A Study of Substandard Housing in Geneva

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Substandard housing is a serious issue in Geneva, let alone in the United States, that negatively affects people’s health, sense of security, privacy, and their ability to work. To address this problem, we worked to collect the data needed for Catholic Charities and its community partners to secure grant funding. We engaged in consulting with Catholic Charities on substandard housing in Geneva, a community that we have been very much a part of for the past four years. We built upon sociological skills to determine the scope of work and method of data collection. We first conducted a literature review to conceptualize and define the issue of substandard housing in Geneva, New York. We then tried to gather data initially by communicating with local offices and offices of other communities if necessary. Ultimately, we quantified the volume and density of substandard housing based on data received from City of Geneva Code Enforcement. Lastly, we used this data to approximate a percentage and range for the number of substandard rental units in Geneva, New York. This project also serves as a call to action for future research consultants and organizations, for this an issue that deserves the community’s attention.
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Introduction:

Our highly trained team of sociological consultants spent this past semester working with Catholic Charities of the Finger Lakes to conceptualize and quantify the issue of substandard housing in Geneva, New York. Catholic Charities is an organization founded in 1982 that provides advocacy, direct service and education to those in need within the counties of Ontario, Seneca, Cayuga and Yates. This organization administers programs in categories such as Adult and Community Outreach, Children and Family Services, Emergency Assistance, and Social Justice. Although the organization is Catholic in name, it does not discriminate its services based on religious or political affiliation, gender, age, national origin, or race.

Our group has been in contact with the Executive Director of Catholic Charities, Ellen Wayne about the issue of housing, specifically substandard housing. It was asked of our group that we determine exactly what it means to be substandard according to the state of New York and that we quantify the volume and density of substandard housing in the Geneva community. This meant determining the scope and size of the problem with regards to certain criteria such as code violation, overcrowding, rent to income ratio, accessibility, and needs of certain populations depending on which information was most readily available. Catholic Charities and its community partners, such as Just Neighbors, intends to use our findings to apply for grants that will help correct the issue in the most efficient way possible.
Literature Review:

To begin our literature review we sought after a definition of substandard housing for use throughout our research project. We came upon a definition from the New York State Housing Trust Fund Corporation Office of Community Renewal. As stated in the document, the objective of the Community Block Program, “is the development of viable urban communities by providing decent housing and a suitable living environment and expanding economic opportunities, principally for persons of low and moderate income (LMI),” (Cuomo and Towns 2011:1). The document goes on to define standard housing along with substandard housing as the following:

**Standard** – Housing units that are in standard condition, have no critical or major structural defects, have adequate plumbing facilities and their appearance does not create a blighting influence. This condition requires no more than observable, normal maintenance; dwelling units which have no deficiencies, or only slight observable deficiencies. **Substandard** – Housing units that have one or more major and/or critical structural defects, but can still be repaired for a reasonable amount. The degree of substandard is either moderate or severe according to the number of defects and the degree of deficiency.

1. **Moderately Substandard** - Housing units that have less than three major defects and can be restored to a standard condition for a reasonable cost.

2. **Severely Substandard** - Housing units that have three or more major defects or at least one critical defect and can be restored to a standard condition for a reasonable cost (Cuomo and Towns 2011:76).

The document also describes the different degrees of deficiency, which helps to explain the defects referred to in the above definitions of standard and substandard, as the following:

**Critical Defects** - Component is badly deteriorated, sinking, leaning, non-operative or non-functional, out of plumb, or unsafe to an extent requiring complete replacement. For example, 1) a complete electrical rewiring, 2) a complete new roof, 3) a plumbing system which requires extensive repair or none exists, 4) major repair of exterior structural elements (e.g. walls, sills, floor joists, rafters, large porches), 5) major
repair of unstable or deteriorated foundation walls, or 6) a non-existent or dysfunctional septic system, a well with a spring of poor quality or quantity.

**Major Defects**- Component is badly deteriorated and in need of major repair or replacement. **Minor Defects** - Component is worn, loose, or cracked and in need of repair. **Sound** - Component needs no more than normal maintenance (Cuomo and Towns 2011:76).

The existing research on substandard housing discusses the health affects of this issue, other initiatives that have worked towards eradicating the problem, and examines a specific example of substandard housing in relation to immigration.

**Health:** Substandard housing is a substantial problem in America that has all kinds of negative implications for a person's sense of security, privacy, stability, and mainly for a person's health. An article in 2002 stated that two million Americans occupy homes that are severely damaged while 4.8 million occupy homes that are moderately damaged (Krieger and Higgins 2002: 758). Severely damaged homes are associated with an assortment of health conditions, “including respiratory infections, asthma, lead poisoning, injuries, and mental health” (Krieger and Higgins 2002: 758). Research has shown that substandard housing can contribute to illness effecting children living in substandard housing. A study quantifying the economic cost of selected environmental factors among children in North Carolina found that substandard conditions along with other environmental factors could contribute to illnesses and chronic diseases including asthma, developmental problems, birth defects, and some types of cancer. Additionally, this study found that children are more likely to suffer injuries as a result of falls, fires, and burns directly related to substandard conditions. According to one study "preschoolers whose homes needed repair had an estimated risk of injury nearly 4 times that of preschoolers whose homes did not need repair" (David, Estes, Lee 1). Similarly the study mentions that
although lead poisoning does not have boundaries, the majority of those affected by this poisoning are usually poor, colored families living in older, poor housing conditions. The research concluded that growing up in substandard conditions could lead to a lifetime of medical complications.

