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# FBI Law Enforcement

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# The Chicago Area Project Addressing the Gang Problem

By  
ANTHONY SORRENTINO  
and DAVID WHITTAKER, M.S.W.



In 1934, Russell Square Park was a relatively small, self-contained, Polish-Catholic community in South Chicago. It was also very poor, highly congested, and filled with immigrant steel workers, many of whom worked nights while their families clung to old rural traditions and tried to cope with life in a highly industrialized setting.

Russell Square Park was also home base for 15 well-established youth gangs—the Tigers, Tomatoes, Bush Walkers, Baker Bears, Brandon Speed Boys, and others—who principally committed such crimes as petty larceny, vandalism,

and lewdness. These gangs were the scourge of the community and a danger to those who did not defer to them. However, they never posed the same threat as gangs do today, whose sophisticated and violent crimes, turf wars with rival gangs, and networks in other cities closely resemble the acts of organized crime syndicates.

During this time, University of Chicago sociologist Clifford R. Shaw, aided by colleagues in the sociology department of the Institute for Juvenile Research, identified Russell Square Park as an area where crime rates were high and rising, despite an ever-growing

number of programs, agencies, and institutions established to cope with the problem. Shaw decided that this area, and others like it, needed a new approach to reduce juvenile delinquency. Here, he tested his then-experimental Chicago Area Project (CAP), a project that remains committed to the prevention and treatment of juvenile delinquency.

## A Revolutionary Approach

Shaw believed that the solution to Chicago's gang problem meant reaching out to the gangs and re-directing them into the conventional life of the community. His method, which emphasized a

“bottom up,” proactive approach, contrasted greatly with traditional, “top down” methods, which stressed punitive or repressive measures to control delinquency.

To lessen the attractions of delinquency for gang members, Shaw began what became popularly known as “curbstone counseling,” or “street work”—going to where the juveniles “hung out” and offering them friendship and a sympathetic ear. As part of this approach, former gang members from the community worked with these youths.

CAP also embarked on an even more controversial path—involving some of the “unsavory” elements of the community in neighborhood plans and in the decisionmaking process. Recognizing that the “bad elements” of a community often wielded power and could not be avoided, Shaw’s workers actually solicited their support and used their power and strength to meet the community’s needs.

Shaw’s ideas met with skepticism. Some established social agencies considered them heresy. Eventually, however, Shaw proved that his methods worked and that the community could control its own destiny. Now, almost 60 years later, the Chicago Area Project continues to thrive.

### Strategies

CAP uses a three-pronged attack on delinquency—direct service, advocacy, and community involvement. It empowers neighborhood residents to work together to improve neighborhood conditions and to ensure the physical, social,

and moral well-being of their children.

CAP’s principles sharply contradict the current practices of most philanthropic and social organizations in the United States. First, CAP seeks to fully use established neighborhood institutions—particularly those that naturally allow for social gatherings—such as churches and clubs, rather than to create new institutions that embody the morals and values of the more conventional communities. As Russell Square Park residents once did in conjunction with the local Catholic church, many communities continue to establish Boys and Girls Clubs at local sites, which they use as a rallying point for the neighborhood.

In addition, in contrast to social agencies that attempt to assist residents on a case-by-case basis, CAP focuses on the neighborhood as a whole. It aims to make the neighborhood conscious of the problems of delinquency, collectively interested in the welfare of its children, and active in promoting programs to improve the community environment.

Finally, CAP stresses the autonomy of the actual residents of the neighborhood to plan and operate the program, as contrasted with the traditional organization in which control is vested in lay and professional persons who represent interests outside the neighborhood. Russell Square residents started to promote this concept in 1934 by forming the Russell Square Community Committee, the first step in revitalizing their neighborhood. This citizens group became a model for other local committees and

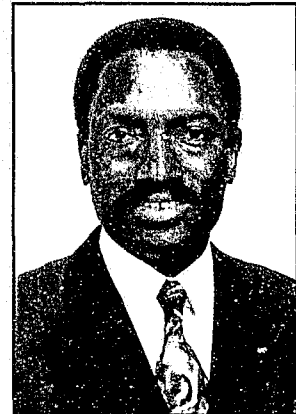
represented the heart of CAP’s self-help philosophy.

