NEIGHBORHOODS IN PERIL

ENQUIRER EXCLUSIVE: Around the city’s heart, houses decay, residents flee and blight creeps outward.

Cincinnati’s fate is tied to its neighborhoods. A first-of-its-kind Enquirer analysis reveals that neighborhoods which have been the backbone of the city for more than a century are in peril.

They are losing people, homes and families. Property values are plummeting, and crime is rising. The analysis suggests the most significant change is under way in places such as North and South Fairmount, East and West Price Hill, Avondale and Madisonville.

Their problems matter to the entire region, because they can spread from ailing neighborhoods to healthy ones, and from the city to the suburbs.

As millions of dollars are invested in Downtown and Over-the-Rhine, Cincinnati’s neighborhoods are struggling to rebuild and remain viable for the next generation. Their challenge is compounded by dwindling city coffers and scarce resources, leaving many neighborhoods to fend for themselves.

Starting today, as part of a three-day series, The Enquirer explores the troubling trends under way in these communities and why they matter to all of us.

"If we lose our neighborhoods, we would all suffer," says Frank Russell, director of the University of Cincinnati’s Community Design Center. "We would lose our sense of community. That impacts the entire region."

Today: North and South Fairmount struggle with decades of falling population and property values. A12

When Melvin Walker was growing up in a middle-class home on North Fairmount’s Pulte Street, the neighborhood was solid and active. His childhood home is gone, as are the bowling alley, stores, school and firehouse. THE ENQUIRER/AMANDA DAVIDSON
High-stakes decline

Once solid, now struggling – North and South Fairmount a cautionary tale for region

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NORTH FAIRMOUNT

The stairs on Pulte Street used to lead somewhere.

Row after row of them line the end of the street, climbing the hillside into a tangle of weeds and brush. Disconnected power lines dangle overhead, and a fallen retaining wall spills onto the sidewalk.

At the top of each set of stairs is the foundation of a house that is no longer there.

Decades ago, these stairs carried working-class men and women in North Fairmount home to their families every night. They connected children to playgrounds and schools, and parents to factory jobs in the valley below.

Now, the stairs are crumbling monoliths to a way of life that is disappearing as fast from this neighborhood as the homes that once lined Pulte Street.

"There used to be a house here... and here... and here..." says Melvin Walker, pointing to vacant lots where his neighbors used to live. "They're all gone.

"A lot of people use it as a dumping ground now."

Pulte Street's troubles are among the most serious in Cincinnati, but such problems are not confined to a few city blocks or even to North Fairmount.

A first-ever Enquirer analysis of all 52 city neighborhoods shows that some of Cincinnati's most important communities are in serious distress. Population is falling, families with children are leaving, and vacancy rates are rising. Property values are dropping.

Rents are displacing owner-occupied homes.

The analysis suggests that the most significant change is under way in places such as North and South Fairmount, East and West Price Hill, Avondale and Madisonville.

The news is not all bad. Some neighborhoods are faring better than others, and success stories can be found in all of them.

But the reality is this: Neighborhoods that have been the backbone of the city for more than a century are in peril. They must either find a way to restructure and rebuild, or follow a path that leaves them a shell of the communities they once were.

For some, such as North and South Fairmount, time is running short. Their decline began decades ago and grows worse by the year.

"In the long run, it's really unlikely there will be a turnaround in all of those neighborhoods," says Gary Wright, a demographer and the founder of Wright Futures in Cincinnati. "This is the cold, hard truth of it."

The stakes for these neighborhoods -- and for the rest of the city -- are high. The neighborhoods have been centers of business, transportation and family housing for generations. Many are located close to Cincinnati's core, and together they represent about 20 percent of the population.

They are home to some of the city's best-known schools, churches, businesses, landmarks and historic figures. If they fail, the cost to Cincinnati's image, economy and surrounding neighborhoods will be great.

That's because the city's fate is tied to its neighborhoods.

Problems such as blight, vacant homes and crime can spread from failing neighborhoods to healthy ones and from the city to the suburbs.

Cincinnati is home to nearly 300,000 people, and thousands more come every day for jobs, a Reds game, dinner with the family, medical treatment, a zoo visit or countless other activities. The city is the heart of the region, and what happens to its neighborhoods matters to businesses and homeowners from Butler County to Northern Kentucky.

"If we lose our neighborhoods, we would all suffer," says Frank Russell, director of the University of Cincinnati's Community Design Center. "We would lose our sense of community. That impacts the entire region."

Spreading funds evenly? 'Those days long gone'

Yet the city's most troubled neighborhoods often lack the resources they need to turn things around. Public dollars are hard to come by and banks are hesitant to loan money in places with falling property values and rising vacancy rates.

Some neighborhoods lack strong, grassroots organizations to take on the challenges they face. Others struggle with internal feuds and missed opportunities. All are looking for help wherever they can and worry the rest of the city isn't doing enough.

"I don't think the city looks at the 52 neighborhoods equally," says Patty Hogan, a longtime resident of East Price Hill. "All we have to do is drive around Cincinnati and you can see the ones that have been neglected."

She and others are quick to point out that their neighborhoods have continued to decline even as tens of millions of dollars has poured into new housing and infrastructure in Over-the-Rhine, Downtown and the Uptown area.

The disparity is not accidental. City officials say their effort to revitalize the city's center, which is home to most of Cincinnati's businesses and jobs, benefits every neighborhood.

For that reason, they say, it gets the biggest share of the city's limited resources and cash. The city can help neighborhoods, they say, but it can't be a white knight riding to the rescue.

"We've tried to be strategic in what we do," says City Manager Milton Dohoney. "One of the things I've heard in the past is that if you've got $52 and $2 neighborhoods, then I want my dollar. Well, that is not being strategic."

"Those days are long gone."

But without a greater commitment beyond the city's center and some key business districts, Hogan and others fear Cincinnati could lose some of its endangered neighborhoods, block by block, street by street.

They see the vacant lots and the stairs to nowhere and ask Pulte Street not as a product of hard times on a single city street, but as a warning the city should heed.

"Blight is like cancer," Hogan says. "It might start on one block, but before long it takes over."

Bad luck, poor decisions ... unending decline

If there is a cautionary tale for Cincinnati's struggling neighborhoods, it is the story of North and South Fairmount.

Never known as "destination" neighborhoods, the Fairmounts in the early 20th century carved out a working-class niche in the hills and valleys between Westwood and Camp Washington.

More than 15,000 called the neighborhoods home in the 1920s and many worked in the breweries, factories and warehouses that sprang up along the railroads on the Fairmounts' western edge. Soon, the area became a stable, lower- and middle-class community.

But the Fairmounts' heyday, such that it was, didn't last long. By the 1960s, demographics, trends and some lousy decisions by city leaders combined to send the neighborhoods into a free fall that began in the 1950s and continues today.

Troubled streets like Pulte now crisscross the neighborhoods.

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Fairmounts.

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For more information on the history of Fairmount, see "The...".

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