

**Community Mobilization in Milwaukee: Creating Critical Mass to Address the Free-Rider
Problem**

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Introduction

Stark disparities in the City of Milwaukee create pressing challenges for Milwaukee's African American community. Even prior to the "great recession", African American Men in Milwaukee experienced a "stealth depression" as employment rates declined from deindustrialization by 8 percent between 1970 and 2000 (Levine, 2012). Following the recession, employment has plummeted especially in the inner city. As recently as 2012 "employment for working-age (20-64) males in 53206 was only 36.3 percent, less than half the metro area average" (Levine, 2014). Levine adds, "the employment rate for females in 53206 is higher than the male rate, but nonetheless lags well behind the city and regional averages".

African American youth face specific challenges as a result of the unemployment rate and other disparities in Milwaukee. The national report card indicates that Wisconsin's achievement gap is the worst in the nation (Beck, 2013). Wisconsin has the highest incarceration rate in the nation (Pawasarat; Quinn, 2013). Given the recent national dialogue surrounding the mounting controversies of police brutality towards African American youth, these statistics highlight the urgency for engaging residents, especially youth in Milwaukee's African American communities.

This study assesses the effectiveness of developing active community volunteers in three neighborhoods in Milwaukee, offering a perspective on how people in their own communities are able to address Mancur Olson's Free Rider Dilemma. Well indicates that "recent attention to collective efficacy have overlooked actual citizen interventions in the face of neighborhood problems for studies of resident response to community problems" (Well Schafer; Varano, Sean; Bynum, 2006). Because employment levels have reached crises levels in many Milwaukee

neighborhoods, the study looks specifically at how “individualized incentives” (Olson, 1965) such as job opportunities affect resident mobilization.

In the wake of Olson’s collective action theory, competing theories have emerged. One suggests that a “by product” incentive of “private goods” is necessary to motivate group members (Olson, 1965; Sweeny 1973). Another theory is that social norms of groups, facilitated by group achievements and social cohesion can overcome the temptation to “free-ride” in large groups by creating and sustaining critical mass (Macy, 1990). The findings here indicate that in some cases individual incentives may be necessary at first, but the effects on social norms of community residents can sustain involvement after initial incentives are provided.

Through interviews and participant observation, I gathered information about three community organizers who work in Borchert Field, Metcalfe Park, and Westlawn. Additionally, I worked in Metcalfe Park and in Westlawn as a supervisor in job training programs. The research was primarily deductive, but new findings during interviews shifted the scope of the research. The research question of this article is: what successful methods do community organizers use to mobilize community residents to discourage free-riders?

Literature Review

The challenge of mobilizing groups of people for collective action is well documented. Mancur Olson articulated the problems posed by “free-riders” in *Logic of Collective Action*. According to Olson, free-riders exist because groups lack the ability to withhold the benefit of collective action, “the very fact that a goal or purpose is common to a group means that no one in the group is excluded from the benefit or satisfaction by its achievement” (Olson, 1965).

What message does a community organizer use given the daunting circumstances that Milwaukee residents experience every day? The mobilizer’s dilemma exists because “strategies

that discourage free riding by emphasizing urgency may inadvertently undermine efficacy by making the situation seem hopeless” (Vasi and Macy, 2003). Vasi and Macy found that “when improving conditions are coupled with empowerment messages, participants do not use the improvement as an opportunity to free ride”. In contrast, the authors found that participants “react much more effectively to crisis messages when conditions are getting worse” (Vasi and Macy, 2003). However, “Fear appeals were found to be unsuccessful unless an effective remedy was offered as an alternative” (Vasi and Macy, 2003). This suggests that effective community organizers will use the right messages at the right time.

Messaging can be difficult for organizers in neighborhoods that have been “written-off” or “forgotten” by the broader community. “The construction of problems sometimes carries with it a more far reaching perverse effect: it helps perpetuate or intensify the conditions that are defined as the problem” (Edelman, 1988). Definitions of problems therefore “are critical in determining who exercises authority and who accepts it” (Edelman, 1988). Organizers who are able to exercise authority of the definition of problems in their neighborhood will likely be more successful in community mobilization (Pride, 1995).

