



**INTERFAITH
HOUSING
CENTER
OF THE
NORTHERN
SUBURBS**

IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

Fair housing, which is the individual's right to an equal opportunity in housing, has been the law in the United States since 1968. Fair housing policies have promoted community diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, income level, disability, familial status, sex, and age.

Communities have found ^[1] that diversity has many benefits:

The lives of residents are enriched by the added variety in the area.

Community members are more tolerant of social and cultural differences.

Children in the community receive broader educational opportunities.

Diversity encourages exposure to alternative ways of life.

Characteristics Common to Stable Diverse Communities

A common misconception about diverse communities is that economically, racially, and ethnically mixed neighborhoods are inherently unstable and therefore not viable. However, recent case studies ^[2] have proved this is untrue.

Instead, the research shows that diverse communities can be stable when they share the following common characteristics:

Attractive physical characteristics. The community is attractive due to location, ease of transit to jobs, or architecturally interesting homes.

Mixture of two diversity types. The two types of diversity are (1) racial/ethnic diversity within blocks, and (2) small pockets (such as two or three blocks) of racial homogeneity within a larger diverse community.

Presence of "social seams." There are opportunities for interaction among various racial and ethnic groups, for example, the schools, stores, parks, neighborhood festivals, or other community-wide events. ("Social seams" is a concept used by Jane Jacobs in *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*.)

Residents' awareness of the community's stable diversity. Residents are aware that the diversity within their community is more stable than it is in other neighborhoods.

Active community-based organizations and social institutions. For example, groups can emerge to meet a community need, such as youth programs or revitalizing a business district. They may or may not be self-consciously promoting diversity, but they effectively embrace and encourage it.

Moral or value-oriented component. In these communities the moral value of diversity is recognized. Although religious institutions play a chief role here, other business and community groups embrace this as well.

Efforts to spur economic development. Investment is a key issue in many of these communities. Although some communities successfully attracted malls and superstores, most found ways to carve out a distinct niche through development of small shopping districts, ethnic restaurants, and the like.

Common Challenges

Leaders in diverse communities have noted issues that could threaten community stability if the residents do not remain unified. The challenges ^[2] in sustaining diversity are:

Transition from older residents to younger residents. Often the new residents are of a different ethnic group, so the challenge is to attract younger residents of all backgrounds, and to bring together young and old to avoid social divisions.

Need to address a blight within the community or on the boundaries. A common debate in stable diverse communities is about balancing reinvestment and gentrification without displacement.

Community safety. Because of the perception (fed by long-standing racism) that the presence of African-Americans and Latinos translates into crime, diverse communities are particularly sensitive to this issue.

Schools. The presence of quality schools frequently serves as an anchor for diverse communities.

1. From Herbert Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways Of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1967.

2. Phil Nyden, Michael Maly, and John Lukehart, "The Emergence of Stable Racially and Ethnically Diverse Urban Communities: A Case Study of Nine U.S. Cities," *Fannie Mae Foundation, Housing Policy Debate*, Vol. 8, Issue 2, 1997.