Rethinking the politics of vulnerability: neighborhood empowerment in Kansas City Missouri (USA)

Repensar la política de vulnerabilidad urbana:
el empoderamiento de los barrios en Kansas City Missouri (EE. UU.)

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Abstract

The paper provides evidence for the racialization of urban neighborhoods in Kansas City Missouri, USA and the ways in which voluntary associations of citizens work to resist and reduce conditions of urban vulnerability. The paper presents data from historical patterns of racially-biased real estate practices, including redlining, and demonstrates how these patterns continue to shape the politics of vulnerability in the region today. Three neighborhood profiles provide evidence of the ways in which local neighborhood associations are organized to respond to both social and spatial conditions of vulnerability. In contrast to the estimates of low community resilience in these neighborhoods, the author demonstrates that neighborhood empowerment is an important counterpoint to concentrated vulnerabilities.

Key words: vulnerability; resilience; adaptive capacity; racialization.

Resumen

El artículo demuestra la racialización de los barrios urbanos en Kansas City-Missouri, EE. UU., y las formas en las que las asociaciones de voluntarios de ciudadanos trabajan para resistir y reducir las condiciones de vulnerabilidad. El artículo presenta datos de modelos históricos de prácticas inmobiliarias con prejuicios raciales, incluido el redlining, y demuestra cómo estos patrones continúan dando forma a las políticas de vulnerabilidad en la región en la actualidad. Tres tipos de barrios urbanos proporcionan evidencias de las formas en las que las asociaciones de vecinos se organizan para responder a las condiciones de vulnerabilidad social y espacial. En contraste con las estimaciones de baja resiliencia comunitaria en estos barrios, el autor demuestra que el empoderamiento es un contrapunto importante a las vulnerabilidades concentradas.

Palabras clave: vulnerabilidad; capacidad de adaptación; resiliencia; racialización.

1 Introduction

This paper presents research on neighborhood empowerment and local initiatives that challenge or undermine conditions of urban vulnerability in Kansas City Missouri USA. Evidence from three neighborhood associations focuses on different modes of political action and organizing to challenge the conditions that generate inequality for the region's most vulnerable citizens.

The paper reviews the history of neighborhood-focused research in urban studies as a way to understand the plans and policies that shaped the socio-spatial form of urban neighborhoods and continue to shape the politics of vulnerability in Kansas City today. These different "schools of thought," including the Chicago School of Sociology's urban ecological model and other mainstream theories of neighborhood change (Betancur & Smith, 2016) have influenced urban research and provided guiding principles that have shaped city planning, the private real estate industry and the production of neighborhood space in Kansas City.

The paper presents and critiques the "Community Resilience Estimates" developed by the United States Census Bureau (2020) for neighborhoods, counties and states in the United States. These estimates provide one methodology for comparing risk factors that drive urban vulnerability and exposure to risks, such as the COVID19 pandemic. After review, however, I argue that there are inherent problems with the composition of these estimates that make them biased against diverse, urban neighborhoods and misleading in terms of the factors that generate community resilience.

Following this analysis, the paper dives deeper into a case study of Kansas City, Missouri, presenting evidence from three urban neighborhoods, including a near-downtown neighborhood facing gentrification and displacement, an internationally diverse neighborhood of low wealth families organizing against vulnerability, and a historically African-American neighborhood of middle class homeowners seeking stabilization. Through each location and its organization, the research provides evidence of the conditions of socio-spatial risks that are driving social inequality as well as the ways in which three local organizations have responded to existing vulnerabilities and new threats. Local neighborhood organizing does not exist in a vacuum and the research also presents the influential politics of urban redevelopment and the conditions of disinvestment facing each neighborhood.

Following this critique of community resilience and the Kansas City case studies, the research argues that there is a missing dimension of vulnerability and resilience, voluntary neighborhood associations and their role in mobilizing the assets of community to combat urban vulnerability. Neighborhoods are sites of political empowerment through struggle and resistance to known risk and inequalities. I argue that neighborhood self-governance deserves greater attention and analysis, because of the historical and continuing significance of residential communities in shaping the growth and development of cities.

Risk and vulnerability in the United States are racialized. The paper demonstrates the racialized geography of neighborhood associations in Kansas City today, which is rooted in a historical legacy of private real estate development of suburban neighborhoods and public policies including redlining by the Home Owners Loan Corporation. Further, the racialization of the very social organizations and political systems that have been designed to respond to and mitigate social and environmental risks are also problematic. This racialization of risk and institutionalized response systems (police, EMS and other agencies) generates a double crisis for diverse urban neighborhoods.

Neighborhood associations provide one context for the development of social networks of response to urban vulnerability (Aguirre, 2007). While higher levels of exposure to social and environmental risk are well documented among diverse, urban neighborhoods, what is less known or understood is how to transform the very systems that are set up to respond to vulnerability so that they do not further perpetuate the racialized production of risk or historical legacies of racialized urban neighborhoods. This paper seeks to illuminate some of the strategies for empowerment against vulnerability evident in Kansas City neighborhoods.

1.1 Defining urban vulnerability

Urban vulnerability and inequality in the face of increased risk are complex socio-spatial phenomena that require attention to the "most disadvantaged neighborhoods." This is certainly true in the lessons from practice presented here from Kansas City Missouri in the United States. I would further argue, however, that the development of our political understanding of vulnerability and inequality requires a subtler approach to the conceptualization of "the most disadvantaged neighborhoods" – not solely as sites of passive vulnerability, but also as sites of political empowerment through struggle and resistance to known risk and inequalities. From evidence observed in Kansas City, it is clear that important examples of innovation and experimentation in adaptive capacity – not to mention bold new initiatives for social change, are born of the struggle to reduce vulnerability. It is in the places labeled as "disadvantaged," "vulnerable," "at-risk" or defined by the absence of certain resources or demographic characteristics that are used as indicators of community resilience, where adaptive capacity is generated out of sheer necessity.

While I do not seek to romanticize these struggles, I do see in them the seeds of future political coalitions that can transform spaces of disinvestment and racialized capitalism through new forms of citizen-led reinvestment and response to the causes and conditions of vulnerability. To put it more directly, the Just City will not be achieved absent of the wisdom and leadership of people who have successfully survived and challenged urban vulnerabilities and inequalities at the root, which I argue lies in the geography of diverse urban neighborhoods.

Urban vulnerability is a complex, dynamic and indeterminate socio-spatial condition (Aguirre, 2007; Gotham & Campanella, 2011; Weichselgartner & Kelman, 2015). Neither resilience nor urban vulnerability are fixed states of being defined by individual and household demographic characteristics alone. Social inequalities heighten vulnerability to risks in ways that are both known and unpredictable (Aguirre, 2007), and yet contemporary practices of governance rarely attack inequality as a socio-spatial condition that must be eliminated. Urban vulnerabilities are historical in character as well as a spatial. While it is impossible to understand the experience of inequality without analysis of the environmental aspects, it is also important that geographic knowledge incorporate the ways in which current socio-spatial conditions are influenced by the past.

Adger (2006) defines vulnerability as "…the state of susceptibility to harm from exposure to stresses associated with environmental and social change and from the absence of capacity to adapt." Gotham and Campanella (2011, p. 1) argue that resilience and vulnerability are

"coupled" — defining vulnerability as "...the geographical, economic, political, or social susceptibility, predisposition, or risk factor of a group or community to damage by a hazardous condition." Welsh (2013) provides an analysis of resilience, which highlights the proliferation of research about the concept and the growth of resilience as a convenient narrative for systems of government that push neoliberal economic growth at the expense of community health and safety.

Chronic urban poverty is a persistent problem in American cities, including Kansas City, Missouri. Poverty is poorly mitigated by existing governmental systems or private forms of philanthropy and charity. As Cortright and Mahmoudi (2014) have shown, both the number of neighborhoods experiencing concentrated poverty and the total population of people experiencing poverty has grown in US cities since 1970.