Once organizers address the mobilizer’s dilemma to engage residents in the community, how do they sustain resident involvement? Case studies indicate that shared decision making increases community involvement (Onyx, 2010). “Discussion promotes cooperation because it promotes group identity, leading individuals to substitute group regardfulness for egoism as a principle guiding their choices” (Orbell, 1988). Prior research indicates that committed leaders play a key role in affecting norms of groups (Weber and Murnighan, 2008). By affecting the social norms of a group, collective action can be sustained despite occasional free-riders (Macy, 1990).

Not only does shared decision making help to develop the group cohesion necessary to mitigate free-riders, it has also been proven as a more effective method of decision making (Kameda, Tsukasaki, Hastie, Berg, 2011). Good decision making is important for groups because success of the group can lead to critical mass (Macy, 1990). Macy found that “once critical mass is attained, social fusion becomes self-sustaining” (Macy, 1990). Social cohesion plays an important role by increasing neighborhood involvement in addressing neighborhood problems (Well, 2006; Sampson, Raudenbush, 2001; Taylor, 1996).

A final way that residents may feel connection is through ownership of space. Cox’s concept of “space of engagement” suggests that community residents may define space based on relationships within the community (Cox, 1998). Research related to community gardens in Milwaukee suggests that community sense of ownership and power dynamics of space, may affect involvement with that space (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014).

Because larger groups tend to encourage free riders, over time organizers become victims of their own success, (Olson, 1965; Kyriacou, 2011). Though Macy’s findings indicate that social norms play a greater role in maintaining critical mass than group size, new community efforts and successes will be critical to maintain critical mass. Macy found that the bandwagon effect is dampened by “the increasing redundancy of effort” (Macy, 1990). Hence, over time critical mass may lose its momentum as community initiatives shift from being new efforts and move towards routine, institutionalized campaigns.

According to Olson, the free-rider problem can be addressed with “some separate incentive, distinct from the achievement of the common or group interest, offered to the members of the group individually on the condition that they help bear the costs or burdens involved in the achievement of the group objectives” (Olson, 1965). The role of the “separate

incentive” is supported in experiments in which individuals contributed more to an overall group “when provided with a slight (but compensating) private good for their ‘public spirited’ efforts” (Sweeny, 1973).

Method and Coding

In collecting data I used several methods including qualitative interviews with three community organizers. I also conducted participant observation, with the majority of my experience focused in Metcalfe Park. I also conducted participatory research, serving as a youth supervisor for youth job programs in Metcalfe Park and Westlawn.

I used the following coding categories: 1) level of volunteer commitment, 2) use of shared decision making, 3) use of messaging, 4) role of public space in community engagement, 5) Police relations. Because of my experience in the community coding was largely deductive. However, after conducting the interviews certain themes emerged which altered the trajectory of the research. One unexpected finding was that organizers repeatedly described their efforts to shape the way that the community was perceived, both among neighborhood residents and by the broader community. Initially, the message category was limited to the types of messages used. However, these findings suggested that use of mass media could become a key tool in community organizing. Additionally, the role of community-police relations emerged as a theme during interviews. The significance of community-police relations locally and nationally indicated that community-police relations should be considered in the research findings.

Findings

All three interviews confirmed that community members’ sense of ownership plays an important role encouraging involvement. Findings indicate that this sense of ownership took the form of: shared decision making, community ownership over messaging, and community

ownership over space. These methods of encouraging involvement can all be categorized as methods for increasing residents' sense of ownership in the community under the following categories:

1) ownership of voice: organizers who used shared decision making practices helped community members feel their voice was present in the organizing process (Onyx, 2010; Weber and Murningham, 2008; Orbell 1998).

2) ownership of message: all community organizers interviewed held an inherent understanding about the importance of spreading a message of achievable change in their community (Vasi and Macy, 2003). In some cases organizers created or affected media portrayal of their community (Pride, 1995; Edelman 1988).

3) ownership of space: organizers often referred to experiences in public spaces that were most effective in garnering involvement from their community. This theme indicates that public space serves as a "neutral ground" in which all community members feel equally entitled (Ghose and Pettygrove; 2014, Cox, 1998).

