



# An Introduction to Place-Based Approaches

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*“The most scalable solution to improving  
economic mobility is place-based investment.”*

Raj Chetty, Harvard University & Opportunity Insights

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## The Case for Place: Neighborhood as the Unit & Engine of Change

### What Is Not Working

For more than four decades, researchers and practitioners have been making the case for a fundamental shift in how we approach poverty. The ever-growing call for change is to move away from program-centered and population-driven strategies toward place-based ones. The critique of conventional charitable programming is by now well-documented: most programs address the painful symptoms of poverty without altering its underlying conditions or meaningfully changing the life outcomes of those experiencing it. The United States spends more money on poverty-related programs than other wealthy nations with far less outcomes. Though an argument for spending more is legitimate; if we don't spend differently, it won't create real change.<sup>1</sup> At best, such efforts are palliative. At worst, they inadvertently reinforce the very dynamics they aim to disrupt. Many have noted a need to go beyond relief to development, but even in these conversations the most significant driver of life outcomes, place, tends to be ignored.

In shifting away from charitable relief, many have chosen a single domain such as education, housing, or workforce development as their focus for more comprehensive, developmental strategies. These efforts represent genuine progress. But even here, results have not been commensurate with the investments made or the scale of the challenge. Moving from relief to development adds depth, but within a narrow field of vision. What the evidence increasingly demands is a different scale of thinking altogether.

### The Scale for Impact

The research is now unambiguous: *the neighborhood is the scale at which meaningful social change becomes possible*. The interdependent systems that shape human flourishing — education, housing stability, economic opportunity, safety, social networks, access to care — do not converge at the level of the individual or even the family. They converge geographically. Place shapes exposure, constraint, and possibility in ways that compound across time. The relationship between prosperity and place is as direct as sunlight to growth: individuals may possess genuine resilience and talent, but without supportive conditions, their potential remains

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<sup>1</sup> David Erickson, *The Fifth Freedom: Guaranteeing an Opportunity-Rich Childhood for All* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2023).

constrained. This insight has fundamentally challenged the dominant cultural narrative that attributes life outcomes primarily to personal effort, behavior, or targeted interventions.

The intellectual foundation for this shift was laid in large part by sociologist William Julius Wilson, whose research on the "concentration of disadvantage" demonstrated how structural forces like deindustrialization, racial segregation, deliberate policy choices produced neighborhoods where poverty became spatially entrenched and self-reinforcing. In his seminal work, *The Truly Disadvantaged*<sup>2</sup> (1987), Wilson showed that when disadvantage concentrates, it reshapes local institutions, labor markets, social norms, and collective expectations. Even capable individuals, strong families, and well-designed single-issue interventions struggle to overcome what amounts to the gravitational pull of place.<sup>3</sup>

Robert Sampson built on this foundation by empirically demonstrating what is known as the "neighborhood effect." This the independent influence of the neighborhood itself on life outcomes, beyond individual characteristics. His longitudinal research in Chicago began in the mid 90s and was written about in *The Great American City*<sup>4</sup> (2012). Interestingly, he not only proved the independent influence of neighborhoods, he highlighted the central role of collective efficacy, which is the shared trust and willingness among residents to act for the common good. Where collective efficacy is strong, neighborhoods produce better outcomes related to safety, health, and opportunity. Where it has eroded, even well-resourced interventions tend to underperform.

In the last 10 years no one has added more data and proof to this conversation than economist Raj Chetty. Chetty and his team at Opportunity Insights<sup>5</sup> have brought unprecedented scale and precision to fact and mechanisms by which places hinder or catalyze economic

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<sup>2</sup> William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). He was certainly not the first to make the connection of place and inequalities. The federal government started an effort in the 70s to reverse the effects of disinvested neighborhoods called Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation (now known as NeighborWorks.) There is not clear line or uniform movement to point to. However, it the current landscape of place-based, neighborhood-centered work, Wilson's work can be seen as catalytic.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Tough, *Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada's Quest to Change Harlem and America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Robert J. Sampson, *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Raj Chetty, John N. Friedman, Nathaniel Hendren, Maggie R. Jones, and Sonya R. Porter, *The Opportunity Atlas: Mapping the Childhood Roots of Social Mobility* (Cambridge, MA: Opportunity Insights, 2018), <https://www.opportunityatlas.org/>

mobility. Drawing on the Moving to Opportunity<sup>6</sup> experiment and massive administrative datasets, they mapped patterns of intergenerational mobility across tens of millions of Americans, revealing stark geographic variation in the probability that children born into poverty will rise economically as adults. Their findings made visible what many communities had long experienced: that childhood neighborhood conditions like school quality, exposure to violence, family stability, and the density of social capital are among the strongest predictors of adult outcomes. The oft-quoted conclusion captures the consensus well: *life chances are shaped “more by ZIP code than by genetic code.”*<sup>7</sup> As recently as January 2026, Chetty's team released findings from a landmark study<sup>8</sup> of the federal HOPE VI initiative, which invested \$17 billion to replace 262 public housing projects with mixed-income developments. Children who grew up in HOPE VI communities that were integrated into mixed-income neighborhoods showed significantly improved lifetime earnings, higher college attendance rates, and lower rates of incarceration. This data led Chetty to say during a gathering in Atlanta hosted by the Blank Foundation, “*The most scalable solution to improving economic mobility is place-based investment.*”

Those the thought leaders mentioned above have been instrumental to shaping them field, the broader scholarly conversation preceded, surrounded, and flows from them. Patrick Sharkey has shown how place-based, racialized inequities are both durable and cumulative across generations. Richard Rothstein documented how deliberate public policy and private investment built these conditions into the physical and institutional foundations of American communities. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor has demonstrated that it was not only the formative policies of an earlier era but ongoing political and economic forces that continue to reinforce place-based disadvantage. Michelle Adams examined how the interplay of housing and school policy concentrated vulnerability. Sean Reardon mapped the educational consequences, tracing the opportunity gaps that certain neighborhoods reliably produce. These scholars represent a fraction of a rapidly growing body of work pointing toward the same conclusion.

