Identifying Need in the Inner City: Residents’ Experiences and Perceptions on Living on the Near East Side of Columbus, Ohio

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ABSTRACT
Contemporary urban poverty is the result of intertwined social, historical, and economic factors (Auletta, 1982; Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1987). Residents of poor urban neighborhoods experience living conditions of complexity and deprivation that are not carefully considered by the general public (Gans, 2004; Liebow, 1967; Venkatesh, 2006). As a result, it is at times unclear what such citizens need to help them improve or manage their living circumstances. In this study, 29 residents and workers from the Near East Side of Columbus, Ohio were interviewed about their experiences, how they made sense of their experiences, and what they thought could be done to make their neighborhood a better place. The study used a phenomenological approach that fleshed out the experiences of community members and their subjective interpretations of their experiences. Information from semi-structured interviews and focus groups was used to help a neighborhood church understand how to better meet the needs of area residents. Understanding the daily experiences of poor urban residents can clear up misconceptions about this socially isolated population, improve efforts in enhancing the quality of life in their neighborhoods, and help residents deal with their unique living circumstances.

INTRODUCTION
With decades of contentious policy debates over how to best address socioeconomic decline in inner-city areas, urban poverty has remained a particularly concerning issue in contemporary American society (Auletta, 1982; Massey & Denton, 1993; Strait, 2001; Wilson, 2008). It has had an especially negative impact on the social and economic prospects of African Americans (Massey & Denton; Wilson, 1987). The factors that have contributed to the problem are numerous and interlinked (Auletta, 1982; Wolf, 2007). The explanations for its existence and the suggested solutions for its reduction range from individual and cultural analyses to historical and socioeconomic examinations (Auletta, 1982; Massey & Denton, 1993; Moynihan, 1965; Wilson, 1987). However, the general public tends not to understand the complexity of urban poverty, the gravity of the situation, or the conditions and opportunity structures that sustain the problem.

A key factor that influences misconceptions about urban poverty is residential segregation as the general public is insulated from the lives and hardships of a small segment of the country’s population (Massey & Denton, 1993). This separation leads to evaluations of poor urban residents that do not account for all of the details of their situation. The stigma of poverty affects perceptions of poor urban residents: Negative labels in public discourse combined with incomplete assumptions about their values and lifestyles result in such citizens’ needs being delegitimized and ignored (Gans, 2004). Another key factor that affects general misunderstandings is biased media coverage of the problems that poor inner-city neighborhoods face. Issues such as drug use and violent crime are often presented in a sensationalistic manner that is divorced from the social, historical, and economic contexts in which they occur (Gans, 2004). The result is social isolation of poor urban residents and ambiguity of their daily struggles and needs.

One institution that can affect the lives of poor urban residents is the church. Churches are close to residents and, as a result, are in a uniquely intimate position to offer aid to their communities (Loury & Loury, 1997). Their roles as moral bastions and service centers give them the ability to vouch for neighborhoods on the political level (Alex-Assensoh, 2004). However, what needs to be better understood is how churches and similar neighborhood organizations can best help residents deal with their everyday struggles. Forming a stronger dialogue between neighborhood institutions and community residents can help establish plans for increasing the viability of poor inner-city neighborhoods and improving the lives of the people within them.

Within the context of stressful and complex living environments, citizens of poor inner-city neighborhoods may react in different ways. For instance, in his work on urban life in an impoverished section of Philadelphia, Anderson (1999) indicated that the fear and stress created by conditions of disorder can cause residents to adopt new norms such as a “code of the street” that make them on edge towards potential confrontations. Fear and stress further affect the psychological well-being of residents, contributing to drug use as a way to escape the struggles of everyday life (Boardman et al., 2001). The strenuous living conditions resulting from low educational, economic, and health prospects can have adverse effects on family life and stability (Moynihan, 1965). Seccombe (2002) added that structural barriers like the lack of a comprehensive social safety
net make it harder for impoverished families to be resilient against their disadvantaged living circumstances.

Churches provide varied services to citizens such as food assistance, tutoring, and daycare (De Vita, 2001). Though churches are typically institutions that affirm the moral status quo, they can be invested in upholding the common good and fighting for improved conditions for the poor and disadvantaged (Pacione, 1990). Lupton (2011) argued that churches ought to provide some measure of support in community development, but that development should be steered primarily by residents themselves to encourage pride from productivity. He cautioned that churches taking too much of a leading role would make residents passive recipients of top-down aid rather than empower them to take control of their communities. Loury and Loury (1997) found that churches can play an important role in serving communities due to their proximity to residents and their ability to transmit general values encouraging improved social cohesion. In her study of African-American houses of worship, Barnes (2005) argued that through their varied cultural capital, churches help affirm the identity of their parishioners and serve as vehicles for social change and political action. Alex-Assensoh (2004) found that churches are deeply rooted in community mobilization. In her study of black pastors in Columbus, she cited how churches are actively engaged in building the social fabric and political clout of their communities (Alex-Assensoh). However, Smith (2001) noted that, at times, churches can have a conflicted relationship with poor urban congregants due to class and racial differences between church leaders and parishioners. Such tension can make trust and understanding across class and ethnocultural boundaries more tenuous.

Other literature discusses the lived experiences of inner-city residents. Such ethnographic research helps clear up misconceptions of the poor concerning their lifestyles and values, a necessary facet in understanding their lives and what they need to better flourish in society (Goode 2002). For example, Liebow (1967) studied African-American men in Washington D.C. and discussed the social and economic contexts for their decisions regarding employment, family life, and friendship. Mason (2004) and her students conducted interviews of elderly African-American residents on their roles in their neighborhood as well as the decline in social ties, safety, quality of life, and opportunities in their community. Anderson’s (1999) work on “the code of the street” illuminated the interpersonal dimension of urban street violence amongst poor African Americans in Philadelphia. Aulettta (1982) highlighted the heterogeneity of experiences and viewpoints in the “urban underclass” through his observations of their class sessions at a supported-work program in New York City.

In an ethnographic study, Venkatesh (2006) researched the low economic opportunities on the South Side of Chicago and the concomitant development of an interconnected and ingrained underground economy. Cummings (1998) studied the negative effects of rapid racial and economic change on a community in Fort Worth, citing how the transitions brought forth tension, distrust, and volatility in the neighborhood. Lastly, Donelly and Matza (1998) studied the efforts of inner-city residents of a Dayton neighborhood to mobilize social capital and address the issues affecting their community.

