

# CHARTING THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF BLIGHT

A National Literature Review on Addressing the Community  
Impacts of Blighted Properties

FINAL REPORT

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SUBMITTED TO:  
Keep America Beautiful  
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PREPARED BY:  
The Vacant Properties Research Network

A project of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech

in collaboration with Econsult Solutions, Inc.

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In the spring of 2014, through a request for proposals, the national nonprofit Keep America Beautiful selected Econsult to conduct this national literature review on blight under the guidance of Lee Huang, senior vice president at Econsult Solutions, Inc., a Philadelphia-based consulting firm. In 2009, Econsult released one of the first comprehensive assessments on the economic impacts of vacant properties in the city of Philadelphia. As part of the Econsult project team, the Vacant Properties Research Network (VPRN), a project of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech, conducted this national literature review on blight, led by post-doctorate research fellow Katie Wells and senior fellow Joseph Schilling (VPRN co-director), with important contributions by graduate research assistant Jimena Pinzon and Econsult special consultant John Kromer, former housing director for then-Philadelphia Mayor Ed Rendell, from the Fels Institute at the University of Pennsylvania.

Building on the VPRN's existing e-library and knowledge of the blight and urban regeneration field, this research team combed the Internet and academic databases for journal articles and practitioner reports on the economic, environmental, social, and legal and policy dimensions of blight. Each member wrote sections of this report as identified in the table of contents with overall quality control managed by Huang, Wells, and Schilling.

Our hope is this report will help Keep America Beautiful and its affiliates gain a better understanding about the contemporary and historical dimensions of blight as they continue their regional and local programs to improve the quality of life in communities throughout the nation. We also believe this report's observations make an important contribution to the study of blight, and to the local policies and practices developed by communities across the U.S. to mitigate and abate blight's causes and effects.

## SPONSORS

The team would like to thank the following sponsors for their support:

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## I. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

This project reviews and synthesizes knowledge about blight, broadly conceived, in the United States. This research draws together academic literature and practitioner reports to systematically assess:

- The nature of blight
- The effects of blight
- The factors that have shaped its development
- How understandings of blight have changed over time

Principally, this work outlines how blight persists in American landscapes, and what policymakers and community leaders have done in response.

While considerable research has examined the history of blight in the U.S., its role in national policy, and the experience of communities living in blighted neighborhoods, *little research systematically examines the meanings of blight across contexts, and the effects of these various meanings for understanding the contemporary American landscape*. There is a serious gap both in academic studies and in policymaking circles. This research will contribute significantly to understandings of blight. But it will have an even broader impact because it will provide crucial insight into a set of practices and structures that shape the development of blight and the responses to it.

This literature review will benefit policymakers, particularly in understanding how different communities are addressing rising rates of vacancy and how property abandonment has come to be a common characteristic of contemporary blight in the U.S. The research also provides new and beneficial knowledge for local communities by making the changing patterns of neighborhoods more transparent. Furthermore, for underrepresented groups and their advocates struggling with blighted neighborhoods, this research will provide an assessment of some of the factors affecting their condition.

## A. PROJECT OVERVIEW AND MAJOR OBSERVATIONS/FINDINGS

Blight is a complex and dynamic phenomenon with different meanings shaped and influenced by a variety of actors and institutions. Blight shifts with time and place. In some cases the scholarship examines blight as a symptom of larger social and economic forces, such as the byproduct of poverty. In most cases, however, the scholarship on blight focuses on the physical changes of properties and the harmful impacts that blighted properties have on the life cycle of neighborhoods and residents along with the legal and policy strategies deployed by communities to combat blight's secondary effects. A noteworthy aspect to this project was finding research on other types of blight unrelated to our focus, such as plant diseases caused by environmental blight and the perspective of architects, artists, and psychologists on the design dimensions of visual blight.

**Project Mission and Scope of Inquiry:** *Conduct a review and synthesis of the academic literature, policy analysis, and community practices on blight in the U.S., with a focus on research and scholarship since 2000.*

In light of blight's complexity, our team started this project by developing a preliminary framework or typology of variables and characteristics of blight and blight abatement strategies and practices (see Table 1). The framework helped us ask the following intriguing questions and guided our search and analysis:

1. What is the nature of blight in the U.S.? What factors shape its development and management?
2. What are the effects of blight on people, properties, and communities, especially the economic impacts?
3. What are the common local and community practices/responses to track, address, manage and measure blight? Who are the main actors?
4. How have our understandings of blight changed over time, and what do these changes mean for developing contemporary indicators of blight?

**Dimensions and Characteristics of Blight:** Two important characteristics are geography and scale with how they shape blight and its responses. For example, our framework tried to classify the research according to whether the focus was urban, suburban, or rural. Certainly most of the scholarship we found had a decided urban focus, but issues such as illegal dumping or abandoned buildings happen in all types of communities. Recent research by the Brookings Institution shows that, in less than a 10-year span, poverty is increasing rapidly in suburban areas and thus the physical manifestations of blight, such as littering, correspond with these increased concentrations of suburban poverty (Kneebone, 2014).

Related factors include whether or how do regional cultures influence how people in different parts of the country think differently about blight and whether rural or suburban communities have different community perceptions and standards when it comes to blighted properties. What might be acceptable or customary in a rural setting may not conform to suburban community standards. Although we did not find much research on this issue, these questions about

community standards, individual perceptions of blight and community responses are areas worthy of future exploration.

**Blight Policy and Program Responses:** Within our synthesis of the law and policy scholarship, we found that blight’s legal and policy roots derive from long-standing principles of public nuisance. Local government actions represent the largest share of research synthesized in this report on blight policy responses. State governments establish the legal parameters from which local governments derive their authority to enact and implement ordinances and policies designed to prevent, mitigate and remove blight.

Our work also observed that scholarship shifts when there are shifts in community responses to address new and different types of blight. For example, earlier scholarship on blight covered traditional laws and policies associated with redevelopment planning/eminent domain, littering and illegal dumping, while recent studies examine community strategies to reclaim increasing waves of vacant properties caused by the national mortgage foreclosure crisis.

Beyond government responses, there are also strong community and political perspectives on blight that we found more in the popular media and less as an object of research and scholarship. At the local level, community-based organizations and neighborhoods organize “blight” abatement campaigns on particular problem properties or around particular types of blight to call attention and apply political pressure on state and local policymakers and public officials to adopt and implement new policies and programs that can better prevent and/or remove blight.

Table 1 organizes these and other dimensions and characteristics of blight into a matrix.

**Major Observations and Recommendations:** Throughout this report, we examine different meanings of the term blight, including what the research says about its history and origins as well as the environmental, social, economic and legal/policy dimensions of blight. From the economic perspective, most blight research examines the impacts and influences on property values without a more honest conversation about the broader social dimensions and impacts of blight. Moreover, many blight policies have one-dimensional goals – restoring property values and markets – without considering the impacts these policy responses and legal tools have on communities. With respect to the environment and public health, the research focuses on the health problems caused by living in communities or neighborhoods with blight (e.g., crime, asthma) as well as the benefits of reclaiming blighted properties through brownfields remediation and urban greening.

For Keep America Beautiful and its affiliates, this report includes several topics related to current programs and activities (e.g., litter control, waste management, illegal dumping, code enforcement, etc.), but also discusses current dimensions of blight that could become new Keep America Beautiful areas of interest and engagement. Because the type and scale of blighted conditions vary from place to place, Keep America Beautiful affiliates and their communities may have differing priorities (e.g., preventing vacant properties, stopping illegal dumping, cleaning and greening vacant lots, etc.), as well as deploying policies and programs differently

to address blighted properties. Much depends on the local political, legal, and community dynamics. In light of these community variations and influences, this report identifies new and existing local practice and policy around blighted properties. For example, some cities are now commissioning studies that attempt to quantify blight impacts. Such data can then support changes to state and local policies as well as catalyze political and community-driven anti-blight initiatives.

Section V of this report concludes with a menu of interrelated recommendations, grouped into three categories about how our findings can help guide future Keep America Beautiful initiatives, government/private-sector/nonprofit organization policies and practices, and future research collaborations. In reviewing these recommendations, Keep America Beautiful may want to create various working groups or task forces to consider opportunities for developing partnerships and collaborations with researchers, experts, and relevant national organizations.

- Establish performance measures that Keep America Beautiful affiliates can use to monitor the progress of anti-blight initiatives.
- Use metrics to create a baseline and undertake performance reporting.
- Develop a user-friendly calculator of impacts from blighted properties.
- Support and examine community partnerships and grassroots responses to blight.
- Redefine the term “blight” to reflect its multiple meanings.
- Expand the goals and audiences of blight policy and programs to more equitably address blight’s socio-economic dimensions.
- Examine public agency organizational development, capacity building, and civic engagement challenges in implementing anti-blight policies and programs
- Support comparative, multi-disciplinary studies across cities.



**Table 1: A Typology of Blight’s Multiple Dimensions and Characteristics**

Types of Blight: Characteristics of place, property conditions and use (common spaces or indicators)	Scale and Geography of Blight	Blight Causes and Impacts: The drivers and externalities of blight (economic, social, environmental)	Practices and Policies to Address Blight
Buildings: Industrial and commercial; occupied vs. vacant or abandoned; unsafe/dangerous; derelict; brownfields, etc.	Concentrations of blight at neighborhood or community scale vs. individual site	Reduced property values and property tax revenues or assessments of adjacent properties	Littering and dumping citations and enforcement
Apartments and Homes: Residential; occupied vs. vacant or abandoned; substandard	Urban and First Tier Suburban Communities: Small cities and towns, etc.	Adjacent/Nearby Disinvestments: Decline in property values, property sale transactions, construction loans, building permits; lack of public investment in infrastructure	Substandard housing, code enforcement, property maintenance codes
Public Spaces: Litter, illegal dumping, graffiti, etc.	Suburban and the Exurbs	Community Impacts: Social-psychological stigma, perceptions of public safety, fear, Broken Windows Theory, etc.	Anti-blight campaigns and initiatives; task forces, etc.
Vacant Lots	Rural and Open Space	Local Government Impacts: Costs for increased calls for service (police, fire, CE); costs for enforcement actions; nuisance abatement costs to remove blight; environmental cleanup costs; in some cases, maintenance costs of vacant lots, etc.	Vacant property registration ordinances, land banking, demolition, eminent domain,
Unwanted or highly regulated uses that may have blighting influences, such as adult businesses or junkyards or heavy industrial uses, etc.		Behavioral Influences on Blight: The connection of people and place; causes of blighting behavior	Public nuisance lawsuits and nuisance abatement
		Correlation of crime and public health issues and proxies of blight (e.g., vacant properties)	

## B. LITERATURE REVIEW PROCESS AND METHODS

Exploring blight across environmental, economic, social, legal, and policy contexts, this work approaches blight as a prism that can be seen from multiple angles. Data collection, which proceeded in two steps, identified and sorted sources according to these five categories: environment, economy, society, law and policy, and practice (non-academic articles and reports).

In the first step, a combination of systematic note taking and indexing that allows documents to be sorted in relation to the questions was conducted. Researchers developed exhaustive bibliographies of academic journal articles in the social sciences (that were available in online databases or by request through Interlibrary Loan) and practitioner reports that were available online or by request through sponsor organizations. The bibliographies exclude popular media such as newspapers and online publications, and focus primarily on publications released since the year 2000. For each bibliography, a comprehensive set of 20 keywords, on average, was developed and tracked. Librarians at Virginia Tech helped in the construction of these word sets and the identification of journal databases (See Appendix A). We then used Boolean search tools (connecting terms using or, and, etc.) to create different combinations of keywords to guide the bibliographic search. For each area, a comprehensive set of databases was also developed and tracked. For each search, the researcher logged the search terms used, the Boolean tools used, the database used, the date of the query, and, if relevant, a set of years for search results. Appendix B lists the journals referenced across the project. By tracking each query in a uniform manner, the researchers were able to ensure accuracy, maintain rigor, and facilitate communication across team members.

The researchers evaluated search records at three progressive scales:

1. For some records, researchers only read the titles and did not chart the name of the study in a log. These records are tertiary sources.
2. For the majority of records, researchers read the title and abstract. In these cases, the researcher logged the text, wrote a brief sentence about why the text does not need to be read in its entirety, coded\* the article as urban, rural, or suburban in the log, and saved a PDF of the text using the data storage conventions (AuthorName\_YearPublished) to a shared folder for the project.<sup>1</sup>
3. For other records, researchers read the entire text. In these cases, the researcher logged the article, wrote a few sentences about how useful the text is, coded the article as urban, rural, or suburban in the log, searched the bibliography for pieces to locate, saved a PDF of the text, if possible, using the data storage conventions

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<sup>1</sup> The focus of the coding was twofold: landscape type (urban, suburban, and rural) and method (quantitative, qualitative, spatial, etc.). Per Econsult's final proposal, the literature will not be coded by region or building type (vacant land vs. commercial facility).

