

**Tackling Poverty in Place:  
Principles for a Next Generation of Place-Conscious Interventions**

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Neighborhoods matter to the well-being of families and their children. They are the locus for essential public and private services—schools being perhaps the most significant of these. The availability of quality grocery stores, reliable child care, and safe after-school activities and healthy recreational facilities also shape the quality of life a neighborhood offers its residents, as does access to employment opportunities. Moreover, neighbors and neighborhood institutions provide needed social and emotional support and help transmit the norms and values that influence behavior and teach children what is expected of them as they mature. And where we live directly affects our exposure to crime, disorder, and violence, which in turn affect our physical and emotional well-being.

A substantial body of research establishes that conditions in severely distressed neighborhoods<sup>2</sup> undermine both the quality of daily life and the long-term life chances of parents and children, other things being equal (see Ellen and Turner 1997 and Turner and Rawlings 2009 for reviews of the research literature on neighborhood effects). In fact, studies have found evidence of damage at every stage of life. To illustrate, preschool children living in low-income neighborhoods exhibit more aggressive behavior when interacting with others. Young people from high poverty neighborhoods are less successful in school than their counterparts from more affluent communities; they earn lower grades, are more likely to drop out, and less likely to go on to college. Neighborhood environments influence teens' sexual activity and the likelihood that girls will become pregnant during their teen years. Young people who live in high crime areas are more likely to commit crimes themselves, other things being equal. And living in disadvantaged neighborhoods significantly increases the risk of disease and mortality among both children and adults.

Moreover, emerging evidence suggests that living in a high-poverty neighborhood undermines some outcomes not just for one generation, but across generations. For example, children whose parents grew up in poor neighborhoods score dramatically worse on reading and problem-solving tests than those whose parents grew up in non-poor neighborhoods, other things being equal (Sharkey 2013). In other words, neighborhood distress contributes to the persistence of poverty across generations.

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<sup>1</sup> The evidence and analysis presented here draws heavily from a longer paper, prepared with support from the JPB Foundation (Turner, Edelman, Poethig, and Aron forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> The term “neighborhood distress” encompasses an interconnected set of problems, including crime and violence, physical and environmental blight, private sector disinvestment, weak (or absent) institutions and services, high rates of joblessness and poverty, and low levels of social capital and collective efficacy. Most researchers use the poverty rate of a census tract as the primary proxy for neighborhood distress, with tract-level poverty rates above 30 or 40 percent serving as indicators of severe distress (see Jargowsky 1998 for the seminal research on concentrated neighborhood poverty). However, not all high-poverty neighborhoods suffer from the same levels of social and economic distress.

Breaking the cycle of poverty requires sustained interventions at many levels, including nationwide efforts that expand employment opportunities, boost wages, strengthen systems of work supports, and bolster the social safety-net. But while these types of universal reforms are necessary, *they are not sufficient* for families living in severely distressed neighborhood environments. Interventions that explicitly target the neighborhood conditions most damaging to family well-being and children's healthy development are also necessary to "move the needle" on poverty – especially among families of color, who account for the majority of those living in severely distressed neighborhoods.

*Community Action Project of Tulsa County (CAP) is a nationally recognized anti-poverty agency, coupling high-quality early education with parent support services as part of a two-generation approach to breaking the cycle of poverty. Its programs serve low-income families throughout Tulsa County. For example, CAP's Early Childhood Program, enrolls over 2,400 children into Head Start/Early Head Start centers or into a range of home visiting program options, and also serves as the entry point for parents to simultaneously receive tailored support services. In 2005, as the result of a lengthy strategic planning process, CAP recognized that the impact of its county-wide efforts were undermined by neighborhood conditions in the most distressed neighborhoods and began supplementing their agenda with more targeted efforts to tackle pockets of poverty.*

**Lessons from a century of place-based practice.** Beginning with the settlement houses of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, practitioners and policymakers have worked to tackle the challenges of poverty in place through an evolving set of strategies (for concise histories of this field, see Mossberger 2010, Van Hoffman 2012, and Martinez-Cosio and Bussell 2013). A century of experimentation and evolving practice has generated substantial evidence in support of arguments that efforts to combat poverty should include initiatives that focus on the neighborhoods where it is concentrated. But experience has also produced a much deeper understanding of the complexity of the problem and the challenges of implementing effective interventions.

