

# New Deal for Communities

## The National Evaluation

### Research Reports

#### **Fear of Crime and Insecurity in New Deal for Communities Partnerships**

Research Report 14

The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit is currently sponsoring the 2002-2005 national evaluation of New Deal for Communities. This evaluation is being undertaken by a consortium of organisations co-ordinated by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit.

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*Sheffield Hallam University*

# **Fear of Crime and Insecurity in New Deal for Communities Partnerships**

Research Report 14

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## Executive Summary

- Nationally the reduction of fear of crime is as a priority for policing and local authorities. The overwhelming majority of NDCs included the reduction of fear of crime as a target in their delivery plans.
- Analysis of survey data has shown that measured levels of fear of crime are higher in NDC areas compared to the national average. This is not surprising given that the British Crime Survey has identified that respondents living on low incomes, in social sector housing and/or in inner city areas were more likely to worry about crime.
- NDC partnerships have struggled to engage with the concept of fear of crime. They have found it difficult to identify reliable baseline measures and have been frustrated by the fact that fear of crime has not responded to changes in crime levels. **Difficulties experienced by NDC partnerships reflect problems inherent in the concept and the way it has traditionally been measured rather than any failings on behalf of the partnerships.**
- Faced with these difficulties partnerships have either hoped that if crime continues to fall, 'fear of crime' will follow suit. Or they have abandoned the reduction of fear of crime as an active goal. Adopting either approach has not had any appreciable effect on the NDCs' activities. Indeed, if fear of crime had not been a consideration, NDCs would have implemented a near identical range of interventions.

Given that fear of crime is an unhelpful concept for the direction of policy and practice, how should partnerships address the insecurities of NDC communities? The case studies have suggested approaches to adopt and highlighted pitfalls to avoid.

- There are ethical problems in reducing fear of crime without reducing the risk of crime. Fear motivates people to protect themselves. Reducing fear without reducing risk leads people to behave in ways which may increase their vulnerability. Therefore there should be no fear of crime reduction without risk reduction.
- Over concentration on the fear of crime can overshadow the other issues and problems contributing to feelings of insecurity. Practitioners should understand crime relative to the range of other concerns and anxieties held by the community.
- There are many misplaced assumptions surrounding perceptions of crime. The most dangerous of these is that fear is the primary emotional response to crime. Practitioners should not neglect other, typically more common, emotional responses to crime, including anger, outrage and annoyance. Concentration on fear may direct attention to factors which are incidental to a community's real feelings.
- Other assumptions focus on the demographic groups that are most susceptible to fear, interventions prioritising an ill-defined 'vulnerable' group can often be an inefficient use of resources.
- Different individuals and communities interpret different issues and problems as cause for concern, or as warning **signals** about the state of an area. Moreover the cumulative effect of a succession of minor incidents (or weak signals) can be significant. The impact of these events upon communities and individuals does not have to be understood in terms of 'fear of crime,' it can be understood in terms of the impact upon quality of life.

- Practitioners should aim to identify which problems are interpreted as a concern in their locality and prioritise them. Locally relevant insecurities should be identified through qualitative and unobtrusive measures that tap into patterns of behaviour and real experiences rather than measured perceptions of hypothetical situations.
- Interventions tackling these problems should provide visible and demonstrable signs of improvement, **signalling** that the area's problems are under **control**, increasing public confidence in the authorities.
- **Positive communication and publicity** are essential to amplify these control signals to get across the message that something is being done about crime and that results are being achieved. If the message is not adequately managed interventions may become cause for concern rather than comfort. This can be the case when beneficiaries:
  - Perceive interventions or their outcomes as short term.
  - Do not understand the mechanisms through which interventions will work.
  - Are not convinced that anything has changed.
  - Are alerted to an issue they had not previously interpreted as a serious concern.
- **Community participation** should extend beyond keeping people informed to involving them in planning and decision-making.
- More holistic approaches attend to the deeper social networks that support the community's own ability to respond to problems (known as **collective efficacy**). For example:
  - Housing policies can address the balance of the socio-economic profiles of residents and help to move away from the situation where community sustainability is undermined through the concentration of homeless, deprived and vulnerable tenants on the least popular estates.
  - Youth projects can be a means to increase **community cohesion** through greater intergenerational understanding, discouraging the reflex perception that groups of youths signify a threat.
- The writers of this report seek to contribute practical help in the following way. Crime may not be the greatest concern of citizens in NDC areas. Concerns about crime should be understood in the context of a broader range of insecurities. There is a danger of crime overshadowing other issues that impact upon quality of life. We propose to explore the relative impact of crime on quality of life compared to other problems, and provide a tool whereby practitioners may rationally prioritise local effort in terms of the elements contributing most to experienced well-being.

## 1. Introduction

The reduction of fear of crime is now well established on the policy agenda, being signalled as a priority for policing and as a Best Value Performance Indicator for local authorities. Yet there are substantive concerns over the adequacy of the fear of crime concept raising doubts as to whether fear of crime has been misrepresented. This report suggests that NDCs have been tasked to reduce something that is not properly understood, cannot be reliably measured and bears little relationship to either presenting crime levels or quality of life.

Some interviewees were unable to appreciate how reducing crime differed from reducing crime concern and therefore tended to conflate them. The authors feel that the practice of marshalling crime reduction interventions under the banner of fear of crime is a consequence of the deficiencies in the concept. Faced with no alternative many partnerships have either hoped that if crime continues to fall, 'fear of crime' will, however tardily and partially, follow suit. Or they have abandoned the reduction of fear of crime as an active goal. The choice of approach has had no effect on the NDCs' activities that the writers can discern.

The aim of this report is to:

- Summarise the problems inherent in the fear of crime concept.
- Present BCS and NDC household survey findings on worry about crime.
- Outline the problems presented to those charged with tackling fear of crime.
- Provide examples of promising approaches adopted by NDCs.
- Conclude with a view of what direction NDC practitioners might profitably take and proposal as to how to aid them.

To anticipate our conclusions we argue that the appropriate stance to adopt is one which focuses on crime reduction itself, but positions itself to be sensitive to events that have a disproportionate impact on the perceptions of local communities.

