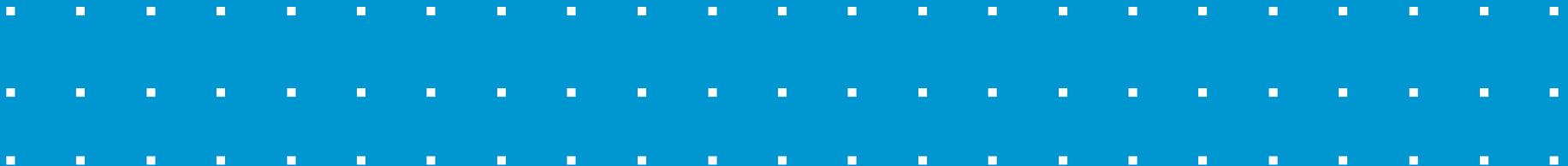# A Systematic Approach to Addressing Blighted Properties

National Association of Realtors'
Government Affairs Directors' Institute
July 13th, 2017
Joseph Schilling, *Senior Research Associate*
*jschilling@urban.org*

# Evidence-driven economic and social policy insight

**URBAN INSTITUTE POLICY CENTERS & GROUPS**

**Urban.org**

- International Development and Governance

- Labor, Human Services, and Population

- Nonprofits and Philanthropy

- Health Housing Finance

- Income and Benefits

- Justice Policy

- Metropolitan Housing and Communities

- Policy Advisory Group

- Statistical Methods Group

- Urban-Brookings Tax Policy

# VPR Network: www.vacantpropertyresearch.com

## Translation Briefs:
- Urban Greening
- Basics of Blight
- Neighborhood Change
- Code Enforcement
- Real Property Data
- Strategic Demolition



**VPRN Research & Policy Brief No. One**

# GREENING LEGACY CITIES
### Recent Research on Local Strategies for Reclaiming Vacant Land
By: Megan Heckert[1], Joseph Schilling[2] & Fanny Carlet[3]

City of Baltimore Source: J Schilling

The Vacant Property Research Network's "research and policy brief" series bridges the traditional divide between research and practice by explaining the methods behind recent research along with the context and findings so that practitioners and community leaders can better understand what the research says, what the research does not say, and how it might be relevant to their respective vacant property initiatives. By understanding how current research may or may not apply to local efforts, we believe practitioners and policymakers will be better equipped to make better decisions, improve policy and program implementation, and ultimately facilitate the regeneration of their communities.

Dozens of older industrial "legacy" cities—Baltimore, Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, Youngstown—are repurposing hundreds of vacant lots into emerging networks of community gardens, urban farms and forests, pocket parks, and green infrastructure projects to address concentrations of neighborhood abandonment. Urban greening initiatives have rapidly become vital policy and planning strategies as part of broader urban regeneration initiatives, such as Detroit Future City and Reimagining a More Sustainable Cleveland. Recent research documents that public, private and nonprofit entities are leading initiatives to green post-industrial landscapes that can achieve a wide range of public goals and objectives (e.g., aesthetic, infrastructure, recreational, ecological, etc.) while offering local governments and neighborhood residents' potential health, economic, social and civic benefits. Part of the challenge for practitioners and researchers is how best

# CHARTING THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF BLIGHT

A National Literature Review on Addressing the Community Impacts of Blighted Properties

## FINAL REPORT

May 6th, 2015

SUBMITTED TO:
Keep America Beautiful
(www.kab.org)

PREPARED BY:
The Vacant Properties Research Network

A project of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech

In collaboration with Econsult Solutions, Inc.

**KEEP AMERICA BEAUTIFUL**

Virginia Tech | METROPOLITAN INSTITUTE
*Invent the Future*

ECONSULT SOLUTIONS
economics | policy | strategy

**The Meaning of Blight**

BRENTIN MOCK

CITY LAB , FEB 16, 2017

http://vacantpropertyresearch.com/blight-literature-review/

URBAN

# Blight is vacant or derelict structures and unmaintained property, usually characterized by litter, dumping, and abandoned personal property.



Neighborhood Preservation, Inc. estimates that at least 13,000 structures or vacant lots in Memphis qualify as being "blighted." At least 10,000 properties are addressed a year for high weeds and grass concerns by City. Low population density, particularly within the core city, allows blight to spread almost unabated in some neighborhoods.

