

## Issue Brief: Blight in Detroit

### Key Findings:

- Nearly three-quarters of Detroit residents report that their neighborhoods contain blighted properties.
- Residents of neighborhoods with blighted properties have lower levels of neighborhood satisfaction and feel less safe in their communities than those living in neighborhoods without blight.
- More than half of Detroit residents report some blight removal activities in their neighborhoods in the last five years. Residents in the city’s most socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods are more likely to report neighborhood blight removal.
- While a majority of residents hold favorable opinions of the city’s blight elimination efforts, opinions vary significantly by age, racial identity, homeownership status, and reported experience of neighborhood blight removal.
- Detroiters do not view all blight remediation activities equally favorably: Residents prefer taxpayer-funded blight remediation activities that make productive use of vacant or abandoned property and are less supportive when demolitions result in vacant lots.

### Overview:

Across the city of Detroit, blighted properties and vacant land are a common sight. Estimates suggest that, as of 2014, there were nearly 80,000 blighted properties and more than 20 square miles of vacant land within the city’s 139 square miles.<sup>1</sup> In response to the scale and scope of vacancy, Detroit has undertaken a massive blight remediation program, demolishing 19,000 vacant homes and rehabbing 9,000 others through the Detroit Land Bank Authority between 2014 and 2019.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Detroit Future City. 2017. *139 Square Miles*.

<sup>2</sup> City of Detroit. 2019. “[Mayor Outlines \\$250M Bond Program to Eliminate Residential Blight From All Neighborhoods by Mid-2025.](#)”

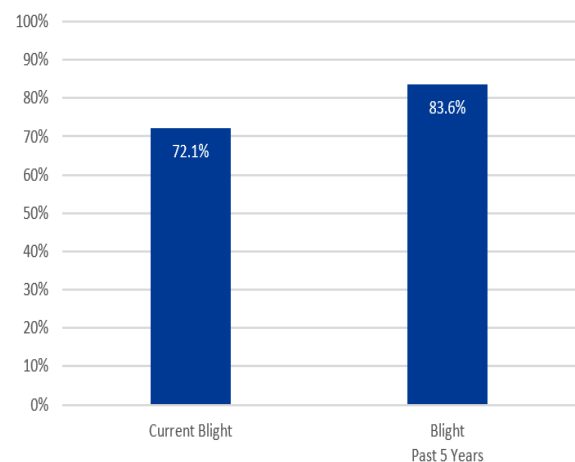
<sup>3</sup> Responses are collected from panel survey participants selected as a representative sample of the Detroit population. Statistics are estimated using calibrated weights. Unless otherwise noted,

In an effort to understand the effects of blight and blight remediation activity on Detroiters, the University of Michigan’s Detroit Metro Area Communities Study partnered with the Land Policy Institute at Michigan State University in winter 2018-2019 to collect data on residents’ perceptions and opinions of blight remediation and neighborhood change, among other topics. The Winter 2019 Detroit Metro Area Communities Study is a survey of 507 Detroiters.<sup>3</sup> Responses were collected between October 2018 and February 2019.

### Blight remains widespread in the city though the geography of blight varies by city council district.

Nearly three-quarters (72.1 percent) of Detroit residents report that there is currently blight—defined in the survey as a building or property visibly deteriorating in a way that suggests long-term neglect—in their neighborhoods (Figure 1). A slightly higher proportion of Detroit residents (83.6 percent) report that there were blighted properties in their neighborhoods at some point over the past five years, which suggests that the presence of blight is decreasing over time.

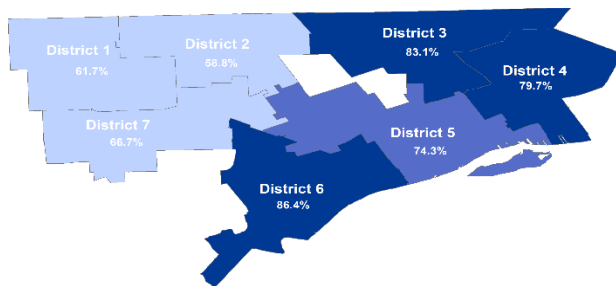
Figure 1: Proportion of Detroit Residents Reporting Past and Present Neighborhood Blight



descriptive analyses comparing group means throughout this report represent statistically significant differences at the 95% confidence level. See Wave 4 Topline/Methodology Report for details on sampling, data collection, and weighting.

