

PERCEPTIONS OF CRIME IN A DREADFUL ENCLOSURE¹

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Abstract. The environmental context for this research is Alumni Village, a married student housing complex on the campus of Florida State University. Alumni Village was analyzed as an example of a "dreadful enclosure" which can be defined as a large-scale housing estate or development which possesses a reputation as the home of thieves and cutthroats. Perceptions of the safety of the complex by its residents were obtained through use of a set of mental maps which were constructed by resident respondents. The method utilized in this study was derived in large part from Kevin Lynch's (1960) urban image delineation methodology. An analysis of the match between perceptions as recorded in mental maps and a known crime measure was carried out. Conclusions were drawn about policy improvements on the part of both the policing service and the management service for the complex.

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The environmental design perspective on crime prevention and control urges criminologists to explore the dynamics of man-environment interactions in order to construct empirical models of criminal events. These models should facilitate environmental analysis and engineering which will change the critical man-environment interaction at potential crime sites such that crimes will be prevented (Jeffery 1971).

We have learned enough about man-environment associations at the crime site in recent years to know that we are dealing with a very complex interaction. Jeffery (1975) has lately been concerned with bio-social components of this interaction and here we are concerned with another aspect: spatial perceptions of crime sites. These perceptions include at least 4 different sorts of people who are important to criminal events—potential victims, potential offenders, police and policy makers. Each of these groups of people play an important part in creating and defining the occurrence of crime. Victims and offenders are immediate par-

ticipants, police are both conditioning and responding agents. Policy makers decide what sorts of problems ought to be handled by means of criminal sanctions and shape the allocation of resources in time and space to such sanctions. We explore the crime site perceptions of one of these groups, potential victims within a married student housing complex of some 795 apartments, a limited but important setting.

RELATED INVESTIGATIONS

Recent victimological literature (Drapkin and Viano 1974) extends the theoretical and empirical importance of the victim-offender interaction, as a basis for understanding criminal events, by suggesting that mutual perceptions of victims and offenders can alter the behavior patterns of both groups (Landau, 1974). Indeed, as Dyreson (1973) has elegantly demonstrated, the behavioral interactions of victim, offender and policeman can often be modeled as an intricate spatial search and avoidance pattern in which the victim seeks to carry out a variety of activities while avoiding dangerous places and offenders. Conversely, the offender seeks to find congenial crime sites and "good" victims while avoiding the police; and the policeman seeks to find a maxi-

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imum number of offenders. This complicated predator-prey patterning of behavior is necessarily shaped by the various actors' perceptions of a number of things:

- (1) victim and police perceptions of the characteristics and habits of potential offenders.
- (2) offender perceptions of "good" victims and targets.
- (3) offender perceptions of the legal and empirical risks involved in the commission of particular crimes.
- (4) perceptions on the part of all actors about the location of crime sites, and the perceived dangerous areas of city and countryside where crimes are likely to be committed.

The first 3 sets of perceptions have been explored in the criminological literature (Henshel and Silverman 1975). The fourth set of perceptions—about crime sites—has hardly been touched, yet has critical implications for environmental designers. To the extent that victim, police and policy maker perceptions of the locational aspects of specific crime problems are at variance with some underlying real-world objective pattern (See Henshel and Silverman 1975), there may be critical errors made in making policy choices of both a systemic and behavioral sort. The result may be that environmental design efforts to control crime may appear to have no effect, or may appear to make things worse.

The few pieces of research that have addressed potential victim perceptions of the locational aspects of crime suggest that those perceptions are different from alternative, objective measures of crime location. Thus, Droettboom *et al* (1971), in a study of residential mobility rates as a function of perceived crime problems, demonstrated that large segments of urban populations have substantial misperceptions about the intensity and location of urban crime problems with respect to their own neighborhoods. The groups which expressed the greatest fear of crime appeared to be groups which experienced the smallest chances of victimization. Residential mobility as a result of crime

appeared to be related to actual victimization rather than to perceived crime problems. We have known for some time, from the fear of crime literature, that there are disjunctions between the social groups most victimized by crime and the groups who most fear crime. (President's Commission 1967; Biderman *et al* 1967; Wolfgang 1970; Brooks 1974; Gubrium 1974). More recently, we have learned from an observation found in the early fear of crime literature (President's Commission 1967), that people tend to think crime is not so bad in their own neighborhoods and is worse elsewhere, regardless of the underlying reality. This apparently holds true across time and space, and such perceptions have been demonstrated in the British dreadful enclosure literature (Damer 1974; Baldwin 1974, 1975; Baldwin *et al* 1976).