## 2. Methodology

A review of NDC delivery plans was conducted to identify interventions with the explicit aim of reducing fear of crime. Three NDCs, Bradford, Brighton and Hackney, were selected for further study. In each of these, interviews were conducted with stakeholders including project coordinators, residents, police officers and community safety officers. The interviews attempted to uncover the processes through which NDC partnerships have understood fear of crime, approaches taken and problems encountered.

The report also contains an analysis of fear of crime based on responses to a household survey conducted in the 39 NDC areas between July and October 2002. The survey conducted by MORI, interviewed approximately 500 individuals in each NDC, selected randomly. The survey covered a range of topics including quality of life, housing, health, employment and crime. The survey will be repeated in 2004.

### 3. Fear of Crime: Over-Worry or Flawed Concept?

Criticisms of the concept of fear of crime have taken two forms: the conceptual and the methodological. A selection of these criticisms is summarised below.

#### Conceptual

- There may be a number of very different causes for the fears that people express. Fear of crime is one component in a much more diffuse sense of **insecurity**. Fear of crime has become a 'dump' concept, where probability of victimisation is elided with nebulous anxieties or 'urban unease.'
- Concerns regarding crime are by no means the only or the most important issue for individuals and communities. Research has shown that issues such as health, having an accident, environmental issues and security in retirement can be of greater concern than crime.
- Researchers, policy makers and practitioners have commonly confounded emotions, judgements and values about crime under the umbrella of crime fear resulting in a confusing picture.
- There is a weak relationship between fear levels and area crime levels, fear of crime rates have remained stable despite reductions in crime rates.
- Those living in high crime areas can be less fearful than people living in safer neighbourhoods; hence repeated exposure to fear evoking stimulation can lead to sensitisation or at other times and in other circumstances to desensitisation.

#### Methodological

- It would be incorrect to suggest that fear is the only emotional reaction to crime, when the BCS allowed victims to express other emotions the number indicating anger was greater than the corresponding number for fear in every subsequent survey. Other emotional reactions include anxiety, annoyance, resentment, resignation, powerlessness, and seeking revenge.
- It cannot be assumed that people are always able, or even willing, to recognise and describe their fears (for example it has been bng recognised that men admit to certain fears only with difficulty). Furthermore, translating phrases such as 'very frightened' and 'terrified' into degrees on one quantitative scale, which can inform reductive action, is problematic.
- Surveys imply that people are afraid all of the time; this is spectacularly unhelpful for crime reduction practitioners who need to know the specific times and places when people are fearful. Surveys, including the NDC household survey, fail to refer to a specific time period for which respondents should answer, responses could relate to how worried respondents felt at the time of the interview or how worried they felt at the time when their fear was most extreme.
- While fear of crime levels remain implausibly stable, they do change with some things. Sadly, what makes them change does not inspire confidence in their validity. For example, the imminence of elections raises crime fear.

## The Ethics of Fear Reduction

Too little has been made of the ethical underpinnings of attempts to reduce fear of crime other than as a by-product of crime reduction. In a current television advertising campaign, the comedian Peter Kay is depicted in a restaurant being phoned by his daughter, who says she is frightened by 'wardrobe monsters'. His reply is that 'It's not wardrobe monsters you need to be frightened of, it's the burglars who get in through the window'. The serious point to be made here is that while the fear of (fictional) wardrobe monsters is properly to be discounted, the fear of real hazards is not. To reduce fear of crime, particularly by understating its actual incidence and impact, is ethically an extremely problematic tactic. Insofar as fear of crime influences risk-averse lifestyles, reducing fear of crime without changing underlying probabilities potentially puts people in danger. Further, the demographic groups most prone to characterisation, as 'over-worriers' are those for whom the consequences of crime victimisation would be most severe. Thus their worries are not unfounded. None of this is to suggest that lifestyles are typically based on a rational estimation of relative presenting risks, merely that while the risks exist, persuading people to behave and feel otherwise than they do is to assume a responsibility for their increased vulnerability that many of us would prefer not to assume.

## Perceptions and Crime Reduction

Research has demonstrated that the mechanisms of crime reduction are influenced by perception. For example;

- Improvements in street lighting are associated with reductions in crime. What is surprising is that these improvements had their effects in daytime as well as at night. It has been suggested that the mechanism through which improved street lighting reduces crime is through its impact on residents' perceptions of safety and their levels of community confidence. This sends a strong message to offenders that the area is well cared for and has strong 'informal social control.'
- Impactive crime reduction schemes often begin to work before the schemes are implemented (an anticipatory benefit). This suggests that both offender and other citizen perceptions are of primary importance in understanding crime reductive mechanisms. Even the purchase of locks and safes will have crime reductive effects only if the offender has concerns about being interrupted during the course of an offence.

To abandon the central role of perception in the crime reduction landscape would be to throw out a flourishing baby with the bathwater. Rather we have intended to highlight that perceptions are more wide ranging and complex than 'fear.'

As we have argued, responses to fear of crime questions will conflate a range of different perceptions and emotions in unknown proportions. The result is that although survey research shows variations in fear and worry about crime, there is a degree of uncertainty over what exactly has been measured. With this precaution in mind the following section presents fear of crime findings from the British Crime Survey (BCS) and the MORI survey of NDC Households. The wide range of other topics covered in the MORI survey necessarily limited the questionnaire space devoted to crime and fear of crime and the narrower range of questions preclude a more sensitive analysis. The findings show a significant variation in 'fear of crime' across different geographical areas and suggest that demographic groups may experience 'fear of crime' in different ways. This preliminary work is intended to provide NDC practitioners with an indication of local perceptions in relation to NDC areas as a whole.

