YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING IN PUBLIC HOUSING PROJECTS: A PROBLEM OF INTER-ETHNIC COEXISTENCE?

Annick Germain (Institut national de la recherche scientifique – INRS) and
Xavier Leloup (Institut national de la recherche scientifique – INRS)

ABSTRACT

This article presents the findings from a study of four public housing projects for families in Montreal. This study was conducted to provide insight into four community organizations working with youth in these housing projects. Although immigration is a growing concern, is it at the root of the cœxistence problems facing young people in these projects? What strategies are community organizations using to help youth living in these highly stigmatized environments?

In the fall of 2005, as part of the Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion (a joint undertaking between the Quebec government and the City of Montreal), four community organizations working with young people and their families living in public housing in the borough of Mercier-Hochelaga-Maisonneuve came together to review their actions. With the support of the borough and of the *Office municipal d'habitation de Montreal* (OMHM) [Montreal municipal housing authority], they partnered with two INRS-UCS researchers to help them with this project.

This marked the beginning of an original research project which drew us into the world of the so-called "neighbours society" of housing projects, home to a growing number of immigrant families. We considered naming the project *Once upon a time in public housing...* because it reads like a story of the conditions for cœxistence in the projects, and because it is a testimony to the community stakeholders' soul-searching as they grappled with the challenges and issues stemming from their work with young people and their families in disadvantaged residential areas.

Before presenting the framework for this collective reflection and looking at some of the findings, we will provide a brief description of the conditions in the four housing projects we studied, and public housing in general.

DEFINING THE HOUSING PROJECT

Montreal built 27 housing projects that have more than one hundred units in the 1970s. They are essentially public housing developments with 100–400 units each that are laid out according to rather unique planning in which three to four-story buildings face small interior courtyards and back onto the street. Many are located near parks. Although some of these projects won architectural awards at the time, they have not aged well. As a consequence, the substandard building materials and the island configuration of the projects offer little privacy to the residents. The largest of these developments recently underwent major renovations which meant that 400 households had to be temporarily relocated in order to deal with serious mould problems. Over $1 billion has been earmarked for the rehabilitation of other low cost housing projects over the next five years. Quebec government policy dœs not advocate the demolition/reconstruction approach practised elsewhere—most notably as part of France's vast urban renovation projects that were designed to transform the residential landscape and the social profile in public housing projects after their impoverishment and the increase in social problems, not to mention the *banlieue* question (van Kempen *et al.*, 2005).

Although living conditions in public housing projects in Quebec have also become more problematic, social intervention follows a different path and focuses on community action, which is the focus of this report. Let us begin, however, by discussing the social context of the housing projects, which has changed considerably over the past 20 years.

DEALING WITH DIVERSITY

We will begin by looking at the general social profile of families living in low-cost housing projects in Montreal (Leloup, 2008). In a survey of public housing tenants with children, conducted during the winter of 2006, four factors became clear:

1. Household size (4 people) is considerably larger than for Montrealers in general (2.2 in 2001). The gap is reduced slightly when we restrict the comparison to families. However, the average number of children per household in public housing projects is much higher, at 2.82 children, compared with only 1.1 in the general population. This highlights the importance of children and youth in public housing projects.
2. The over-representation of one-parent households in public housing (61%) is a well established fact. The majority of children and young people (52%) are living in this kind of household.
3. Average public housing occupancy is 9.3 years, with a median occupancy of 9 years.
4. Finally, also pertinent to this study is the percentage of tenants who are immigrants: 69% of adults and 16% of children are immigrants. They originate from the following regions (in decreasing order): the Caribbean (25.3%), Maghreb and the Middle East (15.1%), Latin America (10.8%), sub-Saharan Africa (7.3%) and Asia (7.2%).

Interestingly, these immigrants are definitely not newcomers to Canada: 87% arrived prior to 1995, and one-third arrived in the 1980s. Skilled immigrants (or economic immigrants)—unsurprisingly—are under represented among public housing tenants.

Immigrant representation in public housing projects is definitely on the rise—especially in the larger units since, according to the OMHM, 90% of the people at the top of the waiting list are immigrants. This trend is undoubtedly a consequence of the shortage of large affordable rental units in Montreal.

Public housing projects for families also house a significant number of single people, including many individuals with mental health problems (an unforeseen effect of the deinstitutionalization movement), and these single people are living alongside families that generally have several children. In the four housing projects in the study, young people made up almost half of the entire population. Ethno- cultural differences play themselves out within the context of this diversity in familial situations. Although tenants in the housing projects are all equally disadvantaged, they are still likely to encounter greater diversity than do most Montrealers—even though they live in a relatively isolated and stigmatized community. The challenges of cœxistence are great.

RESPONDING TO RISING INSECURITY

The early 1990s witnessed a growing sense of insecurity in and around housing projects, some of which were located in Francophone, white, middle class neighbourhoods. The growing presence of young people contributed to this real, or perceived, insecurity. Committed and dedicated community stakeholders responded by setting up four community organizations. Some public housing tenant associations, which were usually headed by older single people, were also destabilized by this new trend.

