Community Development

Improving downtown in a mid-sized legacy city: examining responses to potential downtown improvements in Flint, Michigan

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Improving downtown in a mid-sized legacy city: examining responses to potential downtown improvements in Flint, Michigan

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While many researchers have examined strategies for revitalizing downtowns, few have done so in small or mid-sized legacy cities. This article adds to the literature by examining 1263 survey responses to statements about potential improvements to the downtown area of Flint, Michigan (USA). Descriptive statistics were used to identify perceptions of the most promising strategies for improvement. Those strategies were further analyzed using regression methods, to determine which characteristics of participants influenced responses. We found that while there are many improvements that might encourage people to come downtown – such as reducing crime, having more to do, making parking easier, and having suitable housing – some traditional improvements advocated by planners (involving proximity, walkability, and bikeability) were not desired. Additionally, we found that responses appeared to be influenced by age, residency status, and perception of downtown, but not by education level, frequency of visiting, or whether or not one currently works downtown.

Keywords: central business district; redevelopment; revitalization; shrinking city; fear of crime

Introduction

Legacy cities (also known as shrinking cities) are cities that have experienced substantial population losses for decades, due in large part, to deindustrialization (Schilling & Mallach, 2012). Detroit, Michigan, is one of the most well-known American legacy cities, given the numerous newspaper articles, books, and academic publications that have detailed its decline (e.g. Binelli, 2012; Davey & Walsh, 2013; LeDuff, 2013; Vojnovic et al., 2014). Although large legacy cities like Detroit have received a great deal of attention from the media and the research community, the same has not been true for smaller legacy cities, which are in fact far more prevalent. The J. Max Bond Center at the City College of New York (2014) has identified 48 legacy cities in the United States with populations greater than 50,000. Of these 48 legacy cities, 36 have populations of fewer than 300,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Thus, small- to mid-sized legacy cities outnumber larger legacy cities by at least a ratio of three to one, yet we rarely hear about them. Considering their prevalence, researchers and policy makers need to take notice of small- to mid-sized legacy cities and examine how they compare with more famous legacy cities like Detroit.

This study contributes to the literature by examining questions regarding downtown revitalization in the mid-sized legacy city of Flint, Michigan. Flint's population in 2010

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was about 102,000, down from a peak of nearly 200,000 in the 1960s (Houseal Lavigne Associates, 2013; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The city's population has declined for decades, due, in part, to the closure of several automobile manufacturing facilities and suppliers. The subsequent erosion of the city's economic base contributed to common legacy city challenges such as unemployment and property abandonment, which further increase demand for services (e.g. schools, fire, police) at a time when the city has reduced capacity (Cohen, 2001; Cowie & Heathcott, 2003; Oswalt, 2006; Schilling, 2002; Temple University, 2001). To break this cycle of decay, it is vital for cities like Flint to retain current residents, attract new residents, and encourage new investment.

A recent study by Mallach and Brachman (2013) underscores why Flint is an important city to study. They selected eighteen legacy cities and ranked the strength of each city using fifteen separate indicators. Of the eighteen cities studied, Flint was ranked 18th (i.e. the worst) based on overall indicators of distress, immediately behind Detroit and Youngstown, Ohio. Furthermore, Mallach and Bachman found that certain legacy cities, such as Baltimore and Pittsburgh, are gaining young people between the ages of 25 and 34 despite overall population losses. Yet Flint is actually losing people between the ages of 25 and 34 at a rate faster than that of other age groups. Going forward, it is vital for Flint to figure out ways to retain its residents, especially its young people.

We believe that Flint's wider population loss can be slowed by strengthening its central city core. Currently, Flint's overall population continues to shrink while its downtown population slowly grows. Although the downtown population increased by only 189 people from 2000 to 2010, this represented the largest growth of any neighborhood in the city (Houseal Lavigne Associates, 2013). Local policy makers want to build upon this success by implementing further improvements to encourage even more people to visit and to live downtown. A lively downtown is important because it can create jobs for current residents, attract new residents, increase the city's tax base, and improve the quality of life for citizens both inside and outside of the city (Speck, 2012). A strong downtown can serve as a starting point from which to revitalize other parts of the city. Among their recommendations for regenerating legacy cities, Mallach and Brachman (2013) suggest rebuilding the central city core and reestablishing the central economic role of the city. The question is how to do this.

Cities like Flint may not be able to attract major investments from private foundations and individuals on a scale like Detroit (Austen, 2014); therefore, it may be necessary to take a different approach to improving the central city core. Although researchers have documented an increased interest in urban living, especially among young people (Benfield, 2014; Birch, 2006), few studies have specifically examined why or how the downtowns of small to mid-sized legacy cities might rebound. A number of studies have examined the effectiveness of various tools in attracting people to downtowns, such as stadium building and entertainment (Chapin, 2004; McCarthy, 2002), tax increment financing (Grueling, 1987), business improvement districts (Mitchell, 2001), and creative parking and open space schemes (Robertson, 1995). Still, few researchers have simply asked people what would encourage them to visit or to live downtown, especially in a legacy city context. Fewer still have examined how downtowns in small- to mid-sized legacy cities might rebound. It is well established that downtowns have declined due to factors such as suburban sprawl and the movement of retail (Birch, 2009; Faulk, 2006). However, these trends appear to be reversing, even in cities like Flint. Thus, it is important to reevaluate the reasons people may choose to visit or live downtown today.

