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Urban desertification, public health and public order: 'Planned shrinkage', violent death, substance abuse and AIDS in the Bronx

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Abstract

Techniques and approaches from population and community ecology, along with theoretical viewpoints from criminology and the 'social support hypothesis' of health maintenance, are used to examine recent patterns of rising homicide and suicide, intensified substance abuse, low birth weight and AIDS deaths in the Bronx section of New York City. Empirical and theoretical analyses strongly imply present sharply rising levels of violent death, intensification of deviant behaviors implicated in the spread of AIDS, and the pattern of the AIDS outbreak itself, have been gravely affected, and even strongly determined, by the outcomes of a program of 'planned shrinkage'

directed against African-American and Hispanic communities, and implemented through systematic and continuing denial of municipal services—particularly fire extinguishment resources—essential for maintaining urban levels of population density and ensuring community stability.

This work complements a recent study by McCord and Freeman [1. *New Engl. J. Med.* **332**, 173, 1990] on Harlem, and suggests the present overburdening of New York's criminal justice system arises from almost exactly the same causes as its accelerating inability to meet demands for acute medical service, so-called “medical gridlock”™, in that both are expressions of the increasing social disorganization of poor communities initiated and continued in considerable part by government policy.

The critical role played by improper policy in triggering the syndrome suggests ecologically informed interventions, particularly essential service restoration, may hold the potential for great positive impact.



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Keywords

New York; migration; planned shrinkage; homicide; substance abuse; AIDS

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