The current study clarified how explanations for the causes and effects of urban poverty factor into the daily experiences of residents in poor urban neighborhoods. Some key research questions guided the current study. What are the general experiences of residents living in a disadvantaged neighborhood of Columbus, Ohio? What can neighborhood institutions such as churches do to help residents improve their lives and deal with personal and community struggles? Something that is lacking in the research literature is the perspective of poor urban residents on what is necessary to change their lives and their neighborhoods for the better.

Alex-Assensoh (2004) studied the work of Black Baptist Church leaders in their efforts to increase political representation for poor inner-city neighborhoods in Columbus. However, the information on churches’ roles in community life is gathered primarily from the church pastors’ perspectives. In addition, Alex-Assensoh focused more on churches’ impact on the political life of poor urban communities rather than their possible broader social impact. Cummings (1998), Liebow (1967), Mason (2004), and Venkatesh (2006) all wrote on the life experiences of residents in underinvested inner-city neighborhoods. In many cases, the researchers documented the adversities that their subjects encountered and the ways by which they adapted to their trying living circumstances. However, the focus of their research was on the description of inner-city residents’ lives rather than on the use of such descriptions to prescribe possible solutions for improving the lives of residents and their communities. What requires more focus is not just an understanding of residents’ everyday life experiences, but how to use those experiences and perceptions to shape community improvement, thereby putting those ideas into action. In addition, decisions for neighborhood revitalization tend to be top-down endeavors that may not be fully based on community input or that may lack long-lasting or widespread benefits for all members of a community (Arnstien, 1969).

Through qualitative research methods and a phenomenological research approach, this study identified the lived experiences of citizens of a low-income neighborhood in a large American city. It aimed to illuminate the perceptions and experiences of those who live and work in the midst of social and economic decline. It looked to better understand how structural forces, social change, and social problems converge and affect everyday residents. Lastly, this identified
what neighborhood organizations can do to help residents deal with the difficulties that they encounter in their lives.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

In all, 29 individuals were interviewed: 22 were residents from the Near East Side of Columbus and 7 worked or owned businesses in the neighborhood. Out of the 22 residents, 3 worked and lived in the neighborhood. Twenty-two participants were African American, 6 participants were white, and 1 participant was Spanish-Caribbean. Sixteen respondents were male and 13 respondents were female. The participants ranged in age from their 20s to their 60s.

Columbus’s Near East Side is a predominantly African-American neighborhood that is noted for its historic housing stock. Most homes in the area are in relatively good condition, but a visible quantity of homes is vacant or dilapidated (City of Columbus, 2005). In 2009, the neighborhood had a poverty rate of 41.7% and an unemployment rate of 20.7% (Reece et al., 2012). The community has had to deal with the attendant problems of concentrated poverty such as higher rates of violent and property crime and concentrated disadvantage (as it is home to a disproportionate amount of social service organizations) (City of Columbus). It bears the scars of race riots from the 1960s and the flight of its wealthier residents in the form of underinvested commercial corridors (WOSU, 2012). Recently, various stakeholders such as The Ohio State University Hospital and the Columbus Metropolitan Housing Authority have been involved in efforts to enhance the viability of the neighborhood (Wray, 2011).

First English Lutheran Church is a community institution on the Near East Side that provides an array of services and programs for individuals from the surrounding area. These include Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, community meals, Bible studies, and children activities. One program at the church, the Advocacy Center, is a student-run group in which individuals from the neighborhood come to discuss personal problems related to employment, housing, health, and general quality of life. The church is an important stakeholder in the well-being and development of the neighborhood.

**Measures**

A 9-item interview schedule was used to present residents with general questions about their daily experiences. The interview schedule was based on Seidman’s (2006) guidelines for qualitative interviews and included sets of questions asking participants about their life histories, their daily experiences, and how they made sense of their experiences. The interviews covered a few broad themes. The first few questions asked participants about their time in the neighborhood and their interactions with family, friends, and neighbors to establish some personal context for their life there. The next set of questions then delved into aspects of neighborhood life, focusing on participants’ personal experiences in the neighborhood, the experiences that they saw others go through, and their perceptions of greater neighborhood change. These questions expanded the scope of the study by creating a broader context of life in the neighborhood and seeing how individuals’ own lives fit within it. Lastly, residents were asked about their ideas of what would help change their neighborhood for the better, especially with regards to how churches and similar community organizations could intervene. Such a question brought together individuals’ personal narratives with their narratives of greater neighborhood life as they offered possible solutions for improvement in the area.

A 13-item interview schedule was used to gauge residents’ thoughts on living in the neighborhood. Additional questions were added to the original interview schedule that focused on aspects of neighborhood life such as relations between residents and general civic engagement. These additional questions aimed at obtaining perspectives on broader social conditions in the community.

Lastly, a 5-item focus group schedule was used to offer participants an opportunity to talk about neighborhood issues in a group setting. The focus group questionnaire asked residents about their time in the neighborhood, their perceptions of neighborhood change, the assets that their neighborhood possessed, the problems it faced, and what they thought was necessary for its improvement. The focus group questionnaire represented a condensed version of the interview schedule.

**Procedure**

Participants were obtained through convenience sampling at First English Lutheran Church and interviews were conducted at that location. Some interviews were conducted in secluded office rooms in the church’s upper stories to ensure confidentiality and privacy. Other interviews were conducted in the common area where residents had their community meals. Participants were given a chance to review the interview schedule to see whether they would like to answer the presented questions. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner: I relied on the basic questionnaire to provide organization to the interview, but I allowed residents to talk as much or as little as they wanted on each topic, even if they drifted from the primary questionnaire. I included probes to encourage participants to elaborate on certain responses. Each interview session averaged about 30 minutes and was recorded and transcribed for analysis at a later point in time.

I used the 13-item interview schedule in my interviews at First English Lutheran Church. In addition, I supplemented my interviews of residents at the church with interviews of people at local establishments throughout the
neighborhood. Such spots included restaurants, barber shops, and other small businesses. At these additional locations, I conversed with business owners or patrons. After some conversation, I revealed my identity as a researcher as well as the nature of my project and asked individuals if they would be interested in sharing their thoughts about the community. The views of such members of the community helped to increase understanding of the greater social and historical context of neighborhood conditions.

