

*A Paper Tiger on Chestnut Lane:  
The Significance of NIMBY Battles in Decaying Communities*

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This article details a New England community's struggle over a halfway house placement. Through our interviews with community members, we found that they are prone to experience sharp feelings of moral cynicism and, to a lesser degree, feelings of fear and loathing toward halfway house residents. We also note how political figures sometimes use community residents' fear of the halfway houses and its inhabitants as a platform to commandeer political discourse. Our conclusions discuss how NIMBY ('not in my backyard') battles present important opportunities for communities in decline to control symbolically their own neighbourhoods.

**Keywords:** Corrections, Halfway House, Housing, NIMBY, Rehabilitation.

**Introduction:**

Social ecology (Park 1926) is a school of thought that emphasizes how certain manifest neighbourhood conditions (that is, broken windows, boarded up housing, and so on) coalesce to form predictable patterns of human interaction. This theory suggests that neighbourhoods in decay experience an economic downturn, a spiralling decay in quality of life including heightened crime and victimization rates. Such neighbourhoods are commonly disenfranchised, having limited control over the actions of other neighbourhood residents, politicians and the police (Kaylen and Pridemore 2013). Criminologists have shown there are myriad certain characteristics that manifest within such neighbourhoods. These include, but are not limited to abandoned housing, boarded up windows, graffiti, and open-air drug markets (Porter, Rader and Cossman 2012). Such neighbourhoods in decline are often viewed as society's 'dumping grounds', making suitable zones for locating undesirable facilities (Costanza, Kilburn and Vendetti-Koski 2013; Snowden and Pridemore 2013). Among the forms of undesirable facilities that can be placed in the neighbourhood are bars, mental health clinics, strip clubs and correctional facilities, such as jails or halfway houses.

While social ecology often uses aggregate conditions to explain neighbourhood deterioration, it seldom describes the shared experience of these people and their 'feelings' about their circumstances (Bruinsma, Pauwels, Weerman and Bernasco 2013). Much of this is due to the fact that social ecology was developed as an aggregate level theory to explain expanding crime victimization rates. Over many years, the trend in criminology has been to show that aggregate conditions associated with certain neighbourhoods is a predictor of conditions that influence crime, without taking behaviours of individuals into regard. Many aggregate level theorists recoil from committing the 'ecological fallacy', which refers to a mistake made when aggregate level conditions are used to describe individual behaviour (Kramer 1983).

The NIMBY ('not in my backyard') phenomenon is one that is largely defined by differing constructions of social reality made by people on alternate sides of a community issue. The term NIMBY first arose during the 1970s when environmental scholars were becoming aware of the use of several areas as dumping grounds for toxins and industrial waste (Dear 1992, McGurty 1997). The 1970s also saw changes in laws governing group homes and halfway houses that laid the foundation for NIMBY battles. Until that time, group homes and halfway houses were so uncommon that laws to regulate them were unnecessary. As the horrors of state run psychiatric institutions were exposed in the media, nearly all states passed laws mandating the creation of group homes for persons with mental illness and those with developmental disabilities (Szasz 1991). However, the passage of these laws did not mean that group homes and halfway houses were established without opposition.

In some cases, the laws themselves contained a built-in mechanism for community protests (Schonfeld 1984). In New York State, for example, the Padavan law requires that agencies seeking to purchase property to convert into group homes and halfway houses give notice to the city and get approval not from local zoning boards but from a special state hearing officer before the purchase is made. This extra level of scrutiny provided ample time for communities and their political representatives to mount a counteroffensive (Winerip 1994).

One controversial idea implied by all NIMBY battles is that neighbourhoods with affluent and non-minority residents will avoid suffering the burden of unwanted government or industrial use of community land use. Despite protests, state and local governments have used disenfranchised neighbourhoods for correctional purposes because of their lack of political voice. Prisons, halfway houses and community correctional facilities can also be placed in such politically powerless communities (Costanza, Kilburn and Vendetti-Koski 2013; Kilburn and Costanza 2011).

In this article, we report how residents of one New England town continue to adapt to the unwanted placement of halfway houses in their neighbourhoods. The people in this neighbourhood view the presence of the halfway houses as an imposition on their way of life. They lash out in myriad ways at governmental attempts to subsidize halfway houses in their neighbourhoods. We explore how these people behave in what they perceive as a decaying environment and show how community dynamics function in the midst of a classic NIMBY battle. The battle over halfway house placement, moreover, presents us with a unique set of conditions because each individual that tries to have a voice in the crisis defines their personal situation in their own unique way. We draw from several interviews to assess the feelings of residents and discover that sometimes when a town is in decay, residents (many who previously had not known one another) will cohere behind a common objective in an attempt to regain perceived control over their environment.

