

## Policy Brief

### PANEL 3: CAREERS FOR JUSTICE-INVOLVED INDIVIDUALS

#### Speakers:

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### “Repairing Blight and Abandonment to Restore Places and People”

John MacDonald, *Professor of Criminology and Sociology*, University of Pennsylvania

Place plays a powerful role in shaping lives. The upkeep of sidewalks, the quality of housing, the amount of green space, and the cleanliness of city streets affects whether people walk, the quality of the air they breathe, and how safe they are from crime. A small number of places of concentrated poverty in every major city generate the majority of serious crime.<sup>1</sup> In Chicago, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia in 2018 just 5% to 10% of addresses where a crime was reported account for 50% of all crime in these cities.<sup>2</sup> And studies show that a small minority of individuals in these hot spots generate the bulk of reported crime.<sup>3</sup> The location of high crime places in cities is remarkably stable year after year, suggesting that place may be more important than people in shaping who is involved in crime and victimization. While the best evidence for preventing a life of crime is investing in early prevention like childcare, family services, and other social supports<sup>4</sup>, scaling these programs to entire populations is challenging administratively and politically. At the same time, there is a growing body of evidence of effective programs that can be implemented to change the physical environment of the most disadvantaged places – generating health and safety benefits for everyone living in areas of high crime and concentrated poverty.

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<sup>1</sup> Weisburd, David, Elizabeth R. Groff, and Sue-Ming Yang. *The criminology of place: Street segments and our understanding of the crime problem*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Based on calculations from data posted for Chicago at: <https://data.cityofchicago.org/Public-Safety/Crimes-2001-to-present/ijzp-q8t2>; for Los Angeles at: <https://data.lacity.org/A-Safe-City/Crime-Data-from-2010-to-Present/y8tr-7khq>; and Philadelphia at: <https://www.opendataphilly.org/dataset/crime-incidents>

<sup>3</sup> Loeber, Rolf, and David P. Farrington, eds. *Serious and violent juvenile offenders: Risk factors and successful interventions*. Sage Publications, 1998 see (Table 2.2; pp. 26-27).

<sup>4</sup> Farrington, David P., and Brandon C. Welsh. *Saving children from a life of crime: Early risk factors and effective interventions*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

It has become a popular axiom to say that the census tract or zip code where someone grows up has more to do with their life outcomes than ability or effort. While there is research to support that place matters fundamentally in shaping life outcomes,<sup>5</sup> the zip code is too large an area to be so determinative. Rather, it is likely the block or street segment where one grows up that is more influential in their life outcomes. Dilapidated homes, vacant and abandoned spaces, trash and debris are all typically present in high crime blocks, a fact that has been shown to exist over centuries and across countries.<sup>6</sup> Blocks with abandoned buildings and overgrown vacant lots equal unhealthy lives. More people suffer from crime and gun violence, heart disease, and drug overdoses when neighborhoods are overrun by these problems of blight and abandonment. The experience with these negative outcomes is starkly higher for those living in blighted and disordered places relative to those living nearby. A panel of experts from the National Academy of Sciences pointed out that it is unreasonable to expect peoples' lives to improve when their surroundings are working directly against positive human development.<sup>7</sup>

Social science evidence suggests that pockets of crime and poverty develop in a spiral of decay—employment opportunities decline, housing prices drop, people abandon homes and blocks, businesses close, properties turn to ruin, trash accumulates, graffiti multiples, fear of crime emerges leading to further decline, and crime and disorder fester.<sup>8</sup> Reducing physical decay and disorder in high crime places can reverse the spiral of decay and produce transformational improvements in opportunities for people living in these places. Cities can fix the problems of blight and abandonment in these pockets of crime and avoid the problem of thinking that the only approach to improving places is addressing “root causes” like intergenerational poverty, inadequate primary education, and a lack of access to decent paying jobs.<sup>9</sup>

