

# Gated Communities and Property Fencing: A Response to Residential Neighbourhood Crime

Sunday Emmanuel Olajide<sup>1\*</sup> and Mohd Lizam<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Real Estate and Facilities Management, Faculty of Technology Management and Business, University Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, Malaysia.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Real Estate, Faculty of Technology Management and Business, University Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, Malaysia.

## Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The issue of residential neighbourhood crime is no longer a new discourse as many studies have been done on it. However, the most pressing issue is its unabated trend especially in the developing nations mostly in Africa and Asia. One of the prescribed crime prevention strategies with long history as well as receiving global knowledge and practice is gated communities and property fencing.

**Aims:** It is the intention of this paper to assess the desirability of the concept with a view to considering how it has fared in practice through an in-depth search into relevant literature.

**Study Design:** Relevant journal articles were accessed through Google Scholar, Science Direct, Emerald, Scopus, Researchgate, Sage Journal Online and host of others.

**Place and Duration of Study:** The study was conducted in the Department of Real Estate, Faculty of Technology Management and Business, University Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, between April and September, 2015.

**Methodology:** The study dwells on the submissions of previous studies on the desirability of gated communities and property fencing in response to neighbourhood crime through

\*Corresponding author: E-mail: [gp140026@siswa.uthm.edu.my](mailto:gp140026@siswa.uthm.edu.my);

review of related literature.

**Results:** This paper reveals that the major reason why people desire to live within gated communities among others is for safety and/or to reduce their fear of crime which was discovered is far from being perfectly achieved.

**Conclusion:** The paper concludes by recommending that remarkable positive effect can be felt if the design concept of crime prevention can be blended with the social factors (SEDeF Model). The article renews the clarion call to the policy makers, urban city planners and researchers to prioritize the issue of property crime to enhance sustainability of our neighbourhoods.

*Keywords: Gated communities; residential neighbourhood; crime; fear of crime; CPSD; CPTED; SEDeF model.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, security challenges within the residential neighborhoods have been an issue of global discourse. Residential estates are evident to be susceptible to various crime especially burglary and other violent crimes like murder and rape. The fact that most valuables are kept in the house as well as the fact that homes are most times deserted during the day as residents must go to work or school or market or recreate- might have been attributed to this [1]. Sequel to this, one of the crime preventive strategies popularly used is gated community and property fencing.

Despite the widely-held view that gated communities are safer than their non-gated counterparts, few are known about the reality of this assumption: explanations motived on routine activity theory and situational crime prevention recommend that restricted entry would subdue crime. Alternative reports theorized that the overuse of security may increase crime [2]. Gated neighborhoods have experienced phenomenal growth worldwide due in part to increasing fear of urban crime and violence. On other hand, the move to gated communities has also been linked to affluence and recreation [3,4].

Gated community in its current form is a residential housing estate containing rigidly controlled entrances for pedestrians, bicycles, and automobiles and often distinguished by a closed perimeter of walls and fences. Gated communities usually consist of small residential streets and include various shared amenities. For smaller areas, this may be only a park or other common areas. For larger communities, it may be expedient for homeowners to stay within the neighborhood for most daily activities. Gated communities are a variety of common interest improvement but are distinct from intentional communities.

Grant & Mittelsteadt [5] posited that although most extensively documented in the United

States, gated developments are appearing in many nations, including Australia [5], the Bahamas [6], Argentina [7], Costa Rica [8], Indonesia [9], Latvia [10], Portugal [11], Malaysia [12,13], Brazil [14,15], South Africa [16,17], Venezuela [18], Ghana [19] and Nigeria [20,21]. Concern over gating has recently heated up in Britain [22,23]. In Canada as well, gated communities are creating interest and attention among researchers [24-31].

One of the key issues relating to the concept of gated communities is the paucity of concrete research or data that proves or disproves that gated communities or private fencing premises residents have higher level of security or decreased crime rates. In Low [32], it was revealed that residents of gated communities complained of the fact that their being within the walled residence could still not provide everything about safety as there are workers who enter the community every day, and they (residents) must go out in order to procure other house needs. The gates were said to provide some protection, but that they would still like more; however Low [32] wondered what more would be. The residents further complained, though the gates and guards excluded the feared 'others' from living with them, 'they' could slip by the gate, follow residents' car in, crawl over the wall, or worse, the guard could fall asleep or be a criminal himself. In the same vein, Atkinson & Smith [3] in their study submitted that attempts to neutralize risk in high crime communities are by no means guaranteed – even via the most vigorous attempts at deploying walls, gates and guards. This, they argued was caused by social inequality and segregation.

