# Perceptions of Community Safety in West Auckland and White Fragility

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## Abstract

Unitec and Community Waitakere have recently completed a Lottery's Foundation funded project looking at the contemporary issues affecting the perceptions of safety in West Auckland communities. A review of eight recent surveys or research reports between 2012 and 2016 into community safety in West Auckland show that the negative perceptions we have about the safety of our community and the people who are part of it, have more impact than the actual amount of crime that is reported in our community. Responses to questionnaires to 159 people covering the age-span, female and male gender, Pākehā/European, Māori, Pacific Island and Asian/other cultures showed that despite a clear fall in reported crime rates in West Auckland people generally believed that crime had increased and was worse than in the rest of Auckland. On a number of different measures, the Pākehā/European participants were significantly more concerned about personal safety and crime that the other communities who did the questionnaire. The Pākehā/European participants were significantly more likely than the other groups to want more police patrols and a get tough on crime approach and were significantly less interested in a collaborative neighbour to neighbour community development approach. The data suggests that perceptions of safety in the community are influenced by culture and that one or more cultures are likely to be seen as the problem by the dominant culture. This raises the issue of the role *white privilege* (McIntosh, 1988) and, particularly, *white fragility* (DiAngelo, 2010) in addressing community safety. *White fragility* explores the challenges of over-reactive white sensitivity to suggestions that their position of privilege might impact on the well-being of people of other cultures.

## Introduction

West Auckland, consisting of three local boards, has long been the focus of concerns about community safety.  Henderson/Massey, as well as being the largest of the three boards is also younger, poorer and has higher proportions of Māori and Pacific peoples than Auckland generally.  It also has one of the four fastest growing populations in the Auckland region with 24% growth between 2001 and 2013 (Statistics NZ, 2013). Whau in contrast has a particularly high proportion of Asian people (35.4%) and the lowest household and personal income levels of the three West Auckland Local Boards.  Compared to Henderson/Massey and Whau (and Auckland as a whole), Waitakere Ranges is older, richer, more European, and with much slower growth. West Auckland is a vulnerable community. Ministry Justice (2015) data on rates of victimisation lists several factors such as crowded housing, being a sole parent or unemployed, renting, having money crises, being of Māori or Pacific Island culture and being young and/or poor which make people more likely to be victims of crime.  These features are major parts of West Auckland life, particularly for Whau and Henderson/Massey.

The impetus for this work arose from several violent murders occurring in West Auckland in the first half of 2014 culminating in the manslaughter of Arun Kumar, a Henderson Dairy owner, by a 14-year old boy, on 10 June 2014 (Dennett & Boyer (2015). These events were widely reported and gave rise to a heightened level of public consciousness and general concern about safety within the

community. These concerns had already been articulated in 2012 when an Auckland Council Report, *Public Perceptions of Safety from Crime in the Auckland,* identified that people from Henderson/Massey generally felt unsafe in their community at a level worse than anywhere else in greater Auckland, that Henderson-Massey and Whau were two of only three local board areas where people felt their area was becoming more unsafe, and Henderson-Massey were one of two areas where people felt they were most likely to be a victim of crime. The reasons for feeling unsafe were the presence of people with any or many of the following characteristics – being young, aggressive, drunk, drugged, suspicious and/or homeless. Poor lighting, places where people could hide, having no one around and scary media reports all made things worse.

Following the Auckland Council Report were another eight investigations with a focus on Henderson/Massey specifically or the wider West Auckland region. These reports, many commissioned by the Council, were about:
- the establishment of broad ranging (e.g. including workplace, traffic, home and water safety) and comprehensive safety standards that the city could be held accountable for (Safer Communities, 2012);
- using the *Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design* (CPTED, Jeffery, 1977) approach to develop a of comprehensive set of recommendations that improve community safety such as the improvements in street lighting, surveillance, tidiness and design (including art works and landscaping), and extending the hours use of physical environments so that people are more comfortable using town centres, parks, public transport and the local streets during the day and at night (Stoks Limited, 2014).
- addressing the issue of "adverse perceptions associated with congregations of youth which comes to the forefront in all public safety perception studies" (Stoks Lmited, 2014, p.37). This was felt to be "perhaps the most important CPTED initiative" (p.37).  Thinkplace *Ideas for a Safer Henderson Town Centre* and *Safer Henderson Town Centre Plan* reports (Thinkplace, 2014a, b) pulled in narratives from people that often were named as reason why the public felt unsafe.- young people, gang members and the homeless.  As one commented: "[Henderson is] safer than some kid's homes". Thinkplace argued for a whole of community approach where everyone is "legitimate" (even the homeless and "youth"). They wanted to involve people with pop-up events in community spaces, odd-job and upcycling hubs and street games, adopt a grandparent and generally making those who are seen as problem, part of the solution.

