

**DOWNTOWN SAFETY, CIVILITY, AND JUSTICE PROJECT:
REPORT ON STAGE ONE FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Prepared by



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Executive Summary

On August 10, 2016, Mayor John Hamilton introduced a new City initiative to address downtown safety and civility issues, because “our public spaces must be and must feel safe.” He observed that as “we come together as community members, we will encounter neighbors from all walks of life and must ensure that we are able to do so in a way that is safe and expresses the value that each of us brings to our community.” He also announced the City had undertaken to study and make recommendations to resolve some of the issues that lead to these behaviors. The Mayor asked the Community Justice and Mediation Center (CJAM) to develop a public deliberation process as part of this initiative. CJAM is a non-partisan nonprofit organization that has provided community mediation services and training for over 20 years in Bloomington and Monroe County.

The Mayor also announced that the City had undertaken steps to address issues of aggressive panhandling and nuisance behaviors (a website for donations to service agencies in lieu of panhandlers, related signage, lighting, surveillance cameras on the B-Line Trail and other locations, and increased police patrols in certain locations). These steps were independent from the public deliberation process CJAM undertook. CJAM designed a three-stage process: Stage One Focus Groups, Stage Two Stakeholder Dialogue, and Stage Three Public Deliberation.

In Stage One, CJAM volunteers facilitated seven small focus group discussions. This report addresses only findings in Stage One. There were seven focus groups: members of the homeless and/or panhandling community, advocacy and community organizations, businesses, local government, the justice system, service organizations, and patrons. CJAM identified these seven groups to get differing perspectives, viewpoints, and experiences related to downtown safety, civility, and justice. CJAM asked participants to identify and frame the behaviors, dynamics, issues, and options as they see them. This report summarizes what participants said in the focus groups; this is qualitative and exploratory data. It is intended to summarize comments made in the focus groups for the purposes of guiding brainstorming on ideas and action proposals in Stage Two. It is not intended to recommend or endorse any specific action.

Neither the facilitators nor the Steering Committee defined the issues for the participants. This was a bottom-up process. The small focus groups lasted approximately two and one-half hours each and were held over a three-week period. Participants agreed on ground rules, specifically the Chatham House Rule, which provides that participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed. Facilitators used a brainstorming process called storyboarding as a means of collecting information from participants.

The homeless group was first to meet. Through contact with Shalom, Crawford House, and the Saturday morning breakfast using flyers describing the project and through personal contact, participants were solicited to join a “talking circle.” A stone was used as a talking piece that was passed around encouraging each participant to speak only when they held the stone. Facilitators used prepared questions to address the issues presented in the project that could elicit the experiences of the participants. The remaining six focus groups used a group dialogue and a written brainstorming process called storyboarding. In storyboarding, each participant wrote an observation or experience with a large marker on a single sheet of paper. CJAM volunteers asked participants to write as many ideas as possible, each on a separate sheet of paper. Participants then taped the sheets on the wall, clustering them by theme. Participants informally discussed the results and could move or relocate any of the ideas to the best fitting theme or cluster. CJAM then conducted a facilitated whole group dialogue to deepen the understanding and analysis of the comments and themes.

Focus group volunteers took notes and summarized small groups’ work with no attribution of comments to individuals or organizations. These notes or reports of each group were shared with that group’s members for accuracy and comment. All of the small groups’ work is reflected in this report. Facilitators maintained the anonymity of individual participant’s comments. Report authors do not attribute any comment or statement to any individual participant. This report summarizes all comments and reports them in the aggregate organized by themes that emerged in the dialogues.

