



Examining the Assumptions behind Place-Based Programs

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In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus has to thread his way between two dangerous sea monsters, Scylla and Charybdis, in crossing the Strait of Messina. Place-based revitalization work also faces two opposing pitfalls. On the one hand, initiatives might do too little to alter the status quo, leaving neighborhoods as impoverished as when they began, with the added insult of broken promises and a sense of intractability. On the other, initiatives might have too much of an effect, improving a neighborhood to the point that the resulting market interest leads to the crowding out of households that have low or moderate incomes and have lived in the area for years.

In the first pitfall, too little change might be observed because an initiative deployed too few resources relative to the need or because it deployed resources in the wrong way. One possible consequence is that a disbelief in change takes hold among residents or outside observers such as elites in city government, philanthropy, journalism, or anchor institutions. For the second pitfall, the danger is that a revitalized neighborhood becomes a gentrified one and that the people originally intended to benefit from the initiative no longer can.

In seeking to transform distressed communities, place-based initiatives have constructed apartment buildings, financed small businesses, organized residents, offered tax breaks, paved streets, rehabilitated arts centers, financed charter schools, provided workforce training, and more, all to promote the physical and social health of neighborhoods. The initiatives recognize that a history of oppression and exclusion, especially for communities of color, has resulted in profound challenges.

Sometimes these efforts are scattered or shallow. But sometimes they are deep and sustained. For example, "comprehensive community" initiatives have been of interest for decades, but their use has

grown in recent years (Ferris and Hopkins 2015; Kubisch et al. 2010). These efforts are typically backed by foundations, although they often have support from local governments and anchor institutions (Theodos 2021a, 2021b).

The intellectual origins of the broader set of place-based development efforts date at least to the 19th century settlement house movement. The federal government's involvement in place-based programs started with the public housing program in the 1930s. This was followed by urban renewal, authorized by the Housing Act of 1949. Successive presidential administrations have put their stamp on local revitalization, from Lyndon Johnson's Model Cities, to the Nixon-era Community Development Block Grant, to Bill Clinton's Empowerment Zones. The Obama administration embraced a place-based paradigm to policymaking, rolling out, among others, Choice Neighborhoods; Promise Neighborhoods; Strong Cities, Strong Communities; Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation; and Promise Zones. President Trump signed Opportunity Zones into law via the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (Theodos et al. 2020).

This mass of place-based programs might lead one to expect that the efforts have a clear theory of change. This is largely not the case. What then is the intellectual justification for such efforts? After a detailed review of the documents, activities, and initial announcements of multiple programs and initiatives, I find that place-based programs rest upon eight assumptions or justifications for intervention.

The assumptions are often not fully articulated in advance of, or even after, the start of an initiative. They have emerged from the research evidence, firsthand practitioner experience, and the change program designers hope for. Some of the eight pillars are on solid ground empirically; others are not. Some are frequently touted by program designers, while others are rarely mentioned. But all contain important beliefs that motivate and shape interventions.

The assumptions are as follows:

1. Place matters: distressed communities adversely affect the lives of their residents.
2. One-size-fits-all solutions do not work given the heterogeneity of US neighborhoods.
3. Local control and accountability lead to better outcomes.
4. The solutions to local distress do not lie in a single outcome domain, approach, actor, or policy change.
5. A local organization can coordinate community revitalization.
6. Locally focused efforts can overcome global, national, and regional challenges.
7. Neighborhoods have tipping points, and place-based initiatives can lead to self-sustaining, market-based investments in target areas over time.
8. Residents stay in place long enough to benefit from revitalization; place-based efforts do not lead to substantial displacement.

In this brief, I introduce each pillar, give examples of its use, describe the research evidence supporting or refuting it, and offer critiques when appropriate. Any problems with these assumptions can lead to problems for place-based initiatives—in design, execution, or effect. Those who design place-based initiatives should think carefully about these assumptions and the ways they manifest in communities of interest. Such an investigation should guide which programmatic elements are introduced in a place-based effort and even whether a place-based approach should be pursued at all in a given place, at a given time, and with an expected level of resources.

