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# **ASSESSMENT OF NEIGHBORHOOD SAFETY INITIATIVE**

JAMES 'MAX' HELMS  
LEAD RESEARCH ASSISTANT

DR. ANGELA MADDEN  
RESEARCH ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR

BILL GIBBONS  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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## INTRODUCTION

One of many factors to increase community safety is citizen involvement. Within Memphis and Shelby County, many citizens have stepped up to help improve their neighborhoods and to assist with local issues. The Memphis Shelby Crime Commission (MSCC) recognized the potential crime prevention power of organized groups of citizens in the current Safe Community Plan that targets the overall crime rate. The plan aims to establish and maintain a “Neighborhood Safety Initiative” (NSI) to help build and strengthen partnerships among neighborhood groups, law enforcement, and other city/county government agencies. Neighborhood watch groups (NWGs), for example, align themselves with their police precincts to help report unusual, and possibly criminal, activity. Police precincts also help educate neighborhood residents on how they can improve safety, not only in their communities, but also in their homes.

Another example of strengthening these partnerships with citizens is through monthly meetings of Police Joint Agencies (PJAs). Leaders of NWGs and other citizens get the chance to address specific concerns in their neighborhoods with numerous city and county agencies such as law enforcement, city/county code officials, and health officials. At the suggestion of the Memphis Police Department (MPD), the NSI effort has focused on the Austin Peay and Tillman MPD precincts. The objective of this assessment is to determine whether NSI is meeting the objectives outlined in the Safe Community Plan.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *The Neighborhood Watch Group (NWG) Movement*

Neighborhood watches developed out of an effort in the United States to increase citizen involvement in preventing crime (Titus, 1984). Through the growth of NWGs, various terms were used to describe these groups such as block watch, apartment watch, home watch, citizen alert, and community watch. The primary approach that these groups take to reduce crime is for residents to report any suspicious activities to their police department in hopes of deterring future criminal activity (Bennett, 1990).

One of the earliest evaluations of neighborhood watch groups within the United States was of the Seattle Washington Community Crime Prevention Project which started in 1973 (Cirel et al. 1997). This evaluation showed a greater reduction in burglaries in neighborhoods which had NWGs compared to those without. Since the early 1980s, there has been a continuous push for NWG expansion across the United States. According to *The 2000 National Crime Prevention Survey* by the National Crime Prevention Council in 2001, an estimated 41% of the American population resides in communities that have a NWG. According to the report, “This makes neighborhood watch the largest single organized crime-prevention activity in the nation” (39).

### *Vacant/Abandoned Properties and Blight*

Unoccupied and blighted properties in a neighborhood can lead to higher possibilities of unsafe environmental conditions. Approximately 15% of the land in United States cities has been deemed vacant or abandoned; this is roughly the same size of Switzerland. Over 11,500 square miles of useable areas remain neglected (Bowman & Pagano, 2010). Low-income neighborhoods are common areas of vacant and blighted properties and point to these properties as hazards to both health and safety (Garvin et al, 2013). Targeting these properties, especially in an urban setting, has shown to have effects on economics and crime (Wachter S, Wong G, 2008; Kondo M, South E, Branas C, 2015). Other studies have shown mixed results (Bogar S, Beyer K, 2016). For example, low-lying trees and other dense areas of vegetation have been associated with higher fear of crime. These areas limit visibility and can potentially hide possible criminals and other illegal activity (Gobster & Westphal, 2004). Urban context matters in regard to human behavior. Some studies have found that blighted properties, such as broken-down housing and high littered areas, can lead to higher violence and crime (Keizer, Lindenberg, & Steg, 2008; Harcourt & Ludwig, 2006). Branas and others (2018) found that residents near maintained vacant lots not only reported significantly reduced perceptions of crime and safety concerns but also had significant reductions in crime overall, including gun crimes, burglaries, and nuisances.

## METHODS

During the time period covered by this assessment, a representative from the University of Memphis' Public Safety Institute (PSI) attended monthly PJA meetings in the Austin Peay and Tillman precincts to evaluate the meetings and ascertain the issues discussed. These include the PJAs in Frayser, Raleigh, Highland Heights, and the University of Memphis area. The PSI representative also attended the monthly NSI working group meetings, held in both Austin Peay and Tillman MPD precincts and virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic. The NSI meetings were comprised of the leaders of each of the PJAs mentioned above along with representatives from various city and county agencies. Steve Shular, assistant to Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland, chairs the NSI meetings. Attendance at the NSI meetings allowed the PSI to examine how city and county organizations handled issues brought to their attention by citizens.

Data for the analyses below were pulled from surveys distributed at PJA meetings, documents distributed at those meetings, notes from those meetings, and from the 311 system. The 311 system allows Memphis residents to request city services online or by phone. Some problems that can be reported through this 311 system include potholes, trash on highways, abandoned cars, and many other non-emergency issues. Data on the number of NWGs and NWG boundaries were obtained from the MPD.