Individual incentives were especially important for encouraging youth to become involved in the community (Olson, 1965). Organizers who had sufficient support (funding, institutional) were able to direct youth employees towards becoming volunteers in the community. This supports findings that "indicate that the key to critical mass is neither group size nor heterogeneity but a decisive and aversive reaction to the social costs of unrestrained privatism" (Macy, 1990).

Method for community mobilization	Borchert Field	Metcalfe Park	Westlawn
Shared decision making	Limited	Yes	Yes
Emphasis on Empowerment or crises messaging	Empowerment	Empowerment and crises	Empowerment
Method for messaging	Message board, neighborhood improvement	Influence over local media	Social media
Ability to influence message in community and beyond	Limited	Effective in community and metro-area	Effective in community
Youth employment that encouraged youth to volunteer	No	Yes	Yes
Ownership of Space was present	Yes	Yes	Yes

Borchert Field

Mr. Shareef is a volunteer organizer, resident, and landlord in the Borchert Field Neighborhood. He has partnered with community organizations to build a community garden on a vacant lot on 11th and Burleigh. The mowing for the vacant lot and general upkeep (picking up litter, maintaining neglected garden beds, watering) is done by young adults in the neighborhood. Mr. Shareef offers compensation in the form of pay and housing. He indicates a desire to see greater community involvement, especially in relation to less dependence on police for addressing neighborhood problems (Well, 2006), and a willingness of the young adults to volunteer.

It should be noted, that the young adults who work in the community do not simply treat the opportunity as a mundane job, but they seem inspired to support the community. This is indicated by the fact that litter is cleaned up consistently in the early mornings. Mr. Shareef references that litter is picked up before he wakes up every day. Routine observation indicates

the bountiful garden is meticulously maintained. Mr. Shareef's dedication and success seems to have affected the social norms of the youth (Vasi and Macy, 2003; Macy 1990). However, his volunteer role may restrict his ability to develop the group cohesion necessary to sustain the critical mass. The critical mass created through this cohesion could develop the necessary group dynamics to encourage the young adults to sustain community involvement as volunteers (Macy, 1990).

An event that was highly successful in encouraging community involvement was a cookout. Mr. Shareef found that one of the best aspects of the event took place when community residents were able to get on stage and share their concerns for the community. This opportunity for residents to express their thoughts and concerns about the community offers a glimpse into the effectiveness of shared decision making (Onyx 2010 and Leonard, 2010; Orbell 1988). Similar opportunities could garner greater involvement. Because of the event's success Mr. Shareef plans to maintain and grow the community event.

The success of the cookout also demonstrates the importance of public space as a method for community engagement (Ghose, Pettygrove 2014; Cox, 1998). Further evidence of the importance of public space is described by Mr. Shareef's emphasis that the new garden "exposed us to the outside". He meets with friends in the morning in the garden to share a cup of coffee. There is no coffee shop or public community center in the immediate vicinity of the garden. In addition to offering a pleasant space in the morning, it seems that the garden is filling a void of a "neutral" and "public" community space (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014; Cox, 1998).

Mr. Shareef uses the garden for messaging in his community. He has helped to install a message board in the garden that provides a space to post community information. A primary goal of the garden for Mr. Shareef, is to make the neighborhood "attractive", suggesting a desire

to convey a message of “improving conditions” (Vasi and Macy, 2013). He receives regular compliments from residents of appreciation and gratitude for the level of upkeep, suggesting the garden is effective in communicating a message of hope through “improving conditions” (Vasi and Macy, 2003).

Metcalf Park

Ms. Cross has prioritized employment for young adults as a key component of her work in Metcalf Park. She helped to develop an employment program in which young adults worked for Groundwork Milwaukee (a local environmental justice non-profit) to install rain gardens and orchards on residential properties and vacant lots. Since the completion of the seasonal employment program, Ms. Cross has encouraged the young adults to continue their involvement in the community as volunteers and neighborhood leaders. Six out of the ten young adults, who were employed during the summer, continue to show up to regular weekly meetings; two others show up on occasion. This indicates that the jobs have had success in transforming youth into community volunteers.