STAGE ONE FOCUS GROUP PERSPECTIVES:

The following paragraphs provide a brief overview of the discussion within each focus group:

Homeless and panhandlers: Nineteen individuals attended this focus group which included those who were or had been homeless and those who were or had been panhandlers. The atmosphere was cordial and a level of caring for each other and the community as a whole was evident. There was a concern anything would really come from this process that the Mayor has initiated. In views expressed: there is a core group that causes most of the problems, and the police should arrest them. Drunken IU students are more of a problem than the homeless, and those students sometimes harass the homeless. The police, at least currently, treat lawful panhandlers with respect, but are discriminatory as between treatment of students and homeless. Group members expressed sympathy for issues faced by business owners, especially regarding misuse of their restrooms, but the unavailability of public restrooms is a problem for them. Some business owners have negative stereotypes of the homeless. Generally, the homeless treat each other with kindness and offer mutual help. The homeless gather on Kirkwood and in the parks for social connection and because there are no other places for them to go, but they have concerns for their safety regarding drug dealing, violence, and theft of their property. The community should do more to make housing and shelter available, with some participants having specific ideas regarding buildings and structures that could be adapted to meet the need, but housing in itself does not eliminate the economic need that, in part, drives panhandling.

Advocacy and Community Organizations: Participants included people working in the community with various populations in need of services as well as advocacy organizations, boards or commissions, and nonprofit organizations (including United Way). While many shared observations of behaviors that cause concern about safety, they distinguished between people who are homeless and those engaged in aggressive panhandling; these are different populations. Participants wanted a clearer definition of aggressive panhandling. Some of the advocates and service organizations are more interested in addressing homelessness. “Generally, homeless people do not panhandle;” people often seen panhandling are not regular social service agency clients. It is a big mistake to stereotype any group. Panhandling is annoying; homelessness is a serious and systemic justice issue. For many in Bloomington, one of the biggest problems is affordable housing. Some observed that getting a job is easy, but you cannot shelter yourself in this community on most low-wage jobs. Participants reported that the majority of people they observed panhandling in the streets, Library, or parks were Caucasian white males. There are also the mentally ill, a separate group. Most individuals with mental illness are nonviolent and are often vulnerable to victimization. Participants observed we need to treat mental illness, alcohol and substance abuse or addiction as health issues. Some participants expressed concern about a dynamic related to student drinking and businesses. Participants identified a need for a detox center and emergency detox services. They also indicated a need for outpatient care, particularly for children. There are insufficient mental health and case management services. People may be in crisis who are poor or with no insurance or Medicaid. There is no shelter year-round, only the Inter-Faith Winter Shelter (IFWS) from November 1st to March 31st. Many people have observed homeless people using the restroom in parking garages at 4th street and Scotty’s garage. Some view adequate housing as basic and should be regarded as a human right. There are tremendous demands on the faith community that the rest of the community needs to understand; it takes 800 volunteers to run the Inter-Faith Winter Shelter. Participants have observed many of the homeless taking leadership within the homeless community and trying to “police” behavior of others in community who are not behaving appropriately. The group distinguished between the lack of safety or *perception* of that lack of safety; some have concern about personal safety in environments where others felt no concern.

Business Community: The business community is concerned. Participants said they were fearful for personal safety of employees, customers and downtown residents especially after dark. They identified physical health risks regarding blood borne illness due to syringes, feces and urine in public spaces outside shops, or feces and urine in dressing rooms inside shops. People also fear retaliation from confrontations on the street and inside businesses. Participants recognize this is a serious problem, believe it has become steadily worse, and ask where it goes from here. There are many points of view for input and action that could present solutions. They want to keep a vital downtown and businesses open. Participants stated there is a need for some positive change, something other than to incarcerate ourselves out of the problem. The participants emphasize they do not want to ban people from the community. They are trying to get positive results with very simple information. Businesses ask what the police want us to do. Giving money to panhandlers is not helpful. Participants observe there is not sufficient integration of services. Churches and service agencies think they are helping, but it appears that they do not work together. Participants emphasize it is important to keep the project positive, moving forward, and not be satisfied if there is a lull. There is a sense of community, but participants emphasize the need for representation from Indiana University, and consistency and

involvement across communities. They have a passion to make Bloomington better. They observe that a lot of this is growing pains for the community; its size and economy are growing. They ask where the pipeline is coming from; drugs are a huge part, but they ask what we are missing? “These people” will not just go to another community. What they seek are real solutions to deal with the issues.