(AuthorName\_YearPublished) to a shared folder for the project, and printed a double-sided copy of the text. For specific sources noted in other texts, researchers noted these references in a to-find log. When the texts were found, the regular conventions about reading the entirety of the publication and logging its import were followed.

Our records log contains 322 entries or documents. Of these 322 bibliographic references, 311 sources were selected as part of this literature review, but not necessarily cited in the report. References reviewed but not listed in the bibliography are listed in Appendix C. For the complete records log, refer to the Microsoft Excel® 2007 spreadsheet sent to Keep America Beautiful or the VPRN Research Inventory available at the [www.zotero.org/groups/vacant\\_property\\_research](http://www.zotero.org/groups/vacant_property_research) or use the following hyperlink.

In evaluating the numbers of texts surveyed, this research design was less concerned with achieving statistical significance through a large sample size than ensuring thorough understanding of the processes of blight and their effects.

Of these 311, 75 percent are sources related to law and policy, including practice, and economics (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Distribution of sources by academic sub-area**

Sub-Area	% Total
Economics	8%
Environment/Public Health	12%
Law and Policy	17%
Social	13%
Practice	50%
Total	100%

Approximately 90 percent of the literature was published after the year 2000 (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Distribution of sources by publication year**

Decade	% Total
Before 1990	3%
1990-1999	5%
2000-2009	34%
After 2010	55%
Undated	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

Ohio and Pennsylvania were the two states with the most articles. Table 4 presents the top 10 states which featured blight research and/or programs.

**Table 4: Top 10 states listed in dataset**

Top 10 States Listed in Dataset
Pennsylvania
Ohio
California
Louisiana
Maryland
New Jersey
Michigan
New York
Georgia
Wisconsin

Similarly, Table 5 below lists articles which featured blight research and/or programs from particular cities. Philadelphia, New Orleans and Cleveland were the three cities with the most articles and reports.

**Table 5: Cities listed in dataset**

Cities Listed in Database	
Alpharetta	Los Angeles
Atlanta	Miami
Baltimore	Milwaukee
Boston	New Orleans
Buffalo	Oklahoma City
Charleston	Philadelphia
Charlotte	Phoenix
Chicago	Pittsburgh
Cincinnati	Providence
Cleveland	Reading
Cuyahoga County	Richmond
Dallas	Smyrna Beach
Dayton	South Bend
Detroit	Toledo
Erie County	Toronto
Flint	Wilmington
Frederick	York
Indianapolis	Youngstown
Lawrenceville	

Table 6 presents a matrix relating publication year with academic sub-area.

**Table 6: Publication year and academic subject area matrix**

	Economic	Environment/ Public Health	Law and Policy	Social	Practice	Total
Before 1990s	4	0	1	3	2	<b>10</b>
1990-1999	2	3	3	5	3	<b>16</b>
2000-2010	7	13	18	10	58	<b>106</b>
After 2010	11	22	30	22	86	<b>171</b>
undated	0	0	0	0	8	<b>8</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>311</b>

The second step in this project required the construction of several narratives to describe the factors that shape and are shaped by blight. For each of the five sub-areas, researchers constructed oral and written narratives to describe some of the central ideas, practices, and historical contexts that surrounded blight from the years 1950-2014, with a focus on the years since 2000. Sources were examined for the key *geographies* through which blight has been studied and the key *scales* at which these studies have taken place. Sources were assessed to determine key *periods* and *themes* of blight research. Sources also investigated and determined the key *practices* through which blight has been governed (e.g., changing planning practices; economic upheavals that change blight removal funding; city and national-level decisions concerning the funding of blight programs, etc.).

Data analysis involved with this project compared these multiple narratives of blight – a pioneering approach that had not been done before. Researchers looked for points of convergence and divergence in the factors, effects, and kinds of intersections documented in the five sets of data. Researchers broadly synthesized the five sets to produce a general assessment of blight and its significance. Researchers further synthesized these individual articles and studies to develop important themes and observations about how blight occurs and in what ways it matters for understanding contemporary American landscapes.

The methods described here ensured a comprehensive assessment. They facilitated intensive engagement with the nature of blight, its development over time, its effects, and its various meanings. The work is limited, however, by its exclusion of non-online texts such as books, and its U.S.-only focus. Future research about blight should take up comparisons across national boundaries and investigate how approaches in the U.S. converge or diverge from approaches abroad.

## C. HISTORY AND ORIGINS OF BLIGHT

For a century, policymakers, elite civic leaders, and planners in the U.S. have described areas of cities as “blighted” (Brown 2004). These practitioners, however, have used the adjective “blighted” and the noun “blight” to refer to very different features of the American landscape. Wide disagreements exist within policymaking circles about what blight really is. As Brown’s research (2004) shows, there is no such “thing” as blight. The one constant in the history of blight is its highly contested and malleable nature (Weaver, 2013; Shlay and Whitman, 2006).

That the category of “blight” has been used to signal so many different factors and forces does not mean that the category itself is useless. On the contrary, the sub-discipline of blight studies encompasses a swath of diverse, relevant, and important inquiries into many of the country’s most pressing social issues. That the category of “blight” shifts so much means simply that policymakers and practitioners need to be attentive to the context in which it is being invoked. How the category is used — what it represents and what it excludes — offers important insights to the assumptions, priorities, politics, and methods of policymakers and practitioners. Researchers today are interested in not only studying what blight is, how it functions, and what it means, but also how ideas about blight actually come to be and where they come from.

In the early 20th century, the term blight referred to unsanitary housing with offensive conditions (Breger, 1967). Housing reformers who were concerned with public health used blight to describe the threat of places where residents had poor sanitation conditions. The fear for these reformers was that blight, like any disease, could grow and spread across cities. Reformers borrowed language from plant studies to describe urban disorder through the metaphor of blight (Prakash, 2013). Proximity to blighted places was seen to be a hazard in itself because blight was talked about as a pathogen that could spread like a disease. From this perspective, a blighted neighborhood was a leg of a city to amputate, not an injury that could be healed and nursed back to health. In other words, blight was not a point along a continuum that could be resurrected or treated (Carriere, 2012). And, the solution, according to reformers, had to be aggressive – slum clearances to eradicate blight and adoptions of citywide zoning codes to prevent its return. These ideas about blight as a natural but deadly feature of cities emerged alongside a dominant narrative that industrialization had turned cities into places of danger and chaos (Holliman, 2009). According to the City Beautiful narrative, cities need to be sanitized and orderly if they were ever again to breed healthy, productive, and moral communities (Gillete, 1995).

After the economic collapse of the Great Depression, housing reformers and urban policymakers shifted gears away from these concerns about public and moral health. Questions about public health and moral well-being were replaced by concerns about economic growth. In the 1940s, urban reformers used blight to describe economic stagnation or decline. Blighted areas began to refer to neighborhoods where there was mass disinvestment, unemployment, poor housing infrastructure, and stalled economic growth, not areas of the city that posed public health threats (Linehan, 2000).

Urban renewal programs in the 1950s and 1960s formalized this definition of blight as an economic problem. Blight was seen as a drag to city growth and economic development. Instead of clearing slums on the basis of protecting public health, these new anti-blight programs sought to clear slums to attract new investment.

At a micro-scale, blighted properties were understood to be dangerous places that possessed the power to destroy a neighborhood. But, at a macro-scale, blighted neighborhoods could be

optimistic canvases for building better cities and economies (Highsmith, 2009). In these strategic demolitions, urban renewal programs routinely exaggerated the extent of structural decline contributing to depressed appraisal values for black communities and mass displacements (Highsmith, 2009). Houses that were in good shape were routinely cleared if they were located in alleys, slums, or ghettos that had been slated for far-reaching redevelopment projects.

In the aftermath of these mid-century bulldozer responses to blight, urban tenants, most of whom were black, argued for revitalization without displacement in their neighborhoods. Black residents wanted better housing where they lived rather than clearance projects and building from scratch. The passage of the U.S. Housing Act of 1954 responded to these changing political dynamics. It required for the first time that residents be involved in neighborhood planning and shifted urban housing priorities from new construction to the renovation of existing stock. The federal Model Cities program of 1966 took this goal further. For the first time in mass numbers, low-income residents and black community groups had their voices heard in public debates about the condition of housing and neighborhood life (Gillette, 1995).

Neither of these federal actions addressed the century-long problem that blight predominantly affects neighborhoods where communities of color live, while anti-blight policies have focused on the economic development of downtown areas at the expense of the socio-economic conditions of the residents who live in blighted areas (Oakley 2006). Residents in blighted areas continue to be politically, economically, and socially marginalized and exposed to greater-than-average safety and environmental contamination issues (Johnson, 2008; Hillier et al 2003; Kaplan, 1999; DeMarco, 2009; Runfola and Hankins, 2010; Leigh and Gradeck, 1996; Morrel-Samuels, 2013).

Today, this correlation between disadvantaged communities and blight is hard to see in popular discussions. Policymakers use blight as a synonym for a host of issues at varying scales, including uncollected litter, houses in poor shape, vacant lots, and inadequate street lighting (Greenberg and Schneider, 1996). Contemporary definitions of blight encompass physical characteristics of properties like broken windows and overgrown lawns, as well as temporal changes to properties like the prolonged decline of a house into an unacceptable condition (Weaver, 2013; Breger, 1967). In both cases, blight refers to land (or property on land) so damaged that it is incapable of beneficial use without outside intervention (Kivell, 1987). Often left out in popular discussions of blight are the actors, practices, and policies that contribute to the production of blight and the disadvantaged communities that have been negatively affected by both blight and anti-blight policy responses.

**Origins: What Causes Blighted Properties?** Few studies of blighted properties address the production of blight. But when the subject is addressed, the conclusion is unanimous: blighted land is not a problem that cities inherited from the past, but an active creation of contemporary urban policies and a series of non-economic forces, such as the uneven distribution of city services (Kivell, 1987; Runfalo and Hankins, 2009). Blighted properties are not happenstance or inevitable (Akers Forthcoming). Vacancy and abandonment, in other words, are the outcome of a particular set of structural forces, institutional mechanisms, and powerful decisions by individuals. Even though the actors and structural conditions are difficult to see, blighted properties are the expected consequences of urban development that is organized around market forces. A number of federal, state, and municipal policies have helped to create blight over the past century through measures like harsh code enforcement, municipal disinvestment, suburban investment, a regressive tax system that incentivizes property investment, and refusals to grant construction permits in redlined areas (Highsmith, 2009; Brueckner and

Helsley, 2011). Urban renewal programs in particular worsened the condition of urban neighborhoods and propelled the rise of blighted properties (Agapos and Dunlap, 1973). Public policies have also actively shaped the conditions under which private capital functions and institutional actors such as banks, landlords, and neighborhood organizations make decisions (Aalbers, 2006; Runfalo and Hankins 2009). Other factors that have contributed to the presence of blighted property in cities include the reduction of costs in suburban housing (Brueckner and Helsley, 2011), technological changes, and rising social standards (Breger, 1967).



## II. THE ECONOMIC MEANINGS OF BLIGHT

### A. ECONOMIC DEFINITIONS OF BLIGHT

In economic studies, blight is narrowly examined (Jakle and Wilson, 2009). For economic researchers, blight refers to one, some, or all of the following phenomena:

- Tax delinquency (Whitaker and Fitzpatrick, 2013)
- Foreclosed homes (Johnson et al, 2010)
- Properties on their way to auction or that have reverted to bank ownership (Ellen et al, 2013b)
- Violations of real property codes (Weaver, 2013)
- Environmental contamination
- Abandoned or deficient sites and buildings (Rosato et al, 2010; Runfola and Hankins, 2009; Hortas-Rico, 2010)
- Vacancy in lots, homes, and buildings<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note that abandonment and vacancy are not homogenous. Vacancy, which receives more attention than other signifiers of blight in economic scholarship, describes a property that is not occupied but may still be maintained. Abandonment, by contrast, occurs when a property no longer has a steward. Some researchers differentiate types of vacancy like “zombie” properties (e.g., long-term vacant structures, often properties in the mortgage foreclosure process, that lending institutions fail to pursue so they are effectively lost in a type of legal limbo) compared with temporarily abandoned sites (TOADs), which are often industrial and commercial properties (see Silverman et al, 2013). Others make strong arguments about the benefits of replacing the term “blight” with more specific terms such as neglect or dereliction (Jackle and Wilson, 1992). Blight as a noun can shift attention away from the actions and actors that helped to create unfavorable conditions in cities.

The phrase “blighted properties” instead brings attention to an active process of blighting or neglecting and offers a more accurate representation of urban landscapes. The latter phrase also helps to avoid slippage from discussions about places to discussions about people. There is a long history of blight referring to communities of color (see Prakash, 2013). This report concurs with this finding and recommends that policymakers and practitioners adopt this latter phrase, “blighted properties,” rather than the more ambiguous stand-alone “blight.”

