Community development, crime and violence: a case study

Mary Lane and
  Kaylene Henry

ABSTRACT A *community development* project in a Sydney suburb provides an opportunity to explore the potential of community development as a means for '*street crime*' prevention. Violence and crime are seen as social problems associated with social, economic and political disadvantage. A broad programme of social development is undertaken, aimed at increasing educational and recreational opportunities for children and young adults, and at promoting inclusion and the capacity of local people to deal with social problems in their area. Outcomes suggest that a combination of social projects, modifications to the built environment and community development processes, can be an effective means for creating safer, more neighbourly places, as well as achieving *social justice* outcomes for disadvantaged people.

Introduction

In this paper we explore the potential of community development to contribute to the prevention of crime and violence. In doing so, we note similarities between many of the purposes, values, and strategies of community development and those of certain crime prevention approaches. We refer, particularly, to developmental and socio-cultural approaches which link the incidence and fear of crime and violence, with inequality, social exclusion and lack of opportunity for children and young people to develop their potential (King, 1989; Weatherburn, 1992; Farrington, 1994; Hope, 1997; Weatherburn and Lind, 1998).

Although a contested concept, community development is characteristically described as a 'grass-roots', enabling intervention which seeks through participatory processes to redress inequality and exclusion (Henderson, Jones and Thomas, 1980; Fordham, 1993; Henry and Lane, 1993; Checkoway, 1995; Ife, 1995; Lane, 1999). The work generally takes place with marginalized groups, viewed as socio-economically, culturally, or politically disadvantaged.

It is the explicit commitment to tackling inequality, disadvantage and exclusion which we emphasize in this paper, concerned as we are to draw

some connections between community development interventions, the prevention and reduction of crime and violence, and social justice outcomes. A community development project in a Sydney suburb serves to illuminate connections and the focus is on what is commonly referred to as 'street crime' – bashings, robbery, intimidation, vandalism, household theft. We acknowledge however, this is a limited view of 'crime' and does not include domestic violence, white collar and corporate crime, all of which are widespread.

Connections between disadvantage and crime victimization are well documented. In low income urban communities such as public housing estates, fear of crime and the risk of being a victim are much higher than in other types of neighbourhoods (Sarre, 1994; Bright, 1997; Murie, 1997; Pitts and Hope, 1997). The problem is compounded by poverty; residents lacking the material resources to protect themselves. Such was the case in the project we explore.

Project Context

The geographical base for the Residents in Safer Environments (RISE) project was a public housing estate in the Fairfield Local Government Area, Sydney. Built in 1981 on a site originally occupied by about 400 people in 89 single standing residences, the estate was a medium density development with 253 dwellings and around 1200 people with a population which included large numbers of children, adolescents and unemployed young single adults. By the late 1980's, there were over 60 language groups in the estate and 57% of the population were from non-English speaking backgrounds. Many were refugees from south-east Asia, the middle east, Europe and South America (Lane, 1990; Lane, 1999).

Until 1991, funding for a generalist community worker on the estate and in the surrounding area had been limited and sporadic, leading to a turnover of workers and few resources to deal with identified problems. Consequently, whilst there had been some positive changes associated with community development, youth work and community artswork (Lane, 1988; Cazalet and Lane, 1988; Lane, 1990; Henry, 1990; Lane, 1991) many social problems continued. These included unemployment, early school leaving, inadequate recreational opportunities for children and youth, and difficulties with the English language and with obtaining information about rights and services (Mahtani, 1988).

Street crime and violence had been a concern for residents ever since the very first people moved into the estate (Vasta, 1983) and consequently, participation in community activities was adversely affected by the reality and fear of violence. The disrepair of the built environment, overflowing garbage bins and the presence of fierce dogs, compounded fear, giving an impression of social disorderliness (Richards, 1990; cf. Willemse, 1994; Grabosky, 1995).

In 1990, Fairfield City Council sponsored the Safer Neighbourhood Project to research and promote crime prevention in the local government area. The researcher identified one of the 'trouble spots' as the estate discussed above, commenting that it 'appeared to be a community that greatly needed a crime prevention program ... a very demoralized and poorly resourced community' (Fairfield City Council, 1991, 18).

The research added weight to the arguments of residents and a local community development agency, Fairfield Community Resource Centre (FCRC), for a full time community development worker for the estate. FCRC gained funding from the state Department of Planning and the worker commenced at the beginning of 1991. His first priorities were to establish contact with residents and encourage their participation in a broad programme of community development aimed at improving the social and material conditions of existence.

