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Social Issues

D.C. residents fret over shelter plan, citing crime and property values

By [Terrence McCoy](#)

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The people of Massachusetts Avenue Heights have long loved their neighborhood not for what it has, but what it doesn't. Buffered by the Washington National Cathedral and the vice president's house, this affluent community of million-dollar homes has stayed small and quiet while developers had their way with busier neighborhoods. But residents now fear that could soon change.

"Betrayed!" longtime resident Jane Loeffler wrote in an email to a neighbor, condemning a District proposal to place 38 homeless families into the neighborhood as part of a plan to close D.C. General Hospital, a former hospital that now serves as the city's largest homeless shelter, and disperse its residents into seven shelters spread evenly across the city. The news has left the neighborhood in "utter turmoil," said Loeffler, who is trying to sell her \$1.4 million home in Ward 3.

What will this mean for property values? What about crime?

"Bad things do happen around shelters — you can't prevent it," she wrote. "It goes with the territory."

One of the most prevalent and visceral reactions people have when learning their neighborhood will host a homeless community is to fret over property values and crime. In California, 700 Orange

County residents flooded a forum in October to [convey](#) those worries. In Toronto, residents [had the same reaction](#). In New York, Manhattanites even [sued](#) over the matter, which a judge called “based solely on speculative fears.” More than 40 percent of facilities servicing the homeless face community opposition before opening, a 1997 poll conducted by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty indicated.

But are the concerns warranted?

A review of four research papers and interviews with policy experts, economists, housing providers and longtime neighbors of shelters suggests a more complicated narrative. On average, researchers have found supportive housing facilities servicing the homeless and other vulnerable populations rarely lead to higher crime rates or a drop in property values — and sometimes even raise the latter if the shelter helps stabilize a distressed community.

The findings come with important caveats. Supportive housing is much more prevalent in poor communities, so its impact on affluent neighborhoods is not as well documented.

But some factors transcend neighborhood demographics. “It is critical that these developments are well-built and well-designed, well-maintained” and well-managed, said Ingrid Gould Ellen, an urban planning expert who analyzed how 123 New York City housing facilities affected the surrounding neighborhoods, a few of which were wealthy.

If they are run well, she said, supportive housing rarely endangers its host community. “We thought . . . ‘Let’s take a look and see if

there is any basis for these fears,’” Ellen said. “We found there is not.”

If you track today’s tension between housing projects and neighborhoods to its origin, you will end up in the 1980s, when a recession disgorged thousands of poor people onto the streets.

Before that time, most housing services were limited, faith-based and funded by local authorities or philanthropies. But then — amid a homeless crisis and an AIDS epidemic — the federal government started pumping money into facilities that cared for the newly vulnerable, helping spark what is a very familiar clash.

One popular model was supportive housing. Settled in residential areas, these facilities are different from traditional homeless shelters, where transients wait in long lines to get in. Supportive housing, meanwhile, provides services and individual quarters for residents — who may sign leases. District officials say that model is similar to what they are planning for the city’s homeless families, who will have their own rooms and receive employment training, health care and financial counseling at the shelters.

But community opposition has nonetheless frequently beset these projects, which, in addition to the homeless, also serve the mentally ill, disabled and those affected by disease. So in the late 1990s, federal officials asked the Urban Institute to study whether these concerns had merit. The think tank eventually published two reports, in 1999 and 2002, that looked into the group homes.

The studies, based in Denver, found the facilities were usually in poor neighborhoods, where property was cheaper and community

resistance less severe. Overall, the 1999 report noted, the 11 facilities studied had a “positive impact on house prices in the surrounding neighborhood,” even reversing declining property values in the distressed communities.

The 2002 paper concluded the difference in the crime rate surrounding the facilities and the rate farther away was not “statistically significant.” Reports of crime, however, did increase by 30 percent within 500 feet of larger residences that housed an average of 89 people, although it was unclear whether this was because the facility attracted criminals or neighbors started calling the police more often.

Anna Santiago, a professor at Wayne State University who participated in the study, remembers the dichotomy between what residents thought a housing project would do and what it actually did.