## 4. The Extent and Nature of Measured Fear of Crime in NDC Areas

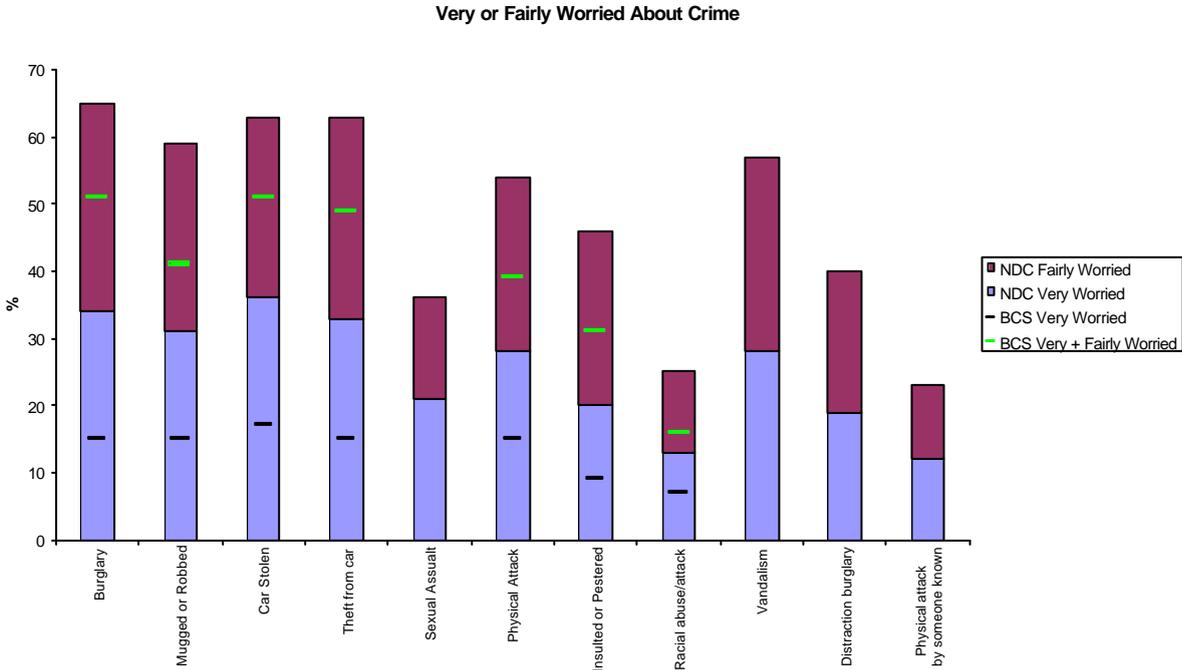
In the 2001/2 British Crime Survey:

- Less than one-fifth of respondents considered themselves ‘very worried’ about all of the crimes listed (burglary, theft of a car, theft from a car, mugging, physical attack, being insulted or pestered, racially motivated assault or rape).
- A third of respondents were ‘fairly worried’ about burglary and car crime, crimes for which worry about crime was greatest.
- Perceptions of risk and worry about crime increased for those at greater risk but for all respondents the perception of risk remained higher than the actual risk of victimisation.
- Respondents living on low incomes, in social sector housing and/or in inner city areas were more likely to respond stating that they were worried about crime.

Given that the 39 NDCs fit the description in the last bullet it is not surprising that concern about crime is greater in these areas compared to the national picture, represented in the BCS. Analysis of the NDC household survey showed that:

- In all but one NDC (Islington) respondents were more likely to feel ‘very or a bit unsafe’ after dark relative to BCS respondents. Overall 56% of respondents felt either ‘very unsafe or a bit unsafe’ walking alone in their area after dark, compared to 33% in the BCS.
- In common with the BCS, NDC respondents worried most about burglary and least about physical attack by someone known to them and sexual attack. Amongst car owners (56% of NDC respondents) car theft and theft from cars were of greatest concern, (see Figure 1).
- Levels of worry were higher in almost all NDCs for each crime specific question when compared to BCS responses.

**Figure 1: Worry about Crime: Responses from the NDC Household Survey 2002**



## Fear of Crime and Crime Rates

The 39 NDCs represent areas that are deprived across a number of key social factors. Given what is known about crime, and ‘known’ about fear of crime it is not surprising that fear of crime is high in these areas. However even amongst NDC areas there is a (statistically) significant degree of variation in levels of fear of crime.

**Table 1: NDCs Ranked by Worry About Crime**

Rank	NDC Area	Rank	NDC Area
1	Southwark	21	Coventry
2	Sandwell	22	Sunderland
3	Luton	23	Lambeth
4	Tower Hamlets	24	Birmingham Aston
5	Liverpool	25	Brent
6	Birmingham Kings Norton	26	Knowsley
7	Nottingham	27	Rochdale
8	Wolverhampton	28	Middlesbrough
9	Hackney	29	Norwich
10	Haringey	30	Leicester
11	Doncaster	31	Sheffield
12	Derby	32	Walsall
13	Bristol	33	Lewisham
14	Oldham	34	Brighton
15	Bradford	35	Plymouth
16	Salford	36	Newcastle
17	Manchester	37	Southampton
18	Hartlepool	38	Hull
19	Newham	39	Fulham
20	Islington		

Table 1 provides a ranking of NDCs based on the 11 questions on worry about crime. It shows that there is a clear group of NDCs in which worry about crime was lower across all crime types relative to the other areas, (Fulham, Southampton, Hull and Plymouth) while in a contrasting group of NDCs fear was high across the various crime types (Southwark, Sandwell, Tower Hamlets and Liverpool).

Figure 2 below shows the association between crime worry and self-reported victimisation by area. Haringey is one of the more ‘fearful’ NDCs but has amongst the lowest reported victimisation. The case study area Hackney, also has a higher level of fear than would be expected given the level of reported victimisation. On the other hand Brighton NDC respondents appear to have quite low levels of fear given the level of victimisation.