Three focus groups were conducted. One focus group was conducted at First English Lutheran Church. The other two focus groups were conducted during block watch meetings at a neighborhood policing center. At these block watch meetings, residents discussed community issues such as crime, housing, and economic development. I attended two sessions of two different block watch groups before asking the residents if they would be interested in participating in a focus group.

I used a thematic analysis for this qualitative study. After transcribing all of the interview and focus group sessions, I reviewed the transcripts and highlighted particular lines and responses that touched on the major points of the questionnaires. I looked for and picked out responses within participants’ interviews which seemed to be shared or repeated by several participants.

RESULTS

Residents varied in their assessments of how the neighborhood has changed. A general trend, though, was that the longer a resident lived in the neighborhood, the greater the likelihood that they would cite both a time when the neighborhood was in a worse state of decline and current signs of its recovery. One long-time resident recalled the demographic and social changes that affected the Near East Side, citing a riot in the wake of Martin Luther King, Jr’s assassination and racial tensions within the neighborhood:

Way back when, this neighborhood was all Jewish, Italian, and whites. No blacks at all. At 18th and Main, a white guy lived in a house near a big empty field. Near there, there was the first black family in the area. There was a Jewish/Italian pool house, on another side there was a pawn shop. The black guy had 7 kids and they would go out in the backyard and play, laugh, giggle, hoot and holler, and the white guy upstairs, y’know, said he was tired of it. So he broke up a bunch of glass and threw it in the yard where the kids played at. And the black guy came down and knocked on his door, and he raised the window upstairs and asked him why, y’know, the black man asked him why he put all the glass in the backyard. And the white guy said he wanted the kids to stay away from the backyard because his bedroom is back there on the backside of the house, and they would laugh and play and make noise. So, he said “Wait a minute, I’m coming down.” He came downstairs, and I, I’m on Blackburn’s, they got a tennis court now, but then was a basketball court. He came down and we stopped, it was, we were...there was nine of us over there, witnessing this, and we stopped and walked on the sidewalk and was looking, and he asked him again, and the guy said. “This is why.” He came out the door, the black guy standing on the steps, and he was standing there looking up at the window, so the white guy comes out of the door and says “This is why.” Pow! Pow! Shot him in his stomach twice. Pow! Shot him in his chest. The black guy fell, he spit on him, and kicked him in his stomach. And the black guy died right there. And that was three days after Martin Luther King had got killed. Three days, and that just tipped the scale, and everybody that seen it, witnessed it, everybody just went berserk. It was already in an uproar because of Martin Luther King, and that just set it off right there.

Another long-time resident offered her view on the fairly turbulent changes that came through the neighborhood in her time there:

When I moved over here first, it was bad. The drug dealers ran this whole area in 2003, 2003 to 2005: it was off the chain (criminal activity was more flagrant). They’d do drive-bys all the time. Back then, there were no streetlights. My father was a brick mason and I had a lab (dog) and he bore his name. I guess by the grace of God and because of my dog, when I went out at night, I was safe. And then, the neighborhood was torn down. In 2004, they started to tear down the vacant houses. The landlord I have now put out the drug dealers and redid the homes... I’ve seen them redo this neighborhood, better than in 2003. The black people with money, then the white people started buying up the properties and fixed them up, and it’s better. Proteam was an organization that worked here and they put jobs in the neighborhood. They changed this neighborhood—jobs came in and the drugs decreased. Then Proteam was involved in some shady stuff, and it was shut down. The whole neighborhood had been working. Everyone had a job. But after Proteam was shut down, the drugs came back. The carryout that sold beer and wine over there on the corner became the new home for the drugs. We voted to get liquor out of the neighborhood and it changed for a little bit. But then the drugs came back and the police are not doing enough.

Residents’ outlooks on change in the neighborhood could vary somewhat significantly. One participant, a 30-year resident noted an upward trend for the section of the neighborhood where she lived:

Outsiders had a low opinion of the neighborhood. Slumlords, vacant properties. Drug dealers were out on the corners, but not so much. We have more street lights, a park, more people moving in who want to be good neighbors. We are recognized now as a neighborhood. The image is starting to change. We got city money for lights, parks and sidewalks. The most change is instigated by people coming in who want to make a change and that attracts others. We’re seeing more people who want to live here.

Another participant, a 1-year resident, offered a different perspective on the neighborhood:

I don’t want to sound negative...the only changes I’ve seen is worse. Sidewalks deteriorated, roofs leaking. The landlord that we got: he’s tight with his money, slow with fixing things, he’s not up on safety.

One resident noted some longer-term positive changes in the area with increased funding and attention from the city:
Now they’re going to bring a waterpark. New funding. Volunteers bringing little league football games, cleanups to involve the kids. More jobs are opening up on the Near East Side, churches, carryouts bringing new jobs. Columbus police are stepping up, picking up those who are making trouble and putting them in juvenile facilities, Alvis House (residential re-entry program). More funding, more schools, it’s starting to develop and bring better things to the neighborhood. The churches are especially helping. Parenting is stepping up. Parents are realizing they want their kids to go to school, stay out of jail, go to college, get a good job.

A business owner gave a brief anecdote comparing neighborhood conditions back when she was a social worker and current neighborhood conditions now that it was receiving more attention and funding:

A lot of poverty, drug abuse…I encountered a lot of teenage moms, single parent homes that were male and female. I’ve seen them clean up the neighborhood quite a bit. I’ve seen business development. I’ve seen a lot of abandoned homes in the area bought up and renovated by our white brothers and sisters. The housing project in the area, Poindexter Village, was the first public housing facility in the country. After they got rid of the projects, the problems there have been dispersed. They’ve been less concentrated, but it looks like they just push the poverty and problems from one place to another place without really solving it. The violence here has declined somewhat. They put a new police substation down the street, so that has helped. There’s a lot more community involvement as there’s a lot of government money coming into the area. They’re building the new highway and new money is coming in to revitalize the area. They now have monthly cleanups. You don’t see much paper or litter in the streets anymore.

