



Neighborhood Revitalization

Findings and lessons from 10 communities

A SUMMARY

Introduction

In the United States, a person's address is a predictor of their longevity and economic outcomes. Residents of low-income neighborhoods face greater barriers in accessing educational opportunities, adequate health care, a safe community and healthy food. Because of decades of discriminatory policies, these disparities are disproportionately concentrated in communities of color. According to the Urban Institute, "across the U.S., 1 in 4 Black households and 1 in 6 Latino households

live in high-poverty neighborhoods, compared to just 1 in 13 white households." The Urban Institute found that majority-white neighborhoods receive 4.6 times as much market investment per household as majority-Black neighborhoods and 2.6 times as much investment as majority-Latino neighborhoods.

Through Habitat for Humanity's Neighborhood Revitalization program, we partner with historically

disinvested communities to work toward equitable and livable neighborhoods and improve the quality of life for and with neighborhood residents. Neighborhood Revitalization is a holistic, place-based approach to addressing neighborhood disparities in the communities where Habitat works.

Neighborhood Revitalization's Quality of Life Framework identifies outcomes and practices that contribute to improving the quality of life of the communities where Habitat works and of the residents who live there. In April 2018, Habitat for Humanity International began a five-year initiative to evaluate how neighborhoods change. We selected 10 diverse, low-income neighborhoods (see Table 1) across the United States to pursue the following objectives from 2018 to 2023:

- Apply and learn from the Quality of Life Framework.
- Build on the evidence base to reinforce approaches and strategies that lead to systemic and sustainable change.
- Inform recommendations for the wider Habitat network and beyond.

ORS Impact, our evaluation partner, explored and evaluated the five-year effort in a report titled *Improving Quality of Life Across Neighborhoods*. Relying on a range

of sources, including broad resident surveys, focus groups and interviews, the report examines enabling factors to neighborhood change, racial equity and inclusion, and how neighborhood revitalization efforts contributed to quality-of-life improvements across the 10 neighborhoods.

This summary outlines some of the lessons captured in the report and shares some reflections about their implications for Habitat's work moving forward. A primary lesson from the five-year intervention is that, while our efforts did improve conditions across neighborhoods, we can do more to center racial equity in our outcomes and processes and help build the power of communities to address inequitable systems. Habitat's efforts to advance equitable outcomes in underserved neighborhoods require an inclusive racial equity and social justice lens at all steps. Habitat for Humanity International and our affiliates must begin by focusing inwardly on the recruitment and training of our staff and on our internal policies, systems and practices as a prerequisite to embarking on community development work. We are committed to recognizing and undoing our own biases, prejudice and blind spots; developing partnerships with a diverse set of people in marginalized communities; and working together to achieve equitable and livable communities.

TABLE 1: Demographics of 10 neighborhoods

	Berkeley County South Carolina	Charlottesville Virginia	Dacono Colorado	Lafayette Louisiana	Los Angeles California	Muncie Indiana	Philadelphia Pennsylvania	Pittsburgh Pennsylvania	Pittsfield Massachusetts	Portland Oregon
Neighborhood population	480	705	1,870	4,582	6,231	1,519	4,549	1,318	3,852	13,899
Asian residents (%)	0.2%	0.6%	0.2%	0.4%	4.7%	0.4%	1.0%	1.1%	1.6%	5.9%
Black residents (%)	36.9%	9.6%	0.7%	75.6%	13.4%	12.2%	89.4%	84.3%	12.0%	11.5%
White residents (%)	59.4%	53.8%	79.4%	21.4%	34.8%	84.1%	5.8%	11.4%	79.7%	53.6%
American Indian/Alaska Native residents (%)	0.5%	1.0%	0.9%	0.3%	1.0%	0.5%	0.3%	0.3%	0.4%	3.0%
Multiple races (%)	1.2%	0.9%	2.1%	1.7%	4.4%	1.8%	2.3%	2.0%	3.5%	12.0%
Other race (%)	2.0%	34.0%	16.8%	0.5%	40.4%	0.8%	1.1%	0.8%	2.7%	14.0%
Residents of Hispanic/Latinx origin (%)*	3%	49%	35%	2%	78%	2%	3%	2%	6%	24%
Median household income	\$44,153	\$40,092	\$43,718	\$21,841	\$34,582	\$22,086	\$14,723	\$21,625	\$27,282	\$69,125

*Hispanic/Latino/Latina/Latinx/Latine is an ethnicity; people of various races identify as Hispanic/Latino/Latina/Latinx/Latine.

