



# INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH LEADERS

ISSUE BRIEF | November 2020

## Using Code Enforcement To Help Local Governments Build A Culture Of Health

### WHY WE DID THIS STUDY

Where we live matters for our health and well-being. Housing code enforcement is one important, but often overlooked, tool to improve health. Local governments can use existing housing codes to ensure safe and habitable housing conditions. Housing code enforcement is most commonly used to address immediate safety concerns or easily visible problems, but it can also be a helpful strategy for improving the long-term health of residents. To identify ways in which leaders in Memphis and other cities can more strategically use code enforcement to improve health, we used a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) framework. An HIA is a research tool that combines community input with quantitative and qualitative data to make health a priority for policymaking.<sup>1</sup> We used an HIA framework to explore how housing code enforcement currently works in Memphis and how it might expand to more intentionally include and address population health as a key outcome.

### WHAT WE FOUND

- Current code enforcement in Memphis is focused on minor violations such as junk in the yard, that are unlikely to impact the health of residents.
- Opportunities exist to shift code enforcement activities to improve health in Memphis. Specific enforcement targets that can impact health include: lead-based paint, mold, and bed bugs.
- Code enforcement could be shifted to better target substandard housing. After learning about ACEs, 63 percent of parents in our focus groups found it helpful; 40 percent found it empowering.

**“Cities and towns could dramatically improve the health of their most vulnerable populations by understanding and using the full power of Strategic Code Enforcement.”**

*—Joe Schilling, Senior Research Associate, Urban Institute*

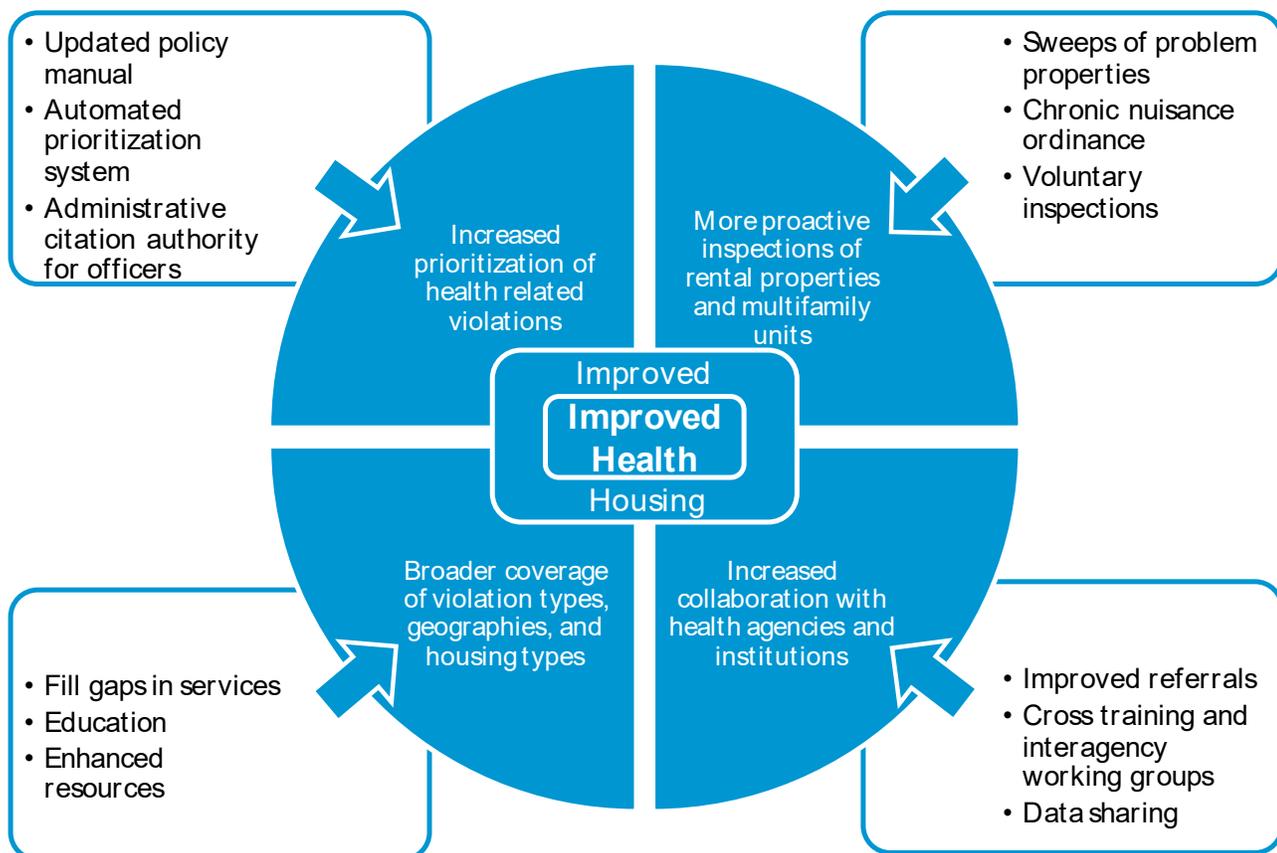
## WHAT THESE FINDINGS MEAN

City and county code enforcement (CE) agencies in the Memphis area could have a greater impact on resident health with some small changes. These changes include incorporating public health perspectives, metrics, and strategies into their plans and actions. They also could coordinate with health care organizations and stakeholders. We recommend that the Memphis Housing Code Enforcement Department:

- Consider health outcomes and strategies that lead to improved health in all enforcement activities,
- Prioritize enforcement actions on violations that have a higher likelihood of causing serious health problems, such as mold and lead,
- Make the inspection process more proactive,
- Use spatial and mapping techniques to focus enforcement in areas and types of housing where more health issue occur, and
- Increase collaboration between city code, county environmental health, and a number of other health, housing, and financing organizations to identify problem areas and use enforcement actions to improve health.

The figure below illustrates specific actions that the Memphis Housing Code Enforcement Department can take to implement these recommendations.

### Recommendations for Better Targeting Health Outcomes Through Housing Code



## MORE ABOUT THIS STUDY

Our analysis uses an HIA framework and expands beyond the typical HIA model to include multiple proposed policies. <sup>1</sup> Our HIA aims to identify a range of potential policies and programs that might improve health through strategic enforcement of housing codes.

We began with a screening phase, in which the HIA team and stakeholders determined whether an HIA was needed. We consulted with practitioners in Memphis, including health and code enforcement leaders, to learn about current practices, identify gaps in current knowledge, and provide guidance for change where it was needed.

The team and stakeholders decided that an HIA was needed. We decided on a strategy for approaching the work. This process included identifying pathways between code enforcement and potential health impacts. This phase involved a review of the scientific literature, discussions with experts, and a process mapping of code enforcement interventions.

In the assessment phase, we gathered relevant data, collected evidence regarding the pathways between inputs and impacts, and developed hypotheses about the potential impact of proposed solutions. This phase involved working with local partners in Memphis to gather data on city and county code enforcement practices, crime, and health at small levels of geography.

Next, we compiled and crowd-sourced recommendations for changes to the code enforcement process in Memphis to improve the public health outcomes of residents. This phase involved discussions with stakeholders, an expert advisory group, and learning about promising solutions in other cities.

Finally, we are continuously monitoring and evaluating the HIA work through its impact on decision-making and health outcomes. This final stage will not only allow us to keep track of the HIA's impact, but it will also allow us to modify our process for future studies.

## SOURCES

<sup>1</sup> Suther E and Sandel M. "Health Impact Assessments" Rhode Island Medical Journal. 2013; 96: 27–30

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