

Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey

# RESEARCH UPDATE

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## Putting our houses in order

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In the 1998/1999 Continuous Tenant Omnibus Survey run by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), it was reassuring to note the levels of satisfaction among tenants of the services provided by the Housing Executive. Amid the general background of positive findings only two discordant notes were raised. First, the fact that almost two-thirds of households had an annual gross income of £7,300 or less; and second, the rather significant levels of fear of crime. Neither of these could possibly be construed as 'criticisms' of the work of the Housing Executive, but both are symptoms of a problem that needs addressing by a number of agencies. Commenting on the results, Chairman Sid McDowell pointed out:

*"A worrying aspect of the Continuous Tenant Omnibus Survey was the high number of tenants on low income. Almost two-thirds of households had a gross income of £7,300 or less. This is a clear indication that housing is no longer just about 'bricks and mortar'. It supports our commitment to work with other agencies and local communities to tackle deprivation on our estates."*

While the relationship between crime and deprivation is not a simple one, the unique situation in Northern Ireland has deflected attention from the kinds of problems that have long occupied the attention of housing researchers in Britain. This paper

uses results from the 1998 *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey* to highlight these problems and to consider, in particular, the relatively vulnerable position of some of Northern Ireland's Housing Executive tenants.

## Levels of crime in Northern Ireland

International crime surveys carried out in 1989 and 1992 have demonstrated that Northern Ireland has lower rates of crime victimisation than England, Wales, or Scotland (e.g. Mayhew & White, 1997). More recently, findings from the Northern Ireland Crime Survey have reiterated this – at least in relation to household crimes (Power, Willis & Amelin, 1999). The fact that this is basically good news for most of us tends to obscure the more precarious position of a minority of people living in areas where crime, fear of crime and anti-social behaviour are much more common. Studies such as the Communities Crime Survey (O'Mahoney et al, 2000) and numerous other surveys in Britain demonstrate consistently that crime is heavily 'clustered' within neighbourhoods.

## Uneasy environments ...

Although the notion that Northern Ireland has much lower overall crime levels than other parts of the UK has generally permeated public consciousness, Housing Executive tenants are slightly more cautious about signing up to this 'feel-good' factor. While 80% of home-owners feel there is less crime in NI than in GB, only 71% of Housing Executive tenants

are quite so confident. This is still a large majority – but the first tentative indication of some of the problems that Housing Executive tenants face. More significantly perhaps, home-owners were much more likely to believe that there was less crime in their own areas compared with the rest of Northern Ireland – 76% thought so but only just over half of Housing Executive tenants (55%) agreed.

The *Life and Times Survey* does not ask directly about householders' own experience of crime, but it does ask about the general level of crime and incivilities<sup>1</sup> in the neighbourhood. Incivilities are important predictors of crime (Skogan, 1990) and as the following table shows, the level of anti-social behaviour suffered by many people living on estates is far in excess of that experienced by home-owners. To choose a few examples, Housing Executive tenants were about three times more likely than home-owners to say that graffiti, mugging and vandalism were common in their area. Well over half of Housing Executive tenants also report that "teenagers hanging around" is common – something which may be innocent enough, but which can appear highly threatening to the elderly and other vulnerable groups.

% saying "very" or "fairly" common	Owns	HE
Mugging	5	14
Noisy neighbours	5	25
Drunks/tramps on streets	6	22
Homes in bad condition	6	37
Graffiti	11	41
Rubbish or litter	18	47
Vandalism	19	52
Teenagers hanging around	25	60
Burglary	27	33

### Fearful environments...

Unsurprisingly given the extent of anti-social behaviours reported, Housing

<sup>1</sup> Incivilities in this context means anti-social behaviours such as graffiti, noisy neighbours, drunks and tramps on the street etc.

Executive tenants also report greater levels of fear and anxiety.

*How safe do you feel walking alone in this area after dark?*

	Owns	HE
	%	%
Very safe	33	24
Fairly safe	49	44
A bit or very unsafe	16	31

Nearly a third of Housing Executive tenants (31%) compared with 16% of home-owners said that they felt unsafe walking alone in their area after dark. These figures are consistent with those reported on the Continuous Tenant Omnibus Survey (NIHE, 1999).

