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PRACTICE BRIEF:
NORMS, NARRATIVES, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
FOR CRIME PREVENTION

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Introduction

This practice brief addresses the practical aspects of addressing "norms and narratives" in crime prevention. A norm is a rule or a standard held by an individual, group or community: for example, that one should obey the law, or that men get respect for going to prison. A narrative is an explanation used by an individual, group, or community to understand and explain why something has happened, is true or false, is justified or unjustified: for example, that poor neighborhoods are flooded with drugs as a plot by law enforcement to do them harm, or that communities do not take strong public stands against drug dealing because everybody is living off drug money. The norms and narratives held by offenders and potential offenders; communities; and law enforcement have tremendous impact on crime and crime prevention, how each party views the others, and their actions; and their willingness to work together. Recent work has shown that norms and narratives can be directly addressed and even changed, with enormous practical impact. This is a new and important way of thinking about and carrying out crime prevention.

Much of this work has been done in high-crime communities; around very serious issues of gang, gun, violent, and drug crime; and in the context of a strategic framework variously called "Ceasefire," "the Boston Strategy," "focused deterrence," and "pulling levers." This strategy follows a basic pattern. It focuses on a particular crime problem, such as gang violence; identifies offenders (such as gangs and gang members); creates a partnership of law enforcement, social service providers, and community actors; and directly engages with offenders to deliver a core message that violence is wrong and unacceptable to the community; that social service help is available; and that further violence will be met with very specific law enforcement action. This practice brief will focus on the "norms and narratives" element within such strategies. Because the strategy includes all the pieces, implemented simultaneously, it has not been possible to assess the independent impact of the "norms and narratives" aspect. Some, including the author, suspect that it may be the most powerful element, or at least the one with the greatest overall potential. It is, at the very least, a substantial component of more robust crime prevention strategies. This practice brief is intended to provide concrete guidance for addressing "norms and narratives" in real settings.

The basic idea: promoting informal social control

The most important things that influence whether someone obeys the law or commits a crime are whether he thinks doing so is right or wrong; whether those he cares about and respects thinks it is right or wrong; and whether the community he belongs to thinks it is right or wrong. Even most offenders, even very serious ones, obey the law most of the time; in the highest-crime communities, most people obey the law most of the time. Los Angeles, for example, estimates

that there are 400 organized gangs with at least 65,000 gang members in the city.[1] In 2009, there were estimated to be 141 gang homicides in Los Angeles.[2] That means that 64,859 gang members (assuming one gang member per homicide), and at least 259 gangs, did not kill anybody that year. It is common to say of gang members, and high-crime communities, things like "guns have become the preferred method of dispute resolution," but such statements are simply not true: if they were true, there would be nobody left standing. Far more often than not, good sense prevails.

That good sense is mostly self-imposed. The ability of the criminal justice system to impose punishment – what scholars call "formal social control" – is the least important influence on a person's decision to commit or not commit a crime. The police are not present at every potential crime scene, most crimes that are committed are never reported, most crimes that are reported are never cleared by an arrest, and most arrests do not result in meaningful sanctions. What matters the most is the judgments of individuals, peer groups, families, and communities that to do crime, or this crime, is wrong for various reasons. Most people do not have to think about criminal justice consequences when they are tempted to shoot someone: they believe that shooting people is wrong. If they are tempted personally, they know that their friends, families and communities think that shooting people is wrong, and they care about what their friends, families and communities think. Scholars call this "informal social control," and divide it into "internal" – conscience, shame, and the like – and "external" – peers, loved ones, families, and community. Common sense, ordinary experience, and a vast amount of research show that informal social control is far more potent, overall, than formal.[3]

One way of thinking about informal social control is in terms of "norms" and "narratives." Norms are standards for behavior; they establish rules to which people tend to conform. Gang members regularly experience social friction on the street: they are disrespected. The idea that if they are disrespected they must respond with violence is a street norm. The more they, their friends, their families, and their communities believe in that norm – or seem to – the more violence there will be. The idea that gang members have each others' backs – that the enemy of my friend is my enemy – is a street norm. The more they, their friends, their families, and their communities believe in that norm, the more often that act of disrespect, and the violent response to it, will turn into a vendetta between gangs.