Justice System: This focus group included representatives of the local justice system, including representatives of the three local police forces, the Prosecutor’s office, the judiciary, the probation department, the jail, and lawyers representing clients of limited means. In views expressed, the system is not broken, but it is overwhelmed. There is heavy drug use, especially Spice, with drugs being readily available. Individuals who have access to drugs and many addicts use Shalom Center services. This may make it easy to get in contact with other addicts, which may promote relapse or make it easy to find access to a dealer. Bloomington has most of the elements of a complete system which work well together, with the courts and Probation Department adopting evidenced based support methods, but there is inadequate capacity. Bloomington is a magnet city with the Department of Corrections and sheriffs in surrounding counties releasing homeless and drug dependent prisoners in Monroe County. Potentially helpful work done with users in recovery is not effective when they are released to an environment of users and readily available drugs. The jail is always pushing a federally mandated cap on capacity; the hospital gives quick treatments and releases patients; there is inadequate capacity in case management and sheltered accommodation. There is little deterrence in the system because those arrested know there is little the courts can do to them. Residents’ fears, whether well founded or not, are real and put pressure on law enforcement to act. Police do not make arrests because individuals are homeless or substance abusers, but for illegal behaviors. They respond to complaints, but know that their making arrests will have little impact. Frustration with the situation was widely expressed.

Local Government: Participants representative of city and county government departments and current elected offices came together to discuss important downtown issues. Participants observed that there has been growth in the homeless population in town (as Bloomington identifies as a magnet for homeless individuals) but no systematic data about who, why, or how. Many questions emerged from the group to explore ways to better understand the overall picture of the issue. There are distinct and sometimes overlapping groups: homeless, homeless people with mental health issues, homeless with drug addiction issues, and others not homeless. Regarding panhandling, it is a legal act. Individual people and organizations are trying to act and fill gaps in service needs for the homeless, mentally ill, and drug and/or alcohol addicted, sometimes in counterproductive ways. People give money to panhandlers because of lack of education. The distinction between “professional panhandling” (organized and systematic) and “aggressive panhandling” (threatening) was made. Mental health problems, substance and/or alcohol addiction are seemingly driving 99% of the panhandling activity. There is the perception that people who give to panhandlers enable substance abuse and that drug deals happen freely in public spaces. In response to some of these issues, the role of the DRO’s (downtown resource officers) appear to be helping and there is a need for businesses and social service organizations to further discuss the issues. There appears to be a lack of public understanding and awareness about panhandling and the options for how to respond. Bloomington is a compassionate community, and wants to be supportive of those in need, but

there is a lack of mental health, substance abuse, and related homelessness services in light of the demand. Tensions exist between homeless (both locals and out-of-towners) and their need for social connection (in parks, for instance) and the City's ability to maintain "family friendly" and welcoming public spaces in the parks. Safety and public health issues are a key concern. Often, this is due to trash, waste, lack of public restrooms for homeless individuals and the problem with syringes (and lack of sharps containers). The group appeared to agree that the issue needs attention from city and county government as well as IU administrators, especially since IU students directly impact the problem by supporting panhandlers, engaging in drunken and disorderly behavior, and sometimes starting physical altercations with homeless people. In the end, the group concluded that more research is needed to go upstream to better understand the source of the problem. What is happening and what are contributing factors to the problem? This data can help better address the problems as well as be used as data to take to state legislators to potentially support community action.