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

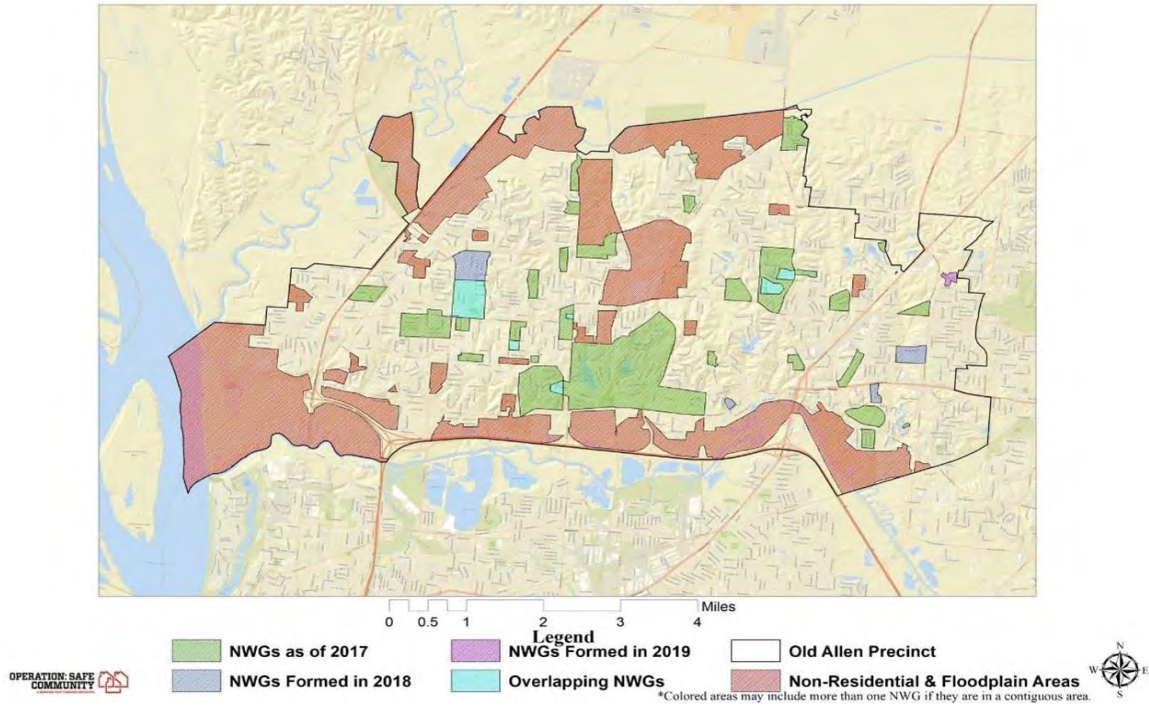
Desired Safe Community Plan NSI Outcome: Ensure all neighborhoods in the NSI geographic areas [Austin Peay and Tillman] have active NWGs.

### *Mapping*

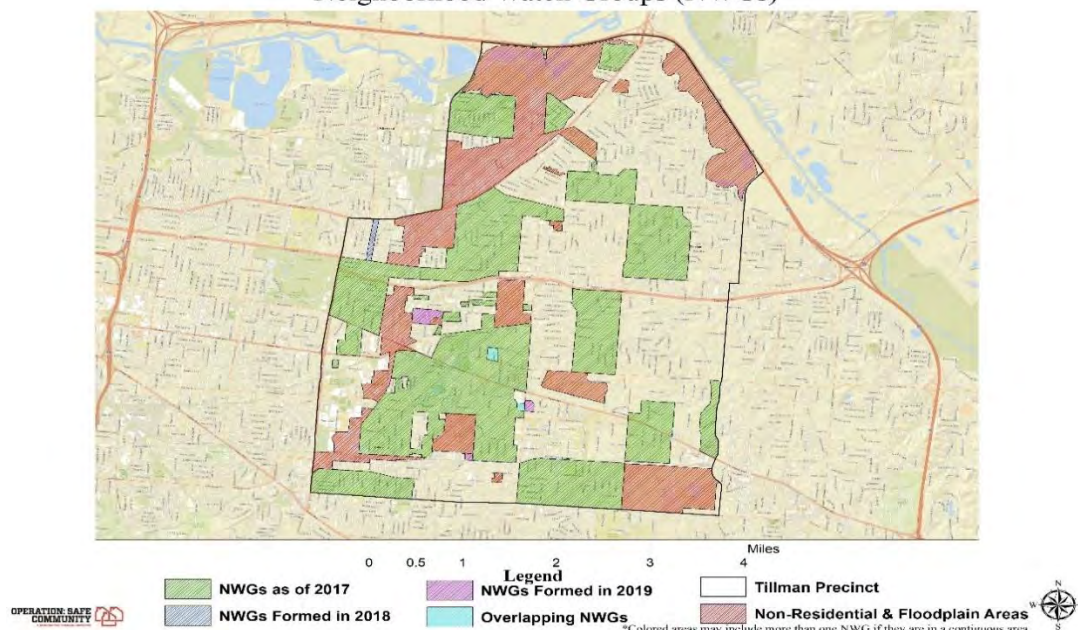
Precinct level maps were created for the Austin Peay and Tillman MPD precincts to illustrate areas with active NWGs and potential target areas for new NWGs. The following maps include all NWGs that were active in 2016 (baseline year) and all that were active by the end of 2019. The 'green' areas had an existing NWG at the end of 2017, the "blue" areas represent NWGs that formed in 2018, and the "purple" areas

represent NWGs that were formed in 2019. The “cyan” areas represent areas that are covered by more than one NWGs, and “red” areas are areas that are considered non-residential (examples: parks, industrial areas, floodplains).

### Austin Peay Memphis Police Department Precinct Neighborhood Watch Groups (NWGs)



### Tillman Memphis Police Department Precinct Neighborhood Watch Groups (NWGs)





## Number of NWGs & Growth

The following chart and tables are more up-to-date than the maps and show the growth of NWGs through the COVID-19 year of 2020 in the Austin Peay and Tillman MPD precincts. The annualized goal is to help create and start an active NWG in at least 20% of those populated areas that do not have a current NWG. Chart 1 also includes NWGs in an adjacent Shelby County Sheriff's Office (SCSO) district. Tables 1-3 show the monthly growth of NWGs for 2017-2020. It should be noted that no regular NSI monthly meetings were held in early 2017. The first regular NSI monthly meeting was in April 2017, which is why some months lack numbers. As reflected in Table 1, active NWGs in the Austin Peay precinct increased 41.4% in 2017, 43.9% in 2018, 1.69% in 2019, and 5.0% in 2020. Together, Austin Peay precinct NWGs have increased by 117.24% from January 2017 through December 2020. Table 2 shows that active NWGs in the Tillman precinct increased 13.3% in 2017, 7.84% in 2018, 5.45% in 2019 and 5.17% in 2020. Overall, from January 2017 through December 2020, active NWGs in the Tillman precinct increased by 35.56%. Finally, Table 3 shows that NWGs in the SCSO's district increased 0% in 2017, 133.3% in 2018, 14.29% in 2019, and 0.0% in 2020 for an overall increase of 166.67% from January 2017 through December 2020.