While some may argue that volunteer neighborhood associations are the community developers of last resort — I argue that this view of neighborhoods justifies disinvestment and the failure to build local adaptive capacity. The idea that profesional and governmental systems are inherently "better than" neighborhood associations is shaped by a bias against local voluntary action and a privileging of governmental, business and other institutional actors. This type of thinking tends to view high poverty neighborhoods through a needs-based lens focused on deficiencies and deficits (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993)

Unfortunately, these institutional actors have regularly demonstrated a lack of interest in the conditions of vulnerable urban neighborhoods or in some cases outright disdain for people and places experiencing concentrated poverty and other conditions of inequality. In too many cases, to wait around for institutions to reform themselves would certainly mean waiting around for one's own death or slow demise.

1.2 Why neighborhoods?

Neighborhood associations and local self-governance are not viewed as progressive or organized for progressive social change in the United States. In fact, evidence suggests that neighborhoods led by homeowners or landlords tend toward conservative values resistant to change, such as objections to affordable housing provision and other NIMBY sentiments. Especially in market-based societies like the United States — where the politics of wealth and poverty hinge on the accumulation of capital through property and homeownership and where social safety nets are slim or nonexistent, the politics of social inequality are written into the very fabric of neighborhoods.

Within the scholarship on U.S. cities and neighborhoods in particular, there is an established consensus that racial inequalities and vulnerability are linked to racially-biased real estate industry practices, including redlining, blockbusting and other ways in which the wealth of African American, Latino and other diverse households has been undermined by racist policies of the private sector and government (Gotham, 2002a).

This is especially true of home owners' associations (HOAs), which in Kansas City Missouri and many suburban neighborhoods and municipalities across the country were founded as racially-biased political units "protected" by redlining, racialized suburbanization and other forms of racial capitalism (see Thomas, 1998; Gotham, 2002a). Because of the historical and continuing significance of residential communities in shaping the growth and development of cities in terms of race, wealth and opportunity - neighborhood self-governance deserves greater attention and analysis.

Neighborhood self-governance includes a spectrum of formal and informal networks and organizations and there is ample reason to imagine a political future for place-based organizations that can and must contribute to the reduction of vulnerability, racially-biased real estate decisions and greater social justice and equity. Local community organizations organized around the citizen's place of residence provide an opportunity for new forms of community building, new economic development strategies rooted in cooperative values, and awareness of the underlying socio-spatial conditions that generate inequality and vulnerability.

In this research I refer to and use "neighborhoods organizations" to indicate voluntary associations of residents who share a common interest in a particular location within the municipal boundaries. The sharing of interest or identification with a particular place is often based on the location of an individual's residence, but also a shared interest in place can include people experiencing homelessness, local businesses, tenants and others who may not own property. Neighborhoods are part of individual and household political identities as they are linked directly to where people vote and how the space of the neighborhood is managed in terms of multiple political jurisdictions (from city council to the US Senate).

Neighborhoods are spatial units — or places, as well as social organizations of people with shared place-based identities and attachments to specific places via residency, identity and other forms of attachment. As units of self-government (Jacobs, 1961), neighborhood associations are important political units with varying degrees of influence, organizational capacity, financial and other forms of capital, and what Aguirre (2007) calls "adaptive capacity." Neighborhood

associations in the US are largely led by volunteers, although some of the organizations studied here do have part and/or full-time staff. In this research, I am interested in the ways in which particular neighborhoods promote and sustain their ability to respond to different forms of vulnerability as an aspect of the "adaptive capacities" of three local associations in Kansas City. To put these neighborhoods in context, we need to look at the underlying historical and spatial conditions of risk that drive vulnerability and shape the context in which neighborhood associations function.

Adaptive capacity is a concept that is common in the context of urban geography and research focused on resilience and vulnerability. While there are different definitions, the central meaning of the concept is the ability of a social network, organization or system to cope with disturbances in the short run and to adapt to change in the long run (Gallopin, 2006, p. 296). The impact of COVID19 on local organizations provides one example of how neighborhood and community organizations have at first sought to cope with the pandemic and then, as the immediate shocks and changes to everyday life have been absorbed, how local associations have made efforts to restart organizational activities in new and innovative ways.

1.3 Neighborhoods in U.S. Urban Studies

This section looks at neighborhoods as typologies of vulnerability and resliance — a way to explore the different dimensions of urban inequality and how it is politically contested. The purpose here is to begin to outline the conditions or factors that shape urban vulnerability — the risk factors evident in demographic, social and environmental factors that impact particular neighborhoods in the city. Attention to variations in the types of vulnerability is important and must drive local understanding of the conditions faced by neighborhood advocates in their everyday efforts to combat the conditions of vulnerability at the neighborhood scale.

There is a long history of categorizing neighborhoods by different demographic characteristics dating back to the late 1800s in American urban studies. The mainstream approach to urban studies in the United States typically focuses on the impact of the Chicago School of Sociology (Burgess, 1925). These studies promoted the ecological view of urban neighborhood change — a model full of problematic assumptions and silences (Gotham, 2002b; Betancur & Smith, 2016) regarding sources of power in society linked to financial power and institutional racism.

Other scholars and practitioners added to this particular school of thought — including Clarence Perry (1929) and Homer Hoyt (1939) — creating models of the neighborhood unit and sector model respectively. Each of these mainstream approaches explained neighborhood change in a

de-politicized fashion that ignored the conflict inherent in American cities and urban neighborhoods throughout the 20th Century. By focusing on patterns of economic and land use, these models tended to ignore and downplay the competition for space, including racial, ethnic and class conflict. The shaping of urban space was expressed in and through neighborhoods by the actions of banks, mortgage lending and federal housing policies — not to mention riots, protests and other forms of political action and violence.

Mainstream urban planning largely adopted this conflict avoidance and ideology of neighborhoods. Planners promoted these beliefs through the practical application of mainstream urban sociology in city plans. The City of Kansas City Missouri's planning department and planning commission directly expressed the "neighborhood unit" ideology in the 1947 plan, which was the first modern city plan of its era. The plan specifically promoted a view of neighborhoods in which elementary schools were placed at the center and these schools were further identified by race. Planners employed the language of the "ecological" view of neighborhoods to normalize the racialization of urban space and neighborhood segregation by schools — which were segregated by race (Kansas City, 1947).

1.4 Critical views of neighborhoods in U.S. cities

In contrast to this mainstream mode of sociological thinking and planning practice in Kansas City and the United States, several scholars including W.E.B. DuBois (1899), St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, Jr. (1945) and Jane Jacobs (1961) provided different schools of thought with important critiques of the mainstream model based on empirical analysis of urban neighborhoods and cities, including Philadelphia, Chicago and New York. Betancur and Smith (2016, p. 18) call this the critical approach to theories of neighborhood change. This legacy of critical research provides an important foundation for our investigation of Kansas City and our understanding of urban neighborhood change in the 2020s.

W.E.B. DuBois greatly advanced the empirical study of urban neighborhoods and our understanding of conditions faced by urban residents experiencing vulnerability and discrimination through his study of the African American experience of Philadelphia in the 1890s (DuBois, 1899). Despite Dr. DuBois' pioneering work to advance Urban Studies, American sociology, urban geography and related fields — including urban planning largely ignored this landmark study and its insights for decades. In Black Metropolis (Drake & Cayton, 1945) further advanced the study of the African American urban experience through a rigorous analysis of African American life in Chicago — one that certainly advanced the empirical study akin to

DuBois' landmark approach. In terms of documenting urban vulnerability — as well as resilience, it is notable that the authors' study was situated within the federal government's response to the Great Depression and the WPA program.

Jane Jacobs (1961) responded to an era of neighborhood destruction during urban renewal and revealed the anti-urban/pro-suburban bias in the policies and programs of the post-WWII era. In the "Uses of City Neighborhoods" — Jacobs makes clear distinctions between her view of city neighborhoods and the dominant view of neighborhood promoted by city planners and public officials. Her devastating critique of the dominant logic of the urban planning and sociology of the day provides a "realpolitik" view of existing neighborhoods and how they self-organize.