At much the same time, another major intervention commenced – extensive physical upgrading of the estate. Faced with huge maintenance costs resulting from vandalism, break and enters and trashing of vacant properties, the Department of Housing had at last recognized that problems in the estate required more than minor, ad hoc modifications to properties. Upgrading sought to open up the estate, and increase community surveillance and tenant satisfaction with homes and 'place'. Strategies included closing alleyways, enlarging private space around homes, and re-designing homes to face outwards towards public streets rather than inwards towards the estate. We see here parallels with the ideas of Jacobs (1962) and Newman (1972), who spelt out theories of crime prevention though urban design.

Two major interventions were thus introduced – full time community development work and radical structural changes to the environment. A third intervention followed . . .

Residents in Safer Environments: the RISE project

A year after the community development worker commenced, the National Roads and Motorists Association (NRMA) stated their interest in funding a crime prevention project in the Fairfield Local Government Area (a high crime area according to their home and car insurance claims and police data). The NRMA had previously sponsored Neighbourhood Watch in NSW, but wanted to test a new approach to community crime prevention.

The public housing estate emerged as a favoured location for the pilot project for several reasons: previous research identified it as an extremely vulnerable neighbourhood subject to crime and social problems; a well respected and capable community development worker was based there; and he recognized financial resources were needed to address the violence and crime concerns of residents.

Negotiations between the NRMA, the worker, and his employer (FCRC) set terms for the RISE project which aimed to reduce street violence, vandalism and theft. Community development would be the means for tackling immediate problems, as well as opening the way for longer term transformation by addressing the conditions associated with crime and violence. The RISE project would not be separate from the broad programme of social development that the worker and residents were already undertaking. And, the three years of generous funding offered by the NRMA would be spent on activities identified by residents through community development processes.

There is strong support, in Australia and internationally, for holistic, social development approaches to crime prevention. Sutton (1997, 20) refers to a review of Australian projects by Coventry et al (1992) who note that a focus on crime prevention, rather than social development and social justice, can deflect attention from 'the real problems', such as lack of access to employment and adequate housing. In his discussion of disadvantaged communities and multiple deprivation in OECD countries, Fordham (1993) supports an integrated, multi-objective response, arguing there is substantial evidence 'that single-objective programmes, whether to do with education, crime, housing, or economic development, by themselves cannot work' (p. 301).

Project implementation

From the outset, the worker sought residents' views about directions for RISE, talking with residents he knew through existing networks, and doing a wider, random doorknock survey. The survey was designed to promote discussion and encourage ownership of the project by residents. Despite difficulties of language and fear, about 70 residents were surveyed with children and young people deliberately included as they were seen as important stakeholders.

The survey gave clear direction to the project. It overwhelmingly found that theft, vandalism and fear of violence were major issues for residents. Responses did not provide evidence of an association between particular ethnic groups and being an offender or victim – respondents took a broad view, prioritizing activities for young people and those that brought the community together as areas for positive intervention.

A planning day, where residents discussed survey results and identified potential projects, was followed by a launch of RISE – a community event with food and entertainment, allowing priorities and planned projects to be promoted to a broader 'community'.

Two main groups of projects were implemented: to address the needs of youth and children, and to increase resources and networks in the wider community. Programmes for young people aimed to build self esteem, encourage participation in education, increase employment opportunities,

and provide positive recreational outlets. They included holiday and after school activities, camps, training and tutoring programmes, and sponsorship of local sporting teams. Emphasis in all these activities was inclusion: to bring young people into the life of the estate and to increase their opportunities for broader social and economic participation.

Community resources and networks were built through activities such as playgroups, women's groups, English classes, sewing classes, craft groups, market days, and public parties and celebrations. Whilst seeking inclusion, projects also emphasized the cultural diversity of the area and promoted respect for difference. It was believed that an appreciation of diversity would reduce the isolation, marginalization and violence which is associated with fear of 'the other'.

Broad participation was an ongoing and crucial feature of RISE. Fundamental, was the ability for people to participate at the level at which they were comfortable – a critical issue in an area with high non-English speaking background and youth populations, and long history of resident disempowerment. As well as an annual evaluation, and planning meetings, a core group of residents met regularly with the worker and other project staff to oversee the day by day running of RISE; others attended meetings to discuss particular aspects of the project. Many people chose to participate simply by attending a RISE activity. Most importantly, resident participation was maintained through the worker's day by day community development work – contacting people, consulting with them, encouraging them, and sharing information.

Project impact

Difficulties with 'measurement'

One might assume that 'measuring' impact could best be done by analyzing crime statistics. There are, however, a multitude of problems with this approach, including under-reporting, and logistical problems with the way data is collected, stored and analyzed (Norton, 1991a; Weatherburn, 1992).

