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Crime and Community Development: A Q&A with Ingrid Gould Ellen of NYU

Ingrid Gould Ellen, a professor of urban planning and public policy at New York University's Wagner Graduate School of Public Service and co-director of the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy, is one of several critical thinkers who contributed to *Investing in What Works for America's Communities*. The book, a joint project of the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco and the Low Income Investment Fund, offers a hard and experienced look at what it will take to help build strong communities that support the opportunities for people to live healthy and productive lives.

In "Crime and Community Development," Ellen writes about what she calls an often-overlooked element of community development: public safety. *NewPublicHealth* spoke with Ellen about the link between crime and community development.

NewPublicHealth: What is the link between high crime neighborhoods and the health of the people who live there?

Ingrid Gould Ellen: I think there is growing evidence that living in a high crime—and particularly a very violent—environment can be very harmful to kids, to children's development in terms of even their ability to learn, their outlook on the world. They're obviously more likely to be injured and harmed themselves. But I think we're also seeing increasing evidence of the profound psychological damage that living in a very violent community can have, and I think the evidence is strongest on children.

NPH: What's the connection between crime and the way a community is developed? Are some neighborhoods inherently safer than others?

Ingrid Gould Ellen: I guess it's three things. There may be just pure design elements and how a community is designed to make sure that spaces are visible and can be patrolled and monitored, number one. Number two, the "broken window" theory says physical deterioration may be a signal to potential offenders about how much people care about this neighborhood and how much people are going to be monitoring behavior—and therefore how easy it is to get away with a crime there. The third thing is I think there's lots of evidence that the level of social organization within a neighborhood—social or collective efficacy—can profoundly affect levels of violence in a community. That's really the willingness of residents to work together to collectively solve problems.

So to combat crime, it's important to partner with law enforcement to make

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sure that the community is being well-monitored and patrolled and that complaints are being responded to, obviously. Also jumping on and remedying any kind of decline and decay in a neighborhood is important. And finally, efforts to build collective efficacy in a community are really important.

NPH: Why is it important to build collective efficacy in a community?

Ingrid Gould Ellen: Any attempts to build the collective efficacy of the community can be tremendously helpful and there's very good [research](#) supporting that idea. I do think there is promise in the budding system of community courts in certain cities around the country. These courts try to engage residents in participating and having some ownership over the safety of their communities and the criminal justice system, at least for less serious offenses.

NPH: Can you give some background on community courts?

Ingrid Gould Ellen: They're part of the court system, but they're actually housed in communities, in particular neighborhoods, and they only will hear cases that are for non-serious crimes that have taken place in that community. The idea is that community members can decide on what the appropriate punishment is. Often the punishment is things like doing community service projects that will benefit that community. The courts also have relationships with local service providers and work to connect court-involved youth to services and programming.

NPH: What are some specific examples of solutions that are related to the community development field, such as improving affordable housing, and how they've been shown to impact crime in communities?

Ingrid Gould Ellen: That's a good question. Some of my own work right now is showing that an increase in the number of foreclosed homes in a community actually increases crime. One could infer from that that if you can keep homes in private ownership and keep homes from deteriorating and becoming abandoned, that ought to in turn reduce crime.

The [Moving to Opportunity](#) project represents a seminal study in this area. They randomly assigned a group of folks who were living in high-poverty public housing developments, to get vouchers to move out to low-poverty neighborhoods. When they were asked just qualitatively why they wanted the chance to move to a higher opportunity neighborhood—the number one response was about avoiding violence and crime. That's really what mattered to them, and I think that at the time researchers were actually quite surprised because I think economists were very focused on job access and maybe schools as secondary. But it turned out that for many of these households, it was just they wanted to escape the fear and the stress and the violence—living in these highly violent environments. And so I think that is very telling evidence as well just in terms of what matters to households and what they say matters to them in their communities.

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