Place Matters: Distressed Communities Adversely Affect the Lives of Their Residents

Community revitalization efforts are shaped by the recognition that neighborhoods with concentrated disadvantage, low-performing institutions, inadequate housing, crime, and other indicators of distress have strong negative effects on the well-being of residents and the vitality of towns and cities. While proponents of these initiatives are armed with new research evidence, these worries have echoed through generations of social reformers. Concerns about the deleterious effects of certain places in the US date to at least 150 years ago (Lubove 1963). And, indeed, if concentrated poverty is an accurate marker of local distress, then local distress has increased over the past four decades, with a stark rise in recent years (Bishaw 2014; Jargowsky 2013).

To identify, document, and explain whether and how places influence people has been a considerable challenge for researchers. But a consensus is emerging that social and environmental contexts influence the trajectory of people's lives, at least for children. This "neighborhood effects" literature is well-developed, in both theoretical and empirical terms.

Beginning with the theoretical, we see several mechanisms for how people's surroundings might influence their life trajectory. There have been at least four attempts to classify the ways that neighborhoods can affect residents (Ellen and Turner 1997; Galster 2012; Jencks and Mayer 1990; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000). They include social, environmental, geographical, and institutional, with specific mechanisms such as the quality of local services (e.g., public schools), peer influences, exposure to crime and violence, relative deprivation, and conflict and competition for scarce resources.

Turning to the empirical, it is important to acknowledge that determining the causal effect of community context on people is difficult. People are rarely assigned to different locations, so randomized studies are uncommon (Hollister and Hill 1995; Jencks and Mayer 1990). Also, nonrandomized statistical instruments or approaches struggle to definitively determine causality, the time required for individual-level outcomes to develop can be lengthy, and data collection costs can be high (Theodos and Firschein 2015). Furthermore, the neighborhood conditions that may matter most (e.g., peer influences, fear, collective efficacy) can be hard to measure and may be nonlinear, making them difficult to discern (Ellen and Turner 1997; Hollister and Hill 1995; Jencks and Mayer 1990).

Despite these challenges, the evidence that place matters in the lives of residents is growing. For example, Chetty, Hendren, and Katz (2016) find that children 12 years old and younger whose families received housing vouchers through the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) experiment requiring them to move to low-poverty neighborhoods had by adulthood higher incomes, higher rates of college attendance, lower rates of single parenting (among women), and higher likelihoods of living in low-poverty neighborhoods, compared with similar people who did not move with the vouchers. The researchers, however, do not find evidence of similar gains for young people ages 13 to 18 or adults who moved with MTO vouchers. This study builds on earlier work that finds that MTO did not lead to employment or earnings gains for adults but increased their satisfaction with safety, neighborhood services, and housing quality; decreased obesity; improved mental health (for adults and girls); lowered arrests for violent crimes (for girls); decreased smoking and marijuana use (for girls); and resulted in children attending lower-poverty and higher-performing schools (Orr et al. 2003; Sanbonmatsu et al. 2011).

Other researchers have examined neighborhood impacts based on resident characteristics. For example, Galster and coauthors collected outcome information about young people whose families had been quasi-randomly assigned by the Housing Authority of the City and County of Denver to a scattered-site or conventional public housing unit in neighborhoods throughout Denver from 1987 through 2005. The study finds that living in a neighborhood with a higher share of foreign-born or Black residents was predictive of lower postsecondary educational attainment, higher rates of repeating grades and suspensions, and greater likelihood of being placed into special education classes (Galster et al. 2016; Galster, Santiago, and Stack 2016). The research also provides evidence that neighborhood effects in labor market outcomes for teenagers varied by gender and race/ethnicity (Galster, Santiago, and Lucero 2015). However, it is important to acknowledge that racial and ethnic disparities in wealth, opportunity, and connection are the result of private and public sector actions and inactions that have facilitated opportunities for white families while impeding them for families of color (Kijakazi 2019).

These experimental studies confirm nonexperimental research. Evidence about neighborhood effects on health comes from Currie and Moretti (2007) and Johnson (2011). Evidence about neighborhood effects on educational outcomes and IQ comes from Brooks-Gunn and coauthors (1993); Cutler and Glaeser (1997); Harding (2003); Owens (2010); Sampson, Sharkey, and Raudenbush (2008); and Wodtke, Elwert, and Harding (2016). Evidence about effects on employment and earnings comes from Cutler and Glaeser (1997). Evidence about effects on teen births and single parenting comes from Brooks-Gunn and coauthors (1993), Cutler and Glaeser (1997), and Harding (2003). Evidence about effects on crime perpetration comes from Ihlanfeldt (2002).

