

# **PREFACE**

## **MIDDLE NEIGHBORHOODS IN AMERICA'S CITIES AND SUBURBS: REDISCOVERING A PRECIOUS ASSET**

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Policymakers in America have long understood that the quality of life in neighborhoods—or the absence of it—matters a great deal to the social and economic vitality of larger cities and surrounding metropolitan regions. This understanding translated into clearing slums in the 1950s and 1960s, improving distressed neighborhoods via community development corporations later in the twentieth century, and seeking communities of opportunity in today's policy environment.

Largely absent from these policy and redevelopment efforts is the consideration of neighborhoods in the middle. These are neighborhoods that are not in deep distress, but are not thriving either.

These “middle neighborhoods” exist in almost all cities and some larger suburbs. They are especially important in places where the overall population of a city is declining. Population fragility in these areas is much more of a concern than the phenomenon of gentrification—which is prevalent in hot-market cities. As Henry S. Webber describes in his chapter, the decline of these cities' middle neighborhoods has had more negative consequences for their residents than rapidly rising prices.

These cities—which are struggling to hold their population and move their economies into the twenty-first century—have been labeled “legacy cities.” Much of the material in this volume focuses on these cities.

Legacy cities have experienced profound economic decline and population loss because of fundamental shifts in the global economy and policy decisions made at the local, state, and federal levels. Legacy Cities Partnership<sup>1</sup> defines these cities—which are primarily located in the Great Lakes and Northeast regions—as metropolitan areas with over 50,000 residents that have lost 20 percent or more of their population since the mid-century. The future trajectory of these categorized 48 legacy cities will have major consequences for neighborhood vitality. It also will impact public finances and housing markets throughout the country.

The middle neighborhoods described in this volume usually have a functioning housing market, which is one indicator of any neighborhood's well-being. But it is not at all clear to existing

<sup>1</sup> More information is available at <http://www.legacycities.org/>.

residents and prospective movers-in whether the trajectory of housing values is going up or down. Often these neighborhoods are situated near or adjoin distressed neighborhoods—and there is an active worry that the nearby distress could spread to the middle neighborhoods. One way to think about middle neighborhoods is that they are on the edge of transition.

These are also neighborhoods where housing is often quite affordable. In addition, quality of life—measured by employment rates, crime rates, and public school performance—is sufficiently good that new residents are still willing to play the odds and choose these neighborhoods while knowing that they may decline rather than improve. In fact, in cities where rising prices are resulting in displacement of modest-income households, these middle neighborhoods can be areas that provide good housing and neighborhood environments for those needing more modestly priced housing.

The well-being of these neighborhoods is essential for the families and individuals living in them. It is also critical for the overall financial stability of many cities and suburbs that rely on the property tax base of these neighborhoods. Should these middle neighborhoods decline in value by slipping into distress, local governments will have even fewer dollars to provide needed city services in these and other neighborhoods.

As Ira Goldstein, William Schrecker, and Jacob Rosch describe in this volume, these middle neighborhoods house a substantial portion of the residents of many older cities—with the overall percentage of residents living in middle neighborhoods of the cities studied ranging from 37 percent to 51 percent.

Given the importance of these neighborhoods to America's cities and suburbs, it is unsettling how little attention is being paid to ensuring that these neighborhoods transition into greater health rather than lapse into decline. This volume is an effort to add middle neighborhoods as a focal point for the nation's urban and suburban agenda, with special emphasis on legacy cities.

The authors in this volume think of attention to middle neighborhoods as “an ounce of prevention being worth a pound of cure,” as Benjamin Franklin said long ago. Strengthening middle neighborhoods is very inexpensive and relatively simple when compared with the great costs and complexities of remediating the deep challenges of distressed communities or covering the costs of producing affordable housing in very hot markets.

*On the Edge* aims to stimulate a national dialogue about middle neighborhoods.

Joseph McNeely and I begin the book by tracing earlier efforts to stabilize these neighborhoods. Ira Goldstein and his colleagues at The Reinvestment Fund then describe the demographics and characteristics of this category of neighborhoods in select cities. George Galster continues this overview and makes the case for why middle neighborhoods matter in America's cities and suburbs. Bob Weissbourd then places these neighborhoods in their economic context regionally.

Alan Mallach next describes the many challenges that face middle neighborhoods and the importance of homeownership in them.

Other *On the Edge* authors provide important case studies of promising approaches underway to strengthen middle neighborhoods, with a particular focus on Detroit, Milwaukee, Baltimore, and cities in Ohio. These chapters are very close to the ground and offer sound practical examples and advice for strengthening middle neighborhoods.

The final chapter focuses on the policy changes needed at the local level to support those working to improve middle neighborhoods. This work covers general policy changes and particular ways to balance physical improvements with historic preservation.

All of these esteemed authors believe that increasing our understanding of middle neighborhoods will enhance the discussions underway nationally and locally about improving distressed neighborhoods or coping with gentrification. We hope *On the Edge* sparks new discussions, research, and policies as well as innovative programs that will strengthen and secure the social and economic vitality of middle neighborhoods in all of America's cities and suburbs.