Neighborhoods saw significant improvements

All neighborhood coalitions reported significant improvements in neighborhood conditions, such as economic opportunity, education and health, according to the ORS report.¹ All 10 neighborhoods achieved improvements in housing, including new construction

and housing repair and amenities, such as new and redeveloped parks, new community centers, installed murals and artwork, and new grocery stores.

In addition to improving neighborhood conditions, the people involved in neighborhood coalitions' efforts perceived improvements in the three foundational outcomes of the Quality of Life Framework: sense of community, social cohesion and collective action. Specifically, communities demonstrated an increased capacity to work together to make change happen. Examples included evidence

Building a sense of community in Lafayette, Louisiana

At the time the Quality of Life Framework Learning Cohort was launched, the McComb-Veazey Neighborhood Coterie in Lafayette, Louisiana, was acquiring an adjudicated property on Magnolia Street. While residents were painting a mural at the intersection, a resident pointed out the blighted property on the corner – a small house that had been in the neighborhood for decades but was in disrepair and adjacent to a defunct filling station. Coalition participants began a conversation with the local government and Lafayette Habitat for Humanity about turning the property into a community meeting space. In time, Lafayette Habitat purchased the house and filling station, and with the help and leadership of the coalition, facilitated a participatory design process that completely refurbished the property into a well-appointed, one-room community house with two bathrooms, fans, air conditioning, Wi-Fi, and a wide veranda that wraps around the building on the south and east sides.

The Community House is now the heartbeat of the coalition's work in the neighborhood and a gathering place for their business incubator and youth entrepreneurship programs, as well as community events and meetings. The space is also used as a drop-in safe spot for neighborhood youths and anyone else looking for a bit of company – a place to rest and get something to eat. Several local nonprofits use the space for meetings and programming.

The coterie also rehabbed the former filling station into an elevated and covered stage and expanded the driveway with bike racks, planters, string lights and a colorful shipping container painted proudly with the statement "We are McComb-Veazey." The Filling Station is where



concerts, performances and other events can take place in the open air, attracting passersby and curious neighbors who pull up a chair. The draw has been so big that, on occasion, the crowd has blocked traffic at the intersection with the Magnolia Street mural.

Residents and coalition partners describe how the Community House has given the community a place to gather, a place to call their own, a safe place to meet, celebrate, organize, share and rest. It gives residents a sense of ownership and pride in the community, and because of the coterie's commitment to deepening intergenerational connections to the neighborhood's heritage and culture, it creates a nexus for sharing stories and culture and tightening community bonds.

of increased resident engagement, where residents are leading efforts and programming in the community, and the rising number of residents involved. The researchers also documented increases in advocacy activities to bring about systems change improvements and stronger coalitions with more partners involved, working together toward a shared goal. Seven neighborhoods reported that working intentionally on sense of community allowed for

more neighbors to get to know each other. In three of those neighborhoods, it was particularly important for neighbors of different races and cultures to connect with each other. These interactions created more respect and unity and made the neighborhood more welcoming. Community events and community centers have contributed to sense of community, and four neighborhoods mentioned an increased sense of pride.

