

CENTER COURT PROJECT

ADDRESSING CRIME AND DISORDER

AT AN APARTMENT COMPLEX

JOLIET POLICE DEPARTMENT, ILLINOIS, 1996

- THE PROBLEM:** A community's residents were concerned with the crime and disorder occurring at Center Court Apartments. A review of the calls for service in the area revealed that over 50% of calls come from these two apartment buildings.
- ANALYSIS:** A more thorough examination of the calls for service revealed that less serious incidents (drinking, loud music, etc.) were caused by residents after work and were determined to be of minor concern to residents and neighbors. The residents were more concerned with the dilapidated condition of the properties. Gang members were responsible for the more serious incidents. In general, the police were taking reports and making arrests without solving the problems.
- RESPONSE:** Officer Roechner made several suggestions to the owner and manager of the properties to reduce crime and disorder. The City found over 100 violations and issued orders for the owner to fix the problems. After 90 days, the owner failed to take action. The City re-inspected the property and gave the owner another 90 days to rectify the problems. A third inspection yielded 37 pages of violations. The City eventually ordered the owner to close both buildings.
- ASSESSMENT:** The owner sold the properties and the residents were temporarily relocated. New owners renovated the interior and exterior of the buildings, fenced and landscaped the property, established security procedures, and reopened the buildings.
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INTRODUCTION

In early 1994, Officer Alan Roechner was assigned to the Cathedral Area of the City of Joliet as a Neighborhood-Oriented Policing Team (NOPT) Officer. The residential area consists of several businesses, a grade school, and a small college. In the easternmost part of the Area there are two apartment buildings: 337 and 339 North Center Street. Both buildings are owned and operated by the same owner and

were named Center Court Apartments. Each building contained twenty-four separate apartments.

SCANNING

After receiving his assignment, Officer Roechner ran a calls for service summary of the entire Area. After reviewing the summary, Roechner noticed that over 50% of the total calls-for-service to the Area were coming from

337 and 339 North Center Street. The most common types of calls were: noise complaints, criminal damage to property and vehicles, domestic troubles, parking complaints, drinking alcohol in parking areas, battery, and gang graffiti. Some of the more serious crimes occurring at the two apartment buildings were: aggravated battery, controlled substance delivery, and sexual abuses and assaults.

One major function of a NOP Officer is attending community meetings, neighborhood meetings, and watch group meetings. At every meeting Roechner attended, the main issue was always the Center Court Apartments.

The neighbors would complain about the loud music and drinking at all hours of the day and night. The immediate neighbors would complain not only about the music and drinking, but also about the drug dealing, gang graffiti, and gunfire in the parking lot.

The neighbors would also complain about the garbage on the property, the high grass, lack of landscaping, and the dilapidated condition of both buildings. The neighbors explained that other problems throughout the neighborhood, such as juvenile problems, thefts, criminal damage, and speeding, were all a direct result of the people and problems at Center Court.

There are six houses and two businesses that directly border the Center Court property. On separate occasions, Roechner interviewed the occupants of each residence, as well as the owners of the businesses and their employees. In each case, the residents and employees explained how bad the crime and noise is from the two buildings and how police are always called but nothing gets done; or, in their opinion, seems to get done. When asked how long this has been going on at the two buildings, some stated two, three, and five, even up to seven years.

After running calls for service for three years previous to Roechner's assignment to the Area, it confirmed that the highest number of calls for the Cathedral Area were, in fact, from Center Court, which received over 250 calls per year.

ANALYSIS

When reviewing hundreds of different calls from both 337 and 339 North Center, it was found that mainly Hispanic residents did most of the less serious activities—like loud music and drinking in the parking lot in the evening after work. The more serious activities or crimes—drug dealing, battery, criminal damage, aggravated discharge of firearms, and sexual assaults—were done mainly by the gang members living in the buildings and in the area to the east of the buildings.

