

# TURNING THE CORNER: LESSONS FROM FIVE CITIES ON DISPLACEMENT RISK IN CHANGING NEIGHBORHOODS

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Launched in January 2016, Turning the Corner: Monitoring Neighborhood Change to Prevent Displacement piloted a research model in five cities to monitor neighborhood change, drive informed government action, and support displacement prevention and inclusive revitalization. The project was guided by the Urban Institute's National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership and the Federal Reserve-Philanthropy Initiative, a collaboration between the Restoring Prosperity in Older Industrial Cities Working Group of the Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities and several Federal Reserve district banks. Turning the Corner was motivated by a desire to understand neighborhood revitalization and related displacement pressures in cities with recovering or moderately strong housing markets. The participating sites were Buffalo, Detroit, Milwaukee, Phoenix, and the Twin Cities (Minneapolis and St. Paul). As some areas in these cities see the fruits of public and private investments, some community members view the changes as harbingers of displacement, potentially shutting longer-term residents and small businesses out of the benefits of this new growth. New investment, however, also provides a window of opportunity to craft equitable neighborhood revitalization strategies.

The local research and engagement generated several cross-site lessons about the complexity of displacement across different housing markets, the necessity of resident contributions, and the value of community coalitions for influencing neighborhood change. These lessons led to emerging recommendations about how communities should approach efforts to prevent displacement and ensure equitable development.

This brief presents those ideas, drawing from the local publications and informal exchanges among the project participants. The Turning the Corner local and national teams hope that other cities facing similar challenges can learn from the sites' experiences to undertake their own research and mobilize interest across sectors for neighborhood development that serves longer-term and new residents. To access all of the project publications and resources to help communities monitor change, see <http://www.neighborhoodindicators.org/turningthecorner>.

## PROJECT BACKGROUND

To help communities better understand their changing neighborhoods and craft informed responses, local teams researched neighborhood change and displacement risk using varying approaches selected to fit their local context. The basic team structure included a research partner, a local funder,

and a cross-sector advisory group of local stakeholders, some of which involved a representative from the regional Federal Reserve bank. Each team selected two to four focus neighborhoods where they perceived that rising housing prices either were putting longer-term residents at increased risk of displacement or already displacing residents. The teams used quantitative and qualitative data to explore residential, commercial, and cultural displacement.

Understanding the characteristics of the 14 Turning the Corner neighborhoods provides important context for the

observations below, which are drawn from Urban Institute analysis (Cohen, Pettit, and Levy 2019). The neighborhoods as a group are diverse racially and ethnically: in four neighborhoods blacks comprise the largest shares of the population, in three the largest shares are white, in six the largest shares are Latinx, and in one the largest share is Asian. The neighborhoods also represent diverse economic conditions. For instance, in five neighborhoods, less than half of the households have annual income under \$35,000. For another six, that share is between one-half and two-thirds, and in the remaining three it is two-thirds or higher.

The project design focused on neighborhoods with early signs of change or with development activity that could increase displacement pressures. Drivers of these pressures included proximity to enlivened downtowns, introduction of public transit, and expansion of anchor institutions. Consistent with the project design, the areas exhibited varying market dynamics, with seemingly contradictory forces occurring in the same place at the same time. Most neighborhoods had indications of investments and associated displacement pressures alongside signs of disinvestment. Most of the neighborhoods had high rates of housing cost burden; all but one had rates higher than 40 percent. The vacancy rate in nine neighborhoods was above 10 percent, and in four of those it was above 20 percent.