Historically, efforts to overcome the negative effects of neighborhood conditions on families and children have primarily aimed to change conditions *within the boundaries* of a distressed neighborhood by building and rehabilitating housing, providing community amenities, delivering needed services, and expanding jobs within the neighborhood. These place-based efforts, many led by community development corporations,<sup>3</sup> have made important contributions to the well-being of inner-city neighborhoods, in particular by increasing the availability of decent, affordable housing. To date, however, few have achieved their larger goal of sustainable neighborhood transformation – reversing the effects of disinvestment and distress and effectively connecting low-income residents with the economic mainstream (Kubisch et al. 2010b).

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<sup>3</sup> Community development corporations (CDCs) are non-profit entities, incorporated to acquire and redevelop land, manage properties, and deliver services in low-income communities. CDCs typically serve a clearly-defined neighborhood and include residents and businesses on their governing boards.

In recent years, some place-based initiatives have focused particular attention on *income mixing*, making investments designed to attract higher income residents, on the theory that their purchasing power and political clout are essential to sustain the high-quality services (both public and private) that neighborhoods need to thrive. Other initiatives place greater emphasis on resident empowerment and *community building*, seeking to strengthen a neighborhood's social networks and collective efficacy so that residents can work to help each other and to advocate for needed resources. And some have begun to focus less on neighborhood transformation than on family outcomes, viewing the neighborhoods in which they work as *platforms* or *hubs* for delivering the services and supports low-income families need to advance.

Today, innovative practitioners, scholars, and advocates are defining a next generation of strategies that can best be described as “place-conscious” rather than “place-based.” These strategies recognize the importance of place and target the particular challenges of distressed neighborhoods. But they are less constrained by narrowly defined neighborhood boundaries, more attuned to market-wide opportunities and barriers, and open to alternative models of how neighborhoods function for their residents. Six principles distinguish this place-conscious approach to combatting poverty from more narrowly place-based efforts of the past.

**Scale matters.** The optimal geographic scale for tackling a problem varies across policy domains. In some cases, interventions can have the greatest impact by focusing at the block level. In others, it makes more sense to intervene across a somewhat larger neighborhood geography, or even at a city-wide or regional scale. For example, a child's exposure to crime and violence may be determined by conditions on the blocks immediately surrounding his or her home, so a violence prevention intervention that targets a small sub-neighborhood might be essential to improve that child's life chances. In contrast, ensuring that the child has access to adequate healthcare, or that his or her parents can buy healthy foods may call for larger-scale interventions (building a community clinic or affordable grocery stores within walking distance, for example). And improving the quality of a child's education requires action at the scale of an elementary school enrollment zone, or possibly the school district as a whole.

Correspondingly, while some neighborhood challenges can be effectively addressed through work by and with residents and community-based institutions, many require action at higher levels of governance. Severe distress within a neighborhood ultimately stems from the interaction between market forces and public policies at city, metropolitan, and state levels that constrain opportunities for poor people and disinvest from the neighborhoods where they live. Therefore, the levers for addressing the many challenges facing these neighborhoods are not all contained within the boundaries of the neighborhood itself. Initiatives focused solely on neighborhood-scale collaboration and integration may have limited impact because they lack access to resources at different levels of the political system (Weir, Rongerude, and Ansell 2011). Sustainable changes in neighborhood conditions are more likely to be achieved when all levers are activated – when place-conscious efforts reform policies and mobilize resources at city, state, and federal levels *in addition to* breaking out of conventional silos at the neighborhood level.

