

**Mixed-Income Neighborhoods in Grand Rapids:
A Summary of Findings**

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Urban Collaborators

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Mixed-Income Neighborhoods in Grand Rapids: A Summary of Findings

Our investigation of mixed-income neighborhoods focused on Grand Rapids, Michigan. We were particularly interested in seeing which neighborhoods in Grand Rapids were able to maintain an income mixture over the time period from 1990 to 2000, and in determining what was similar or different about these particular neighborhoods. The study included:

- a review of the literature about similar topics;
- an analysis of census data from 1990 to 2000;
- three sets of focus group interviews in selected neighborhoods.

About Grand Rapids and the Project

Few studies have been done of mixed-income communities that have not been created either through public housing redevelopment or vouchers. It is important to understand mixed-income communities that occur without intervention and the social dynamics that are present in them. This study looks at the process of change in terms of mixture of income levels. Some fear that low-income residents would not be able to co-exist with new residents of better circumstances. The hope is that this research will help scholars and residents of communities understand the nature of areas that have bridged the gap of income levels. This research shows, however, that tensions exist within mixed-income communities, as well as benefits.

Grand Rapids is located on the western side of Michigan and is the second largest city in Michigan by population, with just under 200,000 residents within the city, and just over one million in the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA)¹. From 1990 to 2000² Grand Rapids

¹ Grand Rapids MSA in 2000 is comprised of Kent, Ottawa, Allegan, and Muskegon Counties. The cities of Muskegon and Holland are included in this four county area.

² Figures are from the United States Census of Population for 2000

experienced an increase in population with a growth rate higher than the rest of the state and the nation.³ Grand Rapids, however, is still described by residents as a “city of neighborhoods.” There are thirty-two organized neighborhood associations covering most of the city of Grand Rapids.⁴

Once a hub of furniture manufacturing, Grand Rapids is now home to a diverse group of employers, is conveniently located between the economic centers of Detroit and Chicago, and benefits from its proximity to Lake Michigan’s sunset coast. A quick statistical profile of Grand Rapids gives us a glimpse of the racial and ethnic diversity there and the economic status of the city’s families. The 2000 Census reported the racial/ethnic count of the city as White, 62.46 percent; Black, 19.92 percent; Hispanic, 13.05 percent; Asian, 1.59 percent; and other, 2.98 percent. The percentage of racial and ethnic minorities in the city is growing; data from the 1990 Census show that non-Hispanic Whites were 74.9 percent of the population as a whole. The 2000 Census shows that the percentage of non-Hispanic Whites decreased over the next ten years, even as the total population of the city increased 4.6 percent.⁵ Even with this increase, racially, a majority of the population was White in 2000. Figure 1 shows the African-American population as a percentage of total population. This shows that African-American people were highly concentrated in 2000. The ten census block groups featuring more than 70 percent African-Americans are, as is apparent in Figure 1, clustered together.