#### Key Terms

*The Turning the Corner project was motivated by concern for people with low and moderate incomes, most of whom are people of color, residing in neighborhoods with perceived increasing market pressures. These people lived in the neighborhoods before the recent investments driving market demand. This brief uses **longer-term residents** as shorthand to capture these ideas. This term is imperfect since it is imprecise about the length of time and does not explicitly note residents' income, race, or ethnicity.*

*The project also includes a focus on **small businesses**—small, locally owned enterprises that contribute to the community fabric and existed before recent investments.*

***Displacement risk** in this brief refers to factors that could result in rising property values and force residents and local businesses to move from their neighborhoods.*

## CROSS-SITE LESSONS

Three lessons emerged from the sites' research that have implications for analyses, policy responses, and community organizing around displacement and neighborhood change. First, the risk of displacement can develop in varied conditions, and the path it takes can vary as well. Second, residents make invaluable contributions to the knowledge base on changing neighborhood conditions, helping fill gaps and interpret quantitative data. Third, community coalitions' engagement with local government can advance more inclusive policies and plans around neighborhood development.

### **Displacement risk occurs in neighborhoods with diverse baseline conditions and trajectories.**

One motivation for this project was to explore neighborhood change in places with recovering and moderate-strength housing markets, and local research confirmed that the trends in Turning the Corner neighborhoods often differ from those in typical revitalizing areas in hot housing markets. For example, several focus neighborhoods experienced declines in population during their study periods, even though such declines tend to be associated with a lack of investment. This finding contrasts with other research showing population increases in revitalizing areas with stronger housing markets (Acolin and Wachter 2017; Baum-Snow and Hartley 2015; Sturtevant 2014). It could also reflect the project's selection of areas at earlier stages of revitalization.

Milwaukee's two focus neighborhoods illustrate how different contexts shape displacement risk. Walker's Point is largely industrial and has many vacant lots, so the recent commercial revitalization has not noticeably displaced local businesses. However, the education level of the neighborhood residents has shifted since 2000; the share of residents with a college degree more than doubled from 2000 to 2015, compared with a smaller citywide increase. Residents expect the enlivened business corridor to lead to higher housing costs but generally do not express concerns about immediate residential displacement (Pritchard et al. 2019). In contrast, Brewer's Hill, a historic predominantly residential black neighborhood, has shown stronger signs of displacement. From 2000 to 2015, the share of residents with college degrees doubled to 50 percent, and the share of residents who are white increased from 30 to 61 percent.

In some neighborhoods, local researchers found that residents held concerns about concentrated poverty, lack of city services, and inadequate private investment alongside concerns about displacement related to higher housing costs from increased investments. These views are not mutually exclusive, especially where revitalization is in its early stages or is not spatially uniform across a neighborhood. Stakeholders in St. Paul's Dayton's Bluff neighborhood, for example, mentioned poverty

and underinvestment as problems alongside anticipation that displacement pressures would rise based on planned redevelopment and spillover from nearby gentrifying areas.

Local observers noted a slower pace of change in some neighborhood housing markets in the Turning the Corner sites than they expected, owing to either the nature of the housing market or other factors. The more moderate changes in housing markets presented opportunities for communities to get ahead of development that could lead to displacement, and they permitted a wider set of viable policy and program options when real estate is more affordable.

Of the three Phoenix focus neighborhoods where light-rail stops opened in 2009, only one experienced significant rent increases. Resident surveys conducted at neighborhood meetings found that most respondents perceived no displacement among their neighbors over the past decade (Arizona State University 2019). Residents at some sites mentioned protective factors in the neighborhood. In the forthcoming *Turning the Corner in the Twin Cities* report, stakeholders in Near North/Jordan, Minneapolis suggested that nonprofit organizations moving into commercial space slowed an influx of new businesses, in addition to providing services to the residents. Some also identified less favorable factors that affect the pace of change, such as a small number of absentee landlords who own many residential and commercial properties in the neighborhood and have invested little to date.

In Buffalo, researchers found that the three study neighborhoods—Ellicott, Fruit Belt, and the Lower West Side—were in the early stages of revitalization. They noted the importance of planning ahead, as public and private actions can catalyze a shift in a neighborhood's trajectory and accelerate the transformation of the housing market. In Fruit Belt, the city's housing demolitions and tax foreclosures over the past few years furthered the loss of black renters and those with low incomes as the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus expanded. Researchers found that median rents increased 40 percent and the total rental stock declined 35 percent between 2006–10 and 2011–16 (Taylor, Silverman, and Yin 2018).