**Efforts to Address the Problem:** There are, however, many private and public-private initiatives that have tried to improve the physical conditions of homes over the years. For instance, Healthy People 2010, a program that supports efforts of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “called for a 52% reduction in the more than six million currently occupied housing units in the United States with moderate or severe physical problems” (Pollack et al. 2008: 3). In addition there is the Healthy Homes Initiative established by Congress in 1999 to “develop and implement a program of research and demonstration projects that would address multiple housing-related problems affecting the health of children” (Pollack et al. 2008: 3). Initiatives such as these also have employed several strategies to enforce their standards such as creating housing guidelines and codes, assessing housing conditions, and advocating for healthy, affordable housing (Krieger and Higgins 2002: 758).

**Substandard Housing and Immigration:** In the article, “The Dynamics of Immigration and Local Governance in Santa Ana: Neighborhood Activism, Overcrowding, and Land-use Policy,” by Stacy Harwood and Dowell Myers, the issue of substandard housing with regards to immigration is discussed. The article illustrates that as the population of Santa Ana, California changes with an influx of immigrants and migrant workers there must be something done about the housing that these people inhabit. The
authors discuss different ways of addressing the issue of substandard housing, how to go about bringing these houses up to code, the various ways this was done in the past, and how it is being dealt with currently. They discuss that in the past, “one strategy entailed buying out and demolishing substandard apartment complexes, then replacing them with higher-quality town homes or lower-density apartments, ensuring at the same time that some of the new units remained at affordable prices,” (Harwood, Myers pg. 80). However, the article ends with what is being done today to deal with the issues of overcrowding, and people living in poor, substandard homes. It states that currently the way these issues are dealt with is through building and safety code enforcement, (Harwood, Myers pg. 85). The city council has, “...also approved the creation of a Pro-Active Rental Enforcement Program (PREP) for the city’s 37,000 rental units. PREP required rental property owners to pay $17.50 per unit for an annual inspection, and stipulated that a building must meet all codes to receive a rental permit,” (Harwood, Myers pg. 85). Although today the city is not demolishing buildings that meet the conditions of substandard housing, they are taking action to hold landlords accountable in hopes that they will make the improvements necessary in order to bring these houses up to code.
SCOPE OF WORK AGREEMENT

Leslie Carrese, Cristian Cedacero, Melanie DeVuyst, and Chelsea England students in Sociology 465: Senior Research Practicum at Hobart and William Smith Colleges (hereinafter referred to as "Consultants"), will provide research consulting services to the Catholic Charities of the Finger Lakes (hereinafter referred to as "Agency"), located at 94 Exchange Street, Geneva, New York.

I. RESEARCH SCOPE OF WORK

The Consultant’s Scope of Work will be to assist the Agency by providing the following services:

• Provide an operational definition of substandard housing that will be useful to Geneva not-for-profit organizations in their grant writing activities
• Communicate with institutions in the Geneva community to help assess the problem
• Communicate with institutions in other communities that may have a firm grasp on the issue
• Review of documents necessary to provide context and information useful to the consultants’ analysis
• Data collection activities
• Analysis of collected data
• Quantify the extent to which there is a problem with substandard housing in the Geneva community
• Power Point Presentation and discussion about findings and recommendations
• Final written report, with attached results of inquiries

II. CLIENT’S RESPONSIBILITIES

• Provide the Consultants with a list of useful contacts relevant to project
• For the limited defined scope identified herein, there will be no engagement cost to the Agency. No travel time will be assessed or labor billed by the Consultant for this Agreement.
• Agency agrees to pay any agreed upon expenses that may be incurred for printing, telephone, fax, photocopying, mailing and postage, and distribution costs for sending materials to desired parties.