Some residents were cognizant that their neighborhood was stigmatized in the larger city. In a focus group at a block watch meeting, two residents raised this as a local issue:

IEb: Crime and the perception of the neighborhood is that those who are living there are horrible people.
IEc: The fact we’re the dumping ground for bad things in the city. The perception of the area is not good. It’s known for crime, but there’s more than that. There’s too many vacant properties, slumlords, some of the pockets that aren’t vacant are properties rented out to undesirable tenants who don’t have a real stake in the community. It’s a dumping zone with a high turnover rate. It’s frustrating that we keep fighting what looks like a losing battle, but we never give up.

Some participants had similar ideas about the social problems that affected their neighborhood. One resident offered a list of some challenges that residents encountered in the area:

Well, there’s a lot of unemployment, drug addiction, alcohol addiction, mental health problems...kids not having enough to eat...fathers not being involved with their families. I see a lot of apathy...a lot of the “poor me” attitude around here, that “there’s nothing I can do.”

Another resident offered his own observations of the problems in the community, which mainly concerned some of the obstacles that residents encounter within a neighborhood characterized by poverty and disorder:

You see a lot of people out here who suffer from mental disabilities, who’ve lost their marbles. You got people living in abandoned buildings with it getting cold outside. I see children with mothers who are struggling to take care of them. There are young girls who think they have to dress a certain way to be a woman and then you have these older men who see them and get to thinking “she’s a woman.”

One participant offered a response to the question of problems associated with living in a disadvantaged inner-city neighborhood that marked the complexity and heterogeneity of the neighborhood’s population:

There are many people who feel lost. And there are a lot who wouldn’t work or take their opportunities, even if they were available. But there are a lot of people here who are educated, but life slapped them around and they don’t know how to get back on their feet. And it takes a lot of time to build yourself up again.

An issue that was frequently mentioned was the problem of drug and alcohol addiction. A long-time resident offered his perspectives on the effect of substance abuse on people’s health:

The problems that they get from chasing that monster called cocaine, called heroin, called addiction. Y’know, it’s one thing to be addicted to caffeine: you might get a headache or start to shake, but it’s another thing to be addicted to alcohol... You see the change in a person when they’re addicted to alcohol. It’s not just from young to old; it’s young... young and beat down to look old, cause alcohol waxes their skin out. It just changes them drastically. I could take you to the corner now and show you some who are 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, you look them down and you’d swear they were forty years old...

Child poverty, child neglect, and the lack of adequate role models for children were cited as issues that impacted a particular population in the neighborhood. One resident expressed her concerns about the condition of young people in the community:

I say a problem I see is children being neglected. Parents out not doing what they should, kids raising themselves. They have no one to care for them. It’s just sad. The kids go to me for help. I’m the neighborhood granny. People ring my door bell. Some come to my porch and just sit and talk. These parents get money for themselves, don’t look for their children, let ‘em run around. Then I see some kids who want it (better), but don’t know how to get it and don’t have anyone to push them. And the people out here on the street, they’re not dumb people. Some of them are really smart. They just need to be shaken up; shown a new way...Education is the main thing. They drop out in droves. Babies having babies. Fathers leaving. Kids not having no one to care for them, then thinking “Why should I care about anything?”

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Low levels of education can hinder community growth due to the lack of access to higher-paying jobs or a sense of common neighborhood identity. Education, in regards to general schooling and awareness of neighborhood cohesion, was raised as a neighborhood issue by a person who worked in a neighborhood service center:

I would say...lack of education, because I feel like if everyone valued education, then the neighborhood could be better off. You have parents without education sending their kids to school, and they don’t pay any mind if their kids get in trouble or get suspended. Then those kids have kids and the cycle continues. If you have education, you can do better. You can get a job, you can get work, you can be a realtor and buy up the homes in the community and fix them up. No education is the biggest issue.

An important aspect of neighborhood life is interaction between residents. One participant noted some community issues with interpersonal violence and explained how it could interfere with collective action:

I see...I don’t know, you see the different families who hang out in front of their house, and then they start fighting over nothing. “You’re sitting on my stoop” or “you’re standing on my corner.” To me, it’s the fights of ignorance. Since they’re fighting for nothing. When we are fighting each other, we should be fighting poverty, drugs on the streets, dads and moms who are alcoholics and crackheads, children getting pregnant. The biggest thing I hear here is black-on-black crime over nothing.

One resident, a member of a community organization, cited a lack of collective investment in the neighborhood:

One of the biggest things I see is people lacking ownership of the neighborhood. Though everyone is neighborly, we realize people like community gardens and having garden food, but there’s not active participation in the maintenance of the garden. Everyone likes the idea of new businesses, but they go to restaurants outside of the neighborhood, not helping the local economy. I’m not saying everyone needs to be an activist, but if there were a few individuals who can arrange a consensus among their neighbors rather than go in ourselves and try and encourage them to act.

In one focus group at a block watch meeting, the lack of community ties was cited along with the lack of sustained community action:

Vacant houses contribute to low populations on the street, so you lose that neighborly feeling. Slumlords who bring in undesirable tenants who don’t help the neighborhood. Drugs are a problem since the dealers don’t want to be involved in the block watch and the good people who would want to participate are afraid of retaliation. The problem is when crime happens, when an event happens, a block watch will be set up. But when the problem’s dealt with, the block watch and the people who attend it just disappear.

A business owner in the community cited that community relations were hindered by fear and uncertainty:

I would say, you know there’s different levels of people here. There’s those without values for life. Those are the drug dealers. But even then, not all of the dealers are like that. Some are doing it to raise their families, even though that’s not the best way to go about doing it. And they’re alienated from the rest of the community since they bring down the neighborhood. Most people stay to themselves because of fear. There’s fear of interacting since you don’t know who you’re going to meet. We also have a bad name... on the news, on the radio, we don’t ever hear ourselves in a good light. When’s the last time you ever heard of something good going on [Main Street]? You never hear of the good that happens in the neighborhood. I think it’s the fear factor that stops them from doing it.

Some residents in a focus group explained that the lack of social ties was influenced by broader social changes:

IEa: I think it is a social...Sadly it’s a social evolution. We have whole house A/C, so instead of sitting on the porch to get cool, seeing your neighbors, we stay in the house. There’s an attitude that there’s no need to know each other or get involved in each other’s business. The communities that are doing well have neighbors who know and are concerned with each other.