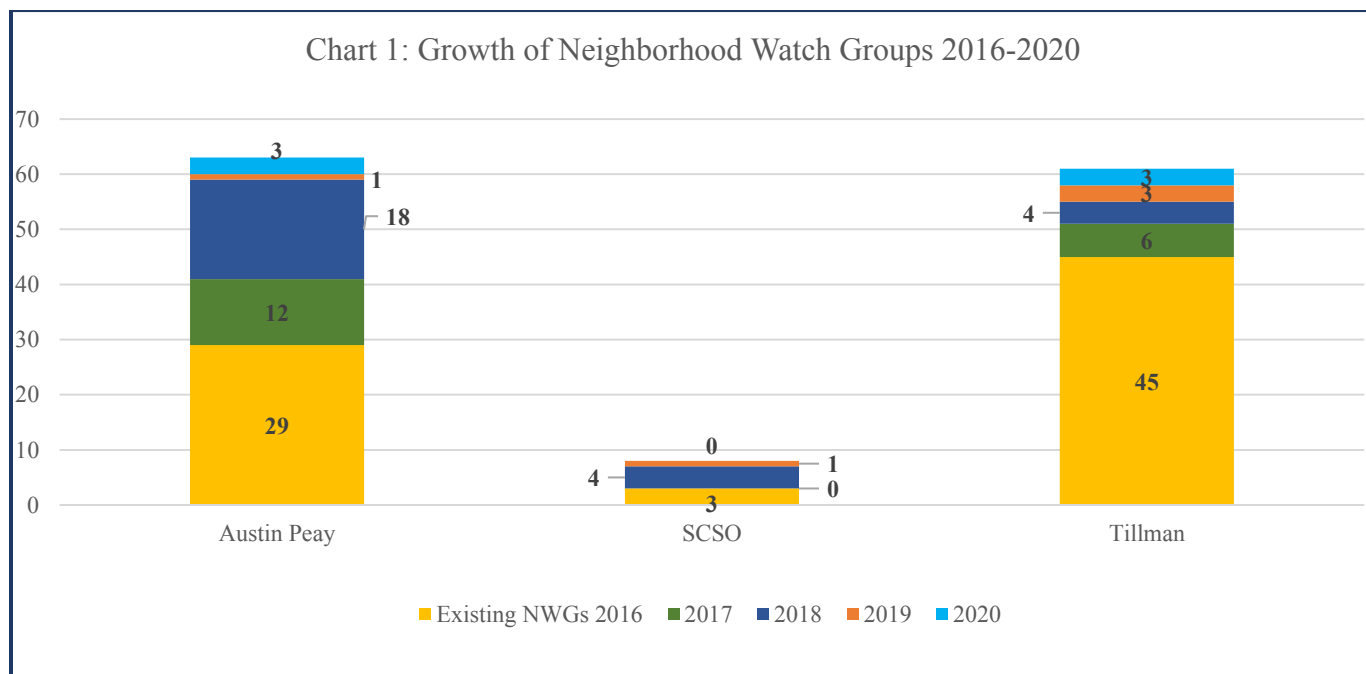


Table 1: Active MPD Austin Peay Neighborhood Watch Groups

2017				2018				2019				2020			
January	-	July	34	January	41	July	56	January	59	July	60	January	60	July	62
February	-	August	34	February	41	August	56	February	59	August	60	February	62	August	62
March	29	September	35	March	41	September	57	March	60	September	60	March	62	September	63
April	32	October	35	April	43	October	57	April	60	October	60	April	62	October	63
May	34	November	41	May	56	November	58	May	60	November	60	May	62	November	63
June	34	December	41	June	56	December	59	June	60	December	60	June	62	December	63

Table 2: Active MPD Tillman Neighborhood Watch Groups

2017				2018				2019				2020			
January	-	July	49	January	51	July	53	January	55	July	56	January	58	July	59
February	-	August	49	February	52	August	54	February	56	August	56	February	58	August	59
March	45	September	49	March	52	September	54	March	56	September	56	March	59	September	59
April	49	October	51	April	53	October	54	April	56	October	57	April	59	October	60
May	49	November	51	May	53	November	54	May	56	November	58	May	59	November	60
June	49	December	51	June	53	December	55	June	56	December	58	June	59	December	61

Table 3: Active SCSO Austin Peay Neighborhood Watch Groups

2017				2018				2019				2020			
January	3	July	3	January	3	July	6	January	7	July	7	January	8	July	8
February	-	August	3	February	3	August	5	February	7	August	7	February	8	August	8
March	-	September	3	March	4	September	5	March	7	September	8	March	8	September	8
April	-	October	3	April	5	October	7	April	7	October	8	April	8	October	8
May	3	November	3	May	5	November	7	May	7	November	8	May	8	November	8
June	3	December	3	June	6	December	7	June	7	December	8	June	8	December	8

### *Growth in Geographic Areas with Active NWGs*

One of the objectives of the NSI is to increase the geographic coverage of NWGs within the Old Allen and Tillman MPD precincts. To determine the extent to which geographic coverage of NWGs changed within each precinct, we used the area of each precinct in square miles, the areas that are either non-residential or floodplain, the area covered by NWGs as of 2018, and the new area within 2019 NWG boundaries (See Table 4.) Using the boundaries of each precinct's NWGs as detailed in the preceding Maps 1 and 2, a program called ArcMap allowed for a determination of the square mileage within any boundary set. The square mileage growth in 2019 is reflected in Table 4. The percent covered represents the area within the precinct excluding the non-residential and floodplain area.



Table 4: Neighborhood Watch Group Growth within the Geographical Areas of Austin Peay and Tillman MPD Precincts

	<b>Austin Peay</b>	<b>Tillman</b>
<b>Station Precinct</b>	38.58	21.52
<b>Non-Residential &amp; Floodplain</b>	10.88	4.12
<b>NWGs as of 2018</b>	4.500	6.905
<b>2019 Neighborhood Watch Groups (New)</b>	0.025	0.078
<b>All Areas Covered by Watch Groups</b>	4.525	6.982
<b>2018 Percent Covered</b>	16.25%	39.67%
<b>2019 Percent Covered</b>	16.34%	40.12%
<b>Change</b>	+ 0.09%	+ 0.45%

Desired Safe Community Plan NSI Outcome: On an annualized basis, at least 80% of complaints brought to the NSI as priorities will be resolved to the satisfaction of the PJA leadership.

