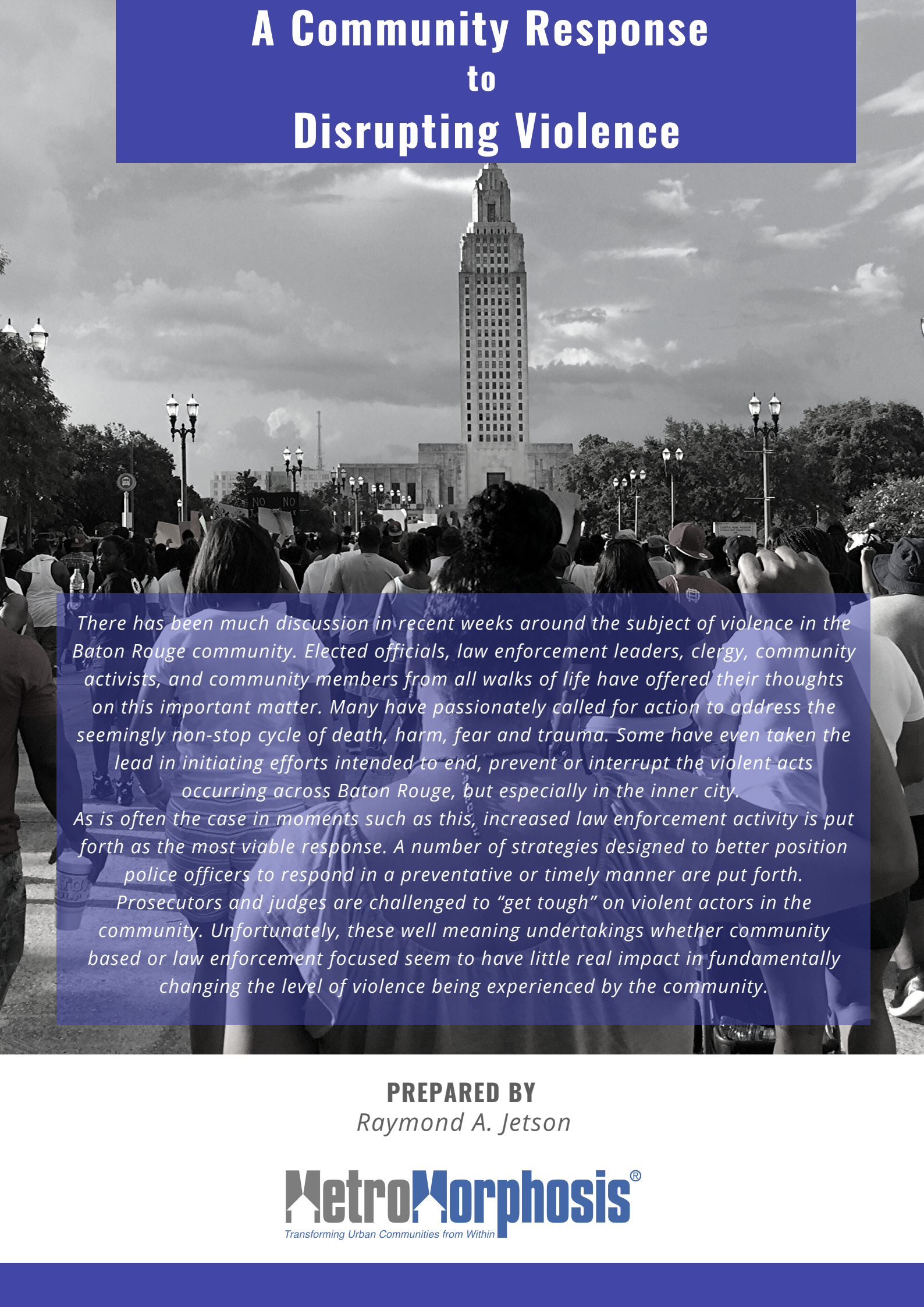


A Community Response to Disrupting Violence



There has been much discussion in recent weeks around the subject of violence in the Baton Rouge community. Elected officials, law enforcement leaders, clergy, community activists, and community members from all walks of life have offered their thoughts on this important matter. Many have passionately called for action to address the seemingly non-stop cycle of death, harm, fear and trauma. Some have even taken the lead in initiating efforts intended to end, prevent or interrupt the violent acts occurring across Baton Rouge, but especially in the inner city. As is often the case in moments such as this, increased law enforcement activity is put forth as the most viable response. A number of strategies designed to better position police officers to respond in a preventative or timely manner are put forth. Prosecutors and judges are challenged to “get tough” on violent actors in the community. Unfortunately, these well meaning undertakings whether community based or law enforcement focused seem to have little real impact in fundamentally changing the level of violence being experienced by the community.