It is the primary objective of this paper to assess the desirability of the concept in residential crime prevention with a view to considering how it has fared in practice through an in-depth search into relevant literature. Hence, in the remaining parts of the article, extensive discussion is made on

the conceptual definition of gated communities; the evolutionary trend, gated communities categorization; gated communities and security; recommendation and conclusion.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Conceptual Definition**

The concept of gated community has been variously but relatedly defined by different authors and scholars. Blakely [33] defines gated communities as a new form of residential space with restricted access such that normally public spaces have been privatized. According to him, they are intentionally designed security communities with designated perimeters, usually walls or fences, and entrances controlled by gates and sometimes guards. Blakely [33] added that they include both new suburban housing arrangements and older inner-city areas retrofitted with barricades and fences.

Lister, Atkinson & Flint [34] affirmed that gated communities are walled or fenced housing developments to which public access is restricted, often guarded with CCTV and/or security personnel, and usually characterized by tenancy legal agreements which tie the residents to a common code of conduct.

In the words of Grant & Mittelsteadt [5], gated community is seen as a housing estate on private roads connected to general traffic by a gate across the main access. The developments may be enclosed by fences, walls, and other natural barriers that further limit public access. According to them, this definition includes schemes that gates across roadways, but would exclude “barricade perches”, as Blakely & Snyder [4] designate them, where some street is closed off for traffic calming while others remain open.

Hence, from the previous, the key element of gating represents an attempt to check access to the community giving room to the inside and an outside.

### **2.2 Evolutionary Trend of Gated Communities**

It is a statement of fact that crime prevention through walled building or residential neighborhood is not a recent phenomenon in the human race. From early pre-historic cave-dwellers to medieval and modern cities, human

settlements have always attempted to provide for the safety, security and well-being of their residents in terms of design and their place close to food, water and other vital resources. As technology grew, settlements adapted to reflect new and emerging threats. Hence, the need for discovery of modern techniques like fortification designs for castles, the emergence of gates and walled cities and the likes. Such improvements demonstrate that using environmental design to control human behavior and particularly security issues and crime, has a long tradition [35].

As culled from Le Goix & Callen [36] the transformation from global ‘spread’ to local ‘emergence’ as an underlying reason naturally leads to the study of locally specific antecedents to Gated Communities (GCs). GCs have a long history. Private urban governance began in 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial European cities such as London and Paris, in which the new industrial bourgeoisie solicited in privately operated and enclosed suburban neighborhoods, quiet withdrawal from the bustling city center [37,38]. Le Parc de Montretout, in Saint-Cloud, France, developed in 1832, probably being the chief of its kind [39,40]. In the US, the expanse of gated communities has roots in a long-standing philosophy of suburban growth. One early string of influence is the idealized suburban utopias and utopian-influenced projects. Haskell’s Llewellyn Park was probably the first contemporary gated community developed in the U.S. It has continuously administered a gatehouse and a private police force since 1854 and launched private governance of allotted amenities based on restrictive deed covenants that guarded the steadiness and uniformity of the community [41]. A second thread links America’s new gated communities to the historical processes that brought Common Interest Developments (CIDs) — a form of co-ownership tenure and organization — and exclusionary prohibitive agreements from Europe to the U.S. McKenzie [42] examines the long European history of conditional covenants and residential organizations (observable since 1743 in London). The first homeowners’ organization per se was founded in the United States in 1844 in Boston. Llewellyn Park and Roland Park in 1891 became the original large privately owned and run luxury subdivisions, yielding exclusive communities. They built consumer and real estate developer expectations and legal and organizational strategies that assisted to shape up-to-date private urban governance in the U.S. McKenzie writes “to keep the private parks, lakes and other

amenities of the subgroups, developers designed provisions for common ownership of the land by all occupants and private taxation of the owners. To guarantee that the land use would not be diverted by succeeding owners, developers appended ‘restrictive covenants’ to the deeds” [42]. This set of high-end subclass at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century became very familiar (Mission Hills, Missouri in 1914, KC Country Club District in the 1930s, and Radburn in 1928). Along with landscaping and architectural specifications, the idea of social judgments as a commoditized property has become common in CIDs. Exclusive lifestyle improvements became common by the turn of the 1960-70s, designed as mass-consumption real estate developments, financed by large corporations attracted by inherent profits and supported by the State through the Bureau of Housing and Urban Development [42].

A contribution from Blakely [33] further revealed that the strength to eliminate is a new emblem for the new government space in the United States. Fear generated by a rising tide of foreigners and indiscriminate violence ordering from the terrorist attack of September, 11, 2001 to the killers in the suburban of Washington, DC in 2002 has modified public areas with an explosion of public space privatization. Gated communities according to Blackely [33] are clear indicators of the spatial division of the nation by race or class. According to him, in the 1960s, suburban

exclusionary zoning to achieve this result was challenged and, to some degree, rejected through judicial or legislative open housing laws. De facto residential exclusivity has since been pursued through the private housing market, which has built hundreds of gated communities since the 1980s under the rubric of “security” from threats to homes and their inhabitants. Inferably, it can be said that Gated community got its root from France and the United States. The works of Low [32,43] mark the origin of longitudinal research in gated communities.