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<sup>6</sup> Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, and Lawrence F. Katz, “The Effects of Exposure to Better Neighborhoods on Children: New Evidence from the Moving to Opportunity Experiment,” *American Economic Review* 106, no. 4 (2016).

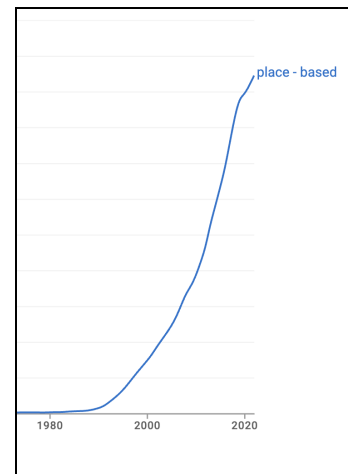
<sup>7</sup> Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, *Commission to Build a Healthier America: Issue Brief 1—Beyond Health Care: New Directions to a Healthier America* (Princeton, NJ: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Raj Chetty, Rebecca Diamond, Thomas B. Foster, Lawrence Katz, Sonya R. Porter, Matthew Staiger, Laura Tach, “*Creating High-Opportunity Neighborhoods: Evidence from the HOPE VI Program*” <https://opportunityinsights.org/paper/hopevi/>

The field has moved past debating *whether* place matters. The conversation now centers on *how* neighborhood systems shape life outcomes and *what* it actually takes to change them. The mounting evidence makes the strategic implication clear: to interrupt generational patterns of inequity, improve health and wellbeing, expand educational opportunity, and increase economic mobility, place-based investment is the most effective and scalable approach available. The question that follows is a practical one: what does place-based social change actually mean, and what methodologies sustain it?

## A Framework for Understanding Place-Based Approaches

"Place-based" has seen a 543% increase in digitized print materials between 2000 and 2022.<sup>9</sup> The term is now firmly embedded in the social impact lexicon. The problem is that its frequency may be growing in rough proportion to its ambiguity. The intuitive definition — focusing one's efforts within a defined geography — sounds straightforward enough, but a purely geographic reading of the term would render place-based approaches no more effective than the very philosophies they seek to replace. Concentrating ineffective programming within a targeted area may produce efficiency gains, but it does not produce the long-term, sustainable, generational change. Clarity of language and shared mental models will be foundational to building a productive place-based approach. To get there, several distinctions need to be made: first, between efforts that are simply *based in a place* versus those that are genuinely *place-based*; then between geographically-bounded strategies aimed at systemic change in one area versus place-based efforts that attend to the health of an entire ecosystem. After drawing those distinctions, we will examine existing definitions and characteristics of place-based approaches before turning to leaders in the field.



<sup>9</sup> Google Books Ngram Viewer, search for "place-based," 200-2022, accessed February 17, 2026, [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=place-based&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2022&corpus=en&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=place-based&year_start=1800&year_end=2022&corpus=en&smoothing=3) This is search does not even include the existing and growing number other fields of practice that are connected overtly to place: Placemaking, Asset Based Community Development, Christian Community Development, etc.

## Based-in-a-Place vs Place-Based

When philanthropy uses the language of being place-based, it is most often describing something more modest: the selection of spatial boundaries (e.g. a city, a ZIP code, a region) within which an organization chooses to invest resources. Concentrating relationships and resources rather than spreading them across too broad a geography is a reasonable and often effective decision. But it is not what a genuine PBA entails.

Nonprofit cooperatives offer a useful illustration. In communities near Congruence Consulting's area (Metro Atlanta), it is common for businesses, faith communities, and civic organizations to form or support a single nonprofit as a centralized hub for addressing residents' basic needs like food insecurity, emergency rental assistance, and utilities support. These efforts are necessary and admirable. But being bounded by a service area is not place-based work as it is not oriented toward the place itself. They represent being based in a place, not a place-based approach in the fuller sense of the term.

A PBA is fundamentally different in its logic. Rather than delivering services to people who happen to live in a particular geography, a place-based approach is oriented toward changing the place itself. It proceeds from the conviction, which is supported by the sociological research described in the previous section, that places impact life outcomes. The "neighborhood effect" is not background context; it is the central problem to be solved. The goal is to understand how a place is generating and sustaining inequity, and then to intervene in the systems producing those outcomes so that the place itself, over time, begins to reliably produce better ones.

This requires ecosystem thinking: the capacity to see the interconnected systems of a place — physical, institutional, economic, social — and understand how they combine to create mutually reinforcing outcomes. A place-based approach asks not just what people need, but what conditions the place is creating that make those needs so persistent.

## Single-Issue vs Holistic

Place-based strategies can be applied to a single issue or pursued more comprehensively. A single-issue application might take childhood asthma rates in a specific neighborhood as its focus. A place-based analysis would not simply provide medicine and treatment to those who are suffering. Even though such relief is necessary, a place-based response would also examine what is happening in that place across schools, businesses,

transportation, the built environment, and local government that is producing or perpetuating adverse health outcomes. It would then build cross-sector partnerships to address those systems, with the aim that asthma rates not only decline but that children growing up there eventually experience better-than-average health outcomes because the place has been redesigned to produce them. The contrast with a based-in-a-place program is precise: one mitigates suffering while leaving the underlying causal systems intact; the other works to redesign those systems.

