

**December 2016**

# **RWJF Culture of Health Community Snapshot**

**Stockton, California**

## About this Report

The Sentinel Communities project, conducted by RTI International in collaboration with the RAND Corporation, is sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The project will monitor activities in each of 30 diverse communities around the country for at least 5 years. This Snapshot is the first in a series of planned reports about this Sentinel Community. Using data compiled in early 2016, it provides an initial overview of the community's history, challenges, and approaches to building a Culture of Health. Visit [cultureofhealth.org](http://cultureofhealth.org) to see the full list of communities and links to other reports and information about the project.

## Introduction

Stockton, located in northern California, is the seat of San Joaquin County and one of the state's 20 largest cities. It lies along the San Joaquin River, roughly 40 miles south of Sacramento and 40 miles east of Oakland and San Francisco.<sup>1</sup> Stockton has a population of 297,223, including 41% Hispanic, 22% white, 21% Asian, and 11% black residents—a composition that has remained relatively stable since 2008.<sup>2</sup>

During the 1849 Gold Rush, the area around Stockton grew rapidly as a miners' supply point. In 1869, with the use of irrigation and the development of the Central Pacific Railroad, the city became a market for farm produce.<sup>1</sup> The San Joaquin River's deep-water channel, completed in 1933 and stretching 78 miles, helped Stockton develop into a major shipping point for many agricultural and manufactured products in Northern California.<sup>1</sup> Stockton Port's shipping business continues to grow, now specializing in bulk cargo, such as grain, sulfur pellets, coal, molasses, vegetable oil, bagged rice, finished steel, and oversized equipment.<sup>3</sup>

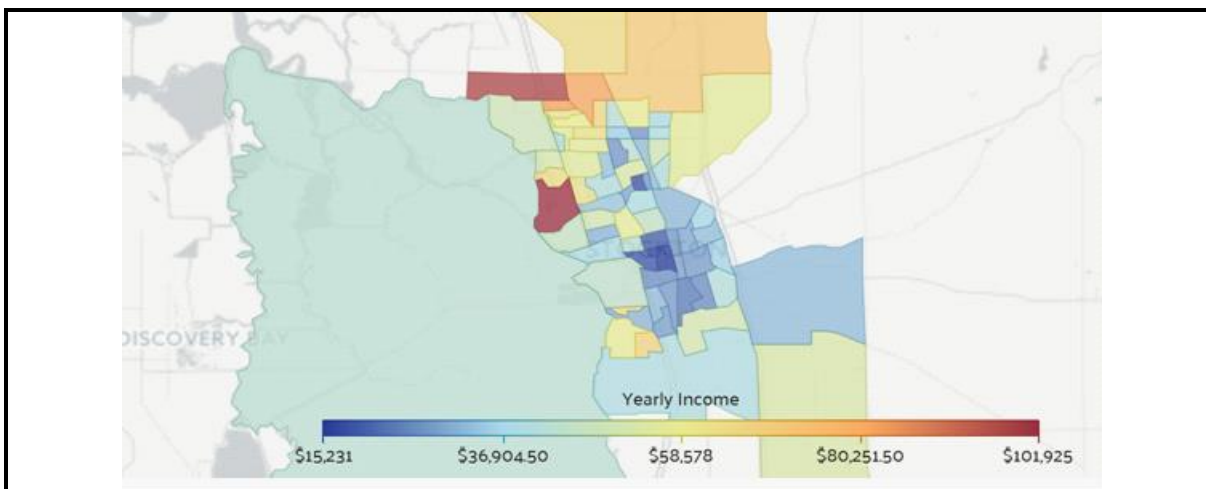
Despite the inland port's role in economic growth, Stockton has been plagued by poverty and crime for decades. Nearly 50% of black residents and more than 29% of Hispanic residents live below the federal poverty level, compared with less than 17% of white residents.<sup>4</sup> These rates are much higher than cities that have also faced similar financial hardships, including Sacramento, California, and Detroit and Flint, Michigan. In addition to these racial/ethnic income disparities, sharp geographic divisions also exist, with more affluent residents living in the northwest and low-income residents living in the east and south<sup>5</sup> (Figure 1). More than 6% of residents live in Stockton but commute at least 90 minutes by car or mass transit each day to higher-paying jobs in surrounding areas. Stockton's share of these residents, referred to as "super commuters," is more than double the national average.<sup>6</sup>