She believes that the jobs were important in sending a message that the youth “were a priority” to the community leaders. While individual incentives were necessary to mobilize young adults (Olson, 1965; Sweeny 1973), her ability to encourage the young adults to continue their community involvement on a volunteer basis indicates that social norms developed by Ms. Cross’s commitment and social cohesion formed during employment, has developed critical mass among the young adults (Weber and Murningham, 2008; Macy, 1990).

A large part of her success in keeping the young adults engaged is giving the youth ownership of voice. She works to ensure that they feel “their voice matters” and it “can’t be interrupted”. The Young Adults were given the freedom to create a program to follow their job

program. They developed the “selfie project”, in which they will document “their lives by telling stories”. The self-expressive nature of the project and the fact that the youth developed the project supports the importance of shared decision making (Onyx, Leonard, 2010; Orbell 1988) and ownership of messaging (Edelman, 1988; Pride, 1995).

The Milwaukee Police Department, Ms. Cross’s partner through the Building Neighborhood Capacity Program (BNCP), has taken note of the success of the job program in engaging youth. Ms. Cross explained that the police department is “putting together a pilot program to employ 20 young adults”.

Ms. Cross also demonstrated a commitment to shaping the narrative about Metcalfe Park during a tragic incident this summer. Metcalfe Park became the focus of the entire metro-area in the aftermath of a shooting of a Sierra Guyton at a Clarke Street School. Ms. Cross and her core group reacted quickly to the event, to ensure that the rest of the community would not be a victim of stereotyping and fear.

Ms. Cross explains that the Police Chief’s comments after the shooting, in which he compared the shooters to animals “put a frame around the whole community”. Ms. Cross sought to put a different frame around the community (Edelman, 1988). She organized a rally the following day with partner organizations to encourage hundreds of community members to come outside and stand against the violence. The event received substantial press (Williams and Ross, 2014). In the weeks following, the core group continued the effort with an afternoon “safety walk”, which involved adults and youth walking through the neighborhood. These efforts demonstrate how Ms. Cross worked to shift the perception of the neighborhood from within and from the outside (via mass media) (Pride, 1995) that highlighted the crisis taking place but also work towards healing and prevention (Vasi and Macy, 2003). Simultaneously, the effort

demonstrates the significance of maintaining the public space (streets, sidewalks, playground) as a space undoubtedly affected by the shooting but not stolen from the community by the fear of violence (Cox, 1998).

Monthly meetings organized by Ms. Cross and her fellow Metcalfe Park organizer, Mr. White saw increased attendance and involvement. The meetings engaged community members in the decision making process. These results indicate how committed leadership (Weber and Murnighan; 2008) and shared decision making (Onyx and Leonard, 2010; Orbell 1988) can develop social cohesion for social norms to develop critical mass (Macy, 1990).

The summer concluded with an event titled, *Arms Around Us*, in which community residents and police held hands for several blocks along North Avenue. The name of the event, and its ability to bring hundreds of people outside, indicates that effective use of messaging can mobilize residents (Vasi and Macy, 2003). Ms. Cross sees promise in the fact that police officers were dancing in the parking lot, which allowed the “community to see the police in a different way”. She suggests that improved relationships between police and residents assisted in the arrest of the individuals involved in the shooting of Sierra Guyton. This supports findings that neighborhood involvement can “enhance safety and order” (Well, 2006).

Westlawn

Ms. Sally Yeldell works for the Westlawn Partnership for Neighborhood Health at the Silver Spring Neighborhood Center. The neighborhood has witnessed massive investment in the process of constructing new mixed-income housing. Community meetings, which served to generate community feedback to guide the massive reconstruction of Westlawn, have helped to create greater community involvement. It should be noted that the community center offers greater institutional support than what exists in Metcalfe Park and Borchert Fields.

Ms. Yeldell organizes monthly meetings with a typical attendance between 30-50 people and sometimes as many as 100 people. Ownership of voice plays an important role in sustaining this high level of involvement. Residents volunteer in the food pantry and for community events. In planning and implementing these events Ms. Yeldell explains that residents “make it theirs”. This illustrates the value in giving voice to residents over the decision making process (Onyx and Leonard, 2010; Orbell, 1988). A high level of social cohesion, which exists in the community likely supports the critical mass of community involvement (Macy, 1990).

