Perceptions of Community Safety in West Auckland and White Fragility

by Geoff Bridgman

Article

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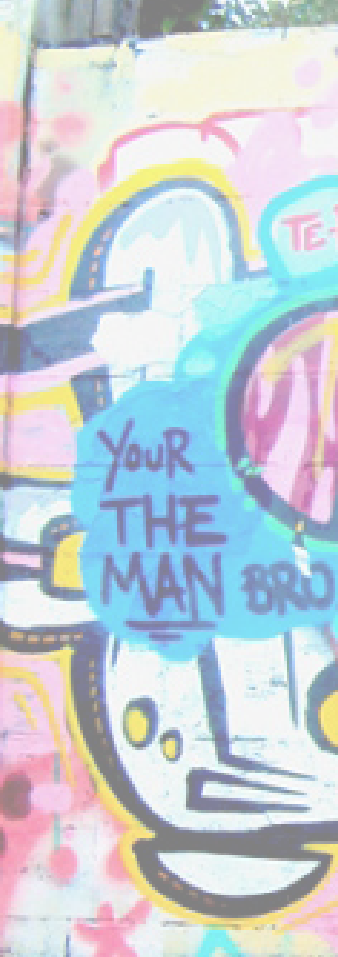
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ABSTRACT

Unitec and Community Waitakere have recently completed a project supported by the Lottery Community Sector Research fund, looking at the contemporary issues affecting perceptions of safety in West Auckland communities. A review of eight recent surveys and research reports between 2012 and 2016 into community safety in West Auckland suggests that the negative perceptions held 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 the community.

Responses to questionnaires given to 159 people covering the age spectrum, female and male, and Pākehā/European, Māori, Pasifika, Asian and 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. In a number of different respects, the Pākehā/European participants were significantly more concerned about personal safety and crime that the other communities who participated in 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 minority cultures are likely to be seen as the problem by the dominant culture. This raises the issue of the role of 'white privilege' (McIntosh, 1988) and, particularly, 'white fragility' (DiAngelo, 2010) in considering community safety. 'White fragility' here refers to the challenges of over-reactive white sensitivity to suggestions that their position of privilege might impact on the wellbeing of people of other cultures.

INTRODUCTION

The impetus for the survey on public perceptions of community safety 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 June 10, 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 Region,* identified that residents of Henderson-Massey Local Board area generally felt more unsafe in their community than people from 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 that Henderson-Massey was one of two areas where people felt they were most likely to be a victim of crime. The reasons given 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, it was reported.

Our survey covered West Auckland, an area consisting of three local boards (Henderson-Massey, Whau and Waitakere Ranges). Henderson-Massey, as well as being the largest of the three boards, is also younger, poorer and has higher proportions of Māori and Pasifika peoples than in Auckland generally. It also has one of the four fastest-growing populations in the Auckland region, with 24% growth between 2001 and 2013 (Auckland Council, 2014a). 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 (Auckland Council, 2014b). Compared to Henderson-Massey and Whau (and Auckland as a whole), Waitakere Ranges is older, richer, more Pākehā/European, and with much slower growth. West Auckland is a vulnerable community (Auckland Council, 2014c). A Ministry of Justice (2015) crime and safety survey lists demographic features which make people more likely to be victims of crime, including crowded housing, being a sole parent or unemployed, renting, having frequent money crises, being of Māori or Pasifika culture and being young and/or poor. These features are a major part of West Auckland life, particularly for Whau and Henderson-Massey residents (Auckland Council, 2014a and 2014b).