Stockton also faces soaring crime rates, with violent crimes occurring at more than three times the rate in California (1,331 compared with 396 per 100,000).<sup>7</sup> In 2012, one-third of the city's homicides reportedly were related to gangs that have lived there for generations.<sup>8</sup> In 2014, Stockton was ranked the 9th most dangerous American city with a population over 200,000, based on data from the FBI's Uniform Crime Report.<sup>9</sup>

The city's existing problems with poverty and crime were exacerbated in 2012 when Stockton declared bankruptcy in response to one of the most extreme housing market collapses in the nation. Recognizing the need for a complete revitalization of Stockton, the city council, the police, and other community stakeholders have launched initiatives to

revitalize neighborhoods, reduce crime, and actively engage residents. Many challenges lie ahead, but Stockton residents are fighting to redefine their community.

**Figure 1. Income by Location in Stockton**



Source: Data USA: Stockton California

### ***Housing Crisis and Bankruptcy***

In the early 2000s, many banks lowered standards for and aggressively marketed home loans, causing home ownership to increase substantially. “Subprime borrowers,” who would not have qualified for mortgages under previous lending requirements, made about 56% of U.S. home purchases from 2000 to 2006.<sup>10</sup> During the housing boom, new subdivisions emerged in Stockton, and middle-class families who were priced out of the Bay Area housing market flocked to the city to purchase more affordable and larger houses.<sup>11</sup> A relatively large percentage of Stockton homeowners accepted risky, subprime mortgages during this period, with some “hot spots” having more than 2,000 homes with subprime loans in 2007. This compares unfavorably to most Bay Area neighborhoods, which typically had fewer than 250 homes with subprime loans in 2007.<sup>12</sup>

Eventually, the initially low interest rates of the adjustable-rate loans began to rise, and people increasingly were unable to pay their mortgages.<sup>11</sup> In December 2007, 20% to 25% of subprime loans in Stockton were overdue.<sup>12</sup> As a result, the housing bubble burst in 2008, causing foreclosures around the United States and bank bailouts by the Department of Treasury.<sup>10</sup>

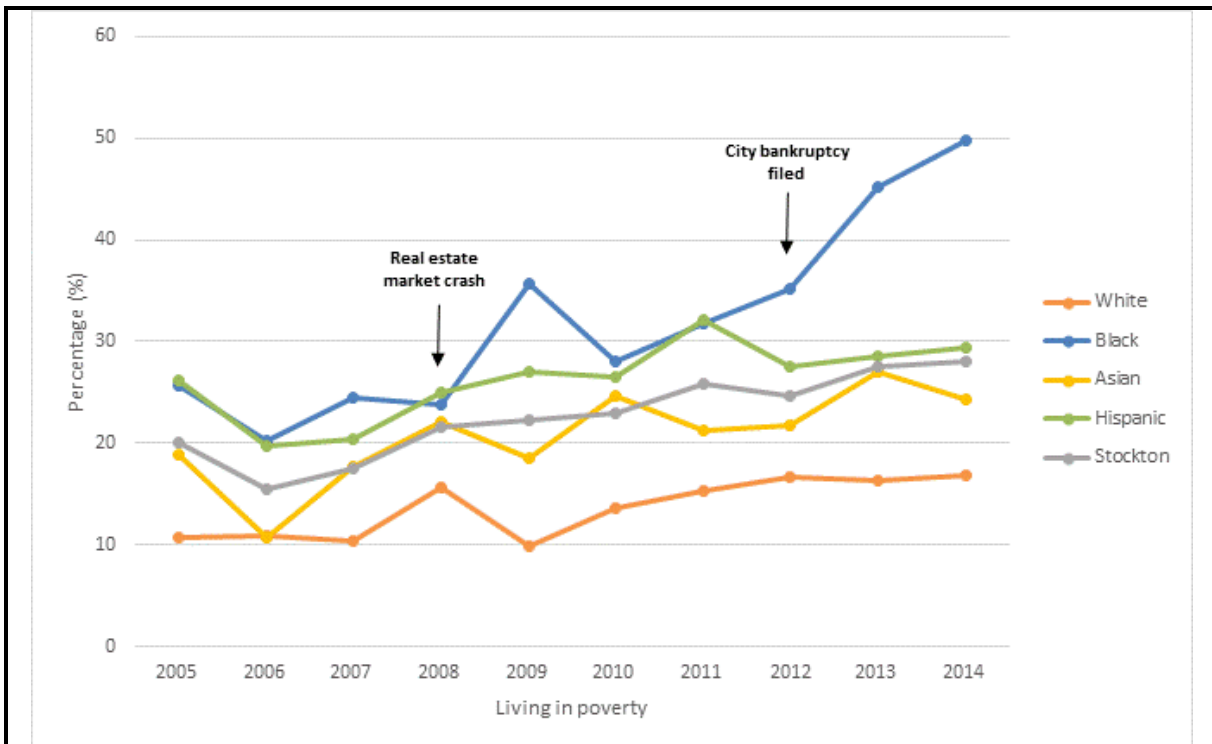
After the bubble burst, the median value of houses in Stockton fell from \$346,000 in 2008 to \$178,900 in 2012,<sup>13</sup> and many homeowners lost their properties to foreclosure.<sup>14</sup> By September 2012, one in every 67 homes in Stockton faced foreclosure, one of the highest rates among metropolitan areas in the nation (data on the foreclosure rate before 2012 are unavailable).<sup>15</sup> Home ownership among black and Asian residents decreased substantially; in 2009, nearly 37% of black residents and 61% of Asian residents owned homes, but by 2014, those figures dropped to 23% and 47%, respectively.<sup>16</sup>

