

“Private” Crime in Public Housing: Violent Victimization, Fear of Crime and Social Isolation Among Women Public Housing Residents

Claire Renzetti¹
St. Joseph’s University &
Shana L. Maier, University of Delaware

Although public housing is typically associated with high crime rates, little research has been done on fear of crime or violent victimization experiences among public housing residents. Moreover, there are few studies that look specifically at women’s fear of crime or violent victimization experiences in public housing, despite the fact that women constitute the majority of public housing residents. These issues were examined in the present study through interviews with female public housing residents in Camden, New Jersey (NJ). The interviews reveal high rates of violent victimization, especially at the hands of intimates and acquaintances. Fear of crime is also high among these women and this fear is intensified by the women’s sense of social isolation, which manifests itself as distrust in the police and neighbours. The implications of these findings for future research are discussed.

In the minds of many people in the United States, public housing is associated with serious social problems, including crime. Despite this image, surprisingly little research has been done on crime in public housing (Holzman, 1996). Much of the available research on crime in public housing focuses on what Fagan and his colleagues (Fagan et al., 1998, p. 3) refer to as “structure-of-housing” issues —that is, comparisons of crime rates in different types of public housing developments: large vs. small, high-rise vs. garden-style vs. town house units. As they correctly point out, such research overlooks important differences in location, composition, social organization and administration in public housing, all of which can affect crime. More surprising to us, however, is the lack of research on the gendered nature of fear of crime and criminal

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victimization in public housing, given that of the more than 1.27 million public housing households in the United States, over 90% are headed by women (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2000).²

This article reports the findings of an exploratory study of fear of crime and criminal victimization of female public housing residents living in Camden, NJ. The article focuses on the women's fear and experiences of violent victimization. Although the women articulate their fear of crime in terms of "stranger danger," we find that, like women in general, they are at greatest risk of being victimized by intimates. Moreover, because previous research on fear of crime has shown that the availability of social supports as well as confidence in the police lower fear of crime, we examine the women's support networks in times of crisis and their assessment of local police responsiveness. We find that although their victimization rates are high, they have difficulty getting help when they are victimized. Our findings raise several important questions for future research. But before we discuss the present study in greater detail, we briefly review the research on how social class, race, gender, feelings of community cohesion and confidence in the police are related to fear of crime and violent victimization.

FACTORS THAT AFFECT FEAR OF CRIME AND VIOLENT VICTIMIZATION

One of the first things criminologists (should) teach their students is that not everyone has an equal chance of becoming the victim of a violent crime. Social class is one factor that has been found to influence one's risk of violent victimization, with the poor (individuals with annual incomes under \$15,000, US) being twice as likely as the wealthy (individuals with annual incomes of \$75,000, US or more) to be victims of a violent crime (Coker et al., 2000). Given that people of color are more likely than Whites to be poor, it is not surprising to find that their rate of violent victimization is significantly higher: 52.3 violent victimizations per 1,000 African Americans age 12 and older, 44.0 violent victimizations per 1,000 Hispanics age 12 and older, 40.9 violent victimizations per 1,000 Whites age 12 and older. Gender also affects likelihood of violent victimization, with men having a 30% greater risk of being victimized. However, while poor, Black men have the highest victimization rates, poor women of color are significantly more likely than White women to become the victims of a violent crime (U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1998).

² This figure does not include Section 8 federally subsidized housing.

Despite gender differences in victimization rates, one of the most consistent findings in the criminological literature is that women fear crime more than men do (Ferraro, 1995; LaGrange & Ferraro, 1989; Stanko, 1990; Warr, 1984, 1985). Women's greater fear of crime holds across social classes and racial/ethnic groupings, although poor and minority women appear more fearful than middle and upper-class White women (Coston & Finckenauer, 1993; Madriz, 1997).

Ferraro (1995) notes that our understanding of why women are more fearful is limited. In his research he found that fear of crime among women is largely fear of rape or sexual assault. Indeed, so great is women's —especially young women's—fear of rape that it "shadows" other types of victimization among women. That is, for women rape is a kind of "master offense," which raises women's fear of other offenses, such as robbery, assault and burglary. Women believe that being victimized by these other offenses could lead to rape. For women, rape is, in Warr's (1985, p. 246) words, a "perceptually contemporaneous offense." In both Ferraro's (1995) and Warr's (1985) studies, women feared rape more than any other crime, including murder. Gordon and Rigor (1989) refer to women's fear of rape as "the female fear."

