

# **Forest Park: Rebuilding the Community From the Ground Up**



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## Abstract

The concept of community policing was introduced to the Joliet Police Department in the early 1990s. Since that time, it has been expanded to include twenty-five areas and sub-areas, thirty-two officers, two sergeants and one lieutenant. The designated "Neighborhood Oriented Policing Team" (NOPT) areas are those that have the most frequent and serious calls throughout the city. As a NOPT officer, I was assigned to what could arguably be called the worst of all these areas.

At one time this area was a working class neighborhood, but time and changing economics have distorted this portrait to the point where the only thing that could be considered "working" today is the local drug trade. After attempting to identify the root causes of the most pressing problems, I learned that there were three failures within the area: low educational attainment and job skills, little attention to property maintenance, and few activities for youth.

I felt that the most pressing activity was to set up base within the community, and begin to familiarize myself with the community residents. Once this was accomplished, I started to consult with residents on how I could help them empower themselves and make their own improvements. With the assistance of the community center staff, I was able to link several residents to GED classes, employment programs, and other activities both within the center and at other agencies.

Beyond personal growth, I utilized City ordinances and codes to enforce property maintenance by all residents. This tool was quite valuable in both improving the appearance of the area, but also improving the pride of residents in their community. Finally, I helped develop a playground near the community center for children to enjoy.

The improvements have made a significant difference in many residents' lives. There is rarely a day when a resident does not approach me and either ask for assistance or thank me for helping the community. A few years ago, these actions would have been unthinkable by many residents, who sincerely distrusted the police. Their willingness to help me to assist them has been instrumental in the success of all the projects I have initiated and assisted with. By attacking the problems on several levels, I was able to make an impact for many residents, rather than a select few. I look forward to the development of new projects, and have already planned several for the near future.

When initially assigned as a Neighborhood Oriented Policing Officer to the Forest Park area, around January of 1997, I knew that my work was cut out for me. Once a vibrant, working community, it had become run down over time to the point where it was essentially dead to the rest of the city. Since most businesses refused to remain in such a forlorn area, the only real enterprises developing involved drug dealing. Community members were either passive or aggressive participants in these activities, or were too afraid to speak out against them.

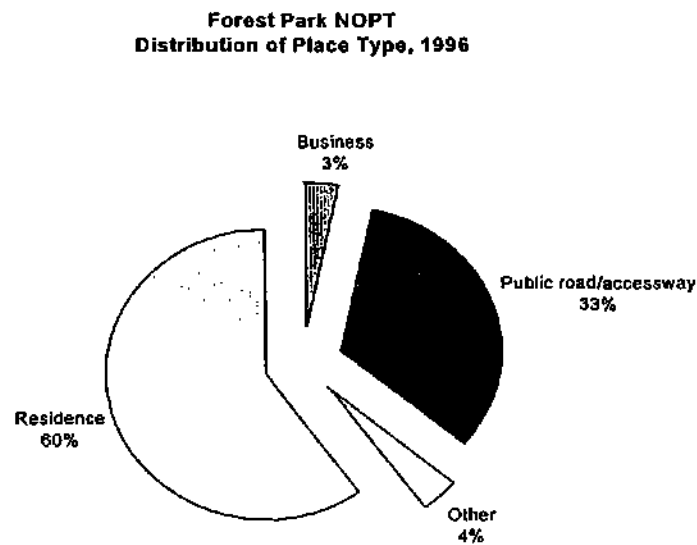
I am a member of our police department's Neighborhood Oriented Policing Team (NOPT). My regular assignment is to one small area that has been identified through crime statistics and experience to be a hot spot for criminal activity. Rather than participate in regular patrol, we have been specially trained to perform community policing and problem solving techniques on a full-time basis. These particular projects were initiated in January of 1997 at the Forest Park NOPT area.

In order to gain a deep understanding of the community's issues, I spent a lot of time interviewing residents, making my presence known in the neighborhood, and becoming involved in community activities. After assessing the situation, I found several key issues that, if addressed, might alleviate some of these deeply rooted problems, and perhaps turn the tide away from criminal practices.

