

# Designs and Codes that Reduce Crime around Multifamily Housing

Helping local agencies understand and codify safe multifamily housing without gates, fences, locks and burglar alarms!

**R**esearch shows that crime rates are influenced by the design of both the building and the space surrounding the building. The key elements to look for are:

- ▶ Semi-public or semi-private space
- ▶ Windows
- ▶ Sense of community
- ▶ Maintenance
- ▶ Siting

## Defining space as semi-public or semi-private

Architect Oscar Newman, in 1971, reported crime rates to be much higher in high-rise buildings surrounded by open space than in low-rise buildings with central courtyards.

Open space surrounding high-rise buildings belongs to no one – it becomes a no man's land. Central corridors to apartments shared by large numbers of occupants have the same problem. Criminal activities can occur there and no one feels the responsibility to step in and try to stop it.

However, if a space is clearly designated as semi-public or semi-private, as were the courtyards and stoops in the low-rise buildings studied by Newman, residents know who belongs and who doesn't. They are more willing to assert their dominance over an intruder. And the intruder is also less likely to enter a space where he will be recognized as an outsider and his activities observed.

All space is public



Ownership is defined – Crime discouraged



# Placing windows for surveillance

Author Jane Jacobs was the first to observe the “eyes on the street” phenomenon. If residents can see criminal behavior going on in what they perceive as their own space, they will be likely to take action.

From the intruders’ perspective, when windows surround a space, the unwelcome visitor feels as though he is being watched. Even if there is no one behind the glass, there is the fear that someone might be.

No surveillance breeds crime



Surveillance opportunities reduce crime



Poorly maintained property



Well-maintained property



# Maintaining the property

Researchers have, for years, recognized something called the broken windows syndrome. If property is not cared for, it appears that no one is asserting ownership and no one cares about it. These properties become magnets for crime.

# Developing a sense of community

Researchers at Harvard University found that rates of violent crime in neighborhoods where residents knew and watched out for one another were as much as 40% lower than in neighborhoods where a sense of community was not present.

Income levels made no difference. Some of the most affluent neighborhoods studied had a poor sense of community (and high crime rates), while some of the poorest had a strong sense of community (and lower crime rates).

While a host of factors determine whether a sense of community will develop, the physical environment plays a role. To form relationships, people need a place and a reason to get together. This can be accommodated by providing gathering places like a small playground for children, a community garden, or even a front porch or stoop.

The presence of trees and grass has also been associated with reduced crime rates, possibly because residents of a well-landscaped building spend more time outside, allowing them to get to know one another and develop a sense of community.

▲ As the photographs on this page illustrate, such design elements can include community gardens, pocket parks, trees and grass, stoops and front porches, playgrounds for tots, community rooms, neighborhood coffee shops and other gathering places.

## Designs that Allow a Community to Develop



## Implementing These Ideas

A number of local agencies have converted these anti-crime design standards into local codes for new and redevelopment. The following examples of these codes can be found at [www.lgc.org](http://www.lgc.org):

- City of Watsonville, CA, "Livable Residential Design Guidelines," p. 23-26
- San Diego Southeastern Economic Development Corp., "Multi-Family Development Guidelines," Chapter 7: Safety and Security
- City of Salem, OR, "Development Design Handbook - Multifamily and Compact Residential Development," p. 29
- City of Sacramento, CA, "Multi-Family Residential Design Principles," p. 6-28
- City of Overland Park, KS, "Multifamily Residential Design Guidelines and Standards," p. 23-24
- City of Santa Monica, CA, "Ocean Park Design Guidelines," p. 24

# Choosing the site

Numerous communities have found that concentrating poverty breeds discontent and exacerbates social problems. The U.S. Housing and Urban Development Agency's HOPE IV program has experienced considerable success in transforming older projects so that low-income residents are housed in mixed-income neighborhoods.

Siting housing for low-income residents near transit, grocery stores, work places and other services also addresses the negative consequences of isolating the poor and leaving them unable to help themselves.

.....

Produced by the Local Government Commission and Fannie Mae.

For references to information used in producing this document: [www.lgc.org](http://www.lgc.org) > Crime Prevention



Fannie Mae is the nation's largest source of mortgage, multifamily and bond financing, and recently announced new goals to create 6 million first-time homebuyers, increase the minority homeownership rate to 55%, and address issues of workforce housing in high-cost markets.



1414 K St. Suite 600  
Sacramento, CA 95814-3966  
(916) 448-1198 • [www.lgc.org](http://www.lgc.org)



Geneva Towers



St. Francis Square

Geneva Towers was a high-rise, low-income housing project in San Francisco, surrounded by open space – the public area was a no man's land.

St. Francis Square is a housing co-op with three-story units built around courtyards. Windows overlook the courtyard space.

Studying these two San Francisco housing developments, researchers found that very few Geneva Towers residents said they would come to the aid of a crime victim in their neighborhood. In St. Francis Square, the majority said they would surely come to the rescue of a neighbor. Geneva Towers was so crime-infested it was eventually demolished and replaced by low-rise housing.



Diggs Town – before



Diggs Town – after

The Diggs Town housing project in Norfolk, Virginia, is home to 4,000 tenants, the majority of whom live below the poverty line. Faced with the physical decay and social collapse of Diggs Town, the redevelopment agency decided to retrofit the housing rather than demolish it.

The site was modified to create a series of small villages, connected by streets and paths. The anonymous, barracks-like buildings were redesigned to line the streets with front porches, well-defined front doors, and picket fences that surround individual front and back yards. Many residents have created gardens and planted flowers around their homes.

Before the physical renovations occurred, the police department was responding to 30 calls a day from the area. After the redesign, the number decreased to two to three per week.