### **'Chestnut Lane'**

Because we were asked by certain town representatives to keep our research anonymous, we use 'Chestnut Lane' as the pseudonym for the main street of a New England town. Its native

population is 89 percent white and mostly lower to middle class. Chestnut Lane itself has become a symbolic battlefield in a NIMBY struggle over the character of a community.

The community is located in a town with slightly over 25,000 residents. During the 1970s, a declining economy caused several problems to befall this community. With the closing of two factories that were integral to prosperity, there followed joblessness and the general social malaise that comes with it. Homelessness, addiction, alcoholism and street crime began to take root in the area. Many houses were left vacant and fell into disrepair. Later, the area was to experience an influx of federally subsidized housing.

During this time of hardship, one of the ways that the town council attempted to alleviate their new financial burdens was to accept stipends allowing state-run transitional residences to enter the town. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the town began to deteriorate and de-gentrify. During the tech boom of the 1990s, the town saw its white-collar population relocating to different regions.

By 2000, there were six halfway houses in the town. The State departments in charge of corrections, and of health and addiction services funded most of these houses. Two of them were work-release houses, where former inmates could work at jobs in the community while returning to the home at night. The work-release houses were run by the state department of corrections to provide housing and to monitor the actions of ex-offenders leaving prison. The other houses specialized in housing drug offenders who were sentenced to a halfway house as an alternative to traditional prison.

During the time when halfway houses were being opened, the federal government also assisted several 'Section 8' (public assistance) tenants in migrating to the area to fill the numerous housing vacancies in the town. Although the new migrants were more plentiful than the residents of the halfway house, the impact of released offenders in the town seems to have affected the residents more than the migrant population. 'The poor people don't bother me any. They are plain people like everyone else', said Robert, a local Caucasian man of age 52, he added, 'These people from prison though, they're not like us'.

It is true that Chestnut Lane is located in a neighbourhood where crime and victimization were practically unheard of until the 1970s. A local political official described this town as an 'idyllic place during the 1950s: All the stores were open on Thursday and Friday nights. There were community dances. The Fire Department put on a dance and the Police would put on a dance at the armoury. There was a community centre. And the Elks had a big fair in their back yard and that was great place for the young people to get connected.' (Quote from Jacob, a former town councilman).

Other residents, however, when asked about the history of the town are hard pressed to remember a time when the town was like this. They are distraught over the halfway houses that they perceive as a blemish on the town's quality of life. 'My grandpa used to say this is a real bedrock town and when you see people... criminals... in here who don't have to work to pay rent or anything I suppose you know it's gone downhill' said Jared, a local man of age 32.

## Relevant Literature

There are two relevant bodies of literature that we draw upon to examine the NIMBY battle being fought on Chestnut Lane. Social ecology is a theory of neighbourhoods and their experiences while in decline (Skogan 1990). Social constructionism is a theory of perception and how people define conditions around them (Burr 2003, 1998). Social ecology is important because it presents us with a unique set of variables that are specific to neighbourhoods in decline. Social constructionism is important because it deals with perceptions of reality and how people adapt to it.

### *Social Ecology Literature*

Social ecology was first developed during the Depression by sociologists at the University of Chicago who were attempting to explain heightened crime rates in minority neighbourhoods (Park, Burgess and Mac Kenzie eds 1984). A central tenet of the early theory is that people are attracted to the central business district of the city for economic opportunity, but do not invest in the neighbourhood because they have ultimate ambitions of moving (Park 1936). As a result, the idea emerged that many inner-city neighbourhoods become improperly maintained because of transient residents who presumably do not care about the future of the neighbourhood (Harris and Ullman 1945).

These ideas were tempered through the years to account for the fact that many people were stuck in a socially disorganized environment and often financially unable to move out of those neighbourhoods (Wilson 1987, Sampson and Groves 1989). Such neighbourhoods can be defined by a gamut of conditions that include, but are not limited to: abandoned housing, broken windows, gang activity, graffiti, and abandoned cars. Social Disorganization Theory is often used to explain the interaction between certain neighbourhoods and inner-city crime rates, where the term 'inner-city' is often synonymous with minority and poor communities (Wilson 2012). In such communities, unemployment rates have been shown to be quite high, and educational attainment and social or economic status, by contrast, quite low (Andresen 2006).

