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# Communities at Risk: A Community Perspective on Urban Social Problems

*Robert B. Denhardt, Mark A. Glaser*

Throughout America, there is an increasing disparity in income and opportunity between the *haves* and the *have-nots*. In many neighborhoods, those we will call *communities at risk*, that disparity manifests itself in a variety of social problems, including illegal drugs, crime, inadequate education, and social dislocation. In the past such problems have been dealt with by government in a generic way, through imposition from the outside of one-size-fits-all solutions. The failure to recognize the special character of individual communities has resulted at least two problems. First, there has often been a mismatch between available programs and the specific character of individual communities. For example, policies were sometimes at odds with the will of the community and could not be modified to fit the local situation. Second, inadequate communication often led to battles between local political leaders and those in the target neighborhood itself. Being unclear about community norms and values, elected officials, even at the local level, found it difficult to communicate with those in the communities—and vice versa.

In this article, we explore the idea that urban social problems might be better approached with the understanding that each individual community at risk has its own particular mix of social, economic, and cultural attributes, which uniquely define its problems and their potential solutions, and that paramount among these attributes are issues of leadership and social cohesion. We also suggest that intervention strategies need to take such differences into account and provide specific rather than generic solutions. Our purpose is not to propose a set of categories for describing neighborhoods and communities but rather to suggest several important *relationships* between community types and intervention strategies, relationships that suggest which strategies will succeed in which settings.

## Differing Communities

In our view, the idea of community provides an important key to better understanding the dynamics of social and government interventions in communities at risk. Community implies a system of shared meanings, through which people coalesce around important interests, give meaning and focus to important projects, and maintain the social and moral fabric of their area. Although in many communities at risk the forces of the polity and the market have broken down, there remain elements of community that may provide the basis for reconstructing the political and economic order. Only as those inside and outside the community recognize the distinct and legitimate characters of particular communities at risk can intervention strategies be successful.

For those in such communities the fact that opportunities are available somewhere “out there” is usually meaningless. What they experience in their immediate surroundings is what influences them to take advantage of opportunities. For many who live at the margins of society, the family or neighborhood is their lifeline. For elderly immigrants who have not learned English, the ethnic neighborhood is an essential link. For the poor, the disabled, or the emotionally scarred, the neighborhood or family often provides a web of support and dignity that social service agencies cannot duplicate. The degree to which people attach meaning and importance to a place or to their relationship with an identifiable group strongly influences the capacity of those people to band together to ward off further social deterioration or to seize available opportunities.

In our view, successful efforts to improve community life must be based on a clear understanding of the character of the particular neighborhood. Obviously, there are many critical characteristics of urban neighborhoods: the racial-ethnic mix, quality of housing, level of crime and fear of crime, historical relationship with government, and political organization. However, merely assessing these features does not provide sufficient insight into potentially successful interventions, specifically those likely to make a difference in the community's long-term economic condition. As the concept of community instructs us, what is most important is the way a community defines its own structure of meaning, what we will call its *community orientation*.

Community orientation is produced by two general factors: (1) social cohesion, including a history of experience with and a level of commitment to community organization and a willingness to commit to helping in community improvement, and (2) community leadership, including both the quality of internal leadership and the willingness of community members to cooperate with leadership from the larger, outside community. Communities that act with a common understanding of and a commitment to the well-being of the overall community and those that have established effective interactions with the external community will have substantially better chances of success in community improvements. We define the following general types of commu-

nities at risk, types based on relative levels of social cohesion and community leadership.

**Type I: Fragmented Community.** The *fragmented community* evidences low levels of cohesion and leadership. This community exhibits few if any signs of community identification; members generally act purely in the interest of their own survival. Leaders have not emerged either within the community or in such a way that they might speak effectively to the external community.

**Type II: Inexperienced Community.** The *inexperienced community* shows an emerging sense of community, but community organization remains informal and has little success in effecting change. These communities evidence certain elements of leadership; however, this leadership usually centers on short-term, individual interests rather than a dedication to community-wide change. Leaders have not emerged to give focus and direction to the community.

**Type III: Committed Community.** The *committed community* is characterized by high levels of community organization and leadership. This community usually has a history of collective action and reflects community members' dedication to positive change. It also possesses a history of active community leadership, which, when fully mobilized, can give direction to new efforts to spur social and economic development.

### Variations in Intervention Strategies

The key question is what intervention strategy is likely to be most effective in a particular community? We would like to suggest that some strategies will be more appropriate to one kind of community and other strategies more appropriate to other communities. Indeed, certain strategies that are quite successful in one type of community simply won't work in another. Here we examine four community-based intervention strategies, noting the assets and liabilities associated with each strategy. The *public order strategy* focuses on interventions that seek order first, then attempt to build community-based programs. At the next level lie the *services delivery strategy*, which aims at providing basic services that serve foundational needs in the community, and the *basic economic development strategy*, which aims at entrepreneurship and small business development. At the upper extreme, the *self-sustaining economic development strategy* aims at making possible a new and broader range of interventions, such as the development of joint economic ventures that generate and retain wealth in the community.