The current system for analyzing data is limiting in its capacity. Data concerning the calls for service in the area for 1996 provided an introductory picture of the extent of the problems in the Forest Park area. First of all, the distribution of calls for service for the area indicated that there were a total of 1067 calls for service in 1996. Of these, Violent crimes were eleven percent (11%), Other crimes were fifty-eight percent (58%), and Service calls were thirty-one percent (31%).

The types of crimes that were occurring most frequently were found to be Alarm calls (112, or 10.4%); Domestic incidents (106, or 10%); Suspicious incidents (64, or 6%); Abandoned vehicles (61, or 5.7%); and Disturbances (61, or 5/7%).

Another important factor was where the crimes were occurring. Since there are few businesses in the area, I assumed that the majority of crimes would be within residences. This was found to be true, as the following pie chart indicates.



By speaking with community members, especially victims of crime, I was able to develop a further understanding of the interaction between victim, offender and place. The great majority of victims are female, Black, single mothers with two or more children, most of whom are on some form of public aid. Offenders are often live-in boyfriends that have ties to gangs and drugs. Since Forest Park is mostly residential, most crime scenes are housed within public housing or special residences designated as Section 8.

Although many crimes may be reported infrequently, residents felt that the most pressing ones are domestic battery, theft, child abuse, drug trafficking and truancy. Most of the

complaints come from concerned homeowners that live in the surrounding area. They see more than the police because they are around more often, and have the opportunity to view the car and foot traffic coming in and out, and can differentiate between who lives in the area and who does not.

I found that the most pressing issue is the two-pronged problem of gangs and drugs. Not only is drug dealing illegal, but a whole host of additional problems surface as a result. Further discussion with community members has lead me to believe that several things combine in this neighborhood to provide the perfect resting ground for criminal behavior.

Many of the so-called "boyfriends" deal drugs right out of his girlfriend's house. She usually knows this is going on, but is hesitant to do anything about it because she gains a sense of value through his perceived status within the community as a gang member, as well as the fact that it is an added income. Ironically, she sees very little, if any, of the money that the boyfriend may make on his drug sales. Instead, she often becomes a victim of domestic violence when her boyfriend becomes drunk or high. Many women have told me that violence occurs many times when a boyfriend expects to be treated like a "king", while his girlfriend refuses to take on a subservient role. This in turn perpetuates her low self-esteem, which eventually negatively influences her children's attitudes and behavior as well. Her self worth becomes so low that she does not see the futility in trying to keep a boyfriend who does not really love her or the kids that he did not father.

Beyond interpersonal issues, the immediate environment was also a significant contributing factor to the crime and disorder within the community. A multitude of opportunistic real estate developers had bought available properties, renovated them just enough to make them legally inhabitable as well as eligible for Section 8 status, and then rented them out. The typical

scenario goes as follows: the tenant moves in initially only with her children. Soon her boyfriend, who has some ties to gangs and drugs, moves in, and then takes over the household. After some time, things in the apartment start to fall apart, but the slumlord does not bother to come to the apartment to fix anything. The building then becomes run down, gangs move into the area and take over the building.

Drug sales increase traffic in the area, which in turn becomes run down. The people in these areas become lost in their own community. They do not know how to interact with people outside of their community, so they depend upon the only activity they are familiar with: selling or using drugs and alcohol.

