



6-1994

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Original Citation

Wolman, H. L., Ford, C. C., & Hill, E. (1994). Evaluating the Success of Urban Success Stories. *Urban Studies*, 31, 6, 835-850.

Repository Citation

Wohlman, Harold L.; Ford, Coit Cook III; and Hill, Edward W., "Evaluating the Success of Urban Success Stories" (1994). *Urban Publications*. 0 1 2 3 75.

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EVALUATING THE SUCCESS OF URBAN SUCCESS STORIES

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This article was originally published in:

Wolman, Harold L., et al. (1993). Evaluating the Success of Urban Success Stories. *Urban Studies*, 31(6), 835-850.

Post-print standardized by MSL Academic Endeavors, the imprint of the Michael Schwartz Library at Cleveland State University, 2012



Evaluating the Success of Urban Success Stories

Harold L. Wolman, Coit Cook Ford III and Edward Hill

Summary. Arresting and reversing the condition of urban distress in America's cities represents one of the most challenging and perplexing problems confronting policy-makers. Indeed, urban distress in American cities has proved to be a stubborn and largely intractable phenomenon during the past two decades. Nevertheless, a number of cities that were experiencing distress at the beginning of the 1980s are now being acclaimed as 'urban success stories' or 'revitalised' cities. We evaluate the performance, between 1980 and 1990, of these supposedly 'revitalised' cities on objective indicators of the economic well-being of their residents and compare their performance to that of other cities that were equally distressed in 1980. We conclude that with the exception of Atlanta, Baltimore and Boston, the purportedly 'revitalised' cities performed no better with respect to change in the economic well-being of their residents than did other cities that were equally distressed in 1980—and in many cases performed worse.

The condition of America's distressed urban areas represents one of the most serious and vexing problems facing the nation. Urban economic distress has been both persistent and highly resistant to policy solutions (see Bradbury *et al.*, 1982). Yet, in the face of these problems, it is widely acknowledged that there have been examples of urban successes. Both popular and academic journals have heralded the revitalisation of cities such as Baltimore, Pittsburgh and, more recently, Cleveland.¹ Such success stories have naturally attracted the attention and interest of public officials and community leaders in distressed cities that are desperately seeking solutions to their own problems. Indeed, delegations from distressed cities are frequent

visitors to these 'successful' cities, hoping to learn from them and to emulate their success. Unfortunately, these visitors—and others who herald these 'urban success stories'—are frequently quite unclear about the nature of these successes and the benefits they produce.

There are obviously many different ways of defining and measuring 'success'. Success may be viewed in terms of improvement in a variety of economic, social and physical conditions such as increased business investment, physical redevelopment, reduction in crime and infant mortality rates, increases in educational achievement, etc. In this paper, our concern is with improvement in the economic well-being of area residents, a concern

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widely held to be of substantial importance. Our objective is to determine whether cities that are perceived to have undergone economic revitalisation have, at the same time, experienced improvement in the economic well-being of their residents. We pursue this objective by comparing changes in the economic well-being of residents in cities perceived to have undergone successful urban revitalisation to changes in the economic well-being of residents in cities that were similar to them prior to their supposed revitalisation. This will permit us to assess the extent to which 'urban success stories' are myth or reality, at least with respect to the economic well-being of their residents.

As Ladd and Yinger (1989) observe, urban revitalisation can benefit cities by improving

- (1) their economic base (increasing employment and output in the city);
- (2) their fiscal condition; or
- (3) the well-being of their residents.

Well-being is a multi-faceted construct that includes economic, social and psychological components (see Wolman and Goldsmith, 1992, for a discussion of the concept of residential well-being). In this article, our concern is the extent to which the perceived 'urban success stories' have actually improved the *economic well-being* of their residents relative to that of residents of other cities that were similar to them, prior to their supposed revitalisation, in degree of distress. We do not address the relationship between perceived success and other objective success measures such as those previously discussed, although, we believe such relationships worthy of exploration, and invite others to apply our methodology to that end. Instead, we are concerned with whether public perceptions of success are related to reality, at least with respect to improvements in the economic well-being of city residents. Furthermore, we take these perceptions as given—i.e. we are not concerned with the causes of these perceptions or why they arise, but with whether these perceptions of success accord with reality. Such public per-

ceptions, whatever their origins, are important, for they condition and influence the actions of policy-makers and community decision-makers, often in quite profound ways.

The question of whether urban revitalisation has actually benefited city residents has been widely discussed and debated in the literature (see, for example, the exchange between Levine (1987a, 1987b) and Berkowitz (1987), the various contributors in Squires (1989), Fainstein *et al.* (1986), Clavel (1986), Riposa and Andranovich (1988), Barnekov *et al.* (1989) and Brownhill (1990). However, it has not been the subject of systematic empirical research across a range of cities.

