Neighbourhood security and urban change

Understanding how crime, disorder, fear of crime and the responses to these problems affect neighbourhood perceptions of safety and security is central to transforming neighbourhoods. This study, by Martin Innes and Vanessa Jones of the University of Surrey, establishes an innovative framework for understanding what factors affect neighbourhood security and insecurity and how these influence the way urban neighbourhoods change. The research shows that:

- Peoples' perceptions and beliefs about disorder and crime are as important risk factors for neighbourhood decline as actual crime and disorder rates. If people perceive an area to be declining then they are likely to act accordingly. Managing people's impressions of their neighbourhood, including what they see and feel when they are in public spaces, is a vital component of transforming neighbourhoods.

- Certain types of crime and disorder have a particularly potent impact upon local perceptions of neighbourhood security. They alter how people think, feel or act because they are interpreted as indicators of the local level of safety.

- Rather than increasing feelings of security or safety, actions taken by the police and other agencies can amplify the problems people perceive.

- However, policing can also be important in creating the conditions in which communities are sufficiently confident and competent to deal with some crime and disorder problems themselves.

- Interventions carefully tailored to the local problems which people perceive to be risks to their security are more likely to promote neighbourhood security than are more generic approaches.

- In most neighbourhoods interventions that foster resilience and stimulate recovery at the neighbourhood level are more likely to improve quality of life than efforts that target 'problem' individuals.

- Areas with weak or inadequate levels of resilience, and where certain types of crime and disorder are becoming more pronounced, are particularly at risk of decline.

- Recovery is most likely to progress in areas where several key features are all present: adequate levels of resilience; a combination of behavioural and environmental 'control signals'; connections between sources of formal and informal social control; and the presence of key local figures who can reinforce and build on initial improvements.

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Background

This study aims to increase our understanding of how crime and disorder, fear of crime, and attempts to control unsocial behaviour affect neighbourhood perceptions of safety and security, so that this understanding can inform ways of transforming neighbourhoods.

The study used the following definitions:

- **Neighbourhood security**: when any actual or perceived local risks to an individual or group's safety are at tolerable levels.

- **Neighbourhood insecurity**: when people living or working in an area perceive themselves to be vulnerable to particular risks or threats which have a negative impact on how safe they are or feel.

The study is based on data from interviews drawn from four of the 16 trial sites for the National Reassurance Policing Programme that ran throughout England between April 2003 and March 2005.

Factors behind risk, resilience and recovery

From analysing the interviews, the researchers developed the '3Rs framework' of **risk, resilience and recovery factors**:

Risk factors
These are problems or conditions that generate insecurity and increase the likelihood of an area entering a process of decay and decline. The interviews show that:

- Perceptions and beliefs about disorder and crime may be as important as actual crime and disorder rates in generating neighbourhood decline. If people perceive an area to be declining then they are likely to act accordingly.

  "I'm nervous about going out when it's getting near evening, and starting to get dark or whatever, because there is a lot of people what take drugs on the estate, there's a lot of teenage children in a group that fuel each other, so I'm worried about getting mugged or just generally being followed, it's a nervous place to be to be honest…" (Interviewee, Blackpool)

- Certain types of crime and disorder have a particularly potent impact upon local perceptions of neighbourhood security, frequently functioning as neighbourhood level risk factors. These 'signal crimes' alter how people think, feel or act in relation to their security because they are interpreted as indices of the level of safety afforded by a particular area. They may include persistent vandalism (giving rise to feelings of powerlessness), high levels of graffiti (creating tension around gangs and notions of territory), or violent muggings.

  "That's another problem we have, graffiti, but down in this area here, it's on the walls, whites keep out … They have it up here, Pakis keep out." (Interviewee, Oldham)

- Rather than increasing security, actions by the police and other agencies often amplify the problems people perceive.

Resilience factors
These factors enable some places to withstand and mitigate the risks and threats to which they are exposed. The analysis suggests that:

- A neighbourhood's resilience reflects the distribution of economic and social capital within it.

- Resilience is determined by how well groups of people come together around a shared goal, such as improving feelings of safety, and the extent to which they achieve these goals ('collective efficacy').

- Such collective efficacy results from the degree of social cohesion in an area combined with the capacity of local people to engage in informal social control mechanisms, such as challenging disorderly behaviour.

  "I think it's the whole atmosphere living in the Glodwick. Everyone knows everyone, so you're not a stranger in your own town. And you just feel so safe, just in your own street and your own area." (Interviewee, Oldham)

- Analysis of data from Colville in London suggests that, under certain conditions, women's social networks can operate as an important source of collective efficacy and informal social control.

- Data from St Mary's ward in Oldham shows that levels of collective efficacy and neighbourhood security can differ markedly between two separate ethnic communities living in close proximity to each other, even though their economic and demographic characteristics are similar.

Recovery factors

These promote and propagate enhanced security and so contribute to an overall material improvement in a neighbourhood's situation. Processes of neighbourhood recovery have been studied less than processes of decline. However, a detailed case study shows that policing, if undertaken in collaboration with communities, can contribute to inducing recovery in an area.

■ Policing can help trigger recovery by providing a basic level of neighbourhood security that creates the conditions in which communities themselves can develop better informal social controls.

