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Walter S. DeKeseredy
Ontario Institute of Technology, Canada

Alvi Shahid
Ontario Institute of Technology, Canada

Claire M. Renzetti
St. Joseph's University, claire.renzetti@uky.edu

Martin D. Schwartz
Ohio University

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Reducing Private Violence Against Women in Public Housing: Can Second Generation CPTED Make A Difference?

Walter S. DeKeseredy, Alvi Shahid, Claire Renzetti & Martin D. Schwartzhuck

Prior to the mid-1990s, most of the information on crimes committed by and against North American urban public housing residents was produced and disseminated by journalists. The underlying presumption of most of their writings was that public housing crimes were pathological aberrations in an otherwise stable social order (DeKeseredy & Renzetti, 2004; Reiman, 2004). More recently, criminological researchers have discovered public housing sites, but their findings are similar to the journalists': street crime occurs more often in public housing than in other areas. For example, Ireland *et al*, Thornberry and Loeber (2003) found that adolescents living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, public housing units are more violent than those who do not live in these dwellings.

What is to be done about reducing the high rates of crime in these socially and economically marginalized neighborhoods occasionally referred to as "cities-within-cities" (Venkatesh, 2000)? Some scholars and practitioners contend that the answer is to modify the structure of public housing¹. For example, guided by the principles of First Generation CPTED (e.g., improving the territorial control people have over their buildings)², Ireland *et al*. (2003) suggest that people should be moved from large housing complexes into smaller ones. Many researchers and policy makers agree that shifting people out of "fortress-like" structures into less alienating ones is a positive step (Currie, 1993). However, as pointed out by the founders of Second Generation CPTED (Saville & Cleveland, 1997), this simplistic solution alone does little, if anything, to build high levels of collective efficacy. In communities where collective efficacy is high, neighbors closely and frequently interact with each other, residents can count on their neighbors for various types of social support such as childcare, people intervene to prevent teenagers from engaging in delinquent acts, and community leaders struggle to obtain funding from governments and local businesses to help improve neighborhood conditions. Further, rates of some types of interpersonal violence committed on the streets are lower in communities where there is "social cohesion among neighbors combined with their willingness to act on behalf of the common good...." (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997, p. 918).

Walter S. DeKeseredy, Faculty of Social Science, University of Ontario Institute of Technology, Oshawa, Ontario, Canada L1H 7K4
walter.dekeseredy@uoit.ca

Shahid Alvi, Faculty of Social Science, University of Ontario Institute of Technology, Oshawa, Ontario, Canada, L1H7K4
shahid.alvi@uoit.ca

Claire Renzetti, Dept. of Sociology, St. Joseph's University, Philadelphia, PA 19131 USA crenzetti@sju.edu

Martin D. Schwartz, Dept. of Sociology & Anthropology, Ohio University, Athens, OH 45701 USA schwartz@ohio.edu

Second Generation CPTED directly addresses these concerns, but focuses primarily on reducing public crimes through community capacity building. Hence, in its current form, it can hardly be considered a “holistic approach” to improving neighborhood safety because it ignores one of the most pressing social problems facing public housing residents today, that is, violence against women behind closed doors. As DeKeseredy and Renzetti (in press) ask in their critique of Ireland et al.’s (2003) policy proposals, “What about the women?” This is an important question, given that 90% of the more than 1.27 million U.S. public housing households are headed by females (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2000)³, and that exploratory research shows that many of them are frequently and severely abused by male intimates and acquaintances.

This is not to say, though, that Second Generation CPTED has no part to play in efforts to curb wife-beating, date rape, and other variants of woman abuse. Rather, the main objective of this paper is to suggest how this approach can be modified to help reduce much pain and suffering in intimate relationships also plagued by poverty, unemployment, and host of other social ills. Before outlining our blueprint for change, it is first necessary to briefly review the extant literature on the extent of private violence against women in public housing.

