

East Liberty Revitalization: Crime Reduction Strategy

Between 2008 and 2012, crime in East Liberty's residential neighborhood fell by 49%, and residential housing values rose 120%. This remarkable transformation was driven largely by a crime reduction strategy employed by East Liberty Development (ELDI), in which the organization purchased nuisance properties that were known to be hotbeds of crime.

This white paper, the second in a series of six, explores the theoretical underpinnings of ELDI's crime reduction strategy. From the point of view of a retrospective analysis, we do not claim that ELDI modeled their efforts on these theories, but rather that they help to explain why and how their efforts have been successful. Furthermore, ELDI's initiatives added an innovative twist to existing theories in criminology. These initiatives are of two different types; those related to real estate acquisition and management, and those related to the neighborhood's social characteristics. Both types of initiatives are correlated with the following academic theories.

The first theory that applies to ELDI's strategy is "hot spot"^{1,2} theory; the concept that a very small percentage of physical addresses in a neighborhood are responsible for a disproportionate amount of criminal activity. In a study that came closest to what was happening in East Liberty, 3% of addresses generated 50% of all calls to the police.

In 2006, two ELDI staff lived in the vicinity of the 500 Block of North Negley Avenue, one in East Liberty and the other in Garfield. Each had continuous, daily, personal exposure to crime in the neighborhood and all that such exposure entails. In their experience (and later backed up by crime statistics), most criminal activity occurred on or near a small number of nuisance properties owned by slumlords or which were abandoned. At this point in time, ELDI staff had tried virtually every conventional community development tactic employed in the field, with very few results.

In attempts to ameliorate these issues, the owners of the properties were generally uncooperative, and attempts to alter their behavior through code enforcement efforts did not work. Instead, ELDI decided to target the nuisance properties, or "hot spots" by purchasing them. Using a mix of creative financing, over a five year time period 2008-2012, ELDI was able to acquire approximately 200 property units, or nearly 3% of all rental units in East Liberty. Once these units were purchased, the next step was to figure out what to do with them, which brings us to our next relevant academic theory.

¹ Sherman L, Buerger M, Gartin P (1989a) Repeat call address policing: The Minneapolis RECAP experiment. Washington, DC: Crime Control Institute

² Weisburd DL, Bushway S, Lum C, Yang S (2004) Trajectories of crime at places: a longitudinal study of street segments in the city of Seattle. *Criminology* 42:283-321

The second relevant theory to ELDI's strategy is called "place-based management"³. Place-based initiatives attempt to leverage resources by focusing investments and corrective action measures in targeted places. These measures can be instrumental in changing the culture of disorderly conduct and criminal activities in specific places. Once ELDI acquired these properties, the organization put strong property management in place to enforce already existing rules. Law-abiding residents were not displaced, and residents were much more satisfied with a renewed sense of order.

The use of property-management as a place-based approach to crime reduction is novel in that most crime prevention efforts at hot spots rely on police. The chief limitation of a police-centric approach is that crime returns when the police leave.⁴ ELDI's approach has delivered sustained reductions in crime because, unlike police, effective property management is a constant presence.

These efforts in turn fostered a sense of "collective efficacy"⁵, a third theory that posits that when people feel a sense of social cohesion and belonging, they are more willing to intervene on behalf of the common good. Collective efficacy then helps to encourage informal social controls, which in turn reduce the need for police intervention, and consequently allows for positive social changes to be sustainable. Over the past two decades, ELDI has been instrumental in seeding this community effort through partnerships and collaborations and the use of platforms that put residents in the driver's seat of the decision-making process.

The outcome of ELDI's property acquisition

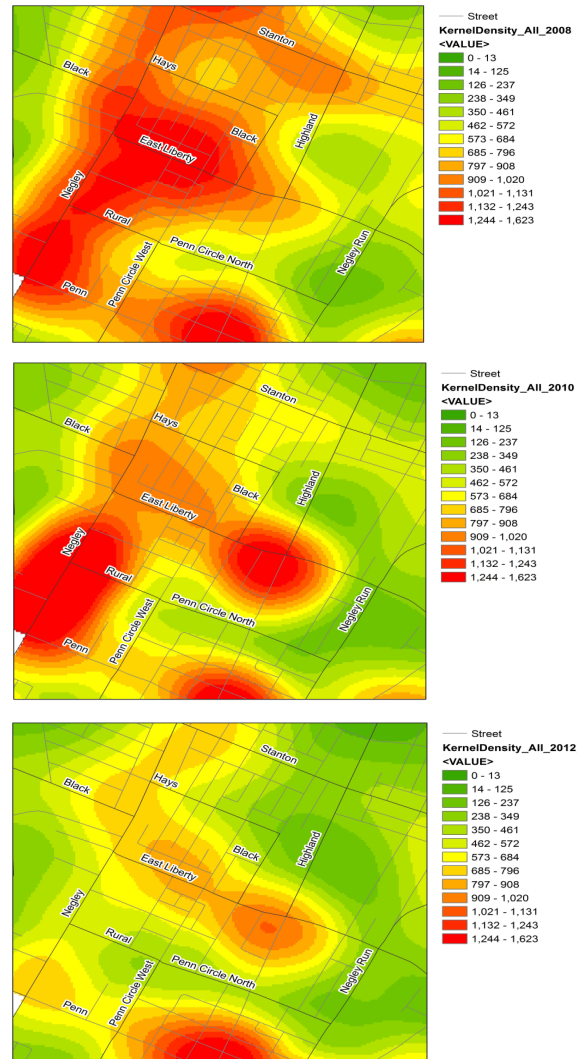


Figure 1a-c: Heat maps showing East Liberty's crime hot spots in 2008, 2010 and 2012.

³ Eck, John E. and Julie Wartell (1999) Reducing Crime and Drug Dealing by Improving Place Management: A Randomized Experiment. Research Preview. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice

⁴ Koper, C.S. (1995) Just Enough Police Presence: optimizing patrol time in crime hot spots. Justice Quarterly, 12(4), 649-672., Sherman 1990

⁵ Sampson, R. J., & Groves, W. B. (1989). Community structure and crime: Testing social-disorganization theory. The American Journal of Sociology, 94, 774-802.

and management strategy, combined with the resulting increased collective efficacy, was an astounding 49% reduction in residential crime in the neighborhood during the period 2008-2012. It is especially noteworthy that these developments occurred in an environment where the median income stagnated and actually declined in real terms and where there was minimal change in the racial composition of the neighborhood. This crime reduction is significantly greater than what occurred, on average, in the City of Pittsburgh during that period, and is also noticeably greater than that observed for comparable neighborhoods in close proximity to East Liberty. The crime reduction results observed in East Liberty mirror those of other research that show that targeting high crime places cuts crime at the targeted place, and does not cause crime to re-emerge elsewhere⁶.

The theoretical underpinnings of the ELDI strategy are sound, and we have shown a high level of correlation between their initiatives and the resulting crime reduction. Our goal is to target another neighborhood in Pittsburgh, with a similar strategy and a rigorous research component. The goal would be to establish beyond a shadow of a doubt whether ELDI's strategy is in fact responsible for the fall in crime incidents.

⁶ Weisburd, D., Telep, C., Displacement of crime and diffusion of crime control benefits in large-scale geographic areas: a systematic review. *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 12/2014; 10(4):515-548. DOI: 10.1007/s11292-014-9208-5.