

City of Gainesville Community Revitalization Project

Summary

In 2012, the City of Gainesville held internal meetings to discuss community problems and methods to address them. The Gainesville Police Department administration had already recognized that criminal activity was on the rise. A primary goal of the Department was to reduce criminal activity, not only to create a safer community, but increase the general feeling of safety among the public. During the internal meetings, the deteriorating conditions of some areas of the community was noted. A Patrol Sergeant elaborated that the prevalence of substandard structures provided concealment for offenders and criminal activity.

The Department administration had reviewed the annual UCR data and noted that Part 1 criminal activity had started an upward trend again since 2009 after seeing a significant decrease in 2008. Prior to 2008, UCR Part 1 crimes had been trending up since 1996, peaking in 2004 and then trending down until 2009. Arrests for illegal drugs were common and there is a correlation between illegal drug activity and other crimes. Officers were familiar with the areas where criminal activity, particular illegal drug offenses, were commonplace so they focused their efforts on those areas. With limited resources, this often meant that other areas were neglected which compounded the problem.

An interdisciplinary team, composed of several city departments, was created to address the troubled areas. The team began to prioritize areas that needed to be addressed based on the overall condition of the area and the frequency of criminal activity. The team would focus on violations in selected areas in an effort to gain compliance and improve the quality of life in the area, also identifying substandard structures that needed to be removed. As the City prepared to proceed with the demolition of these structures, a court ruling held that the existing process in the State of Texas was unlawful. The City of Gainesville looked for alternative methods to continue with the program and subsequently developed a successful voluntary demolition program.

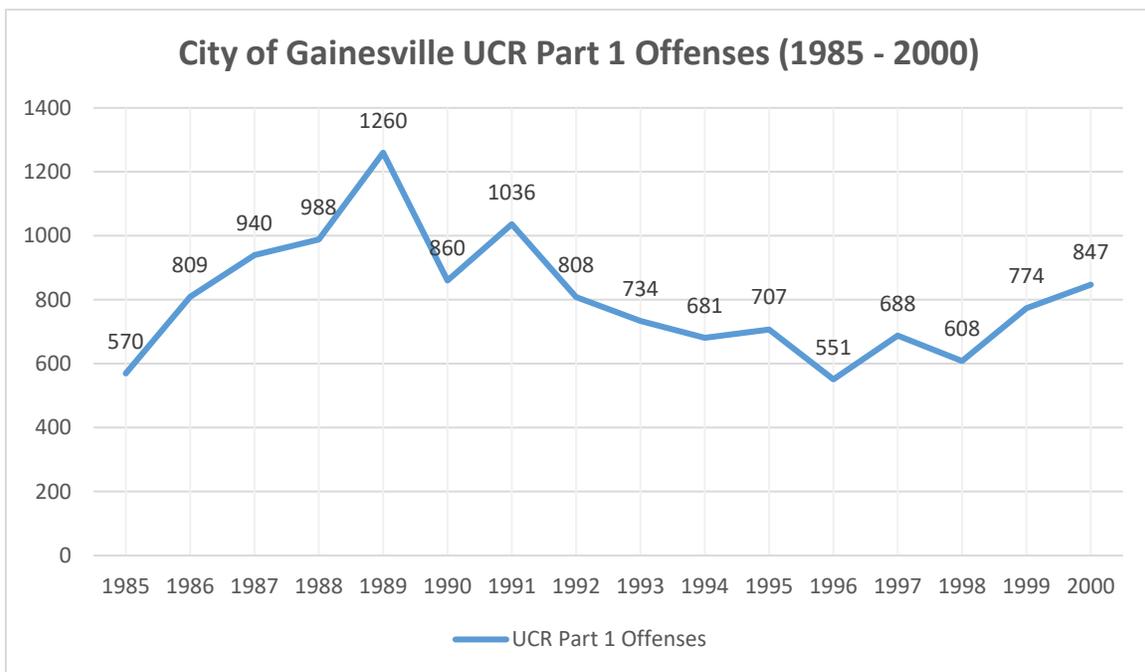
As the City of Gainesville began the demolition program, the Gainesville Police Department continued to monitor criminal activity and noted that after the UCR Part 1 crimes peaked in 2012, they steadily declined until 2020 with this outlier possibly being attributed to the pandemic. The Gainesville Police Department holds that the focused enforcement efforts and the voluntary demolition program are both key elements in the decline of criminal activity.

