Designing Safe Neighborhoods in Waterloo

Shawn F Dorius, Sarah Walker, Matthew J Voss, & Cassandra Dorius
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PUBLIC SCIENCE COLLABORATIVE

Overview

The Public Science Collaborative (PSC) at Iowa State University was invited to partner with the Waterloo Safe Neighborhoods Commission to design neighborhood safety strategies. Fortunately, a great deal is known about the causes of community violence and ways to improve safety. Social determinants like high unemployment, concentrated poverty, norms about conflict, high population turnover, crowded housing, and low social cohesion can reduce neighborhood safety. Environmental factors like disorderly neighborhoods, abandoned buildings, including home foreclosure clusters, pervasive substance use, and high density of alcohol establishments also diminish neighborhood safety.
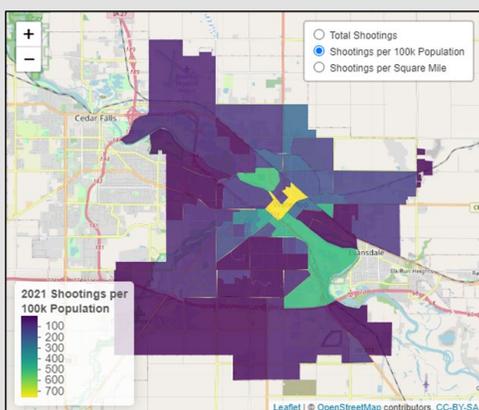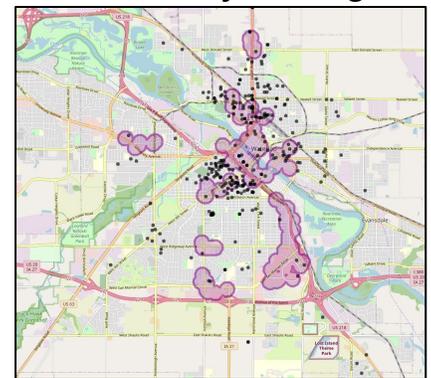
In short, there are many potential risk factors <u>and</u> actionable opportunities to keep neighborhoods safe and ensure that people feel comfortable being out in the community and living the good life. A diverse group of community leaders and organizations gathered at the Jubilee United Methodist Church Freedom Center in late April 2023 to design health and safety strategies in Waterloo. Guiding the discussion was the question: "How can we best use data to support the goals of the Safe Neighborhoods Commission?" and a shared understanding that we often make better decisions with evidence (data) in hand. Data can help reveal problem areas, hidden community assets, and guide decision-makers in knowing where and how to invest scarce resources for maximum impact.

Reviewing Waterloo Safety & Risk

PSC conducted an extensive data scan to understand Waterloo assets and risks, starting with environmental risk factors. That analysis identified six significant alcohol outlet densities (AOD), including four on-premise clusters (e.g., bars, restaurants) and two off-premise clusters (e.g., liquor & grocery stores, gas stations).

AODs are places where alcohol-selling establishments are highly concentrated in a small area. Alcohol-sales violations, property crimes, including violent ones, are also concentrated in areas of high outlet density in Waterloo. Underlying this environmental risk to community

Alcohol Outlet Clusters and Locations of Shootings

safety is a concerning trend: per-person liquor sales in Waterloo have risen rapidly in recent years. Because alcohol is involved in as much as two-thirds of intimate partner violence incidents and is a known contributor to other forms of violence, **it is recommended that the community monitor outlet densities and make efforts to reduce density to reduce violence and improve health**.