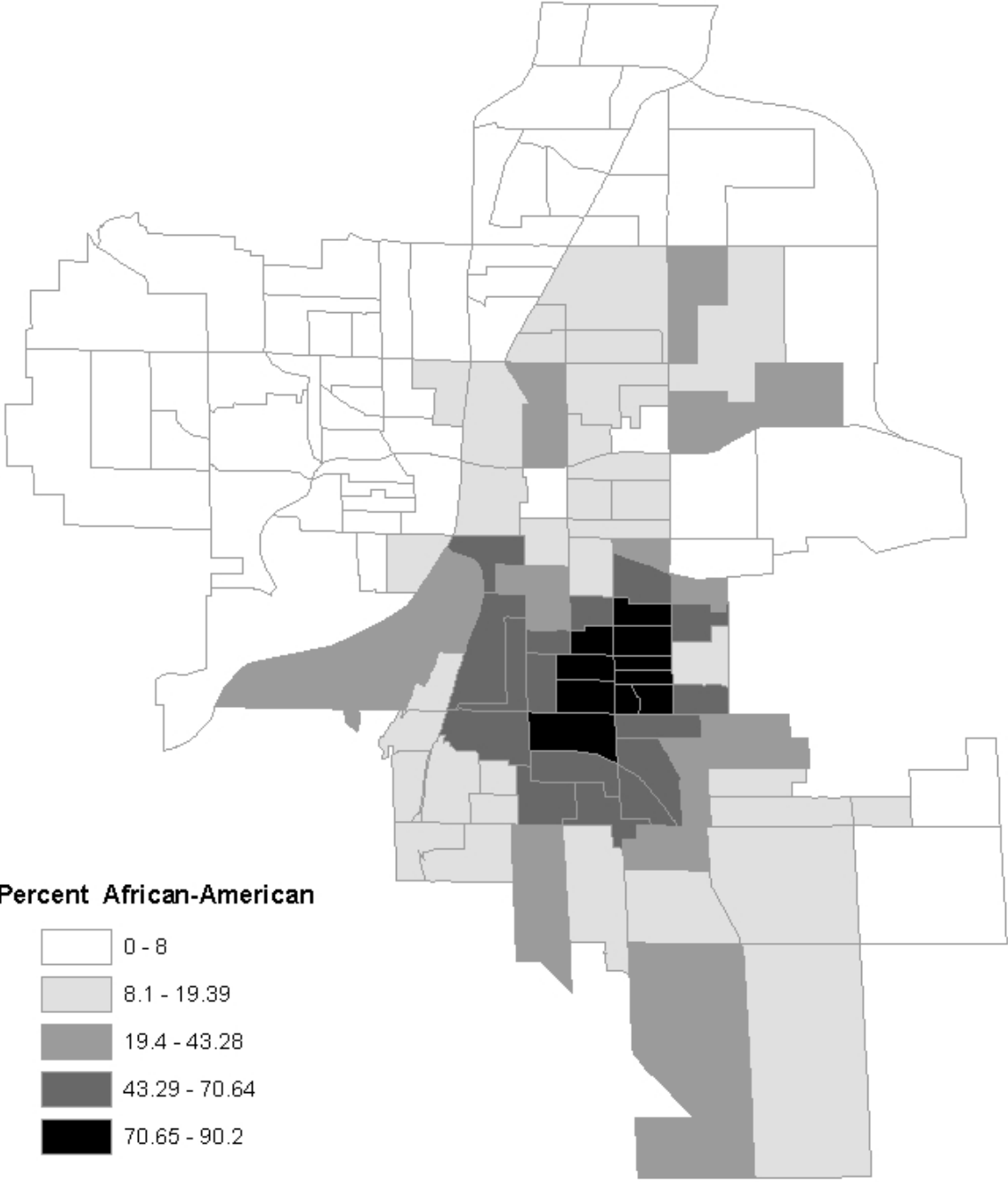
The median family income reported for Grand Rapids in the 2000 Census was \$44,224 and the median income of the Grand Rapids MSA was \$54,118. (The median family income of Michigan was \$44,667.) The percentage of families with incomes below the poverty level was

³ This data was gathered from the Grand Rapids Community Research Institute (CRI) website maintained by Grand Valley State University: <http://www.gvsu.edu/philanthropy/cri/data/demographics/index.html>

⁴ According to the CRI website: <http://www.gvsu.edu/philanthropy/cri/profiles/neighborhood/index.html>

⁵ Figures are from the United States Census of Population for 2000 and the 1990 Census of Population

Figure 1: African-Americans as a Percentage of Total Population, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2000



