CRIME HAS NO HOME HERE

Affordable Housing And Crime in Rural America

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Few things are likely to bring the crowds to a community's Planning Council or Commissioners meeting than a proposed affordable housing project. Like many other public good undertakings, opponents of affordable housing are reacting to concerns about how the proposed project will affect everything from traffic congestion to property values, and from school quality to the "fabric" of the community[1] . Often opponents philosophically agree with the need for additional affordable housing but believe their community already hosts its "fair share" and that the proposed project should be built elsewhere.

In community planning, this phenomenon, known generally as "Not In My Back Yard" or NIMBY, has traditionally focused on incompatible land uses (landfill siting and zoning changes, for example) and the potential real harm to a community's health and well-being[2]. Affordable housing NIMBY-ism, in contrast, is often based on perceived fears, often with unintentional classicist and racist undertones, rather than concrete concerns[3]. In addition, the community perceptions which underlie affordable housing NIMBY-ism creates not only opposition to the physical structure in the immediate, but also a negative view of the property's tenants long after the contractors move on.

Crime and police activity are one of the most often cited concerns to a proposed affordable housing project[4]. However, multiple studies in major urban and suburban areas have shown that these concerns do not hold up to rigorous analysis. In fact, several studies show an inverse relationship, with affordable housing units providing a boost to home values and a decrease in crime in declining neighborhoods[5] . A review of the literature, however, shows very little attention has been paid to rural and smaller urban areas, where, due to lower incomes, the on-going affordable housing crisis is far more significant, increasing potential ramification of NIMBY-ism[6] .

This study looks to add to the body of knowledge by investigating whether a relationship exists between affordable housing and crime from a rural community lens. In the course of this analysis, we make two contributions to the literature on affordable housing. We focus on rural and small community affordable housing, an area that has received little to no attention in the academic world.

In addition, our research differs from much of the previous work in that we look at tenants' perception of, and experience with, criminal activity on their properties and the surrounding community, rather than neighbors and the community at large. Since the intent of this study was to determine what, if any, relationship exists between affordable housing and criminal activity in the study area, the perceptions of those outside the property were not relevant to the task. In the context of this

study, tenants' experiences provided a valuable real-life insight into crime and criminality, both on-property and off, from the individuals most likely to be the victims, or perpetrators, of on-property crime, where it exists.

Analysis of the outside community's perception also did not make sense in the geographic context of the study. The population density in the study area hovers around 630 people per square mile. The affordable housing properties in the study area, on the other hand, generally were of a significantly higher density, upwards of 1,000 people per square mile. This imbalance is consistent with much of rural America where owner occupied, single family residences are the norm. Therefore, even if the rate of crime were similar on-property to the community as a whole, by default the police would be on property more often than in the surrounding neighborhood thus skewing neighbors' perceptions of crime.

Our analysis employed a mixed-method approach to data collection and analysis centered on six properties owned and managed by Keene Housing, a public housing authority located in Keene, New Hampshire. The City of Keene is a small, rural community in the southwest corner of New Hampshire with a population of 23,500 people. The community is predominately white, non-Latino (92.7%) with relatively high educational attainment (40% with a Bachelor's degree or higher)[7] .

Established by the City in 1965, Keene Housing provides housing assistance for individuals and families who earn below 80% of the area median income ($58,550 for a family of three) in Keene and the surrounding region[8] . Keene Housing serves almost one thousand low – and moderate-income households through a variety of federal affordable housing programs.

Research Design and Methodology

All six properties selected – Central Square Terrace, Brookbend East and West, North and Gilsum, Harper Acres, Meadow Road, and Forest View – are located within city limits and are no more than three miles from each other. Four of the properties – Meadow Road, Forest View, North and Gilsum, and Harper Acres – are former public housing or HUD Multifamily sites that the agency converted to conventional mortgages and subsidizes with Project-Based Vouchers. Of the remaining two properties, Central Square Terrace is a HUD Multifamily property designated for tenants who are elderly or disabled and the Brookbends are a mix-funded property utilizing Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC), project-based vouchers, and Multifamily subsidies.

