



Placelinking: An Emergent Approach to Improving Economic Mobility Outcomes

By Ben Seigel, Tena Spencer, and Elizabeth Talbert

Introduction

Neighborhoods, including their schools, housing stock, access to jobs, and social capital, impact the long-term economic success of children. Thanks to Raj Chetty's and Nathan Hendren's [groundbreaking research](#), the ability to quantify this impact is now possible. Their analysis of Internal Revenue Service (IRS) data shows the causal relationships between where a young person grows up and their future earnings. For example, a young boy raised in Baltimore City can expect to earn 28 percent less in household income as an adult than the national average.

Neighborhoods that trap residents into downward mobility are often geographically isolated. Throughout the 20th century, real estate policies and practices that promoted redlining and suburbanization coupled with depopulation in many cities and highway building programs left visible scars on many urban landscapes. Abandoned railway lines, blocks of vacant housing, burnt out industrial buildings, and multilane roadways physically separate communities and disrupt the flow of people and commerce. This unhealthy infrastructure blocks access to jobs, human services, enrichment opportunities, and other essential

resources that allow neighborhoods and their residents to thrive.

Policy interventions to improve economic mobility outcomes for residents of distressed, isolated neighborhoods have generally fallen into two categories:

1. Place-based initiatives that revitalize entire communities by developing new housing, schools, businesses, and community facilities, while also providing an array of integrated services and human capital investments in residents; and
2. Housing mobility programs that move families into better neighborhoods via vouchers or other subsidies.

We believe policymakers and researchers should pay greater attention to a potential middle category between place-based initiatives and housing mobility programs, a model we refer to as placelinking. Placelinking seeks to improve existing, isolated neighborhoods by better connecting these communities through improved transit, parks and recreation, and other forms of infrastructure and amenities.



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Placelinking has the potential to maximize the strengths of place-based and housing mobility programs, while minimizing the weaknesses of these models, as visualized in Figure 1. Place-based programs range from efforts such as the federal [HOPE VI](#) initiative of the 1990s that demolished public housing and replaced it with mixed-income housing and family-based services, to the [Harlem Children’s Zone](#) that has focused on comprehensive education, health, economic, and housing institutions and services in a targeted neighborhood. Place-based initiatives often involve

large-scale projects requiring significant investment that can sometimes lead to the displacement of longstanding residents as the neighborhood improves and gentrifies. Meanwhile, housing mobility programs, such as the federal [Moving to Opportunity](#) demonstration that ran in five large cities, have resulted in positive education and economic outcomes for children by relocating very low-income families in public housing to higher-income and opportunity areas. Compared to place-based initiatives, housing mobility programs are relatively low-cost. However, housing mobility

FIGURE 1: COMPARISON OF TARGETED ECONOMIC MOBILITY INITIATIVES

	INTERVENTIONS	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES	EXAMPLES
Place-based	Neighborhood revitalization and human capital investments that seek to integrate housing, economic, education, health, safety, and other goals	Improvements to built environment: housing, businesses, roads, transit Improvements in economic, education, health, and crime indicators of neighborhood	Improvements result in gentrification and displacement of original residents High cost for capital and infrastructure improvements and service provision	HOPE VI program demolished public housing developments and re-made neighborhoods as mixed-income communities with new housing stocks and family based services
Housing Mobility	Person-based strategy that relocates households from distressed communities to higher opportunity neighborhoods	Increased access to educational and economic opportunities for parents and children Relatively low cost	Not everyone can move and not everyone wants to move No improvement of the neighborhoods from which families move	The Moving to Opportunity (MTO) experiment offered housing vouchers and counseling services to families to move from high-poverty neighborhoods to low-poverty neighborhoods
Placelinking	Strategies and investments that seek to reconnect isolated neighborhoods without directly revitalizing neighborhoods or moving or displacing residents	Increased access to economic opportunities and city amenities Potential for low-cost projects and inclusive growth that does not displace original residents	Limited research on role as stand-alone intervention for improving economic mobility Projects run risk of high-cost and displacement from gentrification depending on scale	The Minneapolis Greenway is 5.5 miles of disused railroad corridor repurposed as recreational urban trails that connect economically diverse communities

programs cannot be a panacea, as not all families want to move, and it is impossible to move everyone to higher opportunity neighborhoods.

Rather than making wholesale changes to neighborhoods, or moving people into other neighborhoods, placelinking makes it easier for residents to access jobs, education, parks, and other amenities by creating bridges between neighborhoods. In some cases, placelinking may include a massive, citywide project focused on transit. In other cases, it might consist of targeted remediation of a blighted space isolating two neighborhoods from each other and the rest of the city with a park or housing development.