### B. ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF BLIGHTED PROPERTIES

Economic researchers who are concerned with blighted properties primarily focus on one question: What are the market effects of blighted properties? Recent responses to this question

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<sup>2</sup> By no means is the list of physical conditions comprehensive; these are the common variables that economic studies focus on in determining the economic impacts of blight.

have suggested that the impact of foreclosures on urban economies and communities is more complicated than previously thought (see Whitaker and Fitzpatrick, 2013). Researchers estimate that the costs to municipal governments of an extended property vacancy vary between \$5,000 and \$35,000 (see Summell, 2009). Researchers also show that a vacant house, not surprisingly, takes longer to sell on the market than an occupied house (see Peng and Cowart, 2004) and properties that go through lengthy foreclosures are more likely to become vacant (Ellen et al, 2013b). And, researchers document that areas where there are high levels of city-owned properties and elevated rates of vacancies are more likely to experience housing abandonment (Silverman et al, 2013).

Other research investigates the effects of blighted properties on the market value of a single home or on a neighborhood as a whole (see Summell 2009). This body of work has produced a number of estimates: a selling price of a vacant and foreclosed home is 2 percent, 22-24 percent, or 46.6 percent less than that of an occupied house (see Summell 2009). Researchers have also demonstrated how distressed residential properties shape property values within 500 feet. One project found that foreclosures in low-poverty areas lead to \$7,000 reductions in neighboring property values (or by 4.2-7.5 percent); an additional vacancy reduces sales prices by 1.1 percent; an additional tax-delinquent property reduces sales prices by 2 percent, and if a house is both vacant and delinquent the sales price is reduced by 4.6 percent (Whitaker and Fitzpatrick, 2013). These estimates vary greatly and attest to the need for multiple measures, or multivariate models of linear regression (Silverman et al, 2013).

Much of the economic research on blighted properties adheres to the unexamined belief that increased property values are good, just, and necessary. Research projects seek to figure how blighted properties undermine property tax bases (see Whitaker and Fitzpatrick, 2013). For blight research in the U.S., market fundamentalism, the idea that strengthening property markets will solve the problem of blighted properties and make better cities, is the dominant paradigm. In this popular framework, blighted properties are treated as market problems that need market solutions (Weaver, 2013).

## C. ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF ANTI-BLIGHT POLICIES

Recent scholarship on blight offers little data about which policies and programs work best to limit, eradicate, and/or correct blighted properties (Heckert and Mennis, 2012; Francis and Thomas, 2006). Part of the problem is that anti-blight policies, much like blight itself, vary greatly. Anti-blight policies are often implemented in a piecemeal approach and directed toward ambiguous goals of increasing economic wealth for particular places or people (Gordon, 2004; Weaver, 2013). “Cities seeking to redevelop large stockpiles of vacant land have struggled to resolve” social and spatial issues and where, how, and for whom to redevelop land (McGovern, 2006:535). These programs offer an impression of vacancy, abandonment, foreclosure, and other aspects of blight as problems in and of themselves. Much of the anti-blight policy and programmatic work engages the private sector to revitalize distressed neighborhoods (McGovern 2006). Projects try to ready the land for the market, or, as in greening programs, reduce the appearance of neglect until developers return. Rather than rely on community

development corporations as they did in the past, policymakers leverage private investments with public acquisitions of large tracts of lands and try to expand an area's marketable potential.

Researchers have difficulty studying these ad-hoc approaches to blight (Francis and Thomas, 2006). Few studies of anti-blight policies exist (Hortas-Rico, 2010). Some scholars, however, have investigated the spillover effects of anti-blight programs on adjacent properties. One study found that property values near recently greened spaces increase at a rate greater than that of the city as a whole (see Heckert and Mennis 2012; see also Dunn 2010). Other scholars have examined the consequences of particular anti-blight policies. In one analysis of an urban growth boundary, a researcher found sprawl containment strategies to be useful in increasing investments and reducing deterioration in central cities (see Hortas-Rico 2010). Like most research projects about anti-blight policies, this particular analysis did not consider the negative effects of these projects for marginalized residents of the central cities where new investments were directed.

A handful of social scientists have recently raised questions about the extent to which anti-blight policies prioritize social justice outcomes over private market stabilization (see Weaver, 2013). This critical research documents how anti-blight policies negatively affect communities of color (see Weber, 2002; Highsmith, 2009). In the past, municipalities routinely used eminent domain and other anti-blight tools to "eliminate black communities and replace them with highway infrastructure" and other publicly-funded projects such as stadiums and hospitals (Prakash, 2013:1437). Today, urban agriculture and other anti-blight programs can contribute to displacement of communities of color (Hoover, 2013). Scholars show how anti-blight projects often, and many times unintentionally, limit economic wealth, increase residential segregation, and continue social polarization for marginalized populations.

Research about blight doesn't just overlook the social consequences of blight and anti-blight policies. Few studies address informal anti-blight projects and the practices of actors outside of formal governance structures. Across the U.S., post-industrial landscapes have become laboratories for new poverty survival strategies. Groups like the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign and Take Back the Land of Miami and Rochester, N.Y. are changing the meaning of vacant property in cities and rural areas. In Baltimore, community organizers are pairing residents who are homeless with houses that have no tenants. In Philadelphia, vacant houses have been occupied as recovery homes for residents struggling with drug and alcohol addiction (Fairbanks, 2011). Future research must address the implications of these informal anti-blight programs, including their capacity to shift political priorities and governmental responses to disinvested neighborhoods.

### III. SOCIAL DIMENSIONS/MEANINGS OF BLIGHT

#### A. SOCIAL DEFINITIONS OF BLIGHT

As a result of the economic-centric focus of blight research, there has been little scholarly attention to the impacts of blighted properties beyond traditional market effects. Some work shows how places that are blighted have low levels of employment opportunities (Kaplan, 1999). Other research demonstrates that additional foreclosures lead on average to a 1 percent increase in additional crimes, especially violent ones (see Ellen et al, 2013; see also Hillier et al, 2003). Youth violence, too, persists at high rates in blighted neighborhoods (Morrel-Samuels, 2013). This critical yet small body of research also includes analyses of social network strength in neighborhoods described as blighted. Blighted neighborhoods do not typically have strong social networks and have greater needs for city service intervention (DeMarco, 2009; see also Benediktsson, 2014). When blighted neighborhoods do have strong social ties, the residents who live in these places often possess little political power (see Runfola and Hankins, 2010).

Researchers have begun to pay attention to the uneven distribution of blight across cities. Blight does not affect all neighborhoods or populations equally. Black populations are disproportionately affected by the concentration of environmentally suspect, tax delinquent, or vacant properties (see Leigh and Gradeck, 1996; Silverman et al, 2013; Runfalo and Hankins, 2009; Carriere, 2013). Low-income neighborhoods are also more vulnerable to increases in property abandonment and blighted properties after natural disasters (Zhang, 2010).

#### B. BROKEN WINDOWS THEORY

Under the rubric of the Broken Windows Theory (BWT), social science researchers for the past 30 years have examined the social and psychological dimensions of blight and its relationship with crime, safety, and social order. Broken Windows Theory proponents tend to focus on indicators and/or behaviors of *physical disorder* (abandoned buildings, graffiti, overgrown lots, and litter) and *social disorder* (conduct and people such as panhandlers, drug sellers, prostitutes, and squeegee men who break the law or some social norm), as important environmental cues that attract criminal behavior and activities. In response, local police and code enforcement officials target resources to enforce minor offenses, such as littering and loitering, and help stage community-driven cleanup initiatives that together can maintain neighborhood order, prevent more serious crime, and perhaps stabilize declining neighborhoods.

Community policing gurus George Kelling and Professor James Q. Wilson coined the BWT term in 1982, "... social psychologists and police officers tend to agree that if a window in a building is broken and is left unrepaired, all the rest of the windows will soon be broken."<sup>3</sup> Allowing a neglected property to remain in such a condition indicates that neighborhood residents do not

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<sup>3</sup> Source included in bibliography. Refer to Wilson and Kelling, 1982.

care and thus it signals potential opportunities for social disorder and criminal behavior. Wilson and Kelling (1982) go on to suggest that disorder and crime are inextricably linked with the physical environment at the community level:

*“[A] lot of serious crime is adventitious, not the result of inexorable social forces or personal failing. A rash of burglaries may occur because drug users have found a back alley or an abandoned building in which to hang out. In their spare time, and in order to get money to buy drugs, they steal from neighbors. If the back alleys are cleaned up and the abandoned buildings torn down, the drug users will go away. They may even use fewer drugs, because they will have difficulty finding convenient dealers and soft burglary targets.”(Wilson and Kelling, 1982)*

The BWT still has significant influence in the fields of criminology, code enforcement, community development, and municipal policing. Researchers examine the interplay of the social and the physical aspects of neighborhood disorder along with the fear of crime and actual crime rates (Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999). In the 1990s, the BWT greatly influenced policing practices and policies as leading city police departments began to develop community-oriented policing units and focus police resources on seemingly minor violations of local ordinances to maintain social and physical order, and thus prevent more serious crime.<sup>4</sup> New York City is perhaps the best-known major city to adopt more aggressive police tactics to address issues of social disorder and physical decline (Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999).

Within the past 15 years, researchers and policymakers have begun to reexamine and challenge some of the BWT’s underlying assumptions and principles. Perhaps one of the more comprehensive efforts involved a University of Chicago research team’s construction of a social and physical disorder scale to rate and rank 196 neighborhoods using video surveillance of 23,000 street segments, neighborhood surveys, and assessments of police records and U.S. Census data (Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999). Based on this research in Chicago, the researchers contend that “collective efficacy,” defined as cohesion among residents combined with shared expectations for the social control of public space, better explained lower rates of violent crime, with the exception of perhaps robbery, and observed disorder than the BWT. For Keep America Beautiful and its affiliates perhaps it is more of a blend of helping neighborhoods coalesce around blight through neighborhood action and close partnerships with actions taken by local police and code enforcement staff.

Another dimension emerging from recent research involves individual and neighborhood perceptions and attitudes towards blight. A research team developed a structural equation model to test residents’ associations among actual property upkeep, perceived upkeep and neighborhood satisfaction. Focusing on the effects of physical disorder, the team’s study confirmed that as perceived property upkeep improved, residents felt more safe (free from crime) and neighborhood satisfaction improved (Hur and Nassar, 2014). Other researchers

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<sup>4</sup> Their work helped form the philosophy and research that supports the essential principles and practices of community-oriented policing. See George Kelling’s latest book, *Fixing Broken Windows: Restoring Order and Reducing Crime in Our Communities* (New York: Touchstone, 1998).

suggest that we should move beyond the BWT's fixed definitions of social norms and social disorder to a more nuanced understanding of how the social meanings of disorder play out among different groups of people in particular places (Murphy, 2012). Differences in how groups of people perceive and react to social and physical disorder, particularly in neighborhoods, could perhaps lead to more strategic policy and planning interventions, especially in declining or transitioning neighborhoods.

The relevance of these debates and discussions on the BWT can perhaps come to light through recent research on community perceptions of littering conducted by a graduate student who embedded herself for three years in Pennsylvania Hills (Penn Hills), Pa., a declining, inner-ring suburb of Pittsburgh (Murphy, 2012). Her insights and observations about how the residents, local government and community-based organizations thought about litter offer important insights into the social dimensions of blight that local officials and civic leaders from other communities can learn from and use to adapt. Here are a few of the findings from this research project:

- The case study of Penn Hills explains how the accumulation of litter shapes community perceptions of who the litterers are. In Penn Hills, the accumulation of litter was more severe where predominantly low-income African Americans lived. The case study research offers insights into issues of how people's perceptions about litter is influenced by where they live, who they are and the people who live in their neighborhood or community; thus, such community-wide perceptions contributed to the stigmatization of these neighborhoods and their residents.
- The built environment and development types can influence littering. For example, the researcher compared Penn Hills to Edgebrook, Pa., a neighborhood with similar demographic composition, and found that Edgebrook's more residential development pattern provided fewer private commercial spaces for littering (note that Edgebrook had a different littering problem — the illegal dumping on abandoned properties and empty lots).
- By defining litter as a pressing social problem, longtime residents of Penn Hills (both white and black homeowners) created this self-perception of being "virtuous community insiders" while constructing their own "folk theories" of how new residents (often poor, renters, etc.) were causing the community's littering problem even though they did not see them actually engage in the act of littering.
- Litter within the community accumulated in some places (western section of Penn Hills) and not in others (confirmed by field observation and interviews with business owners and residents). This led the researcher to identify four structural features that contributed to this spatial pattern of litter:

- 1) Public use of private space: Areas with more privately-owned commercial sites (active or abandoned) had more accumulation of litter, as was the case with Penn Hills.
- 2) Institutional negligence: Litter accumulation is also a consequence of lack of places/receptacles provided by private commercial business or the local government and the lack of sufficient resources to regularly maintain and empty existing trash receptacles.
- 3) Municipal constraints: Penn Hills' declining population and revenue made it difficult for the city to more aggressively enforce local littering ordinances and codes. Littering often took a back seat to more serious issues, such as public health code violations and unsound structures.
- 4) Unequal organizational capacity across neighborhoods: Wentworth Civic Association, one of the first planned neighborhood associations in Penn Hills, continues to make neighborhood beautification a top priority and organizes regular neighborhood cleanups using resident volunteers and university students. No other neighborhood in Penn Hills has the same capacity or priority to focus on litter. Thus, inequality in neighborhoods' organizational capacity across the suburbs may explain why litter is cleaned up in some neighborhoods and not others.