For each monthly NSI working group meeting, the PJA leaders are asked to identify priority complaints from their geographic areas. Chart 2 shows the status of priority complaints that were brought before city and county leaders at the monthly NSI meetings. Cases involving blight or crime are reported by PJA leaders and are listed as “resolved” once they meet the respective PJA leadership’s satisfaction. Those that are listed as “litigation-active or concluded” means that they were sent to the Environmental Court for further action. Since these cases no longer involve action by county and city agencies and rely solely on the courts, they are listed as “resolved” whether or not a judgment has been decided upon. Therefore, the percentages reflected in Chart 2 are possibly inflated in terms of the “resolved” rate.

For those NSI priority complaints deemed resolved, Chart 3 shows the amount of time it took for resolution. At the end of 2020, 27 (11.59%, of the total) of the priorities brought to the NSI monthly meetings during that calendar year remained unresolved. This is considerably better compared to 2018 where 34% of cases remained unresolved. As for the 20 unresolved priority cases in 2020, some of these priorities were brought during the latter months of 2020 and may have been resolved in the early months of 2021. At the end of 2020, five out of 64 of the 2019 priority complaints (7.81%, of the total) remained unresolved.

Chart 2: Neighborhood Safety Initiative PJA Priority Complaints  
Brought/Litigated/Resolved CY 2017 - 2020

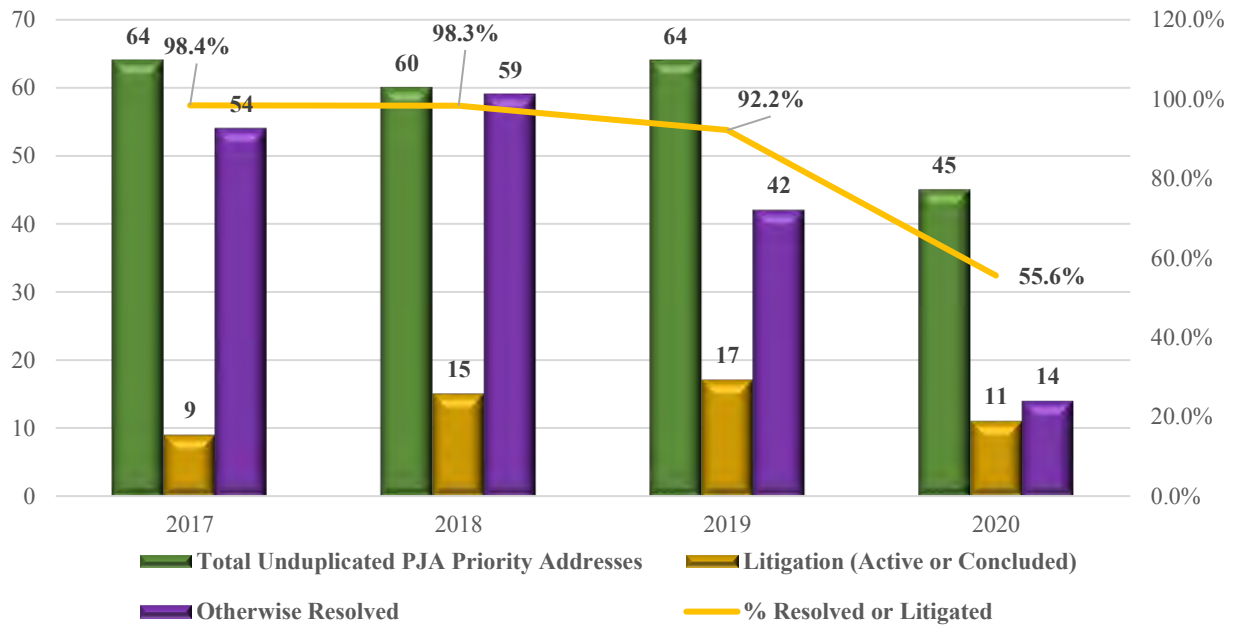
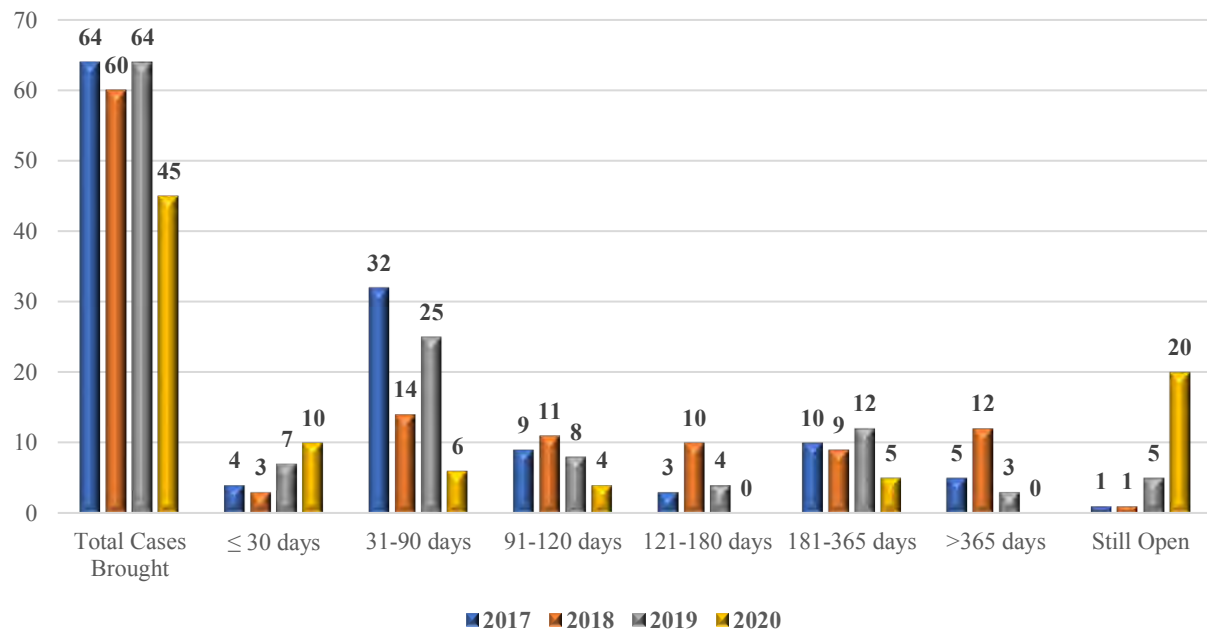


Chart 3: Neighborhood Safety Initiative Priority Cases Time to Solve 2017 - 2020



Desired Safe Community Plan NSI Outcome: Obtain median times to resolution for [certain types of] citizen complaints emanating from the NSI areas below the median times in 2016 (with a goal of  $\leq 30$  days).

