

A Two-Tier Strategy for Public Safety around Banner Lane and Sursum Corda

Executive Summary

Sursum Corda, while culturally rich, has long grappled with crime, and although conditions have improved since its days as a nationally known open-air drug market, many Sursum Cordans remain living in constant fear as the neighborhood remains a target for predators. Residents of Banner Lane and the surrounding Sursum Corda neighborhood in Ward 6 are still haunted by chronic violence and disinvestment. Even after a 2015 lawsuit forced the former housing cooperative to install 98 new lights and cameras, the area remains one of D.C.'s most dangerous, with a roughly 1 in 18 chance of victimization.^{1,2} Recent redevelopment has delivered 560 new units and a landscaped promenade, but physical disorder, poverty and substance use continue to fuel crime.³ This memo recommends that the D.C. Council Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety adopt a two-tier strategy: (1) implement Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) improvements, such as better lighting, clear sightlines, maintenance, and greening, and (2) invest in youth employment, addiction treatment and community-driven violence intervention. Empirical research shows that enhanced lighting reduces nighttime crime by 36%, summer jobs cut violent-crime arrests by 43%, and treatment courts reduce recidivism by up to 58%.⁴⁻⁶ Coupling these quick fixes with long-term social supports promises sustainable safety gains.

1. Background and Problem Definition

1.1. History and Redevelopment

Sursum Corda began as a low-income cooperative in the 1960s and soon became a haven for drugs and violence. In 2015, the District sued the cooperative and mandated lighting, cameras and security.¹ While these measures helped, they didn't go far enough. The neighborhood remained unsafe; it is still ranked among D.C.'s most dangerous.² The Banner Lane redevelopment project, part of the broader Northwest One plan, has replaced much of the old housing with 560 mixed-income units and a landscaped park.³ Nevertheless, construction delays, vacant lots and blind alleys create disorder, while economic deprivation persists in the surrounding blocks.

1.2. Concentration of Violence

Violent crime in D.C. is highly concentrated, as is crime in virtually every city. Roughly 10% of block groups in major cities account for roughly half of the crime and for over half of shootings.⁴ This concentration justifies focusing resources on micro-hotspots like Banner Lane. Citywide, homicides fell from 39.4 to 27.3 per 100,000 residents between 2023 and 2024, but the rate remains very high relative to peer cities.⁷ Residents attribute local violence to poor lighting, trash-strewn lots, high youth unemployment, and untreated addiction.

2. Evidence for a Two-Tier Strategy

2.1. CPTED and Environmental Maintenance

The CPTED framework uses design to reduce crime opportunities. A municipal checklist should emphasize maximizing sightlines, using transparent windows and providing clear distinctions between public and private spaces.⁸ Maintenance (e.g., promptly removing litter, repairing damage, and trimming vegetation) signals community ownership and deters crime.⁸ Adequate

lighting is also critical: an experiment in New York City's public housing showed that installing bright LED lights reduced nighttime crime by 36% and overall arrests by 24%.⁴ Additional studies find that cleaning and greening vacant lots (e.g., planting trees and remediating abandoned buildings) significantly reduces shootings without displacing crime.⁴ It is worth mentioning that some research has found that situational measures such as lighting upgrades or CCTV can shift crime to adjacent areas or times, but comprehensive reviews show that diffusion of benefits (e.g. reductions spilling over to nearby locations) is more common than displacement, and that any displacement rarely outweighs the overall drop in crime.¹⁵ Regardless, these measures have been proven to be effective, have relatively low costs, and can and should be implemented quickly.

2.2. Social investments

Youth employment: Randomized evaluations of Chicago's summer jobs programs reveal that offering six–eight-week jobs to high-risk youth reduces violent-crime arrests by 43% for at least 16 months; moreover, these programs cost about \$3,338 per participant (a very low price relative to the payoff) and provide mentoring and safe spaces.⁵ Participants also gain work experience and community connections.

Addiction treatment and courts: About 65% of incarcerated individuals have a substance-use disorder and 20% were under the influence during their crime.⁹ Drug treatment courts (i.e., courts combining judicial oversight with treatment) reduce recidivism by up to 58% and save roughly \$6,000 (in taxpayer dollars) per participant while lowering overdose deaths.⁶ Evidence shows that providing treatment inside and outside jail decreases drug use and criminal behavior.⁹

Community violence intervention (CVI): Programs like the *Cure Violence* model employ credible messengers to interrupt conflicts and connect high-risk individuals to services. Evaluations in Chicago and other cities report up to 38% reductions in homicides and 15% reductions in shootings, and some programs achieved 50% declines in gunshot injuries.^{10,11} D.C.'s *Cure the Streets* uses this model and could be expanded.¹²