Many researchers have noted increased interest in urban living, especially among young people (Benfield, 2014; Birch, 2006). A larger legacy city like Detroit may appeal to some young people due to its "hip," rustbelt image (Drennig, 2014), whereas smaller legacy cities like Flint may not hold such an attraction. To encourage the continued revival of Flint's downtown, it is important to understand basic factors that may encourage people to visit and to live downtown, and why certain strategies may or may not work in Flint.

To examine these issues, we conducted a survey study that asked participants to respond to a number of statements about potential downtown improvements. The statements reflected variables hypothesized to influence the likelihood of visiting or living downtown. These variables were selected based on existing literature and the interests and scope of the city's downtown development authority. See Table 1 for details. The

Table 1. Hypothesized relationships and supporting literature.

Attractors to downtown	Hypothesized relationship	Measured using statements about	Supporting literature
City services	As city services in the downtown improve, more people will want to visit and live in the downtown	• Crime • Public schools • Public transit • Recycling	Billingham (2015), Birch (2002), Jaffe (2014), Lett (2015), Meyer-Emerick (2012), Milder (1987), Varady (1990)
Atmosphere and vitality	As the downtown's atmosphere and vitality improve, more people will want to visit and live in the downtown	• More to do downtown • Music events and festivals • Attractiveness (better looking) • Family-friendly atmosphere	Campo and Ryan (2008), Heath (1997), Jacobs (1961), Robertson (2004), Springer (c. 2005), Tillotson (2010), Willcocks (2011)
Accessibility	As the downtown becomes more accessible and pedestrian friendly, more people will want to visit and live downtown	• Bikeability • Bike lanes and racks • Walkability • Public Transit • Parking • Distance from home and work	Cervero and Kockelman (1997), Dill (2009), Newman and Kenworthy (1999), Nielson (2014), Robertson (1999), Rybarczyk and Gallagher (2014), Springer (c. 2005), Suzuki, Cervero, and Iuchi (2013)
Diversity of land uses	As the number and variety of land uses increase in the downtown, more people will want to visit and live downtown	• Recognized retailers • Unique restaurants • Desirable housing • Housing costs • Restaurant chains	Alter (2013), Birch (2002), Heath (1997), Jacobs (1961), Kenny and Zimmerman (2004), Nielson (2014)

statements receiving the highest mean and modal responses from participants were presumed to be the most important improvements (within the study's available set) for encouraging a person to visit or to live in downtown Flint.

In addition to identifying strategic improvements, we were interested in knowing whether survey responses differed based on specific participant characteristics such as age, education level, residency status, frequency of visiting downtown, and perceptions of downtown. This type of information is important for policy makers to understand which strategies may be most effective for different segments of the population. For example, it may be useful to examine responses by age, given young people's increased interest in urban living (Benfield, 2014; Birch, 2006) and baby-boomers' tendency to value downtown features like walkability more as they age (Sohmer & Lang, 2003). Similarly, it may be important to examine responses by education level if the intent is to attract the "creative class" to the downtown (Florida, 2003). A respondent's residency status may also influence their response. City residents might view the downtown as a place where basic needs are met given the poor economic conditions in some city neighborhoods and their relative proximity to downtown. Conversely, non-residents might consider the downtown to be a place for entertainment. Finally, we examined how often participants visit the downtown, and whether they believe the downtown is already improving (the perception variable). Given Flint's high overall crime rate and the associated negative media attention (e.g. Badenhausen, 2013; Goff, 2014; Harris, 2014), people who already visit the downtown may have a different perception of the crime factor compared to people who do not visit. Thus, current visitors may express different priorities about what should be improved.

Methods

Study participants were recruited by both a foot survey and a mailed survey. The foot survey was conducted in March of 2013 by talking to people on the streets of downtown Flint, and by dropping off surveys at downtown employers (306 people participated to form the convenience sample). Recognizing that only surveying people who were downtown would be insufficient (since the more important question is how to attract new visitors and residents), we used a database of county addresses and a random numbers generator to mail surveys in May of 2013 to randomly selected households in Genesee County, the county in which the city of Flint is centrally located. We had 957 respondents at this stage of the survey (representing a 16% response rate, see the limitations section at the end of this article). Since both the foot and mailed survey efforts were combined in one database and analyzed together (total $n = 1263$), the data were checked to see whether the responses differed by sampling group. We found that responses on only one item differed ("I would consider living downtown if it was closer to my work"); therefore, we are confident that combining the survey efforts did not bias the results.

Additionally, we used the American Community Survey's (ACS) 2013 five-year estimates to check whether our sample differed from the Genesee county population in terms of education, age, and race. We found that our participants were much more educated than the county population as a whole, with 58.4% of the sample having obtained a college degree compared to only 28.4% of county residents. We also compared the ages of participants to the county population in five-year age brackets and found that we had greater participation from upper middle-aged persons with 23.8% of our sample being between 55 and 64 years old, compared to only 12.8% for the county. Finally, because we did not collect data on participants' races, we used geographic information

systems and ACS block-group-level data to estimate the probability of each participant being either Caucasian or African-American.[1] The estimation process was only possible because Genesee County is highly segregated (Highsmith, 2009), making home location a strong indicator of race. We estimated that 73.6% of our participants were likely Caucasian and 21.1% were likely African-American. These estimates are very close to the county-level estimates of 74.7% Caucasian and 20.4% African-American. Information on gender was not collected as part of the surveying effort, nor was gender interpolated like race, because gender is not known to be residentially segregated.

