



Safety and Placemaking in Brooklyn

Examining the Relationship between Sense of Safety and Creative Placemaking

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The Brownsville neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York, is a microcosm of the challenges young people face in urban communities across the country. In addition to safety issues and difficulty connecting to educational and employment opportunities, young people must navigate a complicated local landscape, whose social boundaries affect their sense of safety and their comfort in accessing resources and opportunities.

The Brownsville Community Justice Center (BCJC), a project of the Center for Court Innovation, has been at the forefront of local efforts to connect young people to local opportunities. BCJC has built an approach that links creative-placemaking¹ techniques to youth engagement and inclusion, with the broader aim of building a more equitable community, where people of all ages can come together comfortably. BCJC offers programming to young people across the neighborhood. Staff are cognizant that young people's perceptions of whether they can safely access specific resources or opportunities vary substantially depending on where they live in the neighborhood.

With this context, the Urban Institute worked with BCJC to design a community safety mapping exercise for young people from across the neighborhood (box 1). Its objective was to identify patterns in how safe or unsafe young people felt in different locations within the neighborhood, to gain a more granular sense of safety concerns in Brownsville, and to identify potential sites for placemaking efforts that would help young people from across the neighborhood feel relatively safe. With BCJC, we designed an exercise in which young people indicated on a map the parts of the neighborhood where they felt safe or unsafe. We then compiled responses into aggregate maps and presented those maps to BCJC and young people for comment and reflection.

As with many activities planned for 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic complicated this engagement. What had been designed as in-person workshops and focus groups ended up being done mostly remotely and, to date, with relatively limited opportunities for participant feedback. As such, even though this brief reports on what we found, it also focuses on how the process can be used in the years ahead to inform programming and local initiatives.

After providing an overview of community mapping and participatory GIS, we describe the status of young people in Brownsville and the work that BCJC does with them. We then provide an overview of the mapping exercise and focus groups we designed for this project and present our findings. We conclude with a discussion of takeaways, themes, and lessons learned from the process itself.

BOX 1

Creative Placemaking and Equity Studies

Building on the Urban Institute's previous work on creative placemaking and community safety (Treskon and Esthappan 2018; Treskon et al. 2018), we continued our engagement with three groups to examine the effects of their creative-placemaking initiatives on equity in their communities. These projects showcase the range of efforts that communities are making to strengthen their residents' sense of belonging. The three initiatives represent different scales of creative placemaking: community-level, city-level, and county-level. This study (community-level) examines how the Brownsville Community Justice Center is working with young people to use creative placemaking to build a more inclusive neighborhood. The others are as follows:

- In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, we examined the effort to build a consistent and inclusive creative-placemaking approach (the Milwaukee Method) that can be implemented in different sites across the city using the Beerline Trail and downtown Night Market as case studies (Treskon, Burrowes, and Arena 2021).
- The Alameda County, California, Sheriff's Office has used creative placemaking to build a more inclusive approach to community policing. In this project, we designed survey and assessment tools that community safety stakeholders in Alameda and other jurisdictions can use to guide conversations about how they can work together to build safer and more equitable communities.

Community Mapping and Participatory GIS

Maps are one of the most effective tools for understanding how communities fit together. But how they are created and presented affects their usefulness and can hamper community understanding or engagement. In recent decades, the development of computer-based geographic information system (GIS) technologies has made maps easier to create than ever, but the roadblocks to understanding these platforms or accessing them can limit their use.

Since at least the 1990s, planners, advocates, and others doing community-based planning have used participatory GIS to try to address these issues, by giving individuals and communities better

access to these technologies, and to broaden the use of mapping techniques (Brown, Reed, and Raymond 2020). One such example is general perception, or perceptual, mapping, which uses community engagement techniques to understand local perceptions of the environment and to highlight elements for further investigation (Haklay and Francis 2018). Perceptual mapping reflects the reality that people bring different viewpoints and experiences to their understanding of and “sense” of place (Tuan 1977), so even though compiling multiple viewpoints (however one does it) into a map may show overall patterns, recognizing that those patterns may hide variability in individual responses is important (Brown, Reed, and Raymond 2020).

These techniques have also been a way to more effectively engage young people. A common implementation approach has been to use asset mapping, which asks respondents to identify community resources (“assets”) and then uses those responses to facilitate colearning between local experts (young people) and outside experts (researchers) (Mosavel, Gough, and Ferrell 2018). To be effective and maintain community trust, these exercises need to be part of a broader engagement and creative process: the map itself should be only a starting point for identifying common ground and figuring out how best to implement an intervention that responds to what the maps show (Amsden and VanWynsberghe 2005).