### Local Committees

Since formation of the original Russell Square Community Committee in the 1930s, 40 separate community committees have developed throughout Chicago. In addition, 100 similar programs



*Mr. Sorrentino is the retired director of the Chicago Area Project, Chicago, Illinois.*



*Mr. Whittaker is CAP's current executive director.*

operate in downstate Illinois. These nonprofit, independent, self-governing citizens groups function under their own local names and charters. Each has a headquarters and an office, and some committees have developed subcenters or branches.

Though CAP initially provides grants to the local community committees, they must eventually raise their own funds or make a significant contribution to the program effort. And, they do. Through various fund-raising activities, the local committees have almost matched CAP's financial contributions. More important, members of the committee donate their time and talents to the program and provide free access to such facilities as churches, schools, and police stations.

### Programs and Results

Each community committee conducts a wide range of activities. Some have promoted recreation and sports programs involving thousands of children and young people; others have opened summer camps.

The local committees secure space for activities from churches and other local institutions and groups that are usually not available for neighborhood welfare programs. These committees have improved relationships between the schools and communities by helping to organize parent-teacher associations and adult education classes. They

have also provided leadership to campaigns for community improvement and, in several instances, have initiated the formation of housing boards.

When the people of a neighborhood band together and work collectively in a community welfare program, new and basic resources are



brought to bear on local problems. As residents work on behalf of their children, positive attitudes are reinforced. The children begin to live in a better environment and respond to constructive social influences.

These influences, as well as the improvements in general living conditions that the residents effect, advance both the prevention of delinquency and the treatment of delinquents. In fact, in those communities where area projects have been in operation for a number of

years, incidents of crime and delinquency have decreased. From forming youth clubs in neighborhoods where no recreation facilities exist, to building playgrounds and operating summer camps, to improving school curricula and such city services as garbage collection, CAP community organizations are working in Chicago's many and diverse neighborhoods.

### Beyond Prevention

In an effort to help as many youths as possible, local committees establish regular working arrangements with neighborhood police officers. With the trend toward community policing in law enforcement, police departments can use the resources of a local committee.

Leaders of the committee maintain liaison with law enforcement officials from the chief to patrol officers, and especially with the juvenile officers. Officers sometimes refer the juveniles they arrest to local committees, who then attempt to redirect the youths into constructive activities. This mutual relationship between CAP affiliates and local law enforcement works to meet the needs of the delinquent children.

Similarly, local residents work with probation and parole officers in order to maintain contact with juvenile offenders in court, in institutions when they are committed, and in the community when they are

released on parole. In fact, work with young parolees has been one of the most promising aspects of this program.

In many neighborhoods, local residents successfully help released offenders secure jobs and attend school. The residents also persuade them to join neighborhood groups. Frequently, the parolees become members of the local community committees, eventually serving on a board of directors, and sometimes being elected officers of the committee.

Community leaders supplement work with individual delinquents by dealing with gangs as a group. In fact, well before launching a neighborhood program, local workers approach the area's gangs and street corner groups. This enables the workers and citizens committees to obtain the information they need to plan and develop the program. As a result, young adult workers who symbolize values meaningful to the youths are in strategic positions to guide them into constructive activities.

### New Initiatives

Representative of its ongoing partnership with the State of Illinois, CAP participates in the Comprehensive Community Based Youth Services Program, providing children ages 10-17 with a variety of services, such as crisis intervention, emergency foster home placement, job training, and counseling. For example, in an attempt to combat gang activity and to prevent fires in the area, a squadron of cadet firefighters has been formed. These youths receive such assignments as

speaking on fire awareness and learning how to combat fires in their communities.