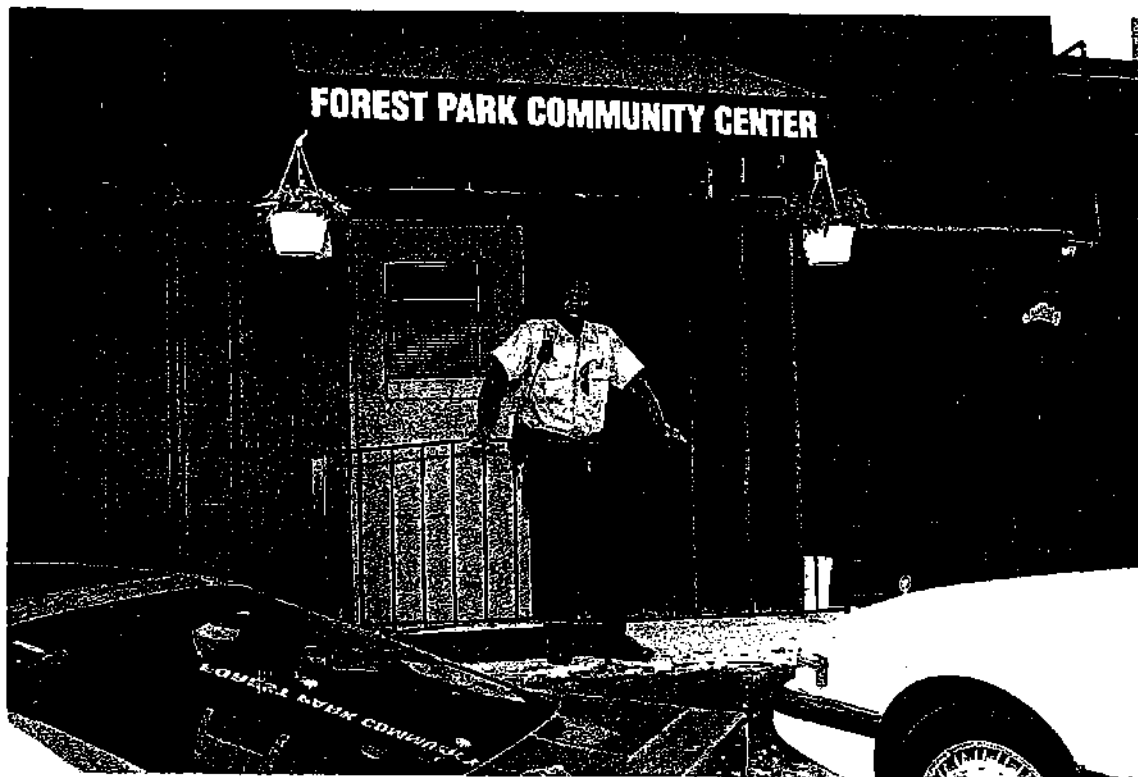
This collaboration between drugs, crime and gangs eventually begins to become evident in the community. People start hanging out on the corner selling drugs and blocking traffic. There are very few constructive activities for the children and young adults. Many young adults fail to earn a high school education or GED and have limited job skills. Pride in the area declines, which subsequently encourages a lot of properties to become run down as well.

Instead of one intervention designed to address several problems, I decided to try several different approaches. I felt that my most productive activity would be to wake the people up to the fact there their lives could be better, that they could be a working part of the city. Through the analysis that I conducted to understand the roots of the problems, I believed that my goal could be accomplished through helping community members help themselves. This included improvements in education levels, job skills, property maintenance, and the development of constructive activities for youth.

Beyond the immediate benefits to these improvements, expected outcomes were also community members' higher self-esteem, increased pride in their neighborhood, and recognition

that they do not need drug dealers or users in their life or the lives of their children. I strongly believe that when a person holds their head up and says "I made a difference in my community", their positive attitude tends to become infectious, and snowballs to include other families in the community. Eventually the majority of residents will gain control of their neighborhood, and become intolerant of crime.

My first plan of action was to establish a base within the community. I was able to do this in probably the most appropriate site in the neighborhood: the Forest Park Community Center. By working directly out of this office, I have had a chance to talk and work with many people in the community, and perhaps develop relationships much more quickly. When I ask the people that come to the center what do they want out of life, many respond that they want a good paying job. Unfortunately, their lack of education and job skills precludes them from attaining this goal. In fact, just about ninety percent of the people did not complete high school, and most of them never had a job in their life.





With assistance from community center staff, I have been able to assist them in enrolling in either GED classes, or finishing their diploma if they only need a few credits. By doing this, I am hoping that residents will become qualified for better paying jobs, thus reducing their passive or aggressive participation in criminal activities, [n addition, by knowing how important education is, parents may be more encouraging to their children in terms of remaining in school.

Another priority has been to develop a playground for the children. I have encouraged residents to lobby for a site in their neighborhood. In addition, I have worked closely with the City of Joliet and the Joliet Park District in attaining adequate funds, choosing an appropriate site, and ensuring the safety of all potential users. The development of this park would serve a multitude of purposes: increase pride in the community, provide a forum for constructive activities for children, and boost self esteem of residents by showing that the City is concerned with their needs, and have not abandoned hope.



