Households in the United States have increasingly turned toward gated communities in response to a perceived increase in the threat of crime and as the feeling of safety in the general community decreases. In 1997, it was estimated at least three million households in the United States lived in gated communities (Wilson-Doenges, 2000, p. 597). By the early 2000s, this number more than doubled to approximately seven million households (McGoey, 2009). The phenomenon of gated communities is not a new concept. The first permanent residences of mankind were fortifications built to “protect life and property and to keep the barbarians out” (Helsley & Strange, 1998, p. 102). During the Middle Ages, castles featured high walls, towers, moats and drawbridges that served to protect the royal family and their subjects and as a clear statement that outsiders were not welcome (Blakely & Snyder, 1999, p. 4). Modern day gated community residents are typically in the upper socioeconomic strata. Gated communities located in the United States, with their high walls and fences that restrict public access, offer those who live within the compound a sense of privacy, protection and security from outsiders. The objectives and implications of gated communities as a crime prevention model will be analyzed through the concepts of community, security and risk and how gated communities have addressed the way the public views crime, prevention and security.

The objectives of gated communities meet the basic premise and assumption of the theoretical model of community crime prevention. The community is a powerful resource that
plays a pivotal role in preventing crime. Under the crime prevention model, residents have to become involved in pro-active interventions aimed at reducing criminal opportunity and development. This increase in social cohesion positively contributes to the reduction of a spiral decline to crime; more community equates to less crime (Blandy, 2007, p. 50). The homogenous community that generates from the shared set of attributes and values in gated community residents creates a collective response that does not permit criminal activities to occur within the compound. These shared values establish the social norms, which differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. Gated communities are selected by households for safety and security reasons (Sanchez et al, 2005); (Blakely & Snyder, 1998). The physical perimeters of gated communities create an identifiable defensible space and dissuade breaching by outsiders. The desire for safety and security begins at the individual level and cultivates to groups of individuals with strong social cohesion and shared norms who then form a community. The law-abiding residents within a gated community can mobilize and utilize their resources to effectively prevent crime in their community. Gated communities foster the socialization and social cohesion among residents that are fundamental to crime prevention within the community. The theoretical objectives of the community crime prevention model are met through the design of gated communities.

Within the confines of a gated community, residents can perceive an increase in security and community. As defined by Blakely & Snyder (1997) gated communities are “residential areas with restricted access in which normally public spaces are privatised. They are security developments with designated perimeters, usually walls or fences, and controlled entrances that are intended to prevent penetration by non-residents” (Manzi & Smith-Bowers, 2005, p. 346). Access to the interior is controlled by the physical barriers, walls or fenced perimeters, and gated
or guarded entrances (Blakely & Snyder, 1998). The premises within the community can be
monitored by private security and closed-circuit television. A typical gated community in the
United States is described as having “six-foot brick walls and iron fences which encircle the
enclaves of luxury homes. Electronic gates and 24-hour security keep outsiders away” (El
Nasser, 2002). The ability to control the access in and out of a gated community through
designated guarded and monitored entry points portrays the image of a “perimeter that is difficult
to breach” (Sanchez et al., 2005, p. 283). Inside a gated community, residents can have the
additional protection of private police. There is a movement towards governance beyond the
state as the public views the state can no longer adequately address crime and its prevention.
More residents are seeking the new methods of security that gated communities can offer. Many
gated communities rely on private policing measures to provide residents with constant
surveillance. The protection and security offered by private policing within gated communities
reinforces the public view that there is a lack of protection and security offered by public
policing. The sales marketing of residences within the confines of a gated community promote
this sense of increased security. As well, the sense of security inside the gated community is
furthered with a communal sense of responsibility through “eyes on the street” surveillance
where non-residents and deviant behaviour can be easily observed (Blandy, 2006, p. 240). With
daily media announcements of criminal activity, residents want to believe their household is a
secure refuge from the chaotic outside world (Blandy, 2007). Residents can also be involved in
the management and development of their community (Blandy, 2006). Many gated communities
foster a homeowners association, which serves to bring members of the compound together to
discusses such issues as security and encourage a sense of community. As emphasized by David
Blunkett, “establishing management by residents would further help to engage people in making
decisions, and to reinforce the message that they are part of the solution” (Blandy, 2007, p. 50). The physical exclusiveness of gated communities has a direct increase in the sense of security that residents experience and acts as a force to instill a greater sense of community.

