

Emergency Housing for Victims of Violence

Working Paper 2026-10

Irshad Altheimer, Ph.D.,
Ellen M. Granberg Endowed Professor | Department of Criminal Justice
Director | Center for Public Safety Initiatives
Rochester Institute of Technology
ixagcj@rit.edu

Alexander Tobey, M.S.
Research Associate | Center for Public Safety Initiatives
adtgcj@rit.edu

Introduction

Community violence is a distressing issue leaving countless individuals and communities struggling with the devastating consequences. The violence is observed to be disproportionately concentrated in neighborhoods often inhabited by minority racial and ethnic groups (Tong et al., 2023). At the root of these conditions lie the chronic effects of generations of structural racism and segregation (Tong et al., 2023; Bailey et al., 2021). Policies like redlining and mass incarceration have played a significant role in systemic disinvestment. Consequently, victims of gun violence face exacerbated challenges as they confront the trauma of victimization -- its physical and mental distress -- that hinders reintegration into society. Housing offers a fundamental sense of safety and stability. Stable housing for violence victims can potentially support trauma recovery and prevent revictimization or retaliation. The importance of emergency housing for victims emerges as a beacon of hope to pursue healing in a community of lives altered by gun violence.

History

In 1933, the U.S. government created the Homeowners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) to promote homeownership during the Great Depression (Bailey et al., 2021). The HOLC developed maps of cities, with predominantly black neighborhoods being marked by red lines. This practice known as "redlining", flagged black communities as hazardous investments, making mortgages less accessible and undervaluing the real estate in primarily black neighborhoods (the historical fallout of which is still being felt to this day). Consequently, the systemic disinvestment of the public and private sectors in black neighborhoods left communities with under-resourced facilities for healthcare, employment,

and education. High rates of unemployment, low educational achievement, and chronic health conditions create strain, distress, and frustration, resulting in cultivating high rates of violence (Tong et al., 2023). The violence in these communities disrupts the social cohesion and collective well-being of the area. Violent neighborhoods have been observed to be associated with chronic stress, poor cognitive abilities, and trauma-induced health problems for residents regardless of victimization. However, it is possible to counteract these debilitating effects on the victims and their communities through housing policies that enable social cohesion.

Housing and Crime

Improving housing conditions, developing and maintaining vacant land, and more can help to reduce rates of violence (Tong et al., 2023; Kondo et al., 2015). Research suggests that foreclosed or vacant properties have a connection to criminal activity and community health (Cui & Walsh, 2015; Kondo et al., 2015). Crime rates are observed as reflections of the disorganization and control in a society; higher crime rates are seen in areas with higher physical deterioration (Cui & Walsh, 2015). Cui & Walsh (2015) found that violent crime within 250 feet of a foreclosed or vacant property increases by approximately 20% and properties that are vacant beyond six months further exacerbates this figure. It is suggested that as property begins to show visible signs of disrepair, potential criminals think this reflects a reduced degree of surveillance and crime deterring mechanisms; as a result, criminals and/or squatters can gather and engage in criminal activities in these areas. Therefore, addressing these vacant properties can show promising results to reduce crime.

Demolishing vacant properties and/or repurposing the property can have positive results reducing crime rates (Sadler et al., 2017; Stacy, 2017). Stacy et al. (2017) found that when vacant property is demolished there is a drop in violence and property crimes in the area. Furthermore, neighborhoods nearby experience a decrease in crime rates. Once the land is cleared, the process of “greening” can commence. The process operates by restoring, and maintaining it by planting grass and trees, removing waste and debris (Branas et al., 2018; Sadler, 2017, p.13). Greening has been linked to reducing crime in many communities.

