



August 9, 2021

Honorable President and Members of the Baltimore City Council
City Hall, Room 400
100 N. Holliday Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21202

**RE: City Council Bill 21-0040R
Investigational Hearing - Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design**

Dear Council President Mosby and Members of the City Council:

The Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (MONSE) appreciates the opportunity to discuss the City's current and future efforts to prevent crime through environmental design. This public health approach to preventing violence is an important component of Baltimore City's Comprehensive Violence Prevention Plan and a major area of focus for MONSE's inter-agency coordination efforts.

How We Got Here

The connection between blighted properties and crime rates is well-established. The legacy of structural racism, discriminatory housing practices such as redlining, and changes in the labor market such as the loss of manufacturing jobs have led to the racialized patterns of structural neighborhood disinvestment Baltimore suffers from today.

Like many other cities across the country, Baltimore experienced a spiral of disinvestment, crime, and abandonment. As those families who were able to leave declining neighborhoods moved away, the cycle of systematic disinvestment worsened and neighborhood health and safety continued to erode. Baltimore's high levels of vacant houses and lots contributes to more negative outcomes than just visual blight. Vacant houses and blighted properties contribute to high crime rates and the loss of sense of community and safety.

Research on Environmental Design to Reduce Crime

Public health and criminology research consistently show that cleaning and greening, improving lighting, blight and lead abatement, and demolishing or securing vacant houses can reduce violence and improve residents' quality of life. These place-based interventions are well-studied, consistently effective, relatively inexpensive, and easily scalable.

Individuals engaging in criminal activity oftentimes use vacant lots and unmaintained parks to store or dispose of guns in order to avoid being caught with an illegal firearm. Greening and maintenance efforts should be focused on to vacant lots that are used to store guns or used as staging grounds for groups preparing to commit acts of violence. In addition to reducing violent crimes, research has shown that

cleaning and greening vacant lots can significantly increase *perceptions* of safety for residents living nearby. In addition to the carrot of funding cleaning and greening programs, the enforcement of anti-bligh ordinances increases the effectiveness of this approach.

A number of studies have demonstrated that that greening programs focused on vacant lots reduce crime rates in high-vacancy areas. Between 1999 and 2008, Philadelphia greened 4,436 vacant lots totaling over 7.8 million square feet. A 2011 evaluation by Charles Branas et al. comparing the greened lots with a control group of 13,308 vacant lots found that greening vacant lots was associated with a 15% reduction in assaults and an 8% reduction in gun assaults. In addition to the crime reduction benefits, health benefits associated with greening vacant lots included residents' reporting less stress and more exercise. Philadelphia did not experience a reduction in drug trafficking complaints, but other cities have seen reductions in open air drug dealing associated with greening. As author Dr. Branas explains, "Our study shows that direct changes to vacant urban spaces may hold great promise in breaking the cycle of abandonment, violence, and fear in our cities and do so in a cost-effective way that has broad, citywide scalability."

Another evaluation found that by greening and planting trees, nuisance crimes were reduced by 28% because residents utilized the outdoors more and relaxed under the trees, making it less desirable for individuals engaging in vandalism, public drunkenness, excessive noise, and illegal dumping. Firearm assaults also fell by 17% because the previously blighted areas were being used by residents for healthy pursuits and illegal guns could not be stored in uncontrolled growths of weeds or large trash items. An evaluation of a vacant lot greening program in Youngstown, Ohio found a decrease of 27% in felony assaults in vacant lots turned into community gardens by the community and a significant reduction in property crimes around contractor-greened lots.

Under Philadelphia's LandCare (PLC) program, it takes less than a week to clean and green a vacant lot and the average cost lot is between \$1,000 and \$1,300, plus \$150 per year to clean, weed, and mow the lot biweekly during the growing season. According to a 2016 study in the *American Journal of Public Health*, for every \$1 invested in the PLC program returns an estimated \$333 in general costs to society and for every \$15,000 invested, one shooting is averted.

Unlike more complicated and expensive responses to large inventories of vacant properties, cleaning and greening encourages residents to stay in their neighborhoods and help improve conditions rather than displacing existing residents.