IEc: The main thing is neighbors who don’t know each other. Some of the neighbors I have aren’t the kind I used to know when I was younger, the kind who would be interested in getting to know you. Back then, there was neighborliness but now, people stay in their homes. I have a flower garden and that keeps me outside, seeing people and seeing things, but people, even kids, aren’t outside much anymore. They’re holed up inside with their computers or technology.

An important element of a neighborhood’s sense of community is the level of attention it receives from the local government. In a focus group at a block watch meeting, a resident talked about the perceived lack of support from the city government in helping the neighborhood deal with its issues:

Yeah, but I’ve seen city council sidetrack us, get someone else to talk to us rather than talk to us directly. With the loitering law issue, we’ve had problems with drug dealing and prostitution. But council invited a group of black ministers, not the concerned neighbors who raised the problem, to talk about the issue. The ministers argued the loitering laws are going to cause racial profiling, but what we’re trying to do is get rid of the drug dealing and prostitution that comes from standing around all day on the corner.

One particular exchange in a focus group touched on the lack of collective cohesion in the neighborhood that got in the way of adequate attention from city government:

IR: Could you elaborate on the point about the lack of involvement of city government?
IEa: Last mayor’s election: “we take care of our neighborhoods.” That was his motto, but what he really meant was the rich areas. The only place they’re cleaning up now is the Bottoms. Why aren’t you helping us out too?
IEC: I think it’s unfair to say all that when we can’t get our neighbors involved to improve the area. The other areas succeed in their efforts because they have a unified group of neighbors who give their voice to encourage change in the area. Look at this meeting: 3 people instead of 100 or 200 people is not enough to bring change. There’s power in numbers and we need to increase our numbers to increase the power of our voices.

A frequent point of commonality was that residents saw churches in a positive light, citing how the institution helped them in their time of need. One resident stated:

I think the church has a lot of resources here. It’s just a matter of people finding those resources. [A local church], I’ve really enjoyed what they do for the community. I feel that they do a lot for the community and have a lot of resources. It’s mainly a matter of people going there not just for the meals, but for the help.... The church has helped me a lot. I just learned about it [a few years ago] and have come to really enjoy the church. [The pastor] is a good leader at the church. He’s in the community and he has our interests at heart.

Another resident raised the point that churches can serve as vouchers for poor urban residents:

People listen to the church. If the church would come in and voice that, people could come in and employ people.

One resident made positive statements of how the church treated those who requested help:

[This church] does a lot....[This church] helps me when I go completely haywire. This church keeps me stable, like a rock. Here, I can talk to someone about my problems and not have to feel bad, feel accused.

In other cases, however, the involvement of churches was not seen as adequate. In one focus group at a block watch meeting, one resident argued that some churches in the neighborhood did not give an adequate air of community engagement:

The physical churches aren’t even involved with what’s going on on their property. You have these churches where their congregations just come from the suburbs and return back home. Other than that, we don’t know. Everything’s so fragmented, if we can get it all together, we could get things done. First English does things for kids, block parties, free dinners. They’re involved in the city, but churches around here aren’t involved.

In another focus group, a resident argued that some churches needed to be more engaged in the neighborhoods in which they resided:

Cleanup and beautification are two things we need. We know that the first way to pull people in is what they can see. All the churches should have gardens, landscaping, no trash. Do something so when people drive by, they’ll turn their heads and say “Now what’s going on over there?” One pastor complained about a burned out house across the street from his church, but he didn’t call the city to do something about it. You need to take responsibility. I think the churches have a lot more weight to understand how to call the city to fix things. Learning how the government works and how to get things done to make a real difference.

One resident remarked that the church’s ability to help residents rested on support from the larger community and the city:

They can do a lot more, but it depends on funding. It’s all about money. As long as the church has the money, is the pastor going to use it well for the community? It’s up to the church what they’re going to do with that money for the community. But there’s a lot more everyone can do. Take kids on camping trips, tutoring in the church, Bible study, church services, have more food drives. Pick-up day for litter, snatch kids up and get them involved.

One solution that was frequently raised was some form of neighborhood economic revitalization, with a particular focus on jobs. One resident stated:

One thing to bring positive change anywhere is the economy—boost the economy to get people to work. Most people want to work, want to be active. The improvement of the economy would bring a lot of change to people and their outlooks and their actions.

Revitalization on a larger scale was supported by another long-term resident of the neighborhood:

More jobs, more businesses, tear down these old places and bring in businesses. If they brought things to the inner city, made things new, it could make people think that they could better themselves. There’s a lot of people out here who are unemployed. Most want to work, but no one’s hiring. Some turn to drugs, but they end up killing each other. And I can see why they might do that. But there’s a better way. If you can go out here selling drugs, you can go out and get some skills...Bring some more businesses out here. Rehab this city. More schools, schools that help people better themselves. After-school programs to keep kids off the street, there’s not enough of them. But the ones that exist, the kids don’t have transportation. No way to get to the rec centers, the library. We got to do something about these kids...

One business owner identified that improving local social infrastructure was necessary to help residents facing struggles or barriers:

I think it’d be good if there was more assistance to small business development, a resource center for the community. Individuals in this area could also use financial education, credit counseling, a resource center for those individuals in the starting phases of developing a small business to help them be aware of the things they might not realize in running a business. Something that is lacking in this area is a GED program. One young lady in the
area works till 3:30 and is unable to work at the GED program. Now, with Columbus State
and OSU Hospital, they’re filling up that gap. Also, there’s a lack of affordable daycare. A lot
the parents can’t afford aftercare so they have to take a lower-paying or part time position
to accommodate the child. Title 20 means a person has to be indigent to get subsidies for
child care. If they can do something with education and child care, it can help the people in
the area.

The importance of education was expounded by one resident who
bemoaned the current state of the community:

Education is the key to self-improvement. I’m trying to tell these youngsters out here: there
are three parts of this world to look at: past, present, and future. The past is what already
happened. The future is what you’re going to do and how you’re going to do it. Education is
the key to self-improvement. If you don’t have it, you can’t go anywhere in life. I’m trying to
put it in their heads that they need an education to get ahead in this life.

