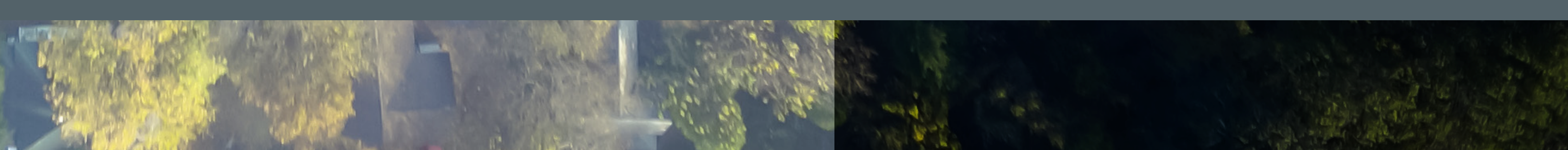
Tackling Vacancy and Abandonment:
Strategies and Impacts after the Great Recession

Center for COMMUNITY PROGRESS
Vacant Spaces into Vibrant Places

FEDERAL RESERVE BANK *of* CLEVELAND
Cleveland | Pittsburgh | Cincinnati

Federal Reserve Bank *of* Atlanta



This article is excerpted from ***Tackling Vacancy and Abandonment: Strategies and Impacts after the Great Recession***, a new edited volume from the **Center for Community Progress** and the **Federal Reserve Banks of Atlanta and Cleveland**.

The views expressed here are those of the editors and individual authors and are not necessarily those of the Center for Community Progress, Federal Reserve Banks, the Federal Reserve System, or the authors' affiliated organizations.

© 2021, Center for Community Progress, the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, and the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta. All rights reserved.

The Rise, Fall, and Rise of Vacant Properties as a Public Issue

Alan Mallach

Introduction

In the past 10 years, the issue of vacant and abandoned properties has been high on the agendas of many cities, counties, and states in the United States, as well as a frequent topic for newspaper pieces, blogs, and scholarly papers. The enactment of land bank legislation by many states, along with the proliferation of vacant property registration ordinances, demolition strategies, and other state and local activities, testifies to the extent to which this topic is recognized as an important public policy issue and addressed accordingly. During those years, the Center for Community Progress has contributed significantly to both the conversation and the growth of local activism around vacant and abandoned property issues. Yet the wellsprings of that activism are deep and diverse and hardly limited to older industrial cities in the Rust Belt with which it is most often associated.

Given the magnitude of the problem that vacant and abandoned properties represent, it seems unsurprising that it should be treated as an issue of importance. And yet, the widespread presence of such properties and their corrosive effects on urban and rural communities has been a reality in the American urban scene for far longer than the past 10 years. In 1970, Robert Embry, then commissioner of Housing and Community Development for the City of Baltimore,[1] at a U.S. Senate hearing, characterized abandonment as a "long ignored but most critical of problems" (Subcommittee on Housing and Urban Development 1970, p. 796). Two years later, a senior official of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) suggested that "the abandoned neighborhood may become the Sputnik[2] of the Seventies" (Goldbeck, 1972).

Yet for all the attention that abandoned properties received in the 1970s, they largely fell off the national radar in the 1980s, only to reemerge some two decades later. That unusual trajectory of rise, fall, and rise again is the subject of this chapter. In the course of this exploration, I look both at the incidence of vacant and abandoned properties and their effect on their surroundings and also at the discourse on vacant and abandoned properties, and under what circumstances people conclude that they are important and call for action. Such an exploration is, of course, speculative, given both the nature of the question and the limited and inconsistent information available. Thus, what I am trying to do is to create a mosaic by drawing together many small pieces of information, so that when taken together they will add up to a larger, more coherent picture of how vacant properties have been perceived and addressed as a public issue in the United States over the past 50 years.

The first section talks about how vacant and abandoned properties became a public issue in the 1970s and how that was part and parcel of the urban crisis narrative of that era. The second section then steps back and looks at the long trajectory of the incidence of vacant properties since the end of World War II to the present day. The third section looks at the decline in attention to vacant properties during the 1980s and 1990s, while the fourth looks at their reemergence as a public issue around the end of the millennium. In the conclusion, I look at how vacant and abandoned properties have been both perceived and addressed during the last 20 years and speculate about what this unusual trajectory might mean for the future and its implications for public policy.

When I discuss vacant and abandoned properties in these pages, I am addressing a subset—small in some places, large in others—of vacant properties overall. Leaving aside the millions of properties that are vacant at any point because they are used only seasonally or intermittently, a certain amount of vacancy is not only not a problem but an essential condition of any functioning housing market. Problems arise when too many properties become vacant, are not reoccupied or reused, and are eventually abandoned by their owners, whether in the literal sense or in the constructive sense of ceasing to maintain them, even though they may continue to pay property taxes. These are the vacant properties that are the subject of this chapter and this volume.

The Sputnik of the 1970s?

Properties were being abandoned in large numbers in cities like New York, Philadelphia, and St. Louis in the 1960s or earlier. The fact that an author could write in 1970 that "the conspicuous problem of abandoned housing — 100,000 units in New York, 30,000 in Philadelphia, and 10,000 in St. Louis— caused HUD, early in 1970, to carefully and seriously examine the nature of abandonment in American cities" (HUD, 1970, p. 5) makes clear that the problem had long been gathering steam. Despite that, it is notable that the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968, one of the most comprehensive bills ever enacted to address issues of housing and urban decline in the United States, which incorporated extensive changes to the Urban Renewal program as well as creating two large-scale, new subsidized housing programs (Sec. 235 and Sec. 236), was all but silent on the subject of abandoned properties, addressing them only in two minor tweaks to the demolition provisions in the 1949 Housing Act. This reflects the fact that while vacant properties were already a problem, in the sense that they were already affecting the quality of life in cities across much of the country, they had not yet meaningfully become part of the larger national discourse on the urban crisis that had begun in the 1950s.

The year 1970 appears to have been a watershed. U.S. Senate hearings that summer had called attention to the issue (Subcommittee on Housing and Urban Development, 1970), while, also in 1970, HUD commissioned a series of studies of vacant and abandoned housing. Activity continued throughout the 1970s. A major HUD-funded research project charted in detail the course of abandonment in Newark, New Jersey (Sternlieb and Burchell, 1973), while, in 1977, HUD funded a Rutgers University research center to conduct a massive research effort on abandoned properties, including an in-depth telephone survey of 150 cities around the United States. That led to the preparation of *The Adaptive Reuse Handbook*, a detailed catalogue of abandoned property reuse strategies (Burchell and Listokin, 1981). Although the more recent period of abandoned property activity has brought forward a number of handbooks and strategy guides (Mallach, 2005), no survey of comparable scope has been undertaken since.

Although it is impossible to chart the full extent of local abandoned property efforts during the same years, they were clearly extensive. The 1970s saw the creation of the first land bank agencies, in St. Louis and Cleveland (Alexander, 2015), as well as the invention of urban homesteading (Hughes and Bleakly, 1975). By 1975, 25 urban homesteading programs, under which vacant houses were sold at nominal cost to individuals and families who committed to restore and occupy them, were under way; by the end of the decade, at least 90 cities had such programs (Mother Earth News, 1980). Along with providing pilot funding appropriated in 1974, HUD commissioned an Urban Homesteading Catalogue to smooth the path for prospective homesteaders (Urban Systems Research & Engineering, 1977).

The creation of the federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program in 1974 reflected this emphasis. The first two of its purposes can be reasonably seen, in part, as a response to the increased concern about abandoned properties:

1. The elimination of slums and blight and the prevention of blighting influences and the deterioration of property and neighborhood and community facilities of importance to the welfare of the community, principally persons of low and moderate income; and
2. The elimination of conditions which are detrimental to health, safety, and public welfare, through

> code enforcement, demolition, interim rehabilitation assistance, and related activities.[3]

The CDBG program facilitated removal or reuse of abandoned buildings in low-income communities and provided explicitly for use of funds for the "clearance, demolition, removal, reconstruction, and rehabilitation [...] of buildings and improvements."[4] The same legislation also included an Urban Homesteading Demonstration Program. However, the Abandonment Disaster Demonstration Relief Act, introduced by Senators Hart, Mondale, and Cranston in 1974 and again in 1975, which would have led to an aggressive direct federal response to abandoned properties, was strongly opposed by HUD and never became law.

