



Landscape care of urban vacant properties and implications for health and safety: Lessons from photovoice



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ABSTRACT

Care of vacant properties in urban environments is of particular interest to planners and residents alike. We report on a photovoice project completed by community leaders, researchers, and residents in two Detroit neighborhoods experiencing longtime systemic disinvestment. Participants photographed and discussed examples of care in a series of three focus groups in each neighborhood. Analyses highlight how acts of landscape care and visible cues to care contribute to changes in physical and social environments, and explore various links to health. We suggest theoretical and practical applications of residents' perspectives on landscape care and identify implications for well-being and neighborhood stability.

The beauty of manicured lawns, gardens intended to feed families, beautiful flowers, pocket parks for children to play in or for adults to sit while contemplating their next move in life—these do not escape our sense of humanity simply because we live in an "ill community". We want and need the best for ourselves and loved ones just like those who live in thriving areas.

– Reflection from photovoice participant and co-author, Kathleen Hurd.

1. Introduction

1.1. Urban vacancy, landscape care, & health

Since the mid-twentieth century, many U.S. cities have experienced significant industrial decline and disinvestment, which has resulted in depopulation and massive inventories of vacant property (Dewar and Thomas, 2013). Often referred to as 'post-industrial,' 'shrinking,' or 'legacy' cities, these include Buffalo, New York; Cleveland, Ohio; and Detroit, Michigan. Disinvestment in legacy cities is linked to weak housing markets, unemployment, concentrated poverty, racial segregation, and environmental contamination from past land uses (Dewar

and Thomas, 2013; Massey and Denton, 1993). In Detroit, for example, approximately 140,000 properties have undergone tax or mortgage foreclosure since 2005 and, consequently, the Detroit Land Bank Authority now owns nearly 80,000 vacant parcels, or one-quarter of all property (DLBA, 2015). While decision-makers struggle to address economic implications, there are high stakes for the well-being of residents remaining in neighborhoods with large numbers of vacant properties (Accordino et al., 2000).

Living among vacant properties in post-industrial urban settings may influence residents' physical and mental health through multiple pathways. Adverse physical environmental exposures (e.g., debris, rodents) are disproportionately high and have been linked to injury risk (Goldstein et al., 2003). Abandoned homes provide spaces for criminal activity that threaten residents' safety (Garvin et al., 2013). Mental health is at risk for residents subjected to chronic stressors associated with nearby unmaintained conditions (Kruger et al., 2007). High levels of vacancy and associated adverse health effects may also eclipse positive features or experiences in a depopulating urban neighborhood (Garvin et al., 2013), contributing to further depopulation. To the extent that landscape care of vacant property counteracts histories of disinvestment in depopulating urban neighborhoods, there may be positive implications for residents' health (South et al., 2015), directly and as a product of neighborhood change.

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1.2. Theoretical framework

The construct of landscape care, as it relates to neighborhood stability, may add to understanding of stress and health in post-industrial urban neighborhoods. Social scientists have long measured and assessed the stress-inducing experiences of disadvantage and disorder as “stark visual reminders of neighborhood deterioration, that may trigger institutional disinvestment, out-migration, and a general malaise among residents (Sampson et al., 2002, p.465).” In contrast, landscape care might suggest institutional investment, in-migration or neighborhood stability, and may be related to improved physical and mental well-being among residents. Different disciplines have approached the concept, but few studies have systematically examined landscape care of vacant property, and fewer still have done so from the perspective of residents in post-industrial urban neighborhoods.

It is well documented that highly vacant neighborhoods may contribute to adverse health outcomes as conditions of disadvantage or physical deterioration of abandoned property activate stress processes (Pearlin et al., 1981) and contribute to long-term chronic stress (Boardman, 2004; Schulz et al., 2008, 2013). These conditions may inhibit neighborhood capacity and elicit feelings of fear, powerlessness, isolation, hopelessness, or mistrust as contributors to distress (Brenner, 2012; Latkin and Curry, 2003; Ross and Mirowsky, 2009). Chronic stress is repeatedly linked to adverse mental and physical health outcomes, including premature mortality (Cohen et al., 2012; Jackson et al., 2010; Juster et al., 2009). The concept of structural violence, which holds institutions accountable for debilitating effects of disinvestment, may also apply (DeVerteuil, 2015; Farmer et al., 2006). With this framework, theorists describe how neoliberal sociopolitical systems normalize a “killing me softly” approach by contributing to the accumulation of stressors over the life course (Inwood and Alderman, 2015).

