Public Initiatives in Housing

Security Improvement
Crime Prevention

The case of Montréal
Neighbourhoods

Summary

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**PUBLIC INITIATIVES IN HOUSING
THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO SECURITY IMPROVEMENT AND CRIME PREVENTION.
THE CASE OF MONTREAL NEIGHBOURHOODS**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of our study was to examine to what extent public initiatives in housing can help to improve security and prevent crime in Montreal neighbourhoods. For our study, we selected three different neighbourhoods: Côte-des-Neiges, Petite-Patrie and Saint-Michel.

The three neighbourhoods included examples of all public initiatives in housing carried out under various housing programs between 1989 and 1996: the acquisition/renovation program of the Office municipal d'habitation de Montréal (OMHM - Montreal Municipal Housing Board), the Rental Building Renovation Program (RBRP), the Private Non-Profit Housing Program (PNHP), the Index-Linked Mortgage (ILM) Co-operative Housing Program, and the Rental Housing Acquisition Program (RHAP). These initiatives, all of which included renovations, covered a wide range of buildings featuring various types of building management: housing co-operatives, low-income housing (LIH), buildings managed by non-profit organizations (NPOs), and privately-owned rental buildings.

The study was principally based on a survey administered to three groups of respondents (totalling 1,006 persons) in each of the selected neighbourhoods: residents in buildings targeted by a housing initiative (*residents in initiative zones*), their *neighbours* and residents in zones unaffected by these housing initiatives (*respondents in control zones*). Since it was not possible to analyze the situation before and after completion of the projects, our study sought by comparing the various groups of respondents in the three neighbourhoods, to identify common elements which might be related to public initiatives in housing and which previous studies had identified as promoting security and a sense of security among residents. In addition to providing a profile of the respondents, the main objective of our survey was to gather information on the respondents' perceptions and opinions on these issues.

Several of the elements we examined stem from the situational approach to crime prevention, that is, improvement of the physical condition of the buildings, building maintenance and tenants' sense of responsibility for building maintenance, the installation of security devices, and informal surveillance of the premises. Other elements, such as residents' sense of involvement and mutual

aid between neighbours, can be related to the community approach, which emphasizes social awareness and social development.

2. Profile of the neighbourhoods and the respondents

a) Neighbourhoods

Côte-des-Neiges features a multiethnic population (including many recent immigrants) and a relatively large proportion of elderly people, whereas Saint-Michel, which also shows ethnic diversity, is characterized by a substantial number of families with children. The percentage of immigrants in Petite-Patrie is lower, more closely approximating that of the City of Montreal as a whole (23% in 1991). In the latter two neighbourhoods, household incomes are significantly below the Montreal average, but in all three neighbourhoods, there is a marked need for social housing.

In all three neighbourhoods, the population density is high, there is little room for new construction, and a large number of the multi-family buildings are deteriorating. The *initiative zones* in these neighbourhoods all include sectors where there is a significant need to bring dilapidated buildings up to standards. Residential renovation thus emerges as a priority in initiatives targeting housing problems.

According to community workers and the police, the levels of crime in these neighbourhoods are no higher than elsewhere, despite the predominantly negative image of Côte-des-Neiges and Saint-Michel. The problems mentioned most often are youth gangs, drugs, break-ins and physical aggression; however, the evolution and the frequency of these problems and how they are perceived by the respondents differ in each of the neighbourhoods.

b) Respondents

In our study, the profiles of the respondents in the three neighbourhoods show both similarities and differences. There is a fairly equal distribution of the entire population of respondents, all of whom are tenants, among various types of buildings, with residents in the initiative zones usually living in buildings of six to eleven units. Most of the respondents have been in their building for less than

seven years, although they have generally been living in their neighbourhood for a much longer period of time.

Women made up 60% of the respondents and men, 40%. Petite-Patrie has a higher proportion of persons living alone compared to the other two neighbourhoods, where there are more families with children. In the initiative zones in all three neighbourhoods, most of the households (residents and neighbours) report annual incomes below $20,000 (in 1996), with income levels slightly higher for respondents in the control zones.

3. STUDY RESULTS

The survey findings show a number of significant differences between zones using cross-tabulation tables. Logistic regression analysis was also used on the survey data, enabling the researchers, among other things, to control for certain variables: the results of this analysis are shown in italics. Finally, the findings of focus groups (from a subsample of the respondents) are used to complement the main findings.

a) Initiative zones

• Compared to other tenants, residents in initiative zones were more likely to have security devices in their buildings.

