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POLICY BRIEF

Building Strong Neighborhoods: How Local Initiatives Contribute to Public Safety, Health, and Prosperity

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American neighborhoods have declined over the past few decades, contributing to many social ills, such as steadily rising inequality,[1] unstable households for children, deaths of despair, social distrust, and alienation. And yet, there are few systematic efforts to bolster neighborhoods and neighborhood social habitats. How can Americans change that?

During the past 50 years, the number of high-poverty neighborhoods has tripled, and the population of poor people in them has doubled, even as welfare spending has soared. American cities now have more than 750 distressed communities, and even more such communities exist in suburban and rural areas.[2] Indicators show that everything from life expectancy to crime rates to student test scores to social mobility are not only correlated with each other but also with physical location.[3] These dynamics create a multiplier effect—with particularly grave effects on children and youth. Their concentration by locale partially explains why those who are born poor are likely to stay that way.[4] Meanwhile, in many well-off neighborhoods, there is a steady decline in interaction among neighbors and lower levels of involvement with various types of formal and informal institutions, which increase isolation, distrust, and polarization.[5]

Strong neighborhoods host institutions and norms that encourage cooperation, trust, and mutual support among residents and businesses; nurture a sense of security, belonging, and meaning; promote skills and standards that help residents thrive in the broader society; attract investment and different types of residents (e.g., different socioeconomic status and stages in life); and maintain social networks that help residents access opportunities and resources locally as well as externally as needed. Fragile neighborhoods, by contrast, do the reverse. Material poverty does not tell the whole story, but it is important to consider how a country of fragile neighborhoods produces a fragile society.

HOW CAN COMPLEMENTARY SOCIAL INITIATIVES CATALYZE BETTER SOCIAL DYNAMICS?

While specific initiatives sometimes produce inspiring cases of individual success, they most rarely make a dent in overall trends. Why? Most government, philanthropic, and nonprofit organizations support programs and policies that tackle social problems (e.g., education, housing, and health) in a siloed manner, ignoring the neighborhood dynamics that make interventions necessary in the first place and limit their effectiveness once undertaken. These organizations are drawn to projects that target specific goals—projects that can be planned for, easily measured, and achieved in short time horizons. And their staff tend to be thematic experts steeped in data rather than place experts steeped in the knowledge of the relationships, organizations, and assets of a neighborhood that can be built upon.

In some cases, initiatives may end up unintentionally hurting more people than they are helping by worsening the social dynamic of a neighborhood. For example, programs that encourage the best and brightest to leave for better horizons may benefit those specific individuals but make a locale less attractive to investors and residents, hurting everyone left behind. Similarly, when government establishes low-income housing, it may help some people but concentrates poverty in a way that brings the whole neighborhood downward.

Policymakers and practitioners need to consider the context and character of each neighborhood. Some neighborhoods go from strength to strength despite little intentional effort to improve them, whereas other neighborhoods struggle no matter how much public money or private philanthropy is invested in them. Almost half of America's urban population lives in a "middle neighborhood"—a locale that lies between these two extremes.[6] This is where strategic initiatives (such as the ideas discussed in the next section) could make an outsized difference.

Rural communities face unique challenges, including the difficulty of finding and training leadership, garnering resources (because they are not set up for such work), developing a visionary plan (because they have limited exposure to what has been done elsewhere), and advocating for funding (because they have a small or low-density population relative to other locations). So they often benefit from creative approaches involving consolidation, investment in whatever strengths exist, and links with the closest success pockets.

Bolstering a neighborhood typically requires a series of complementary initiatives that incrementally build up neighborhood institutions, capacity, and wealth based on an acute understanding of the local context, a long-term commitment, and the flexibility to adjust to changing circumstances. This entails strengthening some combination of key social institutions—families, associations, businesses, and informal groups—as well as the underlying structural landscape shaping them, such as employment opportunities, environment, transportation links, housing mix, social infrastructure (e.g., libraries, parks, and gathering places), commercial infrastructure (e.g., retail

and office spaces), and socioeconomic diversity. Each of these requires different strategies—and sometimes different types of entities to work on it. For instance, while even small and scrappy local organizations can make an impact on institutions, improving the structural landscape often requires a long-term commitment by deeper-pocketed organizations, changes in government policy, or a substantial investment by moneyed donors.

WHAT PRACTICABLE INITIATIVES AND POLICIES CAN BOLSTER NEIGHBORHOODS?

