

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

WALTER S. DEKESEREDY, SHAHID ALVI, MARTIN D. SCHWARTZ, and E. ANDREAS TOMASZEWSKI, *Under Siege: Poverty and Crime in a Public Housing Community*. New York: Lexington Books, 2003, x + 184 p.

Under Siege is a left-realist look at poverty and crime in an Ontario public housing complex known by the pseudonym of West Town. Dekeseredy and colleagues attempt to bridge the macro/micro theoretical divide by connecting exclusionary neo-liberal policy objectives and post-industrial economics to the plight of those caught in the grips of concentrated disadvantage and crime. In its entirety, the book is a wonderful – although, at times, seemingly disjointed – piece of scholarship that is intellectually appealing, enraging, and saddening all at the same time.

Using a combination of survey (n = 325) and interview data, the research team reveal that the residents of West Town live amidst chronic socio-economic disadvantage, crime, disorder, and fear. With almost 55% of the respondents falling victim to predatory crime, and a disproportionate number of females experiencing intimate partner and stranger violence in public settings, the evidence is clear: the residents of West Town are exposed to levels of risk above and beyond those experienced by the general Canadian population.

Under Siege is theoretically rich and aptly syncretic. Although the book offers a relentless critique from the political left, the authors avoid the trappings of dogma by effectively and rigorously connecting theory and research. Although at times the authors' politics do lead to a premature and almost knee-jerk dismissal of other viable crime prevention strategies (especially those relating to situational forms of crime prevention), the policy objectives put forward in the book's conclusion reflect a careful blend of sensible pragmatism (e.g. improving public transit) on the one hand, and respectable idealism (e.g. rethinking the nature and purpose of work) on the other.

In addition to its obvious relevance with respect to informing social policy, *Under Siege* is aptly suited for helping undergraduate students learn about research methodologies and about the trials and tribulations of their application in the field. The authors' willingness to openly address the methodological challenges of response bias, scale design, language

barriers, cultural differences, and the need to measure the ever-elusive “dark figure” of crime would undoubtedly enrich in-class discussion.

However, the book does have its limitations. For example, based on the data collected from their Quality of Neighborhood Life Survey (QNLS), the authors demonstrate that residents of West Town are victimized at a rate much higher than the general population. Yet given the nature of the research sample, the authors’ subsequent argument that “public housing residents are more likely to be victims of predatory crime than members of the general population [*italics added*]” is specious. In order to compare the victimization rate of public housing residents in general to the Canadian population, data collected from a representative sample of housing complexes from across the country would have been necessary. Although the argument is plausible (and likely entirely true), the data presented in *Under Siege* do not support such a wide-ranging conclusion.

Moreover, DeKeseredy et al. claim to be making an important contribution to the literature on the relationship between collective efficacy and crime in Canadian public housing. Yet, for the most part, the study is unable to establish the temporal order of the variables in question. Although the authors demonstrate that areas with low collective efficacy are more likely to be plagued by crime and victimization, it is not clear whether such low levels actually contributed to the criminal activity in question or whether participants perceived collective efficacy to be low as a result of their victimization. To their credit, the authors do acknowledge this problem (92 & 100), but seem to gloss over it as if were only a minor conceptual setback, despite the fact that it runs counter to the directional logic of their initial path models (85-7). Moreover, the reasoning seems very much at odds with their initial hypothesis that “perceived collective efficacy is negatively associated with three types of victimization ... [*italics added*]” (90). Rather than re-theorize what appears to be a highly symbiotic (and perhaps amplifying) relationship between rates of victimization and perceptions of collective efficacy, the authors seem to settle with the mere observation that the two phenomena are simply co-present.

Although at times it reads like an amalgamation of disparate works, *Under Siege* is rich in theoretical and methodological details. It makes a noteworthy contribution to the literature on the relationship between poverty and crime in public housing communities.

Patrick F. Parnaby University of Guelph