

# **Samuels, R. (2004), Inter-Agency Crime Reduction Strategies in Public Housing Concentrations in Australia**

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## **Acknowledgment and Proviso**

This paper is based on research not yet published. It is however appropriate to present some generic findings; specifics (tables, maps, crime-data) will be illustrated in the oral presentation only.<sup>1</sup> In any event, the research and this commentary on it scrupulously avoid mentioning any place-name or associating findings with any identifiable official body. All spatial identifiers have been removed: anonymity is guaranteed. Only the social and spatial policy *principles* – and their consequences in practice - are of interest.

## **Introduction**

During the twentieth century, the 'public housing' urban-design paradigm adopted in industrialised Western nations concentrated disadvantaged populations into large 'estates'. This paper discusses some policy-related findings with regard to crime reduction on nine such estates in three States of Australia.

Historically, these estate-type concentrations housed the poor, but contemporary policy (in Australia at least) has shifted towards prioritising such social housing for the *most* disadvantaged groups (inadvertently disenfranchising the 'merely' poor). Included are the culturally marginalised - indigenous and immigrant groups; the socially marginalised – domestically-abused or substance-abusive individuals, racially disenfranchised populations, the homeless, the mentally-ill (post 'asylum-closure' policy), and of course

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<sup>1</sup>Research funded by The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI); see Judd, Samuels *et al*, 2002 and Samuels, Judd *et al*, 2004/forthcoming. The three Police Agencies providing crime data for the research on which this paper is based, have sanctioned our publishing of papers of this generic and ethical nature.

the elderly - a huge 21<sup>st</sup> century demographic problem for developed and developing nations alike.<sup>2</sup> Thus, volatile mixtures of highly vulnerable groups are accommodated in the least appropriate housing situations: clustered in huge and monolithic agglomerations of depersonalising high-rise apartments, frequently isolated at edge-city locations, or in very low-density, very low community-appropriated dormitory-domains at the outer suburban-edge (in Australia, for instance).

In all cases, the crucial *sense of territory* – of personal and communal responsibility for places, necessary for safe and civilised habitation - is seriously wanting. It should not be surprising that crime and harassment are more prevalent in such places. Addressing these complex issues involves strategic interventions by a wide range of agencies on many fronts simultaneously. This is the contextual framework of the research referred to here.

### **Contemporary Public Housing Paradigms: Developed and Developing Nations**

In most developed nations large public housing estates have declined economically, socially and physically over the last 20-25 years (Stegman, 1998; MacLennan, 1998; Spiller *et al*, 2000). Australian and UK researchers have consistently associated socio-economic disadvantage with higher levels of crime and delinquency, and also higher perceived crime (Devery, 1992; Mirrles-Black *et al*, 1998; *inter alia*). Others have linked crime with vast housing estates in the UK and USA from the 1970s to the present day (see the seminal work of Newman, 1972; Baldwin & Bottoms, 1976; Herbert, 1977, *inter alia*). Recently, Weatherburn *et al* (1999) further supported the notion that public housing estates in Britain, the United States and Australia are frequently plagued by crime problems.

The research reported here definitively illustrates the interrelationship between disadvantaged public housing areas and crime prevalence and experience: a ‘public-hotspot’ spatial association is unequivocally evident. However small the spatial

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<sup>2</sup> 80 million people aged over-80-years projected in China by 2050 (China Internet Information Center)

concentration, the effect is similar: a clustering pattern of recurrent crime<sup>3</sup> coinciding with social housing areas in each of the nine areas evaluated.

In often populous nations in so-called development phases (many no less developed than their Western-industrialised counterparts) rapidly increasing urban populations pose significant problems for planning authorities, and the high-rise/high-density housing paradigm is still widely implemented.<sup>4</sup> It is noteworthy that the negative social affects of such configurations appear to impact differently on people from different cultures.

Westerners now decry such lifestyles, and there is a long history of social discontent and personal malady, well-known and unnecessary to repeat here. Suffice it to say that the blowing up of housing estates in the US and France for instance stand as potent reminders of the lack of fit between user aspirations and these built forms. Presumably, if there were an equivalent rejection or if crime was an issue in Asian versions for instance, social policy and urban design would be reflecting this now. Whatever the situation, there is always some degree of crime; the Singapore Housing and Development Board (HDB) web-site mentions: break-ins (often associated with migrants from the countryside or neighbouring countries), and objects being dropped from the high-rise buildings as two issues of some concern<sup>5</sup> - minor issues in comparison with their Western counterparts nonetheless.