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Description

Gainesville, Texas was founded in 1850 and then officially incorporated in 1873. In the early years, Gainesville served as a hub for the agriculture and cattle industries. Oil was discovered in the area in the 1920's which helped Gainesville through the Great Depression. The petroleum industry remains an important part of the Gainesville economy today. During World War II, the U.S. Army built Camp Howze to serve as an infantry training camp which resulted in a rapid growth in population and bolstered the economy. At the conclusion of the war, Camp Howze was closed and Gainesville returned to a traditional economy. The volatility of the oil industry in the 1970s and 1980s had a significant impact on Gainesville. While the community flourished during times of increased demand, it struggled when the industry developed a national surplus. National Supply, a drilling equipment manufacturer and one of the largest employers in the area, closed in 1987 causing a significant downturn in the economy. Gainesville struggled over the course of the next two decades as it sought to replace the lucrative employment opportunities that had been lost.

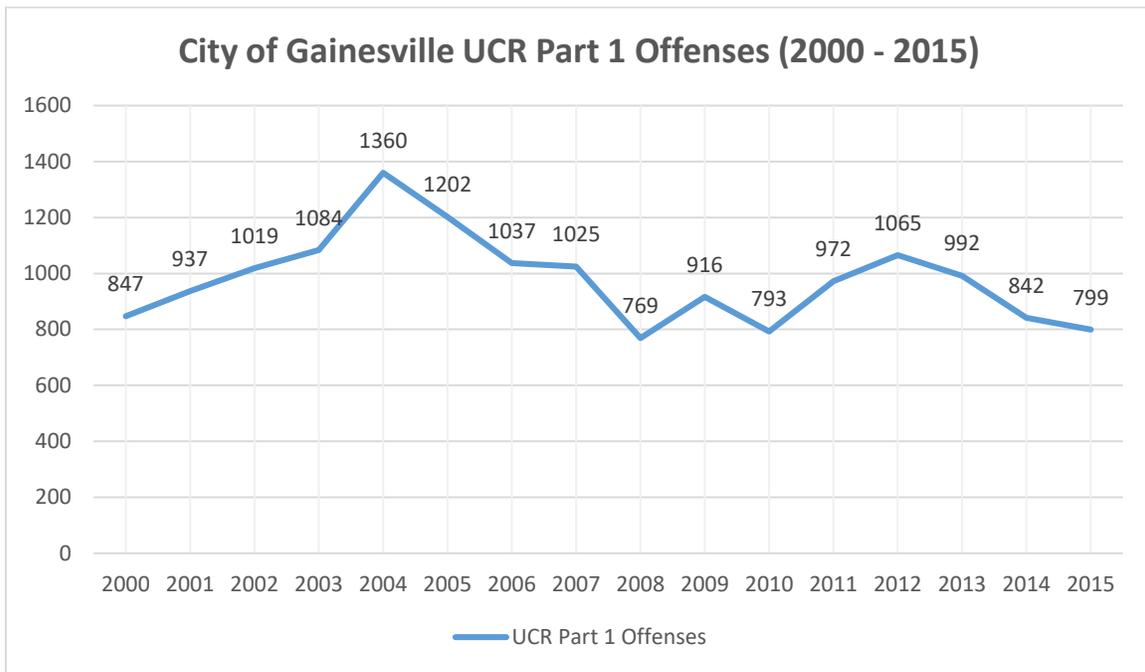
The depressed economy, along with other socioeconomic factors, created challenges in other areas including criminal activity. The City noted an upward trend in Part 1 UCR crimes during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Vacant police officer positions had been frozen during this time due to budgetary constraints although the positions were restored in 1992. The Police Department focused efforts on the criminal activity and the levels stabilized with the UCR Part 1 statistics fluctuating mildly until the year 2000 as evidenced by the chart below, City of Gainesville UCR Part 1 Offenses (1985 – 2000).



Although criminal activity declined after 1991 for the next several years, Gainesville began to see the first indicators of gang activity in 1993. External gang influences moved into the largely rural

area and gained traction with some of the local youth. While the lifestyle was readily adopted by a relatively small number, it was still enough to have a negative impact in the area. Tragically, Gainesville experienced its first gang-related homicide in 1995 when a 15-year-old male juvenile was killed for refusing to join a gang. This type of activity plagued the community for the next several years as various resources began to come together to address the issues.

