Reviewer's report

Title: Linking social and built environmental factors to the health of public housing residents: a focus group study

Version: 1  Date: 9 January 2015

Reviewer: Jennifer Kent

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Discretionary Revisions:
1. The paper states that “Participants received a $25 gift card as compensation for their time” – it’s good practice to declare where the voucher was for, allowing the reader to make judgements as to whether this might impact participant motivations or influence the participant selection process.

2. The statement “We reached thematic saturation after six focus groups” suggests that data analysis was undertaken concurrent to data collection. If this is the case then this should be mentioned.

3. The four themes identified are interesting however they are not contextualised well within the existing (and broad) literature in this area. The relationship between themes is also not discussed. For example, theme four seems to be very much related to the built environment. By stating that resident groups in different courts display different relationships, the study essentially identifies that the way the neighbourhood is designed has quite a specific effect on sense of community. To a built environment professional this might be a really interesting finding! However without any description of the built context (as recommended below) it is difficult to explore how the built form might attenuate relationships.

4. Would it be helpful to include a table of all themes and subthemes? Were there other subthemes identified that are not explored here?

5. The discussion section could be more succinctly structured perhaps making better use of subheadings?

6. The acknowledgement of the study’s weaknesses appear a little tokenistic. Qualitative research will never be generalizable so it’s not particularly necessary to acknowledge this as a weakness. Instead, it might be better to say “This is a qualitative study. It’s the aim is not to produce results generalizable to other populations but to provide deeper insights into a particular problem….” or something like that.

Major Compulsory Revisions:

7. More work needs to be done on defining what is meant by the social and built environments and situating the impacts of these on human health and social connection in existing literature. These two influences are key to the paper’s
analysis however they are not well set up. First, a detailed description needs to be given of the built environment – what is the density? How is housing configured? Is it high rise? How is it currently governed and allocated? What is the context relative to the urban area in which it is situated? As for the social environment, what exactly is meant by this term? Does it include the cultural context?

8. Page 10, Line 22: The statement that “We build upon these prior studies by identifying factors that public housing residents perceive exacerbate these conditions, including housing authority enforcement of lease terms and the behaviors of other residents” refers to the idea that individual health is impacted by structures of provision (including housing governance) and wider socio-cultural processes. This is not necessarily a novel finding and it needs to be tied in to broader literature in this area. Fran Baum’s work is particularly insightful in this area.

9. The address to the impact of crime and fear of crime on the uptake of health promoting behaviours needs to be augmented and, again, situated within existing literature in this area. Commonly known as “CPTED” (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design), the authors should review the work of Paul Cozens, Gregory Saville and others.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.