Following the Auckland Council (2012) report were another four investigations, one with a focus on the wider West Auckland region (Safer Communities, 2012) and three, commissioned by the council, with a focus on Henderson/Massey specifically (Stoks Limited, 2014; Thinkplace, 2014a; 2014b). These reports addressed:

- the establishment of broad-ranging and comprehensive safety standards covering areas such as safety in the workplace, traffic, home and water that the city could be held accountable for (Safer Communities, 2012).
- using the *Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design* (Jeffery, 1977) approach to develop a comprehensive set of recommendations to improve community safety through changes in street lighting, surveillance, tidiness and design, and extending the use hours of physical environments so that people are more comfortable using public spaces and transport 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). Narratives from groups who were often named as reason why the public felt unsafe – young people, gang members and the homeless – argued for a whole of community approach where everyone is "legitimate" with pop-up events in community spaces, odd-job and upcycling hubs and street games, adopt-a-grandparent schemes, and generally making those who are seen as a problem part of the solution (Thinkplace, 2014a;b).

Many of these recommendations have been taken up by the Henderson-Massey Local Board 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 in Henderson, young people were still considered threatening to Henderson people and businesses, and there was the feeling that they were insufficiently punished for the crimes they committed. The WAVES Trust (2015) Henderson/Massey survey repeated the same message about a perceived lack of safety in Henderson town centre and generally attributed this to youth crime, and drug and alcohol problems.

Two options present themselves: The actions taken in response to the recommendations above in design and engagement were not sufficient for change; and it is the community'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., these factors explain a much higher percent of the variance related to fear of crime) than other factors such as actual crime rates, expenditure on unemployment rates or even income inequality. The second option (the disconnect between the community perceptions of safety and actual levels of crime) is supported by Bridgman and Dyer (2016) who have identified a halving of substantiated child-abuse rates in West Auckland over the period of 2010-2015 and a 27% drop in the crime rate in the Waitakere police district over the period from 2010-2014 – the fourth-largest fall in New Zealand – to the extent that it had a lower
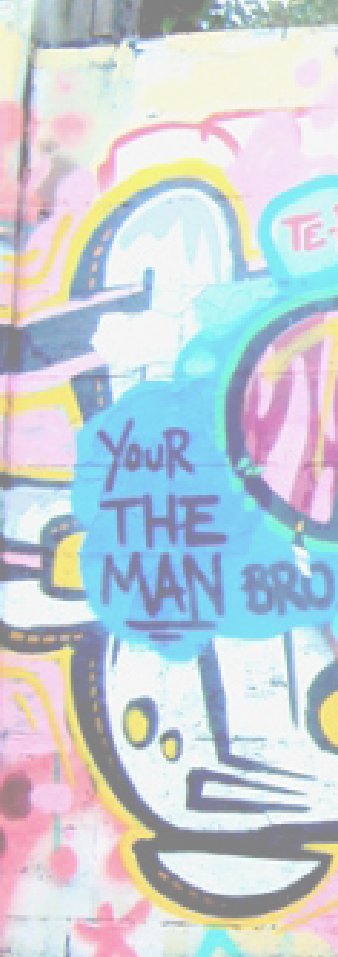
Street artists Kakano Youth Arts Collective (vulnerable young people, many of whom have been homeless) celebrate their connection to Henderson.

crime rate than all but two of the 11 police districts in New Zealand (excluding Waitematā, of which it is a sub-district). These falls in rates of child abuse and crime mean "there were 676 fewer children suffering substantiated abuse in 2015 than there were in 2010" (p. 29) and "5000 fewer crimes in 2014 – just under 14 fewer crimes every day" (p. 30). Again, something other than levels of crime are driving perceptions of safety.