What, then, do we make of this wealth of evidence? The notion that growing up in distressed neighborhoods can have deleterious effects on a person's life trajectory is well-documented, and targeting distressed places for improvements seems warranted. However, careful study of the outcomes and populations is useful. The MTO experiment offers an interesting case study, with earnings gains for younger children but not for teens and other benefits found for girls but not boys. Furthermore, the gains achieved were generally modest. It is clear that "place matters," but the realities of how and for whom are more nuanced than many place-based interventions allow for.

One-Size-Fits-All Solutions Do Not Work Given the Heterogeneity of US Neighborhoods

The diversity of cities and neighborhoods across the US is striking. From the former coal mine boom towns of Appalachia, to the former steel mill communities of Youngstown and Erie, to many Native American and tribal lands, to underresourced majority-Black neighborhoods in industrialized northeastern and midwestern cities, to the barrios of Texas—poverty in America comes in all colors, ages, topographies, and political parties. But the residents, stakeholders, institutions, and policy environments that have coalesced to give rise to pockets of poverty are different enough that even though “distressed” communities share that label, they may share little else.

Community revitalization initiatives target areas of distress, a term that is broadly defined by those designing and implementing these efforts. According to the American Community Survey, 3,641 census tracts have poverty rates of 40 percent or higher, a level commonly used to define extreme poverty neighborhoods.¹ Thirty-nine percent of these neighborhoods are majority-Black (non-Hispanic), 24 percent are majority-white (non-Hispanic), and an additional 20 percent are majority-Hispanic. Every state except Alaska and 97 of the nation’s 100 largest metropolitan areas have extreme poverty neighborhoods. Yet even though they are in many parts of the US, their distribution across the country is not uniform—extreme poverty neighborhoods are more prevalent in older, industrialized areas; immigrant gateways; and the South.

Several researchers have created typologies or groupings of distressed neighborhoods, not only for descriptive purposes but also to inform proscriptive means of change. Such typologies have captured the attention of researchers for some time. In the Chicago School of sociology, dating to the 1920s and 1930s, cities were perceived as a series of rings that contained the business district (Zone 1), a transition zone (Zone 2), working-class housing (Zone 3), higher-income housing (Zone 4), and commuter housing (Zone 5) (Burgess 1925). More recently, neighborhood typologies have proliferated, generally beginning with a specific frame or entry point. Neighborhood typologies have been used widely in epidemiology and public health (Dupéré and Perkins 2007; Kay 1978; Li and Chuang 2009; Wineman et al. 2009). They have been used in the study of social services and needs (Chow 1998; Warren 1978). Housing and commercial markets have been perhaps the most focused on neighborhood attributes (Goldstein 2011; Mallach 2008; Turner et al. 2005; Weissbourd, Bodini, and He 2009). Others have classified neighborhoods based on how they are changing and the links to residential mobility (Coulton, Theodos, and Turner 2012) or with an eye to racial composition (Ellen 2001), commuting patterns (Lee et al. 2011), neighborhood social capital (Sampson and Graif 2009b), or neighborhood trust (Sampson and Graif 2009a).

The striking diversity evident even among economically distressed communities justifies, in part, the assumptions that one-size-fits-all approaches are not called for and that place-based initiatives should be locally contextualized endeavors. Place-based work does not emerge from uniform, prescribed, nationalized approaches to change. Even federal programs such as Choice Neighborhoods and Promise Neighborhoods rely on local design, strategy, and control. Or consider philanthropic

initiatives like the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Making Connections initiative, Living Cities' Integration Initiative, Local Initiatives Support Corporation's Building Sustainable Communities, and the MacArthur Foundation's New Communities Program, in which the efforts at one site may have relatively little in common with sites in other cities. Even unified networks of community change like Purpose Built Communities have different activities across program sites.

Top-down, formulaic approaches to economic and community development have a poor track record in the US, and the diversity of places is undeniable. However, a challenge emerging from the assumption of local heterogeneity is that each initiative is bespoke, each community requires a unique approach. Therefore, we have underinvested in building—and roundly lack—shared insights about what program elements are the best fit for particular communities and what level of resources are needed to effect change.