Individuals, groups, and communities understand and explain the world around them in terms of history, stories, and various other kinds of explanations: "narratives." Narratives have a powerful influence on norms. Gang members frequently consider selling drugs. The idea that

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[1] http://www.lapdonline.org/top_ten_most_wanted_gang_members/content_basic_view/23466
[2] Calculated from information at
http://www.lapdonline.org/top_ten_most_wanted_gang_members/content_basic_view/23466 and
http://www.laindependent.com/news/80935317.html.
[3] See, for example, Sampson, Robert J. "Crime in Cities: The Effects of Formal and Informal Social Control" *Crime and Justice*, Vol. 8, Communities and Crime (1986), pp. 271-311
Sampson, Robert J. & Laub, John J. "Crime and Deviance over the Life Course: The Salience of Adult Social Bonds" *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 55, No. 5 (Oct., 1990), pp. 609-627

drug enforcement is an outside plot to do the community harm – that the government is using drug laws as a tool of racial oppression – is a narrative. That narrative can make a drug arrest an act of racial aggression, make going to prison a badge of honor, and create the norm that incarceration is a rite of passage. The narrative that law enforcement is an illegitimate presence in the community can lead to the norm that good people don't talk to the police – to "stop snitching."

Law enforcement and other groups and institutions working on crime prevention and control have their own norms and narratives. In policing, for example, an arrest is a good thing – norms are pro-arrest – even when an arrest does not solve the underlying problem. This can and often does lead to high-arrest strategies in troubled communities. Those strategies are often read by the community through the lens of their own narratives: they are interpreted as further evidence that the point of policing is arresting young men, rather than to solve community problems. That community narrative fuels norms against working with police. Law enforcement's narrative – their understanding and explanation of why the community is silent – is different, and is often that the community is living off drug money and is tolerant of crime and violence. That narrative blocks law enforcement's consideration of community partnerships and fuels the pro-arrest norm.

Changing norms and narratives can have very direct impact on crime. A gang, or a gang member, that comes to believe that disrespect does not require, or justify, violence will be less violent. A community that no longer believes that law enforcement is oppressive is more likely to express community standards against violence. A police department that recognizes that a community is angry, not corrupt, is more likely to take that community seriously. Deliberate attention to norms and narratives, and steps to change them, is thus an important practical way of addressing crime.

The idea of "legitimacy"

Another way of framing these issues is that people will do the right thing, including obeying the law, when they think it is the right thing to do – and when, if they have doubts, they feel that those making the rules are legitimate and that the rules will be applied fairly.[4] If they are not sure that refraining from violence is the right thing to do, if they do not understand that that is what their own community wants, and if law enforcement is seen as illegitimate, then violence will be more likely. If offenders' own views about violence can be shifted, if community norms against violence can be clarified, and if law enforcement comes to be seen as legitimate and fair, then self-control, community control, and the impact of any action by law enforcement will be more powerful and effective.[5]