Targeted community economic development would seem to be the natural policy approach to improving blocks struggling from crime, poverty, and stunted opportunities. Unfortunately, there are few successful examples of place-based economic development. More often than not, place-based economic development ends up costing more than the benefits it generates in producing local jobs and economic opportunities. One of the reasons place-based economic policies often fail is because they typically don't take advantage of the tendency of businesses to co-locate where there is a dense population and an available workforce.<sup>10</sup> Even when successful, the benefits of place-based economic development will take years or decades to come to fruition. This doesn't mean that place-based economic development shouldn't be explored, but there are reasons to be skeptical about its potential for immediate success at curbing the problems of concentrated poverty and high crime in the 5% of city blocks generating the bulk of crime.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, research by Chetty and colleagues shows that children (before age 13) of families living in public housing were selected by a lottery to receive a voucher to move to higher income neighborhoods increased their chance of college attendance, adult earnings, and reduced their chance of becoming a single parent. See Chetty, Raj, Nathaniel Hendren, and Lawrence F. Katz. "The effects of exposure to better neighborhoods on children: New evidence from the Moving to Opportunity experiment." *American Economic Review* 106, no. 4 (2016): 855-902.

<sup>6</sup> Sampson, Robert J. *Great American city: Chicago and the enduring neighborhood effect*. University of Chicago Press, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Institute of Medicine (US). Committee on Assuring the Health of the Public in the 21st Century. *The Future of the Public's Health in the 21st Century*. National Academy Press, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Skogan, Wesley G. *Disorder and decline: Crime and the spiral of decay in American neighborhoods*. Univ of California Press, 1992.; Wilson, James Q., and George L. Kelling. "Broken windows." *Atlantic Monthly* 249, no. 3 (1982): 29-38.

<sup>9</sup> Wilson, James Q. *Thinking about crime*. New York: Vintage, 1983.

<sup>10</sup> Glaeser, Edward L., and Joshua D. Gottlieb. *The economics of place-making policies*. No. w14373. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2008.

Where place-based economic development can take years to see benefits, cities can implement programs to address the present physical features of high poverty-crime places that make them the most unbearable in which to live. A growing body of scientific evidence shows we can reduce crime and associated problems by changing neighborhoods block-by-block. Clean up vacant lots and people go outside and walk and have less stress. Depression, crime, and the experience of gun violence all drop for individuals living on blocks after vacant lots have been cleaned up. Programs are being experimented with around the country that have been shown to be effective at reducing crime and disorder that cost relatively little to implement, can be scaled to entire cities, and are sustainable with minimal investment relative to the benefits they produce. Decisions about how and where cities invest resources in the abatement of vacant lots and abandoned homes could have a greater influence on reducing crime than many realize.

John Snow's work on the causes of cholera in contaminated drinking water in the United Kingdom in the 19<sup>th</sup> century provides a powerful example of how simple changes to places can be transformative. At the time most people thought cholera was caused by bad air (miasma). Snow was skeptical. He compared cholera infection rates in those served by two water companies. Initially, both water companies got their water from central London where people dumped sewage and waste into the river. But one of these companies moved their water source upriver. Snow showed that cholera deaths declined by 38% in the areas that got their water from the new upriver sources compared to the places that still got water from central London. Snow used this evidence that contaminated drinking water was the likely cause of cholera, along with maps of cholera deaths in the Soho section of Westminster, to convince the local authorities to remove the handle of the Broad Street water pump. After shutting off the Broad Street water pump cholera deaths dropped in Soho, vastly improving the health of a community. Like cholera in contaminated drinking water wells in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, cities can improve communities by making strategic investments in addressing blight and abandonment.