Local Control and Accountability Lead to Better Outcomes

Resident voice in local development can be justified on moral grounds (White House Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative 2011). These claims have at their core democratic notions of self-governance. But often embedded is the assumption that such approaches produce better outcomes.

The research evidence is ambiguous about whether bottom-up approaches to community development lead to quicker, larger, or more sustained gains for residents than top-down ones do (Babajanian 2005; Larrison 2000). Of course, the history of top-down community development in the US—for example, the urban renewal program—cannot be divorced from underlying motivations of entrenching segregation (von Hoffman 2012). But today's debate is not as simple as choosing between Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses—bottom-up and top-down design elements can be used in combination.

Further complicating matters, local accountability is not easy to achieve and is often merely symbolic (Mendes 2019). The boundaries of place-based initiatives do not frequently map to local governments or accountability structures. Cities do not typically have decisionmaking bodies made up of local neighborhood representatives—they have citywide decisionmaking bodies. The extent to which cities allow neighborhoods to have influence or control over zoning and development activities—whether through advisory commissions, zoning boards, planning boards, or similar mechanisms—varies widely.

Place-based initiatives often operate outside or apart from formal means of local control, sometimes by design. Most are oriented toward some element of local voice and control. How much local ownership, design, and implementation an initiative truly has differs across place-based efforts. Nearly all allow residents and stakeholders to give advice and participate in vetting during the design and implementation phases.

The logic for including a local voice is as follows. Having both an authentic desire for change within the community and the active involvement of residents throughout the revitalization process is important and therefore effective. And it is crucial for leaders to understand residents' views of the neighborhood, particularly its needs and assets, and the ways that residents want the neighborhood to change. Revitalization efforts that involve, and in some cases that are led by, community members create a sense of ownership of the challenges among residents and help ensure that the path forward is relevant, accountable, and sustainable (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2013; Greenberg et al. 2014).

Although local voice is framed as a moral imperative, local voice and accountability may not be easy to achieve. Initiatives may operate from a simplistic vantage point that a community is unified in its desires or objectives. This could be because the community is divided (e.g., renters versus homeowners) and any strategy must side with the interests of one group or another. Alternatively, the reason that deliberative and local democracy is not more widely witnessed may be that local residents lack the time, interest, or inclination to be involved in the decisionmaking, leaving it to a few local elites or highly engaged residents.

The Solutions to Local Distress Do Not Lie in a Single Outcome Domain, Approach, Actor, or Policy Change

A fourth assumption of place-based work is that solutions to local distress do not lie in a single outcome domain, approach, actor, or policy change. This is not to say, again, that neighborhoods are different from one another (assumption No. 2), but to say that even within neighborhoods, the needs are multifaceted. As such, community revitalization efforts cut across outcomes and across traditional funding, organizational, and sectoral silos. Because local communities are complex, the justification for revitalization initiatives asserts, so too must be the solution to local distress—and therefore the answer does not lie in a single institution, level of government, funding stream, or policy fix.

That community disadvantage is a series of interrelated problems is evident. A lack of high-quality housing can be the by-product of limited housing stock, but also of low local incomes, a lack of lenders, or insufficient local political resources to return vacant properties to use. Low-performing schools may be the result of structural racism and segregation, too few resources, weak leadership in a school district, or limited engagement from principals, teachers, parents, and students. High rates of diabetes in a community can result from a lack of full-service grocery stores, too little personal investment in health and wellness, insufficient access to high-quality medical care and coverage, and fears about safety that limit outdoor exercise. And so on.

Each neighborhood problem has its roots in a dozen other problems—the challenges are interlocking and reinforcing. Thus, the logic of place-based initiatives goes, the solutions must be the same. This assumption, while on strong intellectual ground, can result in muddled approaches. In trying to accomplish everything, or at least many things, place-based work can fail to articulate a clear theory of change. This means that local activities do not logically lead to near-term outcomes, which in turn do not

lead to the intended intermediate and long-term outcomes. The failures could result from the wrong mix of activities or issues around dosage, with too few residents, businesses, homes, or others supported.

A Local Organization Can Coordinate Community Revitalization

Although community revitalization efforts do not rely on a single organization, proponents of place-based revitalization often believe that having a coordinator, conductor, or quarterback organization is important for guiding local strategy and implementation. And, indeed, the kind of transformations being attempted may not be possible without such an organization (Erickson, Galloway, and Cytron 2012; White House Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative 2011).