### **Resident perceptions are essential for responding to neighborhood change.**

Local researchers drew from interviews, focus groups, and quantitative data to develop portraits of their focus neighborhoods. Qualitative data revealed that residents often saw change happening before it showed up in quantitative data. In Detroit, for example, people identified improvements in infrastructure, such as newly installed streetlights, street resurfacing, and nonprofits funding improvements in commercial corridors, as early signs of neighborhood change. These changes would likely not be captured in the common sources of quantitative data and thus could be overlooked by people outside the neighborhood.

Engaging people who live or work in the focus neighborhoods also helped researchers interpret trends revealed by the quantitative data. Without insight into context, analysis of the quantitative data could lead to incomplete or inaccurate conclusions. As discussed in Cohen, Pettit, and Levy (2019), public safety surfaced as an issue particularly important to explore from multiple viewpoints. Focus group observations shed light on the implications of changing resident and business composition on public safety, namely shifting types of reported crime in neighborhoods and reports of some longer-term black and Latinx residents feeling less safe as policing increased

(Cohen, Pettit, and Levy 2019; Quesnelle, Rubio, and Urban 2018; Taylor, Silverman, and Yin 2018).

#### **Qualitative Toolkit for Understanding Neighborhood Change**

*For cities interested in exploring these themes in their own neighborhoods, Turning the Corner has published its protocols for focus groups for residents and interviews for business owners asking about neighborhood change and residential, commercial, and cultural displacement (Levy and Woluchem 2017).*

In every neighborhood, the “community” is not monolithic. Interviews and focus groups in the five sites found views differed across many dimensions of personal experience: newcomers and longer-term residents, people of different ages and races, families with and without children, homeowners and renters, residents and business owners. Longer-term black residents in Milwaukee’s Brewer’s Hill who were interviewed perceived change as more negative and more pressing than white residents. The Buffalo team reported the conflicting viewpoints between black homeowners, who expected their property values increase with the influx of more affluent residents, and black renters with low incomes, who might have to move because of the rising rents. Such diversity of experience and perceptions further underlines the importance of input from a variety of residents and other community stakeholders.

### **Community coalitions’ engagement with the public sector can foster more inclusive neighborhood development policy and planning efforts.**

Local Turning the Corner projects progressed against a backdrop of citywide policies and practices that affected neighborhood change and the risk of displacement. Buffalo and Milwaukee released citywide strategic plans during the project, with some common themes but differing emphases. These cities illustrate how parallel efforts of public agencies and community coalitions shape neighborhood development.

Buffalo’s Housing Opportunity Strategy, released in December 2017, notes two goals of “housing options that are sufficient to compete for and retain households that can choose to live anywhere in the region” while realizing “community values around inclusion, social equity, and opportunity” (czb 2017, 7). As a framework, the authors grouped neighborhoods into five categories based on the level of market demand and recommended a range of interventions for each. The three Turning the Corner

focus neighborhoods— Ellicott, Fruit Belt, and the Lower West Side—spanned the middle three categories. The report notes that there are difficult choices for limited public resources and sets forth five principles of city investment: focused, asset-based, inclusive, patient and locally-invested.

To inform the city strategy, the local research team spoke with people affected by neighborhood change, particularly about the impact of the city's code enforcement and tax foreclosure policies on residents with low incomes or residents of color. Based on resident insights and analysis of fine-grained local data, the team offered recommendations for low-, moderate-, and high-demand areas to supplement the recommendations in the city's strategy (Taylor, Silverman, and Yin 2018). Specifically, the team suggested policies to reduce the displacement of residents with low incomes, such as amending the city's tax foreclosure policy and enacting a "just cause" eviction ordinance. The research team's report also called for the city government to take a more active role in development of the lowest-demand areas. The Turning the Corner activities, guided by resident and stakeholder input, surfaced important views on what policies and practices are needed. The civic conversation will continue beyond the Turning the Corner project.