The development of gated communities as a crime prevention model is premised on their ability to create an environment that reduces the risk of crime. Inside the gated community, residents “distance themselves from the messiness of everyday urban life, where graffiti, panhandling, vulgar language, and violence are seen as evidence of urban decline” (Grant, Greene & Maxwell, 2004, p. 73). By controlling access, gated communities can provide residents with a safer environment in which the risk of becoming a victim of crime is minimal because it is hypothesized criminal acts will not occur. Only those residents who have met the gated community’s residency requirements will be admitted, and unauthorized persons will be denied (Dillon, 1994). Visitors must remember to call ahead, have their license plates noted, obtain and display appropriate ‘visitor’ identification and to sign in and out of the community (Grant et al, 2004). Community surveillance by residents can encourage active crime prevention tactics, such as a Neighbourhood Watch-like scheme. “In small developments, everyone knows who is supposed to be there” (Grant et al., 2004, p. 76). If a criminal act were to occur within a gated community, the suspect population would be easily identifiable. Thus, a gated community can create an environment that is able to reduce the risk and possibility of crime.

The monitoring and surveillance provided within gated communities contribute to a sense of personal protection against the risk of crime and victimization. A main characteristic of risk is that risk is predictable (SOC316, Jan 23). The ability to predict the future risk of becoming a victim of crime has been a driving force behind the development of gated communities. “The high level of insecurity characteristic of contemporary discourse on the environment, the
economy, crime and interpersonal relations has given birth to the idea of ‘risk society’ and gated communities can be seen as one governance technology for risk society” (Bislev, 2004, p. 603). The concept of a ‘risk society’ and fear of crime is based on the public view that crime rates are high. The fear of crime is furthered through external forces such as daily media coverage of criminal acts (Bislev, 2004, p. 604). According to Wilson-Doenges, “close to 70% of the residents surveyed reported that security was very important in their decision to move to gated communities” (2000, p. 599). In response to the public’s fear of crime, developers advertise the security features gated communities provide. These features are designed to combat and reduce the risk of victimization to residents in gated communities and provide them with a sense of personal protection against crime.

Gated communities foster a sense of community and security by facilitating the development of close bonds among its residents. “Those who want to live near others of similar backgrounds and interests can make strong friendships and develop an ethic of neighbourliness and mutual aid (Grant et al., 2004 p. 74)”. This homogeneous residency helps foster friendships and bonds based on similar views which can assist in the development of a sense of community. In Georjeanna Wilson-Doenges’s (2000) article titled An Exploration of Sense of Community and Fear of Crime in Gated Communities, she states that “two studies [(Riger, LeBailly & Gordon, 1981; Taylor et al., 1984)] have shown that strong neighbourhood bonds are related to being able to identify strangers and decreased crime rates” (2000, p. 601). Due to the homogeneous residency, residents often share the common goals of security and protection that gated communities strive to offer. Residents of gated communities are encouraged under the basic premises of crime prevention to become proactive in order to reduce crime, where “eyes on the street or community surveillance [plays] an important part” in preventing crime (Wilson-
The common norms and beliefs shared by residents enable informal social control to regulate the sense of community and contribute to the prevention of crime within these compounds. To ensure a homogeneous residency of similar backgrounds and life-interests, many gated communities have a set of rules and regulations that must be consented to prior to purchasing a home within the compound. For example, in the gated community Barkley Estates in Harvey, New Orleans, “rules prohibit overnight street parking. No boats, campers or RVs are allowed in driveways. Houses must be painted certain colours” (El Nasser, 2003). Failure to follow the rules and regulations of the gated community may result in outrage and exclusion from the rest of the residents and the gated community (Zeitlin, 2001). Durkheim’s theory of moral order is applicable to gated communities and their residency. When a crime occurs, the norms of a society are threatened, but the passionate reactions by society strengthen the norms and reinforce the moral order (Zeitlin, 2001). The fear of exclusion and outrage by other residents forces members to conform to the moral order of their community, and the sense of community is strengthened (Zeitlin, 2001). The residents in a gated community take an active role in creating and maintaining social bonds that promote a sense of security and community. Gated communities have succeeded in addressing the public views on crime, prevention and security, and have contributed by providing and promoting an increased sense of community and personal safety.

However, the objectives of gated communities presented as a model for crime prevention also include significant implications that relate to concepts of risk, community and security. Although a motivation to reside within a gated community is the reduction in risk of potential victimization, empirical evidence has demonstrated that general and violent crime rates have decreased in the United States (Wilson-Doenges, 2000). Thus, the driving factor behind this
motivation is the increased perceived risk and fear of crime, and not the actual incidence of crime itself. The obsession with risk and preventing a future potential victimization has a direct correlation with an increase in fear (Wilson-Doenges, 2000). Despite a decline in crime rates¹, the fear of crime has not relented. The fear of crime negatively impacts an individual’s quality of life, causing them to look to consumer products to manage their potential risk of victimization (Wilson-Doenges, 2000). Developers of gated communities have exploited and support this fear through the construction and advertisement of these fortresses of safety. Residents with this unsupported fear remove themselves from the general social community to unreasonably protect themselves, which leads to an increase in levels of suspicion and distrust, which leads to a further increase in fear (Wilson-Doenges, 2000). Instead of contributing to a solution through crime prevention tactics, residents of gated communities “turn their backs on neighbours by hiding behind gates” (Sanchez et al., 2005, p. 282). Due to the associated costs of living within a gated community, these compounds have become a safe haven for the wealthy and have come to symbolize distinction and prestige (Manzi & Smith-Bowers, 2005 p. 357). As one resident of a gated community states: “There is the ultimate scenario of secure affluent gated communities surrounded by chaos” (Atkinson & Flint, 2004, p. 17). The perceived sense of increased community is relevant only within the compound. The segregation of a gated community actually reduces communal ties, social cohesion and “neighbourliness” with the outside community (Manzi et al., 2005, p. 345). In addition, gated communities do nothing to actively prevent the incidence of crime in the community at large.