What is striking about all the research above is that it lacks a cultural analysis. What is the connection between the culture/s of those who are seen as the problem (the gangs, the homeless – those more identified with minority cultures) and those with the greatest concerns about safety (the majority culture)? In seeking an answer to this question we will draw upon the ideas of white privilege (Macintosh, 1988) and white fragility, which is "a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves [aimed at preserving white privilege]" (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 54). 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" (p. 64) that are part of our media, education, justice and political systems.
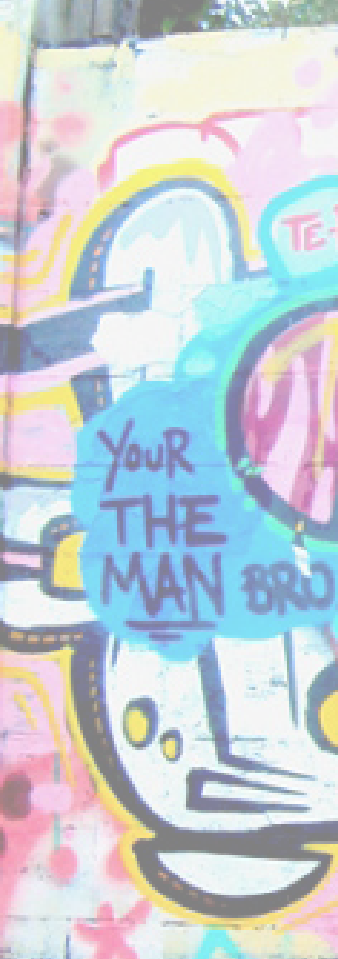
WHAT WE SET OUT TO DO

This paper seeks to confirm the generally increasingly negative perceptions of community safety held by people in West Auckland and to seek cultural explanations for them. Table 1 shows the convenience sample of 159 people who were participants in the survey. The survey asked questions about interactions with neighbours and the police; safety in relation to children, and to 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 for improving community safety.