In order to pursue our objective we make use of a form of natural experiment. First, we identify cities that were distressed in 1980, but have (purportedly) successfully revitalised since that time. We then compare the extent to which the economic well-being of the residents of these perceived 'successful' cities has improved from 1980 to 1990, with that of the residents of cities which were similarly distressed in 1980 but are not perceived to have undergone successful revitalisation. We call the latter the perceived 'unsuccessful cities'. Finally, we identify those distressed cities in 1980 that, in fact, experienced the greatest increase in resident economic well-being during the past decade.

Methodology

The first step was to identify the 'urban success stories'—that is, cities that were distressed in 1980, but are widely believed to have successfully revitalised over the course of the past decade. Rather than relying on impressions from the media, we decided to consult expert opinion in a systematic manner. Specifically, we asked a set of highly informed observers to identify those cities that had been distressed in 1980, but had undergone successful revitalisation by the end of the decade.

We began by identifying a set of cities that were distressed according to objective criteria in 1980. The first step involved devel-

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oping an index of urban distress. There is a substantial literature on what constitutes urban distress. Bradbury *et al.* (1982) distinguish between *descriptive decline*, which they measure through changes in population and employment, and *functional distress*, which they measure through changes in variables such as the unemployment rate, per capita income, the incidence of poverty and the rate of violent crime. Franklin James (1990) develops a 'city distress index' that combines *resident needs*, as measured by city poverty rate, unemployment rate and per capita income growth, and *population change*. Other measures abound (see, for example, Nathan and Adams (1976), Cuciti (1978) and Fossett and Nathan (1981). For reviews of this literature, see James (1990) and Sternlieb (1980).

Our urban distress index combines both descriptive and functional indicators and is quite similar to that of James (1990). We utilised five indicators:

- (1) the 1980 unemployment rate;
- (2) the 1980 poverty rate (persons);
- (3) 1980 median household income
- (4) percentage change between 1970 and 1980 in per capita income; and
- (5) percentage change between 1970 and 1980 in population

A distribution of standard scores was created for each of the individual indicators. The indicators were standardised by converting them to z scores.² The standardised scores for each city were then summed across all five indicators (thus weighting each of the indicators equally) to create a cumulative index of urban health (see Appendix).³ The bottom third of the cities in this distribution were designated as 'distressed' ($n = 50$).

We then solicited the opinions of a set of experts, sending them a survey letter that included the list of the 50 most distressed cities in 1980, and asking them to select up to 10 that had experienced the strongest 'economic turnaround or urban revitalisation' by the end of the decade. The survey was sent to members of the editorial boards of the leading American academic journals

concerned with urban affairs and economic development (*Urban Affairs Quarterly*, *Journal of Urban Affairs and Economic Development Quarterly*), and to members of the Executive Boards of two leading economic development practitioner organisations, the American Economic Development Council (AEDC) and the Council on Urban Economic Development (CUED). Our response rate was 47.8 per cent (76 responses from 159 sampled).

We deemed 'successfully revitalised' those cities ($n = 12$) that were named by 20 per cent or more of the respondents, and 'most successfully revitalised' those cities ($n = 6$) that were named by 40 per cent or more of the respondents (Table 1). In order to ensure that the successfully revitalised cities did not differ from the other distressed cities as of 1980 (i.e. they were both part of the same distressed population), we compared the means of the two groups of cities using a difference of means test, and found no statistically significant difference between them.

Again, we emphasise that this process yielded only *perceptions*, albeit of reasonably informed people, and that this is what it was designed to do. We did not use it as a means of determining which cities had, in fact, successfully undergone urban revitalisation in objective terms, and we do not argue that perceptions accord with reality. We also do not know how these perceptions were formed. Our intent was to capture perceptions, based on what our informed respondents carried around in their minds, rather than to capture objective reality based on data.

Comparisons of the performance of the different groups of cities between 1980 and 1990 were then made on a series of indicators of the economic well-being of residents. We focus on the economic well-being of residents because the ultimate benefit of spatial revitalisation must be measured in terms of whether or not people (rather than tracts of land) are better off, and economic benefits are nearly universally recognised as being of substantial importance.

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Table 1. The 'successfully revitalised' cities, 1980–90

Central city	State	Count	Response (%)
Pittsburgh	Pennsylvania	63	82.9
Baltimore	Maryland	49	64.5
Atlanta	Georgia	40	52.6
Cleveland	Ohio	37	48.7
Cincinnati	Ohio	33	43.4
Louisville	Kentucky	31	40.8
Miami	Florida	23	30.3
Boston	Massachusetts	22	28.9
Chicago	Illinois	22	28.9
Birmingham	Alabama	18	23.7
Buffalo	New York	18	23.7
Norfolk	Virginia	16	21.1
Total count			541
Total respondents			76
Average responses			7.12
<i>Survey organizations</i>		Responses (Number)	
American Economic Development Council		13	
Council on Urban Economic Development		18	
Journal of Urban Affairs		11	
Economic Development Quarterly		22	
Urban Affairs Quarterly		14	
Duplicate Membership (respondents)			2
Total respondents			76
Total number surveyed			159
Survey response rate (%)			47.8

Note: The 'successfully revitalised' cities were selected by respondents from a set of 50 cities that were experiencing distress in 1980 according to their scores on an index of urban health. (See Appendix note for a description of the methodology.)

