

BLOCKING

Fear of crime has been found to be the single most powerful predictor of neighborhood dissatisfaction among urban dwellers. Indeed, a recent *New York Times* poll of New York City residents indicated that crime is mentioned three times more often than its closest rival, housing, as that city's most important problem.

Yet fear of crime may have less to do with actual rates of victimization than with residents' perceptions of social control in their community. This social control may be exercised both informally by neighbors and formally by block associations and other voluntary organizations, as well as by police. In addition, crime is perceived as being inextricably tangled with a network of community problems, many having only indirect relationships to the problems addressed by traditional crime control approaches. Despite this evidence, the link between crime and citizen efforts to regain a sense of community has generally been ignored.

EXISTING RESEARCH

Within victimization research, a great deal of attention has been paid to individual reactions to: (1) neighborhood conditions, such as crime rate and crime-associated cues in the physical environment, (2) psychological factors, such as high levels of fear, and (3) demographic characteristics which involve the vulnerability of certain residents, such as women or the elderly. Unfortunately, most of this research has shed more light on passive and debilitating personal consequences of crime and victimization (e.g., avoidance behavior) than on active, organized, and efficacious self-protection.

It is the latter "public-minded" response to which Emile Durkheim referred in suggesting that crime unites some communities against the violation of accepted norms. Other communities may, in contrast, react with "private-minded" fear and isolation. The implication of this for criminal justice policy, research, and practice is that we need a better understanding of why residents get involved or do not get involved--in their community, and what the crime-related impact of that involvement is.

Even when a community perspective is taken, however, the residential block level of analysis is usually ignored in favor of the neighborhood or, when considering crime data, the precinct or city level. There are at least two important reasons why the block (defined as the dwellings fronting on a single street between two cross streets) is a preferable unit to study. First, its boundaries are less ambiguous to local inhabitants and more easily defined for research purposes than are neighborhood boundaries. Second, blocks are more culturally homogeneous than neighborhoods or police precincts, and residents are more likely to know and share the same concerns with people from their own block. This last characteristic of blocks provides them with greater meaning as a social unit and is especially important for studying reactions to a problem such as street crime which strikes so "close to home."

CRIME

WITH BLOCK ASSOCIATIONS

By Douglas D. Perkins
with David M. Chavis, Paul Florin,
Richard C. Rich,
and Abraham Wandersman

When compared with other types of decentralized political or service organizations in urban communities, the block association offers further advantages, both to research and to intervention. Research by Douglas Yates, for example, has found that block associations generally have a greater influence on the quality of life than do other "mediating structures" because they tend to be task oriented, flexible, and self-limiting--they tend to take on only those activities for which the needed skills and resources are readily available. Furthermore, the small scale of block associations and the "immediacy" of their problems often

more effective informal social control.

(3) Block associations often work to improve the block's physical environment. This can further increase residents' real and felt safety.

COMMUNITY CRIME PREVENTION

Traditional citizen participation in crime prevention has included citizen patrols, "block watch" programs, property identification, youth programs, and escort services for women and the elderly. These programs have generally been found to reduce residents' fear of crime and, in many cases, to actually lower local street crime and apparent signs of community disorder. They have been most successful where the civilians have worked in concert with local police.

It has also become clear, however, that the effects of groups which are exclusively oriented toward crime prevention tend to be short-lived, and that group leaders have difficulty eliciting and maintaining broad participation. In addition, the success of such groups tends to be closely related to socioeconomic characteristics of the community. It has been clearly demonstrated that poor communities require much more than the short-term, crime-specific solutions offered by typical community crime prevention activities.

For these reasons, ongoing, multi-purpose block associations may hold greater long-term promise for reducing crime and disorder in urban neighborhoods. Such organizations not only encourage greater and often more reliable citizen participation in formal anticrime activities, they also keep residents better informed about crime and other block problems. In addition they can increase residents' neighborhood behavior and their psychological "sense of community." These effects, in turn, may help prevent crime and disorder and reduce fear on the block.



provide greater consensus and make changes at the block level more noticeable to residents, and consequently results in greater participation.

For these reasons, block associations may provide one of the most promising means to overcome the obstacles to collective action against urban crime and a wide range of other community problems.

THREE ROLES FOR BLOCK ASSOCIATIONS

Community organization is thought to affect crime and fear of crime in three important ways:

(1) Organized blocks are more likely to engage directly in formal community crime prevention activities.

(2) Block associations develop the social environment of the block through greater contact and cohesion among neighbors. This, in turn, leads to

Douglas D. Perkins is a doctoral candidate in Community Psychology at New York University and a research associate with the Citizen's Committee for New York City. Drs. Chavis, Florin, Rich, and Wandersman are the senior investigators of the Block Booster Project.

INFORMAL SOCIAL CONTROL

Key to understanding the role of community organization in crime prevention is the concept of informal social control--the everyday regulation of community norms, public behaviors, and physical conditions of the neighborhood by community residents themselves. Low informal social control has been empirically linked to increased resident turnover and flight, loss of local commerce, deterioration of the physical environment, and a rising crime rate. The basic argument advanced by advocates of informal social control is that where the social environment of a community is closely regulated, residents are more likely to develop a vested interest in the community and have confidence in its future--two vital conditions for effective crime prevention.