Comprehensive revitalization is hard work. Proponents believe it requires a leader to weave together disparate funding sources and agendas into a coherent, unified strategy. A local actor is needed to engage residents, petition local officials, and mobilize key stakeholders. Often, the local lead will contract for or directly execute a physical rebuilding effort.

Proponents also see a local coordinator as pivotal because revitalization does not happen quickly. Most distressed communities have been that way for years—in some cases, for generations. The barriers to progress are entrenched and often structural. Therefore, the backers of place-based strategies frequently design their initiatives to be long-term.

This assumption, however, ascribes to local coordinators an impartiality that is difficult to practice. In reality, local coordinators do not always coordinate. They can become just another interest group in the fray, motivated by self-preservation. Perhaps a group can only very rarely rise to the level of a master architect, orchestra conductor, or football quarterback—creating and overseeing a long-term plan that depends on many other parties' acceding to that strategy.

Locally Focused Efforts Can Overcome Global, National, and Regional Challenges

Another intellectual pillar of place-based development is that locally focused will and resources can overcome global, national, and regional challenges and economic, social, and policy disadvantages that have coalesced, in combination with local factors, to create distressed communities. This rationale for action is not frequently stated in these terms, but it is nevertheless crucial to the theory of change adopted by community revitalization efforts—that, indeed, the neighborhood is the right unit or level for intervention.

If this rationale for the creation of place-based strategies was more fully articulated, the logic might go as follows. Yes, there are regions of economic stagnation, and, yes, technological advances and global trade have hollowed out many sectors of the US economy. But, even so, communities of affluence and of

poverty exist in every metropolitan area. Inequality of income and assets is notably high in the US compared with other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development nations (OECD 2011; Piketty and Saez 2014; Smeeding 2005). And this inequality manifests spatially, often—though not always—along racial lines.

Although national and global dynamics like trade, automation, labor laws, and tax policy establish the broad parameters of employment, income, and inequality, they do not necessarily create a spatial distribution that results in a greater share of adverse conditions in some communities than in others. Indeed, spatial inequality can reenforce the adverse impacts of national and global dynamics. Upgrading distressed neighborhoods and connecting them with the parts of a city and region whose economies are growing will take local action, in addition to national and state efforts. For example, more progressive national tax rates may do little to connect the lower-wealth Anacostia neighborhood of Washington, DC, with the wealthier Capitol Hill neighborhood just across the Anacostia River, but a new bridge park, inspired by the High Line in New York, that spans the river might (Building Bridges across the River 2018).

Clearly, not all conditions can be addressed locally, and many place-based efforts have thought carefully about which factors can and cannot. But even a robust place-based development strategy may fail in the face of, say, a significantly weakening regional economy. For example, a local community revitalization intervention that began in West Virginia in recent years would likely have been swamped by the coal industry's decline as a result of hydraulic fracturing (fracking). Or consider that the industrial and manufacturing cities of Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Youngstown each lost more than 50 percent of their population from 1950 to 2019—while the US more than doubled in size.

It is difficult to imagine place-based community revitalization strategies that can fix broad-based, regional economic declines. A disconnect exists intellectually and in practice among practitioners and scholars concerned about the competitiveness and growth of regions, who generally have little to do with neighborhoods, and those concerned with place-based development, who generally have little to say about regions. This is not to say that neighborhood redevelopment is impossible in economically declining regions, but doing so will require considerable resources to overcome these deficits.

Neighborhoods Have Tipping Points, and Place-based Initiatives Can Lead to Self-Sustaining, Market-Based Investments in Target Areas over Time

A seventh assumption that underlies community revitalization initiatives is that they can work themselves out of existence. Small (in relative terms) amounts of public or philanthropic capital, the logic goes, can catalyze private market investments above and beyond what the initiative itself can contribute, leading to sustained success and a limited long-term need for the intervention.

This logic is built, in part, on the idea that neighborhoods have tipping points. In other words, social or economic change is slow or sticky up to a certain threshold beyond which it is rapid and transformative. A threshold or tipping point can, in theory, exist for a neighborhood moving in either direction.