This all means that although mapping (and GIS more specifically) has developed into a powerful tool to build knowledge, bridge divides, and identify plans for action, it comes with challenges that need to be accounted for—not least of which is managing the dynamic between so-called “technical experts” (e.g., outside researchers) and community members (“local experts”), who bring their own insights and knowledge to the table (Fischer 2000). These challenges can be exacerbated when engagement focuses on the views and insights of young people, so ensuring that their voices are integral to the work is crucial.

Background: Young People and Community Safety in Brownsville

Young people in Brownsville, Brooklyn, face several challenges: nearly half of residents 17 or younger live below the federal poverty level, and the community has the highest concentration of public housing in the nation, one of the highest shares of incarcerated residents in New York City, one of the highest reported crime rates in the city, and a historically tense relationship with law enforcement (Brownsville was the epicenter of the New York City Police Department’s controversial stop-and-frisk policy).

After declining between 2015 and 2019, reported crime incidents in the neighborhood rose substantially in 2020 (table 1 shows reported shooting incidents broken down by different areas of the neighborhood). The distribution of these incidents has varied over time: in recent years, the northwestern part of Brownsville has experienced the most shooting incidents, but the southwestern part experienced a large increase in 2020.

TABLE 1

Shooting Incidents in the Brownsville Neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, 2015–20

| | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 |
|--------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Rockaway Avenue | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 6 |
| Sutter Avenue west of Rockaway | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Sutter Avenue east of Rockaway | 8 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 8 |
| Southwest Brownsville | 11 | 6 | 11 | 8 | 6 | 29 |
| Southeast Brownsville | 8 | 7 | 3 | 10 | 5 | 14 |
| Northwest Brownsville | 17 | 18 | 9 | 18 | 14 | 26 |
| Northeast Brownsville | 13 | 12 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 14 |
| Total | 60 | 47 | 34 | 46 | 34 | 97 |

Source: Author's analysis of New York Police Department data from "NYPD Shooting Incident Data (Historic)," NYC OpenData, accessed July 1, 2021, <https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Public-Safety/NYPD-Shooting-Incident-Data-Historic-/833y-fsy8>.

Note: Counts are shooting incidents in Community Board 16, Ocean Hill–Brownsville south of Fulton Street.

Geographically, the 2015–20 shooting incidents show some developing patterns (figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Heat Map of Shooting Incidents in the Brownsville Neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, 2015–20

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Source: Author's analysis of New York Police Department data from "NYPD Shooting Incident Data (Historic)," NYC OpenData, accessed July 1, 2021, <https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Public-Safety/NYPD-Shooting-Incident-Data-Historic-/833y-fsy8>.

Note: Boundaries (in black) reflect those of Brooklyn Community Board 16, Ocean Hill–Brownsville.

The highest concentration of shooting incidents is in the central and eastern portions of the neighborhood, especially on East Sutter and Pitkin Avenues, and between Betsy Head Park and Rockaway Avenue, which is the street dividing two New York City Housing Authority developments (the Brownsville Houses to the west, and the Van Dyke Houses to the east).

BCJC engages with young people from across Brownsville, with the goal of linking together opportunities for young people in a way that builds community safety and a sense of local empowerment and agency (see Treskon and Esthappan [2018] for a project focused on young people in the southwestern part of the neighborhood). This involves programming focused generally on providing opportunities for youth development, education, and employment. BCJC also runs programs designed to support justice-involved young people, partnering with city agencies, including the Department of Probation, to offer opportunities such as higher education assistance, internships, and workforce training tied into local community benefit projects, including murals and a local community garden.²

BCJC's work has largely focused on how to use youth engagement and placemaking to help stitch together the broader Brownsville community. However, this work is complicated by the lived experiences of young people in the neighborhood. Residents from different assisted housing developments have fraught relationships with one another, making the borders between developments, which tend to be larger thoroughways like Rockaway Avenue, potentially difficult places for engagement. Also, community resources—whether BCJC's offices, employment or training opportunities in businesses on Belmont Avenue, or parks and other local assets—are relatively more accessible to some young people than others: where people live determines how far they must travel to reach a resource, what parts of the neighborhood they must go through, and how safe they believe that journey to be. Young people living on the blocks that surround Belmont, one of the neighborhood's core shopping districts, may see it as safe, while young people who live farther away may see it as unsafe.