Data Source: Analysis of U.S. Census data

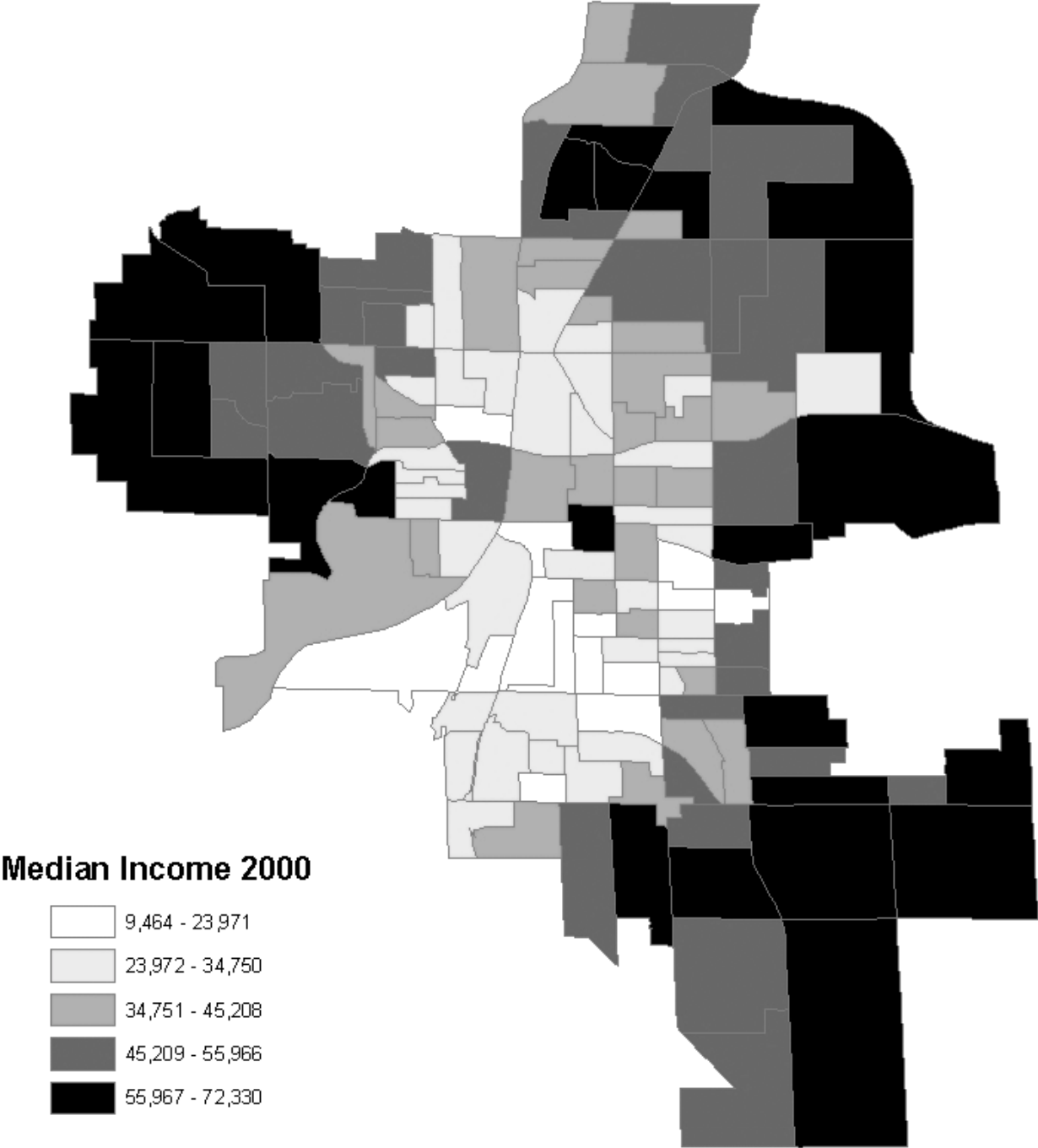
11.9 percent for the city, and for the Grand Rapids MSA 5.9 percent of families fell below the poverty level. (The percentage of Michigan families with incomes below the poverty level is 7.4 percent.)⁶ Figure 2 is a map of the range of the median income of families for each block group. From this map, we can see that low-income families are concentrated in the center of the city as well. One exception is the area in the center of the map that represents the area bounded by I-196 on the north, College Avenue on the east, Fountain Street south, and Barclay Street and Ransom on the west, which is characterized by a high number of relatively prosperous families. This area is the northern part of the Heritage Hill Neighborhood Association. The peripheral areas had higher median incomes than the rest of the city (Figure 2) and also had fewer African-Americans (Figure 1).

Review of Literature

Our review of the literature summarized what is known about mixed-income neighborhoods, looking at both the literature that concerns interventions such as public housing projects that are moving to mixed income levels, and at the literature that relates to integrating communities racially. We were hoping to find some agreement regarding a quantitative definition of a mixed-income neighborhood, however, we found no agreement about the definition of “mixed-income.” However, Jargowsky and Bane (1991) define “mixed-income” neighborhoods as a process of trying to identify “ghetto” neighborhoods. They define ghetto neighborhoods as those with 40 percent poverty rate, and mixed-income neighborhoods as those with 20-40 percent poverty. Besides being rather arbitrary, this percentage of poverty is high for purposes of our study. We were looking for a more dynamic mix of all income categories where possible.