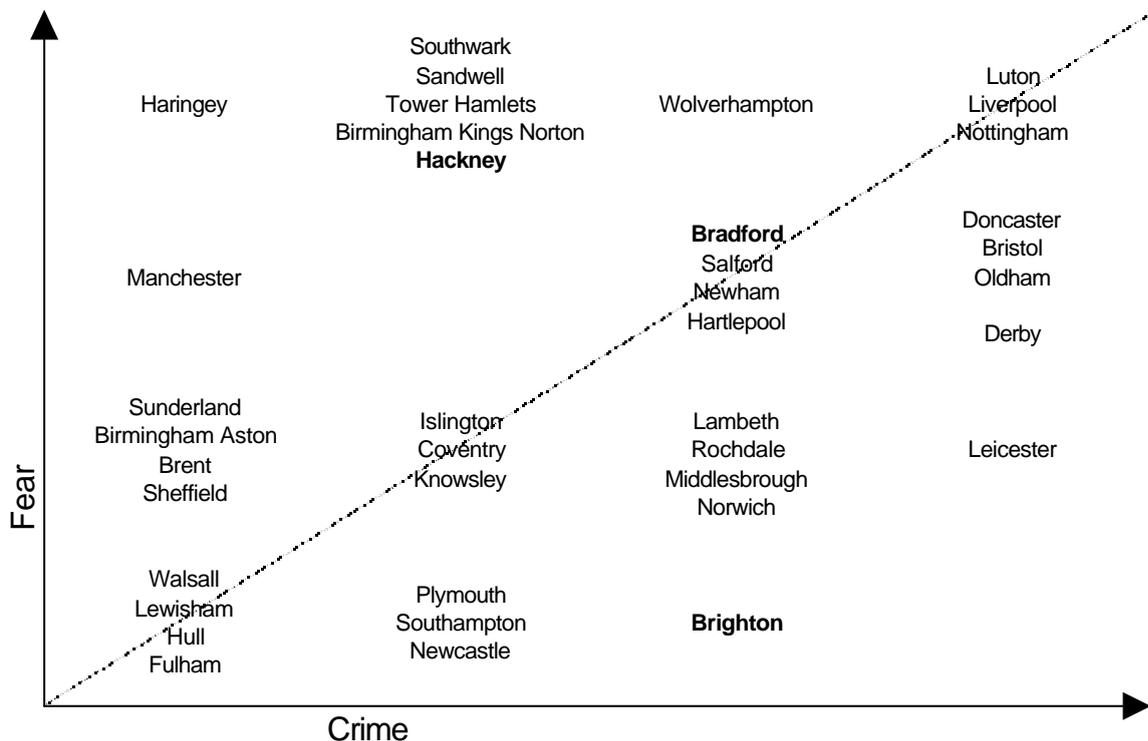
Figure 2 can be used to illustrate two points:

- The association between an area’s crime level and the worry levels of its residents is very slight, at least within the range which NDC areas represent. **It is unlikely that reduced levels of fear of crime will automatically follow reductions in area crime rates.** Recognition of this point frustrated those whom we interviewed

for the case studies. In Brighton it was felt that the fact of crime reduction was not mirrored in residents' perceptions of crime risk. In Hackney, fear of crime increased considerably despite only relatively minor increases in specific crime categories.

- **The ethics of striving for fear reduction are problematic.** Residents in places like Haringey are more fearful than their area's crime rate might suggest to be appropriate. On the other hand, Brighton's residents characterise those that may not be fearful enough. Is it any less defensible to make the people of Brighton more fearful than to make the people of Haringey less fearful?

**Figure 2: Matrix of self-reported victimisation in an area by level of worry**



(NB. It is important to remember that while the axes show increasing levels of fear and crime, the areas at the bottom left hand corner are not 'low crime' or 'low fear' areas, they have lower fear and lower crime **relative to the other NDCs.**)

Analysis of the survey data showed that those who had experienced a crime within the last twelve months were more worried about that crime, than non-victims however large proportions of respondents express worry about crimes even though they have not been victims of that crime over the last year. The percentage of non-victims in the NDC sample who worried about crime was at a level comparable to the proportion of victims who worried about crime in the BCS.

The worry about crime expressed by non-victims should not be classified as 'irrational fear.' Respondents may have been victimised more than 12 months ago while other respondents may have experienced crime indirectly through knowing or living near to people who have been victims.

## **Fear of Crime and Levels of Disorder / Neglect**

The notion that high levels of disorder could spiral into crime problems underpins the broken windows approach and other theorising within criminology. The review of NDC delivery plans has shown that interventions aiming to reduce fear of crime commonly focus on reducing disorder and area neglect, for example completing environmental improvements.

Analysis of the NDC Household Survey shows only a moderate relationship between fear of crime and perceptions of disorder. In areas where these issues were not perceived as a serious problem, around half of respondents were still worried or very worried about these crimes.

One explanation for the weak relationship is that in individual NDCs different types of disorder provoke different reactions from the community. This hypothesis needs to be tested on an area by area basis and if proven would suggest that **partnerships should aim to understand disorder in the neighbourhood context before prioritising action.**

## **Personal Characteristics Associated with Crime Fear**

All sweeps of the BCS have shown age and sex to be strongly related to worry about crime.

- In the BCS 2001/2 women were four times more likely to feel unsafe walking alone after dark than males, five times more likely to be worried about rape, and three times more likely to be worried about physical attack.
- In the NDC household survey women were also more likely to be very worried about crime, but the differences between men and women are less apparent. In particular the gender differences in feelings of safety after dark, and worry about physical attack are narrower.

Older people are frequently characterised as being more afraid of crime, however analysis shows that the elderly are not more afraid; rather their fears are merely different to the young.

- The BCS suggests older people are more likely to feel unsafe after dark while younger people are the most concerned about car theft and young women are particularly concerned about being physically attacked or raped.
- In the NDC survey older people were more inclined to feel very unsafe while walking alone after dark. However the under 20s were more likely to feel unsafe walking alone after dark than those aged between 20 and 60.
- Worry about burglary was spread fairly evenly across age categories. Younger people were more worried than older people about being mugged or robbed, being attacked by someone they know or pestered/insulted in a public place and more worried about car crime.

The import from our discussion of age and gender is a cautionary note to practitioners, there are many misplaced assumptions surrounding fear of crime, and **interventions prioritising an ill-defined 'vulnerable' group can often be an inefficient use of resources.** This is a point to which we strongly urge practitioners to attend.

## 5. Fear of Crime: Findings from the Case Studies

The overwhelming majority of NDCs (37/39) included the reduction of fear of crime as a target in their delivery plans and outlined interventions aimed explicitly, although not exclusively, at reducing fear of crime. Case study NDCs explained that they had encountered difficulties in defining these targets:

- In Hackney practitioners stressed that the target to reduce the number of people feeling 'unsafe after dark' had been selected because they could not find a suitable alternative.
- Bradford NDC stated that their fear of crime target was not helpful in terms of directing resources. Bradford also felt they did not have sufficient 'concrete evidence' on which to tackle concerns about crime.

The MORI survey showed that of those listed in the survey the crimes which concerned respondents in the case study areas most were car crime, burglary, and drug dealing/use. Practitioners confirmed these findings and added that 'young people hanging around' litter, vandalism, poor maintenance and abandoned cars contributed to the community's anxieties about the area. These are examples of the cumulative effect that a succession of minor disorder events can have on the community's sense of security. The visible nature of serious violent crimes and their investigation was highlighted in Hackney. Streets are often cordoned off for several days while evidence is gathered, large police boards appeal for witnesses but at the same time advertise the nature of the crime. The incidence of these crimes is unlikely to affect residents' risk of crime, but it is hard to imagine that these visible crimes will not disproportionately affect how residents feel about the area they live in.