In February 2012, Stockton became the largest city to file for bankruptcy in the nation’s history, costing the city more than \$42 million.<sup>17</sup> The city’s financial problems resulted from

a combination of factors, including the housing market crash, expansive government spending on downtown development, compensation promises to government employees with unsustainable levels, and an ill-timed bond offering. During the real estate market boom of the early and mid-2000s, Stockton signed several major employment agreements with government employees. When the housing bubble burst in 2008, Stockton quickly depleted its reserves on contractual salaries, pensions, and benefits that were more than 25% above other cities' offerings.<sup>18,19</sup> To emerge from bankruptcy, the city did not reduce pension benefits, but did eliminate funding for retirees' health plans totaling \$544 million.<sup>20</sup> Stockton also increased its sales tax and laid off many public employees, causing some police and firefighters to leave Stockton in search of higher-paying jobs.<sup>21,22</sup>

Many Stockton residents struggled financially before the recession, but the housing market crash and the city's bankruptcy filing exacerbated their plight. The number of residents living below the federal poverty level increased by almost 30% from 2009 to 2015 (Figure 2). Black residents were hit particularly hard, with nearly half falling below the federal poverty line by 2014.<sup>4</sup> By 2016, an estimated 750 people live in homeless shelters.<sup>23</sup>

**Figure 2. Stockton Residents below the Federal Poverty Line by Race/Ethnicity**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2014

### ***Ongoing Economic Struggles and Disparities***

Stockton emerged from bankruptcy in February 2015, but is struggling to rebuild itself and respond to social and health problems of residents with low educational attainment and economic deprivation.<sup>24</sup> More than 25% of Stockton residents have less than a high school degree, compared with about 18% at the state level and 13% nationally.<sup>19</sup> Hispanics disproportionately experience poor educational achievement, with nearly 41% earning less than a high school degree, compared with white (22%) and black (15%) residents.<sup>19</sup>

Currently, more than 16% of Stockton residents are unemployed, compared with 11% in the state and 9% nationally. Residents report a median income of \$45,347 compared with \$61,489 for the state, with black and Hispanic residents earning less (\$30,389 and \$40,424, respectively) than the city's median income.<sup>16</sup> Although Stockton's unemployment rate is nearly double the national rate, it is lower than some similar cities struggling with economic disruptions, including Detroit (22%) and Flint (24%), Michigan.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to the diverse employment opportunities in the greater Bay Area region, most jobs within Stockton are in relatively low-paying industries, such as education, retail, and manufacturing.

