



# Innovating to End Urban Poverty

## TACKLING POVERTY IN PLACE: PRINCIPLES FOR A NEXT GENERATION OF PLACE-CONSCIOUS INTERVENTIONS

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Neighborhoods are crucial to the physical, emotional, and economic well-being of their residents. Access to good schools, fresh food, quality health care, and safe living environments are largely determined at the neighborhood level.

The absence of such advantages negatively affects people at every stage of life. Preschoolers in low-income neighborhoods can be more aggressive in their social interactions, impoverished school-aged children get lower grades and are more likely to drop out, and young people surrounded by poverty and crime are more likely to commit crimes themselves. In disadvantaged neighborhoods, adults and children alike have an increased risk of disease and early death. Evidence suggests that such negative outcomes are passed down from one generation to the next.

### BREAKING THE CYCLE

Breaking this cycle of poverty requires broad interventions, including sustained efforts to expand employment, boost wages, and otherwise strengthen the social safety net. Reforms must work in tandem with interventions that target the neighborhood-level conditions most damaging to families. The challenge is how to refine place-based interventions to make them more effective.

Historically, efforts to improve neighborhood

conditions have focused on building and rehabilitating housing, creating community amenities, delivering needed services, and expanding job opportunities within the boundaries of a distressed neighborhood. These interventions, many led by community development corporations, have been generally positive, especially in increasing the availability of decent affordable housing. But few have succeeded in achieving sustainable neighborhood transformation by moving low-income residents into the economic mainstream.

Recently, some place-based initiatives have focused on income mixing, making investments designed to attract higher income residents and their economic clout to neighborhoods. Others have focused on community building through resident empowerment, which is designed to strengthen a neighborhood's social networks

The Innovating to End Urban Poverty policy brief series details policy recommendations from top researchers and practitioners on how to improve the quality of life for low-income urban residents. Topics include education, housing, health care, executive function, immigration and the role of place.

and help residents help themselves. Other efforts have focused more on the families within neighborhoods rather than the neighborhoods themselves.

### NEXT-GENERATION INTERVENTIONS

Neighborhood interventions are evolving into a new generation of strategies best described as “place-conscious” rather than place-based. These strategies recognize the importance of place and the unique challenges of distressed neighborhoods, but they are less constrained by rigid neighborhood boundaries, more attuned to market-wide opportunities, and open to alternative models of how neighborhoods can function.

These principles distinguish place-conscious strategies from place-based ones:

- **Scale matters.** Some interventions are effective block-by-block; others require larger geography. Determining the most effective scale to leverage proper resources lays an important foundation for neighborhood improvement. Sustainable changes are more likely to be achieved when policies are reformed and resources are activated at neighborhood, city, state, and federal levels.
- **Opportunities outside the neighborhood matter.** Interventions aimed at connecting people with opportunities beyond neighborhood boundaries may be more effective than trying to duplicate those resources within a neighborhood. Job training and opportunities in the broader region, for example, can work better than trying to create that training or employment opportunity within a neighborhood. Likewise, advocating for school choice programs can result in more poor children gaining access to non-poor schools,

where student achievement often exceeds that of schools with high concentrations of low-income students.

In many cities, lack of transportation can be a barrier to accessing opportunities outside the neighborhood. Programs helping people buy and maintain cars have proven more successful than transportation options such as special-purpose vans and buses.

- **Mobility matters.** About 12 percent of the U.S. population moves to a new address each year; mobility rates are even higher among low-income families. This can compromise the success of place-based anti-poverty programs, or, at best, make it difficult to gauge their effectiveness.

Mobility can reflect positive changes in a family’s circumstances, such as moving to upgraded housing or to be closer to a new job or school. Advocates for the poor should be open to offering assistance that encourages such positive moves.

But mobility can be a symptom (and source) of instability for individuals and communities. Individuals might leave a neighborhood before they have had an opportunity to benefit from a new program, or they might be squeezed out of an improving area by market forces and be denied the fruits of that neighborhood’s improvement. For the neighborhood, a steady supply of people arriving with unmet needs can mask the effectiveness of improvement programs.

One-time or short-term assistance to families can help prevent moves caused by financial instability. And conflict resolution assistance can diffuse conflicts with landlords or

neighbors that result in unwanted moves.

- **Institutional capacity matters.** No single organization can transform a distressed neighborhood, but experience suggests that one organization is needed to coordinate multiple efforts. No one kind of entity is necessarily best suited to this role. It can be a local foundation, a neighborhood-based organization, a public agency, or a citywide nonprofit.

No matter what organization serves as coordinator, doing the job effectively requires sustained financial support. Unfortunately, too many funders are narrowly focused on direct service delivery or capital investment. Funders must be willing to invest in leadership, coordination, and capacity building.

- **Measurement and accountability matter.** Organizations coming together to fight poverty in a particular neighborhood must agree on a set of measurable goals so that participating groups can hold each other accountable and align their efforts. Those selected to coordinate efforts should take the lead in developing the measurable goals and data systems necessary to track progress. Collective impact measures will only be useful if they produce

information that helps local actors learn from disappointments as well as from successes. The job can be costly and time-consuming but is an investment worth making.

### CONCLUSION

Traditionally, community improvement initiatives view the neighborhood as an incubator for advancing the lot of low-income residents. Community improvements cause residents to want to stay, and the improving fortunes of families further enhance the neighborhood.

This is an admirable aspiration, but it is not the only possible vision for neighborhood success. Some neighborhoods might more effectively serve as launch pads for their residents, who move on to better neighborhoods as their individual circumstances improve. Neighborhoods serving as entry points for successive waves of immigrants have often functioned this way. Although the neighborhood itself might remain poor, it functions well for those who live in it.

Ideally, neighborhoods can serve as both incubator and launch pad, giving residents a choice for the future.

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