

Introduction

In August of 2006, RALLY was asked by Baptist Community Ministries (BCM) to expand its pilot needs assessment conducted for the Department of Justice's Weed and Seed project in May and June of 2006. The pilot demonstrated the viability of household assessments and resulted in validation of a number of questionnaire items and scales. This expanded needs assessment both increased the sample size of the household survey conducted earlier in Central City and fine-tuned a diagnosis of needs in the Hoffman Triangle area by over-sampling in that part of the neighborhood.

Recovery Action Learning Laboratory

The Recovery Action Learning Laboratory (RALLY) is a not-for-profit corporation created to support evidence-based decision making in disaster and recovery settings. RALLY focuses in particular on providing information in support of the nonprofit sector and also emphasizes primary data collection in the post-Katrina setting.

RALLY was born from early efforts by Tulane faculty and students to respond to recovery planning and intervention needs. Several Tulane graduates form the core team of RALLY. RALLY began conducting neighborhood assessments in New Orleans in early October of 2005. Since then, RALLY has contracted and collaborated with a number of nonprofit organizations in New Orleans.

History of Central City

Central City is a neighborhood of New Orleans nestled between the core of downtown New Orleans and the historic Garden District. Because of its

location “behind” St. Charles Avenue with respect to the river, it was referred to in the past as the “back of town.”

Formerly a large swampy area on the outskirts of New Orleans, 3-10 feet below sea level, what is now referred to as “Central City” New Orleans was developed early in the 19th century. The area directly behind the affluent St. Charles Avenue was developed first in response to the opening of the New Orleans & Carrollton Railway (later named the St. Charles Avenue Streetcar.) Originally, this neighborhood was a center of commerce surrounding the New Basin Canal and was populated mostly by working class Irish, Italian and German immigrants. However, with the conclusion of the American Civil War, many African Americans from rural areas settled in this part of the city extending the urbanized area all the way back to Claiborne Avenue¹.

This present day Central City now extends beyond South Claiborne into what is now known as the Hoffman Triangle. The paradigm of typical New Orleans architecture, the majority of houses in Central City were built in the “shotgun” style to optimize space and serve mainly as two-family rental properties, thus creating one of the most densely populated areas of the city. According to the 2000 census, the Central City neighborhood contains approximately 8,147 households². However, the number of households has significantly dropped after Hurricane Katrina.

Referred to in the past as one of the city’s most racially diverse areas, Central City’s commercial corridor Dryades street (later changed to Oretha Castle Haley) operated as a racially-mixed and thriving business district that beginning in the 1830s. Prior to the Civil Rights Movement this area was known as one of the few areas where African Americans could shop without discrimination and where people of all races and ethnicities would come from all over the city to sample over 200 businesses. However at the close of the 1960s and the conclusion of the civil rights movement, business in this area slowed. Among other factors, it is thought that the of other commercial areas

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Central_City%2C_New_Orleans

² <http://www.gnocdc.org/orleans/2/61/index.html>

around New Orleans, as well as the migration of many of the wealthier people of this area to the suburbs, may have propagated the economic decline of this once thriving neighborhood³.

By 1990, the majority of the buildings on Dryades street were blighted or vacant. This steep decline took the attention of the city, and initiatives to revitalize the neighborhood were put in place beginning with the renaming of the street to Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard after a local civil rights activist. By the year 2000 gradual improvements in the vitality of the neighborhood had become evident, but the positive momentum of this revival has since been interrupted by Hurricane Katrina. However, due to its location and elevation, much attention has been given to the post-Katrina redevelopment of this area^{1,3}.

Over the past few decades this neighborhood has been dealing with poverty, low employment rates and high teen birth rates. The 2000 Census reflected a 49.8% poverty level; 26.5% the households were single parents and 43.9% had not completed high school⁴. This neighborhood also includes and borders three New Orleans public housing developments: C.J. Peete (Magnolia), Guste (Melpomene), and B.W. Cooper (Calliope). However, C.J. Peete and Guste have been in the process of demolition and redevelopment for the past decade, a process that has come to a halt post-Katrina. Although Hurricane Katrina had a profound impact on the neighborhood, many of the socioeconomic problems persist in Central City and have been exacerbated.

Despite the present social and economic hardships of this area, Central City is known to be the seat of many of the rich cultural traditions that make New Orleans unique. Central City is the home to several of the Mardi Gras Indian tribes which play an integral part in the famous New Orleans Marti Gras celebration. The Free Southern Theater, a group using the arts to inspire and support social struggle and fight against racism and exploitation, also originated in this neighborhood in 1963. Many of the jazz musicians who

³ <http://www.gnocdc.org/orleans/2/61/snapshot.html>

⁴ <http://www.gnocdc.org/orleans/2/61/income.html>

played a role in shaping the now famous New Orleans music once called Central City home, including King Oliver, Kid Ory, Papa Celestin, Pops Foster, the Dodds and Shields brothers, Tom Zimmerman, Buddy Bolden and more recently the rapper Terius Grey (Juvenile).