PRIVATE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN NORTH AMERICAN PUBLIC HOUSING

To the best of our knowledge, only two studies were specifically designed to glean data on violence against women in North American public housing. The first was conducted in Eastern Ontario by DeKeseredy, Alvi, Schwartz and Perry (1999), and their Quality of Neighborhood Life Survey (QNLS) data show that 19.3 percent of their female respondents reported having been physically assaulted by an intimate partner in the year before the study. This incidence rate (events that occurred in a one-year time period) is much higher than those generated by major national surveys of the general population using a similar measure, including Tjaden and Thoennes’ (1998) National Violence Against Women Survey (1.9%). Renzetti and Maier’s (2002) qualitative study of 36 female residents of public or section 8 housing in Camden, New Jersey, also uncovered an incidence rate higher than those obtained by large-scale victimization surveys. Thirty-three percent of their female respondents were violently victimized during the year before being interviewed, and 50 percent of these assaults were committed by a husband/ex-husband, boyfriend/ex-boyfriend, or an acquaintance (e.g., a friend or neighbor). Note, too, that the results of these two studies are underestimates because of factors such as respondents’ memory error, reluctance to recall traumatic experiences, fear of reprisal, and embarrassment (DeKeseredy, 1995; Schwartz, 2000; Smith, 1987, 1994). Other problems, discussed elsewhere, also contribute to underreporting, such as immigrants’ or refugees’ language barriers and reluctance to report events to people considered authority figures (DeKeseredy et al., 1999; DeKeseredy &

Renzetti, in press). Still, the most important point to consider here is that on top of struggling to deal with the day-to-day stress of living in poverty, many female public housing residents endure a substantial amount of intimate violence. Clearly, it is now time to develop solutions, including those guided by Second Generation CPTED, that refocus attention on what happens inside public housing units (Renzetti & Maier, 2002).

CURBING PRIVATE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: THE PITFALLS OF SECOND GENERATION CPTED

To create effective CPTED policies aimed at reducing private violence against women, it is first necessary to outline the key problems with gender-neutral CPTED initiatives. The first and most obvious shortcoming is that they do not focus on woman abuse behind closed doors. Second, creating a tight-knit community is an important goal, but the extant literature on Second Generation CPTED overlooks the fact that this approach can also contribute to the protection of batterers by their neighbors (Ames & Dunham, 2002; Websdale, 1998). For example, some of Renzetti and Maier's (2002) interviewees mentioned incidents in which neighbors and even security guards got offenders out of a Camden housing development before the police showed up. Moreover, many men who reside in public housing estates belong to tight-knit, all-male, patriarchal peer groups that include offenders, as well as those who encourage physical and sexual assaults on women who challenge male authority (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2002; Websdale, 2001). Consider, too, that many of the social interactions between men in these impoverished communities do not include designing plans to lower crime rates. Rather, since they are unemployed, these men spend much of their time together drinking and taking illicit drugs, and lamenting about patriarchal authority threatened by the disappearance of manufacturing jobs, "uppity women who don't know their place" and the increasing number of women refusing to live with men who cannot financially contribute to the well-being of a household (Bourgois, 1995; Conway, 2001; DeKeseredy, Alvi & Schwartz, 2004).

Related to this problem is that while many members of a community are deeply committed to eliminating public crime and are willing to intervene for the common good in public settings, sizeable proportions believe that what goes on behind closed doors is "none of their business" or is just a "domestic dispute." Further, many abused women have no faith in their public housing neighbors and do not count on them because they are often a source of other problems (they deal drugs, play their music too loud, etc.) As one woman told Renzetti and Maier (2002, p. 59), "My neighbors tend to be more screwed up than me." Moreover, regardless of whether abused women frequently interact publicly or privately with neighbors, some hide their experiences or do not seek informal intervention because of shame, embarrassment, fear of reprisal, or because they might lose their public housing lease according to the "One strike and you're out" initiative signed by President Clinton on March 28, 1996 (Renzetti, 2001). Under this law, physical abuse itself may result in eviction of the

victim, given that some courts have interpreted the lease term “control” to mean that tenants control who has access to their housing units (Hellegers, 1999). One Strike also deters victims’ neighbors from calling the police on their behalf for fear of helping to evict them. In sum, then, for the above and other reasons, implementing Second Generation CPTED strategies that ignore highly injurious gender relations is like using “a bandage...to cover up a heart attack” (Cleveland & Saville, 2003a). Still, all is not lost. Indeed, the four main strategies that comprise Second Generation CPTED can be modified to deal with the gender-related problems identified here. These approaches are: community culture; connectivity; community threshold; and social cohesion (Brassard, 2003; Cleveland & Saville, 2003b). It is to these strategies that we turn to next.