The renovations generally helped to improve the condition of the dwellings, and the security devices in rental buildings. For every group of respondents, most of the tenants indicate that they are satisfied with the renovations carried out and with the security devices installed in their buildings. Nevertheless, *the level of satisfaction regarding renovations is no higher for residents in initiative zones than for other tenants.* However, *the installation of security devices is more frequent in buildings targeted by a housing initiative ("initiative" buildings).* In the three neighbourhoods, most of the residents in these buildings attribute the improvement of security devices to the renovation work.

We can say that the renovations carried out in the context of the housing programs clearly improved the condition of the dwellings as well as their physical appearance in the Côte-des-Neiges and Petite-Patrie areas. In these neighbourhoods, *residents in the initiative zones identified markedly*

fewer need for repairs in their dwellings and often indicated that their buildings had a better appearance than other buildings nearby. The findings are not the same for the Saint-Michel area, despite similar tendencies, undoubtedly due to the higher-quality buildings in the immediate area and in the control zone.

A greater proportion of respondents in the initiative zones than in the other groups felt that there have been positive changes, which they generally ascribed to the renovations. Long-term tenants (five years or more) in "initiative" buildings more often mentioned an improvement in the living conditions in their building. The other groups of respondents perceive little difference, with most indicating that their living conditions are unchanged, especially in the control zones in Côte-des-Neiges and Saint-Michel.

• Compared to other groups of respondents, residents in the initiative zones view their neighbourhood in a more positive light.

Overall, *residents in the three initiative zones express more confidence and optimism than other respondents regarding the evolution of the quality of life in their neighbourhood.* But this does not mean that they necessarily view their present situation more favourably. The differences in perceptions more clearly centre around the ongoing dynamics and changes that residents foresee occurring in their neighbourhood.

Residents in the initiative zones more often consider that there has been an improvement in the quality of life in their neighbourhood over the past five years. And a greater proportion of these residents expect that the quality of life will continue to improve in the next two years. Although they in part share this positive outlook, their neighbours more often tend to perceive the situation as unchanged. On the other hand, a greater proportion of residents in the control zones believe that the quality of life in their neighbourhood is deteriorating, especially in Côte-des-Neiges and Saint-Michel; in Petite-Patrie, residents in the control zone view the quality of life as unchanged.

Nevertheless, the results do not indicate that residents in the initiative zones have a greater sense of security. There are also differences in terms of the types of building management in "initiative" buildings and differences between neighbourhoods.

b) Types of building management

• **The installation of security devices and satisfaction with security devices are less frequent in privately-owned buildings targeted by housing initiatives.**

Of all the residents surveyed, tenants in privately-owned buildings renovated in the context of the RBRP tend to benefit the least from security devices: fewer of them have such devices in their buildings (66%) and a greater proportion of them are dissatisfied with the security devices installed by their landlord (21%).

• **Tenants' sense of responsibility for building maintenance, mutual aid between neighbours and informal surveillance of the premises are more frequently found in housing co-operatives than in other types of "initiative" buildings.**

There are considerable differences in maintenance responsibilities according to the type of building and building management in the study areas. For neighbours of "initiative" buildings and for respondents in the control zones, landlords are most often responsible for building maintenance, except in Côte-des-Neiges, where janitors play an equally important role. In "initiative" buildings in Côte-des-Neiges and Saint-Michel, janitors are most often responsible for maintenance, whereas in Petite-Patrie, janitors, landlords and maintenance committees in housing co-operatives are equally likely to be responsible for building maintenance.

The results of the survey show that, despite the positive changes brought about by the renovations, residents in initiative zones do not tend to feel more responsible for maintenance of their building's entrance and grounds than other tenants. Differences are however found according to the type of management in "initiative" buildings. In general, members of housing co-operatives more often see themselves as "very responsible" for the maintenance of their building, with this attitude found among 60% of co-op members, compared to about 40% of other types of residents. Only 5% of co-op members feel that they have no responsibility for maintenance, compared to nearly 20% of respondents in buildings managed by non-profit organizations (NPOs), low-income housing (LIH), and privately-owned buildings renovated in the context of the RBRP.