A small segment of residents, representing all economic classes, commute west to San Francisco and Silicon Valley for higher-paying jobs—with some of these "super commuters" traveling up to 90 minutes each day on trains and buses—while benefiting from the availability of more affordable housing in Stockton.<sup>11,25</sup> For \$2,126, the average monthly rental cost of a studio apartment in San Francisco, a four-bedroom rental house with ten times the square footage is available in Stockton.<sup>26</sup> However, affordable housing remains a challenge for many; in 2009, 47% of residents' housing costs accounted for 30% or more of their total monthly income, compared with 45% in the state and 35% in the nation.<sup>16</sup> Many minority and low-income residents of Stockton cannot afford home ownership at all, or even the opportunity to live in housing that is not substandard, as numerous houses in South Stockton—which is home to one-third of the city's population—are affected by blight, code violations, and disrepair.<sup>27,28</sup>

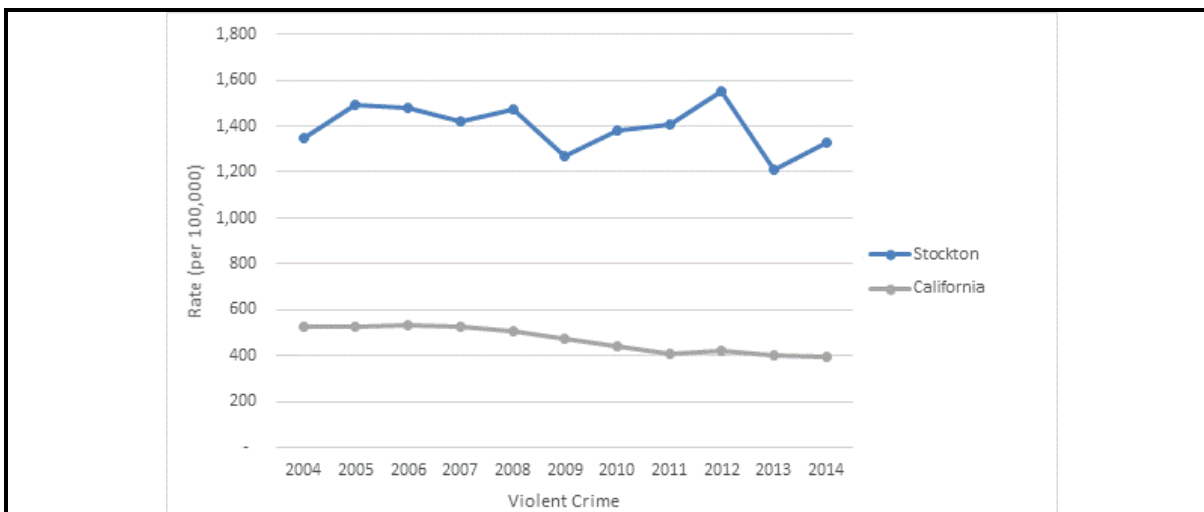
In addition to substandard housing, crime, poverty, and lack of city services have long plagued South Stockton. During the peak of the housing boom in 2006, the Stockton Police Department reached its highest staffing level. With over 450 sworn officers, the city was able to actively monitor and police its most troubled neighborhoods. However, the city's bankruptcy forced Stockton to cut police staffing by one-fourth to control salary and pension expenses.<sup>14, 29</sup> The reduced size of the police force took its toll on community-oriented policing and assertive crime prevention strategies.<sup>29</sup> By 2012, Stockton reached a record high of 71 homicides for the year, many of which were gang-related.<sup>8,30</sup>

As in other U.S. cities, Stockton gang members are born into the groups or join at very young ages to sell drugs to make money for themselves and family members. Conflicts between rival gangs, like the Crips and Bloods, escalate quickly and are often resolved with gun violence.

As a result, violent crime weighs heavily on Stockton adults; according to a recent Gallup poll, fewer than 63% of adults in the Lodi-Stockton metropolitan statistical area say that they always feel safe and secure in their neighborhoods—the second lowest rate in the nation.<sup>31</sup> The city's violent crime rates are dramatically higher than the rest of the state (Figure 3).<sup>32</sup>

South Stockton was the subject of a San Joaquin County civil grand jury report in 2015, which urged the city administration to allocate more resources for code enforcement and police services.<sup>33</sup> In response, the city government conducted an aggressive "neighborhood blitz" in the southeast neighborhoods to remove blight and compel landlords to make repairs. The 90-day sweep was controversial, however, resulting in two legal claims against the city. The homeowners and a landlord who filed the claims maintained that police were heavy-handed and violated individuals' privacy and civil rights.<sup>34</sup>