Dreadful enclosures (the term was coined by American sociologist E. V. Walter of Boston University in 1972) are council housing estates (public housing projects to Americans) which develop fearsome reputations as the homes of thieves and cutthroats. Over time, these areas come to be viewed as difficult and dangerous by non-residents, housing officials, police, and residents themselves. Yet residents of such areas assume the crime problem is not so bad in the area where they live and that the dangerous areas and criminal residences must be in some other part of the housing estate. Damer (1974) made this finding in a Glasgow dreadful enclosure called Wine Alley in the course of one of the more useful and thoughtful recent studies. Baldwin (1974, 1975) made a similar finding in a comparative study of housing estates in Sheffield.

METHODOLOGY FOR EVALUATION

It seemed to us that it would be useful to develop a technique for measuring the accuracy and intensity of locational perceptions of crime sites held by various actors in the criminal event. To accomplish this, we reasoned we would need 2 sources of information: a source which measured group perceptions of crime in a *spatial* way; and an objective measure of the real crime problem in a given local. We selected Alumni Village, a university

married student complex with a local reputation as a dreadful enclosure for the residents because it was supposed to have enormously high crime rates. A review of police records showed low crime rates, but further checking indicated that the Village fell into a perceptual *black hole* between the perceived jurisdictions of the city police, the university police, and the county sheriff. The relatively low recorded crime rates were a product of police recording policies, each agency believing that crime at the Village was the responsibility of one of the other agencies. The objective measure of location, kind and intensity of crime became a victimization survey which canvassed residents in almost all 795 apartments and allowed construction of a detailed picture of criminal victimization at Alumni Village over 5 university academic quarters, from Fall 1974 through Fall 1975. This survey showed a severe crime problem at the Village, justifying its reputation as a dreadful enclosure. (For details of results of this victimization survey, see Molumby 1976). Figure 1 shows a general plan of the Village.

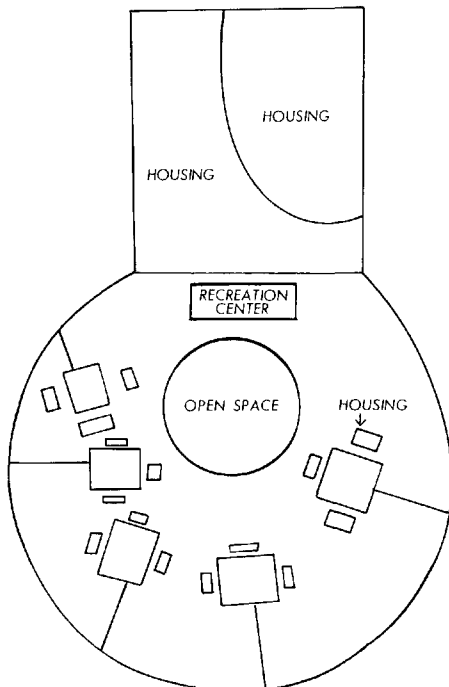


FIGURE 1. General Plan of Florida State University Alumni Village.

For a technique to measure perceptions of crime, we turned to urban planning and social geography, to the literature on mental maps (Lynch 1960; de Jonge 1962; Gould and White 1974; Beck and Wood 1976). Several different procedures have been developed to obtain spatial perceptions of the physical and social environment on the assumption that people develop simplified images, mental maps, or models of the real world as behavioral guidelines, and these mental maps further measure aspects of the real world which are important to the conduct of everyday life. Such a method, which yields a large quantity of information, was developed by Kevin Lynch in a urban planning work entitled *The Image of the City* (1960). Lynch asked residents of several cities to draw sketch maps of their cities. From these maps he extracted a number of prototypical concepts (building blocks) which people apparently use to construct mental maps of urban areas such as paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks. He also found that he could consolidate many individual maps into composite group maps. This procedure also was used successfully by de Jonge (1962) to analyze a number of cities in the Netherlands. Orleans (1973) used the method to explore the impact of social status on urban perception in Los Angeles, and Ley (1972) used it to analyze perceived areas of safety and danger in a black neighborhood in Philadelphia. The Lynch (1960) technique has considerable intuitive appeal and we elected to use his procedure in an attempt to construct a two-level mental map of Alumni Village and its crime problem.