⁶ All income data is from the American Fact Finder website: <http://factfinder.census.gov/>

Figure 2: Median Income for Families, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2000



Source: Analysis of 2000 US Census Data

Concerning public housing, we found that some high-profile programs have contributed to greater income mixing and that the results for low-income residents have been positive but that true mixing is still very limited. The programs, sometimes seeking integration based on race and other times integration by income, include Chicago's Gautreaux program, HUD's Moving to Opportunity, Section 8, and HOPE VI. These programs sought to overcome problems of concentrated inner-city poverty including the spatial mismatch of jobs and skills, the lack of positive role models for low-income people, and poor safety and education for children in inner-city neighborhoods (Wilson, 1987). These programs are seeking to reduce the concentration of poverty and its negative effects in urban areas. Enhanced social capital is a theoretical benefit of mixed-income communities that has been forwarded by many scholars but has not yet been verified. It is also not clear how the presence or absence of social capital has impacted residents of public housing.

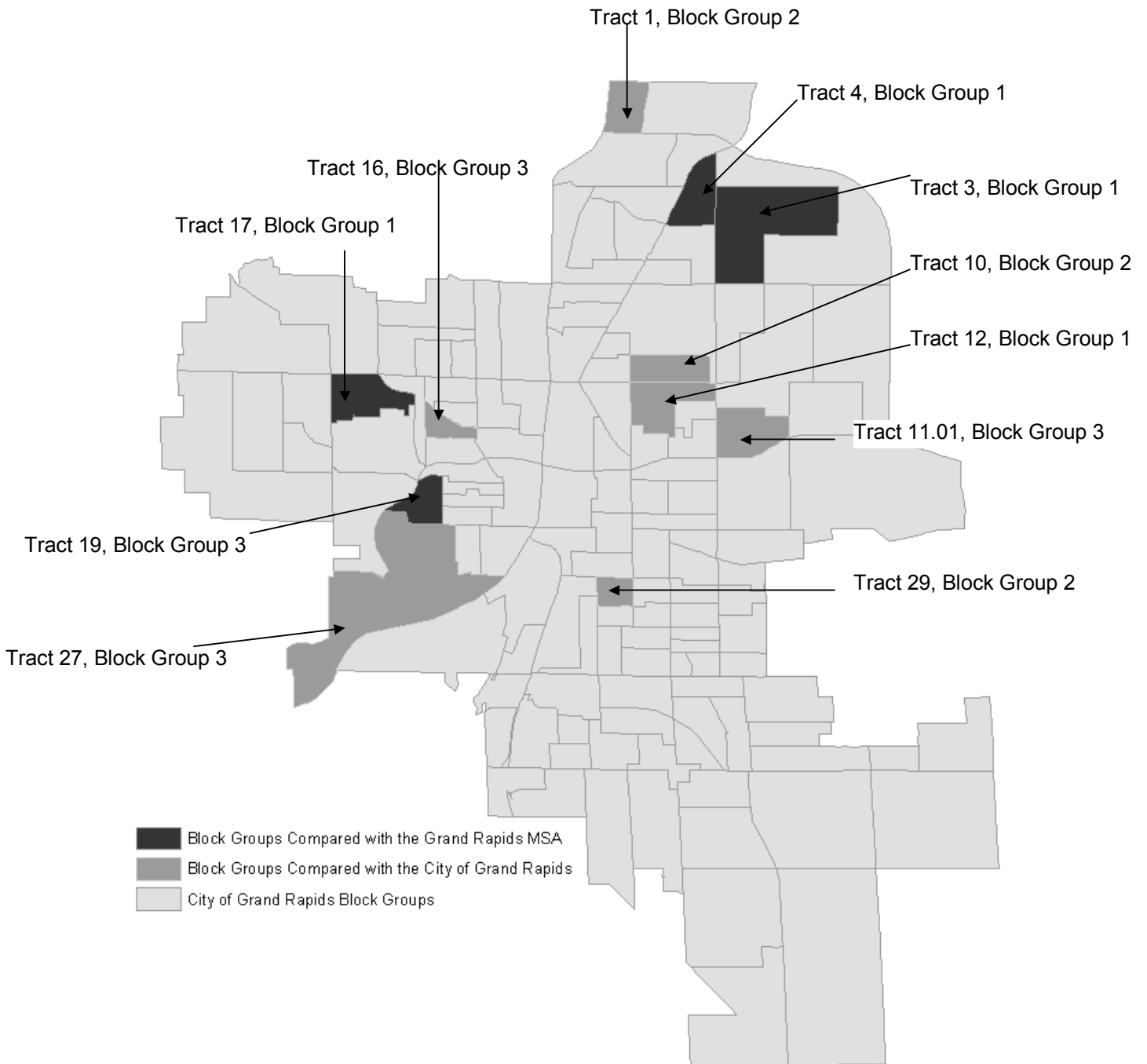
Concerning racial integration, we found that some residents choose racial mixing, but that the results are not well understood. This literature helped us most by helping us understand how integration is theorized. Donnelly and Majka (1996, 1988) studied a racially diverse neighborhood in Dayton, Ohio in successive studies. They theorized that college educated liberal residents of the Five Oaks neighborhood sought to maintain their diverse community. Their study contradicted previous work that showed a decrease in community ties as they become more racially mixed. The mobility literature shows that pressures to move can be counterbalanced by ties to the community, better neighborhood quality or better housing. Both of these literature streams support the idea that people stay in communities to which they have ties, whether they be social, ideological, or practical (that is, related to the quality of housing or amenities).

