Focus on the neighbourhood. Effects of restructuring on liveability and safety

Summary

Residential neighbourhoods have been attracting a great deal of attention recently, as increasing importance is attached to creating a residential environment that combines liveability and safety. There are particular concerns about these aspects in the major cities, where residents are more often confronted with crime and generally feel less safe than people living outside the cities. The government’s urban policy accordingly devotes a great deal of attention to increasing both objective and subjective safety. The central plank of the safety programme Naar een veiliger samenleving (‘Towards a safer society’) developed jointly by the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (rijksoverheid) and the Ministry of Justice is to improve the quality of the residential environment, while a key objective of the urban renewal policy of the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (VROM) is to improve the liveability of inner-city neighbourhoods. Parts of the safety policy and the entire urban renewal policy form separate elements in the overall urban policy.

The creation of a new Minister of Housing, Communities and Integration in the fourth government under prime minister Balkenende in early 2007 provided a new impulse for the tackling of problems in residential neighbourhoods.

A wide variety of initiatives have been launched in a bid to create a liveable and safe residential environment. One such measure involves changing the quality and profile of the housing stock by demolishing old homes and building new ones. Physical interventions such as this lie at the heart of the restructuring policy. There are several objectives underpinning this policy, varying from improving the housing quality to increasing social cohesion. The intention is that these measures should also improve the liveability and safety of neighbourhoods for their residents.

The purpose of this study is to gain a greater understanding of how and to what extent restructuring of the housing stock influences these more social objectives. Two central research questions are addressed:

– To what extent and in what ways do (1) the physical characteristics of a neighbourhood, (2) the social characteristics of a neighbourhood and (3) individual characteristics of the residents influence the degree to which residents perceive their residential environment as liveable and safe?

– To what extent is restructuring of the housing stock an effective tool for improving the liveability and safety of a neighbourhood?

To answer these questions, we collected data from several sources on neighbourhoods and their residents in 30 major cities for the period 1995-2006. The data were drawn from various registrations and from surveys of residents.
Restructuring as a means of increasing liveability and safety

Broadly speaking, there are three possible mechanisms by which restructuring could improve the liveability and the safety of a neighbourhood. In the first place, a different configuration of the public space (including adaptations to the housing stock) can reduce the opportunity for undesirable behaviour and the likelihood that residents will feel unsafe. Poorly lit and deserted locations in neighbourhoods or communal areas in apartment buildings are typical examples of situations which make it easy for people to exhibit undesirable behaviour.

The second mechanism is changing the resident population: as a result of restructuring, a proportion of the original residents move to other neighbourhoods and are replaced by new residents, who often have a more favourable socioeconomic status. Changing the social mix of the resident population can influence the liveability and safety of the neighbourhood.

The third mechanism through which restructuring can contribute to increased liveability and safety is based on the notion that characteristics of the residential setting influence the social processes which take place in the neighbourhood, and therefore the way in which residents think and behave. For example, it is suggested that neighbourhoods with a high concentration of disadvantaged residents lack positive role models and may be dominated by norms and values which are opposed to generally prevailing ideas in the rest of society. The presence of sufficient social capital and social contacts between residents aimed at preventing undesirable behaviour is accordingly seen as an essential condition for creating a liveable and safe neighbourhood.

Research question 1

The first research question is primarily intended to provide an insight into the causes of differences in liveability and safety between different neighbourhoods. Can these differences be explained by differences in the profile of the resident populations, or do the physical and social characteristics of the neighbourhood also contribute? We answer this research question by analysing data from a single point in time: for 2002 we have a unique set of data on the physical and social structure of all neighbourhoods and on the individual perceptions of liveability and safety of residents of those neighbourhoods.