That example is instructive because it illustrates what this white paper is *not* advocating. A single-issue PBA asks how the ecosystem produces one particular outcome. What is recommended here is something more ambitious: *an approach oriented toward the health of the entire ecosystem, evaluated through the lens of the opportunity it creates for residents experiencing social and economic vulnerability.*

PBA's should assess the health of the community by how it expands or narrows inequality, sustains or disrupts poverty, and widens or constricts pathways to opportunity. The aim is an ecosystem that functions well enough that every socially or economically disadvantaged resident has genuine access to a holistically healthy, vibrant life. When all residents experience belonging, agency, and opportunity, this is inclusive prosperity (a concept that will take on more meaning below). In practice, this orientation may lead to investments that are concentrated in one or two high-leverage interventions — but the animating question should always be the city as a whole. With that vision in view, it is worth examining how the existing literature defines and characterizes PBAs more precisely.

## Existing Definitions of PBAs

Below are a few definitions from notable players participating in and influencing place-based approaches.

NeighborWorks, a congressionally chartered nonprofit organization working in partnership with HUD, actually opts for the term “Comprehensive Community Development” as the category within which being place-based is rooted. They define it like this:

*“Comprehensive community development is a place-based and intentional approach aimed at improving lives and strengthening communities by working at the intersection of people, places, and systems. It is driven by a shared vision, unified strategy, and collaborative structure to attract*

*and deploy resources and is grounded in inclusive resident engagement to create and sustain positive change.”<sup>10</sup>*

HUD themselves simplify place-based in the following way:

*Efforts to improve housing and neighborhood conditions and outcomes for residents within a defined geography (e.g., distressed or disinvested neighborhoods). These initiatives involve coordinated, targeted local action to improve community infrastructure and conditions.<sup>11</sup>*

Frameworks Institute in partnership with Purpose Built Communities (highlighted below) produced a strategic communications brief that describes place-based work like this:

*Place-based initiatives aim to improve the social and economic wellbeing of a particular place, be it a city, state, or neighborhood. They involve a mix of strategies, partnerships, and engagement efforts that serve the broader mission of resident-centered neighborhood revitalization...Beyond schools, houses, roads, and businesses, neighborhoods are also about people, community, culture, history, and legacy. For any neighborhood to be a place of flourishing, now and in the future, local residents must play a central role in its planning and long-term visioning. These two components, infrastructure and people, are at the core of place-based initiatives.<sup>12</sup>*

The Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement, based in Canada, frames the practice primarily around resident-designed and led solitons. Their descriptive approach framing the practice says,

*Place-based change... includes the physical or geographical boundaries, the economic and human resource investments driving change, and the interdependencies that arise between people, place, and change...Tackling changes in place means working with systems and in a systemic way. It means getting to the root causes of what holds communities from making change happen and creating change in the wider system at a local, regional, provincial/state, or even national level. Place-based change is about working deeply in the context of a community to co-design a journey of change that builds on local capacity, builds on the local energy and momentum for change and works at a pace that enables the community to participate equally.<sup>13</sup>*

A report that was commissioned by the Australian government defined place-based in two ways:

<sup>10</sup> NeighborWorks America, “Comprehensive Community Development,” accessed December 11, 2025, <https://www.neighborworks.org/Community/Comprehensive-Community-Development>.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, “Place-Based Initiatives,” *HUD Exchange*, accessed December 11, 2025, <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/choice-neighborhoods/>

<sup>12</sup> FrameWorks Institute, *Where We Thrive: Communicating about Resident-Centered Neighborhood Revitalization* (Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute, 2023), <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/resources/where-we-thrive-communicating-about-resident-centered-neighborhood-revitalization/>

<sup>13</sup> Tamarack Institute, “Community-Driven Place-Based Change,” accessed December 12, 2026, <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/articles/community-driven-place-based-change>

*“A collaborative, long-term approach to build thriving communities delivered in a defined geographic location. This approach is ideally characterised by partnering and shared design, shared stewardship, and shared accountability for outcomes and impacts.” (Dart, 2019).<sup>14</sup>*

*“An approach that targets the specific circumstances of a place and engages local people as active participants in development and implementation, requiring government to share decision-making.” (Victorian Government, 2020).<sup>15</sup>*

## Common Characteristics of PBAs

As one can see, a challenge in the current landscape of PBAs is that two crucial things do not have a universally accepted definition: what qualifies as “place,” and what defines taking a “place-based” approach. This was acknowledged in the aforementioned report:

*“The term ‘place’ commonly refers to a specific geographic area where people live, learn, work and recreate. ‘Place’ in the context of place-based approaches has no universal definition. The key is that the definition used by any initiative is meaningful and resonates with the local community...The term ‘place-based approaches’ describes a diverse range of activities that target a place or location, to build on local strengths or respond to a complex social problem...there is no agreed definition of a place-based approach...”<sup>16</sup>*

Likewise, a literature review on documents promoting a place-based approach concluded:

*Place-based approaches have been challenged for their lack of conceptual clarity and operational precision. Ensuring conceptual coherence across and within different public sectors, levels of government, and stakeholders involved in place-based approaches is considered important for the success of approaches relying on collaborative governance. Our analysis revealed that most documents did not define place-based explicitly.<sup>17</sup>*

This led the researchers to provide a list of common elements within the many varied descriptions of place-based work.

