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EXPLAINER

LESSONS FROM TACOMA

April 2024



Background

When cities encounter threats to public safety, particularly those related to youth violence, it underscores the crucial need for a comprehensive blueprint to enhance community safety. Cities nationwide have successfully reduced crime and improved perceptions of safety by engaging a diverse range of stakeholders in coordinated planning and implementation of evidence-based, community-centered solutions.

In 2023, the R Street Institute partnered with the City of Tacoma to provide research and expertise regarding community safety and effective solutions. This was at a time when violent crime rates were reaching all-time highs in the community. As part of this collaboration, we conducted a series of key stakeholder interviews and reviewed a variety of local studies, reports, crime statistics, and news sources. Insights from those efforts were integrated with research and best practices from across the nation. The outcome was a set of informed, localized recommendations to guide Tacoma in addressing safety challenges faced by its residents and neighborhoods.

Crafting an effective strategy can be complex. It requires understanding the unique factors of a specific community, identifying strategies that already exist, and establishing both short- and long-term solutions. In addition, community safety cannot be addressed by government entities alone; the undertaking requires collaborative efforts involving key stakeholders, community leaders, and citizens committed to a safer city. It also requires an openness to innovative approaches. This includes avoiding overreliance on increased incarceration and acknowledging the potential negative consequences that come with it.

Thorough analysis and consideration led to the findings presented below. For additional details on these recommendations, refer to the final report at <http://cityoftacoma.org/safertogether>.

Recommendations

Strengths and Successes to Build Upon

- Sustain an unwavering, communitywide commitment to and investment in safety
- Expand cross-agency collaborative efforts
- Address socioeconomic, behavioral health, and other root causes to prevent future crime
- Address environmental factors promoting criminal opportunity
- Leverage and expand the Whole Child framework
- Develop opportunities for youth outside of school
- Prioritize resources and reduce crime through behavioral health support and rehabilitation

Areas of Opportunity

- Foster hope amidst hopelessness
- Define what “success” looks like
- Collect data to guide strategic decision making
- Explore public-private partnerships and streamline funding
- Focus prevention efforts on the most at-risk populations
- Use credible messengers to engage at-risk youth in choosing a more positive lifestyle
- Navigate state-level policy changes together
- Empower community members as collaborators in public safety
- Build, heal, and repair relationships with law enforcement



Gaps in Programming and Policy

- Collect data and ensure transparency to guide action steps
- Shift perception and engage community in finding solutions
- Focus on family violence
- Support evidence-based violence-reduction program:



Group violence intervention: A coordinated, proactive strategy addressing gun violence through collaboration between law enforcement and the community via a three-pronged anti-violence message of accountability, hope, and consequences



Juvenile deflection: Provides young people with an individually tailored treatment plan (in lieu of arrest) in an effort to avoid the negative downstream effect of formal system involvement



Prevention of retaliatory violence: Initiatives like a trauma recovery center or hospital-based intervention program that provide resources to victims of crime to reduce the chances of retaliation



Collaborative management program: A program that brings together agencies and services for at-risk, high-systems-use youth and families



Restorative justice: An alternative approach to the traditional criminal or juvenile justice system focused on repairing harm and restoring relationships

Tacoma stands to benefit significantly from investing in and leveraging its current successes and should also look to new solutions. Economic and environmental root causes should be considered. The City of Tacoma government cannot do this work alone. A thoughtful and community-centered approach is necessary, with the city providing the vision, leading the charge, and supporting the work with time, resources, and policies, when appropriate.

Organizations Represented in Interviews

- Tacoma City Council
- Pierce County Council
- Pierce County Juvenile Court
- Pierce County Family Council
- Tacoma-Pierce County—Eastside Family Resource Center
- The Big Homie Program
- Imagine Justice Project
- Metro Parks Tacoma
- Tacoma Neighborhood and Community Services
- Pierce County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office
- Tacoma Police Department
- Tacoma Fire Department
- Tacoma Public Schools

For more information, please contact:

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