### Policing

Insofar as there is any public debate about crime on housing estates, attention tends to be deflected by wider issues to do with policing. The day to day management of anti-social behaviours and innovative ways of dealing with this (as experimented with in Britain) receive little public attention. Furthermore, the preoccupation with 'big' policing issues tends to obscure other societal fissures which may impact heavily on the nature of dealings with the police.

The *Life and Times Survey* asked what people would do if they witnessed a burglary and, in turn, a hi-jacking. While there is a greater tendency among Catholics not to report the crime at all, there is nonetheless a visible reluctance among tenants from either community background to enter into direct contact with the police. Only just under two thirds of tenants would themselves report a burglary directly to the police. That figure is even higher when people were asked what they would do if they witnessed a hi-jacking. Over one in ten tenants (Protestant or Catholic) would not report it at all and only about 60% would report it themselves.

If witnessed a burglary, % who would...	Catholic		Protestant	
	Owns %	HE %	Owns %	HE %
Report it to police themselves	78	63	86	65
Use confidential phone or someone else report it	15	19	11	28
Not report it at all	5	13	-	4

If witnessed a hi-jacking, % who would...	Catholic		Protestant	
	Owns %	HE %	Owns %	HE %
Report it to the police themselves	70	61	83	58
Use confidential phone or someone else report it	16	22	13	26
Not report it at all	8	13	2	11

The same reluctance to come forward is apparent when people were asked if they would give evidence in court about the crime that they witnessed. Again both Catholic and Protestant tenants are much less likely to come forward than their home-owning co-religionists. Over a fifth of both Catholic and Protestant tenants would *not* come forward to give evidence in court about a burglary that they had witnessed; and about three in ten would not give evidence in a hi-jacking case. It is worth bearing in mind that we are not necessarily looking at inner-city 'hot-spot' housing estates here - this is the average view across the range of neighbourhoods in which Housing Executive tenants are located.

	Catholic		Protestant	
	Owns %	HE %	Owns %	HE %
Definitely <u>not</u> come forward - burglary	6	21	5	24
Definitely <u>not</u> come forward - hi-jacking	16	33	8	28

## Conclusion

Clearly these results beg many questions about reasons for police avoidance, the dynamics of intra-estate conflict and the vexed question of community relations. But what they do highlight is a problem that is moving up the policy agenda. Dealing with anti-social behaviour has become a key issue for housing organisations across the United Kingdom, particularly in view of the Government's focus on social exclusion and the development of a neighbourhood renewal strategy.

The Housing Executive acknowledges the duty it is under to address issues of community safety and anti-social behaviour in Northern Ireland. It is currently developing a Community Safety/Relations Strategy in partnership with other agencies to tackle the problem of anti-social behaviour. Raising awareness of these issues is only the first step.

## References

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Power, M., Willis, M. and Amelin, K., 1999. Fear of Crime and Victimization in Northern Ireland, *Research Findings* 1/99. NIO.

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Skogan, W., 1990. *Disorder and Decline: Crime and the Spiral of Decay in American Neighbourhoods*. New York: Free Press.

### KEY POINTS

- Home-owners were much more likely to believe that there was less crime in their own areas compared with the rest of Northern Ireland – 76% thought so but only 55% of Housing Executive tenants felt the same.
- Housing Executive tenants were about three times more likely than home-owners to say that graffiti, mugging and vandalism were common in their neighbourhoods.
- 60% of Housing Executive tenants reported that “teenagers hanging around” was common in their areas compared with 25% of home-owners.
- Nearly a third of Housing Executive tenants (31%) compared with 16% of home-owners said that they felt unsafe walking alone in their area after dark.
- There is a reluctance among tenants from either community background to enter into direct contact with the police. If they witnessed a burglary, less than two thirds of Housing Executive tenants would themselves report it directly to the police.
- Over a fifth of both Catholic and Protestant tenants would *not* come forward to give evidence in court about a burglary that they had witnessed; and about three in ten would not give evidence in a hi-jacking case.

The *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey* is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 1998, 1800 adults were interviewed on the main survey and 449 young people on the accompanying Young Life and Times Survey. Interviews were carried out by *Research and Evaluation Services*.

The *Life and Times Survey* is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings ([www.qub.ac.uk/nilt](http://www.qub.ac.uk/nilt)) or call the survey directors at Queen’s University (028 90 273585) with any queries.