Social Services Organizations: Participants representative of social service organizations came together to discuss important downtown issues. With a significant poverty rate in the city, there was some frustration with a lack of progress in addressing many safety, civility and justice issues and there was also acknowledgment of successes such as the needle exchange program and other food, shelter and key support services. An interesting question that came up was: Is downtown not safe *because* of homelessness OR is downtown not safe *for* those homeless? There was a distinction made that there is often a classist divide amongst the homeless themselves and between the homeless and the IU student population, especially with regard to perceptions of harm being done since there are reports of students harming homeless individuals. Related, the participants discussed the challenge of common perceptions and activities that criminalize basic needs, addiction and mental health challenges. There appears a need to re-examine these perceptions and offer the public a chance to examine their own feelings (emotional struggles) towards homeless. Part of the discussion focused on the fact that the problems are not really an Us vs. Them situation; some members of the group acknowledged that We are all in this together and it is worth hearing peoples' stories. Throughout the discussion, some significant problems were identified such as: lack of opportunities for employment; need for public restrooms; need for low barrier full-time shelter; lack of affordable housing; lack of mental health services; lack of funding; rampant drug use on the rise; lack of detox and rehab services; challenges in the hospital system regarding stress care services and a hospital discharge plan; and lack of weekend resources, since resources are scarce and bus services are not regularly available. Regarding the problems that relate to safety, it seems that the DRO's (downtown resource officers) are helping and there seemed to be consensus that this resource could be expanded. A tension in the discussion emerged regarding enabling vs. assisting and whether services provided are enabling problems to continue or if they are assisting in rectifying the problems. It was a key discussion when considering issues of building capacity to address problems. In some ways, it can be seen as the difference between giving fish or teaching them how to fish. The group had many different perspectives on the various problems addressed throughout the discussion. There appeared moments of insight and learning about each other's work and appreciation for the different angles that people were approaching the issues.

Downtown Patrons and Public: This group included patrons of downtown businesses and others who visit downtown for the library, theaters, or other facilities. The group also

included business owners on the fringe of downtown and individuals who live in downtown apartments. Two IU students were in this group. In views expressed, safety downtown has been an increasing problem, perhaps as more outsiders in need and with substance abuse and mental health issues are attracted to or are sent to Bloomington. Observed behaviors include aggressive panhandling (including instances of being followed and threatened) and incidents of violence, drunkenness, and drug dealing. Feelings of lack of safety are influencing members of the public to avoid downtown and downtown parks. They feel discomfort in familiar places and going to and from downtown residences and businesses. Some are not bringing children to the Library. Problem behavior is observed in alleys as well as on the streets. There are perceptions of inadequate policing, but that the Downtown Resource Officers (White Shirts) have helped. Those hanging out and panhandling are a diverse group, variously homeless, substance abusers, panhandlers (aggressive or not, “professional” or not), and mentally ill. Conversations with homeless individuals have been experienced as positive and educational. IU students also engage in aggressive behavior towards each other and the homeless. It is observed that IU students are arrested for drunkenness more than homeless, perhaps because of evidence that arrest will have an influence on students but not the homeless. Bloomington has more community resources than most, but there are gaps: no detox center or work release, inadequate shelter. The Library is a resource for the homeless in multiple ways.

THEMES ACROSS FOCUS GROUPS:

Participants’ comments fell into eleven categories or themes:

Theme 1: Safety and Civility: Feeling Unsafe and Public Health Concerns

While they recognized that different people have different perceptions, and that perceptions may not reflect reality, participants in each of the focus groups identified concerns related to feeling unsafe, public health, and security. Comments addressed general safety, downtown employees, women, businesses, customers, visitors, community residents, and downtown residents. Participants identified concerns about open drug use and dealing, discarded needles or syringes, human waste in alleys, parking garages, behind dumpsters, and in private bathrooms in businesses. Participants also distinguished between legal peaceful panhandling and aggressive panhandling. Generally, most of the homeless were seen as not engaged in panhandling.

Theme 2: Mapping the Community Dynamics on Safety and Civility

Participants identified certain locations and groups in town as those where activities occurred that caused the concern about safety and civility, including but not limited to Kirkwood Avenue east from the Square to the IU Campus, People’s Park, Seminary Park, the Monroe County Public Library and environs, and a number of specific regular panhandling locations, particularly in locations of dense traffic such as College Mall and Route 37 exit ramps. Discussions suggested people perceived a loss of public spaces.