“Resident perceptions about crime and property values do not jibe with their experiences after they live nearby these sites,” she said. They “generally knew about the presence of these facilities. . . . However, they reported little impact on themselves or larger neighborhood well-being.”

The same thing happened years later and hundreds of miles away in Philadelphia.

Laura Weinbaum, an official of Project HOME, which manages 15 supportive housing residences throughout Philadelphia, said her organization decided to get to the bottom of the issue in 2006. That year, residents of a wealthy neighborhood had inveighed against a proposed homeless shelter, fretting over property values

and security.

“We thought that was ridiculous,” Weinbaum said. “It wasn’t our experience. . . . And that was the moment we got mad and said, ‘We’re going to push back.’” So the nonprofit organization asked a local economics firm to analyze all of their sites, which included affordable and supportive housing, and report on the actual impact.

“I said, ‘I can answer this question, but you may not like the answer,’” recalled Kevin Gillen, the Philadelphia economist who did the research. But then he returned with the findings: Neighboring properties around the housing facilities had accrued \$1,700 in annual value — even beyond broader neighborhood trends.

Gillen, however, cautioned against extrapolating too much from the research. He studied facilities only in rough neighborhoods, some of which replaced derelict structures of illicit behavior. Anything, he said, would have been better than that, so of course a new facility helped the neighborhood.

It is less clear, he added, what would happen in wealthy communities — such as the kind that Erik Gutshall calls home. For nearly two decades, Gutshall has lived within 500 feet of an Arlington supportive-housing facility that has 44 beds and serves homeless families.

“My own experience is that property values have gone up considerably,” he said. “We’ve done quite well in Lyon Park.”

It did not take long for the leaflet to circulate. The same day that Mayor Muriel E. Bowser (D) announced the addresses of the seven shelters, concerned residents in Ward 1 released a flier that complained that a shelter at 10th and V streets would give rise to problems involving “congestion, loitering, safety, decreased property values.”

At neighborhood meetings, some vented that the Bowser administration was not transparent in how it chose the sites; others fretted about the type of person moving into their communities. In Ward 6, a mother wanted to know whether the city would bar sex offenders and criminals from the shelters — and found out it would not. Another resident seethed over what she said she had seen at another neighborhood homeless shelter.

“There were naked men in the playground where our kids had swings,” she said. “The [Hurricane] Katrina people came, and they had sex on the sidewalk.”

“When residents hear the word ‘shelter,’ they’re fearful of what that will mean for their property values, and they think about the 12-hour, low-barrier, low-service model — people lining up and coming in for 12 hours,” Director Laura Zeilinger of the D.C. Human Services Department said, adding that families spend an average of five months at D.C. General. “And [these shelters] isn’t it. It’s a supportive-housing environment. These are people who are parenting.”

Such comments have not mollified residents such as Paul Cunningham. He said the proposed shelter could “destroy” Massachusetts Avenue Heights, representing a “radical change in a dictatorial process with no due process.” Where, he and fellow

resident Brandon Bortner asked, will the homeless people shop for food? The plan will “put them in a place where they have to go to Whole Foods,” Cunningham said, “which is typically not where your homeless people can shop.”

Both residents expressed certainty it would diminish property values. But “no one has done any studies on that,” Bortner said.

The imbroglio reminded Kathy Sibert, president of an Arlington homeless shelter, of a vicious clash in 2011 over a proposed shelter in the wealthy area near the Court House Metro station. People were worried that the facility, which ultimately opened in October and shelters homeless singles, would attract crime.

So far, it has not happened that way. Between October and Feb. 19, Arlington police statistics show the number of crimes committed within a 1,000-foot radius of the shelter — 145 — was about the same as it is every year. “We have not seen an increase in crime in the neighborhood related to the opening of the homeless shelter,” Arlington police spokeswoman Ashley Savage said.

And what about property prices? In one of the wealthiest spots in the region, no signs of slowdown yet.

Aaron C. Davis, Julie Zauzmer and Perry Stein contributed to this report.

 **Comments**

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