Neighborhood conditions influence residential stability, which is also associated with chronic stress levels among residents. Residential stability refers to the turnover rate of a population. A ‘stable’ population has a high proportion of residents residing in the same household in the previous five or more years (Ross and Mirowsky, 2001). Residential stability is associated with the development of social networks, higher levels of social control, accrual of wealth, and better overall health (Boardman, 2004; Cagney et al., 2005), as well as lower levels of perceived stress (Schulz et al., 2008), childhood poverty (Ferriss, 2006), and drug use (Boardman et al., 2001). In low-income neighborhoods, however, there is some evidence to suggest that residential stability may be associated with adverse health of residents due to the “daily exposure to chronic stress in the physical, economic, and social environments in which they live” (Ross and Mirowsky, 2001, p.16). As blight increases, for example, more residents lose confidence in the future of their neighborhoods, defer repairs, and seek to move (Galster, 2001). Those who remain in neighborhoods with increasingly isolated or dangerous conditions may do so by choice or because they do not have the economic means to leave (Coulton et al., 2012).

Heavily grounded in landscape design and planning literature, landscape care emphasizes positive, observable signs that residents, neighborhoods, and municipalities are caring for properties (Nassauer, 1995). Sometimes referred to as ‘cues to care’ (Nassauer, 1995), they may include, for example: flowers, yard décor, community gardens, boarded up windows and doors, and other locally relevant signs of ownership or collective identity. Such cues are theorized to have a “halo effect” in which property appearance affects assumptions about the people who live there and related neighborhood characteristics, such as perceived safety (Nassauer, 2011). In highly vacant neighborhoods, the halo effect of landscape care may help to counteract adverse effects of disorder or deterioration on residents’ health and safety, and may affect neighborhood stability (Nassauer and Raskin, 2014; Wood and Giles-Corti, 2008).

1.3. Study purpose

Studies demonstrate that residents’ perceptions of physical and social environments in their neighborhoods differ from those reported by systematic observers (Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999; Schulz et al., 2008). These differences vary in implications for health (Schaefer-McDaniel et al., 2010; Schulz et al., 2013). Thus, improved understanding of landscape care, as perceived by residents who experience it directly, may help improve program, policy, and landscape interventions in ways that reduce stressors that affect neighborhood stability and resident health.

The purpose of this study was to better understand landscape care in highly vacant urban neighborhoods, with particular attention to acts of care, the meanings these acts have for residents, and implications for residents’ well-being. We used a photovoice (Wang and Burris, 1997) process in which participants documented “care” through photographs and then discussed these acts and meanings ascribed to selected photos in focus groups. The project was implemented by community members and facilitated by teams of academic researchers and community leaders in two Detroit neighborhoods. Reflecting the collaborative nature of this effort, academic and community partners, including two participants, were involved in the analysis and preparation of this manuscript as co-authors.

2. Methods

2.1. Study areas: Brightmoor and Jefferson Chalmers

This study was conducted in Detroit’s Brightmoor and Jefferson Chalmers neighborhoods (Fig. 1), which have experienced notable population loss and increased household vacancy since the early 2000s (Table 1) at rates notably higher than the city as a whole. Population loss between 2000 and 2014 was 56% in Brightmoor, 34% in Jefferson Chalmers, 27% in Detroit citywide, and .5% Michigan statewide.

2.2. Photovoice procedures

Photovoice is an interactive method in which people photograph aspects of their lived experience. Used as a research or community organizing method, the process actively engages those experiencing a particular phenomenon in creating visual images, naming, and examining dimensions of their experience from their own perspective (Cataloni and Minkler, 2010). We borrowed heavily from the protocol, experiences, and ethical considerations reported by Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001), e.g., discussing Wang and Redwood-Jones’ areas of image ethics (e.g., intrusion into private space) with partici-

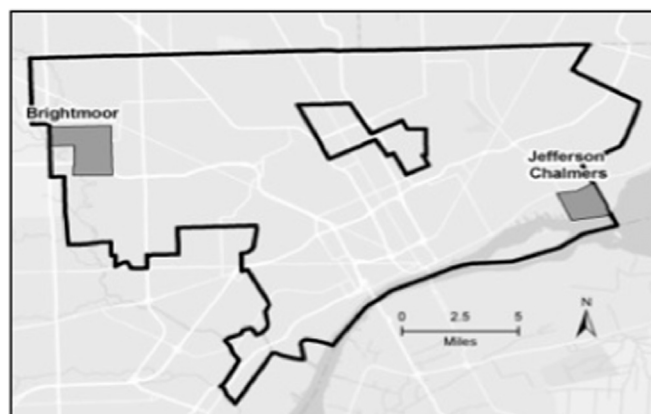


Fig. 1. Photovoice neighborhoods: Brightmoor and Jefferson Chalmers, Detroit, Michigan.

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