1. *collaboration between multiple stakeholders*
2. *including community in decision making*
3. *responsiveness to community priorities/needs/issues*
4. *‘understanding the place’ and valuing local knowledge*

<sup>14</sup> Jess Dart, *Place-Based Evaluation: A Framework for Evaluating Place-Based Approaches* (Australia: Clear Horizon, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> Victorian Government, *Place-Based Approaches: A Guide for Victorian Public Servants* (Melbourne: State of Victoria, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> Victorian Government, *Place-Based Approaches: A Guide for Victorian Public Servants* (Melbourne: State of Victoria, 2020).

<https://www.vic.gov.au/place-based-approaches-guide-victorian-public-service/chapter-one-what-are-pba>

<sup>17</sup>Emily S. Williams et al., “Place-Based Approaches to Health and Wellbeing: A Systematic Literature Review,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 23 (2023): Article 7119. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10685506/>

5. *addressing complex issues in a specific geographic location*
6. *alignment across existing programs and alignment between those involved in a place-based approach in the form of a shared vision*<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, The Urban Institute, rather than articulating a succinct definition, chooses to outline 8 pillars, or assumptions, that drive the mindsets and methodologies behind many of the existing place-based interventions.<sup>19</sup>

1. *Distressed communities adversely affect the lives of their residents*
2. *One-size-fits-all solutions do not work*
3. *Local control and accountability lead to better outcomes*
4. *The solutions do not lie in a single outcome domain*
5. *A local organization can coordinate community revitalization*
6. *Locally focused efforts can overcome global, national, and regional challenges*
7. *Neighborhoods have tipping points, and place-based initiatives can lead to self-sustaining, market-based investments in target areas over time*
8. *Residents stay in place long enough to benefit from revitalization; place-based efforts do not lead to substantial displacement.*

Though we lack one standard definition for the entire field, there is enough general consensus and sustained investment in PBAs that a national field is emerging and is gaining some exciting momentum.

## Place-Based Partnerships

The most well-resourced and coordinated expression of this emerging field is Place-Based Partnerships,<sup>20</sup> a national coalition launched through a collaboration among Purpose Built Communities, the William Julius Wilson Institute, StriveTogether, and Partners for Rural Impact. Harvard's EdRedesign Lab has become a key organizing and capacity-building partner for the network, and Raj Chetty's Opportunity Insights led by Raj Chetty is an integral partner as well. Primary funding comes from Blue Meridian Partners and the Ballmer Group.



<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Walker, Sarah Rankin, and Julie-Anne Winston, *New Approaches to Comprehensive Neighborhood Change: The Case for and Lessons from Initiatives* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Place-Based Partnerships, "What Is a Place-Based Partnership?," accessed February 24, 2026, <https://www.placebasedpartnerships.org/what-is-a-pbp>

Place-Based Partnerships (PBP) is not a generic or simply descriptive term; it is their official name for their coalition and the field they are building.

Over the past five years, PBP has worked to articulate a shared theory of change capable of aligning policymakers, funders, researchers, and practitioners around place-based impact. Its core convictions are that the challenges associated with poverty are geographically bound and systemically interconnected, meaningful progress requires cross-sector collaboration that is centered on residents, it needs to be coordinated by a trusted local organization with the capacity to drive the work over time, and there should be a rigorous commitment to data and tracking to prove real impact. Interestingly, even though they articulate a vision for system-wide, place-based change, they only overtly name one domain of work in their 5-part model (the other 4 parts are about *how* to work, not *what* to work on).

The reach and institutional weight of PBP are genuinely exciting. A note of candor, however: PBP's framework places a heavy emphasis on cradle-to-career education interventions and treats economic mobility as its primary indicator of success. Both are worthy investments, and the research behind them is strong. It is recommended that those interested in place-based strategies should pursue an approach that measures community health across a broader range of outcomes than educational attainment and income alone.

### The Flourishing Neighborhoods Movement

A second emerging force in the field is the Flourishing Neighborhoods Movement, convened by Dr. Seth Kaplan, author of *Fragile Neighborhoods* and a professorial lecturer at Johns Hopkins University. His expertise spans fragile states and community resilience. Over the past four years, Dr. Kaplan has brought together a nationwide coalition of practitioners and thought leaders at the New York Federal Reserve to shape a movement that centers neighborhood-level investment as essential to a healthier, more socially cohesive society. The steering committee, which includes this author, draws representatives from PlaceMakingX, the City of Atlanta, Georgia Tech, Purpose Built Communities, the Brookings Institution, the William Julius Wilson Institute, Neighborhood Economics, the NY Fed, and the Parish Collective. This is another exciting field-building effort with considerable reach and influence.

The Flourishing Neighborhoods Movement is considerably less formalized than PBP, but it represents an expanding and intellectually serious conversation about neighborhoods as a foundational social infrastructure worth investing in. This group is concerned not only for places

of concentrated disadvantage, but all neighborhood types. That broader scope reflects a recognition that the forces eroding neighborhood health are not confined to low-income communities; they are reshaping American civic life at every economic level. There is an “epidemic of isolation and loneliness”<sup>21</sup> impacting health at a national scope. And the solutions, we contend, must be scaled for neighborhoods. For communities where economic disadvantage is present but embedded within a predominantly middle-class context, this more expansive framing is relevant.

## Examples of Place-Based Actors

### General Approaches

Across the wide range of organizations and practitioners working in the place-based field, a few common themes emerge regardless of geography or sector. The first is the indispensability of a convening organization. Place-based work is, by definition, cross-sector work. It cannot be done by a single institution operating in isolation. But the role that a convening organization plays exists on a spectrum, and where any given effort falls on that spectrum depends heavily on what already exists in the community.