As yet, little quantitative evidence exists that places experience tipping points (or that they do not). Galster (2012) suggests that when poverty in an area reaches a threshold of 20 percent, a neighborhood experiences a tipping point. When we examine neighborhood transitions by race, we do see examples of rapid change. Many neighborhoods during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s experienced dramatic shifts in racial composition as white people left central cities for suburbia and Black people replaced them (Jackson 1985; Pattillo 2007; Self 2003; Stone 1989). In the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s, a highly visible set of neighborhoods in high-cost markets gentrified, transitioning from low-cost to high-cost areas. (Compared with the white relocations of the 20th century, the more recent gentrification trend has affected fewer neighborhoods, and with a more complex racial change dynamic.)

If tipping points exist, we would observe nonlinear patterns in neighborhood change and investment returns. Some studies explore homeowners' investment thresholds, which vary across race and local social cohesion (Galster 1987; Taub, Taylor, and Dunham 1984). And some research on Community Development Block Grants has found the existence of thresholds, where program dollars only affect neighborhoods that have reached a sufficient size (Galster et al. 2004; Pooley 2014). Analogously, a Baltimore research study found that neighborhoods with housing vacancy rates of more than 4 percent in one year experienced population declines that were not evident in neighborhoods with vacancy rates below 4 percent (Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance 2016). This provided justification to the city of Baltimore to target their blight reduction resources in neighborhoods just below and above this tipping point—rather than, for example, neighborhoods with considerably higher levels of vacancies. This latter example illustrates the reality that community revitalization strategies, while targeted to economically distressed communities, do not always elect to upgrade the nation's most severely distressed communities—though to be sure, some do.

Neighborhoods may indeed have tipping points. (It is also possible that those designing and implementing initiatives hope they do, given limited resources, the number of other neighborhoods that need help, and the wavering attention spans among public and philanthropic institutions.) However, if neighborhoods have tipping points, they may be at considerably higher dollar thresholds than most programs believe or anticipate. Theodos (2021b, forthcoming) finds that two of the nation's largest and oldest comprehensive community initiatives, the City Heights Initiative in San Diego and the East Baltimore Development Initiative, have had little to no effect on neighborhood economic, housing, or demographic attributes. The initiatives have invested more than \$200 million and \$1 billion over 26 and 17 years, respectively. This is not to say that place-based investments never result in changes—some efforts do catalyze local market interest, as happened when the East Lake Initiative in Atlanta invested more than \$600 million over 25 years (Theodos 2021a). This varied empirical evidence, however, should call into question public and private efforts that intend to achieve neighborhood-level change from smaller investments. It is not uncommon for place-based efforts to invest \$1 million or \$10 million when seeking to accomplish local change.

Residents Stay in Place Long Enough to Benefit from Revitalization; Place-Based Efforts Do Not Lead to Displacement

A final intellectual assumption of community revitalization efforts is that residents remain in place long enough to benefit from their neighborhood's ascent. The sector's reasoning is that a "sufficient" share of the residents who were living in the target area when the initiative began will continue to live there when perceptible gains have been generated. And out-migration will not be greater as a result of the initiative. Even those who move outside the initiative's boundaries may continue to benefit if they move nearby, just outside the target area, and have networks that link them back to it.

As with some of the other intellectual pillars, this rationale is not frequently cited by proponents of place-based interventions, but it is crucial to the theory of change posited by such efforts, as high mobility rates challenge many intervention structures (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2013). Indeed, some evidence exists that residential turnover is not necessarily higher in neighborhoods receiving place-based investments than those that are not (Coulton, Theodos, and Turner 2012; Theodos, Coulton, and Pitingolo 2015). But much depends on the specifics of the intervention and market context. That mobility rates are not necessarily higher is in part because mobility rates in distressed communities are generally quite high. In a review of a multisite initiative, Making Connections, Theodos, Coulton, and Pitingolo (2015) found that roughly 50 percent of residents were no longer living at the same address three years later. This complicates both the theory of and approach to how revitalization initiatives benefit incumbent residents. These mobility rates are comparable to those of renters with low incomes generally.

Studies of neighborhood gentrification have demonstrated that neighborhood change is not strongly linked with high levels of residential mobility. Gentrification leads to small increases in neighborhood out-migration, according to one study (Brummet and Reed 2019). Other studies find turnover rates that are not higher than those in other neighborhoods (Mallach 2015; Vigdor 2002; Webber and Swanstrom 2014). Of course, even if aggregate mobility rates are not higher, differential turnover could occur if place-based initiatives target pockets of poverty in otherwise economically vibrant locales (Coulton, Theodos, and Turner 2012) and make them attractive to more affluent households.