Greening in communities where violent crime is prevalent has shown to be cost-effective and reduces violence in the area (Branas et al., 2018). Additionally, greening and gardening programs implemented in communities have also been correlated to alleviating depression symptoms, distress, unemployment, food security, substance abuse, and cardiovascular disease in the community (Sadler, 2017). Moreover, greening has shown to also encourage social cohesion among the community because it can bring residents of the area together and they spend more time outside. Notably, in Branas et al. (2018) study, a significant reduction of fear from residents was observed and an increase in the usage of outdoor spaces. Improving the infrastructure of the community has shown to improve the social cohesion of the community which can further benefit community violence victims who are suffering from the residual traumatic effects.

Emergency Housing and Violence Victims

Experiencing violence can have significant consequences on mental health of victims like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety (Ahmad et al., 2017;

Kagawa et al., 2020). McDonald et al., (2008) found in a meta-analysis that these mental conditions have significant connections to exposure to violence as a victim or witnessing violence. Kagawa et al., (2020) found that victims of violence report they experienced significant distress which caused detriments to daily functioning such as demoralization and negative emotional reactivity. Research suggests an almost universal negative response as a consequence of exposure to community violence. Therefore, it is important that victims are provided the resources they need for both their physical and mental health. Providing victims with secure and stable housing can assist in their recovery from victimization.

Safe and stable housing is critical for everyone (Dohler et al., 2016). A stable home and living conditions can help the most vulnerable populations – people with mental illness, chronic health conditions, and histories of trauma to get treatment and support recovery. Living without a stable sense of housing can drastically worsen health conditions, exacerbate mental illness, and prevent any chronic health conditions from being cared for. Additionally, housing affordability has become an increasingly pressing issue affecting everyone in measurable ways (Baker et al., 2020). When housing is insecure, unstable, and/or unaffordable the consequences can negatively affect mental health which accumulates overtime. For violence victims who already struggle with the trauma from victimization makes acquiring appropriate housing far out of reach.

Violence is more common in economically disadvantaged communities and deteriorating infrastructure (Tong et al., 2023). According to Sullivan & Olsen (2017), several factors increase homelessness risk: scarce affordable housing, poverty, mental health issues, and victimization. Therefore, violence survivors in these communities face elevated risk of homelessness due to these risk factors. Community programs such as “The Housing First” model, offer promise in securing suitable housing for those at risk for homelessness by aiding the accessibility and retention of homes.

The Housing First model was to aid access to and retention of homes for violence survivors and ensure that they are also safe and stable (Mbilinyi, 2015). Sullivan & Olsen (2017) found that victims can retain housing after 18 months when applying four elements. First, is that the model is survivor driven, addressing all identified needs as long as necessary. The second is flexible engagement and funding including temporary financial support to aid victims reach self-sufficiency. Third, it incorporates trauma-informed practices, fostering emotional safety and facilitating healing from trauma within a calm environment. Lastly, it promotes community engagement, which not only enhances community safety but alleviates distress and isolation. Promoting community engagement can build social cohesion and further assist the victim’s mental health through a supportive network.

Conclusion

Community violence predominantly affects economically disadvantaged areas suffering from

deteriorating infrastructure, causing pervasive challenges for racial and ethnic groups in those communities. Structural racism and outdated policies like redlining and mass incarceration have compounded these issues over generations. Violence victims grapple with trauma, physical and mental distress, and heightened risk of homelessness. Housing policy reform to improve the infrastructure of the area has shown to reduce violence and overall crime in these communities. Housing instability exacerbates violence, health issues, trauma and hinders recovery for victims. Emergency housing can potentially be a fundamental support pillar in addressing the multifaceted problem of community violence. Victims of violence can recover in a stable and secure environment where social cohesion is prevalent.