*CASA de Maryland is a national leader in providing immigrant-focused services, and an excellent example of engaging at multiple scales. Founded in a church basement in suburban Maryland nearly 30 years ago to address the needs of Central American refugees, CASA now provides a range of direct services in sites across the state. It focuses on economic empowerment, financial independence, and social, linguistic and political integration, coupled with a community organizing and advocacy program that empowers low-income immigrants to challenge the systems that prevent them from achieving economic and social well-being. In 2012, building on a longstanding partnership with the Prince George's County Public School system, CASA received a Promise Neighborhoods planning grant for the Langley Park neighborhood. This led CASA to focus on other critical challenges facing low-income families in Langley Park. In particular, it has launched a multi-year advocacy campaign to ensure that the substantial resources that will be generated in Langley Park by construction of a \$2.2 billion light rail transit system will benefit existing residents. This campaign will focus on preservation and creation of safe, quality and affordable housing; protections for small businesses; and economic opportunities for local residents.*

**City and regional opportunities matter.** Many of the services and opportunities families need are located outside the neighborhoods in which they live, and interventions that connect them to these opportunities may be more effective than interventions that try to create them within the neighborhood. The best example is employment. Few people today work in the neighborhoods where they live. Rather, they commute to jobs in other parts of their metropolitan region. The primary employment challenge facing residents of distressed urban neighborhoods is *access* to job opportunities in the larger region. They may not know about those opportunities; they may not have the skills or credentials necessary to qualify for them; or the time and cost of commuting may be too high. A place-conscious intervention would improve access to regional employment opportunities rather than only trying to create jobs within the neighborhood. This might mean helping residents enroll in a city- or region-wide training and placement program with a strong track-record, helping them learn about and apply for jobs in unfamiliar suburban locations, or advocating for new transportation options that link low-income neighborhoods to centers of employment.

One linkage strategy that has been rigorously tested is to provide special-purpose vans or buses that transport workers from low-income neighborhoods to outlying employment centers. This approach has generally produced quite disappointing results, however, because job locations are widely dispersed and work schedules vary, making the services costly for providers and inconvenient for riders. A demonstration of this approach, called the Bridges to Work Initiative, found no evidence of higher employment or earnings among participants than for a control group (Palubinsky and Watson 1997). An alternative approach is to help low-income people buy (and maintain) cars. A growing body of research finds a positive relationship between automobile access and employment rates among the poor. Studies that directly compare the relative benefits of cars and public transit find that automobiles are far more powerful determinants of job acquisition and job retention than is public transit (Pendall, Dawkins, and

Blumenberg forthcoming). Nonprofit organizations in cities across the country operate programs that distribute cars directly to families, make low-interest loans for car purchases, or facilitate matched savings for car down payments and purchases (Working Cars for Working Families 2010).

Interventions that expand access to opportunities outside a distressed neighborhood may also offer solutions to education challenges. In many low-income neighborhoods, the public schools perform very poorly, with under-maintained facilities, inadequate supplies, ineffective teachers, chaotic classrooms, and high rates of truancy and drop-outs. Efforts are underway at local, state, and federal levels to improve the schools that serve low-income neighborhoods and these merit attention and support. However, some children may benefit from strategies that offer access to high-performing schools outside their immediate neighborhoods. Research evidence strongly suggests that the challenges to effective teaching and learning are substantial when a large share of students in a classroom are poor (Kahlenberg 2001), and a recent study found that low-income students who were randomly assigned to attend low-poverty schools scored higher on math and reading exams than those assigned to higher-poverty schools, despite the county's policy to direct extra resources to higher poverty schools for full-day kindergarten, smaller class sizes, teachers' professional development, and special instruction for students with special needs (Schwartz 2010). Interventions that can give poor children access to non-poor schools include public school choice programs, charter schools, and school vouchers (Green et al. 2010). A number of urban school districts are currently implementing at least some programs of this type, including Washington DC, New Orleans, and New York City. Significant questions remain, however, about whether low-income children are able to take full advantage of the opportunities these programs create and about how to *combine* them with initiatives that strengthen neighborhood schools (rather than pitting the two approaches against one another).