Many of these recommendations have taken up by the Henderson/Massey Local Board (including a "Love Hendo" campaign) and by the Council between 2011 and 2015. So it has been with some disappointment that in 2015 two more reports came out concluding that little had changed. The Waitakere Ethnic Board (2015) felt that despite the improvements in community policing, the introduction of CCTV and other developments, young people were still presenting as a threat to Henderson people and businesses, and that such people were insufficiently punished for the crimes they committed. The WAVES Trust (2015) Henderson/Massey survey repeated the same message about lack of safety in Henderson town centre and generally about youth crime and drug and alcohol problems.

Two options present themselves. 1) We are not taking the right measures in sufficient magnitude to create significant change and 2) it is people's perception that there is a major safety problem, that is the problem. These positions are not mutually exclusive. The first option is supported by cross-country European data about "fear of crime".  Hummelsheim, Hirtenlehner, Jackson, & Oberwittler (2011) argue that macro factors such as a strong family and child support funding, comprehensive

education services, access to employment and support for people with a disability have a much greater impact on fear of crime (i.e. explain a much higher percent of the variance related to fear of crime) than other factors such as actual crime rates, expenditure on unemployment or even income inequality. The second option is supported by Bridgman and Dyer (2016) who have shown a dramatic drop in substantiated child abuse rates in West Auckland over the period of 2010-2015 and a falling crime rate in the Waitakere police district over the period from 2010-2014 – the fourth largest fall in New Zealand – such that it had a lower crime rate than all but two of the 11 police districts in New Zealand (excluding Waitemata of which it is part).

## What we set out to do

This paper drawn from research undertaken by Community Waitakere under a Lotteries Foundation grant seeks to address this issue of perception through a survey of convenience sample of 159 people across the range of ethnicities, gender, age groups, locations and length of time people have lived in their West Auckland communities. The survey asked questions about interactions with neighbours and the police; safety in relation to children, times and places; what it feels like to be safe or unsafe; relative levels of safety in West Auckland; and what should be done and who should take responsibility around improving community safety.

| **Table 1:** Characteristics of the survey participants | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Factor | Category | Number | % |
| Gender | Women | 134 | 84.3% |
| | Men | 25 | 15.7% |
| Culture | Asian, other | 11 | 6.9% |
| | Māori | 17 | 10.7% |
| | Pacific People | 30 | 18.9% |
| | Pākehā/European | 101 | 63.5% |
| Age | 16-34 years | 36 | 22.6% |
| | 35-44 | 34 | 21.4% |
| | 45-54 | 41 | 25.8% |
| | 55-64 | 33 | 20.8% |
| | 65 and older | 15 | 9.4% |
| Location | *Eastern Fringe*: Avondale, Blockhouse Bay, New Lynn, New Windsor, Rosebank | 39 | 24.5% |
| | *In the Bush*: Green Bay, Glen Eden, Titirangi, Laingholm, Parau | 29 | 18.2% |
| | *Suburban Henderson*, Glendene, Kelston, Sunnyvale, Henderson, Henderson Heights, Te Atatu South | 29 | 18.2% |
| | *Harbour fringe*: Te Atatu Peninsula, West Harbour, Hobsonville | 21 | 13.2% |
| | *Massey, Ranui* | 30 | 18.9% |
| | *Bohemian West*: Oratia, Swanson, Waitakere, Karekare | 11 | 6.9% |
| Length of time in community | less than 12 months | 12 | 7.5% |
| | 1-2.99 years; | 20 | 12.6% |
| | 3-4.99 | 21 | 13.2% |
| | 5-9.99 | 42 | 26.4% |
| | 10-19.99 | 36 | 22.6% |
| | 20 years or more | 28 | 17.6% |
| Total | | 159 | 100.0% |

Our analysis here looks at the correlations between the demographic features of the participants in table 1 and the perceptions of these different groupings. While correlation is not on its own a powerful statistical tool and our sampling method means that we cannot claim to have a representative sample, I hope to present a convincing argument for differentiated perceptions by an aggregation of significant instances of the cultural effects I am describing. I will begin by showing all significant correlations $p<0.05$ with gender, age and culture for a set of rating questions that started the survey.

## What we found

Correlations show the following significant relationships (p<0.05). Women feel less safe than men when answering the front door after dark (50% vs 16%); walking in the street after dark (57% vs 24%) and with their children going on their own to the local park (43% vs 12%).