Members of housing co-operatives also differ from other types of tenants in terms of their relations with their neighbours, with three quarters of them indicating that they are friendly with or talk to other tenants and that they feel that people in their building try to help one another. In contrast, over 60% of residents in LIHs and privately-owned RBRP buildings say that tenants merely greet one another, have no other form of contact, do not know each other at all and generally keep to themselves rather than helping one another. In buildings managed by NPOs, residents are more similar to co-op members in their views on relations between tenants, but are divided on the question of mutual aid. According to participants in the focus groups, mutual aid between neighbours would seem to be on the rise in the initiative zones. However, in the Saint-Michel area, LIH residents appear more mistrustful of other tenants and tend to avoid contact with other residents as much as possible.

With regard to informal surveillance of the premises, the attitude of co-op members and residents in non-profit housing is in sharp contrast to the attitude of LIH residents and tenants in private buildings renovated under the RBRP. A large majority of the residents in the co-ops and non-profits say that they can count on their neighbours to keep an eye on their place when they are away, whereas this is true for only half of the residents in the other types of housing. This aspect is probably related to the different levels of concern shown by these residents in terms of the risk of a break-in occurring in their dwelling. Members of housing co-operatives are less concerned about this risk than people in low-income or non-profit housing: only 42% of co-op members are concerned about such a risk, compared to 64% of LIH residents and 58% of residents in non-profit housing.

• **LIH residents are more aware of problems related to drugs, family violence and physical aggression than other types of residents.**

Overall, the crime situation appears less problematic for tenants in privately-owned RBRP buildings than for members of housing co-operatives or LIH residents, whose concerns may be linked to a greater sense of insecurity or a greater awareness of what is going on in their area.

LIH residents are markedly more concerned about problems related to drugs than are other types of residents in the initiative zones. Most LIH residents feel that drugs are a major problem or somewhat of a problem. Most of the other types of residents do not see drugs as a problem in their immediate neighbourhood. LIH residents are also more concerned about family violence, about half of them

consider this a problem. As for the fear of being attacked or robbed in their immediate neighbourhood, this is mentioned by 58% of LIH residents, compared to 40% of other residents.

c) Neighbourhoods

The results of the survey show similarities between groups of respondents in the same neighbourhood. These similarities suggest that neighbourhood particularities may influence factors related to improving security in the area and the specific ways in which local communities react to crime.

• **In Côte-des-Neiges, the level of satisfaction of tenants in "initiative" buildings regarding security devices in their buildings and their stability of residence clearly distinguish them from other groups of respondents; however, for respondents in this neighbourhood, building maintenance and waste disposal represent major problems.**

In Côte-des-Neiges, the level of satisfaction with security devices clearly differentiates residents in the initiative zone from their neighbours and respondents in the control zone, who show an especially high level of dissatisfaction. This difference is less evident in the other two neighbourhoods. Thus, in Saint-Michel, the high level of satisfaction of tenants in buildings targeted by a housing initiative seems to be shared by the other respondents, a positive perception confirmed by participants in the focus group.

In terms of tenants' sense of responsibility for maintaining their building's entrance and grounds, there are greater differences between neighbourhoods than between groups of respondents. Thus, more tenants in Côte-des-Neiges than in Saint-Michel and Petite-Patrie feel that they are "not at all responsible" for maintenance, especially in the control zone in this neighbourhood. Differences between neighbourhoods are also seen in the respondents' perceptions about waste disposal in their area. In Côte-des-Neiges, far more residents in the initiative zone believe this to be a major problem, especially in the area around Barclay Street. Cleanliness influences the way residents perceive their neighbourhood and the neighbourhood's overall image. Almost all the participants in the Côte-des-Neiges focus group mentioned the poor management of waste in their area and saw this as a sign of an attitude of neglect and even abandonment, on the part of citizens (landlords, building managers, tenants) and the City of Montreal.

Nevertheless, residents in the initiative zone in Côte-des-Neiges show greater stability of residence than their neighbours and respondents in the control zone, a finding that does not apply to the other two neighbourhoods. As in Saint-Michel, low rents encourage people to stay in the area. The main factor prompting tenants in the "initiative" buildings to move is the size of the dwelling, whereas for the other groups of respondents, the poor condition of the dwelling is frequently cited as the reason for moving.

