

## Priming a Sense of Place Increases Attendance

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To get residents to attend housing fairs, give them a personal invitation that emphasizes their connection to the neighborhood.

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### Question

How can community organizations increase attendance at housing fairs?

### Background

In the wake of the foreclosure crisis, the city of Milwaukee and other groups have designed programs to stabilize distressed neighborhoods and improve the appearance and safety of Milwaukee's housing stock. Many of these programs remain underutilized, and greater community outreach is needed. Four field experiments were conducted between February and August 2014 in Milwaukee's Harambee neighborhood to test the impact of the Harambee Great Neighborhood Initiative's (HGNI) community outreach efforts.

### Intervention(s)

In Study 1, 212 homeowners were randomly assigned with equal probability to receive a postcard invitation to attend a community meeting. Postcards for half the sample included the text: "need help with your home?" while the other half primed a sense of place with: "want to help your community?" In Study 2, residents were randomly assigned to a control group (no contact, 842 residents) or to receive a visit from an HGNI organizer (240 residents). In Study 3, 1,550 homeowners were randomly assigned with equal probability to a control group (no letter), to receive a standard letter inviting them to a housing fair, or to receive an otherwise similar letter that also emphasized their connection to the community and thanked them for their efforts to make the neighborhood a better place to live. Study 4 replicated Study 3 among a different set of homeowners (630 in total).

### Results

Study 1: Postcards that primed a sense of community led to higher meeting attendance than the postcards that did not (2.3 % turnout vs. <1% turnout).

Study 2: There was no discernible treatment effect for the door-knocking experiment. However, contacts were attempted during the workweek and few homeowners in the neighborhood were successfully contacted.

Study 3: Homeowners who received a letter were significantly more likely to attend the housing fair (4.9% turnout vs 0% in control group). The form of letter (primed sense of community or not) did not have any impact on attendance rates.

Study 4: Homeowners who received letters were significantly more likely to attend the housing fair (2.5% turnout vs. <1% turnout in control group). However, the letter that primed a sense of community had the largest impact (3.2% turnout vs. 1.8% turnout for the standard letter group).

### **Lessons**

- Personal invitations can increase attendance at housing fairs. Estimated treatment effects ranged from a 2.5-5 percentage point difference in attendance.
- Priming a sense of community attachment among homeowners generally resulted in the largest increases in attendance.

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