Each participant was asked to assign a score, ranging from 1 to 5, indicating the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each of 28 statements about potential downtown improvements – 14 statements about changes that might encourage them to *visit* downtown more often and 14 statements about changes that might encourage them to *live* downtown. These statements, along with their respective measures of central tendency, are listed in Tables 1 and 2. A score of 5 indicated "strongly agree," 4 indicated "agree," 3 indicated "no opinion," 2 indicated "disagree," and 1 indicated "strongly disagree." Statements receiving a mean response of 3.5 or above or a modal response of 4 (both of which correspond to "agree" on the scale) were deemed most important, as they were presumed to identify potentially effective strategies. Of the original 28 statements, 10 qualified as potentially effective strategies.

Responses to each of these 10 statements were separately analyzed using multivariate, simultaneous regression to determine whether they were influenced by any one of the six personal characteristics (i.e. age, education level, residency status, frequency of visiting downtown, perceptions of downtown, and whether or not a person worked downtown). Multivariate regression was used (instead of multinomial regression) since responses to 25 of the 28 statements were normally distributed. Of the statements reflecting strategies important in attracting *visitors* to downtown, none were so strongly correlated to warrant combination using factor analysis or a similar method ($r < .58$ for all pairs of statements). However, strong correlations existed among statements deemed

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the statement "I would visit downtown more often if …".

	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Median	Mode
Crime was reduced[a]	1162	4.12	1.079	4	5
There was more to do downtown[a]	1150	3.86	.979	4	4
There were more music events and festivals (like art walk)[a]	1162	3.82	.979	4	4
Parking was easier[a]	1171	3.80	1.081	4	4
It was more attractive (better looking)[a]	1151	3.70	1.032	4	4
There were more unique restaurants[a]	1165	3.67	1.021	4	4
It was more walkable	1150	3.48	1.061	3	3
There were more recognized retailers (such as Walgreens, Petsmart, and Staples)[a]	1161	3.12	1.236	3	4
Bike lanes and bike racks were readily available	1135	3.12	1.010	3	3
It was more bikeable	1148	3.11	1.004	3	3
Public transportation was easier to use	1139	2.98	1.030	3	3
It was closer to my home	1128	2.89	1.052	3	3
There were more restaurant chains (such as Panera, McDonalds, and Wendy's)	1161	2.78	1.235	3	2
Nothing. I will never come to downtown Flint	1088	1.68	.945	1	1

[a]Indicates regression model was run for this statement.

important in encouraging people to *live* downtown. Nonetheless, it was not useful to combine these statements since the individually they produced distinct regression results. A family-wise *p* value of .05 was adopted and, with a Bonferroni correction to control for the number of analyses run (10 analyses, i.e. one for each qualifying statement), a *p* value of .005 (.05/10) was used to test the statistical significance of responses to individual statements.

Measurement of the independent variables

Age, a continuous variable, was determined by asking each participant to indicate the year he or she was born and then converting that year to a specific age. Education level, an ordinal variable, ranged from some high school to college graduate. Residency status was treated as a dichotomous variable – either the participant was a resident of Flint (coded 1) or not (coded 0). Frequency of visiting downtown, an ordinal variable, ranged from 0 to 5 with 0 indicating "never" and 5 indicating "several times per week." The perceptual variable, also ordinal, measured responses to "How strongly do you agree with the following statement: Overall, I think that downtown Flint is improving." Responses ranged from "strongly disagree" (coded 1) to "strongly agree" (coded 5). Finally, whether or not a participant worked downtown was treated as a dichotomous variable – either a participant worked downtown more than one day per week (coded 1) or worked downtown less than one day per week or not at all (both coded 0).

Findings

Visiting downtown

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for the statements about visiting downtown. The improvements rated as potentially effective, in descending order of means, were as follows: crime reduction, more to do downtown, more music events and festivals, easier parking, making downtown more attractive/better looking, and more unique restaurants. The statement about more recognized retailers was also included in the effective group given that the modal response was 4.

The following six strategies did not receive favorable responses: improving walkability, adding bike lanes and bike racks, improving bikeability, making public transit easier to use, having downtown be closer to home, and having more restaurant chains. The statement, "I will never come to downtown Flint" also had a mean below 3.5, which corresponds to "disagree" on the survey.

Regression analysis

The improvements thought to be potentially effective for attracting people to visit or to live downtown (that is, those statements with a mean of 3.5 or a mode of 4) were separately analyzed to see whether responses were influenced by personal characteristics (age, education level, residency, frequency of visiting downtown, perceptions of downtown, and working downtown).

Table 3 shows the regression results for the statements about visiting downtown. One can see that age, residency, and perception were the only personal characteristics that influenced the responses to the statements about crime, more to do downtown, and music events and festivals. For the crime question, the negative regression coefficient for age indicated that as age increased, agreement with the statement about crime

Table 3. Participant characteristics affecting responses to statements about visiting downtown Flint.

