

Who are you? Squatters can actually help a neighborhood

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Squatters who illegally occupy vacant homes or buildings are not always contributing to apathy or social disorder, says a new University of Michigan study that will be presented at the 111th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA).

It can actually be a good situation for a neighborhood to have these individuals move into abandoned homes, lessening the chance of them becoming sites for [drug users](#) or burned by arsonists, the study indicates.

In urban communities nationwide, such as Detroit, which are experiencing population decline, homes have been abandoned by owners or left unattended by private investors who often purchase them in bundles of tens, hundreds, or even thousands.

"While attempts to revitalize a city rely on private ownership to induce responsible care for property, that isn't always an option," said study author Claire Herbert, a recent graduate of the University of Michigan, where she earned a PhD in sociology.

That's where squatters come in.

Herbert, who will be an assistant professor at Drexel University in the fall, interviewed more than 60 people, including squatters, city authorities, and residents between 2013-2015, while also gathering ethnographic data on illegal property use from various sources, such as community meetings and squatted areas across Detroit.

Surprisingly, many of the residents in the study welcome squatters to keep abandoned homes occupied. Squatting, however, was not considered acceptable to residents if the [home](#) was still occupied or if the legal owner was maintaining and overseeing the property.

But, when there is minimal police or city oversight to enforce legal owners to maintain their vacant properties, neighboring [residents](#) seek solutions, Herbert said. Many forego involving the police or other [city](#) authorities to enforce legal ownership, but instead encourage responsible squatters in order to bring about the kind of positive impact that legal ownership is supposed to bring—improved neighborhood conditions, such as safety, community, and care for physical structures.

More information: The paper, "Like a Good Neighbor, Squatters Are There: Neighborhood Stability After All the Windows Have Been Broken," will be presented on Sunday, Aug. 21, in Seattle at the American Sociological Association's 111th Annual Meeting.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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