Research suggests that large groups might lose involvement through “redundancy of effort (Macy, 1990). Ms. Yeldell sees a great deal of increased involvement from her efforts to organize numerous health initiatives. The variety of new initiatives may help to sustain the critical mass of the community. It is possible that the personal benefit of better health represents a “slight but compensating” private good for their “public spirited efforts” (Olson, 1965; Sweeny, 1973).

However, residents clearly have broader community interests in mind. In their efforts to improve the community through public meetings, Ms. Yeldell explained that results are important to residents because “if there’s no progress they won’t come”. This further supports the principal of critical mass, which suggests the need for sustained results (Macy, 1990).

Ms. Yeldell finds that Facebook is an effective tool for communicating to neighborhood residents. Through her use of social media, Ms. Yeldell is able to take authority over the framing of the message of Westlawn (Edelman, 1988) and is able to empower residents by giving them voice in the social media and combines empowerment with messages of improvements (Vasi and Macy, 2003).

Ms. Yeldell also has directed a youth employment program for Middle School and High School aged youth. The program has successfully transformed youth employees into community volunteers. One young man, who has worked with Sally in the garden for over three years, received an award for best community volunteer from Silver Spring Neighborhood Center. He and other former workers regularly ask how they can help Ms. Yeldell.

She believes that employment has been an important step in the process of encouraging the youth to volunteer their time. After receiving an opportunity to earn money to serve the community, it seems that the youth feel they have more stake in the community than if they were asked to volunteer first. Evidence is supported by Ms. Yeldell and personal observations. This both supports the free-rider problem, suggesting a need for individual compensation (Olson, 1965; Sweeny 1973), but also challenges the notion that such individual compensation is always necessary. Social norms, established during employment, here serve an entry point for the youth to understand the need to support and improve their community. After their initial employment, the social cohesion and lessons that their job experiences taught the youth about the role of community service seem to have stuck. This supports findings that social cohesion (Macy, 1990) and social norms (Weber and Murnighan, 2008), can help to maintain involvement even in large groups.

The physical space of the neighborhood center seems to shape its role in the community. The Silver Spring Neighborhood Center (SSNC) has a neighborhood centric mission helping it serve the role of a more traditional civic center. The services provided by the Silver Spring Neighborhood Center are often times provided by a combination of churches and/or youth centers in many Milwaukee neighborhoods. These institutions generally have members and mission oriented towards specific age groups, which likely affects sense of belonging for those

neighborhood non-member residents, when they attend neighborhood meetings (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014; Cox 1998). This may indicate the value of having a community center which has some public ownership, allowing all residents to feel not only welcome but that they have equal belonging, to encourage greater community involvement (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014; Cox 1998).

Conclusion/Analysis:

The findings of this study indicate a correlation between a sense of ownership and community involvement. Organizers in Metcalfe Park and Westlawn were able to mobilize and sustain involvement from neighborhood residents and youth. The role of shared decision making seems to play an important role in motivating involvement. The success in generating involvement at a cookout event in Borchert Fields indicates how public events can be used for giving residents ownership of voice.

All of the organizers interviewed, recognized the key role of messaging in their communities. The shooting in Metcalfe Park presented Ms. Cross with the challenge of both addressing the crises of ongoing violence and creating a sense of improvement. Ms. Cross effectively organized residents around the crisis, while at the same time presenting a solution of community togetherness. Without this message of empowerment, the resulting involvement would likely not have occurred (Vasi and Macy, 2003). The ability to garner significant community involvement over a short period of time in Metcalfe Park supports the importance of taking authority over message especially in “crises moments” (Pride, 1995; Edelman, 1998).

Though use of appropriate messaging was hypothesized, the use of and influence over mass media was unexpected. In Metcalfe Park, Ms. Cross shaped the way that the media portrayed Metcalfe Park. Her ability to affect media’s portrayal of the shooting likely affected

resident involvement, because residents viewed the media's portrayal of the tragedy in their community that depicted a community coming together to confront the tragedy. Ms. Yeldell has been effective at using Facebook to communicate to and with residents. The institutional support of the neighborhood center, which offers several computer rooms, makes Westlawn a particularly suitable neighborhood for the use of Facebook in organizing.

