

Study finds residents believe vacant land threatens community, physical and mental health

November 30 2012

As public health researchers continue efforts to understand the effects of neighborhood conditions on health, residents themselves can provide valuable insights regarding public health issues and potential solutions. A new study from researchers at the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania uses in-depth interviews with local residents to examine perspectives on how vacant land affects community, physical, and mental health. The study highlights the importance of community engagement in promoting urban revitalization. Full results of the study, which mirror and expand upon previous studies linking vacant land to poor health, are published online in the *Journal of Urban Health*.

"This study prioritizes input from local [residents](#) to help us better understand community concerns. Residents in this study clearly see vacant land as a negative force that undermines health in their own neighborhoods," said lead author Eugenia C. Garvin, MD, a resident in the Department of [Emergency Medicine](#). "As local communities work to recover from the recent housing crisis, which has caused a significant increase in vacancy rates, the perspectives of residents reinforce the idea that both the economy and health suffer when neighborhoods decline."

An analysis of 50 in-depth interviews reveals that residents are concerned about the effect of vacant land on community well being. Participants feel vacant land overshadows the positive aspects of their neighborhood. For example, illegal use of vacant land for dumping,

prostitution, or drug sales contributes to a sense of [helplessness](#) and a lack of trust among neighbors. Prior research has shown that communities lacking collaboration and respect for one another are more likely to have increased rates of violence. Participants in the latest study echo the concern that vacancy promotes violent crime, making people feel less safe and often forcing them to stay inside. The presence of vacant lots – which are often strewn with garbage, vermin and other hazards such as broken glass – contributed to a sense of stress among Philadelphia residents, making them feel angry, or even depressed.

Though strategies for dealing with vacant land fall under the broad spectrum of urban planning and revitalization, the study suggests that the success of community programs aimed at reducing the negative effect neighborhood conditions have on health will depend heavily on incorporating the priorities and concerns of local residents into their design.

"Participants in the study had their own ideas for how to change vacant land from a negative to a positive influence in their communities," Garvin explained. "Some suggested transforming [vacant lots](#) to playgrounds and turning abandoned homes into subsidized housing. Some even felt they could take on small improvement projects themselves if given the proper resources by the city. Working with community groups and local residents is a huge opportunity for policy makers. The success of public health policies will depend heavily on the city's commitment to deploying the necessary resources and working with residents who experience the effects firsthand."

Provided by University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine

Citation: Study finds residents believe vacant land threatens community, physical and mental health (2012, November 30) retrieved 6 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-11-residents-vacant-threatens-physical-mental.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.