However, some feminist criminologists are critical of the characterization of women's fear of crime as solely or even primarily fear of rape. Stanko (2000), for example, argues that equating women's fear of crime with fear of rape causes us to overlook the many other types of victimization women experience in their daily lives, including sexual harassment and domestic violence. Further, associating women's fear of crime with fear of rape reinforces the notion that women are most likely to be victimized by strangers when, in fact, most women, including those who are raped, are victimized by men they know. Madriz (1997) also points out that, "[d]uring recent decades, researchers have referred to 'female fear of crime' as if it were the same feeling for most women and it is not" (p. 54). Women's fears vary as a result of their personal experiences as well as their "place" in society, which is determined not only by their gender, social class and race/ethnicity, but also by such factors as their age, sexual orientation and physical ability/disability.

In addition to these factors, researchers have also found that women's (and men's) fear of crime is mediated by their perceptions of the community in which they live and by their assessment of police effectiveness (Box, Hale & Andrews, 1988). Studies indicate that in neighbourhoods showing visible signs of economic decline and physical deterioration (e.g., abandoned buildings, littered streets and sidewalks, graffitied walls), fear of crime is high (Box et al., 1988; Miethe, 1995; Skogan, 1990). Residents come to see life in these communities as

disorderly and unpredictable and, therefore, threatening. However, even in economically and physically impoverished neighbourhoods, fear of crime may be lowered if community cohesion—or what Sampson and his colleagues (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997) call “collective efficacy”—is high. More specifically, research shows that in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods characterized by a high level of trust among neighbours and a shared willingness among neighbours to help one another, fear of crime and rates of violent victimization are reduced (Box et al., 1988; Sampson et al., 1997; Skogan, 1990). In addition, women (and men) who believe that the police are effective—that is, they respond to calls quickly, they are visible in the community, they are successful in apprehending offenders—express less fear of crime (Box et al., 1988).

Available research also shows that significantly more so for women than for men, fear of crime acts as a powerful social control agent in their everyday lives, leading them to curtail some activities and pursue various strategies to avoid violent victimization (Ferraro, 1995; Warr, 1985). Women often report, for example, that they do not go out alone at night, they keep their doors and windows locked when at home and they sometimes choose clothing that ensures they will not draw attention to themselves in public (Madriz, 1997; Stanko, 1990). These strategies reflect the fact that regardless of race or social class, women typically conceptualize their fear in terms of “stranger danger.” More specifically, women are socialized—by caregivers, teachers, law enforcement and the media—to believe that they are most vulnerable to a particular crime scenario: a violent sexual assault by a psychotic stranger who comes out of a dark alley or breaks into their home to attack them. For most women, crime wears the face of a young, dark-skinned, male stranger, who is mentally ill and/or addicted to drugs (Madriz, 1997; Pain, 1993; Stanko, 1990, 1996; Young, 1996).

Unfortunately, the precautions women are advised to take are not always successful in protecting them from violent victimization, especially since research shows that they are less likely to be victimized by a stranger than by someone they know. In fact, women are three times more likely to be violently victimized by a male intimate, relative, friend or acquaintance than by a stranger (Craven, 1996; see also Dobash et al., 1998; Greenfeld, 1998; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). And while countless articles on intimate violence point out that women in all socioeconomic groups may be victimized, research shows low-income women and women who live in neighbourhoods of concentrated economic disadvantage are at greater risk than more affluent women and women who live in more affluent neighbourhoods (Benson et al., 2000; Browne & Bassuk, 1997; Coker et al., 2000; Moore, 1997; Schwartz, 1988).

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN PUBLIC HOUSING

DeKeseredy and his colleagues (DeKeseredy et al., 1999, p. 501) have argued that public housing developments are "key arenas where gendered power relations are played out." Consequently, one would expect women's rates of violent victimization in general and intimate victimization in particular, to be exceptionally high there. Yet, as noted at the outset of this article, we know little about the lives of female public housing residents. Few researchers to date have systematically examined female public housing residents' concerns about or experiences of criminal victimization, particularly violent victimization by intimates.

In their study of violence against women in Canadian public housing developments, DeKeseredy and his colleagues (1999) found a high rate of intimate partner physical violence. Nineteen percent of the 216 women in the sample reported being violently victimized by an intimate during the 12 months preceding data collection. In contrast, the global rate of violent victimization by a stranger was 3%.