Dependent variable	Independent variable	B	Standard error of B	Beta	t	Sig.	95% CI lower	95% CI upper
Crime	Age	−.010	.002	−.155	−4.726	<.001	−.014	−.006
	Education	−.032	.047	−.021	−.671	.502	−.124	.061
	Residency	−.236	.069	−.109	−3.422	.001	−.371	−.100
	Visitation	−.060	.027	−.103	−2.203	.028	−.114	−.007
	Perception	−.198	.038	−.173	−5.170	<.001	−.274	−.123
	Work	−.195	.098	−.088	−2.004	.045	−.387	−.004
More to do	Age	−.013	.002	−.225	−6.985	<.001	−.017	−.010
	Education	.051	.043	.037	1.91	.234	−.033	.134
	Residency	.256	.062	.129	4.132	<.001	.134	.377
	Visitation	.013	.025	.025	.541	.589	−.053	.061
	Perception	.196	.035	.187	5.665	<.001	.128	.264
	Work	.010	.087	.005	.118	.906	−.161	.182
Music events & festivals	Age	−.014	.002	−.234	−7.434	<.001	−.017	−.010
	Education	.057	.042	.042	1.362	.174	−.025	.139
	Residency	.227	.061	.114	3.730	<.001	.108	.347
	Visitation	.027	.024	.051	1.137	.256	−.020	.075
	Perception	.274	.034	.261	8.063	<.001	.208	.341
	Work	−.224	.086	−.110	−2.600	.009	−.392	−.055
Parking	Age	−.004	.002	−.059	−1.740	.082	−.008	.000
	Education	.064	.050	.042	1.268	.205	−.035	.162
	Residency	.164	.073	.074	2.243	.025	.021	.307
	Visitation	−.031	.029	−.052	−1.078	.281	−.088	.026
	Perception	−.094	.041	−.080	−2.307	.021	−.174	−.014
	Work	−.202	.103	−.089	−1.959	.050	−.405	.000
Attractiveness	Age	−.007	.002	−.119	−3.486	.001	−.011	−.003
	Education	.084	.047	.059	1.760	.079	−.010	.117
	Residency	.106	.069	.051	1.534	.125	−.030	.242
	Visitation	.011	.027	.019	.391	.696	−.043	.064
	Perception	−1.24	.039	−.112	−3.195	.001	−.200	−.048
	Work	−.182	.097	−.085	−1.867	.062	−.373	.009
Unique restaurants	Age	.001	.003	.016	.479	.632	−.004	.006
	Education	−.116	.057	−.067	−2.019	.044	−.228	−.003
	Residency	.303	.083	.119	3.643	<.001	.140	.466
	Visitation	.019	.033	.027	.574	.566	−.046	.083
	Perception	.062	.047	.046	1.322	.183	−.029	.153
	Work	.181	.117	.070	1.545	.123	−.049	.412
Recognized retailers	Age	.003	.002	.039	1.188	.235	−.002	.008
	Education	−.043	.056	−.025	−.765	.445	−.153	.067
	Residency	.500	.081	.198	6.169	<.001	.341	.659
	Visitation	.033	.032	.048	1.019	.308	−.030	.095
	Perception	.138	.045	.103	3.045	.002	.049	.227
	Work	.233	.114	.090	2.035	.042	.008	.457

decreased. The analysis also indicated that residency (whether one lives in the city of Flint) affects responses to the crime question. The coefficient for the perception variable was also negative, meaning that as participants' perceptions about Flint improve, responses to the crime statement decrease.

For the statement concerning more to do downtown, as age increased, agreement with the statement decreased. The coefficient for residency was positive, indicating that compared to non-residents, Flint residents would visit downtown more often if there was more to do. As for perception, the coefficient was positive, meaning that the more participants believe the downtown is improving, the more likely they are to visit if there is more to do. The same pattern holds for the question about music events and festivals, since the coefficients maintain the same direction. Notably, for the question about more to do downtown, age was the strongest predictor; for the question about music events and festivals, perception was the strongest predictor.

Responses to the statement, "I would visit downtown more often if it was more attractive (better looking)" were influenced by age and perception of participants only. As age increased, agreement with the statement about attractiveness decreased. For perception, as agreement with the statement, "Overall, I think that downtown Flint is improving" increased, agreement with the attractiveness statement decreased.

While residency was not a statistically significant predictor of responses to the attractiveness question, it was the only statistically significant predictor of responses to the question, "I would visit downtown Flint more often if there were more unique restaurants." As indicated by the positive coefficient, Flint residents responded more favorably to this question than non-residents. For the question about recognized retailers, residency and perception were the statistically significant predictors. The analysis indicated that residents are more likely than non-residents to visit the downtown more often if there are more recognized retailers. Furthermore, as perception about downtown improved, agreement with the statement about retailers also improved, as indicated by the positive coefficient.

The question about parking produced different results. None of the personal characteristics were statistically significant predictors. However, since the mean for parking as a potential strategy was high, the lack of significant predictors indicated that participants would consider visiting downtown more often if parking was easier, regardless of personal characteristics such as age and education.

Living downtown

Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics for the statements about living downtown. The improvements rated as potentially effective, in descending order of means, were as follows: crime reduction, increasing desirable housing that suited my [the participant's] needs, and a more family-friendly atmosphere. The strategies that did not receive favorable responses in terms of encouraging people to live downtown were improving public school quality, making the downtown more attractive/better looking, making it less expensive to live downtown, making parking easier, making recycling available, making it more walkable, having more to do downtown, adding bike lanes and bike racks, improving bikeability, making public transportation easier to use, and being closer to work.

Regression analysis

Similar to those statements receiving favorable responses for *visiting* downtown, statements receiving favorable responses for *living* downtown were separately analyzed to

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for the statement "I would consider living downtown if …".