How should economic well-being be conceptualised and operationalised? Conceptually, we define economic well-being of area residents to consist of the ability to purchase goods and services (income), the distribution of income among residents, and the ability to participate effectively in area labour markets (as a component of economic well-being itself, irrespective of the income such participation might produce). Since our concern is with change in economic well-being, operationally we seek measures of change in real income, in the distribution of income, and in the labour force status of area residents.

Three measures of change in income and the distribution of income were used: (1)

percentage change in median household income and (2) percentage change in per capita income as measures of change in income, and (3) percentage point change in the rate of persons below the poverty line as a measure of distribution. We expect that 'successfully revitalised' cities will have experienced larger increases in both median household and per capita income and greater reductions in the rate of poverty than will the unrevitalised or 'unsuccessful' cities.

To operationalise the labour force status of area residents, we used two measures that are common in the labour economics literature: the percentage point change in the unemployment rate and the percentage point

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Table 2. Comparative performance of perceived 'successfully revitalised' and perceived 'unsuccessful' cities, 1980–90

Indicator	Successful (<i>N</i> = 12) Mean	Unsuccessful (<i>N</i> = 38) Mean	Test statistic (critical: – 1.96, 1.96)
Unemployment rate (percentage point change)	1.40	1.27	– 0.347
Poverty rate (percentage point change)	2.53	2.91	0.275
Labour force participation (percentage point change)	2.78	2.70	– 0.111
Median household income (percentage change)	73.38	76.78	0.390
Per capita income (percentage change)	89.36	87.57	– 0.220
Index of economic well-being (<i>n</i> scores)	– 0.038	0.012	0.043

Note: The index of well-being is the product of the summation of the standard scores for changes in five indicators of resident economic well-being between 1980 and 1990. These include: percentage point change in the unemployment rate, the rate of persons below the poverty line and the labour force participation rate; as well as percentage change in median household income and per capita income. The percentage point changes in the unemployment rate and the rate of persons below the poverty line are adjusted (multiplied by negative one) so that a positive sign on all indicators connotes relative improvement in economic well-being.

change in the labour force participation rate. Employment—the possession of a job—is seen as, in itself, an important component of economic well-being. Lower unemployment rates thus imply greater economic well-being for area residents. We expect that 'successfully revitalised' cities will have experienced a greater tightening of labour markets over the decade relative to 'unsuccessful' cities and, consequently, reductions in unemployment rates relative to these cities. This expectation is consistent with Bartik's (1991) work on state and local economic development policy.

Increases in labour force participation reflect increased optimism on the part of area residents about the prospects of gaining employment and thus, in our terms, an increase in their economic well-being. Eberts and Stone (1992) have conclusively shown that local labour markets adjust to fluctuations in the demand for labour by changing their labour force participation rates. Thus, we expect that if cities have truly revitalised, then their labour force participation rates will be higher than rates found in the unsuccessful cities.

We first compared the 12 'successfully revitalised' cities with the 38 other cities that

were distressed in 1980, but were perceived by our panel as not having undergone successful revitalisation over the decade. Next, we compared the 6 'most successfully revitalised' cities to the 38 'unsuccessful' cities.

Findings

Did the distressed cities which were perceived by our experts to have successfully revitalised during the past decade actually perform better than the other distressed cities in terms of our indicators of resident economic well-being? To answer this query, we compared the means of the supposedly 'successfully revitalised' cities with the means of the supposedly 'unsuccessful' cities on each of the five indicators. Since we were dealing with two populations of cities rather than samples (all cities in metropolitan areas of 250 000 or more that were distressed in 1980), differences found between the populations were real differences, not sampling error. Nevertheless, in order to determine whether the observed differences were large enough to be significant under more rigorous statistical assumptions (i.e. if we considered the cities as a sample of all possible distressed cities over a long period of time), we

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Table 3. Comparative performance of perceived 'most successfully revitalised' and perceived 'unsuccessful' cities, 1980–90

Indicator	Most successful (<i>N</i> = 6) Mean	Unsuccessful (<i>N</i> = 38) Mean	Test statistic (critical: – 1.96, 1.96)
Unemployment rate (percentage point change)	1.30	1.27	– 0.058
Poverty rate (percentage point change)	3.03	2.91	– 0.055
Labour force participation (percentage point change)	2.47	2.70	0.296
Median household income (percentage change)	69.10	76.78	0.800
Per capita income (percentage change)	91.35	87.57	– 0.350
Index of economic well-being (n scores)	– 0.222	0.012	0.228

Test criterion: $p = 0.05$, Z probability distribution

applied a difference of means test. In doing so, we found no statistically significant difference for any of the indicators (see Table 2).