Older people are more likely than younger to know their neighbour's name (>44 years=78% vs <45 years=55%) as are people who have lived in the community for longer periods of time (>2.99 years=72% vs <3 years=50%). Older people feel that people from different backgrounds get along in their neighbourhood (75% vs 50%) and are also more conformable interacting with police (89% vs 66%) than young people.

Pākehā/European participants feel less safe at night walking alone than do other cultures (59% vs 38%); Pacific Island participants are less likely to know their neighbour's name than all other cultures (50% vs 76%) and Asian/other people feel more strongly that individuals should take responsibility for making the community safe (82% vs 63%). Pākehā/European participants were more likely than other cultural groups (43% vs 28%) to believe that their suburb's crime rate is higher than the rest of Auckland and Asian/other participants less likely (9% vs 39%).

That women have more safety concerns than men is unsurprising and a routine finding (Cossman & Rader, 2011). It is logical that older people and people who have lived for longer periods in neighbourhood are more likely to know their neighbour's name as is the proposition that a population for whom English is not the first language (Pacific Island peoples) are less likely to know their neighbour's name. It is perhaps more surprising that the majority population might be the most frightened population, but this, too, is well supported in the literature (Quillian & Pager 2001; Drakulich 2012; Pickett, Chiricos, Golden, & Gertz 2012; Kuhn & Lane 2013).

Finally, one of the early questions in the survey was virtually identical to a question in the 2012 Auckland Council Report. Table 2 compares this survey's responses to the 2012 report and finds them almost identical. Despite the survey's heavy bias towards female participation, this was not a question that discriminated between men and women, thus the findings from this question suggests that the data from the survey is credible; the correlations are make good sense and that the relationship between culture and perception of safety needs to be more fully explored. This will be done by looking at the narrative responses made to questions about an instance of "feeling very unsafe" and "one thing that would make neighbourhoods safer".

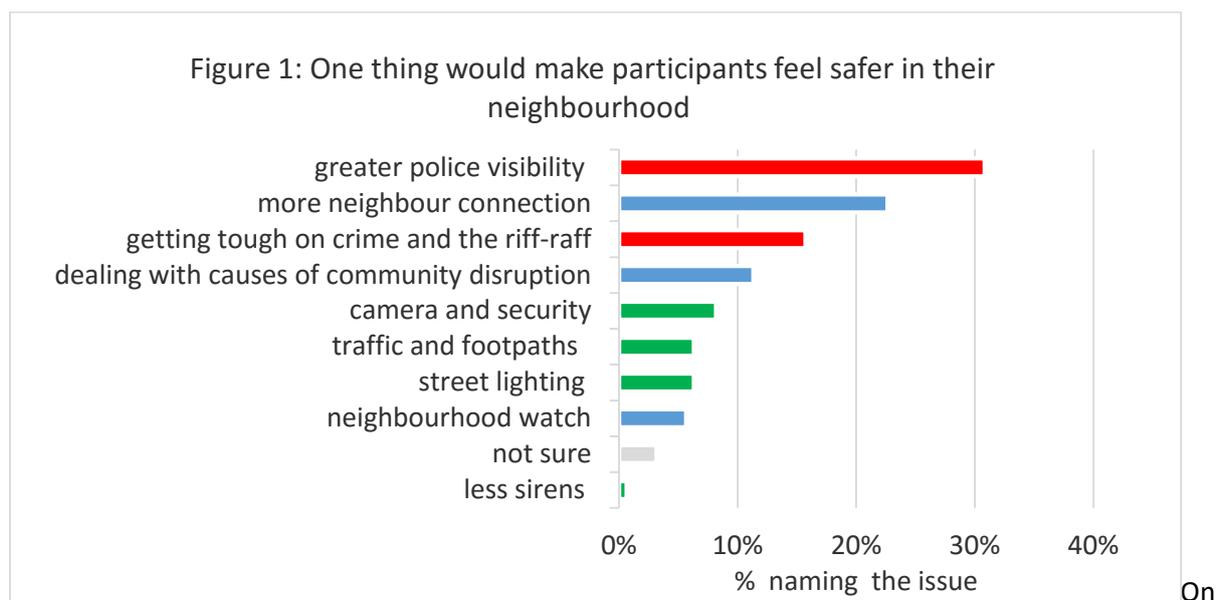| Table 2: Percent of participants feeling unsafe walking in their neighbourhood during the day* | | |
|---|---|---|
| Area | 2012 Auckland City Council Report | 2016 (this survey) |
| Henderson Massey Local Board (Suburban Henderson, Harbour Fringe, Massey/Ranui} | 10% | 10% |
| Whau Local Board (Eastern Fringe) | 8% | 10% |
| Waitakere Ranges Local Board (In the Bush, Bohemian West) | 5% | 3% |
| * The Auckland City Report asked participants "how safe they felt walking around their neighbourhood on their own during the day" (p49) and this survey asked participants to rate their level of agreement with the statement "I feel safe walking the street alone where I live during the day". These groupings are approximations to Local Board areas, with *Eastern Fringe*, in particular, being a less affluent part of the Whau Local Board. | | |

