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Data-Driven Organizing: A Community-University Partnership to Address Vacant and Abandoned Property

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Abstract

Vacant and abandoned properties adversely affect the physical, mental, social, and economic health and well-being of individuals, families, and communities. This article describes a community-university partnership that combined a multimethod data collection strategy with a novel community-based participatory intervention research model (i.e., data-driven organizing) to address the vacancy problem. The project assessed the conditions of over 1,500 properties in an economically disadvantaged, predominantly African American neighborhood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and mobilized residents to use an existing policy mechanism to ameliorate the impact of property vacancy in the community.

Keywords:

Community-based participatory research

community organizing

neighborhood

university-community partnerships

built environment

housing

Notes

¹ Despite widespread attention to the problem, the definition of vacancy remains elusive and is left primarily to local discretion ([Shlay & Whitman, 2006](#)). For example, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania defines a vacant building as, “a structure which is vacant and is either unsecured, secured by other than normal means, unsafe, non-compliant with housing or building codes, illegally occupied, or unoccupied for over a year with pending code enforcement citations” ([Hirokawa & Gonzalez, 2010](#), p. 630).

² According to the [Environmental Protection Agency \(2010\)](#), the most common sources of childhood lead exposure are lead paint, commonly found in homes built prior to 1978 and lead contaminated soil. Lead contaminated dust, present in homes with lead paint and in urban air as soil sediment is diffused by wind and traffic is another common source of contamination.

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