

Engaging Mothers, Teens, Immigrants, and Other Special Groups

Many of the communities in which we work and live are constantly inundated with a plethora of culturally relevant issues and concerns. These challenges affect different populations and become manifest through such things as depression and lack of neighborhood involvement among residents, high school students carrying out violent acts on school campuses, and the increasing number of people becoming victims of hate crimes due to their perceived difference. These are issues with which local communities are struggling during their community planning and justice work.

People are the most important commodity in a community-based planning effort. Their active involvement is essential to the proposed line of progress that is necessary to transform their neighborhoods into places that exude pride, respect, dignity, and a sense of community. As we examine the demographics of many communities that are progressively making demonstrable change, we find three interesting characteristics:

- Women volunteer more than men
- Young people, particularly those over the age of 14, are volunteering and taking on more community-focused leadership roles
- Immigrant populations are a permanent part of American society and make significant contributions to improving the quality of life therein.

These facts have led to the development of this paper. While there are many other groups of individuals that you will need to include in your planning, it is imperative that we keep women, teenagers, and people of various ethnic backgrounds involved in our planning and community building efforts. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to briefly identify some of the issues that these entities face, on a daily basis, and identify ways to keep them connected to your community-based planning initiatives.

Neighborhood Safety and Social Involvement among Women and their Children

Many of the neighborhoods and communities we serve struggle constantly with issues of poverty, lack of safety, and a limited infusion of resources. These factors and others tend to have an adverse impact on mothers and their young children. For example, studies have shown that mothers who raised children in neighborhoods that were perceived as dangerous, limited the amount of freedom that their children had when playing outside. Conversely, mothers living in neighborhoods that were perceived to be safer, allowed their children to play freely. Not only does the level of neighborhood safety influence parenting, but the social atmosphere has an impact as well. While disadvantaged neighborhoods have some level of social ties, they tend to have fewer than others. In addition, there is increased alienation and the level of social control is often very low. When parents withdraw from formal and informal community and neighborhood networks, there appears to be a non-adherence to conventional norms and behaviors. This tends

to lead to disorder, which opens the way to elevated levels of crime, graffiti, open substance abuse, and overall dangerous conditions.

Social capital and social relationships in the family, as well as the community, will promote competence among children. Parenting practices are the direct result of that effort. When parents increase their social contact in the community, it increases the likelihood that a group of parents will monitor the behavior of children, particularly children that are not their own. Moreover, the behavior of adolescents is mediated through parenting practices. Essentially children that reside in communities with a high level of collective socialization tend to be exposed to more consistent and reinforced messages from multiple sources. This enhances the likelihood of pro-social behaviors and positive developmental outcomes. On the other hand, the withdrawal from community activities and neighbor relations tend to undermine parenting. Certain behaviors became evident in some young children because they were restricted in terms of peer relationships, limited area in which to play, and the ability to learn and enjoy the geographical boundaries of their neighborhood.

Another important finding has been that when parents live in communities that are wrought with crime, substance abuse, graffiti, and disorder, they tend to show signs of anxiety and often become personally distressed and, sometimes, clinically depressed. Depression results in withdrawal and, in some cases, can lead to inappropriate disciplining of their children. In most instances, neither the parents nor the children experience healthy emotional outcomes.

Teenagers and School Violence

Teenagers are needed to help rebuild and take on new leadership roles in our communities more than ever before. Many are becoming more actively involved in neighborhood revitalization projects. Also, there is a proliferation of youth organizations that are actively involved in social justice. These events are hitting an all time high. These are the youth that are preparing to take on greater leadership roles in the near future in business, government, and in non-profit organizations. Conversely, there is a group of young people who are not moving in this direction. They are confused, disgruntled, and mad at the world. They are showing up in gangs, on street corners, and in jails. Then there is the “middle” group—the alienated group. These teens have the leadership ability and are intellectually competent, but they don't always make the right choices. Some of these young people are showing up as perpetrators of school violence.

