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BOOK REVIEW

CRIME TRENDS IN PUBLIC HOUSING

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SUSAN J. POPKIN, VICTORIA E. GWIASDA, LYNN M. OLSON, DENNIS P. ROSENBAUM, & LARRY BURON, *THE HIDDEN WAR: CRIME AND THE TRAGEDY OF PUBLIC HOUSING IN CHICAGO*.

Rutgers University Press 2000. 256 pp.

*The Hidden War*¹ provides a post mortem on one of the most expensive if not one of the grandest urban social experiments to have ever failed in this country: high-rise public housing communities. Begun on a large scale in the 1950s, subjected to numerous policy shifts that redefined eligible tenants from about 1960 onwards, criticized architecturally from the 1960s on by Rainwater, Newman and others, managed by local housing authorities subjected to urban political cross-currents, and overseen and sometimes funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, these communities are coming down all across the country as rent vouchers, scattered site housing, section 8 (assisted) housing and low-rise, partially-public housing communities take their place. The dynamiting of Pruitt-Igoe in St Louis at the end of the 1960s, widely photographed because it was one of the first uses of the timed implosion demolition technique, not because of the surrounding social controversy, has been bookended by a 1990s *Homicide: Life on the Street* episode where a police officer witnesses the demolition of the high-rise Baltimore public housing community where he grew up. In the same way that social reformers in the 1950s hoped that clearing "slum" housing and moving residents to well-managed, new high-rise living accommodations would result in drastically improved quality of life, reformers two genera-

¹ See SUSAN J. POPKIN ET. AL., *THE HIDDEN WAR: CRIME AND THE TRAGEDY OF PUBLIC HOUSING IN CHICAGO* (2000).

tions later hope that low-rise developments, rent vouchers, and scattered-site housing will be the safe haven or at least a new and better beginning for residents of high-rise public housing communities. The implications of this book will give them pause in their speculations. If people in later generations want to know how bad conditions were for residents in those high-rises at the end of the millennium, and to get some insight into the policy, social, cultural, and economic factors that led to these deplorable conditions, *The Hidden War* will provide the case study descriptions and some explanation. This book is for anyone who doubts the unforgivably high costs of segregation and hyper-segregation.

The volume describes the results of a multi-method, longitudinal study carried out in three Chicago public housing communities, namely, Rockwell Gardens, Harold Ickes, and Henry Horner, from the early 1990s through the late 1990s.² A multi-institutional research team led by Susan Popkin (Abt-Chicago, now with the Urban Institute) surveyed residents repeatedly, carried out in-depth, key-person interviews, compiled information from local newspapers and other sources, and for a few months had a trained ethnographer visiting the locations.³ Repeated surveys spanned 1994 to 1997, with various follow-up information on some topics included up to mid-1999.⁴ The data on which the volume rests is extremely strong because it is multi-wave, it is multi-method, and it was carried out by researchers who were able to negotiate successfully some of the most dangerous settings imaginable in the United States at the time. Hopefully the newspaper archive and the ethnographic results will be archived, along with the repeated surveys, so that future researchers can benefit more fully from these powerful data.

Chapter One introduces the overall scope of the study, its purposes, and some of the themes the authors develop later. The authors' stated purpose is as follows:

We tell the story of the CHA's [Chicago Housing Authority's] struggle against crime in its developments presented through the eyes of the residents who suffered through life in these communities. The stories in the book poignantly document the tremendous toll that violence has

² See *id.* at 191-98 (describing the methodology used in the book).

³ See *id.* at 5-6.

⁴ See *id.*

taken on these individuals and the ways in which gang-dominated social order has undermined any efforts to improve conditions.⁵

In Chapter One, the authors also start to introduce some of the “lessons learned” from their investigation, and they explain why they decided to “tell this story as a series of three comprehensive case studies.”⁶ The reasons are so that readers would understand daily life in these communities, to pinpoint the factors that prevented programs launched there from having positive impacts, and to explore “how variations in the level of social organization” influenced program outcomes.⁷