At one end is integration. In communities where strong institutions already exist across government, nonprofit, and private sectors, the convener's primary task is to bring those actors together — aligning on shared goals, organizing resources, and building the incentives and trust necessary for sustained collaboration. At the other end is institution-building.<sup>22</sup> In communities where capable partners are sparse, where government services are siloed or dysfunctional, where nonprofits are too few or too under-resourced, or where a history of broken promises has eroded the trust necessary for collective action, the convener must take a more direct role — building new capacity, cultivating fresh leadership, establishing accountability structures, and coalescing residents around a shared vision. Integration brings capable partners to a common table; institution-building constructs the table itself.

A second common thread is a shared set of foundational community health priorities. Across the literature and practice, five elements appear consistently: safety; access to quality

<sup>21</sup> Vivek H. Murthy, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023), <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

<sup>22</sup>David J. Erickson, Ian Galloway, and Naomi Cytron, “Routinizing the Extraordinary: Scaling Up Systems Change in Community Development,” Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, 2012.

early learning; continuing access to high-quality education; living-wage employment; and community design and services that support residents in making healthier daily choices. These represent a reasonable baseline. At the same time, the field is clear that every neighborhood is unique. Effective place-based work requires actionable, localized data to accurately diagnose community conditions, define shared and measurable outcomes, and guide the convening function accordingly.

Though the field is still maturing, a number of well-established, evidence-based practitioners and organizations are defining its standards and direction. Four are particularly instructive: Purpose Built Communities' national model for urban neighborhoods; the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods' strategy for England's most disadvantaged communities; the Strong Towns model for revitalizing post-war suburban places; and Partners for Rural Impact's education-centered model for rural communities.

## Field Leaders

Atlanta's own **Purpose Built Communities (PBC)**<sup>23</sup> continues to grow in national prominence. Founded in 2009 by Tom Cousins, Julian Robertson, and Warren Buffett following the revitalization of the East Lake neighborhood, PBC is now a nationwide network of 30 Community Quarterback organizations across 14 states, representing more than 50 neighborhoods. Its model is widely regarded among field leaders as among the most rigorous, holistic, and proven in the country.



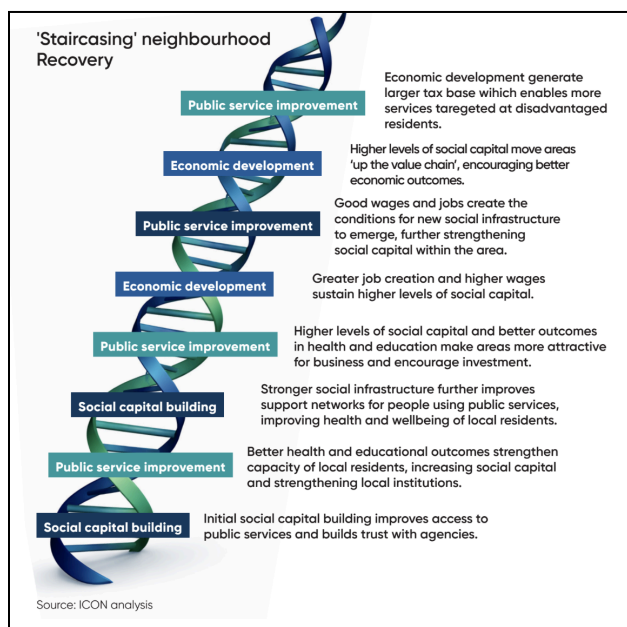
PBC organizes its work around four primary interventions: mixed-income housing, cradle-to-college education, economic vitality, and community wellbeing. Residents are at the center. All of it is coordinated by a Community Quarterback — a local organization with the capacity, trust, and long-term commitment to drive the work.

<sup>23</sup> <https://purposebuiltcommunities.org/>

*Why this matters:* PBC is one of the few models explicitly oriented toward the health of the entire place rather than a single outcome or population. Economic mobility and educational attainment matter to PBC, but as components of a larger whole. That holistic orientation is the disposition advocated for here. PBC is also unambiguous about the necessity of resident-centered engagement: this work cannot be done to or for a community — it must be done with it, and at times by it, with outside actors in a supporting role. Finally, PBC's insistence on the neighborhood as the unit and engine of change is instructive. Translating that into one's each unique place-based context will certainly require adaptation, but the discipline of thinking in terms of smaller, defined neighborhood units within the city may lead to more targeted and effective engagement.

*Where it doesn't map directly to all place-based efforts:* PBC was built for urban neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty, histories of racialized disinvestment, and a trajectory of comprehensive revitalization. Some locales are starting from a different place and moving in a different direction. The language of revitalization does not fit every place-based intervention. It may be helpful to use a more broad frame of inclusive prosperity — ensuring that a growing, diversifying community expands opportunity rather than reproducing the exclusions that concentrated poverty elsewhere.

In January 2026, England's **Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (ICON)** released a landmark report, *No Shortcuts: Towards a National Strategy for Neighbourhood Recovery*<sup>24</sup> — a call for major, sustained investment in the country's most disadvantaged communities. The report proposes eight pillars organized into a "staircase" model with three distinct stages: recovery, foundational, and transformational. It is one of the more granular and sequenced frameworks in the field, specifying not just what needs to be done but in what order.



