Razing Detroit: 
An Exploratory Analysis of the Impact of Concentrated Demolitions on Neighborhood-Level Crime and Social Disorder

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Motivating Social Problem

HISTORICAL EVENTS:
- Loss of population - waves of abandonment began in the 1950s
- In 1950 Detroit’s population was approximately 1.8 million (Sugrue, 1996)
- Racial tension and economic downturns led to significant migration
- In 2010 Detroit’s population was approximately 750,000

RECENT EVENTS:
- Subprime lending
  - 2006 – 48% of Detroit mortgages were subprime (Ashton, 2010)
  - 2009 – 63,000 homes went through mortgage foreclosure (Dewar, 2015)
- Blight and abandonment
  - 2010 – 79,000 of Detroit’s structures were abandoned (Mallach, 2012)
  - Peaked at 85,000 after city’s bankruptcy in 2013 (Farley, 2015)
- Demolition program launched in 2014
  - Unprecedented, mass removal of abandoned homes
  - What’s the impact of the mass demolition of abandoned homes
Neighbors celebrate as three blighted homes in their neighborhood are torn down

BY: Ronnie Dahl
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Community Optimism

Impacts of Blight Removal:

1. COMMUNITY SAFETY
   Blighted structures are more than a visual blemish; they present an immediate and serious threat to resident safety.

2. STABILIZE HOME VALUES
   Blighted properties have a significant negative effect on property values. Removing them can help reverse that damage.

3. REDUCE FORECLOSURES
   Demolition investments in communities have been shown to reduce foreclosure rates.

Source: Dynamo Metrics (2015)
Guiding Theoretical Perspectives

**Social Disorganization Theory:**

- Rich literature explicating the effects of social disorganization (Shaw & McKay, 1942)
- Most studies use indicators reflecting social dimensions of disorganization (e.g., poverty, density, female-headed households, etc. – for exception, see Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004)
- Original work discussed physical dimensions, too (e.g., dilapidated housing, abandoned buildings)

**Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design:**

- Physical geography and design influence criminal opportunities (Jeffery, 1971)
- Territoriality (Crowe, 2000; Newman, 1972)
Guiding Theoretical Perspectives

**Situational Crime Prevention:**

- Crime attractors
  - Create well-known criminal opportunities (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1985)
  - Increase in crime, generally (MacDonald, 2015)
  - Increased *home vacancy*, more burglary (Jones & Pridemore, 2016)
  - Provide locations with a lack of guardianship (Boessen & Hipp, 2015)

- Crime generators

**Broken Windows Theory:**

- Wilson and Kelling (1982) explicate a theory of urban decay that implicates the breakdown of neighborhood social capital as a primary culprit for the evolution of criminal behavior.
Broken Windows Thesis

Disorder (physical & social) → Fear Generated → Altered Behavior (Less Interaction) → Less Informal Social Control → Serious Crime

Perception = No One Cares
Citizens’ Perceptions

Neighbors celebrate as three blighted homes in their neighborhood are torn down.

Soon, the two houses next door became vacant. With caring neighbors moved out, criminals moved in: hookers, drug dealers and drug users.

After years of dealing with the nuisance properties, they were coming down.

“It’s going to be a huge difference.” Brittany Young told 7 Action News. “To be able to drive down and walk down the street and not be approached by hookers and crack heads, it’s going to be great. My nieces and nephews are going to be safe. We are all going to feel safer with these gone.”

Source: WXYZ Detroit (2016)
Citizens’ Perceptions

“Crooks, killers and losers tend to infest areas with dead buildings, like maggots on a carcass” (Holmberg, 1998).
Current Study

Research Questions:
- What is the impact of the concentrated removal of abandoned building/homes on neighborhood-level (1) crime and (2) disorder?

Data Sources:
- Demolitions
  - Detroit Data Portal
- Crime Incidents
  - Detroit Data Portal
- Neighborhood characteristics
  - American Community Survey (U.S. Census Bureau)

Level of Analysis:
- Census tract vs. Census block group
Quinn Street, northern Detroit

September 2009

August 2013
Elmhurst & Rosa Parks, Detroit

July 2009

August 2015
Detroit’s Demolition Program

- Awarded over $250 million from the Hardest Hit Fund
- 85,000 vacant units (goal is to raze 40,000 by 2026)
- Since 2014, $207,880,047.39 has been spent on 13,513 demolitions
- Average cost per demolition = $15,383.71

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Vacancy Rate</th>
<th>Vacant Units</th>
<th>Structures Demolished</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Detroit</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>85,000</td>
<td>13,513(^1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>40,000</td>
<td>6,000(^2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>34,000</td>
<td>200(^2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buffalo</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>23,000</td>
<td>3,500(^2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pittsburgh</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>405(^2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\)As of 2/18/2018; since program began in 2014  
\(^2\)Estimate
Detroit’s Expanded Hardest Hit Areas (n=17)
Where Did Demolitions Actually Take Place?

Source: City of Detroit Open Data Portal: [https://data.detroitmi.gov/](https://data.detroitmi.gov/)
## Total Demolitions 2014-2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of demos</th>
<th># of BG</th>
<th>% of BG</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>14.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-11</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>41.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-24</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>22.19</td>
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<tr>
<td>25-43</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>15.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>44-69</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>5.46</td>
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<tr>
<td>≥ 70</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Legend**
- Red: Detroit Boundary
- Orange: 1 - 11
- Dark Orange: 12 - 24
- Yellow: 25 - 43
- Light Blue: 44 - 69
- Green: 70 - 131

Source: City of Detroit Open Data Portal: [https://data.detroitmi.gov/](https://data.detroitmi.gov/)
Methodological Issues

• Original blight removal efforts now reach city-wide
  • Only 56% of demolitions have been in original HHF zones

• Space...and “time”
  • Cross sectional analyses are insufficient

• What happens after a demolition?
  • Various post-demolition outcomes exist

• Neighborhoods in Detroit are ever-changing
  • e.g., Detroit Land Bank properties, new lighting infrastructure, PGL, etc.

• Capturing the nature of "effects"
  • Threshold effects? Short-term or long-term?
Moving Forward

• Work through methodological issues

• Try to assess what happens after demolitions occur (vacant parcel, community garden, redevelopment?)

• Work with City of Detroit to conduct pre/posttest surveys of residents in block groups where demolitions are planned to occur

• Try to assess the impact of the mass scale demolitions on mental and physical health outcomes
The end