Though the majority of Detroiters report their neighborhoods contains blight, the prevalence of blight varies by city council district, with particularly notable differences between districts on the city’s east and west sides (Figure 2). This variation likely reflects differing levels of abandonment, demolition, investment, and blight remediation activity across the city. For example, while 79.7 percent of residents in District 4—which includes Morningside and Jefferson Chalmers—report their neighborhoods currently contains blighted properties, only 58.8 percent of residents in District 2—home to the University of Detroit Mercy and Palmer Park—report current neighborhood blight.

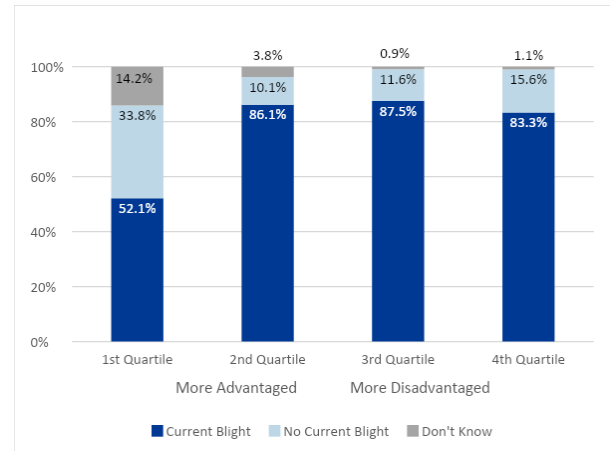
Figure 2: Prevalence of Perceived Blight by Detroit City Council Districts



Residents of more socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods also report more blight compared to those in less disadvantaged neighborhoods. A comparison of blight perception across neighborhoods ranked by level of socioeconomic disadvantage<sup>4</sup> shows that in the most affluent neighborhoods (i.e., those in the lowest quartile of socioeconomic disadvantage) significantly fewer residents report blight in their neighborhoods than do residents in the

rest of the city. In fact, roughly one-third (33.8%) of residents in the most affluent neighborhoods report no blight at all (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Proportion of Residents Reporting Present Neighborhood Blight by Neighborhood Disadvantage Quartile



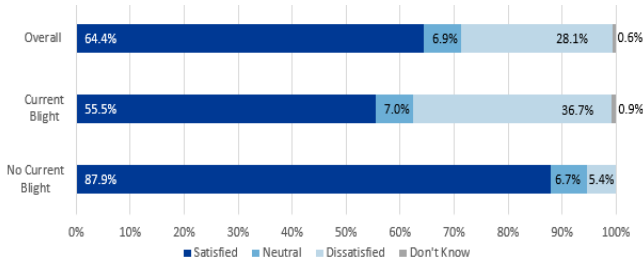
### Detroiters living in blighted neighborhoods report lower neighborhood satisfaction and perceived safety.

While neighborhood satisfaction in Detroit is generally high—64.4 percent of residents report feeling satisfied with their neighborhoods as a place to live while only 28.1 percent report feeling dissatisfied—there is more dissatisfaction among residents who report blight in their neighborhoods than among residents who do not report blight in their neighborhoods (Figure 4). Nearly 90 percent of residents who live in areas without blight report being satisfied with their neighborhoods, compared to only 55.5 percent of those with blight in their neighborhoods.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> A neighborhood disadvantage scale was created using factor analysis to measure neighborhood quality. The scale uses tract-level data from the 2012-2016 American Communities Survey 5 Year Estimates to capture five neighborhood characteristics: median household income, percent of families below the poverty line, percent of residents over age 25 with less than a high school education, percent of residents over age 16 who are unemployed, and percent vacant housing units. The scale is standardized across all Detroit census tracts with a mean of zero and standard deviation of 1 and ranges from -5.12 (advantaged) to 2.07 (disadvantaged). Neighborhoods were categorized into quartiles by disadvantage score.