More recently, urban geographer Clyde Woods (1998) magisterial study of regional geography bears special attention as he outlined the political economic structures that generated and sustained conditions of racialized vulnerability for Black residents of the Mississippi Delta region. Further, this work outlines how working class African Americans in the Delta South used creativity as a means to respond to marginalization. In doing so, he laid the intellectual foundation for our understanding of the blues epistemology as a response to the violence of American racism and a framework for community planning and development (Woods, 1998).

Anguelovski (2014) provides an important international comparative study of neighborhoods in Boston, Barcelona and Havana. Her work demonstrates the links between social and environmental justice in distressed urban neighborhoods. Through her detailed case studies, she shows the importance of dignity as a component of the fight against vulnerability and discrimination. In the context of community-based efforts to overcome disinvestment, racism and injustice, neighborhoods take action to restore their sense of self-determination and empowerment as well as physical repair of urban environments.

Risk and vulnerability in the United States are racialized. This is a critical insight that bears emphasis. Yet it is also the racialization of the very social organizations and political systems that have been designed to respond to and mitigate social and environmental risks that are also problematic. Governmental and other systems of response to vulnerability are also racialized — and this generates a double crisis for people and communities of color, as in the most obvious case of policing. While higher levels of exposure to social and environmental risk are well documented, what is less well developed is our knowledge of how to transform the very systems set up to respond to vulnerability and crisis — such as policing and planning, so that these systems stop perpetuating the racialized production of risk, exposure and vulnerability.

This research focuses on three neighborhoods in Kansas City Missouri to begin to unpack this dynamic between the socio-spatial condition of vulnerability and the ways in which non-racialized systems of response can be recognized, strengthened and enhanced. First, however — I outline my methodology for analyzing neighborhoods as units of local social organization and political action.

2 Methodology

This paper presents a case study of three neighborhoods in Kansas City Missouri USA in order to understand the ways in which vulnerability is (re)produced and resisted by local associations at the neighborhood scale. Given this special issue's focus on vulnerability, multi-level governance and new forms of resistance to urban inequality — a review of neighborhood-oriented, place-based community action is timely. My selection of area of study and neighborhoods is explained in more detail below.

I begin with an analysis of the historical patterns of redlining and racially-biased neighborhood development that have shaped Kansas City neighborhoods since the early 20th Century. These practices were developed by private real estate developers seeking to generate a demand for neighborhoods that were "restrictive" — including control of architectural style, commercial development and the access to housing by African Americans and other racialized and ethnic groups.

The paper then presents and analyzes "community resilience estimates" provided by the U.S. Census Bureau (2020) for neighborhoods in the City of Kansas City, Jackson County, Missouri. Data are presented at the census tract level for three neighborhoods. I then compared these quantitative measures of risk factors to existing conditions within each of the three neighborhoods — in terms of the social and environmental conditions as well as the organizational capacity building efforts.

I utilized a case study method with a mix of data and sources, including analysis of historical patterns, quantitative data, analysis of spatial patterns, observation of neighborhood conditions, participant observation of neighborhood meetings, interviews and other sources of neighborhood documentation, including websites, social media and meeting minutes.

The data collection for each case study is based on five years of work with leaders from more than 50 neighborhoods in Kansas City, Missouri and more than a decade of neighborhood advocacy planning. Over the course of this period, I have attended hundreds of neighborhood

meetings, led urban planning and design studios, worked with neighborhood leaders on specific place-based projects, and built a practice of community planning assistance for vulnerable urban neighborhoods and communities of concern.

This paper highlights three particular associations that are actively organizing to confront and change conditions of urban vulnerability at the neighborhood scale prior to and during COVID19. Observed conditions of vulnerability include people experiencing homelessness and housing precarity, public infrastructure disinvestment and disrepair, and the physical evidence of concentrated poverty. Closed public school buildings, proximity to risk factors such as floodplains, high concentrations of poor air quality, lack of access to public transportation and high dependency on automobiles, as well as concentrated vacancy of housing units and other structures are further evidence of exposure to risk.

Despite these often extreme conditions of inequality and vulnerability, neighborhood organizations are sites of empowerment and resistance to the physical conditions of deprivation and disinvestment. Following Aguirre (2007), Gotham and Campanella (2011) and others, I present evidence that vulnerability and resilience are coupled and should therefore be studied together in specific geographic contexts. Social factors — such as empowerment of community organizations and adaptive capacity to respond to local crises and disasters, are important aspects of community resilience highlighted in this research.

3 Neighborhoods as units of analysis and spaces of action

The focus of this work is the neighborhood associations in the context of urban inequality, vulnerability and resilience. Following the pioneering work of Jane Jacobs (1961) Mindy Thompson Fullilove (2020), and many others, I focus on the neighborhood organization as a unit of local self-determination and self-government.

The history of neighborhood organizing and local self-determination is an important and often overlooked dimension of U.S. planning history (Thomas, 1998) — especially for African American, Latino and other diverse communities that are often absent from the mainstream scholarship of planning history. Further, as research on urban vulnerability and resilience suggests (Aguirre, 2007), social organizations are critical in terms of adaptive capacity to manage risks and respond to crisis and disasters. Aguirre (2007, p. 50) makes an important argument for the inclusion of informal social networks into the realm of planning for disaster mitigation, response and recovery.

The activation of civil society through purposeful networks is part of a needed rethinking about how to bring about more effective ways to minimize the vulnerability and enhance the resilience of social organization.

While Aguirre is specifically focused on informal social networks that mobilize in the context of disaster response and recovery, the insights of his research suggest a new direction for neighborhoods as sites of social action to reduce vulnerability. That direction is to further strengthen the power and effectiveness of local self-governing organizations, such as voluntary neighborhood associations facing urban vulnerability and inequality.

There are several types of place-based organizations in U.S. cities. These include the urban neighborhood association, the home owners association, community coalitions, community or commercial improvement districts (CIDs), and a variety of community-based, nonprofit organizations with a mission focused on specific places. Neighborhood associations are typically volunteer-led and run organization composed of residents that live in a particular place and self-identify with that place. Membership in neighborhood organizations is optional, loosely defined and individual residents are often compelled to participate based on a variety of different motivations. Some of these factors motivating people to participate include:

- Pride of neighborhood identity
- Desire for neighborhood improvement
- Maintenance of private property values (home values)
- Resolving or responding to land use conflicts
- Political conflicts or opportunities with the city
- For access to needed services or programs
- Sense of place and place attachment

Neighborhood residents are often motivated by a wide variety of spoken and unspoken factors. Experiences of vulnerability — either firsthand or observed, can actually motivate residents to join a local association or increase participation as an existing member. Frequency of meetings is also an indicator of different kinds of organizations and the challenges of social inequality faced by the residents of a particular location. In Kansas City we find that homes owners associations and neighborhoods with high income and low vulnerability of residents tend to meet infrequently and often only once a year for the full membership. In contrast, neighborhood associations that represent diverse urban neighborhoods with high levels of vulnerable households typically meet

monthly (for full membership), and when they are well-organized — may meet weekly (for leaders and committees).

A very different type of organization is the home owners association (HOA). These organizations are typically set up prior to the development of a particular real estate subdivision and membership is typically required as a function of property ownership. Dues are required and the HOA may have powers to enforce the payment of dues. While homeowners tend to drive the leadership of these organizations, the character of membership typically provides clues to other factors at work in the neighborhood — such as aesthetic, architectural or related design issues, absentee ownership of property, aging of the properties and/or the homeowner population.

HOAs and Neighborhood Associations rarely exist in the same neighborhood at the same time. A few examples of this phenomenon are found in Kansas City neighborhoods and it typically indicates internal division, cultural and class differences between residents within the same or overlapping geography. What is perhaps more telling about the city's history of racial discrimination in residential housing is the geographic distribution of neighborhood associations versus homeowners associations. Figure 1 compares the locations of neighborhood associations with home owners associations in Kansas City Missouri today.

Figure 1 reveals that not all areas of the city are claimed by a neighborhood or home owners association. This is partially due to the land use patterns of settlement and areas with low or insufficient concentrations of residential population to warrant the formation of neighborhood groups. It should also be noted that this typology does not include groups organized for business, commercial or industrial interests.

