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Adler Institute on Social Exclusion Mental Health Impact of Chicago's Vacant Buildings Ordinance

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Abstract

This poster provides a brief analysis of community mental health issues that arise when vacant buildings become pervasive in the urban landscape. A review of the literature suggests that research to date does not adequately examine how a reduction in vacant properties affects individuals and community mental health. It is hypothesized that if the proposed amendment to the Chicago Vacant Buildings Ordinance is put in place, the community will experience a decline in negative mental health outcomes. A Mental Health Impact Assessment (MHIA) was conducted to evaluate the proposed amendment to the Chicago Vacant Buildings Ordinance that would require owners to maintain such properties. MHIA's are procedures that systematically judge the potential and sometimes unintended effects of a public policy on the health of a population. The MHIA revealed that vacant buildings promote disadvantage environments, perpetuated stressful neighborhoods, and contributed to symptoms of mental illness (Downey & Van Willigen, 2005; Latkin & Curry, 2003; Yonas et al., 2007). The interdisciplinary team that participated in the Mental Health Impact Assessment recommended the enactment of the proposed amendment because a pathway analysis indicated that vacant buildings contribute to poor mental health outcomes.

Objectives

- ✓ To advance HIA practice by: expanding beyond its traditional focus on physical health to include mental health; expanding beyond planning, land use and built environment to include a broader range of public proposals; and conducting a structured and systematic monitoring/evaluation process.
- ✓ To facilitate Englewood residents' involvement in a systematic analysis of a public decision that will affect their lives.
- ✓ To ensure that the decision reflects an evidence-based understanding of community mental health.
- ✓ To make recommendations about community mental health and well-being, and narrow health disparities.

Chicago Vacant Building Ordinance

Amends Chapter 13-2, Municipal Code of Chicago

- Imposes higher fees on owners of 5 or more unmaintained vacant properties
- Requires owners to pay 5% finder's fee to City's residents who report code violations
- Expands the definition of "owner" to include financial institutional that have initiated foreclosure proceedings, and exempts Illinois non-profit from the fees/fine
- Requires those owners to post \$10,000 bond for each vacant property for the city to draw upon to pay or reimburse fees and fines

Why is the Amendment being introduced?

- Because there is an increase in the number of foreclosures in Chicago
- Because many vacant buildings are not registered with the City
- Because there is an increased concern about health and safety related to vacant properties in local neighborhoods

Differences between the Existing and the Proposed Ordinance

- Expands definition of owners, exempts non-profits, institutes a finder's fee for citizens
- Increases the registration and renewal fees for large owners
- Requires bonds or insurance for the city to draw upon to pay or reimburse fees and fines
- Increases fines for non-compliance with respect to dangerous and unsafe buildings
- Increases penalties for non-compliance

