

# SITUATIONAL CRIME PREVENTION IN PUBLIC HOUSING : LETTER FROM AMERICA

*Véronique LEVAN* is doing her comparative doctoral research in *American Studies* (University of Paris IV-Sorbonne/CESDIP) on the effects of the implementation of situational crime prevention in public housing in France, Great Britain and the United States. She reports here on the situation in New York City<sup>1</sup>.

In France, the repeated announcement that a bill will soon be passed on crime prevention policy, partly focusing on dissuasion, along with the cyclic, current event-linked politicized debates on "insecurity", show that a reflexive detour by thinking about experiences elsewhere is quite relevant. The present paper attempts to provide some elements of response, based on the analysis of the implementation of situational crime prevention in a public housing project in New York City<sup>2</sup>. We first discuss the theoretical foundations of situational prevention, followed by a presentation of the programs implemented in the USA and in the neighborhood studied and last, the findings of the local investigation.

## I - Theoretical Foundations and Definitions

Several decades ago, in response to the limits of the reactive strategies applied by the criminal justice system, a movement developed which gave credence to the notion of the prevention of crime. Social prevention and situational prevention are usually contrasted. The former assumes that the causes of crime are to be sought in the personality and motives of individuals, in personal psychological, genetic or social factors and the socializing environment, all of which may be conducive to offending. It posits that these deprivation factors may generate criminal inclinations. The latter approach resorts to an explanatory model focusing preferentially on the criminal act, the situations encouraging acting out (the "opportunities") and the offender's motivation. It refers to the principles of individual responsibility and free choice. The target of the intervention is not the same, then, and generally designates individuals termed "at-risk" in one case, and potential victims and those situational aspects of the immediate context that encourage people to commit criminal acts in the other.

Three **major theories** support the latter criminological perspective. Routine activity theory<sup>3</sup>, at the macro-sociological level, postulates that with changes in society, opportunities for crime increase. The risks are greater with the convergence of three elements (a motivated offender, abundant and unguarded targets). At the intermediate level we find crime pattern theory<sup>4</sup>, concentrating on the dynamics of criminogenic locations in neighborhoods. Last, at a micro-sociological level, the rational choice perspective<sup>5</sup> looks at decision-making processes in offenders, with targets chosen in accordance with the risks run, the effort required and the expected winnings. This approach to crime control is based on rationality of an economic type, to which new variables have recently been added – "moral justification of the act" and "inducements". Advocates of situational prevention do not confine situational control techniques strictly to target-hardening, as is sometimes believed. They also involve social influence components (Neighborhood Watch or police patrols), legislative measures (civil remedies), and so on, as shown in the synoptic table below.

Situational prevention, then, aims at **adapting the urban design and the management of a given environment so as to reduce opportunities for specific types of crimes by acting on the perceptions of potential offenders**. The postulate is: when perceived and treated as a relatively widespread phenomenon, crime turns into a "normal" risk, requiring "casual" management. Given the enormous abundance of "temptations", then, the response consists of mutualizing preventive efforts and integrating them in the everyday routines of ordinary citizens and para-public and private actors, by urging them to protect themselves by their own means. This coincides with the political precept aimed at limiting government intervention.

Table : Twenty-five Techniques of Situational Prevention

Increase the Effort	Increase the Risks	Reduce the Rewards	Reduce Provocations	Remove Excuses
1. Target harden	6. Extend guardianship	11. Conceal targets	16. Reduce frustrations and stress	21. Set rules
2. Control access to facilities	7. Assist natural surveillance	12. Remove targets	17. Avoid disputes	22. Post instructions
3. Screen exits	8. Reduce anonymity	13. Identify property	18. Reduce emotional arousal	23. Alert conscience
4. Deflect offenders	9. Utilize place managers	14. Disrupt markets	19. Neutralize peer pressure	24. Assist compliance
5. Control tools/weapons	10. Strengthen formal surveillance	15. Deny benefits	20. Discourage imitation	25. Control drugs and alcohol

Source : R. Clarke, J. Eck, 2003, *Become a Problem-Solving Crime Analyst*, London, Jill Dando Institute of Crime Science, UCL.