Chart 4 shows the median days to close for certain types of blight complaints in the Austin Peay and Tillman MPD precincts during the calendar year for 2016 through 2020. The median was used due to outliers that caused the average to be skewed. Since 311 receives thousands of complaints each month, only selected categories of blight which correlate with potential criminal activity were examined. These include junk yards, substandard and derelict structures, weeds-vacant houses or lots, weeds-occupied houses, and picker piles. Other categories were tracked such as graffiti, abandoned vehicles, and illegal dumping. Charts 5 and 6 show the number of blight cases that were closed within 30, 60, or 90 days during the years of 2016 through 2020 and include any remaining cases for both the Austin Peay and Tillman MPD precincts. One thing that should be noted for the following charts is how the term “closed” changed. For a majority of the time period starting in January 2016, “closed” did not always mean that they were resolved but could have meant that 311 referred the issue at hand to another agency. If the matter was referred, 311 would then mark the issue as “closed” since it was no longer involved with it.

Chart 4: Median Days to Close Selected 311 Blight Complaints in Austin Peay and Tillman Precincts

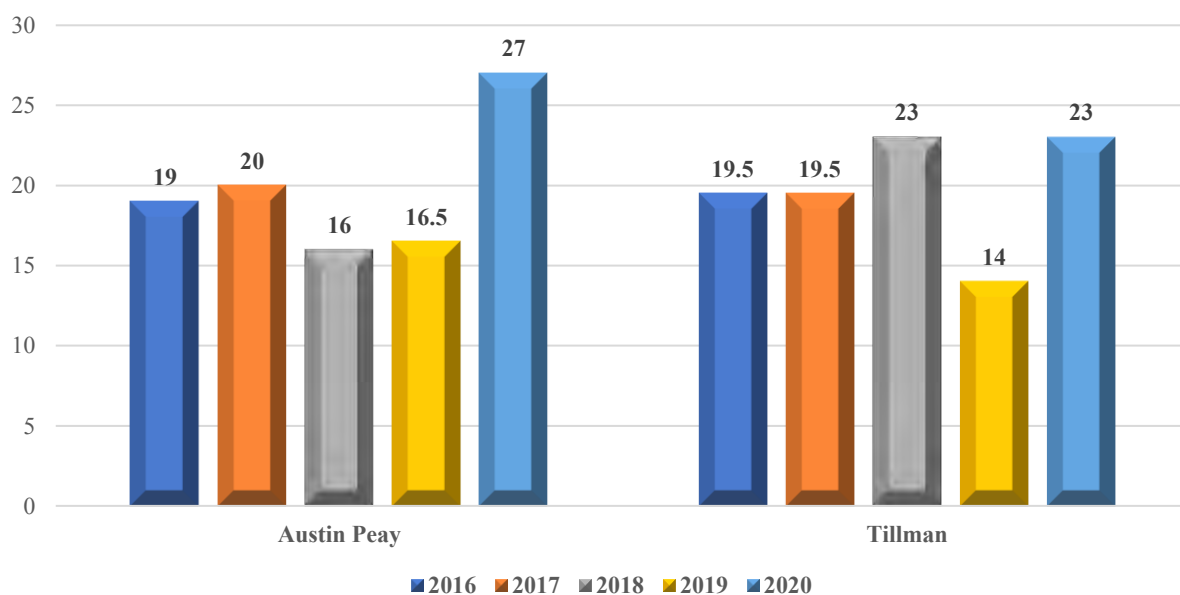


Chart 5: Days to Close Selected 311 Blight Cases in Tillman Precinct 2016-2020

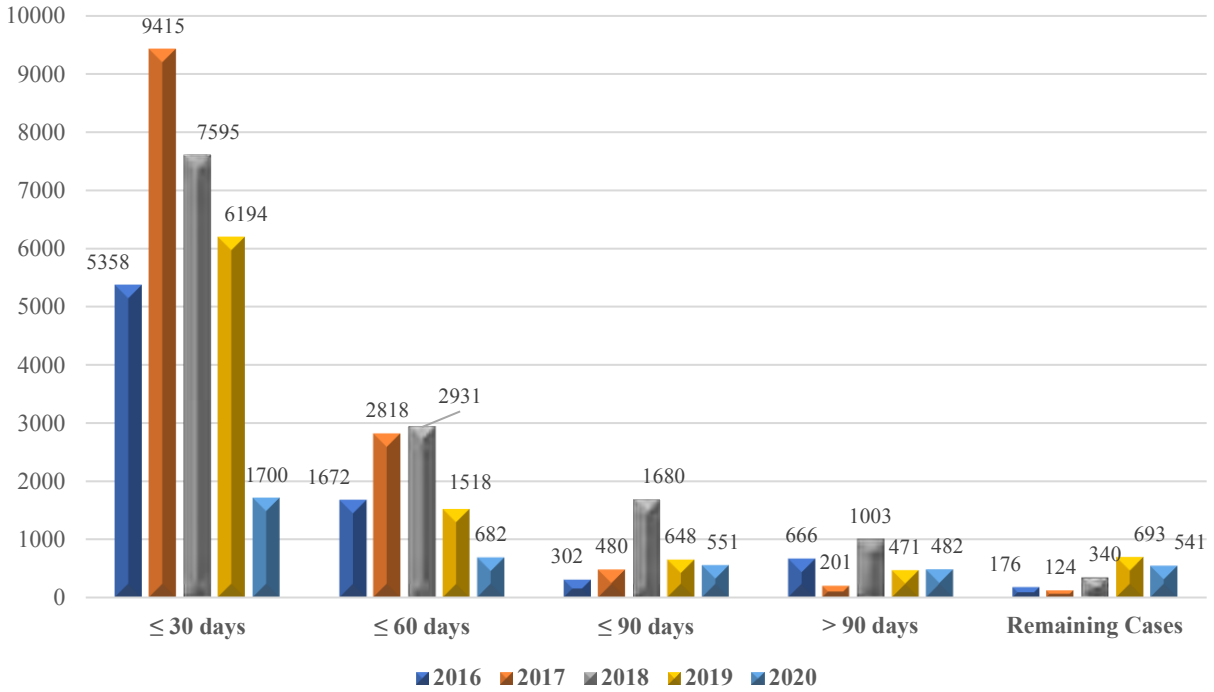
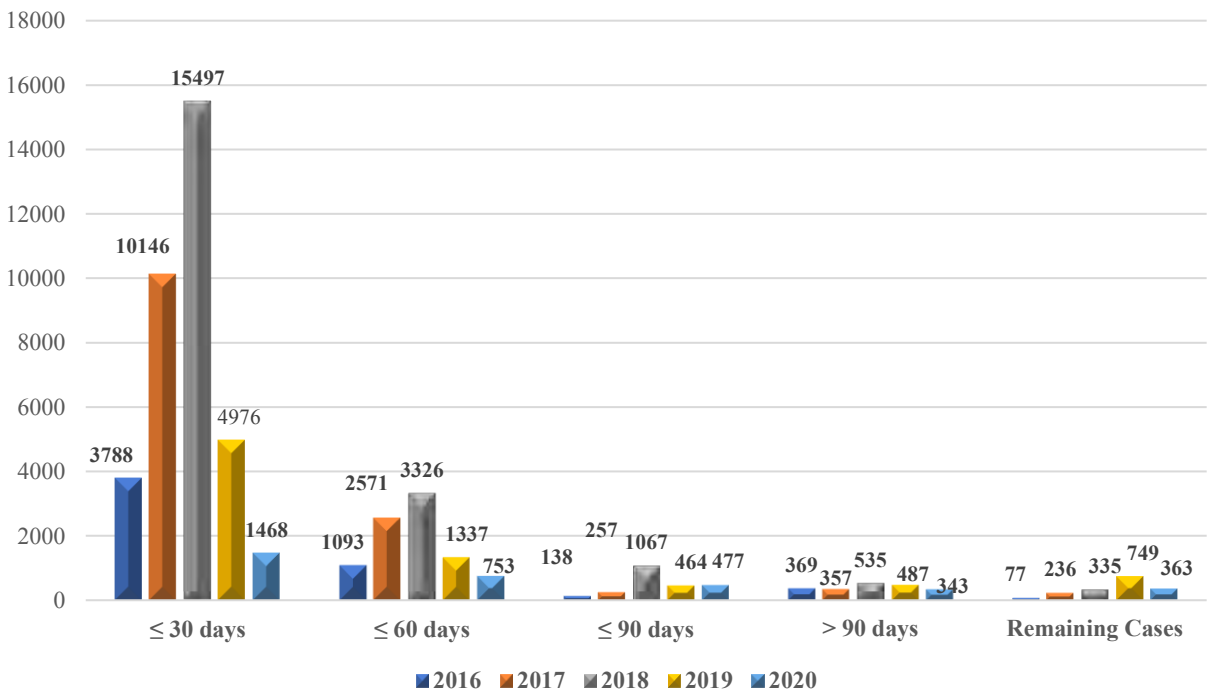


Chart 6: Days to Close Selected 311 Blight Cases in Austin Peay Precinct 2016-2020