<sup>24</sup> Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (ICON), *No Shortcuts: Towards a National Strategy for Neighbourhood Recovery* (London: Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods, 2024), <https://www.icon-london.org/publications/no-shortcuts-towards-a-national-strategy-for-neighbourhood-recovery>

*Why it matters:* ICON's geographic unit of analysis — the Middle Layer Super Output Area (MSOA) — is the closest international equivalent to the U.S. census tract, encompassing 5,000 to 15,000 residents across 2,000 to 6,000 households. It is a bounded, data-rich geography small enough for local institutions to have measurable impact and for residents to have genuine relationships with one another. That scale is meaningfully closer to what many communities consider the boundaries of their place, unlike PBC's urban neighborhood scale. ICON also places unusual emphasis on social capital and belonging, operating from the conviction that government, business, philanthropy, and civil society are critical enablers — but that power must ultimately rest with communities themselves for change to be lasting. The staged approach is equally valuable: place-based work is not simply about identifying the right interventions but about knowing what comes first. Every place-based effort will face a long list of priorities; sequencing them intelligently will be essential. ICON's metric framework is also instructive — built on 36 indicators of wellbeing across six domains: education, worklessness, health, crime, housing and the physical environment, and community.

*Where it doesn't map directly to all place-based efforts::* ICON's model assumes deeply disadvantaged neighborhoods navigating the aftermath of sustained decline and disinvestment. Not all communities that would benefit from a place-based approach are recovering from decades of neglect. Some are experiencing a recent and rapid influx of lower-income residents into an otherwise stable, growing area. The goal is not recovery but intentional inclusion.

**Strong Towns**<sup>25</sup> is a nonprofit media and advocacy organization built around a distinct philosophy of community development — specifically, a critique of what its founder Chuck Marohn calls the post-war suburban development pattern. Though not formally part of the emerging place-based field, Strong Towns is directly relevant because it is one of the few voices specifically addressing the structural vulnerabilities of suburban communities. Its work is organized around six principles: fiscal solvency as a prerequisite for long-term prosperity; land as the foundational resource of community wealth; transportation as a means to prosperity rather than an end in itself; job creation as the result of a healthy local economy rather than a substitute for one; strong citizens as the irreplaceable foundation of strong places; and local government as a platform for collaborative community-building.

*Why it matters:* Strong Towns is working at a scale and in a community type more closely aligned with mid-sized and suburban cities where poverty continues to grow and concentrate.

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.strongtowns.org/>

Their communities are more economically mixed, and its emphasis on civic engagement and local ownership resonates broadly. The principle that strong places require strong citizens — people who are genuinely invested and actively engaged — is worth taking seriously for anyone developing their own convening strategy.

*Where it doesn't map directly to all place-based efforts::* Strong Towns' primary concern is the structural and fiscal health of suburban communities broadly, not the specific dynamics of social and economic vulnerability within them. A thriving town is certainly a better environment for lower-income residents than a declining one — but if equity is not an explicit priority, the strength that gets built into a community will tend to benefit those already positioned to take advantage of it. The place-based approaches advocated for here must keep the wellbeing of its most economically vulnerable residents at the center, not as an afterthought.

**Partners for Rural Impact (PRI)**<sup>26</sup> is one of the four lead conveners of the Place-Based Partnerships coalition, alongside StriveTogether, Purpose Built Communities, and the William Julius Wilson Institute. PRI is instructive because it represents the work of translating a place-based framework — developed largely in urban contexts — into a fundamentally different geographic, social, and economic landscape. PRI's work is primarily focused on building partnerships to improve educational and early career outcomes for youth and young adults, making it an example of a geographically-grounded, cradle-to-career approach in defined communities.

*Why it matters:* PRI operates in communities that receive less philanthropic attention and institutional investment than major cities. It is navigating a terrain with limited nonprofit density, thinner funding ecosystems, and significant transportation challenges — all dynamics that resonate in any context outside of a major urban core. Its focus on children and young people also provides a natural rallying point for most communities.

*Where it doesn't map directly to all place-based efforts::* PRI is a single-issue place-based model. Its indicators and pillars are drawn almost entirely from educational attainment metrics. For areas with relatively strong public schools, the more pressing need is for a framework that addresses the health of the whole community across multiple domains. PRI offers valuable insight for the education dimension of anyone's work, but should not serve as the primary template.

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<sup>26</sup> <https://partnersrural.org/>

## Content Producers and Conveners to Note

Each of these models has genuine value to contribute to one's thinking, even though none offers a direct blueprint. The field is diverse enough that leaders will need to synthesize across multiple frameworks, while innovating in its own right, rather than adopt any single one wholesale. For ongoing learning, the following organizations represent important content producers, practitioner networks, and field conveners worth following, and, where possible, engaging directly:

- Build Healthy Places Network :: <https://buildhealthyplaces.org/>
- Christian Community Development Association :: <https://ccda.org/>
- Parish Collective :: <https://www.parishcollective.org/>
- Shelterforce :: <https://shelterforce.org/>
- Urban Institute :: <https://www.urban.org/>
- William Julius Wilson Institute :: <https://hcz.org/william-julius-wilson-institute/>