Figure 1. Neighborhoods in Kansas City Missouri by type
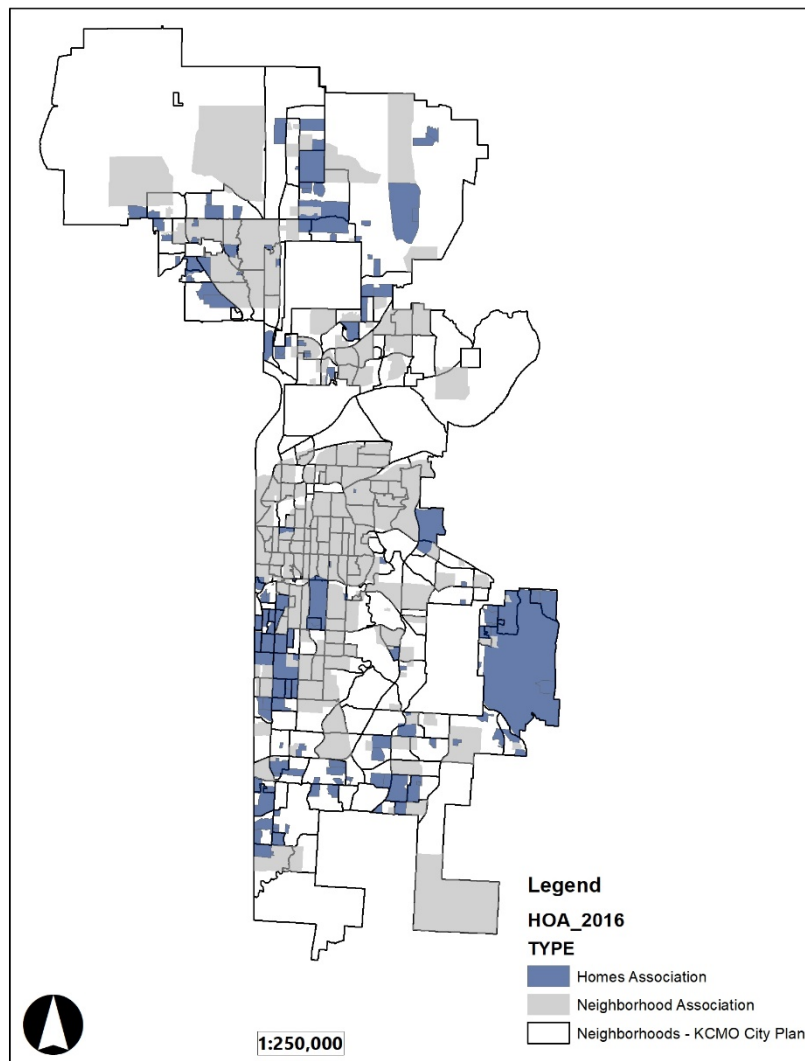
Source: own elaboration based on the mapping of KCMO data, neighborhoods by type (2016)

What may seem relatively innocuous to the casual observer, can reveal deeper patterns of underlying racialized and class history in the city's residential neighborhoods. With the exception of very few areas of the city — neighborhood associations largely represent the areas that were once redlined by the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) in 1939. In contrast, the home owners associations were largely outside of the redlined areas. Figure 2 demonstrates this racialized geography of residential associations. The geography of home owners associations largely coincides with the areas that were not redlined in 1939. In contrast areas governed by neighborhood associations within the central city were redlined areas. This geography of social organizations is itself a remnant of the racialization of neighborhood in Kansas City and the establishment of home owners associations by real estate developers as instruments from

maintaining residential segregation (see Gotham, 2002a for further detail on the historical dimension).

Figure 2. Map of Neighborhoods with 1939 HOLC Redlining
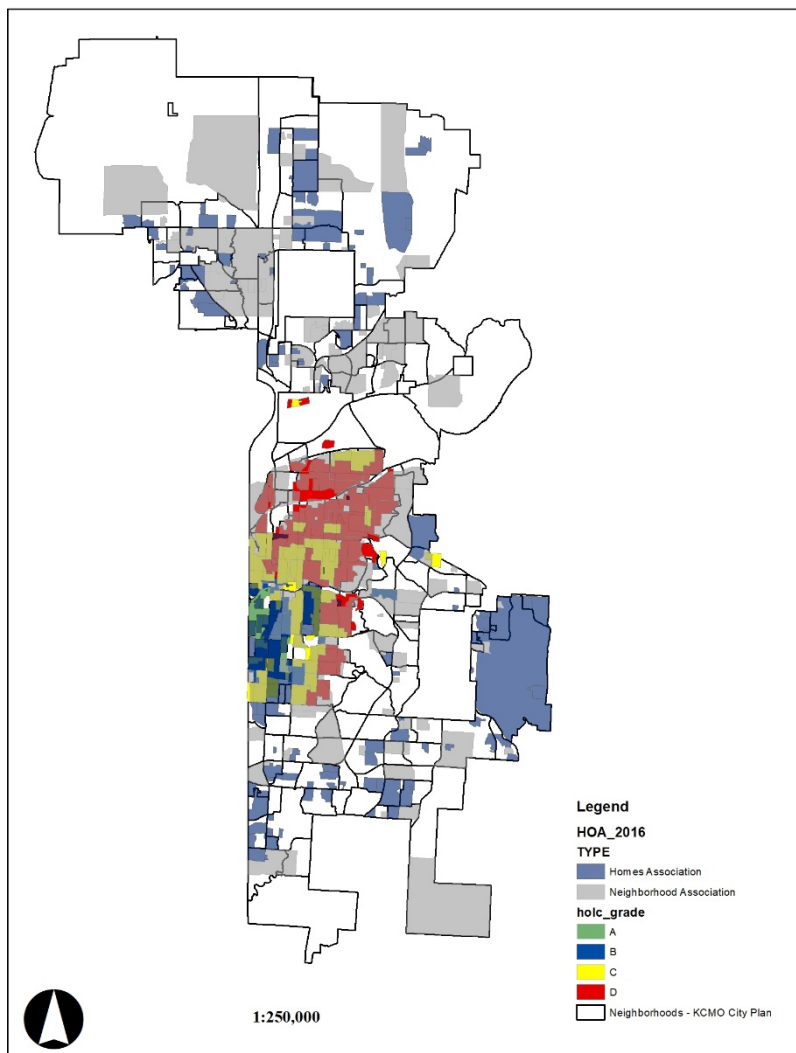
Source: own elaboration based on the mapping of KCMO data, with HOLC data (1939)

The Home Owners Loan Corporation was established as part of the federal government in the 1930s. The agency worked with local real estate agencies, property appraisers and other local actors to assess levels of "risk" for mortgage lending in cities across the United States. Neighborhoods were assigned one of four "grades" which included the category of D (red) for "Dangerous." This mapping of mortgage risk undermined existing urban neighborhoods by restricting access to capital and promoted suburbanization of White residents by "greenlining" suburban neighborhoods. More than eight decades later, these practices of federally-backed real

estate investment and disinvestment continue to shape the geography and conditions of Kansas City's neighborhoods.

3.1 Measuring risk and resilience

The United States Census Bureau recently developed a "community resilience" dataset with a stated purpose to estimate levels of resilience and risk across the country. The data are available at the census tract level and the bureau provides totals for states and counties. Sources include the 2018 sample of households (ACS) and data from the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS). According to the technical memorandum associated with the dataset, the US Census Bureau developed these community resilience estimates to provide a measure of individual and household risk that increase vulnerability and exposure in the context of a disaster, pandemic or other crisis. The data include 11 different factors that shape vulnerability at the neighborhood level (Table 1).

