

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Designing for A Safer Public Housing Community: A Case Study of Chester Le, Toronto

Crime and fear of crime are major concerns confronting public housing tenants today. Public housing tenant population is usually composed of groups of people who have traditionally been found to be more vulnerable to violence and have greater fear of criminal victimization. In response to the increasing level of fear of crime and urban violence, a physical structure-based approach to crime prevention and management of urban spaces, Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED), was emerged and prevailed in the planning profession in recent years.

This research project examined the links between the characteristics of the built environment, fear of crime, and community safety in a public housing project, the Chester Le community, located in L'Amoreaux neighbourhood in northeast Toronto. The objective of this study was to identify and examine the potential impact of physical design features on the perception of safety in Chester Le and determine how the perception of safety can be improved by modifying these design features. The research used evaluation criteria established in the Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children's (METRAC's) Community Safety Audit (CSA) tool and the City of Toronto's safety design guideline, *A Working Guide for Planning and Designing Safer Urban Environments*.



Map 1: Site Plan of the Study Area



Figure 1: Townhouse units in Chester Le

A group safety audit was conducted with five local residents in Chester Le, led by the researcher, using a safety audit guide consisted of seven evaluation criteria. The findings from the safety audit revealed some of the main safety concerns associated with the built environment in Chester Le, including:

- Insufficient signage to define the entrances and exits;
- Inconsistent lighting throughout the neighbourhood spaces;
- High fences and overgrown vegetation that blocked the sightlines;
- Lack of emergency services;
- Untidy garbage areas and backyards;
- And a few potential entrapment sites.

At the same time, it was discovered that Chester Le also embodied some physical characteristics that helped to ameliorate fear of crime, including:

- Clear and diverse signage;
- Well-used community amenities;
- An effective surveillance system;
- And a good mix of land uses nearby.



Figure 2: Grade separation with self-built high fences and overgrown vegetation together reduced sightlines in Chester Le.



Figure 3: Well-used community amenities in Chester Le

**Table 1: Evaluation of the Built Environment in Chester Le**

<b>SAFETY AUDIT CRITERIA</b>	<b>STRENGTHS</b>	<b>WEAKNESSES</b>
<b>Territoriality</b>		
Signs and Maps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A variety of signs are present throughout the neighbourhood</li> <li>• Existing signs are easy to read and understand</li> <li>• Emergency contact information is available</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Entrances and exits could be better defined by appropriate signage</li> <li>• Absence of wayfinding signage and maps</li> <li>• Stigma attached to TCHC logo on the signs</li> </ul>
<b>Natural Surveillance</b>		
Lighting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brighter Nights Program</li> <li>• Tenants knew where to report broken lights</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low illumination level</li> <li>• Inconsistent level of lighting throughout neighbourhood spaces</li> <li>• Vandalism</li> </ul>
Sightlines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tree trimming</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharp corners</li> <li>• High fences</li> <li>• Walls</li> <li>• Overgrown vegetation</li> <li>• Grade separation</li> </ul>
Isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Well-used playground and outdoor sitting area</li> <li>• Functional CCTV</li> <li>• Regular police patrol</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of emergency services</li> </ul>
<b>Image</b>		
Maintenance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accessible superintendent's office</li> <li>• Painted graffiti</li> <li>• Curb Appeal Project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintenance of garbage dumping areas</li> <li>• Maintenance of backyards</li> <li>• Long time for repairs</li> </ul>
<b>Environment</b>		
Nearby Land Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Busy commercial plaza</li> <li>• Schools</li> <li>• Well-used community centre</li> <li>• Well-used park</li> <li>• Adjoining busy public streets</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open access to the park</li> <li>• Separation from the main street by wall</li> </ul>
<b>Natural Access Control</b>		
Entrapment Sites and Escape Routes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Locked unused spaces</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unlocked garbage dumping areas</li> <li>• Unlocked community garden</li> <li>• Complicated alleyway networks</li> </ul>

**Table 2: Recommendations to Improve the Built Environment in Chester Le**

<b>SAFETY AUDIT CRITERIA</b>	<b>SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>IMPLEMENTATION</b>
Signs and Maps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Add street address signs at appropriate locations</li> <li>• Add wayfinding signage or maps at main entrances to aid navigation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use signs with positive tones</li> <li>• Standardize signage across TCHC communities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TCHC should take the responsibility of adding or changing any signage in the neighbourhood</li> </ul>
Lighting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Add LED lights in the neighbourhood, especially around the playground area</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep up the maintenance of the lights</li> <li>• Promote awareness among tenants to keep their porch lights on overnight</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tenants should take the responsibility of turning on and off the porch lights</li> <li>• TCHC should take the responsibility of adding, changing, or maintaining other lights</li> </ul>
Sightlines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Add security mirrors at sharp corners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage tenants to take down self-built fences in their backyards that obstructed sightlines</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tenants should be responsible for taking down the self-built fences in their backyard with potential help from TCHC staff if in need</li> <li>• TCHC should take the responsibility of adding security mirrors</li> </ul>
Isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expand the playground area to accommodate more recreational activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intensify the use of community spaces with planned events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TCHC should take the responsibility of improving the current recreational facilities</li> <li>• TCHC and local community organizations should work together to encourage the tenants to enjoy the community spaces more often by holding various events</li> </ul>
Maintenance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regularly tree trimming</li> <li>• Timely snow removal</li> <li>• Keep up the maintenance of around the garbage dumping areas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage tenants to keep up the maintenance of their backyards by prohibiting stocking of large household goods in the area</li> <li>• Make repair services more timely and efficient</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tenants should take the responsibility of maintaining their backyards and also helping with the maintenance of the garbage areas</li> <li>• TCHC should be responsible for improving tree trimming, snow removal, and other maintenance services</li> </ul>
Entrapment Sites and Escape Routes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lock potential entrapment sites after certain time at night, such as the garbage dumping areas and the community garden</li> <li>• Add lights or convex mirrors at the entrapment sites</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make the entrapment sites or unused spaces useful with appropriate functions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TCHC should be responsible of making the entrapment sites safe spaces</li> </ul>

Additional policy recommendations for TCHC include:

- Make ‘little things’ right.
- Continue the effort of tenant engagement by conducting safety audits regularly.
- Allocate more funding towards maintenance and make the process more efficient.
- Promote the use of safety design guidelines produced by the City of Toronto.

This research project promoted the awareness and better understanding of community safety issues to the local residents in Chester Le, as well as to TCHC, and highlighted the role of planners to engage local community members in the planning process to actively search for solutions to make changes in their microenvironments of daily life. Planning could play a significant role in crime prevention, reducing fear of crime, and enhancing perception of safety in a community. Good planning helps to reduce opportunities for crime and allows potential victims to escape to safety through effective design and management of urban spaces.