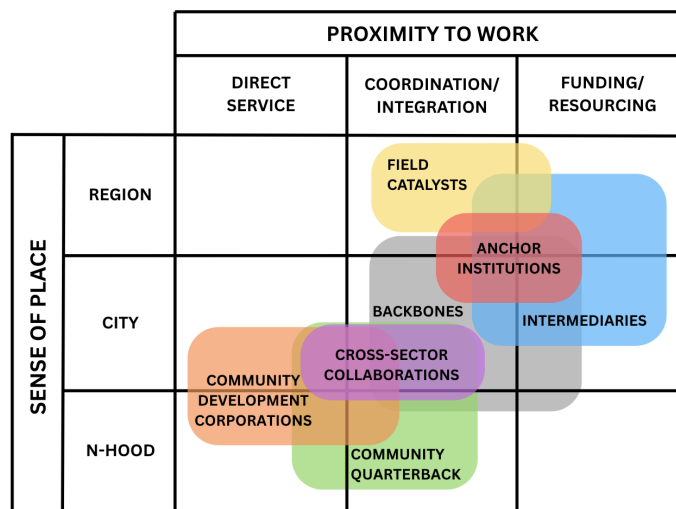
## Types of Place-Based Organizations

Effective PBAs require more than good intentions and a defined geography. They require sustained coordination and leadership, the capacity to mobilize diverse stakeholders, an ability to align resources across sectors, and the vision to maintain long-term commitment to community wellbeing through the inevitable shifts in personnel, funding, and political will. As the field has grown, a variety of organizational models have emerged to fill this convening and coordinating role. Each carries unique characteristics, strengths, and approaches to catalyzing systemic change.

A word of caution before proceeding: these categories do not have universally accepted definitions, and their boundaries are genuinely porous. The same organization is often labeled with multiple terms. This is sometimes an accurate labeling because the organization plays multiple roles, but sometimes it is simply because terminology is used loosely across the field. *What follows is offered as a heuristic for thinking about roles and functions, not as a definitive taxonomy.*

The graphic below plots six types of place-based organizations along two axes. The horizontal axis represents proximity to ground-level work, ranging from direct service delivery to partnership coordination to field-level financing. The vertical axis represents geographic scale, from a single neighborhood to a city to a region. The goal is to map organizational roles and

scale not to sort any given organization into a fixed box. (A better design would make this with water colors bleeding fluidly into multiple areas!)



**Field Catalysts** amplify the efforts of others by shaping the conditions for collective action rather than engaging directly in service delivery. They orchestrate collaboration, prioritize the success of the field over the visibility of any single organization, and work as behind-the-scenes connectors linking stakeholders, aligning agendas, brokering relationships, and stewarding shared learning across communities and organizations. The concept was articulated by Leslie Crutchfield in her 2015 *Stanford Social Innovation Review* article,<sup>27</sup> drawing on research about organizations that create change by influencing entire fields rather than scaling individual programs. The Christian Community Development Association is a useful example: it convenes practitioners, elevates best practices, defines shared values, and advances the legitimacy of community development work nationally — without providing direct services in any specific place.

**Intermediaries** often serve as mission-driven connectors between funders and the organizations delivering services in communities. In community development, intermediaries link local nonprofits and community-based organizations to financial and capacity-building resources from larger public, private, and philanthropic institutions. They typically provide operational support, technical assistance, and access to capital. The intermediary model emerged in the

<sup>27</sup> Leslie R. Crutchfield, “How Change Happens: Field Catalysts,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, January 2015, [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/how\\_change\\_happens\\_field\\_catalysts](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/how_change_happens_field_catalysts)

late 1970s and early 1980s, pioneered by organizations like the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), founded in 1979, and the Enterprise Foundation (now Enterprise Community Partners), founded in 1982. LISC remains one of the nation's largest community development intermediaries, providing grants, loans, and equity investments to community development corporations while coordinating comprehensive neighborhood initiatives.<sup>28</sup>

**Anchor Institutions** are large, place-rooted organizations — typically universities, health systems, or major public entities — that leverage their economic assets, human resources, and physical infrastructure to benefit surrounding neighborhoods. The concept gained significant traction through the work of the HUD Office of University Partnerships and scholars like Ira Harkavy at the University of Pennsylvania, and has been further developed by the Anchor Institutions Task Force. The University of Pennsylvania offers a well-documented example: through local hiring programs, procurement from diverse local businesses, and strategic neighborhood investment in West Philadelphia, Penn has demonstrated how an anchor institution's sheer scale of economic activity can reshape a surrounding community — without necessarily touching ground-level service delivery at all.<sup>29</sup>

**Backbone Organizations** provide the dedicated infrastructure that makes collective impact possible. Their role is to guide shared vision and strategy, support aligned activities across partners, establish common measurement practices, build public will, advance relevant policy, and mobilize funding. The backbone function was defined and popularized by John Kania and Mark Kramer in their influential 2011 *Stanford Social Innovation Review* article on collective impact,<sup>30</sup> which identified it as one of five essential conditions for large-scale social change. StriveTogether in Cincinnati originated as the Strive Partnership and built a cradle-to-career vision for improving educational outcomes across the region. They are one of the core partners in the emerging PBP field.

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<sup>28</sup> Christopher Walker, *Community Development Corporations and Their Changing Support Systems* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2002), <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/community-development-corporations-and-their-changing-support-systems>

<sup>29</sup> Lauren Taylor and Germaine Luter, *Anchor Institutions: An Interpretive Review Essay* (New York: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2013), <https://www.rwjf.org/en/insights/our-research/2013/12/anchor-institutions.html>. Ira Harkavy, “Anchor Institutions as Partners in Building Successful Communities and Local Economies,” in *Retooling HUD for a Catalytic Federal Government: A Report to Secretary Shaun Donovan*, ed. Henry G. Cisneros and Lora Engdahl (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2009).

