

Study validates link between abandoned buildings, crime

For some time now, we've been pointing out the devastating effect that plywood-boarded properties have on communities across the country. Now, by documenting the link between abandoned buildings and crime, a new study provides further validation that remediating vacant and abandoned properties can both reduce community blight and make neighborhoods safer.

We've seen plenty of anecdotal evidence that properties boarded up with plywood become hubs for crime, drug activity and squatters, requiring constant attention from code enforcement, police and fire and placing a strain on communities' resources and budgets.

The new study, led by Dr. Charles Branas at the University of Pennsylvania, offers statistical confirmation of how remediating abandoned buildings significantly reduced firearm violence in Philadelphia.

"Abandoned buildings and vacant lots are blighted structures seen daily by urban residents that may create physical opportunities for violence by sheltering illegal activity and illegal firearms," Dr. Branas and his team concluded. "Urban blight remediation programs can be cost-beneficial strategies that significantly and sustainably reduce firearm violence."

The study focused on data involving more than 5,000 abandoned buildings and vacant lots in Philadelphia and the occurrence of firearm and nonfirearm violence between 1999 and 2013. It compared abandoned buildings where blighted windows and doors had been replaced through an urban blight remediation program against buildings in violation of a city ordinance requiring working doors and windows in all structural openings.

Analysis showed a statistically significant 39 percent fewer firearm assaults at or near abandoned buildings after they had been remediated.

"Urban blight remediation is a low-cost, high-return solution to firearm violence," the study notes. "Simple treatments of abandoned buildings and vacant lots returned conservative estimates of between \$5.00 and \$26.00 in net benefits to taxpayers and between \$79.00 and \$333.00 to society at large, for every dollar invested.

"Other firearm violence prevention programs have either been unsuccessful or require more costly human resources to be active and ever-present for them to work. Blight remediation may outperform many of these other programs in terms of value and sustainability."

The direct link between abandoned buildings and crime should remind us all of why fighting community blight is so important. Eliminating the use of plywood to board up vacant properties is a great place to



start. The study notes that the Philadelphia ordinance requiring working doors and windows was driven in part by concerns about plywood.

Although plywood has long been the standard material for boarding up properties, it has become the ugly and stigmatizing symbol of community blight. It announces that a building is vacant and abandoned, sending a distress signal of a neighborhood in trouble and negatively impacting the value of other properties.

Enter the criminals, who can easily remove the plywood to gain access. As the study notes, abandoned buildings can “serve as out-of-sight staging or storage areas for their illegal firearms until they are needed.”

But we don’t have to give in to the criminals.

Fighting community blight calls for collaboration, communication and cooperation, as well as appropriate funding for proven programs like that in Philadelphia.

As Dr. Branas and his colleagues remind us, “Simple remediation of abandoned buildings and vacant lots is a high-value intervention to reduce firearm violence. By design, these remediation programs make structural improvements to the very context within which city residents are exposed on a daily basis.

“They involve straightforward, inexpensive and reproducible implementation and maintenance protocols that are scalable to entire cities, ask little if anything of local residents to be sustained over time, and allow residents to remain in their home neighborhoods without the need for expensive and unwanted relocation.”

http://www.urbanhealthlab.org/uploads/2/3/2/0/23203352/branas_et_al_urban_blight_and_gun_violence_ajph_2016.pdf

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