

# CHARTING THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF BLIGHT

A National Literature Review on Addressing the Community Impacts of  
Blighted Properties

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Keep America Beautiful  
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PREPARED BY:

The Vacant Properties Research Network

A project of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech

in collaboration with Econsult Solutions, Inc.

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### **Charting the Multiple Meanings of Blight: A National Literature Review on Addressing the Community Impacts of Blighted Properties**

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Keep America Beautiful, the leading national nonprofit that envisions a country where every community is a clean, green and beautiful place to live, has been a leader in the world of litter prevention since its founding in 1953. The national organization conducted groundbreaking research in the 1960s and 1970s about littering behavior and the sources and causes of litter.

Keep America Beautiful replicated and expanded on that research by conducting pivotal studies in 2008 and 2009. The project and resulting study, “Littering Behavior in America,” focused on the composition of litter across America – its volume, locations and costs to local communities and businesses. Moreover, the research team explored aspects of littering behavior, including how often people litter, the individual and contextual variables that contribute to littering, and the effectiveness of various approaches to reducing littering rates.

The focus on capturing metrics that measure the scale of litter in a community has evolved in more recent times to capturing additional elements of a community’s appearance. The Keep America Beautiful Community Appearance Index – which includes the Litter Index and optional indices for illegal signs, graffiti, abandoned/junk vehicles and outside storage – is a tool that Keep America Beautiful affiliates use to better measure a community’s quality of life.

With those historic tools and measures in mind, Keep America Beautiful and its network of community-based affiliates decided that it should focus its next research effort on a related area of concern – that of community blight. Before seeking to address the issue of “blight,” it was determined that some preliminary work was necessary. For example, finding a broadly-accepted definition of blight was elusive. And the wide array of research on blight – through all of its “multiple meanings” – made the topic somewhat obscure.

#### **Charting the Multiple Meanings of Blight**

Working with its State Leaders Council and leaders from affiliates in major metropolitan areas, Keep America Beautiful selected Econsult Solutions Inc., a Philadelphia-based consulting firm, to conduct a national literature review on blight under the guidance of Econsult Senior Vice President Lee Huang in partnership with the Vacant Properties Research Network (VPRN), an initiative of the Metropolitan Institute (MI) at Virginia Tech in Washington, D.C.

Led by MI Senior Fellow Joe Schilling, the new national report – *Charting the Multiple Meanings of Blight* – examines more than 300 academic articles as well as special policy and practitioner reports devoted to the concept of blight. The review provides a contemporary snapshot of how researchers, experts and practitioners describe and understand the complex conditions that create blight and the many policy responses that communities are taking. The term “blight” continues to evolve as communities confront different types of blighted properties from littered and vacant lots to foreclosure and abandoned homes.

At Keep America Beautiful's National Conference in January 2015 in Washington, D.C., the primary authors outlined: 1) what recent articles and reports say about blight's long history and its contemporary context; 2) how policymakers and community-based organizations can leverage the report's findings; and 3) how Keep America Beautiful and its network of affiliates can build on this report by developing a blight cost calculator for community groups and local governments, as well as identifying best practices to address and reduce blight in rural, urban and suburban communities.

### **Why is Blight Important?**

Blight is a frequent topic in the headlines and in the hallways of city and county governments. Numerous local governments have launched citywide campaigns to eradicate blighted properties, from Detroit and Flint, Mich., to Birmingham, Ala., and New Orleans. National organizations such as Keep America Beautiful and the Center for Community Progress host conferences and provide resources to help policymakers and practitioners working the frontlines of blight.

Research identified in this report also documents the community impacts that blighted properties generate, particularly on the value of adjacent properties:

- Vacant properties cost city governments from \$5,000 to \$35,000 per property.
- Foreclosed homes can lead to an average increase of 1 percent in neighborhood crime.
- Vacant dwellings have higher risks of fires in urban areas.
- Residents in blighted neighborhoods have greater exposure to public health and environmental risks.
- Low income neighborhoods are more vulnerable to increases in property abandonment.

### **What Did We Find Out About Blight?**

The report delineates what blight really means. Blight really means the physical changes of properties that cause harmful impacts on the life cycle of neighborhoods and their residents.

- Blight is a complex and dynamic phenomenon with different meanings and actions shaped by a variety of actors and institutions.
- Blighted properties also shift with the times and the place. While most of the articles and reports focused on urban blight, deteriorating properties are now a challenge for suburban and rural areas, thanks in part to increasing concentrations of foreclosed homes and the spatial diffusion of poverty.
- Blight is a symptom of larger social forces, such as poverty, and includes a wide variety of actions primarily led by local governments and community-based groups.
- Blight's legal and policy roots derive from the long-standing principles of public nuisances.
- While early legal scholarship focused on traditional blighting conditions, such as litter, visual blight of signs, and eminent domain processes, current case studies and analysis focus on how to reclaim vacant properties.

### **What Can Policymakers and Community-Based Groups Do to Address Blighted Properties?**

The report provides a menu of next steps for Keep America Beautiful and its community-based affiliates as well as practical policy actions that local governments and community leaders can take:

- Document the costs of inaction: Commission studies that show how blighted properties drain local and county budgets as well as the social and economic costs on neighborhoods.

- Organize blighted/vacant properties working groups: Convene a cross section of public, private and nonprofit leaders to develop more comprehensive and coordinated responses to blight, including changes in state and local laws.
- Launch a good landlord program: Offer incentives to review landlords who maintain their properties blight- and crime-free.
- Conduct targeted code enforcement: Place-based code enforcement can stimulate market activity in selected neighborhoods through comprehensive property maintenance actions.
- Explore urban greening opportunities (gardening, urban agriculture, green infrastructure, etc.) to address vacant lots and blighted land.
- Charter a land bank or adopt land-banking statutes and ordinances: Land banks can acquire neglected and/or tax delinquent properties and return them to the mainstream real estate market or support their improvement as public green space.
- Publish a problem properties toolkit: having a guide that explains how communities can take action with vacant and blighted properties.
- Expand the use of low-cost, high tech tools: Many neighborhood groups from New Orleans to Youngstown, Ohio, are using apps to inventory blighted properties in their communities. This helps to document the costs and identify opportunities for reuse.

### **Report's Recommendations for Researchers and Policymakers**

As the first national synthesis of our current knowledge about blight, the report offers important recommendations for future policy development and future research to further advance our understanding of blight and the expanding range of policy actions that communities can take:

- Support and examine community partnerships and grassroots response to blight.
- Revise the term “blight” to reflect its multiple meanings.
- Expand the goals and guidance of blight policy and programs to more equitably address its socio-economic dimensions.
- Examine public agency organizational development, capacity building and civic engagement challenges in implementing anti-blight policies and programs.
- Support comparative, multi-disciplinary studies across cities.

### **Next Steps—Developing the Community Blight Calculator**

The intention of this report is to provide a better understanding about the contemporary and historic dimensions of blight. The observations within the report make an important contribution to the study of blight, and to local policies and practices that have been developed across the United States in an effort to mitigate and abate blight's causes and effects.

With a better understanding of blight, Keep America Beautiful, working in conjunction with its State Leaders Council, affiliates and Econsult Solutions, will develop new tools and resources to better measure the many impacts of blight. In effect, the next step will be the development of a “community blight calculator,” which will take into consideration what has been learned and what will be most beneficial to communities seeking to measure the scale and scope of blight in their effort to remediate the problem.

A copy of Econsult Solutions' full report is available on the Keep America Beautiful and VPRN websites.