Importers of situational prevention, in France and elsewhere, often reduce the complexity of these approaches to the promotion of a few rudimentary techniques. They contend that the solutions are inexpensive, a matter of common sense and rapidly effective, and therefore constitute an attractive pragmatic option for political policy-makers. But what reception

do these situational innovations get from users: how do they use them, and perceive them? What consequences, if any, may be drawn for reducing crime? To attempt to answer these questions, we collected information on the personal experience of residents of a public housing development in New York City. Criminal justice policies in the USA, and specifically, in New York, are often an attractive model for foreign

<sup>1</sup>This study could not have been conducted as auspiciously without the support of the French Committee of the France American Foundation, which gave her a scholarship, and the acceptance of Ms. Levan as International Visiting Library Fellow within the School of Criminal Justice (Rutgers University, USA) in 2003.

<sup>2</sup>The work of Oscar Newman on the theory of defensible space in New York public housing (1972, *Defensible Space Evaluated – People and Design in the Violent City*, London, Architectural Press) provides systematic formulation of preventive arrangements based on urban planning.

<sup>3</sup>L.E. Cohen, M. Felson, 1979, Social change and crime rate trends : a routine activity approach, *American Sociological Review*, 44, 588-608.

<sup>4</sup>P. Brantingham, 1993. Environment, routine and situation: toward a pattern theory of crime, in R. Clarke, M. Felson, (eds.), *Routine Activity and Rational Choice, Advances in Criminological Theory*, New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 5, 259-294.

<sup>5</sup>D. Cornish, R. Clarke, (eds.), 1986, *The Reasoning Criminal. Rational Choice Perspectives on Offending*, New York, Springer-Verlag.

observers. What light does our North American study bring to the subject, and how can we guard ourselves against any overly hasty transposition ?

### Research Methodology

The partial findings discussed here come from a doctoral study on situational prevention in public housing in Paris, London and New York City. The idea was, firstly, theoretically speaking, to attempt to determine the gaps between these three countries in the institutionalization of this preventive approach. The empirical side aimed at identifying various aspects of the changes that took place in a public housing project targeted by comprehensive interventions including situational schemes, in each of the metropolises studied. For the US case study (Brownstone, in the borough of Brooklyn) conducted in 2003, the field-work material includes : some ten exploratory interviews with senior New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) officials, sociologists and researchers from the Department of Housing and Urban Development in Washington DC ; the analysis of internal NYCHA documents, local newspaper articles and annual surveys of residents; the calculation of crime rates based on New York Police Department reports between 1995 and 2004. The qualitative survey was also based on direct ethnographic observation combined with semi-structured interviews conducted with about thirty Brownstone residents (aged 15 to 82) as well as with local institutional actors. They were approached in public places, outdoors and in public neighborhood facilities (the library, senior citizens' club, a playpen, a community justice center) and during tenants' association meetings.

## II - Federal and Local Institutional Responses to Urban Ghetto Problems

On the other side of the Atlantic, operators of experiments in defendable spaces in public housing projects, interested in generalizing them, have often shown great concern with scientific evaluation of these programs. During the Reagan administration, however (1981-1989), research in this field suffered from drastic funding cuts. The "war on drugs" was constantly in the forefront. The rare scientific evaluation reports available<sup>6</sup> have established a **not entirely positive appraisal, to say the least**, for these urban design preventive strategies. True, the environment (including safety) is unquestionably improved, although only in the short term. These reports pointed up three weaknesses, which account for the excessively limited effects : the ridiculously insufficient scope of these uniform, low-dose techniques, the ambivalent status of "offenders", who happen to be "residents" as well, and last, the lack of managerial coordination.

Actually, situational prevention, combined with aggressive law enforcement strategies, resident participation, community policing, and more recently, urban revitalization operations, finally developed in the shadow of the more comprehensive federal anti-drug programs set up in some large troubled public housing projects in the 1980s and 90s.

- The Public Housing Drug Elimination Program (PHDEP) encourages cooperation with residents in fighting crime, the development of informal surveillance (tenant patrols), passive building security (metal detectors, security doors), formal surveillance (security forces, police patrols) and preventive schemes targeted at drug users ;

- The Safe Home Operation finances local citizens' informal surveillance initiatives and tenants' reports' on other residents' involvement in illegal activities in conjunction with repressive policing tactics and promotes the inventory of priorities for safety-directed repair work ;

- The One Strike and You're Out measure encourages recourse to civil remedies. It allows public housing authorities to evict suspected offenders or tenants who violate lease procedures ;

- The Housing Opportunity for People Everywhere (HOPE VI) program is aimed at the most distressed inner-city neighborhoods, and includes demolition/reconstruction operations. In some cases this is a strategy for taking buildings away from gangs. The new buildings are on a more human scale and their rental status (public or private) is conducive to the creation of mixed-income communities.