Theme 3: Panhandling

Participants reported aggressive panhandling is one of the main issues that they deal with. Aggressive panhandling includes turf wars on busy corners. Participants reported that some panhandlers organize in groups of three or four. Participants observed that

unwelcome behaviors include vulgarity and fighting. Some people are swearing loudly on Kirkwood, making people uncomfortable. Criminal behavior includes intimidation of tenants, violence on B-line, drug dealing in city parks, loitering and/or trespassing on private property, particularly in the area of Kirkwood, Walnut, and Wylie, high levels of vehicle break-ins, felony prosecution for possession of needles, residential break-ins, and arrests daily in public parks.

Theme 4: Homelessness

Participants in all focus groups emphasized the importance of not stereotyping people and distinguishing among those who are aggressively or professionally panhandling and those who are homeless. Panhandling does not equal homelessness. The community needs to distinguish between the two groups. Participants who were themselves homeless expressed concerns about being able to preserve their belongings and their health in the absence of shelter. Many homeless feel a sense of hopelessness about the problem due to low wages and high housing costs. Affordable housing is a root cause for the systemic problem for which there is shared responsibility in the community. Bloomington adopted a 10-year plan to address homelessness, but it was very difficult to get support for this and hard to start. It requires leadership and resources at a higher level.

Theme 5: Substance or Alcohol Abuse or Addiction and Mental Health

Participants reported that alcohol and substance abuse contributed to creating an unsafe environment. As in Theme 1, participants noted the presence of undesired refuse such as used syringes, needles and other drug paraphernalia; bodily fluids/waste, feces, and urine on sidewalk areas, streets, parks, inside and outside public buildings, and on private property. The group's responses included perceptions about the relationship between panhandling and individuals with mental health issues and/or addiction issues and existing support and/or resources for mental health and addiction or lack thereof. Participants discussed the importance of community members becoming educated about individuals with mental/behavioral health issues and drug addictions; the need for the community to provide effective and coordinated treatments options; the barriers to treatment and/or recovery for individuals dealing with behavioral and/or drug addiction and patterns of the populations.

Theme 6: Costs

Participants from different groups, including participants from businesses, the justice system, and the homeless, identified operation costs and opportunity costs. Those who are homeless or formerly homeless emphasized that businesses need to distinguish between people causing the costs, who are more likely to be drug users, and people who are homeless. Costs include shifting roles and responsibilities, for example, increased security and repairs in business, changing roles for police as paramedics or connecting people to social services, lost or declining customer business, and increased training, supervision, and escorting employees to cars for safety.

Theme 7: Resources and Justice

Participants identified a number and variety of community needs related to safety, civility, and justice as these relate to panhandling, homelessness, and the service needs of the mentally ill and those with substance abuse or alcohol addiction. Participants in each

group distinguished between the issues of aggressive or organized panhandling downtown, and the challenges faced by the homeless. Participants had wide consensus on the issues of justice for the homeless and the need for education for the public. The service organizations, faith-based community, nonprofits, and individuals all face challenges with a shortage of resources to address the growing need.

Theme 8: Policies and Enforcement

Participants identified positive efforts. They appreciated the Mayor's engagement in the community, the Police responses to telephone calls to stations, the Department of Parks and Recreation's good work cleaning and maintaining parks, and the work of the Downtown Resource Officers in defusing conflict and connecting people with appropriate services. However, the justice system, including police, probation, and courts, is carrying a burden related to concerns about safety, civility, and justice with respect to aggressive panhandling, drug or alcohol addiction, mental health issues, re-entry from prison, and homelessness. The burden is substantial and stressing the system.