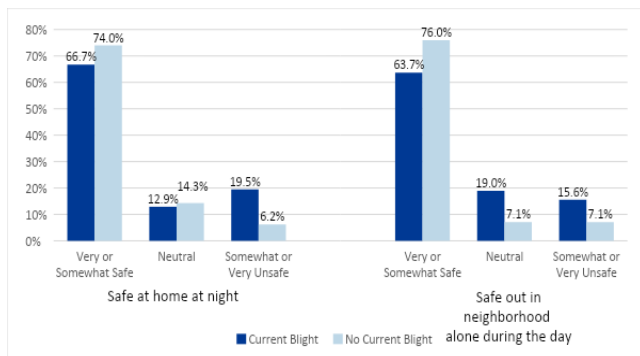
<sup>5</sup> The survey measures neighborhood satisfaction using a seven category Likert scale in which '1' is *very dissatisfied* and '7' is *very satisfied*. In this report, categorical responses have been combined so that satisfied captures responses ranging from *somewhat satisfied* to *very satisfied*, neutral captures those who responded *neither satisfied nor dissatisfied*, and dissatisfied captures responses ranging from *somewhat dissatisfied* to *very dissatisfied*. For responses in the original scale categories, see question 35 on [Winter 2019 Toplines](#).

Figure 4: Resident Neighborhood Satisfaction by Current Neighborhood Blight Conditions



Residents who report neighborhood blight are also more likely to feel unsafe in their neighborhoods (Figure 5). Nearly 20 percent of residents who observe blighted properties in their neighborhoods report feeling unsafe in their homes at night, compared to just 6.2 percent of residents who do not observe blight in their neighborhoods. Similarly, 15.6 percent of residents who live in neighborhoods with blighted properties report feeling unsafe when out alone in their neighborhoods during the day, compared to 7.1 percent of residents in neighborhoods without blight.

Figure 5: Perceptions of Safety by Current Neighborhood Blight Status

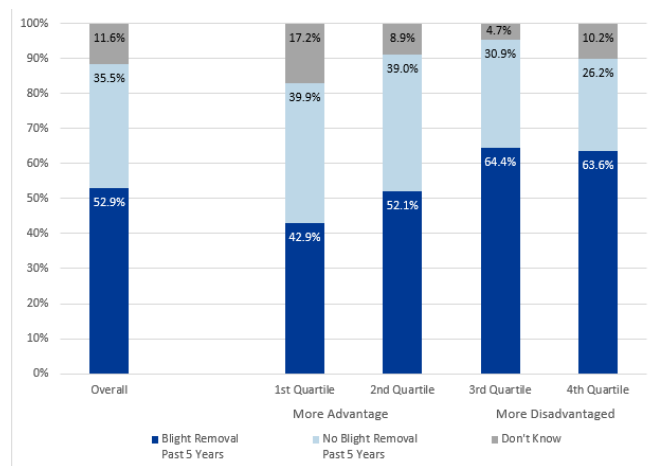


<sup>6</sup> The survey measures opinions of citywide blight elimination activities using a five category Likert scale where '1' is very favorable and '5' is very unfavorable. In this report, categorical responses have been combined so that favorable captures very

## Reports of blight reduction activities vary by neighborhood condition but not by city council district.

More than half of Detroit residents (52.9 percent) report that there has been some blight removal in their neighborhoods during the past five years, and blight removal activities are more widely reported in the city's most socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods (Figure 6). Additional analysis found no difference in reports of blight removal activity by city council district.

Figure 6: Reports of Blight Removal Activity in the Past 5 Years by Neighborhood Disadvantage Quartile



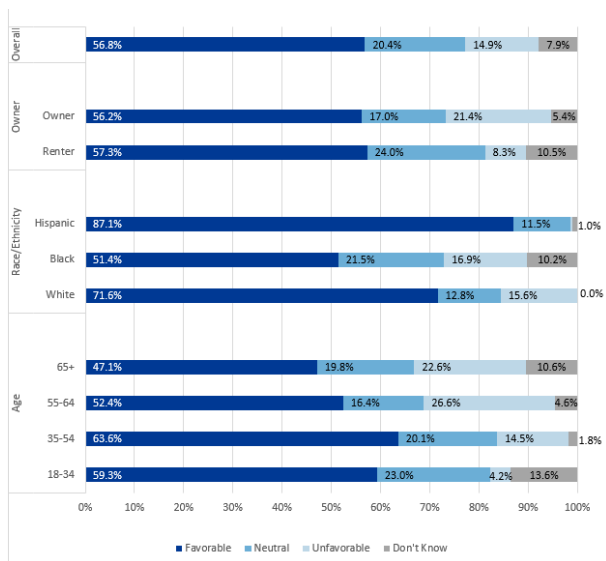
## Detroiters generally hold favorable views of the city's blight remediation efforts.