One in three firearm homicides involved heavy drinking. Analysis of firearm incident data indicates that residential areas immediately adjacent to downtown, including the Church Row neighborhood, are where gun violence is most persistent. This is a high-value area for neighborhood-level interventions, engagement, and targeted investments. Using data to track hotspots like these is a resource-efficient way to determine *where* to make high-value investments aimed at improving safety and protecting health.
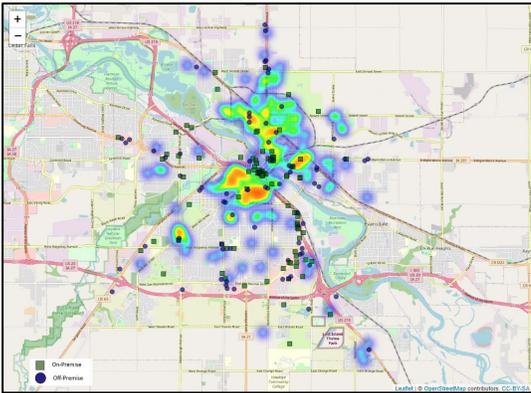
Reviewing Waterloo Safety & Risk, *continued from page 1*

To understand deeply rooted causes of community health and injury, PSC investigated what are known as social determinants of health. Social determinants include things like education, employment, and high poverty rates. We also identified areas with high vacancy rates and homes with lead paint. That analysis revealed several places where upstream social investments and community programs, including public-private partnerships, can make a difference. PSC created an easy-to-use, web-based dashboard that allows you to explore educational attainment, health insurance coverage, English proficiency, unemployment, and poverty rates in your community (**Social Determinants of Health Dashboard**). PSC also created a custom interactive dashboard to explore gun violence, alcohol outlets, and the social determinants of community safety (**Waterloo Safe Neighborhoods Initiative Dashboard**).

Heat Map of Shootings Locations of Alcohol-Selling Establishments

Substance use is also a known risk factor for community violence and negatively impacts health. PSC created an interactive, web-based map that identifies neighborhoods with a high density of substance use vulnerability risk characteristics. These data can be used to guide place-based interventions that get the community upstream of violence (**Substance Use Vulnerability Dashboard**). In and of themselves, data like the tools PSC created for Waterloo won't solve neighborhood problems. But paired with a motivated team, some high-value resources, and an interest to use evidence in decision making, data can make the difference.

Define the Problem Space

A discussion about problems that make neighborhoods unsafe revealed considerable concern about youth, including youth violence, unsupervised youth, and lack of youth programming. Transportation was also a concern, and discussions revealed that a) public transportation does not meet community needs, b) Waterloo's large area (62 square miles) makes getting around difficult, and c) many youth have no means to get to places like the YMCA and afterschool programs. Economic issues like employment and stable housing were also mentioned, as were social issues such as education, proactive programs, and racial differences in arrests. These ideas expand collective thinking about the range of opportunities for engagement and problem-solving.

Neighborhoods Safety Problems to Solve
Crisis vs Thriving
Stable Housing
Gun Violence
Employment
Transportation
Poverty
Lack of Education on Resources
Addiction
Lack of Opportunities
Youth Violence
Lack of Youth Programming
Domestic Violence
Transportation
Trauma
Proactive Programs
Violence
Arrests of Men of Color > Than White Men
Unsupervised Youth

Thinking Upstream and Downstream to Causes and Effects

Using a divergent thinking method known as a *problem tree*, workshop participants were organized into four small groups with the charge to think broadly about the root causes of unsafe and violent neighborhoods with special attention to their effects on individuals, families, and neighborhoods. It is often the case that complicated root causes are interconnected. Tools like the problem tree can help to reduce a set of causes and effects into manageable and definable relationships. Diagramming the connections can reveal action steps and upstream prevention opportunities that begin to address root causes. Participants were highly engaged in this activity and collectively identified 80 causes and 33 effects of unsafe and violent neighborhoods. Many causes were viewed in a sequence chain, with immediate causes leading to other causes farther upstream. Similarly linked *effects* of violence were also identified.

Group 1 identified 17 causes, including three causal chains and five effects, with one community effect chain flowing from unsafe and violent neighborhoods. The major themes that emerged in this group were focused on *socio-economic* issues (6 mentions, including one causal chain) and *violence* (5 mentions, including one effect and one causal chain), with *family*, *mental health* and *substance abuse*, *education*, and *social* or *political* (one causal chain) causes also discussed.