Table 1. Variable in the community resilience estimates

RISK FACTOR	TYPE	SOURCE
RF1: Income to Poverty Ratio (IPR)	Household	ACS
RF2: Single or zero caregiver household	Household	ACS
RF3: Residence in a high density tract	Household (Domain)	ACS
RF3a: Unit-level crowding	Household	ACS
RF4: Communication barrier	Household	ACS
RF5: No employed persons	Household	ACS
RF6: Age greater than 65	Individual (Domain)	ACS
RF7: Disability	Individual	ACS
RF8: No health insurance	Individual	ACS
RF9: Serious heart condition	Individual	NHIS
RF10: Diabetes	Individual	NHIS
RF11: Emphysema or Asthma	Individual	NHIS

Source: Technical document US Census – community resilience estimates (US Census, 2020)

The provision of a dataset on "community resilience" at the national scale with local estimates provides an important opportunity for discussion of the ways in which resilience is measured and assessed at the local level. However, there are clear limitations to this approach revealed by the results as well as what the estimates fail to measure. By focusing on resilience — or at least risk factors — at the individual and household scale, this particular estimate of "community resilience" fails to provide any evidence of how levels of resilience vary greatly — even within areas with similar levels of risk.

The risk factors used to create estimates of vulnerability and risk are based on individual or household characteristics with only one characteristic related to the neighborhood context (residence in a high density census tract). A recent update provides insights into the current modeling and how planners, public health officials and others can use the data to address vulnerability and opportunities to address resilience (US Census Bureau, 2020).

The production of a dataset for "community resilience" at the national level suggests the increased attention and growing awareness of the factors underlying exposure to risk in U.S. cities, counties and neighborhoods, especially in light of the social disparities of health revealed by COVID19. Locally, the Kansas City Missouri Health Department was well aware of these underlying disparities long before the current health crisis (RWJF, 2015).

Neighborhoods, counties and states are organized according to the number and percentage of residents in each category of low (no risk factors), medium (1-2 factors) or high risk (3 or more factors present). Thirteen counties in the State of Missouri have high levels of concentrated vulnerability. Jackson County Missouri — where the historic urban center of Kansas City is located - has the second highest percentage of residents with three or more risk factors, second only to St Louis County. As estimates, the community resilience data are limited and they do have a high margin of error. The county average for high-risk individuals is about 12,495 residents with three or more risk factors for the counties in the State of Missouri. Jackson County, where the City of Kansas City is located, has an estimated 176,181 residents with high levels of risk. In orders of magnitude — the Jackson County numbers are about 14 times the average of high-risk individuals statewide.

Looking at the neighborhood (tract) level data for Kansas City, a small group of neighborhoods is categorized as "low risk" in the city of Kansas City Missouri. These neighborhoods are some of the highest income and wealthiest neighborhoods in the entire metropolitan area. On the other

end of the spectrum, the neighborhoods featured in this research have high percentages of their residents living with risk factors and exposure to disasters and other vulnerabilities.

Two out of the three neighborhoods featured here (Lykins and Paseo West) are areas of *concentrated vulnerability* where 50% or more of residents are considered high risk - or living with three of more of the eleven potential risk factors identified in the dataset. Even with this very useful "community resilience" dataset with its attempt to estimate the underlying factors that increase vulnerability and exposure to risks and disasters, there is a missing dimension of neighborhood vulnerability and resilience, which I illuminate in this paper.

Measuring risks and estimating "community resilience" as a product of certain demographic characteristics of individuals and households leaves out the social organization and networks that help to mitigate known and unknown risks (Aguirre, 2007). While the demographic and "data-driven" approaches to mapping risk and resilience are one way to highlight known risks in specific places and provide comparative data across a large geography - they do little or nothing to measure a community's ability to respond to the known and unknown risks and disasters. For this, I turn to an analysis of the existing social organizations and place-based relationships, which are the site for developing our understanding of resilience and adaptive capacity in practice.

4   Area of study: Kansas City Region

The Kansas City region is located near the geographic center of the continental United States. The urbanized region is complex in terms of political geography as it covers parts of two states (Missouri and Kansas) and more than 11 counties. The politics of the region are complicated by more than 110 municipal and town governments, and the City of Kansas City Missouri covers parts of three different counties. Research by Massey and Denton (1993) established that the metropolitan region demonstrated conditions of hyper-segregation by race. More recent evidence from Vey (2006) and Benner and Pastor (2012) show that the hyper-segregation of the region has economic implications for the citizens of urban neighborhoods, including spatial mismatch between affordable housing and areas of job growth as well as social disparities of health and economic disparities of income and wealth.

Neighborhoods near the historic center of the City of Kansas City in Jackson County, Missouri are the focus of this research. Two hundred and forty (240) neighborhood geographies are recognized by City Planning, while approximately 300 associations have been identified that represent these geographic areas. The City consists of six council districts, 12 city council

members and a Mayor. The city government has a weak-mayor form of government, which dates to the reform politics of the mid-20th century and the end of the political regime of Boss Tom Pendergast and the rise of modern city management. The City Manager is a professional and administrative position hired by the City Council, which holds considerable power in terms of the city budget and the management of city departments.

This research looks specifically at three neighborhoods within Kansas City Missouri. Local neighborhoods are important spaces for understanding the politics of race, inequality and vulnerability in the United States, since at least 1939, the federal government and private real estate industry created a system of white privilege in neighborhood location that favored new suburban neighborhoods with racially restrictive policies to diverse urban neighborhoods (Gotham, 2002a). These historical conditions continue to shape the politics of vulnerability in United States cities, including especially the Kansas City region.

Neighborhoods are viewed here as important scales of political action and identity. Vulnerability and conditions of risk are identifiable at different geographic scales: 1) regional (both the environmental and metropolitan region), 2) the municipal scale (City of Kansas City Missouri), and 3) local — defined as the political identities that exist at the neighborhood (residential scale) level.

Regional dimensions of vulnerability are of critical importance as we consider the politics of resource distribution, access to federal funding, as well as the economic geography of jobs and housing the KC Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). A recent example of the complicated politics of federal funding, for example, highlights this regional aspect, and how political fragmentation exacerbates existing inequalities and risks for vulnerable households. The decision by the federal government under the current administration to distribute federal aid for Coronavirus response and recovery to county governments and not to cities under 500,000 population has disabled municipal governments like that of Kansas City Missouri, and favored suburban, often majority-white, political regimes at the county-level.

Political battles over federal funding in the midst of a crisis has undermined response time for the most vulnerable. This situation pitted the Jackson County MO against the City of Kansas City as federal funding for COVID relief went to the County and States instead of directly to the city. This displays the anti-urban bias of federal regime in Washington DC, which undermines existing efforts in the region to work collaboratively on issues related to equitable development policies, tax incentive reform and it more generally undermined urban municipal responses across the United States to the most neighborhoods and populations most vulnerable to COVID19. The

challenge of course is that the areas with concentrated levels of vulnerability among their resident populations were left out of direct funding and had to seek additional funds from the three county governments within its municipal boundaries.

Kansas City is not unique in this situation. It is only one of many cities facing this condition, including New Orleans and other cities with high concentrations of minority populations, an African American Mayor, and total municipal populations under 500,000. Further, this situation is not unique to the current presidential administration. In fact, the bias against cities and urban diversity is a deep ideology in the United States and one that continues to structure the politics of vulnerability and risk. From an environmental perspective — regional conditions also shape aspects of local vulnerability. This includes climate change predictions for the Kansas City region, access to clean water and other critical resources. Cities and communities in the region are also subject to extreme weather events, including drought, extreme heat, flooding and extreme cold.

Municipal dimensions of vulnerability are shaped by the history of the city and its settlement patterns, which include varying degrees of vulnerability to the above mentioned regional risks and challenges. The City of Kansas City Missouri — as the historical core of the urbanized region includes many historic neighborhoods with varying degrees of social and environmental vulnerabilities. Economic differences between the city and the suburbs provide added levels of disparity within the region while concentrated poverty within the city is often a burden not shared regionally.

Competition for limited municipal resources and the inequality within the City further complicates the issues of community resilience and vulnerability. The City contains internal competing interests — many of which are geographically based, in terms of the growth and development of the city and competition for limited public dollars. Public infrastructure and public spaces often reveal the disparity and inequity across the city and its many neighborhoods — and the improvement of public services and shared public spaces are often the major focus of local efforts by neighborhood associations.