Overall, a majority of Detroiters (56.8 percent) hold favorable opinions of the city's blight elimination efforts, but opinions on blight removal vary across demographic groups (Figure 7).<sup>6</sup>

*favorable* and *somewhat favorable* while unfavorable captures *somewhat unfavorable* and *very unfavorable*. For responses in the original scale categories, see question 28 on [Winter 2019 Toplines](#).

Older residents and Black residents are less likely to hold favorable opinions of blight removal than younger residents and White or Hispanic residents. For example, only 51.4 percent of Black residents hold favorable opinions of the city’s blight elimination efforts, compared to 71.6 percent of White and 87.1 percent of Hispanic residents. Additionally, homeowners are more likely to hold unfavorable opinions of blight removal than renters: 21.4 percent of homeowners hold unfavorable views of blight removal compared to 8.3 percent of renters.

Figure 7: Opinions of Citywide Blight Removal Efforts by Age, Race/Ethnicity, and Resident Type

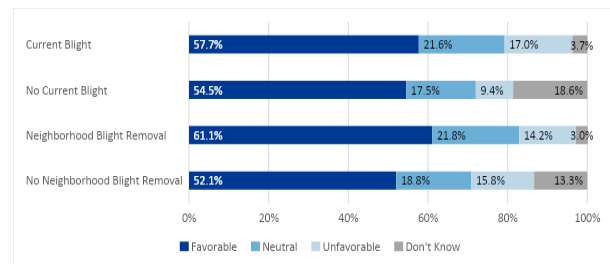


Opinions of citywide blight removal efforts also appear to be related to whether residents report there are blighted properties in their neighborhoods now and to whether blighted properties have been removed from their neighborhoods in the past five years (Figure 8). Residents who report that there are blighted properties in their neighborhoods are more likely to have unfavorable opinions of citywide blight removal efforts: 17.0 percent of Detroiters

living in neighborhoods with blighted properties hold unfavorable opinions of the city’s blight removal efforts compared to 9.4 percent of those in non-blighted neighborhoods.

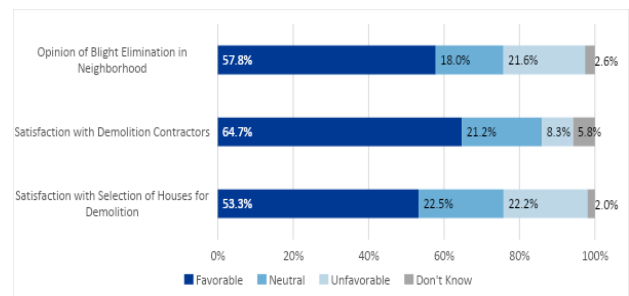
However, residents who report blight removal activity in their neighborhoods in the past five years are more likely to have favorable opinions of city blight removal efforts than those who do not report blight removal in their neighborhoods.

Figure 8: Opinions of Citywide Blight Removal Efforts by Current Neighborhood Blight Conditions and Blight Removal Activity



Examining only the opinions of residents who have had blighted properties removed in their neighborhoods in the last five years,<sup>7</sup> more than half (57.8 percent) have favorable opinions of blight elimination activities in their neighborhoods (Figure 9).<sup>8</sup>

Figure 9: Residents’ Opinions of Local Blight Removal Efforts in Blight Remediated Neighborhoods