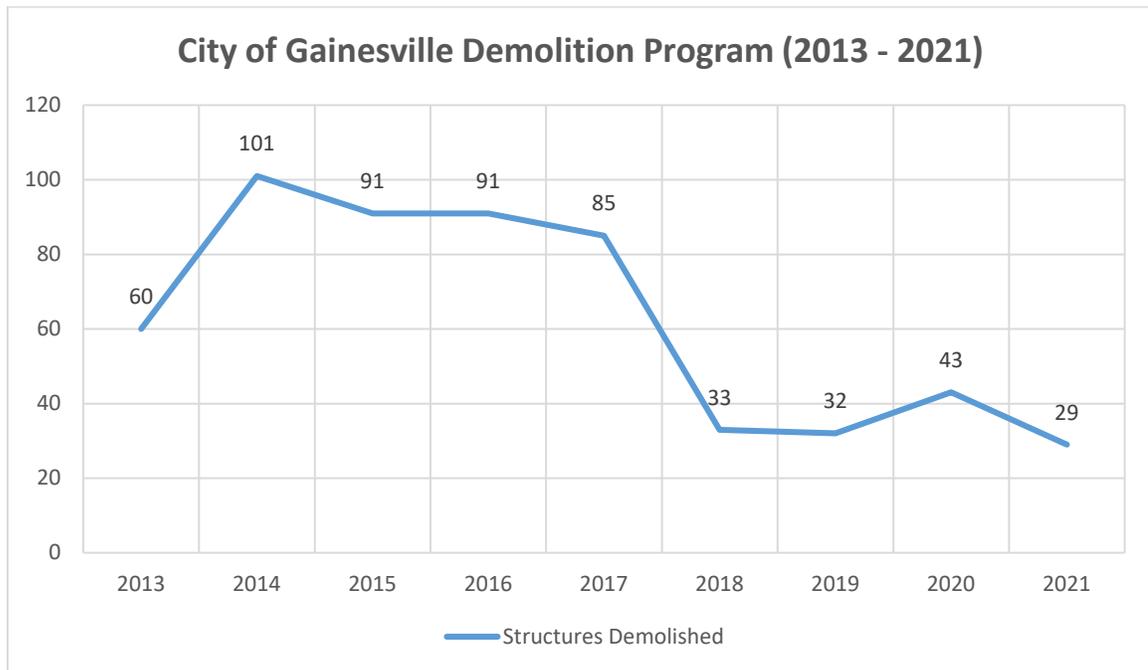
By the year 2000, the City of Gainesville saw an increase to crime levels not experienced since 1991 with the trend continuing upward, peaking in 2004. The Police Department realized that drug and gang activity continued to have a negative impact so enforcement efforts were directed toward those areas. The targeted enforcement efforts began to show results with the criminal activity trending downward after 2004. Officers were familiar with the areas where criminal activity, particular illegal drug offenses, were commonplace so they focused their efforts on those areas. With limited resources, this often meant that other areas were neglected which allowed crime to increase. There was a small spike in 2009 followed by another reduction in 2010, however the trend started upward again in 2011. (City of Gainesville UCR Part 1 Offense (2000 – 2015) Chart).



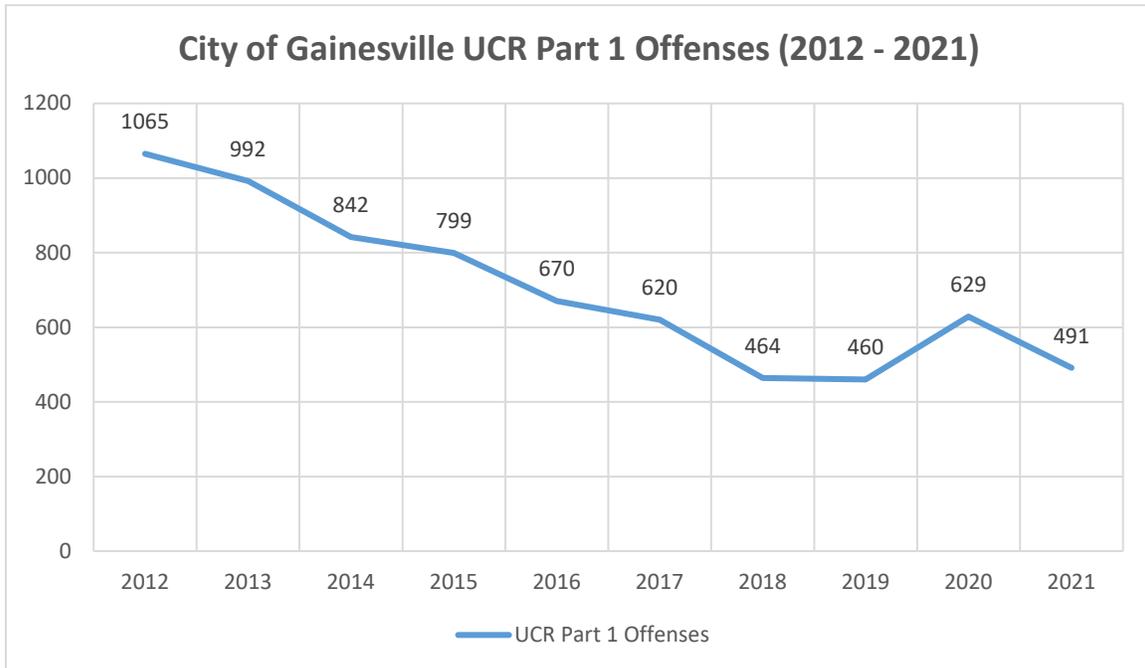
In 2012, the City of Gainesville held internal meetings to discuss community problems and methods to address them. The Gainesville Police Department administration recognized that criminal activity was on the rise again. A primary goal of the Police Department was to reduce criminal activity, not only to create a safer community, but to increase the general feeling of safety among the public. Although the Police Department recognized that focused enforcement efforts could reduce criminal activity, the administration was open to looking at addressing the issue with other alternatives as well. During the internal meetings, the deteriorating conditions of some areas of the community was noted. A Patrol Sergeant elaborated that the prevalence of substandard structures provided concealment for offenders and criminal activity.