Vulnerability and risk are unevenly distributed across the city's 240 neighborhood geographies. The city contains several areas with high levels of risk to flooding, including settlements along the Missouri and Kansas rivers, as well as several significant tributaries. Historical patterns of settlement persist with African American, Latino and working class neighborhoods often located in areas of much higher flood-risk while predominantly white suburbs continue to develop in ways that increase this flood risk in downstream locations. Urban heat island and air pollution

problems also affect diverse urban neighborhoods at higher levels than suburban neighborhoods (Hoffman et al., 2020). These problems in particular exacerbate the lives of low-income residents living with poverty and health disparities, such as diabetes, asthma and heart disease.

Mitigating factors at the neighborhood scale are significant. Large, historic parks system in the city's oldest neighborhoods can provide spaces of refuge for working class and minority communities. Efforts to increase access to public transportation have also increased within the municipality and region. A history of community organizing in the city's most vulnerable neighborhoods, as well as the growth of the community development system since 1970, have provided important counter-balances to the many vulnerabilities experienced in the city's poorest districts. Church and faith organizations provide an additional network that often responds to known risks.

4.1 Neighborhood Analysis: Community Resilience Estimates

This section of the study features three neighborhoods in Kansas City seeking to develop and sustain neighborhood self-determination and empowerment as a basis for neighborhood planning and community development. Each area struggles with significant socio-environmental challenges that increase risk and vulnerability. Despite these challenges, however, each neighborhood also contains complex social networks of organizations and individuals who help to mitigate and reduce vulnerability for their neighbors.

Table 2. Community Resilience Estimates, selected neighborhoods

NEIGHBORHOOD	HIGH RISK	MEDIUM	LOW
Paseo West	50.75% (1,963)	49.25%	0
Lykins	51.79% (1,884)	48.21%	0
Blue Hills (North)	47.15% (1,090)	52.85% (1,222)	0
Blue Hills /Citadel (South)	49.17% (1,516)	50.83% (,1567)	0

Source: US Census — community resilience estimates (US Census, 2020)

Table 2 demonstrates the high percentages of residents (and total numbers) in all three neighborhoods highlighted in this study. Blue Hills is considered one neighborhood in terms of its social organization despite the internal demographic differences. Paseo West and Lykins have

higher concentrations of residents with three or more of the risk factors identified in the 2020 Community Resilience Estimates by the US Census.

4.2 Kansas City neighborhood profiles

This section features three (3) profiles of Kansas City neighborhoods in relationship to conditions of vulnerability at the neighborhood scale. I seek to understand how neighborhood leaders experience and respond to "vulnerability" of residents and their neighborhood. Because vulnerability and exposure to social or environmental risks is context-dependent, I provide brief introductions to each neighborhood. It is impossible to understand Kansas City's neighborhoods without the above explanation of how different attitudes and beliefs about neighborhoods have shaped actually existing neighborhoods today.

Table 3. Comparative Demographic Characteristics, selected geographies

NEIGHBORHOOD	Total population	Households	Average household size	Median household income	% of metro Hhld income
Paseo West	1,050	255	2.89	$20,276	32%
Lykins	4,436	1491	2.93	$25,471	40%
Blue Hills	4,912	1957	2.44	$37,805	59%
Kansas City Metro	2,106,632	821,644	2.5	$64,020	100%

Source: US Census — ACS, 5 year estimates (2014—2018)

4.3 Neighborhood profile: Paseo West

Paseo West is a small neighborhood of about 50 city blocks wedged between the downtown highway loop and surrounding neighborhoods. The area is east of the city's central business district and about five blocks from City Hall. The highways create a formidable boundary that leaves the area cut-off from downtown (west), the riverfront (north) and several neighborhoods to the South — including the historic 18th and Vine "Jazz District" and the heart of the African American community. The Paseo West area is a mix of industrial and warehouse buildings with historical remnants of residential buildings and churches from earlier decades of development. Older structures in the area date to the late 1800s and the history of the area includes important

connections with both the history of the African American community and the legacy of immigration.

Today, a variety of community kitchens, services for people experiencing homeless, the City's Union Mission, Greyhound Bus Station and a mix of light industrial, construction and engineering firms are located in the area.   Vacant surface parking lots shape the spaces between the warehouses and buildings and semi-abandoned streets and alleys provide marginal spaces for the unsheltered residents of the area. The neighborhood is cultural diverse and includes a center for Somali residents, a small community arts center with a small theater, and several historic church buildings. Two of these historic Church buildings were demolished within the past year.

Figure 3. Map of the Paseo West Neighborhood
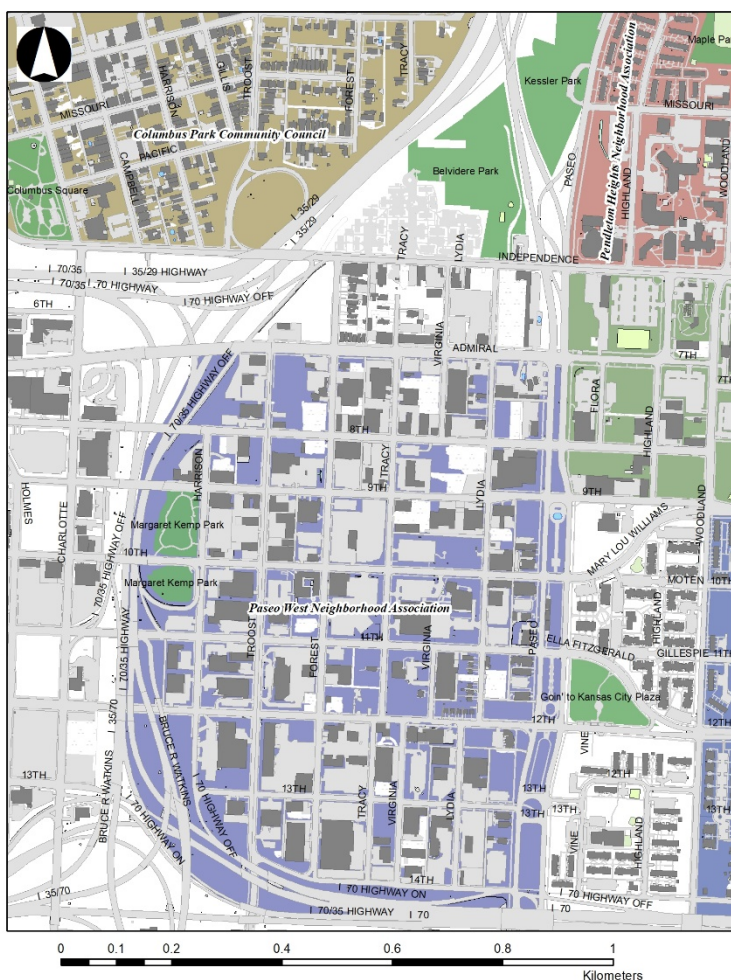
Source: own elaboration, City of KCMO GIS data (2020)

In 2016, the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) awarded a Choice Neighborhoods grant for redevelopment of the Chouteau Courts site — a former public

housing complex located in a wedge of land at the north end of the neighborhood. Based on recent activity by the Urban Land Institute (ULI) and other growth machine actors, the site appears to be coveted by luxury housing developers due to its views of nearby downtown and the Missouri River. IN the meantime however — and quite ironically, the city's Downtown Council has moved to develop temporary shelters on the site for people experiencing homelessness.

In the context of this disparate physical landscape and contested future (Figure 3), the Paseo West Neighborhood Association (PWNA) provides one of the few venues for this diverse set of organizations to come together along with residents, city and police department staff, and employees of businesses in the area. Given the heavy presence of businesses and the low residential population, the organization has the look and feel of a business association. The director of a local arts facility serves as the volunteer leader, President of the Association, and organizer. She is also a former director for a local homeless services provider and has a depth of expertise in this area.

The neighborhood has long served as a place where affordable housing and services for low-income individuals and families have been located. Several properties managed by the Housing Authority are located in and around the neighborhood. The recently demolished Chouteau Courts, for example, suggests the historical legacy of the area with public housing units located in neighborhoods and sites that were marginal at best — next to highways and intentionally hard to access. This history of affordable and marginal housing units — some of which serve a highly mobile population of individuals, continues to exist in the context of the industrial, construction and engineering businesses in the area. Earlier geographic research described the area more than 27 years ago (Rollinson, 1998) and the everyday lives of people experiencing homelessness.

