

Systemic Vacancy

The Costs of Vacant, Abandoned, and Deteriorated Properties

Vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties—including occupied properties in serious disrepair—impose significant costs on public health, property values, and local taxpayers.

Like ignoring a leaking roof, failure to address these so-called “[blighted](#)” properties costs more over time and causes compounding harm. Quantifying these costs is the first step to reforming the broken status quo, returning properties to productive use, and, critically, preventing deteriorated occupied properties from becoming tomorrow’s vacant and abandoned ones.

Ways Vacant, Abandoned, and Deteriorated Properties Harm Communities



PUBLIC HEALTH

Exposes occupants to life-threatening hazards (lead, asbestos, mold)

Elevates risk of arson and violent crime

Erodes mental health

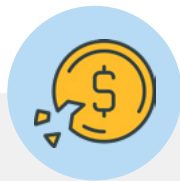


INDIVIDUAL WEALTH

Depresses neighboring property values

Repair costs outpace property worth

Raises insurance premiums



COMMUNITY FISCAL STABILITY

Shrinks the tax base through lower property values

Accelerates future property vacancy

Strains municipal services (fire, police)

Graphic: Center for Community Progress



KEY TERMS

Vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated (VAD) properties are residential, commercial, and industrial buildings or vacant lots that pose harm to residents and their community. (**Vacant property** is inclusive of vacant buildings and vacant lots. A **vacant lot** is a parcel without a structure, which could include a previously developed lot or an unbuildable lot.) Their owners or managers have not kept up the property, walked away, neglected paying taxes or utilities, or defaulted on mortgages. Often these are referred to collectively as “blighted” properties or “problem properties.”

Deteriorated properties are structures in poor condition with damage or visible signs of deferred maintenance. They may be occupied or vacant.

Blight is a shorthand term many use to refer to properties they perceive as problematic in some way: appearing unsafe, visually unpleasant, or a threat to neighborhood property values. While a pervasive word in community revitalization, urban planning, and housing policy, Community Progress [discourages using the term](#). It has historically been used to justify stripping low-income people and people of color of their homes in the name of “blight eradication.”

[Learn More](#) about addressing systemic vacancy at communityprogress.org/resources/vacancy.

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PROGRESS POINTS

Public Health Impacts

Physical Health: Long-term vacant properties are associated with [many negative health outcomes](#) for neighbors, including high blood pressure, cancer, asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, high cholesterol, kidney disease, and stroke, as well as poor physical and mental health.

Emotional Wellbeing: In addition to the physical health impacts of vacant properties, living in a deteriorating home takes a measurable toll on mental health, with research linking [substandard housing conditions](#) to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress. Visual evidence of vacancy and neighborhood disinvestment—such as boarded up properties, trash and dumping, and overgrown weeds—harms the mental health of neighbors, putting them at greater risk of sadness, depression, stress, and elevated rates of intentional injury. The percent of vacant housing in a community has also been shown to be significantly associated with [increased mental health-related hospitalizations](#).

Violence and Crime: Studies have shown that both property and violent crimes, including assaults and gun-related crimes, [increase in disinvested neighborhoods with vacant and abandoned properties](#).

Individual Wealth Impacts

Property Equity: Owning a property is often an individual's greatest investment and financial asset. Research has consistently shown that vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties reduce the value of surrounding properties, making it more difficult for owners to build equity and generational wealth.

Financial Liabilities: Property owners near abandoned properties are often charged [higher insurance premiums](#) or even face policy cancellations because of the neighborhood instability caused by vacant properties. This leaves homeowners with [greater financial liabilities](#).

*An analysis of US Census data on 107 cities found **individuals who lived in deteriorated neighborhoods** had higher rates of premature death, death from cardiovascular disease, and homicide.*

*A study in Philadelphia found children in census tracts with a higher percentage of vacant properties had a **1.45 times higher risk of elevated blood lead levels**.*

*In Chicago, researchers estimated that the presence of one tax-delinquent property **reduced the average price of nearby homes by \$6,310 to \$12,872**.*

*The total costs of distressed vacant properties in Atlanta **range from \$55 million to \$153 million in lost property values**. This translates into lost property tax revenues of \$1 million to \$2.7 million annually.*





Community Fiscal Stability

Municipal Revenue: Property taxes are typically the largest source of revenue for local governments. Research has shown vacant and abandoned properties lead to a [decrease in taxable values](#) of surrounding properties and increase the likelihood of mortgage and tax foreclosures nearby creating a [harmful domino effect](#) that creates revenue challenges for local governments.

Maintenance and Abatement Costs: Local governments incur the costs of remedying nuisances and unsafe conditions, including boarding and securing structures, cutting grass, removing trash and debris, and demolishing unsafe structures.

Public Safety Costs: Higher violent and property crime rates and the associated costs to dispatch police and fire services to respond to these crimes are commonly associated with vacant properties.

The Cost of Doing Nothing

The costs of the status quo are high, and inaction is not an option. Across the country, communities have shown that investing in solutions to address vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties is cost-effective and leads to healthier, more vibrant communities. This includes addressing deteriorated occupied properties before they become vacant, which is one of the most cost-effective strategies a community can pursue.

Understanding the true costs of vacant properties is critical to reforming broken systems so that every person can live in a neighborhood where they feel safe, connected, and have opportunities to thrive.

*In 2016, the City of Toledo spent **\$3.8 million on services related to VAD properties**, including \$1 million on code enforcement, \$800,000 on nuisance abatement, \$600,000 on police dispatch, and \$1.4 million on fire dispatch.*

*A study in [St. Louis](#) found that proximity to vacant buildings **increases the risk of both aggravated assault and homicide**. Being within 450 feet of a vacant building increases the risk of being a homicide victim 4.6 times, while being within 750 feet of a vacant building increases the risk of aggravated assault 2.9 times.*

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