While social ecology was meant to be a macro-level theory, there are many allusions to the idea that improper maintenance in such neighbourhoods is also coupled with attitudes that people have about conditions around them. Many criminologists, however, have refrained from discussing the attitudes and behaviours of individuals in such environments because it would mean committing the fallacy of making assumptions about people based on aggregate level data (Kawachi, Kennedy and Wilkinson 1999). However, implicit in the larger theory is that people in socially disorganized environments behave in a certain way.

Some social disorganization theorists (Barcan 2000, Stark 1987) suggest that prolonged residence in an area that is socially disorganized is essentially correlated with poor quality of life experiences. Some feel that residing in a disorganized neighbourhood, where everyone who could move away has done so, leads to feelings of anomie, hopelessness or a sense of 'moral cynicism.' According to Kubrin and Weitzer (2003: 380), 'Research indicates that neighbourhood disadvantage is linked to cynicism regarding legal norms . . . and to the emergence of street values that condone deviant behaviour . . . Additionally they document a

“code of honor” or “street code” that shapes residents’ values and behavior, for instance, by encouraging a disputatious attitude and aggressive sanctions against individuals who show disrespect.’

What Kubrin and Weitzer (2003) and several others suggest is that people in such neighbourhoods lack collective efficacy. Coined by Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls (1997), the term collective efficacy refers to a dynamic mutual trust and support among neighbours built on the bonds they have with one another. People in neighbourhoods that have collective efficacy can work together to solve what they perceive as problems. In disorganized neighbourhoods, however, residents do not work together. It is possible that people in such neighbourhoods have become ‘numb’ about the conditions around them, therefore allowing further deterioration to happen. It is possible they do not care to stop the open-air drug markets, or the graffiti, or the crime, nor can they fix the abandoned housing or move the abandoned vehicles. It is also possible that people in such neighbourhoods think there is nothing that can be done about these issues. Thus, crime is allowed to run rampant in those areas where a community concerned about keeping it in check is absent. The present study, by contrast, finds that people in such neighbourhoods *do* care about certain things related to neighbourhood safety and quality of life issues.

#### *Differing Constructions of Reality*

To understand how life in such a neighbourhood relates to the NIMBY battle, one theory that is useful is social constructionism. Thomas & Thomas (1928: 572) first articulated the idea that ‘...situations are real in their meaning, only if men define them as such.’ This idea is meant to express the myriad ways that individuals define and adapt to the world around them. The idea was later called social constructionism and is a micro-level theory that suggests that people behave in ways that are appropriately consistent with their definition of their environment.

Sociologists have long worked with the idea that multiple definitions combine into a holistic reality. Researchers such as Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Schütz (1967) sought to explain the ways that aggregates act based on shared discourse about individual perceptions. Later iterations of social constructionism would include symbolic interaction, ethnomethodology and phenomenology that placed the onus on perception above macro-level conditions in explaining human behaviour. While the epistemological tenets of social constructionism have rarely been used to explain aggregate patterns of behaviour such as crime rates, one can see how they would drive people who share geographic space to operate toward a commonly beneficial resolution to a problem. In an uncertain environment, people will work together to define normative boundaries.

Some social constructionists (Blumer 1936, Becker 1963) have pointed out the importance of shared discourse in predicting collective action. NIMBY battles represent the ability to turn shared dissatisfaction with the neighbourhood into efficacious political activism. Deseran (1978) suggested that community satisfaction could be understood as tri-dimensional. It consists of factual knowledge to provide the descriptive content, individual appraisal of a situation and salience to indicate the relevance of a circumstance to the actor.

Assuming that each community member understands the perception of their neighbourhood as a 'bad place', NIMBY battles allow avenues for neighbourhood residents to vent frustrations about their own perceived quality of life. They literally 'walk the middle ground' between the institution and the community with picket signs to assert their definition of the situation. Local politicians are cognizant of this sensitive situation and may interweave their own opinions on halfway houses into their political diatribe.

This article attempts to fill a gap in the current literature on social disorganization. Social ecology is useful in understanding the conditions that constitute a neighbourhood in decline. Social constructionism, on the other hand can account for definitions shared by residents in neighbourhoods in decline. Both, in turn, are important in understanding the many dimensions that are involved in any given NIMBY battle and especially one taking place in a disorganized neighbourhood. In such battles, there are groups of people that feel largely disenfranchised. Their experiences are not dissimilar to the experiences of civil rights protesters of the early 1960s. And like the physical conditions that spawned the civil rights riots in the 1960s, effects on definition are more pronounced when there is a struggle over control of the usage of space in an area where there is a perceived territoriality.

