Safer streets and neighbourhoods for older people

Dr Joanna Waters
Research Fellow
Personal Safety Research Unit

University of Glamorgan
you live, you learn
Our SPARC project

• The design, management and layout of the environment can influence feelings of fear and safety
• Negative senses of personal safety and environments dominated by fear of crime can lead to avoidance behaviour and social exclusion
• Groups that feel ‘safe’ within an environment are more likely to make extensive use of the services available
• Understanding how space-users interpret environmental spaces is crucial to designing safer environments
An identified need for the research

• Majority of criminological research uses quantitative techniques in the field of crime and fear of crime
• Crime statistics often underestimate true levels of crime
• Crime surveys reduce perceptions to narrow responses and provide little insight into social or physical contexts of crime and fear of crime

THEREFORE:
• A qualitative perceptual approach is useful to explore situational and contextual details of fear of crime and provides revealing insights into how the design and maintenance of communities impact on older people’s personal safety
The selected case study communities in Rhondda Cynon Taff

11 wards in RCT are in top 50 most deprived in Wales
Methodology

- Questionnaires to identify older people’s common pedestrian routes in the community
- Filmed each route using VR Panorama Tool
- Assessed each route based on a safety index
- Presented the VRs in focus groups to discuss personal safety concerns and possible environmental refinements
- Framework of user-led recommendations for a range of solutions to contribute to reducing older people’s personal safety concerns based directly on their needs
Questionnaires/route identification

- Derived user-led routes to film in a systematic way
- Identified a sample of most commonly used routes from questionnaires
- Downloaded A0 size street community maps from DigiMap
- Manually drew all routes from questionnaires on to hard copy of maps
- Identified 6 representative pedestrian routes in each community

Source: www.digimap.ac.uk
Virtual Reality Panorama filming of routes

Uses QuickTime software and digital photography to produce an interactive environmental stimulus

- Useful Stimulus for the group discussion
- Photographic representation is familiar to users
- Less directed than video
- More flexible than stills
- Easy for participants to manoeuvre through walkthroughs
Street Segment Personal Safety Index

- Binary framework
- Measure of environmental characteristics at each ‘node’ along each route

Ten safety domains including:
1. CCTV
2. Street lighting
3. Vegetation
4. Natural surveillance
5. Escape routes

Provides objective data to compare with user perceptions
Research Findings
Key concerns with social environment

- Youth gangs
- Anti-social behaviour
- Violence
- Crime and a lack of police support
- Anti-social tenants
- Drug and alcohol problems
- Changing social values
- Transient communities
Key concerns with social environment – resident quotes

ID2: “Nowadays they haven’t got respect for the police, for the clergy, for teachers, for nothing.” F/85

ID2: “The house the other side of me….the people who own the houses…were living away and filing them up with unsatisfactory people really because they don’t care a fig. they don’t look after the place. It’s a terrible state.” F/85

ID2: “Ashamed to say I live in Tylorstown to be honest. I’ve lived up here 46 years since I was married and to be honest it’s disgusting. It’s gone worse.” F/66

ID3: “If you do tell ‘em off you have a mouthful of language.” M/66

ID5: “Put it this way if we see a policeman walking, well we’ll get a camera to take a photo!” F/71
Key concerns with physical environment

• Gathering places e.g. ‘gullys’, bus stops, outside shops
• Litter and fly-tipping
• Poorly maintained gardens
Key concerns with physical environment – resident quotes

ID4: “When an area’s neglected that’s when the problems start.” F/71

ID1: “The litter in the Valley’s, it’s incredible. It’s the mental attitude, it’s the apathy.” M/67

ID1: “Years ago the people living down there…were all elderly. Their gardens were tidy…but now…” F/86
Perceived problem areas
Perceived safe areas

Lake area 1
The lake area scored poorly on the safety index because it was isolated from residential streets, had no lighting, was surrounded by vegetation, provided little visibility into the distance and wasn’t near a transport node.

Despite this participants thought the lake area felt safe and had few concerns for their personal safety.

Lake Area 2

This suggests that the lack of physical measures to reduce crime and fear do not always indicate an unsafe area.

University of Glamorgan

you live, you learn
Solutions to address personal safety concerns

- Higher police presence
- More CCTV
- Improved street lighting
- Better maintained environments
- Alley-gating
- Improved environmental design
- Parental responsibility and children exhibiting respect
- Tenant checks
- Social and community change
Key discussion points

- Social environment main concern for older people
- Built environment not a major primary problem because of familiarity and local knowledge
- Many respondents didn’t go out at night but didn’t perceive this as limiting their activities
- Main factors influencing perceptions of personal safety were concern over gangs of youths, drugs and rented properties
- SSPSI suggests that environmental design or physical environment alone will not make a place safer if the social element is not simultaneously tackled
Practical outcomes based on user-led research:

• Study provided a new focus in safety and crime research by emphasising an engagement with key stakeholders

• It allowed older people’s personal safety to be explored with the end-user guiding the discussions

• It provided a powerful understanding of the personal safety concerns and needs of older people in deprived communities

• Resulted in an informed and user-led framework of recommendations for personal safety improvement with specific environmental characteristics to target

• We hope that this will contribute to more inclusive communities and improved quality of life for older people