Due to the fact that members of four rival gangs were living in the two buildings, a lot of the graffiti and criminal damage was done to mark gang territory; while the shooting and batteries were done to show power and as well as mark territory, and the drug dealing was done for profit.

After receiving all of this information from Area residents and calls-for-service, Roechner decided to speak to the manager and residents of both 337 and 339 North Center. The manager felt that there was not a lot of crime or illegal activity going on at the buildings when he is working during the day. The manager, however, lives in one of the buildings and stated there is a lot of activity there at night.

Most residents said they were used to the loud music, drinking, and other crimes. Their real concerns were the care and maintenance, or lack thereof, at both buildings. The residents were also upset about the damage to their cars and property. The residents stated that whenever police were called they would drive through the lots, take reports and, sometimes, make arrests, but nothing was done to really solve the problems and prevent them reoccurring. The people would also report maintenance and bug problems to the owner; however, nothing was done to correct the problems.

Both neighbors and building residents considered the dilapidated condition of the interior and exterior of both buildings a major contributor to the crime problems because these conditions made it look like the owner did not care about the buildings or to whom he rented.

At least 75% of the people living in the buildings were known gang members, or gang associates, with criminal histories.

RESPONSE

After attending numerous community meetings and speaking with immediate neighbors and residents of the Area about the problems at Center Court, Roechner decided to set up a meeting with the owner and his manager. At the meeting, he outlined to the owner the seriousness of the numerous calls for service and community complaints about his buildings.

The owner said he had no control over what type of crime went on in his buildings but asked what he could do to help. Roechner suggested several things that needed to be done at both buildings to lower the criminal activity, deter crime, and eventually eliminate crime. For example, all exit and entrance doors to both buildings were always left open and had no locks.

Roechner asked if locks could be placed on all doors and only residents be given keys or, possibly, a buzzer system installed because the buildings were accessible by anyone at any time, making it easy for the gang members to conduct drug sales in the building and its basement.

Then Roechner asked the owner if he was willing to sign a trespass agreement with the City. He explained that this meant officers could arrest people on the property, who do not belong there. Roechner informed him that, in order for officers to know who did or did not belong, the owner would have to (along with his manager) set up a pass system for visitors and give officers a valid tenant list.

This system would help keep unwanted subjects off of the property. Along with the pass system for visitors, Roechner explained that a vehicle pass should be given to visitors for their vehicles, and parking stickers and spaces should be given to residents. For this to work, the owner would have to sign a towing agreement. This would enable the manager or an officer to have a vehicle in the lot towed if it did not have a pass or sticker.

Another suggestion was to build a fence around the property so access would be limited, therefore making it more difficult for would be criminals to congregate on or pass through the property.

Perhaps the most important thing Roechner requested of the owner was to do tenant screening. He pointed out that his tenants had not been screened; the majority were known gang members and/or known criminals. Tenant screening would allow him to get criminal histories on all of his prospective clients, which would help him decide to whom to rent.

Roechner also informed him that when owners tell their prospective tenants they are doing criminal history checks through the City, the good people would still tend to apply while most bad people will not.

When the owner left the meeting, he said he would get started on the visitor pass system, vehicle pass system, the towing agreement, and the tenant checks. The owner said that, in order for him to implement these changes, he would first have to notify all of his tenants of the changes.

Roechner believed that if the owner and his manager listened to the ideas and followed through on them, the crime and illegal activity at the Apartments would decrease. For example, with the visitor pass system in place, it would make it a lot easier for officers to arrest unwanted subjects for trespassing. Because those who went to the apartments to hang out and drink or cause problems usually were not visiting any residents and, therefore, could not get a legitimate visitor's pass, they could now be arrested before criminal activity occurred.

About a month after Roechner's meeting with the owner, the towing agreement had been signed and posted, the passes for visitors and vehicles were printed, and the owner started doing tenant screening. Roechner thought this was great, and that the owner really wanted to stop crime at his buildings and make them a better place for people to live. Only to find out this was definitely not the case.

