



## Strategic Promotion of Ageing Research Capacity

Design and  
Community  
Regeneration:  
older people in  
socio-economically  
deprived  
communities in  
South Wales  
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*Meeting the challenges of  
an ageing society*

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# Design and Community Regeneration: older people in socio-economically deprived communities in South Wales

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The design of the physical environment can contribute to a decline in the social environment. Careful redesign of the physical environment can therefore be used as a way to deter undesirable behaviour and reduce crime. Environmental improvements designed to create safer communities in deprived areas rarely consider how older people perceive and construct personal safety; this results in neglect of their needs and concerns. This project was centred on some of the most socio-economically deprived regions in South Wales, where there are particular concerns for the personal safety of older people, and investigated how this situation might be improved. It adopted a user-led methodology to reveal the personal safety issues faced by older people in deprived communities. The research identified particular areas and routes used by local people and the safety issues associated with them. Although perceptions of safety cannot be reduced solely to features of the physical environment, they are very much tied up with the social changes which characterise such areas.

## Key Findings

- Measures to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour in communities do little to make older residents feel safe. Frequently, these measures are based on a perspective of safety that is not reflected in the perceptions of older people. Their effectiveness may be greatly enhanced by ensuring that analysis of the physical environment is accompanied by analysis of the social environment. Changing the physical environment will not alone improve safety and inclusion, although it may be of some help. Policies which support the maintenance and upkeep of neighbourhoods could go some way in arresting the continual physical decline which encourages crime.
- Underlying the concerns of many older people is a decline in the sense of community. This is thought to be brought about by rapid social change and many older people feel powerless in the face of these changes. Those surveyed have very considerable concerns about crime, which at least over half had experienced, and about anti-social behaviour, which all had experienced.
- Situational crime prevention techniques have limited scope for reducing crime and fear, although they may make a contribution. Rather, it is the prevailing concerns about the social environment as a result of changing community dynamics and changes in attitudes, values and behaviours which need to be addressed.
- This study developed a valuable approach for engaging older people in discussions about their communities, and priorities for action which could be incorporated into current methods for assessing the need for crime prevention measures.

# Introduction

## The Issues

Many older people, not least those who live in socio-economically deprived communities, have major concerns about crime and safety.

The Borough of Rhondda Cynon Taff (RCT) is currently one of the most deprived regions of Wales following the decline of mining and other heavy industries. Many of its communities are blighted by high unemployment, high crime levels and poor access to amenities and services. The low per-capita GDP means that the area has EU 'Objective 1' status. Other negative characteristics include a prevalence of youth gangs, anti-social behaviour, violence, drug and alcohol problems, and a poor police presence.

These problems mean that many older people are afraid to use parts of their community. This is certainly the case after dusk, but in some cases this is an issue during the day, and prevents access even to basic amenities and transport. The fear of crime and anti-social behaviour is a major deterrent, even though the actual incidence of crime against older people may be low.

## The Background

Existing approaches to tackling these issues range from policing arrangements (such as raising the level of police presence and giving out ASBOs and dispersal orders), through to the redesign of local environments, and the provision of community facilities to provide a greater variety of leisure opportunities. These measures are often criticised as failing to address the underlying reasons for the decline of local communities. At a more strategic level though, other measures are concerned with regenerating local economies by encouraging investment in industry and services.

Initiatives concerned with the redesign of the local built environment (for example creating more attractive urban areas, streets and transport interchanges) can achieve this objective, but sometimes only those groups which need to be discouraged appear to benefit. Whilst these areas are likely to be used mostly by older people, attempts to redesign the environment do not generally take sufficient account of their needs or their concerns about safety.

Considerable criminological research has explored the relationship between crime, the fear of crime and older people. Although this has found that the majority of older people feel unsafe walking home after dark, other work has found that the risk of people over 75 becoming victims of crime is in fact low. However, the research methods used have been limited and have given little insight into how older people perceive safety in relation to their physical and social environments.

## The Aims of the Study

The study sought to:

- identify older people's personal safety needs and fear of crime in relation to their use and perceptions of the environment;
- contribute to promoting inclusive environments by reducing the fear of crime and improving the quality of life of older residents in deprived areas;
- make recommendations for appropriate solutions to tackle the major areas of concern, which can be disseminated to practitioners and policy makers;
- contribute to the academic literature on older people's needs;
- extend existing, and develop new approaches, to studying older people's personal safety through in-depth discussion with older people and direct engagement in safety initiatives.

## The Study

Case studies of two communities were carried out. A multi-method approach was used to gather a range of information. Focus groups were supported by the use of computer based 'digital walk-throughs' of local streets and buildings to stimulate discussion; questionnaires provided supplementary data.