Chapter Two provides a thumbnail history of the CHA over the last fifty years and the broader, political, legal and policy contexts affecting the authority.⁸ Specific agency leaders, their connections to local reform or political bosses or both, and the nationally shifting legal and policy arenas are recounted.⁹ Particularly relevant for the study site in the 1990s was the Vincent Lane administration at CHA and his focus on combating drugs and crime, the “war . . . costing the CHA more than \$78 million each year” by the mid 1990s.¹⁰ Funds for those efforts were diverted from maintenance and operating categories within the CHA budget.¹¹ Widespread warrantless searches also were initiated, receiving media and legal attention.¹²

Chapter Three provides details on the crime fighting efforts in Chicago’s public housing.¹³ The efforts mounted were complex, drawing on several different enforcement agencies, including the City of Chicago Police Department, a newly created housing authority police, and private security.¹⁴ The law enforcement efforts initiated were complemented by more meager “service and maintenance components [that] were curtailed,” and social services, particularly drug treatment and prevention programs housed in centers within the communities.¹⁵

⁵ *Id.* at 3.

⁶ *Id.* at 4.

⁷ *Id.* at 5.

⁸ *See id.* at 10-23.

⁹ *See id.*

¹⁰ *Id.* at 17.

¹¹ *See id.* at 17-18.

¹² *See id.* at 18.

¹³ *See id.* at 24-38.

¹⁴ *See id.*

¹⁵ *Id.* at 32.

Chapters Four through Six detail the events taking place in each of the three communities.¹⁶ Each chapter starts with at least a couple of heart-wrenching stories about particular residents, using extensive quotes from the interviews to convey the residents' perspectives.¹⁷ Each case study includes information on the immediate community context, gang developments, resident initiatives, treatment activities, and results over time from the surveys displaying residents' perceptions of physical incivilities, drugs and gang activity, and violence.¹⁸

Chapter Seven closes with more general thoughts on lessons learned and questions about the future.¹⁹ The lessons learned include that there are "no simple solutions" (the chapter title), that law-abiding residents must live in close relationships with large numbers of active, violent gang members with whom they share numerous social ties, that some of the best-designed community crime prevention programs failed miserably, that massive amounts of comprehensive, on-site social services are needed to overcome the economic, social and physical isolation experienced by these families, linked to a model of "transitional case management services" such as maintained for welfare-to-work transition households.²⁰

The Hidden War is valuable solely for the descriptions provided in the three case study chapters.²¹ To be able to track the policy changes, crime changes, gang changes, enforcement shifts and variations in residents' reactions and views over a multi-year period is valuable documentation. Because these thick descriptions are based on more than just in-depth interviews, they provide a more complete picture than would a stand-alone series of lengthy interviews.

But the value of the volume runs deeper. It provides a number of "take away" lessons, not all of which the researchers themselves highlight. Here is my list, in order of descending importance. First, relocation to scattered-site or low-rise public housing communities may solve some problems, but only par-

¹⁶ See *id.* at 39-173.

¹⁷ See *id.* at 39-45, 85-91, 138-42.

¹⁸ See *id.* 39-173.

¹⁹ See *id.* at 174-90.

²⁰ *Id.* at 187-90. The volume concludes with a brief appendix on research methods, a bibliography, and a detailed index.

²¹ See *id.* at 39-173.

tially, at the same time that it creates others. For example, one interviewee, Clarice, reported that her new townhome neighborhood was dangerous and gang-dominated, and she felt more socially isolated than before because her new neighbors ignored her once they learned she was not Puerto Rican.²² Second, the variations over time in quality of life in the high-rise communities were driven solely by the current state of inter-gang conflicts over drug territories. If a “peace” was in place, residents perceived fewer problems and less violence. If “war” broke out, problems worsened and residents literally ducked as they went about their business. Gang dynamics dominated buildings, and inter-gang relations—not programs or security coverage—were the major determinant of quality of life.²³ Gang dominance and residents’ accompanying fear of retaliation if they were to report anything led even to unreported dead bodies in the stairwells for several hours, even though seen by tenants.²⁴ Third, and perhaps most miraculously, it was possible, even under these extreme circumstances, for residents to make progress if specific setting conditions coalesced. The success of the Monroe Street site in Rockwell Gardens was a case-in-point.²⁵ A charismatic local leader, a favorable building position making it of less strategic interest to warring gangs, and resident initiatives that for a time coincided with CHA preferences resulted in modest success for a period.²⁶ Active tenant patrols in the Harold Ickes Homes were somewhat effective because they were complemented by twenty-four hour security forces.²⁷ But then CHA decided to cut that expense, given other pressing needs, and the tenant patrols diminished their active patrols because they were so much more vulnerable.²⁸ Residents could achieve some building-by-building success but it was extremely fragile.²⁹ Finally, one way to reduce violence was to negotiate with gang leaders.³⁰ Leaders at the service delivery center in the Harold Ickes site negotiated with gang leaders, worked out commit-

²² *See id.* at 136.

