

AUSTIN | TEXAS

BCJI 2012 PLANNING & IMPLEMENTATION AWARD (\$1,000,000/36 Months)

Lead Agency: Austin Police Department City of Austin

Spurred by efforts to build stronger ties with residents, the Austin Byrne Criminal Justice Initiative team revitalized large open spaces that had fostered crime, increased local resources to engage and support youth, and created an empathetic and effective way to address homelessness.

The Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation (BCJI) program leadership team in Austin, Texas, focused on three goals for its target area, the Rundberg community: 1) Build a collaborative relationship with residents to reduce crime and the drivers of crime. 2) Improve the physical space within the target community to be more attractive to residents and businesses. 3) Provide resources to engage and support youth to both increase educational opportunities and decrease their likelihood to drop-out of school or become gang-involved.

The Restore Rundberg BCJI project efforts were able to achieve these goals through strong leadership from Commander Donald Baker of the Austin Police Department (APD), an involved steering committee comprised of business and community leaders and concerned residents, and active analysis and input of programmatic efforts by research partner Dr. David Springer from the University of Texas at Austin, School of Social Work. Together, this team used data and community input to make informed strategic decisions and build sustainable collaborations to ensure the progress of BCJI does not end when the grant expires.

The Rundberg area of Austin is a collection of neighborhoods north of downtown Austin along a major highway that runs from Kansas to the Mexican border. Rundberg is a community of primarily single family residential homes divided by commercial corridors that have been eclipsed by the development of surrounding suburbs. Median earnings for the area was \$21,189, with the majority of jobs in construction, retail, and restaurants, which are often temporary. Ninety-five percent of school children in the community are considered economically disadvantaged, and a homeless population sought refuge in large open spaces of land in the area.

The Rundberg area faced a higher proportionality of crime than the city as a whole, with 11 percent of Austin's violent crime and 7 percent of its property crime. The APD found that crime was highly concentrated with less than 1 percent of the citywide blocks accounting for more than 7 percent of the total violent crime in Austin. Budget motels and other remaining business properties contribute to problems, including open air drug markets, loitering on street corners and in parking lots, prostitution, and other criminal activity.

With an exceptionally diverse population including many immigrants and refugees—almost two-thirds of the population speaks languages other than English—Rundberg residents have not historically worked closely with police

The BCJI Approach

These powerful themes run through all BCJI projects.

DATA-DRIVEN

BCJI targets crime hot spots – often streets, properties or public spaces in communities that have struggled with crime for years. Researchers are engaged in the day-to-day work, helping partners examine problems, assess evidence-based solutions, and monitor progress.

COMMUNITY-ORIENTED

BCJI champions active roles for residents in identifying problems, selecting strategies and creating safe and healthy environments.

SPURS REVITALIZATION

BCJI tackles problem properties, unsafe streets and parks, unemployment, transit barriers and service gaps related to crime.

BUILDS PARTNERSHIPS

BCJI taps the resources of public, nonprofit and community leaders to bring more resources and different approaches to bear on longstanding crime challenges for lasting change.

or each other to address these problems. Prior to BCJI, law enforcement efforts to address crime issues in the community were primarily suppression-based programs that APD officials noted were not creating the needed inroads with residents. Community-based police officers began to push for a strategy that fostered engagement and collaboration with the neighborhood—an approach also supported by the community.

A Broader Role for Law Enforcement

Rather than focusing on arresting individuals or issuing citations, officers in Operation Mobile Walking Beat made connections and built trust with residents, youth, and business owners.

Looking to identify new criminal justice solutions, the Austin Police Department met with Springer, the director of the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service in the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas (UT). A specialist in community-based services for youth and families who was working on other juvenile justice related grants focusing on Austin youth, Springer possessed the expertise to take a deeper look at the crime issues in Rundberg and to assist with the strategy to achieve community buy-in.

To facilitate dialogue between the community and the APD, the BCJI initiative created the Restore Rundberg Revitalization Team (RT), consisting of six representatives from various city and faith-based agencies selected by APD and seven community volunteers. After identifying crime issues and community-wide priorities, the RT created working groups that met twice a month for the first eighteen months, and then monthly thereafter. The groups were headed by several influential persons living and/or working in Rundberg and provided critical feedback and support connecting residents to resources.

APD worked with Springer to identify where in the neighborhood to focus its crime reduction efforts. Looking at Part 1 Violent Crime and Part 2 Property Crime, three “hot-spots” stood out, accounting for 21 percent of crime in Rundberg (and almost 12.5 percent of crime citywide). When BCJI efforts began, Springer said, the relationship between the police and the community was tense. The Austin BCJI leadership had recently changed

personnel, many of the immigrant and refugee population did not trust police, and the residents thought BCJI was another grant that would come and go without creating any real change.

As identified by Commander Baker, a major underlying dynamic was that the police historically focused crime reduction activities in areas where more serious violent crimes were taking place, yet the community was more concerned with areas and issues that they perceived to be dangerous—like individuals hanging around bus stops, loud groups of people in parking lots, and prostitution around local motels. While these activities were not all criminal in nature, they made residents feel unsafe in certain parts of the community, and they wanted police to make these areas a priority.