A 'safety index' was developed to provide an objective assessment of environments, and with which to compare residents' perceptions. Drawing on the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (which consists of measures such as employment, health, education, access, income and housing in each ward in Wales), eleven communities from the RCT region were identified as being in the top 50 most deprived in Wales. Because of the limited resources for the study, two of these were chosen on the basis of the feasibility of being able to undertake the case studies, and the likelihood of being able to recruit participants.

The two communities were Tylorstown and Cwn Clydach; the 11<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> most deprived wards in Wales. In 2001 Tylorstown had a population of 4717, with 16.3% aged over 65. For Cwn Clydach the population was 3164 and 16.6% were over 65 in 2001.

The research team spent several weeks building trust and familiarity by getting to know community workers and local residents. Male and female participants aged over 60 were recruited through a variety of methods. The project was explained at partnership meetings (involving Communities First Officers, the local police officer, and residents) and older people's groups. Each potential participant was provided with information on the study and informed consent documents.



*A Focus Group with VR display*

Questionnaires were distributed in each community to twenty individuals. These questionnaires gathered broad demographic details, general perceptions of safety in the community, and information about two main pedestrian routes used by each participant in their community. Maps from Digimap, an internet service, were amended with the routes used by the participants, enabling representative routes to be identified. Six commonly used routes were identified in each community. Films of these routes were subsequently presented to focus groups. These films gave a wide representation of the environment in both communities.

The routes were filmed using the Virtual Reality Panorama Technique (VRPT), which used a digital camera to take 18 digital still images at key points along each route. These were knitted together to produce a fluid 360 degree panorama, resulting in a 2D virtual representation of a route (VR). Day-time filming was incident free, but night-time filming was abandoned because of the considerable risks which became apparent.

The filmed routes were assessed in terms of a Street Segment Personal Safety Index (SSPSI) based on the principles of CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) which has three central themes aimed at reducing crime: natural surveillance, access control and territoriality. Each segment of a route was scored between 10 (all features in evidence and therefore the most safe) and 0 (no features and least safe).

Twenty people in each community were invited to attend one of four focus groups. In the event, four focus groups involving 18 people were held, and there were discussions with two individual older people. Participants were aged between 65 and 86. Each focus group was presented with each route in turn and asked to discuss their views of personal safety on that route. As possible problems arose, the groups were asked to consider possible safety improvements. The focus group discussions were transcribed word-for-word. This was then analysed to identify key themes that represented the patterns in the discussion, and was supported by direct quotes from the focus groups and images from the VRs.

# Findings

## Concerns about the Social Environment

The main concern was the social element of community life. Issues included:

- *Youth gangs* - loitering in public places, indulging in reckless and troublesome behaviour, drunkenness and drug dealing. Most participants had experienced direct harassment, been heckled or intimidated by youth gangs.
- *Antisocial behaviour* - examples of this included reckless driving, heckling, blowing-up post-boxes with fireworks, killing pets, used condoms in gardens, loud music and fighting.
- *Violence hot-spots* - these were certain streets and social clubs. Examples of violence included teachers punched by irate parents, and evidence of local people carrying machetes, knives and guns.
- *Crime* - half of the participants had been victims of crime. There was concern over drugs, vandalism, arson and theft.
- *Lack of police patrols* - there was a lack of officers 'walking the beat' to provide reassurance. A failure to deal directly with anti-social behaviour, and police reluctance to make arrests or charge perpetrators, was seen to legitimise criminal behaviour. Police now cover such wide areas they cannot respond immediately to incidents.
- *Drug and alcohol problems* - this was a particular problem in one community and made many residents feel very threatened. They knew where the drug dealers lived and the routines by which drugs were sold. Drug paraphernalia littered the streets; binge and under-age drinking were rife.
- *Changing social values* - these were reflected in crime, social problems and a decline in moral standards. They were attributed to drugs, the growth of the welfare state, and more working mothers, who were not at home providing parental surveillance. 'Strangers' were thought to contribute to this decline.
- *Transient communities* - there was despair at the irreversible decline in community cohesion and society. The sense of community and feeling of safety was compromised by an influx of unfamiliar tenants.

## Concerns about the Physical Environment

The social problems identified earlier were reflected in gathering places, rundown communities, by litter and fly-tipping, and by poorly maintained gardens.

Perceived problem areas included: houses of alleged drug dealers and troublesome tenants; public areas, including main streets and squares; bus stops; and areas near to or on route to buildings such as the post office, bingo hall, and social clubs.

Areas that should have been safe (for example busy with road traffic, overlooked by houses, adjacent to a police station) were often avoided because of the intimidating behaviour of loitering gangs.