**Public Order Strategy.** A public order intervention strategy is one designed to create order so as to establish a basis for building leadership and social cohesion. Initial efforts necessarily include establishing harmony, forging a sense of community, and engaging local institutions. A public order strategy intervention assumes limited community organization or social cohesion, with individuals acting on self-interest. Correspondingly, fragmented communities (Type I) may initially require a public order strategy.

Community policing is an example of a public order strategy intervention that not only addresses a salient issue (crime prevention) but also provides an opportunity to build community organization and leadership. Obviously, social cohesion is a common denominator for successful crime intervention and community development. Moreover, investments in public safety result in an opportunity to enlist public trust and support community building through involving citizens in coproduction of community safety.

Public safety investments also constitute important first steps in encouraging the involvement of local leaders in addressing local problems and in reversing the disenfranchisement of the target community from local government. Community policing depends on local leadership, and where such leadership does not exist, steps must be taken to encourage community leaders to step forward.

We should note that the development of leadership in fragmented communities is extremely difficult, in part because of the conflicting expectations of leaders *in* the community and those *outside* the community. That is, the leaders and leadership styles that are likely to build community support in such communities are likely to be antagonistic to local government; indeed these communities may actually require leaders that engage in confrontation with local government. Although these leaders may be effective at rallying the community (an important first step), they may be seen by outside leaders as antagonistic toward building cooperative linkages to local government. So, even though such confrontational efforts may be necessary initially, community leadership must evolve if the community is to take full advantage of external assets to support community development.

**Services Delivery Strategy.** A services delivery strategy includes many activities found in a public order strategy, including close working relationships between police and community. However, a service delivery strategy moves beyond informal community building, through programs that meet basic human needs. And it may lead to the establishment of a formal community-based organization, driven by community participation and with multiple purposes. For example, these programs may offer recreation, job training, drug abuse prevention, and community-based child care. Although such programs meet important needs, they also require new organizational and political skills, and they may require involved citizens to build linkages to external institutions.

Services delivery strategies demand community leadership that is increasingly adept at building political bridges to the external community, including local government. As we have discussed, initial development strategies may be best served by leaders in the target communities who employ such themes as “it’s us against them” or “they only hear us if we speak from a position of power.” Although leaders of fragmented communities are more likely to focus on taking the initial steps toward helping people identify themselves as a community, leaders of inexperienced and especially committed communities (Types

II and III) will recognize that important progress and economic change require investment from the outside and thus building ties with business and government.

The issue of community-based organization must also be addressed. Most communities have a number of single-purpose organizations formed to address specific needs or issues and consequently with narrowly defined missions. Organizations formed around the coproduction of public safety are common examples of single-purpose community participation organizations. Indeed, such organizations may be encouraged by a services delivery strategy. However, though these organizations are effective in the short run, they sometimes lose community support and participation as issues or needs change.

Multipurpose community-based organizations are better suited to low-income communities simply because multiple dimensions of poverty must be recognized in successful intervention efforts. In addition, these multipurpose organizations necessarily involve a broader cross-section of the community. Mobilization of community resources builds a sense of community, enhances political clout, and provides opportunities for closer working relations with local government.

Inexperienced communities and committed communities offer favorable environments for services delivery strategies, but success depends on a variety of community contexts. For example, politics and the local economy are important influences on the extent to which a strategy may be appropriate. Competing political factions can have a disruptive influence on services delivery intervention strategies, including formal community organization. Religious affiliation is a strong influence in many low-income communities and can act either to divide or to reinforce community organization.

**Basic Economic Development Strategy.** A basic economic development strategy emphasizes entrepreneurship and small business development, as opposed to more recent economic development models that involve collective action such as community ownership of business enterprises and that may be applied later. A basic economic development strategy and its associated programming not only improve the functioning of a society but also attempt to improve functioning in the local economy. Because this intervention generally requires extended community commitment, it has a higher probability of success in inexperienced and committed communities, where leadership and social cohesion are more highly developed.

Strategic investments by government in the low-income community can lay the foundation for enhanced community identification, quality of life, and general attractiveness to business capital. In some cases community-conscious businesses are willing to work with government and community representatives to create employment opportunities in low-income communities. Public-private partnerships can also be quite effective in producing business investment in such areas, as can vertical partnerships between federal, state, and local government designed to entice private sector investment and

associated employment opportunity. Public investments may also indirectly enhance employment opportunities. For example, public transportation system improvements offer increased mobility that in turn increases citizens' employment opportunities.

***Self-Sustaining Economic Development Strategy.*** The final intervention strategy, self-sustaining economic development, focuses on collective economic development, a situation in which the whole of community activities exceeds the sum of specific interests. This strategy assumes the community's strong commitment to community-based organization and community-based intervention focused on collective economic development. Here community leadership is especially critical and includes an added dimension most likely to be found in committed communities. Leaders engaged in self-sustaining economic development strategies not only must be capable of building bridges between public and private sector organizations but also must have knowledge of business development and operations. Such leadership is essential to the development of organizations, such as community development corporations (CDCs), that are designed to facilitate business development owned and operated by the community. CDCs generate employment opportunities for residents and hold wealth in the community for the purpose of reinvestment. Moreover, profits from such ventures are reinvested in community-owned businesses or in the community's own service delivery priorities.