### 2.3 Categorization of Gated Communities

The study of Blakely & Snyder [4] has been described as the most widely accepted study that provides the most thorough investigations of gated communities available, and presented the most frequently discussed typology of the phenomenon [5]. In their study of US enclaves, Fortress America, suggests that gated communities in the USA housed around three million dwelling units by the mid-1990s; the census count increased that to four million by 2000 [44]. Blakely & Snyder [4] described projects from the coast to coast, and at all income levels. In developing a typology of the kinds of schemes found in the USA, they made a vital enrichment to understanding the key characteristics of gated communities. As shown in Table 1, Blakely & Snyder [4]

**Table 1. Blakely & Snyder’s [4] general typology of gated communities**

Type	Features	Subtypes	Characteristics
Lifestyle	These projects emphasize common amenities and cater to a leisure class with shared interest; may reflect small-town nostalgia; may be urban villages, luxury villages, or resort villages	Retirement	Age-related complexes with suite of amenities and activities
		Golf and leisure	Shared access to amenities for an active lifestyle
		Suburban new town	Master-planned project with suite of amenities and facilities; often in the sunbelt
Prestige	These projects reflect desire for image, privacy, and control; they focus on exclusivity over communities; few shared facilities and amenities	Enclaves of rich and famous	Secured and guarded privacy to restrict access for celebrities and very wealthy; attractive locations.
		Top-fifth development	Secured access for the nouveau riche; often have guards
		Executive middle class	Restricted access; usually without guards
Security zone	These projects reflect fear; involve retrofitting fences and gates on public streets; controlled access	City perch	Restricted public access in inner city area to limit crime or traffic
		Sub-urban perch	Restricted public access in inner city area to limit crime or traffic
		Barricade perch	Closed access to some streets to limit through traffic

recognized three kinds of gated community: Lifestyle, influence, and security zone communities. In hypothesis, the categories describe ideal types that serve particular markets. In practice, they say, neighborhoods may show a combination of traits from these types.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The study dwells on the submissions of previous studies on the desirability of gated communities and property fencing in response to neighborhood crime through review of related literature. Relevant journal articles were accessed through Google Scholar, Science Direct, Emerald, Scopus, Researchgate, Sage Journal Online and host of others. The thrust of the study is to assess the desirability of GCs as a response to residential neighborhood crime.

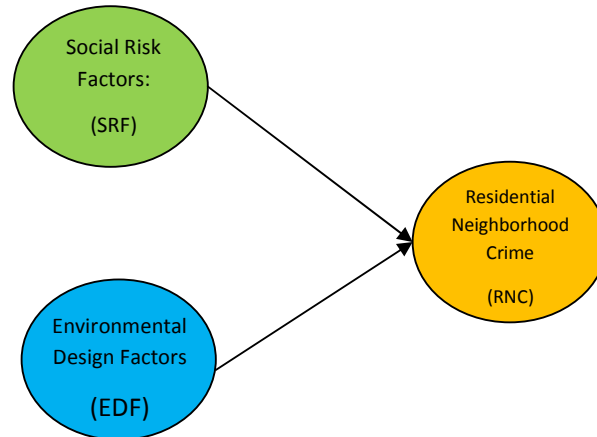
### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Although there seems to be limited number of studies that center on the efficacy of gated community and property fencing in the area of guaranteed physical security, nonetheless, there are strong views on the two sides of the discussion [2,12,32,45]. The thought is that because security fencing and gates provide restricted access to non-residents, it is only reasonable that there will be a reduction in the number of property offences. Gated communities provide a solid physical barrier, as well as acting as a psychological deterrent for would-be criminal [46]. However, moving into a neighborhood solely because it is gated is not wise security decision. As many security and crime experts would say, it is important for any intending resident/tenant to make a necessary investigation before deciding to buy or rent a place within such a community.