The concept of education was emphasized by another resident, but with
less emphasis on its effects on economic mobility and more emphasis on instilling
a sense of community:

[We] don’t see the social service people really educating people. Social service agencies and
rental associations don’t educate people on what it means to live in the neighborhood. The
emphasis is on clean affordable housing as a right. And that’s all well and good. But there is
not education on reducing litter or not letting your kids run wild. You don’t let kids go wild.
The agencies think everyone should have clean affordable housing, but there’s a
responsibility to keep it clean. It’s problematic when people tear things up with impunity...
They want to do all these services, but they don’t teach them responsibility. There was one
organization whose answer to problems was to just throw a block party/get-together. All
you need to do is tell people “We don’t litter around here” and that’s it, they’ll stop, but
the organizations don’t tell them that. I feel it’s insulting to think that the only thing to do in
such a situation is to throw a block party. You need to orient people to show them you
don’t do those things in a neighborhood. And also, they should have some of the neighbors
come to tenant orientation to get new tenants to understand what it means to be a
neighbor.

Another neighborhood resident had a similar point to make, referring to
the need to get individuals in the neighborhood involved in productive activities
that connected them to the community:

Instead of people on the corner selling drugs, educate them. Make things to get people
involved. [One pastor] gets up a crew, walks down to Livingston and back on up to
Long...But people also need to help themselves. You can’t just sit back and have things
handed to you.

A business owner remarked on the need for some community
organizations to make a lasting impact in the neighborhood through an improved
use of resources:

Build a place on that empty lot to give people a one-stop shop for rehab and living
arrangements to help them have something to do and somewhere to be away from where
they’re having problems. They need something to help themselves, be productive.
Everyone has a program, but all they’re doing is getting money for administrative fees, not
to actually help or work for the people. People hear about some new grant money and
think they can just make a new program: administrative fees can’t just eat up the funds.

Another resident offered ideas for dealing with the problems of crime
and the at-times distant relationship between residents and the police:

If we could get more police help, more walking police officers to talk to people instead of
driving by, to see their life, see why they do this. Back in the day when I was growing up,
police walked the beat. Now, once in a blue moon, they bike by.

One resident in a focus group emphasized the need to overcome barriers
to better cohesion in her block watch’s efforts to mobilize social capital:

I think communication is broken down. We need a network that works better to connect to
people in the immediate area. People don’t want to read simple flyers when they get a
million pieces of junk mail a day. The old ways of communication aren’t working; we need
something different. But then trying to do it by computer won’t work when not everyone
has Internet at home.

Individuals offered varied ideas on how they made sense of their
experiences. One theme that arose was that individuals accepted their
experiences holistically. One resident offered this:

I take the good, the bad, and the ugly in this neighborhood. There are a lot of variables that
affect this neighborhood. But there are also a few jewels that I appreciate. Everybody has a
different story in this neighborhood.

Individuals showed some reservations about the change and
improvement of the neighborhood. One business owner remarked:

Like I said, I see some improvement. It will be slow, but it’s coming. But the neighborhood
isn’t going back to what it was like before. At least I don’t think so in my lifetime.

Some participants had a sense of conviction in the future change and
improvement in the neighborhood. One resident said:

I’m not moving, I’m not going anywhere. I’ve lived here too long... It means a lot to me to
live in this neighborhood since I’ve seen where it’s been. A lot can be done with this
neighborhood; we just need to fight harder. I just got to stay here.
DISCUSSION

This study examined what residents and workers on the Near East Side of Columbus, Ohio perceived as problematic in their neighborhood. It also intended to identify what participants thought churches and other community organizations could do to improve efforts in helping struggling residents in particular and the neighborhood in general.

The Near East Side has undergone changes and experiences similar to other inner-city neighborhoods that have been affected by suburbanization and economic restructuring. As cited by Price-Spratlen and Guest (2002), inner-city neighborhoods undergo a life cycle as they pass through the hands of different cohorts of residents with different economic means. Some longer-time residents noted that the neighborhood was somewhat different in the past than it is in its current state. If participants’ accounts go back to the past two or three decades, the neighborhood tended to be evaluated as having been in a worse state of decline. For those living in the neighborhood for more than 40 years, the neighborhood was identified as having been more stable, especially during the years when there was a marked presence of wealthier middle-class homeowners. Several residents and business owners cited that the neighborhood currently is experiencing revitalization that may return it to its former glory. Another notable point is that inner-city neighborhoods are multifaceted areas. Residents’ responses concerning the state of the Near East Side varied based on where they lived in the neighborhood, how long they lived there, and with whom in the community they interacted or encountered. Such neighborhoods, therefore, cannot be painted with a broad stroke as dangerous or derelict when some sections continue to retain their stability. Just the same, when revitalization in such neighborhoods occurs, it cannot be overgeneralized that all parts of the neighborhood are feeling the effects of improvement in the same way.

As in similar poor and isolated inner-city neighborhoods, economic decline and social disorganization figure to be prominent characteristics of the Near East Side. The outmigration of wealthy residents translates to the loss of well-funded neighborhood institutions that serve as anchors for the community (Davis, 1982). The loss of these stable supports leads to the decreased strength of the norms that uphold a secure social order. The lack of capital and stable institutions interacts with the neighborhood’s high rates of poverty and unemployment to create a vacuum in which varied social problems arise. Some residents stated that crime and drugs were problems on the Near East Side; Cummings (1998) and Venkatesh (2006) cited how gang activity and drug trafficking can become entrenched in inner-city neighborhoods where there is a dearth of economic opportunities. Unemployment, poorly-performing schools, physical and mental health problems, vacant housing, and public safety were frequently raised by participants as issues on the Near East Side, especially within the context of the neighborhood’s decline.

The loss of wealth and the growth of social disorganization get in the way of the development of social ties within a neighborhood. The significant number of abandoned or decayed buildings and residences on the Near East Side is a marker of the high level of depopulation that it has experienced. Its decline in population and investment translates to the fracturing of social networks and the increased sense of distance and isolation between residents. In one focus group, residents talked about the problem of poor communication between residents and the resultant difficulty of mobilizing social capital to deal with neighborhood issues. The realities of violent and property crime, the over exaggeration of the problem in the media, and the subsequent stigmatization of the neighborhood make residents wary about forming relations with others, as cited by Geis and Ross (1998) in their work concerning fear’s effects on the development of community social ties. The condition of social isolation on the community level is exacerbated by a lack of homeowners in the neighborhood. The fairly high level of residential transiency means that some residents may feel as though they do not have a stake in the neighborhood’s well-being. Not having a sense of investment in the community makes it more difficult for residents to muster the trust and kinship necessary for greater cooperation. The lack of ownership in a community makes it easier for negative influences such as criminal activity, public disorder, and antisocial behaviors to go relatively unchallenged and to further contribute to the neighborhood’s decay and instability. Some participants mentioned how certain members of the community, namely those involved in criminal activity, engendered consternation by lowering safety and quality of life in the neighborhood. Anderson (1999) identified a dichotomy between “decent” families who espoused middle-class values and “street” families who were alienated from mainstream institutions and partook in subcultures marked by aggression, distrust, and communal apathy. The relative separation and conflict between these groups can make interaction and the bonding of social capital ever more tenuous, especially when some parts of the latter group engender fear in the greater community (Venkatesh, 2006). Social disorganization and social isolation exacerbate each other in a feedback loop as conditions of instability undermine the communal trust and social bonding necessary to abate such conditions.