An important clarification is that some place-based initiatives have sizable relocation components. Substantial relocation may result in much higher mobility rates than are observed in otherwise comparable neighborhoods. For example, rates of relocation among residents living in public housing under the US Department of Housing and Urban Development's HOPE VI program were robust in some sites (Goetz 2010; Jones and Paulsen 2011; Kleit and Manzo 2006; Popkin, Levy, and Buron 2009; Popkin et al. 2004). Another example is Atlanta's East Lake Initiative, which began by demolishing a large public housing development (not via HOPE VI) and building a mixed-income development. Staff estimate that just 25 percent of the residents of the original development returned to the neighborhood (Theodos 2021a). In Baltimore, the East Baltimore Development Initiative relocated 742 households in

its target area. How many households returned is unclear; by 2011, 40 original households were living in renovated townhomes, and 36 were in affordable rental apartments (Theodos, forthcoming)—10 percent of those relocated. Resident rates of return often remain unknown. For example, the City Heights Initiative in San Diego demolished roughly 400 housing units, and the number of residents who stayed within the neighborhood is unknown.

Short of direct relocation and displacement, place-based initiatives may start or accelerate gentrification. This was the case for the East Lake Initiative, which resulted in shifts in the neighborhood's racial composition, education levels, home values, and incomes (Theodos 2021a).

High mobility rates—whether because of relocation, gentrification, or the more regular dynamics of families and underresourced communities—raise the question of who benefits from place-based initiatives if few original residents will remain in place. This is especially true for strategies that emphasize the physical environment over human services. But even for people-based investments, high mobility rates raise the question of how positive change in the neighborhood will endure after many residents move.

Conclusions for Policy and Practice

Are the assumptions that underlie place-based policies and programs so shaky that these approaches should be avoided? No—a strong intellectual foundation has been laid for why disadvantage is localized and therefore the solutions to address it must be as well (Austin, Glaeser, and Summers 2018; Bartik 2020). But simply acknowledging this reality has let place-based initiatives too easily off the hook: most are not designed in ways or with sufficient scale to accomplish the desired change (Theodos 2021b; Theodos, forthcoming). More care must be given to the complex dynamics of communities before place-based efforts are implemented.

Now that we have explored the soundness of the eight assumptions that justify place-based programs, what can future public and philanthropic efforts do to improve their design and reach?

First, remembering that most place-based initiatives are not solely or even principally federally driven is important. We are still in an era of federal austerity—for example, Community Development Block Grant funding has been cut 80 percent since its peak (Theodos, Stacy, and Ho 2017), and federal resources make up a smaller share of local government spending. To create and sustain more initiatives, then, additional federal resources will be needed.

Philanthropy and anchor institutions can provide the backstop needed to change communities over many years, as public officials come and go. But public programs can do more to build in mechanisms of resident input and control. These processes are relatively weak in many programs. Other conditions like mandatory build-back and build-on-site requirements can help better ensure residents benefit from neighborhood investments.

A third consideration is that programs will need to include neighborhood planning processes. Program leaders must help marry financial expertise, human service expertise, community engagement expertise, and management and learning expertise. This also means working to align resources, including transportation and infrastructure, with local initiatives.

More fundamentally, perhaps, a critical look at the justifications for place-based initiatives indicates that not all communities are optimally positioned for a revitalization effort. It may be that the commitment of time and money is not sufficient to meet the need. Change is hard, it takes time, and patience is needed.

Furthermore, initiatives must think carefully about the precise mix of benefits provided. How will residents benefit, especially if they move? How can human service investments be aligned with benefits to the built environment? How can the target community be better connected with its city and regional economy? How can the initiatives, when successful, prevent gentrification-induced displacement?

Given what we now understand about the importance of neighborhoods for children and the examples we can point to where robust revitalization efforts have been created and sustained, what is called for is deepened commitment to ensuring that those initiatives contain the ingredients necessary for success, with a greater emphasis on outcomes for longtime residents.

Note

¹ Data from the 2013–17 American Community Survey.

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