Given their deep engagement with young people locally, BCJC staff already had a sense of how young people perceived safety within the neighborhood and how patterns of perceived safety influenced how young people understood and used their community. They also had already done a community safety exercise for young people in the Marcus Garvey Apartments (Treskon and Esthappan 2018). However, BCJC had not undertaken a systematic review of how young people's sense of safety differed across the neighborhood. Urban and BCJC jointly identified an expansion of this work as a way to identify the local geography of safety and potentially serve as a basis for future opportunities to build inclusive spaces in Brownsville. To this end, Urban and BCJC designed a safety mapping exercise in which young people in the neighborhood were asked to fill out maps according to how safe they felt in given locations. These maps, when aggregated, would be used to start discussions and reflections on overall patterns of perceived safety in the community.

Methods

The community safety mapping exercise and workshop involved young people from the neighborhood who had taken part in BCJC programming. The original plan was to hold in-person workshops during

which participants would both fill out the maps and reflect on what those maps showed, but the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that Urban and BCJC needed to design a comprehensible virtual approach that provided both security and consent protections for participants. To start, we divided workshops into two parts: the first was a mapping exercise that participants could do on their own time, and the second was a focus group (over Zoom) to discuss what the researchers and BCJC had learned from the mapping exercise and other topics related to safety and creative placemaking in the neighborhood. The young people were compensated for their time. Although BCJC also works with people younger than 18, we engaged only people who were 18 or older because of consent issues related to minors.

Mapping Exercise

For the mapping exercise, participants were given a blank street map of Brownsville (they were offered either a digital copy or a paper printout, which they could pick up at the BCJC offices; in practice, all participants used the paper printout). Because of privacy and technological hurdles, the team decided that paper-based maps, rather than electronic mapping options, were preferable. The relatively user friendly electronic platforms we considered tended to be cost-prohibitive or collected participant data as a part of their terms of service, while platforms without these limitations tended to be less intuitive. And both electronic options required access to screens and systems that many of the young people may not have had access to on a daily basis.

Along with the map, we provided instructions for filling it out. The core request was for the participant to color areas of the neighborhood according to how safe they felt: green for very safe, yellow for safe under some conditions or using caution, and red for unsafe and avoided. After completing the maps, young people submitted them to the Urban team, which compiled responses to serve as a starting point for the focus groups.

Focus Groups

Because of the social tensions between people living in different parts of Brownsville, we worked with BCJC so each focus group would include only participants from one part of the neighborhood. The goal of the focus groups was to discuss multiple topics: neighborhood safety, the safety maps the young people had made, local challenges and opportunities for young people, and the role of arts and culture in their lives and in the life of the neighborhood.

For several reasons, focus group participation was lower than intended, and the majority of participants had not been part of the mapping exercise. This meant the connections between the two components were weaker than we had aimed for. As such, only a limited amount of material from the focus groups is included here. Overall, one in-person mapping exercise and workshop would have strengthened the connections between the two methods. We believe BCJC has the materials and ability to build this work out more systematically and comprehensively in the future.

Findings

In this section, we examine the overall patterns we found when compiling the results of the mapping exercise across all participants. To preserve participants' anonymity and confidentiality, we do not present or discuss differences between groups in the neighborhood; instead, we focus on young people as a whole. (BCJC has maps and data for individual groups that can be used to create more targeted questions and programming for future use.)

Overall, 24 young people completed the mapping exercise. Respondents tended to take one of two approaches to filling out the maps: they either highlighted a limited number of streets or provided more comprehensive coverage by highlighting not just the streets themselves but also the spaces between them. Although this type of disparity could have been handled in a live workshop, the two approaches are generally complementary, especially when the maps are compiled.

Overall: What Parts of the Neighborhood Do Young People Know Best

At the most basic level, we were interested in what parts of the neighborhood young people were most familiar with. Figure 2 illustrates the response rates using a “redundant” visual approach: streets are highlighted according to response patterns both by color (darker means more responses) and thickness (thicker means more responses). The patterns we found would likely not be a surprise to Brownsville residents: people expressed opinions (whether they felt very safe, safe under some conditions, or unsafe) most often about the main commercial and traffic corridors and those that provide transit access. As figure 2 shows, Rockaway Avenue (the major north-south corridor in the neighborhood) and Sutter Avenue west of Rockaway were highlighted by almost every participant (as were stretches of Fulton Street and Atlantic Avenue, two commercial corridors at the neighborhood's northern edge). Otherwise, young people tended to have opinions about the parts of the neighborhood closest to where they live.