CDCs offer extended economic development opportunities. For example, they may conduct activities that translate directly into employment opportunity. The community stands to benefit in a variety of ways, depending on the type of business operation. For example, retail and service delivery operations not only employ community residents but may depend on the community for economic viability. These businesses can offer products or services at competitive prices and are fed by the goodwill of the community manifested as positive buying behavior. Citizens of the community are expected to be favorably predisposed to business transactions with community-owned businesses.

Access to capital is an important contributor to successful business operations, regardless of a community's socioeconomic status, but capitalization is especially important to business operations in low-income communities. Investment in businesses in low-income communities contains too much risk for traditional sources of capital such as banks. However, banks that serve low-income communities are required under the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) to extend loans to the community. Public-private partnerships may be required to reduce risk and assemble sufficient capital; or lending institutions may be willing to underwrite a portion of the risk, based on obligations associated with the CRA. In other cases public-private interventions may include government underwriting of a portion of the risk through a loan guarantee program. Capital formation through community development banks appears promising.

Leadership of CDCs requires a wide range of talent and commonly features a board of directors with citizen representation. Such citizen representa-

tion is designed to protect the overall interests of the community. Community participation and collective involvement generally exceed the previously discussed strategies in both intensity and breadth of commitment. Leadership must have improved knowledge of business operations as well as an accurate reading of community values and priorities.

CDCs generally offer the greatest opportunity for important community change and improvement but can also carry the greatest risk. The required intensity of commitment to community and the CDCs far exceeds that needed for the previously discussed intervention strategies. A self-sustaining economic development strategy is best reserved to committed communities. Marginal community commitment substantially elevates the risk of failure, and initial setbacks are undesirable not least because they may undermine later efforts. However, communities that have developed a sense of social cohesion and strong leadership may be able to sustain long-term efforts to restore economic viability. Again, the key is to understand the level of leadership and social cohesion—the level of community—and to design interventions suited to that level.

### **The Essential Roles of Leadership and Participation**

In this article, we have constructed a broad approach to intervention strategies in communities at risk that suggests the importance of building a community orientation in the particular neighborhood, that is, increasing its *social capital*. However, we have not yet considered certain factors lying *outside* the community—the context in which the community resides and the type of leadership that the larger community is willing to provide. We suspect that ultimately, elected leaders from the larger community who recognize the importance of addressing the needs of specific communities and who are supportive of community leadership will be required for communities at risk to make progress.

Certainly local public officials are facing an increasingly complex political landscape, including a myriad of special interests. Although the interests of the economically advantaged and disadvantaged are aligned in the long run, politics places greater emphasis on the short run. Even when public officials recognize the need for action, it is easy for the interests of the poor to get pushed to the bottom of the local agenda. On the surface it seems unlikely that local public officials will support the development of community organizations that might represent new power bases in low-income communities.

At the same time, communities at risk feel politically alienated from local government. Poverty populations view the ballot box as an ineffective form of representation yet do not have easy access to other means of redress. Changes in election practices, including increased use of single-member districts, are seen as positive steps for increased recognition of the low-income community. Similarly, many local governments use boards and commissions to give minority and poverty residents a stake in the system. However, narrow bands of participation

do not enlist changes of the magnitude necessary to reverse the fortunes of low-income communities.

However, enlightened self-interest of local public officials and the overall interests of the society demand attention to the problems of low-income communities. Since the problems of low-income communities spill over into the broader community, intervention is critical to the long-run well-being of that broader community. And, as illogical as it may at first seem, the formation of a poverty power base can focus the local political agenda so that the community sends fewer conflicting signals. Differences of opinion within low-income communities can undermine development policy; however, community-based organizations can be important tools for consolidating opinion—and an aid to both elected leaders and the community.

The challenge for local leaders in both the target community and the larger community who have made a commitment to “do the right thing” is to understand that each individual community has its own problems and its own resources. Understanding the particular combination of leadership and social cohesion that a community exhibits is helpful in designing approaches suited to it. But the design of such programs cannot come merely from outside. Rather the community at risk must itself be fully involved in efforts to improve. Only when communities *come together* to define their own needs and aspirations can external resources be effectively mobilized to correct unnecessary and debilitating disparities and to build stronger and more economically viable communities.

Outside leaders must maintain sufficient support but also sufficient flexibility to permit the appropriate intervention strategies to be used effectively by the community. Such an approach requires a clear understanding of the character of the target community and a willingness to support community desires and directions in bringing about change. Only through a recognition of the centrality of community and the consequent need for collaborative leadership in solving urban ills will progress be made.

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Robert B. Denhardt is Messick Professor of Public Administration at the University of Delaware.

Mark A. Glaser is a professor at Wichita State University.

