



Briefing Paper No.10

Insecurity, Identity and Gated Communities

Based on Working Paper no.10: Jo Beall, 'The People Behind the Walls: Insecurity, Identity and Gated Communities in Johannesburg'. This is intended to provide a summary of the principal findings, and an indication of the implications these may have for debates over policy.

In Johannesburg, as in Los Angeles (California's most divided city), there is a collective paranoia about 'security'. However, in Johannesburg it is not only the wealthy who find ways to barricade themselves behind protective barriers. Gated communities can also be found in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods. This paper explores this, and the ways in which voluntary self-exclusion may be serving to undermine efforts by the city's progressive planners to challenge the apartheid legacy of socio-spatial segregation. It draws on two sets of fieldwork: one among the multi-racial but still mainly white residents of two gated communities in Johannesburg; the other among the mainly isiZulu-speaking migrants of a hostel complex in Soweto. The analysis is set against an account of the realities and perceptions of crime and public safety in Johannesburg, a city renowned as a national 'crime capital'. The relationship between space and social identity is explored, as is how both are mediated by who you are and where you are. The paper concludes with a comment on what these trends mean for urban governance.

- **The main victims of crime are the poor**

Although property crimes disproportionately affect affluent areas, the use of violence is more common when Africans are the victims than for other groups. As a result, the main victims of crime are not the affluent white population, but rather the African poor.

- **Insecurity comes of fear of crime rather than its reality**

One of the most common sites of crime is at home. It is therefore both sad and ironic that the response to insecurity is so often a retreat into the home. It seems that insecurity is as much about the fear of crime than crime itself, and that fear of crime can serve to mask fear of race and social difference. Fear of crime and the various social antipathies for which it stands has given rise to an aversion to public spaces and engagement with the city. The gated communities work against the creation of a diverse and integrated city and perpetuate apartheid-like socio-spatial segregation.

- **Amongst affluent, class replaces race as defining inclusion**

In affluent gated communities, class replaced race as the badge of inclusive membership. It allowed the inhabitants to erect physical and symbolic 'walls' to reduce interaction and mixing in shared public space, while an architecture of fear legitimised a deepening segregation based not on apartheid of race but on new articulations of social difference.

- **Poor and excluded groups also use gated communities**

It is commonly assumed that gated communities are a feature only of affluent populations and that poorer communities protect themselves through other means such as vigilantism. However, isiZulu-speaking rural migrant workers have also utilised their socio-spatial identity to secure defensible spaces in the city.

- **Shared alienation of hostel dwellers leads to violence with surrounding community**

Hostel dwellers share a language, culture and a sense of alienation, which present an ideal opportunity for rapid mobilisation. This helped to lead to the eruption of violence between hostel dwellers and the township residents. As a result of this, all hostel dwellers are still regarded with suspicion by many in the surrounding community. This is not only because of their ethnic identity (who they are), but also because they live in a place associated with violence and crime (where they are). The hostels are stigmatised zones. Whatever rapprochement has occurred between hostel dwellers and other township residents, a cultural and attitudinal

divide remains, which will take a long time to overcome. A process of social healing is needed, which is being undermined by the continuation of the hostels in their current form.

- **Social exclusion both externally and internally imposed**

Social exclusion can result not only from others doing the excluding but also from groups choosing to exclude themselves from broader social participation. Self-exclusion can be exercised not only in response to prejudice and stigma but also in order to preserve or protect existing resources, or to access potential new resources. Social linkages such as kinship, clan and friendship networks reached across from the hostels to the rural areas. Within the hostel compound, people living within a particular hostel building invariably came from the same area and many maintained links with 'homeboys' or 'homegirls' living in other hostels.

- **Gender difference in attachment to hostels**

Some hostel residents say they only live there because they cannot afford to live anywhere else. Women particularly show negative feelings towards the place. Hostels can be violent, frightening places, and women feared rape and were constantly anxious on behalf of their children. The committees that rule the hostels are male-dominated, and women are not represented in any serious way. In local governance processes and decisions, perceptions and priorities of hostel dwellers are overwhelmingly biased towards those of male residents. Nevertheless, women are among those most willing and able to build links with the surrounding community.

- **Hostel residents doubly affected by crime**

Within a bounded socio-spatial environment, a majority of hostel residents are being held to ransom by a minority of powerful anti-social elements, both inside and outside the compound, while at the same time they are themselves branded as violent criminals by people outside the hostel.

- **Hostel life controlled by male elders**

Hostels have served to foster and reward informal clientelist institutions that lie outside the rule of law, and which will prove difficult to dislodge. The male elders of the hostels (*Indunas*) limit engagement with the outside world. They allow no strangers in at all, not even to provide municipal services, and residents are forced to be self-servicing, relying on informal solutions. As a result, the hostels are less porous to outsiders than more affluent gate communities, which depend on the influx of manual labour. However, there are signs of generational change, with younger political leaders challenging the power of the *Indunas*. Since younger residents are less likely to have connections and resources in rural areas, they are more committed to engaging with the local community.

- **Importance of social identity in reinforcing socio-spatial separation**

Social identity plays a crucial role in reinforcing socio-spatial separation, but in quite different ways. For the hostels, this comes from their shared ethnic identity, overlaid and intertwined with a violent political history and stigma based on hostel living itself, which both excludes residents from life in the wider community, and reinforces their claim on affordable space in the city. In white but racially-mixed, affluent gated communities, there is a stronger tendency to abandon race-based identity and to emphasise shared class position.

- **Fear and exclusion out of the state's control**

The geography of fear, when combined with exclusionary mindsets and the socio-spatial legacy of apartheid, mitigates against the establishment of a new, non-racial Johannesburg. The biggest challenge facing governance in this city is the fact that responsibility for spatial exclusion more and more rest in the hands of private citizens rather than the state. To counter 'fortress Johannesburg' and to woo their residents back into the ranks of civic engagement, the Johannesburg Metropolitan Council must improve city security on behalf of the greater social good. To do so would be fundamentally redistributive policy at the city level.

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