

“Metropolitan Resilience, Precarious Housing, and the Durable State of Concentrated Poverty”

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Rolf Pendall is director of the Metropolitan Housing & Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute. In this role, he leads a team of over 40 experts on a broad array of housing, community development, and economic development topics, consistent with the Urban Institute’s nonpartisan, evidence-based approach to economic and social policy. Pendall’s research expertise includes federal, state, and local affordable housing policy and programs; land-use planning and regulation; metropolitan growth patterns; and racial residential segregation and the concentration of poverty. He currently leads the institute’s evaluation of the HUD Choice Neighborhoods demonstration; a HUD-funded research study on the transportation needs of housing choice voucher users; and a project funded by Living Cities to understand the federal Partnership for Sustainable Communities, which coordinates activities among HUD, the U.S. Department of Transportation, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Between 1998 and mid-2010, Pendall was a professor in the Department of City and Regional Planning at Cornell University.

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Summary and Findings: Our key research question is, why do we see persistence, recurrence, and new emergence of concentrated poverty in certain neighborhoods and metro areas? We explore whether precarious housing constitutes a durable substrate on which personal or household vulnerability predictably emerges and recurs. While our prior research demonstrated the links between precarious housing and vulnerability at the household level (Pendall, Theodos, and Franks, 2012), this analysis has not previously been extended to factors unique to neighborhoods and broader metro areas. Our paper then addresses a follow-on question: do the neighborhood-level links between precarious housing and vulnerability exhibit the same patterns across metro areas—and, if not, how does the relationship between precarious housing and vulnerability differ across metros? We find that precarious housing, especially old housing and rental housing, consistently augurs poverty growth, imperiling metropolitan resilience. Vulnerable people concentrate disproportionately in specific precarious housing types. As those housing types concentrate in specific neighborhoods, this yields concentrated poverty. Every metro has “habitats of poverty,” but not all are equally concentrated. Different precarious housing types predict the formation of habitats of poverty, varying by metro.

Implications for Policy and Practice: By examining household and housing characteristics, we have laid the groundwork for a more robust approach toward tackling concentrated disadvantage within the context of fostering more resilient metropolitan areas. We have established that precarious housing types concentrate within neighborhoods, and relate to changes in poverty. Reducing precariousness in housing is valuable in its own right, but takes on added import given these findings. The current political, social, and economic environment hinders a coordinated response to concentrated vulnerability. Responses often focus on a single vulnerability while ignoring other challenges within the same person or household. There is much the federal government, together with states, localities, and interjurisdictional organizations, can do to help metro areas become more resilient to precarious housing conditions. In accomplishing this work, it is important to keep at the forefront that metro areas have widely different challenges and are affected differentially by precarious housing.