Keep America Beautiful and its affiliates may find the results, research methods, and approach of this research useful to review or replicate in other communities.

## IV. THE ENVIRONMENTAL DIMENSIONS OF BLIGHT

There are three topics of concern related to blight from the environmental standpoint. These topics include:

- Public health
- Green infrastructure
- Brownfields

It is important to note that vacant properties and brownfields are synonyms of blight in the environmental context.

### A. BLIGHT AND PUBLIC HEALTH

The presence of vacant properties and dilapidated structures creates public health concerns to adjacent communities. Research indicates an association between blight and the following three health threats: 1) increased risk of fire, 2) increased presence of illness in the community, and 3) personal safety.

**Increased risk of fire:** Research shows that vacant dwellings are at a higher risk of fire in urban areas (Hall, 2008, Shai, 2006 and Scharterle, 2011). Most of these fires are intentional, set by individuals looking for warmth or to prepare drugs (Shai, 2006). According to Hall (2009), vacant houses become a matter of increasing concern as the economy weakens. Research by Scharterle (2011) indicated that a 10 percent increase in the amount of vacancies was associated with a 9.9 percent increase in fires when data was evaluated at a census-level track.

Additionally, the risk of fire increases in low-income neighborhoods with old houses (Shai, 2006). Poor districts have declining tax bases that result in lower safety systems such as firefighting and law enforcement. Furthermore, old dwellings in poor neighborhoods usually have hazardous cooking facilities and a lack of storage, which both increase the risk of fire (Shai, 2006). Studies also demonstrate that occupied dwellings within 100 meters (approximately 330 feet) from an abandoned property are at a higher risk of fire. Scholars recommend that areas with a large presence of vacant properties need to remove trash and maintain their buildings structurally to reduce the risk of fire (Schacterle, 2011).

**Illness:** Blighted neighborhoods with large numbers of vacant properties can affect a community's health.

Ragweed is a common plant in urban ecosystems and a producer of allergenic pollen. In Detroit, for example, vacant lots are the main source of ragweed production. Katz (2014) investigated if mowing was an effective management technique for ragweed control. Research indicated that ragweed populations increase when lawns are mowed only once or twice a year. Management of ragweed is best accomplished by mowing on a monthly basis or not mowing the



lots (Katz, 2014). Scholars believe that the presence of taller plants and limited resources, such as light and nitrogen, prevent the germination of ragweed plants (Katz, 2014). Although lots that are left un-mowed can reduce the presence of ragweed, unmaintained vacant properties attract illegal dumping, crime, and unwanted wildlife, all of which are symptoms of blight (Katz, 2014 and Garvin, 2013).

Vacant properties are also associated with an increase in mosquito-borne diseases (Becker, 2014 and Reisen, 2008). Becker (2014) evaluated the association between roofless vacant houses and the presence of mosquitoes in two Baltimore neighborhoods. Results suggested that in dry conditions, blighted neighborhoods were at a lower risk of mosquito-borne diseases, despite the large presence of unmanaged trash that can hold water. Additional research shows that blighted neighborhoods are more at risk in wet conditions (Becker, 2014). Reisen (2008) demonstrated that there was an association between abandoned pools and West Nile virus cases in Kern County, Calif., an area highly affected by the foreclosure crisis. Research showed that abandoned and unmaintained pools in urban areas of Kern County were breeding grounds for *Culex Tarsalis*, the West Nile virus-carrying mosquito common in rural areas (Reisen, 2008).

Physical disorder has also been linked to poor physical and mental health conditions, including cardiovascular disease, injury, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse (Garvin, 2013).

**Personal Safety:** Research suggests that vacant properties are associated with crime assaults (Jones, 2014 and Branas, 2012). Studies using data from 126 metropolitan statistical areas after the housing crisis indicated that vacant houses and burglary were positively associated (Jones, 2014). Scholars argue that the increase in burglary can be attributed to a reduction in guardians and police because of financial constraints (Jones, 2014). Furthermore, there is a significant association between aggravated assault, especially gun assault, and vacant properties even when controlling for demographics and neighborhood socioeconomic characteristics. Branas (2012) concludes that vacant properties should be targeted in interventions to reduce assault in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

As discussed in Section III, scholars argue that physical disorder in a community (e.g. graffiti, litter, and overgrown lawns) is associated with crime, fear, and physical assault (Branas, 2014, Jones, 2014, Perkins, 1992, De Marco, 2009, Garvin, 2013 and Benediktsson, 2014). Research by Garvin (2013) indicated that trash build-up, vegetation overgrowth, and vacancy were perceived by the community as forms to attract unwanted animals. Research also indicates that urban design elements such as planters and lighting can improve public perception of a neighborhood (Perkins, 1992).

## B. BLIGHT AND GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE

Despite the negative effects of blight, research indicates a growing momentum since the mid-2000s to reuse vacant and underutilized land into green infrastructure, especially in older industrial-legacy cities. Research has investigated efforts to successfully implement green infrastructure for stormwater management, urban agriculture, and open space.

Green infrastructure has been recognized as an alternative to improve water quality, reduce air pollution and the urban heat island effect, save energy, enhance urban aesthetics and safety, and promote green jobs (Dunn, 2010 and Keeley, 2012). It is important to note that the term “green infrastructure” has multiple definitions, depending on scale, in the literature (Dunn, 2010).

Researchers typically examine a particular program in a particular city or neighborhood and document the benefits from the particular treatments by using a variety of research methods such as econometric analysis, and gathering environmental data from a sample of individual sites or projects. The research typically does not examine the impacts and influence of deploying multiple greening strategies over the course of time. What is critical for practitioners and policymakers is to recognize that research about one program intervention or policy may not directly translate to another intervention. However, there has been research that evaluates which factors influence the success of urban greening projects. Research by Vogt (2005) demonstrated that socio-demographic characteristics of neighborhoods may affect the outcome or urban greening efforts.

**Stormwater Management:** Many municipalities are starting to use green infrastructure for stormwater management. Research indicates that most examples in the U.S. exist in post-industrial cities characterized for having issues with old infrastructure and combined sewer overflows. (Keeley, 2012 and Barkasi, 2012). These cities see green infrastructure as a low-cost opportunity to meet the mandates of the Clean Water Act, reduce stormwater volumes, and remove consent orders for degrading surface water bodies (Keeley, 2012 and Barkasi, 2012). Stormwater control methods comprised in green infrastructure include: bioretention ponds, rain gardens, wetlands, detention ponds, and community gardens. Research indicates initial efforts to develop soil suitability tests to properly implement stormwater control methods (Barkasi, 2012). There are a host of challenges implementing green infrastructure, including financial constraints, administrative political barriers, and technical challenges (Keeley, 2012).

**Urban agriculture:** Urban agriculture, in the form of community gardens and urban farms, has gained attention from policymakers, social organizations, and academia as a way to reduce blight. Community gardens provide learning opportunities and improve food security in disadvantaged neighborhoods and shrinking cities (Meenar, 2012, Knight, 2013 and Hoover, 2013). Community gardens can also be considered a stormwater control method since the cisterns used to irrigate the crops can help reduce peak flows (Barkasi, 2012).

A successful example of community-led greening project is Baltimore’s Community Greening Resource Network (CGRN), which is modeled after Detroit’s Garden Resource Program Collaborative (Krones, 2010). The purpose of CGRN is to identify gardeners’ needs and provide an organized system by which anyone in the community can access educational and material resources. Research suggests that fair and equal access to knowledge and resources empowers individuals to participate in their communities (Krones, 2010).

There are concerns associated with the movement, however (Hoover, 2013 and Meenar, 2012). Research performed in Philadelphia by Meenar (2012) found urban agriculture to be exclusionary. White communities are more active in community gardens, even though these

projects are located in ethnically diverse areas (Hoover, 2013). Segregation in urban agriculture has been attributed to multiple reasons. One cause is that community gardens are often member-only gardens with long waiting lists. In addition, low-income residents usually have two or three jobs, impeding these members of the community to create and sustain a garden.

**Soil Suitability:** Given the growing momentum for green infrastructure, recent research shows efforts to assess the suitability of urban soils for crop productivity and stormwater management, especially in post-industrial cities such as Cleveland (Knight, 2013, Barkasi, 2013, and Rhea, 2014). In the case of urban agriculture, there are concerns about urban soils to provide sustainable and safe produce. Knight (2013) tested the effectiveness of soil health indicators by planting lettuce in various vacant lots in Cleveland. Results showed that lettuce can be a useful indicator of soil health conditions. Furthermore, the presence of clay, active carbon, soil organic matter, and microbial biomass are positively correlated with lettuce productivity. Rhea (2014) has started to develop fast and efficient methods to characterize suitable areas for stormwater management, community green space, and pollinator habitats in urban core areas by using land use covers. Initial research shows that vegetation is correlated to nutrient availability and soil drainage (Rhea, 2014).

**Community Tools:** In 2010, Kirnbauer and Baetz developed a Microsoft Excel® community-based decision support tool (known as C-SAP) to aid communities in evaluating strategies to reuse vacant and underutilized land (Kirnbauer, 2011 and Kirnbauer, 2014). The tool includes 15 reuse strategies in the following categories: parks, urban food production, and stormwater/ecosystems management. Communities can use C-SAP to determine the suitability of a site, allocate reuse strategies at the neighborhood and community levels and project the life-cycle cost of a specific redevelopment (Kirnbauer, 2011 and Kirnbauer, 2014). The tool is available online for free (Kirnbauer, 2011 and Kirnbauer, 2014) through the McMaster University Sustainable Communities Research Group website:

<http://www.eng.mcmaster.ca/civil/sustain/downloads.html#csap>

C-SAP has been pilot-tested successfully in Hamilton, Ontario (Kirnbauer, 2011 and Kirnbauer, 2014). In one pilot test, C-SAP was used to identify suitable areas for urban food production. During the pilot test, the tool was adjusted to reflect the constraints of each site (Kirnbauer, 2011). In the second pilot test, C-SAP was used to rapidly evaluate the cost-effectiveness of two design alternatives to reuse an underutilized utility corridor at four life-cycle lengths (five, 10, 15 and 30 years). The evaluation took into consideration the lease length, frequency of maintenance, and pathway materials (Kirnbauer, 2014).

## C. BROWNFIELDS

Vacant industrial properties, commonly referred as brownfields, are often seen as blight (Herbst, 2004). Brownfields are usually encountered in African-American and Latino communities, creating an association between race and presence of brownfields (Hockman, 1998 and Kibel, 2014). Furthermore, research by Litt (2002) revealed that Southeast Baltimore communities, characterized by presence of blight, poverty, and brownfields, had excess death from respiratory illnesses and total cancers.

The redevelopment of brownfields to open, green space has gained support within the U.S. (De Sousa, 2006). Research by De Sousa (2006) showed that the greening of brownfields has brought people back to forgotten areas and complemented the redevelopment of residential, commercial, and industrial projects. A study by Garvin (2013) indicated a strong interest by the community to change vacant land to parks in Philadelphia. Many scholars have demonstrated that areas colonized by animals and plants can be of value for the enjoyment of the community, especially in areas that lack open space (Herbst, 2004).

## V. LEGAL AND POLICY MEANINGS OF BLIGHT

As a legal and policy term, the meaning of blight can vary from state to state and often shift according to the underlying public policy drivers and the specific legal tool or strategy. For example, state laws for eminent domain may define blight differently than local ordinances designed to prevent or punish illegal dumping of trash and debris. Most of the legal and policy scholarship classifies blight according to different types of deleterious property conditions and/or uses—vacant homes, brownfields, litter/trash, illegal dumping on vacant lots—and the various legal tools and policy strategies that local governments and communities deploy to address blight (e.g. eminent domain, land use regulations, code enforcement, nuisance abatement, demolition, land banking, etc.). Despite this diversity, the protection of public health and safety serves as blight’s primary legal and policy rationale.

The legal and policy scholarship also discusses the socioeconomic impacts and negative influences that blighted property conditions and/or uses generate, such as decreases in property values, increases in crime, etc. Recognize, however, the primary focus is the underlying legal and policy rationales for these interventions and the implementation challenges to prevent or abate blight. Moreover, blight laws and policies occur within the domain of local governments, but states often have the controlling authority to grant, expand, or restrict the ability of local governments to adopt or revise blight ordinances. Thus, municipal law principles greatly influence blight’s meaning in contemporary law and policy.