There is no single explanation for why abandoned properties emerged as a compelling issue during the 1970s; instead, many different strands coalesced for that to take place. This is a separate question from that of why vacant and abandoned properties emerged as a problem in individual cities during the preceding decades, which I will discuss in the next section. At the forefront, most probably, is the fact that the number of abandoned properties in older cities steadily grew during the 1960s, ultimately, as suggested by Embry and others at the Senate hearings, to the point that they could no longer be ignored. That was arguably a necessary, but not sufficient, condition. We can identify at least three separate strands that contributed to the outcome, including the widespread racial violence of the 1960s, the recognition of the extent of urban population loss and the "planned shrinkage" issue, and last but not least the debacle of HUD's Section 235 program, which I describe below.

The urban uprisings of the 1960s, most notably in the aftermath of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in 1968, fundamentally changed how the nation perceived the cities and what they represented. While in the early 1960s, some contemporary observers saw a sense of progress on the urban scene, as a *U.S. News and World Report* article of 1964 asserted, writing that "slums and old buildings across the United States are being demolished–the beginning of a massive drive to halt decay in major cities and reshape urban America" (quoted in Beauregard, 1993, p. 194), that attitude shifted during the 1960s to one in which that optimism could no longer be sustained.

As Robert Beauregard writes in his invaluable book *Voices of Decline*, ".... Urban renewal seemed less and less a panacea. More projects than ever were under way, but urban decline had not abated and the riots had made the cities even less attractive to investors. Redevelopment was not gaining ground over the slums" (p. 195). As George Romney, Nixon's HUD Secretary, commented in 1972, despite the federal government having spent nearly $160 billion since 1960 on inner-city problems, "none of this has made a dent in the overall problem of the central cities" (quoted in Beauregard, 1993 p. 197).

These comments at the time reflect an elite discourse wedded to a vision of urban renewal that was widely at variance with its reality on the ground. By the late 1960s, people were increasingly realizing that the urban renewal program, which was largely predicated on the assumption that cities could be "saved" by large-scale demolition of older downtowns and disinvested neighborhoods, and their replacement with more "efficient," lower-density, automobile-oriented development, was not only a failure but was often pernicious in its effects on low-income communities, particularly African American communities (Anderson, 1964; Gans, 1966). At the same time, the Kerner Commission report, which called attention to the systemic racial discrimination and inequality that pervaded America's cities, made clear–perhaps for the first time for most readers–that the problems of the cities went far deeper than how they were understood by the nation's political or business leaders (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968).

The pervasive pessimism that dominated the discussion of the cities at the end of the 1960s was reinforced by accelerating urban population loss. Prior to World War II, with a few minor exceptions like New England mill towns or played-out mining towns, American cities had grown, not shrunk. While many cities lost population in the 1950s, in many cases the population losses were modest, allowing local boosters to believe that the decline could be reversed by tinkering with the urban fabric through housing projects and urban renewal.

When the 1970 census came out, it became clear that that was not the case. Virtually every major city outside the Sun Belt lost population during the 1960s, largely through white flight, with St. Louis, Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit all losing over 100,000 people. It was in that climate, compounded by the 1973-1975 recession, that then-New York City housing administrator Roger Starr notoriously called for "planned shrinkage," suggesting that New York City "accept the fact that the city's population is going to shrink, and [...] cut back on city services accordingly" (Starr, 1976). In the racially charged climate of the time, not unlike our current era, Starr's comments triggered vehement criticism, which still reverberates today (Mallach, 2017a).

The third strand, which provided much of the impetus for HUD's promotion of urban homesteading as well as for the unsuccessful abandonment disaster demonstration relief bill, was the Section 235 fiasco. Few federal housing programs have had better intentions, poorer design, and worse execution. Enacted as part of the 1968 Housing and Urban Development Act with the goal of turning more than a million low-income families into homeowners, the 235 program provided low-income homebuyers with 1 percent mortgages through the Federal Housing Administration. The program was initiated with little recognition of the many pitfalls to such a strategy and implemented by FHA offices under pressure for quick results and with little preparation for the job, often managed by the same federal officials who, up to only a few years earlier, had been enforcing racially discriminatory lending policies and refusing to approve mortgages in low-income and African American urban neighborhoods (Jackson, 1985; Rothstein, 2017). The program collapsed in the early 1970s under the weight of massive defaults and widespread misrepresentation and fraud by real estate brokers, appraisers, contractors, and FHA officials (McClaughry, 1975). By 1975, HUD owned over 80,000 empty single-family houses (Subcommittee on Housing and Urban Affairs, 1975) and 54,000 empty multifamily buildings (Allen, 1994).

Before moving on, it is worth noting that many of these same strands, while highlighting the extent to which urban neighborhoods were increasingly facing disinvestment and deterioration, also contributed to a growing awareness of their importance as the building blocks of cities and of social life.[5] Those concerns had arguably been of little interest to policymakers during the 1950s and 1960s, preoccupied with urban renewal on the one hand and construction of often barren housing developments on the other. Both formed the framework for Jane Jacobs' famous critique (1961).[6] The renewed recognition of the importance of neighborhoods in the 1970s brought a spate of books on neighborhood revitalization (Albrandt and Brophy, 1975; Goetze, 1979) but, more importantly, led to major and lasting federal policy changes, including the 1975 Home Mortgage Disclosure Act, the 1977 Community Reinvestment Act, and the creation of the federally chartered Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation in 1978. All were far more the product of grassroots efforts than of Washington policymakers.

Counting Vacancies

As American troops demobilized after World War II, they came home to towns and cities that had few vacant homes to offer them. A decade and a half of the Great Depression and wartime austerity had stifled housing production and discouraged more than routine maintenance and repairs. The 1950 census, which came after postwar production had already begun to ramp up (Levittown broke ground in 1947), showed severe housing shortages in nearly every urban area in the United States. In cities like Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, and Milwaukee, rental vacancy rates were barely 1 percent. In Cleveland, a city with over 110,000 homeowners, there were barely 500 units listed for sale that year. While the census found half a million "dilapidated" vacant units—probably a reasonable proxy for abandoned properties—roughly 1 percent of the national housing stock, they were disproportionately located in rural areas. Few cities except for the very largest had more than a few hundred such units.

In this environment, it was the shortage of vacant properties that was the problem, and the response, both in central cities and in the suburbs, was a massive increase in housing production during the late 1940s and 1950s. From 1950 to 1960, the national housing stock grew by 27 percent, and by 1960, the number of vacant housing units available for sale or rent had more than doubled compared with 1950. The total vacant inventory, as well as the number available for rent or sale, fluctuated within a relatively moderate range from that point through 2000, while the number of "other vacant" units, after rising from 1960 to 1970, stayed relatively constant through 1990, as shown in Table 1. "Other vacant" is the residual category used by the Census Bureau to denote units that do not fit into any of their other categories.[7] While it can include a variety of uses (or non-uses) other than abandonment, including units that may be held off the market for speculative purposes by their owners, it is the closest proxy for abandonment offered by census data.

The question must be asked: Why did the number of vacant and abandoned units rise so greatly between 1950 and 1970? While a detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, some discussion is appropriate in order to place the issue in a meaningful historical context. After all, from the earliest years of American urban history through the end of World War II, concern about slums or blight had to do with housing that may have been shabby, unsafe, or dilapidated, but was always *occupied*. Now, for the first time in American urban history, an excess of vacant urban housing started to become a matter of significant concern.

Reflecting both the shortage of urban housing that existed at the end of the war and the general shabbiness of many urban neighborhoods after the lack of investment during the Depression and the war years, families began to leave the cities in large numbers in the late 1940s, the beginning of "White flight." It was *White* flight in part because far more White urban families had the means to buy the new suburban houses, but even more because of overt racial discrimination not only by developers but also by government, particularly through the racial segregation dictated in new suburban subdivisions by the two key federal lending agencies, the Federal Housing

Table 1. Vacant Housing in the United States, 1950 to 2018 (all figures in thousands)

	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2018*
All housing units	45983	58326	68672	88411	102264	115905	131705	137407
All vacant units (excluding seasonal, migrant or held for occasional use)	1980	3560	4254	5227	7234	6821	8964	11640
% of inventory	4.3%	6.1%	6.2%	5.9%	7.1%	5.9%	6.8%	8.5%
Vacant for sale or rent	732	1975	2167	3127	4307	3819	5406	4784
Sold or rented, not occupied	235	334	808	714	808	702	628	666
Vacant for sale or rent, or sold or rented, not occupied	967	2309	2975	3841	5115	4521	6134	5450
% of inventory	2.1%	4.0%	4.3%	4.3%	5.0%	3.9%	4.7%	4.0%
Other vacant (excluding seasonal)	1069	980	2087	1386	2085	2299	3653	6190
% of inventory	2.3%	1.7%	3.0%	1.6%	2.0%	1.4%	2.8%	4.5%
Other vacant as % of all vacant units	54.0%	27.5%	39.9%	26.5%	22.4%	16.8%	25.5%	35.7%

SOURCE: Decennial census for 1950 through 2010; One-Year American Community Survey for 2018.