	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Median	Mode
Crime was reduced[a]	1116	3.48	1.435	4	5
There was desirable housing that suited my needs[a]	1108	3.38	1.381	4	4
It had a more family-friendly atmosphere[a]	1093	3.33	1.360	4	4
Public school quality improved	1101	3.22	1.406	3	3
It was more attractive (better looking)	1102	3.14	1.321	3	3
It was less expensive to live downtown	1096	3.12	1.318	3	3
Parking was easier	1107	3.12	1.324	3	3
Recycling was available	1084	3.02	1.274	3	3
It was more walkable	1097	2.94	1.257	3	3
There was more to do downtown	1099	2.92	1.300	3	3
Bike lanes and bike racks were readily available	1084	2.77	1.158	3	3
It was more bikeable	1085	2.76	1.164	3	3
Public transportation was easier to use	1092	2.75	1.175	3	3
It was closer to my work	1062	2.43	1.108	3	3

[a]Indicates regression model was run for this statement.

Table 5. Participant characteristics affecting responses to statements about living in downtown Flint.

Dependent variable	Independent variable	B	Standard error of B	Beta	t	Sig.	95% CI lower	95% CI upper
Crime	Age	−.013	.003	−.148	−4.346	<.001	−.019	−.007
	Education	−.058	.067	−.029	−.860	.390	−.189	.074
	Residency	.257	.098	.087	2.618	.009	.064	.450
	Visitation	.095	.039	.118	2.463	.014	.019	.171
	Perception	−.010	.054	−.006	−.185	.853	−.117	.097
	Work	−.236	.138	−.078	−1.710	.088	−.506	.035
Housing	Age	−.015	.003	−.176	−5.362	<.001	−.020	−.009
	Education	.081	.062	.042	1.298	.195	−.041	.203
	Residency	.456	.091	.159	4.991	<.001	.277	.635
	Visitation	.133	.036	.172	3.679	<.001	.062	.204
	Perception	.111	.051	.074	2.190	.029	.012	.210
	Work	−.225	.129	−.077	−1.744	.081	−.478	.028
Family-friendly	Age	−.012	.003	−.140	−4.140	<.001	−.017	−.006
	Education	−.001	.063	.000	−.015	.988	−.125	.124
	Residency	.397	.093	.140	4.265	<.001	.214	.580
	Visitation	.097	.037	.126	2.614	.009	.024	.169
	Perception	.071	.052	.048	1.381	.168	−.030	.172
	Work	−.098	.132	−.034	−.739	.460	−.357	.162

Note: R^2 values are not reported because the purpose of the regression models was to identify which (if any) personal characteristics affect responses; the purpose was *not* to explain the greatest amount of variance in the statements using the fewest number of independent variables. Thus, no attempts were made to make the models parsimonious, since what we want to know is whether certain personal characteristics have an effect holding constant all other personal characteristics available to us. Reporting R^2s is potentially misleading since low R^2s might be interpreted negatively since, from a statistical standpoint, low R^2s are associated with poor-fitting models. However, in our case, a low R^2 value would indicate that responses to a particular statement were not influenced by personal characteristics – which is not necessarily undesirable from a policy perspective, since it would indicate that participants who differ in personal characteristics feel that the statement is equally important.

determine whether responses were affected by the personal characteristics of respondents.

From Table 5, it is apparent that responses to the statement, "I would consider living downtown if crime was reduced" were influenced by age only. The negative regression coefficient indicates that as age increases, agreement with the statement decreases. For the statement, "I would consider living downtown if there was desirable housing that suited my needs," age, residency, and visitation were statistically significant. As age increased, agreement with the statement decreased. Flint residents were more likely to agree with the statement than non-residents, while increases in the frequency of visiting the downtown corresponded to an increase in agreement with the statement about housing. Lastly, responses to the statement, "I would consider living downtown if it has a more family-friendly atmosphere" were influenced by age and residency only. Once again, as age increased, agreement with the statement decreased. Like the previous statement about housing, Flint residents were more likely to agree with the statement about a family-friendly atmosphere than non-residents.

Discussion and conclusion

Many of the proposed downtown improvements received positive responses. In terms of attracting visitors to Flint's downtown, the study's findings appear to support policies directed at reducing crime, increasing opportunities for activities downtown, increasing festivals and music events, and making it easier to park. In terms of encouraging more people to live downtown, the findings again appear to support policies that would reduce crime, as well as provide more suitable housing and a more family-friendly atmosphere.

Reducing crime

Reducing crime appeared to be the most effective measure for encouraging people to visit and to live downtown. Given the city's high crime rate (Goff, 2014; Harris, 2014), these results are not surprising. However, it is important to keep in mind that the downtown is far from being the most dangerous part of the city (Lawlor, 2009). Therefore, the issue at hand may be perception of crime or fear of crime, not actual crime (LaGrange, Ferraro, & Supancic, 1992; Warr, 2000). Since Flint receives substantial negative media attention (such as Badenhausen, 2013), it is likely that participants believe more crime is occurring in the downtown than actually occurs (Romer, Jamieson, & Aday, 2003).

Addressing concerns about crime may be less about increasing policing efforts to reduce the number of crimes committed, and more about positive marketing and image-making (Avraham, 2004). The finding that perception affects the responses to visiting downtown if crime was reduced supports this notion, as does the finding that non-residents are more likely to visit the downtown if crime was reduced. It could be that residents are more aware that crime is not a major issue downtown compared to residential neighborhoods; and therefore, residents do not respond as strongly to the crime statements. There may also be a self-selection bias in the responses to crime, since non-residents may have chosen to live outside of the city due to concerns about crime (Bayoh, Irwin, & Haab, 2006). We also found that as age increased, the likelihood that someone would visit the downtown if crime was reduced decreased. This finding that younger people are more concerned about crime is consistent with recent

empirical literature on fear of crime (such as Jackson, 2009). Pain (2001) notes that younger people are more fearful due to their higher risk of victimization and greater socialization into fear. What this means from a downtown redevelopment standpoint is not entirely clear at this time.

