

Cook County Commissioner Richard R. Boykin

Endangered Communities Listening Tour

Final Report



February 2017

Introduction

On August 30, 2016, 16-year-old Elijah Sims was spending a summer night with friends from his old neighborhood in the 5500 block of West Quincy in the Austin community. He was looking forward to celebrating his birthday the following day. It was around 10 pm, and he was planning on heading home soon to Oak Park. He never made it. Elijah was shot that night on that block. He was one of nearly 100 people who were slain in Chicago in August, one of the bloodiest months of a remarkably bloody year.

Days after his death, I joined the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr., the Chicago Urban League, and iHeart Radio on a Listening Tour of Chicago's Endangered Communities. Over the course of eight weeks, more than 1,000 residents joined us on that Listening Tour.

The sense of anguish facing people in these Endangered Communities – Austin, West Garfield Park, Englewood, Riverdale, Auburn Gresham, Gage Park, Washington Park, Fuller Park and North Lawndale – was clear. It was, at times, difficult to face those who have lost so much, those who felt that they had no one who would listen to them or advocate for them.

The reality is that Chicago is truly a tale of two cities. In West Garfield Park, the average life expectancy is 71.7 years. Citizens of the Loop can expect to live to nearly 84 years. In Austin, the unemployment rate is 21 percent. Not even 5 percent of Lincoln Park residents are jobless. As cranes rise in the West Loop, companies like International Harvester, Sears and Roebuck, and Brach's Candy Company have fled the city's West Side. Austin teens have a 91 percent unemployment rate.

The residents of these Endangered Communities made clear what it is that their communities need. And I, along with my partners, have pledged to push a policy agenda that will work to bring stabilization and peace back to these neighborhoods. We cannot, however, do this without buy-in from the community. I urge you to hold your leaders accountable. You must work with representatives at every level of government and demand that they work on your behalf. If they do not, remind them on Election Day and every other day how unacceptable that is.

After a year during which nearly 800 people were killed and more than 4,600 were shot, we must not remain silent. This is not normal. We are in a virtual state of emergency.

Thank you to all who have joined us in this mission. Thank you to the clergy who allowed us to use their churches and who spread the word to their congregations. And thank you to my staffers who organized and assisted in convening each meeting. I look forward to working with you until every citizen in Cook County feels safe in their homes and in their neighborhoods. Our work will not be done until that is the case.

Sincerely,

Richard R. Boykin
Cook County Commissioner – First District

Part I – The problems and the solutions

As we visited the various Endangered Communities, there were a myriad of issues preventing progress over the last 50 years. Some had individual issues, but it became clear that several problems existed across each community. Those will be the focus of this report, as they are the problems that have the greatest potential for impact across the city.

- (a) The first issue that was raised in each community is that the public servants that work with the community the most – the police, the teachers, and the firefighters – rarely, if ever, live in the communities they serve. It is even rarer for those public servants to look like the communities they served.

This, as we heard, causes a number of problems. First, people collecting a salary for serving those communities take those middle class dollars out of those Endangered Communities. They then go home to communities on the outskirts of Chicago, stable communities with a bedrock of middle class families who stabilize those neighborhoods. That leaves places like Auburn-Gresham or West Garfield Park with a more destabilized environment. The second problem is that the people dealing with a neighborhood's children in the schools do not understand the realities they face at home. This is not to say that the teachers are not sympathetic and understanding of what goes on in those neighborhoods. But it is to say that they cannot be truly empathetic to what goes on without seeing the pain that goes on when the students are out of the building. And it means that police officers who interact with perhaps the neediest of our citizens do not have a firm understanding of what has led those people to where they are. They become numbers, crimes, and histories rather than neighbors.

The solution to this problem will not be easy. It will not be quick. But it can happen. It will start at the February 2017 County Board Meeting, when I will introduce legislation to create a very strong incentive program for teachers and first responders who live and work in endangered communities.