Spatial Analysis

We conducted a spatial analysis using publicly available police call logs published on the Keene Police Department website. The call logs include the date of the police call or interaction, incident number, time of the incident, the call reason, the action taken by the police officer, and the location. Researchers focused only on 2017, the last complete data set available, which contained a total of 27,811 incidents. We then filtered out all incidents recorded with incomplete addresses, such as "Main Street" or "Court Street" leaving only crime incidents that had accurate locations associated with them such as complete addresses, business/property names, or clear cross street names indicating the location. Next, researchers filtered out all incidents that were not criminal in nature such as disabled motor vehicles, building checks, warrants, reports, welfare checks, and school patrols. The remaining incidents were grouped into one of the following categories: property, personal, domestic, or substance misuse. The resulting dataset of 4,167 incidents were used for spatial analysis.

Data-points were geocoded and mapped in ArcGIS. Following HUD's crime analysis protocol, we utilized a 50-yard buffer around each property[9]. Crimes occurring within the buffer are considered to fall within tenants' living space, thus have an impact on Keene Housing tenants' perceptions of safety, regardless of whether tenants were involved in the incident. Crime rates were then calculated at the property and city level by dividing the number of remaining incidents by the total population in the area.

Resident Perception

We supplemented police logs with tenants' perceptions and experiences with crime through a series of questions included in the agency's annual Resident Satisfaction Survey. The goal was to ask tenants their general levels of safety, and to explore any possible concerns they may have. In total, 113 surveys were collected across the properties being studied. Due to the uneven response rate across properties, responses were pooled together and analyzed collectively rather than by individual property. By pooling responses, we were able to conduct a fair and statically significant analysis of

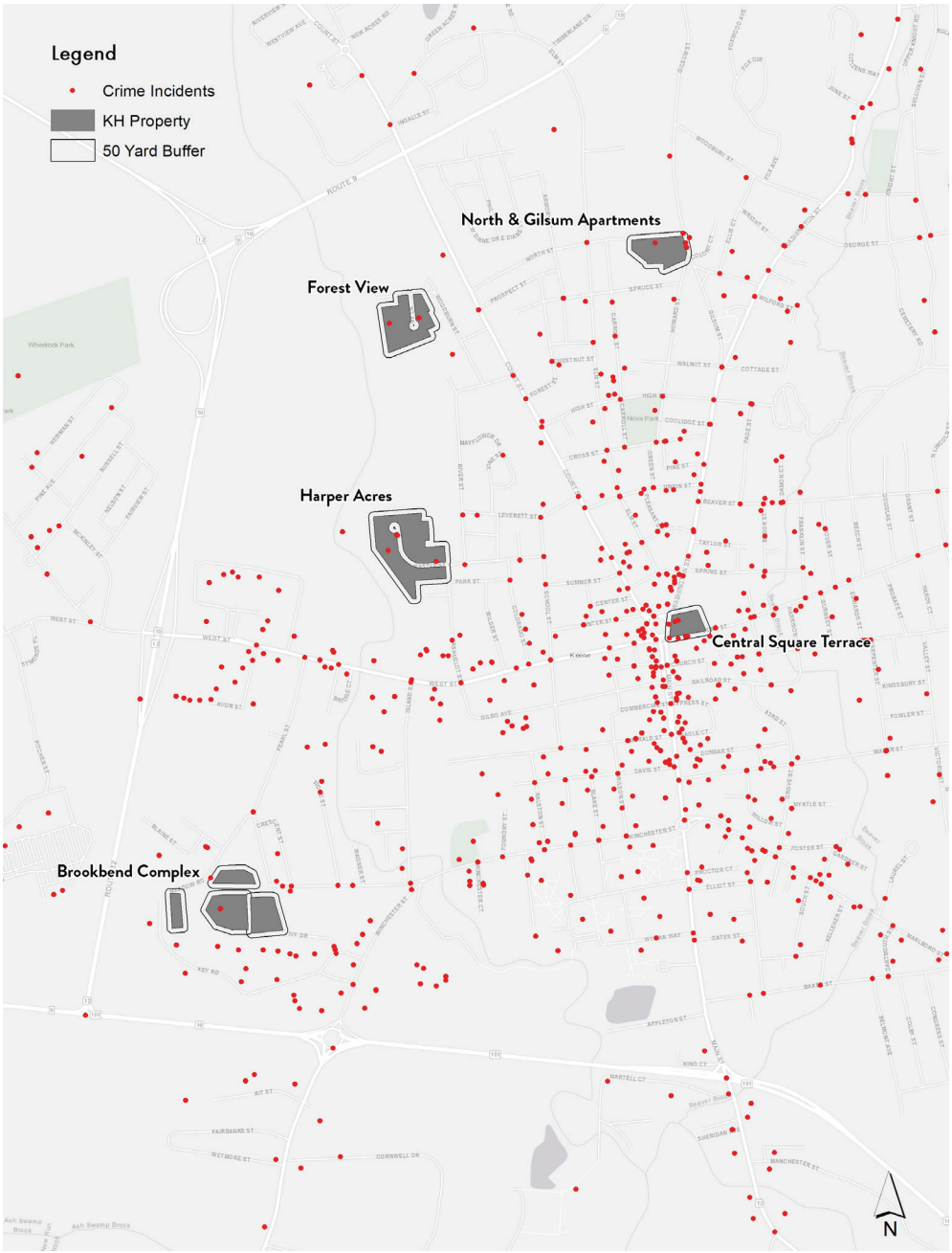
tenant's perceptions.