Our analysis here looks at the correlations between the demographic features of the participants in Table 1 and the perceptions relating to safety of these different groupings. Correlation is not on its own a powerful statistical tool and our sampling method means that we cannot claim to have a representative sample. Therefore, showing that the findings for the sub-groups in Table 1 are representative will be demonstrated by the triangulation of significant correlations (p<0.05) with external data, which will help establish the credibility of the new findings relating to culture. I will begin by showing all significant correlations with gender, age and culture for the set of rating questions that started the survey. Only where there are significant correlations (p<0.05) are the differences of groups within factors (e.g., % of women vs % of men within gender) reported.

FINDINGS

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 about 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%

Factor	Groups	Number	%
Gender	Women	134	84.3%
	Men	25	15.7%
Culture	Asian, other	11	6.9%
	Māori	17	10.7%
	Pasifika	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%

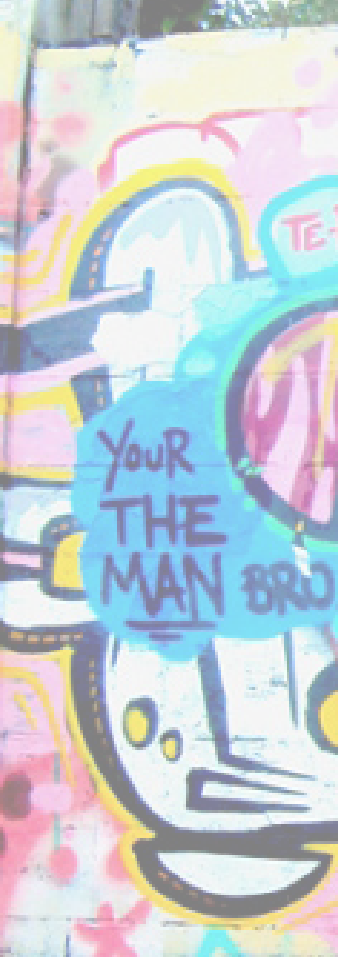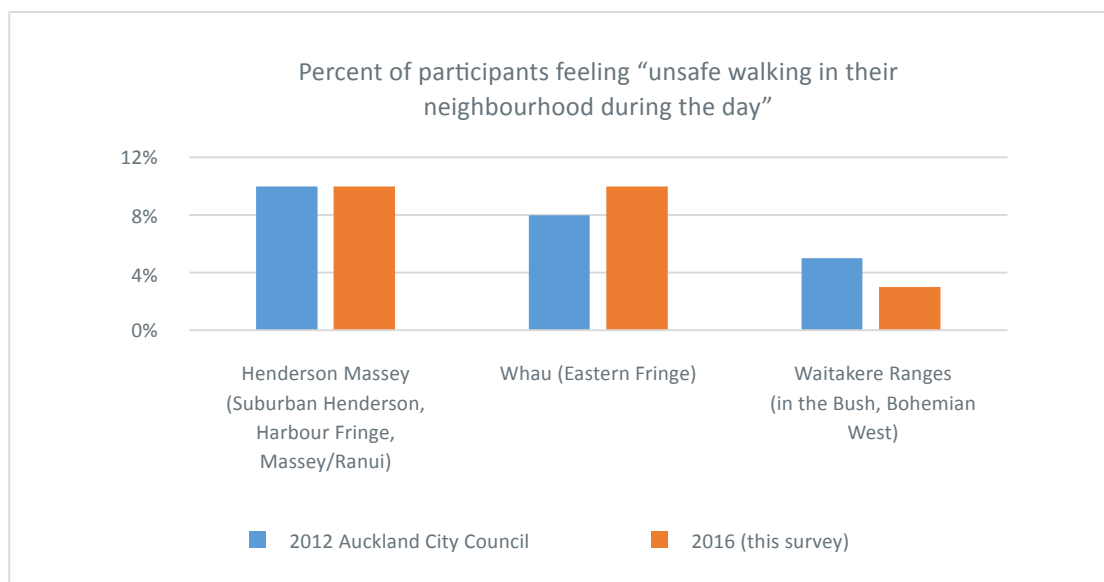**Table 1:** Characteristics of the survey participants