Indeed, the 'successfully revitalised' cities were actually outperformed by the 'unsuccessful' cities on some of our indicators. The 'unsuccessful' cities did better than the 'successful' cities in terms of the percentage point change in the unemployment rate—the rate increased in the 'successful' cities by 1.40 percentage points, while it increased by 1.27 percentage points in the 'unsuccessful' cities. The 'unsuccessful' cities also saw greater improvements in median income than did the 'successful' cities (76.8 per cent in nominal dollars compared to 73.4 per cent). The 'successfully revitalised' cities did do slightly better than the 'unsuccessful' cities with respect to percentage change in per capita income and percentage point change in the poverty rate, but these differences were slight and as noted, far short of statistical significance.

We next constructed an overall 'index of economic well-being' as a summary measure of the change in resident economic well-being from 1980 to 1990. The index was constructed by summing the standard scores of the five indicators (percentage point change in: the unemployment rate, labour force participation rate and the poverty rate and percentage change in median household income

and in per capita income). The 'unsuccessful' cities actually had a slightly higher summary index of resident economic well-being than the 'successfully revitalised' cities (0.012 compared to –0.038), although the differences were not statistically significant.

In order to provide a more stringent test, we next compared the performance of the six 'most successfully revitalised' cities—those which 40 per cent or more of the respondents had mentioned—with that of the 38 'unsuccessful' cities. Remarkably, the 'unsuccessful' cities outperformed the 'most successfully revitalised' cities on all of the five indicators of resident economic well-being (except change in per capita income) and on the summary index (0.012 compared to –0.222). Again, there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups of cities, either with respect to the individual indicators or the summary index of performance (see Table 3).

Since averages may hide important differences in individual city performance, we examined the individual means of the 6 'most successfully revitalised' cities on each indicator of economic well-being by comparing them to the means of the 38 'unsuccessful' cities. It is clear from this analysis (see Table 4) that two of the perceived 'most successfully revitalised' cities—Atlanta and Baltimore—did perform considerably better than the 'unsuccessful' cities. Baltimore per-

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Table 4. Individual city changes on the indicators of resident economic well-being, 'most successfully revitalised' cities, 1980–90

City	Percentage point change unemployment	Percentage change in median house income	Percentage point change in persons below the poverty line	Percentage change in per capita income	Percentage point change in the labour force participation rate
Pittsburgh	2.2	54.7	4.9	83.8	1.5
Baltimore	0.1*	87.7	- 1.0*	104.1*	3.7
Atlanta	1.5	97.2*	- 0.2*	133.7*	4.1*
Cleveland	3.9	45.2	6.6	60.5	0.3
Cincinnati	- 0.4*	65.7	4.6	82.5	3.2
Louisville	0.5*	64.1	3.3	83.5	2.0
Mean 'unsuccessful cities'	1.27	76.78	2.91	87.57	2.70

Note: The values for each city that are half standard deviation units beyond the mean of the 'unsuccessful cities' ($n = 38$) for each indicator of resident economic well-being are marked with an asterisk.

formed better than the 'unsuccessful' cities on each of the five indicators; and on three of these indicators (unemployment rate, poverty rate and per capita income), Baltimore's mean was at least half a standard deviation better than the mean of the 'unsuccessful' cities. Atlanta performed better than the 'unsuccessful' cities on four of the five indicators (all but change in unemployment rate); and for each of these four indicators, Atlanta's mean was at least half a standard deviation better than the mean of the 'unsuccessful' cities. However, Cleveland and Pittsburgh performed more poorly than the 'unsuccessful' cities on all five of the indicators (indeed, Cleveland was more than half a standard deviation *below* the mean performance of the 'unsuccessful' cities on four of the five indicators), while Louisville performed more poorly on four of the indicators and Cincinnati on three.

We also examined separately the other six cities comprising the set of 'successfully revitalised' cities. Of the six, only Boston clearly outperformed the 'unsuccessful' cities, experiencing beneficial changes in the economic well-being of their residents as demonstrated by being half a standard deviation or more beyond the mean of the 'unsuccessful' cities on four of the five

indicators. Norfolk also outperformed the 'unsuccessful' cities on four of the five indicators, but on only one was it more than half a standard deviation better than their mean. The other four cities perceived to be 'successfully revitalised' (Miami, Chicago, Birmingham and Buffalo) all performed more poorly than the 'unsuccessful' cities on at least three of the five indicators of economic well-being (see Table 5).

It is possible that our survey respondents may have been focusing on metropolitan areas rather than central cities when they listed urban areas that experienced 'the strongest economic turnaround or urban revitalisation'. It is also possible that the impact of urban revitalisation may have exerted its most substantial economic effect on the residents of the entire metropolitan area rather than specifically on the residents of central cities, with suburban residents benefiting most from the increased economic viability of the central city. Accordingly, we repeated our analysis for the metropolitan areas of the 'successfully revitalised', 'most successfully revitalised', and 'unsuccessful' cities.