The Pennsylvania Horticulture Society's (PHS) LandCare program is a successful example of a program to address blight and abandonment that has been demonstrated by scientific evidence to help improve property values, reduce crime, gun violence, stress, and depression.<sup>11</sup> Philadelphia, like many formerly industrial cities, suffers from a problem of vacant and abandoned spaces. In 1996, residents living in the Kensington neighborhood decided they were frustrated by the constant eyesore of the vacant lots in their neighborhood and partnered with PHS to start pilot program to remediate vacant lots. After initial success of implementing the pilot, LandCare expanded through partnerships with local contractors to the entire

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<sup>11</sup> See Heckert, Megan, and Jeremy Mennis. "The economic impact of greening urban vacant land: a spatial difference-in-differences analysis." *Environment and Planning A* 44, no. 12 (2012): 3010-3027.; Branas, Charles C., Rose A. Cheney, John M. MacDonald, Vicky W. Tam, Tara D. Jackson, and Thomas R. Ten Have. "A difference-in-differences analysis of health, safety, and greening vacant urban space." *American Journal of Epidemiology* 174, no. 11 (2011): 1296-1306.; Branas, Charles C., Eugenia South, Michelle C. Kondo, Bernadette C. Hohl, Philippe Bourgois, Douglas J. Wiebe, and John M. MacDonald. "Citywide cluster randomized trial to restore blighted vacant land and its effects on violence, crime, and fear." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 12 (2018): 2946-2951.; Moyer, Ruth, John M. MacDonald, Greg Ridgeway, and Charles C. Branas. "Effect of remediating blighted vacant land on shootings: a citywide cluster randomized trial." *American Journal of Public Health* 109, no. 1 (2019): 140-144.; South, Eugenia C., Bernadette C. Hohl, Michelle C. Kondo, John M. MacDonald, and Charles C. Branas. "Effect of greening vacant land on mental health of community-dwelling adults: a cluster randomized trial." *JAMA network open* 1, no. 3 (2018): e180298-e180298.

city, transforming more than 12,000 vacant lots and more than 18 million square feet of land. Today, roughly 1/3 of the vacant lots in Philadelphia have been remediated by LandCare.

The LandCare program intervention is simple to implement and scalable to an entire city. Vacant lots have trash and debris removed. The land is then graded and grass, small bushes, or a few trees are planted. A small wooden post fence is installed around each of these parcels to prevent illegal dumping of garbage and to signal that someone is caring for the property and the community is caring for its use. The rehabilitation of lots is fast, taking only a day to clean and green a vacant lot. Lots are then maintained through a twice a month cleaning, weeding, and mowing from April through October. The actual cost of this intervention is also relatively low, only \$1,000 - \$1,300 to “clean and green” a lot and \$150 per year for biweekly cleaning and mowing.<sup>12</sup> These newly greened trash free lots create the appearance of small pocket parks in Philadelphia’s highest crime blocks.

Research on the effect of the PHS LandCare’s vacant lot rehabilitation program has shown that it reduces serious crime on the blocks it is implemented, improves housing values, and leads to better mental health (stress and depression). This has been demonstrated in both studies that look at changes in crime, gun violence, and housing values around vacant lots that received the cleaning and greening from PHS with vacant lots nearby that remained blighted,<sup>13</sup> as well as a controlled experiment that randomly assigned over 500 vacant lots that were blighted to receive the LandCare intervention or to remain in the usual state of blight.<sup>14</sup> Results from a survey of residents living in the clusters that were part of the experiment showed that those living near greened or cleaned lots reported significantly fewer concerns regarding their personal safety, increased use of outside space for relaxing and socializing, and reduced depression compared to residents living near lots that remained blighted.<sup>15</sup> The LandCare program provides clear evidence that a simple program to address blight and abandonment can be transformative for addressing the negative effects of living on blocks facing problems of chronic poverty and crime.

Beyond the benefits of reducing the physical disorder of blighted abandoned lots, there is also the important role of the LandCare program in demonstrating that interventions like this can be done that provide economic opportunities for local community members and those that have criminal justice involvement. The LandCare program relies on a network of 18 community organizations who hire local landscape contractors to perform the work. These contractors hire individuals from the same communities to clean, green, and maintain the properties. The LandCare program has expanded its effort to engage employing local community members through its Roots to Re-entry Initiative, a program that focuses on offering training and employment to individuals released from prison in Philadelphia. Through this initiative, local landscape contractors and community organizations train and employ returning

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<sup>12</sup> <https://phsonline.org/programs/landcare-program>

<sup>13</sup> Branas, Charles C., Rose A. Cheney, John M. MacDonald, Vicky W. Tam, Tara D. Jackson, and Thomas R. Ten Have. "A difference-in-differences analysis of health, safety, and greening vacant urban space." *American Journal of Epidemiology* 174, no. 11 (2011): 1296-1306.