Figure 1

Percent of participants feeling "unsafe walking in their neighbourhood during the day"

	Henderson Massey (Suburban Henderson, Harbour Fringe, Massey/Ranui)	Whau (Eastern Fringe)	Waitakere Ranges (in the Bush, Bohemian West)
2012 Auckland City Council	10%	8%	5%
2016 (this survey)	10%	10%	3%

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 (>44 years 75% vs <45 years 50%), and are also more comfortable interacting with police (89% vs 66%) than younger people.

Pākehā/European participants feel less safe at night walking alone than do other cultures (59% vs 38%); Pasifika 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 a routine finding of community safety surveys (Cossman & Rader, 2011). It is logical that older people and people who have lived for longer periods in the 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 (Pasifika participants, for example) 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 location questions in the survey was virtually identical to a question in the 2012 Auckland

An example of street art created by homeless people (from the Kakano Youth Arts Collective in Henderson).

Council report. Figure 1 compares this survey's responses to the 2012 report and finds them almost identical. Thus, the findings from this question and the alignment of significant correlations with external data suggest that the data from the survey is broadly representative, and that the relationship between culture and perception of safety could usefully 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".

One 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
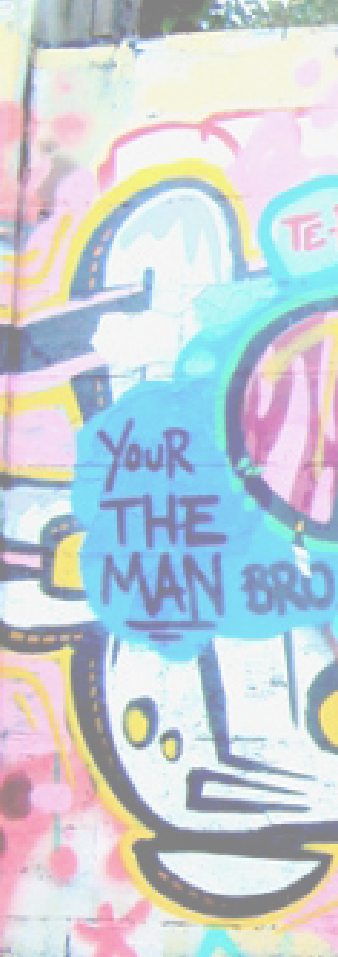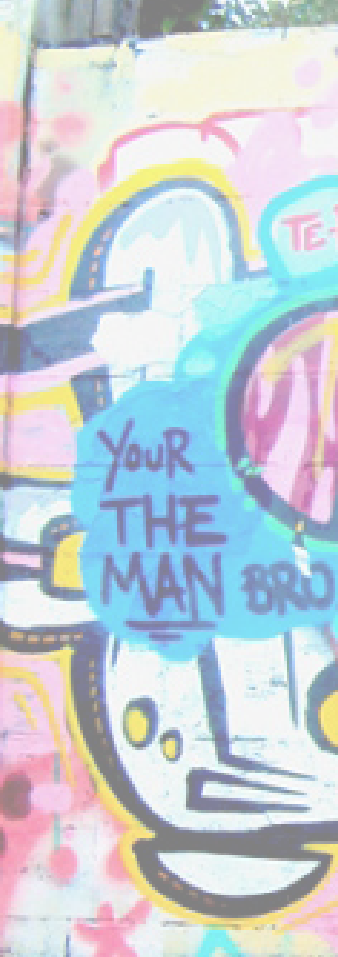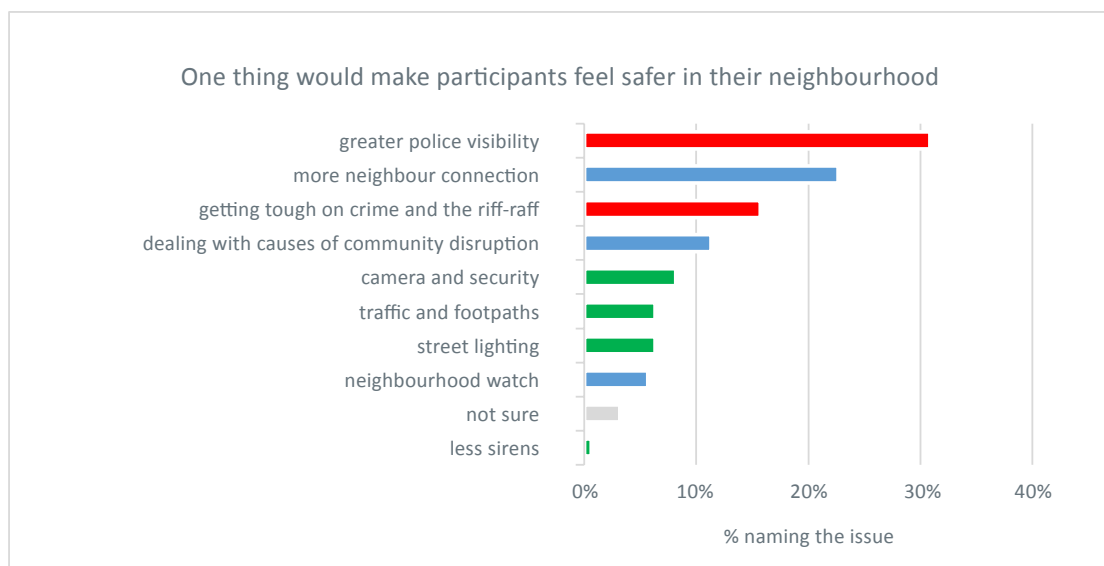
Figure 2

only 9% had a decreasing concern. Fear of specific locations, especially after dark, such as shopping centre "alleyways", 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 ("the recent murder of the lady in the Te Atatu Peninsula'"), other crime ("an historic mass burglary of all houses in our street"), and stranger danger ("I noticed an unfamiliar car making slow trips around the street") add to the general anxiety people have. These features were present in half (50%) of the narratives about feeling "very unsafe".