It is feasible, theoretically, to effectively and satisfactorily house large numbers of people in many smaller clusters of lower rise, humane-scale (5 to 7 stories, from observation) medium-density housing based on a perennial 'courtyard-urban square' design principle embodied in a mixed-use, pedestrian-prioritised 'urban village' context. Evidence from earlier urban housing paradigms, still evident and visible today in many European old-city centres, attests to the extraordinary quality of this urban experience. More liveable

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<sup>3</sup> Longitudinal data accessed to evaluate *public realm crime* trends include the common categories: reported crimes 'against the person' such as: assault and robbery and verbal, physical and sexual harassment, and property crimes such as: theft ('break, enter and steal'), car-related crime and vandalism ...but exclude very serious offences (murder, eg). No claim is made that these data are comprehensive, covering all crime. The extent of un-reported crime is well understood (see Samuels 2001, Samuels & Judd, 2002); but the potential of using geocoded data as an explanatory tool has been borne out in this research, albeit commonly reported crime only which is mapped here.

<sup>4</sup> [www.HDBhousing.com](http://www.HDBhousing.com)

<sup>5</sup> HDB/Singapore

environments are hard to find. Importantly, recently, more potentially interactive, community-oriented and humane scale mixed-use developments are being favoured in many countries – diluting the monolithic residential-only character of earlier designs. Included are Hong Kong, Singapore, Shanghai and Beijing (Binder, 2002). A case in point is the Enjili residential district in Beijing – constructed in the early 1990s – housing 7,000 residents in just such a configuration: walk-up apartments, courtyards, neighbourhood clusters, multiple non-residential uses, shady trees.

Currently almost half of Hong Kong's population lives in public housing (a program begun in 1953, after the massive Kowloon fire that displaced tens of thousands of people overnight), and 86% of housing in Singapore is public. The issue is a significant one. In comparison, the mere 5% of public housing provision in *Australia* would seem to pale into insignificance, yet there is surely proportionately more disaffection and criminal experience here, given that this housing is specifically for the disadvantaged, not the general population. In a real sense, the issue here is more critical. Certainly concerned government and community-renewal agencies are taking the issue very seriously, and serious money is being invested in raising community quality of life.

### **Inter-Agency Partnerships**

The primary construct or philosophy on which the contemporary community-renewal approach rests is interrelationship between stakeholders, superseding paternalistic top-down management systems clearly proven to be inadequate. The entire hierarchy of stakeholders needs to be involved, from the top to the bottom. In the UK recently a community renewal paradigm places the emphasis on local strategic partnerships, cooperative solutions involving government and non-government agencies and providing opportunities for community and voluntary groups to take leadership roles (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1995; Taylor, 1998).

In Australia a similar approach is being adopted. Many different multi-agency interventions are being applied in different States. Housing and Police agencies are the two major interventionist players here, although many other agencies are also involved,

in particular where a ‘whole-of-government’ approach is adopted, and engagement can range from the Attorney Generals Department to Local Councils and of course neighbourhood community groups of widely differing character.

### **Research Rationale and Method**

The research grew out of the social capital/social exclusion and environmental criminology movements. Given that intervention strategies had been implemented some years before, it became possible to reflect back – using a mapping technique that locates crime in space (and time). In other words, its utility is its ability to evaluate the relative efficacy of different policies – by spatially mapping crime trends.

Crime data at micro-urban scale was accessed from State Police Services, geo-coded (street address co-ordinated) and mapped (Mapinfo<sup>®</sup> software). From the extensive mapping (of 48,562 incidents over five years) many hotspot locations emerged (places with intensely recurrent crime). These coincided with concentrations of public housing in almost every case. Simultaneously, wide-spread or endemic crime was also revealed, located between these *criminocentric* areas; indeed, very few places were actually crime-free. This endemic spread is hypothesised to be a consequence of ‘diffusion’, a spilling over or erupting from public housing hotspots into ‘cooler’ privately-owned areas.

Due to the very sensitive nature of this information absolute confidentiality was maintained, and all spatial identifiers were removed (replaced with a coding system). In other words, no negative associations with any area or person should result as a consequence of this research. In any event, it is theoretical principles and tactical policies and their empirical evaluation that is the aim of the study, not to characterise any area.

### **Generic Findings**

The research categorised the policies implemented and related them to the crime trend spatial patterns, thus evaluating effectiveness (or ‘efficacy’) – defined as a reduction in crime prevalence over the given period (1998-2002) in a given area.

