

Places to hide.

by Edward J. Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder

Gated communities have increased in number and spread across the country. Lifestyle communities which include leisure activities and amenities the residents want to protect, Elite communities are the communities for the rich and famous, and Security Zone communities are created to keep crime and outsiders out are the three types of gated communities. Long-term crime rates are not affected by the installation of gates and fences, but residents, however, feel safer. No evidence was found to support the idea of greater community spirit.

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America is forting up, as gated communities become more common nationwide. New suburban communities are being built with gates in mind from the get-go, while urban areas are retro-fitting them into existing neighborhoods.

Since the late 1980s, gates have become ubiquitous in many parts of the country. While early communities were restricted to retirement villages and compounds of the super rich, the majority today comprise middle- to upper-middle-class households. Estimates of the number of Americans living behind bars in this voluntary sense ranges from 3 or 4 million to as many as 8 million. But little research has been done on these types of communities, until now.

We recently completed a year of research on the phenomenon of gated communities. We interviewed residents of these communities during site visits across the country, and conducted a survey of more than 400 homeowner association boards in gated communities in Florida and California.

GATED STYLES

Our field research, conducted in 1994-95, reveals three kinds of fortified American neighborhoods, distinguished by the primary motivations of their residents. The first group comprises Lifestyle communities, where the gates provide security, but also separation for the leisure activities and amenities within. These include retirement communities, golf and country-club developments, and suburban new towns.

Second are the Elite communities, where the gates symbolize distinction and prestige, both of which create and protect a secure place on the social ladder. These include enclaves of the rich and famous, developments for the very affluent, and executive home developments for the upper-middle class.

The third type is the Security Zone, where the fear of crime and outsiders is the foremost motivation for defensive fortifications. This category includes inner-city perches,

often in deteriorating area; suburban perches, attempting to protect property and property values; and barricade perches, where street closures create suburban-style street patterns within a city grid.

Brian and Karin Cutler live in this last type of community. Their North Miami Beach neighborhood became gated in 1995. "The neighborhood had to petition the county for the creation of a special taxing district," says Brian. "The idea came from a small group of people following reports of increased crime -- mostly vandalism, but some serious. We agreed to tax ourselves at a higher rate to provide specific services." In this case, those services include gates that prevent completely open access to roads and sidewalks that remain public, as well as roving patrols manned by off-duty Florida Highway Patrol officers in marked cars. Residents have stickers on their cars and get waved through the two gates at either end of the 150-home community. Others are stopped and their license numbers taken down, but access is rarely if ever denied.

Although gated communities have sprung up everywhere, they are not the norm. They began as retirement and leisure communities in the South. The largest aggregations remain in California, Florida, and Texas. Yet in recent years, gates have been erected in nearly every metropolitan area in the country. Real-estate developers suggest that they are increasingly in demand. In addition, evidence indicates that homes in these communities do appreciate in value faster than those outside the walls.

IS IT WORTH IT?

In Miami and other areas where gates and barricades have become common, one hears reports that some forms of crime such as car theft are reduced, at least immediately after the streets are closed. However, our data indicate that the long-term crime rate is at best only marginally altered. Despite this lack of real impact, residents in our survey report that they feel their developments are safer and that the gates are responsible.

Another supposed benefit of gated neighborhoods is the sense of community they generate. One might expect

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greater community spirit or tight-knittedness in gated areas because they have such clear boundaries, as well as homeowner associations and other vehicles designed to include members in the social structure of the community. But again, our interviews give no indication that they achieve this goal. Instead, most report middling levels of community and participation in community governance and socialization.

But participating in organized groups is not the only way for neighbors to interact. Many Americans take for granted the informal act of chatting with a neighbor while out for a stroll. For those in newly gated communities, it's a long-denied treat. "The biggest pro in my opinion is that the traffic on our street stopped the day the end of the road was blocked," says Karin Cutler. "The enclosure allows the children to play safely outside and has given residents more opportunity to engage in conversation." Her husband Brian adds: "Many neighbors have made comments like, 'For the first time in years, I like being out and talking with my neighbors, getting to know them better.' There is now a yearly block party."

For those inside the gates, life may be a little more comfortable. For others, however, gated communities symbolize a larger social pattern of segmentation and separation, designed to disassociate and exclude. America is increasingly separated by income, race, and economic opportunity. These trends compound parallel trends toward fragmentation and privatization, providing a new rationale for the gated community based on shared socioeconomic status.

Even within communities, feelings are mixed. Not everyone in the Cutlers' neighborhood wanted the gates. "There were some very strong detractors," says Brian Cutler. "Some for financial reasons (the upfront first-year costs were huge); others for philosophical reasons. Some neighbors tried to sue the county, and others simply sold their homes and moved."

What is the measure of nationhood when neighborhoods require armed patrols and electric fencing to keep out other citizens? Regardless of the motivation or mode, gated communities are in effect sealing themselves off from the outside world. This has the potential to reduce social contact and weaken bonds of mutual responsibility. In the gated communities we visited, as in the rest of the nation, there is little talk of citizenship. In the new lexicon, we appear to be not citizens, but taxpayers who merely exchange money for services.

The Cutlers of North Miami Beach have a matter-of-fact attitude toward the services they receive. "Like weight loss, the system requires constant attention," says Brian. "The

roving-patrol officers have been found sleeping in their cars. Some gate officers let cars through without really looking at who's in them. We have meetings several times a year and complain about the service. It's not much different from any other type of service these days."

The Cutlers also recognize that their neighborhood is not solving any problems in the world at large. "We know that the gates do not prevent crime, just move it to the next area," says Brian. "Since ours went up, neighboring areas have for the most part also become gated." As long as Americans feel that gates can improve their quality of life, the fortressing of the nation is likely to continue.

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