Below, we highlight three major themes surrounding the legal and policy meanings of blight:

- 1) Blight’s roots derive from long-standing legal and policy principles of public nuisance.
- 2) Earlier scholarship on blight covers traditional laws and policies associated with redevelopment planning/eminent domain, littering and illegal dumping, and the local government regulation of the blighting influences of signs and adult businesses.
- 3) Recent scholarship on blight responds to the new legal tools and policy strategies that communities are deploying to reclaim increasing waves of vacant properties caused by the recent mortgage foreclosure crisis.

### A. BLIGHT LAWS AND POLICIES AS OUTGROWTH OF PUBLIC NUISANCE PRINCIPLES

Principles of public nuisance law and its tenets serve as blight’s legal foundation—connecting the concept of blight to property conditions and the built environment. As defined by the Second Restatement of Torts, a public nuisance is an unreasonable interference with a public right caused by conduct or activities that: 1) significantly interfere with the public health, the public safety, the public peace, the public comfort, or the public convenience; or 2) is proscribed by a statute, ordinance, or administrative regulation; or 3) is continuous in nature with a long-lasting effect and the actor knows or has reason to know will have a significant effect on the public right

(Lind, 2011). Public nuisance principles focus not only on the existing physical condition of the property but on human conduct that causes it. Different from a private nuisance case, the condition or conduct causes harm, such as a pile of rubbish, a smoking fire, or a vacant building to the general public that reasonable people would find offensive (Lind, 2011).

Local governments in the U.S. have long-standing legal powers to abate public nuisances as part of their delegated state police powers to protect the public's health, safety and welfare (Juergensmeyer, 2007). By the early 1900s, it became a common practice for U.S. cities to adopt local ordinances that declared certain types of property conditions or related actions/behaviors, such as unsanitary housing, unsafe structures, and unhealthy neighborhood conditions as public nuisances. With the growth of cities and associated public health and quality of life problems, it became difficult, if not infeasible, to take nuisance abatement actions against each individual property to protect the public health and safety (Schilling and Linton, 2005).

From these public nuisance roots evolved a new approach in building, housing, and zoning codes that established minimum standards and procedures for construction, compatibility of uses, site placement, and property maintenance (Schilling and Linton, 2007). These new regulatory measures enabled local governments to help prevent properties from deteriorating or generating nuisances that could negatively impact the quality of life in neighborhoods. Now local officials could take legal action by merely proving a violation of the state or local codes without having to describe in detail property conditions that created public nuisances—the legal doctrine of public nuisance per se (Juergensmeyer, 2007).

State and local blight laws evolved from these public nuisance concepts with the creation of new legal strategies and tools (e.g., eminent domain, spot blight, etc.) to address concentrations of unhealthy and unsightly property conditions on a broader, neighborhood-based scale.

## B. BLIGHT RESEARCH TRACKS THE SHIFTS IN THE LEGAL AND POLICY RESPONSES TO PROBLEM PROPERTIES

Our review of law and policy scholarship reveals how the literature tracks community trends in addressing contemporary blight challenges. As communities recalibrate existing legal strategies and tools to address new types of problem properties and new forms of property ownership and neglect, so does the definition and use of the term blight. Many of the articles published 10 or more years ago discuss long-standing challenges with illegal dumping or falling-down buildings along with the classic legal and policy responses to blight such as eminent domain, litter ordinances, sign and billboard regulations, adult entertainment zoning, etc. Such classic blight responses derive from long-standing local government police powers to protect the public health, safety and welfare by adopting regulations on properties/structures and/or imposing fines or pursuing prosecution for those parties responsible for failing to maintain their properties per the local rules (Reynolds, 2009).

Around 2004, a huge shift in the literature arose with a new focus on reclaiming vacant housing and abandoned properties in response to the community impacts caused from the mortgage

foreclosure crisis and Great Recession. Previous vacant property research primarily studied the legal/policy dimension of post-industrial cities, such as Buffalo, N.Y. and Cleveland, which suffered decades of decline (Schilling and Logan, 2008). The foreclosure crisis caused this type of blight—vacant properties—to spread throughout the country, so the research tracks mounting inventories of vacant properties, often bank-owned, in fast growing communities in the West (e.g., Phoenix and Las Vegas) and the Southeast (e.g., Atlanta, Orlando, Fla. etc.). In response to this variation on blight, communities are experimenting with new legal strategies such as land banking and registration ordinances to stem the tide of vacant and foreclosed properties. Below we discuss these shifts in blight research on the policies and practices deployed in response to new challenges in maintaining property and neighborhood conditions.

### C. TRADITIONAL BLIGHT LEGAL STRATEGIES AND TOOLS

***Redevelopment Planning Powers and Eminent Domain:*** Blight in the redevelopment context generates a host of specialized legal, policy, and social issues that affect its legal definition and policy responses. While well beyond the scope of our search, we felt Keep America Beautiful should understand the tensions and contentiousness that still reverberate around eminent domain and, thus, indirectly affect the legal and policy meaning of blight.<sup>5</sup> Below, we provide a brief history of eminent domain/redevelopment law that illustrates how blight still remains a valid legal justification for eminent domain despite changes in state laws and local practice.

Blight as a legal justification for urban redevelopment can trace its roots back to the 1920s and 1930s when the federal government and a few states began to clear slums to remove unsanitary housing and replace it with public housing (Gold and Sagalyn, 2011). These findings of blight (to protect the public health, safety, and welfare by removing dilapidated and unsanitary housing) were consistent at that time with the public purpose provisions found in eminent domain law. By the 1950s, federal and state urban renewal policies and programs expanded their legal scopes by connecting the removal of “blighted” properties with economic development strategies to build market-rate housing, offices, and businesses (Gold and Sagalyn, 2011). From the 1960s onward, it became common place for local governments to charter special redevelopment authorities (RDAs) with powers of eminent domain as provided by state law (Reynolds, 2005) (Juergensmeyer, 2009). Formation of the urban redevelopment areas or districts generally required formal findings of blight and adoption of redevelopment plans (Shultz, 1989). This expansion of RDAs led to the acquisition of private property for major economic development projects (within cities and beyond) by using their eminent domain powers as authorized by state laws and local policies (Reynolds, 2005) (Juergensmeyer, 2009).

A policy and political resurgence to revitalize deteriorating downtowns in the 1980s and 1990s cemented such private property acquisitions through eminent domain as a cornerstone of urban redevelopment practice. Depending on state law, local officials, as part of a public redevelopment planning process, relied on the blight definition to justify their exercise of

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<sup>5</sup> See also the discussions about the negative socio-economic implications of eminent domain in Economic Development section of this report.

eminent domain on economic development grounds. While the blight definitions vary from state to state, a 2001 survey of 51 state eminent domain statutes (including Puerto Rico) ranked the top 10 common property conditions found in these laws under the blight category (Gold and Sagalyn, 2011):

- Structural Defects (100%)
- Health Hazards (96%)
- Facility or Obsolescent Planning (84%)
- Taxation Issues (69%)
- Lack of Necessary Amenities (67%)  
(Impacting health and safety, such as water, sewer, heat, etc.)
- Conditions of Title (61%)
- Character of Neighborhood (25%)
- Blighted Open Areas (24%)
- Declared Disaster Areas (22%)
- Economic Use of Land (20%)

In light of these broad definitions of blight, eminent domain actions could involve occupied properties on the verge of decline, perhaps underused and obsolete, with other indicators of neglect beyond physical deterioration. Legal commentators and experts began to question this practice (Tepper, 2001). By the early 2000s, several special policy reports highlighted how local governments had greatly extended the eminent domain's economic development definitions to properties that were old, perhaps obsolete but not deteriorating or structurally deficient. This expansion, or perhaps misapplication, of the original intent behind using eminent domain for strictly public development projects led to a popular media and community backlash against local governments' use of eminent domain for economic development purposes, propelled by the now famous 2005 U.S. Supreme Court case of *Kelo vs. New London*. While the Court upheld the city's use of eminent domain to take Ms. Kelo's home to assemble land for a downtown development project, nearly all states subsequently amended their statutes to prohibit (or severely restrict) eminent domain solely for economic development. A few states also made the definitions of blight more restrictive.

The debate over the Kelo decision and subsequent actions by state and local governments generated extensive debates within the legal and policy literature. Several important policy and legal questions surround the use of blight as acceptable legal grounds for eminent domain (Lefcoe, 2008). Legal commentators have called for revisions that would return blight's focus to properties that are severely substandard, involve structural problems and/or pose health and safety hazards (Kokot, 2011). Other commentators argue that blight itself should be retired as legal grounds for eminent domain given the high degree of subjectivity involved in making that determination (Cahn, 2014). Despite the debate, blight remains a valid legal ground for using eminent domain.

***Littering, Illegal Dumping, and Solid Waste Regulations:*** Blight laws and policies designed to prevent, deter, and remove trash, debris, and litter remains a mainstay of local government



police powers (Durdan & Ray, 1997; Connolly 2003). Municipal departments (public works and streets, etc.) also devote substantial resources to cleaning streets, sidewalks, and neighborhoods and even remove abandoned vehicles and junk from public rights-of-way and vacant lots in some cities. State Departments of Transportation (DOTs) do the same for the highways, roads, and rights-of-way under their jurisdiction.

In 2007, Keep America Beautiful commissioned a review of litter studies, attitude surveys and other litter-related literature by the consulting firm R.W. Beck. One aspect of the report synthesized 30 statewide litter surveys from 1989-2006 along with research on individual behaviors/attitudes that cause people to litter public spaces (Beck, 2007). Of the surveys done by the Institute of Applied Research (IAR), the most visible types of litter were miscellaneous plastics and paper, vehicle-related trash and packaging, and beverage cans and related trash (though they noted beverage trash was not as prevalent across these states as in the past) (Beck, 2007). Construction and other debris associated with illegal dumping made up only 4.2 percent of the estimated trash from nine of these IAR statewide surveys (Beck, 2007) compared with 12-13 percent for food packaging, snack wrappers, and miscellaneous paper and plastics. Their report also noted a possible trend from the survey research in the increase in unintentional litter compared with deliberate littering/illegal dumping (Beck, 2007). Another important trend is the overall reduction in littering, about an average of 2 percent annually over the past 30 years according to an IRB study in 2006 (Beck, 2007). Beck postulated this annual reduction may be in response to the steady increase in municipal curbside recycling programs that started in the 1980s (Beck, 2007).

In response to these characteristics and trends on litter and the associated behaviors/attitudes, communities deploy a wide range of programs, policies, and laws. For example, the 2007 Keep America Beautiful commissioned report examined research on sites adopted for special cleanups by Keep America Beautiful affiliates, a sampling of adopt-a-highway cleanup programs/projects, the effectiveness of public trash receptacles, and anti-littering messaging and campaigns (Beck, 2007). Other policy strategies to address litter and solid waste often include cleanups of public spaces by local governments and nonprofit organizations, such as Keep America Beautiful and its affiliates, and new tactics for helping increase enforcement of state and local litter regulations (Beck, 2007).

Our literature review also noted the recent increase in local ordinances that charge fees or, in some cases, ban the use of plastic bags or Styrofoam food and drink containers by grocery stores and restaurants. For example, in 2009, the District of Columbia adopted a 5 cent fee on each disposable carry bag provided at the point of sale (NAEP National E-News, 2011). The goal behind the fee is to change consumer behavior and limit pollution in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed based on a study by the district government which found that plastic bags comprised 45 percent of trash collected in tributary streams (NAEP National E-News, 2011).

Over 100 cities have adopted some type of local ordinance that bans retail businesses from giving plastic bags to customers (Romer and Tamminen, 2014). These and other ordinances are designed to prevent or minimize waste by applying pressure upstream against companies that develop packaging or products. Certainly, these ordinances are the latest iteration of local

government policies and programs (e.g., curbside recycling, composting, and pay-as-you-throw programs) designed to decrease the amount and type of waste that goes into landfills as it makes both fiscal and environmental sense.

Keep America Beautiful and its affiliates should also be aware of another emerging dimension to blight and litter policy—the growing hoarding epidemic and the serious threats it causes for communities. According to a recent New York Times article, an estimated 3 percent to 5 percent of Americans suffer from some type of serious hoarding disorder. Now recognized as a mental illness (often associated with obsessive-compulsive behavior), hoarders collect and accumulate an excessive amount of possessions, including animals, and cannot discard them even though they have little or no value (Frost and Hristova, 2011). While much of the hoarding happens within the confines of private residences, the volume of possessions often spills over into adjacent yards. Moreover, hoarding conditions typically pose public health threats as homes become habitat for rats and other disease-carrying vermin as well as fire dangers that can threaten occupants and neighbors. Generally, hoarders constantly go out and acquire possessions by purchasing, stealing, or accepting free items and then bringing them back to their residences. (Frost et al, 2012). For a variety of socio-psychological reasons, they form attachments to the items, which make them difficult to discard and motivates the hoarder to continue saving and seeking more items. Animal hoarders tend to have a large number of animals, which results in a disorganized and cluttered home (Frost et al., 2011). Forced cleanouts, usually involving the hoarder, family, and members of public agencies, remove items in a short time period (Weiss, 2010). While these cleanouts may provide temporary relief and decrease the public health and safety hazards to the occupant and neighborhood, they often have significant negative impacts on the hoarder and rarely result in addressing the underlying problems (Weiss, 2010).