FIGURE 2

Mapping Exercise Combined Results: Frequency of Street Selection

Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York



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Source: Author's analysis of participant-created maps.

Note: The shade and the size of a street segment are based on the number of respondents who expressed any opinion about that segment—the more responses, the darker and thicker the segment.

This map is only a baseline for future work but does highlight that young people see the spine of Rockaway Avenue as the neighborhood's center.

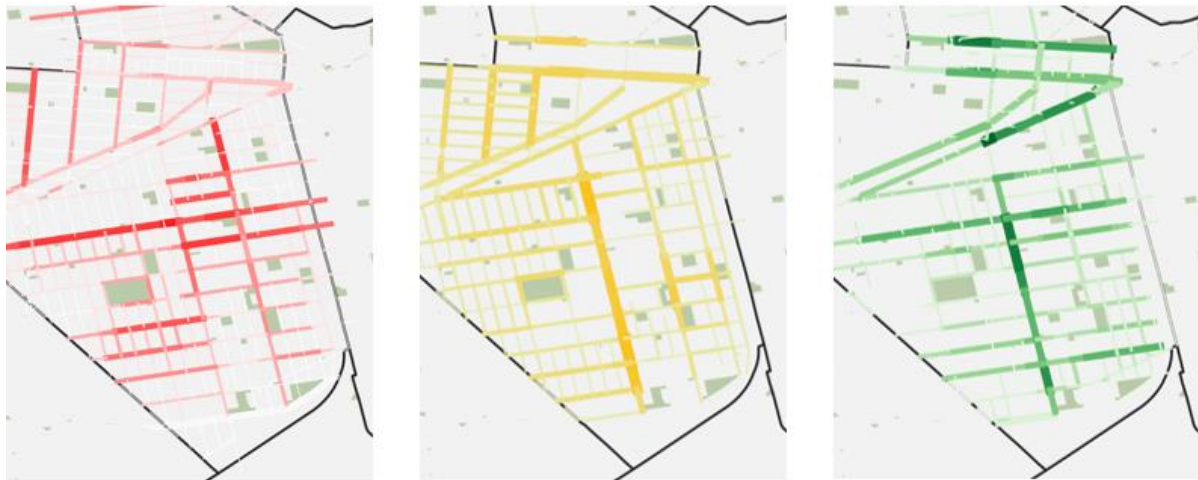
Safety

Moving beyond familiarity with the neighborhood and to safety, other patterns emerge. Even at a high level, where the responses of young people from different parts of the neighborhood are combined, we can see how complicated the safety geography of the neighborhood is. Here, again, the focus on major corridors, especially Rockaway and Sutter Avenues, is instructive (figure 3).

FIGURE 3

Mapping Exercise Combined Results: Safety Perceptions of Participants, by Street

Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York



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Source: Author's analysis of participant-created maps.

Notes: Respondents were asked to color areas of the neighborhood according to how safe they felt. Red = unsafe and avoided; yellow = safe under some conditions or using caution; green = very safe. The shade and the size of a street segment are based on the number of respondents who expressed any opinion about that segment—the more responses, the darker and thicker the segment.

Overall, most participants considered Rockaway Avenue either “very safe” (green) or “safe under some conditions” (yellow), but the exact pattern varied depending on the block. This reflected comments by youth participants in our previous study (Treskon and Esthappen 2018) that because Rockaway is the boundary between public housing developments, young people need to be aware of their surroundings there (respondents mentioned not wanting to “get caught lacking”) but do not feel particularly unsafe. However, the responses about Sutter Avenue were more clearly bifurcated into relative safety (green) and relative unsafety (red), with few participants indicating “safe under some conditions” (yellow).

The commercial corridors on the edge of the neighborhood (East New York Avenue, Fulton Street, and Atlantic Avenue) tended to be considered relatively safe. Their location, at the periphery of the neighborhood, may mean they are less central to the daily lives of the young people in Brownsville and therefore are less likely to be subject to the social tensions and safety concerns that exist at the core of the neighborhood.

Elsewhere in the neighborhood, Belmont Avenue stands out as a street that came up often but was relatively rarely marked as a safe space: almost all respondents used yellow or red for the corridor. These results could mean that even though Belmont is an important commercial corridor, it is not one that young people who live outside the immediate vicinity feel particularly comfortable in.

Finally, when we compare the sense-of-safety results with shooting incidents (figure 3 and figure 1), we see some overlap, especially on the streets east of Rockaway Avenue and around Sutter Avenue. In both, the streets that respondents were most likely to consider unsafe were also where most recent shooting incidents occurred.