Baltimore's Comprehensive Violence Prevention Plan

Coordinated place-based interventions focused on blighted and vacant environments contributing to crime is an essential component of the Baltimore City Comprehensive Violence Prevention Plan recently released by Mayor Scott. As part of a public health approach to reducing violence, the plan emphasizes prevention and reducing harm to communities by empowering community-based alternatives as the option of first resort.

During MONSE's many community feedback sessions about the draft version of the plan, the public was especially interested in discussing our goals around altering the built environment to reduce crime. Baltimore taxpayers were enthusiastic about the idea of the city making significant public investments in physical infrastructure, including cleaning and greening areas that contribute to crime, costly lead abatement, and improving the quality of public and affordable housing. As a result of this positive public feedback, environmental design principles were incorporated into several key initiatives featured in the plan.

Resident-led efforts to clean, green, and improve lighting in high-crime areas is a key aspect of the new Coordinated Neighborhood Stabilization Response (CNSR) effort to ensure violence prevention and response is the responsibility of everyone in Baltimore, not just criminal justice or law enforcement agencies. Recognizing that deadly shootings and law enforcement takedowns can inflict trauma on bystanders and create a power vacuum in a neighborhood, the CNSR will include a Shooting Response Protocol to support families and communities following incidents of gun violence. In addition to preventing retaliatory violence, addressing trauma, and promoting healing, city agencies and community leaders will review data and service call trends to make changes to the built environment to prevent future crime.

Cleaning, greening, and blight remediation is an important function of the Neighborhood Policing Plans (NPP). In alignment with the requirements of the consent decree, NPPs are partnerships between BPD, residents, MONSE, and other city agencies to create avenues for communities to address both immediate violence and address quality of life issues. NPPs will be piloted in the Western District in partnership with Fayette Street Outreach and in the Southern District with the Greater Baybrook Alliance. Baltimore residents have asked for more agency over decision-making impacting their communities and the Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) model will help inform individually-tailored strategies to build safer neighborhoods.

MONSE is developing accountability tools to measure each agency's performance on CPTED initiatives and to evaluate the crime-reduction impacts. Neighborhood Stat will include KPIs to measure crime, perceptions of safety, and the determinants of social health. In addition to leveraging governmental data, Neighborhood Stat will incorporate data from local partners, such as Live Baltimore and the Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance (BNIA) to prioritize limited resources and measure success. The newly expanded Violence Prevention Task Force provides another forum to increase inter-agency collaboration around place-based interventions and to hold each agency, including MONSE, accountable.

While holding perpetrators of violence accountable is an important aspect of the Group Violence Reduction Strategy (GVRS), deterring violence and preventing the need to arrest and imprison community members is at the core of this intervention launching later this year. As GVRS partners conduct shooting reviews, they may identify specific places that are contributing to violence and order a coordinated code enforcement and clean-up response. These responses must occur quickly and involve community participation.

Investing in the Social Infrastructure

While interventions following the CPTED model have shown impressive and cost-effective results, it's important to note that improving only the physical infrastructure of our neighborhoods is inadequate. As sociologist Dr. Robert Sampson writes in *Great American City*, "Physical infrastructure and housing are crucial, but so too is the social infrastructure." Baltimore must invest in community-level interventions that increase social cohesion, trust, and ability for communities to come together to collectively act.

After cleaning and greening improvements are made, the difficult work really begins – empowering neighbors to reclaim those areas and keep them clean, safe, and healthy. As you'll hear from my colleagues in other agencies today, Baltimore will continue to clear alleys full of obstructions placed by drug dealers to impede police patrol cars, but the trash will quickly be replaced unless it's part of a larger strategy led by the community. MONSE will join other agencies and community partners in building the capacity of communities to reclaim these improved spaces and keep them clean and safe. Rather than rely solely on police patrols, we must encourage informal policing and connectedness by neighbors to keep our streets safe, block-by-block. MONSE fully supports investing in the physical and social infrastructure

of our communities and will continue to work with our partners to ensure that the city's limited resources are allocated effectively in support of Baltimore City's first Comprehensive Violence Prevention Plan.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "S Jackson". The signature is stylized with a large, looping "S" and a cursive "Jackson".

Shantay A. Jackson
Director, Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement

cc: Sunny Schnitzer, Deputy Mayor, Public Safety
Nina Themelis, Legislative Liaison, Mayor's Office of Government Relations
Natasha Mehu, Director, Mayor's Office of Government Relations