However, while there is concern across all communities in these areas, the experience of feeling very unsafe has a distinct cultural flavour. For Pākehā/European participants, feeling very unsafe is often one of being in the presence of people who are felt to be dangerous – "the strange people"; 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". In these descriptions, no actual physical harm, direct threat or rudeness to the participants is stated. Pākehā are much more likely to use this kind of labelling than the other groups (35% vs 12%). Pākehā/ European participants are also significantly more involved in social media (89% vs 69% for all other groups) and the fear generated from its use. For example, "a recent murder" as a reason for feeling unsafe, is only mentioned by users of social media. Pasifika participants were significantly less likely to use social media than the other groups (60% vs 79% for all other groups).

When it comes to direct encounters with abusive and aggressive people, or experience of the aftermath of robberies or burglaries in their streets (as distinct from concerns about the possibility of such events) these were identified by more than one-third of participants when they were describing times when they felt very unsafe. These events range from verbal abuse such 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%).

Thus, 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 (Pasifika people); and a third less-vulnerable community (Pākehā/European) which not only appears to be the most fearful community, but also 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.

The responses (Figure 2) 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 change (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 disreputable or undesirable (the 'riff-raff'). These participants want more resources put into catching the people doing "burglaries … graffiti-ing", "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 2). 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 Pasifika 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.
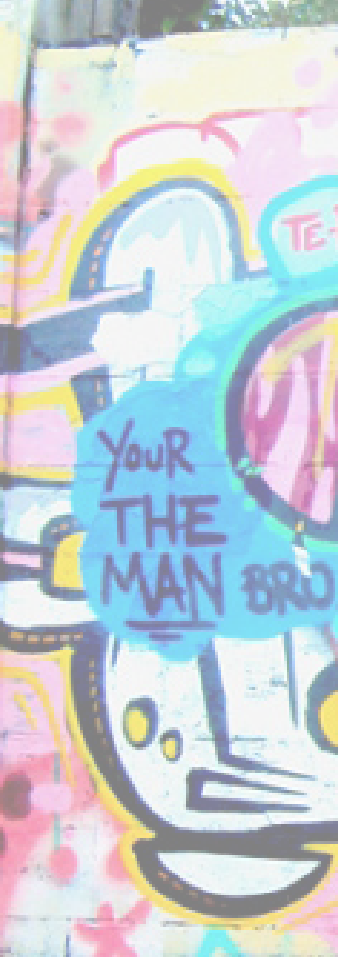
A small percentage of Pākehā/European participants (13%) made positive suggestions about addressing the causes of community disruption – poverty, inequality, better education and mental health services, anger management and parental support – at a level similar to the other groups. This was also true 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 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 & 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 and Farrall (2008) have pointed out, questions that ask for overarching perceptions about safety (e.g., how worried are you about…?) generate large overestimates of concern when compared with questions asking about 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 suggest, with only 9% overall saying that they are afraid to walk in their local streets during the day, that community safety is not a major concern. However, if we ask the same question about walking after dark, then the number rises to 52%, which could mean that a 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 dairy, school or park. The result is that children are transported everywhere (including to 'safe' schools with low non-Pākehā/European enrolments), connections between neighbours become weak, 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. A similar survey in Rotorua of predominately Pākehā/European participants found that 55% of the solutions to improve community safety related to protection and enforcement (APR Consultants, 2015). It is an echo of the call regularly made for more to be spent on fighting crime, with the result that there are plans to provide 1800 extra prison beds at a cost of $1 billion (Sachdeva & Kirk, 2016) and $500 million for extra policing (Kirk, 2017). However, this massive expenditure will likely have very little impact at all on fear of crime (Hummelsheim et al 2011; Vieno, Roccato, & Russo 2013; Visser, Scholte &

Scheepers, 2013). The most vulnerable cultural communities, the ones whose members are most likely to end up in prison – the Māori and Pasifika communities (Department of Corrections and Statistics New Zealand, 2012) – want solutions that emphasise community engagement and connection. Hummelsheim et al. (2011) argue that 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 barbecues, having a say in neighbourhood developments, keeping an eye out for each other and the children of the community) that increase people's sense of control and engagement.