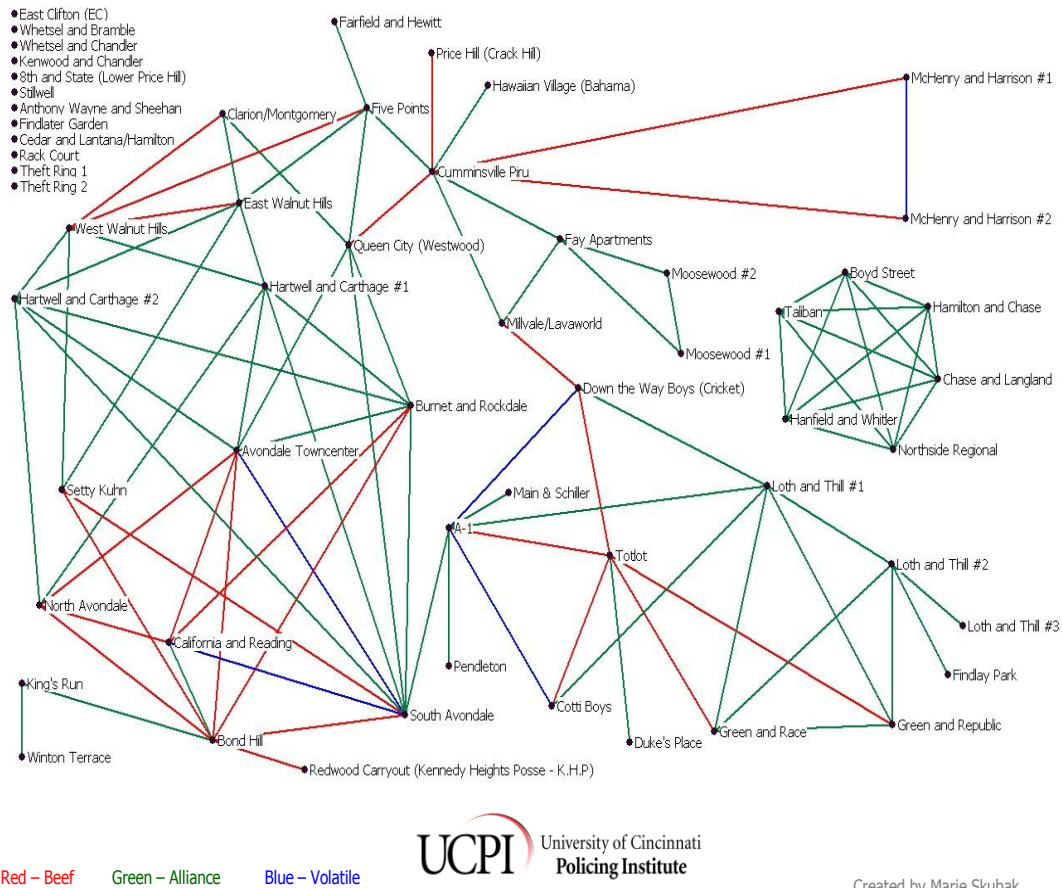[4] Tyler, Tom (2006) *Why People Obey the Law*, Princeton, NJ:Princeton University Press
[5] Meares, Tracey "The Legitimacy of Police Among Young African-American Men" Barrock Lecture On Criminal Law, Marquette University Law School, February 19, 2009

Who is the focus?

The set of crime prevention strategies that focus on norms and narratives in this way usually work from the problem back – from the street up. There's now a good deal of experience in using these strategies to effectively address several types of substantive crime problems.

- Serious community violence tends to be very heavily concentrated amongst *gangs and other offending groups*, so one focus has been on such gangs and groups. Such gangs and groups are usually readily identifiable. The traditional "Boston" strategy works with front-line law enforcement officers, and sometimes others such as gang outreach workers, to identify violent groups in the community. These exercises produce clear pictures of gangs, networks of gangs, and the conflict ("beef") and alliance relationships amongst them. See figure 1, below, for an example of a sociogram of the gang universe in Cincinnati, Ohio in 2007.[6]

CINCINNATI – Network Analysis of Street Sets

Red – Beef   Green – Alliance   Blue – Volatile

University of Cincinnati
Policing Institute

Created by Marie Skubak

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[6] University of Cincinnati Policing Institute, 2007

Further work, drawing on more detailed front-line information about individuals; gang and associate databases; criminal investigations; and other such existing information can provide equally detailed pictures of networks of relationships within particular gangs and groups. These gangs and groups, and sometime key figures within them, then become the focus for intervention.[7]

- Serious violent crime is also concentrated amongst repeat offenders, so strategies have focused on those with criminal histories of gun and gang crime. A very successful crime reduction initiative in Chicago, under the auspices of Project Safe Neighborhoods, for example, worked with parolees with gang and gun histories returning from prison to several particularly violent neighborhoods.[8]

- Drug market strategies have worked up from particular flagrant, or "overt," community drug markets. Traditional criminal investigative techniques are used to identify street-level offenders for subsequent intervention.[9]

The "call-in"

A formal, organized meeting between the intervention partners – law enforcement, social services, and community "moral voice" representatives – has become a key element in these interventions. There is now experience with several approaches to these meetings.

- The most traditional version has been aimed at gangs and other violent groups. It has proceeded by, as sketched above, identifying such gangs and groups; identifying probationers and parolees from each group; and working with probation and parole to direct attendance at a meeting. This approach has tended to use courtrooms as the meeting site.

  In this approach, the intervention relies on the probationers and parolees in the call-in to carry key messages back to their gang or group. The point is not so much to influence the behavior of the offenders in the call-in as it is to use the call-in to reach the gangs and groups out in the community.