3. Policy Options and Evaluation

1. Do nothing (status quo). This option relies on the existing mix of redevelopment and law-enforcement responses. Given persistent crime and economic hardship, it risks continued victimization and further eroding public trust. Distrust in institutions is itself a driver of crime, so simply maintaining the status quo could deepen the very conditions that perpetuate violence.
2. Implement CPTED without social programs. Enhanced lighting, vegetation management and greening are evidence-based and could cut opportunistic crime. However, studies caution that lighting alone does not reduce violent robberies in a truly sustainable way and that physical improvements may only move crime if underlying drivers like unemployment and addiction remain unaddressed.¹³ As aforementioned, the existing literature on the independent effects of CPTED is mixed and sometimes contested. On its own, CPTED's effects are somewhat ambiguous; paired with social programs, the results are much clearer. CPTED measures produce stronger, longer-lasting reductions when paired with youth employment, addiction treatment, and other social investments.

3. Adopt a two-tier CPTED & Social Investment Strategy (recommended). Combining environmental design with youth jobs, addiction treatment and CVI addresses both situational and structural causes of crime. Research shows that \$10,000 spent on environmental maintenance generates over \$200,000 in societal benefits; youth employment cuts violent arrests by nearly half; treatment courts reduce recidivism; and CVI programs reduce shootings.^{4,5,6,10} Coordinated implementation offers sustained safety gains.

4. Recommendations

1. Enact a CPTED ordinance and fund quick fixes. Require developers and property managers to follow CPTED standards during site plan review; require clear sightlines, LED lighting, transparent ground-floor windows and distinct boundaries.⁸ Trim trees and shrubs (2 ft/6 ft rule) and install motion-activated lights. Partner with local nonprofits and the NoMa Business Improvement District to remove litter and green vacant lots. Evidence shows greening reduces shootings.⁴
2. Expand youth employment and apprenticeships. Allocate funds for summer and year-round jobs targeting 14–24-year-olds in Ward 6. Partner with construction firms, retailers and arts organizations to provide paid positions and mentorship. Integrated support services (e.g., transport subsidies, counseling and tutoring) enhance effectiveness.⁵
3. Invest in addiction treatment and treatment courts. Increase funding for the District’s drug treatment courts and expand eligibility. Provide medication-assisted treatment and

counseling in jail and community settings, recognizing that most incarcerated individuals struggle with addiction.⁹ Mobile mental-health and peer-recovery teams should be deployed in Ward 6.

4. Scale community violence intervention. Expand *Cure the Streets* to include Banner Lane and seek federal Community Violence Intervention and Prevention Initiative (CVIPI) grants.¹⁴ Establish hospital-based violence intervention programs in partnership with local hospitals, for such programs reduce reinjury and save money.¹⁰
5. Create an evaluation and accountability framework. Require agencies to collect data on crime, program participation and recidivism. Partner with local universities for independent evaluations. Publish annual reports to ensure transparency and allow course corrections.

5. Implementation Considerations

Funding and coordination: The District should combine resources from the Department of Transportation, Department of Public Works and private developers. Federal CVIPI grants provide up to \$200 million nationally; D.C. should apply.¹⁴ The Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement can coordinate CVI and youth programs, while Public Works and Transportation handle physical improvements.

Avoiding displacement: Safety improvements can accelerate gentrification. The Council must ensure that affordable housing commitments remain and that local residents benefit from new

jobs and services. A community advisory board comprising residents, business owners, and youth should guide implementation.

Timeline: Immediate actions (first 6 months) should include CPTED audits, temporary lighting and cleaning. Short-term actions (6–18 months) should encompass permanent lighting upgrades, job program launches, and treatment court expansion. Long-term actions (18–36 months) should focus on scaling successful programs and integrating services into subsequent redevelopment phases.

Conclusion

Public safety in Ward 6 cannot rely solely on police or redevelopment. Those methods have proved themselves to be insufficient and incomplete. Evidence shows that environmental design (e.g., lighting, clear sightlines, and maintenance) can reduce opportunistic crime, while social investments (e.g., youth jobs, addiction treatment, and community violence intervention) can address deeper causes and produce lasting reductions in violence and crime.^{4,5} A two-tier strategy that marries these approaches offers the best chance to transform Sursum Corda into a safe, thriving, and inclusive community. It not only mitigates current crime but also builds the social and environmental conditions for sustained reductions in violence. Each approach is valuable on its own, but when they are used together, they complement and amplify each other's impact. The Council should seize this opportunity to pair immediate CPTED improvements with long-term investments in the people of Sursum Corda.

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