Findings

Of the 4,167 incidents in Keene in 2017, 174 (4%) occurred within the 50 yard buffer of the six properties in the study group for an average crime rate of .24 per person. The city-wide average during the same period was .18 crimes per person. Statistical analysis showed the difference in crime incident rates amongst property tenants was not significantly higher than that of the general population ($p<0.01$).

Mapping out incidents across Keene also provides visual evidence of patterns. As shown in Figure 1, incidents were spread somewhat evenly across the City's neighborhoods, with the largest cluster of calls characteristically located in the denser downtown area. Keene Housing properties, on the other hand, have few incidents compared to other neighborhoods in the city.

Figure 1. Spatial analysis of crime incidents in Keene, NH in 2017.



Resident experience seems to support these findings. Overall, the majority of tenants on the properties have neither been a victim or a witness of a crime in the past year, 69% and 78% respectively (Figure 2). In addition, when tenants were asked about their general levels of safety, the responses were predominately positive (Figure 3). However, about 12% of respondents said they felt either unsafe or very unsafe in the outdoor common areas or the neighborhood surrounding their property. While not a statistically significant number, further analysis showed that respondents that indicated an unsafe feeling outdoors generally lived at Central Square Terrace, the only downtown property in the study group.

Tenants were also asked to rank how concerned they were with various issues on their property. The results show fairly evenly distributed responses, with roughly half of tenants saying they felt neutral or not concerned with incidents on their property and the other half saying they felt concerned or even very concerned (Figure 4). Of the 7 potential incidents, tenants felt most concerned about unauthorized guests and drug use/sales, at 60% and 52% respectively. On the reserve side, tenants were least concerned with violent crime as well as domestic violence and litter/graffiti at 45% and 35% respectively.

Lastly, to understand overall perceptions of crime and safety, tenants were asked if they felt crime is a serious problem on their property and if they felt police activity has increased on their property

within the last year. 51% of respondents felt crime was not a serious problem, 32% felt neutral on the subject and only 17% felt crime was a problem on their property (Figure 5). In contrast, perceptions of police activity on housing properties were evenly distributed among tenants with roughly a third of respondents saying police activity has not increased, another third saying they felt neutral, and the last third feeling as if police activity has increased. This could be due to the fact that the total number of respondents was pooled together from each property and not analyzed by each individual property.