CREATING A GENDER SENSITIVE SECOND GENERATION CPTED

Before any of the suggestions raised here can be implemented, public housing communities, those who manage them, politicians, social service providers, and criminal justice officials must first publicly announce that private violence against women is a major problem and that a holistic, integrated community approach is needed to curb it. This requires political will and public education, as well as “the shedding of self-serving professional prejudices that currently separate system groups” (Bowker, 1998, p. 14). Once this goal is achieved, then the following initiatives are necessary to promote the creation of “domestic violence free homes” similar to those found in some subsidized housing projects located in Jackson’s Point, Ontario (Ellis & DeKeseredy, 1996).

Community Culture

This approach calls for the creation of a “shared history in a neighborhood” through the use of festivals, sporting events, music and art (Cleveland & Seville, 2003b). Sometimes referred to as “placemaking” (Adams & Goldbard, 2001), this initiative should also involve the use of plays, concerts, and paintings that send out powerful messages to public housing residents about the pain and suffering caused by violence against women. Such cultural work, including designing tee shirts to memorialize women’s victimization, could be done in local parks or community centers with the assistance of a diverse range of public housing residents. Plays, art displays, and other elements of placemaking should also be situated in nearby shopping centers.

Graffiti, although offensive to many people, can be constructive and contribute to placemaking. For example, Ohio University in Athens maintains a concrete wall where students are allowed to paint pictures and murals and write political messages aimed at promoting social justice. There, you will often see statements such as “Stop Rape” and “Let’s Take Back the Night.” Defined by some young people and scholars as “signpainting,” such

art work could be done on a wall deemed fit by public housing residents and authorities, and it would increase the visibility and legitimacy of young and old artistic members of the community⁴. Perhaps, too, artists could be paid for their work with cash or in the provision of spray paint because many of them are in desperate need of money (Ferrell, 1993).

Connectivity

Public housing residents, like other people, need to connect with members of other communities, as well as groups within their neighborhoods (Cleveland & Saville, 2003b). However, many abused women suffer from social and geographic isolation (Renzetti & Maier, 2002). This problem is not, of course, restricted to public housing tenants. Indeed, many abused women in more affluent communities are unable to socialize with people in and outside their neighborhoods. Thus, it is also necessary to build easily accessible women's centers in public housing communities or very close to them. The creation of these safe places should be done with the support of the private and public sectors, and they do not have to focus only on issues related to abuse. For example, women's centers could offer educational programs aimed at training unemployed women for jobs contributing to their economic independence. Artistic events and other social activities should also be organized there, as well as the provision of daycare, which gives women time to seek jobs or to get a brief reprieve from the pressures of child rearing (DeKeseredy, Alvi, Schwartz, & Tomaszewski, 2003).

Most men do not beat or rape female intimates and sizeable portions of them are eager to eliminate woman abuse. Still, regardless of where they live, most anti-sexist men do not socialize with other males who are concerned about enhancing women's safety (DeKeseredy, Schwartz, & Alvi, 2000). Thus, formal pro-feminist men's organizations such as the National Organization of Men Against Sexism (NOMAS) should be invited to hold town hall meetings in community centers where pro-feminist men can get together and develop individual and collective strategies to reduce woman abuse such as the following:

- protesting and boycotting strip clubs, bars with live sex shows, and "adult" stores that rent or sell pornography;
- confronting men who make sexist jokes and who abuse their female partners;
- supporting and participating in woman abuse awareness programs;
- actively listening to women and reading literature on their issues, problems, and concerns (Funk, 1993; Johnson, 1997; Thorne-Finch, 1992).

Men's groups can also discuss how and where male members can apply for jobs, effective job interview strategies, and ideas for opening or running a small local business. Initiatives such as these bring public housing residents together "in common purpose" (Cleveland & Saville, 2003b) and connect them with outside groups that can help them acquire financial

and other forms of support for their peacemaking efforts. Outside groups also help public housing residents avoid reinventing the wheel. For example, established women's groups and male anti-sexist collectives located in other communities can offer public housing residents existing sets of best practices that can be tailored to meet their needs and quickly implemented at little or no financial cost.