Wider communities report challenges

Perceptions weren't always as positive, however, in wider neighborhood surveys that included residents not directly involved in the coalitions. The neighborhoodwide surveys – conducted in nine of the 10 communities – revealed a perceived decrease in sense of community and social cohesion. Though the surveys didn't ask why, possible explanations include the severe hardships associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and nationwide trends of greater social isolation and decreased sense of community. The broader neighborhood surveys did determine, however, that residents in all neighborhoods perceive an increase in collective action, or the neighborhood's capacity to affect change, during the five-year period. The proportion

of residents who reported greater collective action ranged from 8% to 27%, with an average jump of 15%, and researchers found those increases to be statistically significant in seven of the nine surveyed neighborhoods.

The resident survey revealed significant differences in resident perception of quality of life by race or ethnicity, finding that residents of color rated elements of quality of life significantly lower than did white residents in six neighborhoods. This is consistent with research highlighting the racial disparities in neighborhood investments across the United States.

Improving racial equity through collective action in Portland, Oregon

Neighborhood revitalization seeks to inclusively engage residents to change policies and practices that will improve racial equity. In Portland, Oregon, an innovative collaboration called Living Cully created the Cully Housing Action Team, or CHAT, as a formal, standing community meeting that enabled active resident listening and engagement. Residents came together with Living Cully staff members to discuss neighborhood issues, identify priorities and organize collective action. These conversations, along with targeted community engagement, set up the foundation for organizing that resulted in the building of affordable housing; advocating for policies to protect mobile home communities; constructing Cully Park; and creating a new, community-driven tax increment financing district. CHAT was also a

space for providing feedback where residents could hold organizations accountable for advancing the priorities they identified for their community. When residents identified that Black residents were not being represented within resident engagement efforts, Living Cully hired a community organizer to focus exclusively on engaging Black residents. Many of the community leaders active today through Living Cully or other organizations were residents who first engaged in neighborhood revitalization efforts through CHAT. Through their participation in that space and in related campaigns, these residents were able to move into paid community engagement positions in community organizations like Habitat for Humanity and Living Cully. These leaders have become connectors and sources of credible information for residents, serving as the connective tissue in Cully and as the face of Living Cully's neighborhood revitalization efforts.

Principles for community development

This work highlighted the need to address historic discriminatory practices, trauma and distrust, and imbalance of power within disinvested neighborhoods. In 2021, Habitat for Humanity International's Housing and Community Strategy and Neighborhood Revitalization teams developed a set of principles to guide our work, and the report identified lessons learned from the 10 neighborhoods on how to put these principles into practice. The principles will continue to serve as a core commitment for neighborhood revitalization affiliates building strong relationships and working in solidarity with diverse residents, community associations and partners.



Foster partnerships

We leverage and build on the strengths and assets of partners and collaborate in ways that build mutual trust and respect.

- Aligning on shared goals and values and using connectors and conveners to facilitate partnerships.
- Investing in relationship-building with diverse partners, understanding who is not “at the table” and making space for them.



Accountability to the community

We are accountable to our communities through transparent, responsive and just processes to ensure communities get the information they need and have mechanisms to provide feedback.

- Listening to the community and addressing their needs, focusing efforts on what the residents want and need and on the priorities that they identify.
- Maintaining trust and accountability to the community through openness and transparency.
- Keeping leaders and organizations accountable to residents.



Build power

We center the voices of those affected most by systemic inequities and support communities to lead the changes they seek.

- Engaging residents as partners with shared decision-making authority rather than as mere providers of input.
- Sharing resources, public support, social capital and advocacy training with residents to ensure they are supported in leading change.
- Building trust and maintaining ongoing communication.



Learn, improve, innovate

We prioritize learning, experimentation and continuous improvement to drive effective community transformation.

- Learning from trial and error, without fear of calculated risks that can result in a big return on community investment.
- Having a learning culture.
- Being willing to pivot and shift strategies based on changing needs.



Focus on systems

With and through partners, we focus on system outcomes, impact, and transformation across sectors and at multiple levels.

- Working collaboratively in a coordinated way.
- Engaging in community organizing and advocacy.
- Supporting and equipping residents to navigate complex systems.