*Differences in methodology between the ACS and decennial census data mean that the ACS overestimates the number of vacant units relative to the decennial census. A comparison conducted by the Census Bureau of the 2010 decennial census and 2010 ACS found that the overestimation was approximately 15 percent. Assuming one adjusted the 2018 figure for total vacant units downward by 15 percent, the total would be 15,093,000, or only slightly higher than the figure for 2010. The variation, however, was significantly higher for the "other vacant" category than for other vacancy categories, higher in the ACS by approximately 45 percent. That, in turn, applied to the 2018 data would suggest that the 2018 figure is in the vicinity of 4,265,000, much lower but still a nonnegligible increase over 2010.

Administration (FHA) and the Veterans Administration (VA) (Jackson, 1985; Rothstein, 2017).

Continued Black migration to the cities, however, took place simultaneously with sweeping changes to the physical form of older cities, a process driven by two federal initiatives—first urban renewal, and, on its heels, the interstate highway system—with devastating effects. In the course of making cities more "efficient," urban renewal respected no race, creed, or ethnicity, but Black families were disproportionately affected. Suffering from the worst housing conditions, often located strategically close to downtowns, and their residents lacking political power or connections to effectively challenge powerful White politicians and business interests, Black neighborhoods became disproportionately the targets of urban renewal and the construction of urban links in the interstate highway system, which carved through many of the neighborhoods that had been spared by urban renewal. They were also disproportionately poor, blocked by racial discrimination not only from housing but also from employment and educational opportunities.

Black neighborhoods, already bursting at the seams after the in-migration of the war years, were bulldozed, their residents dispersed. With the suburban option largely closed to them, Black families began to move into neighborhoods where much of the population was already leaving or predisposed to leave. Efforts to foster stable racial integration were few and far between. Instead, blockbusting, the practice of spreading racial panic in order to induce White families to sell their homes to speculators at low prices, who would then resell them at inflated prices to Black buyers, was widespread (Orser, 1994). Millions of White families picked up and left urban neighborhoods, as the pace of departure accelerated. Meanwhile, undermined by urban renewal, highway construction, and finally, the outward movement of the Black middle class, the vibrant Black neighborhoods of the prewar years gradually became a thing of the past.

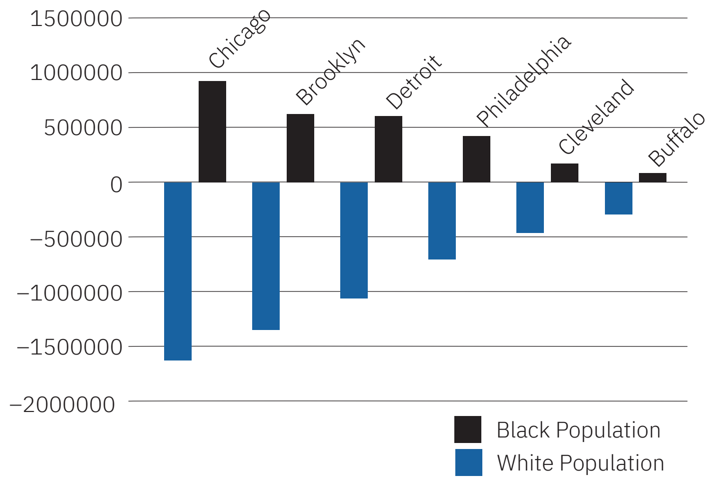
While all of the above factors contributed to the rise of abandonment in cities like Detroit and Philadelphia, it is rooted in a simple arithmetical equation. During the course of the *"urban crisis" years from 1950 to 1980, far more people left the cities than came in*, as shown for selected cities in Figure 1. UCLA economist Leah Boustan has estimated that "each Black arrival was associated with 2.3 to 2.7 departures" (Boustan, 2010). In the end, this led to the creation of a seemingly permanent reservoir of vacant houses in the hearts of America's older cities.

The increase in "other vacant" units from 1960 to 1970 shown in Table 1 can be seen as a proxy for the increase in abandoned properties that played a critical role in making the issue of vacant and abandoned properties a matter of public attention during the 1970s. Similarly, the increase after 1990 in this same metric, modest during the 1990s and more substantial thereafter, is consistent with the way in which the issue reemerged with the new millennium.

The principal reason for the increase in abandoned properties after 1990, however, was less economic than demographic. Housing vacancy, at its most fundamental, is a function of the relationship between the number of housing units and the number of households, defined as one or more people who live in a housing unit. As can be seen in Figure 2 and Table 2, the average size of the American household dropped steadily from 1890 to 1990, with the greatest drop taking place between 1970 and 1980. After 1990, however, the average household size remained effectively the same for the next two decades, until 2010.[8] Many factors go into changes in average household size, including shifts in family type from multigenerational to nuclear families, the number of children in the typical nuclear family, the increase in single-parent households, and increases in life expectancy and the age of first marriage, both of which mean people spend a greater part of their life cycle as single-person households. All these factors were present, to varying degrees, throughout the postwar period.

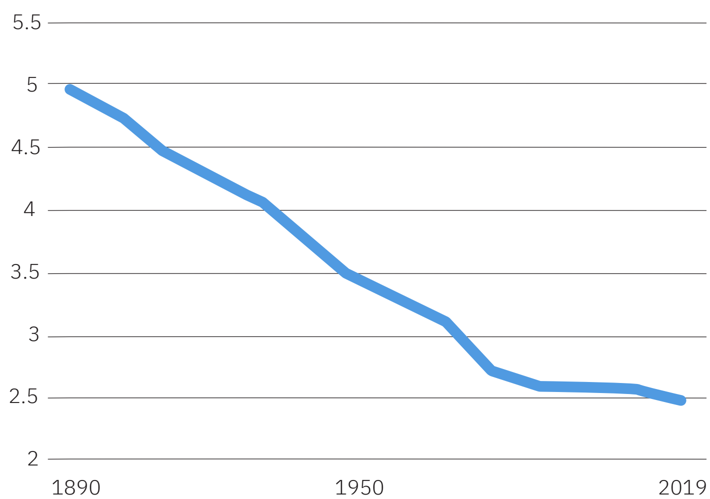
The decline in household size has powerful implications for the spread of vacant and abandoned housing. In an environment with a static population but a declining household size, the demand for housing will grow because the same number of people will form a larger number of households. Similarly, in a city with a declining population as well as a declining household size, *if the decline in average household size is equal to or greater than the population decline, no structural surplus in housing will emerge.*[9]

Figure 1. Black In-Migration and White Out-Migration in Selected Cities, 1940-1980



SOURCE: Decennial Census for 1940 through 1980

Figure 2. Average Household Size in the United States, 1890 to 2019



SOURCE: Decennial Census for 1890 through 2010; One Year American Community Survey for 2019

For example, between 1950 and 1990, the city of Rochester, New York, lost 101,000 people, or roughly 30 percent of its population. During the same period, because of the simultaneous decline in the average household size in the city, the number of households in Rochester declined by only 6,000, representing only a 6 percent

Table 2. Average Household Size in the United States, 1890 to 2019

	Household size	Change from previous decade		Household size	Change from previous decade		Household size	Change from previous decade
1890	5.0	NA	1940	3.8	−7.3%	1990	2.63	−4.7%
1900	4.8	−4.0%	1950	3.5	−7.9%	2000	2.62	−0.4%
1910	4.5	−6.3%	1960	3.33	−4.9%	2010	2.59	−1.1%
1920	4.3	−4.4%	1970	3.14	−5.7%	2019	2.51	−3.1%
1930	4.1	−4.7%	1980	2.76	−12.1%			

SOURCE: Decennial Census for 1890 through 2010; One Year American Community Survey for 2019

decline in the number of households. As a result, the number of abandoned properties in Rochester in 1990 was far less than what it would have been had Rochester lost 30 percent of its *households* over that period.