Interagency strategies had been implemented in all areas to greater or lesser degrees – some with more of a social focus, some spatial. Some (apparently) were more effective than others: overall crime trends clearly fell in two of the nine areas. Deeper analysis based on micro-urban trends at specific places within each area represents the ultimate efficacy indicator *ie* crime trends evident *at hotspots* over the five-year period (representing 16,000 incidents) is a more meaningful measure.

### *Social and Spatial Efficacy*

From the efficacy indicator it was deduced that reductions were occurring in places where, in general, there had been more focus placed on ameliorating social conditions and community relationships, than on the physical-spatial and environmental design aspects – which are nonetheless still important, but proportionately less so.

This is theoretically consistent with the philosophy of social exclusion as a root cause of anti-social attitudes and behaviour. But it is more complex than that. All study areas in this research experienced higher crime prevalence than their State averages, and were similarly disadvantaged socio-economically (income, education, tenure...) and demographically (marginalized...). But, when evaluated at intra-areal level *ie* relative to each other, those areas that experienced a reduction in crime prevalence could not be distinguished by these exclusionary factors. Indeed, if anything, the opposite seemed true, since several highly disadvantaged areas with the most marginalised groups seemed to be responding best to interventions. Analytic interpretation suggests that in these areas there is also an intense focus on engaging deeply with the local community, right down to the interpersonal level. This is a major finding emergent from this research; and is theoretically and practically of most utility to policy makers.

Although physical and spatial design interventions (housing upgrades, public domain amelioration, diluting estate concentrations, and/or ‘Radburn-reversals’...) had taken place in several areas, no consistent relationship with falling crime was evident. Possibly more time is needed for spatial strategies to begin to overcome habituated attitudes and behaviours. Particularly interesting are the two Radburn super-concentrated estates in the

sample: one in the throes of major reversals such as turning houses to face the street while closing rear paths and enclosing rear yards, but still experiencing only rising crime. The other, virtually untouched – with a consistently falling trend. Many factors contribute, to say the least, but at least it was possible to positively associate *intensive* social interventions with falling trends.

### *Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design*

In CPTED-terms all nine areas are very similar: very low density, outer suburban, spatially homogenised, low animation, low mixed-use highly-segregated places – with very high levels of personal territoriality – frequently interspersed with or adjacent to large, dark, intimidating and potentially criminogenic open-spaces – but virtually no urban realm activity and roads that are dark to a quite startling degree. No sense of social conscience, no people presence at night, or sense of place at all. Associated with this is another phenomenon: many cars, mostly old, each dwelling housing several, parked on the front lawns and the nature strips and in driveways, creating a strong presence in the neighbourhood: cars on roads, not people on streets.

These characteristics are inherently ‘non-defensible’ and can be considered as criminogenic: ‘contributing to the chances of a crime occurring’ (Taylor and Harrell, 1996), in the first instance. The point here is that despite this these factors do not distinguish *between* the areas, and *cannot* thus be held accountable for rising or falling crime trends there now. It must be something else.

### *Personal interaction...inclusion*

Given the above empirical arguments, deduced from the apparent relationships between social strategies and falling crime trends and experience, it seems reasonable to assert that the degree of person-to-person interaction is ultimately the crucial catalytic factor in the intervention-reduction equation. Memorandums of understanding between agencies and inter-agency partnerships at the highest level is where these relationships begin, but until strategies are implemented at ground level, and not merely at the so-called ‘community’

level but where people are interacting at an inter-personal, *psychological* level, efficacy will be limited.

## **Conclusion**

The *degree of territorial interaction* appears to be *the* key to crime reduction.

Interestingly, there is little really novel in this deduction; Jane Jacobs (1961) said it all forty years ago, but it is satisfying to be able to re-confirm, empirically, now, this fundamental paradigm.

...‘the public peace...is not kept primarily by the police...[but]...by an intricate, almost unconscious network of voluntary controls among the people themselves’ (:32)

A holistic, whole of government, inter-agency partnership approach includes interaction with community groups and leaders (Osborn and Shaftoe, 1995). When it filters down to the interpersonal, individual, ‘commoner’ level - especially when it involves younger people who inhabit the public realm, community elders, and is implemented via empathetic crime prevention officers and community housing managers, locally born or based where possible – people appear to respond positively, most probably because they feel included.

In theory, it should be possible to generalise these apparently effective strategies – emergent from this study – cross-culturally, to any socially-housed groups.

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