## Surveys of Citizens Participating in PJA Meetings

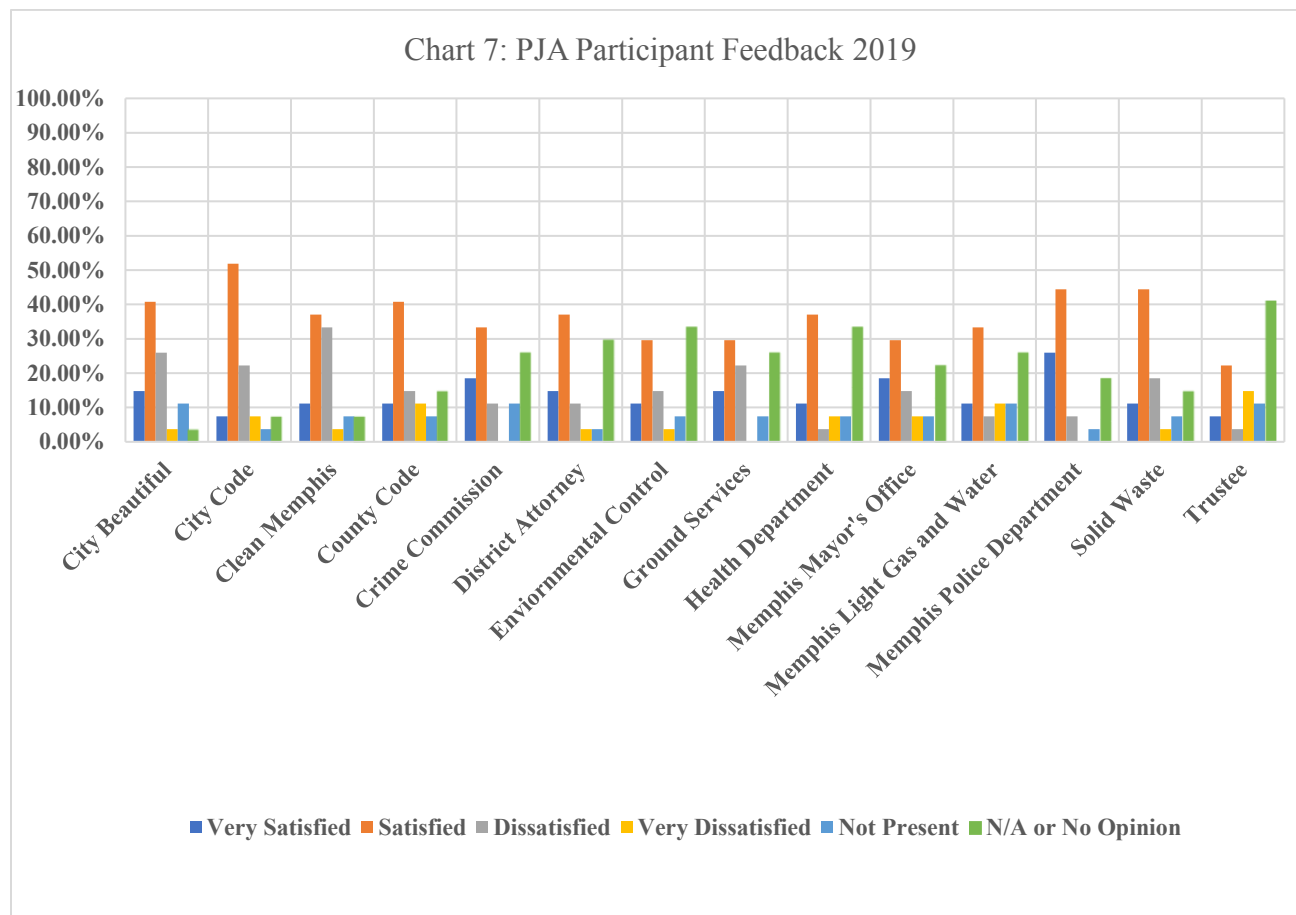


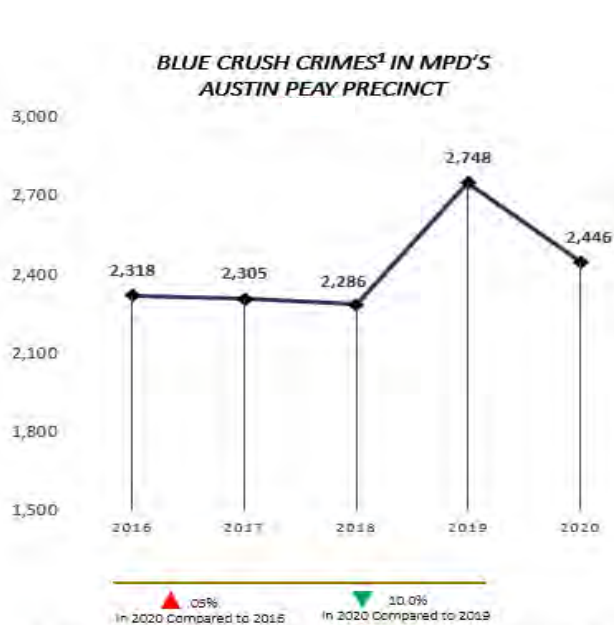
Chart 7 shows the breakdown of PJA participants surveyed for feedback on various government agencies and private entities invited to participate in the PJA meetings. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the PJAs did not meet regularly for most of 2020. Therefore, surveys of PJA participants were not used in 2020. This survey tool was last used in October 2019 in order to evaluate agencies and private entities on their knowledge and actions of priority cases during these meetings. Most of the agencies received a majority of very satisfied or satisfied responses, with the exceptions being Environmental Court and the Trustee, with both scoring a majority in “No Opinion.” There does appear to be a relationship between the level of satisfaction and whether PJA participants were aware of a particular agency or private entity’s presence at the PJA meetings.

Table 5 shows the attendance percentage of community partners at the NSI meetings. It should be noted that 2019 only had nine attendance sheets, and 2020 only had ten attendance sheets. Some agencies such as City Code Enforcement, City of Memphis Mayor's Neighborhood Program, the District Attorney's Office, Memphis Police Department, Memphis & Shelby County Crime Commission, and the Shelby County Sheriffs Office were present for the vast majority of meetings during the two years. However, the list of attendees for these meetings is recorded by individuals checking in prior to the start of the meeting, it could be that some agencies just failed to sign the attendance sheet resulting in some missing numbers.