<sup>14</sup> Branas, Charles C., Eugenia South, Michelle C. Kondo, Bernadette C. Hohl, Philippe Bourgois, Douglas J. Wiebe, and John M. MacDonald. "Citywide cluster randomized trial to restore blighted vacant land and its effects on violence, crime, and fear." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 12 (2018): 2946-2951.; Moyer, Ruth, John M. MacDonald, Greg Ridgeway, and Charles C. Branas. "Effect of remediating blighted vacant land on shootings: a citywide cluster randomized trial." *American Journal of Public Health* 109, no. 1 (2019): 140-144.

<sup>15</sup> South, Eugenia C., Bernadette C. Hohl, Michelle C. Kondo, John M. MacDonald, and Charles C. Branas. "Effect of greening vacant land on mental health of community-dwelling adults: a cluster randomized trial." *JAMA network open* 1, no. 3 (2018): e180298-e180298.

citizens in landscape maintenance services. While this program has yet to be formally evaluated, it provides an example of how a relatively low-cost scalable intervention that relies on local community partnerships can transform vacant land and reinvest the resources in employing criminal justice involved adults who face barriers to gainful employment in many service sectors. As the program has grown from a pilot in the Kensington neighborhood to a citywide effort, LandCare has brought jobs and future career opportunities in landscape management to individuals in some of Philadelphia's most economically disadvantaged communities.

The PHS LandCare program is an exemplar of a low-cost program that can, through partnerships with city government, be scaled to entire cities. Cities throughout the U.S. that confront problems of blight and abandoned lots all have an eligible workforce to remediate vacant lots. These efforts can also be scaled to entire cities, remediating the most high crime-poverty blocks, and employing individuals with criminal justice involvement who come from these same areas. The cost of remediating the entire city of Philadelphia, for example would be roughly \$34-45 million (assuming a remaining 30,000 lots) and roughly \$5 million to maintain. This cost is extremely small relative to the benefits accrued from reducing crime, improvements in mental health in the community, maintaining housing values, and providing employment opportunities to community members.

From a perspective of re-entry, employing individuals with criminal justice involvement in a semiskilled occupation that pays decent wages can spur economic self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship. Research in Chicago and New York City shows that providing adolescents and young adults with decent paying semiskilled jobs reduces serious crime among participants and the chances of becoming incarcerated in state prison compared to those who remain on a waitlist.<sup>16</sup> As the founder of Homeboy Industries, Greg Boyles, is famous for saying: "Nothing stops a bullet like a job."<sup>17</sup>

Today, a growing body of high-quality science demonstrates that abating the negative effects of blight and abandonment in cities can dramatically reduce crime in neighborhoods. Moreover, these changes do not require major upfront investments from cities. They require local partnerships between landscape workers, contractors, and municipal organizations to address cleaning up blighted blocks and providing employment opportunities for people in the community, many of whom have past or current criminal justice involvement. Research shows that dramatic impacts can be made by addressing these problems block-by-block. And given that crime and related problems are highly concentrated in the same places, this means that strategic planning can have large scale population benefits. Programs like LandCare can be reproduced in cities across the country, can easily be scaled to cover entire sections of cities in need of remediation, and are sustainable with limited overall public investment. Investing in remediating blight and abandonment in America's highest crime places can improve the quality of life for everyone living in these spaces and provide opportunities for prevention and rehabilitation for community members with criminal justice involvement. Repairing blight and abandonment can help cities restore places and people.

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<sup>16</sup> See Heller, Sara B. "Summer jobs reduce violence among disadvantaged youth." *Science* 346, no. 6214 (2014): 1219-1223.; Gelber, Alexander, Adam Isen, and Judd B. Kessler. "The effects of youth employment: Evidence from New York City lotteries." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 131, no. 1 (2015): 423-460.

<sup>17</sup> See article: <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=127019188>.