Our study shows that only a small part of the differences in perception between the residents of different neighbourhoods can be attributed to neighbourhood characteristics; less than 15% of the total variance in the different indicators of liveability and safety can be ascribed to these characteristics. The neighbourhood as a social context is clearly less important than the individual characteristics of the residents. Although neighbourhoods sometimes vary widely in terms of liveability and safety, these differences can largely be traced back to differences in the individual characteristics of residents such as sex, age, education level and family composition. This means that if restructuring is an effective policy instrument, this is primarily because it (helps) change the residential population.
Research question 2

The second question addressed in this study is: To what extent is restructuring of the housing stock an effective tool for improving the liveability and safety of a neighbourhood? To answer this question we set up a quasi-experimental study. We aimed for a design which enabled us to measure the different outcome indicators – liveability and safety, but also population mix and social cohesion – in a neighbourhood both before and after the policy intervention (experimental neighbourhoods). We then compared the outcomes with those in (corresponding) neighbourhoods where the intervention did not take place (control neighbourhoods). Substantial physical interventions had taken place in 70 neighbourhoods (out of a total of 634) in which both old homes were demolished and new ones built (general intervention). In 30 of these neighbourhoods the intervention was focused specifically on changing the social mix of the population, and involved the replacement of social housing by owner-occupied homes (specific intervention).

Clearly, in this quasi-experimental study we were dealing with a ‘natural setting’ (rather than a laboratory experiment): restructuring does not always have a clearly marked beginning and end, and interventions in the housing stock are moreover often accompanied by other initiatives designed to improve the liveability and safety of the neighbourhood. It is therefore not possible to isolate the effects of restructuring fully from the effects of other interventions. However, we believe that the design chosen marks an important step forward compared with earlier research in this field.

Our research leads to a number of findings, the most important of which are set out in this summary. In the first place, our study demonstrates that part (20%-25%) of the restructuring has taken place in neighbourhoods which are to some extent unique. This uniqueness is apparent from our inability to find a comparable control neighbourhood for these experimental neighbourhoods. These are neighbourhoods with a relatively high proportion of rented dwellings and early post-war homes. The proportion of households with a low income and the proportion of non-Western ethnic minorities is also considerably higher in these neighbourhoods than in the experimental neighbourhoods for which we were able to find control neighbourhoods. Further, the liveability and safety of these neighbourhoods is relatively low. This finding is interesting from a policy perspective: there are evidently virtually no problem neighbourhoods where physical interventions are not taking place but where this would be logical. Our study shows that in these unique neighbourhoods, too, liveability and safety improved in some respects following the intervention.

In the second place, we see that restructuring can influence the population mix. In neighbourhoods where physical interventions have been carried out, the proportion of non-Western ethnic minorities has increased to a lesser extent than in the control neighbourhoods. This can accordingly be attributed to restructuring. In neighbourhoods where a specific intervention has taken place (replacing social housing with owner-occupied homes), we moreover see a reduction in the number
of low-income households; restructuring that is explicitly aimed at changing the social mix of the population in order to reduce the concentration of disadvantaged residents is evidently effective. In neighbourhoods where a general intervention has taken place and where the objectives were less specific, we do not find this effect.

Thirdly, there are indications that restructuring has also made a small positive contribution to the liveability and safety. However, this finding needs to be interpreted with some caution, as the differences between the experimental neighbourhoods and the control neighbourhoods are small. In all neighbourhoods studied there was a substantial fall in levels of violence, threats and theft, and also in the degree of physical disorder. There was also a marked improvement in the perceived levels of safety. In the experimental neighbourhoods, the objective safety was found to have improved slightly more than in the (comparable) control neighbourhoods. There was no difference in the increase in subjective safety between the experimental and control neighbourhoods. We also found an increase in social cohesion during the intervention period, but this is not attributable to the restructuring. The level of satisfaction of residents with their residential setting shows virtually no increase. The positive effects of restructuring thus manifest themselves mainly in the areas of crime and physical disorder. It is of course uncertain how the different indicators of liveability and safety will develop over the long(er) term; restructuring is a lengthy process and after it has been completed it takes some time for the neighbourhood to settle down again and for a balance to be restored. The restructuring was by no means always complete during our study, and the possibility cannot be ruled out that the effects in the long(er) term could be different.

General conclusions
Summarising, we can conclude that physical intervention in the housing stock can be effective mainly in altering the social mix of the population and thereby reducing the proportion of ‘disadvantaged’ residents in a neighbourhood. Restructuring has a limited influence on the liveability and safety of neighbourhoods. We have demonstrated that restructuring appears to make a small positive contribution to reducing crime and physical disorder. We also found that differences in liveability and safety between neighbourhoods are due primarily to differences in the characteristics of their residents, and that the neighbourhood as a social context is less important. The way in which restructuring exerts its influence – primarily by changing the social mix of the resident population – confirms that reducing the social problems of a neighbourhood involves an interplay of physical and social policy.