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MetroMorphosis[®]
Transforming Urban Communities from Within

INTRODUCTION

There has been much discussion in recent weeks around the subject of violence in the Baton Rouge community. Elected officials, law enforcement leaders, clergy, community activists, and community members from all walks of life have offered their thoughts on this important matter. Many have passionately called for action to address the seemingly non-stop cycle of death, harm, fear and trauma. Some have even taken the lead in initiating efforts intended to end, prevent or interrupt the violent acts occurring across Baton Rouge, but especially in the inner city.

As is often the case in moments such as this, increased law enforcement activity is put forth as the most viable response. A number of strategies designed to better position police officers to respond in a preventative or timely manner are put forth. Prosecutors and judges are challenged to “get tough” on violent actors in the community. Unfortunately, these well meaning undertakings whether community based or law enforcement focused seem to have little real impact in fundamentally changing the level of violence being experienced by the community.

The purpose of this writing is to provide support to those who are truly committed to disrupting the cycle of violence impacting the lives of so many in Baton Rouge. Our intent is to offer information that will prove helpful in planning, implementing and evaluating strategies to reduce violence. This paper is decidedly community focused. By this, we mean that we seek to share information to identify actions that are able to be grasped and advanced by a wide range of community members. The thoughts shared herein do not look to government or law enforcement alone as the answer to the violence dilemma. This writing is deeply rooted in the belief that any effort to solve a community challenge must be ultimately driven by the people of the community. There is no cavalry coming to save inner city neighborhoods and the people who live there. Only like-minded, motivated, sincere and hard working people joining together to act collectively will bring about the change being sought. This paper is intended to support such an effort.

In addition to defaulting to a law enforcement alone based approach, another key issue that requires addressing is the use of valuable resources on strategies that have not been proven to be effective. Our community does not have the time, people or money to waste on efforts that don't really make a difference, regardless of how well meaning they may be. This paper seeks to respond to this truth by offering ideas and concepts that are rooted in evidence of effectiveness. We sought credible sources and examined their research to identify critical elements of a community response to violence. The ideas and concepts found in this paper are the result of this investigation.

Virtually all of the information in this document was drawn from resources made available by Cities United. Cities United is a national movement focused on eliminating the violence in American cities related to African American men and boys. The organization provides assistance with planning and implementing solutions by sharing best practices, instituting innovative approaches, and understanding how and where to reconfigure resources. The group accomplishes its work by working with Mayors and cities in developing localized plans to eliminate violence related to African-American men and boys. Cities United has a relationship with the City of Baton Rouge and they are working together to advance a plan at that level. This paper however, is aimed at the people in our community who desire change enough to actually work to make it happen and who desire their efforts to have real impact. We seek to inform their actions.

TO BEGIN: A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Critical to understanding the Cities United approach to impacting violence is understanding the issue from a public health perspective. A public health perspective requires that we acknowledge that violence impacts all of us and is not limited to only those directly engaged in or harmed by violence. In addition, a public health perspective stands on the position that law enforcement alone is not a viable approach. This rejection of the law enforcement alone approach is based on the belief that a number of other factors contribute to violence in a community. Some of these factors include housing, education and mental health. Beyond this, a public health framework requires that we consider the whole person in our response to violence and not a single facet of a person's life. If we, as a community, are going to disrupt violence in Baton Rouge, we must remain mindful that violence is connected to a number of other factors. Along with being mindful of the connections to these factors, we must be willing to invest the time, people and money needed to impact these other factors, such as lack of opportunity, poverty and trauma.

A public health approach further means we must view this issue on a population level, and not just a few "high risk" individuals. Violence impacts a larger community and addressing it means considering that larger community. This perspective also involves a "system wide" multi agency approach. Because the factors that contribute to violence are so broad, no single agency, organization or individual is positioned to handle it alone. A public health perspective requires involving others in a meaningful way to create collective action. And finally, the public health perspective means acknowledging the complexity of the issue of violence. There is no one thing that will "solve" violence. The issue is as complex as the people and communities involved. Any effort to address violence that does not consider this complexity is doomed to minimal impact at best, or failure at worst.