Community Mental Health and Public Decision-Making

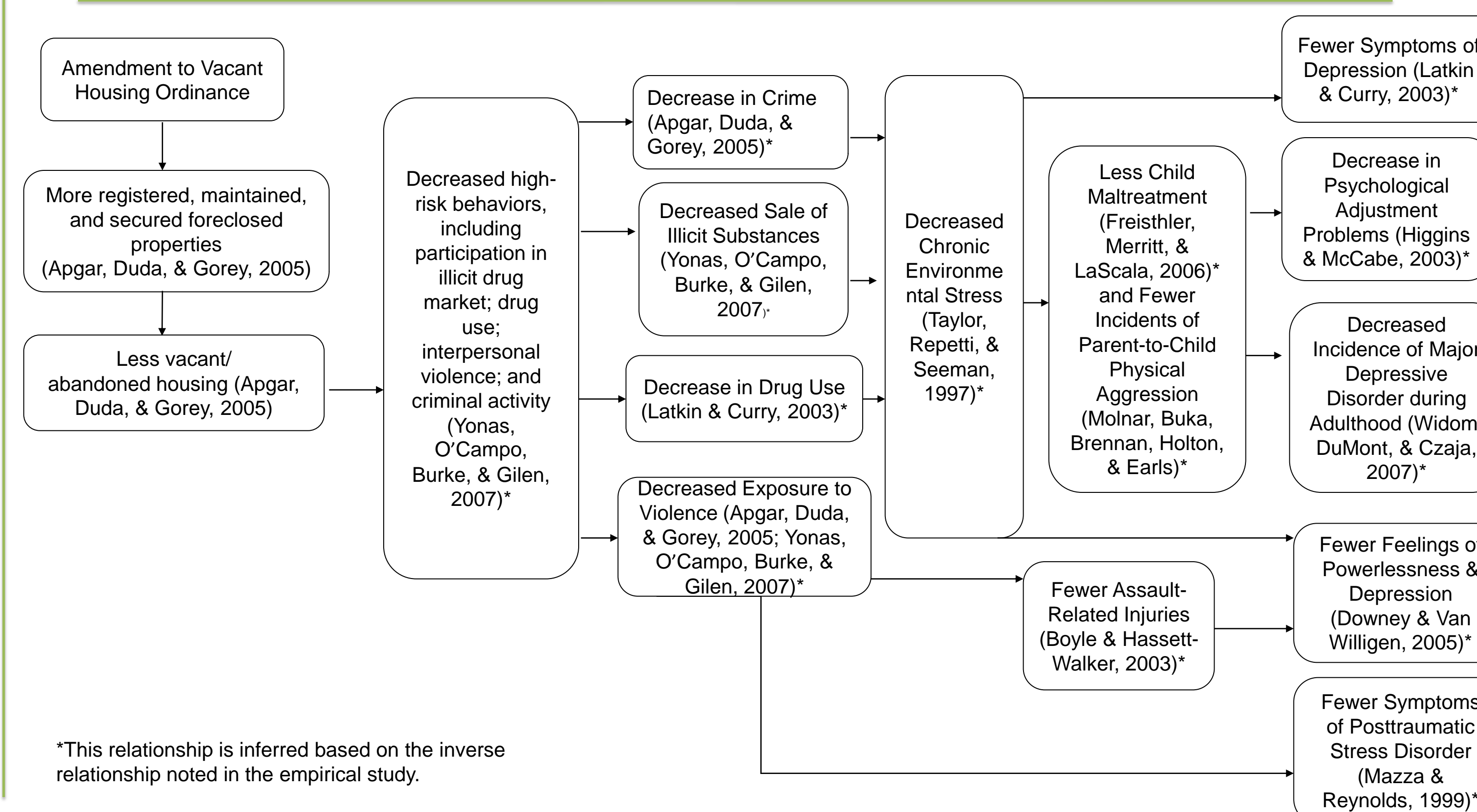
- The Adler Institute on Social Exclusion (ISE) seeks to: promote public awareness of the structural and systemic barriers that exclude groups from fully participating in society; and advance social change through public policy reform.
- The Mental Health Impact Assessment (MHIA) project is informed by five years of community-based work in the Englewood neighborhood of Chicago, a largely low-income community on the southwest side of the city that suffers from a wide range of risk factors for poor community mental health including high rates of poverty, joblessness, poor quality housing, crime, and violence.
- The purpose of the MHIA is to prospectively assess the impacts of public decisions on the collective mental health and well-being of the Englewood community.
- The overarching goal of the MHIA is to promote community mental health by addressing the lack of community voice in public decision-making processes. Many vulnerable communities, like Englewood, are largely "acted upon" rather than initiators of action. Residents have limited voice in public decisions that impact their lives. Often, the result is public policy that exacts unintended and unanticipated harm on the community.

Methods

The five steps of Health Impact Assessment (HIA) include the following:

- **Screening** – determine the need and value of an HIA.
- **Scoping** – determine which mental health impacts to evaluate, analytic methods, and a work plan.
- **Assessment** – determine the potential mental health impacts of the public decision under consideration; develop recommendations for mitigating negative impacts and enhancing positive impacts.
- **Recommendations & Reporting** – draft and circulate a final report that communicates major findings and recommendations.
- **Monitoring & Evaluation** – assess the HIA process and its impact on the decision-making process; and track the impact of the decision on health outcomes.

Effects of Vacant Buildings Ordinance on Mental Health



Outcomes

- Policy letter was sent to the Chicago Alderman who proposed the amendment.
- Developed evidence-based findings and recommendations that potentially: mitigate negative health impacts; maximize positive health impacts; and ensure that the proposal promotes mental health and well-being.
- Increased awareness of the impacts of "non-health" decisions on community mental health.
- Improved community capacity for research, coalition building, organizing, and advocacy to take action on the social determinants of mental health.
- Made equity impacts of public decisions more explicit and clear.
- Helped stakeholders understand the social determinants of mental health.
- Supported HIA practice for use by local communities and public agencies.

Learn About Mental Health Impact Assessment

The Adler Institute on Social Exclusion works to dismantle the barriers that block people from important rights, resources and opportunities – such as decent housing, quality education, healthcare, fair employment, nutritious food, safety, democratic participation and judicial equity – that are all critical to social integration.

To learn more about Mental Health Impact Assessment, contact ISE@adler.edu or call 312.662.4000

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