**Mobility matters.** Place-conscious practitioners increasingly recognize that residential mobility plays a critical – and complicating – role in the effectiveness of their work. Neighborhood distress is a dynamic process, sustained by the inflow of poor people (who have few alternatives for where to live) and the outflow of non-poor people seeking better environments). About 12 percent of the US population moves to a new address each year and mobility rates are even higher among low-income households and renters. As a result, distressed neighborhoods frequently experience rates of mobility that exceed the national average.

Residential mobility can be a symptom (and a source) of instability and insecurity, with many low-income households making short-distance moves because of problems with landlords, creditors, housing conditions, or in response to family violence or conflict. But mobility can also reflect positive changes in a family's circumstances, such as buying a home for the first time, moving to be close to a new job, or trading up to a larger or better-quality house or apartment. Similarly, staying in place sometimes reflects a family's stability, security, and satisfaction with its home and neighborhood surroundings, but in other cases it may mean that a family lacks the resources to move to better housing or to a preferred neighborhood (see Coulton, Theodos, and Turner 2012).

High levels of mobility complicate the intended mechanisms of many neighborhood change strategies, both because families may leave before they have had time to benefit fully from enhanced services and supports and because new residents continue to arrive with needs that have not been met. For example, suppose a high-quality pre-school program serving a large share of a neighborhood's children significantly boosts their school readiness. One might expect to see subsequent improvements in the neighborhood elementary school's third-grade reading scores as a result. But if many of the pre-school children move within a year or two, the pool of third graders will include very few of those who attended the early program. School-level test scores may therefore show no evidence of neighborhood-level gains in performance. This does not mean that the pre-school program was ineffective, but high mobility does make it more difficult to build up from individual-level gains to neighborhood-wide transformation.

*The **Jobs-Plus Demonstration** was launched in the mid-1990s by HUD, the Rockefeller Foundation, and MDRC working in partnership. Based on the assumption that a community where more adults work is safer, more vibrant, and provides a better environment for families, the demonstration targeted public housing developments where unemployment was particularly high and delivered a three-part intervention: high-quality job training and placement services; rent incentives to reward work; and community-level support and encouragement for residents to find and keep jobs. The theory was that this combination of incentives and supports would increase the share of residents working, thereby transforming the neighborhood across multiple dimensions. In three of five demonstration sites, all three components of the intervention were fully and effectively implemented, providing an effective test of the underlying theory of change. Employment and earnings rose significantly for residents of these sites and the gains were sustained over time. However, the communities changed very little, primarily because so many residents moved over the course of the demonstration period. In other words, this place-based intervention generated important gains for individuals and their families, launching them on a path toward greater economic stability and success, but it did not catalyze a measurable transformation of community-wide conditions (Turner and Rawlings 2005).*

Patterns of residential mobility can also crowd low-income residents out of a revitalizing neighborhood. If investments in community services and amenities yield visible improvements and a neighborhood begins to attract higher income residents, market forces may reassert themselves, resulting in much-improved social and economic indicators at the neighborhood level without meaningful gains in well-being for the original residents.

One way to address these challenges is to try to reduce involuntary mobility among families living in a neighborhood who want to stay there. Indeed, helping families avoid unplanned or disruptive moves can play a critical role in their well-being and in the success of a neighborhood change strategy. This can involve preservation and production of affordable housing, but it might also include one-time or short-term subsidies for families facing eviction or an involuntary move, assistance in resolving conflicts with a

landlord, or longer term case-management services that can help a family overcome sources of instability.