Key Themes

The mapping exercise illustrates a few key patterns. First, people tend to feel safest closest to where they live. This pattern is clearest when responses are broken out by neighborhood group (for confidentiality reasons, those group-level responses are not reproduced in this report). Outside their immediate neighborhood, patterns may diverge. For streets that are a part of people's day-to-day lives, such as the main commercial and transportation corridors like Rockaway and Sutter Avenues, opinions vary between safe, safe under some conditions, and unsafe depending on the street's location within the neighborhood's social boundaries. On the other hand, a street farther away may be considered safer than a relatively nearby street if it is not considered a boundary for people from different social groups or developments. But if a street is not part of someone's day-to-day life, it, obviously, is a bit of a blank slate: this seems to be the case for many of the small side streets that are not commonly used to get to commercial corridors or transit.

Because of the limited number of participants and the limited opportunity for robust follow-up and reflection, we do not want to put too much weight on these patterns, especially on the level of a street segment or intersection. However, our findings are useful jumping-off points for future discussions about programmatic decisions that BCJC may consider. Finding areas of opportunity is a balancing act: you want a place that people are already familiar with, but also one where most people from different parts of the neighborhood are comfortable. So even though Rockaway Avenue is in the middle of everything, because of the way Brownsville has developed, it is also on the margins of the neighborhood's social life. Here, turning "safe under some conditions" into a sense of safety would be crucial for successful and inclusive place activation.

On the other hand, some of the more peripheral corridors (such as East New York Avenue or Fulton Street) are seen as relatively safe, at least in part because they are farther from the core of the neighborhood. This makes them potentially less fraught but also less central to the daily lives of young people. Finally, while Belmont Avenue is in many ways the center of Brownsville's social and commercial life, making it a safe and secure spot for young people would take a lot of work in the years ahead.

Process: Lessons Learned and Next Steps

In this brief, we provide a general assessment of patterns we found in the maps that the young people filled out, but our aim is not to come to a set conclusion. Rather, we want to set up BCJC to expand on this work. The maps we discuss here can be an initial step in assessing neighborhood social patterns and residents' perceptions of safety. Following up with participants and young people to assess patterns they observe is crucial. As with many things in 2020, COVID-19 upended our plans for this project, and we could only lightly use the maps to foster engagement and reflection with young people.

However, despite these challenges, we set up a process that BCJC can use in the future. Some logistical challenges we encountered are relevant to similar approaches, even those done in person.

First, technology is great, but it comes with trade-offs. As noted earlier, some of the user friendly mapping options had limited privacy and data security features. For a project on the potentially fraught topic of public safety, that trade-off was not acceptable. Also, there is something to be said for paper: filling out electronic maps on smartphones with small screens had the potential to be a more complicated and frustrating endeavor, and the filled-out paper maps were, for the most part, easy to interpret.

It helped that the mapping exercise was relatively straightforward: even though young people took different approaches to filling out the maps, the instructions were simple and brief. An in-person workshop could have addressed differences of approach and allowed for more complicated features, of course, but for the goals of this project, the process worked.

However, the paper maps presented challenges, too. Compiling and interpreting hand-drawn lines meant that some judgment calls were firmly in the hands of the researcher, a circumstance that was not ideal: although many lines were clearly marked, the beginnings and endings of some other lines faded out or stopped just short of or just beyond an intersection. These sorts of inconsistencies tend to be washed away when more responses come in, but in larger projects that involve multiple people (whether that be researchers, participants, or other stakeholders), getting them on the same page when interpreting results is important.

Compiling hand-drawn maps into the electronic versions displayed in this brief was also a relatively painstaking process, involving organizing and tallying multiple maps and entering results into a GIS program. Although automating the process is possible, these techniques take time, effort, and sophistication. But as a starting point, Urban presented BCJC with the files organized in such a way to make additions easy to tally, process, and analyze.

Overall, then, what we produced here was an approach and system that BCJC, and programs doing similar work, can use to inform its programming in a way that acknowledges and respects the lived experiences of the people it works with.

Notes

- ¹ We follow ArtPlace America's definition, which states that creative placemaking is "the intentional integration of arts, culture, and community-engaged design strategies into the process of equitable community planning and development." See "About ArtPlace," ArtPlace America, accessed June 29, 2021, <https://www.artplaceamerica.org/about/introduction>.
- ² See Berman (2015) and "Brownsville Community Justice Center," Center for Court Innovation, accessed June 15, 2021, <https://www.courtinnovation.org/programs/brownsville-community-justice-center/more-info>.

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