Practitioners noted a number of ways in which concerns about crime affects the everyday lives of the community. In Hackney attendance at public meetings has been affected by residents' anxieties about walking through the estates in the evening. In Bradford and Brighton crime concerns have been cited as reason for residents leaving the area and in Brighton research found that 40% of families leaving the NDC area had done so as a consequence of 'serious harassment.' Potential residents were reluctant to register for housing within the Brighton NDC, the area's reputation for crime is thought to be a key factor in housing refusals.

Factors that appear to 'amplify' worry about crime were identified in the case studies. The foremost of these was the reporting of crime in the media. The mass media can often shape the issues that people think about and thus perform a 'priming role' which encourages people to 'tune into' certain signals. Many of the NDCs suffer negative community coding with very negative local news reports painting the area as permanently blighted by crime and anti-social behaviour. Crime news is highly selective and has been shown to over-report crimes involving sex and violence. The BCS identified that tabloid readers were more likely to believe that the crime rate had increased compared to broadsheet readers. Stakeholders in all three case studies raised concerns about the influence of local media, particularly local newspapers, on residents' fear of crime. There is a tendency to generalise national crime news to ones own local area, this effect has been identified in Hackney with residents generalising incidents reported in other parts of the borough to the New Deal area. The media portrayal of crime is largely out of NDC control, partnerships only have influence over local media and here attempts to influence the nature of crime reporting have had limited results, articles about NDC interventions and outcomes have been included but sensationalist reporting has not been curbed.

Findings from the case studies support the assertion that insecurities about crime are not limited to fear. Box 1 lists examples of insecurities that case study respondents felt personally or had encountered through contact with others. These perceptions were identified from interviews with practitioners and residents, and from the minutes of public meetings.

**Box 1: Insecurities about Crime, Findings from the Case Studies.**

Worry about victimisation  
Intimidation and harassment  
Worry about witnessing a crime  
Fear of reprisals as a consequence of reporting crime  
Frustration about the authorities' (perceived) incapacity to tackle crime  
Worry about health risks from the traces of drug use / prostitution  
Anger about the young age of some of the girls involved in sex work  
Anger about what the prevalence of crime signals about the state of the neighbourhood  
Anger that culprits are 'getting away with it.'  
Worry that children may 'get in with the wrong crowd'  
Concern and anger about the impact of crime on others in the community  
Feeling helpless, unable to protect self and family

### **Interventions to Reduce Fear of Crime**

A review of the 39 NDC delivery plans identified interventions selected to reduce fear of crime. These are summarised in Table 2. Fear of crime interventions within the case study NDCs are representative of the range of interventions employed across the programme and almost all of the interventions listed have been adopted by one or more of the case studies. Interventions have been classified within broader crime prevention strategies and the theoretical mechanisms through which interventions are intended to tackle fear of crime are outlined.

What is immediately apparent from Table 2 is that with the notable exception of East Brighton's communications and housing allocations strategies, all of the interventions employed to reduce the fear of crime also include an element of crime reduction. Indeed, if we were to abandon fear of crime as a consideration, the table below would be left virtually unchanged with a near identical range of activities. This is due to the commonly stated view among the case study NDCs that the most beneficial way of meeting their fear of crime targets is to reduce crime itself.

**Table 2 NDC Strategies for Reducing Fear of Crime, Ranked by Frequency of Inclusion in Delivery Plans**

STRATEGY	NDC INTERVENTION	MECHANISM
Policing	Extending policing family (e.g. community wardens) (26)	Crime reduction Symbolic reassurance via occupational presence Rebuild confidence in Policing
	Increase police presence (13)	
	Community policing (5)	
	High visibility policing (2)	
Individual victimisation and social control	CCTV (19)	Crime reduction Community reassurance
	Alleygating (7)	
	Crime prevention advice (6)	
	Environmental improvements (3)	
	Anti-Social Behaviour Orders/Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (3)	
	Personal safety training (1)	
Community based programmes	Target Hardening (17)	Youth crime reduction Promote community cohesion
	Youth Programmes (10)	
	Neighbourhood/shop/pub watch (4)	
	Reduction of anti-social behaviour (2)	
	Community capacity (1)	
	<b>New housing allocations strategy (1)</b>	
	<b>Communications strategy (1)</b>	
Changing built environment	Street lighting (15)	Build community efficacy Crime reduction
	Designing out crime (4)	

NB. Figures in brackets denote the number of NDCs planning to implement these interventions who have explicitly linked them to the reduction of fear of crime. NDCs plans are subject to change therefore mention of an intervention in a delivery plan does not necessarily indicate that the intervention is being implemented. The classification of interventions is intended for illustrative purposes only and is limited by the interchangeable use of crime prevention terminology, for example information in delivery plans may suggest that two NDCs are implementing similar interventions when further investigation may reveal that they are actually implementing very different although similarly titled interventions.

As highlighted earlier crime reduction alone does not automatically lead to positive changes in how people perceive crime levels, or how they feel about crime in their area. However, the case studies provide examples of how the careful design and implementation of crime reduction interventions, including sensitivity to the role of public perceptions, can help to capitalise on crime reduction successes in providing community reassurance.

## 6. Recommended Approaches

### Crime and Disorder as Signals About the State of Social Order

Particular crimes or their aftermath are powerful communicators of an area's state of communal health and incidents that have the greatest impact upon an individual's quality of life may not necessarily be those that the police and the courts define as serious. The cumulative impact of a succession of apparently 'trivial' occurrences may have significant impacts upon the local community. Abandoned and burned out cars are obvious and recent examples of this (also see Box 3). Events carry different '**signal values**' and all individuals do not interpret these 'signal events' in the same manner. This is important as what is read as a signal crime by the residents in one area may not be interpreted in the same way by the residents in a different area. Speculatively, high visibility interventions including CCTV, street lighting and Neighbourhood Wardens can either act as **visual control signals** demonstrating a response to the community's concerns or alternatively provoking others' anxieties. Similarly, the presence of a police car may be a powerful signal of different things in different communities. In affluent areas, it may betoken trouble. In more crime-prone areas, it may bespeak the police doing their job.