There was little association between the participants' perceptions of safety and the actual SSPSI. Concerns remained high, even in some of those areas where physical measures to reduce crime had been introduced. Social conditions were the over-riding factor in determining how safe people felt. Whilst the provision of CCTV cameras, street lighting and escape routes might have prevented these areas from becoming complete 'no-go' zones, they did not promote a feeling of safety. A weak association emerged between participant's perceptions and the SSPSI for those areas which were identified as being safe. Areas with a low safety index, such as more affluent areas with green spaces, and those adjacent to lakes, were perceived as being safe by participants. This highlights once more the importance of the social environment.

## Steps Taken to Improve Personal Safety

Strategies used by the participants to improve their safety included: looking out for one another and walking in groups, "safety in numbers"; avoiding trouble spots, or crossing to the opposite side of the road; the use of taxis; hiding valuables; locking all doors, closing curtains and not going out after late afternoon; and, listening for noises, voices and shouting.

## Hierarchy of solutions to address personal safety concerns

Key themes emerged on how to improve older people's personal safety. Some of these themes related to design features and others to social change, thereby having both policy and practical implications. These are listed in order of participant preference; although some centre on the social environment, most lead to recommendations for physical and crime prevention techniques.

- 1. Higher Police presence** - the intended introduction of the Partnerships and Communities Together (PACT) initiative which brings together the police, community groups and local residents once a month was viewed positively. It was used to discuss and prioritise local crime and antisocial behaviour. Evidence from other research has indicated that a strong police presence, coupled with arrests and charges, reassures local residents.
- 2. More CCTV** - this was one possible solution to personal safety concerns. Another study has found that nearly 80% of people think that they are less likely to become victims of crime in areas with CCTV. Other work suggests that CCTV simply shifts crime to locations where security measures are not in place.
- 3. Improved street lighting** - this was recommended, even though most participants didn't go out at night, to improve visibility in the immediate vicinity of their homes. Other research indicates that although better street lighting may reduce the fear of crime, its impact on actual crime is mixed. CCTV and lighting may need to be viewed as an important part of a package of approaches rather than having a great impact on their own.
- 4. Better maintained environments** - the overall visual appearance of a community was found to be important for boosting perceptions of safety. Signs of neglect (such as graffiti, rubbish and unkempt buildings) led to fear and a negative sense of safety. Other work has shown that the poor physical appearance of a neighbourhood diminishes older people's quality of life. This neglect then leads to further disorder and crime if the original problems are not addressed. Good maintenance by residents and the local authority can improve people's perceptions of safety.
- 5. Alley-gating** - this involves installing gates to the end of lanes that run behind terraced houses. It can reduce burglaries although, as with other measures, it might just move the problem on to other more vulnerable areas. The Welsh Assembly Government has recently given power to Local Authorities to install alley-gates.
- 6. Improved environmental design** - CPTED is based on the idea that the proper design and effective use of the built environment reduces the fear and incidence of crime. The principles involved relate to access control, surveillance and territorial reinforcement. This can discourage youths from gathering in certain areas, although little is known about what attracts youths to certain places and what deters them. Environmental design does not address the root causes of social problems.
- 7. Parental responsibility and children exhibiting respect** - this is currently on the political agenda. An example is the Respect Programme, which reflects government strategies to improve the way members of society treat each other and to reduce anti-social behaviour.
- 8. Effective crime prevention policies** - these are vital for making older people feel safer in their communities, and need to address issues such as drugs and alcohol abuse. The participants felt that that no one in the community, including the police, had control over criminal behaviour. Whilst effective policing would help, they felt a dramatic change in public attitudes and values was needed.
- 9. Tenant checks** - whilst Housing Associations check potential tenants, private landlords do not. This increases the likelihood of undesirable residents entering a neighbourhood. Vetting systems and landlord training are being trialled in other parts of the UK. Although these measures will not prevent strangers from entering a community (a much cited reason for community fragmentation) it may mean they are better behaved.
- 10. Social and community change** - many participants spoke of the destruction of their communities by social and economic decline. A neighbourhood that works together was thought to be a safer community. It is not feasible that the ethos of once united communities can be restored, but regeneration projects, community participation and many of the recommendations given above may go some way to reuniting fragmented communities if there is a desire and commitment for a community amongst residents of all ages.

## Discussion and Implications

### Personal Safety

The study highlights the daily and on-going personal safety issues faced by older people in deprived areas. It also shows the realities of the decline of mining and heavy industry in communities in South Wales. Although these problems are symptomatic of nationwide social and cultural changes, they are magnified in these communities as a result of massive economic decline. Older people have retained their cultural and behavioural practices, but these are not shared by younger people. The result is that older people are finding it hard to come to terms with a new society.