In his ethnography of an East Harlem neighbourhood, Bourgeois (1999) implies a high rate of intimate partner violence among residents of the public housing developments he studied, but he presents the experiences of only one woman: Candy. Nevertheless, he theorizes that the extensive and severe intimate violence he witnessed and heard about among the predominantly Puerto Rican residents is an outgrowth of men's significantly weakened control over their households, "their" women and public space. He sees in "El Barrio" a "crisis in patriarchy" generated by men's poor or nonexistent opportunities for employment in the legal economy as well as their confinement to "the isolated towers of public housing projects surrounded by people they do not know or trust" (p. 215). These historical structural changes have drastically diminished the men's sense of masculine dignity and the men's sense of failure as a man "expressed itself concretely in the polarization of domestic violence and sexual abuse" (p. 215).

Similarly, Websdale (2001) discusses the violent victimization of the Black female public housing residents he interviewed in his ethnography in Nashville, Tennessee, in the context of "the frantic competition between men in the projects over every conceivable issue, including sexual access to women" (p. 134). He also argues that, unlike more affluent men who may exercise power and control over women through more subtle, manipulative means, poor men may resort to more overt physical violence. He sees the "patriarchal compulsion" of some poor Black men to use direct coercion and physical violence to control their intimate partners as being exacerbated by saturation policing that ensnares large numbers of Black men, labeling them "criminals" or "felons" and thus making it

more difficult for them to find and maintain legitimate paid employment. "If the criminal justice juggernaut's close regulation of black men makes them more likely to use violence against their intimate female partners, then such close regulation constitutes yet another assault on the black family and contemporary black kinship systems" (p. 137).

Ironically, Websdale (2001) found that the saturation policing of Nashville's public housing developments did not reduce most women residents' fear of crime or their likelihood of victimization at the hands of intimate partners. Websdale identifies a number of reasons for this, including fear and distrust of the police and concern about being labeled a "snitch" by others in the community. Many of the women did not think the police were willing to protect them; others were concerned that they would be arrested instead of their abusers because they themselves were involved in some illegal activity. Some women felt that domestic violence is a "White problem," or that by calling the police they were reinforcing negative stereotypes of Black men, and finally, a few others seemed to be desensitized to domestic violence in public housing.

Both Bourgois (1999) and Websdale (2001) heard women express fear of the physical spaces outside and around their public housing developments. While both note that some women have toughened themselves and become street smart, Websdale, in particular, notes that this fear of potential victimization on the streets could make it difficult for women to get help if they are abused at home.

The present study sought to add to this limited literature on violence against women in public housing. This article explores the issues of fear of crime, victimization experiences and help seeking using data collected through interviews with female public housing residents in Camden, NJ.

STUDYING FEAR, VICTIMIZATION AND HELP-SEEKING AMONG FEMALE PUBLIC HOUSING RESIDENTS IN CAMDEN, NEW JERSEY

The Setting

Camden, NJ occupies about nine square miles along the Delaware River, just across the Benjamin Franklin bridge from Philadelphia. It is bordered by some of the wealthiest suburbs in NJ. Standing square in the center of Camden, one can look across the river at Philadelphia's glistening skyline. Camden, however, seems hundreds of miles from prosperity; indeed, the problems the city's 87,500 residents face daily rival those of many developing countries.

More than a third of Camden's residents (36.6%) live below the poverty line. More than half of Camden's children (50.5%) live in poverty. Among

the city's adults, 22.3% of men and 33.6% of women are poor. Median family income in 1990 was just \$18,874 compared with the national median in 1990 of \$35,353. Among Camden's families with children under 18, 44.1% are living in poverty but this poverty is disproportionately concentrated among female-headed households: nearly 60% of female-headed households with children under 18 are poor, compared with 42.9% of male-headed households with children under 18 and 16.2% of married couple households with children under 18 (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1997; 1999).

The economic deprivation that characterizes Camden is reflected in other indicators as well. About half (50.3%) of Camden's residents age 25 and older have not completed high school. Overall, less than half (45.9%) of the city's residents age 16 or older are in the paid labour force. Although women have a lower unemployment rate than men (6.7% vs. 11.7%), more women than men are not in the paid labour force (48.8% vs. 40.4%). About 27% of households in Camden receive income from public assistance programs. Less than half (48.4%) of housing units in Camden are owner-occupied compared to 64.2% nationally; the median value of owner-occupied housing in Camden in 1990 was \$31,300 compared to the national median in 1990 of \$95,500 (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1997; 1999).