Analysis of Census Data

Analysis and mapping of census data showed that the population of Grand Rapids is clustered by non-White status, African-American proportion, and median income. We also found that the most prosperous African-American families were located in areas that are not predominately African-American. We found that the lowest quintile or fifth of the city in terms of family income also tended to be clustered in the center of the city with a few exceptions. An assessment of changes from 1990-2000 identifies many block groups that have experienced both an increase in relative status of family income as measured by quintiles as well as a decrease in lower-income quintiles. Using this same method, we identified four specific areas that seem to have experienced marked changes of this sort or “gentrification,” between 1990 and 2000.

We used census block groups as an indication of neighborhood. We defined areas with stable income mixture as areas having a stable percentage of the population in the two lowest of five quintiles, which means having a representation of lower-income residents that remained over time (no high-level gentrification) without tipping over into “too many” lower-income residents (no major movement downward in terms of socio-economic status). We found a total of 11 census block groups, which met this criterion for stable mixed-income neighborhoods over that 10-year period of time. Of these 11, we selected four because they showed stable characteristics as compared to the metropolitan area, and seven because they displayed stable characteristics as compared to the city as a whole. These 11 represented 8.4 percent of the total of 131 census block groups in the city as a whole, in 2000.

Figure 3: Block Groups Identified as Mixed-Income, Defined as Stable Proportion of Lower Two Quintiles, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1990-2000



We found that the stable census block groups were indeed slightly different than other block groups in the city. They tended to have less vacant housing in 2000, less rental housing in both 2000 and 1990, lower median income for families in both years compared to metropolitan median income, lower proportions of families in poverty in both 1990 and 2000, and fewer people of color. In 1990, the median income for families in the mixed-income block groups was higher than for the city as a whole. The implications of our findings include:

1. Not surprisingly given our definition, mixed-income neighborhoods will require making sure that the proportion of residents who are of low income does not become overwhelming. This means that means will have to be found to maintain middle-class residents.
2. Supporting home ownership will be an important part of a strategy needed to maintain mixed-income housing. This suggests that tapping government or private programs that support home ownership could be an important strategy for maintaining a balanced population. Support includes not only purchase programs but also home repair, mortgage counseling, and other means to keep lower income owners.
3. The fact that in 2000, our selected blocks actually had lower median income for families suggests that it is still possible to maintain mixed income within neighborhoods that are not wealthy or even middle-class when compared with the city or region as a whole.
4. It appears that in Grand Rapids the “stable” areas are not necessarily characterized by racial diversity. However our comments from the focus groups may help with the need to create strategies. Focus group dialogue, for example, indicates that race is not necessarily a barrier to neighborhood stability.
5. It appears that in Grand Rapids neighborhoods with a high proportion of African-Americans tend to be low income. This suggests a need for further investigation, especially since some researchers such as William Julius Wilson believe that mixed-income African-American neighborhoods give greater access and mobility to low-income populations.