In addition to extending services directly to juveniles, CAP has, most recently, established two new special projects—Citizens United for Better Parks and Women for Economic Security (WES). These projects cross community boundaries and indirectly affect Chicago youths.

Citizens United for Better Parks encourages citizens in low-income areas to work with the Chicago Park District to improve the safety, maintenance, and staffing of community parks. WES attempts to determine and influence the impact of public welfare policy on the ability of

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***CAP uses a three-pronged attack on delinquency—direct service, advocacy, and community involvement.***  
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female recipients to find and retain meaningful employment. Because women on welfare often head their households, WES can help determine the long-term goals of the communities that CAP serves.

Each year, CAP works toward having a greater impact in Chicago-area communities by expanding the number of affiliates and by initiating new coalitions to effect changes.

The diversity of CAP's community programs mirrors its mission—to ensure self-determination in each neighborhood. The results achieved reflect the critical need for community organizations to combat juvenile delinquency and to reduce crime in low-income areas.

### Establishing Local Committees

The resources usually needed to establish local committees include the following:

- Well-trained personnel made available by municipal, State, or other community development agencies. From 1934 to 1981, various State agencies provided CAP with personnel. CAP, in turn, assigned these workers to targeted areas to organize community committees. Since 1981, CAP has hired committee employees itself, with funding received from the State's Department of Children and Family Services, foundations, charities, and private contributions.
- Initial financial assistance from the government or from outside foundation sources, such as CAP, often offered on the condition that the local committees raise matching funds.
- Assistance to local committees in their search for other sources of capital.

CAP personnel in Illinois, functioning as consultants and community workers, help the independent citizens groups to attain their objectives. As the committees approach the point of self-sufficiency, they

## Bulletin Reports

also employ their own personnel. Then, CAP personnel act only as consultants.

### Conclusion

Today, CAP remains dedicated to improving the quality of neighborhood life, with a special focus on solving problems faced by young people and their families. From the beginning, CAP's focus has been to provide alternative social groups with appropriate rewards and approval, so young people can turn away from gangs and direct their energies to more positive endeavors.

But, unlike other agencies, CAP has always worked *with* Chicago's gangs—identifying and meeting gang leaders, discussing community and individual needs, and turning negative behavior into a positive force to create change for all members of a neighborhood. This grassroots effort has made CAP successful and continues to provide it with a unique focus in helping to prevent and treat juvenile delinquency.

CAP's strength lies in the very neighborhoods that need help the most. Its resources are in the streets and communities that are the most blighted. It is in these communities that Clifford R. Shaw's idea lives on. And, it is among young people, in all the neighborhoods where the hope for the future of the Nation lies. ♦

### Community Policing Guide

The Bureau of Justice Assistance has released the community policing document, "Neighborhood-Oriented Policing in Rural Communities: A Program Planning Guide." This document offers guidance to law enforcement professionals, city or county governments, and community organizations considering, planning for, or implementing community policing.

"Neighborhood-Oriented Policing in Rural Communities" (NCJ143709) provides practical information on how to begin identifying and addressing community needs through effective problem-solving methods and community involvement. The guide informs readers of the tools actually used by local law enforcement agencies and gives a resource list for more hands-on information.

*The document can be obtained from the Bureau of Justice Assistance by calling 1-800-688-4252. When requesting copies, callers should reference the document number.*

### Crime and the Elderly

The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) has published several brochures on crime prevention for the elderly. The brochures contain practical advice on how to reduce criminal opportunity and can support community service programs. Each title—"How to Spot a Con Artist," "How to Protect Your Home," "How to Protect Your Neighborhood," "How to Report Suspicious Activities," "How to Protect You and Your Car," "How to Protect Your Rural Homestead," and "How to Conduct a Security Survey"—is available in English or Spanish.

*Up to 50 copies of each title are available to each agency, without charge, from AARP, ATTN: CJS B-5, 601 E Street, NW, Washington, DC 20049. Allow 4-6 weeks for delivery.*