Viewing crime incidents, as 'signals' reorientates crime into a broader concept of **insecurity** whereby signals are interpreted as warnings about the level and distribution of crime risk and the need for protective action. There are four key concepts which underpin signal crimes theory (see Box 2).

#### Box 2: Key Concepts in Signal Crime Theory

##### Increased Risk Signalled

1. Signal Crime: a criminal incident interpreted by the public as a warning signal about their level of security
2. Signal Disorder: a physical or social disorder interpreted by the public as a warning signal about their level of security

##### Contextual Change Signalled

3. Signal Event: other events which have an impact on individual or collective attitudes about levels of crimogenic risks

##### Reassurance Signalled

4. Control Signal: The actions taken in response to actual or potential deviant behaviours (formal and informal social controls)

Two implicit principles underpin these four concepts, first, the disproportionate impact of some actions or events upon people's perceptions of insecurity, and second, how visibility shapes public reaction to a problem.

It appears that frequently the risks people have greatest anxiety over are also those with the lowest probability of occurrence. According to signal crimes theory the explanation for this phenomenon does not lie in people's irrationality in misunderstanding the issues,

rather in selective attention to risks with the highest signal value, (a spectacular hazard is more noticeable among a range of other potential risks, and therefore skews the focus for risk perceptions).

There are strong and weak signal crimes with the possibility that successive weak signals (i.e. nuisance behaviours) can also lead to a shift in perceptions of risk. When clustered together weak signals can lead people to perceive an area as more dangerous. Different communities may show varying tolerance to disorder or criminality. But if these problems become too numerous or serious then a threshold is reached, residents then 'tune in' converting the noise into signals of a problem. Different communities may be able to show more tolerance to some forms of disorder or criminality than others, as the threshold for conversion differs for different people and groups of people.

The advantage of the signal crime approach is its focus on those factors that are disproportionately generative of insecurity. Once the cause of the problem is understood, one can begin to effectively act against them. This is not the case for mainstream fear of crime research. As noted earlier, fear that people express may have a number of different causes, and not necessarily be a response to crime alone. Tactics and strategies can be designed and implemented at the local level, NDCs can have a disproportionate impact on the causes of insecurity, increase public trust and confidence in the police and thereby provide greater reassurance to residents over their safety. Signal crime theory is a method for problem identification in which issues and problems that cause most concern to residents can be targeted by the NDC.

### **Box 3: The Importance of Careful Tailoring of Control Signals, an Example from East Brighton NDC**

The East Brighton NDC is suffering a high level of abandoned vehicles. Feedback from residents indicated that this is seen as one of the key signs of physical neglect and disorder (that abandoned vehicles were construed as having a particularly high signal value). The Community Safety Team (CST) had found that the generic council 7-day Notices (large bright orange stickers displayed on the windscreen) which were routinely attached to all abandoned vehicles could act as flags for the vehicle to be vandalised or burnt out by local youths. The method of controlling disorder was effectively accentuating the visibility of disorder signals. This is so because not all abandoned vehicles in the NDC were obviously abandoned, but the old notices acted to remove any ambiguity for members of the public. As current legislation requires a notice period prior to target removal, the council notices are now substituted for a small discrete sticker, thereby acting to disguise the problem vehicle to passers by, and it is hoped, their perception of the neighbourhood. The CST report that so far this action has proved successful in reducing criminal damage and arson. This emphasis on changing a physical sign of disorder is significant because most residents only have perceptual data available to them in making judgements on risk assessments.

## **Communication and Publicity**

Publicity and communication are recurrent themes in the above examples. East Brighton NDC distinguishes itself by having given most thought to developing a comprehensive communications strategy aimed at combating negative images of the community and assuaging public fear. The strategy here is that 'good news stories' act as a confidence building measure in the local area and communicate some of the positive gains made in the NDC in reducing crime. Earlier we highlighted the importance of perception in mechanisms of crime reduction, and changing perceptions about crime. The pre-

emptive use of communication may assert more control over these perceptions, perhaps leaving less to the imaginations of recipients. For example, if the community know what is happening and why, and what the outcome has been they are less likely to misinterpret the presence of police in the area as a sign of 'trouble'. The case study areas have incorporated communication in varying degrees; their approaches are described in Box 4.

#### **Box 4: Approaches to Communication in the NDC Case Studies**

The Brighton NDC has recognised that crime reduction alone will not counter the image of a high crime housing estate that is amplified in the local media's portrayal of the area. In response they have adopted a communications strategy and employed a dedicated communications officer 'skilled in PR techniques' to handle publicity and push a positive image of East Brighton. The strategy here is that 'good news stories' act as a confidence building measure in the local area and communicate some of the positive gains made in the NDC in reducing crime. The spirit of disseminating progress with crime and disorder extends to informing local residents by letter after enforcement actions have occurred (such as drugs raids) thereby ensuring that local people are made aware that problems are being tackled with successful outcomes.

In the Hackney NDC crime reduction interventions have consciously been designed to include a publicity element. Community magazines are used to publicise crime reduction progress, and the Neighbourhood Wardens have their own monthly newsletter.

### **Building Community Efficacy**

The idea of community efficacy draws upon the notion of human capital and refers to the informal resources that a community can draw upon from within itself to deal with crime and disorder problems. To realise the full productive potential of people requires the provision of an education system, in a similar sense to realise the 'civic virtue' of individuals requires particular social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness. This calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is at its most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations (good will, sympathy, fellowship and social intercourse etc.). As one author notes, 'a society of many virtuous but isolated people is not necessarily rich in social capital'. Yet it is these social networks which all too often are absent in many communities, in effect making the community inoperative.

Increasing confidence in the community's ability to control crime can help to reduce feelings of insecurity. Of the crime reduction interventions implemented in case study areas a number include an element of community participation with prospects for mobilising a collective response to crime:

- The Anti-Crime Partnership in Bradford and the Crime Task Group/ Walkabouts in Hackney invite a public contribution to crime reduction. Both initiatives are multi-agency approaches that provide the public with the opportunity to raise their concerns and be informed of current initiatives. Moreover, by engaging active participation in decision making processes these initiatives have also increased the public's understanding of the difficulties involved with implementing crime reduction interventions, including reaching priorities with limited budgets.