Commander Baker credited the collaborative model of BCJI for focusing his efforts on engaging with the community, Springer, and the RT to alter their law enforcement strategy. In the past, the police primarily used direct overtime suppression-based efforts in these hot spots, which was largely unsuccessful and not sustainable. Using input from the BCJI steering committee, the police created Operation Mobile Walking Beat (OMWB), which used between four to six officers rotating across hot spots in four 6-hour shifts every week. Rather than focusing on arresting individuals or issuing citations, officers were directed to make connections and build trust with residents, youth, and business owners.

Officers working OMWB used a survey tool to engage with residents, capture neighborhood concerns, and learn about areas of the neighborhood where the residents felt most uncomfortable or perceived as dangerous. In a little over one year, OMWB made contacts with 12,511 residents. In some cases, APD could connect residents with city and community resources when officers would take the concerns to city officials such as code enforcement or public works.

Collaboration and brainstorming within APD departments and with other city agencies and the BCJI team led to a number of opportunities for small “wins,” demonstrating that the team was listening and taking action on the input from the surveys. Because of the BCJI efforts, the police and city agencies targeted law enforcement responses to a known open-air drug market, worked with the public works department to clean up areas that had unsightly trash, installed lighting in areas

where residents didn't feel safe, held community clean-up days, and launched an apartment coalition to address parking violations to disrupt drug dealing and other criminal activities.

The specific goals of OMWB, which could only be met with input from Rundberg residents and collaboration with BCJI partners, was a critical element in making the community feel safer. "This was an opportunity to gauge the effectiveness of the community policing efforts in a way that did not tie directly into crime stats," Springer said.

Restore Rundberg Seven Priorities

The Restore Rundberg Revitalization Team (RT) identified seven community-wide priorities to improve the neighborhood and decrease crime. RT working groups met regularly around these issues.

1. Revitalization of Key Properties
2. Healthcare Access
3. Afterschool Programs
4. Code Compliance
5. Homeless and Prostitution
(later split into separate priorities)
6. Housing Affordability
7. Economic Development

Working with Residents

Resident priorities led to initiatives to improve connections with the Hispanic community, support local schools, and revitalize the community.

Early in the BCJI initiative, despite passing out flyers in the neighborhood and sending notices home with local students, turnout at the Restore Rundberg community meetings was not representative of the large Hispanic community living in Rundberg. OMWB was created in part to help address this gap. Commander Baker wanted to proactively ensure APD officers were interacting with the public to hear their concerns and get their input.

Of the OMWB contacts, 67 percent were with Hispanic residents, matching the demographic makeup of the neighborhood. RT also partnered with Latino Health Care Forum to raise funds to do a health care needs assessment with a focus on the Latino community.

Another major BCJI goal was to improve educational attainment and provide more support to local youth and local schools. The RT held "CEO for a Day" programs pairing business leaders with youth in the community and helped secure funding to support additional service hours by a local community-based agency for youth identified by the school district as at-risk of dropping out.

Restore Rundberg focused efforts to rebrand the area as the Rundberg Educational Advancement District (READ). During the BCJI initiative, READ partnered with the UT to organize more than 2,000 volunteers to clean up areas around a school that were previously littered or unkempt. Two plots of land have since been set aside to build new schools and increase community park space, and one of the READ middle schools led Austin in most improved attendance and grades and decreases in disciplinary incidents.

Meanwhile, the RT, in collaboration with community members and city government, was working on community revitalization. An RT economic development forum brought business leaders, developers, and city officials together to focus efforts on resources to support the Rundberg business community and individuals looking for employment. They joined with UT to work with the District's city council representative to focus greater resources in housing affordability and revitalized four problem properties in the BCJI area.

A Homeless Situation

The BCJI partners developed a strategy to both use vacant land that housed a homeless enclave and provide help to the homeless individuals.

One of the major findings from Springer's analysis of APD crime data for the BCJI initiative was that homeless persons were represented in 44 percent of violent crimes in Rundberg. Many of the homeless persons congregating in the hot-spot areas lived in a large 22-acre open plot

of vacant land where groups of individuals had their own informal property lines. Some of the groups were known by APD to be violent, while others were non-violent and kept to themselves.

The BCJI team was able to collectively develop a long-term strategy to humanely assist the homeless population transition out of the area while also planning a revitalization strategy to use this space in a way that could benefit the neighborhood. The strategy of police coming in with eviction notices was quickly dismissed by members of the RT, who were concerned that this would only lead to the homeless seeking other open spaces in and around the Rundberg? area. Instead, Commander Baker and the RT devised a strategy of a “care team,” where the police worked with social service agencies, mental health provides, and veteran’s programs that provided assessments for the homeless to determine the types of resources each individual had and needed.

“One of our main goals was not to scare the homeless population,” Commander Baker said. “If we came in with eviction notices, we knew the people we wanted to help would scatter and we would not be fixing the problem, only relocating it. To build trust, our officers went out with social workers and brought them food, backpacks, and supplies so we could sit with them to understand their situation and how we might be able to help them.” Some individuals turned down assistance, but out of the 40 individuals assisted, 35 were able to access government resources to find more secure housing.

