

“Seeking the Welfare of the City”

Research Brief

November, 2009



Introduction

The following conclusions summarize the “Seeking the Welfare of the City” (SWC) report:

- There are 100 distressed neighborhoods in Orange and Seminole Counties, Florida.
- The best supported modality for alleviating this distress is Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD).
- There are no mature expressions of ABCD evident in the area.
- Therefore, it is advisable to implement ABCD in these 100 neighborhoods. Furthermore, the Christian church has demonstrated its ability to play a central role in this type of development and has a clear mandate to seek the welfare of the city (Jeremiah 29:7) and to treat distressed persons as if they were Jesus Christ himself (Matthew 25). ABCD is a time-tested approach to fulfill this mandate in ways that truly benefit the community and serve as a powerful witness to a watching world.

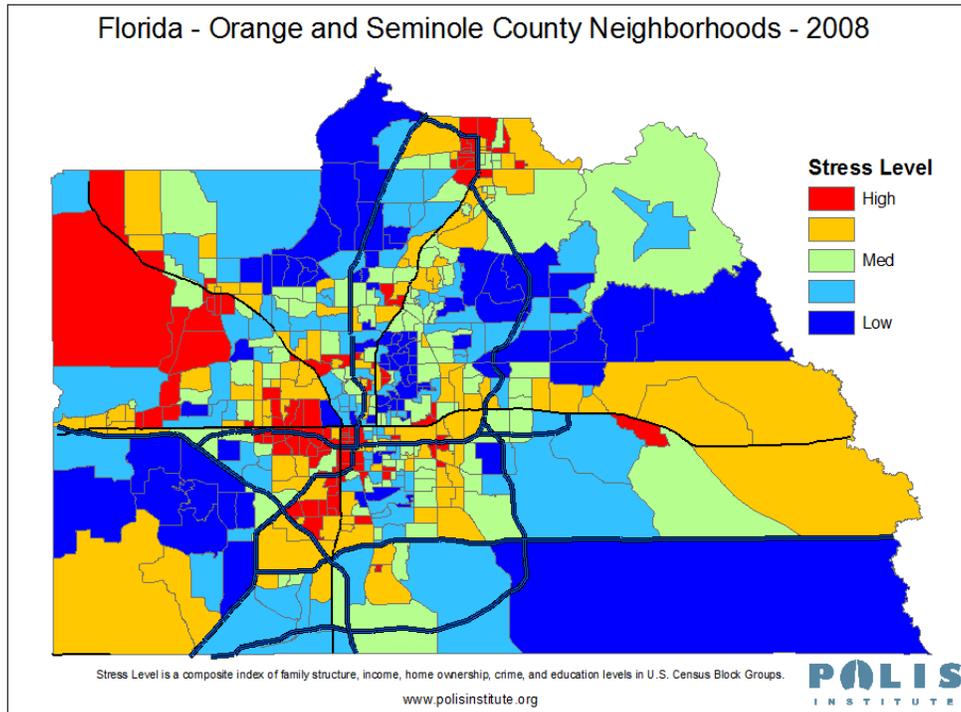
The report was the result of a three year research project commissioned by Jim Seneff and conducted by students of Reformed Theological Seminary between August of 2006 and June of 2009. During that time, over 300 organizations dedicated to addressing human need were assessed using a Participatory Action Research methodology. Additionally, the Neighborhood Stress Index (NSI) was established to monitor community distress and three robust frameworks were articulated to describe the most appropriate actions to alleviate this distress. This document is a brief summary of the research. The complete report is available at www.polisinstitute.org.

The overarching need in Central Florida is to engage holistic capitalization for our most distressed communities and this will only be accomplished when leadership becomes convinced of this necessity and brave enough to act. Leaders will need to enter into purposeful collaborations that require sacrifice and result in stronger communities. Ongoing research will need to be conducted in order to monitor our efforts and create the best educational tools to help ensure that our efforts succeed. The Polis Institute was formed to continue the research, provide the tools, and to serve as a catalyst for a movement that will address the other recommendations of the research which are brave leadership, sacrificial collaboration, and holistic capitalization.

Neighborhood Stress Index

The Neighborhood Stress Index (NSI) was developed during the research project to reveal priorities for where to act and to monitor progress in these areas. It provides a comprehensive view of the following six issues facing Central Florida residents:

1. Preponderance of service sector jobs that do not offer sustainable wages
2. Underperforming secondary education system
3. Increasing crime rates, particularly in certain neighborhoods
4. Majority of households severely burdened for housing costs
5. High concentration of single parent led homes in low income neighborhoods
6. High percentage of under-insured residents for family healthcare



There are 507 neighborhoods in Orange and Seminole Counties and 100 of them are in distress. Stress level was determined by forming a composite index as the average ordinal ranking of income, home ownership, crime, family structure, and education variables. The index was then divided into five intervals using Jenks Natural Breaks algorithm and assigned labels from “low” to “high” to indicate relative levels of stress. The roughly 20% of the neighborhoods at the highest stress level are considered to be in distress. The Block Group geography from the U.S. Census bureau was used to define the boundary of a neighborhood.¹

The research recommends that Central Florida leaders across all social sectors adopt the Neighborhood Stress Index (NSI) as the baseline data from which to assess our collective efforts to alleviate distress in these communities. This index can be updated annually and used to draw attention to our successes and remediate our failures. The 100 distressed communities outlined in the NSI should be the areas of primary focus but their distress should *not* translate into goals. It is preferable to make use of asset-based strategies for determining suitable goals that accentuate potentialities and creating partnerships that will effectively champion these goals. This effort will involve enhancing the impact of existing programs and establishing community-led initiatives.