Placelinking is typically not viewed as a stand-alone approach to improving economic mobility. In this brief, we seek to make a case that placelinking should be viewed as a mobility strategy on its own, and as a viable option for local policymakers alongside place-based and housing mobility initiatives. We have identified three types of placelinking strategies outlined below with examples from specific cities: 1) transit, 2) recreation and parks, and 3) filling voids between neighborhoods. We also offer examples of citizen-led placelinking efforts and a case study of the Atlanta Beltline, a large-scale example of placelinking.

Transit

Transit is perhaps the most obvious form of placelinking with rail or bus service connecting neighborhoods to each other and to job and commerce centers within a city or metro area. In 2016, public transit initiatives were on the ballot in 45 local elections. Voters were overwhelmingly supportive of these projects, many of which are large-scale investments in transit, such as [Measure M in Los Angeles](#) that will invest \$120 billion in sales tax receipts into expanded rail and bus

services. In other growing metro areas, including Seattle and Atlanta, voters also approved multi-billion-dollar transit projects. This is notable in that place-based and housing mobility initiatives have traditionally been funded and guided by the federal government, whereas placelinking may have more potential to be funded and guided by local governments.

As a method for placelinking, transit projects don't necessarily have to run into the billions of dollars. [Houston](#), for example, recently used a low-cost approach to reengineer its bus system from a traditional hub-and-spoke model leading into the downtown corridor to a new system that follows a grid with quick, crosstown routes designed to increase ridership and speed and more effectively connect multiple neighborhoods with each other, rather than just with the downtown. After the new routes went into effect, bus ridership in Houston increased by nearly 7 percent.

Another example of placelinking via rapid bus service is in [Indianapolis](#), where a new \$100 million project is underway to connect several neighborhoods, major employers and cultural institutions. Known as the Red Line, the north/south route will come within a quarter mile of more than 50,000 residents and nearly 150,000 jobs - a quarter of all jobs in Marion County. The line will connect the University of Indianapolis at the south end through downtown and to neighborhoods and districts north of downtown.

Recreation and parks

Recreation and parks projects are an ideal type of placelinking strategy. These projects tend to have a lower cost than transit projects and focus on remaking the places in between, rather than redeveloping entire neighborhoods. If

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done well, they create a more integrative city by improving walkability, increasing foot traffic, and beautifying areas experiencing disinvestment. These projects take the form of greenspace creation and development; walking, biking, and hiking trails, including the [Rails-to-Trails movement](#); public art spaces; or shopping plazas.

The [11th Street Bridge Park](#) in Washington, D.C., is an example of a literal bridge connecting the city. The Anacostia River divides Washington into two, very different cities. To the east of the river is Anacostia, a 94 percent African-American neighborhood with a median household income of \$32,000. To the west is the Navy Yard and Capitol Hill, where the median income is \$91,000. In an effort to link these two neighborhoods and promote equity and inclusion of residents east of the river, the 11th Street Bridge Park will be a pedestrian green space stretching the length of three football fields above the river. With the intention of limiting displacement and other adverse consequences of gentrification, the \$45 million project, scheduled to open in 2023, seeks to link eastside residents to opportunities, while connecting eastside and westside neighborhoods together through recreation and sustainability.

The [Minneapolis Midtown Greenway Trail](#), owned by the Hennepin County Regional Railroad Authority and maintained by the City of Minneapolis, is a 5.5 mile former railroad corridor that has been named “the best urban bike trail in the USA” by USA Today. The built-environment already lends itself to limited intersections and barrier-free bicycling, making it quicker and less cumbersome than travelling by car. To the west, the trail stretches out to the western suburbs, and to the east extends to the Mississippi River, connecting ethnically and economically

diverse communities throughout the city. Though it is primarily a connection and recreational mechanism at the moment, the city plans to use the Greenway as a site of a future mass transit express rail line. The project has spurred economic development and social connection. For example, self-guided tours of the Greenway lead residents and visitors to restaurants and art and culture venues.

The [Miami Underline](#), a 10-mile park and urban trail, seeks to transform the land under Miami’s metrorail system into a space of recreation and urban art. Creating a place for healthy recreation, connecting different neighborhoods through its pathways, and increasing economic development are a few of the project’s specific goals. Ultimately, the Underline is expected to be the starting point for over 250 miles of trails in the Miami area. The project will be built by the Miami-Dade County Parks department with planning and funding coming from public, nonprofit, and private partners. According to an [economic impact study](#), the Underline is expected to generate \$50 million in annual economic output upon its completion. The same study also predicts accelerated property value appreciation.