Factors that may attract more visitors to downtown

Increasing the number of things to do

For the statements about visiting downtown, "more to do" received the second most favorable response (behind reducing crime), followed by more music events and festivals. Since the days of Jacobs (1961), city planners have recognized that activity is important for the health, vitality, and functioning of cities. Consequently, from a policy perspective, finding that participants desire "more to do" is not terribly helpful, especially since the statement does not specify what exactly should be done. The responses to the statement about music events and festivals are thus more useful, since attending music events and festivals is something specific that people can do downtown. Since we found that younger people were more willing to visit downtown for these types of activities, if the idea is to attract a younger demographic group, music events and festivals might be one way to do so (National Governors Association, 2009). However, policy makers should be cautious if these activities cost more to host than they produce in revenue. Furthermore, if the idea is to attract non-residents to the city or to change peoples' perceptions of the downtown, the effect of music events and festivals might be somewhat limited since this study showed that current residents are more likely to come downtown for these activities anyway, as are people who already believe that the downtown is improving.

Improving parking

Easier parking received the next most favorable response of the set of statements about visiting the downtown. Notably, none of the personal characteristics in this study affected the responses to this statement; accordingly, there seems to be broad support for this change. But given the history of planners ravishing the character and walkability of downtown environments with parking lots (Birch, 2009), we are hesitant to advocate for more parking, particularly when recent accounts indicated that there were over 600 parking spaces available for a new farmers' market downtown which is only open three days per week (Atkinson, 2014). Additionally, the authors are skeptical that making parking easier will actually encourage people to visit. The question is whether parking is an issue because of perception, behavior, or a physical lack of spaces (Robertson, 1999). It could be the case that parking spaces are available, but are not terribly visible from the main road or are located in unattractive areas from which people do not want to walk (Kent, 2014). It might also be that people (especially Michigan residents who are used to being car dependent) are unwilling to walk to get to their destination (Crowley, 2012). If so, the issue might be a lack of healthy behaviors, not a real lack of parking spaces.

Increasing the physical attractiveness of the downtown

Participants also responded favorably to making the downtown "more attractive (better looking)." We found that younger people responded more positively to this statement than older people. Since younger people tend to be mobile, [with one-third of people in their 20s moving to a new residence every year (Henig, 2010)], perhaps aesthetics

matter more because they have greater flexibility in terms of where to visit and to live. For perception, participants who already believed the downtown is improving were less affected by aesthetics than those with less positive perceptions. Recent improvements in downtown attractiveness may have already resulted in more positive perceptions, limiting the future impact of aesthetics for some visitors. We can only speculate, in large part, because the statement about attractiveness suffers from the same limitations as the statement about more to do downtown – it is not clear what specifically should be done in terms of aesthetics. Perhaps strategies such as painting buildings, planting flowers, demolishing derelict structures, and picking up litter would be effective, seeing that there is a relationship between upkeep and perceived attractiveness in urban environments (Lekwa, Rice, & Hibbing, 2007; Nasar, 1987). The city could also consider the creation of design guidelines or overlay zones to better regulate the activities of individual property owners. However, more regulation would have to be paired with more code enforcement in order to be effective; and without creative partnerships, the city may not have the capacity to do this (Schilling, 2009).

Increasing the number of unique restaurants

Unique restaurants received a favorable response as well – whereas restaurant chains did not. Given that many of the study participants and most county residents live outside of the City of Flint, it makes sense that unique restaurants would be more attractive than restaurants chains that might be found closer to participants' homes. From central place theory, it is well established that people are more likely to travel longer distances to see or experience things that they cannot otherwise access (Mulligan, Partridge, & Carruthers, 2012). Thus, policy makers may want to attract establishments that do not exist elsewhere in the metropolitan area.

Increasing the number of recognized retailers

Participants were also in favor of more recognized retailers (such as Walgreens, Petsmart, and Staples) downtown. As far as the authors are aware, there are no nationally known, mainstream retailers located in the downtown area. In some cases, if residents want to shop at these establishments, they have to leave the city to do so. Thus, it is not surprising that residents responded more favorably to this question than non-residents, as did those participants who already believe the downtown is improving. It is our hope that this study – along with the city's master plan, which identifies specific areas where the city is experiencing retail leakage (Houseal Lavigne Associates, 2013) – can be used by local policy makers to recruit prospective businesses. On a different note, it is interesting that chain restaurants were not viewed favorably by participants, but chain retailers were. Since several unique restaurants have opened in the downtown in the past decade, it is conceivable that participants responded unfavorably to restaurant chains in an effort to maintain the character of the establishments that have already opened (Passey, 2010). There might consequently be greater demand for retail than for restaurants, fueling a favorable response to any type of retail in the downtown area.

Factors that may encourage people to live downtown

The set of statements about living downtown received considerably fewer favorable responses than those statements about visiting downtown. This outcome is to be

expected since there is a segment of the population that would not consider living downtown no matter what changes are made (H. Blount, 2002). Given the low mean values for most of the statements about living downtown, it might have been useful to ask respondents if they would *ever* consider living downtown before asking them to respond to the current set of statements – that way we could filter out those individuals who are not at all interested in downtown living. Nonetheless, the responses that we do have are important, because the low means speak to the difficulty of attracting residents to small downtowns. The responses also provide us with a good idea of what the county population (not just those people who are interested in downtown living) think about living in downtown Flint in particular.