Community Threshold

Fear of crime in public places influences many women to stay indoors, which precludes their obtaining knowledge about services available to abused women and developing social ties with neighbors who might be willing to informally confront the men who assault them inside their homes. Neighborhood disorder (e.g., vandalism, garbage on the streets, noise, etc.) is a powerful determinant of women's fear of crime in public housing and does not always need to be dealt with by a massive police presence or architectural tinkering (Alvi, Schwartz, DeKeseredy, & Maume, 2001). In fact, a key finding of Sampson et al.'s (1997) studies of collective efficacy is that community threshold can be enhanced and violent crimes can be reduced in neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage when neighborhoods band together for informal social control and to pool their collective power to extract such resources as garbage collection and housing code enforcement. For example, high-tech security devices not only do not reduce crime in public housing, but also provide one more expensive item to vandalize (James, 1997). However, as is the case in Melbourne, Australia, provisions for tenant empowerment had a major effect on both crime and fear. When a responsive management system is put into place (including tenant management) and combined with tenant decision-making in security measures, sharp reductions in women's fear of public places are possible.

Thus, strategies aimed at reducing women's fear, increasing perceptions of safety in public housing estates, and making women feel comfortable leaving their homes do not require a major criminal justice response. Instead, they may involve tenant empowerment around issues related to garbage, noise, vandalism, and people who drink and do drugs in public places (Alvi et al., 2001).

Social Cohesion

Second Generation CPTED studies show that teaching positive communication skills and conflict resolution enhances neighborhood cohesiveness (Gilligan, 2001; Saville & Clear, 2000). To reduce private violence against women, then, schools located near public housing estates should build empathy into the curriculum through constant attention to the intersections of race, gender, and class, and require students to take on the role or point of view of the "other" (Connell, 1995; DeKeseredy et al., 2000; Messerschmidt, 2000). Further, workshops could be given in local schools or public housing community

centers designed specifically to train people what to do when confronted with male-to-female violence on the street and behind closed doors. Participants should also be taught how to support victims, to seek help in appropriate ways, and to work to help abusive men become peaceful (Hazler, 1996). For example, prisons across the country are now using violent offenders to train guard dogs, under the theory that providing a dependent animal that gives love and attention will help offenders empathize with others. Public housing communities might consider such imaginative ideas.

CONCLUSIONS

As Holzman, Hyatt and Dempster (2001, p. 682), correctly point out, “The fundamental nature of our approach to crime prevention needs to change if public housing spaces are to be made safer.” Of course, architectural design and location play a role in reducing private violence against women, but only if they are combined with gender-sensitive Second Generation CPTED policies recommended here (Raphael, 2001). However, such solutions are likely to be undermined by existing laws that should be immediately removed, such as One Strike.

Although it is important to rethink the legal response to private crime in public housing and to develop community-based informal crime prevention strategies guided by Second Generation CPTED, these approaches should not be viewed as substitutes for economic strategies and public spending. To nourish public housing communities and to develop those rich in collective efficacy, or a community’s capacity to sustain itself, stable, quality jobs and effective social programs are necessary (Currie, 1985; DeKeseredy, 2000; Wilson, 1996). Moreover, affordable public transportation should be located near public housing districts so that people can connect with outside groups and have easier access to employment (Jargowsky, 1997). Affordable and reliable public transportation will also reduce traffic congestion, the number of traffic accidents, and pollution levels. Still, using public transportation should not involve multiple transfers because they will only increase travel time to and from low paying jobs and create scheduling problems for parents who have to travel to and from child care providers.

Regardless of sufficient political will and money, it takes time to construct public transportation. Therefore, in the meantime, as in Chicago, privately subsidized car- and van-pool networks should be created to transport people to their jobs or potential places of employment (Wilson, 1996), a strategy that churches and other places of worship could also participate in (DeKeseredy et al., 2003).

Will the progressive solutions advanced here, including tailoring Second Generation

CPTED to meet the needs of abused women, really make a difference? Perhaps Jargowsky (1997, p. 213) has the best answer to this question: “The task is difficult and the results of even our best efforts are uncertain, but to continue our current path is to give the wrong answer to Martin Luther King’s question: ‘Where do we go from here – chaos or community?’” Hopefully, policy makers, academics, and the general public will choose the latter.

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NOTES

- ¹ In fact, much of the research on crime in public housing has focused on housing structure issues (Renzetti, 2001).
- ² See Cleveland and Saville (2003a) for a critique of 1st generation CPTED.
- ³ This statistic excludes Section 8 federally subsidized housing.
- ⁴ As Ferrell (1993) found in his study of Denver graffiti artists, some local business people, homeowners, and others often hire signpainters, which fosters their “stake in conformity” (Hirschi, 1969), enhances their self-esteem, and contributes to their economic well-being.

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