### **Data and Methods**

We conducted our interviews with 48 respondents who lived in an area of town (near the main street) that was an ideal location for the placement of halfway houses. We used a snowball design asking local community leaders, such as the chief of police and local priests, where we might find people to interview. Some of the interviews were conducted at the community centre of a local church. Others were conducted directly out front of the halfway house during some of the many community protests that took place.

The majority of respondents (95 per cent) were Caucasian, however since this was the demographic of the town, we did not expect much minority participation in the interviews. Most of our respondents were males between the ages of 25 and 65. The ages used in the interviews in this article represent how old a person was at the time of the interview. The interviews were conducted between 1998 and 2008 and our respondents still keep in touch with us periodically. During the interviews, one of the authors of this paper maintained a residence near Chestnut Lane and developed a special knowledge of community events, places and rituals through daily interaction as a town resident.

The neighbourhood where the interviews were conducted had an urban centre with resources such as a hospital and local social service offices, an abundant supply of low-cost housing, and access to public transportation. We found that most of the residents had two main perceptions in common related to the declining condition of the neighbourhood: perceived failure of local economies and perceived neighbourhood image. The content of what these people said confirmed what Berger and Luckmann (1966) defined as 'intersubjective sedimentation', which is a particular form of symbolic understanding that arises when individuals share a common perceived biography.

Piat (2000) describes how NIMBY battles begin. They begin with residents of a neighbourhood seeking to maintain some kind of control over the area in which they live.

Thus, an unwanted establishment (for example, a halfway house) must be commonly perceived as a mechanism that will take away control of neighbourhood surroundings for residents. It makes sense that people who share the same neighbourhood also share an ideal view of where the neighbourhood is going and where it has been; and that is largely what we are interested in learning about. In addition, we sought to discover whether residents shared similar interests in the values of their homes and shared hopes of creating a relatively crime-free environment where neighbours trust each other. Finally, we wanted to explore whether a shared opposition to the placement of a halfway house was related to the basic need to feeling financially secure, free from crime and free from shame.

### **Economic Realities and Perceptions in a NIMBY Battle**

As with any grassroots struggle, there is a dichotomy between perception and reality among participants in a NIMBY battle. A common perception is that halfway houses contribute to the economic decline of a neighbourhood. One of the most common themes among people who oppose the placement of the halfway house was some variant of: ‘my property values will go down’. In reality, however this is not the case, as it was many other factors that contributed to the downfall of Chestnut Lane long before the halfway house arrived. Ironically enough, many of the residents that we interviewed seemed to promote the false causation of the economic demise of the area with the placement of halfway houses.

The residents appeared accurate in their perception of one disheartening reality of the NIMBY battle however. Sometimes, as opposed to fighting the placement of unwanted facilities by the state in their neighbourhood, economically privileged people simply leave. The residents of Chestnut Lane were no stranger to the phenomena of middle-class flight and perceived it as diminishing the quality of life in their neighbourhood: ‘I’ve seen a couple of good people that were just adamant about getting out of town,’ said Annie, a middle-aged Caucasian female resident, ‘We’re thinking about doing it too when we have enough money saved up’.

Interestingly, the less affluent people left behind on Chestnut Lane had a similar unpleasant reaction to residents of communities studied by sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s during the white flight era. During this time, schools were desegregating and more affluent whites left the inner city for the suburbs (Frailing and Harper 2010, Bankston and Caldas 2002). On Chestnut Lane most residents were not able to articulate how the flight of such affluent people would affect the greater economy (that is, the tax base of the neighbourhood) but they did see how it affected events and important things in their vernacular life.

Restaurant owners, architects, lawyers and doctors were all reported as leaving Chestnut Lane. At least three of the people that we interviewed seemed concerned that a young doctor was considering the possibility of family life in the local neighbourhood. ‘All of the good ones [doctors] are leaving the area’, said Martha, a local resident and a grandmother of three who would not reveal her age to us. She added, ‘This must be the third doctor we’ve been through in about 10 years’. When we interviewed this doctor, Alex, he said, ‘I did my residency here because I didn’t mind working with people in need but we’re [his wife and

him] getting to the point where my wife wants to have children and I just would not know about raising them here’.

Quite a few residents also complained about the closing down of ‘good’ local restaurants that had become neighbourhood fixtures over the years. ‘I remember a place called Dino’s,’ said Ray a 76-year-old Caucasian male. ‘My wife and I had our first date [there] in ’62 [1962]. You could really get the best Italian food in town. Now it’s closed down like everything else I suppose’.