Crime in Central City

New Orleans has a reputation for being a dangerous city. In 2003 the New Orleans's murder rate was nearly eight times the national average of 5.5 per 100,000, and since then it has increased. In 2002 and 2003, New Orleans had the highest per capita city homicide rate in the United States, with 59 people killed per year per 100,000 citizens—compared to New York City's rate of seven per 100,000⁵. Following a brief post-Katrina lull in the crime rate, there has been a sharp increase in overall crime, especially murders which have risen beyond the pre-Katrina baseline. Despite the halved population, New Orleans is back at the average of 22 murders a month, and as of July (with 21 murders in July) the numbers seem to be on the rise⁶. With the lull in the murder rate occurring during August, September has been right back on average with four murders taking place over Labor Day weekend alone. Sadly, many New Orleanians, both pre- and post-Katrina, have come to accept violent crime as an inevitable part of life. This seems to be especially true in Central City.

March 21 2006, during a typical New Orleans jazz funeral procession through Central City held in broad daylight an 18 yr old man opened fire on the dancing crowd of mourners shooting two men and killing one before being shot in the leg by a policeman.⁷

⁵ Gelinas, N “Who’s Killing New Orleans”, City Journal, Autumn 2005

⁶ http://www.nola.com/news/t-p/frontpage/index.ssf?/news/pdf/073106_violentjuly.jpg

⁷ Ripley, A “Crime Returns to the Big Easy” Time Magazine posted March 21, 2006

Central City has long been one of the city's more problematic areas in terms of crime and crime rates. However, post-Katrina, the neighborhood is now widely regarded as one of the most dangerous parts of the city in terms of murder and crime. While this change in perception may be partially related to the devastation of other historically dangerous areas of the city and the redistribution of the population around the city, there is an obvious trend of recent murders in Central City.

There were only 17 murders in the first three months of this year. However, two-thirds of the 53 murders this year in New Orleans occurred between April 2006 and the end of August, the one year anniversary of Katrina. One out of every four of these murders took place in Central City. A map created by the New Orleans police department depicts the location of these murders with numbered circles in the location. Of the murders listed on this map all of the victims were men ages 16-27, all deaths were the result of gunshot wounds⁸.

Perhaps the most startling of the recent murders was the quintuple homicide that took place in Central City on June 17th on the corner of Josephine and Danneel. Five victims--three of whom were 19 years old, along with a 16- and 17-year-old--were shot multiple times as reported by local papers while riding in a Ford Explorer around 4 a.m. They were the apparent targets of a retaliatory strike by rival gang members. Some place this as the worst single incident of crime in New Orleans since March 1995 when five people were murdered in a Ninth Ward home⁹. The incident prompted Mayor Nagin and Governor Blanco to request National Guard presence to help the understaffed police department of New Orleans concentrate more on the crime "hot spots" of New Orleans such as Central City. Governor Blanco recently

⁸ http://www.nola.com/news/pdf/062006_murderchart.pdf

⁹ <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1205340,00.html>

announced that these troops would be staying until the end of the year¹⁰.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact cause of the increase of murders in this particular neighborhood. Some believe that most of these crimes are drug-related and are acts of retaliation or quarrels over turf. Police officials have stated that they believe the landscape of abandoned houses, stretching block after block, after Hurricane Katrina is being incorporated into a revived drug trade, with the empty dwellings offering an unexpected convenience to dealers returning from places like Houston and Atlanta¹¹. Others point to a high level of desperation amongst those returning to New Orleans.

Although the number of murders continues to rise there is hope on the horizon. The quintuple murder in June not only gained the attention of the city and country but it also caused a call to action within the community. Recently, the people of Central City have started to take a stand against the violence. On October 6th, 2006 a group of local ministers led by Raphael of the New Hope Baptist Church all dressed in black suits, white shirts and red ties marched from the New Hope Baptist Church to the corner of S. Claiborne and Martin Luther King Blvd. carrying a sign that simply said "Enough." There, at the monument to the slain civil rights leader, they discussed the problems with the current violence, prayed and declared their mission to bystanders and passing traffic¹².

Furthermore, the New Orleans branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) met on the corner of Josephine and Danneel, the same corner where the five murders occurred in June to announce an interagency collaboration to combat violent crime. This NAACP anti-violence committee will include police, community members, church officials and members of the NAACP. The mission of this committee is to

¹⁰ <http://www.columbiatribune.com/2006/Sep/20060917News027.asp>

¹¹ Nossiter, A. "As Life Returns to New Orleans So Does Crime" NY Times, March 30, 2006

¹² <http://www.nola.com/news/t-p/frontpage/index.ssf?/base/news-17/1160205003253020.xml&coll=1>

provide a unified voice and leadership to mobilize collective action to address violence in the Greater New Orleans Area¹³.

¹³ www.nolaagainstcrime.com