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[7] Braga, A. A., Kennedy, D.M., Waring, E.J., & Piehl, A.M. (2001). Problem-Oriented Policing, Deterrence, and Youth Violence: An Evaluation of Boston's Operation Ceasefire. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 38* (3) 195-226

[8] Papachristos, A. V., Meares, T., & Fagan, J. (2007). **Attention Felons: Evaluating Project Safe Neighborhoods in Chicago.** *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies*, *4* (2) 223-272

[9] Kennedy, D. (2009, March). **Drugs, Race and Common Ground: Reflections on the High Point Intervention.** *National Institute of Justice Journal*, No. 262.

- Another version has been aimed at individual probationers and parolees. It has proceeded by establishing some threshold criteria, such as a record of a violent felony or gun conviction; gang association; or the like, and then working with probation and parole to direct attendance at a meeting. These can be a routine part of, for example, release from prison, as with the Chicago PSN project, or can be staged as desired by the partnership, bringing probationers and parolees in the community to a meeting. In this approach the intent is primarily to influence the behavior of those in the call-in. These meetings have been held in formal settings such as police stations or, as in Chicago, in "places of civic importance" such as community centers.

- Another version, used in the drug market intervention, has relied on home visits with identified drug dealers, who are told, ideally along with family members, that their presence is requested at an upcoming meeting. They may or may not be told that they face pending drug cases, and they may or may not be told that they will be arrested for those cases if they fail to appear at the meeting. They are given a document, signed by the police chief or district attorney, ensuring that they will not be arrested at the meeting. They are invited to bring family members and others important to them.

- More recently, it has turned out to be possible to hold strictly voluntary meetings. In Providence and Cincinnati, projects have worked through police officers (Providence) and gang outreach workers (Cincinnati) to invite gang members to meetings at police stations (Providence) and neighborhood centers (Cincinnati). Both have been successful: a majority of invited gang members have responded to these invitations and voluntarily attended these meetings.

- Finally, a number of jurisdictions have used home visits with offenders and, often, their families. In some instances these have worked with probationers and parolees, who are directed by their supervisors to be home at a given time. Other have simply set up the meeting voluntarily.

Norms, narratives and the "community moral voice" in the call-in

The call-in, as noted, conveys several key themes, including ones around social service opportunities and law enforcement practice. The attention to offender, community, and law enforcement norms and narratives, and to the moral voice of the community, is a separate, and very powerful, theme. It is intended to convey a number of important messages, some of which are expressed directly and some implicitly and by example. This section will address these main messages; the next will address those who can convey them effectively and how that can be done in practice

- *None of us have been entirely in the right; all of us would like to change.* In most places with serious gang, violence, and crime problems, the core constituencies involved – law enforcement, communities, and offenders – blame each other. Many jurisdictions, as they go through the process of adapting these strategies, come to believe that there is at least some truth to the idea that no one party is entirely in the right. Law enforcement has not solved the crime problem and has been intrusive; communities have not set clear standards about right and wrong; offenders have done violence. A new place of consensus becomes that all will shift together to a place that all can accept as legitimate.

- *Law enforcement respects you.* Offenders, and many in the community, believe that law enforcement dislikes them and that this dislike is personal, racial, and otherwise illegitimate. In the call-in, therefore, law enforcement addresses offenders with respect, does not attack or abuse them, makes clear that they are being treated as responsible adults, emphasizes that any law enforcement action that may be directed to them is business and about their behavior and not personal, emphasizes that law enforcement is trying to save their lives and keep them out of prison, and stands with their community in wanted them to survive and succeed. Law enforcement may address particular false narratives, such as that law enforcement would be out of work without drugs to chase or that law enforcement doesn't like black people, by explaining that there's plenty of work to do and that enforcement tends to follow violence, which is presently the most severe in these communities.

- *Law enforcement has been part of the problem and would like to change.* In some – not all – projects, law enforcement is willing to say that what is has done has not worked, that troubled minority communities have not been policed in the same way as majority communities, that some of that policing has been illegitimate and inappropriate, and that even well-intentioned policies like heavy drug enforcement have created inadvertent harm in communities through breaking up families, the psychological and social cost of repeated incarceration, the persistent harm of having a criminal record, etc. This undercuts the offender and community narrative that law enforcement is seeking to do harm and does not care about community well-being, and undercuts the law enforcement norm that enforcement is in and of itself a good thing.