When asked about the economic realities of NIMBY battles, most residents feel that the placement of halfway houses near their homes is coincident with lower property values. Although there is no proof of this being the case as of yet, the residents are convinced otherwise. There were at least six people we interviewed who were willing to sell their homes below market value if they could get rid of them. ‘I’d move in a heartbeat if I could’, said Ray, ‘but who the heck is going to buy a house in this area?’

The reality is that low property values often coincide with poor tax bases, but also coincide with the effective delivery of public assistance in service to many people in an area. Eventually, this may translate into refurbishment in local economies. However, and with good reason, people seemed more concerned with the perceptions of everyday life and less with the larger long run social and economic issues.

As far as residents are concerned, the things that presented themselves as most important in life (that is, good schools, expensive homes, good restaurants, good medical care, and so on) are simply not to be found on Chestnut Lane anymore. One of the more interesting observations that was perhaps linked indirectly with the economy was that many residents felt the school system was failing. Despite having a high ranking on state placement tests, this theme resounded among residents. ‘I told my son to leave town as soon as he graduated from college. He has his degree in education,’ said Rodney, a local Caucasian man of 55. ‘The local public school was swarming with Puerto Ricans’ he continued, ‘I told him if that’s what you want to teach then go ahead and teach them, but if I were you I’d like to work in another town that treats the teachers better’. Here, the perpetual cycle of neighbourhood decay can be viewed as intergenerational. A young college graduate who might have otherwise been a valuable contributor to the local economy was encouraged to leave rather than have to contend with issues in a dilapidated environment.

Of course, the root of the local hardship truly lies at the closing of the town’s main textile mills during the 1970s, and the halfway houses on Chestnut Lane represent a last-ditch effort by local government to stimulate a dying economy. But the residents do not see it that way. The most prominent perception among residents was that Chestnut Lane went from an affluent, upper-middle class suburban area to a decaying lower-middle class area when the halfway houses appeared on the scene, not before. ‘As soon as they moved those halfway houses in, it was like the straw that broke the camel’s back,’ said Hugo. ‘First the mill closes down, a couple years later your favourite stores are closing, your friends start moving out to different places . . . then the criminals come along. You just know the rest your life you’re not going anywhere . . .’



Ironically, the halfway house subsidy plan was perceived by local business operators as weakening the local economy by eventually removing a few remaining healthy investors from the community. ‘When they opened the work-release houses, my husband said you better think about getting a shotgun for your business . . .’, said Angela, a Caucasian 46-year-old female and former greeting card shop owner. She added, ‘sure enough . . . two weeks later the police caught some people trying to break into my store. There were just some local kids but I figured between them and the ex-convicts somebody was going to eventually do it again with me in there . . . so I decided to close shop a couple months later’. However, the problems were brewing on Chestnut Lane long before the halfway houses arrived. Whether it is important for residents to acknowledge and understand this is somewhat irrelevant.

### **Shared Symbolic Fears in the NIMBY Battle**

So why do the people of Chestnut Lane recoil at the presence of the halfway house, even when socioeconomic conditions in the area have steadily declined and brought a number of other, arguably more pressing problems to the area? In the eyes of most residents, at the time that the state government was subsidizing halfway houses in the neighbourhood, Chestnut Lane went from prosperity to disrepair. While not directly contributing to the demise of the local economy, the halfway houses serve as a constant reminder of lost prosperity. As with most communities, on Chestnut Lane with the decline of the economy came an increase in both instrumental crimes and crimes of opportunity. Again, as with the declining economic value of the area, heightened crime and victimization activity was already taking root before the placement of the halfway houses. But from our interviews, we learned that there is perhaps no other better embodiment of increased criminal activity than a house full of ex-offenders. The house itself becomes a symbol to lash out at.

Chestnut Lane is far from being the affluent suburb it once was, but this is not the fault of the halfway houses or the ex-offenders in them; it is a symptom of a greater stagnant economy. In our interviews, we noticed that residents failed to acknowledge many of the other signs of economic hardship apparent in the neighbourhood. Graffiti mar the dreary area. Boarded up houses or houses with broken windows were not the norm, but they were becoming more visible at the time of our interviews. Residents clearly associate this with the halfway houses as if they were in denial about larger events.

What is perhaps most disconcerting is that in the process of incorporating the halfway houses into the shared NIMBY diatribe is that many neighbourhood residents have come to devalue the human rights of people in the halfway houses. It is easy to demonize ex-convicts and drug addicts, and the people of Chestnut Lane have taken all too readily to doing so.