¹ According to the Department of Justice Federal Bureau of Investigation’s report “Crime in the United States: 2007”, “after rising for two straight years, the estimated number of violent crimes in the Nation declined from the previous year’s total. The declining trend continued for property crimes, as those offenses were down for the fifth year in a row,” and “all four of the violent crime offenses declined in 2007 when compared with figures from 2006.”
Furthermore, gated communities can even discourage a sense of community among residents. Wilson-Doenges (2000) found “gated community residents reported a significantly lower level of sense of community” when compared to residents of non-gated communities (2000, p. 607). In a typical scenario, “a gated community resident pulls up to the gate in her car, rolls down her window only long enough to insert her card to electronically open the gate. She drives through, drives down the street to her house, presses the garage door remote control, drives in, and shuts the door. She enters her home after deactivating the alarm system, closes the door behind her, and reactivates the alarm” (Wilson-Doenges, 2000, p. 608). “In general, gated communities do not increase a sense of community, and may actually decrease it, and give either a false sense of security or no sense of security at all” (Wilson-Doenges, 2000, p. 609). The gated communities become “enclaves of fear” where communities are not defined as: “an organic unit of social organization characterized by enduring personal ties and networks, a high level of social interaction and cohesion, a sense of belonging and common goals, involvement in community affairs, and a feeling of wholeness” (SOC316, Jan 23). Instead, the community defined by gated communities is a geographical physical space demarcated by physical impersonal barriers.

Although gated communities are advertised as a secure and crime-free compound and serve as a deterrent to criminal activity, gated communities are not without crime. Blakely and Snyder (1997) interviewed local public police agencies about gated communities and “found no firm evidence of any general permanent reduction of crime” (Blakely & Snyder 1997). A 1994 study in Miami found gated communities experienced similar crime rates to non-gated communities for assaults and auto thefts (Wilson-Doenges, 2000, p. 600). Following a 1995 robbery spree in gated communities in Atlanta, El Nasser reported “burglars target gated
communities … and stole $1 million in jewelry, cash and silver from at least 90 homes before getting caught” (El Nasser, 2002). In a case of crime or distress, gated communities can pose a barrier to emergency services. One police officer states, “the main problem is that when anyone in the development rings to call out the police the gates are locked and we need to get the security codes to gain access” (Atkinson & Flint, 2004, p.17). As crime habitually follows the path of least resistance, crime is diverted to surrounding non-gated communities. Although the empirical evidence is scarce, “crime barred from one place is bound to divert unless something else happens to reduce the total volume” (Le Goix & Webster, 2008, p. 12). Gated communities may make residents feel safer, but there is no overwhelming decrease in criminal activity and may delay or prevent timely assistance in emergency situations.

Gated communities meet the objective of a crime prevention model as they contribute to residents’ increased sense of safety, security and community. The increase demand for and development of gated communities is directly related to the public views about crime, prevention and security. Gated communities can foster a strong sense of safety and security in the residents. Through screening of residents and visitors, gated communities offer a very controlled population. Those with high fear of crime and need for increased security want the safety, security and surveillance advertised as available in gated communities. Residents of gated communities are able to escape from the risks of the general community and can retreat to their privately secured sanctuary. “Gated communities, with their pragmatic prevention of risk through target-hardening and simple prevention of access by non-residents, exemplify situational crime prevention” (Blandy, 2006, p. 242). The proliferation of gated communities demonstrates the success of this model in addressing the public’s view about crime prevention. Security is achieved by living within a protected compound and to avoid the perceived increase in crime in
general society. The gated community model is so successful in this that residents ignore the fact that their fear of crime and risk of victimization is statistically unfounded as crime in the United States has decreased. Residents of gated communities report feeling at more risk when they leave their compound. “Although residents may actually be no safer inside the gates, residents in gated communities report that they feel less safe when outside of their communities” (Sanchez et al., 2005, p. 283). Although gated communities do address the public views around crime prevention, this model of crime prevention does not succeed in reducing the driving force behind gated communities: the fear of crime.
References