We experienced such difficulties when we sought to use police statistics as part of our assessment of impact. It was the view of a senior local policeman that violence and crime had dropped in the estate during the time of the project (Christley and Lane, 1995). We were however, unable to back up this claim with comparative figures as there had been changes in the ways that police calls were recorded.

Difficulties were also encountered when trying to access statistics from other sources. Two years into the project, an NRMA representative claimed that their statistics indicated household and car theft in the area had declined, 'because we've put a lot of work into it. . .community liaison work' (Rush, 1995, 10;32). No statistics were provided to allow exploration of these claims.

The usefulness of statistics is further challenged by the argument that it is the public's perception of the crime problem and the public's fear of crime which has the most significant impact on the quality of life of individuals, families and 'communities' (Grabosky, 1995, 1; Norton, 1991b, 2–3). It is fear of crime, rather than crime rates, which should, then, be the focus for measurement of change.

Taking up this argument, we now turn to some qualitative sources of evidence for further insight into the project's impact.

Sources of evidence

In 1991, Norton undertook an extensive study to measure fear of crime, perceptions of the local crime problem, and victimization in the suburb which included the project area (Norton, 1991b). His study gathered responses from 180 randomly chosen residents representing a diversity of language groups, 99 of whom lived in the public housing estate where RISE was later to be based. Norton's study provides a solid starting point for any assessment of changes during the time of the RISE project.

One source of evidence comes from the extensive documentation of residents and paid workers views of community development on the estate, which include reflections about the impact of RISE (Christley and Lane, 1992/3/4; Lane and Vinson, 1994; Christley and Lane, 1996).

A second source of evidence is the evaluation commissioned by the NRMA and undertaken by Rush and Partners two years after RISE began. The Rush report (1995) drew on 20 in-depth interviews, and a survery of 90 residents from the estate, with surveys in English and other community languages. The interviewing staff were residents and used their local knowledge to network within the estate: some interviewed door-to-door; others followed networks of speakers of a particular language.

A third source is 'Villawood Infront' (1995), a project of the Department of Housing and the University of Technology Sydney, to provide a strategic plan for the estate. The report draws on interviews in 1995 with 'individuals and groups identified as having an interest in the estate' – the Department of Housing, residents, service providers and local government (p. 18).

Aspects of change

(i) Perception of Crime: The Norton study in 1991, found that 66.7% of estate respondents evaluated the local crime problem as quite serious or very serious (Norton, 1991b, 9). In 1994, participants in the Rush survey were asked what they disliked about the neighbourhood. Just over 15% said 'nothing', and only 39% named crime/break-ins (Rush, 1995, 44). Nearly two thirds (62%) said that during the last year or so, the neighbourhood had become a 'nicer' place to live (Rush, 1995, 45). The 'Villawood Infront'

report (1995) stated: 'Residents put forward generally favourable comments about the estate. Most are very happy living there and come across few problems' (p. 18). It compared its findings to Norton's, and stated: 'Interviews with other service providers including Police, Department of Community Services, local schools, Health and Ambulance indicate that the problems on the estate have been considerably reduced' (p. 19). Residents interviewed for the Rush report agreed:

> 'There was a lot of thieving going on and now it's cut right back.' (p. 9)

> 'Since the project started the area has become safer, there are fewer break-ins and places being trashed' (p. 23)

> 'There's a noticeable change. People aren't so worried about personal safety' (p. 23).

Evidence suggests a widespread perception that street violence and crime had dropped during the time of the project and that consequently the area was a safer, more 'neighbourly' place to live.

(ii) Levels of Fear: In 1991, 52.5% of the estate respondents in Norton's survey, indicated that the local crime problem was serious enough to seek a move from the area (Norton, 1991b, 9). In contrast, 82% of Rush respondents planned to stay on the estate, and none of the 13% hoping to move, named crime as their motivation (1995, pp. 41–42). Rush quotes a representative of the Department of Housing as saying, 'they are staying (in the area) whereas I understand there used to be a very high turnover' (p. 24). This is consistent with the findings of the 'Villawood Infront' report, which noted that statistical data about tenancy turnover rate did not support a negative community perception of the estate (1995, p. 25).