According to our information, the PHDEP definitely was in existence in Brownstone in 1997, and continued until 2003 when its funding was cut. This shows how difficult it is to assess what is the real impact of one particular type of measure.

### A description of Brownstone

Brownstone is a self-enclosed urban area of over 7,000 inhabitants, to which we should add a floating, "illegal" population estimated at 30 % in 2000, composed for about 59 % of Afro-Americans and 39 % of Hispanics. 29 % of residents are under the poverty line. In 1996, 40 % of families were receiving social security, and the same proportion were single-parent homes with children. Extreme socio-economic marginality, urban segregation and social isolation, in a context of a reduced offer of public services and the drying up of welfare programs, have inevitably pushed the ghetto's inhabitants into survival strategies. Hustling of all sorts is widespread. The deterioration of the neighborhood and the loss of solvency are correlated, for the residents we met, with endemic physical violence in public places. This developed with the gang wars over the crack market, their strategies for territorial expansion and the widespread commonplace use of firearms. However, this analysis overlooks the climate of violence generated by the banditism of the 1960s.

In the early 1990s, Brownstone experienced a tragic occurrence : the death, by a stray bullet, of a locally known and respected white man. The event triggered a series of emergency institutional interventions, implemented a decade later, and amounting to tight social control of the project's social space (decentralized legal institution, early prevention, after-school programs, prevention of drug abuse, community problem-solving approaches and so on).

We will now describe three situational techniques used in Brownstone – those most integrated in the residents' daily life – after which we will provide elements of evaluation by analyzing our interviews with users.

## III - Putting Situational Techniques to the Test of Practice

What are the social harms of these safety programs in underprivileged socio-economic contexts? Are these programs in phase with local safety needs?

### A) Controlling access : buildings' entrance security doors

The new doors, installed between 1997 and 1998, are now locked by a magnetic device working with "vigik" keys. This electronic technology systematically records every time the owner of the accessing device enters, although the data are not analyzed, for lack of available staff. A limited number of "vigik" keys are distributed so as to avoid illegal dealings,

<sup>6</sup> All names of places, individuals and institutions have been modified so as to keep the field anonymous. This was one of the conditions for accessing police statistics on the neighborhood.

<sup>7</sup> Especially for New York, the Urban Design Research Group report (main rapporteur : R. Plunz), 1997, *Defensible Space Evaluated – Research Topics in Public Housing*, New York, Columbia University Press.

which represents a constraint for homes with more than two individuals. The problem is amplified when the intercom system is deficient. So the system is deviated from its original purpose by some legitimate users, which in fact may detract from its preventive function.

According to police statistics, burglaries began to decline in Brownstone in 1997, which corresponds to the installment of these doors. They did have a deterrent effect, then, at least at the outset. This conclusion coincides with the perceptions of residents: the private areas of buildings are less obstructed by the presence of undesirable individuals such as drug users. For instance, one 21-year-old Afro-American, father of a little girl, sees these arrangements as practically fool-proof, although he admits they are not an ideal solution :

*"I say, people don't belong in the building are still there, but is not bad as it used to when you have a hundred people in the building. More now, you probably get like four or five people. (...) I think it has changed. (...) I prefer the intercom doors. 'Cause it stops the... like I said the drug addicts out of the building. So your kids can go, come up and down the stairs without you... you know. They coming from school. You needn't worry about them".*

#### B) Controlling the exits : fencing

The fences, about three feet high, are part of the landscaping scheme ; they set off the neighborhood parks. These techniques, designed both to discourage gang meetings and to slow down offenders who attempt to run away from the police, are the least appreciated by residents. Firstly, their appearance is suggestive of a "cheap", stigmatizing safety policy making people feel cooped up. Moreover, some more elderly residents refuse to give up their comfort and change their habits just to "make it hard for delinquents". Take this fifty-year-old Spanish-American woman, who feels that the fences are also "speed-reducers" that separate her from her private garden, dearly won at a NYCHA community contest.