There were several recurrent comments among residents we interviewed, including (but not limited to) these common themes:

1. people in the house ‘look different’
2. many of them are ‘drug users’
3. they are not ‘like others’ in the community

Many Caucasians that we interviewed highlighted the idea that people in the house ‘look different’. Many of them were also quick to point out that most people who live in the work-

release houses are of Hispanic persuasion. From this we determined that shared symbolic fears about the halfway houses were more or less directly related to a common distaste that local white residents had toward the Puerto Rican community. Few interviewees specifically mentioned race as a factor, however it was apparent that some did not distinguish Puerto Rican citizens in the community and Puerto Ricans that lived in the halfway houses.

Part of this racial tension is undoubtedly due to the history of the community when during the 1970s an influx of Puerto Rican emigrants threatened to displace Caucasian workers from their factory jobs. While the closing of the factories means that immigrants no longer threatened workers in the area economically, Caucasian residents were quick to unite in their statements against the Hispanic population. One Caucasian man, age 41, stated, 'The complexion of the community changed and as far as I'm concerned, I think the biggest problem is the melding of the cultures. Just reluctance. . . It seems to me reluctance on the part of the Hispanic community to not integrate with the non-Hispanic community. There has been a flight — definitely. And real estate values have plummeted and they have not come back appreciably'.

Many of our interviewees expressed disgust at the site of halfway houses in the neighbourhood even though some of the halfway houses were better maintained than the homes of local residents. We heard stories about 'the strange men who sit on the front porch of the halfway house smoking cigarettes' and how they mostly frightened the residents. 'They just stand out there eyeing up the people, looking menacing and smoking cigarettes,' said Hannah, a 28-year-old Caucasian female, who added, 'They smoke them one after the other and then ash them in rusty old coffee cans'.

Halfway house residents are mostly minorities and they look vastly out of place on Chestnut Lane, and such appearances fit the criminal stereotype well in the minds of certain residents. Many of them have tattoos and wear ill-fitting clothes, most of which are donations. A local halfway house worker, John, a 35-year-old Caucasian man, said, 'The local residents glare at them with contentious looks. They [the halfway house residents] can't stand that. Sometimes local residents increase the speed at which they walk by the house . . . you can just tell that they are scared of these guys!'

A few parents we interviewed now tell their children not to go 'riding bikes past' or 'playing near' this house, and they have a good reason as far as they are concerned. Why not? The house is a habitat of multiple persons with criminal records. It is a halfway house. We are aware of concerns people have about the siting of halfway houses. Kilburn and Costanza (2011) highlight many stories of residents concerned about the presence of homes and their inhabitants altering the character of the neighbourhood. One story they note from the *Los Angeles Times* quotes a little girl stating 'Daddy won't let me play outside anymore. I don't want to play outside because of those crazy men' (Bailey 1985).

While the halfway house residents may not feel welcome and frequently suffer contentious glares, the men in this house are nevertheless grateful to be on Chestnut Lane. As one halfway house resident stated, 'After 28 days you start to clear up pretty much mentally and see the true picture . . . the counsellor I had there said, "I don't think you should go right back home. I don't think it's a good idea. I don't think you have your sober feet on the ground

yet. Let's see if I can go make arrangements at the halfway house. You can go and stay there". I kind of resisted that. I can only say looking back on it, it was good for me. I just couldn't do what I wanted'.

Many residents of that work-release house have come and gone, but rarely have these residents caused a problem with the community. Local police we interviewed said that the men in the house were not directly responsible for any major crimes in the area. The men have not robbed any liquor stores in the vicinity. They have not burglarized houses or committed motor vehicle theft. Sometimes they feel offended by the glares; and sometimes those glares remind them that they are criminals in the eyes of society. Sometimes they even regret that people look at them with the contentious glare. More so, one halfway house resident interviewee told us, 'Any time you go and apply for a job and you check that application, you see that little box that says "have you ever been convicted of a felony?" and sometimes that's hard for people, really hard for people, man'.

Like all ex-offenders, the strangers on Chestnut Lane are feared and loathed by the society that surrounds them. But like the citizens of Chestnut Lane, these men have a story to tell that rarely escape the confines of the house. Many residents do not realize those 'strange' men were not sent to the halfway house by coercion but voluntarily admitted themselves to use the resources available to them to re-strengthen their self-discipline and live a drug free life. One resident, Paul, admitted himself to a halfway house after his wife discovered his alcohol addiction. Soon after admittance, Paul began to see clearly and the true picture of the problems his alcoholism caused.

