) and perhaps can be used to monitor plans for upcoming parties.

Mixed opinions exist surrounding the role of RPD/NSCs in the monitoring of parties. Many voiced the opinion that parents should be more responsible for monitoring parties. Another theme that emerged is the need for more structured and supervised events for youth.

D1. Parents or Party Hosts should be held accountable - Parents must play a stronger role in awareness about their children's activities, and should not be condoning any under-age partying with illegal activities.

- "Parents should check with other parents regarding their children going to any house party" (NW)
- "Parents should hold their child accountable, know who they are hanging out with" (NW)
- "Make parents of underage party-goers more accountable - arrests, counseling, DHS (Department of Human Services)" (SE)
- "Responsibility must be taken on by a party host" (SW)

D2. Social Media can play a positive or negative role - While advertising house parties on Facebook and other social media can lead to the unruly crowds that result in violence, social media is here to stay and can be used as a tool for education and even to monitor the potential for illegal activity.

- "Most house parties are communicated via social media" (NW)
- "Develop public awareness campaign on the consequences of bad house parties" (NW)
- "Monitor and stop negative communications for parties on Facebook; Create a channel on which students can report upcoming parties to school officials" (NE)
- "Communicate with house party hosts and participants via social media as well as flyers, announcements, on-scene communication" (NE)
- The City Recreation Heart Coalition grant program can use youth-friendly social media to educate youth and provide real data on the proportion of youth using drugs-low percentage of users" (SW)

D3. The RPD and Neighborhood Service Centers have a role to play in enforcing existing laws, increasing interactions and education - Use existing laws such as those regarding noise and parking to help control or prevent bad outcomes at house parties. The City could consider setting up an anonymous hotline to allow citizens to report an upcoming house party, which would allow the RPD to plan to drive by.

- "[Consider] legal aspects...there are noise ordinances in place" (NW)
- "Increase noise enforcement" (SE)
- "Increase enforcement of party goers' illegally parked cars" (SE)
- "Enforce noise ordinance and parking" (NE)
- "RPD should be contacted if uninvited guest tries to get into party" (NW)
- "Increase awareness among residents about writing depositions that help RPD facilitate writing tickets, making arrests" (SE)
- "RPD must develop guidelines to assist officers to distinguish between legal and illegal parties" (SE)
- "RPD should only be called as a last resort if those invested in their neighborhoods look out for one another" (NE)
- "After an incident create dialogue with police and neighbors" (NE)
- "Crack down on corner stores selling supplies to minors" (SW)
- "Create a party hotline to provide names and numbers of responsible people" (SW)
- "Let the NSC/Police know of the party. Police can do a drive by" (SW)

D4. Need for more structured activities for youth - In a theme that came up under other topics, youth need more places and times to congregate in a stable atmosphere, whether it's at school, Recreation Centers, churches, or other locations.

- "[Need] a location for youth to congregate other than a Recreation Center. If at a Recreation Center, need mentor-type activities" (NW)
- "Contact parents, deans, coaches to help promote positive behavior" (SE)
- "Schools should be used as community centers for social events -more events needed, more hours for instruction or building use" (NE)
- "More collaborative efforts needed by churches/school" (NE)

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