Unfortunately, it was not possible to gather labour force participation rate data on a comparable metropolitan area basis for both 1980 and 1990, so the metropolitan area

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Table 5. Individual city changes on the indicators of resident economic well-being, 'next most successfully revitalised' cities, 1980–90

City	Percentage point change unemployment	Percentage change in median house income	Percentage point change in persons below the poverty line	Percentage change in per capita income	Percentage point change in the labour force participation rate
Miami	4.1	52.8	6.7	61.1	0.0
Boston	2.3	132.9*	-1.5*	137.7*	6.4*
Chicago	2.3	71.9	1.3	84.5	3.0
Birmingham	-1.7*	60.6	2.8	74.2	1.8
Buffalo	-0.6*	59.4	4.9	76.2	3.9
Norfolk	2.6	88.4	-1.4*	90.5	3.4
Mean 'unsuccessful cities'	1.27	76.78	2.91	87.57	2.70

Note: The values for each city that are half standard deviation units beyond the mean of the 'unsuccessful cities' ($n = 38$) for each indicator of resident economic well-being are marked with an asterisk.

index of economic well-being consisted of four indicators rather than five. Nevertheless, our findings were essentially the same as for the previous analysis (see Table 6).

There were no statistically significant differences between the performance of the metropolitan areas of the 'successfully revitalised' cities and the metropolitan areas of the 'unsuccessful' cities. Indeed, the 'unsuccessful' metropolitan areas outperformed the 'successfully revitalised' metropolitan areas on three of the four indicators, having somewhat greater percentage increases in both median household and per capita income and a greater decline in the unemployment rate (-1.69 percentage points compared to -1.03). The 'unsuccessful' areas also performed better on the summary index of resident economic well-being. We repeated the analysis for the six metropolitan areas of the 'most successfully revitalised' cities with much the same results (see Table 7).

Our analysis has convincingly shown that the so-called urban success stories were, on the whole, mythical—at least so far as the economic condition of the residents is concerned. We can now consider the question of which distressed cities *did* experience the best performance with respect to our summary index of resident economic well-being from 1980 to 1990. The n scores on the

summary indicator for all the 50 cities are listed in order of performance (best to worst) in Table 8. The index consists of the summation of the city n scores from each of the five indicators (percentage point change in unemployment rate, poverty rate and labour force participation rate; and percentage change in median household and per capita income). By these criteria, the six best-performing cities over the period are, in order, Wilmington, Paterson, Atlantic City, Jersey City, Boston and New York. Clearly there is a regional factor at work—for cities and their metropolitan areas are likely to perform in much the same manner as the region of which they are a part, and the Mid-Atlantic and New England regions performed very well during the 1980s. Of the perceived 'most successfully revitalised' cities, Atlanta ranks 12th, Baltimore 14th, Cincinnati 21st, Louisville 30th, Pittsburgh 38th and Cleveland 44th.

Discussion

We have examined the cities that are perceived to be 'urban success stories' and found that, taken as a group, they performed no better with respect to change in the economic well-being of their residents—and in many cases performed worse—than did other

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Table 6. Comparative performance of the metropolitan areas of perceived 'successfully revitalised' cities to the metropolitan areas of perceived 'unsuccessful' cities, 1980–90

Indicator	Most Successful (<i>N</i> = 12) Mean	Unsuccessful (<i>N</i> = 38) Mean	Test statistic (critical: – 1.96, 1.96)
Unemployment rate (percentage point change)	– 1.03	– 1.69	– 1.36
Poverty rate (percentage point change)	0.37	0.51	0.21
Median house income (percentage change)	76.93	81.81	0.73
Per capita income (percentage change)	98.84	104.21	0.87
Index of economic well-being (<i>n</i> scores)	– 0.54	0.17	0.72

cities that were equally distressed in 1980. We did find that three of the cities reputed to be successful—Atlanta, Baltimore and Boston—performed considerably better than the other distressed cities; they could justifiably be termed 'urban success stories', although, with the possible exception of Boston, they were by no means the best performers of the distressed cities.

How can we account for these findings, and how do we interpret them? First, we must state the obvious: we purposefully did not define the terms 'economic turnaround' or 'urban revitalisation' for our respondents, and it is uncertain what criteria they were using when they identified those cities that had experienced the 'strongest economic turnaround or urban revitalisation'. It is clear, however, that improvement in the economic well-being of the residents was not the criterion by which urban revitalisation was being measured, or, if it was, it was badly misperceived.

If we were to define urban revitalisation in objective terms (e.g. an increase in residential, commercial and industrial investment in the city), it may be that some or all of these cities did not undergo urban revitalisation at all. Or, perhaps, these cities did experience such revitalisation, but it did not produce an improvement in the relative economic well-being of their residents. Instead, 'urban revitalisation' might have been manifested in improvements in the city's economic base (e.g. an increase in the number of jobs located in the city) or fiscal condition. Indeed,

it is possible that one or both of these conditions may have served as implicit criteria by which our respondents identified cities which had undergone economic turnaround or urban revitalisation.