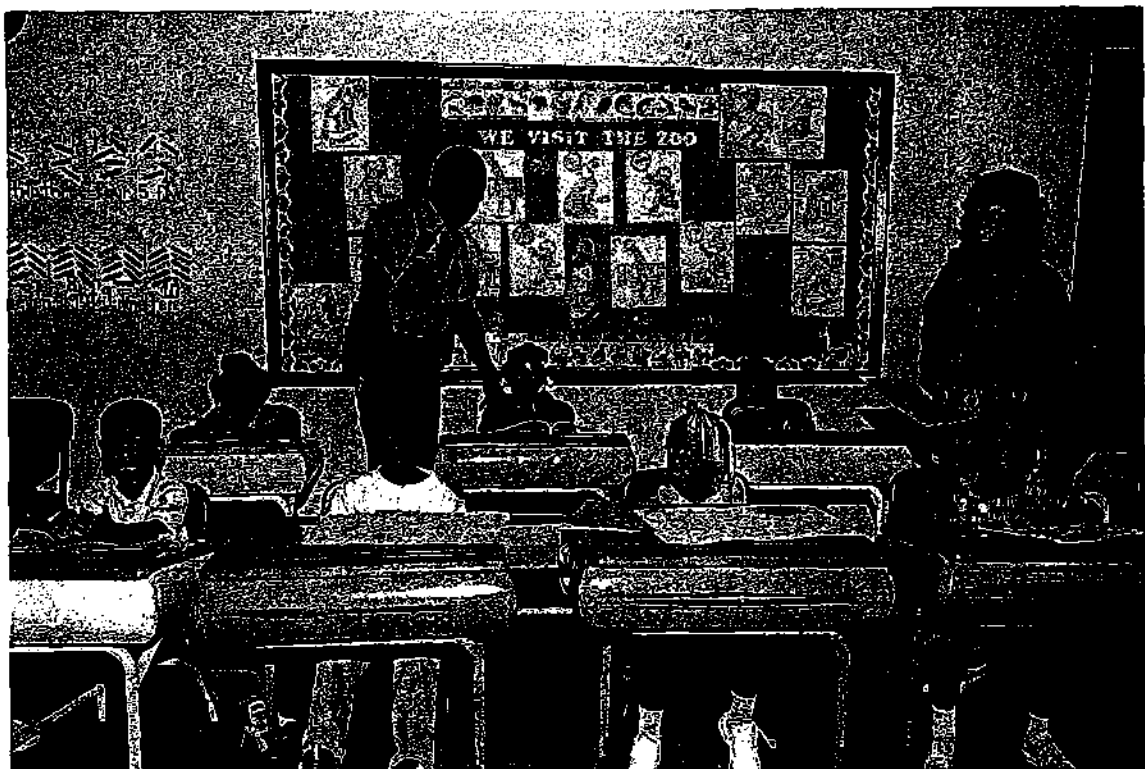
Piggybacking on the neighborhood improvement theme, I have been able to utilize existing city ordinances to encourage all residents to have pride in their surroundings. As a police officer, I have the authority to issue compliance tickets for any private property that is not well maintained. This can include junk cars and an overabundance of trash. I was able to partner with an inspector from the City Neighborhood Services Department to inspect private yards in the community. Homeowners that have obvious violations are issued warnings in which they have five days to clean up the yard, or move the cars. After the five days, if the cars or trash is still there, a compliance ticket, and an accompanying fine, is issued.



Since private properties are not the only areas which have accumulated trash and contribute to the general deterioration of the community, I have been fortunate to develop a

relationship with the courts of Will, Cook and DuPage. An arrangement has been forged in which the courts send people assigned to community service hours to the community center, and the community center director, along with myself, track all hours that they work. Persons assigned to community service have assisted tremendously in cleaning up public properties and contributing to the general improvement of the community.

These many interventions may be very successful in improving the community, but another important aspect is prevention of future deterioration. My contribution to this has been to develop close, trusting relationships with as many community members as possible. In pursuing this goal, I hold regularly scheduled discussions with the community center pre-school class. I talk with the children all the time about right and wrong, good and bad. Over time, the children have come to trust and respect me as a person and a police officer, and are not afraid to talk to me at any time.