In addition, however, a place-conscious initiative might also offer an assisted housing mobility option, offering low-income families the option of moving to more desirable neighborhoods that offer safety, effective schools, decent services and amenities. These programs (which have been the focus of considerable federal attention and experimentation over the last two decades) typically provide families with a portable housing voucher funded through the federal Section 8 program, along with help searching for and moving to a better neighborhood (Scott et al. 2013).

*The best-known assisted housing mobility program is the **Moving to Opportunity (MTO)** demonstration, conducted by HUD in five metropolitan areas to evaluate the impact of relocation for poor families and their children (Briggs, Popkin, and Goering 2010). The evaluation concluded that, as a group, the MTO experimental families enjoyed significantly lower crime rates, improved housing, and better mental health than the control group but not higher employment, incomes, or educational attainment (Sanbonmatsu et al. 2011). The health gains among MTO's experimental families are hugely important, because obesity, anxiety, and depression severely degrade a person's quality of life, employability, and parenting abilities. But the absence of employment and educational gains is disappointing. The likely explanation is that the special mobility assistance provided by the demonstration did not enable the experimental families to gain and sustain access to high-opportunity neighborhoods. Experimental families moved to better-quality housing and safer neighborhoods but few spent more than a year or two in low-poverty neighborhoods. New analysis finds that the MTO families that lived for longer periods in neighborhoods with lower poverty rates did achieve better outcomes in work and school, as well as in health (Turner, Nichols, and Comey 2012).*

**Institutional capacity matters.** No single organization can perform all the tasks and activities needed to transform a distressed neighborhood into one that effectively serves poor children and their families. In any neighborhood, multiple organizations across the public and nonprofit sectors – and operating at different scales – will have to work together. But experience argues strongly for one organization to play a coordinating role, leading and facilitating these multiple stakeholders as they pursue a shared vision. This is no easy task given the multi-dimensional challenges facing distressed communities and the complexities of race, ethnicity, and class that inevitably surface as goals and strategies are developed. Such a role has variously been described as “orchestra conductor,” “quarterback,” or “backbone.” However it is labeled, it is increasingly acknowledged as essential to achieving ambitious place-conscious objectives. Further, performing the role effectively requires financial support that is sustained over time. If funders are only willing to support direct service delivery or capital investments, and not the hard work of leadership, coordination, and capacity building, place-conscious efforts are unlikely to gain traction or be sustained (Kubisch et al. 2010).

The “orchestra conductor” role can potentially be played by many different types of organizations: a local foundation, a neighborhood-based organization, a public agency, or a citywide nonprofit. This organization does not have to do everything itself, but it must have the capacity to bring actors together across silos, to integrate their agreed-upon strategies, and to engage vertically with key city and regional actors. To succeed in this role, the conductor organization must be viewed as a viable leader across sectors, established and successful in its own area of expertise, and financially stable with strong internal leadership. Unfortunately, as the Citi Foundation discovered recently in its Partners in Progress initiative, fewer groups have this capacity than one might hope, in part because so few funders reward it.

*Community Solutions’ **Brownsville Partnership** is a collective of organizations and residents working to transform Brownsville, Brooklyn – one of New York City’s poorest and least healthy communities. Brownsville is a community of almost 90,000 residents with the country’s largest concentration of public housing: 10,000 units. In 2008, Community Solutions brought together local leaders, business organizations, government agencies, and high-performing nonprofits to work together to change the conditions that trap Brownsville and many of its residents in long-term poverty – and to do so without displacing local residents. The initiative focuses on six large public housing developments in the neighborhood where some of the most extreme social conditions in New York City are concentrated. Community Solutions anchors the effort and coordinates the work of the partner organizations, convening and facilitating regular communication, managing data collection and analysis to track neighborhood progress and articulating and tracking common success metrics.*

**Measurement and accountability matter.** Among the important functions of the orchestra conductor is to guide the development and tracking of performance measures that hold partners accountable for shared outcome goals. The idea of *collective impact* reflects the reality that no organization can solve these complex problems single-handedly and that significant progress only occurs when actors from different sectors work together in pursuit of a common agenda. When this agenda is made explicit by a set of agreed upon and measurable goals, participating organizations can hold each other accountable and their work is more likely to remain aligned.