In connection to the conditions of economic disinvestment and social disorganization, a striking point that was raised by a few participants was how individuals seeing broader neighborhood improvement could imagine improvement in their own lives as well. Wilson (1987) argued that the outmigration of middle-class residents from central cities took away some important resources for the low-income residents who were left behind: daily
models of success who demonstrated the rewards that came with an education and a steady job (and thereby provided hope in the possibility of future mobility), and individuals who had the capital, savvy, and clout to connect others to resources or employment opportunities. Massey and Denton (1993) reported that the concentration of disadvantage within a confined geographic location reinforced social isolation by separating residents from the channels to mainstream social institutions and making the dysfunctional norms amongst some residents of urban neighborhoods appear normative. The presence of positive influences or trends of improvement can help give local residents the impression that if progress is occurring on a whole, then progress can come to their own lives as well. The lack of positive role models and the feeling of hopelessness that occurs in isolated inner-city areas like the Near East Side highlight the intractable structural dimension of poverty in such neighborhoods. The high level of poverty is a byproduct of residents’ concentration in lower-wage work and their inability to obtain better-paying job opportunities (as a result of spatial or skills mismatch) (Wilson, 1987; Wilson, 1996). The lack of a viable income makes it more difficult for residents to accumulate the wealth necessary for advancing themselves through better education and housing. It makes it more difficult for residents to support the local institutions (such as businesses and schools) that provide for their collective livelihood. The stagnation of economic activity and opportunity can grind on the endurance of individuals, limiting opportunities for social or political mobilization that are necessary for attracting broader attention towards neighborhood needs (Seccombe, 2002; Wilson, 2008). Consequently, some residents spoke positively about the influx of wealthier residents, the restoration of old homes, and new economic activity on the Near East Side. Some business owners remarked that an increase in racial and income diversity helped to infuse not only new capital, but a new sense of vitality in the neighborhood. Some participants were enthusiastic about the arrival of new neighbors who showed an interest in living in the neighborhood and helping to rebuild its social fabric.

A point mentioned by a few participants was that they wished people in the neighborhood would be less self-centered. Some residents noted a lack of general social cohesion, citing that some members of the community lacked a personal stake in the neighborhood. Something that could have influenced this reported condition of selfishness was the erosion of community ties that came with the decline in wealth and population in the neighborhood (Wilson, 2008). The growing isolation between residents in an increasingly poor and socially disorganized neighborhood was sustained by the decline of community institutions. The unpredictability of how others will act, with the specter of crime and violence in the background, can further make individuals turn into themselves and avoid significant social contact (Anderson, 1999; Geis & Ross, 1998). The fact that many residents of these neighborhoods themselves are poor and struggle to take care of themselves makes it more difficult for them to reach out to help others, rather focusing their energies to their own condition (Das, 2003).

Another key point that was noted throughout some interviews was that urban poverty had a negative impact on children. Parents within such neighborhoods vary in the problems or limitations they encounter in their role as guardians: whatever the issue is, the lack of guidance can increase the ease of negative influences in affecting youths’ self-concepts (Auletta, 1982). Children in poor inner-city neighborhoods, particularly those without stable family backgrounds or bonds to their community, are especially likely to get involved in delinquent activities or make decisions that end up being self-destructive such as having sexual relations at a young age or dropping out of high school (Anderson, 1999). Such actions are performed within the context of economic insecurity and isolation from a social reality that offers optimism about the future (Anderson, 1999; Venkatesh, 2006; Wilson, 1996). Some residents talked about the lack of positive role models for children to look up to as well as children’s lack of access to safe havens for enrichment or recreation in some parts of the neighborhood. Conditions of economic decline and social disorganization can have a substantial impact on children within poor urban neighborhoods, their coping abilities, and how they approach the greater world.

Participants frequently stated that churches and similar organizations can play an important role for residents by serving as a voucher for the community (Alex-Assensoh, 2004; Pacione, 1990). Several participants praised local churches for their contributions to the community and its residents; the different clothing programs, community meals, and child care activities that some area churches provided were held in high regard. What could be found within this praise was an implicit element of trust that church leaders would serve the interests of the community. Assets that some neighborhood churches currently hold include their current services to the community and their perception as legitimate institutions by neighborhood residents. Therefore, churches and other community organizations can use their somewhat privileged standing to serve as a locus of activity or mobilization of community members for greater actions. Such might include lobbying city government for more resources and attention as well as reinforcing larger community values of cooperation and trust. Churches have the opportunity to build off of their current role as service providers and social spaces to mobilize social capital in the community. A few residents noted efforts by a local pastor to gather residents to walk blocks in the neighborhood. Increasing the opportunities for neighborhood gatherings and unity can help repair the social fabric that has been broken down by varied social and economic changes over the years. Such gatherings can put neighbors in constant contact with each other to build a sense of shared identity and collective stake in their community. Increasing partnerships with neighborhood organizations and even
with other community churches can lay the foundation for a comprehensive community support system that can provide residents with services and connect them to different resources for help. The size and scope of such partnerships could allow for connections within and across the neighborhood, tying different isolated locations together in a common mission of lifting up and helping all residents.