• **Residents in the initiative zone in Petite-Patrie show a stronger sense of involvement and solidarity than their neighbours and respondents in the control zone; and a greater proportion of them believe that the quality of life is good in their area.**

In Petite-Patrie, a stronger sense of involvement and solidarity is seen among residents in the initiative zone than among their neighbours or respondents in the control zone, but similar results are not found in the other two neighbourhoods. Thus, in the initiative zone in Petite-Patrie, most residents say that people in their building help each other, whereas in the initiative zone in Saint-Michel, most of the residents feel that people in their building prefer to mind their own business. Informal surveillance by neighbours in the same building is also more common among the first group of residents than among residents in the other two initiative zones. Relations between neighbours vary according to the neighbourhood: they are rather distant in Saint-Michel, either distant or friendly in Côte-des-Neiges, and quite friendly in Petite-Patrie. Keeping an eye on a neighbour's place when no one is home is also less common in Côte-des-Neiges than in the other two neighbourhoods.

Of all the groups of respondents, residents in the initiative zone in Petite-Patrie most often take a favourable view of the quality of life in their neighbourhood. According to participants in the focus group, there are signs of revitalization in the area, especially in the business district. In contrast, a quarter of respondents in the Saint-Michel area feel that their neighbourhood is deteriorating, compared to less than 15% of respondents in the other two neighbourhoods. The negative changes are attributed to the presence of youth gangs and higher unemployment, which residents associate with an increase in crime in the area.

• **There is a more negative perception of the level of crime in Saint-Michel than in the other neighbourhoods.**

Residents in the initiative zone in Saint-Michel have a more negative perception of the level of crime in their area than those in Côte-des-Neiges, who more often feel that the level of crime in their neighbourhood is lower than elsewhere, and those in Petite-Patrie, who think that it is about the same. However, compared to the other respondents, a greater proportion of residents in the initiative zones in Saint-Michel and Côte-des-Neiges believe that crime has gone down in their area, whereas in the initiative zone in Petite-Patrie, residents and their neighbours are more critical of the level of criminal activity in their area, and think that it has increased.

In the focus groups, differences between the neighbourhoods were apparent from the very first question: in Saint-Michel and Côte-des-Neiges, the participants immediately highlighted problems linked to violence, crime, vandalism and lack of security. However, participants in Côte-des-Neiges associated the positive changes observed in their area with improved security (less drug-related gang activity). Concerns about crime were markedly more visible in Saint-Michel, where nearly two thirds of the residents pointed to the rise in violence and crime as factors in the deterioration of the quality of life in their neighbourhood.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study show that the renovations help to improve the condition of the dwellings and the security devices in rental buildings. But beyond these physical measures, the type of management in buildings affected by public initiatives in housing has a greater influence on residents' sense of responsibility for building maintenance and on informal social control, and are most often found in housing co-operatives. Physical measures do not seem to be enough: we must also look at the internal organization of tenants within their buildings. The differences between the three neighbourhoods also underscore the need to take the particularities of each community into account. Our findings accentuate the importance of assessing problems on a neighbourhood level and the need for a comprehensive approach in analyzing the factors that contribute to crime and fear of crime, and in implementing initiatives targeting these problems.

The confidence and optimism expressed by a substantial number of residents in the initiative zones regarding the past and future evolution of their neighbourhood suggests that, given the proper encouragement, these residents might be induced to play a more active role in their communities. The study in fact shows the need for more activities in the initiative zones which would be helpful not only in terms of crime prevention, but also and especially in promoting communication between neighbours, active community involvement and participation in community development. Moreover, the pessimism manifested by many respondents in the control zones regarding the evolution of their neighbourhood points to the need to take preventive action in these zones before the problems intensify.

The results thus indicate the value of other approaches more closely aimed at strengthening the social fabric in the neighbourhoods. They also highlight the importance of efforts targeting people's perceptions about crime, since the fear of crime is often greater than the actual level of crime. Our findings show that residents in a neighbourhood need to be well informed and to have effective means of interaction and communication, as mentioned by many participants in the focus groups. It is important that citizens be aware of problems, be genuinely concerned about preventing these problems, and become actively involved in finding lasting solutions.

Public initiatives in housing must not be limited to situational prevention; they must be combined with social development and community mobilization. In neighbourhoods, these efforts must be coordinated and accompanied by other types of action, so as to develop targeted strategies that include housing in a broad approach aimed at improving security and preventing crime on a neighbourhood level.