



TIME FOR THE URBAN SAFETY DISCUSSION TO MOVE ON?

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ABSTRACT

Today the safety and security of residents and property has become an increasingly serious topic considering immigration and terrorism threats in Western cities. At the same time urban managers look for ways to be successful in the ongoing competition between cities. This paper looks at various strands of this discussion, and proposes a way to move it onwards. The main principle here is to take distance from the dominating, but arguably overdue paradigm based on liberal and multicultural cities. While the study borrows arguments from both sides of Atlantic, some empirical evidence from Finland is also presented.

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INTRODUCTION

It could be argued that we are, currently, at the cross-roads of two competing ideals. One is the received wisdom of globalization, liberalism and multiculturalism; the other is the new paradigm based on entirely different sets of values. This tension, of course, corresponds with the general trend towards more conservative political agendas, epitomized, notably, through recent elections on both sides of the Atlantic.

When looking into more specific issues, it could also be argued that, the old paradigm has neglected the need to provide *safe* and *secure* living environments. However, as a counter-argument, a paradigm change would work against the hitherto accepted paradigm based on promoting tolerance and diversity.

Diversity has become an established concept in much of the urban literature. Diversity can be seen either as “an asset and an engine of the sustainable development of the city”, or, less politically correctly, “as a liability and a source of potential tension and conflict”, whenever the cultural differences between the natives and the newcomers exceed a critical threshold of peaceful coexistence (Bitušiková and Luther 2010). This discourse can also be related to the issue of trust and community cooperation; Putnam (2007), famously, sees the effect of increased immigration-based diversity as positive in the long-term but negative in the short-term.

More generally, increased diversity in an urban area can be considered either *sustainable* (theory) or *unsustainable* (practice of failures of certain immigrant groups to integrate in Western European and North American cities). This is an issue that divides views between mainstream and alternative perspectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Even in comparatively safe circumstances crime rates and sense of security tend to be connected (Hino *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, Buck and Hakim (1990) showed that economic growth and crime reduction go hand in hand, via impacts on property prices.

In a wider sense, urban economic theory puts a significance on the reduction in property value contributed to nearby situated *negative social externalities* such as social housing projects, antisocial behaviour or proportion of unpopular groups (e.g. drug-addicts) in an area. Asylum centres comprise a special case in this set of social nuisance factors. According to the received wisdom, asylum centres and immigrant ghettos do not possess more danger to nearby residents than elsewhere. This argument can, however, be refuted: what matters here is how renters and buyers *perceive* this rather than the factual situation. Demand falls as a result of unfavourable perceptions, and property prices are determined by demand in the short term. So the reduction in nearby property prices depends on preferences of potential buyers or renters for locations near asylum centers. (We return to this point later.)

Unfortunately, not too much has changed since the study by Buck and Hakim above. Subsequently, ‘soft’ approaches, such as design solutions and various management strategies, have

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been tested to combat serious safety and security problems. Similar approaches include social policy, situational prevention of crimes and leaving room for experiments instead of law enforcement by strictly formal authorities. However, considering recent problems, commonly perceived to be a consequence of too lax immigration policy, one may argue the opposite – that to combat criminals and terrorists might require stricter policy solutions.

Research shows that, from mid-nineties onwards, immigrant crime rates are higher than the average crime rates of the general population in many European countries (Salmi *et al.*, 2015). In the US the situation is however different: ‘natives’ have still higher crime rates than immigrants. Due to the variation in findings and the socioeconomic significance this topic would require more research attention. However, unfortunately for researchers, to find data on the ethnicity of the perpetrator of violent crimes is getting increasingly difficult in many countries. In England and Wales, for instance, it is only possible to obtain statistics on the experiences of various groups. One positive exception here is Finland, where, thanks to a well-administered data infrastructure, perpetrator and crime can be connected at an individual level, and in doing so, the benefit for society is considered to weigh more than other concerns.

Unlike many other European countries, Finland has managed to avoid problems such as organised criminality, ghettoization and terrorism, until very recently. And even today, here the debate is lagging far behind other developed countries, due to strong lobbying by the politically powerful liberal elite in Helsinki. Moreover a home-grown ‘sanctuary city’ philosophy has been adopted by Finnish voluntary organisations and even the Evangelic-Lutheran Christian church.

Nonetheless people’s preferences do not align with calls for political correctness as fear of immigrant crime is a real issue. Furthermore, the economic harm is evidenced by how highly the negative externality effect was noted in a questionnaire survey of real estate brokers in this country: 86 per cent of respondents considered an asylum centre the single most serious negative effect on property value. The reasons are obvious. Finland experienced an unexpected and unprecedented influx of 30,000 refugees via Sweden in 2015. In Finland, in 2015 foreigners (all groups regardless of their immigrant status) were sevenfold overrepresented in sexual crimes compared to natives; this demonstrated a 200 per cent increase in the figure from the previous year. Furthermore, The Police authorities warn about the emergence of real problems with *jihadi* fighters being radicalized and subsequently returning to Finnish cities, where they pose a serious security threat. In fact, the ratio of such fighters to the Muslim population (which still is modest) in the country is the highest in the world.

In research conducted by the Institute of Criminology and Legal Policy (KRIMO) first and second generation immigrants were used as case group and native Finns as control group. Data comprised both registers and surveys; and statistical methodology was used to control for differences in socio-demographic background. And indeed, Middle-Eastern and African immigrants were found over-represented to the Finnish born population in violent crimes by a factor of 17 for rape, a factor of ten for robbery, and a factor of six for violence (Lehti *et al.*, 2014). In another study on youth crime immigrants were

found to have higher crime rates than the Finnish born population - so a finding in line with findings from other Western Europe (Salmi *et al.*, 2015). While this is a relatively recent problem, it is to note that these studies were carried out before the huge influx of immigrants mentioned above, which would predict even more alarming findings if a follow up study was carried out now.

These findings fit neatly into a broader picture; as already noted, research has shown that in many European countries immigrant crime rates are higher than the average crime rates of the general population. The increased immigrant crime much depends on the clustering of immigrants in already vulnerable neighbourhoods, which tends to trigger out-moves of the original population, and eventually increased safety problems. Such a development has already begun in the largest Finnish cities.

So, because of political correctness and lack of critical research tradition, topics such as ghettoization, immigrant crime and terrorism threat are much neglected in the literature. Fear of stigma and exclusion prevents academics to pay attention to such a research direction. As the Finnish case showed, violent crime has a strong ethnic dimension. When we add terrorism to that mix, the picture becomes bleak. The threats are real and the risks involved serious. And this has brought up the need to discuss the option of stricter enforcement of security instead of only relying on integration and social policy of immigrants, as sensitive as this issue is.

As already noted, risk of crime affects economic development too. Urban areas are well-placed to use this aspect when designing strategies aimed at attracting investments, firms and professional workforce – and tourists. To adopt this kind of philosophy would be an alternative to the ‘diversity, multiculturalism and tolerance’ approach currently being prescribed by ‘urban management consultants’ and accepted by city leaders. Safety and security factors might *de facto* already be latent in the mobility of capital and – the considerably slower – mobility of labour. And this is why we in the new era cannot rely on old theories of urban competitiveness any more – what we need is one based on recognition of safety as a major factor for people’s well-being and the economic prosperity of urban areas.

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