Because churches and similar neighborhood organizations serve as social spaces, they could serve as a locus for political mobilization. At one local church, residents frequently stated how they saw the church and its pastor as legitimate leaders. Other residents noted that churches could have significant sway in changing neighborhood conditions. Such institutions could therefore serve as a voice for residents desiring increased connection to the larger city and increased attention from government in attracting revitalization. Churches exist in a mediator position where they can serve as a conduit between political officials and neighborhood residents. As Barnes (2005) and Alex-Assensoh (2004) explained, churches reflect the collective identity of their parishioners. Pacione (1990) argued that churches can advocate for the needs of the marginalized populations that they serve. Such institutions could help residents raise their voice in government in fighting for more attention and funding to help the community deal with its social and economic issues. In the process of political mobilization, however, the church and other similar organizations can improve a sense of collective identity and purpose that makes residents feel an increased stake in one another’s well-being and the well-being of the neighborhood.

Other issues to address are the high levels of unemployment and child poverty on the Near East Side which pave the way for varied social problems in the neighborhood. Neighborhood organizations can support public works or volunteer opportunities (e.g., gardening, beautification, maintenance, etc.) to get individuals active and positively involved in their neighborhoods. Helping to increase a sense of ownership in the community can tie people together and thereby increase the level of social cohesion as residents feel a more common stake in neighborhood life and stability. Such efforts could possibly have a positive impact on children in the neighborhood by engendering a general sense of community pride, increasing their awareness that there are individuals who are looking out for their best interests as well as individuals on whom to model behavior. However, such efforts may be stymied by the scarcity of funds in the neighborhood. Some residents noted that the decline of funding for social programs could limit churches’ abilities to reach out to struggling residents. An important goal for church and community organization intervention in such a complicated matter as unemployment is to find ways to keep disaffected individuals tied to their communities and help them weather the economic and possible mental strains that such a situation can cause.

The barrier of unemployment can be addressed by churches using their clout to connect residents to economic opportunities in the city. For instance, at one local church, a student-run service center provided access for individuals to job opportunities and offered help in writing job applications. This resource center had connections to a larger program in which a local employer went through the church to hire neighborhood residents. Churches stand in a position to offer these broad connections that can help decrease unemployment and social isolation. Providing opportunities for job training, developing soft skills, and preparing for the job search can give residents access to the resources necessary for bettering their economic position. In addition, the positive reputations of churches and organizational leaders can ease employers’ distrust towards hiring individuals who may be experiencing long-term unemployment.

Education was frequently mentioned by participants. One resident bemoaned the lack of foresight or grounding in history that youth had in the neighborhood, and explained that education was the key for self-improvement among people in the neighborhood. A business owner remarked about the growing presence of The Ohio State University and Columbus State Community College in the neighborhood, especially as the neighborhood gained more attention from and better integration to downtown Columbus. Churches and similar institutions can again use their position to form and sustain partnerships with educational institutions that might provide resources for residents’ economic advancement and self-enrichment. As spots for social gathering, churches already provide information in their sermons that imbue individuals with a sense of identity, morality, and responsibility (Barnes, 2005; Loury & Loury, 1997). What might be necessary to sustain organizations’ current activities is to provide and encourage activities or talks that raise collective consciousness for such residents. Residents are already perceptive of the social and economic issues that affect their community. Some, however, remarked that ties in the neighborhood are fragmented. Neighborhood organizations need to reinstil within the community the sense of connection necessary for helping residents mobilize social capital and aim for broader community growth. Using the power and legitimacy of churches and neighborhood institutions to increase this consciousness can improve mobilization efforts that put more pressure for better city resources and attention to the particular neighborhood. In the process of demanding more attention and assistance from the larger city is the possibility of recreating a social fabric based on trust and mutual interests. Such a task may be difficult to implement in a community like the Near East Side where there is a relatively low population of home-owners. The task of imbuing a sense of community and collective purpose is hindered by the structural barriers of poverty and agents’ limited time and energy for civic involvement. The lack of funding in the neighborhood and the perceived lack of support of city government further makes mobilizing and
unifying more difficult. Even a few residents stated that the church could only do so much in helping the people and that, in their views, neighborhood residents needed to increase their own sense of communal responsibility. Churches and neighborhood organizations can serve as the channels through which individual engagement in community betterment occurs. Having stable local institutions can help sustain a greater sense of community that is able to support all residents, whatever their economic or residential background. Local institutions can provide a sense of collective purpose and cohesive identity that is necessary for bolstering further community and economic development.

There are several limitations with this research. The data were collected from a convenience sample, based on the people at the church, block watch meetings, and commercial streets to which I had access. As a result, it is difficult to generalize the results to all members of the Near East Side community. Another possible limitation was that the sample focused on poor African American residents of the Near East Side community. Including more residents in the study, namely the wealthier and predominantly white residents who are newcomers to the neighborhood, could help put the experiences of poor urban black residents in the broader contexts of neighborhood change and identity.

Another issue was raised that some churches in the neighborhood had merely a physical, but not a social presence in the neighborhood. Particularly in the focus groups at block watch meetings, residents stated that some local churches lacked awareness of what was going on outside of their premises. What needs to be better understood is why such churches have grown isolated from the surrounding neighborhood.

Another area of research to pursue is the nature of fragmented social ties in the neighborhood. Some residents mentioned that some groups in the neighborhood, namely drug dealers and undesirable renters, decreased the neighborhood’s quality of life. Gaining more understanding about such residents in the neighborhood could clarify why such groups may feel less of a stake in the neighborhood, bridge the gap between those who are engaged in community growth and those who are less engaged, and thereby improve broader unity in efforts to improve the community.

In all, the problems that the Near East Side of Columbus, Ohio faces are problems that are similar to other poor urban areas in America: economic disinvestment, population decline, social disorganization, and social isolation. These problems have resulted from the intersection of complex social, economic, and demographic changes. However, the neighborhood is seeing signs of improvement with increased population, the restoration of old homes, and new businesses. Churches and other neighborhood institutions sit in a viable position to mobilize social capital and enhance communal ties as the neighborhood undergoes redevelopment. In several cases, praise was directed towards the work of such organizations in helping residents who encountered struggles in the neighborhood. Possible areas for intervention include increasing social cohesion between residents and imbuing residents with an increased sense of collective purpose and identity. The church can continue to use its clout to provide and advocate for neighborhood residents. In certain areas, institutional and structural constraints such as neighborhood poverty, limited funding, and high residential transiency prevent the ease of some of the advised reforms. However, through their interactions with and services to residents, churches and similar organizations can increase a sense of community and rebuild larger social ties as a way to help residents facing social and economic struggles. A heightened sense of community can be the bedrock for greater neighborhood revitalization.

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