In the end, of course, we do not know what was in the minds of our respondents or why they responded as they did. This is an interesting subject, and one worthy of further research. An initial hypothesis is that perception of downtown redevelopment efforts greatly influences perception of urban success. (Physical development is frequently viewed by planners and development professionals as the leading indicator, if not the culmination, of revitalisation. See Frieden and Sagalyn, 1989). If this hypothesis is valid, then the cities that are perceived as most revitalised will be those that experienced the most substantial improvement in their central business districts, the most visible part of an area's image. Redevelopment of the central business district in terms of both new office buildings and the presence of retail stores and boutiques, recreational opportunities and tourist attractions may drive public perceptions of the well-being of the entire urban area. However, if this hypothesis is true, then it must be said that improved downtown image did not translate, at least immediately, into improvements in the economic well-being of residents, either in the city or in the metropolitan area as a whole.⁴

An interesting, though highly speculative explanation, can also be constructed from the data we have presented on the performance

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Table 7. Comparative performance of the metropolitan areas of perceived 'most successfully revitalised' cities to the metropolitan areas of perceived 'unsuccessful' cities, 1980–90

Indicator	Most Successful (<i>N</i> = 12) Mean	Unsuccessful (<i>N</i> = 38) Mean	Test statistic (critical: – 1.96, 1.96)
Unemployment rate (percentage point change)	– 1.28	– 1.69	– 0.83
Poverty rate (percentage point change)	0.48	0.51	0.03
Median house income (percentage change)	73.00	81.81	1.02
Per capita income (percentage change)	99.13	104.21	0.71
Index of economic well-being (n scores)	– 0.63	0.17	0.70

Test criterion: $p = 0.05$, Z probability distribution

of the 'most successfully revitalised' cities relative to the 'unsuccessful' ones. First of all, per capita income increased more in the six 'most successfully revitalised' cities than in the unsuccessful ones, but median household income increased more in the 38 'unsuccessful cities'. The only possible explanation for this is that household size declined more rapidly in the most successful cities, which would be consistent with a relatively greater increase in young single individuals and childless couples (yuppies) frequently associated with revitalisation of downtown areas and gentrification. The small, but greater increase, in the unemployment rate and poverty rate in the 'most successfully revitalised' cities would be consistent with a worsening of the income distribution and growing disparities between the wealthy and the poor.

Summary and Conclusion

We begin by emphasising what we did find and what we did not. Cities that have been perceived as 'urban success stories' have not, in fact, been successful, at least in so far as improving the economic well-being of their residents. The change in the economic well-being of residents of cities that are typified as 'urban success stories' between 1980 and 1990 did not differ from—and in some cases was inferior to—change in the economic well-being of residents of other cities that

were (like the 'urban success stories') distressed in 1980.

Our findings do not suggest that actual (as opposed to perceived) urban revitalisation might not lead to improvements in the economic well-being of residents, unless one assumes (and we do not) that the correspondence between perceived and actual urban revitalisation is exact. Our findings relate to the common perceptions which drive policy-makers (and urban experts as well) to evaluate city performance and learn from 'successes'. We argue that efforts to copy the policies and development activities of these 'success stories' may well be misplaced, at least if improving the economic well-being of area residents is the goal that is being pursued.

We have no data that relate to actual urban revitalisation. It would indeed be useful to identify which cities have actually achieved urban revitalisation and to examine the effect of revitalisation on economic well-being. Such an effort would require a careful conceptual definition of urban revitalisation and selection of a corresponding operational variable for which data could be collected.

Our work also raises interesting questions about what urban experts, policy-makers and others mean when they make use of the term 'urban revitalisation'. We view this as an important question, since we believe that mental constructs about the nature of a phenomenon are important determinants of

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Table 8. Central city economic performance on the index of economic well-being, 1980–90 (emboldened cities are those selected as ‘successfully revitalised’.)

Central city	State	Index score
Wilmington	Delaware	9.388
Paterson	New Jersey	7.374
Atlantic City	New Jersey	6.120
Jersey City	New Jersey	5.960
Boston	Massachusetts	5.943
New York	New York	4.487
New Haven	Connecticut	4.422
Newark	New Jersey	4.027
New Brunswick	New Jersey	3.767
Trenton	New Jersey	3.650
Bridgeport	Connecticut	3.515
Atlanta	Georgia	3.482
Albany	New York	3.470
Baltimore	Maryland	2.835
Philadelphia	Pennsylvania	1.632
Reading	Pennsylvania	1.516
Scranton	Pennsylvania	1.090
Providence	Rhode Island	0.774
Norfolk	Virginia	0.703
York	Pennsylvania	0.552
Cincinnati	Ohio	0.007
Utica	New York	– 0.064
Birmingham	Alabama	– 0.069
Springfield	Massachusetts	– 0.140
Chicago	Illinois	– 0.142
Syracuse	New York	– 0.166
Buffalo	New York	– 0.228
Binghamton	New York	– 0.297
New Bedford	Massachusetts	– 0.316
Louisville	Kentucky	– 0.334
Augusta	Georgia	– 0.497
Macon	Georgia	– 0.661
St. Louis	Missouri	– 0.919
Hartford	Massachusetts	– 0.936
Akron	Ohio	– 1.194
Harrisburg	Pennsylvania	– 1.250
Rochester	New York	– 1.335
Pittsburgh	Pennsylvania	– 2.066
Dayton	Ohio	– 2.184
Huntington	West Virginia	– 3.863
Canton	Ohio	– 4.236
New Orleans	Louisiana	– 4.597
Saginaw	Michigan	– 5.253
Cleveland	Ohio	– 5.334
Miami	Florida	– 5.758
Flint	Michigan	– 5.967
Detroit	Michigan	– 5.967
Johnstown	Pennsylvania	– 6.886
Gary	Indiana	– 7.001
Youngstown	Ohio	– 8.080

Note: See text for an explanation of the creation and composition of this index.