One key question in which there was general agreement across all demographics, was the question on whether "concern about crime" had changed. Overall 55% had increasing concern and 9% had

decreasing concern.  The experience of feeling very unsafe is one of being in the presence of people who are felt to be dangerous – stranger danger- the "youth. . . loitering", "the drunken mob", the gangs, the drug dealers, "street-fighters", "the scumbags", "big troublemakers", the robbers, the "sex offenders, "beggars, "people with mental health problems [who] scare me", "the 'so-called' homeless", and the "squatters …under buildings".  No actual physical harm has occurred and no direct threat or rudeness has occurred in these examples. Fear of specific locations, especially after dark such as shopping centres "alley ways", and "at night walking home from the train station" and fear generated by media stories and by social media particularly *facebook* and *Neighbourly* about local murders and other crime add to the general anxiety people have. These features account for more than 50% of the narratives about feeling "very unsafe". However, while there is concern across all communities in these areas it is clear that Pākehā/European participants are significantly more involved in social media (89% vs 69% for all other groups) and the fear generated from its use, and that the negative labelling used above for out groups is almost entirely from Pākehā/ European participants.  Pacific Island were participants significantly less likely to use social media than the other groups (60% vs 79%for all other groups).

When comes to direct encounters with abusive and aggressive people or the aftermath of robberies or burglaries in their streets, rather than concerns about the possibility of such events, these were identified were identified by more than one third of participants as times when they felt very unsafe. These events range from abusive "beggars" saying such things as "I'm going to fuck you, bitch" to accounts of physical assaults on people or their property ("a car window punched at traffic lights", "a rock through my front door window" through to "a neighbour's daughter …[getting] raped in the house opposite". Māori participants were significantly more likely to experience issues of actual abuse and aggression compared with all other groups (47% vs 18%)

So on the one hand, we have a picture of two vulnerable communities, one more likely to directly experience abuse and aggression (Māori) and the other more likely to be isolated from neighbours and the mainstream media (Pacific Island people); and on the other hand a third less vulnerable community (Pākehā/European) which not only appears to be the most frightened community, but possibly the least tolerant. The priority given by the four communities to the single best solution to the perceived lack of community safety will decide whether these differing pictures have substance.

Figure 1: One thing would make participants feel safer in their neighbourhood

greater police visibility
more neighbour connection
getting tough on crime and the riff-raff
dealing with causes of community disruption
camera and security
traffic and footpaths
street lighting
neighbourhood watch
not sure
less sirens

0%    10%    20%    30%    40%

% naming  the issue

On

The responses (figure 1) fell into two major categories – one around protection and enforcement (red bars); one around community engagement (blue bars), and a third much smaller category around environmental changes (green bars).  Protection was about wanting greater police visibility

(identified by 31% of participants). This would increase safety by having more police patrols, wardens, night security patrols, community constables and neighbourhood police getting involved with "the little kids…[showing] they are their friends". Also wanted was "giving the police the resources to monitor … criminal activity, …[and] help prevent ... crime". This set of solutions was significantly correlated with being Pākehā/European - 39% of Pākehā/European supported this compared with 14% for the other cultural groups.

On the enforcement side, 16% of participants believe that getting tough on crime would make a difference. Many comments refer to getting rid of people considered undesirable. These participants want more resources put into catching the people doing "burglaries… graffiti-ing" and "marijuana"; "dropping so much rubbish"; and having out of control dogs.  They wanted "the Justice System … to be harder on convicted criminals", and one participant wanted "the right to bear arms".  The getting tough on crime solution was significantly positively correlated with being Pākehā/European, 22% of whom supported this solution compared with 3% for all other groups. Only two non-Pākehā/European responses were in this category.