Group 2 was keenly attuned to the range of causes of neighborhood violence, identifying 24, including five causal chains, two effects, and one chain of effects. *Socio-economic needs* (10 mentions) was again the largest theme group, followed by *social-political* issues (10 mentions, including three causal chains) and *violence* (5 mentions, including one causal and one effect chain).

Group 3 identified 27 causes, including six causal chains, 19 effects, and six effect chains concerning safe and violent neighborhoods. The major themes for this group were *socio-economic needs* (12 mentions, including three causal and two effect chains), *social-political* (15 mentions, including one causal and two effect chains) concerns, *violence* (5 mentions, including one effect chain), *education/schools* (5 mentions, including one effect chain), *mental health* (5 mentions, including two causal chain), *substance abuse* (2 mentions), and *youth needs* (2 mentions).

Group 4 identified 14 causes, including six causal chains and seven effects with two effect chains. The main themes were *socio-economic needs* (8 mentions, including three causal and one effect chain), *social* (5 mentions, including two causal chains), *youth-related concerns* (5 mentions, including one causal and one effect chain), and *violence* (2 mentions, including one causal chain) or *substance abuse*. Thinking about causes and effects of unsafe neighborhoods revealed deep feelings and concern among participants. In each group, the development of causal chains came with personal stories, real people, and specific neighborhood settings. Each effect chain tells a story of community.

Group 4 Causes and Effects
Fear → Don't let kids out
Increase rental rate → Increase transience
Youth without support → Youth transience
Homelessness → Apathy, not caring
Family and child abuse → Lack of proactive youth programs
Street gangs (Small groups) → Trust
Unemployment → Transportation
Out-of-state property owners → Slum lords

One participant shared that they worry about their congregation aging and having fewer people in attendance. This led to the observation that there were fewer and sometimes no young people in active attendance across many churches in town. When asked why this mattered, a deeper theme emerged. Participants felt this signaled that the community was breaking down, with people not knowing their neighbors and not having reasons to meet or talk to one another. This signals that they now lack the "village" safety net that once existed to help in tough times (e.g., last-minute child care support). One participant shared how people used to talk to their neighbors in church when kids were getting in trouble or "acting a fool." The sense was that the community's adults were once actively watching and helping to guide and protect youth, but that is no longer happening.

Causes and Effects, *continued from page 3*

This two-part effect chain of *Gray haired congregations, no children or youth going to church → Community breakdown, no village* illustrates fundamental changes in the local social and cultural structure and how this might be affecting community safety.

There is a strong sense that community values are changing, and not necessarily for the better. But this creates an opportunity for the Safe Neighborhoods Commission, should the group make this a measured goal. This might include implementing proactive community programs, a solution that emerged in various forms in all four discussion groups. Other emerging narratives focused on *fear*, including f*eeling unsafe* when out and about in the neighborhood, *feeling abandoned or targeted by local and state governments*, and *a deep racial divide* that felt intentionally fostered by the city. Some of the most pervasive narratives across the four groups were socio-economic in nature, including the *lack of affordable and quality housing, the lack of transportation to other wards in the city, and the lack of access to jobs that pay a livable wage.*

Identifying the High-Impact, Low-Hanging Fruit

An effort-impact matrix is a simple tool designed to help organize a set of ideas into a sort of priority list. Ideas, initiatives, and programs viewed as high in impact and low in effort/resources represent what is known as 'low-hanging fruit,' whereas high impact initiatives that require high effort or resources typically need a longer-term commitment and the marshalling of more resources.

A total of 68 problem areas were moved into the effort-impact matrix. Our analysis of these responses revealed several broad domains. The largest cluster of topics (13 ideas) involved the area of **civic engagement**, including things like *peace marches, policy campaigning, NAACP committees, communication with neighborhood associations,* and *getting people to show up for events*. Another large theme centered around **education** (9 ideas), including things like *educating the public on resources, eradicating functional illiteracy, financial education, the mental health hotline,* and *better marketing of resources* that Waterloo already has in place. **Economic** issues were also prominent (8 ideas). This included *guaranteed income, getting community investments/funding, changing the minimum wage,* and *affordable housing*. Other domains included **housing** (8 issues), **programs** (especially youth-centric ones), **resources**, **childcare**, **families**, and **environments**.