This discussion regarding the substandard structures led to the development of the Neighborhood Improvement Task Force, an interdisciplinary team which was composed of the City Manager, the Police Chief, the Community Services Director, the Public Services Director, the Fire Marshal, and the City Marshal. The Police Department provided data from different areas around the city to allow the team to select specific areas to address. The cooperation between the various departments throughout the City of Gainesville allowed all of the available resources to work on the problems that were identified. Each department worked on the issues within their specific discipline to correct deficiencies that had been noted. As for the substandard structures, Code Enforcement would work with the property owners in an attempt to address the various code violations, but some structures were simply too dilapidated.

Structures that were determined to be beyond repair were presented to the Building and Standards Committee who made the ultimate decision regarding the need for demolition. As the team prepared to move forward in the latter part of 2012, the Texas Supreme Court issued a ruling in *City of Dallas v. Stewart* which required that nuisance cases requesting demolition must go through judicial proceedings prior to demolition. This delayed the program while the City looked for alternatives. As a result, the City of Gainesville developed a voluntary demolition program that has proven to be successful with over 600 structures being demolished since 2012, including those that have been removed during the first half of 2021 illustrated in the chart below, City of Gainesville Demolition Program (2013 – 2021). The City of Gainesville even partnered with an antique lumber vendor who assisted with the program in exchange for the ability to recover the lumber.



As the various teams worked through the assigned areas, the Police Department continued with focused enforcement efforts. The Police Department also implemented regular criminal activity intelligence meetings to identify specific individuals and locations that were having the most detrimental impact on the community. These combined efforts had a notable effect on overall criminal activity with a 57% decrease in Part 1 offense from 2012 to 2019 as shown in the chart below, City of Gainesville UCR Part 1 Offense (2012 – 2021). There was a notable increase in 2020 although it is believed that this is related to the COVID-19 pandemic since the number decreased significantly in 2021.



The reduction in criminal activity was not the only benefit that was derived from the community revitalization program. As the team worked through the selected areas, there was a visible improvement in the area. While some of the structures required demolition, there were many others that were able to be restored. In fact, as the program continues, the number of properties being repaired are increasing while those needing to be demolished are decreasing. The City of Gainesville Community Development Department performed a random sampling of properties that were involved in the program from 2013 to 2022 which included locations where new structures had been built in place of those that had been demolished along with other locations where the property had been remodeled. This sampling included 48 properties and they found that the total value of these properties had increased by \$9.8 million over the course of 10 years.

The City of Gainesville Community Revitalization Project has been successful in many ways. Not only has criminal activity declined, but areas where dilapidated structures were prevalent have given way to new and remodeled homes which has begun to provide much needed housing for the community. While one of the key components of this program, the removal of substandard structures, could have been completely sidelined due to the uncertainty of new requirements, the City of Gainesville found a successful alternative that has improved the quality of life in the community.

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Contact

Name: Kevin Phillips

Position/Rank: Chief of Police

Address: 201 Santa Fe Street

City/State/Postal code: Gainesville, TX 76240

Phone: 940-668-4774

Email: kphillips@gvps.org