Community organization directly encourages greater social contact, particularly in public areas of the block, which may reduce fear and elicit a willingness to "get involved" in the fight against crime. This sort of self-perpetuating cycle of neighbors vigilantly watching out for community interests, reducing fear, and encouraging greater participation and social contact results in more cohesion and more vigilance within the community. For these reasons, informal social control becomes a powerful approach to crime control.

There is, at least potentially, a dark and destructive side of informal social control and formal community crime prevention which must not be overlooked, however. Our history is replete with examples of groups of citizens banding together to fight a perceived external threat to the community--whether in the person of criminals or merely "undesirables"--and taking the law into their own hands, often with violent and unjust consequences. Today, the vast majority of citizens who are formally or informally engaged in crime control efforts operate well within the law. Even so, they must always guard against vigilantism, an extremely

characteristic of the architectural environment that are even more directly related to a criminal's ability to strike. A residential area with adequate lighting, surveillance opportunities, and barriers to entry, for example, is said to have "defensible space." Along with more permanent features, such as building size and type, these environmental design modifications have been associated with modest, but real, reductions in crime and fear.

THE BLOCK BOOSTER PROJECT

Having observed these positive benefits of block associations in a variety of settings, a group of university-based researchers working in conjunction with the Citizens' Committee for New York City has recently initiated The Block Booster Project. This project is a longitudinal action research study, funded by the Ford Foundation, which attempts to view crime prevention in the broader context of community development and seeks to identify the

Block associations are an anchor for many communities. They allow the 98% who care to reassert control over the few who would stand on the corner and menace them.

Franklin Thomas, President of the Citizens' Committee for New York City

behavioral processes and environmental conditions which link organization to security and disorder to crime and fear.

A major purpose of the Block Booster Project is to examine the relationships between a variety of community and individual crime-related variables and participation in block association activities or other crime prevention efforts within low and moderate income blocks in New York City. It will study both the effect of the crime-related variables on block association strength and the effect of block association strength on the crime-related variables.

The project will provide both practical and theoretical information on two key questions: (1) Why do some individuals react to the threat of crime on their block through collective action, while others engage in more private defenses, withdraw, or do not react at all? (2) What are the effects of the level of block organization on formal and informal social control, on crime and fear, and on physical signs of social disorder, territoriality, and "defensibility"? Another important project objective is the exploration of the personal, leadership, and organizational characteristics that make for strong and effective block associations. As part of this action research, we have developed a system of organizational assessment and training materials, based on information that is individually tailored to each block, to help community organizations maintain and strengthen themselves.

The project employs a multimethod research design in order to tap block residents' subjective appraisal of the block and its problems and strengths, as well as more objective indicators of crime and the physical environment. Data is being derived from five sources:

- (1) We are conducting a telephone survey of 1,126 residents on 48 blocks in three New York City neighborhoods.
- (2) On the 32 blocks that have block associations, we will carry out a mem-

bership survey to provide additional data on the type and extent of group activities, and the organizational characteristics of the associations.

(3) On these same blocks, we will conduct a series of leader interviews to obtain information about organizational history, incentives, decision-making, and leadership.

(4) Data on officially reported crime will be collected at the local police precincts. Unlike most previous studies, rates of reported crime will be collected and analyzed at the block level as opposed to the precinct level or above.

(5) Finally, an environmental assessment will be conducted on all the blocks in order to examine primarily nonarchitectural (i.e., more easily changed) physical signs of social disorder and vulnerability to crime. The assessment will involve in person observation of three types of physical cues that have been found to be related to crime and fear of victimization: social disorder or "incivilities" (e.g., the presence of litter or loitering youths); territoriality (e.g., personalization signs and beautification); and "defensible space" features (e.g., fences around the property).

In addition, the first three measures will be repeated one year later in order to examine the effects of the Block Booster training to maintain and strengthen the block associations.

The results of the project are expected to have important policy implications for community development and crime prevention. They will indicate, for example, whether block-level organization can help lower-income communities turn a fragmenting crime problem into effective and cohesive group action. The findings should also have important theoretical implications, allowing researchers to determine the necessary ingredients for effective block organizations and leadership and to understand the relationship between block-level citizen participation and crime.

USEFUL RESEARCH AND EFFECTIVE POLICIES

In spite of its tremendous promise as an area of study and intervention, research on the relationships between community organization and crime, fear, physical signs of disorder, territoriality, informal social control, and formal civilian crime prevention has not kept pace with theoretical speculation. In particular, there has been little conclusive investigation of the crime-related causes of citizen participation in community organizations, and even less that has been able to obtain and analyze block-level crime data.

We are fairly confident that community development is the key to crime prevention; but without a specific understanding of the social, psychological, and environmental processes by which crime and community organization are linked, it is difficult to design programs or policies to encourage the development and maintenance of organizations that will effectively deter crime in the most crime-prone areas. Action research can meet this critical need. ■

For further information, contact the authors c/o Citizen's Committee for New York City, 3 West 29th Street, New York, NY 10001; (212) 694-6767.