- In Hackney the residents association led the bid for improved street lighting. Their success has increased residents' confidence that they can have a significant influence in decisions that affect their area.
- Brighton NDC is aiming to support the development of social networks through housing policies designed to balance the socio-economic profiles of residents. This policy is outlined in Box 5. Whilst this initiative does not directly address crime or insecurity, it does attempt to change some of the more deep seated structural issues like housing voids which act as drivers or signals about crime risks.

### **Box 5: Building Community Efficacy in the East Brighton NDC**

Building community efficacy requires valuing and encouraging social networks. A commitment to a more balanced community in respect of the socio-economic profile of residents can encourage this process. This is noticeable in East Brighton's attempt to diversify the area, moving away from a needs-based housing allocations system in favour of a procedure originating from the Netherlands for advertising properties and ranking applicants for greater social diversity (the Delft based model).

The aim is to move away from the current situation of undermining community sustainability through concentrating a disproportionate number of homeless, deprived and vulnerable tenants on the least popular estates (*PAT7 and National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal*). One such area is North Moulsecomb, in East Brighton which has had a number of properties, especially large family houses, void for long periods of time due to persistent vandalism, fly tipping and anti-social behaviour from a number of large, well established extended families. It would seem that these activities function as signal disorders, the presence of which helps construct people's subjective risk assessment about the area and thereby shape decisions about housing and business lettings.

By achieving a greater social mix in the neighbourhood, and through extending consumer choice, the sense of 'ownership' among new tenants and responsibility for their neighbourhood is likely to increase. Applicants are prioritised according to how the characteristics of their household might help maintain or strengthen social balance in the community, thereby creating a balance of different household characteristics. Applications are considered on the basis of criteria such as:

- The potential 'positive contribution' to the community (e.g. participation in voluntary activities, residents' groups, setting up local clubs, and so forth).
- Whether applicants are economically active.
- Whether applicants have family and friends in the locality).

This policy has the effect of strengthening informal social networks and hence helping to build community strength and community sustainability.

## **Community Cohesion**

Concerns about young people hanging around are caused partly from the anti-social behaviour, criminal damage, and substance abuse attributable to specific groups of local youths. However, misunderstandings between young and older people also contribute to these concerns with older generations interpreting young people as 'threatening'. Youth work in the NDCs areas is addressing both of these issues.

Youth projects have been implemented to reduce youth offending and anti-social behaviour. These include Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Projects (Bradford), Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) and Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABCs, Brighton and Hackney). In all three areas these approaches have been successful in reducing the arrest rates for young people.

At the same time, work with young people in the case studies recognised that young people themselves are concerned about crime and bullying, and often feel 'over policed.' One Bradford practitioner argued that the concept of 'fear of crime' allowed for the convenient scapegoating of young people. Their tendency to hang out in gangs has been identified as a response to their own fears of victimisation yet this behaviour sees them interpreted as intimidating by other members of the community. Youth Inclusion Projects in all three areas are seeking to address the way in which older generations perceive young people and visa versa, specifically aiming to discourage the automatic interpretation of the presence of young people as a warning signal.

- Brighton NDC's 'Green Gym' (environmental clean up) has attempted to accentuate the valuable contribution young people can make in their communities.
- Through role play, the Trading Places project in Hackney builds bridges between young people and the Police and the Probation Service. Young people specifically requested that response officers attend in addition to community police officers. These are the officers who most frequently encounter young people on the streets, often in the most confrontational situations.
- A youth worker in Bradford suggested that youth inclusion projects should be extended to include all age groups, to provide 'community inclusion' programmes. This could include an exchange of valuable skills to the younger generation.

## **Policing operations**

Despite public demand for more police officers, increases in policing presence can be as much a cause for concern as a means of reassurance. Examples from the case studies provide support for prioritising communication and sustainability:

- In Brighton the anxiety generated by short-term policing operations is being directly addressed by keeping residents personally informed of the purpose and the outcome of these operations.
- In Hackney the successes in targeting crack-cocaine dealing has had a limited impact on the community's concerns. Residents have noted that after police raids on crack houses crack users persist in roaming around housing blocks trying to locate their dealers who quickly find alternative premises. In addition, residents were concerned that dealers were not evicted after their arrest. Crime task group meetings have provided a forum for agencies working in the NDC area to raise awareness of the problems involved in securing evictions.
- Where policing operations have successfully contributed to community reassurance there is a risk that when policing is withdrawn the community may feel a new sense of insecurity. Bradford's Community Policing Strategy aims to ensure that police officers are viewed as a long term community resource rather than a short term response limited only to serious crimes. The community police officers are funded by the NDC for eight years. This ensures that their time is ring fenced, that officers remain tied to the NDC and that their presence can be sustained.

- In Hackney police beat sweeps were timed to ensure an overlap with Neighbourhood Wardens. The police presence has aided the induction of Wardens while the Wardens provide an opportunity to sustain the work of the police.

## **Neighbourhood/Community Wardens**

Neighbourhood and Community Wardens provide an important communication channel through which partnerships can inform the public of initiatives operating and their outcomes. Wardens are also in an ideal position to develop an understanding of the wide-ranging concerns held by the public.

- Wardens in Brighton visit all new residents with a welcome pack, this is an important step in including new residents in the community and helps to avoid feelings of helplessness or insecurity that may arise from not knowing who the supportive agencies are in the area, and how problems can be resolved. This process help to build community sustainability and hence community strength
- In Brighton and Hackney Wardens provide a link between the Police and the community. They provide alternative opportunities to report crimes and provide support and information to victims of crime.

## **Understanding of the Criminal Justice System**

Earlier it was highlighted that crime insecurities included frustrations and misunderstandings about the role of the criminal justice system. Case study areas have attempted to address these concerns but it has not always been straightforward:

- Supervised ex-offenders conduct the installation of household security devices under Bradford's Secure by Design project which is managed by the Probation Service. Those with convictions for theft, burglary or violent crime are not allowed to participate. However, contact with rehabilitated offenders enables some reparation for victims and has increased public understanding of the role of the Probation Service.
- Difficulties with enforcing breaches to anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs) have the potential to undermine their utility in reducing crime and tackling concerns about crime. In Brighton and Hackney ASBOs are well publicised, therefore those breaching orders are well known. Both practitioners and residents feel that the Crown Prosecution Service does not take breaches sufficiently seriously and this undermines attempts to increase confidence in the criminal justice system.