The neighborhood organization has begun a process of redoubling its efforts to improve the pedestrian environment of the area. A variety of factors are influencing this focus: 1) high levels of vulnerability and people experiencing homelessness, 2) proximity to the downtown business districts, and 3) recent development of new affordable housing built along The Paseo Boulevard (see Figure 3) as part of the aforementioned Paseo Gateway Choice neighborhoods Project funded by HUD.

In conversations with the neighborhood leadership, it is clear that the vulnerability is perceived as a matter of the extreme social exposure of residents to economic and inter-personal risks. Many of the organization's efforts are focused on safety, working with community police officers, local

service providers. The group also works with local business owners to stabilize the area and respond to opportunities for physical neighborhood improvement.

Recent homicides in the past three years were top of mind for the leaders and a consistent focus of local news coverage. In some cases these appear to involve religious or ethnic differences among residents of the area as well as visitors attending services at a local mosque. Much of the geography of homelessness described by Hollinson (1998) is largely intact in the Paseo West neighborhood. With a few minor relocations to different buildings or expansions of shelters, the area retains its role as provided of shelter for many of the region's most vulnerable individuals. The move to redevelop the Paseo Gateway removed several motels that were also used as temporary shelters while new housing units have been relocated further away from the highway in much better physical locations.

Environmental vulnerabilities, such as heat island effects or climate change were not at the forefront of conversations or Neighborhood meeting agendas. The adaptive capacity of the organization to COVID19 has been moderate or low. Like many neighborhoods led by volunteers, the organization took several months to reconfigure and adapt to managing activities in the context of social distancing requirements. Lack of paid staff is clearly a challenge and promoting new leaders to join has been difficult. Development of new affordable housing units in the area and the growth of the population experiencing homelessness, however, suggests a growing need for the organization to continue its efforts.

4.4 Neighborhood profile: Lykins

The Lykins Neighborhood is also east of downtown and in a district known locally as the Historic Northeast. The Neighborhood boundaries include several hard edges created by busy streets, the highway and the railroad. The area was built in the late 1800s and has served as an area for working class families in the railroad, local industries and warehouse and shipping businesses that once served the entire midwestern United States.

The population of Lykins today is ethnically and racially diverse with a mix of Latino, White, African American and immigrant communities from around the world. The leadership has sought to increase its capacity dramatically in the past five years while maintaining affordability for the diverse, working class residents and new immigrant families. According to recent census estimates (ACS, 2018), 75% of the area's residents were considered "poor or struggling." The quality of existing housing is highly variable from house to house and block to block. The area struggles with vices such as prostitution and other forms of unlawful entertainment.

Figure 4. Map of the Lykins neighborhood

Source: own elaboration, City of KCMO GIS data (2020)

Leadership in Lykins began as all-volunteer and is moving toward a model of nonprofit organization led by an Executive Director (paid) with a mix of volunteers, part-time paid "staff," the occasional university interns and task-oriented contractors to help with specific projects. Volunteer leaders have brought new energy and high levels of capacity with previous experience in business, non-profit legal assistance and other fields. Landlords and building contractors, new immigrants, small business owners and mix of residents also make up the membership, A local "maker space" provides a location for meetings (prior to COVID19) and until the organization builds a new building for its offices.

The main focus of the efforts of this diverse mix of neighborhood leaders and volunteers is neighborhood stabilization, safety and affordable housing. Vulnerability is understood in social terms focused on the physical improvement of the neighborhood as well as basic social and community services to minimize the impacts of many different forms and experiences of urban

inequality. The adaptive capacity of the organization to COVID19 is high. Volunteers and employees have demonstrated HIGH capacity to adapt to COVID, sustain and even increase outreach during the pandemic — despite the need to change methods.

The neighborhood association has also identified a recent increase in homelessness and has sought creative ways to address the issue by engaging the people experiencing homelessness in the neighborhood organization through neighborhood clean-ups and other activities. Unlike Paseo West, however, the area does not contain shelter facilities and housing of the homeless is a growing concern in the context of both COVID19 and the colder winter weather.

4.5 Neighborhood profile: Blue Hills and Citadel

In contrast to the Paseo West and Lykins neighborhoods, Blue Hills is located in a more suburban location south of the city center and Brush Creek — a local tributary to the Blue River watershed and Missouri river. The neighborhood has lower levels of concentrated poverty and vulnerability than the first two neighborhoods featured here, but still faces significant challenges related to the history of racialized vulnerability and disinvestment.

The Blue Hills Neighborhood is a predominantly African American Neighborhood in terms of demographics and identity. The area includes a northern section with greater levels of vacancy and lower population densities. The southern section south of 55th Street includes a mixed variety of housing and a subdivision within the area called Citadel. This area is a Homeowners Association that Works closely with the Blue Hills Neighborhood Association. The Blue Hills neighborhood leadership operates with a well-organized, team-based approach. They maintain high levels of organizational capacity over the past 20 years — despite significant challenges.

The organization owns and manages a former single-family house as a headquarters and runs a variety of programs and committees that help to build community and reduce the vulnerability and decline of the neighborhood. The area is predominantly residential neighborhood, with high levels of rentals and housing evictions over the past 15 years. There is a significant base of owner-occupied units whose owners provide the bulk of neighborhood leadership. The neighborhood has demonstrated significant levels of adaptive capacity, although the aging of the neighborhood leadership remains a concern.

Figure 5. Blue Hills neighborhood and Citadel
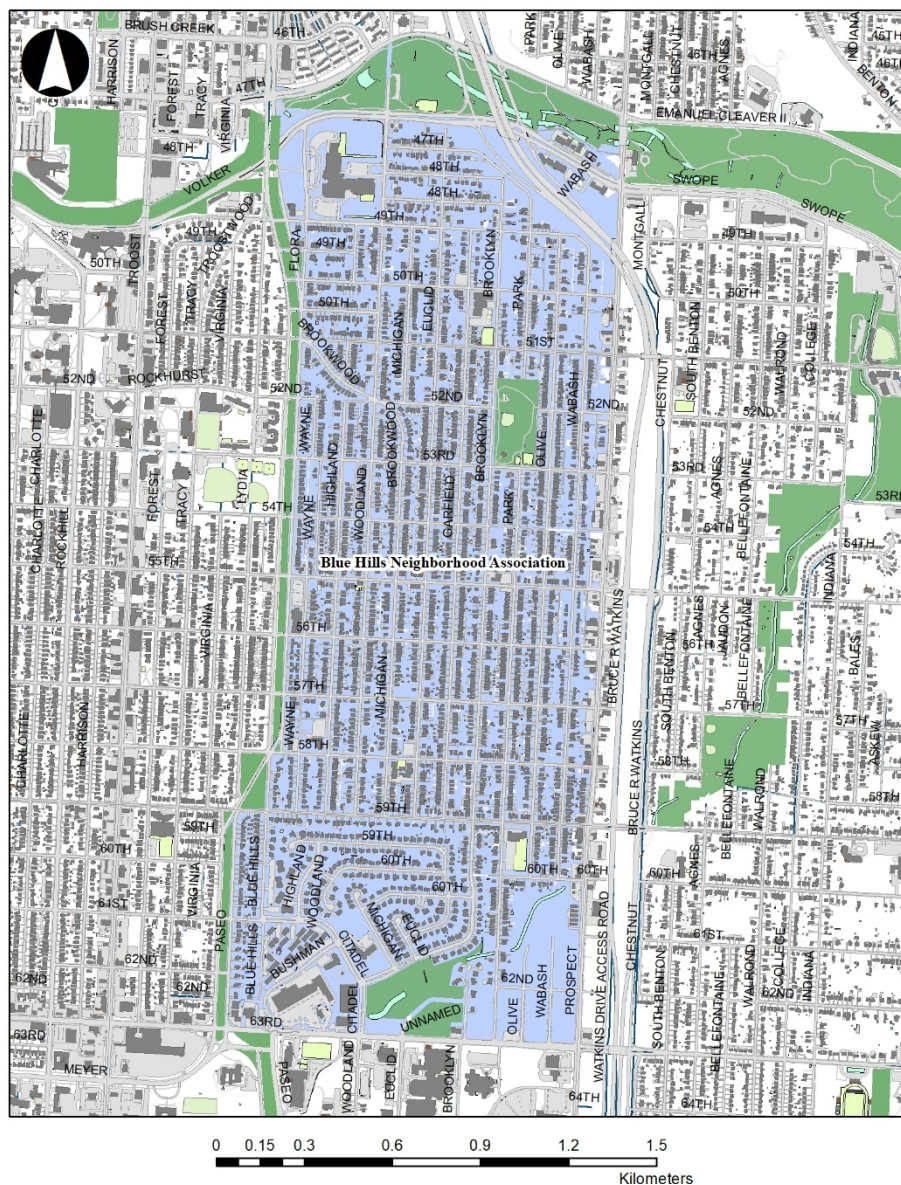
Source: own elaboration, City of KCMO GIS data (2020)