We extracted a probability sample of apartments at Alumni Village and interviewed 72 respondents. Each respondent was asked to sketch a map of the Village, locating important features. After the sketch map was completed, each respondent was asked to mark any areas in the village which might have a crime problem. Each respondent was then interviewed, eliciting background information (e.g., how long a resident? a personal victim of crime?) and about the type and intensity of the crime problem identified on the sketch map of the Village.

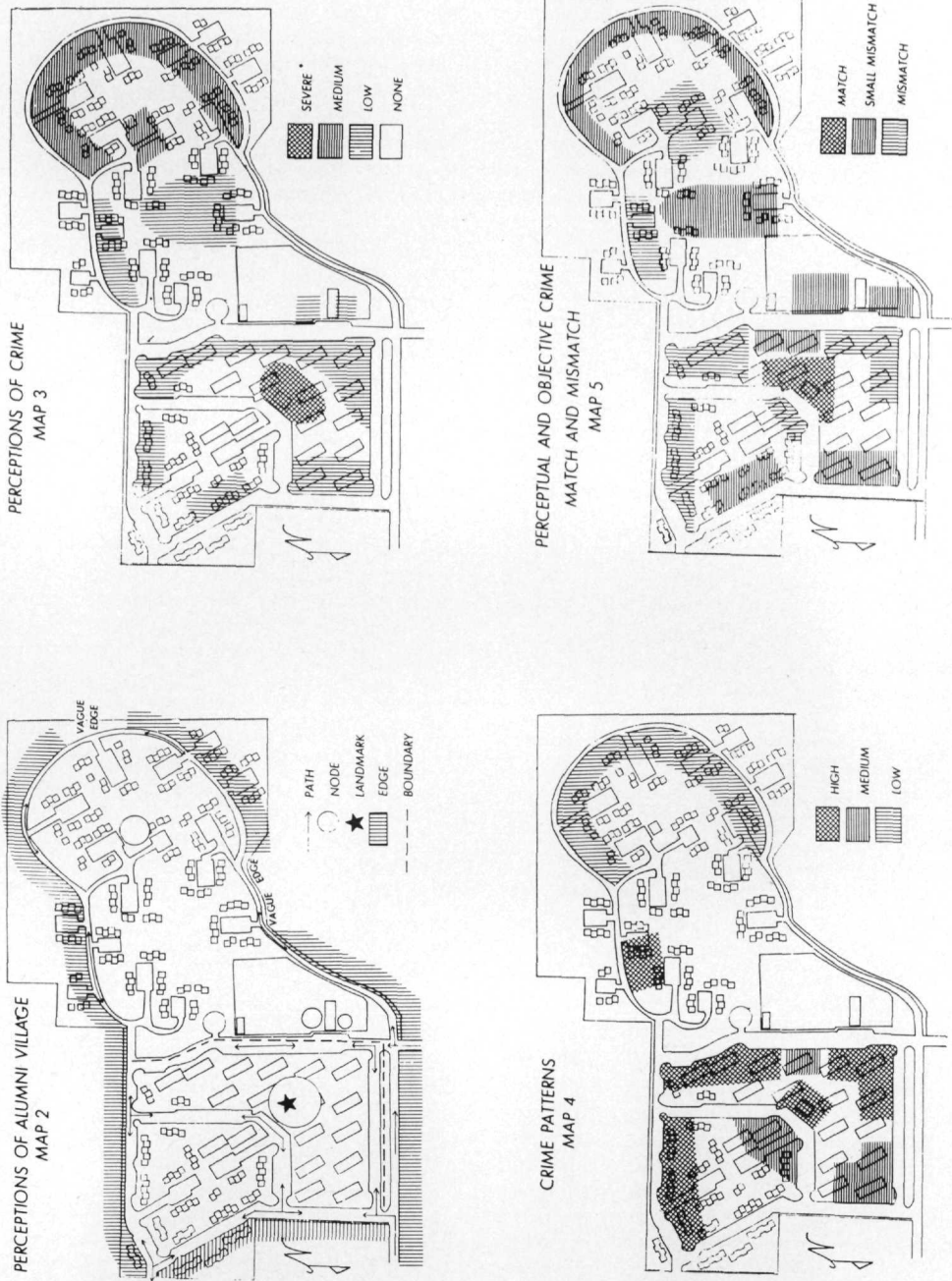


FIGURE 2. Composite Perceptual Maps of the Florida State University Alumni Village Area.

