

WORKING TO IMPROVE DISTRESSED NEIGHBORHOODS



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When a regional nonprofit organization wanted to invest in distressed neighborhoods and to improve services to minority populations, it turned to Case's Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences to help with research methods, data collection, and analysis. **Sharon E. Milligan, Ph.D., M.S.W., M.P.H.**, associate professor of social work and co-director of the Center on Urban Poverty & Social Change, and her research team conducted a study to assess the social, physical, and economic assets and needs in eight such communities in four northeastern Ohio counties. The three and a half year study was guided by five aspects of neighborhood life: economic opportunity, service availability and quality, safety and security, family and youth development, and community identity and pride. A resulting profile was developed to be used for neighborhood discourse and action, as well as public policy making.

The study showed that persistent poverty, unemployment, and low homeownership coexist with signs of improvement such as increased access to capital and opportunities for future investment and redevelopment in distressed communities. For example, while there were gains in the value of home loans, homeownership itself declined over the last decade because housing was generally unaffordable for the Hispanic population. Although residents generally found the assets of their community (services, institutions, and other resident resources) to be fairly high quality, most lacking were youth mentoring, educational tutoring, and organized activities for youth.

In the family and youth development aspect of neighborhood life, the study revealed that fewer than 5 percent of the adults were involved in programming geared toward youth—despite there being twice as many adults as children living in low-income neighborhoods and among members of the Hispanic communities. This adult-to-child ratio revealed that there is unrealized opportunity for positive adult-child interactions. In looking at safety and security, most residents reported few fears of crime and characterized relationships with safety officers as being relatively good.

Neighborhood identity and pride were affirmed in that neighbors considered each other to be close-knit and expressed



confidence in their ability to work collectively toward neighborhood improvements. Unfortunately, this did not translate into much community action except in one Cleveland neighborhood where the civic participation was quite high, particularly through the political process. Few residents and Hispanic community members participated in civic activities, few had institutional memberships, and very few were involved in neighborhood affairs. However, Hispanic residents had a strong desire to establish Latino cultural centers to promote diversity and increase community awareness and interaction.

"These data provide important insights into the characteristics of our local Latino linguistic communities as well as low-income geographical neighborhoods. The next steps in improving these communities will come from neighborhood leadership working together with committed nonprofit institutions," notes Dr. Milligan.

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