In light of the increase in hoarding behaviors/incidents, local governments are creating multidisciplinary teams or task forces to address hoarding situations that have become overwhelming for one person or agency to address (Koenig, Chapin, & Spano, 2010). A hoarding task force often responds when the impacts affect the health and safety of the individual and/or the community (Koenig, Chapin & Spano, 2010). Team members often include managers, inspectors, and social workers from code enforcement, fire, police, housing, attorneys, adult protective services, child protective services, vector control, council on aging services, animal services, and mental health, and human service agencies (Bratiotis, et al., 2010).

***Billboards and Signs as Visual Blight/Adult Entertainment Zoning:*** Within the legal and policy context, blight's meaning covers some unusual and unique land use planning issues. Two somewhat common applications of blight policy include the regulation of signs and billboards as a type of visual blight that can pervade especially suburban and rural communities and highway corridors, and local zoning ordinances that disperse adult entertainment businesses throughout a city as a land use planning strategy to mitigate the potential blighting impacts that arise where such businesses concentrate (historically in declining downtowns). Although Keep America Beautiful and its affiliates may not be directly involved with these special types of blight, a brief

discussion of the legal and policy dimensions of signs and adult businesses illustrates the wide range of property conditions and land uses which blight now covers.

With respect to billboard blight along highways, numerous federal and state statutes regulate the proliferation of billboards, especially those signs on designated scenic highways, to preserve places of scenic beauty and historical interest (Flad, 1997). For example, the 1965 Highway Beautification Act championed by Lady Bird Johnson, the former first lady, and the passage of the Visual Pollution Control Act of 1990, gave states and localities the power to amortize old billboards that did not comply with current zoning and planning regulations (Flad, 1997). While billboard advertising is perhaps less prevalent in the Internet age, it can still have a negative impact on rural communities that rely on preserving the rural aesthetic as part of its tourism economy and cultural heritage (Flad, 1997).

In considering the control of visual blight caused by signs, local government sign regulations must operate within the parameters of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Decades ago, the U.S. Supreme Court recognized that local governments could regulate signs on the basis of aesthetics alone (Calo, 2005). With respect to signs and other forms of commercial speech, communities must navigate decades of confusing U.S. Supreme Court jurisprudence (Calo, 2005). As long as sign regulations are narrowly written to address visual blight from the proliferation of commercial signs and billboards, the courts have approved sign codes as valid. Municipalities cannot ban signs, as commercial speech also has some level of First Amendment protections, but they can impose reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions, such as height, placement, size, etc. These legal rules provide Keep America Beautiful and its affiliates the general context surrounding sign code regulation

In the context of adult entertainment zoning regulations, the courts use blight as the underlying legal and policy rationale to approve this exercise of the local government police power. Similar to the field of sign code regulations, the U.S. Supreme Court played a pivotal role when it approved adult entertainment zoning ordinances in the landmark decision of *Young vs. American Mini Theatres* (1976) (Cramer, 2014). In *American Mini Theaters*, the Supreme Court fashioned the “secondary effects doctrine,” which said that cities could rely on studies that document blight, crime, and urban decay associated with the concentrations of adult businesses (Cramer, 2014). The Supreme Court upheld Detroit’s zoning ordinance to disperse adult entertainment establishments throughout the city as a permissible means to address their blight-causing effects even though this type of expression has some level of free speech protections (Cramer, 2014). In a subsequent decision (*City of Renton vs. Playtime Theatres, 1986*), the Supreme Court reinforced the secondary effects doctrine even though Renton did not conduct its own studies about the blighting influence of adult businesses. In this case, the city relied on similar studies/research by neighboring Seattle (Cramer, 2014).

Despite its general acceptance by the courts and planning practitioners, recent research reveals inconsistencies when it comes to the municipal studies on blight’s secondary effects (Cramer, 2014). In her research, Cramer examined the content from 41 municipal reports from 1977-2005 that discussed secondary effects in support of proposed adult entertainment zoning regulations. These municipal studies identified several unusual community problems that might result from

the presence of adult businesses in their jurisdictions—public resentment, increased traffic congestion, decline in community character, attraction of transient, etc. However, the three most prevalent secondary effects were crime, negative impacts on property values, and blight/noise (Cramer, 2014).

In support of the blight and noise finding, Cramer found that nearly half of the 41 municipal reports relied heavily on “subjective” public testimony—comments from adjacent property owners and community members at relevant public hearings—that discussed quality of life impacts, such as littering, noise, offensive language, weeds, graffiti, trash, etc. Only five cities undertook case studies where planning staff and planning commissioners visited the site to record blighting problems, but this method was also subjective and yielded mixed results. Over 40 percent of the municipalities merely asserted the blighting secondary impacts by relying in part on blight findings from other cities. Cramer’s research reveals that municipalities are relying on flawed and questionable research into the negative secondary effects of blight in justifying the adoption of adult business zoning ordinances.

#### D. RECENT LEGAL AND POLICY INFLUENCES ON BLIGHT—RESPONDING TO THE VACANT PROPERTIES AND MORTGAGE FORECLOSURE CRISIS

The contemporary challenges of vacant properties dominate the recent legal and policy scholarship on blight.<sup>6</sup> For over the past six years, an ever-increasing body of academic work discusses new legal tools and policy strategies designed to prevent, abate and/or reclaim vacant and abandoned properties—homes, retail strips, shopping malls, and older industrial plants. Few of the articles evaluate or assess the results or outcomes from using these tools, but instead examine the underlying legal and policy issues, such as the authority to enact these tools and the policy implications from using them. Below we highlight four general categories of legal tools/vacant property programs: public nuisance lawsuits, code enforcement and receivership, land banking, and demolition of abandoned structures/vacant homes. While local governments manage and direct these policy interventions against vacant properties and the associated blighting conditions they cause for surrounding properties, community-based organizations (such as CDCs) are increasingly involved in conducting property condition surveys and organizing neighborhood cleanups of blighted private and public properties (Samsa, 2007); thus, this may be a potential role for Keep America Beautiful and its affiliates to consider.

***Drivers of the Nation’s Vacant and Abandoned Properties Crisis:*** A multitude of factors cause people and organizations to vacate and/or abandon real property, but economic factors remain the dominant driver (Samsa, 2007). Other macro-level drivers include a faltering regional

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<sup>6</sup> The same could be said for the focus of policy studies and practitioner reports involving non-governmental organizations, local governments, professional associations, and community-based groups. Many of the reports collected in the next section of this report also document many of the same policy issues and legal tools from land banking to code enforcement.

economy, demographic shifts, urban sprawl, predatory lending, and speculative real estate practices (Samsa, 2007). Decisions by individuals also cause or contribute to property abandonment. Shifts in real estate markets no longer make it economically feasible to repair an aging home or structure, and thus, homeowners and landlords essentially walk away from their financial obligations or remain living in constantly deteriorating conditions (Samsa, 2007).

Earlier scholarship examined the impacts and legal and policy responses to vacant properties caused by decades of depopulation and deindustrialization primarily in older industrial cities in Michigan, Ohio, New York and Pennsylvania—the proverbial Rust Belt region of the country (Schilling and Logan, 2008). A 2007 report by Greater Ohio, a statewide policy advocacy organization, modestly estimated that Ohio’s eight largest industrial cities had more than 25,000 vacant properties and 15,000 vacant buildings. That corresponds with dramatic population decreases of between 20-30 percent from 1970-2000 for the same Ohio cities (Tisher, 2013). The same study estimated that vacant and abandoned properties cost these Ohio cities roughly \$15 million in annual services and \$49 million in lost property tax revenues.

Along came the illicit financial practices of subprime lending and the collapse of the housing market in 2007 that together triggered a tsunami of mortgage foreclosures through the entire nation (Lind, 2011). Vacant properties, once thought of as only a problem for Rust Belt cities, now infected the fast growing cities of the West and Southwest (Schilling, 2009). As these now vacant homes went through the mortgage foreclosure process, new problems arose with financial institutions that were unable to determine whether some of these homes were in their inventories to manage and maintain, thus putting local government code enforcement officials on the front line as the “first responders” to this meltdown of the mortgage markets (Schilling, 2009) (Pinkston, 2010). Securitization of mortgages by national and multinational financial institutions made it difficult for local officials to identify a responsible party to maintain the property as the legal owner and, in some cases, the banks would “walk away” from this most fundamental duty of property ownership (Lind, 2011). The Municipal Housing Court in Cleveland experimented with a variety of legal strategies, including charges of criminal contempt when bank officials failed to respond to misdemeanor criminal prosecutions for failure to maintain vacant and foreclosed homes under their control and management (Keating and Lind, 2012). Mortgage industry leaders, lawyers, servicers, and property maintenance firms, however, began to wage a media campaign and battled behind the scenes against accepting legal responsibility for maintaining properties that they did not own (Schilling, 2009).

**Public Nuisance Abatement:** Nuisance abatement procedures have become a standard practice for local governments to use in addressing the negative impacts that nuisance properties—ones that “feature” trash, overgrown vegetation, graffiti, broken windows, peeling paint, etc. —have on the community, along with conditions such as unsafe and dangerous buildings that pose more immediate threats to public safety (Tisher, 2013). While local officials have a myriad of legal tools to prevent the spread of blight and preserve and protect residents’ quality of life, the majority of states have codified the ability of local governments to abate these nuisance conditions via two primary legal procedures: litigation (misdemeanor criminal prosecutor or a civil lawsuit seeking injunctive relief, penalties and costs and administrative hearings), or summary/emergency abatement by fire and building officials (Beltramo, 2013).

While state codes tend to follow the classic legal definition, local ordinances tailor the concepts of public nuisance to specific types of property conditions and often follow such language promulgated by national associations through a web of model codes that local governments adopt (e.g., the International Code Council's Property Maintenance, Uniform Fire, Building and Housing Codes) (Beltramo, 2013). The exercise of nuisance abatement powers generally allows local governments to obtain an order from an administrative hearing body or a judge who permits city workers or their contractors to enter the property, take steps to abate the nuisance, and then assess the costs against the property or property owner, which then becomes a special assessment on the property taxes.

***Code Enforcement and Vacant Property Registration Ordinances:*** Local governments can also enforce state and local housing, building, and nuisance codes against individuals and companies responsible for maintaining blighted or nuisance properties (homes, businesses, vacant lots, etc.) (Samsa, 2007). Effective code enforcement can work to prevent substandard properties from becoming worse or eventually abandoned (Schilling, 2009). In response to the mortgage foreclosure crisis and the inability of lending institutions to properly and timely secure vacant and, in some cases, abandoned homes during the foreclosure process, local governments adopted special types of vacant property registration ordinances (VPROs) (Schilling, 2009). These VPROs made the financial institutions (banks/mortgage companies) responsible to maintain the properties, register the properties, and pay a registration fee for homes that were still in the foreclosure process before they became the legal owners (Davis, 2012). Over 1,200 local governments throughout the U.S. have now adopted a VPRO.<sup>7</sup>

The proliferation in VPROs caused a corresponding interest in legal and policy research about the adoption, implementation, and enforceability of this new regulatory approach to dealing with the blighting influence of vacant and foreclosed homes (Davis, 2012) (Tishler, 2013). Some commentators carefully examined the different VPRO models and offered legal analysis on why and how VPROs should be narrowly written in light of the legal uncertainty about whether mortgage companies could be held responsible for failing to maintain properties before they became the legal owners (Davis, 2012). While recognizing long-standing local government powers to abate unsafe buildings and other types of public nuisances, other legal experts and practitioners questioned the VPROs' extension to mortgage companies (Weber, 2013) (Deutsch, 2012) (Sandez, 2014). The mortgage industry continues to engage in strategic legislative campaign to enact or consider state laws that are designed to limit the ability or scope of local government VPROs (Davis, 2012).