**Figure 3. Violent Crime Rates in Stockton Compared with California, 2004–2014**



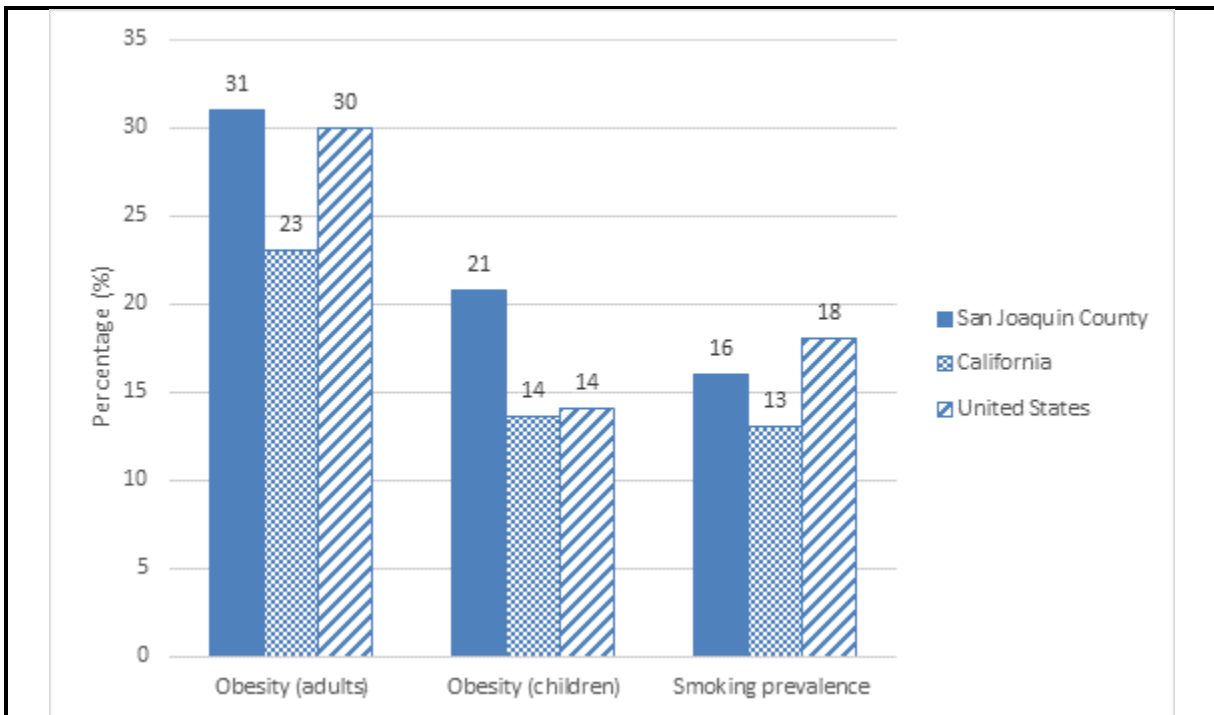
Source: U.S. Department of Justice Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2014

### ***Limited Data and Indicators of Poor Health***

City-level health data is limited; because Stockton, the county seat, comprises 42% of San Joaquin County, health data for the county is used as proxy for the city (Figures 4 and 5). However, Stockton's racial/ethnic makeup is different from that of the overall county. The majority of the county is white (35%), whereas the majority of Stockton is Hispanic (41%). The Asian (21%) and black (11%) populations are also larger in Stockton than in the county (14% and 7%, respectively). Stockton also has a lower median household income (\$45,347 versus \$53,253) and a greater portion of residents living in poverty (26% versus 19%).

San Joaquin County performs worse than the state and nation on nearly all health indicators, including obesity and smoking rates (Figure 3).<sup>35,36</sup> While the county's adult obesity rate is much lower than the nation's, the child obesity rate is much higher.<sup>35,36</sup> The teen birth rate also is higher in the county (42 teen births per 1,000) than in the state (24 per 1,000) and nation (29 per 1,000). In addition, the premature death rate is higher in the county than the state and the nation (Figure 4).<sup>35</sup> San Joaquin County also has a higher rate of drug-induced deaths (16 per 100,000) compared with California (12 per 100,000).<sup>37</sup>