Violence in our schools, whether it involves threats, fistfights, knives, or firearms, is unwarranted and intolerable. Thousands of students, some as young as 10 years old, pack guns with their homework in their backpack. In recent years, we have experienced some of the most horrific events in school violence. We have witnessed the highest increase in young people watching violent movies and purchasing violent video games. In addition, rap stars have contributed to the damage by producing songs that have implicitly and explicitly held messages of violence. The alienated group is, undoubtedly, impacted by this. Child-behavior experts seem to think that all of these factors, coupled with undesirable family issues and poor relationships with peers, move this alienated group under the bar of acceptable behavior, which often leads to, among other things, school violence. While the alienated group often interacts with young people who are making good decisions and sound choices, it doesn't have an affect on them. Sometimes it leads both groups to anti-social behavior, which results in everyone regretting it

later. School violence is of particular importance, even beyond other types of violence, because if a student is expelled for committing a school infraction, this could be the beginning of dropping out of school. Once the student is no longer in school, she becomes exposed to a plethora of other risk factors.

Hate Crimes Against Immigrants and People Who Are Different

Regrettably, prejudice and aggression are among the oldest and most enduring features of human society. The juxtaposition of broad societal agreement on the values of equality and tolerance and the presence of intergroup tensions arising from long-standing status differences in society as well as ethnic and social diversity, have created a new category of criminalized behavior—hate crime. Hate crime is defined as the violence of intolerance and bigotry, intended to hurt and intimidate someone because of their race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, or disability. The purveyors of hate use explosives, arson, weapons, vandalism, physical violence, and verbal threats to instill fear in their victims, leaving them vulnerable to more attacks and feeling alienated, helpless, suspicious, and fearful. If the victims, as well as their relatives and friends, don't believe that the local government and police will not protect them, it begins to weaken those communities, even with the healthiest race relations. In some instances, it might lead them to take the law into their own hand or generate civil unrest.

Tragic events such as September 11th may serve to catapult into public consciousness the experience of victimization by virtue of identity alone. While the groups and individuals that perpetrate these acts have always been around, it seems as though the covering by which they remained somewhat invisible has been slightly removed. Following the 1990 multi-million dollar judgment against Tom Metzger, founder of the White Aryan Resistance (WAR), for murder of an Ethiopian immigrant, he was quoted by the press as saying:

The movement will not be stopped in the puny town of Portland. We're too deep. We're embedded now. Don't you understand? We're in your colleges; we're in your armies; we're in your police forces; we're in your banks. Where do you think a lot of skinheads disappear? We've planted the seeds. Stopping Tom Metzger is not going to change what's going to happen to this country.

In 2000, there were over 8,000 bias-motivated criminal incidents reported. Of those, 54% were motivated by racial bias, 18% religious bias, 16% sexual-orientation bias, 11% ethnicity/national origin bias, and less than 1% disability and multiple biases. Over the past 10 years, Congress has passed several pieces of legislation to help shape the future of hate crime initiatives and prevention measures. These anti-hate crime acts include the Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 1999, Church Arson Prevention Act of 1996, Hate Crimes Sentencing Enhancement Act, and the Hate Crimes Statistics Act of 1990. The U.S. Department of Justice has been designated the lead agency in documenting, tracking these types of incidents, and supporting the legislation by prosecuting perpetrators.

Mothers, teenagers, and immigrants are just a few examples of groups that can be an invaluable asset to community-based justice initiatives. The many factors discussed above are examples of issues that need to be considered in efforts to get and keep them involved in planning efforts.

References

Hill, Nancy and Herman-Stahl, Mindy. 2002. "Neighborhood Safety and Social Involvement: Associations with Parenting Behaviors and Depressive Symptoms Among African American and Euro-American Mothers," *Journal of Family Psychology*, Vol. 16, No. 2, Pages 209, 216.

Coley, R.I., and Hoffman L. W. 1996. "Relations of Parental Supervision and Monitoring to Children's Functioning in Various Contexts: Moderating Effects of Families and Neighborhoods," *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 17, pages 51, 52, 64 and 65.

Turpin-Petrosino, Carolyn. 2002. "Hateful Sirens...Who Hears Their Song? An Examination of Student Attitudes Toward Hate Groups and Affiliation Potential," *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 58, No.2, pages 281-282.

Boeckman, Robert and Turpin-Petrosino, Carolyn. 2002. "Understanding the Harm of Hate Crime," *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 58, No.2, pages 207-208.

Module References

CQ Researcher on Teens in America, 1998. "School Violence", October 9 1998, pp. 19, 24 and 25.

National Criminal Justice Research Service. 2002. "In the Spotlight of Hate Crime,"p. 1.

National Criminal Justice Research Service. 2002. "Hate Crime Resources – Facts and Figures", p. 1.

National Crime Prevention Council, "Organizing in Multicultural Neighborhoods", 2002, p. 1.

National Crime Prevention Council, "Outreach to New Americans", 2002, p. 1.