Essentially, the integrity of a gated community is only as strong as the integrity of the people that live within it. It may be wrong just to assume that because a complex or neighborhood is surrounded by a security fence and gate that only law abiding people live among the property. Burglars and other criminals can as well reside within gated communities [47,48]. Visitors of other occupants can also be of concern. It is because of this and others that some studies opine that gated communities are no safer than non-gated communities [2,3]. Some studies show that by separating apartment complexes and entire neighborhood with fences, it prevents the

residents from coming together as a whole, which is considered to discourage crime [48]. Fences and gates can also pose a false sense of security for the occupants that reside within them; suggesting as if there is no need to maintain an eye out for strange people and action; reduce their guards; is capable of making them and their neighborhoods easy target for criminalities. Agbola [49] in his study interpreted construction of high fences/walls and gates around the building or/and neighborhood as an 'architecture of fear' which paradoxically invite offenders rather than deterring them in that when high fences are built, it might be an indication that valuable things are kept within which may by and large attract a prospective offender. Addington & Rennison [2] found support for the hypothesis that housing units in gated communities experience less burglary than their non-gated counterparts. Their findings also premise on the diversity of gated communities and their residents, which is in sharp difference to commonly held opinions of these areas as upper-class enclaves. The sincerity in the safety of property depends a lot on whether residents look out for each other; whether it is a rental or owner-occupied community and whether the property is professionally managed. For rental, it is desirable to do a criminal background check on the applicants; making sure the access codes of the entry gate are kept confidential as well as changed from time to time is also important. Gated community concept is expected to meet up with the desired expectations in the area of crime prevention if these and other essential precautions are taken.

Empirically, Vilalta [50] recognizes the dramatic increases in crime and fear of crime in Mexico which to him have encouraged interest in research questions about the relationship of fear with new housing developments which transform to seeing increase in the number of gated communities and apartments in Mexico City as an acknowledgment to fear of crime. His study attempts to know if this option helps control fear of crime and also to test empirically crime theory in this respect. The result of his research shows that neither gated communities nor apartment houses seem to provide lower rates of fear of crime when home alone. His result further shows that other variables are held constant, fear of crime was at variance to the nature of residence, instead, fear of crime when alone was associated with gender, years of schooling, social marginally levels, community's fear levels and the option on the local police. Other studies that support the



**Fig. 1. Socio-environmental design factors (SEDeF) model**

hypotheses that gated development eliminates or reduces crime and/or fear of crime include Breetzke, Landman & Cohn [48]; Atlas and LeBlanc [51]; Plaut [45]. In contrast to these findings, some of the studies that negate the belief include Low [52] instead of reducing crime, it rather encourages social segregation; Agbola [49] as a demonstration of architecture of fear; Addington & Rennison [2] only little effect on burglary; Atkinson and Smith [3] refer to the concept as 'an economy of false securities; and Le-Goix & Callen [36] regarding the concept as incurring additional expenses without commensurate result.

## 5. CONCLUSION

From the previous, efforts have been intensified in the course of this review to expansively examine the desirability of the concept of gated communities as a response to residential neighborhood crime. No doubt, remarkable efforts have been made along this direction either through research or government policies as well as private efforts. However, it is noteworthy that the results have not justified the means in that notwithstanding the human and financial efforts put into it, housing crime seems unabated especially within the urban settlements. So far so good, this study has unveiled the main reason people prefer to live within the gated communities- to improve their security or reduce their fear of crime. The question remains- "how secure are the residents within the gated communities?" As already hinted, there is no guarantee that once you live inside gated estate that you are excluded from neighborhood crime, but where stringent precautions are put in place, it may increase the efficacy of the concept.

Sequel to the above, it can be deduced that notwithstanding enormous and avoidable cost expended on the construction of perimeter fencing and walls with a view to ensuring a safe and secure residential environment, the cost seems not to be justifying the means. It is, therefore, the intention of this paper to recommend Socio-Environmental Design Factors (SEDeF) model as an alternative or at least a supplement. The proposed model as shown in (Fig. 1 above) dwells on the fact that a combination of the social risk factors and environmental design strategies would go a long way in checkmating residential neighborhood crime [53]. The model, SEDeF is derived from two theories known as Crime Prevention Social Development (CPSD) which is premised on the belief that crime can be drastically reduced if the fundamental social root causes of crime like poverty, homelessness, illiteracy, unemployment, family disunity, delinquencies and the likes are tenaciously tackled; and Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) which is focused on purposeful manipulation of the environmental neighbourhood design in such a way that it will discourage potential offenders to commit crime. This, which is variously called virtual building, is meant to painstakingly address issues like territorial reinforcement, natural surveillance, natural access control, activity support, image/space management and target hardening [35].

The conceptual marriage is considered beneficial and productive as it allows for both private (CPTED) and public (CPSD) participation. Therefore, this, when fully implemented is capable of enjoying the benefits of the concept of Public-Private Partnership (PPP). This model has

been consciously or unconsciously practiced in developed economies like US, Japan, and UK among others and emerging economies like Malaysia, Singapore and Republic of Saudi Arabia as a veritable tool in residential neighborhood crime prevention.

Further research is however recommended on critical evaluation of SEDeF model to consider its strengths, weaknesses and scope of application. Hence, the public, private, as well as researchers, are implored to explore the untapped benefit of this conceptual marriage as an effective tool for crime prevention within the residential neighborhoods.

### COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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