Providing more desirable downtown housing

In addition to reducing crime, the two improvements that might be effective for encouraging people to live downtown are providing more desirable housing and making the downtown more family friendly (Toderian, 2012). Given that developers are interested in producing more downtown housing in Flint (Uptown Developments, 2014), it would be prudent for the city or other entity to carefully study what people who are interested in downtown living deem to be desirable (number of bedrooms, amenities, style, density, and so forth). We also found that responses to this statement were affected by frequency of visiting the downtown. Thus, by attracting more visitors to downtown, there may be an increase in the number of people who are interested in downtown living, provided that desirable housing units are available.

Making downtown more family friendly

A "family-friendly atmosphere" could mean a number of things and would likely have some overlap with safety or lack of crime (Rukus & Warner, 2013). If the city wanted to pursue efforts to make the downtown more family-friendly, it could conduct another survey with questions about improvements that are thought to be family-friendly, such as increasing the number of parks, daycares, schools, and activities for children and the elderly (Israel & Warner, 2008). Like many of the previous statements, age and residency were predictors of responses, with younger adults and Flint residents being more interested in downtown living than others.

Unanticipated findings

The unfavorable responses are perhaps more fascinating than the favorable responses described above. Surprisingly, many improvements that today's urban planners emphasize (e.g. proximity, walkability, bikeability, and mass transit) were not attractive to participants in our study. [See contemporary planning movements like smart growth (Duany & Speck, 2010), new urbanism (Steuteville & Langdon, 2009), and transit-oriented development (Dittmar & Ohland, 2004).] These unfavorable responses likely coincide with the favorable responses toward additional downtown parking, which may be explained by the prevailing car culture in Michigan. This culture is particularly strong in Flint, which is the birthplace of General Motors Inc. (Hannemann, 2013; Lewis, 1983). It is also possible that unfavorable responses for improvements involving alternative transportation were simply due to survey participants lacking familiarity with how vibrant urban areas can look and function. Nonetheless, given Flint's limited

resources, it may not be sensible to pursue strategies that lack popular support, unless one or more of those strategies is necessary to equitably serve vulnerable populations (e.g. improving mass transit). Thus, these findings may have broad relevance for transportation planners working in legacy cities, since it may be necessary to reconcile resident perceptions and desires with the need for a variety of transportation options.

Finally, it was interesting to find that certain personal characteristics did not appear to affect responses. In general, education level, working downtown, and frequency of visitation (except as it relates to housing) did not influence responses to potential improvements. We had anticipated that people who regularly visit downtown would respond differently than those who do not visit downtown; however, this was not the case.

Future directions

Given that the so called "millennial generation" is interested in urban living (Benfield, 2014) and that many of our findings had an age effect, it seems sensible to conclude that the City of Flint should focus its efforts on attracting young people. To evaluate the potential effectiveness of this type of focus, we briefly examined changes in Flint's downtown demographic characteristics over time. This examination revealed that a strategy focusing on young people might be misguided, especially if current residents are not being retained.

Figure 1 shows the change in the downtown population by age group from 2000 to 2010. The dashed line represents the 2000 population, while the solid line represents the 2010 population. Although the solid line is above the dashed line for age groups 15 through 24 and 50 through 69, to conclude that downtown is successfully attracting *and retaining* these age groups is deceptive at best. The dotted line indicates what the population in 2010 *should have been* (not accounting for mortality) if everyone who lived downtown in 2000 continued to live downtown in 2010, assuming no new increase. While it may not be reasonable to expect *all* downtown residents to stay (especially college students), the fact that the solid line is well below the dotted line for most of the graph indicates that many people who lived downtown in 2000 moved out by 2010 – and not just young people. Furthermore, although a 310-student dormitory opened downtown in 2008 (Mostafavi, 2008) and has remained consistently at capacity, the downtown's population in 2010 exceeded its population in 2000 by only 189 people. This is far shy of the increase that should have occurred due to the students alone. In light of these findings, we could have framed our study differently. While we framed our study to identify improvements that might attract *even more* people to downtown Flint, perhaps it would be better to focus on retaining the people who have already made a commitment to downtown Flint. Likewise, future studies of legacy cities like Flint should revisit the reasons people choose to leave or to stay downtown, instead of (or in addition to) evaluating strategies to attract people to visit or to live downtown in the first place.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The first is the low response rate to the survey and the demographic differences between our sample and the county population. Several factors may explain the response rate, including the long length of the survey and the lack of incentives provided to people to participate (Edwards et al., 2002). However, the

