The number of homicides in Baltimore has exceeded 300 for the third year in a row. This rate outpaces other major US cities and has set new records for the city itself. This epidemic of violence is a preventable public health issue, but all sectors must realize that they have a role to play in violence prevention. Housing is a piece of a larger ecosystem of interrelated causes of violence.

Gun violence and community violence are the most publicly discussed forms of violence, but all forms of violence, including intimate partner violence, police violence, child abuse and neglect, suicide, and elder abuse affect our communities and are interconnected.
How does the affordable housing crisis relate to violence in Baltimore?

Disinvestment in our communities, and the inequities that result, contribute to violence experienced at the individual, community, and environmental level.

Individual

Exposure to violence, housing instability, poor quality housing, and barriers to social cohesion have all been identified as critical determinants of health. These social and physical factors of health are interconnected. Poor quality housing, lack of employment opportunities, and trash build-up have been identified by Baltimore community leaders as contributing to community and intimate partner violence because these conditions can lead to the development of negative self-perceptions of community members and feelings of anger. Lack of affordable housing creates additional barriers for survivors of intimate partner violence, who often struggle to find housing that would enable them to leave violent relationships. After leaving relationships, survivors struggle to stay housed due to “difficulty paying rent, mortgage or utility bills, frequent overcrowded living conditions, or doubling up with family or friends”.

Community

At the community level, the systemic disinvestment and inequity across Baltimore has negatively impacted the social cohesion of neighborhoods by displacing families and communities. Residential stability is important for violence prevention because it allows neighbors to build strong social networks and informal social control.

Within these strong, cohesive communities people are more likely to intervene, seek help when in violent relationships, and adhere to community values about violence. This “collective efficacy” has been shown to mediate the relationship between disadvantage and residential instability and violence.

Residential instability in the context of a declining population, like Baltimore is currently experiencing, thwarts efforts to establish and maintain the types of strong social ties, social, and collective efficacy necessary to thwart the threat of violence. Ensuring that neighborhoods have stability and cohesion is important to preventing violence in our city; development that does not displace residents or disrupt residential stability will address both our growing housing affordability crisis and contribute to violence prevention.
Environment

A vacant house is a vivid marker of abandonment and disinvestment, weakening the fabric of the community by creating spatial opportunities for criminal activity. Vacant buildings are associated with increases in criminal activity and violence both within them and in their vicinity.\textsuperscript{8,9} Baltimore community leaders with intimate knowledge of factors driving violence in our local community identified vacant houses as places “where young people learned, and engaged in activities related to youth violence with peers and older individuals”\textsuperscript{10}. During the recent recession, vacant houses in Philadelphia caused a 19% increase in violent crime within 250 feet of each vacant.\textsuperscript{11}

Addressing vacants, either by renovating them into occupied housing or removing them to create maintained green space, directly reduces violence in the surrounding area. This has been demonstrated in cities such as Philadelphia, Youngstown, OH, and Cleveland.\textsuperscript{12,13,14} Even more importantly, community-led blight remediation efforts lead to the greatest reduction in violence,\textsuperscript{15,16} emphasizing the benefits of allowing communities to drive their own improvements.
What role could 20/20 play in violence prevention?

Housing must be part of a multifaceted approach to violence prevention, focusing on violence at the individual, community, and environmental levels. By providing access to permanently affordable and quality housing, Baltimore could stabilize and uplift individuals and communities that have historically been subject to disinvestment and marginalization.

20/20 creates stable communities and permanently affordable housing through the creation of Community Land Trusts (CLTs). Employing local residents in the deconstruction and renovation of vacant homes removes environmental facilitators for violence while providing viable legitimate employment opportunities, a critical factor identified by Baltimore community leaders as contributing to violence in Baltimore. Access to affordable housing would allow for programs and providers involved in violence prevention, such as Safe Streets, to improve long-term outcomes for their participants by being able to offer additional critical resources. Additionally, community-driven affordable development would increase residential stability and build community cohesion and social ties.

Mayor Pugh initiated a violence reduction plan in October, incorporating several elements aiming at improving education and economic opportunities in Baltimore communities. However, Governor Hogan has proposed only short-term enforcement-focused actions, which have not been successful at violence prevention in the past. The 20/20 Vision is an opportunity to implement a key portion of a multi-faceted community-based violence prevention plan.

About the Authors:

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