  "I think it's brilliant, yeah, because I do think it's actually bringing the community together now. I mean before it was all disarray, there was no order and you just, you sort of walked about, kept your head down and that were it. You got on with it, you know, but now it's different." (Interviewee, Blackpool)

■ Giving neighbourhood communities a voice, working with them to produce solutions and establishing 'control signals' are all important in enabling recovery. Control signals include environmental measures, such as well-maintained public spaces, and types of behaviour, such as a mix of people feeling comfortable enough to use public parks.

■ Taken together these form a linked process of change: control signals by police or others influence the behaviour or beliefs of other key local figures, thereby improving the overall local capacity to regulate troublesome behaviours.

■ Enhanced neighbourhood security can only achieve so much; in order for wider improvements to become established more structural changes will be required.

The importance of informal social control

There are two interlinked ways of addressing issues of risk, resilience and recovery in neighbourhoods:

■ Reducing the types of crime and disorder that signal risk, vulnerability and threat to people;

■ Establishing control signals that persuade people that protective social control is at work in the neighbourhood.

In regulating troublesome or problematic behaviour, 'control signals' positively influence perceptions about the ability to protect and defend social order. They play a part in stimulating a linked sequence of events leading to informal community control being strengthened and emboldened. As such, the connections between the provision of formal and informal social control at the neighbourhood level are crucial. The provision of Neighbourhood Policing and other related initiatives has the greatest and most sustainable impact when it augments a community's informal social control resources. Concentrating only on measures managed by police can be misleading. The police do not guarantee neighbourhood order and security. They can intervene when the social order that is ordinarily maintained by the norms, rules and conventions of everyday interactions in neighbourhoods has been breached or threatened. But ultimately, formal social control can only ever be part of the solution, rather than the whole solution.

Ways of improving urban communities

Identifying the different risk, resilience and recovery factors suggests that there is no single way of improving neighbourhood security. In some places, acting in support of neighbourhood security may require targeting those 'signal' crimes and forms of disorder that increase risk by destabilising the security of residents. In a different area, it may be more effective for the authorities to try and bolster the resilience that is already present in local neighbourhood networks. In other areas the aim may be to stimulate recovery; under such conditions, it may be necessary to establish a basic level of neighbourhood security before investing significant sums of regeneration funding or undertaking other social policy initiatives. Without adequate levels of neighbourhood security, the likelihood of transforming the prospects of these places through such mechanisms is significantly reduced.

Conclusion

Drawing on the development and application of the 3Rs framework, the researchers conclude that:

■ Certain types of crime and disorder place a neighbourhood where levels of resilience are inadequate or weak at particular risk of decline.

■ Recovery is most likely to succeed in areas where the following key features are all present: adequate levels of resilience; control signals (environmental and behavioural); connections between sources of formal and informal social control; key local figures who can reinforce and amplify initial improvements.

Typically, current intervention programmes in this field tend to subject all participating areas to fairly similar treatments in an effort to manufacture fairly common outcomes. This research suggests, however, that the safety and security needs of individual urban neighbourhoods may be different and thus ways for generating improvements may also need to vary.

The researchers conclude that the starting point for any programme should be establishing what the needs are in each area (reducing the risk factors; promoting resilience; or stimulating recovery) and then tailoring interventions to local conditions. Although initially more complex, this may significantly reduce the probability of interventions failing; currently this often happens because the intervention programme simply was not suited to the specifics of a local situation.

The '3Rs framework' of risk, resilience and recovery also constitutes a markedly different approach to the Government's Respect agenda. The Respect programme focuses efforts upon problematic individuals predicted to have persistent high-rate offending careers that harm the quality of life in some neighbourhoods. However, additional measures will also be required to address the conduct of other individuals who are involved in causing problems. The intensive, targeted interventions under the Respect programme may affect issues in a small number of acute problem neighbourhoods but the financial and human resource requirements mean they cannot operate on a large scale. Consequently, in terms of tackling the lower-level chronic problems of crime and anti-social behaviour to be found in many neighbourhoods, promoting community resilience and manufacturing recovery may be more practicable and sustainable solutions.

About the project

The research was conducted by Martin Innes and Vanessa Jones of the University of Surrey. It was based upon data originally collected in four of the 16 wards involved in the National Reassurance Policing Programme (NRPP). The wards are:

■ Brunswick ward in Blackpool, Lancashire;

■ Colville ward in the Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, London;

■ Falconwood and Welling ward, in the Borough of Bexley, London;

■ St Mary's ward in Oldham, Greater Manchester.

The project is based upon a secondary analysis of data originally collected as part of the NRPP. It is based upon data from two key sources:

■ In-depth qualitative interviews with people living and working in the research sites. The questions focused on obtaining detailed accounts from the respondents about their views of the local area and its issues.

■ A telephone survey conducted with approximately 300 residents in each ward. The structured questions focused upon gauging levels of fear crime and attitudes to policing alongside other related topics.

Further details on NRPP are available at www.reassurancepolicing.co.uk.

For more details

Further information about these findings is available from Martin Innes and Vanessa Jones of the University of Surrey, email M.Innes@surrey.ac.uk or Tel: 01483 686979.

The full report, **Neighbourhood security and urban change: Risk, resilience and recovery** by Martin Innes and Vanessa Jones, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

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