In contrast to the focus on protection and enforcement, there was also a strong push for solutions that involved greater community engagement (the blue bars in Figure 1). Twenty-three percent believe that having more neighbour connections and community events would make a difference. "People saying hello", "monthly BBQs…sharing together, [getting] to know … neighbours", "talking across ethnic groups" and creating "a strong sense of inclusiveness". The solution of community connection was significantly negatively correlated with being Pākehā/European - only 13% identified this option compared with 36% for all other cultures. The Pacific Island participants had a significant positive correlation with this solution - 40% vs 19% for all other cultures. Aligned with, but separate from the theme of community engagement, is the suggestion of Neighbourhood Watch type initiatives from 6% of participants. This solution is also significantly negatively correlated with being Pākehā/European - only 1% supported this compared with 14% for the other cultural groups.

A small percentage of Pākehā/European participants (13%) made positive suggestions about addressing with the causes of community disruption – poverty, inequality, better education and mental health services, anger management and parental support – at a level similar to the other groups. This was also for the other area of change suggested – improving environments (better security systems at home and on the street and better traffic management and street lighting).

## Discussion

The data clearly shows that community safety is a growing concern with no change in a key measure of safety (walking in local streets after dark) since 2012 (Auckland Council, 2012).  The data confirms, however, the hypothesis that the fear of crime is not directly connected to crime rates as reflected by police statistics, but is growing despite significant drops in the level of crime in West Auckland (Bridgman and Dyer, 2016). Also confirmed is that the group with the highest fear of crime is the Pākehā/European group, despite being the least vulnerable cultural group. Against these concerns, we need to remind ourselves that we are talking about perceptions and that as Gray, Jackson & Farrall (2008) have pointed out questions that ask overarching questions about safety (e.g. how worried are you about…?) generate large over-estimates of concern when compared with questions relating to how often people have felt afraid in specific contexts of time period, place, direct experience, etc.  Most of our questions have specific contexts and we might ask with only 9% overall, saying that they are afraid to walk in their local streets during the day, is it a major problem? If we ask the same question about after dark, then the percent rises to 52% which means that substantial proportion of the population (particularly women) would not use public transport after dark, which is a major problem. Similarly, it is a major problem when well over half of the parents in this survey feel reluctant to let their children go unaccompanied to the local diary, school or local park. The result is that children are transported everywhere (including to "safe" schools with low non-

Pākehā/European enrolments), connections between neighbours become weak, and access to community resources becomes restricted and those resources become degraded because of lack of use or vandalism.

The strong response of the Pākehā/European group when asked for a solution is to ask for more police protection and for the justice system to get tougher on crime. It is an echo of the call reverberating presently through all the mainstream political parties for more to be spent on fighting crime with the result that the government intends provide 1800 extra prison beds at a cost of $1 billion (Sachdeva & Kirk, 2016) and $500 million for extra policing (Kirk, 2017). The tragedy is that this massive expenditure will have very little impact at all on fear of crime (Hummelsheim et al 2011; Vieno, Roccato, & Russo 2013; and Visser, Scholte & Scheepers 2013). The most vulnerable cultural communities, the ones whose members are most likely to end up in prison, the Māori and Pacific Island communities (Depart of Corrections and Statistics New Zealand, 2012) want solutions that emphasise community engagement and connection. Hummelsheim et al (2011) argue that the macro factors (a strong family and child support funding, comprehensive education services, access to employment and support for people with a disability) that increase individual and family experience of being in control of their lives are the ones that have the greatest impact on reducing fear of crime. The solution of community engagement and connection also reflects a desire for individual and family experience of control. It is the neighbourhood solutions (saying hello to your neighbours, breaking down the cultural barriers, having community events and community BBQs, having a say in neighbourhood developments, keeping an eye out for each other and the children of the community) which increase people's sense of control and engagement.

A big challenge of creating greater community engagement and connection will be getting greater Pākehā/European buy-in. Understanding what is at the base of Pākehā/European resistance will help. Why is it that the least vulnerable group is the most frightened? US cross-cultural educator Robin DiAngelo (2011) describes this as a *white fragility* reaction - "a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves [aimed at preserving white privilege]" (p54). At both the government and the community level the more police, more prisons response is defensive – it does not seek to address the race-based issues of inequality and prejudice that we are facing, merely to contain them or shift them elsewhere. DiAngelo argues that white fragility is a reaction to attacks on *white privilege* (McIntosh, 1988). White privilege is based on such ideas as cultural separation, an individualised world view where Western/ European modes of thinking are treated as universals, a sense of entitlement to superior conditions of comfort and safety than others and "constant messages that… [whites] are more valuable" (DiAngelo, 2011, p64) that are part of our media, education, justice and political systems. Unless we address these issues of privilege and fragility, distrust and insecurity will continue to erode the quality of life in our communities.

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