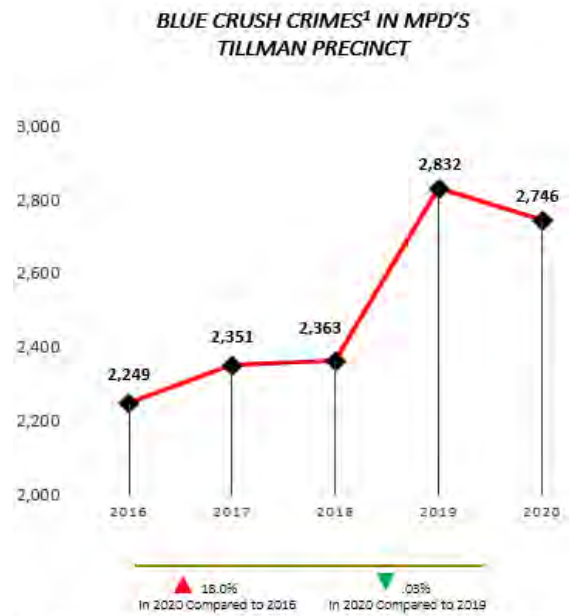
<b>Table 5: Community Partners Attendance at NSI Meetings 2019 &amp; 2020</b>		
	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>
<b>Aging Commission</b>	0.00%	20.00%
<b>City Attorney's Office</b>	0.00%	60.00%
<b>City Beautiful</b>	0.00%	10.00%
<b>Community Engagement</b>	0.00%	0.00%
<b>City Code Enforcement</b>	88.89%	90.00%
<b>Clean Memphis</b>	0.00%	0.00%
<b>City of Memphis Comprehensive Planning Development</b>	0.00%	0.00%
<b>City of Memphis Mayor's Neighborhood Program</b>	88.89%	90.00%
<b>County Mayor's Office</b>	0.00%	10.00%
<b>City Neighborhood Crime Prevention</b>	0.00%	0.00%
<b>County Code Enforcement</b>	66.67%	30.00%
<b>District Attorney's Office</b>	77.78%	80.00%
<b>Engineering Department</b>	0.00%	0.00%
<b>Environmental Enforcement</b>	0.00%	0.00%
<b>Ground Services</b>	0.00%	10.00%
<b>Housing &amp; Community Development</b>	0.00%	10.00%
<b>Health Department</b>	22.22%	0.00%
<b>Memphis Gas, Lighting, and Water</b>	0.00%	0.00%
<b>Memphis Police Department</b>	88.89%	100%
<b>Memphis &amp; Shelby County Crime Commission</b>	88.89%	90.00%
<b>Neighborhood Improvement</b>	0.00%	0.00%
<b>Neighborhood Preservation Clinic</b>	0.00%	10.00%
<b>Public Works</b>	0.00%	0.00%
<b>Shelby County Community Affairs</b>	0.00%	10.00%
<b>Shelby County Sheriffs Office</b>	66.67%	90.00%
<b>Solid Waste</b>	0.00%	0.00%
<b>Trustee</b>	0.00%	0.00%