Civic leaders, policymakers, philanthropists, and social leaders should work in ways that incrementally bolster institutions and the structural landscape in each locale. These initiatives can be loosely grouped into geography and social resources.

Geography

Leaders could re-envision the social landscape around *clearly demarcated neighborhoods*, with a renewed emphasis on bolstering in-person exchange and the development of the wealth of "organizational life." Neighborhoods are specific geographies. Legal definitions may be suitable in some cases, but practical definitions are better. The area should reflect what residents themselves view as their neighborhood and its boundaries—a place where there is some sense of collective identity and mutual responsibility, if not a shared feeling of common community (a much higher bar).

In an urban setting, a neighborhood ideally should correspond to the catchment area of a primary school, include a commercial center that can provide everyday facilities and services, and contain physical assets and institutions that promote bonding and bridging social capital (e.g., parks, libraries, public transit, community organizations, cafés, and bars). In a rural setting, a neighborhood may be the whole county, with the county seat being the main point of congregation. If businesses have a robust way to cooperate to advance the common good—such as through a community investment district—the neighborhood can more easily build up assets and acquire outside resources for improvements. Investing in community organizations or platforms that bring local leaders together to debate priorities, solve problems, establish a wide range of partnerships, and leverage resources would strengthen social ties and give local residents more ownership of their places. Establishing a neighborhood quarterback to bring stakeholders together to devise a neighborhood plan and then operate as a single point of contact for funders, residents, and partner organizations may help in some locales. If the place has a brand name (e.g., Harlem) that can be promoted, these goals will be easier to achieve. In Atlanta, Georgia, the new mayor promises to establish a dedicated Office of Neighborhoods to support and coordinate long-term neighborhood improvement plans, such as bolstering neighborhood associations, leaders, and partners and developing a standardized, comprehensive set of community health metrics (such as those suggested later).[7]

Decentralizing government would allow local authorities more scope for creativity and neighborhoods more say in how funds are spent. This would restore the feedback mechanisms that once played a much stronger role in governance, boosting competence and downward accountability in the process. Public servants would be reoriented from sector-specific expertise that shifts from project to project to generalists with a wide range of skills who are committed to a particular geography for an extended period of time, which would give them a deep and nuanced understanding of neighborhood conditions and the relationships needed to improve them. Their performance would be evaluated on the basis of the trajectory of neighborhood indicators (discussed later) rather than the number of permits issued or housing units built. Public servants would see their roles as facilitators rather than deciders, using their intimate knowledge of streets, businesses, and residents in their specific places to nurture change rather than impose change from far away in a one-size-fits-all style.

Specialized government departments would still exist but with a different focus. Housing departments, for example, could work with frontline neighborhood civil servants on improving places rather than just building units, and they could push for a set of well-coordinated private and public investments that advance these goals (e.g., mixed-income housing, social amenities, retail options, family support). Education authorities could prioritize restructuring school catchment areas (places where students are eligible to attend school) and governance structures to bolster parent involvement and neighborhood collective efficacy. More investment could go into significantly upgrading family social support (e.g., parent groups, peer networking, and intergenerational links) and the outside-school learning environment (e.g., families at home and neighborhood after-school activities).

New metrics to evaluate public servants and initiatives could help reorient organizations from siloed to place-based goals. This means assembling and regularly publishing a neighborhood indicators scorecard that emphasizes meta measures of progress or regression, such as relative property values, transiency rate, crime, family stability, and school performance, for each locale. Other indicators include the extent of toxic stress, collective aspects of neighborhood life, demographic change, and cycles of investment.[8] Data also need to be decentralized to empower those on the ground, not simply reside in some distant office where their meaning may be lost or the necessary urgency may be lacking. Frequent updates (where possible) would help track changes over time and enable stakeholders to better understand the effectiveness of various initiatives as well as pinpoint trends to be worried about.