- (b) A second common theme we heard is that residents simply do not know – or trust – their police officers. Many people told stories of their beat officers calling them out by name when they were children. They recalled times when they were causing a bit of trouble and the officers would take them home for their parents to deal with rather than taking them to the County Jail. While surely there are people who must be arrested, if there is no relationship with the community, arrest quickly becomes the only option. We must work with the Chicago police and community leaders to recreate that environment.

The first step in this process, of course, will be to instill trust in the police. The Department of Justice Report on the Police Department must be fully implemented. I pledge to fight for that until it is done. I believe that incentives at the city and county

levels that will result in more police officers living in the communities they serve will build community trust in the Police Department.

- (c) The third common complaint is a genuine lack of investment and – indeed – a disinvestment in Chicago’s endangered communities. For two generations, the government has failed to properly invest in those communities. It has failed to keep jobs in those communities. It has failed to spread resources evenly across the city’s communities. Twenty years ago, the South and West Loops were skid row. Nobody went there. Nobody ever thought people would pay millions of dollars to live there. Yet that is exactly what has happened. Those communities have improved beyond what anyone would have thought. Lincoln Park has gotten nicer. Places like Edgewater and Uptown do not face the challenges they did in the 1990s and earlier.

Yet Austin suffers. Englewood has been decimated. What’s the difference? Leadership. For too long the leaders in those communities and across the city have been complacent. The status quo in Endangered Communities was sufficient. The consequences of that failure to act have begun to appear over the last few years as violence began rising only to spike dramatically in 2016.

What I can commit to is that I will be vocal among my colleagues in forcing them to acknowledge the dire circumstances. I have already fought and won battles for millions of dollars in grants and transportation funding for the West Side, which historically has received nothing.

The city of Chicago has been successful in luring businesses from out of state and the suburbs to the Loop. But none of those improvements have helped the West Side or the South Side. We must work with businesses to create sustainable jobs in these communities. I have begun working with the Cook County Assessor’s Office to find any and all possible incentives that can be carved out to encourage business growth in these communities.

I need you – the residents – to make it clear to your elected officials that while it’s wonderful to see cranes building skyscrapers in the Loop, it’s time to see construction and investment in your communities. It’s time to read a newspaper headline about a company relocating from the suburbs or Indiana or wherever to Austin and to Englewood. There simply has not been enough of that.

- (d) Additional Solutions:

- a. Stop the blame game. Fight for solutions.
- b. Unite and come behind a set of solutions – like these – that can be achieved and measured.
- c. Increase lighting in alleys and streets in Endangered Communities.
- d. Increase cameras in Endangered Communities and on expressways.

- e. Invest in more mental health – especially trauma counseling – for Endangered Communities.
- f. Invest in education in Endangered Communities.
- g. Invest in parenting programs.
- h. Invest in job training and preparation for the chronically unemployed in Endangered Communities.
- i. Create a truancy center using the Sheriff's Department.

Part II – Chicago's Endangered Communities

(a) Austin

- a. Austin is home to nearly 100,000 people, making it the largest community area in Chicago
- b. The per capita income is \$15,290, about \$12,000 less than the Chicago average
- c. 27% of households live below the poverty line compared to the 18.7% average in Chicago
- d. 21% of people are unemployed
- e. 25% of the population has no high school diploma
- f. Nearly 100 killed in 2016
- g. 445 wounded in 2016

(b) West Garfield Park

- a. Population of 18,000
- b. Per capita income is \$10,951 compared to Chicago's average of \$27,148
- c. 40% of households live below the poverty line
- d. 25% of the population is unemployed
- e. 26% of the population has no high school diploma
- f. 57 people killed in 2016
- g. 327 people wounded