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how policy-makers frame both problems and solutions. 'Urban revitalisation', whatever it is, has a highly positive valence; it is seen to be a *good thing*, worthy of pursuit and emulation. But of what does this *good thing* consist? Clearer understanding of what people mean by 'urban revitalisation' might also lead to more critical thinking about which aspects of it are indeed 'good' and which are more problematic. This, too, is worthy of additional research.

In future work, we intend to examine what factors account for the performance of those distressed cities that actually improved the economic well-being of their residents. Two important questions that arise are what factors accounted for their superior performance and to what extent can that performance be attributed to policy choices made by these cities, rather than to regional and national economic factors? Using the same data set we also intend to examine the relative performance of central cities and their metropolitan areas and address the extent to which central city economic performance affects the performance of the city's suburbs and the metropolitan area as a whole.

Notes

1. The popular press has written extensively on the subject of 'comeback cities' or 'urban success stories', focusing largely on the physical revitalisation of the downtown cores. See, for example, "Spiffing up the Urban Heritage" *Time*, 23 November 1987; "When Cities Smile Again" *The Economist*, 16 January 1988; "The Rest of the Major Cities" *Fortune*, 23 October 1989 and "You Wanna Meet Here", *Sales and Marketing Management*, November 1990.
2. N scores are conceptually equivalent to z scores, but are distributed in standard deviation units from the median rather than the mean. Thus, n scores have the advantage of being less influenced by sample outliers in the creation of a distribution of scores.
3. The signs on the standard scores of the unemployment rate and poverty rate were reversed (multiplied by negative one) in the index, so that a positive score constituted an improvement in economic condition.
4. Indeed, it would suggest that the downtown development and increased activity, if it occurred, involved redistribution of economic activity from other parts of the metropolitan area to downtown rather than an increase in overall economic activity. However, even if this hypothesis is true, we hasten to add that we are not arguing that downtown development and enhancement of a city's image may not have some beneficial effects in terms of the residents' own image of their city and consequent psychological improvements in their quality of life, or indeed, in terms of economic development and economic well-being. It may be true (it may not as well) that any positive economic development gains derived from a city's image enhancement require a substantial lead time before investors of mobile capital respond. Baltimore, Boston and Atlanta have, it is true, been recognised as 'urban success stories' longer than have Pittsburgh and Cleveland.

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Appendix. Central City Performance on the Index of Urban Health, 1980

Central city	State	Index score
Lexington-Fayette	Kentucky	8.236
San Jose	California	7.948
Anaheim	California	7.191
Houston	Texas	6.678
Bakersfield	California	6.326
Appleton	Wisconsin	6.299
Tulsa	Oklahoma	5.894
Wichita	Kansas	5.719
Honolulu	Hawaii	5.713
Raleigh	North Carolina	5.705
Santa Rosa	California	5.664
Davenport	Iowa	5.525
Aurora	Illinois	4.893
Austin	Texas	4.890
Colorado Springs	Colorado	4.877
Oklahoma City	Oklahoma	4.676
Phoenix	Arizona	4.675
Portsmouth	New Hampshire	4.625
Charlotte	North Carolina	4.622
Santa Barbara	California	4.078
Nashville-Davidson	Tennessee	3.957
Modesto	California	3.890
Waukegan	Illinois	3.822
Little Rock	Arkansas	3.717
Corpus-Christi	Texas	3.610
Dallas	Texas	3.483
Albuquerque	New Mexico	3.416
Las Vegas	Nevada	3.281
Oxnard	California	3.226
Madison	Wisconsin	3.198
Evansville	Indiana	3.140
Charleston	West Virginia	2.966
Riverside	California	2.946
Des Moines	Iowa	2.832
Omaha	Nebraska	2.824
Manchester	New Hampshire	2.815
Baton Rouge	Louisiana	2.804

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Appendix.—Continued.