The [New Haven’s Downtown Crossing](#) project is leveraging a \$36-million-dollar federal grant to transform a portion of Route 34, an expressway that divides the city, into urban boulevards for pedestrians, bicycles, and low-speed motor traffic. Route 34 currently separates New Haven’s downtown district and Yale University’s sprawling medical complex from a neighborhood known as the Hill, where about 40 percent of residents live below the poverty line. Downtown Crossing’s pedestrian and bike friendly routes have the opportunity to connect those residents to jobs centers downtown and within Yale’s medical campus.

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Filling voids between neighborhoods

Filling voids between neighborhoods is the process of repurposing distressed urban space that has the effect of isolating two or more neighborhoods from each other and the broader city. While some neighborhoods are isolated due to physical barriers like highways or rivers, others face isolation because they are surrounded by blight like vacant properties or abandoned lots. In some cases, these voids may only stretch for a couple of blocks, but have an outsized impact of completely isolating neighborhoods on either side of the blight. In these situations, a small investment in remediating the blight with small-scale housing or greening projects can help reconnect communities.

In Detroit, two neighborhoods that house the anchor institutions Marygrove College and University of Detroit Mercy are separated from each other by a relatively small patch of blighted housing and vacant lots. The city's [Fitzgerald Revitalization Project](#) is focused on filling-in this quarter square mile of blight between the two neighborhoods.

The city's plan is to tackle every government-owned piece of property within the quarter square mile - 373 parcels in all. The project consists of a bike path and a roughly 20-acre greenway that will link Marygrove and Detroit Mercy, as well as a plan to rehab homes and resell at market-rate or affordable prices, while demolishing others. To date, the city has opened a 2.5-acre park, named after Ella Fitzgerald, that includes a basketball court, picnic area, and playground.

[Baltimore's Green Network](#) will repurpose vacant properties and other disinvested pockets in Baltimore City into an interconnected network of green spaces. The plan incorporates the ideas of neighborhood residents, city agencies,

neighborhood organizations, and business. Its goal is to create community assets like recreation areas, trails, and urban gardens, and in doing so connect some of the most disadvantaged neighborhoods to better resources.

Citizen-led Placelinking

Placelinking offers an opportunity for residents to improve their communities by working in partnership with city leaders and other stakeholders. Citizen-led placelinking projects are typically smaller scale, grassroots efforts spearheaded by local residents and nonprofits living and working in the communities impacted by the projects.

The City of Memphis is one of several cities working with ioby, a nonprofit organization that has created a digital platform to allow individual communities to connect with each other and with resources across the city to support "creative placemaking" and other community-led projects. One of the first and largest projects supported by ioby was a placelinking project, connecting two previously disconnected areas in East Memphis through a multi-use road and bike path system known as the [Hampline](#). The community-based organizing team used the ioby platform to raise nearly \$70,000 for the project through crowdfunding within the local community.

Tactical urbanism is a recent trend in low-cost, temporary changes to the built environment often championed by city residents themselves. For example, [Park\(ing\) Day](#) is an annual summer event in Philadelphia where several metered parking spots are converted into temporary "pocket parks." Tactical urbanism projects typically target blighted and hazardous spaces as they reimagine new ways to reconnect the city and its residents.

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Placelinking Case Study: The Atlanta BeltLine

The [Atlanta BeltLine](#) is a large-scale example of placelinking that incorporates the concepts discussed above. The redevelopment project will ultimately connect over 40 Atlanta neighborhoods using a 22-mile corridor of disused rail tracks and vacant land circling Atlanta's downtown. Public investment of \$450 million has attracted \$3.9 billion in private investment.

The Atlanta BeltLine was born out of Georgia Tech urban planning student [Ryan Gravel's thesis](#) to improve urban mobility for those who lack access to a car. The BeltLine will see the implementation of a 50-mile Atlanta Streetcar system that will run through and around the city, including the 22-mile Atlanta BeltLine corridor. This system will also connect to the downtown and crosstown lines and MARTA light rail stations across the city.

