Public Housing, Policing and Crime Reduction

REDUCING CRIME IN PUBLIC HOUSING AREAS WITH COMMUNITY RENEWAL REQUIRES SOCIAL, RATHER THAN PHYSICAL, INTERVENTIONS. INTENSE INTERAGENCY AND WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT APPROACHES AND EMPATHETIC, LOCALLY BASED, HOUSING MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNITY POLICING ARE PARTICULARLY VALUABLE.

KEY POINTS

- The crime reduction strategies in this study fall into the categories of 'social' or 'physical' interventions.

- Social interventions include strategies ranging from minimal crime prevention initiatives to sophisticated community policing strategies, usually supported by other preventative initiatives involving a larger number of agencies.

- Physical interventions include measures to reduce the concentration of public housing dwellings through sales and redevelopment, landscaping and reconfiguring housing layouts.

- There is an association between intensive social interventions, crime reduction, higher neighbourhood cohesion and perceptions by public housing residents about crime.

- Social interventions are associated with reduced crime, and in this study higher crime areas responded most effectively to social strategies rather than physical ones, but not exclusively.

- Physical interventions were not, on their own, associated with crime reduction.

- A mixture of social and physical interventions proved to be most effective in reducing crime and improving residents' perceptions of crime reduction. This mixture includes whole-of-government strategies, intensive inter-agency collaborations, empathetic housing management, 'non-traditional' community policing interventions and attention to urban design.

- Interventions take time to have an effect and therefore the benefits of some interventions, such as reducing the concentration of public housing dwellings, may not yet be apparent given the time-scale of the research.

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CONTEXT

The concentration of disadvantage in many large public housing areas has given rise to a range of problems, in particular crime and harassment experienced by residents. Since the mid-1990s 'community renewal' programs have been developed. At question is the effectiveness of these programs, policing and other crime reduction strategies for these areas. Anecdotal evidence suggests that community renewal programs reduce (or displace) crime, but to date there has been little empirical evidence to support these claims.

This study coincided with the significant implementation of community renewal initiatives and interagency partnerships in the areas studied – New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia. Throughout the nine study areas crime was widespread, recurrent at particular hotspots, and strongly associated with public housing. Crime was evident in adjacent areas of private home ownership, and while some hotspots occurred there too, it was at a conspicuously lower level.

METHOD

In each of the three States, three areas of public housing were selected to include a renewal program involving:

Physical interventions – strategies included public housing upgrades, reducing the concentration of public housing dwellings through sales or redevelopment, street and park improvements and the provision of community centres or other facilities. In one state, one of the three areas was a Radburn superlot in its original urban configuration. The Radburn style entails back-to-front houses with front facing open space and pedestrian lanes at the rear. 'Backyards' face onto cul-de-sac streets. Another area in the same state was a Radburn-reversal area, where the original 'Radburn' housing layout was reversed to conform to standard suburban configurations.

Social interventions – strategies varied from minimal crime prevention initiatives to sophisticated community policing strategies, usually supported by a broad range of preventative initiatives. These initiatives generally occurred with active interagency linkages, giving emphasis to joint management or responsibilities between agencies (memorandums of understanding between housing management and police were at the core). Physical interventions in these areas were low to moderate – generally involving only upgrades to some public housing, some landscaping improvements and limited stock reduction through sales.

Control area – subject to minimal physical and social interventions. Physical interventions included public housing upgrades and sales, some minor landscape improvements and, in two cases, the provision of community and youth centre facilities. Social interventions were limited to some community consultation, lower level crime prevention education and police liaison.

Interviews were held with key housing and police stakeholders in the nine areas to determine the nature of physical and social interventions over the study period. This was complemented by a neighbourhood survey to ascertain levels of neighbourhood cohesion, perceptions of fear and crime, and the experiences of crime of a sample of residents. Although the survey relied on small sample sizes in some of the nine study areas, and there were some difficulties in establishing statistical significance, the survey results appear to confirm findings from the police data analysis.

The researchers analysed mapped crime data over a five-year period, as well as crime context data (looking at surrounding areas) and conducted a walk-through Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) appraisal to identify aspects of environmental design which might encourage crime.

Crime indicators were used to measure crime prevalence to population size in a given area (Crime Experience Indicator or CEI); crime trend experiences at specific hotspots (Hotspot Experience Indicator or HEI); and the degree of change in property and personal hotspot-crime in each area (Crime Reduction Indicator or CRI).

FINDINGS

The mapping process indicated that fear after dark was widespread in the areas studied (and encompassing entire areas in all cases) and was frequently associated with concentrated areas of public housing. There was little sense of public place, and the shopping malls and sports fields were not utilised after dark. During the day, few people used the streets; cars predominated at all times, in particular at night when almost no one walked about. It was also apparent that victimisation appeared to occur equally during the night and day.

Overall, crime trends decreased and hotspot intensity reduced in three of the nine areas studied over the five years. In the other areas crime trends, as measured by the CEI, had increased.