Analysis of Focus Group Interviews

We carried out focus group interviews in three neighborhoods out of the 11 described above. These neighborhoods were picked with the help of a member of the Extension field staff as fairly representative of all of the 11 neighborhoods. In general, we found that existing

residents' opinion about having a mixed-income neighborhood varied from our expectation. In some cases people saw this as a benefit, and in some cases they saw it as a detriment. We also found that our selected neighborhoods had certain stabilizing influences, which are listed below:

- Religious communities such as Catholic parishes have kept people in neighborhoods;
- Positive feelings about schools in the neighborhood—respondents cited the ability of their children to walk to local schools;
- Strong social networks between and among the neighbors;
- Emotional or familial connection to the neighborhood—some residents inherit or buy from parents or grandparents, others buy in the neighborhood because of family and have affective connections to the area; and
- Neighborhood associations—Grand Rapids has well organized and in some areas professionally staffed neighborhood associations. All three neighborhoods assessed through focus groups had active neighborhood associations.

These neighborhoods were in some senses fragile, however. Respondents were concerned largely about the influx of rental households, if those households did not take care of their properties or if their landlords did not do so. They were also very concerned about the changing quality of schools, and about municipal decisions such as proposed changes in local parks. We identified the following as major threats:

- Poor school quality—some respondents reported increasing dissatisfaction with public schools or the relocation of parochial schools;
- Problem neighbors, this includes poorly monitored rental property—respondents were aware of renters in their area that cause noise, visible blight, and neighborhood change;
- Respondents cited economic decline as forcing many people to relocate from the city or the state to follow employment opportunities. Allied with this are the economic fortunes of residents who may smaller property maintenance budgets; and
- Racial change was mentioned by some respondents as a factor in neighborhood change—other respondents were neutral about this issue.

These discussions allowed us to hear knowledgeable opinions by people active in their community associations. Here are a few implications for direct intervention:

1. It appears that the parish structure of the Catholic Church had a great deal to do with neighborhood stability in some areas. This implies that as church affiliations and policies change, it will be necessary to replace this stabilizing influence with something else.
2. The "something else" could perhaps include social networks in neighborhoods, or strong neighborhood associations, which several people mentioned as stabilizing influences. Along the same line were emotional connections to the neighborhood, which could be heightened with focused strategies.
3. The fact that multi-generational housing was also an attraction that helps maintain stability suggests that neighbors should work to make sure that such housing is possible, particularly in terms of legal codes and zoning.
4. The need to protect the quality of schools came through loud and clear. Our focus groups suggested that if the schools declined drastically, the neighborhood would too.
5. The need to ensure that housing value is maintained and not pulled down by poor property maintenance is extremely important as well. This means that strategies will have to be found to pressure bad landlords to perform up to par, and in addition means will have to be found to enforce building codes. The quality of housing upkeep seemed, for most of our respondents, much more important than the racial characteristics of new residents.
6. Some residents do exist, however, who see racial change as a threat. In neighborhoods where racial change is occurring, an opportunity may arise for direct stabilization efforts that build on increasing neighborhood bonding. This could be a worthy project for intervention by outside parties such as MSU Extension.
7. The city government seems to have a role in all this. In addition to assuring property upkeep, it will also be of assistance if city employees (such as the police) help maintain the positive reputation of a particular neighborhood. It will also be necessary to approach with care mega-projects that could have negative implications, such as the expansion of John Ball Park Zoo.

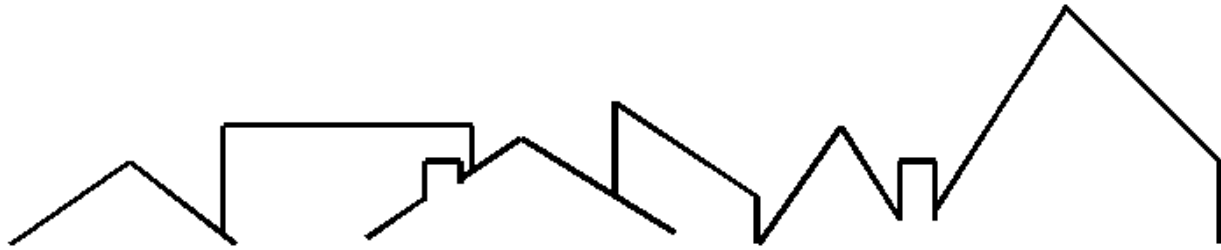
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