When we investigate the decline in public attention to vacancy and abandonment in the 1980s, the subject of the next section, the fact that the 1970s saw the sharpest drop in average household size of any decade in modern American history, a drop that similarly affected both White and Black households, is far from irrelevant. As we will see later, the stabilization of household size in the 1990s contributed to the resurgence of vacancy and abandonment, both in substance and as a matter of public concern.

Morning in America

In Ronald Reagan's inaugural address on becoming president in 1981, he delivered the famous line: "Government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem." While the decline of the governmental role as a would-be solver of social problems had already begun under President Carter, under Reagan it took on a far more prominent, ideologically charged role than the somewhat apologetic, almost sub-rosa character it had under the Carter administration. In that climate, since issues of neighborhood decline and property abandonment had never been central to the mission of HUD, let alone the federal government writ large, it was unsurprising that they would pull back from whatever limited involvement they had shown in the 1970s.

Over and above the governmental pullback, however, the eclipse of abandonment as a public issue was driven by important shifts in the urban discourse as well as the emergence of a critical new public policy issue on the national scene. The Reagan administration's approach to urban policy, reflected in the 1982 President's National Urban Policy Report, was described by one scholar at the time as:

> Minimal federal direction would be forthcoming for cities and urban America would improve and prosper only if the Reagan economic and federalism reforms succeeded. Thus, U.S. urban policy, such as it is, exists only as derivative of these larger, more comprehensive domestic initiatives (Cohen, 1983, p. 384).

Federal policy toward the cities was, in many respects, privatized. Cities were encouraged to pursue public-private partnerships, while the only significant urban proposal that emanated from the Reagan administration was a proposal, modeled on a British program initiated by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, to designate a series of enterprise zones in which tax breaks and regulatory relief would encourage businesses to invest. The enterprise zone proposal, however, although actively promoted by then-Congressman Jack Kemp, was not enacted into law.[10]

The Reagan administration's policies both led and reflected a significant shift in the public's and the media's framing of the urban discourse taking place at the same time and a shift in the priorities of many urban mayors and their corporate counterparts. As Beauregard observes, "Through most of the 1980s the discourse on urban decline virtually disappeared. Dominant was revival, revitalization, renascence and rediscovery; decline was thrust to the rear of the stage (p. 247)." As Neal Peirce, a longtime observer of urban politics, wrote with hyperbolic fervor in 1979, "The inner cities of America are poised for a stunning comeback, a turnabout in their fortunes that could be one of the most significant developments in our national history" (quoted in Beauregard, 1993, p. 247).

With the end of the 1981-1982 recession, fueled by ample capital and generous depreciation rules, investment flowed into the cities, including glass-walled high-rise office buildings, retail malls adapted from their suburban counterparts, and waterfront developments mixing retail with entertainment and recreation led by the Rouse Corporation's highly successful "festival marketplace" projects in Boston and Baltimore. The sight of gleaming new downtown towers and shopping malls obscured the fact that beneath the surface, most of the nation's older cities were still hemorrhaging population, and far more neighborhoods were in decline than the minute handful that were, in the term popularized in the 1970s, gentrifying. While the majority of the families leaving the cities were still White, a number of cities, including Chicago, Newark, and Cleveland, were beginning to see significant Black flight as well.

Mayors, governors, and urban policy thinkers embraced the seeming revival of the cities, as attention moved from the neighborhoods to the downtowns, and a vision of government as facilitator for private investment rather than as initiator of social change became the norm. Intellectual justification for that role was provided by Harvard political scientist Paul Peterson, who wrote in his influential 1981 book, *City Limits*, that "policies and programs can be said to be in the interest of cities whenever the policies or programs maintain or enhance the economic position, social prestige, or political power of the city, taken as a whole" (Peterson, 1981, p. 20) and that those policies should be "limited to those few which can plausibly be shown to be conducive to the community's economic prosperity" (p. 30).

As what might be called the "leadership constituency" for abandoned properties shifted gears to embrace the new privatized paradigm of urban development, many members of what could similarly be called the "housing advocacy constituency," particularly those who shared what might be called a generic concern with housing issues rather than a focus on specific neighborhood concerns, turned their attention toward an issue that first emerged as a major public concern in the 1980s: homelessness. While it is impossible to prove a direct causal link between the growth of advocacy around homelessness and the decline in attention to neighborhoods and vacant properties, the connection appears to be a strong one.[11] It should be stressed that this was not a conflict between neighborhood advocates and advocates for the homeless, so much as a decline in attention by external actors to vacancy concerns, reflecting both the greater visibility of homelessness as an issue and the shift in public funding priorities that followed.

Homelessness first emerged as a major public issue in the 1980s. As Sommer writes, "The increased visibility and size of the homeless population during the 1980s motivated media coverage, public concern, and advocacy on behalf of the homeless"(Sommer, 2001, p. 3). That issue emerged at that point as a result of the conjunction of many different factors, including the cumulative effects of de-institutionalization of the mentally ill and the absence of adequate treatment facilities, unemployment and extreme poverty, the decline in the number of low-priced single-room occupancy (SRO) buildings in American cities, and a shortage of affordable housing alternatives, as well as, in some cases, personal factors (Jencks, 1994; Foscarinis, 1996). Whatever the reasons, once having emerged, homelessness became the dominant housing policy issue of the 1980s, absorbing a large part of the energy and resources of both housing advocates and public officials. Notably, the only major federal housing initiative of the Reagan era to become law was the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987.[12]

This does not mean that all efforts to address vacant and abandoned properties ground to a halt. While such properties may have faded from the national agenda, in city after city, local officials, community development corporations, and others were moving forward to address these issues, often focusing on their backlog of vacant properties from the 1970s. New York City was particularly notable in that regard. In 1985, Mayor Edward Koch announced a massive multiyear plan to restore the city's vacant housing stock, as well as upgrade older occupied housing and build new affordable housing. By 2003, New York City had restored nearly 50,000 abandoned units to productive use while rehabilitating another 125,000 substandard occupied units. The great majority of the funds used in this program came from local sources (Furman Center, 2006).

While New York's efforts vastly exceeded those of any other city, many other cities continued to restore and reuse vacant and abandoned properties during the 1980s and 1990s, including creative programs such as Richmond, Virginia's, Neighborhoods in Bloom program (Schilling, 2001). Many of the other strategies that saw increased visibility after 2000 were first initiated during these years, such as community gardens on vacant parcels (Bonham, Spilka, and Rastorfer, 2002), while local governments and CDCs in many cities were devoting considerable efforts to rehabilitating vacant houses, often as a vehicle to encourage lower-income

Table 3. Change in "Other Vacant" Units in Selected Cities: 1990, 2000, and 2010

Category	City	1990	2000	% Change 90-00	% of all dilapidated units in 2000	2010	% Change 90-10
Legacy Cities	Baltimore	7932	20996	+165%	7.0%	22795	+187%
	Chicago	22081	32112	+45%	2.8%	46981	+113%
	Cleveland	6983	8288	+19%	3.8%	18218	+161%
	Detroit	12071	16887	+41%	4.5%	40597	+236%
	Milwaukee	4044	5883	+45%	2.4%	8790	+117%
	Philadelphia	26839	37508	+40%	5.7%	28965	+8%
	St. Louis	9798	12881	+31%	7.3%	14583	+49%
Other Cities	Atlanta	5143	3846	-25%	1.7%	11022	+114%
	Boston	3955	4083	+3%	1.6%	4486	+13%
	Miami	1926	1817	-6%	1.2%	4682	+143%
	Oakland	2389	2596	+9%	1.6%	4090	+71%
	Portland OR	3365	1988	-41%	0.8%	3335	-1%
	Tucson	2893	1414	-51%	0.7%	4252	+47%

SOURCE: Decennial Census for 1990, 2000 and 2010.

homeownership. This reflects the reality that for many local governments and Community Development Corporations (CDCs), vacant property strategies were often secondarily about vacant properties as such, but primarily about seeing them as a resource that they could use to provide affordable housing.

The fact remains that, as a national issue, whether in terms of media attention or public policy formation, with the exception of the Clinton administration's brownfields efforts, which I discuss in the next section, vacant and abandoned properties were simply not on the radar. Indeed, the Clinton administration's 1995 national urban policy, except for its greater attention to the needs of the cities' low-income residents, was little different from Reagan's 1982 policy. Both administrations saw urban policy largely through a larger macroeconomic lens, rather than as a discrete realm for policy formation.

