

File ID	uvapub:81516
Filename	327305.pdf
Version	final

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SOURCE (OR PART OF THE FOLLOWING SOURCE):

Type	book review
Title	Boek review on City survivors: bringing up children in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.
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Faculty	FMG: Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR)
Year	2009

FULL BIBLIOGRAPHIC DETAILS:

<http://hdl.handle.net/11245/1.327305>

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Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 907217973]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## International Journal of Housing Policy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713700559>

### A Review of “City Survivors: Bringing up Children in Disadvantaged Neighbourhoods”

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**To cite this Article** Karsten, Lia(2009) 'A Review of “City Survivors: Bringing up Children in Disadvantaged Neighbourhoods”', International Journal of Housing Policy, 9: 1, 102 – 104

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/14616710802693763

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14616710802693763>

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happened that point in a negative direction (probably the third-world model) and call for public intervention. To conclude, despite my critical comments, it is a highly interesting book, very useful for scholars of urbanization, making a real contribution to the knowledge on post-socialist cities, though no new theory of post-socialist cities is offered.

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## City Survivors: Bringing up Children in Disadvantaged Neighbourhoods

Anne Power, *Policy Press, Bristol, 2007*, ISBN 978 1847420497

*City Survivors* tells the story of what it is like to bring up children in four highly disadvantaged neighbourhoods in England. It follows the lives of 100 poor families in East London and 100 poor families in northern England neighbourhoods over a period of seven years. The idea is that families are particularly vulnerable for the social and spatial conditions on the geographical level of the neighbourhood. Neighbourhoods form the cradle of family life. Families with children, and particularly poor families, can hardly escape from their residential environment: staying at home is not an option. Children have to go to school, shopping has to be done, even socialising with neighbouring people is to some extent necessary. The families interviewed try to cope with the sometimes-cruel conditions, they try to improve their immediate surroundings, but many also try to move out.

*City Survivors* gives insight into the daily lives of urban families through the eyes of the main carer, typically the mother. Their stories about the daily struggles to survive are reflected in the detailed life stories of 24 families reported in the different chapters of the book relating to neighbourhood, community, family, parenting, incomers and locals, and civic intervention. The neighbourhoods the families live in are described in terms of decay and decline. But, interestingly enough, many families also indicate positive assets they like. With progressive chapters such positive elements become clearer as stories about the community and families are engaged with. The London neighbourhoods in particular have a high level of out- and in migration, which

prevents the establishment of enduring networks among neighbours. In the majority of the families daily life is further troubled by problems such as divorce, violence, low incomes, poor education, etc. Helping the children growing up happily is a great challenge everywhere, but increases in difficulty when families have personal problems and when they live in seriously disadvantaged areas. The chapter on parenting makes that very clear. Parents have to teach their children to reach out from home towards the wider world, but it is this wider world that creates a fear of danger. Parents respond to this fear by protecting their children as much as they can. This often results in controlling and restraining their children from a normal outgoing childhood with the accompanying quarrels between parents and children.

One of the chapters focuses explicitly on families from a minority ethnic background: the incomers. They struggle with barriers to integrate their families into the community. They often lack basic supporting networks and are considered to be 'outsiders'. Their participation in the neighbourhood community is made difficult by a lack of information or knowledge of the English language. Some end up isolated and vulnerable. They become fully dependent on 'professional' support and that is a situation that is never adequate or satisfying. There exist a gap between what families need and how city structure supports their inhabitants. External interventions are often insensitive to community networks and the supports they provide. The title of the concluding chapter is a sort of a statement: cities need families. Cities are not only asked to care better for their family inhabitants, they would also profit if they would do so. The idea is that families make cities more humane by their social networking, their raising of children and their contribution to community organisations. In addition, many of the parents are involved in (low paid) productive work which is a necessary for modern city economy. If the city fails to respond to family needs that arise from their vital social and economic role, and if community relations disintegrate because of limited resources, then the spill over effects on the city as a whole can be very negative. The book ends with a list of interventions, which would tackle down neighbourhood problems. Among these: parks with park keepers, provision for youngsters, supporting parenting groups, maintaining streets, low-cost housing and listening to local families.

The book *City Survivors* reads like a film about misery. Although the writer tries to highlight the 'bright side', what remains is a feeling of distress. These families deserve better, but the big question is how. Of course, it would help a lot to improve the physical conditions of their neighbourhood and to support local social initiatives. However, the problems on the individual level of these families are such that they need to be solved first. That makes the book somehow difficult to read for urban planners. Improved housing conditions will not prevent violence at home, although it may help when each member of the family has some space for her/himself. This study is based on very reach material collected with 200 families over seven years. The 24 life stories, however moving to read, are the only empirical evidence provided. That raises questions about the other 176 families. What do we know about them? Would

it not be useful to add at least some of their personal characteristics in an appendix to the book? Another shortcoming is the lack of systematic comparison between different categories of families (who are actually successful survivors and who are not), between the neighbourhoods studied (London and the North) and between the beginning and the end of the study period. The different chapters would have grown in strength with a short concluding summary at the end of each chapter. Notwithstanding these critical notes, the book is certainly worth reading. It makes you conscious of the many struggles poor residents have to face. In addition, *City Survivors* reminds us to the moral task to improve the living conditions for a considerable group of (future) urban citizens: the children.

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### **Home Ownership: Beyond Asset and Insecurity**

Marja Elsinga, Pascal de Decker, Janneke Toussaint & Nora Teller (Eds), *Amsterdam, IOS Press, 2007, ISBN 978 1586038304*

This book is based on research in eight European countries into the nature of home ownership. The two key questions are said to be; is home ownership a safe haven in a world that is becoming more and more insecure? And is it becoming the cornerstone of welfare regimes through the adoption of asset based welfare? The basis for the findings is qualitative interviews with 20 home owners and ten renters in each country along with assessments of the context of home ownership by authors from the country concerned. Much care was clearly spent to try to ensure that the research was as similar as possible so that meaningful comparisons can be made between countries. Each chapter has a similar (although not identical) set of headings based around contextual changes in labour market, social security and housing markets and policy. The meaning of home ownership is then considered and questions of security and insecurity and safety net strategies are discussed.

The common framework means that this volume overcomes many of the problems of similar edited collections. There is a clear common approach amongst the different research teams and this is apparent in the common ground in the chapters. Also, a theoretical position of weak globalisation is adopted that posits a different reaction in individual countries to common forces. The common forces are said to be the move towards the flexibility of labour markets and the restriction of the autonomous actions of individual governments brought about by globalisation. These are said to have lead to the dismantling of some elements of the symbiotic relationship between work, welfare and home ownership. The result is a contradiction between the stability needed for home ownership and the flexible and risky economy. Therefore, it is argued that home ownership could become a source of uncertainty and risk. In turn