

# A Place To Call Your Own: does housing need make a difference to crime?

Roger Grimshaw summarizes the research on accommodation and offending.

In public discussions, offending has long been associated with conditions of poverty. While novelists could readily portray characters whose origins in the slum somehow made sense of their moral turpitude, criminology has been preoccupied with analyzing how social conditions make a difference to patterns of offending. But the impact of housing need in particular has been less clearly understood. In his classic review, William Bonger (1916) referred to several disadvantageous consequences of overcrowding, such as early sexual experience, resort to alcohol, and indiscriminate association with others through interaction on the street. From a present day perspective it appears that the ways in which housing needs affect patterns of offending depends on several conditions and circumstances. We can all think of several ways of defining 'housing need', for example,

- Inadequacy in structure, facilities and furnishing
- Unhealthy conditions
- Overcrowding
- Temporary residence, transience and mobility
- Unsheltered, roofless, or living in public places

However social expectations highlight which needs are significant for families and individuals in particular times and places.

A broad spectrum of research indicates some common themes but much more detailed studies are required to provide an accurate and full picture. This article looks at the ways in which housing need – broadly defined – impacts on families and communities and in particular how it affects prisoners. Finally it refers briefly to the services and policies that might play a part in reversing these processes.

## Families, children and young people

We know from several studies that risks of delinquency are enlarged by housing deprivation in childhood (Loeber and Farrington 1998; Kolvin *et al* 1988). Conversely, having more living space in childhood helps to protect children from this risk (Kolvin *et al* 1990). Poor housing in childhood has also been found to correlate with adult convictions (Farrington 1992). A typical measure employed in these studies has been overcrowding, which varies in prevalence over time. Like other poverty measures, the measurement of housing deprivation

is usually relative and not absolute, so what may be counted as deprivation is affected by historical trends.

The politics of housing need figure strongly in the crime equation. Sherman *et al* (1997) reviewed the damaging effect of housing policies on crime patterns in the new urban ghettos of the USA. A growing population of poor, female-headed households has been coping with children in housing projects where ineffective schools and declining opportunities create barriers to progress. Nor is this simply a matter of disposing children towards criminality: the housing market also plays a major role in allocating individuals and groups to places that contain opportunities and 'weak spots' among the vulnerable.

## Runaways and homeless youth

Transience is not simply a 'housing need': unsatisfactory homes can generate behaviour that places young people at risk. Abuse has been identified in several studies as a factor in running away (Browne and Falshaw 1998). Stein *et al* (1999) discovered that 16-17 year olds in unstable living situations were particularly likely to offend while running. In a national study serial runaways were found to have higher than normal rates of drug misuse (Goulden and Sondhi 2001).

How far does homelessness make a difference to patterns of offending among young people? Bill McCarthy and John Hagan have conducted several studies in Canada comparing homeless youth with young people of a similar age. They found that hunger, transient street living, length of time on the street, and arrest of street friends were strongly related to street crime. This held true even when background variables were taken into account. For a definitive study see Hagan and McCarthy (1997).

Their findings add the gloss of numerical analysis to the observations of criminologists such as Pat Carlen who have noted how the stress of street living helps inculcate a code of survival, reducing trust and sociability. Public stigmatisation creates another barrier to social inclusion. Life on the streets brings insecurity and heightens the risk of victimisation. Moreover there are further risks arising from contact with people who try to exploit the homeless by offering drugs or purchasing sex. Exposure to police scrutiny and action increases the risk of being criminalized.

## Gender

Gender differences structure the experiences that lead to forms of behaviour problem. Girls are more likely to suffer sexual abuse than boys while rates for physical abuse are similar (Cawson *et al* 2000). Responses to abuse can initially be similar: in the Denver Youth Survey (Daly 1998) for example girls were reported to have slightly higher rates of running away from home. However, girls are more likely than boys to be arrested and sent to court for running away (Chesney Lind 1989; Shelden *et al* 1989). Subsequent to this process, gendered differences in pathways to crime emerge. Sexual abuse experience among female runaways was associated with a greater likelihood of delinquency (Janus *et al* 1987). In an international review, resort to the street is described as 'the leading feminist scenario' of women's lawbreaking. Petty hustling or prostitution is followed by drug misuse that drives further offending (Daly 1994). In recent explanations, a focus on elements of choice by the individual is combined with recognition of the constraints placed on women's lives. (Janus *et al* 1987; Carlen 1996; Maher and Daly 1996).

## Imprisonment

Another key dimension of need stems from the difficulties associated with criminal justice interventions that impact indirectly on families and communities. It has been acknowledged for several years that many prisoners lose their accommodation for a variety of reasons, including benefit restrictions. In a recent official survey of almost 400 prisoners, only 56 percent of men and 47 percent of women due for release within a month knew where they would be living. Recidivists were significantly more likely to have no accommodation than repeat offenders. Prisoners were found to be discouraged and unwilling to take effective action to resolve accommodation problems (HMIPP 2001). The need for urgent and comprehensive action to address a widespread problem has been stressed by the report of the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU 2002).

## A strategic approach to prevention and support

To counter such problems will call for a mixture of social crime prevention and individually targeted services and support. There is evidence that better housing allocation policies can reduce crime. In Baltimore an experimental housing project called 'Moving to Opportunity' sought to address criminogenic needs by finding more suitable locations for poor families. The project evaluation showed that adolescent males in families that moved to low – or middle – poverty areas were significantly less likely to be arrested for violent crimes than those who stayed in public housing (Ludwig *et al* 2001). For young offenders and for ex-prisoners, stable access to housing that meets their needs will often depend on ensuring that support is available to overcome the combined effects of their individual frustrations and of the prejudices and privations arrayed against them. It is true that, as Sherman *et al* (1997) point out, the same interventions can produce very different results in different contexts. A clear strategy to address social and criminogenic needs will have to be responsive as well as determined if it is to grapple effectively with the complex needs of today.

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