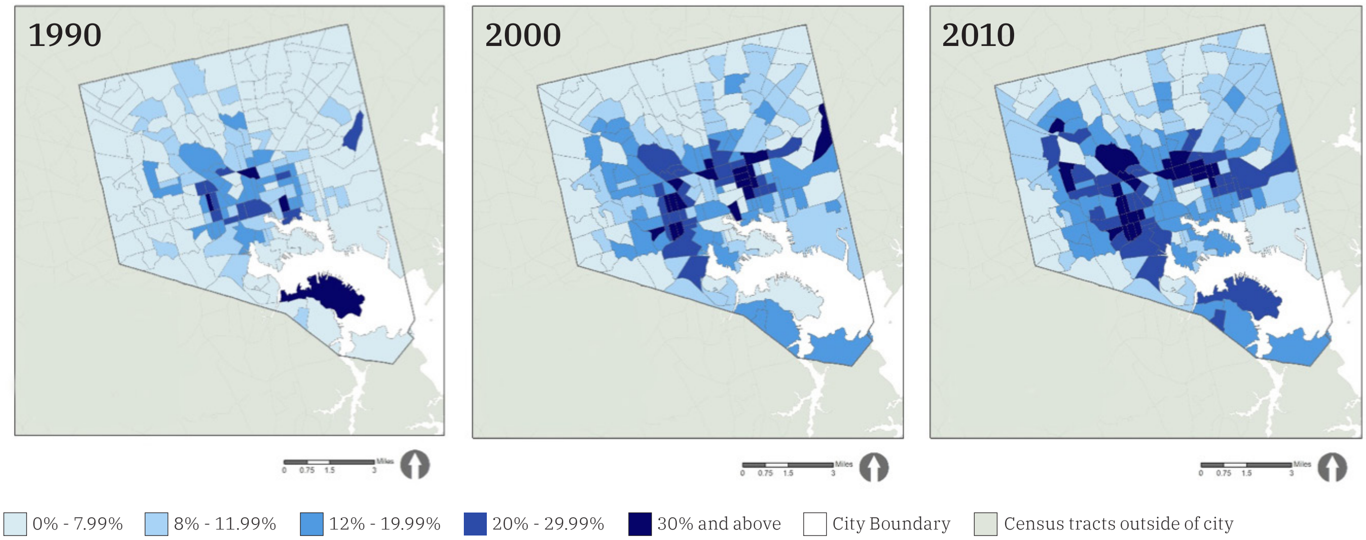
Around the turn of the 21st century, these attitudes began to change. While to some extent the shift reflected a change in objective conditions, it also reflected the process by which it was placed on the national agenda.

Vacant Properties Return to the Agenda

The starting point for the rise in public awareness and concern about vacant and abandoned properties toward the end of the 1990s and early 2000s was the simple fact that in many cities, the number and visibility of vacant, abandoned properties had risen sharply during the course of the 1990s, but not everywhere, to be sure. As I will discuss, the geographic concentrations of rising abandonment paralleled the geographic distribution of renewed public attention.

Table 3 shows changes between 1990 and 2000 and between 2000 and 2010 in the number of "other vacant" properties, a proxy for abandoned properties, in selected cities. It shows that legacy cities—older, shrinking, formerly industrial cities largely, although not entirely, found in the Midwest and Northeast United States—showed dramatic increases in other vacant properties

Figure 3. Distribution of Vacant Housing Units in Baltimore: 1990, 2000, and 2010



SOURCE: Decennial Census for 1990, 2000 and 2010.

from 1990 to 2000, with their numbers growing by over 10,000 in Baltimore, Chicago, and Philadelphia. Over the same period, the number of other vacant units in a cluster of Sun Belt and reviving cities like Boston declined or remained largely the same. Moreover, the share of legacy cities' housing stock made up of other vacant units was far higher, reaching 1 of every 14 housing units in Baltimore and St. Louis. Although the number of other vacant properties rose significantly from 2000 to 2010 in many Sun Belt cities as a product of the foreclosure crisis, the 1990s saw a sharp divergence in vacancy trends. Abandonment increased in legacy cities while declining in many other areas, including many Sun Belt cities.

The proliferation of vacant properties was not the outcome of acceleration in these cities' rate of population loss; indeed, most lost fewer people in the 1990s than in the 1980s, while Chicago gained population. It reflected the fact that for the first time, ongoing population loss was not being offset by declining household size. While legacy city politicians and community leaders were probably unaware of that distinction, what they knew, because they could see it with their own eyes, was that unprecedented numbers of vacant properties were showing up in their cities and their neighborhoods. This is illustrated in Figure 3, which shows graphically the spread of vacant housing in Baltimore from 1990 to 2010.

The existence of a problem or a condition, however, in and of itself does not lead to a policy response, as Haase, Nelle, and Mallach (2017) have written:

> ...conditions do not determine policy directly, but are always filtered by discourses, which in turn drive policy. The discourse, in turn, as Robert Beauregard put it [...] "is more than the objective reporting of an uncontestable reality. [...] it functions ideologically to shape our attention, provide reasons for how we should act in response [...]" (p. 5).

As in the 1970s, a number of discrete strands were present during the years immediately before and after 2000 to frame and mobilize the discourse about vacant and abandoned property. Most broadly, the urban discourse itself shifted gears in ways that laid the groundwork for a renewed, but geographically narrowly demarcated, focus on vacant properties. As I wrote a few years ago:

> While the problems of American older cities remain intense, their representation began to change significantly as the new millennium approached. [...] With positive changes arising in some long-distressed cities, the "urban crisis" discourse was replaced by a more ambiguous one. [...] It was less that the trajectory of American cities as a whole was changing, which remains an open question, but that enough different cities were seeing enough positive change in their individual trajectories to make clear that decline could no longer be considered a generic feature of older American cities (Mallach, 2017a).[13]

As cities like New York, Boston, and Washington, DC, all of which had been part and parcel–New York City, in particular–of the “urban crisis” discourse of previous decades, showed strong signs of revival, the continued struggles of those cities that were *not* reviving were placed in sharp relief. In contrast to the 1970s, when the abandoned property discourse could be seen as an element in the generic “urban crisis” discourse, now it was seen as being particular to that subset of American cities like Detroit, Baltimore, and Cleveland, largely in the Midwest and Northeast, that continued to lose population and jobs, the cities that later came to be known as legacy cities. The focus on these cities included several ultimately discarded efforts at finding an appropriate descriptor such as “shrinking cities,” “weak market cities,” and in a notably inept 2009 HUD coinage, “cities in transition.”

As attention was directed toward this subset of shrinking cities, it was logical that it would focus on vacant and abandoned properties, which are undoubtedly the single most visibly painful manifestation of urban shrinkage, as well as being relatively uncontroversial. In contrast to highly contested issues of social or economic policy, few people of any political persuasion objected to efforts to reuse abandoned properties, while few had much sympathy for owners who paid no taxes and allowed their properties to deteriorate and do visible harm to their neighborhoods. The connection between vacancy and the shrinking city discourse, however, dictated that vacant properties were seen almost exclusively as a phenomenon of the legacy cities of the Midwest and Northeast. It was at this point that the vicissitudes of small, once-industrial cities like Flint, Michigan, and Youngstown, Ohio, began to achieve national visibility and take on new roles as poster children for vacancy and abandonment.

A number of further factors, however, contributed to the reemergence of vacant properties as a public issue. The first can be characterized as the emergence of a “critical mass” of local vacant property activity by the end of the 1990s. As noted earlier, local efforts to address vacant and abandoned properties had continued, albeit largely off the national radar, throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society began working with community groups in Philadelphia to green vacant lots in the 1980s, an effort that, by 2000, had evolved into a citywide greening strategy (Bonham, Spilka, and Rastorfer, 2002). Organizations such as the Patterson Park Community Development Corporation in Baltimore (Pollock and Rutkowski, 1998) or the St. Joseph’s Carpenter Society in Camden (Hevener and Smith, 2005) had shown that strategic and market-sensitive vacant property reuse efforts could lead to sustained neighborhood improvement.