Illustrating how each small group worked together to move causes of violence from the problem tree to an actionable priority list is the table to the right. Here we have 11 perceived upstream causes of neighborhood safety, rated according to the level of effort required and the expected impact on making neighborhoods safer. Addressing homelessness, for example, was believed to have a high impact on community safety but would take substantial effort, making this a longer-term goal likely involving more coordination and resources. School programs that address youth violence were also viewed as having a high impact on community safety but would require less effort and fewer resources. Focusing the committee's efforts on several low-effort, high-impact areas can help the group achieve early wins and learn to work together to produce meaningful results.

Group 4 Priority Areas	
Effort vs Impact	**Community Safety Problems to Tackle**
Low - High	Market what we have
Low - High	One City United
Low - High	Schools
Low - High	One Cedar Valley (employ)
Low - High	Family and child abuse
Low - High	Inventory and promote our programs
High - High	Rental rates >> More inspections
High - High	Transportation (e.g., car)
Low - Low	Youth without support

A Violence Prevention & Monitoring Data System

Toward the end of the workshop, we posed two questions to the full group. The first asked everyone to imagine they had a data system that was designed to monitor neighborhood safety and to think about how they might use it to make the community safer. The answers show a community ready to turn data into action. A well-designed data system can *fast-track resources to areas*, *identify areas for program outreach* and the *risks specific for youth in unsafe areas*, *inform the city council when alcohol licenses are sought in heavily dense areas*, and monitor *violent crime rate trends*. These are exactly the kinds of decision areas that communities across the country are wrestling with and it shows that Waterloo is well-positioned to leverage high-value, localized data for decision-making.

Using a Data Monitoring System to Improve Safety
Discuss at city council when alcohol licenses are sought in heavily dense areas
Educate
Help people with decision making/re-entry planning
Increased feeling of safety
Look at violent crime rate trends
Target problem establishments
Fast track resources to areas
Helping people find affordable and safe housing
Identify areas for program outreach
Identify the risks specifically for youth in unsafe/problematic areas

Reassessing the Team

The final question had us thinking about who might be missing from the discussion. This is a useful exercise for identifying key stakeholders that we either need to keep informed (e.g., media and city communications), partner with on a project-specific basis (e.g., revisiting public transportation routes, county sheriff, youth programs, including YMCA, YWCA), or invite to the Safe Neighborhoods Commission (e.g., reps from neighborhood associations). With 34 unique responses, ample opportunities exist to build new, more expansive, and more inclusive partnerships.

Ultimately, it's the people who make communities great: our elected officials, business leaders, tireless public sector workers, countless local volunteers, or the friends we see daily in the neighborhood. Building partnerships, improving trust and cooperation, and finding common causes to pursue meaningful solutions that make neighborhoods safer embody what it means to **Fly the W**.

What's Next?

PSC used an approach known as design thinking in our brief engagement with the Safe Neighborhoods Commission. The first two steps in that process are to assess the challenges and opportunities (we call this the discovery phase) and then begin to explore the range of solutions to reduce violence and improve safety (the define stage). With just 90 minutes together, we were only able to begin that conversation and get the process started. The most challenging and rewarding two steps are what comes next.

Reducing the many ideas and challenge areas to a small set of concrete action steps is where we recommend the process move from here. In that step, the commission is advised to get people in the room that have the motivation, resources, and influence to make decisions. That might be representatives from the MET to improve service delivery to high-risk and underserved neighborhoods. It might also involve a set of public-private partners to invest in improved lighting in neighborhoods where firearm violence is most persistent. Once the commission has defined and developed four or five action areas, we recommend you prototype and test the delivery of new services, programs, or interventions. Approaching this effort with an understanding that you might not get it right on the first try and that some of the initiatives won't work out arms you with the courage to iterate toward meaningful change.

Recommendations

With the exception of the first two items below, what we have recommended are ideas that emerged from one or more of the small group discussions. These are your ideas, your vision, and your opportunities. We've simply organized them to support next steps for the important work that the commission is charged to address.

