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TECHNICAL REPORT

Neighborhood Effects on Crime and Youth Violence

The Role of Business Improvement Districts in Los Angeles

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Summary

Despite declines in youth violence nationally in the past decade, incidence of youth violence and victimization—from assaults to homicide—continue to be a pressing public-safety and public-health concern. Youth violence is also a particular concern for low-income, minority communities, where poverty, family instability, and unemployment provide a fertile context for gangs and illicit drug markets. Due to public-safety and public-health effects of youth violence and the documented association between community socioeconomic conditions and violence, both public-safety and public-health officials and researchers have invested heavily in developing and examining community-level responses to youth violence. While some of these community-level approaches have shown evidence of effectiveness, they are often expensive, difficult to sustain, and hard to replicate. It is worthwhile then to consider community-level interventions and activities that might address underlying environmental conditions that facilitate youth violence rates in communities.

In this report, RAND investigators examined the impact of business improvement districts (BIDs) on crime and youth violence in Los Angeles (L.A.). BIDs are self-organizing, local public-private organizations that collect assessments and invest in local-area service provisions and activities, such as place promotion, street cleaning, and public safety. Such activities can contribute to community-level attributes that might reduce crime and youth violence by increasing informal social control, reducing visible signs of disorder and blight, improving order maintenance, and providing enriched employment opportunities by facilitating overall improvements in the local business environment.

In Chapter One, we review the literature on community characteristics that are associated with elevated rates of youth violence. In this review, we highlight the key theoretical constructs, such as neighborhood perceptions of collective efficacy and social capital and physical and social disorder that have been empirically associated with crime and violence. We then describe the limited research suggesting that well-functioning BIDs appear to directly affect community-level attributes of crime and violence. We conclude this chapter with a detailed description of our study setting and the location of BIDs in Los Angeles and methods used to assess their effects on youth violence and crime more generally.

Chapter Two provides a descriptive analysis of the budget data, as well as results from in-depth interviews with BID officials that catalog the differences in the priorities and functions of BIDs in Los Angeles. We find that a wide range of BIDs are observable in Los Angeles, from downtown BIDs focused on disorder, crime, and cleanliness with annual budgets in the millions to small BIDs with very little operating capital from which to generate measurable community impacts. In terms of our theoretical model, we are most interested in those BIDs focused on activities more likely to reduce crime and violence than others. In this chapter, we

describe the BIDs in terms of their public safety (or *social control*), beautification (or *broken windows*), and marketing (or *place promotion*). These three domains encapsulate key proximal factors associated with levels of crime and violence in BID areas. We also assess BIDs' capacity to mobilize resources for their neighborhoods by examining the organizational and government relationships of the BIDs. We theorize that BIDs most likely to affect crime and youth violence will be those that devote considerable resources to public safety, beautification, and marketing while also having substantial connections to other organizations and local government service providers. We examine the proportion of BID spending on beautification, marketing, and public safety and note no statistically significant differences by demographic or household-income characteristics of their adjoining communities.

Chapter Three presents a limited systematic social observation of BID areas that focused on examining the variation in BIDs and their relationship with aspects of the social and physical environment (as measured by signs of social and physical disorder), as well as their relationship with community-level household and income characteristics measured by the decennial census. Our analysis of these data suggests that systematic variation in the physical signs of blight and social disorder exists between BIDs. Some BIDs are characterized by visible signs of trash, abandoned cars, and idle adults and teens congregating in public spaces, while other BIDs have no physical signs of blight or other indicators of community-level disorder or disinvestment. We also find that BIDs with more signs of social disorder also have, on average, lower household incomes within their residential populations and spend greater shares of their budgets on crime prevention and public safety, suggesting that these BIDs are responding to the environments in which they are situated.

Chapter Four gives results from a multilevel analysis of interview data collected by youth and caregivers in selected households in BID and comparison-group neighborhoods. The multilevel analysis links individual household features to neighborhood environmental measures to examine the effects of BIDs on the incidence of youth violence. The results from this cross-sectional analysis indicate that youth living in BIDs experience no difference in their exposure to youth violence in their neighborhoods than do youth living in comparison neighborhoods. A comparison of differences between individual BIDs and comparison neighborhoods suggests that the exposure to youth violence is not significantly lower in BIDs that spend a higher share of their resources on public safety. Consistent with other research, however, this analysis finds that individual household- and neighborhood-level features are independently associated with the incidence of youth violence. For example, youth living in households whose parents are immigrants to the United States are significantly less likely to experience violent victimizations than are youth from nonimmigrant households living in the same neighborhoods with similar socioeconomic status. These findings suggest that immigrant households act as a protective mechanism even in distressed neighborhoods, where the exposure to youth violence is a more prevalent reality. *Neighborhood collective efficacy*—or the willingness of residents to engage their neighbors and participate in community well-being—is also associated with a reduced incidence of youth violence. The associations between neighborhood collective efficacy and youth violence hold even after we take into account neighborhood-level differences in age compositions, poverty, population density, and violent-crime rates as reported by the police in prior years. Perceptions of problems with physical and social disorder in one's neighborhood is only slightly associated with youth violence.

Chapter Five presents an analysis of the relationship between the implementation of BIDs and changes in officially reported crimes. The analysis focuses on the associations between the

eventual adoption of a BID in an area and the change in several reported crime outcomes, with a specific focus on violent crimes that are most likely to be experienced by youth and young adults. The results from this analysis indicate that BIDs have marginal effects on reducing total violent-crime rates but *are associated with significantly larger-than-expected reductions in robbery rates*. Consistent with the description of BID budget data and visual observations of BID areas, the effects of BIDs vary by BID location and appear to be strongest in BIDs that place a greater focus on public safety or have undergone significant economic development.

Chapter Six provides a summary and conclusion from these baseline data and analyses as they relate to BIDs' efforts at creating sustainable community-level change. At baseline, the data indicate wide variation in the characteristics of BID areas. The baseline analysis of household interviews compares BID to non-BID residents exposed to neighborhoods with similar community characteristics. It is, therefore, not surprising to find that BIDs do not exhibit consistent effects on youth violence, since we have placed a very conservative test of BID effects on these baseline data. By contrast, the longitudinal analysis of official crime reports that compares the rates of violent crime before and after the adoption of BIDs finds more positive effects of BIDs in lowering the rate of interpersonal crimes of violence and, in particular, robbery than of property or total reported felony crimes. In general, the results from this report provide mixed support for BIDs' effects on violence prevention. It is clear from this study that the simple adoption of a BID itself is not enough to produce systemic change in community conditions and foster reductions in youth violence. BIDs that are active and have enough capital to hire private security, clean streets of trash and debris, and organize with city service agencies to address merchant or property-owner concerns about community needs are more effective agents of community-level change. Whether these activities translate into lasting community-level effects and reductions in youth violence will be part of an ongoing research effort as this study moves into the future and examines the relationship between BID activities and neighborhood-level changes related to economic opportunities, disorder and blight, collective efficacy, and youth violence rates in subsequent years.