Another factor was the attention that had been given in the 1990s to cleaning up and reusing brownfields sites, environmentally contaminated vacant properties, usually former industrial or waste disposal sites. This was the one vacant property issue that received federal attention during the 1990s; those years saw a concerted effort by the federal government as well as by many states to remove legal barriers and provide incentives to encourage the cleanup and reuse of brownfields. With Vice President Al Gore leading the charge, the Clinton administration unveiled a number of initiatives, including the National Brownfields Action Agenda (1995), the National Brownfields Partnership (1997), and the Brownfields Economic Development Initiative (1998). Much of this effort was directed toward urban areas, where abandoned industrial buildings were often embedded in distressed low-income neighborhoods with more than their share of vacant residential properties as well. Few efforts, though, were made to integrate brownfields reuse with more comprehensive neighborhood vacant property strategies.

Even with these factors making vacant properties increasingly visible, it is unclear whether they would have emerged as a coherent, distinct issue without a concerted effort by a group of individuals and organizations that set out around 2000 to make it such an issue. A number of gatherings in 2000 and 2001 brought a diverse collection of people from local and national organizations and foundations together to explore these issues, leading to the formation of the National Vacant Properties Campaign (NVPC) in 2002.[14] The NVPC was a joint effort of three national organizations: Smart Growth America, the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), and the International City/County Managers Association (ICMA). In parallel, LISC created a national vacant properties initiative and ICMA a vacant properties network, to both build awareness and disseminate good practices to their respective constituent organizations and public bodies.

Over the next eight years, the NVPC carried out a variety of activities, including training and technical assistance to help cities better address their vacant property challenges. It is interesting that the leadership on this issue did not come from the top echelon of these foundations and organizations[15] but from line professional staff who had become aware of the salience of this issue from their experience in the field, and who sought and obtained their supervisors’ approval to give it priority in their work.

At the same time, a number of more ambitious and comprehensive local initiatives began to receive attention. While most 1990s initiatives were small in scale, typically involving a handful of properties or at most a neighborhood like Patterson Park or East Camden, Baltimore Mayor Martin O’Malley’s Project 5000, initiated in 2002, was an eye-catching citywide effort: "an ambitious two-year plan to acquire 5,000 vacant and abandoned properties and put them back into productive use" (Leonard, 2010, p. 12). Even more ambitious was the effort mounted by then-Genesee County treasurer Dan Kildee to mobilize county resources to address Flint's epidemic of vacant properties, which led to enactment of pathbreaking state legislation in 1999 to reform Michigan's tax foreclosure practices and in 2003 to authorize county land bank authorities.[16] Similar state legislative initiatives explicitly addressing vacant and abandoned properties, including but not limited to the creation of land bank authorities, took place in New Jersey, Indiana, and Pennsylvania, among other states.

The Genesee County Land Bank, created by Kildee in 2004 with technical assistance from LISC,[17] became the model for an emerging movement to create land banks as a vehicle for addressing vacant and abandoned properties, not only in Michigan but across the United States. The Center for Community Progress currently estimates there are 250 land banks in operation around the country, with the greatest number in Michigan and Ohio.[18] In 2020, now-Congressman Kildee introduced a bill to create a national land bank network (Capps, 2020).

While the initial focus on vacant properties was largely limited to the so-called Rust Belt, that changed with the bursting of the housing bubble and the onset of the foreclosure crisis in 2006 and 2007. From 2000 to 2008, the number of vacant properties in the United States went from 10.4 million to 16 million, while the number of "other vacant" properties more than doubled, from 2.3 million to 4.7 million. The number of vacant properties continued to rise, peaking at 17.3 million, or 13 percent of the U.S. housing stock in 2010. Vacancies increased sharply across the Sun Belt, most prominently in cities like Phoenix and Las Vegas. In contrast to cities like Detroit and Baltimore, where vacant properties were typically older homes, many of the Sun Belt vacancies were newly built or unfinished houses, apartment buildings, and shopping centers.

While the wave of abandoned properties in the Sun Belt abated after a few years, and predictions of what was dubbed the "Detroit-ization" of cities like Las Vegas through the proliferation of abandoned properties turned out to be, at best, premature and, at worst, misguided, it led many people to realize that vacant and abandoned properties affected many communities beyond the midwestern and northeastern cities that had been the focus of attention up to that point. The proliferation of abandoned properties added impetus to the founding of the Center for Community Progress in 2010 through a merger of the National Vacant Properties Campaign and the Genesee Institute, an entity that Dan Kildee had established in Flint to disseminate the lessons of Flint's and Michigan's experiments in land banking. Armed with multiyear funding commitments from the Ford and C.S. Mott Foundations, the Center for Community Progress was a concerted effort not only to expand the national support system for local vacant property strategies but also to further raise public awareness of the magnitude of the problem, and perhaps most importantly, to institutionalize vacant and abandoned properties as a distinct issue and challenge in their own right, rather than as an adjunct to other affordable housing or economic development priorities.

Conclusion: Whither the Vacant Property Agenda?
Vacant properties are not going away. Although household size has been dropping again since 2010, and the overall number of vacant properties has also dropped since the end of the foreclosure crisis, the number of "other vacant" properties in the United States has remained stubbornly elevated and is currently estimated by the Census Bureau at 4 million units.[19] Although it is far too early to tell, it is possible that we may see a further increase in vacancy over the next few years in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting the potential effect of widespread rent arrears and mortgage delinquency, unless effectively addressed by federal, state, and local governments.

Concerted efforts have now been under way for two decades to both understand the dynamics of vacant properties and address the problems they cause. Those efforts have shown that many of the activities that have been pursued have indeed been able to affect the trajectory of vacancy and abandonment. At the same time, those efforts have also shown that they rarely lead to sustained success except where they are congruent with–or can influence–housing market and other underlying neighborhood conditions. While a key achievement of those who lifted up the issue of vacant properties 20 years ago was to highlight the extent to which vacant properties needed to be addressed as a discrete issue, practitioners have increasingly come to realize that the only way that vacancy issues can be effectively addressed is by recognizing the extent to which they are embedded within and connected to a complex web of larger dynamics at the neighborhood level and beyond.

This became readily apparent with the end of the housing bubble in 2007. Not only did the number of vacant properties increase, but, reflecting seismic shifts in the housing market, millions of formerly owner-occupied properties ended up in the rental market, often purchased by inexperienced, undercapitalized, or unscrupulous investors. That shift, coupled with already widespread substandard housing conditions in many lower-income communities, led to an increase in both the prevalence and visibility of problem occupied rental properties after 2008 (Mallach, 2010 and 2014; Truehaft, Rose, and Black, 2010), including the widespread presence of rental properties in low-income communities that are actively unsafe and unhealthy for their occupants (Krieger and Higgins, 2002). Although hardly possible to prove, in my experience this issue was then and remains widely seen by both local public officials and community-based organizations as being of equal or greater significance than the problems of abandoned properties. Needless to say, the two are closely related. Not only are both disproportionately found in lower-income neighborhoods, in particular communities of color, but problem rental housing conditions and the problem behavior of some landlords that can lead to or exacerbate those conditions can be a precursor of future abandonment, as was true in many cities in the 1970s.

From the standpoint of mounting an effective response to neighborhood decline, one can hardly separate the one from the other. Similarly, neither can be completely separated from the larger issues that motivate property owners to maintain their properties, to milk them until they are no longer viable, or to walk away from them (Mallach, 2014). While the issues are complex and multifaceted, they ultimately come down to market weakness or market failure. The outcomes of Baltimore's Vacants to Value program, a highly effective strategy initiated in 2010 to return abandoned houses to productive use, are instructive in that respect.

Those outcomes were seemingly paradoxical (Mallach, 2017b). Specifically, *while in some neighborhoods the program was highly successful in getting those properties that were already vacant in 2010 rehabilitated and put back to use, the total number of vacant properties in those same neighborhoods increased from 2010 to 2017*. In other words, while X properties were being put back to use, >X other properties were abandoned. Moreover, there was no relationship between program success, as defined by the percentage of 2010 vacant properties restored to use, and neighborhood outcomes, as defined by the total number of vacant properties in 2017. At the same time, there were other neighborhoods in Baltimore where the program resulted not only in considerable rehabilitation and reuse of vacant properties but also in a significant drop in the total number of vacant properties in the neighborhood.