- *There is no justification for the violence.* Gangs, groups, and individual offenders justify their violent behavior in various ways: they are oppressed, it's self-defense, a man handles his own business, I have an obligation to my boys, my community doesn't care, outsiders are violent too, etc. It's critical for the community to make very clear that there is no reason of any kind that justifies the shooting and killing. In one of the early Boston call-ins under Operation Ceasefire, a gang member excused his actions on the basis that the CIA was behind the drug trade. A black minister challenged him: shot any CIA

agents lately? Removing these excuses and making community rejection of violence crystal-clear is critical.

- *The community needs the violence to stop.* Many offenders genuinely do not believe that their communities care about the violence. Some feel that their violence is supported by community interests and norms. Many read community silence about violence as approval or disinterest. Express community rejection of violence undercuts any feelings of legitimacy offenders may have.

- *You are valuable and important to us*. Many offenders feel neglected and disregarded. Many have internalized the negative ways in which they have been treated. They need to understand that law enforcement and their own communities want them to succeed and to play positive roles in their families and communities.

- *The ideas of the street code are wrong.* Much violence and other offending are driven by an informal but very powerful street code. This code is toxic, mistaken, and can be directly challenged. The main principles needing to be challenged are:

  - Disrespect requires violence
  - We're not afraid of death or prison
  - We handle our own business: a man doesn't go to the police
  - We've got each other's back: the enemy of my friend is my enemy
  - We're justified in what we do: history, racism, oppression, and neglect make it OK

- *We are justified in demanding that you stop, but we will help you if we can*. Communities, law enforcement, and offenders alike often find themselves in an implicit negotiation in which offending is seen as more or less justified if communities and offenders cannot be made whole, for example by giving all who would like it a job. This is a serious mistake. All parties need to be very clear that some things – such as killing – are categorically, absolutely wrong. Stopping killing is not contingent on some satisfactory level of new assistance. Helping offenders is very important but needs to be explicitly separated from the fact that violence is wholly unacceptable.

- *We have great and justified hopes for you.* A clear, positive message that even seasoned offenders can accomplish important things.

Who can convey these messages and how are they conveyed?

There is no absolute script for these call-ins, or other such events between law enforcement, communities, social service providers, and offenders. That said, a set of basic principles and practices has emerged.

- *The fact of the call-in carries great meaning.* It is extremely unusual for law enforcement, community figures, and social service providers to appear together before offenders and speak with one voice. The simple fact that this has happened sends a powerful signal that things have changed and that the normal state of play, with its frictions and divisions, has given way to something new.

- *The call-in should be respectful.* The tone of the call in should convey strongly that the partnership regards the offenders as rational and responsible, expects them to make good use of the information that they will be provided, and that any law enforcement consequences that might fall upon them for noncompliance are business, not personal. Behavior is rejected, while persons are embraced. It is particularly important that law enforcement speak with respect, not call out offenders collectively or individually, and avoid any terms like "scumbags." Feedback from offenders in call-ins suggests that they are surprised, and strongly influenced, when law enforcement treats them with respect. There is some reason to believe that not treating offenders with respect can actually produce subsequent backlash on the streets.

- *"Law enforcement has been part of the problem and would like to change."* This message is best carried by a senior law enforcement representative, such as a police chief or senior commander, a district attorney/US attorney or senior deputy prosecutor, and the like. Such figures have said, in these sessions, things like: what we have been doing has not been working and we know it; we recognize that your communities have not been policed like other communities and that's not right; we have been doing the best we know how to do but recognize that when we stop everybody and arrest everybody we do your community unintended harm; we've been doing our best but if we can do better working with you in new ways we would love to do that.

- *"There is no justification for the violence.*" This message is best carried by community members, members of the faith community, and ex-offenders. Such figures have said, in these sessions, things like: "It's wrong, you know it's wrong; who here has kids? Who thinks it's OK that kids are getting shot in drive-bys? We may be mad at the police, but how does that justify you shooting each other? If white folks were killing us like we're killing each other, we wouldn't stand for it, so why are we standing for this?"