Central city	State	Index score
Vallejo	California	2.741
San Diego	California	2.658
Shreveport	Louisiana	2.639
Ann Arbor	Michigan	2.545
Chattanooga	Tennessee	2.529
Beaumont	Texas	2.459
Greensboro	North Carolina	2.340
Jacksonville	Florida	2.306
Denver	Colorado	2.219
Fort Lauderdale	Florida	2.217
Joliet	Illinois	2.019
Peoria	Illinois	1.995
Fort Worth	Texas	1.926
Orlando	Florida	1.928
Melbourne	Florida	1.901
Tucson	Arizona	1.824
West Palm Beach	Florida	1.698
Eugene	Oregon	1.576
Duluth	Minnesota	1.460
Johnson City	Tennessee	1.455
Montgomery	Alabama	1.399
Pensacola	Florida	1.301
Salinas	California	1.281
Indianapolis	Indiana	1.171
Charleston	South Carolina	1.125
Mobile	Alabama	1.069
McAllen	Texas	1.005
Portland	Oregon	0.928
Fresno	California	0.908
Lakeland	Florida	0.899
Rockford	Illinois	0.862
Columbus	Ohio	0.847
Minneapolis	Minnesota	0.753
San Francisco	California	0.602
Fort Wayne	Indiana	0.428
Allentown	Pennsylvania	0.418
San Antonio	Texas	0.306
Greenville	South Carolina	0.255
Kansas City	Missouri	0.238
Lorain	Ohio	0.216
Milwaukee	Wisconsin	0.196
Seattle	Washington	0.187
Jackson	Mississippi	0.161
Spokane	Washington	0.155
Tampa	Florida	0.147
Sacramento	California	0.066
Los Angeles	California	0.049
Memphis	Tennessee	0.032
Lansing	Michigan	- 0.019
Tacoma	Washington	- 0.139
Salt Lake City	Utah	- 0.212
Knoxville	Tennessee	- 0.332
Hamilton	Ohio	- 0.360
Stockton	California	- 0.372
Washington	District of Columbia	- 0.537

EVALUATING THE SUCCESS OF URBAN SUCCESS STORIES

Appendix.—Continued.

Central city	State	Index score
El Paso	Texas	- 0.596
Worcester	Massachusetts	- 0.660
Erie	Pennsylvania	- 0.680
Toledo	Ohio	- 1.005
Columbia	South Carolina	- 1.214
Grand Rapids	Michigan	- 1.338
Oakland	California	- 1.606
Lancaster	Pennsylvania	- 1.705
Richmond	Virginia	- 1.739
Daytona Beach	Florida	- 1.746
Huntington	West Virginia	- 1.884
Macon	Georgia	- 1.947
Springfield	Massachusetts	- 2.130
New Orleans	Louisiana	- 2.189
Pittsburgh	Pennsylvania	- 2.259
Norfolk	Virginia	- 2.335
Boston	Massachusetts	- 2.399
Scranton	Pennsylvania	- 2.577
Akron	Ohio	- 2.705
Chicago	Illinois	- 2.746
Albany	New York	- 2.840
Canton	Ohio	- 2.847
Gary	Indiana	- 2.862
York	Pennsylvania	- 3.013
Binghamton	New York	- 3.148
New Bedford	Massachusetts	- 3.282
Cincinnati	Ohio	- 3.346
Miami	Florida	- 3.492
Rochester	New York	- 3.508
Flint	Michigan	- 3.510
Philadelphia	Pennsylvania	- 3.560
Bridgeport	Connecticut	- 3.645
Reading	Pennsylvania	- 3.679
Syracuse	New York	- 3.682
Birmingham	Alabama	- 3.762
New Brunswick	New Jersey	- 3.770
Johnstown	Pennsylvania	- 3.848
Louisville	Kentucky	- 3.986
New York	New York	- 4.295
Harrisburg	Pennsylvania	- 4.485
Baltimore	Maryland	- 4.558
Trenton	New Jersey	- 4.701
Utica	New York	- 4.710
Providence	Rhode Island	- 4.731
Youngstown	Ohio	- 4.798
Jersey City	New Jersey	- 5.226
Wilmington	Delaware	- 5.446
New Haven	Connecticut	- 5.453
Saginaw	Michigan	- 5.552
Dayton	Ohio	- 6.025
Atlanta	Georgia	- 6.057
St. Louis	Missouri	- 6.405
Cleveland	Ohio	- 6.517
Hartford	Connecticut	- 6.727
Buffalo	New York	- 6.809

EVALUATING THE SUCCESS OF URBAN SUCCESS STORIES

Appendix.—Continued.

Central city	State	Index score
Atlantic City	New Jersey	– 6.827
Paterson	New Jersey	– 7.058
Detroit	Michigan	– 7.085
Augusta	Georgia	– 7.841
Newark	New Jersey	– 9.154

Notes: The index of urban health is the product of the summation of standard-scores for a population of central cities ($n = 152$) on five indicators of economic well-being: percentage change in population 1970–80; percentage unemployed 1980; median household income 1980; percentage of persons below the poverty line 1980; and percentage change in per capita income 1970–80. The scores for percentage unemployed and percentage of persons below the poverty line are adjusted (multiplied by negative one) so that a positive score on all indicators connotes relative economic health.

The emboldened entry constitutes the breaking point between the bottom third of the cities and the remainder of the them. All cities that are at, or lie below, the breaking point were designated as 'distressed' and included in the survey mailing.