Although older people had fewer concerns about the physical environment, their solutions to improve personal safety included a number of situational crime prevention measures which involved the physical environment.

Recommendations to improve personal safety in deprived areas are so deep-rooted, social and profound that a simple check list of physical alterations is not possible. It is the prevailing concerns about the social element as a result of changing community dynamics and changes in attitude, values and behaviour which need to be addressed. Simply changing the physical environment will not alone increase safety and inclusion. The issues are intertwined, but it is the presence and behaviour of other people that overrides fears about, for example, alley-ways and poor lighting. Even when measures to improve security have been taken, the fears remain. As a result, older people avoid those spaces which they should be able to enjoy. There are, of course, some areas where there are no problems, and where physical measures are not required.

### Policy Implications

Many older people feel powerless in the face of dramatic social change, and will need to see evidence of Government policies to convince them that change is taking place. Nevertheless, many are upbeat about their lives, and about the work of Communities First teams in engaging with older people and developing strategies to increase social cohesion. Optimising the independence of older people and maintaining their physical and psychological wellbeing, are a priority for both

Government and society. However the Government initiatives such as the 'Reducing Burglary Initiative' and 'Locks for Pensioners', which aim to reduce crime and fear, are based largely on situational crime prevention. This type of crime prevention focuses on the physical environment, and does not tackle the underlying sources of crime or fear of crime.

This study has involved older residents in identifying the underlying issues and producing an agenda for social and community change, which could be used to inform policy. The inclusive research approach taken provides rich and meaningful information which is necessary to gain a picture of safety issues in a local context. This is particularly useful as older peoples' assessments were different from those which would be obtained from objective assessment of the features of a particular environment.

Clearly, further work is required both to pursue the developments arising from findings from this study, and to refine the methodology for use with other groups and individuals who are socially excluded.

### Dissemination

This project fits well with the Welsh Assembly Government's Strategy for Older People, which recognises the importance of the provision of safer environments.

At a local level, the findings from this study have been disseminated to the communities that took part, to the local authority, and to the Welsh Assembly Government. They have also been disseminated in local newspapers and via the internet. This has generated considerable interest. One of the communities is using evidence from the study to develop a case for greater investment in community safety by local authorities.

At a national level, the findings have been disseminated through the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, SPARC, the British Society of Gerontology, OPAN Cymru (Older People and Ageing Research and Development Network), and in academic journals and conferences.

## The Research Team



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## The Study

The study received financial support from SPARC of £28,331 and ran for 9 months ending in September 2006. Additional support was provided by the University of Glamorgan. With financial support from the Welsh Assembly Government, the research team is now actively involved with developing a regional focus for ageing research.

More information about the study can be found on the SPARC website [www.sparc.ac.uk](http://www.sparc.ac.uk) and obtained directly from the investigators.

## Collaborators and mentors

Support, guidance and advice was given by Rebecca Sullivan and Keith Jenkins, of Communities First, and by Ann Elledge of the Suzy Lamplugh Trust. Further advice was given by a Professor Judith Phillips, Professor Stuart-Hamilton, Professor Fiona Brookman, Dr Jim Harrison, Julie Bentley and Lisa Harrison.

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## SPARC

SPARC is a unique initiative supported by EPSRC and BBSRC to encourage the greater involvement of researchers in the many issues faced by an ageing population and encountered by older people in their daily lives. SPARC is directed, managed and informed by the broader community of researchers, practitioners, policy makers and older people for the ultimate benefit of older people, their carers and those who provide services to older people.

SPARC pursues three main activities: **Workshops** to bring together all stakeholders interested in improving the quality of life and independence of older people.

**Advocacy** of the need for and benefits to individual older people and to society of ageing-related research. SPARC is inclusive and warmly welcomes the involvement of everyone with a relevant interest.

**Small Awards** to newcomers to ageing research, across all areas of design, engineering and biology and at the interfaces relevant to an ageing population and older people. In 2005 and 2006 SPARC received 185 applications for support in response to two invitations for competitive proposals of which 34 were supported.

## Executive Summaries

SPARC is supporting its award holders through funding, mentoring, a prestigious dissemination platform, professional editorial assistance, international activities and provision of contacts. Each of the projects has been small, yet the enthusiasm for discovery, and impatience to contribute to better quality of life for older people, has more than compensated for the very limited funding which was provided. available.

This executive summary is one of a series highlighting the main findings from a SPARC project. It is designed to stand-alone although taken with summaries of other projects it contributes to a formidable combination of new knowledge and commitment by newcomers to ageing research to improve the lives of older people. This is a tangible contribution towards ensuring that older people receive full benefit from the best that research, science and technology can offer.