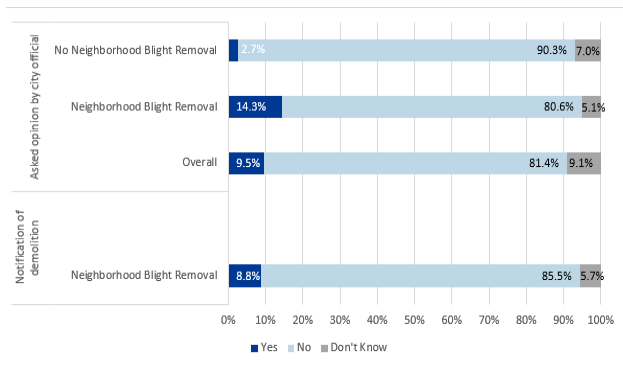
<sup>7</sup> Fifty-five percent of our overall sample, 279 of the 507 total respondents, report blight removal activity in their neighborhoods in the past five years. Questions regarding satisfaction with neighborhood blight elimination activities, selection of houses for demolition, and work of contractors were asked only of this sub-sample of respondents.

<sup>8</sup> The survey measures opinions of neighborhood blight elimination activities using a five category Likert scale where ‘1’ is *very favorable* and ‘5’ is *very unfavorable*. In this report, categorical responses have been combined so that favorable captures *very favorable* and *somewhat favorable* while unfavorable captures *somewhat unfavorable* and *very unfavorable*. For responses in the original scale categories, see question 17, 18, and 19 on [Winter 2019 Toplines](#).

However, 21.6 percent hold unfavorable views of these neighborhood blight elimination activities, compared to only 14.2 percent who have unfavorable views of citywide blight elimination. These same residents also hold generally favorable opinions on specific aspects of the blight remediation process: 64.7 percent are satisfied with the work of demolition contractors in their neighborhoods, and 53.3 percent are satisfied with the selection of houses for demolition in their neighborhoods.

Residents of neighborhoods where blight removal has occurred in the past five years report low levels of communication with city officials regarding local blight remediation activity. Only 8.8 percent of Detroiters who report blight removal in their neighborhoods say they received advanced notice of the demolition activity (Figure 10).<sup>9</sup> Similarly, only 14.3 percent of these residents state that a city official has asked their opinions about neighborhood blight removal, slightly higher than the 9.5 percent of all Detroiters who report being contacted by the city regarding blight removal efforts.

Figure 10: Communication of Blight Remediation by City Officials

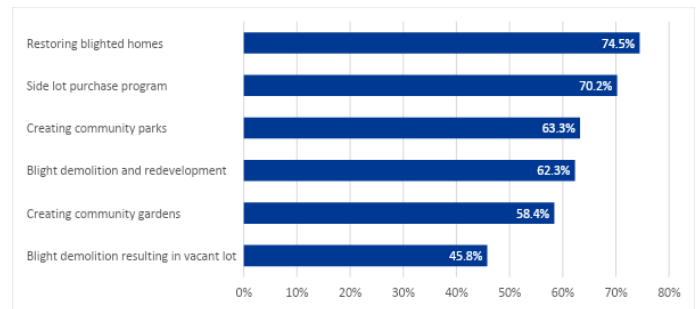


**Detroiters prefer responses to blight that return properties to productive use.**

<sup>9</sup> Only the sub-sample of respondents who reported blight removal activity in their neighborhoods in the past five years (N=279) were asked whether they received notification prior to the removal of blighted properties in their neighborhoods, while all respondents were asked if city officials ever asked their opinions about removing houses in their neighborhoods. Detroit demolition protocols require contractors to provide door hangers informing residents of upcoming work to

Detroiters do not view all blight remediation activities equally. Residents report greater support for taxpayer-funded blight removal efforts that redevelop blighted properties (Figure 11). Roughly three-quarters (74.5 percent) of Detroiters support using taxpayer funds to restore, rather than demolish, blighted homes, and 70.2 percent support using taxpayer money to fund side lot purchase programs that allow owners to purchase vacant parcels adjacent to their property at affordable prices. Less than half of Detroiters (45.8 percent) endorse using taxpayer funds for blight removal that results in the creation of vacant lots.

Figure 11: Reported Preferences for Taxpayer-Funded Blight Removal Activities



**Acknowledgements**

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residents living in the eight houses closest to a demolition site at least three days prior to a demolition, though a [2017 Detroit Health Department task force](#) recommended expanding the radius of demolition notifications. Survey respondents did not indicate their proximity to demolitions beyond “in [their] neighborhood.”

## For more information

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