(c) Englewood

- a. Population of 30,654
- b. Per capita income of \$11,993, more than \$15,000 less than Chicago's average
- c. 42% of households below the poverty line, compared to 18.7% in Chicago on average
- d. 21.3% of the population is unemployed, nearly double the average in Chicago
- e. 29.4% of the population has no high school diploma
- f. 85 people killed in 2016
- g. 356 people wounded in 2016

(d) Riverdale

- a. Population of 6,482
- b. Per capita income of \$8,535, nearly \$20,000 less than Chicago's average
- c. 61% of households live below the poverty line
- d. 26% of the population is unemployed
- e. A quarter of the population has no high school diploma

(e) Auburn Gresham

- a. Population of 48,743
 - b. Per capita income of \$16,000, \$11,000 less than the average in the city
 - c. 24% unemployment
 - d. 19.5% of the population has no high school diploma
 - e. 31 people killed in 2016
 - f. 140 wounded in 2016
- (f) Gage Park
- a. 39,984 people live in Gage Park
 - b. Per capita income of \$12,000 compared to \$27,148 average in Chicago
 - c. 20% of households are below the poverty line
 - d. 14% of the population is unemployed
 - e. 54% of people have no high school diploma
- (g) Washington Park
- a. Population of 11,717
 - b. Per capita income of \$13,087, nearly \$14,000 less than Chicago's average
 - c. 39% of households live below the poverty line.
 - d. 23% unemployment rate
 - e. 28% of residents do not have a high school diploma
- (h) Fuller Park
- a. Population of 2,942
 - b. Per capita income of \$9,016
 - c. 55% of households below the poverty line
 - d. 40% unemployment rate
 - e. 33% of residents do not have a high school diploma
- (i) North Lawndale
- a. 35,912 Chicagoans live here
 - b. Per capita income of \$12,548
 - c. 38% of households below the poverty line
 - d. 18.5% of the population is unemployed
 - e. 30% of residents do not have a high school diploma
 - f. 34 people killed in 2016
 - g. 243 people wounded in 2016

Conclusion

The City of Chicago has become the epicenter for gun violence in America. It's Endangered Communities are in a virtual state of emergency. Each of those communities is predominantly African American. More people were shot and more people were killed here last year than in New York and Los Angeles combined, despite the fact that those cities have roughly 10 million more people total living in them. In fact, the Chicago Department of Public Health has ranked violence as the second most critical issue on the West Side of Chicago.

Though the numbers spiked in 2016, this trend is several years old. In 2015, Chicago had the most murders in the United States at 488. That year, 2,900 people were shot. The majority of those killings and shootings were in predominately African American communities.

These conditions take an obvious toll on the human spirit. Fear has replaced hope for hundreds of thousands of Chicagoans. But these conditions also have a dollar cost. The University of Chicago Crime Lab estimated the cost of gun violence in Chicago was \$2.5 billion. The average cost in stabilizing a gunshot victim is \$50,000. That's just to stabilize them. It does not take into account follow up care. Those are dollars that don't benefit small businesses or schools or libraries. They instead go to save the lives of those impacted by senseless gun violence.

It isn't just the violence that is replacing hope with fear. At the height of the Great Depression – considered by most to be the worst economic crisis in our history – unemployment hovered around 20 percent. Look at the community information above this section. Every endangered community has unemployment at about 20 percent or much, much higher. Those numbers include only people actively looking for jobs, not the ones who have given up.

What does all this say about our supposed world class city? How can we profess to be shocked in the face of hopelessness and violence when these conditions exist mere minutes from thriving commercial centers, in the shadows of gleaming sky scrapers in the Loop?

We cannot ignore this crisis. We must deal with it, or it will deal with us. Though some would argue – correctly – that through the escalating gun violence in poor neighborhoods across this city, it has already begun to deal with us.

There is a deep cynicism with government and leaders. Residents do not believe the conditions in their communities will change. They have been living in hell for decades. But we must believe that – together – we can rise up and make that change. Block by block. Neighborhood by neighborhood. School by school. We can revitalize these Endangered Communities.

Please join me.



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