Theme 9: Indiana University's Role and the Intersection with the Community

Participants commented on the town-gown dynamic related to panhandling. These issues are not confined to city limits, nor are they simply a City problem, but County and University, too. This is town/gown/county. City government, County government, IU administration need to collaborate. IU Students have a significant impact on presence of panhandling and on safety and civility downtown through drunken and disorderly conduct. Some participants suggested there needs to be a program to teach Indiana University students not to give to panhandlers. This needs to educate both IU students and parents.

Theme 10: Data, Information, Research, Best Practices, and Education

Participants identified a large number of questions and issues about which we lack empirical and objective data about the causes and means to address the suite of problems related to aggressive panhandling, safety, civility, and justice. If we do the research, with more knowledge and data, the community learns. There are perceptions that the activity has increased over five years. Participants observe that Bloomington and Monroe County in fact are operating a regional program, not simply one for this community, to address the needs of multiple different and to some extent overlapping groups: the homeless, mentally ill, drug and/or alcohol addicted, and people re-entering society upon release from prison. Their concern is what the future holds if the community does nothing to address this. It appears to many participants to be a growing problem that needs immediate attention.

Theme 11: Steps Forward and Ideas for Action

Over the course of all the focus groups, participants shared a number of ideas for options to explore, action items, or steps the community can consider to address concerns about safety, civility, and justice that relate to panhandling and the needs of community residents who are homeless or need assistance with mental health or addiction issues. Some key ideas for moving forward are the following: Challenge our privilege and sense of entitlement; Mutual respect is the key; Support families and parents from day one;

Prioritize nurturing children; Do research to better inform our community and to educate each other; and Provide opportunities for all to be heard, participate, learn, and the more we will feel safe. While making suggestions, participants also realized that the problem is complex. Participants want to be helpful and resolve issues, but do not know how.

CONCLUSIONS:

The focus groups' information provides insight into the various dynamics related to aggressive panhandling, homelessness, substance or alcohol abuse and/or addiction, and mental health. These conclusions are based on qualitative, not quantitative, data from the participants in Stage One and require further research.

1. Bloomington and Monroe County appear to be operating and supporting what is in effect a multi-county, regional system to address a problem shared across communities in south central Indiana; this is placing a growing burden on public, nonprofit, and private sector agencies and organizations.
2. State agency policies and insufficient state support for needs like mental health services may be contributing to the regional dynamic of an increasing population in need of services in Bloomington and Monroe County.
3. Participants report insufficient resources in the community to address the current human needs, or to support nonprofit, government agency, and justice system responses related to homelessness, substance or alcohol abuse and/or addiction, and mental health.
4. There is need for a more organized collaboration or collaborative public management system across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to address these various issues.
5. All sectors, public, private, and nonprofit (including the faith-based community), report experiencing new burdens or costs and new stress on their staff or volunteer capacity. Participants report this in a) meeting the combined growing human needs in relation to homelessness, substance and alcohol abuse and/or addiction, and the mentally ill, and b) increased safety risks related to aggressive panhandling.
6. There is a dynamic suggesting a need for more town-gown communication and coordination on boundaries of Indiana University in relation to student alcohol consumption, particularly on the east end of Kirkwood Avenue.
7. There is a dynamic of panhandling along Kirkwood, its sidewalks, and public spaces that may be related to the availability of inexpensive alcohol that can be purchased for take-out.
8. There is a dynamic related to what may be an organized, systematic panhandling group located at certain specific locations, including Walnut and College Avenues, Route 37 ramps on the west side, College Mall on the east side, and other locations. This group is independent from individual, peaceful panhandlers. The high traffic in these locations may disproportionately affect perceptions of safety and civility.
9. Dynamics in People's Park, Seminary Park, the B-Line Trail, downtown alleys, and the Monroe County Public Library affect public use and perceptions of safety disproportionately to other locations, which may be creating a sense of lost public spaces downtown.
10. Participants recognized that the focus group process addressed participants' perceptions; there was broad agreement on the need for additional objective data collection and

analysis from a variety of sources, including 211 calls, 911 calls, and justice system records.