THE CORE ELEMENTS

Cities United has performed extensive research to identify key lessons on executing a comprehensive, public health approach to reducing community violence. This research has led to the development of seven core elements of a community based strategy. The seven elements are presented below with our input on each. It is important to note that the items are shared at a high level and a more thorough review and learning is necessary.

Engage youth, family and community

Anyone attempting to reduce violence in the community must seek to include all elements of the community in the effort at all levels. Youth, families impacted by violence, community leaders, and residents of neighborhoods experiencing violence must all be a part of the process. Their input must be actively received and their buy in sought in order for any plan to be effective.

Bolster family support

An often overlooked component of most violence related interventions is supporting the families impacted by the violence. Frequently these families find themselves as the subject of attention with little support to navigate the personal and justice system related challenges they face. Support services to respond to the physical, emotional and mental health needs of these families must be considered.

Boost education

A foundational element of any response to violence in the community has to be improving the educational experiences and achievements for young people, especially those from areas most impacted by violence. The research is clear, consistent and overwhelming in pointing out the relationship between low educational outcomes and youth involvement with violence. In particular, the discipline practices of the local educational system are a likely target for evaluation.

Expand trauma-informed practice

It is unrealistic to think it is possible to have safe and healthy communities without addressing mental health in a comprehensive manner. Cities United points out that, “Unaddressed trauma is both a cause and consequence of exposure to crime and violence”. The community’s mental health resources must be marshaled in ways that respond to the real trauma that is a byproduct of violence.

Build an inclusive economy

Community members are sometimes critical of young people involved in violence without ensuring they have access to the resources needed to access a different way of life. Any attempt to disrupt violence in the community must include strategies to create pathways to job and career opportunities. This includes after high school education, vocational training and work experiences. The support services needed to overcome barriers to success must be made a part of this work.

Interrupt the cycle of community violence

There is a vast body of data on the trends and pattern of violence in the community. This information must be used to proactively and constructively interrupt violence in impacted neighborhoods. One strategy proven to be effective is the use of “community outreach workers” who have deep ties to the neighborhoods where they are deployed. Anyone seeking to launch an effort to disrupt violence in the community would be well advised to incorporate this element as a part of the overall strategy and be prepared to defend it against naysayers.

Reshape criminal and juvenile justice system

It will not be possible to see long term decline in violence in the community without implementing programs and initiatives that make prevention a priority and make reforms in the existing juvenile justice system. Policy makers and community leaders must find agreement in the fact that the current approach to addressing criminal activity and violence among young people, especially African American males, is not producing outcomes in the best interest of the community at large. As such, research must be done to identify evidence based initiatives that can be localized to Baton Rouge. An important element in reforming the system is giving particular attention to the role school districts play in the issue. Again, the matter of school discipline is held up as an absolutely necessary component of any meaningful reform.

OTHER IMPORTANT FACTORS

Beyond the Core Elements highlighted above, two other points deserve consideration. First, the importance of changing the narrative surrounding African American young men and boys cannot be overstated. The harmful perceptions often advanced through media and community conversations must be confronted. Any plan intended to disrupt violence must consider telling new stories that present a different perspective on these young men and boys. There must be an intentional effort to call attention to their potential and celebrate their achievements.

Second, no single organization or community leader can accomplish this goal alone. The issue of violence is too complex and involves so many elements, that it is unreasonable to believe any individual or entity has the capacity to impact all necessary components for change. This work will require a collective approach. Any barriers to creating a large table that welcomes all willing partners must be eliminated so that real change can happen.

CONCLUSION

As shared in the introduction, this paper is decidedly community focused. We conclude by reaffirming our desire to share information to identify actions that are able to be grasped and advanced by a wide range of community members. The thoughts shared above are not focused on government or law enforcement as the answer to violence in our community. Both of these entities, City government and local law enforcement, are important partners in any collective attempt to disrupt violence. Every person reading the document should be reminded that this writing is deeply rooted in the belief that any effort to solve a community challenge must be ultimately driven by the people of the community. As a result, this document is offered as a support to those community members committed to working with others to bring about the wholeness and vitality in our community that violence disrupts.

Finally, any organization, community member, or elected official committed to addressing this vital community issue should consider MetroMorphosis a willing partner. We are open to providing strategic support to whatever degree is helpful in creating a true community based, collective action to disrupt violence and make inner city Baton Rouge a vibrant, thriving place to live, work and experience success.