The same can be said for individuals sent to a halfway house after a prison stay. Luis was sent to a halfway house after a three-year sentence in prison. He credits the vocational and educational programs for turning his life around. He said that being in those programs allowed him to obtain and maintain a job, save money, and helped reduce his chances of succumbing to his substance abuse problems. The halfway house, to Luis, was also a good transitional place to help with the shift back to life in the community. Programs within and surrounding a halfway house offer individuals resources and tools to help combat both internal and external battle they may face.

#### *Political Attempts to Commandeer the NIMBY Battle*

One of the more distasteful aspects of the NIMBY battle that perhaps helps to fuel fear among the local people are the voices of politicians who seek support of the local community. Such politicians are often merchants of hate, stirring up the local populace in fear and contempt. In truth, it was the politicians who are the actual culprits in the NIMBY battle that is currently being fought on Chestnut Lane. Allowing the state to place halfway houses and Section 8 housing near the area, the city council made the proverbial 'deal with the devil'. The influx of new residents promised in the short run to resuscitate the local economy, but the new demographic was not capable of sustaining the community.

Yet, while the town council did not originally oppose the moves by the social service organizations developing the halfway houses, one local politician was quick to play on sentimental issues. A local councilwoman, Penny, described another part of the problem as, 'a

loss of the local people . . . The ones outside the city; the ones that were there before the city people started moving outside the city. They're very much ingrained New England people for generations and generations. And they don't accept change. And they're ultra-conservative for the most part so...'

Political commandeering of the NIMBY battle over halfway houses is not unique to Chestnut Lane. In fact, Winerip (1994) describes a very similar situation in the NIMBY battle against a group home for persons with mental illness in New York State. In that case, the town's mayor used the aforementioned Padavan law to imply that a local agency had not meaningfully engaged with the community in seeking approval for a new group home and instead gone straight to the state hearing stage of the process. Though not true, the mayor used this claim to rally support against the proposed group home within the community. At a particularly contentious public hearing about the proposed group home, community members cited myriad reasons for their opposition to it, including concerns for their safety, the safety of their children, property values, school quality and even for the safety of potential residents. The mayor strongly supported residents' sentiments, even though in private talks with the local agency he had not opposed the site; he even expressed support for the notion that group homes serve better and more humanely persons with mental illness, though he noted that voters have long memories when it comes to support for such locations (Winerip 1994).

The mayor's support set the tone for nearly all the council members to voice their opposition to the proposed group home at that public hearing; the former mayor of the town implied that more affluent communities had not even been considered in the siting process, which added fuel to the fire (Winerip 1994). As was the case in Chestnut Lane, politicians in this small New York town proved eager to capitalize on public sentiment against the proposed group home.

## **Discussion**

Our research offers some evidence that social dynamics of neighbourhoods often extend beyond what is visible on the surface. Physically, halfway houses usually appear different than residential houses in the neighbourhood. Among other differences, they usually have a sign in the front indicating the name of the facility and also more activity inside and around the house. But aside from the physical reality, people in the residential area often react with frustration and hostility to what they perceive as cultural and class identities and differences (Krase 2012b). Halfway houses, like many other institutional correctional facilities, exude stigmata that greatly influence the interpretation of space. Thus, residents can often see a well-kept halfway house and still define the territory as unsafe. Humans make an instant assessment of neighbourhoods based on what they first see (Krase 2012a).

A principal finding that emerged in our interviews is that both ex-convicts and political officials emerge as targets of fear and loathing during NIMBY battles. Despite the futile political manoeuvres to resuscitate the economy, the halfway houses remain on Chestnut Lane. Residents in the area still display a great deal of unhappiness about the local political landscape. During the years that followed, residents began to express their concern that the town council had indeed made a proverbial 'deal with the devil'. During our

interviews, most residents seemed inconsolable about the government allowance of halfway houses in their small town.

One of the questions that have been addressed a few times in NIMBY literature is whether there are any social policy solutions that will diminish fears and allay the concerns of residents. Castells (1983) notes that land use is a struggle over collective consumption. At the neighbourhood level, the quality of businesses and feelings of public safety are products of how these areas are defined by inhabitants of the city. Theoretically, people share a collective understanding of what a 'safe' and prosperous neighbourhood is supposed to look like, giving attention to the primary use of land around them. Knowing about the existence of a halfway house in any given area diminishes positive experiences associated with the consumption of neighbourhood-level goods and services, thus property values are greatly influenced by political decisions on land use.