Milwaukee also illustrates the interplay of community and government-led efforts to ensure longer-term residents can stay and benefit from neighborhood revitalization. Multiple groups of public, nonprofit, and private-sector actors are advancing ideas about equitable neighborhood development in the city. In addition to Turning the Corner, these include the Community Development Alliance; a federally funded equitable transit-oriented development project around a new streetcar line; MKE United Greater Downtown Action Agenda; anti-eviction initiatives; and a LISC equitable growth development symposium. These action coalitions collectively raise the profile of inclusion and equity in cross-sector dialogue and model collaborative approaches (Pritchard et al. 2019).

Within this context, in fall 2017, the city council called for Milwaukee's city housing agency to develop an anti-displacement plan for downtown neighborhoods. The authors consulted members of the various equitable development initiatives, among others, for input into the nature of the displacement risk and potential public responses. The plan began by recognizing that policies like redlining resulted in wealth disparities and racial segregation, and thus new policies should consider reducing racial disparities and fostering equitable growth. Within the seven broad goals with next steps for the city agencies, the plan noted the cross-sector equity-focused coalitions already under way as vehicles for implementing the plan and holding the city accountable. For example, community and advocacy groups have key roles in the city's action steps to help educate and engage residents on displacement and to create outreach mechanisms for city programs that assist longer-term residents (City of Milwaukee Department of City Development 2018).

## EMERGENT RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations based on these lessons present broad principles for communities to work towards inclusive development, recognizing that responses will need to be adapted to the local context. First, institutional actors should create opportunities for residents to participate meaningfully in decisions about the future of the neighborhoods where they live. Second, the civic and public sectors should coordinate their displacement mitigation efforts. Lastly, communities need to invest in up-to-date and fine-grained data to guide engagement and action.

### **Civic actors and local government should ensure decisionmaking includes residents.**

In several Turning the Corner neighborhoods, longer-term residents felt that the improvements visible in their neighborhood were not intended for them but for the better-off newcomers. In the words of one Detroit Southwest neighborhood resident, "There's a huge disconnect between what a community wants and what they're getting" (Quesnelle, Rubio, and Urban 2018). In the cases of Milwaukee's Walker's Point and Detroit's Southwest neighborhoods, residents mentioned bars or restaurants cultivating a more affluent clientele. In Buffalo's Fruit Belt, residents spoke about weakening connections among neighbors and a less welcoming environment for families as signaled by the new apartment developments with just one- and two-bedroom units. Residents also noticed the city investments in upgrading streets and demolishing housing but not in improving the community center that serves neighborhood youth.

In multiple sites, residents expressed fear about the effects of coming changes. Even in neighborhoods with slowly rising housing prices, residents were concerned about the risks new development might pose. If residents have a voice in the neighborhood planning, they would more likely benefit from the changes and feel less helpless in the face of market forces.

Influencing the direction of the neighborhood requires two components. First, local governments, civic actors, and private developers should create real opportunities to influence decisions and help shape the

*We want to remain on the map as a community and give us a chance to be heard. Then, we can build to all of the other things we want: community centers and better schools and whatever. But first [the developers] have to accept us and respect us as a living community.*

- Homeowner in Buffalo's Fruit Belt neighborhood

Source: Taylor, Silverman, and Yin 2018

vision for the neighborhood. Second, they should ensure residents receive information about possible or likely investment plans early on. For example, Phoenix's Valley Metro plans to release a request for proposals to develop land around the Camelback light-rail station. Valley Metro could engage with

residents about the content of the request for proposals and require developers to give ample opportunities for soliciting resident input and to publish proposed plans with time allowed for feedback. Another possibility is to give residents control over certain parcels of land. The Buffalo report highlights collective ownership models, such as cooperative housing and community land trusts, as ways for the community to control some development. Political representatives or neighborhood organizations can also help facilitate residents' influence. In Walker's Point, Milwaukee, people in focus groups and interviews mentioned the neighborhood association as a source for information about neighborhood development and identified the alderman as a resource for mitigating negative effects of change.