The history of these four community organizations, which operate as youth and family centers, is rather chaotic: they were plagued by service interruptions, essentially temporary closures, due to a shortage of funding, but they eventually gave way to a rather unique system of local regulation. These organizations, which serve young people and their families, are located at the heart of the housing projects, so the community stakeholders become neighbours—a factor that proved to be both a benefit and a constraint. Their location was the topic of the first collective discussion among the four stakeholders and their partners from the City of Montreal and the OMHM, as well as the two researchers, and this launched our research project.

In order to provide a better understanding of the community stakeholders' activities and the challenges that they face, these discussions were designed around four key ideas. The first idea, *Building a safe space*, is of course a product of the context that fostered these organizations. The second idea, *Building a matrix of trust*, is central to this discussion: poverty, vulnerability and close proximity do not foster the relationships of trust that are, in fact, the basis of a helping, efficient society. Because of their location, the community stakeholders are in a position to establish a relatively unique reciprocal relationship; however, they must also serve as links with external stakeholders, who are often very wary of public housing tenants. The third idea, *Building a learning space*, deals with educational activities for young people as well as the need to teach cœxistence skills to all housing project residents. The fourth idea, *Building bridges and opening doors*, requires an explanation. When intervening with youth, stakeholders must always work to provide them with the means of coming to terms with the world outside the housing project and to build bridges between their home community (the study showed that adults leave this environment as rarely as possible) and the neighbourhood that surrounds them—or to get them out of their ghetto, as some would say. The riots in France reminded us that young people are often very attached to their groups and to their housing project. It is outside of these enclaves that they are not well received. On the other hand, precisely because of the discrimination that they have to deal with in the outside world, they need their own activities and their own space—so they also need doors to help them find themselves and to feel protected from outside aggression. And, just like all young people, they also need access to services and activities. Community action constantly vacillates between the need to build bridges and the need to close doors to the outside world.

These four ideas effectively illuminate the impact of stakeholders' efforts with youth and their families—whether it is as a result of the nature of community work, of the concrete product of social development and recreational activities, or of managing inter ethnic cœxistence.

We will now turn our attention to inter-ethnic cœxistence.

ETHNIC DIVERSITY AND ISSUES OF CŒXISTENCE: ARE THEY SYNONYMOUS?

Our discussions revealed that these problems seem to be mainly intergenerational rather than inter-ethnic, as has been documented by other research Young people who have grown up together in the housing projects often mix without difficulty. Tensions arise with seniors and among parents who do not share the same views on education, as can be the case between parents from the Caribbean and from Maghreb, for example.

Nevertheless, community organizations are very vigilant, and a number of strategies have been tested. These range from ethnic diversification of staff working in community organizations and youth centres to mediation formulas to resolve tensions between families.

As far as the community stakeholders are concerned, community action is particularly effective because it dœs not filter through projects that are formally trying to bring cultures together and because it is anchored in the daily life of the housing project.

IN CONCLUSION

If we take a step back, we are struck by the success of these community interventions which manage to function as a social control system in high-density public housing projects plagued with problems. These projects were built at a time when social development was not part of the housing office's mandate, and social intervention faces greater obstacles than in other countries where there is at least some degree of social mix in public housing.

The long term viability of these arrangements is questionable given that they are, of course, dependent on short term financial and organizational support, and because they also rely on a tradition of social intervention designed during very different times from those that are before us. The theme of transforming social intervention paradigms is being studied by researchers throughout the world; however, few seem to be considering the truly cultural dimension (Leloup and Germain, 2008).

REFERENCES

Research capsule, December 2007. *Community Intervention Among Young People From Immigrant Backgrounds Living in Low-Cost Housing*, Quebec Metropolis Centre. http://im.metropolis.net/research-policy/research_content/bilans_02_05/eng/FicheVolet2Germain1.2ENG.pdf

Corbillé, Christine. 2002. "Démolir des logements sociaux: du tabou au mot d'ordre", Cahiers de l'IAURIF, pp. 12–31.

Germain, Annick, and Xavier Leloup. 2006. *Il était une fois un HLM… Portrait de l'intervention communautaire dans quatre HLM de type "plan d'ensemble" de l'arrondissement Mercier-Hochelaga-Maisonneuve*, Montreal, INRS-UCS, 117 pp.

Lelévrier, Christine. 2005. "Rénovation urbaine, relogement et recompositions territoriales", *Recherche Sociale*, No. 176, pp. 24–41.

Leloup, Xavier, and Annick Germain. 2008. "L'action communautaire auprès des jeunes et de leurs familles dans cinq plans d'ensemble Montrealais: régulation sociale locale et construction du lien social", in P. Morin and É. Baillergeau (eds.), *L'habitation comme vecteur de lien social*, PUQ, pp.145–195.

Leloup, Xavier. 2007. "Les HLM Montrealais et le discours sécuritaire: l'action communau¬taire ou la société des voisins?", *Lien social et politique-RIAC*, No. 57, 91–103.

Leloup, Xavier. 2008. "*Loger les familles avec enfants dans le logement social public Montrealais: politique d'attribution et profil sociodémographique des residents*", INRS-UCS, research paper submitted to the FQRSC and to the OMHM, 111 pp.

Van Kempen, Ronald, Karien Dekker, Stephen Hall and Ivan Tosics. 2005. *Restructuring large housing estates in Europe*, Great Britain, The Policy Press, University of Bristol.