Key lessons

Key lesson from report	Habitat reflections and implication
<p>Inclusive resident engagement efforts across the neighborhoods meant hiring a diverse staff with cultural competence and offering language interpretation, transportation, child care, meals, and stipends for meetings. Despite these efforts, there continued to be populations underrepresented at the decision-making table, such as marginalized racial groups, young people and older adults.</p>	<p>Habitat must make deeper commitments to diversity and inclusion and embark on more intentional and persistent efforts toward inclusion throughout the life cycle of our neighborhood revitalization work.</p>
<p>Relationships require transparency, listening, a willingness to admit mistakes, and openness to feedback. Relationships require those in positions of power to share their power, such as decision-making authority, with residents. The study indicated that despite being the main driver of success, relationships were also a main challenge because of differing priorities or goals, interpersonal issues, power dynamics, or time commitment challenges.</p>	<p>Nonprofit staff members, in this case the staff of Habitat affiliates, must understand the complex and non-linear nature of progress, be willing to step into discomfort, and engage in generative conflict.</p>
<p>The report identified appropriate staffing as a key component for successful resident engagement. Staff members need to be accessible to the community and culturally responsive. For example, in communities that are majority Latinx, this means hiring a multilingual and multicultural staff.</p>	<p>Resident engagement was more successful when staff members were adaptable to change, worked with different kinds of people, and navigated impersonal dynamics and challenges.</p>

“It feels like people that actually live here ... decided that ‘I’m going to do something about making this better.’ And so there’s a group of people who have been working together, and they’ll say, ‘Hey, I want to do this cool thing. Let’s do that.’”

— Muncie, Indiana, resident

Looking ahead

We are encouraged by the improvements achieved in the learning cohort neighborhoods, demonstrating the potential of Habitat's role as a partner, supporter and facilitator of residents' efforts to improve conditions in marginalized neighborhoods. As we look ahead, we see three main areas for continued improvement in our neighborhood revitalization efforts:

1. **Building and shifting power:** What we have learned sheds light on the relational nature of neighborhood revitalization, which requires shifting power to those who are closest to the problem, as their lived experience also makes them closest to the solution.
2. **Strengthening our equity efforts:** We are reiterating our commitment to racially equitable processes. This includes integrating a racial equity lens into all neighborhood revitalization guidance and as a

prerequisite to doing neighborhood revitalization work. We will revamp our tools and guidance to center historically marginalized residents, and we will seek to influence Habitat for Humanity International and affiliate equity internally, through policies, diversity, staff training and our approach to community programs.

3. **Making resources more accessible:** Residents must lead the work toward just communities, and therefore our materials and support must be accessible to residents.

Recognizing that Habitat's Neighborhood Revitalization programs cannot do this alone, we will continue to partner across the network and with other Habitat programs, such as Advancing Black Homeownership, Health and Housing, and Long-Term Affordability.

"For me, the change has happened with Habitat giving me the opportunity to take classes to learn how to request something from my representatives or demand what we really need."

— Long Beach, California, resident

For more information: habitat.org/our-work/neighborhood-revitalization

Habitat for Humanity International adapted the content presented in this brief from evaluation products created by ORS Impact, an external evaluation firm. ORS Impact conducted the evaluation using qualitative and quantitative data sources and produced individual neighborhood reports summarizing findings from each neighborhood, along with one report summarizing findings across neighborhoods. The cross-neighborhood report is publicly available on habitat.org. The individual neighborhood reports remain private to protect neighborhood actors' confidentiality. Habitat for Humanity International reviewed the original report and selected specific content to share publicly through this brief. Habitat for Humanity is the author of this brief, but ORS Impact had the opportunity to review it and ensure that no findings were taken out of context or misinterpreted.



Scan QR code to
see the full cross-
neighborhood report

1. Not all coalitions reported significant changes across all seven sectors.
2. Urban Institute, "Letter to Department of Housing and Urban Development," March 2020. Available at https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/101823/hud_ignores_evidence_on_discrimination_segregation_and_concentrated20poverty_in_fair_housing_proposal_0.pdf.

everyone
needs a place to call home



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