### **The civic sector and local government should coordinate to prevent displacement.**

Policy research and community advocates have identified a suite of actions to prevent displacement (Levy, Comey, and Padilla 2006; Mallach 2008).<sup>1</sup> Public agencies, philanthropy, and neighborhood organizations all have roles in supporting longer-term residents in areas with rising housing costs. In some cases, existing forums, such as Milwaukee's Community Development Alliance, can be a vehicle for education, agenda-setting, and coordination of activities. Another example (preceding the Turning the Corner project) was the Central Corridor Funders Collaborative, which sought to create a "corridor of opportunity" along Minneapolis and Saint Paul's Green Line light-rail transit from 2007 to 2016.<sup>2</sup> The collaborative's efforts included affordable housing, economic and workforce development, and creative and sustainable placemaking.

An ongoing coalition can quickly engage when new opportunities for influencing development arise. In Phoenix, the Turning the Corner advisory board—housing advocates, philanthropy, and other community groups—expects to continue acting as a hub for sharing local advocacy opportunities and national best practices about equitable development. The Phoenix city council is launching the South Central Transit-Oriented Development Steering Committee to push for equitable development and small business assistance along the proposed southern extension to the light-rail. A Turning the Corner advisory group member who is on the committee can bring the principles and insights from the project to the deliberations and keep the other advisory group members informed of progress.

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<sup>1</sup> For policy ideas and descriptions, see also "Local Housing Solutions: Displacement" (National Community of Practice on Local Housing Policy), <https://www.localhousingsolutions.org/displacement/>; "All-In Cities Policy Toolkit" (PolicyLink), <http://allincities.org/toolkit>; and the NHC Housing Policy Guide (National Housing Conference), <https://www.nhc.org/nexus-policy-guides/>.

<sup>2</sup> Further information about the Central Corridor Funders Collaborative is available at <https://www.spmcf.org/central-corridor-funders-collaborative>.



Cross-sector coalitions can help shift the narrative in weaker markets where cities have emphasized attracting external capital. Some local research teams observed that the moderate pace of change in the focus neighborhoods and continuing market weakness in other areas led to a reluctance to consider displacement mitigation efforts for fear of discouraging private investment. People concerned about future displacement must make the case that cities need to think early about putting protections and plans in place that will enable longer-term residents to stay and enjoy new amenities and other improvements. The Milwaukee anti-displacement plan notes that the pressures in the neighborhoods near downtown are not evident in other low-income areas of the city and affirms the continuing need to attract private investment and higher-income families to the city. At the same time, the city sees that those efforts to attract new investment do not preclude taking steps to address displacement risk in the areas of the city with strengthening housing markets.

Coalitions also should advocate for policies and programs to help residents and small businesses remain in neighborhoods where real estate prices are increasing. In the Twin Cities, people interviewed noted that residents were not receiving resources, such as information and financing assistance, from the city or nonprofits to invest in their own neighborhood. For renters in the neighborhood, city governments could enact and publicize eviction protections or housing authorities could reach out to landlords, so residents have a better chance of finding units with housing choice vouchers. Down payment assistance programs could help some residents stay in the neighborhood. Programs for low- and moderate-income homeowners could include home repair assistance to improve the value of what may be their largest asset. Examples of business assistance programs include grants to upgrade facades and small business trainings. The Central Corridor Funders Collaborative helped businesses near the Twin Cities light-rail expansion cope by providing technical assistance and loans to cover losses from construction (Central Corridor Funders Collaborative 2015).

### **Communities should regularly monitor neighborhood change to support inclusive development and prevent displacement.**

To shape development that benefits longer-term residents and minimizes potential negative impacts, residents, local governments, and other institutional actors need to be equipped with up-to-date information about neighborhood conditions and trends. A common understanding provides a solid foundation for groups' advocacy, planning, and policymaking. Regular monitoring will help reveal the patterns of change within and across neighborhoods. Knowing where change is occurring and where it lags can help a community determine which areas have the most promising opportunities to intervene to prevent displacement. The information also can suggest what types of investments might be most useful. In addition, monitoring will help residents make decisions individually and engage more

effectively in discussions about the direction of their neighborhood. This idea is echoed in comments from Twin Cities' Near North/Jordan neighborhood stakeholders that resident understanding of market changes, and access to more data with which to monitor change, would help them take advantage of the neighborhood improvements. They believed that information about the investments being made in the neighborhood could help identify when neighborhood change and displacement risk begin to accelerate.