- Map 2. Perception of Edge and Boundaries
- Map 3. Perceptions of Crime Areas
- Map 4. Actual Crime Patterns
- Map 5. Correspondence between Crime Perceived and Actual Objective Reality

We subsequently constructed a series of 4 composite maps (fig. 2) by disaggregating each of the sketch maps into five elements: paths, edges, districts, landmarks, nodes, and boundaries. A composite map of the major elements of Alumni Village was then constructed on the basis of frequency counts of particular elements appearing in the sketch maps.

ALUMNI VILLAGE ANALYSIS

The emergent pattern was a residential enclosure walled off from the surrounding city and the neighborhood in which it is embedded by strong perceptual edges, subdivided into 2 distinct districts or neighborhoods by a perceptual boundary. Two major perceptual nodes emerged, both office buildings (which contained laundromats). Two minor nodes also appeared, the community center (which had a variety of recreational facilities and housed a number of family life services) and the tennis courts. The two vague edges were where the Village blurs into the Florida State University Golf Course and the old Florida State University dairy farm (fig. 2, map 2).

A composite crime perception map was then constructed by counting the frequency with which different parts of the Village were identified as areas with crime problems in the sketch maps. Figure 2, map 3 contains areas which were identified as having crime problems perceived by the respondents as severe, medium, low, or none at all. A Lynch-style objective crime map (fig. 2, map 4) based on the victimization data shows areas of the Village with high, medium and low crime rates based on victimization per dwelling unit or non-dwelling structure.

The patterns in the crime perception map and the objective crime map were compared in a search for matches and mismatches. Matches occurred when the perceptual and objective patterns showed similar levels of crime (e.g., severe-high, medium-medium, low-low). Small mismatches occurred when the perceptual and objective maps were one level out of phase (e.g., severe-medium, medium-high, none-low). Gross mismatches took place when the perceptual and objective maps were two or more levels out of phase (e.g., severe-low, low-

high). Matches and gross mismatches are most important in this analysis because matches indicate good correspondence between victim perception of dangerous areas and objective measurement of dangerous area, whereas the gross mismatches indicate poor correspondence between perceived reality and objective reality (fig. 2, map 5). There is only a single match, but there are substantial areas of gross mismatch. Residents in Alumni Village clearly misperceived the location of most of the dangerous crime sites within the Village.

CONCLUSIONS AND SPECULATIONS

The mental mapping approach shows promise as a research technique for criminologists interested in the environmental design approach. We were able to use it to analyze perceptions of crime sites in Alumni Village and obtain results consistent with prior qualitative research and added a spatial/locational dimension. We can now map environmental "danger areas" at the Village where resident misperceptions of crime risk may lead them into behavioral patterns which unconsciously increase the risk of victimization.

What is the future potential of the Lynch (1960) technique? It is possible to improve the quantitative rigor of the Lynchian technique, and it would be worthwhile extending the use of the technique into broader areas of perception. We expect to use it to explore several different group perceptions of crime areas in Tallahassee in the near future (police perceptions, city commission members' perceptions, city planning commission members' perceptions, known offenders' (from Tallahassee area who are currently in prison) perceptions). Each of these analyses should contribute something useful from the environmental perspective, and comparisons of the patterns of perception held by the different groups may yield information about the sociology of crime as well as the environmental perception of crime. It would be useful to triangulate the findings from this research with the findings from other related research into the spatial perception of crime. To accomplish this there are at least 3 kinds of techniques available:

- (1) preference surface mental map-

- ping techniques generating perceptual maps through statistical analysis of results on spatially grounded questionnaires (Gould and White 1974).
- (2) topological modeling of predicted crime patterns using objective data (Brantingham and Brantingham 1975).
 - (3) factorial experimentation using slide presentations of different environments to examine both offender perceptions of target choice (Repetto 1974), and citizen, police and policy maker perceptions of safe and dangerous urban forms.

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