Agreeing upon a shared set of measurable goals and developing the data systems necessary to track progress can be costly and time-consuming. But it is an investment worth making. Given the complexity of the task, collective impact measures may be developed with the help of an embedded research organization that can translate desired outcomes into operational measures and assemble and process the data necessary to track these measures over time. However, researchers cannot be allowed to hijack the measurement effort; collective impact measures will only be useful if they produce information that helps local actors learn from disappointments as well as from successes, and continuously refine their efforts based on information.



**Local context matters.** Traditionally, many community improvement initiatives have reflected an implicit vision that every neighborhood should function as an “incubator” for its residents – especially its low-income or otherwise vulnerable residents. The theory of change underlying this vision is that investments in neighborhood programs and services provide the supports that low-income families need to thrive as well as the amenities that make them want to remain as their circumstances improve. Simultaneous investments in community building strengthen social capital and civic capacity, further enhancing the well-being of individual residents and the vitality of the neighborhood. And, gradual improvements in well-being among residents reduce overall neighborhood poverty and distress levels.

This is an admirable aspiration, but it is not the only possible vision for neighborhood success. Place-conscious practitioners should also embrace the possibility that some neighborhoods may more effectively serve as launch pads for their residents, rather than as incubators. Like an incubator neighborhood, a launch pad offers needed services and supports, enabling residents to advance economically. But as residents achieve greater economic security, they move on to more desirable neighborhoods and are replaced by a new cohort of needy households. Launch pad neighborhoods would experience high mobility, and, even though many residents were making significant individual progress, the neighborhood as a whole would not show any improvement on indicators such as employment, income, or wealth.

Past research suggests that neighborhoods that serve as entry points for successive waves of immigrants may function in this way. And it may be fruitful to see these as highly successful neighborhoods, even though they remain very poor over time. For many neighborhoods, however, strategies that combine both incubating and launching will offer the greatest promise. The key is offering choice – a realistic possibility of remaining in an improved neighborhood that has long been home or moving to a healthier neighborhood that offers more economic opportunity, better schools, and greater safety.

*Neighborhood Centers, Inc. is the direct descendant of Houston’s original settlement houses.*

*Its work is intensely place-conscious – building the assets families need both from within their home communities and through connections to opportunities elsewhere in the region. Like the settlement houses, Neighborhood Centers’ core mission is helping immigrants and other low-income families get a foot-hold in the region’s booming economy. Regional in scope, Neighborhood Centers operates a network of 75 service sites. Its community centers in low-income neighborhoods provide English classes, early childhood education, health care, a credit union, and a charter school (including special classrooms for newly-arrived immigrant children) – all tailored to the needs of neighborhood residents. But Neighborhood Centers does not limit its work to tightly defined neighborhood boundaries. For example, it recently won a multi-year contract to operate state-funded workforce centers that provide employment training and search assistance to jobseekers throughout the Houston region.*

A growing understanding of how city and regional dynamics influence neighborhood outcomes is leading to the recognition that a single approach to place-conscious anti-poverty work will not be equally effective everywhere. Many of today’s best-known initiatives evolved in the big cities of the Northeast

and Midwest, where the legacy of racial segregation and poverty concentration has isolated and “trapped” residents in high-poverty neighborhoods – blocking their access to opportunities in the larger metro region. In other metropolitan areas the geographic patterns and opportunity structures are different. For example, in some of the fast-growing metros of the south and southwest, poor neighborhoods may not be as isolated, and a booming regional economy may be creating more opportunities for employment and earnings. Practitioners in these metro areas are developing and testing strategies for connecting poor people to opportunities that reflect the realities of their geography, demographics, and economy. These strategies are regional in scope, though also focused on the distressed neighborhoods where large numbers of poor people live.

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