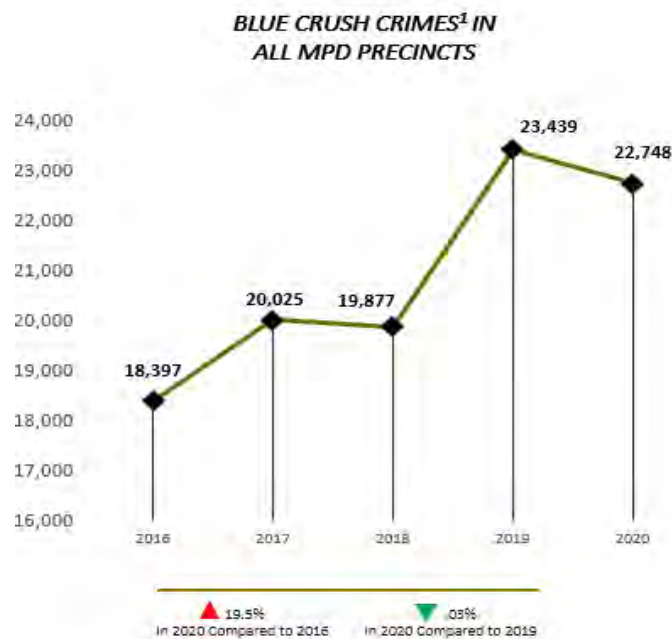
Desired Safe Community Plan NSI Outcome: Reduce the major violent and property crime rate in the NSI geographic areas by an amount greater than the city-wide rate.



1 Includes robberies, aggravated assaults (non-dv), burglaries, motor vehicle thefts, and thefts from motor vehicles. Source: Memphis Police Department.



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The final desired outcome is to reduce the rate of major violent and property crimes (Blue Crush crimes) in both the Austin Peay and Tillman precincts by a greater amount than the city-wide rate. In the case of both of the precincts and city-wide, the 2020 Blue Crush crimes were more than in base year 2016. However, compared to 2019, the Austin Peay precinct saw a 10.0% decrease (2,748 to 2,446) in Blue Crush crimes committed in 2020. The Tillman precinct saw a 0.3% decrease (2,832 to 2,746) in Blue Crush crimes committed in 2020. City-wide, the Memphis Police Department saw a 0.3% decrease (23,439 to 22,748) in Blue Crush crimes committed in 2020. While the Tillman precinct did not see a decrease greater than city-wide in 2020 compared to 2019, it still decreased the Blue Crush crimes committed by the same rate as the city-wide rate.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on analyses of all available data as described above, as well as observing the process used at PJA meetings, the PSI provides the following conclusions:

- 1) The number of NWGs has grown but not at a fast enough pace to reach the desired outcome. There must be a grass roots, intensive effort to obtain the pace needed. The Austin Peay precinct has had a continuous increase every year since 2016, and the Tillman precinct has also seen an increase in each year since 2016. However, the increases are not at a rate to meet the goal of the Safe Community Plan.
- 2) Most PJA community participants who expressed an opinion were either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with each of the organizations participating. This indicates that PJA community participants are appreciative of the opportunity to interact with various organization representatives.
- 3) It would seem that both the Austin Peay and Tillman precincts struggled with having success at moving the selected categories of 311 blight cases at faster rates in 2020 than in past years. Austin Peay saw a 10.5-day median increase compared to 2019, and the Tillman precinct had a nine-day median increase compared to the median days to close 311 cases in 2019. However, these increases could be due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- 4) In the Austin Peay precinct, Blue Crush crimes in 2020 compared to 2016 had increased less than city wide, while the decrease compared to 2019 was greater. For the Tillman precinct, 2020 Blue Crush crimes compared to 2016 increased slightly less than city wide, while the slight decrease compared to 2019 was the same as city wide.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The PSI has the following five recommendations:

- 1) Neighborhood Watch Group Development. A ramped up, grassroots effort must be made to recruit NWG leaders and train new groups. Otherwise, a majority of residential areas will remain unorganized.
- 2) PJA Participant Feedback. PJA community participants would often mark several organization representatives as “Not Present” on the feedback forms although one or more representatives were in attendance. One reason for this could be new community members attending the meetings who may not know who is representing each organization. It would be beneficial for participating representatives of public and private entities to display a name card which identifies his or her name and his or her organization. The Raleigh PJA already has implemented these name cards. Alternatively, the PJA leadership could call on representatives to identify themselves.
- 3) Agency Accountability. Public agencies are not required to have representatives attend PJA meetings or to be prepared if in attendance. Often some agencies which do have representatives present are not prepared to discuss matters on the agendas even though agendas have been provided beforehand to help insure preparation. *Some sense of accountability should be implemented in order to ensure that agency representatives are both present and prepared.* There should be a section added to the survey of citizens participating in the PJA meetings asking them if they felt the representatives were prepared for the meetings. In addition, there needs to be a commitment

by various agencies to fast track priority complaints brought to the NSI working group. There needs to be a sense of urgency in addressing these priority complaints

- 4) Community Partnerships. More community members should participate in PJA meetings, especially NWG leaders. Inviting more community leaders, such as business owners, could help bring in resources to solve some of the community issues.
- 5) Mid-Month Reminders. Reminding the government agencies of priority items may assist with getting them resolved faster, especially if an agency was absent from a meeting. If an agency is not able to have the problem fixed by the next meeting, the agency representative should come prepared to discuss the status of the problem and what steps are next.

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