Mr. Shareef hopes to convey "vision of hope, pride and community dialogue" from new features in the garden such as murals, which can further convey a message of improvement. His plans to engage with neighborhood youth in the process of creating murals, could improve community mobilization with a broader audience for the message of empowerment. This might help in overcoming the mobilizer's dilemma, which suggests that "when improving conditions are coupled with empowerment messages, participants do not use the improvement as an opportunity to free-ride" (Vasi and Macy, 2003).

In all three neighborhoods studied, community ownership of space seemed to play a significant role. This supports existing research that ownership of space is important for involvement (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014; Cox 1998). Additional research will be required to compare involvement where ownership of space is not present.

As Free-Rider theory suggests some mobilization required separate distinct incentives to encourage involvement (Olson 1965; Sweeny, 1973). Engaging African American youth in Milwaukee, where the prospect of obtaining a job is bleak, may render community improvements alone insufficient in developing critical mass among youth. Creating a sense of improving conditions for one's community possibly requires creating job opportunities, so that youth see hope not just for their community's future but for themselves as well. Job programs in Metcalfe Park and Westlawn were effective in developing social norms among youth that inspire

them to volunteer. The findings offer a promising way to create jobs in neighborhoods where unemployment rates have soared. While this work adds value to neighborhoods with vegetable gardens and rain water harvesting infrastructure, these jobs are even more valuable in that they help participants become new community leaders. The job program in Borchert Field indicates that community oriented job programs require broad support to sustain young adult workers' interest in volunteering. Program support that involves shared decision making and team activities which create social cohesion and social norms, are critical in generating the critical mass for volunteers to emerge (Macy, 1990).

The scope of this study is limited, so further research is required to assess the effectiveness of youth job programs in developing youth volunteers. Further evidence of the success of jobs programs in creating youth volunteers would be a sign that such programs have rippling effects in their communities. In addition, findings that indicate best practices for shared decision making, team building and other education curricula in developing social cohesion and social norms would be useful for program managers in improving job programs.

The fact that the Milwaukee Police Department has noticed the effectiveness in employing youth to develop community youth leadership is especially promising. Given the national controversy surrounding police treatment of young African Americans, these findings seem to show a way forward. The Milwaukee Police Department is wise to look to the youth employment program in Metcalfe Park as a means for engaging youth. The findings of this study indicate that the MPD youth program needs to be deliberate in its curriculum to be effective. Through team building and creating a sense of belonging and ownership in the process could create longer term, sustained involvement of the youth in the program and in their community.

The use of media in community organizing is an interesting idea. Prior research indicates that messages of both crises and improvement affect community mobilization (Vasi and Masi, 2003). Further research could build off these findings to provide insight about the effect of residents' perceptions of their own community through media portrayals. The continued growth of social media indicates a need for further research about the effectiveness of the use of social media for community organizers in conveying messages. Barriers to use of social media such as generational barriers and access to technology should be assessed to offer community organizers a better understanding of the limits of social media.

Because the public space seemed to have significance in all neighborhoods, it was difficult to determine the role that it played. Given that violence seemed to impinge on the sense of public access to the street, sidewalk and playground, further research should look at the success of efforts to keep residents engaged in community building when spaces get affected by violence. Additionally, when assessing the role of public space, research could look at the ability to engage all community residents when meetings are held in buildings, which otherwise serve specific members or target demographics. Finally research could look at the way residents develop their own "neutral", "public" spaces when they are otherwise not available.

Community organizers face a constant challenge in mobilizing neighborhood residents to act. Organizers can be more effective when considering how residents feel a belonging to the work. Giving residents a voice and being cognizant of the actual space in which meetings take place can play a role in encouraging involvement. In addition, organizers' work is more effective when they are actually able to affect how the story about the neighborhood is told. Ultimately, in some cases organizers may have to use individual incentives to motivate action. At that point however, the work does not end, but rather an effective organizer may be able to seize the

opportunity to create new community leaders by leveraging the incentive to begin the process once again of creating a sense of ownership within the community.

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