²³ *See id.* at 69.

²⁴ *See id.* at 149.

²⁵ *See id.* at 81.

²⁶ *See id.*

²⁷ *See id.* at 157.

²⁸ *See id.* at 161.

²⁹ *See id.*

³⁰ *See id.* at 162.

ments, and violence lessened.³¹ But other local leaders then criticized such efforts arguing that there should be no negotiation with gang leaders.³²

Turning to theory, I think there are take-away lessons as well, but I disagree with the authors on what those are. They suggest that even some of the soundest, backed-up-by-the-latest-social-science-findings community crime-prevention programs failed.³³ The mistake the authors make, because they ignore important theoretical analyses of community crime prevention dating back to the early 1980s, is in assuming that a crime control strategy relying on resident-police co-production of safety is the most strongly empirically supported type of program. Community crime-prevention programs fall generally into two classes: crime control and social problem reduction. Pioneering work by Aaron Podolefsky and Fred DuBow, based on the Northwestern University Reactions to Crime Project of 1975-1980,³⁴ (confirmed again almost twenty years later by qualitative interviews of Baltimore neighborhood leaders in the 1990s)³⁵ strongly suggests that prevention programs heavily geared to law enforcement will fail in low-income communities dominated by populations of color, as shown by Popkin and her colleagues. Podolefsky and DuBow's theoretical analysis suggests the only effective programs, such as were implemented in the service centers located in the high-rise communities, will be those based on addressing the social problems concomitant with the violence-substance abuse problems, teen and youth employment, recreation, education opportunities, and broader infrastructural development.³⁶ In short, in my eyes, part of the reason the prevention programs failed is because they overlooked what good social science told us almost twenty years ago

³¹ *See id.*

³² *See id.*

³³ *See id.* at 176.

³⁴ Fred DuBow and Aaron Podolefsky, *Citizen Participation in Community Crime Prevention*, 41 HUMAN ORG. 307, 307-314 (1982); FRED DuBOW AND DAVID EMMONS, *The Community Hypothesis*, in REACTIONS TO CRIME, 167, 167-81 (Dan A. Lewis ed. 1981); AARON PODOLEFSKY, CASE STUDIES IN COMMUNITY CRIME PREVENTION (1983); AARON PODOLEFSKY AND FRED DuBOW, STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNITY CRIME PREVENTION: COLLECTIVE RESPONSES TO CRIME IN URBAN AMERICA (1981).

³⁵ RALPH B. TAYLOR, BREAKING AWAY FROM BROKEN WINDOWS: BALTIMORE EVIDENCE AND THE NATIONWIDE FIGHT AGAINST CRIME, GRIME, FEAR AND DECLINE 303-363 (2000)

³⁶ *See id.* at 290-94.

about the connections between community fabric, views about crime, type of program, and success. In their defense, Popkin and her colleagues are not the only ones who overlook the pioneering work of Podolefsky and DuBow.

There are two more far more minor points of theoretical disagreement. One centers on issues of zero-tolerance policing; policies the authors endorse as generally effective,³⁷ but to date have not yet been shown to be effective.³⁸ Another has to do with their dismissal of situational crime prevention as a technique that, because it causes displacement, will not be effective.³⁹ This statement overlooks recent work showing that displacement is not 1:1, and that there can be diffusion of benefits as well as displacement.⁴⁰

Finally, I think there are a couple of take-away theoretical lessons the researchers have overlooked. Work on the incivilities thesis shows that indicators of physical and social disorder may not join together as strongly as they should were they driven by an underlying disorder dynamic.⁴¹ Stated differently, when researchers and policy analysts use terms like "disorder" and "incivilities" they may think they are referring to a unitary set of dynamics. But if different incivilities indicators change in different ways over time, then there is no underlying disorder or incivilities, but instead a set of relatively distinct and only loosely constellated problems. Popkin et. al. report:

By 1998, at least on the exterior, Horner was much cleaner than in May 1994. Indeed, given all the changes, it is surprising that residents' complaints about trash and graffiti outside did not decline more—even in December, 1997, nearly half the residents . . . still reported major problems with graffiti and with trash in the parking lots and lawns. This finding suggests that despite the reduced disorder, vandalism remained a serious problem.⁴²

³⁷ See POPKIN ET. AL., *supra* note 1, at 29.