	AOD Monitoring. The CDC recommends close monitoring and evidence-based regulation of alcohol outlet densities to protect public health and improve community safety. Invest in an easy-to-use AOD surveillance system that includes alcohol outlets, liquor sales and violations data, alcohol-related harms, and co-occurring risks such as substance use. Given the concerns about neighborhood safety, it is recommended that a community monitoring program integrate health and safety data. *https://iowa-aod.github.io/Dashboard/Policy/*
MISSION VISION	**Mission and Vision.** The Neighborhood Safety Commission is composed of excellent, diverse community members with a broad charge to address neighborhood violence. Developing or refining a mission and vision for the commission will its guide efforts and give focus its charge.
	Focus on Neighborhoods. Our analysis of the community violence risk environment in Waterloo shows not all neighborhoods are at equal risk. Waterloo has neighborhood organizations and local leaders in place. We recommend the commission engage directly with these partners, including residents. Using a mix of data and dialogue can help the commission identify neighborhood-specific risks and needs while establishing a collaborative relationship to develop actionable investments to improve safety.
	Economic Threats. The commission members and workshop participants were attuned to the economic drivers of community violence. Partnering with major employers, the Chamber of Commerce, the economic development office, and other organizations that can take lead roles in improving economic conditions is likely to be a critical part of the strategy.
	Housing. Housing featured prominently in discussions at all tables. Concerns ranged from lack of housing, affordability, unresponsive absentee landlords, housing disrepair, lead paint, and a growing unhoused population. The commission might consider putting together a suite of housing initiatives aimed at improving housing conditions and residents' overall quality of life.
	Enhance Trust. There was a strong sense that improving neighborhood safety would require civic engagement. Trust and a commitment to the community and each other are fundamental to civic engagement. Demonstrate equitable and inclusive engagement with community members while showcasing past successes.
	Transportation. There was deep concern about the lack of easily accessible and low-cost transportation. Every group discussed how this negatively impacts community members of all ages. The commission might consider drafting a transportation needs assessment aimed at adjusting times and routes to better meet user needs. On-call bus pick up and drop off for high-demand areas outside the standard route times might also help address this concern. **https://dspg.iastate.edu/case-studies**
	Utilize Existing Resources. Several groups discussed the under-utilization of existing resources and community programs and attributed this to lack of awareness or barriers to access (e.g., costs, transportation). Develop awareness campaigns that meet residents where they are (not everyone can monitor social media for updates). To lower program participation barriers, consider ways to bring programs and resources to at-risk neighborhoods, rather than the other way around.

Problem Tree Cause and Effect Chains

Group 1 Cause and Effect

Access to weapons → Domestic violence

Unfit housing (landlords) → Need stable housing

Cost of housing → Trauma

Ongoing lack of representation from neighborhoods → No representatives of the ward

Group 2 Cause and Effect

Community underinvestment → Historic underinvestment → Lack of options, instability, or security → Lack of resources → Significant poverty and inequality

Stable housing → Quality of housing → Age in place → Red lining → Can't pay rent → Job instability, poverty, and low paying

Lack of sense of safety/security → Prevalence of guns → Presence of guns

Rivalrous groups → Territorialism from kids being "stuck" → Transportation - young people being stuck especially near negative influences

"Kids these days" → Kids not regulating themselves - need social-emotional learning → Busy families - parents have resource limitations → Bullying → Political, environmental, and diverseness → Social media

The feeling of insecurity/Lack of safety → Decreasing in housing quality

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Group 3 Cause and Effect

Stable/Unstable housing → Criminal history

Lack of generational wealth → White supremacy → Poor policies from government → No investment in community programs

Lack of transportation → Density of poverty

Lack of investment and infrastructure → Lack of community investment → Lack of affordable childcare

Trauma → Early death, risky behaviors, poor coping → Depleted mental health services → Access to health care and substance abuse treatment → Jail is the default

Trauma → Poor administrative and legislative policy

Cultural violence norms → Diversity through employment → Lack of healthcare and support (for workers) → Trauma → Community affected