Cowan (2003) suggests community meetings between sponsors of unwanted residences and community members to facilitate communication. She suggests open discourse between citizens and government as a remedy to NIMBY syndrome. Kilburn and Costanza (2011) also suggest transparency and discourse over NIMBY battles, advising that local government takes steps to inform residents of the economic good that may come of sponsoring halfway houses in an area. The authors discuss 'payment in lieu of taxes' (PILOT), claiming that monies received from the state can work to residents' advantage. The authors argue that instead of dealing with blight and abandonment, the city instead could receive large amounts of PILOT money to beautify and restore the area.

However, it is apparent from the content of our many interviews that the strong emotional feelings that people have about halfway houses in the neighbourhood may be too powerful for community meetings, or even state stipends, to overcome. The idea that 'beggars can't be choosers' adds insult to injury, but the label 'beggars' applies here to the residents of this disenfranchised community. While PILOT revenue has been appreciated by local government, it is apparent that residents in the area would prefer these formerly vacant houses to be filled up with 'productive citizens' as opposed ex-cons and substance addicts. Having a taxpayer with a steady job residing in the home is the ideal, and apparently not just any form of revenue is welcomed by residents in what they perceive as their town. When it comes to balancing a small city's budget, it is apparent from our interviews that government stipends have very little significance on the perceived safety or happiness felt by residents.

Part of the reason that residents continue to be so concerned about the placement of unwanted facilities, such as halfway houses in their communities, is because the emergence of such places in residential areas are a constant reminder of both the historic downfall of the economy, and an ongoing pattern of political disempowerment for the neighbourhood. The relationship between individual perception and the larger hand of the governmental system is intrinsically intertwined (Pardo 2012). By allowing the emergence of correctional facilities in residential areas, government is ignoring the interests of the neighbourhood and allowing the perceived process of decay to accrue. Residents feel they are being ignored and shun the legitimacy of government, widening the rift between government and residents.

Pardo (2012) points out that when government ignores small problems like crime, there is often a snowball effect. It was apparent in our interviews that political disenfranchisement becomes something that causes a great deal of resentment and alienation. Although many residents do not (or cannot) phrase their concerns articulately, the effects of political alienation leave neighbourhoods powerless to fight for quality of life issues.

Given Pardo's (2012) analysis of negligent government, one question that we must ask is: *are NIMBY battles worth fighting?* One thing is clear from our interviews: NIMBY battles bond residents in a powerful way. To us, the downside of that unification is not so much the misunderstanding of halfway houses but the unfair labelling of a group of people, many of whom are returning from prison to an already uncaring and cold community. On this note, we suggest an in depth study of the relationship between racism and NIMBY struggles for future research.

There are several other implications for future research that would provide a better understanding of the NIMBY battle. The region that we studied is racially mixed, as is the composition of the halfway house residents. Therefore, offering a simple reason of racism does not clearly explain this phenomenon. Additionally, there is no study that has produced data on whether halfway houses correlate with increases in crime. Nor has any study confirmed that the presence of halfway houses subsequently destroyed the economy of any financially solid town.

Another topic for future analysis would involve finding ways to close the schism between community and government created by unwanted land use. When describing the growth of halfway houses, residents make it clear that halfway houses are a constant source of anger, fear, and irritation on Chestnut Lane. As one resident put it, 'It [the placement of halfway houses] just grew and grew and grew. And it was not accepted in the community in the beginning. The problem is that there are too many. There are just too many. While I don't have any objection... personally, I'm supportive of that because I see the value of halfway houses. The thing that makes me angry is that the state has allowed the private sector to run around town buying up houses and plunking halfway houses in neighbourhoods that are inappropriate. And that causes white flight. And that's not fair. Put houses in [neighbouring towns]. They all have buses. They can bus people into town for the services they need. And I really get angry about that...and of course, you can't talk about it publicly. I mean political correctness has gotten to be totally absurd. People can't vent their distress about it except in generalized terms, because you offend one portion of the community or another'.

A final question to be pondered in future research might be an analysis of '*who leaves and who stays in a neighbourhood facing a NIMBY struggle?*' Our research would seem to indicate that there is a tipping point that usually involves the combination of fear and having one or more children. As one resident stated, 'I very much enjoyed the fact that even though it's a small town it's a lot like a city and you could walk everywhere. So I could walk my daughter to school. Which is good, I got a lot of exercise and it was great for my legs. I also got to ride my bike frequently. I got to walk to shops. But I could also walk to the drug dealers. Which I did not do though I could have. The real down side was the issue of safety for the children since we were on this third floor, letting them go out to play would require

being fairly permissive'. When pressed for detail, this resident stated that, 'I never actually saw the dealing going on but we knew it was going on'. He relocated with the justification of needing a safer environment for his children.

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