In short, to paraphrase a term coined by Kasarda (1992, p. 46), Camden, NJ may be considered a "severely distressed" American city. As we have already noted, women shoulder a sizable share of this distress. The burden is also especially heavy for women of color, since racial and ethnic minorities are disproportionately represented among Camden's population: 56.4% of Camden's population is Black, 31.1% is Hispanic and about 19% is White (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1999).³ A sizable number of these women live in public housing. Most of the women who participated in this study lived in two of North Camden's high-rise public housing developments, although it is important to note that most study participants had moved over the years among the various types of public housing units available in the city.⁴

Sample and Methods

In order to be eligible to participate in this study, women had to be at least 18 years old and a current resident of public or Section 8 housing. Fluency in English was not a requirement for participation, since a

³ The percentages do not add to 100 because in the racial/ethnic categorization used by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, a person of Hispanic origin may be of any race.

⁴ The size and quality of public housing, especially Section 8 housing, varies dramatically in Camden. For instance, one of the women we interviewed who had Section 8 housing lived in a two-bedroom rowhouse, while another lived in a two-room basement apartment.

translator was available. The convenience sample that we interviewed for the study was recruited in several ways. The primary method of recruitment was through social workers at a church-affiliated family services agency in Camden, who made their clients aware of the project and told them how to sign up for an interview.⁵ Women were also recruited through announcements in church newsletters and by word-of-mouth (i.e., snowballing).

Potential participants were told that the study focused on problems faced by female public housing residents. Although this article reports the findings with respect to women's concerns about and experiences of violent victimization and help seeking, other issues were covered during the interviews, including the physical quality of the housing, the quality of the neighbourhood in which the housing is located, whether the women felt the neighbourhood had gotten better or worse than when they first moved in and what they considered to be the best and worst features of their particular housing unit.⁶

If a woman qualified and expressed a willingness to participate, a time was arranged for an interview. All interviews were conducted at a location of the participant's choice —e.g., her home, a private room in her apartment building—with an eye to maximizing the participant's privacy and safety. Each interview was tape recorded with the permission of the participants. On tape, the study was explained again to the participants, who were also told they could discontinue the interview at any time or decline to answer any question they chose.⁷ Each woman's verbal consent to participate was recorded. Interviews averaged an hour in length. Each participant was paid \$20 in cash at the completion of the interview. A total of 36 interviews (about 50% of the interviews that were scheduled) was completed between September, 1998 and February, 1999.⁸

⁵ Many Camden residents, regardless of their religious affiliation, seek the aid of this family services agency because, as several study participants told us, the agency is seen as more reliable and easier to deal with than public agencies. Moreover, this private agency is often sought out to help cut through the "red tape" and negotiate the hurdles of public agencies.

⁶ Many of the questions used in this study were adapted from the interview schedules used in studies by DeKeseredy et al. (1998) and Popkin et al. (1998). The authors wish to thank Walter DeKeseredy and Victoria Gwiasda for generously sharing the research instruments from these studies with us.

⁷ None of the women who agreed to participate in the study ended the interview prematurely or refused to answer any of the interviewers's questions. Although there is no way of knowing whether all participants answered every question truthfully or completely, the women's apparent willingness to participate and discuss their experiences may well be an indication of the sensitivity with which the interviews were prepared and asked, as well as the level of rapport established between the interviewer and the participants. The interviews were conducted by the second author.

⁸ We could not determine if there were important differences between the women who completed the interviews and those who signed up for an interview but cancelled or did not appear at the scheduled time or respond to follow-up attempts. Many of those who could not do the interview at the scheduled time indicated that an unanticipated event (e.g., a child's illness, a forgotten doctor's appointment) had arisen.

Of the 36 women interviewed, 19 (53%) were Hispanic, primarily from Puerto Rico or of Puerto Rican descent.⁹ Fifteen (42%) of the women were African American and two were White. The women ranged in age from 18 to 82, with an average age of 42. Twenty-six of the 36 women (72%) were unemployed and relied on some form of government assistance as their primary source of income. However, even among the ten women who were working, their earnings put most of them well below the federal poverty line. The average annual income of this convenience sample was \$7,733.