#### C) Informal surveillance: tenant patrols

This technique, somewhat similar to Neighborhood Watches, was introduced in Brownstone in the early 1980s. Although not very frequent nowadays, it adds human surveillance of buildings to electronic access control. Volunteer members of this group act as "watchpeople" alone or in twos, a few hours a day or in the evening, at the foot of their building. Intruders are required to identify themselves and say who they are going to visit. The offenses targeted are burglaries, disorder in the common areas of buildings and gangs hanging around in the lobbies. One indication that this approach is successful is the absence of gang control in buildings where "watch-posts" have succeeded in taking hold. The tenant patrols, solicited to become police "antennas", accept the rules of reciprocal "loyalties" : vertical patrols involving teams of police officers and NYCHA staff only intervene provided a tenant patrol has been organized beforehand in the building. This tends to minimize the risk of ambushes. However, the fear of reprisals prevents mobilization when cohesion is lacking and distrust prevails :

*"Drug dealers or crackers... There's no control at all over them 'cause...they'll find anyway... any way to do that... they're gonna find a way. (...) Housing assistance ? They wouldn't do anything to protect. They're afraid they would not be covered up by police. (...) So they're afraid to help. I would open my big mouth if I have a group of people and we are complaining together".*

Brownstone residents react diversely to the situational techniques imposed on them. We may describe a series of ideal types which give some idea of the variety of receptions given these techniques. These ideal types may of course overlap.

#### a) The resigned

These people, turned inward toward the private sphere and possessing little social capital, passively accept what is going on in the project. Having experienced victimization themselves or in someone close to them (be it a theft, burglary, extortion of funds or family violence), they find it difficult to reconcile themselves with the deterioration of their neighborhood. They show some ambivalence toward situational schemes, although they do not challenge their legitimacy, at the outset. The utopia of a pleasant, safe environment faded away gradually, as the safety system began to fall apart : *"They never fixed [the intercom doors] properly. Sometimes, it rings at the other building on the other side. The wires are mixed up"*. They have no qualms about openly opposing the fences, that make them feel hemmed in. Paradoxically, they are fervent consumers of the safety commodity, and can never have enough of it : *"It's never too much safety"*. Although they perceive the situation as appeased, their capacity for appropriation of near-home space does not seem to have been enhanced.

#### b) The pragmatists

This group mostly contains the prominent local people who have had a monopoly on the project's political life for several decades and are anxious to promote a positive image of the neighborhood. Their extended sociability network sets them up as the preferred correspondents of institutional partners. Because they have access to sensitive information and receive special attention from the police, they are less cynical about the inadequacies of the criminal justice system responses. In fact, they live in buildings under the surveillance of the tenant patrols, which monitor comings and goings and make sure the front doors function properly. Their notoriety protects them from a high risk of victimization experiences. The level of satisfaction with the interventions as a whole is high. Furthermore, they tolerate the "diversion" of technical devices by families who are too poor to buy extra keys, and which in fact make the system of protection ineffective :

*"Well, a lot of people... keep [the door] open. A lot of them put a tape or a bottle of something... That's because they don't have keys. You know, some people have 11 or 12 children. So everybody wasn't given a key... and a lot of people, you know, didn't have \$10 to pay".*

#### c) The phlegmatic

This miscellaneous category mostly includes young men aged 15 to 20, who tend to reverse the stigmatization attached to people in their neighborhood. They unanimously confirm the intensity of the changes that have occurred, care little about out-of-order intercom systems or the shortage of keys, and are "enthusiastic" about the new socializing uses to which the landscaping schemes may be put, such as the organization of barbecues in those fenced-in spaces. They consistently prefer local, informal, indigenous patrolling arrangements as opposed to formal policing interventions, although their relations with the police have improved considerably :

*"It's coming strong. It's come along. It's how we respect. We respect them, they respect you"*.

#### Conclusion

The utilitarianism of the situational approach, as convoked by its advocates, actually has very little to do with its empirical side. Or better, the latter is in fact a distortion. Indeed, these programs were conceived for the middle classes or the upper middle classes, and we discover that the implementation of these programs in underprivileged areas reveals a host of uses, diversions, appropriations and even resistances which require

that the whole scheme be re-examined. The efficiency of these programs, per se, is all the more called into question. Also, the middle and upper classes receive higher quality devices, and this reduces the social costs tied to their use. Some people advocate a "socialized version" of situational prevention, then, adapted to underprivileged groups.

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