

Alley-gates: preventing crime or isolating communities?

Colin Rogers looks at the pros and cons of alley-gates.

The use of steel gates, known as alley-gates at the entrances to back alleys can now be found in several large cities – Manchester, Liverpool and London, for example – as well as in many smaller conurbations. Alley-gates are seen as a cure for the evils of all types of burglaries, a raft of anti-social behaviour issues, and an important facet in regaining control of little-used spaces, as well as to assist the regeneration of communities. This approach to crime prevention has attracted widespread support and credibility with local communities, the police and local authorities (Rogers 2005), but success has usually been measured using official crime statistics rather than more detailed local data. The ongoing research in Cadoxton, Barry in South Wales, however, focuses on the residents' perceptions over a period of time with regard to the performance of the alley-gates.

The area studied was a ward within local authorities' boundaries. Alley-gating enforces what is known as 'access control' and is a basic crime prevention technique (Clarke and Mayhew 1980; Clarke 1997) which seeks to reduce opportunities for crime and anti-social behaviour by restricting access to potential targets, creating a heightened perception of risk of apprehension and prosecution for potential offenders. Photograph 1 illustrates an example of an alley-gate. This shows the substantial structure of the gates and how the selected design visually impacts on the local area.

The creation of private or exclusionary zones behind the houses, clearly marked as such (see

photograph) enables the application of both civil and criminal law. However, the majority of alleys are in fact deemed to be 'highways', and this raises the intriguing question of how legal it is to deny public access. One solution might be to redesignate the alleys as private residential routes. Clearly, alley-gating and the substitution of private and semi-private spaces for former public rights of way will have many and varied implications for those individuals who trespass into such spaces and for those who warrant legitimate and routine access.

Critically evaluating alley-gates

One of the main problems of any initiative to reduce crime and disorder in one area is that of displacement. 'Displacement' might also include:

- Temporal – the movement of crime/disorder to a different time;
- Tactical – the continual committal of crime but by more sophisticated means;
- Change in the type of crime committed;
- Target – the movement of crime to different targets;
- Spatial – the movement of criminal activity to new locations.

However, Clarke (1997) argues that even when such displacement occurs it is unlikely ever to be complete. If displacement leads to crimes of lesser seriousness or to occurrence in areas where the burden of victimisation is more evenly spread then these consequences may be considered to be benign rather than malign (Barr and Pease, 1990).

Findings from the Cadoxton initiative

Residents were asked to highlight specific types of behaviour that were perceived as a problem for them *before* the gates were introduced. In the main these problems revolved around litter, noise, antisocial behaviour and traffic issues rather than domestic burglaries or drug offences. They were then asked if they believed the introduction of alley-gates would tackle these problems. In a follow up survey, individuals were asked to say whether they felt that the alley-gates had in fact tackled the existing problems. A third survey conducted two years after the introduction of the alley-gates asked the same questions in order to establish whether attitudes about resolving specific problems had been consistent. The



Photo: Colin Rogers

A typical alley-gate in Barry, South Wales

results can be seen in Table 1 below.

Clearly, the introduction of the alley-gates seems to have had a positive and sustained impact on not only delivering solutions in the period immediately following their introduction, but also into the future. Residents were also asked to indicate their perceptions of the level of crime and antisocial behaviour after the introduction of the gates. This survey, conducted two

numerous gated self-contained communities within towns and cities is more than fanciful thinking, it is already occurring.

While one of the main thrusts behind the implementation of alley-gates is the regeneration of communities, the communities themselves may become more physically isolated from the wider society in which they are located. Alley-gating appears to offer immediate and relatively straightforward solutions

Table 1 Residents' perceptions ⁽¹⁾ of the effectiveness of alley-gates in tackling local problems

	Those who perceived that the introduction of the alley-gates would reduce the problems.	Those who perceived that the alley-gates had reduced the problems six months after their erection.	Those who perceived that the alley-gates had reduced the problems two years after their erection
Yes	84%	86%	85%
No	9%	8%	12%
Uncertain	7%	6%	3%

(1) Based on a sample size of 100 residents.

Table 2 Residents' perceptions ⁽¹⁾ of levels of crime and disorder after the introduction of the alley-gates

Residents' perceptions	In the first six months following installation of the alley-gates	In the period two years after installation of the alley-gates
Crime levels had not changed	41%	26%
Crime levels had risen	12%	10%
Crime levels had fallen	21%	52%
Uncertain about changes in crime levels.	26%	12%

(1) Based on a sample size of 100 residents

years after their introduction, also asked the same questions to determine whether or not there had been any significant changes in the perceptions held by the residents. It was felt that if the introduction of the alley-gates had been successful then the residents' perceptions concerning the level of crime and antisocial behaviour would have positively changed. The results are presented in Table 2 below.

It is apparent that the medium term effect of the introduction of the alley-gates has had a sustained and positive effect upon the *perceptions* of crime and disorder in the Cadoxton area held by the residents.

Conclusions

In general there appears to be widespread public, political and local authority support for the implementation of the alley-gates. They have clearly and positively influenced residents' perceptions about levels of crime, anti-social behaviour and the character of the immediate area in which they reside. Further, the residents' views on some of their specific local concerns also appear to have been positively influenced by the alley-gate initiative.

However, there are several other issues associated with the advent of access control to the alleys which have materialised. There are now increasing environmental concerns regarding the haphazard dumping of litter and furniture by residents, coupled with an increase in dog excrement on the streets. These problems, albeit minor, have implications for policy makers, communities and planners alike.

One inevitable consequence is that the success of alley-gating schemes may contribute to a more exclusive and visibly divided society. Despite demonstrating enhanced levels of 'territoriality' and reduced levels of recorded crime and fear of crime, (Brown 2001; Ratcliffe 2003) residents, far from being satisfied with the positive effects of alley-gating, are already demanding more and higher gates, even gates topped by razor wire. And the idea of

to some crime and nuisance prevention problems in certain circumstances. However, before more widespread introduction of such schemes throughout towns and cities in Britain occurs, those responsible for their implementation and use – planners, the police, local authorities, politicians and the wider community – should carefully consider the ramifications and associated costs of attempting to redesign the social and physical fabric of our towns and cities in the expectation of preventing specific criminal and antisocial activity.

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References

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