The teams in all five cities recommended ongoing monitoring of neighborhoods as displacement pressures evolve. The choice of organization to lead the monitoring effort matters. As reflected in the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership model for data intermediaries, the data should come from a source that is trusted by stakeholders inside and outside the government (Hendey et al. 2016). The project team at the University at Buffalo proposed an ongoing initiative to monitor neighborhood change and identify areas where displacement may occur. The team recommended housing the initiative within the university, which would build on their strong community connections and the Turning the Corner research and engagement.

#### **Guide for Measuring Neighborhood Change**

To help communities get started, the Urban Institute developed a guide titled *Measuring Neighborhood Change to Understand and Prevent Displacement* that reviews common sources of data and indicators used to track neighborhood conditions. It includes an overview of measuring change to prevent displacement, discussion of indicators and data sources, and examples of typologies and indexes. (Cohen and Pettit 2019).

Locally, the research teams analyzed administrative data sources in new ways to portray changes in their focus neighborhoods. For example, Buffalo examined the city's investments in facilities, parks, and streets using the Community Development Block Grant and other city spending data. The Buffalo researchers also examined patterns of demolitions and tax foreclosures as drivers of resident turnover. The Detroit analysts incorporated data on water shutoffs and inactive utility accounts to help identify vacant properties. Local agencies should be willing to share up-to-date data through public data portals or other arrangements, but civic actors may need to advocate for access to critical sources.

Local researchers also recognized the limitations of existing data and collected their own. In Buffalo, they conducted windshield assessments using the methods outlined by Silverman and Patterson (2015) to record conditions of property and public spaces. The data from the observations revealed nuances of neighborhood conditions that would not have been captured otherwise. The Phoenix team used Google Street View to identify businesses in the focus neighborhoods. They found more than twice as

many businesses as documented in the Maricopa Association of Governments data, which included only firms with more than five employees (Arizona State University 2019).

Developing a grounded understanding of conditions requires resident involvement to both contribute and interpret data. This participation can occur through formal structures such as community advisory groups, ad hoc community meetings where the indicators and analysis are presented, and qualitative research methods such as interviews and focus groups. As noted in the findings above, this input will provide critical contextual information and insights to the quantitative analysis.

Communicating the findings is as important as conducting the research. Some local research teams made their findings accessible through data visualizations, interactive maps, and data tools. Milwaukee staff collected photos of the neighborhood streetscapes and community assets to supplement the research findings. The Phoenix team created [an interactive online tool](#) with neighborhood histories and photos, followed by maps and narratives of various neighborhood conditions.<sup>3</sup> Data Driven Detroit's [story map](#) helped users visualize distributions of neighborhood change indicators.<sup>4</sup> In response to feedback, the Detroit team also created an Excel-based Data Explorer that enables users to generate a one-page profile of all the data for a block in the city.

## CONCLUSION

In each participating city, the Turning the Corner research helped community members understand how their neighborhoods are changing and the risks of displacing people and businesses. Turning the Corner activities supported existing cross-sector conversations and started new ones about neighborhood change and displacement in their cities. Stakeholders in the five cities will continue to wrestle with how to improve philanthropic practice and public policies to encourage neighborhood investment that benefits longer-term residents and businesses. The Turning the Corner project has strengthened the capacity of these places to collect and share data and incorporate the voices of residents with low incomes and small businesses to inform these deliberations.

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<sup>3</sup> See "Monitoring Neighborhood Change for Action: A Phoenix Case Study," Arizona State University, <https://asu.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=42bbaab9b4f94bdc91763fdb9dd55ffb>.

<sup>4</sup> See "Turning the Corner: Local Analytic Findings from Detroit," Data Driven Detroit, <https://d3.maps.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=31d1199ec45b4475aa4698f5e7010422>.

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