Pointers for policy
Based on our study we can therefore put forward a few recommendations for policy in this area, though it has to be borne in mind that the main objective of the restructuring policy is to improve the quality of housing.
Where restructuring is used as a means of increasing the liveability and safety of a neighbourhood, this is often based on the assumption that it will set in motion certain social processes, such as strengthening social cohesion and increasing the social capital. Our study shows that the expectations as regards these kinds of social processes at neighbourhood level need to be tempered somewhat. The neighbourhood as a social context is found to have little bearing; the fact that neighbourhoods differ in their levels of liveability and safety can largely be ascribed to differences in the characteristics of the residents of those neighbourhoods. Where restructuring is effective, this is mainly due to the changes it brings about in the profile of the neighbourhood population.

The fact that individual characteristics of residents play the biggest role in explaining differences does not however mean that restructuring interventions in neighbourhoods are not worthwhile. Restructuring will do virtually nothing to resolve the problems of the residents themselves, but it does improve the liveability and safety of the neighbourhood concerned. Restructuring could make a positive contribution especially in neighbourhoods where the liveability and safety leave something to be desired.

In addition, the finding that it is above all individual factors which are decisive means that social policy focusing on issues such as education, employment and combating poverty can also have a positive impact on the liveability and safety of a neighbourhood. Reducing the social problems of residents is then an alternative to relocating them to other parts of the city.

Further research
We believe that our study marks a step forward in obtaining an insight into the effects of restructuring of the housing stock on the liveability and safety of residential neighbourhoods. This is the first time that effects have been studied in a large-scale, quasi-experimental setting covering such a long period. We see different possibilities for deepening this insight further. The study raises a number of questions, for example in relation to the effects in the long(er) term. Our study had a time horizon of ten years, and we know that restructuring often covers a much longer period and that time is also needed for the neighbourhood to settle down again afterwards. Our questions regarding residential mobility remain: precisely who moves in and out of the neighbourhood, but above all, where do the new residents come from and where do the departing residents go to? This is particularly interesting in relation to the question of how far the problem of low liveability and safety is simply displaced to other neighbourhoods (the ‘waterbed effect’).

Detailed information on initiatives aimed at improving neighbourhoods (other than modifications to the housing stock through demolition and new-build) would also provide a better picture of the effectiveness of restructuring. Obtaining such information is very labour-intensive, and case studies in a limited number of cities might be a more logical alternative.
This study was carried out on the basis of four-digit postcode areas. These are relatively large areas and are therefore more diverse in terms of housing stock and population mix, for example, than smaller areas. We therefore believe that it would be useful to work at a lower level of aggregation than the four-digit postcode areas (for example at the level of areas with postcodes having six characters or new postcode combinations). It is possible that the effects of restructuring on liveability and safety would then be different from those found in this study. The availability of data at this lower level is increasing rapidly, but is still very limited, especially as regards indicators for liveability and safety.

We believe that the value of future research (and policy) would be increased if use were made of more detailed information than was possible in our study. More precise information on the structuring of the public space could for example lead to a better understanding. The Liveability module from the 2006 Netherlands Housing Research (WoON) project offers excellent opportunities for this, because this research brings together objective information on aspects such as housing construction and maintenance, scope for supervision, lighting, green areas and the degree of degeneration.

Detailed information on the characteristics of the neighbourhood population would also be illuminating, for example on the socioeconomic position of non-Western ethnic minorities. At present it is insufficiently clear how the population profile changes as a result of restructuring; for example, it was not possible in our study to see whether it was mainly disadvantaged migrants who left the neighbourhood and if they were replaced by an ethnic ‘middle class’. It would also be interesting to investigate whether and to what extent old and new residents have been confronted with crime (as perpetrators and/or victims): to what extent do perpetrators and victims leave the neighbourhood after restructuring, and to what extent do they move in the opposite direction, namely into the restructured neighbourhood from other neighbourhoods? In principle, data are available both on the socioeconomic position of non-Western ethnic minorities and on the involvement of residents in criminal activity.