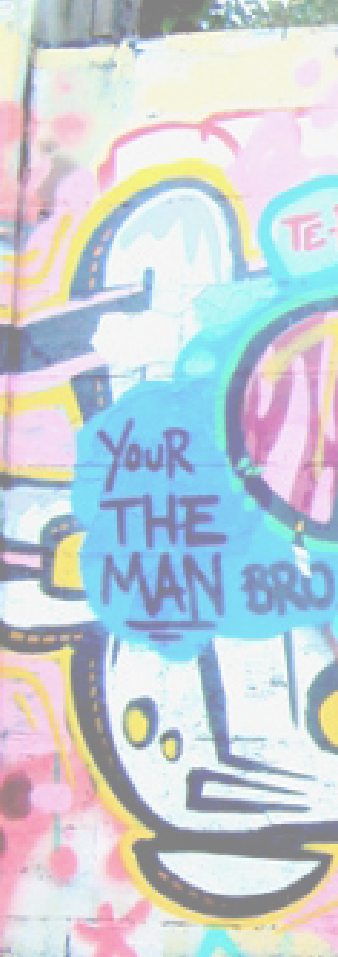Street artists from the Kakano Youth Arts Collective in Henderson celebrate the potential of community.

A big challenge of creating greater community engagement and connection will be getting greater Pākehā/European buy-in. DiAngelo's (2011) "white fragility" thesis suggests that, in the US context, the 'white' population will react badly to the idea that the protection of their position of privilege limits the opportunities for community connection and reduces safety – it will create "racial stress … triggering" resistance to change on their behalf (p. 54). She argues that racism is so embedded in 'white' culture that even those with enlightened positions on race are often unconscious of its presence. White culture also defines racists as being "mean" people (DiAngelo, 2015, para. 11), and that's a good reason to be offended if you are a white person and you are called a racist. DiAngelo wants to get beyond the good/bad dichotomy of racism which is the "fundamental misunderstanding driving white defensiveness about being connected to racism" (DiAngelo, 2015, para. 11). Just having community conversations about white fragility won't solve all the social, environmental and economic issues of poverty, housing, education and sustainability that are core to our sense of safety, but they will make it possible to get better outcomes in all these areas. Unless we address the issues of privilege and fragility, distrust and insecurity will continue to erode the quality of life in our communities.
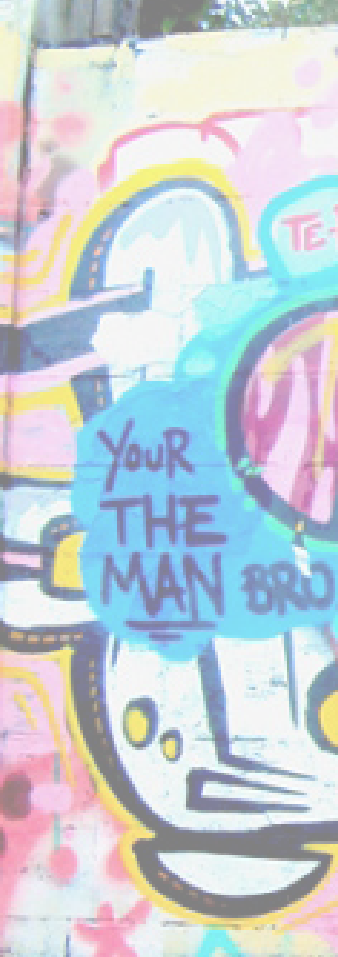
Dr Geoff Bridgman has worked, taught and researched in the fields of disability, mental health and community development. He is Chair of Violence Free Communities, an NGO that creates and evaluates models for programmes that prevent violence and build community resilience. He is currently working with eight schools evaluating the *Jade Speaks Up* violence prevention programme, and a project exploring the experiences of deaf people receiving mental health services. He is a member of the Health Research Council's College of Experts and teaches and supervises research in the Social Practice Pathway at Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland.

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