The BeltLine has the opportunity to increase the city's greenspace by 40 percent by creating and renovating over 2,000 acres of parks and greenspace over the project's

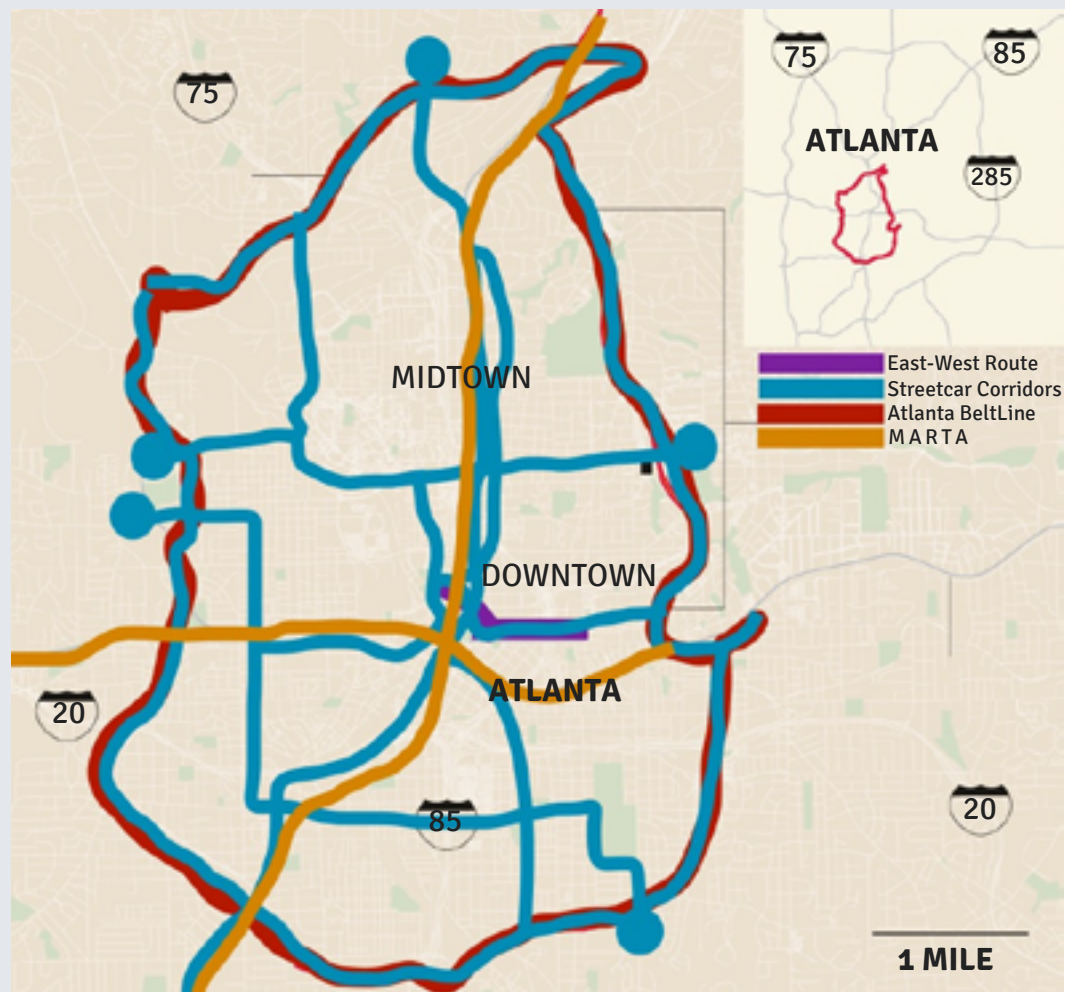


Image edited from: New York Times, "A Glorified Sidewalk, and the Path to Transform Atlanta", 9/11/16



lifespan. These parks will be connected to the newly incorporated 33-mile network of multi-use trails that seamlessly link 45 of Atlanta's in-town neighborhoods. In addition to greenspace, the BeltLine offers community events, workshops, and classes to residents of different neighborhoods to come together in leisure and civic engagement.

The BeltLine is expected to generate 5,600 affordable housing units across the 22-mile line. However, property taxes are already increasing due to luxury apartment construction along the BeltLine, worrying residents of historically African-American neighborhoods like the Old Fourth Ward of their future in the neighborhood. While the Beltline hosts community meetings and homeowner empowerment programs that inform residents on progress and developments, the program has attracted criticism from some in the community who that have felt excluded from planning and decision-making processes and who have concerns that longstanding residents will be forced out of their neighborhoods.



Image edited from: New York Times, "A Glorified Sidewalk, and the Path to Transform Atlanta", 9/11/16

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