Remaking Stable Communities

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The terrible tragedy at the Washington Navy Yards in September 2013 again brought the nation's attention to the potential for violence in our society. While we have located many sources that cultivate this violence, there is one that is consistently underplayed: the unstable communities in which Americans make their homes and raise their children. This "instability of place" aggravates fears and feeds suspicion. People buy guns and use guns because they do not trust those around them, and they do not have the sense "we're in this together," which was more characteristic of America in an earlier era.

In studies of epidemics of violence and social disturbance, my colleagues and I have repeatedly found that the upheaval of communities creates a context for violence. For example, urban renewal in the 1950s and 60s bulldozed large communities and dispersed their residents. That disruption contributed to the civil insurrections—also known as riots—that shook American cities in the 1960s. Planned shrinkage, as implemented in New York City in the 1970s, sought to increase the speed of decline in occupied neighborhoods. This, of course, violently tore communities apart. The massive destruction of housing and dispersal of residents was followed by major increases in both interpersonal violence, as measured by homicides, and violence to self, as measured by suicide. Epidemics of AIDS and addiction were also ignited, poorly managed, and allowed to spread. This created an era of "Mad Plagues" that undermined health, broke up families, and spread further disorder not only in and around New York City, but also as the prevalence of AIDS in Africa today attests, across the world.

This instability has followed a pattern historian Thomas Hanchett called "sorting out" of urban and shared societal places and spaces based upon race and class. He pointed out that "segregation begat segregation," which speaks to the inherent instability in the sorted-out city. Today, African American children in American public school systems are more segregated than before the landmark Brown vs. Board of Education. In order to create stable cities, we need to exit from that paradigm of social organization and begin to build our cities in a new way. This shift requires that many actors in many sectors ask themselves, "What is it I want for the future of our society?" It is in the context of these conversations that we can clarify our intentions. Then we can examine conditions, policies, and programs to see ways in which efforts align with the intention to create healthier, stable cities for all people.

These processes are urgent because the violence we are seeing now is symptomatic of failed communication at a time when society is in desperate need of communication. Urbanists have a critical role to play in creating the physical and social ecosystem where a culture of problem-solving results in healthier cities full of people who care about one another.