The research highlighted a number of associations between social and physical interventions and crime patterns. However, associations made between interventions, crime and victimisation do not indicate causality, they are indicative of a likely relationship only.

SOCIAL INTERVENTIONS

Social rather than physical interventions were associated with reductions in crime. Two of the three areas with reduced crime were subject to intensive social interventions and broad interagency approaches, as well as empathetic locally-based housing management and community policing. Crime trends decreased over the five-year period (down 4% and 3.5% respectively), CEI trends fell (down 10% and 4%) and hotspot intensity reduced. The one control area in which crime also decreased (and the prevalence of crime, as measured by the CEI, was stable) is located in the State with the strongest whole-of-government approach.

The areas that had intensive social intervention also had varying degrees of physical intervention, ranging from high for one area (which included public housing upgrades, sales and improvements of parks, streets and pathways), to a very low level in the other (street cleanups, improved maintenance response and community gardens).

The neighbourhood survey confirmed these findings. The highest level of community cohesion was found in areas with intensive social interventions, where crime trends had also reduced. The two areas with most crime reduction were the only two areas where a majority of residents rated crime and harassment as 'better' over the last few years.

WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT STRATEGIES

Whole-of-government strategies and intensive inter-agency collaborations created a context for social interventions to flourish. In the Radburn-reversal area there was no evidence of crime reduction, even given the moderate level of agency partnerships with community groups. Conversely, in the other Radburn area – with high social but virtually no physical intervention – crime had reduced over the five-year period.

EMPATHETIC HOUSING MANAGEMENT

Empathetic housing management, such as management through small, locally based client service teams and 'non-traditional' community policing interventions at neighbourhood and individual level seemed effective in reducing crime, especially in conjunction with other strategies.

GEOGRAPHIC DISPERSAL

Neither reducing the concentration of public housing dwellings (tenure mix via asset sales) nor Radburn-reversal were associated with reductions in crime. But benefits may not yet be apparent given the time-scale of the research. Crime reduction was not apparent for those three areas located in the State with the strongest strategy of reducing the concentration of public housing dwellings.

URBAN DESIGN

Urban design parameters of likely significance were lighting and dormancy (lack of activity), both associated with places at night. Public housing is frequently located adjacent to large dark and vacant public places, including school grounds. In all the study areas streets were very poorly illuminated. 'Criminogenic' physical configurations such as these increase opportunities for crimes to take place.

DIFFUSION

A 'diffusion' distribution pattern could be detected in the mapped crime data of all nine study areas. This means that possibly crime is 'flowing' from hotspots in the study areas into 'cooler' zones. From an analysis of the context data (crime in surrounding areas) no inference could be made regarding displacement or halo effects, since no distinct patterns emerged. Areas experiencing predominantly increased crime surround the two areas where crime trends reduced. This further suggests and re-confirms the apparent potency of social intervention strategies in crime reduction.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

There are a number of policy implications for crime reduction in areas of public housing:

1. The effectiveness of social over physical strategies in community renewal programs. Research findings support the effectiveness of whole-of-government, integrated, multi-agency approaches to community renewal and crime reduction.

2. Support for a strong community policing approach, empathetic crime prevention officers interacting with multicultural communities, and a social-control mechanism involving elders in informal liaison with local youths. Hot spot analysis and intelligence-based targeting of problem-generating households supplements these people-oriented approaches.

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3. Importance of general activities to replenish social capital, to enhance individual well being and self-esteem, increase social cohesion and augment residents' sense of responsibility and natural policing.

4. Extensive community consultation and participation in problem identification, development and implementation of strategies.

5. Policies to support community-oriented policing, locally based, empathetic partnerships between crime prevention officers and local residents.

6. The role of systematic monitoring of crime profiles over time, as a form of socio-economic cost-benefit analysis. Monitoring to include evaluative indicators to measure changes in crime rates, including hot spots, neighbourhood cohesion and perceptions. Although complex contextual realities cannot be controlled, coexisting relationships between intervention strategies, their cost, and epidemiological crime patterns can be inferred.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 70111 entitled *Linkages Between Housing, Policing and Other Interventions for Crime and Harassment Reduction in Areas with Public Housing Concentrations.* Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website (www.ahuri.edu.au) by typing the project number into the search function.

The following documents are available:
• Final Report
• Positioning Paper

Or contact the AHURI National Office on +61 3 9660 2300.

Previous work by two of the authors studied spatial patterns of crime using mapped police operational data and victim surveys at micro-urban level in public housing areas, but did not associate this with renewal intervention policy:

Judd, B., Samuels, R., Baldry A. and Zehner, R. (1999) *Neighbourhood Improvement and Community Cohesion in the Waterloo Public Housing Estate,* (unpublished research results) Faculty of the Built Environment, University of New South Wales.

Samuels, R. (2001) 'The Afterdark Paradigm; and Temporal-Spatial Mapping', *6th International CPTED Conf,* Brisbane.

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