Discussion

Even though there is a slightly higher crime rate on Keene Housing properties, it can be explained by the nature of the data filtering method. Nearly half of the 23,000 incidents not used in the police log were discarded because they did not have clear locations. Whereas all of the Keene Housing incidents were kept because the police logs included the name of KH properties. Therefore, this inflates the data with a larger percentage of Keene Housing crime incidents. In addition, Central Square Terrace is located in the busiest part of Keene, which naturally has a dense cluster of crime incidents. This caused Central Square Terrace's crime rate to be intensified even though it doesn't accurately represent the experiences of the tenants who live there.

Other methods of analysis also support the notion that crime is not more significant on Keene Housing properties. The spatial distribution of all crime in Keene, shows no pattern of clusters near Keene Housing properties, but even the opposite. Larger clusters appeared near private residential neighborhoods and downtown. These findings match similar

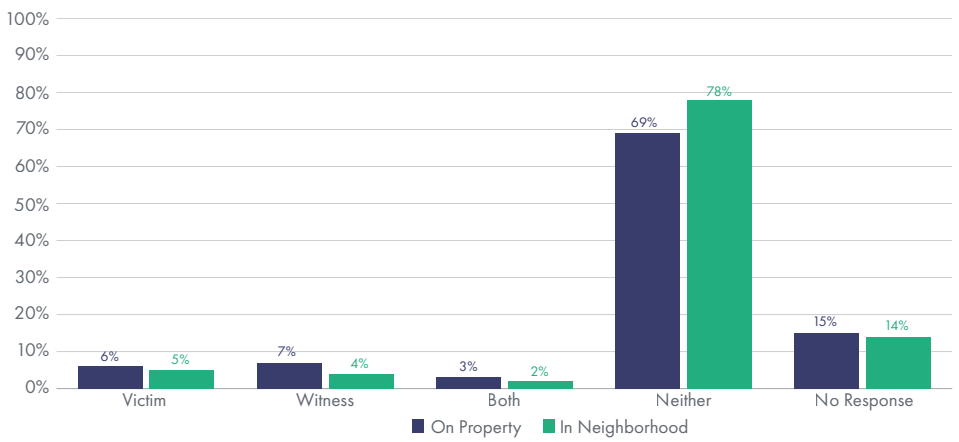


Figure 2. Percentage of respondents that have been a victim, or witness, of a crime in the previous year.

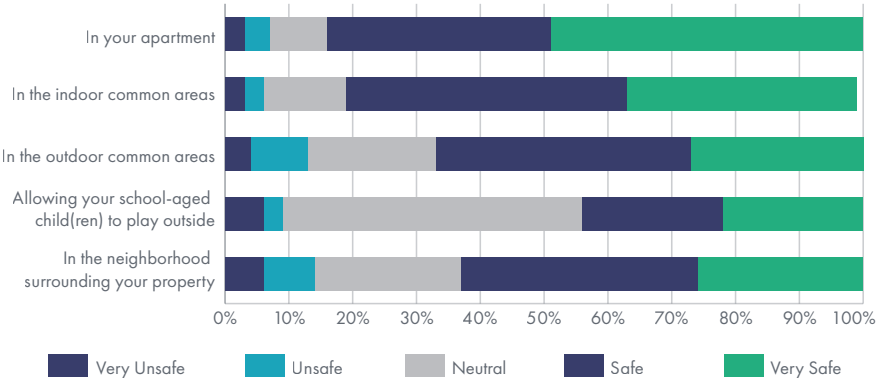


Figure 3. Respondents' perceptions of their safety in and around the property.

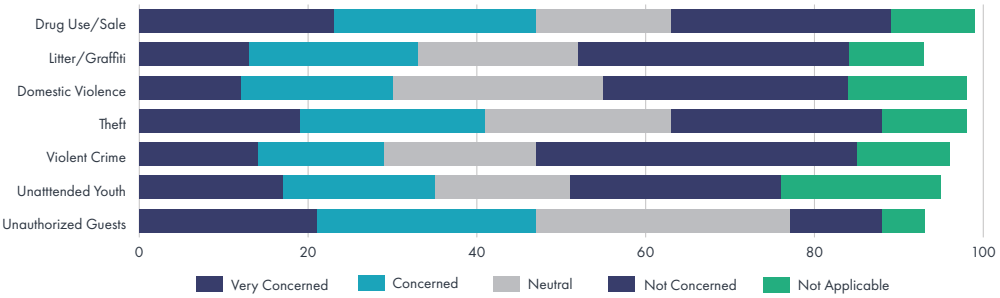


Figure 4. Respondents' concerns about safety issues.