III. OTHER TERMS AND CONDITIONS

Consultant will provide Catholic Charities and its community partners with all existing data at the conclusion of the project including papers, power points, and all visual aides.
Methods Used:

Our group took several main steps in doing our research. First, we communicated with local offices and offices from other communities in order to identify their methods of quantifying substandard housing. Local offices that we communicated with for this search included:

- Legal Assistance of Western New York
- Geneva Housing Authority, Salvation Army
- Finger Lakes Migrant Health Association
- Finger Lakes Community Health
- Coldwell Banker of Geneva
- Lakeview
- Safe Harbors
- Geneva Planning Office
- Tax Assessors Office
- City of Geneva Building Inspection and Code Enforcement
- Intercultural Affairs at HWS
- Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning at HWS

After communicating with all of these offices and organizations, the only office that was able to provide information regarding the volume and density of substandard housing in Geneva was the Code Enforcement Office of Geneva. We then took the records that they gave us, compiled them, and completed a series of calculations. The results of our calculations can be found in the following section.
Results:

In the city of Geneva there are currently 4,800 total parcels and 2,546 total rented buildings. These numbers each contain both commercial and residential parcels. This means that 53% of the parcels in Geneva are rented, which is a very large number compared to other cities. Geneva has a total of 288 residential rental properties that are 3 units or more; in total that is 1356 units. Out of this number we have determined that 21.75% qualify as substandard properties. In order to determine the number of substandard properties we looked at the number of rental units that failed to obtain operating permits because of critical or major defects, and combined that number with the number of units that are currently vacant or have been condemned. The 21.75% of rental units that are substandard does not include the 833 one and two family houses that come to a total of 1242 units. This is because New York State no longer requires one and two family rental units to be inspected. Because of this we have determined a range of houses in Geneva that could qualify as substandard, which is from 295 rental units to 565 rental units.

These pictures were taken from the report, “The Neighborhoods of Geneva, NY” that was written and conducted by consulting agency czbLLC in January 2009.
Map:

The following map contains all of the addresses of rental units that are substandard as well as vacant houses that are not occupied because they have been condemned in Geneva, New York. The City of Geneva Code Enforcement Office provided this list of addresses.

Rental Units and Vacant Houses that are Substandard in Geneva, New York
A Call to Action:

Substandard Housing in the city of Geneva is an issue that affects the entire community, from the people who live in these conditions to other homeowners who live around these houses. Geneva has a diverse population that is comprised of many different ethnicities ranging from those who work as migrant farmers to those who are members of the colleges. Geneva also houses many of the underprivileged and those living in poverty because of all the social services programs located within the city. These services include food pantries, the W.I.C. office, Department of Social Services and the Geneva Housing Authority. Because of this, Geneva must deal with many issues involving housing that other communities are not affected by nearly as greatly.

A variety of health issues can be caused by substandard living conditions including upper respiratory conditions, asbestos poisoning, and diseases spread by insect and rodent infestations. Fire and safety hazards may also be present when homes do not meet code requirements. The personal morale of any individual living in substandard conditions may be negatively affected as well, reducing feelings of self worth. Still, people in the Geneva community are forced to live in homes that many would consider uninhabitable. Many of the migrant farmers are unable to communicate with their landlords and are taken advantage of because of language barriers. The families who receive money for section 8 housing are also taken advantage of because landlords know that they will be guaranteed a certain amount of money each month for rent and are able to charge tenants more for other expenses.
Because of the state of the economy, instead of listing a home for sale, many homeowners have chosen to rent out their homes; being a landlord can be very profitable. Based on what we have found, 54% (2598 of 4800) homes in Geneva are rentals. Since one and two family homes are no longer inspected, there is almost no regulation to make sure a landlord keeps his or her house clean and up to code. With rental houses, tenants usually do not take pride in their space and do not invest as much time, money or effort in making the space their own as most homeowners do. There needs to be more of an initiative to get people to take pride in their homes, whether they are owners or renters, because it is a problem that does not fall on the shoulders of one, but is shared by both.

In doing our research and communicating with the various community offices that deal directly with housing issues, we found it shocking that there are absolutely no records of houses in the city that are substandard. We also found that it was a major problem that there is no one definition of substandard to be used by all of the offices. Each office realizes that substandard housing is a very big issue in the community, but because the definition is extremely subjective and because there is little communication between the various offices it is difficult to work towards solving the issue. If these offices had more communication, such as sharing which houses they know are substandard, or sharing which landlords they know have a history of renting houses in substandard condition, than many of the same problems would not be repeated.

The future of the Geneva community depends on our willingness to solve this issue. The hope of this report is to shine a light on this issue and to capture the attention of the community and of those who deal with this issue on a daily basis. If more people are aware
of the fact that the definition of what it means to be substandard is subjective and that there are no records being kept of the houses that qualify as substandard, then they might be prompted to change this so that the same issues are not here five or ten years from now. This issue is not going away; if anything it is growing, so we need to realize the roadblocks that are impeding our progress so that those living in these conditions do not have to suffer any longer.

**Next Steps:**

As a next step to the research we have already conducted we propose that a future consulting group will partner with John Brennan of the Code Enforcement office of Geneva and conduct a marketing analysis of downtown Geneva. This would include carrying out an inventory of how many storefronts, beauty salons, restaurants and residences are located within a certain area for rent. The Code Enforcement Office would also be interested in seeing what the storefront properties cost and how they can be best utilized. The mission of this project would be to change attitudes and perceptions of downtown Geneva, especially amongst students, and would aim to bring more business to the area. The city of Geneva and the Hobart and William Smith campus need to continue to realize the valuable resources they have in one another; this project would further develop this relationship.
References:


