

Letting Foundation

# CONNECTIONS

Winter 2006



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# Reexamining “CHRONIC Disengagement” through Another Lens

By John Cavanaugh

*Across the country there is a fundamental condition that consistently undercuts even the most successful community development efforts: chronic disengagement. In most cities, public or civic life is a hostile environment for the average person, ruled by cynicism and division, and dominated by entrenched habits of isolation and detachment.*

William Traynor and  
Jessica Andors  
Lawrence CommunityWorks

**O**ur review of the Community Politics and Leadership program area has provided us with a unique opportunity to demonstrate the internal connectivity of the foundation’s research strategy. Our challenge here is to reexamine findings from our studies of Citizens and Public Choice as well as our research on Institutions, Professionals, and the Public in order to derive additional insights that may have implications for our future Community Politics research. Given that communities are comprised of various local institutions constantly searching for new and innovative ways to solve public problems, we can now draw upon several previous reports from our Public-Government program that clearly illustrate the foundation’s interdependent research methodology.



As Traynor and Andors note in the opening quote, local agencies and community organizations struggle to create more hospitable environments for effective civic engagement. This is exactly what the Kettering Foundation is looking for in our studies called “factors that affect the willingness of organizations to provide space for public deliberation” under Citizens and Public Choice. In this instance, Lawrence CommunityWorks in Massachusetts is attempting to confront the problem of “chronic disengagement” at the local level by means of a “network organizing strategy that connects people to each other and to opportunities for people to step into public life—from the neighborhood group to the City Council—in a way that feels, safe, fun and productive.”

But what if the local problem is highly complex with a raft of technical details? Can local citizens from various socioeconomic backgrounds engage in a deliberative discourse and reach

reasoned public judgments about a hazardous-waste cleanup? These questions were addressed recently by KF Visiting Scholar, Alice Diebel, in a study of how federal, state, and local agencies worked with a Central Michigan community confronted with dioxin-contaminated sediment in the Tittabawassee River. While the major findings from this research related to public administration, this report also yielded key findings about the “unorganized” public’s capacity to deal with extremely complicated issues.

Similar conclusions can be drawn from an experiment conducted several years ago by Mike Pompili when he worked for the Columbus Health Department. In this case, the complicated local problem involved high levels of smog and ground-level ozone in Columbus and Central Ohio. In an effort to reduce the pollution that contributed to the formation of smog, the Columbus Health Department developed “Community Leadership to Effect Air emission Reductions,” or Project CLEAR.

As Pompili notes, the health department attempted to move beyond the traditional public education campaign:

The Project CLEAR outreach and education effort needed to be more than building awareness of the issue and informing the public about the technical aspects of ozone and health effects. We wanted to involve citizens in consideration of public policy actions that could affect the future of air quality in Central Ohio. . . . From October 2000 to June 2001 we held 22 forums. The two-hour forums were held in community locations in urban neighborhoods, suburban and outlying county locations within the Central Ohio attainment area. We developed an issue guide to present four generic public policy approaches. By involving small groups of people in a high quality facilitated discussion, we obtained exceptionally detailed public feedback. They told us how they perceived the issue of ozone, what actions as individuals they would do and not do, what responsibility and actions they expected from government and business, as well as revealed the underlying assumptions they brought to the table.

Likewise, the Hamilton County Regional Planning Commission provides us with a third Public-Government research experiment to review anew through the lens of Community Politics and Leadership. In the Fall of 2002, the commission initiated a comprehensive master plan for Hamilton County, Ohio. The core goal was to create this plan using “collaborative decision making” open to the public. HCRPC staff developed “Community COMPASS (Comprehensive Master Plan and Strategies)” which included an issue-framing/public-deliberation component to address the problems of “governance” in the county. This resulted in Hamilton County’s first master plan since 1964.

Again, we have here another example of a report that originated in the foundation’s Public-Government area migrating to our Community Politics/Leadership work group. Based on the Hamilton County evaluation, David Mathews made this observation about Government Planning and Public Politics: “We have reason to believe that public deliberation produces a broader sense of a problem, which encourages multiple actors. But can those actors produce effective action by each person or each group doing their own thing without attention to enlisting other actors, marshalling resources, considering steps or timetables? If they must, should citizens adopt bureaucratic techniques? Or is there a public way of planning and implementing?”

This essay provides three short examples of past Public-Government research studies that have helped us shed new light on questions from our Community Politics and Leadership program area. More important, it demonstrates that our research projects are “not separate studies, but one research design with multiple components.” Thus, from a methodological vantage point, the research capacity of the foundation will only increase when we take a fresh look at previous findings from new perspectives. By relating to past research, new research can build upon past findings and allow us to understand interrelated political phenomena.

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# Involving Ordinary Citizens in Public Work: **The Cincinnati Experience**

By Valerie Lemmie

*Too many of us have become passive and disengaged. Too many of us lack confidence in our capacity to make basic moral and civic judgments. Rarely have we felt so powerless. In a time that cries out for civic action, we are in danger of becoming a nation of spectators.*

“A Nation of Spectators,”  
the Report of the National  
Commission on Civic Renewal

**O**n Saturday, April 7, 2001, at 2:16 a.m., a Cincinnati police officer fatally shot Timothy Thomas in a dark alley in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood. He was unarmed and the fifteenth African American suspect shot by Cincinnati police since 1995. The following Monday, an angry crowd seized control of the City Council’s Law and Public Safety Committee meeting and expressed its dissatisfaction with the responses of public officials to the shooting of another unarmed African American male. The crowd demanded answers they felt were not forthcoming. The anger, alienation, and frustration these citizens felt against their city government was palpable and would later be expressed through two days of rioting.

While many in the community were shocked and outraged by the nature and character of the violence, there was general consensus something needed to be done to address the root causes of the civil unrest. What wasn’t clear at the time was what should be done, when, by whom, and at what cost.

Subsequently, a variety of groups, organizations and government undertook

many initiatives, programs, and actions. Some initiatives focused on meeting immediate needs while others sought long-term solutions to what seemed to be intractable problems. This time, however, things were different. Voices that heretofore had been seldom heard were part of the discussions on what to do. Those who had been ignored by civic, public, and business interests in the past, and who in 2001 felt their only recourse was to “take to the streets,” were now engaged with the larger community in finding solutions to the vexing problems they faced.

Another key difference was a general consensus that finding viable solutions to these problems was the responsibility of the entire community. There was broad recognition government could not solve these problems alone. Government should be a participant, but everyone had to be part of finding solutions.

Using a model referred to as Community Problem Oriented Policing, or CPOP, citizens and police work in neighborhood teams to address key issues and problems. These teams have become an important vehicle for empowering average citizens by giving them a voice and a role to play in addressing issues that directly affect them. They are now active participants in getting the “public’s work” done.

One year after the shooting on April 11, 2002, the City of Cincinnati, the Fraternal Order of Police, the American Civil Liberties Union, and a class of citizens represented by the Black United Front signed a historic five-year agreement, known as the Collaborative Agreement, to improve police-community relationships through, among other commitments,

The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation—not a grant-giving foundation—rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.”

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research corporation supported by a \$250 million endowment. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation’s Web site at [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org).

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