¹ Block Groups generally contain between 600 and 3,000 people with an optimum size of 1,500. U.S. Census Bureau, http://www.census.gov/geo/www/cob/bg_metadata.html, accessed April 2008.

Enhancing the Impact of Existing Programs

Those with greatest access to the greatest areas of distress require support. Most non-profits begin from the passion of a single visionary leader who often struggles with business acumen and administrative skills which can greatly limit their capacity to serve. Non-profit and ministry leaders should have the opportunity to engage in a process focused on strengthening their organization through coaching, training, planning, metrics creation, board support, fundraising, and organizational development. While there are entities in existence that provide this type of support, it is not often made a priority by non-profit leaders and boards of directors. Choosing to not build the capacity of our passionate and visionary leaders is detrimental to community health.

SWC research revealed 3800 organizations dedicated to addressing human need in Central Florida. This represents a small army of concerned people, well-intended programs, and committed investors. While these efforts have yielded success stories for many individuals and families in our community, they have not tended to lead to transformation at the neighborhood level. It is possible to enhance the impact of existing programs by improving their internal measurements, organizational and leadership capacity, and their ability to enter into effective partnerships. If these partnerships have a stated goal of championing the interests of specific distressed neighborhood and share best principles, they will lead to measurable improvements in the NSI and community well-being.

The research team closely investigating over 300 existing organizations as to their:

1. Primary focus

- Over half of the organizations were primarily focused on short-term relief (53%).
- Many organizations were focused on training (42%) while very few organizations were focused on community development (4%) or structural change (1%).

2. Geographic focus

- Most organizations did not indicate a geographic focus.
- Those organizations that did have a geographic focus tended to indicate a regional focus as opposed to a city or neighborhood focus.

3. Primary need

- Most organizations answered 'money' and 'volunteers.'
- Other answers included 'prayer, board, planning and staff.'

4. Collaboration

- Most organizations were willing to commend other agencies or associations but did not regularly collaborate with organizations doing work similar to their own.
- Roughly half of the organizations shared physical space with other organizations.

5. Vision

- Most non-profits were started from the passion of a single visionary leader.
- Churches were often started as offshoots of existing churches. Sometimes this expansion was from positive growth other times from internal strife.

Establishing Community-led Initiatives

Neighborhoods and cities decline because of disinvestment. So investment, or capitalization, is needed to bring about transformation but it must be holistic in nature. Solely focusing on economic investment leads to gentrification and solely focusing on building relationships neglects other indispensable elements of development such as job creation. Solely focusing on providing resources *for* distressed communities leads to harmful dependencies while neglecting to draw in needed capital from outside a distressed community leaves grass-roots initiatives impotent. Similarly, only focusing on one social sector such as government, business, or non-profit dismisses the vital contributions of the other sectors.

Holistic capitalization is required. It ensures that both resources from within and outside of a distressed community are engaged in its development. It is vital to long-term transformation that ideas, leadership, and resources from a distressed community be central to the initiatives that purport to strengthen it. It is equally important that leaders and others from other parts of the region with different backgrounds and experiences commit their talents and resources to strengthening the distressed areas of the region. Interactions between individuals from different socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds are extremely beneficial to everyone involved particularly when these interactions lead to dignified interdependent relationships.

Most importantly, the goals of holistic capitalization must be clear and should be discovered using the best supported modalities. SWC research investigated numerous initiatives from other parts of the country that had demonstrated success in transforming chronically distressed neighborhoods. Surprisingly, the seeds of this transformation were often of quite humble origin - block parties, bike repair services, and small catering businesses – and community-led, built upon what the community *had* rather than what it *lacked*.

A single resource for discovering and championing community-led initiatives was recommended by every expert consulted in the SWC research, *Building Communities from the Inside Out* by John Kretzmann and John McKnight. This book chronicles numerous examples of distressed communities improving, summarizes the common themes of these transformations, and outlines an approach to replicate the positive results called Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). The work is the result of extensive research at Northwestern University by the aforementioned authors. In examining how hundreds of communities have changed, they found the following common denominators:

- The source of change was an asset indigenous to the community
- The faith community (which was overwhelming Christian) was a central component

These results exert a strong call on the Christian community to focus resources on discovering and championing local assets in a community as a means of outreach. *There are mature efforts to do just that throughout the country but not in Central Florida.* The absence of Church-initiated ABCD is conspicuous and, along with the highly visible presence of relief services, provides evidence that there is an ethos of meeting human needs that runs counter to community development. Central to this ethos is the promotion of ‘self-sufficiency,’ a theologically indefensible goal. Instead, what should be sought are dignified interdependent relationships that work to strengthen distressed neighborhoods. When this becomes a priority we will see measurable improvements in community well-being and a decline in neighborhood distress.