

Community Regeneration and Crime Reduction: some tensions and dilemmas

Lynn Hancock scrutinizes the weak links between urban regeneration strategies and crime reduction.

Since 1997 there have been a number of regeneration initiatives aimed at communities experiencing deprivation. Reducing crime and involving communities form important parts of the remits of these initiatives, and all involve 'partnership' approaches involving public, private, voluntary and community sectors. Key initiatives include the *New Deal for Communities*, many activities and programmes under the *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal*, and new funding mechanisms.

These measures have a number of strengths compared to earlier approaches. They recognize, for example, that sometimes longer periods of support are needed to 'turn around' distressed neighbourhoods; the importance of community involvement (which requires 'pump priming', through the Community Empowerment Fund for example; and they emphasise the importance of local priorities.

Some practical considerations

Many practical problems will need to be addressed to "close the gap between the poorest neighbourhoods and the rest of the country over the next ten to twenty years" as the *National Strategy* put it, whether or not the 'gap' is concerned with economic well-being or crime/victimisation rates (Hancock forthcoming). Suffice it here to note the following: first, while there are new pots of money available, in some areas agencies are experiencing reductions in their overall budgets, or are expected to make year on year efficiency gains. Second, the tension between local and central government priorities remains unresolved. Third, there are major questions about the ability of these measures to create the 'capacity' necessary for communities to influence decision-making and shape service delivery in this context. Not least because in many distressed localities, there are considerable problems associated with the legitimacy of decisions made by regeneration partnerships, notably regarding the distribution of funding. Under the new framework, the priorities to be addressed are as multifarious as the agencies are numerous, if not more so. The rhetoric surrounding 'partnerships' and 'multi-agency approaches' tends to underplay the latent and not so latent tensions and divergent interests brought to partnerships. Also to contend with are centrally determined performance targets and the continuing importance of attracting private or 'matched' funding for regenerative programmes; each may

make partnership working difficult and could undermine community confidence. Moreover, poor levels of community involvement have been related to weak partnership performance (DETR 1999).

However, other problems will need to be addressed including assumptions about the connections between urban regeneration and crime reduction.

Assumptions

Two assumptions are often made about urban regeneration and crime reduction: one is that reducing crime is a prerequisite for achieving community regeneration. As the national evaluation of *City Challenge* stated: "Crime and its effects were a significant barrier to regeneration because of their impact on the willingness of residents and businesses to stay and get involved in the problems of the area and their adverse impact on the views of potential investors" (DETR, 1999). The companion assumption to this is that economic and social investment in a community will bring about a reduction in crime.

Studies in the US have shown that while crime and disorder can impact the desirability of an area and its potential to attract inward investment, and these problems may promote outward migration, the nature of these connections is not mechanical (Taub *et al* 1984). The influence of crime can be offset, or reduced, by the presence of other conditions or amenities. Moreover, we still know relatively little about workers' and businesses' decisions to move from, to, or remain in particular localities, and the relative importance of crime or fear of crimes *vis a vis* other factors when such decisions are made (Levi 2001). Where different economic pressures are brought to bear it is clear that relationships are more complicated. In places where the wider urban context is characterised by economic growth (such as in parts of London and the south east), it is evident that a more sophisticated analysis is required; appreciating house values may tip the balance in favour of households moving or staying in a neighbourhood despite relatively high rates of crime and disorder, for example.

Will community investment bring about crime reduction?

The question that needs to be raised is; what mechanism will bring about a reduction in crime? In *Bringing Britain Together*, there is a suggestion that this will be achieved through social inclusion via the

labour market. In its section on jobs, for example, the national strategy says: "Others might need a very gradual return to work: if they could work and earn legally for a few hours a week this might give them the confidence and employment record they need to do more". However, we can appreciate the limitations of this assumption if it is accepted that a major cause of crime is not lack of jobs but relative deprivation, which is being reshaped in the contemporary period (Young 2001). In the Merseyside study (Hancock 2001) some local residents were able to benefit from employment opportunities brought about by regenerative efforts, though for many the opportunities available were frequently characterised by lack of status and poor rates of pay. Desirable employment opportunities remained elusive, particularly for young men lacking educational qualifications. In this vein, the contradictions became manifest between the rhetoric of inclusion and involvement and the messages sent to marginal groups through social policies, criminal justice and especially policing responses aimed at improving safety 'in the interests of regeneration'.

Many attempts at urban regeneration have had effects that have increased levels of reported crime and disorder in particular areas of cities. Here we need to be concerned with the nature of 'regeneration' and to acknowledge the wider economic context of cities since they present particular dilemmas.

In some localities, encouraging economic diversity is difficult, and against this backdrop partnerships are more likely to encourage activities that can generate crime and disorder. Hobbs, *et al* (2000) noted how town planners were concerned that few planning applications in the city centres in their study came from sectors of the economy that were not primarily concerned with the night-time economy, and the development of licensed premises in particular. These authors note the link between violent crime and these developments. After the working day, city centres became increasingly segregated along the lines of age and class. In Merseyside, regeneration partnerships made efforts to attract leisure facilities and arts provisions targeted toward more affluent groups and a wider range of age groups. However, there was evidence to suggest that local people perceived regeneration to benefit others rather than local residents. The absence of adequate facilities, particularly for less affluent young people, was often contrasted in this context (see Hancock 2001).

Polarisation

There is also some evidence that patterns of victimisation have been reconfigured following regenerative efforts. Some modes of physical regeneration, especially housing renewal drawing upon mixed funding or achieved through private developments, have resulted in spatial and social polarisation in some neighbourhoods. Patterns of victimisation broadly reflected these divisions as the least affluent residents bore the brunt of personal and

property crimes. However, there was evidence to suggest that the more affluent incomers were experiencing increases in victimisation from the mid to late 1990s, and were more likely to report their experiences to the police. Some respondents suggested that these groups were targets for 'resentment crime' (see Hancock 2001; forthcoming).

Finally, what is clear is that there is a need for more research examining recent developments in urban regeneration and their relationships with crime patterns and crime reduction policies in British cities. The ways in which these relationships are characterised in local strategic partnership strategies and how partners make sense of these connections are an appropriate starting point. The impact of regenerative efforts on patterns of victimisation, and how the transitions brought about by regeneration affect residents in neighbourhoods should inform theoretical debates about community change and crime, policy-making and urban service delivery.

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