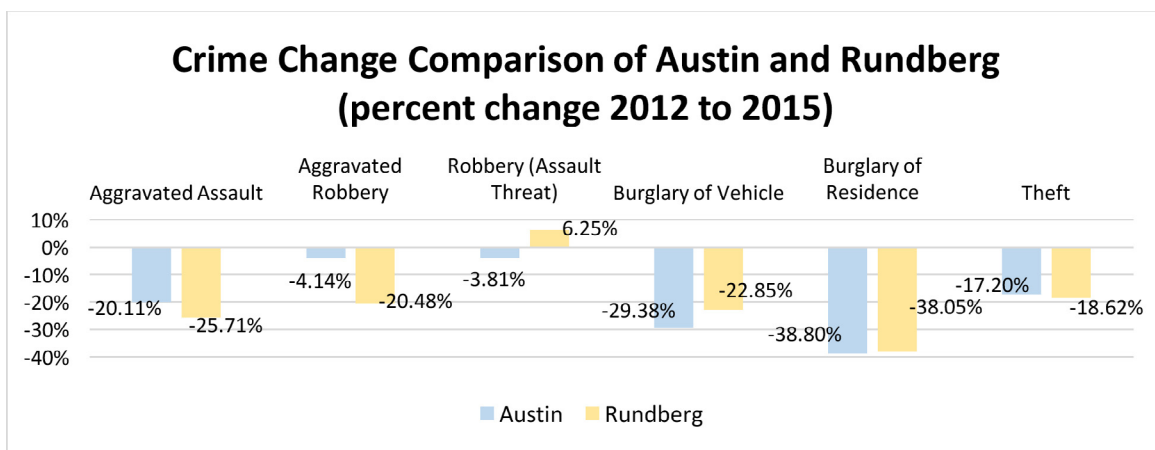
After working with the homeless population, the BCJI team focused on revitalization efforts. APD and the RT requested that the city purchase the land from federal receivership to make it a park. In a setback, the land was

instead sold to IDEA charter school. The RT immediately set up a meeting with the new owners to inform them about the ongoing work of Restore Rundberg, the work they were doing with READ to support youth and educational opportunities in the community, and plans for the land as a safe place for recreational activities for youth and their families. The owners of the charter school were excited about the community involvement, joined the READ initiative, agreed to provide the community access to their school’s planned fields, and sold six acres to the city for a park.

The Impact in the Community

Crime went down in Rundberg, and the BCJI partners learned some lessons about what it takes to build an effective community coalition.

At the inception of the BCJI grant in 2012, 12.58 percent of Austin’s violent crime occurred in Rundberg. The Restore Rundberg BCJI team set a goal to decrease this by one percentage point over the implementation period. They achieved that goal: Rundberg’s percentage of all of Austin’s violent crime decreased to 11.00 percent in 2015. While crime also decreased throughout Austin during the grant period, aggravated assaults and aggravated robbery decreased in Rundberg more than 5 percent and 16 percent, respectively, from citywide data. Moreover, the communities perception of safety also increased. During the initial survey of residents in 2014, only one in three residents indicated they felt safe in their neighborhood. A year later, the number increased by 40 percent, with nearly three-quarters of the residents reporting they felt safe.



To have successes in Rundberg, the BCJI team had to ensure that RT members were on the same page. The research partner evaluated the RT and made these recommendations:

- Formalize policies and procedures regarding participation, processes to handle conflicts, and the requirements for members at the onset of the initiative. During initial meetings, several community members were frustrated that some city officials were appointed to the RT while the neighborhood had to elect its members.
- Clarify the role of the steering committee. At the inception of the BCJI process, RT membership thought it was the decision-making arm of the group because the APD, the official BCJI grantee, had not been clear that the RT's role was advisory only. After clarification, while still frustrated that they were not more active in the decision-making process, the RT's relationship with APD improved.
- Ensure the steering committee has a "bench." Many times people in a leadership role moved positions, left their role, or simply could not regularly attend RT meetings. Having alternatives who can fill in during these moments is critical to ensure that business can be discussed in a timely and complete manner.

Other program issues are still being addressed. For example, the efforts to revitalize the land that had been inhabited by homeless individuals was largely successful: The property now supports a brand new school, community fields, and a park. Yet both the police and the RT were frustrated that local social, mental health, and substance abuse services could not meet the demand for services. Homeless individuals described the area as a "social service desert."

While APD and the RT worked with community-based agencies and city and state government agencies to try to improve transportation alternatives and build a volunteer base to work with the homeless population, there continues to be frustrating gaps in resources as some government stakeholders have not supported programming alternatives promoted by APD and the RT. As the RT continues to address this issue, they realize that greater collaboration with city and state officials is needed to ensure homeless persons have access to necessary services.

Yet the change in perspective and mobilization around issues such as support for homeless persons, greater inclusivity of the Hispanic population, and a recalibration of the goals and strategies of law enforcement to also address perceived areas of violence have created sustainable solutions that will assist the Rundberg area in the years ahead.

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