While there are a lot of blight initiatives going on in Memphis, an overarching, coordinated approach that would maximize existing efforts and attract new resources is not in place. As a result, self-perpetuating with a "culture of blight" is allowed to take hold, eroding the aesthetic standards of a community and frustrating other abatement efforts. Similarly, illegal dumping and littering activities are frequently committed by individuals passing through neighborhoods with no long-term stake in their condition or livability.

Some property owners would like to remediate the condition of their properties do not understand the full costs of doing so, which prevents them from taking action. Policymakers, program administrators, frontline inspectors, courts, and property owners all need to know where their abatement efforts would be most fruitful.

If we are going to effectively and permanently remove blight from our neighborhoods – and prevent its spread — Memphis and Shelby County need a single, focused strategy: the

http://memphisfightsblight.com/

U R B A N

# THE BASICS OF BLIGHT
## Recent Research on Its Drivers, Impacts, and Interventions

Joseph Schilling[1] & Jimena Pinzón[2]

Blighted Property in Detroit, Michigan (1999)    Image by: J. Schilling

Civic leaders and government officials have struggled for nearly a century to define blight and deploy effective policies and programs to address its community impacts. Blight encompasses vacant lots, abandoned buildings, and houses in derelict or dangerous shape, as well as environmental contamination. Blight can also refer to smaller property nuisances that creep up on cities and suburbs: overgrown lawns, uncollected litter, inadequate street lighting, and other signs of neglect. Blight's legal and policy foundation can be found in longstanding principles of public nuisance: property conditions that interfere with the general public's use of their properties. Although there is wide debate about what exactly blight is and how people should talk about it, the most useful description is "land so damaged or neglected that it is incapable of being beneficial to a community without outside intervention."[1] Thus, blight may be defined not so much by what it looks like, as by what it will take to reverse it.

This research brief examines blight's multiple dimensions, offers a definition of blight, summarizes recent scholarship, and discusses the meaning of this concept for scholars and practitioners who work on the issues of distressed properties and urban regeneration. As a translation brief, it synthesizes what the research says about blight and the interventions to address its impacts, what the blight research does not say, and questions for future investigation.

The Vacant Property Research Network's "research and policy brief" series bridges the traditional divide between research and practice by explaining the methods behind recent research along with the context and findings so that practitioners and community leaders can better understand what the research says, what the research does not say, and how it might be relevant to their respective vacant property initiatives.

By understanding how current research may or may not apply to local efforts, we believe practitioners and policymakers will be better equipped to make better decisions, improve policy and program implementation, and ultimately facilitate the regeneration of their communities.

This effort was made possible with the support of the Ford Foundation.

**VirginiaTech**
*Invent the Future*
METROPOLITAN INSTITUTE

http://vacantproperty research.com/translation-briefs/blight/

URBAN

# What is Blight?

A blighted property is a physical space or structure that is no longer in acceptable or beneficial condition to its community. A property that is blighted has lost its value as a social good or economic commodity or its functional status as a livable space. Blight is a stage of depreciation, not an objective condition, which conveys the idea that blight is created over time through neglect or damaging actions. This definition also stresses the role of a community in defining blight.[2] As a Philadelphia planner in 1918 once explained, blight is a property "which is not what it should be."[3]

## EARLY 20TH CENTURY

### EARLY 20TH CENTURY

Housing advocates, like Jane Addams & Jacob Riis, helped bring attention to substandard housing conditions in industrial cities.

### GREAT DEPRESSION

Substandard housing (slums) linked to crime and sickness. Zoning/land use regulations, building, fire, and health codes gained legal approval to demolish properties.
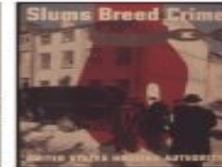
## MID 20TH CENTURY

### 1940s

Urban reformers began to link blighted properties with stalled economic growth. New public housing programs created new low-income rental units.

### 1950s - 1960s

Poor neighborhoods are bulldozed and replaced by large, modernistic urban renewal projects. (Left: Boston West, Right: Igoe Pruitt)

## LATE 20TH CENTURY & 2000s

### 1970s-1990s

Many cities, like Baltimore, began to redevelop their downtowns and waterfronts to spur economic development.

### 1990s - 2005

Despite being contoversial, eminent domain is used for urban revitalization. Backlash from *Kelo v. New City of London* restricted its use for economic development.

### AFTER 2005

Large numbers of vacant/abandoned properties due to the mortgage crisis & Great Recession. Cities look at land banks & strategic demolition to address blight.