Most of the women (53%) were single at the time of the interview; only four were married. The remainder were divorced, separated, or widowed. Nearly all of the women, however, had children; only four were childless. Nineteen of the women had their children living with them in public housing at the time of the interview. Of those who had children living with them, the average number of children was two. On average, the women in this study had lived in public housing for six and a half years.

The tape-recorded interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim and analyzed using the grounded theory method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to identify major themes consistently reported by the women. Three major themes and two sub-themes emerged from the interviews: (1) experiences of violent victimization; (2) fear of crime; and (3) social isolation, which was composed of the sub-themes of (a) distrust of the police and (b) distrust of or unfamiliarity with neighbours.

THEME ONE: EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENT VICTIMIZATION

Experiences of violent victimization among the women we interviewed were widespread, both in terms of recent victimization (within the 12 months prior to the interview) and lifetime experience of violent victimization. Of the 36 women interviewed, 12 (33%) had been violently victimized during the 12 months prior to the interview. These victimization experiences included having been hit or punched, beaten up and/or sexually assaulted. Of these 12 women, six (50%) had been victimized by a husband, boyfriend, or acquaintance (e.g., a neighbour). The lifetime rate of violent victimization in this sample was 64% (23 of the 36) and of these women, 83% had been victimized by a husband, boyfriend, relative, or acquaintance. For example:

⁹ The translator (Spanish/English) was required for just three of the interviews.

Me and my boyfriend would always fight... We would get into a scuffle. I'm a very independent person and I refuse to let anyone rule over me or hurt me in any kind of way... There was a lot of grabbing. Not too much hitting. Mostly grabbing, shoving. [36- year-old single mother of three]

One of my boyfriends, I was living with him. He stabbed me [in the stomach]... I had to get stitches... I wouldn't press charges. I didn't even call [the police]. The hospital did. [44-year-old single mother of two]

At first it started with pushing and slapping. It escalated to him hitting. One day he actually punched me. I had a black eye and a knot. My eye had closed shut because I had a blood clot behind the eye. I had to go to the hospital. I never called the police on him or told him, "You've got to leave." ... I know in my heart I really don't want this guy gone. [39-year-old single mother of one]

Six of the women reported being violently victimized by multiple perpetrators during their lifetimes. These victimization experiences included sexual assaults by intimates and strangers, stalking by an acquaintance and physical abuse at the hands of husbands or boyfriends.

One incident that is especially noteworthy in this study involved a woman who reported having been the victim of a severe beating and attempted gang rape in her apartment just two months prior to the interview. She indicated that the perpetrators were strangers but we later learned that these men may have come to the apartment looking for her 16-year-old son. Her son, who lived with her, apparently owed a bad drug debt. It was not clear whether this woman's victimization was simply the result of her having been available to the perpetrators when her son was not or whether they deliberately chose to victimize her as a way to warn and/or punish her son. If the latter was the case, however, this incident provides a chilling example of how men sometimes use women to exact revenge or retribution on other men.¹⁰

As we have already noted, the rate of violent victimization is exceptionally high among the group of women we interviewed. Consider, for example, that nationally, only 2.1% of women report having been physically assaulted and/or raped in the previous 12 months; 17.6% report having been the victim of an attempted or completed rape during

¹⁰ The abuse of women by men to exact revenge on male rivals or enemies is not an uncommon tactic of warfare. See, for example, Mrsevic and Hughes (1997) and Nikolic-Ristanovic (1999).

their lifetimes, while 51.9% report having been physically assaulted during their lifetimes (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Certainly, the findings of this exploratory study of a small, self-selected sample are not generalizable. Nevertheless, we are struck by the similarity of our findings to those of other researchers who have examined the victimization experiences of economically disadvantaged women (see, for instance, Brush, 2000; Raphael, 2001; Tolman, 1999).

THEME TWO: FEAR OF CRIME

Given the victimization experiences reported by the women in this study, it is not surprising that nearly all of them expressed a high fear of crime, especially violent crime. None of the women felt very safe in their neighbourhood. Although most said they felt pretty safe walking alone during the daytime, even when walking past people they didn't know, none felt safe in the neighbourhood alone at night. As one 44-year-old single mother of two said, "I don't go out... I stopped that a long time ago even when I was living down in South Camden. Camden is not a safe place to be walking at night."

