
Community Revitalization

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What issues characterize a declining neighborhood or community?

Many issues, most often related to poverty, threaten a community's well-being. No single issue means a community is declining, but the presence of multiple issues can signal trouble. Eventually, these issues can impact a community's growth and significantly reduce the quality of life for residents.

Distressed neighborhoods are often marked by:

- Poverty
- Chronic unemployment
- Crime, domestic violence, gang activity and substance abuse
- Substandard and inadequate housing
- Deteriorated buildings, damaged streets and other infrastructural problems
- Lack of new businesses and economic development opportunities
- Depressed real estate markets
- Limited access to healthcare, transportation, child care and other human services
- Poorly performing schools
- Racial or ethnic isolation,
- Inequities between the haves and have-nots in the neighborhood

High-functioning neighborhoods are often marked by:

- Diversity of residents in terms of age, culture and income
- A sense of shared relationships, concerns and pride
- Homeownership, which can help strengthen neighborhoods by attracting residents with a shared interest in maintaining community well-being
- Diversity of property use (a mixture of single and multi-family housing, businesses, community services and recreation), which promotes a steady flow of people (pedestrians and drivers) and deters crime
- Clean, attractive landscaping that includes trees, green space, street lighting, signage, sidewalks and calm traffic flow
- Well-lit pedestrian-friendly pathways that are safe from vehicles and accessible to transit systems, schools, services, parks and jobs

What factors can distress communities?

Poverty and poverty-related issues can cause community decline. The causes of poverty are widely debated, ranging from individual hardships and local economic troubles to systemic inadequacies (lack of supportive programs and policies). Cultural dynamics can also distress communities. As concentrations of low-income residents increase and more residents struggle to meet day-to-day challenges, the conditions in their neighborhoods often decline.

Specific factors that can distress a community include:

- Poor land and housing use
- Employer downsizing or closing
- Population changes as residents grow old and/or move out of neighborhoods
- Natural disasters like earthquakes, fires or floods
- Shifting of resources from older neighborhoods to hot new communities, resulting in less opportunities and services for residents of the older neighborhoods

How are communities revitalized?

Communities are revitalized when people commit their time, energy and resources to address the issues that cause communities to decline, issues like poverty, illiteracy and unemployment. Revitalization occurs when people help others realize their strengths and use those strengths to improve life for themselves, their families and communities.

Community revitalization is often neighborhood-centered, or driven by the priorities, processes and leadership of neighborhood residents and leaders. As such, community organizers often map assets, or identify what is valuable and productive in a community. These assets include financial resources (like grants and other funding) and non-financial resources (like the skills, talents and time of volunteers) that help strengthen neighborhoods and address issues that cause communities to decline. When revitalization efforts are neighborhood-centered and call on the strengths of a community, they better reflect the collective values and goals of the community and ensure long-term success.

Some key characteristics of community revitalization include:

- Resident and community involvement, empowerment and leadership
- Integrity, fairness and accountability
- Ensuring marginalized, vulnerable people are included and benefit from the process
- Individual, family and community wealth
- Home improvements and ownership

Job and business development

Improving community infrastructures (like plumbing, waste management and other public resources)

Improving healthcare, education and other human services

Who can help revitalize communities?

Every person can help revitalize communities. People who are affiliated with corporations, foundations, non-profit organizations, government agencies and faith groups can use their connections to bring needed resources to distressed communities. Even people without a lot of money or clout can also do their part by helping complete community repairs, remove graffiti, pick up litter, plant trees or do something else that beautifies a neighborhood and improves community life.

Community revitalization is often initiated by block clubs, neighborhood associations and Community Development Corporations (CDCs). These groups usually consist of residents, business owners and community leaders who want to improve their communities. CDCs, or non-profits that focus on affordable housing, economic development and transportation, are the most formal of these groups.

A range of other groups can also help. Local, state and federal government agencies can work collaboratively with residents, non-profits and corporations to ensure communities have adequate housing, policing and other resources.

Institutions like banks, investment companies, hospitals and health clinics can also be key partners in revitalization, as these institutions want residents to be healthy and economically stable. Colleges and universities often help by conducting research, supplying interns and providing scholarships to address the issues that contribute to community decline.

Why should we revitalize communities?

Revitalizing communities helps ensure people are healthy, safe, educated and can have a decent standard of life. This, in turn, contributes to an increased quality of life for the entire community and creates a positive legacy for future generations.

Specific benefits of community revitalization include:

Greater awareness of and proactive solutions to community issues

More access to livable-wage careers, self-sufficiency and wealth

Improved health care and human services

Safer, more attractive neighborhoods

Vibrant, active and innovative businesses

Less social, economic, educational and technology gaps

Increased community pride and civic participation

Community revitalization can also increase homeownership.

Some specific benefits of homeownership include:

Increased wealth and tax benefits for homeowners

More stable neighborhoods, as the average homeowner maintains a home for 12 years, versus a renters three-year average (according to U.S. Census housing surveys)

More community pride and civic participation, as homeowners are more likely to make home improvements, help solve community issues and get involved in civic activities like voting and engaging their elected officials

Enhanced family life, as children of homeowners are more likely to become high-school and college graduates and become homeowners themselves (according to a study by Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies)

What are some challenges to revitalizing communities?

Even under the best of intentions, community revitalization can cause dissension and undesirable outcomes.

Some of the pitfalls of community revitalization include:

Displacement of low-income residents, seniors and others when affordable housing is created or property taxes increase. This situation, often referred to as gentrification, makes it difficult for long-term residents to remain in neighborhoods being revitalized.

Financial difficulties for first-time homeowners who become overwhelmed by the new demands of maintaining a house

Failure to engage long-term residents during the process, which can cause residents to resent outsiders and the changes occurring in their neighborhoods

Underestimating the time and resources needed for long-term revitalization

Failing to address underlying issues of community decline (like poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, substance abuse) alongside the bricks and mortar or physical revitalization efforts

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