

City-funded housing repairs in low-income neighborhoods associated with drop in crime

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Investing in structural home repairs in historically segregated, low-income, Black and Latino neighborhoods has been associated with reduced crime rates. In Philadelphia, when a home received repairs through a city-funded program, total crime dropped by 21.9% on that block, and as the number of repaired houses on a block increased, instances of crime fell even further, according to research from the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania published today in *JAMA Network Open*.

In an effort to address an old housing stock and high levels of historical disinvestment in Philadelphia, the city implemented the Basic Systems Repair Program (BSRP) in 1995, which repairs structural damages to the homes of [low-income](#) owners, such as replacing an exterior wall to stop leaking, or electrical repairs that include replacing circuits that overheat, spark, or won't stay on, causing inconsistent heating and unreliable electricity. The majority of BSRP homes

are in Black and Latino neighborhoods.

Researchers hypothesized that over time these micro-investments would have an impact on [community health](#), including crime.

Using BSRP data from 2006 through 2013, researchers determined that 13,632 houses on 6,732 blocks in Philadelphia received BSRP repairs. They then merged crime data—which included instances of homicide, assault, burglary, theft, robbery, disorderly conduct, and public drunkenness—from the Philadelphia Police Department with BSRP data to create a database that allowed them to understand the impact of BSRP investment on crime in every block across the city over time. This data revealed lower instances of all crime, including homicide, on blocks with a single BSRP-repaired [home](#) compared to blocks that were eligible for a BSRP-repaired home but did not get the intervention. With each additional repaired home, instances of crime on that block declined further.

"We can now add structural home repairs to the growing list of place-based neighborhood interventions with strong evidence that they can help reduce violent crime," said lead author Eugenia South, MD, MSHP, an assistant professor of Emergency Medicine and Faculty Director of the Penn Urban Health Lab. "Violent crime is out of control in many cities across the country right now and policy makers should prioritize funding for structural, scalable, and sustainable interventions such as the BSRP that address the lasting scars of historical disinvestment in Black neighborhoods."

The root causes of [violent crime](#) in Black urban neighborhoods are structural, including historical racial segregation, concentrated poverty, lack of economic opportunity, and deterioration of the neighborhood's physical conditions—houses in

disrepair, blighted vacant lots, and a lack of greenspace. What's more, the health implications of violence exposure are vast and include increased depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and cardiovascular disease.

"There is a critical need to invest in the housing stock in cities across the U.S, particularly in majority Black neighborhood that have not received such investment for far too long, if ever," said senior author Vincent Raina Ph.D., an Associate Professor of Planning and Urban Economics and the Faculty Director of the Housing Initiative at Penn. "This research shows that even small investments in housing stabilization benefit both those homeowners who live in homes that receive support and the blocks and neighborhoods in which they live through crime reduction."

The research teams says that programs like BSRP are small relative to housing needs, and are not the sole solution to addressing years of systemic racial discrimination in public and private investments and lending in housing, but they are emblematic of the positive impact that a more robust and comprehensive public and private response to systemic racial inequities in housing and neighborhood investments can have.

"Stable housing is important for creating and maintaining safe and functioning neighborhoods," says David Thomas, CEO of Philadelphia Housing Development Corporation (PHDC). "For over 40 years BSRP has helped individuals and families relieve what can be overwhelming financial and mental pressure that occurs when you need necessary [housing](#) repairs but lack resources. The program has also helped reduce homelessness by keeping persons in their homes, preserve blocks and communities, and reduce blight."

"Just as there is no one cause of crime there is no one solution," said Mayor Jim Kenney. "Investing in our neighborhoods, as we do with PHDC's BSRP program, strengthens those [neighborhoods](#) and, as we see in this study, reduces [crime](#). Our challenge is to continue to find new approaches and resources to supporting community investment for programs like BSRP that stabilize communities."

More information: Eugenia C. South et al, Association Between Structural Housing Repairs for Low-Income Homeowners and Neighborhood Crime, *JAMA Network Open* (2021). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.17067](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.17067)

Provided by Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania

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