When asked about the biggest problem they face as neighbourhood residents, *every* woman mentioned personal safety concerns and fear of crime. However, their responses indicated that they also experienced fear while inside their houses or apartments. While the majority of the women said they felt pretty safe or somewhat safe at home during the day or night, they typically added that this was because they kept their doors and windows locked at all times. Like the majority of women in other studies (see, for example, Madriz, 1997), the women we interviewed worried about being victimized by strangers, especially drug dealers and people using drugs. They described the "bad guy" as a stranger who lurks around the poorly-lit Camden streets at night or even the hallways and elevators of their building. As one 36-year-old single mother of one said, "I don't like riding on the elevators because you don't know who is going to be there when the door opens. But I have no choice cause I live on the 20th floor."

The women's fear of "stranger danger" is reflected in the various precautions they routinely take to protect themselves from victimization at the hands of strangers. As we have already noted, for example, nearly all of them reported that they keep their doors and windows locked with multiple locks when they are at home, regardless of the time of day. Most also said they avoid going out alone at night; if they must go out at night, they go with someone and they go by private car, if possible, not by foot or public transport. The reported behaviour of one 35-year-old divorced mother of three was typical of the women we interviewed:

Ummm, I never walk anywhere. I drive everywhere, you know? I don't know if it's me, but I'm afraid to drive out at night... [When walking on the street during the day], don't make no eye contact. Just keep right on going. Mind your business.... [At home], everything is locked.... every window and every door and the dead bolt is on. So it's like a routine. You just check everything.

It is important to note that the women's fears are not unfounded; the streets of Camden are notorious for violence, especially drug-related turf battles, stabbings and shootings. Many of the women said, in fact, that they often hear gunshots outside their houses or apartments at night. So perhaps one of the reasons so few of the women in this study had been victimized by a stranger was that their strategies for addressing their fear of this type of crime —not going out alone at night, keeping their doors and windows locked when they are at home —are largely successful in preventing violent victimization at the hands of strangers. Nevertheless, given our findings, we can see that these strategies do not fully protect them from violent victimization for they are at high risk of being victimized by intimates and acquaintances.

THEME THREE: SOCIAL ISOLATION

What happens when a woman is victimized? On whom can she count for help? Do most women have high confidence in the police? Can they rely on their neighbours to intervene on their behalf during a crisis or respond with support if they are victimized? Most of the women reported having few sources of help they could count on when a problem or a crisis arose. Two sub-themes emerged from these discussions. One sub-theme was distrust of the police and the second was distrust of or unfamiliarity with neighbours.

"You Could Be Dead or Half-Dead"

The majority of the women said they could not trust the local police to help them or when they had called the police in the past, the police were unresponsive. Several women said they never call the police because officers routinely tell those they are investigating who called them and the women feared retaliation. But the most common complaint from the women we interviewed was that the police "take forever" to respond to a call, despite the fact that Camden is a small city. A 55-year-old widowed mother of two summarized this feeling well when she said, " [w]ell, you

can call them [the police], but how long till they get here, now, that you don't know. It takes awhile." Similarly, a 36-year-old single mother of a 3-year-old said, "[t]hey are so slow... [by the time they come], whatever situation was going on, you could be dead or half-dead. Forget it." Perhaps the most egregious example of this problem was provided by the woman who was severely beaten and nearly gang raped by men looking for her son. She said she called the police as soon as the attackers ran away but the police "didn't come until the next day... To check the window, how they got in."

Other women, who had called the police for help with domestic violence, described the police response as largely ineffective. The women said that it seemed the police "didn't know what to do" when they arrived on the scene or they refused to arrest the batterer. As one woman said, the police appeared to be "helpless" when they finally responded to her call. Another woman said that she went to the station house to sign a warrant for her husband's arrest after he had beaten her up and then was told by the sergeant on duty to go home and tell her husband what she had done. That was the last time she had gone to the police for help.

One woman attributed the poor police response to her calls to her inability to speak English. She said only one person on the force could speak Spanish, so unless that person was available, she needed a translator to communicate to officers what had happened. However, like the women in Websdale's (2001) study, most of the women in this study felt that the poor police response indicated that the police did not consider their calls important or they were afraid to come to the public housing developments. As one 44-year-old single mother of two put it, "[the police] take their time in coming. I don't think they want to even come here because they sure take their time."

