Editorial

Tim Bateman and Hannah Smithson

The quest to establish safe communities through the reduction of crime is an international one and the concerns, and methods adopted to address them, increasingly show signs of convergence. This commonality of interests is amply demonstrated in the current issue of Safer Communities with the articles drawing on a range of experiences in three very different countries.

Maghsoodi Tilaki and Mohammad Javad's paper addresses the relationship between the environment and perceptions of safety, focussing on residents of a gated community in Iran. A growing body of literature notes a linkage between the characteristics of the built environment and the extent to which local populations feel safe. The development of gated communities is one response but understanding of the experience of those living within such communities is relatively limited. The research on which the paper draws considers the extent to which improved "natural surveillance" – the design of environments to facilitate increased monitoring of activities in the area by formal and informal "guardians" of behaviour – is correlated with enhanced feelings of social cohesion and perceptions of safety.

The research was conducted in a gated community built in the 1970s, comprising of 650 dwellings and located in Babolsar, a city in the north or Iran. The study involved a self-administered survey of 250 residents. Increased levels of surveillance, measured in terms of respondents' descriptions of lighting, visibility of properties, and the extent to which they felt responsible for "keeping an eye" on what happened in their area, were correlated with reduced perceptions of disorder in the neighbourhood and higher feelings of safety, a finding consistent with the theoretical assumptions of CPTED. However, while surveillance was also positively related to social cohesion, as manifested in friendships with, and trust in, other residents, the latter was not significantly associated with increased perceptions of public safety, a result which contradicts findings from research in other jurisdictions and different types of neighbourhood. The authors conclude that in the Iranian context, gated communities can help to improve natural surveillance and counter fear of crime.

Hiroki Nakamura's paper also provides an empirical exploration of a principle that underpins CPTED, this time focussing on the notion of "territoriality" – wherein residents have a sense of ownership of the community – in a Japanese context. It analyses the impact of producing "crime maps" on school students' understanding of the extent to which locations were safe or otherwise and how to protect oneself from risk. Participants were given information to improve their ability to recognise the characteristics of dangerous sites based on principles of CPTED and were provided with the technical knowledge necessary for the creation of crime maps. "Fieldwork" involved school students, grouped with university students and local residents, following a route through a district around their school to identify places that were "easy to enter but not easy to be seen". Information gleaned during the fieldwork was used to produce local safety maps that designated particular locations as a high crime risk. Participants then completed a questionnaire designed to measure items such as: attachment to the local area; understanding of characteristics of dangerous and safe locations; co-operation with others from the same generation; and intergenerational exchange. Analysis suggested that self-reported understanding of the characteristics of high and low crime areas and how to avoid risk were both positively correlated with participants feeling that they could produce an effective crime safety map. Effective communication between generations was also found to be important for effective map creation. However, the process of creating maps did not necessarily enhance participants' confidence in their ability to seek help or support where they considered they were at risk of victimisation.

John Pitt's conceptual piece approaches community safety from the other end of the lens, analysing measures designed to reduce gang violence in England and Wales though an exploration of changes in rhetoric associated with government policy. Pitts argues that following

the urban riots of November 2011, and on the basis of limited evidence, the strategy encompassed by the government's Ending Gang and Youth Violence was predicated on an understanding of the gang phenomenon that located its origins in troubled families. The strategy was thus designed to run in parallel with a much wider national programme designed to "turn around" 1,20,000 such families on the assumption that fixing dysfunctional families would alleviate a range of social ills.

Five years on, however, a refreshed approach, described in Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation published in 2016, betrayed a rather different discourse whose six priorities do not include families and are more focussed on traditional forms of policing and crime prevention. Pitts contends that the lack of evidence of impact of the troubled families programme may be a contributing factor that helps to explain the shift in tone but argues too that, where public finances are tight, policy objectives frequently narrow to fit available resources with change justified on the basis of erstwhile success and a refining of focus. He warns that the revised approach, by decentralising responsibility for addressing serious youth violence to a broader range of local agencies irrespective of capacity to deliver, risks blaming poor communities for their lack of aspiration rather than tackling structural problems and a lack of stable youth employment in disadvantaged communities.

His critical analysis reminds us that advancing international community safety is not simply a question of adapting evidence-based crime prevention strategies to the local context but also of responding to the political climate.