## **Outcomes**

The difficulties faced by those charged with tackling fear of crime in practical situations was further evidenced in our discussions with NDCs around early outcomes. The case study areas felt they were beginning to achieve outcomes related to crime reduction including:

- Empowerment of Residents Associations.
- Positive behavioural changes as measured by increased accessing of locality after dark.
- Increased contact between police and residents.

However the conceptual link between these outcomes and a reduction in the fear of crime was hard to make. These outcomes can be more meaningfully understood and evaluated if we **recast the question in terms of quality of life**. This is best achieved by asking questions about personal happiness and further questions (as open as possible) about the contribution of other factors on feelings of well-being. Insofar as crime and disorder variables make a contribution to such an equation, all well and good. Insofar as they do not, the NDC co-ordinator has the defence of concentrating on changing things which are associated with the sense of well-being, without any preconceptions about what crime emotions are to be taken as pivotal.

## **Identifying Local Signal Crimes**

The signal crimes approach understands reactions to crime as a process which generates qualitatively different insecurities in different local contexts. Approaches to reassurance must be sensitive to the local interpretation of signals in order to correctly identify the causes of insecurity. Qualitative techniques are more suited to the identification of locally important signals. Methodologies should aim to prompt local people to think about actual experiences and locations, people and events rather than more broad opinions or attitudes about crime or hypothetical situations. Hackney has employed an interesting approach to understanding children's perceptions of their area, this is described in Box 6.

### **Box 6: Safer Routes to Schools: Research in the Hackney NDC**

In an attempt to provide safer routes to and from school, Hackney NDC commissioned research to understand the hazards faced by children, as perceived by the children themselves. The research centred around two exercises; the first involved a walkabout around the area with children and supervisors, during which the children were asked to note down positive and negative features about their area. The second exercise was a structured classroom-based discussion in small groups focusing on maps of the area.

The advantage of the exercise is that despite not imposing a 'crime' agenda on the children, locally specific information about their crime concerns was obtained. Starting from a 'quality of life' perspective the children were able to define likes and dislikes, 'scary' and 'dangerous' places. Specific streets and areas were identified as places where crime, bullying and intimidation were concerns influencing their behaviour and impacting their quality of life, but in other parts of the NDC factors such as traffic safety, unsafe pavements, litter and lack of play facilities clearly outweighed crime as a concern.

This approach could easily be adopted for use with different groups and is a particularly suitable method for local partnerships to employ themselves.

## Conclusion

It should perhaps be evident, but cannot be stressed strongly enough, that practitioners were troubled by the injunction to reduce crime fear. Case study NDCs have struggled to define fear of crime, and to separate the community's personal fears from their wider and more general emotions, judgements and perceptions. They were not confident about setting meaningful baselines and targets for the reduction of fear of crime. They have experienced difficulties in setting priorities and defining groups vulnerable to fear. Moreover they lacked confidence in establishing the extent to which interventions have impacted upon levels of fear of crime. We have also highlighted the problematic ethics of fear reduction divorced from crime reduction.

We feel that a more profitable way forward is to reposition the fear of crime in a wider complex of insecurities that people perceive or experience in certain environments and to place this within a broader quality of life framework. There is a growing body of research evidence which suggests that fear or insecurity is not necessarily a product of crime and disorder, therefore we want to emphasise the relative significance of the fear of crime situated within other quality of life factors. The signal events approach offers a promising 'problem identification methodology' in which issues and problems that cause most concern to residents can be targeted by the NDCs in order to provide the signal controls for objective threats and subjective perceptions of those threats.

## What Should NDC Co-ordinators do about Crime Fear?

### **Concentrate on crime reduction. No deliberate 'fear' reduction without risk reduction.**

Because lifestyles are adopted to reflect personal vulnerabilities, however imperfectly, the attempt to reduce fear should never be undertaken without an attempt to reduce presenting risk.

### **Acquire an understanding of local 'signal' events.**

Understand the range of concerns and anxieties about crime held by the community. Fear of victimisation is one of a multitude of reactions to and feelings about crime. The 'signal events' approach can be helpful. The impact of these events upon communities and individuals does not have to be understood in terms of 'fear of crime,' it can be understood in terms of the impact upon quality of life, and evidenced by patterns of behaviour rather than quantitatively measured perceptions. Needless to say this approach to understanding signals should remain sensitive to the local context.

Consider more novel ways of understanding the impact of crime. Unobtrusive measures could be used to gain a better understanding of how crime influences quality of life by looking at how it affects behaviour, for example the number of people accessing or avoiding certain areas.

### **Communicate crime reduction initiatives and successes.**

Accentuate the positive by making the most of any achievements. This is crucial particularly as there are so many factors influencing perceptions about crime that are outside of NDC control. Capitalising on 'quick hits' is good, but ensure that the community can see how successes will be maintained in the long term.

Consideration should be given to a mixture of formal and informal publicity. Viral Marketing: try and target your audience so as to maximise good news stories via others' word of mouth i.e. letters to immediate neighbours detailing enforcement actions that have been carried out (drugs raids, ASBO's) is a good example of this strategy. A similar strategy can also be used among offenders in which to deter them.

### **Involve the community in the decision making process.**

Involving members of the community in the identification of problems and the prioritisation of work raises understanding of the processes and difficulties involved and can help reduce the frustration felt when people feel their problems are just being ignored.

### **No community clean-ups to reduce crime fear.**

Given the modest relationship between signs of disorder and crime fear, clean-ups are not justifiable on the grounds of fear reduction. Swift repairs and clear-ups after crime are justifiable on crime reduction grounds, both to reduce levels of repeat victimisation and spirals of area decay. Other clean-ups may well be justified on aesthetic or community building grounds.

### **Help our research team to help you**

Feedback from you about this report will be very valuable. What we propose to do next is to analyse the NDC survey to yield an easy points-scoring scale in which the factors which make for diminished quality of life, including both crime and other contributory factors can be calculated. These will be usable to yield priority assessment for change tactics, both those related to crime experiences and others. Apart from its direct usefulness to practitioners, this can be used in programme assessment, i.e. in the next survey sweep in 2004. Has it been the case that those areas enjoying the greatest change in the key variables are also those where self-reported quality of life has increased most? We strongly believe that this approach offers the best possibility of providing practical help, but suggestions about how we might refine the approach will be most welcome.

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