Taking a step back from the often-exclusive focus on specific legal tools and policy strategies, law professor Kermit Lind offers sage advice to policymakers and code enforcement practitioners in light of how the mortgage industry and recent crisis has essentially turned code enforcement programs on their heads. Lind advises municipalities to: 1) think and act strategically; 2) think beyond programs to a comprehensive system; and 3) think beyond

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<sup>7</sup> Database maintained by property preservation firm, Safeguard Properties, accessed on 12/8/14 at [http://safeguardproperties.com/Resources/Vacant\\_Property\\_Registration/all.aspx?filter=vpr&city=&category=&page=all](http://safeguardproperties.com/Resources/Vacant_Property_Registration/all.aspx?filter=vpr&city=&category=&page=all)

individual houses to health, safety, and security of neighborhoods (Lind, 2012). Within this new framework of “strategic code enforcement,” Lind identifies five critical elements for designing and implementing a more effective code enforcement system: 1) adopt VPROs; 2) support the continuous coordination of enforcement leaders; 3) develop a comprehensive parcel-based information system; 4) target inspections and enforcement actions; and 5) litigate for maximum compliance (Lind, 2012).

**Public Nuisance Abatement Lawsuits:** For many municipal code enforcement agency inspectors, the tracking down of corporate lenders or mortgage servicing companies to issue violation notices for failing to maintain vacant and foreclosed homes has become a huge challenge (Schilling, 2009). Collectively, the management of the vacant home makes traditional code enforcement remedies somewhat obsolete and ineffective, by servicing and property maintenance firms, together with the fragmentation of municipal code enforcement agencies and overwhelming numbers of vacant and foreclosed homes (Lind, 2012). In response to these policy limitations, several cities, led by Cleveland and its nonprofit community, filed public nuisance lawsuits against lending institutions for failure to maintain properties under their legal control (properties that banks end up owning after the foreclosure process—REO properties) (Lind, 2011). The preliminary results in Cleveland were positive, in the sense that courts were ordered to secure these vacant homes and eventually the court-negotiated settlement resulted in the transfer to the Cuyahoga County Land Bank with damages to cover the vacant homes’ demolition (Lind, 2011). Another legal remedy that can result from a public nuisance lawsuit includes the appointment of a community development organization as a temporary property manager (often known as receivers) to secure, repair, and perhaps eventually obtain ownership of the vacant home (Samsa, 2007).

**Land Banking:** Another strand of the expanding research on vacant properties covers the adoption and expansion of land banks as a policy strategy and legal tool that local governments are increasingly using to address vacant and tax-foreclosed properties (Keating, 2013). In the 1970s, older industrial cities such as Cleveland and St. Louis created some of the first land banks to address blighted vacant and abandoned homes caused by deindustrialization and job and population loss. A new wave of land banks emerged on the scene around 2004-2005 thanks to the pioneering efforts of the Genesee County Land Bank Authority in Flint, Mich. (Keating, 2013). Today roughly 25 land banks now exist in Michigan and over 20 more exist in Ohio (where it replicated and enhanced the Michigan and Genesee County laws and policies) (Alexander, 2011). Similar to expansion of VPROs, land bank scholarship continues to increase its scope by covering a range of legal and policy issues, including the history of how land banks, such as Cuyahoga County’s, came about, their powers and programs (Keating, 2013), their legal structure, and policy advantages in tackling vacant and abandoned properties (Samsa, 2007). One land-banking innovation is aligning state tax foreclosure processes to provide land banks with the opportunity to acquire abandoned property before it gets in the hands of private speculators; thus, state policy reform is another critical area of legal and policy analysis (Samsa, 2007). Beyond acquiring vacant and abandoned properties through tax foreclosure, others argue that communities should still consider the use of eminent domain when VPROs and private nuisance lawsuits fail to address the contagion of urban blight (Tisher, 2013).

## VI. CONTEMPORARY POLICY AND PRACTICE RESEARCH ON BLIGHT

### A. TYPES OF DOCUMENTS

Appendix D provides a list of documents identified by Keep America Beautiful affiliates in communication with the consultant team. Of the documents included in the literature review, 157 were reports, studies, and articles associated with the organization and implementation of policies, strategies, and practices designed to prevent, remediate, and/or eliminate blight. Most of these items did not appear in established publications such as journals, but were produced as freestanding documents by their sponsors or authors.

Most publication sponsors belonged to one of the following categories:

- Research institutions (e.g., The Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy)
- Industry groups (e.g., the National Association of Realtors)
- National organizations representing a particular constituency (e.g., The Trust for Public Land)
- Organizations actively involved in funding, managing, and/or implementing practices (e.g., the Local Initiatives Support Corporation)
- Individual government agencies and nonprofit organizations, or collaborative entities involving government and nonprofit entities (e.g., Detroit Blight Removal Task Force)

Publication authors included researchers associated with academic institutions and entities such as the Federal Reserve Bank, policy and practice experts such as Alan Mallach, whose work was published in his capacity as Senior Fellow at the Center for Community Progress, consultants engaged by sponsoring entities, and individual practitioners knowledgeable about a particular subject area.

For certain topics (e.g., strategies designed to reduce vacant properties), many documents were found that were similar in format and content. Rather than attempting to include as many documents of this kind as possible in the literature review, items that were representative of the literature associated with a particular topic (e.g., *City of Alpharetta Strategies for Vacant Commercial Property Re-Use* by the Atlanta Regional Commission) or that shed new light on a blight-related topic (e.g., *Building a New Framework for Community Development in Weak Market Cities*, published by the Community Development Partnership Network) were identified and included in the literature review.

As indicated in Table 7, most of the documents appeared after the turn of the century.



**TABLE 7: REPORT DISTRIBUTION BY PUBLICATION YEAR**

Year	% Total
1948	1%
1980s	1%
1990s	1%
2000-2005	13%
2006-2010	34%
2011	11%
2012	11%
2013	12%
2014	11%
undated	5%

This distribution is likely influenced in large part by the fact that all searches were conducted through the Internet. Although the research may have overlooked documents that were published in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and not posted online, most documents cited by researchers in studies that provide an overview of a specific topic (e.g., *The Effect of Local Housing Ordinances on Neighborhood Stability* by the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland) do not include references to publications that appeared before 2000.

## B. GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS AND TOPIC AREAS

About a third of the policy and practice publications had a national focus. Most of the publications involving specific states, regions, or localities were associated with five states, as shown in Table 8.

**Table 8: Report distribution by geographical area**

Area	Number of Documents
US (national)	27%
PA	20%
OH	10%
LA	7%
CA	6%
NY	4%
19 other states	24%

The large number of documents involving Pennsylvania is because academic institutions in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, along with Pennsylvania-based nonprofit organizations such as the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania and The Reinvestment Fund, have been engaged in a substantial amount of blight-related research for more than a decade.

As shown in Table 9, most publications were devoted to specific policies and practices as a primary theme (e.g., *Residents at the Center: A handbook on community-based planning for distressed neighborhoods* by the Community Development Institute and the Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey). Reflecting the relationship between the foreclosure crisis, local real estate markets, and blighted housing, many publications focused on the effects of foreclosure and on estimates of the cost of blight (e.g., *\$60 Million and Counting: The cost of vacant and abandoned properties to eight Ohio cities* by Community Research Partners and ReBuild Ohio).

**TABLE 9: REPORT DISTRIBUTION BY THEME**

Primary Theme*	% of Total
Policies and Practices	48
Blight and Foreclosure Cost/Benefit Issues	17
Strategic Planning and Neighborhood Planning	8
Legal Remedies	6
Other	21

Land banks were primary themes in five documents (e.g., *Land Banks and Land Banking* by the Center for Community Progress) and secondary themes in an additional 21 documents (*Every Neighborhood Has A Future...And It Doesn't Include Blight: The Report of the Detroit Blight Removal Task Force*). The first document that addressed land banks as a theme was published in 2003, and most documents that addressed land banks as a primary theme were published between 2009-2014.

### C. DEFINITION OF BLIGHT AND RELATED ISSUES

Nearly all documents that were associated with “economic blight” involved vacant land and vacant and deteriorated buildings. However, a primary reason why many documents addressing other forms of blight (e.g., graffiti, littering) were not found may be that reporting on these forms of blight more often takes the form of news articles rather than studies and research reports. Some of these other forms of blight are documented in reports about awards for best practices (e.g., “24-Hour Recycling Center” and “Elk Grove Rain Garden Plaza” by California League of Cities).

A number of documents focused on other issues related to the improvement of community environments:

- *Clean Pittsburgh State of the City* reports for 2011 and 2012 documented initiatives associated with multiple issues, including litter, illegal dumping, and greening.
- The relationship between vacant land and stormwater runoff was addressed in *Where the Water Meets the Road: Connections Between Philadelphia's Vacant Land and Stormwater*, published by the Pennsylvania Environmental Council.
- Abandoned vehicles were the topic of a 2008 U.S. Department of Justice publication, *Problem-Oriented Guides for Police Problem-Specific Guides Series Guide No. 53: Abandoned Vehicles*.
- *Governing* magazine articles published in 2012 described new insights into the causes of graffiti (“Blame Phone Aps for Graffiti's Reemergence”) as well as a new approach for addressing the problem in San Diego (“San Diego Pilot Curbs Graffiti”).
- The California League of Cities recognized mural art as a blight-remediation opportunity in “Hayward Public Mural Art Program.”
- *The Arts and Economic Development Paducah Artist Relocation Program*, a publication by the Onondaga (Kent.) Citizens League, documented a successful revitalization program based on the creation of an arts district.

- “Reducing Vacant Building Fires in Milwaukee” is the topic of an undated Milwaukee Fire Department report.

#### D. NOTEWORTHY FINDINGS

Interestingly, the earliest document found, “Blight Elimination and Urban Redevelopment in Milwaukee,” which was published in 1948, employs a methodology that was not widely used elsewhere until much later and one that includes the compilation and mapping of data on both physical conditions as well as on social and economic impacts. Variables used in the analysis include “dwelling units more than 45 years old,” “overcrowding of land,” “tuberculosis hospital admissions,” and “rate of juvenile delinquency.”

Also noteworthy is the fact that very few of the documents address changes in public sector organization that might be needed to better align available resources to respond to increasing concerns about blight. For example, few of the documents include consideration of the following issues:

- City-city or city-county intergovernmental collaborations to address blight through shared services.
- Recommended changes in the structure and scope of municipal and county redevelopment authorities, planning departments, public works departments, and code enforcement departments to more effectively address blight.
- Potential opportunities to outsource to private or nonprofit entities some blight remediation/elimination responsibilities that traditionally had been managed exclusively by government agencies.
- Residential and commercial displacement associated with blight removal activities and policies/practices to reduce and or avoid displacement.

## VII. OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Policymakers, civic leaders, planners, ecologists, and lawyers in the U.S. use the noun “blight” and the adjective “blighted” to refer to very different features of the American landscape. By exploring environmental, economic, social, legal, and policy contexts, our research shows how “blight” has taken on multiple meanings as defined in these various contexts. As this report explains, there was no singular discovery of something called “blight” in U.S. cities. Urban reformers in the first quarter of the 20th century started to use the language of blight as a metaphor in their descriptions of vast numbers of problems they noticed in cities. They borrowed the term from ecological studies of plant blight with the intent to make their studies of cities seem as rigorous as those of traditional sciences. The term stuck.

For Keep America Beautiful and its affiliates, this report includes several topics related to current programs and activities (e.g., litter control, waste management, illegal dumping, code enforcement, etc.), but also discusses current dimensions of blight that could become new Keep America Beautiful areas of interest and engagement. Because the type and scale of blighted conditions vary from place to place, Keep America Beautiful affiliates and their communities may have differing priorities (e.g., preventing vacant properties, stopping illegal dumping, cleaning and greening vacant lots, etc.) as well as differing thoughts on how to deploy policies and programs to address blighted properties. Much depends on the local political, legal, and community dynamics. In light of these community variations and influences, this report identifies several commonalities across an emerging community of practices and policies around blighted properties.

This section concludes with recommendations, grouped into three categories, about how our findings can help guide: 1) future Keep America Beautiful initiatives; 2) government, private-sector, and nonprofit organization policies and practices; and 3) future research collaborations. In reviewing these recommendations, Keep America Beautiful may want to create various working groups or task forces to consider opportunities for developing partnerships and collaborations with researchers, experts, and relevant national organizations.

### A. KEEP AMERICA BEAUTIFUL-SPONSORED INITIATIVES

In the short term, Keep America Beautiful has several opportunities for using our findings as the basis for constructive action by affiliates and supporters. Below we discuss three related recommendations for Keep America Beautiful to consider.

#### **1. *Establish performance measures that Keep America Beautiful affiliates can use to monitor the progress of anti-blight initiatives.***

To enable Keep America Beautiful affiliates to set realistic goals and priorities and help assess whether their programs and activities successfully address such goals, they should establish performance metrics for each type of blighted condition, from abandoned vehicles to short-dumping. One place where Keep America Beautiful might look to start is to conduct a comprehensive survey of its affiliates and focus the survey on current and recently past anti-

blight programs and initiatives.<sup>8</sup> We found several articles, reports, and graduate student theses that studied Keep America Beautiful programs or where affiliates were integral partners with local governments. A survey would help Keep America Beautiful develop an inventory and typology of Keep America Beautiful affiliate blight programs that could inform the creation of relevant performance measures. Moreover, many municipal and county agencies already have metrics for their blight-remediation activities; thus, it would be worthwhile to determine which ones might work best for monitoring and assessing Keep America Beautiful-related activities. In those instances where the local government metrics are not widely used in connection with certain types of blight, Keep America Beautiful should consider creating them to match a range of affiliate programs.