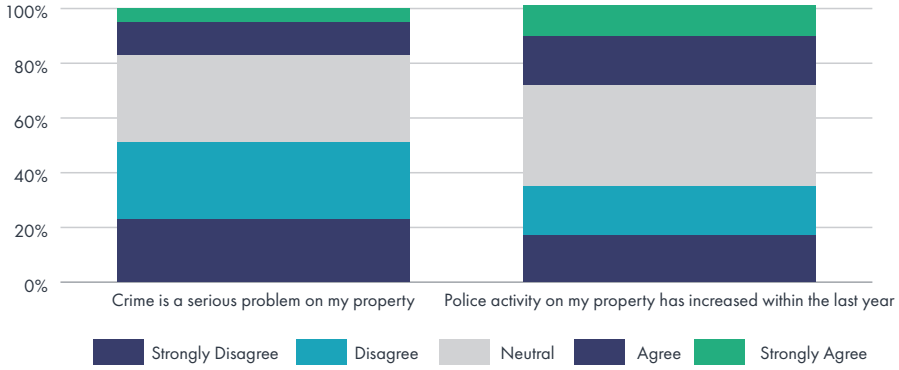


Figure 5. Respondents' perception on the severity of crime on-property.

studies, where the vast majority show that low-income housing does not often match the perception of low-income housing being unsafe and breeding crime.

It was also made clear by the survey that safety and crime perceptions can often differ from that of reality. According to general safety responses, tenants were most concerned with unauthorized guests and drug use/sales. Issues with unauthorized guests would not be recorded in the police logs unless the guest was issued a no trespass or restraining order and the police were called.

When looking at the actual crime data from the Keene police logs, of the crime committed within 50 yards of public housing only 6% was related to substance misuse which was the least prevalent type of offense. In contrast, responses show that tenants were least concerned with violent and domestic crime. In reality though, the actual crime data shows that of the crime within 50 yards of the study properties, personal crime (which includes violent crimes) made up 39% of the total and was the most prevalent type of offense. This may have to do with the fact that substance misuse crimes are easier to detect. While violent and domestic crimes are often times invisible to the general public. Nonetheless, this reinforces the notion that safety perceptions often times stray from reality, and can leave tenants feeling more vigilant than necessary.

Conclusion

The connection between affordable housing and increased crime is well entrenched in the public mind. Despite its prevalence in popular imagination, multiple empirical studies have shown little to no connection in urban and suburban settings. This study further debunks the myth that affordable housing is correlated with increased crime rates in rural and small communities.

The findings support an argument that increased crime rates in and around affordable housing are more contingent on location, rather than its existence, of the property. They also indicate that tenant's feelings of safety generally focus on outside intrusions, rather than overt criminal behavior by other tenants.

It is important to note that this was but an initial exploration into crime, safety, and affordable housing at he rural and small community level. The smaller, less dense population in rural areas, requires a more complex and nuanced approach than urban areas which tends to dissuade researchers from engaging in empirical research at this geographic level. However, given the current affordable housing crisis, adequately addressing this issue with empirical research is essential to help affordable housing developers and communities overcome public opposition.

Endnotes

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2 *Ibid.*

3 Corianne Payton Scally, J. Rosie Tighe. (2015) Democracy in Action?: NIMBY as Impediment to Equitable Affordable Housing Siting. Housing Studies 30:5, pages 749-769.

4 Albright, L., Derickson, E. S., & Massey, D. S. (2013). Do Affordable Housing Projects Harm Suburban Communities? Crime, Property Values, and Taxes in Mount Laurel, NJ. City & Community, 12(2), 89–112.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Getsinger Liza, Poethig Erika C. (2017). The federal government is closing the rental affordability gap in rural America. Urban Wire: Housing and Housing Finance https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/federal-government-closing-rental-affordability-gap-rural-america

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