In fact, after months of monitoring the situation, it seemed that the biggest challenge to improvement was the owner himself. Although the owner had signed the towing and trespass agreements, put up signs, and made up the visitor passes and vehicle passes, he did not follow through on any of these: his manager did not give the passes out, he did not tow vehicles, and he was not doing the tenant screening.

The results of my Roechner's responses thus far, as you can see, were less than favorable, so he decided to respond in a different way documenting all the complaints in reference to the condition of the two buildings. This included electrical problems, plumbing problems, sewer problems, rodent and cockroach problems, and problems tenants were having getting things fixed.

Building code violations were also documented. Roechner provided all of this documentation to the owner and explained that if these issues were not addressed, City Inspectors would be notified. The owner said everything would be fixed.

After a month with no action from the owner, Roechner went to Neighborhood Services and to the Director of Building Inspections for the City (Neighborhood services is the Department of the City that inspects all rental property). He shared the tenant complaints and his personal observations with both Departments. The Director of Building Inspections then set up an inspection.

After this inspection was completed, over 100 building code and safety violations were found at the two buildings. The City had a copy of the violations hand-delivered to the owner, who was given a reasonable amount of time to have the violations corrected.

A month-and-a-half had passed; Roechner noticed no work was being done at either building to correct the violations. Consequently, he informed the Director of Inspections of this and he set up a second inspection. During the second inspection, the Inspector confirmed nothing had been fixed. The owner was then given 30 days to fix all major violations and 60

days to fix all other violations, or the City would close the buildings down.

During the entire time the inspections were being done, the owner refused to work with Roechner to stop the criminal activity at the buildings.

After 90 days had passed since the second inspection and nothing had been fixed, a meeting was set up with the City Manager, the Director of Community and Economic Development, Director of Neighborhood Services, Deputy City Manager, and the City Attorney.

During the meeting, Roechner explained to everyone that for the past year-and-a-half the owner had refused to help address the crime related problems at his two buildings. He also explained that, since the first two health and safety inspections, nothing had been fixed and the condition of the buildings had gotten worse. The City Manager then instructed Neighborhood Services to do a complete inspection of both buildings.

After the third building inspection was complete, a total of 37 pages of violations were found in both buildings. After all the violations were reviewed by Inspectors, the City Manager and the City Attorney, it was decided that the worst of the two buildings should be closed and all of its occupants relocated.

The owner, correcting all maintenance, and health and safety violations, could then rehabilitate the building. Once the first building was done and had passed all inspections, it would receive its Certificates of Occupancy and could reopen. Then the second building could be closed and rehabilitated in the same manner.

The owner was given two weeks to close the first building and relocate all occupants. During these two weeks, Roechner and Officer Sova went to the building several times and made several phone calls to other apartment buildings to help relocate the tenants. By the end of the two weeks, they were able to find homes for all those who needed our help. The owner said he

would have the building ready to reopen in 30 days.

Well, 30 days passed, and then 30 more, and the building was not finished; in fact, it was in the same condition it was in 60 days before. The City Manager held another meeting and it was decided that the second building should be closed. Officer Sova, and myself as before, used the next two weeks to help relocate those who needed help finding places to stay. When the two weeks were up, all of the residents were relocated to new residences.

ASSESSMENT

The owner, since closing both buildings, sold them to two lawyers from Chicago. All former residents have relocated but, if they wish, are welcome to reapply for a lease at the newly re-christened, affordable Cathedral Hill Apartments.

It has been approximately seven months since the two buildings at 337 and 339 North Center were closed. In that time, the new owners have put over \$1,000,000 into the rehabilitation of both buildings. The interiors and exteriors have been completely repaired and renovated, and the property is now fenced, repaved, landscaped and properly lighted.

The new owners are working very closely with Police, City Inspectors, and the City Manager to make the apartments a safe and healthy place for people to live. And the Cathedral Area community, especially the buildings' immediate neighbors, is ecstatic.