Performance metrics should include:

- A definition of each type of blight (e.g., graffiti)
- A description of associated remediation activities (e.g., removing graffiti through the use of high-pressure washers, painting over graffiti, covering graffiti with wall murals)
- The identification of related time and cost factors
- An explanation of how these factors may vary on a local or regional basis

## **2. *Use metrics to create a baseline and undertake performance reporting.***

Current and prospective supporters of Keep America Beautiful-sponsored activities are likely to be interested in learning about the progress of anti-blight initiatives undertaken on a local and regional basis and the extent to which these initiatives are proving successful. Once performance metrics are established, it will be possible to publish data on the performance of anti-blight activities undertaken in an initial baseline year and then in subsequent years. For example, a number of nonprofit and local governments publish regular scorecards around various environmental and urban greening initiatives. Such blight reporting will help inform Keep America Beautiful affiliates and others about initiatives that are producing the best results and that may be ideal prospects for replication. The use of data to show the cost-effectiveness of certain initiatives can also leverage funding and other types of support. Because examples of successful blight-remediation programs are scattered across the country, Keep America Beautiful could create individual performance reporting projects associated with different blight remediation programs in a variety of different locations, document and assess those projects, and then encourage replications of those that demonstrate best results among its affiliates and beyond.

## **3. *Develop a user-friendly calculator of impacts from blighted properties.***

A catalyst for many blight initiatives is the release of studies that document the costs of blight on taxpayers and government. Understanding the many socioeconomic and environmental impacts

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<sup>8</sup> As part of this project, we did discuss such a survey of Keep America Beautiful affiliates, but did not have time or resources to effectively launch and complete it.

that communities and residents incur, along with the costs of inaction, becomes critical in elevating blighted properties and justifying new policies and programs that can minimize or eliminate their negative effects on property values, neighborhoods, and government budgets. Based on the information and insights from our synthesis of the national literature, Keep America Beautiful should consider commissioning the development of a user-friendly calculator on blight impacts. As originally proposed by the Econsult team, the first step in building the calculator is creating a blight impact taxonomy which would address impacts on property values, reinvestment, government spending, and tax delinquency. It should account for differences between urban, suburban, and rural geographies. Such a tool, designed with user-friendly interfaces, would prove useful and accessible to Keep America Beautiful and its affiliates.

## B. POLICIES AND PRACTICES

### 1. ***Support and examine community partnerships and grassroots responses to blight.***

More and more nonprofits and community-based groups are leading citywide and neighborhood-based anti-blight initiatives. Policymakers and practitioners should consider supporting such partnerships with national, regional, and local nonprofits as they can often galvanize communities around blighted properties more effectively than government can alone. Our research found few studies that address informal responses to blighted properties and the practices of actors outside of formal governance structures. Thus, researchers should also pay closer attention to examining these informal and creative responses to blight as ways to rebuild and enhance social capital in distressed neighborhoods. These grassroots endeavors also lend themselves to engaging the community directly in the research project through methods of participatory action.

### 2. ***Revise the term “blight” to reflect its multiple meanings.***

There is still no common definition of “blight” within the social sciences. The term remains ambiguous and contested in many academic, political, and community circles. For leaders concerned with the quality of the American landscape, this etymological history offers a cautious message. The stand-alone noun “blight” does not always convey a clear, delineated story. And, the term places perhaps undue attention on the condition and characteristics of problem spaces. “Blight” does not shed light, as it should, on the actions and processes that contribute to the blighting of particular places or the underlying socioeconomic drivers of conditions that cause or generate different types of blight. Governmental and nongovernmental (i.e., philanthropic) funders continue to direct resources to projects that target something called “blight” and all 50 states and the District of Columbia have adopted anti-blight legislation. What these groups are really talking about, however, is spatial change and how to manage it. Policymakers and practitioners should avoid perpetuating the ambiguity that surrounds talk about spatial change by using terms such as blight. Civic leaders should employ the phrase “blighted properties” to describe problem places and think about their work as “blighted property” remediation. Policymakers should also consider ways of revising current laws, policies, plans, and programs with more precise definitions of blight that perhaps could be recalibrated according to local and neighborhood contexts.

### 3. ***Expand the goals and audiences of blight policy and programs to more equitably address socio-economic dimensions.***

Research about blighted properties reveals wide disagreements among scholars and policymakers beyond just definitional differences. As this report shows, research about blighted properties spans public health, personal safety, environmental contamination, and economic prosperity issues. But this research also varies in its assumptions about the problems that blighted properties cause. Some researchers believe that the greatest problem posed by blighted properties are imminent health and safety concerns while others see the social polarization or low employment opportunities as the greatest threats and challenges. A majority of the research and practitioner reports about blighted properties adhere to the idea that decreased housing market values and municipal tax revenues are the primary problems and increased property values and municipal tax bases are the solutions. Some researchers suggest that policymakers should eliminate the worst cases of depressed home sales or long-term vacant structures rather than a slightly depressed home sale or a recently abandoned property (see Sumell 2009 and Silverman 2013). Others suggest that political responses to blighted property should take a triage or targeting approach by stabilizing property values in low-poverty areas (see Whitaker and Fitzpatrick 2013).

These conclusions rely on the belief that strong property market values make strong and vibrant cities. As new research suggests (see discussion on economic effect of blight policies at pages 14-15), increased and stable property values may not benefit all residents who live in blighted neighborhoods. This finding challenges current legal practices that treat economic development as a motivation and rationale for blighted property remediation.

Researchers have begun to pay attention to the uneven distribution of blighted properties across areas. Blighted properties do not emerge in all neighborhoods equally or affect them in similar ways. For historically marginalized populations, blighted properties can have severe social consequences in terms of reduced political power, social polarization, increased threats of fire, limited access to high-quality soil, and exposure to crime, contaminants, and allergens. Scholarship shows how quality of life for communities of color has been routinely hurt by blighted properties and responses to it.

This analysis about the socio-politics of blighted properties puts a pressing task on the plate of leaders concerned with the quality of the American landscape. Policymakers and practitioners should stay attuned to questions about where blighted properties emerge, whose lives are most shaped by blighted properties, and to what end those properties are being remediated. Before selecting a course of action, policymakers and practitioners should identify a vision of what a good and just landscape looks like. Leaders should agree on a set of goals and make sure that any projects work toward that end.

## C. FUTURE RESEARCH COLLABORATIONS

### 1. ***Examine public agency organizational development, capacity building, and civic engagement challenges in implementing anti-blight policies and programs.***

Our research revealed a lack of any significant literature describing ways in which municipal and county governments have undertaken significant changes in public agency organization and departmental capacity building to more effectively respond to blight problems, especially in the context of postindustrial economic trends. Because many U.S. cities and counties were experiencing growth in population and employment accompanied by an expanding tax base during the decades prior to and right after World War II, some blight that is significant now—the

existence of vacant factories, houses and lots, for example—was not widespread at the time. As a result, the charter documents of many of municipalities and counties do not specify which agency or department should take the lead in addressing a specific blight problem. For example, responding to the problem of vacant buildings might require the attention of a municipality's code enforcement department, legal department, housing department, redevelopment authority, and possibly more departments. A clear delegation of leadership accompanied by a commitment to ongoing interdepartmental coordination is needed to mobilize public sector resources to address blight problems. Our literature review did not reveal substantive treatment of whether and how communities are addressing this critical issue.

Additional research on organizational development and capacity-building initiatives involving public agencies that share responsibility for blight remediation would help demonstrate ways in which public sector resources can be used most effectively to respond to this issue. Published information about successful public sector adaptations to blight challenges could help encourage the replication of best practices on a local and county government level. Because effective government/community partnerships in anti-blight initiatives seem to produce good results, future research should also study approaches that encourage civic engagement in planning these initiatives, securing community buy-in, obtaining community commitments, and even helping local governments implement such programs and policies.

## **2. *Support comparative, multi-disciplinary studies across cities.***

The majority of studies in this report are city-specific and policy-specific. Naturally, communities with long histories of decline and blight, become the focal point in experimenting with new vacant property policies and programs and the recent research that defines and documents these new models. While this project discovered some research that examined particular policies or legal tools across two or three cities, we were surprised to not find more cross-city studies that could compare how different cities are adopting new legal tools, such as land banks or VPROs, or compare how cities are deploying multiple strategies to address blighted properties.

One idea for future research, is exploring the diffusion of policy innovation and policy learning among and across local government practitioners and community-based organizations in adopting or adapting innovative policy and legal tools to combat blight. These observations suggest that Keep America Beautiful and other national nonprofits have the opportunity to track changes and practices across metropolitan regions or areas and perhaps coordinate with researchers in those cities or engage more directly with research networks on collaborative applied policy research in communities with Keep America Beautiful affiliates.

Another suggestion for future research collaboration involves the need for more cross-disciplinary studies of the social-psychological behaviors that cause blight and result from living among blight. In light of the field's focus on the policy and program responses to blight, the majority of studies in this report were policy/practitioners' reports, and law and policy articles. Only a handful of the research documents, such as the studies on hoarders, involved researchers from fields such as public health, social work, medicine, sociology, and psychology. Given that many of the policy responses are designed to change behavior or address behavior, future blight research should develop incentives for encouraging more cross-disciplinary scholarship. While discussing barriers and disincentives within the research community are beyond the scope of this project, Keep America Beautiful and other national nonprofits have



meaningful perspectives to share in these discussions given their direct engagement with communities on the ground.

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## APPENDIX A

**Economic:** blight, abandonment, barrier, bulldoze, clearance, cost, decay, demolish, deprived, develop, economic, efficiency, eliminate, equation, expenditure, externality, funds, incentive, invest, model, money, prevent, price, raze, rebuild, renewal, revenue, revitalize, slum, squalor, tax, transform, vacant, value

**Law and Policy:** abandoned buildings, abate, abatement, Aesthetics, code enforcement, condemnation, dangerous buildings, eminent domain, graffiti, hazardous, illegal dumping, initiative, law, litter, municipality, ordinance, police power, policy, prevention, public nuisance, redevelopment, signs, statute, vacant properties, vehicles, visual

**Environment and Public Health:** blight, decay, derelict, urban, vacant, property, derelict, distressed, neglect, slum, ecology, environment, pollution, air, water, soil, brownfield, superfund, reclaimed, open space, NIMBY, derelict, contaminant, abandoned, illegal, open space, green space, reclaimed, space, pathogen, vectors, disease, health, agriculture, urban, city, region

**Social:** blight, decay, derelict, social, environmental justice, race, gender, income, social, community, community participation, community involvement, public outreach

**Rural key word set:** blight, junk, litter, rural, trash

**Other Words:** area, city, housing, infrastructure, metropolitan, neighborhood, property, region, street, suburb, urban, North America, U.S.

## APPENDIX B

Journal of Urban Affairs	(6)	Sociological Forum
Journal of Urban History	(4)	Urban Ecosystems
The Urban Lawyer	(3)	Utah Law Review
Local Environment	(2)	
Rural Sociology	(2)	
Urban Affairs Review	(2)	
ACME		
Albany Government Law Review		
American Public Health Association		
Arizona State Law Journal		
Boston College Environmental Affairs Law review		
California Law Review		
Capitalism Nature Socialism		
City and Community		
Cityscape		
Ecological Economics		
Emerging Infectious Diseases		
Energy Policy		
Environment and Planning A		
Environmental Affairs		
Environmental Health Perspectives		
Housing Policy Debate		
International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health		
Journal of Agriculture		
Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems and Community Development		
Journal of Environmental Planning and Management		
Journal of Housing Economics		
Journal of Housing Research		
Journal of Park and Recreation Administration		
Journal of Planning Literature		
Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare		
Journal of Urban Economics		
Journal of Urban Health		
Land Economics		
Landscape and Urban Planning		
Local Economy		
Maternity Child Health Journal		
National Municipal Review		
Public Health		
Real Estate Law Journal		
Reclaiming Children and Youth		
Regional studies		
Risk - Health Safety & Environment		

## APPENDIX C

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## APPENDIX D

### Documents Recommended by KAB Affiliates

*The following documents were identified by KAB affiliates in communications with the consultant team. Although some of these items are included in the data base, all are identified below in order to provide readers of the report with KAB affiliates' perspectives on documents that were felt to be appropriate for inclusion. One noteworthy item is Keep Cincinnati Beautiful Blight Index, published by Keep Cincinnati Beautiful, which, in the words of the authors, provides "a way for communities to visually assess their neighborhood and measure change over time."*

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