Disillusionment → Young people leaving

24-7 Report → Racial disparity

Teacher shortages → Schools are providing clothes and meals to kids

Poverty is intergenerational → Liquor stores sell bread and produce, the only place for food access

Gray-haired congregations - no children or youth going to church → Community breakdown, no village

Effort Impact Priority Lists by Group

Group 1 Effort vs Impact	Community Safety Problems to Tackle
Moderate - High	Youth violence >> School programs
Moderate - High	Broken Family >> 10-18 years mentors
Moderate - High	Broken Family >> Teen pregnancy
High - High	Lack of youth programming
High - High	Mental health
High - High	Homeless
High - High	Stable housing
High - High	Substance use
High - High	Domestic violence >> Waypoint
Low - Low	Webpages and social media
Low - Low	Survey

Group 2 Effort vs Impact	Community Safety Problems to Tackle
Low - High	A city number for community resources
Low - High	Community connection person to connect to resources - Jonathan/City Council
Low - High	Peace marches >> community leader involvement in neighborhoods
Low - High	Neighborhood conversations
Low - High	More regulation for landlords
Low - High	Housing inspections/enforcement
Low - High	Communication with neighborhood associations
Moderate - High	Mentoring
Moderate - High	Social & emotional learning for families >> Community conversations
High - High	Social support >> connections in all personal touch points
High - High	Social support >> employers
High - High	School social services supports
High - High	Safe spaces for children
High - High	Enforcement for landlords
High - High	Childcare >> Need incentive programs
High - High	Childcare >> Affordable, quality
High - High	Childcare >> Overnight hours
High - High	Improve public transit
High - High	Attracting high-paying employers in diverse fields
High - High	Anything with guns
High - High	Housing >> improving quantity
High - High	Housing >> continued Habitat for Humanity expansion
High - High	Housing >> more flexible housing options

Group 3 Effort vs Impact	Community Safety Problems to Tackle
Low - High	Vote for progressive candidates
Low - High	Policy campaigning for change
Low - High	Get people to show up >> Use food incentives, provide childcare, after work hours (not 4pm)
Low - High	Fill the school board
Low - High	NAACP committees
Low - High	Change minimum wage >> Need 7 people on city council or 3 people at county level
Low - High	Educating the public on resources for help and mental health
Low - High	Public awareness of services available
Low - High	Financial literacy education
Low - High	Increased lighting
Low - High	Developing a strategic plan
Low - High	Resources for kids >> Programs and sports
High - High	Legislative policy
High - High	Busy city council
High - High	Guaranteed income
High - High	Ford foundation
High - High	Foundations >> Annie Casey Foundation, Otto Schoitz Foundation, Ford Foundation, Michael Jordan, BHC Casino, McElroy
High - High	Get community investment >> funding
High - High	Affordable housing
High - High	Eradicate functional illiteracy
High - High	Mental health professionals go with police on calls >> Incentivize and need more providers
High - High	Accessible mental health
High - High	Resources in schools to support kids >> Need funding; possible sources are Hospitals Alan and Otto
High - High	Equitable health care >> Government and private sector
Low - Low	Hotline to call for mental health that not the police >> Create awareness campaign

Group 4 Effort vs Impact	Community Safety Problems to Tackle
Low - High	Market what we have
Low - High	One City United
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Low - High	Family and child abuse
Low - High	Inventory and promote our programs
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Who's missing from the team?

Parents

Youth

Large employers

Black Hawk County Health

Reps from all neighborhood associations

Waterloo Schools

More educators

Those who've experienced violence in their neighborhoods

Social Services

High school and college youth

Local political figures

Hawkeye Community College

Advancing Equity workgroups

UNI-CUE

Waterloo Community School District

School Officials

YMCA

Mental heath & substance abuse

County Sheriff

YWCA

Boys and Girls Club

Allen

MERCYONE

Dept of Transportation

Court officials

Bill Murray

Grow Cedar Valley

NAACP (2 mentions)

Mid American Energy

City Communications

KWWL

Media (2 mentions)

Mayor

Have those discussions with others