**URBAN**

http://www.communityprogress.net/filebin/160630_TASP_LCLRC_Toledo_Cost_of_Blight_Study_Final.pdf

Center for
COMMUNITY
PROGRESS

Vacant Spaces into Vibrant Places

June 2016

# A CONSERVATIVE ANALYSIS OF COSTS IMPOSED BY VACANT AND BLIGHTED PROPERTIES IN TOLEDO:

## Conducted at the Invitation of the Junction Neighborhood

Center for Community Progress Report to the Lucas County Land Reutilization Corporation, a 2016 Technical Assistance Scholarship Program (TASP) Recipient

April, 2017

# Urban Blight and Public Health—
Addressing the Impact of Substandard Housing, Abandoned Buildings and Vacant Lots

*Erwin De Leon, Columbia University, and Joseph Schilling, Urban Institute*

# Health Impact Assessment—Strategic Code Enforcement of Substandard Housing in Memphis, TN

**Project Summary:** Through a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) process our team will study the wide range of public health impacts from a variety of housing code enforcement (HCE) interventions (e.g., inspection through the Shelby County Environmental Court).

## Team Members

Steve Barlow, MA, JD, Neighborhood Preservation, Inc., Memphis Tennessee;

Dr. Christina Plerhoples Stacy, MA, PhD

Joseph Schilling, JD, LLM, Urban Institute Senior Researchers, WDC.

*"Substandard housing is creating a health crisis and, with my interdisciplinary team, I can be a part of making that connection clear so that innovative solutions can be put in action."* Steve Barlow

04.21.15

# Urban Blight Isn't Just Bad To Look At, It's Bad For Your Health

Walking past barren, trash-strewn areas makes our heart rates jump. But green spaces calm us down.



[ALL PHOTOS: BALTIMORE HERITAGE FLICKR]

**BY BEN SCHILLER**  1 MINUTE READ

We know that abandoned lots dampen a neighborhood's economic attractiveness, scaring away prospective tenants and investors. But what ght-isnt-just-bad-to-look-at-its-bad-for-your-health our health? Is that affected as well?

URBAN

# Cleveland's Housing Crisis Leaves Lasting Imprint on Children's Health

- Lower literacy scores for children entering kindergarten.

- Living in a home that is in poor condition or in foreclosure is associated with a higher risk for child maltreatment, residential instability, and elevated blood lead levels, all of which affect literacy scores.

- Mere proximity to distressed properties (within 500 feet) also lowered literacy scores for these Cleveland children entering kindergarten.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Document the costs of inaction | Commission studies that show how blighted properties drain local and county budgets as well as the social and economic costs on neighborhoods. | **Financial Impact of Blight Study** Steel Valley, Allegheny County, PA |
| | Organize blighted/vacant properties working groups | Convene a cross section of public, private and nonprofit leaders to develop more comprehensive and coordinated responses to blight, including changes in state and local laws. | **Abandoned Property In Indianapolis Report** Indianapolis, IN |
| | Launch a good landlord program | Offer incentives to review landlords who maintain their properties blight- and crime-free. | **Good Landlord Program** Ogden City, Utah |
| | Conduct targeted code enforcement | Place-based code enforcement can stimulate market activity in selected neighborhoods through comprehensive property maintenance actions. | **Neighborhoods in Bloom** Richmond, Virginia |
| | Explore urban greening | Techniques like gardening, urban agriculture, green infrastructure, etc. Can be used as opportunities to address vacant lots and blighted land. | **Urban Agriculture Feasibility Study** Youngstown, OH |
| | Charter a land bank or adopt land-banking statutes and ordinances | Land banks can acquire neglected and/or tax delinquent properties and return them to the mainstream real estate market or support their improvement as public green space. | **Chautauqua County Land Bank** Chautauqua County, New York |
| | Publish a problem properties toolkit | Having a guide that explains how communities can take action with vacant and blighted properties. | **From Blight to Bright Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania** |
| | Expand the use of low-cost, high tech tools | Many neighborhood groups from New Orleans to Youngstown, Ohio, are using apps to inventory blighted properties in their communities. This helps to document the costs and identify opportunities for reuse. | **MyPhoenix** Phoenix, AZ |

COLLABORATIVE NETWORK

INFORMATION SYSTEMS | DATA DRIVEN ACTIONS

REBUILDING        DISTRESSED        TRANSITIONAL        STABLE        SUSTAINING

VACANT PROPERTY STRATEGIC POLICY PROCESS

PREVENTION & STABILIZATION
B, CODE ENFORCEMENT, HOUSING
ION & VACANT PROPERTY MA
ND BANK, TAX FORECLOSU
-TERM PLANNING & RE

& COLLEC
REFORM
D ST
R

©