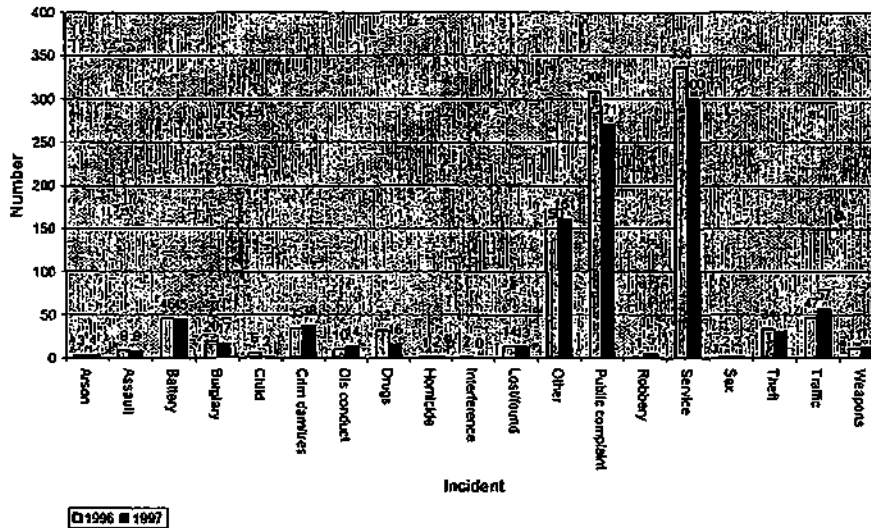


In addition, the trust the children develop tends to rub off on their parents as well, many of whom have come to talk to me about a variety of issues, including things going on in the community, jobs, and school. Finally, if there is a problem with members of Forest Park community being on parole or probation, they are usually referred to the Forest Park Center for guidance. I speak with them one-on-one, in an attempt to get them to be a positive member of the community, and encourage them to refrain from criminal activities.

In the past year, I have found that my efforts are greatly appreciated by many community members. Every day I am greeted with a grateful parent for helping to bring the playground into their community, or an elderly woman that is no longer afraid to sit on her porch in the evening. The qualitative evidence that my approaches have been successful is overwhelming and plentiful. However, statistics also assist in demonstrating the deep impact that I have been able to make in this community.

The following data compares calls for service for 1996, before I was assigned to the area, and 1997. Overall, there were seventy-one fewer calls for service in 1997 than in 1996. The few increases that occurred during this time period are very slight. The chart below illustrates the trends for types of incidents.

**Forest Park NOPT  
Incident Type by Year, 1996 and 1997**



As can be seen, there were some significant decreases in calls for service, including drugs, public complaints, and thefts. The only real increases were found with other crimes, and traffic.

In terms of individual projects, quantitative data also suggests that my efforts, even in this short amount of time, have experienced some success.

- Six young adults have earned their high school diploma, and another thirteen adults earned their GED in 1997.
- An additional fourteen persons are still working toward their degree.
- All equipment has been purchased for the playground, and is scheduled to be installed in June of 1998.
- After issuing over 50 warnings, the neighborhood's appearance is greatly improved.
- Over two hundred people have completed their community service by cleaning up public spaces as well as making improvements on the community center and local churches.
- Discussion sessions are held with pre-schoolers at the community center at least once a week on various topics.
- I have personally consulted with over twenty parolees/probationers on remaining crime-free.

This data, collected only a year after I began working with the Forest Park area, indicates that my efforts have had a significant impact on the lives of residents as well as victims and

perpetrators. Plans have already been laid for the continuation of my current efforts as well as the development of new activities. In 1998 and 1999, a multi-purpose center is expected to be constructed. This new site will include a gymnasium, stage, and rooms to hold banquets, and serve a multitude of recreational and communal purposes. Eventually it is hoped that his center can become self-sufficient, through fees collected from banquet rentals.

The second major project in which I have been an active participant is the development of a strip mall within the area. Since there have been so many improvements in the past few years, businesses are no longer hesitant to develop in the area, and see the potential in providing services to the community. These two projects are expected to revitalize the community even further, and perhaps serve as a model for other communities within the City of Joliet, and the rest of the country. In the coming months, I hope to continue the important work that I have started, and to even develop new projects, as the need for them becomes more evident.