References

- Ahmad, F., Medder, J., Geske, J., Taylor, J., & Margalit, R. (2017). Mental health problems due to community violence exposure in a small urban setting. *Family Medicine and Community Health*, 5(3), 170–178. <https://doi.org/10.15212/FMCH.2017.0128>.
- Baker, E., Lester, L., Mason, K., & Bentley, R. (2020). Mental health and prolonged exposure to unaffordable housing: A longitudinal analysis. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 55, 715–721. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-020-01849-1>
- Bailey, Z. D., Feldman, J. M., & Bassett, M. T. (2021). How structural racism works – Racist policies as a root cause of U.S. Racial Health Inequities. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 384(8), 768–773. <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMms2025396>.
- Branas, C. C., South, E. S., Kondo, M. C., Hohl, B. C., Bourgois, P., Wiebe, D. J., & MacDonald, J. M. (2018). Citywide cluster randomized trial to restore blighted vacant land and its effects on violence, crime, and fear. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 115(12), 2946–2951. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1718503115>
- Cui, L. & Walsh, R. (2015). Foreclosure, vacancy and crime. *Journal of Urban Economics*, 87, 72–84. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jue.2015.01.001>
- Dohler, E., Bailey, P., Rice, D., & Katch, H. (2016). *Supportive housing helps vulnerable people live and thrive in the community*. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities: Policy Futures. <https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/5-31-16hous.pdf>
- Kagawa, R. M. C., Pear, V. A., Rudolph, K. E., Keyes, K. M., Cerdá, M., & Wintemute, G. J. (2020). Distress level and daily functioning problems attributed to firearm victimization: Sociodemographic-specific responses. *Annals of Epidemiology*, 41, 35–42. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annepidem.2019.12.002>
- Kondo, M. C., Keene, D., Hohl, B. C., MacDonald, J. M., & Branas, C. C. (2015). Correction: A difference-in-differences study of the effects of a new abandoned building remediation strategy on safety, *PLOS ONE*, 10(8). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0136595>
- Mbilinyi L. (2015). The Washington State Domestic Violence Housing First program: Cohort 2 final evaluation report. Seattle, WA: Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Retrieved September 13, 2023 from http://wscadv.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/DVHF_FinalEvaluation.pdf

- McDonald, C. C., & Richmond, T. R. (2008). The relationship between community violence exposure and mental health symptoms in urban adolescents. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 15(10), 833–849. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2850.2008.01321.x>
- Sadler, R. C., Pizarro, J., Turchan, B., Gasteyer, S. P., & McGarrell, E. F. (2017). Exploring the spatial-temporal relationships between a community greening program and neighborhood rates of crime. *Applied Geography*, 83, 13-26. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apgeog.2017.03.017>
- Stacy, C. P. (2017). The effect of vacant building demolitions on crime under depopulation. *Journal of Regional Science*, 58(1). 100-115. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jors.12350>
- Sullivan, C. M., & Olsen, L. (2017). Common ground, complementary approaches: Adapting the Housing First model for domestic violence survivors. *Housing and Society*, 43(3), 182–194. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08882746.2017.1323305>
- Tong, G., Spell, V. T., Horton, N., Thornhill, T., Keene, D., Montgomery, C., Spiegelman, D., Wang, E. A., & Roy, B. (2023). Trusted residents and housing assistance to decrease violence exposure in New Haven (True Haven): A strengths-based and community-driven stepped-wedge intervention to reduce gun violence. *BMC Public Health*, 23(1545), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-023-15997-x>.

About the Center for Public Safety Initiatives

The Center for Public Safety Initiatives (CPSI) is a multi-disciplinary research center that examines strategies to reduce crime and enhance the administration of justice. It provides program evaluation, data analytics, and project management services to area law enforcement, community non-profits, and other criminal justice professionals, and it contributes to general knowledge generation of the nature and causes of crime and violence. Its educational goals include training graduate and undergraduate students in strategic planning, program evaluation, and policy analysis.

The foundation of the Center is the practice of action research in which relevant data and analyses are brought to bear on the day-to-day decision-making processes of organizations. The Center serves the practice of policy development and implementation in real time and is a testing ground for 21st century university engagement, demonstrating how rigorous research and analysis can play a role in improving the lives of society's most marginalized citizens.

To access our full library of white papers, visit our website at rit.edu/cpsi.



Learn more

- rit.edu/cpsi
- CPSI@rit.edu
- (585) 475-6386