5 Discussion

Risk and vulnerability in the United States are racialized and Kansas City Missouri is no exception. The city's historical legacy of racially-biased real estate practices has generated a geography of inequality in which race and ethnicity are a key factor. In the three neighborhoods profiled in this study, the racialization of each neighborhood — both in historical terms and in the current moment — plays an important role in the politics of vulnerability. Fortunately, a genuinely enlightened group of neighborhood leaders seems well aware of this historical context in which neighborhood inequality is situated. With a few exceptions, neighborhoods leaders recognize

the racial disparities of wealth and income that continue to shape neighborhood health outcomes, local housing and economic conditions.

Community resilience estimates generated by the United States Census Bureau (2020) provide evidence of the limits of quantitative approaches for the measurement of resilience at a community scale (Aguirre, 2007). When "community resilience" is defined by the aggregation of individual and household characteristics and neighborhood-scale data are biased against dense and diverse urban neighborhoods, it is nearly impossible to make sense of the factors that actually contribute to community-scale resilience in diverse urban neighborhoods.

Two measures in particular — "residence in a high-density census tract" and "unit-level crowding" are biased against urban locations and culturally-diverse urban households. This bias against urbanism distorts estimates of "community" resilience by over-estimating the resilience of higher-wealth families in more suburban and white neighborhoods while under-estimating the resilience of culturally and ethnically diverse households in more dense urban neighborhoods. Research on housing policies and "overcrowding" have been shown to be biased against households from culturally diverse backgrounds, especially Mexican American families (Pader, 1994). Sociocultural biases in housing data (i.e. unit level crowding) assume that persons per room is evidence of a risk for vulnerability and underestimates the cultural and emotional well-being of families. Treating "RF3a: Unit-level crowding" as evidence of a lack of resilience imposes a culturally-biased view of household dynamics on diverse urban households. This is especially problematic for the Lykins neighborhood where 44% of the total population is Latino and 52% of the foreign-born population in the neighborhood originates from Mexico (ACS 2018).

Further, as is evident from the literature and the case studies provided here — community resilience by definition should include a measure of the ways in which associations and social networks mobilize to address known vulnerabilities (Aguirre, 2007) and communicate about local conditions in ways that may provide early warning systems for new or emerging risks.

In contrast to the US Census Bureau's view of "community resilience," this paper provides evidence that three urban neighborhoods in Kansas City, Missouri, despite high levels of household and individual risk factors, are organizing to reduce the vulnerability of their residents through neighborhood organizing and the transformation of spatial conditions. Capacity for neighborhood development is one key measure of the ability to respond to the conditions that generate neighborhood inequality and vulnerability. In all three neighborhoods there is a focus

on the physical improvements of neighborhood spaces as a means to reduce vulnerability. On the private side, this includes new affordable housing provision and improvement of existing homes. On the public side it includes a focus on parks, public spaces and sidewalks as important components of public health and safety.

Figure 6. Blue Hills ground-breaking for a new park

Source: Miles Brown, UMKC Center for Neighborhoods (2020)

In the context of governmental inaction or political conflict that results in government paralysis, neighborhood residents cannot afford to wait for government agencies to provide much needed neighborhood improvements and services. Further, given the high prevalence of a market-based approach to new housing development in Kansas City, neighborhoods cannot rely on market-based actors to build new housing in areas of concentrated poverty. Further, local government is stymied by the lack of action at the State and Federal levels to support low-cost housing provision.

While there are limits to local neighborhood capacity, it is clear from these three cases that small amounts of technical support, capacity building, and fundraising can go a long way to mobilize local residents to combat conditions of vulnerability. In all three neighborhoods presented, local associations spend considerable time and effort on maintenance and improvement of the physical environment of the neighborhood, including public spaces. This improvement of public spaces — including public and neighborhood-owned parks provides an important and visible space for

neighborhood empowerment. Applications to the city for public funding to improve public infrastructure were a high priority for all three neighborhoods.

In Paseo West, where neighborhood residential populations are low and the population of people experiencing homelessness is high — local parks and public spaces are contested and local leaders emphasized a concern about public safety of residents, visitors and employees of local industrial businesses. In Lykins, the neighborhood association has marshaled significant resources outside of city government to plan for public improvements in a local park. This has included design charrettes, work with the city parks department, neighborhood acquisition of publicly-held, surplus property, and independently raising funds for park improvements — including public art amenities.   Housing improvements and concerns around vacant and abandoned properties (with and without structures) also remain a high priority and focus for the local organization.

In Blue Hills/Citadel, the neighborhood leadership has focused on a variety of local land use issues including regular neighborhood clean-ups to reduce illegal dumping, conversion of vacant lots into pocket parks, and improvement of shared spaces throughout the neighborhoods. Larger projects — such as redevelopment of abandoned elementary school buildings and sites remain a challenge, but the neighborhood leaders have actively engaged in efforts to repair and rebuild these publicly-held properties and to create new public spaces for the well-being of local residents (Figure 6).

In all three cases, neighborhood empowerment is a slow process facing great hurdles and setbacks. However, there is clear evidence that the most vulnerable neighborhoods in Kansas City (as defined by the Census Bureau's estimates) are actively creating new initiatives that generate greater resilience through community-driven action.

6 Conclusion

Despite considerable internal challenges and high levels of individual and household risk, volunteer, place-based organizations can provide important counter-balances to the vulnerability of urban neighborhoods and residents. These organizations are important venues for developing greater community resilience at the neighborhood scale. The research presented here demonstrates the ways in which three urban neighborhoods in Kansas City Missouri have responded to acute crisis of COVID19 as well as underlying and chronic challenges of neighborhood disinvestment and racialized housing discrimination.

From evidence observed in Kansas City, it is clear that important examples of innovation and experimentation in *adaptive capacity* — not to mention bold new initiatives for social change, are born of the struggle to reduce vulnerability. It is in the places labeled as "disadvantaged," "vulnerable," "at-risk" or defined by the absence of certain resources where adaptive capacity is generated out of sheer necessity

Neighborhoods with high levels of vulnerability as well as awareness of vulnerability may have higher levels of adaptive capacity to deal with known and unknown risks. As Aguirre (2007) has stated — higher incomes alone do not translate into less risky behavior or choices — nor does greater wealth automatically generate higher levels of community resilience. Neighborhood organizations — largely volunteer associations of citizens who reside within an area of the city — are too often overlooked in the work of building community resilience, responding to crisis and disasters, or reducing urban inequality. In our search for new models of political action and multi-level governance it would be easy to overlook these informal citizen associations. Recent urban disasters in the United States, however, demonstrate the importance of local voluntary associations as first responders and workers who plan for the post-disaster cities while they respond to the current crisis (Aguirre, 2007; Irazabal & Neville, 2007). Much of this work involves the unpaid and voluntary intellectual and physical labor of small armies of local leaders — many of whom would eschew the title itself. Rather than dismiss these informal associations simply as antiquated or mundane, we argue that in the context of rebuilding a more just city from the ruins of this unjust society, neighborhood and community organizations are a vital laboratory for social innovation and adaptive capacity.

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