<sup>30</sup> John Kania and Mark Kramer, “Collective Impact,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 9, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 36–41, [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective\\_impact](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact)

**Cross-Sector Collaboratives** are formal partnerships that intentionally bridge organizational and sectoral boundaries like government, business, nonprofits, and community members to address challenges that no single sector can solve alone. While cross-sector collaboration has existed in community development for decades, its formalization accelerated in the 1990s and 2000s with the 2011 collective impact framework gave it renewed clarity and momentum.<sup>31</sup> Detroit Future City exemplifies this model as they are a strategic framework and implementation organization that coordinates residents, businesses, nonprofits, and government around a long-term vision for the city's transformation. A useful distinction: backbone organizations tend to own more of the administrative and resourcing infrastructure of collective work, while cross-sector collaboratives are focused primarily on the collaboration infrastructure itself. In practice, the line between them is frequently blurred.

**Community Quarterbacks (CQ)**<sup>32</sup> represent perhaps the most operationally specific model in the field. A CQ is a single local organization functioning as the lead systems integrator for antipoverty work within a defined community. They often establish metrics, mobilize resources, ensure coordination among partners, and maintain accountability toward shared goals of comprehensive community change. The term was coined by the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco and the Low Income Investment Fund in their 2012 publication *Investing in What Works for America's Communities*,<sup>33</sup> and was further operationalized by Purpose Built Communities.<sup>34</sup> The East Lake Foundation in Atlanta — the original CQ in the PBC model — transformed the East Lake neighborhood over more than two decades through a comprehensive strategy encompassing mixed-income housing, a cradle-to-career education pipeline anchored by Drew Charter School, and community wellness initiatives. It is seen by some as the clearest proof of concept for what sustained, quarterback-led neighborhood transformation can produce. It is common in the field to hear CD and Backbone used interchangeably as some CQs are more closely tied to ground-level services while others remain at an altitude of partnership and coordination. The presence of the CQ and the pillars it

<sup>31</sup>John M. Bryson, Barbara C. Crosby, and Melissa Middleton Stone, "The Design and Implementation of Cross-Sector Collaborations: Propositions from the Literature," *Public Administration Review* 66, no. s1 (December 2006): 44–55.

<sup>32</sup>Paul Schmitz, "Community Development Needs a Quarterback," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 2014, [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/community\\_development\\_needs\\_a\\_quarterback](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/community_development_needs_a_quarterback).

<sup>33</sup>Nancy O. Andrews, David J. Erickson, Ian Galloway, and Ellen S. Seidman, eds., *Investing in What Works for America's Communities: Essays on People, Place, and Purpose* (San Francisco: Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco and Low Income Investment Fund, 2012).

<sup>34</sup>Purpose Built Communities, "Driving Change Through Community Quarterback Organizations: Connection to Neighbors," October 2024, <https://purposebuiltcommunities.org/2024/10/driving-change-through-community-quarterback-organizations-connection-to-neighbors/>

works on are somewhat uniform in the PBC network, but their proximity to service provision versus coordination is not.

**Community Development Corporations (CDCs)** are nonprofit organizations incorporated specifically to promote and support community development within a defined geography, which is typically a neighborhood or small city. Though they have no special legal status beyond standard 501(c)(3) designation, CDCs are defined by their identity as place-rooted institutions committed to communities that have experienced disinvestment, typically with a strong focus on economic and real estate development and meaningful resident participation in governance.<sup>35</sup> The model originated with the Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, established in 1966 following Senator Robert F. Kennedy's visit to Brooklyn and developed in partnership with the Ford Foundation and the federal government. New Community Corporation in Newark has been named as one of the most successful examples of this model having impact at a large scale.

Taken together, these organizational types represent the range of roles any healthy place-based organization can hold: funder, capacity-builder, convener, developer, service provider, and systems integrator. All are necessary. Again, the distinct articulation above does not play out in the field where the categories overlap, the terminology shifts, and many organizations play more than one role simultaneously. What matters is less the labeling than the function: who is doing what, at what scale, and with what level of sustained commitment. The framework above is a tool for thinking through what kinds of organizational capacity one's place-based approach will need to cultivate — and what role one's organization might be best positioned to play within that ecosystem. No matter the role, however, the principles for leading effectively as a place-based organization are crucial.

### Common Principles for Place-Based Leadership

One of the most necessary mindsets for effectively leading a PBA is the ability to think and communicate in terms of an **ecosystem**. PBA leaders have the health of the whole constantly in mind and are paying attention to all of the factors affecting that ecosystem and the ways those factors interact with each other. PBA leaders are not driven to preserve or promote

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<sup>35</sup>Avis C. Vidal, *Rebuilding Communities: A National Study of Urban Community Development Corporations* (New York: Community Development Research Center, New School for Social Research, 1992).

a particular organization or narrowed in one particular inequity. They see, think about, communicate, and work on the ecosystem.

Another leadership characteristic is being deeply **relational**. PBAs demand relationship-building and trust-development across traditional boundaries that are sectoral, institutional, and cultural. Fragmented efforts cannot address the interconnected challenges facing neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage. All PBA leaders serve coordinating rather than purely implementing roles, recognizing that sustainable community change requires aligning the efforts of multiple actors rather than any single organization delivering all services. Relationships. Trust. Credibility. Partnerships of mutual benefit. These are the currencies effective PBA leaders spend.

Thirdly, PBA leaders operate with **long-term** time horizons, acknowledging that meaningful community transformation typically requires decades of sustained effort rather than short-term interventions. As they do this, they establish shared measurement and accountability systems to track progress toward collective goals, moving beyond individual organizational metrics to population-level outcomes.

Perhaps most critically, PBA leaders unapologetically and continually grapple with questions of power, equity, and authentic community voice, **centering resident leadership** in their approaches. PBA cannot rely on the well-worn ruts that keep systems leaders and social impact leaders siloed from the very people they are intended to serve. PBAs do not just disrupt the measurable inequalities but the power imbalances that create them.

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