- *"The community needs the violence to stop."* This message is best carried by community members, members of the faith community, and ex-offenders. In particular, mothers of murdered children have turned out to be profoundly effective. When these mothers tell the story of what losing their children has done to them and to their families, offenders are often reduced to tears. It's particularly powerful to end these stories with words to the effect of, "I know you're not afraid of dying. My son wasn't either, and this is what his death did to me. If you let yourself get killed, your mother will be standing here. If you kill someone else, his mother will be standing here. I don't think you want that."

- *"You are valuable and important to us."* This can come from all parties – law enforcement, community members, and social service providers. Law enforcement can say, I would rather see you alive, well, successful, and with your loved ones than lock you up – we're sick of locking you up. Social service providers can say, I can help you, and here's how. Community members can say, we need you, you're smart and strong, your little sisters and brothers are looking up to you, we need you to raise your children, the community does not want to live like this any longer and we need you to help show the way.

- *"The ideas of the street code are wrong."* This message is best carried by ex-offenders, gang outreach workers, and the like – those who have been there and can speak with authenticity. Their message is, in effect, one of "the emperor has no clothes." They have said things like, I believed in thug love, I had my gang family on the street. But it's not real – *everybody* flips when the feds come calling, that's how I ended up inside. Who came to see you the last time you got locked up? Who paid your mother's rent? Who's going to raise your kids? Who thinks it's OK that little kids are getting blown off their porches over our stupid respect beefs? Who likes living this way?

- *"We are justified in demanding that you stop, but we will help you if we can."* This theme needs to be clear in all discussion of the violence, and in the way that social services are introduced. It is particularly important that social services not be presented as a trade-off or a negotiation – you should stop because we'll get you a job – and that social service providers and the rest of the partnership not promise something they cannot be sure of delivering (such as a job). The right presentation is usually something like "the violence is wrong, we insist that it stop, we will help you as much as we can, and here's what we can offer and how to get it."

- *"We have great and justified hopes for you."* This can be expressed by all the partners. The realism of this expectation is best carried by authentic ex-offenders who can model by their example that change is possible and desirable.

The idea of "influentials"

In some forms of the call-in, such as the small drug market sessions and some of the smaller voluntary community call-ins, it has been possible to identify and involve "influentials:" persons close to identified offenders who care about them, are respected by them, and who are likely to influence them in a positive way even after the call-in itself. Such persons can include parents, grandparents, local elders, faith figures, close friends and partners, and the like. In practice influentials have been identified by examining probation and parole records, which often contain information about close personal ties; looking at jail and prison visitation and communication logs; talking to community sources; and the like (it may be possible to identify influentials simply by asking offenders who they would like to involve in these processes). Those influentials are then approached by the partnership about participating in the call-in along with the identified offender. In one city, those influentials are being offered community training on working with the offender, liaising with service providers, etc. Experience indicates that incorporating influentials is a very powerful and desirable step when it is possible.

Impact

Moral engagement and the "moral voice of the community" has been an element in the "gang" and drug market interventions from their beginning in Boston some 15 years ago. It has always been present along with the strategies' deterrence, enforcement, and social service elements. All these elements are designed to support and mutually reinforce one another, so it has not been possible to assess the independent contribution of the "moral voice" to the strategies' impact. Early survey research involving parolees who participated in the effective Chicago PSN call-ins, however, seems to substantiate the belief that this moral voice engagement is important: offenders were more likely to comply with the law and less likely to carry a gun when they participated in the call-ins, where community norms against violence were articulated and law enforcement addressed participants with respect and articulated norms encouraging parolee success, as outlined in this brief. This is in comparison to parolees who were only touched by the other elements of the PSN project, which involved more traditional law enforcement approaches such as enhanced firearms prosecutions. Furthermore, the survey research showed that offenders in these neighborhoods generally had what appeared to be relatively "mainstream" ideas that it was right to obey the law.[10] These are ideas the approaches described here seek to honor and mobilize.

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[10] Meares, Tracey, Andrew V. Papachristos, and Jeffrey Fagan (2009) "Homicide in Chicago: Evaluation and Summary of the Project Safe Neighborhoods Program" Project Safe Neighborhoods Research Brief, January