The disparity in outcomes between these two neighborhood types highlights the significance of market factors. In the former neighborhoods, abandoned properties were clearly a *symptom* of market weakness, which was driven in turn by multiple factors unrelated to vacant properties *per se*. While the study did not attempt to identify those factors, there are many possibilities, including migration; crime and safety, real or perceived; the quality of schools and other public services; the condition of the occupied housing; the external perception of the neighborhood; and more. The latter group of neighborhoods, however, typically had considerable potential market strength, usually by virtue of their strategic location, which, however, could not be realized because of the market-depressing effects of large numbers of abandoned properties. In other words, they were a cause of market weakness, rather than a symptom. Once they were removed, the market in those neighborhoods was then able to function.

The Baltimore example highlights the central challenge inherent in the idea of vacant property strategy. As decades of experience have shown, to successfully address abandoned properties in a community, it is necessary to have a strategy explicitly directed at those properties. There are critical issues, including impediments to reuse associated with property ownership and tax foreclosure, as well as reuse challenges, particularly the gap between the cost of rehabilitation and the post-rehabilitation market value of the property, that are specific to those properties. Many of those issues constitute the rationale for the creation of the growing network of land banks. At the same time, except for a small number of neighborhoods with strong locational or physical features, a vacant property strategy in and of itself is unlikely to have a transformative effect on a distressed urban neighborhood.

The evolution of the mission and activities of the Center for Community Progress reflects this challenge. Initially, the organization focused narrowly on vacant property issues, largely concentrating on nonmarket issues such as dysfunctional tax foreclosure practices. It has gradually broadened its focus, engaging with problem rental properties as well as vacant ones, moving from there into the structure and practice of code enforcement and rental regulation and situating those challenges in a framework of larger neighborhood issues. Moreover, as it has broadened its perspective on neighborhood issues, it has integrated into its work an awareness of the role that structural racism has played in the disproportionate decline of African American neighborhoods, and the disproportionate concentration of both abandoned and problem rental properties in those neighborhoods.

At its most fundamental level, the problem of vacant and abandoned properties is a market failure, a straightforward response to an imbalance of supply and demand. That logically dictates that the problem can only be solved, as distinct from, perhaps ameliorated, by increasing demand in areas of widespread abandonment so that it fully absorbs supply, or alternatively, reducing supply to the point where the modest level of demand that exists is adequate to absorb whatever is left. But that simple, one might say neoliberal, formulation raises a larger question: Why does today's U.S. economy and society devalue entire neighborhoods, cities, and even regions while driving so much demand to a handful of favored areas where even middle-class families earning well above the national median can no longer afford to live? As we focus on our blocks, our neighborhoods, and our cities, we must keep that question in mind.

Alan Mallach *is a senior fellow with the Center for Community Progress in Washington, DC, and is widely known for his work on affordable housing, problem properties, and urban revitalization. He teaches in the Graduate Center on Planning and the Environment at Pratt Institute in New York City and has both studied urban issues and lectured in many European countries, Israel, and Japan, as well as across the United States. He has served as director of housing and economic development for the city of Trenton, New Jersey, and taught at Rutgers University and Stockton State College. Mallach is the author of many books, articles, and research studies. His most recent book,* The Divided City: Poverty and Prosperity in Urban America*, explores the uneven effects of urban revival on lower-income residents and communities of color. He is currently coauthoring a book on neighborhood change. He is also an accomplished pianist and author of two books on 19th-century Italian opera. He holds a BA degree from Yale College and lives in Roosevelt, New Jersey.*

Endnotes

[1] Embry subsequently became an assistant secretary of HUD.

[2] Sputnik was the first space satellite, launched by the Soviet Union in 1957. The launch was totally unexpected by the United States and led first to an extended bout of soul-searching about the inadequacy of American science and technology and subsequently to massive efforts to expand educational and training efforts in those areas, as well as a crash program to launch an American satellite, which took place in 1958.

[3] Sec. 101(c)

[4] Sec. 105(d)

[5] Ironically, the 1970s was also the decade in which the concept of gentrification first attracted serious attention from the media and policymakers (Scheuerman, 2019). Although in retrospect, it is clear that the phenomenon was at best modest, there is at least some evidence to suggest that this may have affected the thinking of some of those who planned the urban homesteading programs, seeing emerging gentrification as potentially forming the market for the vacant houses being offered.

[6] Jane Jacobs pointed out vividly how urban vitality was grounded in human scale, mixed uses, and density, and that the combination of those elements created a diversity and intensity of activity that was uniquely urban. She showed how the urban renewal model, with its focus on single-use development and automobile dependency, rather than reviving cities, was effectively destroying them. Her work contributed materially to the repudiation of urban renewal as a strategy and to the rethinking of urban planning around more neighborhood-centered, resident-centered models.

[7] Categories include units offered for sale or rent, units vacant pending occupancy, units held for seasonal or occasional use, and units used as migrant or temporary housing.

[8] Household sizes began to decline again after 2010. Somewhat confounding demographers, who expected the short-term decline in childbirths associated with the Great Recession to reverse itself as the economy recovered, fertility rates have continued to decline up to the present.

[9] If, however, as has been known to happen, developers overbuild relative to the demand, that could lead to a surplus, which, in turn, could lead to abandonment.

[10] A federal enterprise zone program finally became law under President Clinton in 1993. During the interim, many states enacted more modest enterprise zone legislation.

[11] I am grateful to Paul Brophy for first pointing out this connection to me.

[12] One could argue that the creation of the low-income housing tax credit in the Tax Reform Act of 1986 has, in the end, turned out to have a greater impact. But at the time, it was seen more as a replacement for the accelerated depreciation provisions being removed from the tax code rather than the fundamental shift in affordable housing strategy that it turned out to be.

[13] A further sign of change was the emergence of "the cities are back" literature as the new millennium arrived, notably Grogan and Proscio (2000) and Gratz and Mintz (1998).

[14] Among key participants in this process, in which the author also participated, I would mention Don Chen of Smart Growth America, Joe Schilling from ICMA, Lisa Mueller (now Levy) of LISC, Stephanie Jennings of the (now-defunct) Fannie Mae Foundation, Mac McCarthy of the Ford Foundation, Kim Burnett of the Surdna Foundation, and Paul Brophy, longtime colleague and community development and housing practitioner.

[15] An exception should be made for Smart Growth America, which, however, was a far smaller organization than any of the others involved.

[16] Land Bank Authorities are dedicated governmental entities created for the express purpose of taking title to vacant or underutilized land, maintaining it, and recycling it for productive use. While, as noted above, the first land bank entities were created in the 1970s, the wave of recent state laws authorizing the creation of land bank entities began in Michigan in 2003 and subsequently, such laws have been enacted in 16 states. Land bank authorities typically have the power to access tax-foreclosed properties, and, in a few cases, they also have access to dedicated revenue sources. See Alexander (2015) and Heins and Abdelazim (2014).

[17] Kildee had actually founded the organization, but as a private entity, in 2002. With the passage of enabling legislation, he subsequently restructured it as a public entity.

[18] https://www.communityprogress.net/land-banking-faq-pages-449.php#How%20many%20land%20banks%20are%20operating%20throughout%20the%20country?, accessed August 1, 2021.

[19] This figure comes from the Current Population Survey/Housing Vacancy Survey for 2019. There are significant discrepancies between data from the Housing Vacancy Survey and the American Community Survey.

References

Ahlbrandt, Roger S., and Paul C. Brophy. 1975. *Neighborhood Revitalization*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

Alexander, Frank. 2015. "Land Banks and Land Banking." Washington, DC: Center for Community Progress.

Allen, Charlotte. 1994. "HUD: Who Needs It? Rethinking Federal Housing Policy." *City Journal* (Winter).

Anderson, Martin. 1964. *The Federal Bulldozer: A Critical Analysis of Urban Renewal 1949-1962*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Beauregard, Robert A. 1993. *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of U.S. Cities.* Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Bonham Jr., J. Blaine, Gerri Spilka, and Darl Rastorfer. 2002. "Old Cities/Green Cities: Communities Transform Unmanaged Land." Chicago, IL: America Planning Association.

Boustan, Leah Platt. 2010. "Was Postwar Suburbanization 'White Flight'? Evidence from the Black Migration." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 125 (1): 417-443.

Burchell, Robert W., and David Listokin. 1981. *The Adaptive Reuse Handbook: Procedures to Inventory, Control, Manage, and Reemploy Surplus Municipal Properties*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Center for Urban Policy Research.

Capps, Kriston. 2020. "Can Land Banks Get Us Out of This Mess?" *Bloomberg CityLab* (June 15), https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-15/how-coronavirus-makes-the-case-for-land-banks.