In Norton's study, 52.5% of estate respondents indicated they would be very worried about burglary if leaving their house for one hour or less (1991b, 8). Norton noted many residents were virtually housebound; in some families, members even took separate holidays to ensure their home was never unattended (p. 12). In contrast, Rush found that of their 90 respondents, just over two thirds had been to an activity or function on the estate in the past year; some being ongoing commitments, others all-day events (1995, p. 47). By 1994, the community development worker was also able to identify many changes in resident behaviour, including increased levels of participation in decision making about local projects and increased use of the neighbourhood centre and other public spaces such as the park – the latter, particularly by families with young children (Christley, 1995). There is a strong argument that increased communal activity contributes to a reduction in fear through the provision of 'natural' surveillance and the social representation of greater security (James, 1997, 44; Hughes, 1998, 151).

According to Grabosky (1995, 3), 'lack of neighbourhood cohesion, as represented by the feeling that neighbours tend not to help each other, is an

important factor associated with fear of crime. The presence of sociable neighbours can help reduce fear.' In 1991, Norton found that 26.8% of estate respondents did not know and trust a neighbour they could call on for assistance (1991b, p. 85). In 1994, 93% of Rush survey respondents could call a neighbour for help in an emergency, and 83% could enjoy a social cup of tea with a neighbour (p. 46). When asked to name some 'nice' things about the neighbourhood, 71% named 'friendly caring neighbours/caring friendly people'. This was the reply most frequently given to this question (p. 43).

Reduced tenant turnover, increased participation in public life, and increased neighbourliness, suggest that between 1991 and 1994, fear of crime had been reduced.

(iii) Quality of Life: Reductions in fear, along with increases in services, activities and opportunities to participate meaningfully in the life of the estate, had positive results for the quality of individual's lives. The following words from a resident capture the point: 'When I think about [the area] and how I feel about it now, it's changed a lot. I like the place now. My whole attitude's changed. It's not so bad. I've got to know people and involved in other things' (in Christley and Lane, 1996, p. 87).

Just as significantly, there is widespread evidence that there was an increase in the level of social cohesion on the estate. Resident comments in Rush (1995) and Lane and Vinson (1994), reflect an increased sense of belonging, an appreciation of diversity and an attitude of inclusion toward others. Rush states that a significant number of respondents said the area was changing for the better in that residents were mixing more and there was a better acceptance of each other (p. 8). A typical comment notes 'people coming together from different walks of life, different nationalities, making friends and staying friends' (p. 19). The 'Villawood Infront' report, when comparing its findings to those of Norton's (1991b), also notes a far more positive sense of community on the estate (1995, p. 19).

Associated with this increased social cohesion, was a belief that change was both possible, and within resident control. In 1991, Norton found that respondents looked to the police and justice system to remedy the crime problem, even though most respondents identified the causes of crime as social – drug and alcohol abuse and unemployment, particularly amongst young people (1991b, pp. 72–74). In contrast, comments in the Rush report reflect a community confident of taking successful action themselves to reduce crime (pp. 20, 32).

On the 'quality of life' factor, there is substantial evidence of positive change during the life of the project.

Links between interventions and outcomes

Whilst it is possible to show that during four years of community development work there were demonstrable changes in the area of intervention, a

harder task is to link identified outcomes with specific interventions. To what might the perceived and tangible changes be attributed?

This is a difficult question facing broad-aimed, multi-strategy projects. As noted earlier, social problems are inter-dependent and require integrated, multi-objective, multi-strategy responses (Fordham, 1993). It is, then, extremely difficult to clearly identify the effects of particular strategies. In the work under discussion, for instance, it is questionable whether it is possible to separate out the effects – in terms of reductions in crime and violence – of RISE interventions (increased services and activities), design changes to the estate, and community development processes, as these three interventions were integrated and occurred concurrently (cf. James 1997, p. 53).

It could well be that it is this very *combination* which was essential for achieving change. That is, the perceived and apparent reduction in violence and crime in the area were due to a combination and integration of strategies – money for specific, locality-based social projects; changes to the physical environment which created 'defensible spaces' along with increased use of public areas; and skilled, broadly based, community development which brought resources and strategies together to achieve desired outcomes. We see here an integration of situational, developmental and socio-cultural approaches to the prevention of violence and crime – modifying physical environments; providing opportunities for young children and youth; addressing underlying social problems and injustices.

It seems reasonable to argue then, that it is this combination of *resourced and skilled* community development with careful planning of built environments which can provide a good recipe for tackling neighbourhood violence and crime. Arguing for the effectiveness of a mixture of approaches is not new (Sutton, 1994, 218). What we are emphasising as well, though, is the *means* – that is, the potential of community development as a means for achieving that effective mix, and for achieving it in a way which is consistent with social justice outcomes for disadvantaged groups.

The authors are employed at the University of Sydney.
Address for correspondence: Mary Lane, Department of Social Work, Social Policy and Sociology, The University of Sydney, RC Mills Building, A26, NSW 2006, Australia.

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