Most of the women spoke more positively about the "security guards" in their buildings, although there appeared to be some confusion about the roles and duties of these public housing employees. Some of the women said these employees are "property attendants," not "guards," and therefore have no authority to respond to a crime or other crisis. Many of the women complained that because the job paid poorly, turnover was high and the qualifications and training of the "guards" low. To paraphrase one participant, one day a guy could be sweeping the hall and the next day he's wearing a guard's uniform at the front desk. Moreover, guards or attendants were not available in all developments; they could be found in the high-rise buildings, but not in the townhouse complexes or patrolling Section 8 housing.

In short, the majority of the women we interviewed were strong in their expressions of distrust of the police. The police, they made clear, simply

could not be counted on to protect them if they were in crisis, including a crisis precipitated by domestic violence.

"I Don't Count on Nobody"

Most of the women also felt that, for various reasons, they could not count on their neighbours for help when a problem or emergency arose. For instance, some of the women said they could not count on their neighbours because their neighbours were often a source of other problems for them (they dealt drugs, played their music too loud, fought, didn't control their children). A second reason some women gave for not relying on neighbours was that the neighbours had so many problems of their own, they do not want to get involved in other people's troubles. As one 39-year-old single mother put it, "[my neighbours] tend to be more screwed up than me."

But the reason most frequently given by the women for not counting on neighbours in a crisis was that they do not know their neighbours and, in fact, had chosen not to get to know them. For example, one 36-year-old single mother of two said, "Everyone here basically stays to themselves. People are too nosey... I don't like anyone in my business anyway." Another single mother said, "I found living in apartment buildings that it's best to keep your business to yourself. It's not a good idea to make too many friends. Too many people know your business." Another woman described herself as "a loner." This 25-year-old single mother said, "I keep to myself. I don't communicate with nobody. I just come and go."

So to whom do these women turn in a crisis, such as a violent victimization? The majority of the women said they could call a relative who lives nearby; a few said they could go to their caseworker or someone at their church and a number of the women said they simply rely on themselves. As a 23-year-old single mother of two put it, "I don't count on nobody... I don't trust too many people."

The women in this study live in an economically disadvantaged neighbourhood with many of the indicators of physical deterioration identified by Skogan (1990) and others (e.g., Box et al., 1988) clearly visible: The women cited vandalism (broken windows, damaged elevators in the high-rises), noise, graffiti, trash (on the streets, in the hallways of buildings), people drinking alcohol or using drugs in public and youth gangs as major problems they routinely encounter in their communities. As other researchers report, these "physical clues" of disorder increase fear of crime. But these women do not have strong community support networks or confidence in the police to offset this fear. Low community cohesion and lack of confidence in the police produce social isolation which, in turn, intensifies fear and increases vulnerability to victimization (Box et al., 1988).

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A significant limitation of this study was our reliance on a small, self-selected sample of female public housing residents. Of course, as Bourgois (1999) points out, random sample neighbourhood surveys are not likely to elicit accurate information from "individuals who have been marginalized socially, economically and culturally," especially when the topic is a sensitive one (p. 12). Thus, the findings from this study are not generalizable and the research is purely exploratory. The data do, however, raise challenging issues for future research.

One of the major themes that emerged from our interviews with women in Camden was the high rate of violent victimization they had experienced, both recently and over their lifetimes, at the hands of intimates and acquaintances. These rates were significantly higher than those found in random sample surveys of the general population but not dissimilar to the rates obtained in studies of economically disadvantaged women. An important question that arises is why do poor women experience more intimate violence than more affluent women? Does the stress caused by economic deprivation at the individual level induce intimate violence? MacMillan and Gartner (1999) found that economic deprivation in itself did not precipitate intimate violence. Instead, their findings indicated that intimate violence against women was more likely among couples in which the female partner was employed but the male partner was unemployed. Thus, violence was a means for male partners to reassert patriarchal dominance and control over "their" women. Similarly, Raphael (2001) reports that poor women who attempt to improve their economic circumstances through welfare-to-work programs are at increased risk for intimate violence from male partners threatened by the prospect of the women's financial independence from them or by the women's chances of meeting someone better—that is, more financially secure—at work.

However, DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2002) maintain that in addition to the stress produced by economic deprivation or failure and "inversions of patriarchy," men who live in urban areas of concentrated disadvantage, such as public housing developments, are also encouraged through male peer support to physically and sexually abuse women. Although most research testing the male peer support theory of woman abuse has been conducted using samples of college men, including members of athletic teams and fraternities, DeKeseredy and Schwartz cite evidence that male peer support for woman abuse is strong among poor, unemployed and underemployed men who live in and around public housing developments. They point out that these men spend much of their time in

one another's company and that within these peer groups, men encourage one another to be sexually active, to brag about their sexual conquests and to put women in "their place" for challenges to patriarchal authority. Women are considered legitimate victims, deserving sexual and physical abuse (see, for example, Anderson, 1999; Bourgois, 1999).¹¹

Obviously, an empirical evaluation of these hypotheses is beyond the scope of the present article but the findings of our research indicate that such evaluation is warranted in future research. Another issue that should be investigated is the contribution of neighbourhood characteristics, especially social isolation or lack of collective efficacy, to intimate violence. Fox et al., (1999) found that community economic disadvantage has an effect on intimate violence independent of the effects of individual economic distress. However, they were unable to determine if these neighbourhood or contextual effects can be subsumed within the concept of collective efficacy. Fox et al.'s research, coupled with the findings of our study showing high social isolation and low collective efficacy among female public housing residents, indicate that it would be prudent for future research to explore more fully whether women's violent victimization and fear of crime are affected by levels of community cohesion.

Fox et al. (2000) speculate that high collective efficacy may have less of an impact on intimate violence than on other, more public forms of criminal behaviour. Because intimate violence is typically perpetrated in the "privacy" of the home, victims may be less likely to disclose the problem to anyone except those with whom they are very emotionally close and abusers may be less likely to come under the influence of informal community controls. Browning (2002) reports that community norms of nonintervention into partner conflicts are associated with an increase in the likelihood of partner violence against women. However, Browning also found that high collective efficacy has a negative impact on women's likelihood of experiencing severe partner violence. When communities high in collective efficacy also favor intervention into intimate relationships, the likelihood of women experiencing severe partner violence is significantly reduced. Browning also found that high

¹¹ See also Gillum (2000) who reports that African American men who subscribe to the jezebel stereotype of African American women —i.e., that African American women are sexually aggressive, promiscuous and easily aroused— are more likely to justify domestic violence. Gillum also found an association between acceptance of the matriarch stereotype of African American women —i.e., that African American women are overly aggressive, unfeminine and emasculating— with justifications for domestic violence, but it was weaker than that for the jezebel stereotype. The African American men in Gillum's sample viewed the matriarch positively as well as negatively, whereas their views of the jezebel were uniformly negative.

collective efficacy also increases women's willingness to disclose partner violence to others who may provide help and support.

Additional research raises provocative questions regarding the interaction of intervention norms with collective efficacy. For example, researchers who have studied intimate violence in small, rural communities have identified a potential downside of the tight-knit community: the protection of batterers by their neighbours (see, for example, Ames & Dunham, 2002; Websdale, 1998). Although we did not raise this issue with the women we interviewed, some told us about incidents in which neighbours and even security guards got abusers who were their friends out of the housing development before the police arrived on the scene. Thus, future research should explore both the positive and negative effects of collective efficacy levels and how these may influence intervention norms with regard to intimate violence in disadvantaged neighbourhoods generally and in public housing developments especially.

Even if high collective efficacy is found to contribute to positive outcomes, such as a lowered incidence of intimate violence, it is unlikely that high collective efficacy alone is sufficient to reduce women public housing residents' vulnerability to abuse. Some researchers report that neighbourhood residents typically do not want to handle problems or crises themselves; they prefer intervention by "authorities" such as the police (Carr, 2000). Much of the research that has been undertaken to evaluate the effectiveness of community policing and community/police partnerships in reducing fear of crime, social disorder and criminal victimization has reported generally favorable effects (see, for example, Fleissner & Henzelmann, 1996; Miller, 1999; Skogan, 1990). However, the only study to date to evaluate community policing around public housing has shown it to be largely ineffective, not only in reducing crime, including intimate partner violence, but also in boosting residents' confidence and trust in the police (Websdale, 2001).

Additional studies are needed to further examine the impact of community policing on neighbourhoods of concentrated disadvantage, but these studies must seek out, as Websdale's (2001) did, the perspectives of women residents, including victims of intimate violence. Unfortunately, when researchers and policy makers have considered the issue of safety in public housing, they have traditionally focused on "street crime." Our hope is that the findings of our study _and future studies _ will help refocus attention on what happens *inside* public housing units: on the violent victimization of women residents by their intimates and acquaintances.

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