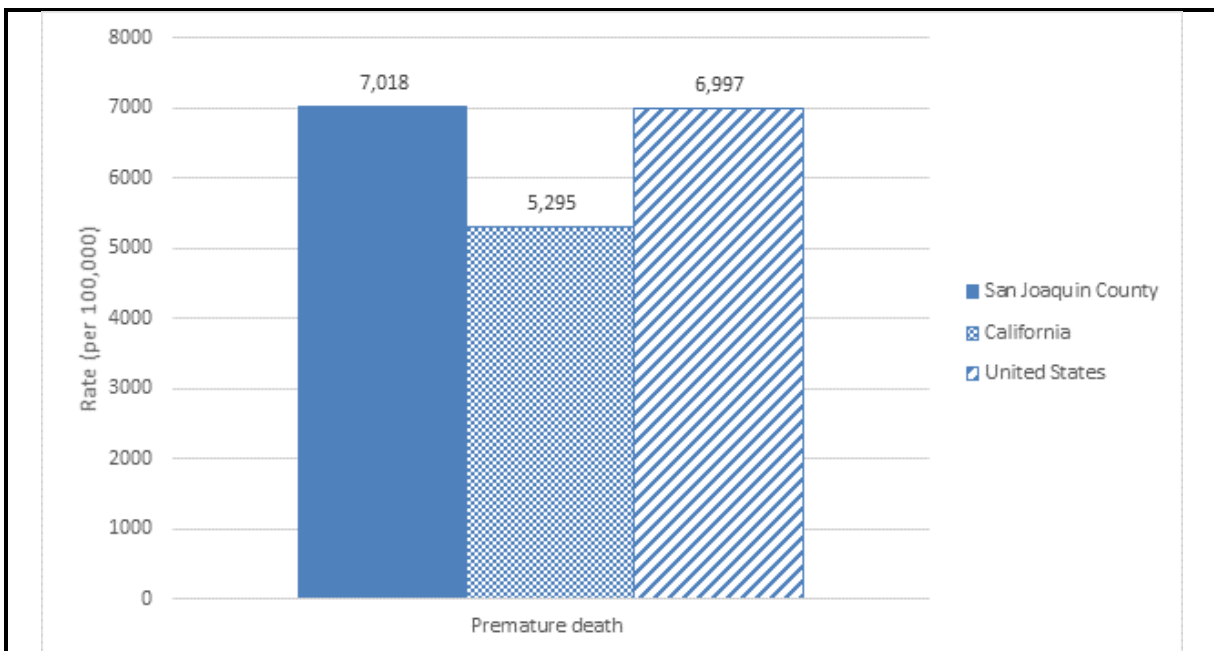
**Figure 3. Obesity and Smoking Prevalence in San Joaquin County Compared with California and the United States, 2014**



Sources: County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2014; California Health Interview Survey, 2014

Note: Due to limited city-level health data, we present data for San Joaquin County, as Stockton comprises 42% of the county.

**Figure 4. Premature Death Rate in San Joaquin County Compared with California and the United States, 2015**



Source: County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2015

Note: Due to limited city-level health data, we present data for San Joaquin County, as Stockton comprises 42% of the county.

## **Revitalizing and Rebuilding a More Equitable Community**

Community volunteers and government officials in Stockton are collaborating to address poverty and revitalize the city's most vulnerable neighborhoods. In 2015, a City Council member and community representatives created the Reinvent South Stockton Coalition (RSSC) with the goal of empowering residents to transform the community's safety, education, housing, job creation, and health.<sup>38</sup> The RSSC is working with 56 stakeholders, including city government, the Stockton United School District, and PolicyLink (an Oakland, California-based research and advocacy organization), to develop a long-term strategy for South Stockton. The coalition is organized into committees based on priorities such as education, health, and housing and safety. It also includes a youth council.<sup>39,40</sup>

## **Grassroots Outreach and Cultivating Community Buy-In**

Following the 2015 North Central Stockton "neighborhood blitz" which was not a transparent process and had mixed results, the Stockton Police Department and code enforcement officials collaborated with RSSC and STAND (Stocktonians Taking Action to Neutralize Drugs), a group of residents that advocates for community policing and affordable housing, to prepare more effectively for a similar community sweep in South Stockton. In summer 2015, the groups used their four outreach workers to go door to door to inform residents about the upcoming blitz and to ease any concerns they might have about the "authorities" coming through. They also posted notices about the effort throughout the target neighborhoods and held a community meeting to enlist residents' support.<sup>41,42,43</sup> After the sweep, RSSC posted an online video that demonstrated the enthusiasm and outcomes of this second neighborhood blitz, including a reported 600 tons of garbage collected from residents' yards and homes.<sup>44</sup> Violent crime decreased by more than 68% while this activity was occurring.<sup>45</sup> Recognizing the importance of buy-in from the local residents, the RSSC housing and safety committee continues to serve as a liaison between city officials implementing clean-up efforts and the residents who live in the area.<sup>44</sup>