Cohen, Neal M. 1983. "The Reagan Administration's Urban Policy." *Town Planning Review 54* (3): 304.

Foscarinis, Maria. 1996. "Downward Spiral: Homelessness and Its Criminalization." *Yale Law & Policy Review* 14 (1): 1-63.

Furman Center. 2006. "Housing Policy in NYC: A Brief History." New York, NY: Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy, Working Paper 06-01.

Gans, Herbert. 1966. "The Failure of Urban Renewal." In Wilson, James Q., ed., *Urban Renewal: The Record and the Controversy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Goetze, Rolf. 1979. *Understanding Neighborhood Change: The Role of Expectations in Urban Revitalization*. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger.

Goldbeck, Bill. 1972. "Abandonment: 'The Sputnik of the Seventies'." *HUD Challenge* 3 (4): (April).

Gratz, Rebecca Brandes, and Norman Mintz. 1998. *Cities Back from the Edge: New Life for Downtown*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Son.

Grogan, Paul, and Tony Proscio. 2000. *Comeback Cities: A Blueprint For Urban Neighborhood Revival*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Haase, Annegret, Anja Nelle, and Alan Mallach. 2017. "Representing Urban Shrinkage: The Importance of Discourse as a Frame for Understanding Conditions and Policy." *Cities* 69: 95-101.

Heins, Payton A., and Tarik Abdelazim. 2014. *Take It to the Bank: How Land Banks Are Strengthening America's Neighborhoods*. Washington, DC: Center for Community Progress.

Hevener, Christy Chung, and Marvin M. Smith. 2005. "The Impact of Housing Rehabilitation on Local Neighborhoods: The Case of St. Joseph's Carpenter Society." Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia Community Affairs Discussion Paper 05-02.

Hughes, James W., and Kenneth D. Bleakly, Jr. 1975. *Urban Homesteading*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Center for Urban Policy Research.

Jackson, Kenneth. 1985. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Jacobs, Jane. 1961. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York, NY: Random House.

Jencks, Christopher. 1994. *The Homeless*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Krieger, James, and Donna L. Higgins. 2002. "Housing and Health: Time Again for Public Health Action." *American Journal of Public Health* 92 (5): 758-768.

Leonard, Barry. 2010. *Revitalizing Vacant Properties with Land Banks*. Darby, PA: DIANE Publishing.

Mallach, Alan. 2005. *Bringing Buildings Back: From Abandoned Properties to Community Assets*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press and National Housing Institute (2nd ed. 2010).

Mallach, Alan. 2010. "Meeting the Challenge of Distressed Property Investors in America's Neighborhoods." New York, NY: Local Initiatives Support Corporation.

Mallach, Alan. 2014. "Lessons from Las Vegas: Housing Markets, Neighborhoods, and Distressed Single-Family Property Investors." *Housing Policy Debate* 24 (4) (October).

Mallach, Alan. 2017a. "What We Talk about When We Talk about Shrinking Cities: The Ambiguity of Discourse and Policy Response in the United States." *Cities* 69 (September).

Mallach, Alan. 2017b. *Tackling the Challenge of Blight in Baltimore: An Evaluation of Baltimore's Vacants to Value Program*. Washington, DC: Center for Community Progress.

McClaughry, John. 1975. "The Troubled Dream: The Life and Times of Section 235 of the National Housing Act." *Loyola University Law Journal* 6 (1) (Winter).

Mother Earth News. 1980. "Urban Homesteading." (September/October). https://www.motherearthnews.com/homesteading-and-livestock/urban-homesteading-zmaz80sozraw.

National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. 1968. *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.

Orser, W. Edward. 1994. *Blockbusting in Baltimore: The Edmondson Village Story*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.

Peterson, Paul E. 1981. *City Limits*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Pollock, Marcus, and Edward Rutkowski. 1998. *The Urban Transition Zone: A Place Worth a Fight*. Baltimore: Patterson Park Community Development Corporation.

Rothstein, Richard. 2017. *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*. New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation.

Scheuerman, Matthew L. 2019. *Newcomers: Gentrification and Its Discontents*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Schilling, Joseph. 2001. "The Revitalization of Vacant Properties; Where Broken Windows Meet Smart Growth." Washington, DC: International City/County Managers Association.

Sommer, Heidi. 2001. *Homelessness in Urban America: A Review of the Literature*. ERIC Clearinghouse.

Starr, Roger. 1976. "Making New York Smaller." *New York Times Sunday Magazine* (November 14).

Sternlieb, George, and Robert W. Burchell. 1973. *Residential Abandonment: The Tenement Landlord Revisited*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Center for Urban Policy Research.

Treuhaft, Sarah, Kalima Rose, and Karen Black. 2010. “When Investors Buy Up the Neighborhood: Preventing Investor Ownership from Causing Neighborhood Decline.” Oakland, CA: Policylink.

Urban Systems Research and Engineering. 1977. *The Urban Homesteading Catalogue*. Washington, DC: Department of Housing and Urban Development.

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. 8/5/21. *Abandoned Housing Research: A Compendium*.

Washington, DC: Department of Housing and Urban Development.

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. 1995. *The Clinton Administration's National Urban Policy Report*. Washington, DC: Department of Housing and Urban Development.

U.S. Senate, Subcommittee on Housing and Urban Development. 1970. *Hearings on Bills Relating to Housing and Urban Development*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

U.S. Senate, Subcommittee on Housing and Urban Affairs, 1975. *Hearings on Abandonment Disaster Demonstration Relief Act of 1975*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Publication Team

Editors
Robert E. Finn, Center for Community Progress
Lisa Nelson, Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland
Sarah Stein, Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta

Project Manager
Sherilyn Narker

Designer
Peter Hamilton

Copy Editors
Sally Burke
Jim Greene

Managing Editor
Nancy Condon

Managing Designer
Odie Swanegan

Communications Liaison
Jennifer Leak

Acknowledgments
The publication team would like to acknowledge the following individuals, whose expertise, support, and insight were critical to the development and completion of this volume: Ann Carpenter of the Atlanta Fed's Community and Economic Development Department; the Atlanta Fed's Public Affairs Department; and Justin Godard, Kathy J. Guillaume-Delemar, Nia Bolden, Danielle Lewinski, Payton A. Heins, and Janell O'Keefe of the Center for Community Progress.

About the Center for Community Progress
The mission of Center for Community Progress is to foster strong, equitable communities where vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties are transformed into assets for neighbors and neighborhoods. Founded in 2010, Community Progress is the leading national, nonprofit resource for urban, suburban, and rural communities seeking to address the full cycle of property revitalization. The organization fulfills its mission by nurturing strong leadership and supporting systemic reforms. Community Progress works to ensure that public, private, and community leaders have the knowledge and capacity to create and sustain change. It also works to ensure that all communities have the policies, tools, and resources they need to support the effective, equitable reuse of vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties.

About the Federal Reserve System
The Federal Reserve System (the Fed) is made up of 12 Reserve Banks that, together with the Board of Governors in Washington, DC, serves as the central bank of the United States. As the US central bank, the Federal Reserve conducts monetary policy, promotes financial stability, provides payment services to financial institutions, supervises banks, and promotes community and economic development.

About the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta
The Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta sits in the Federal Reserve's Sixth District and covers all of Georgia, Florida, and Alabama and portions of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee. The Atlanta Fed's Community and Economic Development Department supports the Federal Reserve's mandate of stable prices and maximum employment by working to improve the economic mobility and resilience of people and places for a healthy economy. To do this, we conduct research and create data tools to uncover the barriers to and opportunities for improved economic mobility as well as to make the data easily accessible for community and organization planning and decision-making. We engage stakeholders to help organizations and communities understand relevant issues and undertake cross-sector solutions. And we track and elevate issues facing the lower-income resident of the Southeast.

About the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland
The Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, the Federal Reserve's Fourth District, covers all of Ohio, western Pennsylvania, eastern Kentucky, and the northern panhandle of West Virginia. The Cleveland Fed's community development team promotes the economic resilience and mobility of low- and moderate-income people and communities throughout the Fourth District. We conduct research and engage with stakeholders on issues affecting access to credit, quality jobs, education, small business, and housing with the goal of increasing economic opportunity and helping people and communities thrive.

Center for Community Progress
communityprogress.org

Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland
clevelandfed.org

Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta
atlantafed.org