³⁸ See TAYLOR, *supra* note 35, at 372.

³⁹ See *id.* at 29.

⁴⁰ See GARY S. BARNES, *Defining and Optimizing Displacement*, in CRIME AND PLACE 95, 95-114 (John E. Eck & David Weisburd eds. 1995).

⁴¹ Ralph B. Taylor, *The Incivilities Thesis: Theory, Measurement and Policy*, in MEASURING WHAT MATTERS, 65, 65-88 (R. L. Langworthy ed.); see also TAYLOR, *supra* note 35, at 93-131.

⁴² POPKIN ET. AL., *supra* note 1, at 124.

This lack of congruence has surfaced as well in work on changes in Baltimore neighborhoods over a twelve-year period.⁴³ To find the same divergence in a more homogeneous set of communities over a shorter time, as did Popkin, deepens the questions I already have about the disorder construct.

Despite all that this volume accomplishes, it is hard not to wish for more. Highest on my wish list is further contextualizing. Some maps showing community locations in the City of Chicago, with detailed maps showing building locations within each community, would have been nice. Historical census data showing the changing populations in these communities would have been helpful as well.

Speaking of context, *The Hidden War* will doubtless be compared closely to two other volumes on life in public housing communities that also appeared in 2000. The three make an interesting contrast in method and perspective. Dalton Conley's *Honky* is a memoir of growing up the son of bohemian parents in a predominantly African-American public housing community in New York City in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s.⁴⁴ Conley's memoir paints far more vivid pictures of the residents of his childhood, and dwells at more length on issues of race and class. Almost literally across the street from one of the communities assessed by Popkin and her colleagues, Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh was conducting ethnographic work for ten years in the Robert Taylor Homes, perhaps the most violence-plagued of Chicago's public housing communities, and has written about the results in *American Project*.⁴⁵ There are numerous points of overlap between Venkatesh and Popkin's accounts: residents' heroic efforts to organize and improve their lives, the difficulties of negotiating relationships with gang members, and the policy initiatives that confound progress seemingly at every turn.⁴⁶ But there are important differences too. Venkatesh's account, for example, provides a more sociologically grounded and nuanced discussion of the rise of gangs in these communities. He argues

⁴³ See TAYLOR, *supra* note 35, at 93-131.

⁴⁴ DALTON CONLEY, *HONKY* (2000).

⁴⁵ SUDHIR ALLADI VENKATESH, *AMERICAN PROJECT: THE RISE AND FALL OF A MODERN GHETTO* (2000).

⁴⁶ See *id.* at 130-31 (describing, for instance, tenant leaders difficulty negotiating with gangmembers); see also POPKIN ET. AL, *supra* note 1, at 162 (describing similar controversies related to tenant negotiations with gangs).

the street gang became part of the local social organization because of shrinking resources flowing to the traditional power structure—the tenant councils—and strong suspicions and distrust of police.⁴⁷ Which volume people prefer may be in part a matter of style. Some may find that the multi-method, more quantitatively grounded approach of Popkin's team may be a more reassuring edifice upon which to mount the lesson plan when we review public housing communities.

The Hidden War should prove of interest in advanced undergraduate classes and graduate classes in a number of disciplines including sociology (urban sociology, communities and crime), political science (urban policies, housing), criminal justice (policy analysis, community crime prevention), and urban studies (housing, social policy). Since it does not rely heavily on quantitative data presentation it should be accessible to students with a range of backgrounds.

⁴⁷ See Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh, *The Social Organization of Street Gang Activity in an Urban Ghetto*, 25 AMER. J. OF SOC. 103, 82-111 (1997).