RSSC has led a number of grassroots efforts as well, including revitalizing local parks and sponsoring a justice fair to help felons with nonviolent records improve their education, job, and housing opportunities.<sup>44,46</sup> In addition, the group uses its four outreach workers to focus on building trusting relationships with residents, hearing their concerns and connecting them to the appropriate social services and resources.<sup>44</sup>

## **Preventing Crime through Capacity- and Community-Building**

With help from community initiatives, including the neighborhood blitz and capacity- and relationship-building efforts by the local law enforcement, safety is improving. Stockton's crime rate hit a 15-year low in 2015.<sup>47</sup>

In 2012, the Stockton City Council launched the "Marshall Plan," an initiative to reduce crime and increase public safety by strengthening the police department's capacity to prevent and control crime.<sup>48</sup> As part of this plan, the city implemented a ¾-cent sales tax increase in April 2014 to fund the hiring of additional police officers.<sup>49</sup> Stockton's police



department continues to expand and rebuild, growing to 400 officers in 2015, with the goal of reaching 485 by June 2017.<sup>50</sup>

In addition to increasing capacity, the city is working to build relationships and deepen trust between police and residents. The police department credits the drop from 71 homicides in 2012 to 32 homicides in 2013 to city programs like the neighborhood blitzes and Operation Ceasefire, an element of the Marshall Plan.<sup>51,52</sup> Operation Ceasefire is a partnership-based strategy that employs respectful, direct communication with youth and young adults who are identified to be at highest risk of violence. Its primary goal is to reduce shootings, but the city says the initiative has also improved community-police relations.<sup>53,54</sup>

To address traumatic effects of violence on victims of crime, the nonprofit Fathers and Families of San Joaquin opened the Stockton Trauma Recovery Center in June 2015. The center's multilingual staff provide free treatment and therapy for victims and families affected by violent trauma. They also assist trauma survivors to file applications with the state's Victim Compensation Program to help cover medical bills, funeral expenses, personal and home security, wage loss, relocation, and crime scene cleanup. Among the 44 persons seen at the center between July and December 2015, nearly 50% were victims of drive-by shootings.<sup>55</sup>

Despite the city's progress, gang- and gun-related violence remains a major concern. In May 2016, the police arrested 52 people in an operation targeting two violent street gangs believed to be responsible for the year's sharp increase in homicides.<sup>56</sup>

Despite areas of improvement, Stockton's persistent issues of poverty and crime have deep roots and are not easily solved. Addressing just one aspect of the problem, such as increasing the capacity of the police force, is unlikely to solve endemic issues, such as low educational attainment, few employment opportunities, and the insidious influences of gangs and the illegal drug trade. As demonstrated by the Operation Ceasefire initiative, success hinges on the community's involvement and participation in addressing root causes of crime and poverty early on, and elevating the importance of education. Local schools and faith-based organizations in particular might play an important role in shaping social norms and life-affirming cultural values among youth.

## **Continuing to Redefine the Community**

Stockton is a community in flux, working to redefine itself yet facing significant challenges and barriers in its efforts to address decades of residents facing poverty, limited educational and employment opportunities, and violence. Additional surveillance, data, and information gathering will examine how initiatives to revitalize and rebuild this community are impacting the economic and social inequities many Stockton residents face and, in turn, how these affect health and well-being outcomes.

Ongoing questions include the following:

- To what extent have the investments in Stockton's police department shown success in reducing gang activity and the rate of violent crimes? How have community engagement strategies enhanced traditional policing practices?
- How will stakeholders, including those in the RSSC, engage and empower Stockton residents from the most troubled areas to take back their communities from gangs and those that wish to control residents through fear and intimidation?

- Which efforts are showing the greatest success in breaking the cycle of poverty and low educational attainment? Why are these efforts effective, and how are they engaging residents and community-based organizations?
- What impact will the “super commuters,” who spend more hours away from Stockton than at home, have on the city? What approaches can leaders take to build a sense of community with these residents?
- What role are faith-based organizations and schools playing in engaging youth and addressing root causes of crime and poverty?

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