Social Resources

Public and civic leaders could place a far greater emphasis on social vitality by supporting the *development of more "third places"*—churches, coffee shops, restaurants, gyms, hair salons, clubs, bars, libraries, parks, main streets, after-school programs, and community centers that host regu-

lar, voluntary, informal gatherings of residents—neighborhood by neighborhood. Whereas people once lived near such places, many residential areas today purposely exclude them by how they are designed and zoned. Instead of just emphasizing efficiency, urban planning and architecture could focus on nurturing social vitality by ensuring that every neighborhood, rich and poor, is built around fountains, churches, green spaces, commercial streets, well-endowed public areas, beautiful street landscaping, and municipal buildings. In Jackson Heights, New York—one of the most diverse places in the world—the 34th Avenue Open Street Coalition helped establish a permanent Open Street, running 30 blocks and operating much like a linear park. This has spawned a slew of in-person programming for residents, such as a Zumba class, salsa, races for kids, and food services—as well as volunteering activities in support of the space.[9]

Governments, philanthropists, and businesses could develop *small-grant programs* to incentivize residents to cooperate to improve their blocks, neighborhood leaders to build community quarterbacks to lead local efforts at change, and nonprofits to invest in endeavors aimed at strengthening the institutions and activities that embed relationships. The goal would be to foster closer cooperation among residents, build more confidence in a neighborhood, and develop the relationships, institutions, and norms that can cascade across a place and transform it over time. The Oswego Renaissance Association has created significant momentum for positive change (and achieved huge returns on investment) in Oswego, New York, by simply offering matching grants of up to $1,000 per home as well as additional resources to city blocks home to individuals who want to cooperate to improve the look of their streets.

Training and assisting residents and small businesses in entrepreneurial undertakings can build up *indigenous capital* (so-called wealth that sticks). This could include developing property; providing opportunities to learn what is possible, especially in rural areas or isolated neighborhoods; and bolstering access to financing, so local leaders can invest in their own neighborhoods and varied local institutions. For example, Jumpstart Germantown in Philadelphia creates opportunities for local residents to invest in their own neighborhoods by offering training, mentoring, and access to networks and capital (i.e., loans) to aspiring real estate developers seeking to rehabilitate local properties while building their wealth in the process.[10] If kept local, this wealth can create demand for other social and economic improvements that serve *all* residents, instead of just a few.

Social dynamics are inherently local, woven into particular places, people, and commitments. In most places, over the past half century, neighborhood social bonds have weakened, with severe implications for American social fabric, political life, and individual well-being. Scale is essential to enhancing social dynamics, but the arena must be a human scale. Although national and regional initiatives are necessary, change inevitably requires concentrated efforts, locale by locale.

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NOTES

1. The Gini coefficient grew from 0.394 in 1970 to 0.482 in 2013. Michael T. Owyang and Hannah Shell, "Measuring Trends in Income Inequality," *Regional Economist*, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, March 30, 2016, https://www.stlouisfed.org/publications/regional-economist/april-2016/measuring-trends-in-income-inequality.

2. Joe Cortright and Dillon Mahmoudi, *Lost in Place: Why the Persistence and Spread of Concentrated Poverty—Not Gentrification—Is Our Biggest Urban Challenge* (Portland, OR: City Observatory, 2014), https://cityobservatory.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/LostinPlace_12.4.pdf.

3. Purpose Built Communities, *Poverty and Place: A Review of the Science and Research That Have Impacted Our Work*, October 2019; Patrick Sharkey, *Stuck in Place: Urban Neighborhoods and the End of Progress toward Racial Equality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Robert Sampson, *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); and William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

4. Raj Chetty et al., "The Fading American Dream: Trends in Absolute Income Mobility Since 1940" (NBER Working Paper No. 22910, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, December 2016); and Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*.

5. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000). On the polarization question, see Timothy Carney and Michael Barone, "Does Lack of Social Connectedness Explain Trump's Appeal?," *Washington Examiner*, March 27, 2016; and Peter Beinart, "Breaking Faith," *Atlantic*, April 2017.

6. "Community of Practice," Middle Neighborhoods, accessed December 7, 2022, https://middleneighborhoods.org/community-of-practice/; and Paul C. Brophy and Ira Goldstein, "America's Forgotten 'Middle Neighborhoods,'" *Governing*, January 4, 2017.

7. City of Atlanta, Georgia, *Transition Report*, 2022, https://www.atlantaga.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/55032.

8. Toxic stress may be physical, emotional, environmental, or theoretical. Recurring exposure increases the risk of long-term adverse health effects, and children are especially vulnerable. Hillary Franke, "Toxic Stress: Effects, Prevention and Treatment," *Children (Basel)* 1, no. 3 (2014): 390–402.

9. John Surico, "New York's Most Exciting New Public Space Is a Street in Queens," Project for Public Spaces, August 5, 2022, https://www.pps.org/article/new-yorks-most-exciting-new-public-space-is-a-street-in-queens.

10. Jumpstart Germantown (website), accessed December 7, 2022, https://www.jumpstartgermantown.com/.