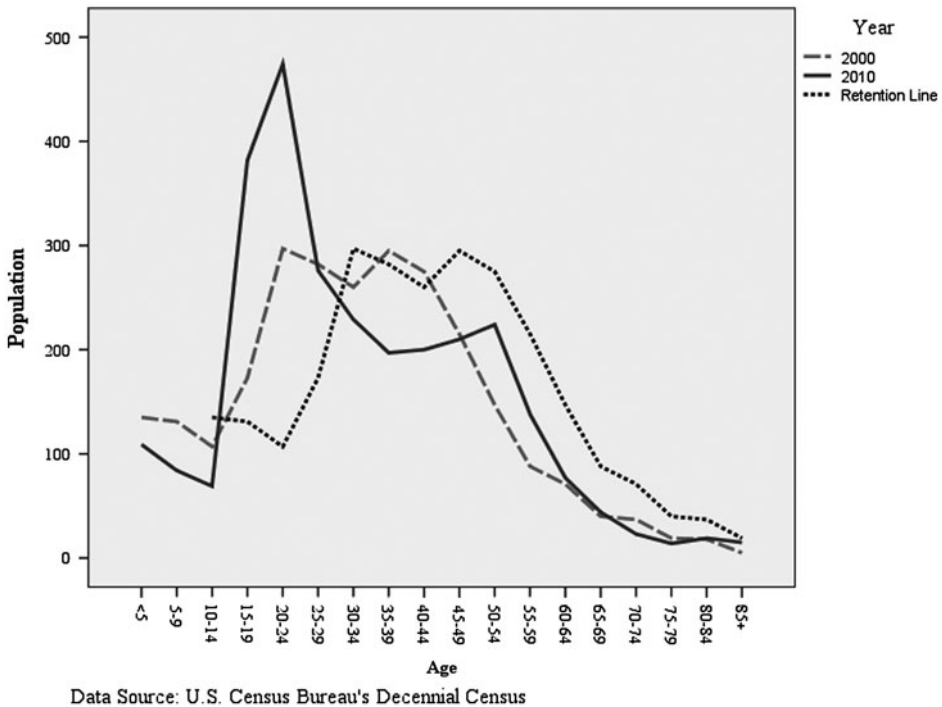Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau's Decennial Census

Figure 1. Flint population change by age group from 2000 to 2010.

low response rate may indicate something far more important: indifference among some county residents regarding the future of the City of Flint. Likewise, it is possible that this study, despite its large sample size, suffers from non-response bias (Groves, 2006). It would be very interesting to see whether similar, future studies in other legacy cities also have low response rates. If so, it may be the case that the lack of response has more to do with the characteristics of the place being studied, than the sampling or survey methodology. Regarding demographic characteristics, the study participants tended to be more educated and older than the county population. It is possible that we recruited a disproportionate number of highly educated individuals who work in the downtown, especially given the presence of a four-year university in the heart of downtown. As for age, perhaps some older, county residents have a greater attachment to the city having grown up in the city and moved to the suburbs; they may therefore have a greater propensity to participate. A less romantic possibility is that this age group consists of so called empty nesters who have more time to complete surveys. We can only speculate.

Second, we do not know for certain that the strategies we have identified as potentially effective for attracting more people to downtown Flint will actually be effective in practice. We presume that if people say something will attract them, it will actually do so. But it is entirely feasible that reported behavior will differ from actual behavior (Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007). Since we do not have data based on an experimental design, we cannot say for certain that a given change (holding all other changes constant) will lead to a predictable change in the downtown population.

Third, the individual statements used to solicit responses present another limitation because they reflect the interests and the scope of the city's downtown development authority. Given this influence, the options provided to participants did not represent the universe of possible downtown improvements. Furthermore, participants were asked to respond to isolated statements; yet, it is likely that implementing several changes concurrently would have the greatest impact.

Additionally, we do not know how or to what extent improvements should occur. For example, if reducing crime will attract more people to the downtown, *to what extent* does crime need to be reduced to have a positive effect? It is also possible that improvements with low mean responses could effectively attract a small but significant number of people downtown. For example, if half of participants answered "strongly agree" to a statement while the other half answered "strongly disagree," the resulting mean response would be too low to be considered effective in this study. However, an improvement that may potentially attract half of survey participants (more than 600 people) to the downtown would certainly benefit Flint.

Despite these limitations, this study supports the notion that people can be attracted to the downtowns of smaller legacy cities like Flint, especially given appropriate improvements. This is further supported by the fact that responses to the statement, "I will never come to downtown Flint," received low marks – indicating that very few participants (mostly county residents) have such a negative view of Flint that they would never visit.

This study could also benefit from a comparison piece; it would be interesting to see whether responses obtained from multiple legacy cities differ by city size, location, or other characteristics. Given the large number of legacy cities that have already been identified (J. Max Bond Center, 2014), comparisons between legacy cities should be done to gain a greater understanding of the importance of context in effective policy making. How a legacy city like Detroit might differ from a legacy city like Flint (which are both located in the same state and are only 70 miles apart) has yet to be fully explored.

Conclusion

It is important for legacy cities, like Flint, to prevent further population losses by improving the parts of each city that are still viable and attractive to some populations. If Flint's downtown can continue to stabilize and to attract new residents, then it might become a strong point from which to rebuild or reinvent other parts of the city. Improving downtown Flint may encourage its residents to remain downtown and, perhaps, encourage city or even county residents to remain in the area.

Our study was not intended to address macro-level causes of population decline in legacy cities (e.g. deindustrialization). Instead, it was meant to offer insight into the process of prioritizing potential improvements to attract more people to downtown areas. The specific changes proposed for Flint may not appear profound; however, the process of taking strategic action based on resident preferences is important given the limited resources available to legacy cities. It offers a way forward that is less risky than taking action without public input or merely taking no action at all. Finally, while our study focuses on Flint, the results of our survey and the process used to obtain the results should be of interest to policy makers and researchers working in other small- to mid-sized legacy cities.

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Note

1. Since no other group comprises more than 3.0% of the county population, other races were not considered.

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