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Revitalisation as a Tool for Limiting Flight from Blight

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – The main objective of the paper is an analysis of the stimulation of suburbanization trends through the degradation of central areas in cities. The term 'flight from blight' is inextricably associated with urban sprawl. These issues are still rarely analysed in Polish literature.

Design/methodology/approach – Data collected by the Central Statistical Office in communes for the years 2018-2019 were used in the work on the article. The research was focused on verifying the hypotheses concerning impact of the intensity of negative social phenomena on the outflow of people from the degraded area (flight from blight) in comparison to other negative phenomena. The second and third analysed hypotheses is relationship between outflow of people from degraded and revitalization areas (flight from blight) and type of the commune.

Findings – It was confirmed that the correlation between negative social phenomena and the outflow of people from the degraded area is the strongest. The decline in the number of inhabitants of the degraded and revitalization area is statistically significant correlated with type of the commune in case of urban and rural ones.

Research limitations – The data available in public statistics and revitalization programs do not allow tracing the direction of migration within individual commune.

Research implications – Verification of the direction of the residents relocation will help to recognize the relationship between suburbanization tendencies in Poland and flight from blight, i.e. an escape from degraded areas.

Keywords:	revitalisation; blight; suburbanisation; flight from blight; city centre
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INTRODUCTION

The degradation of central city areas and their revitalization constitute an extensive research trend in the literature. Some scientists go beyond the analysis of degradation phenomena as such and look for a link between city's degradation or blight and urban sprawl (Mieszkowski & Mills, 1993). In their research, "flight from blight" is one of the main reasons for household relocation from the city centres to the suburbia (Adams & Fleeter, 1996). The process of degradation of city centres is a stimulus for settlement trends to the outskirts of cities, which even planning tools, such as urban containment boundary, cannot tame (Wassmer, 2006). In flight from blight, Mieszkowski and Mills saw a natural inclination of households to escape from the negative effects of the degradation of the city centre, in particular crime, poverty and poor housing conditions (Mieszkowski & Mills, 1993). Bento et al. started their research from an analysis of the effectiveness of various anti-sprawl policy tools (Bento et al. 2006). They present the degradation of the city centres and the urban sprawl as two concurrent and simultaneously contradictory processes. Only consciously conducted revitalization of central areas can be a remedy for an escape from city centers (Bento et al., 2011). Research shows that stopping flight from blight through revitalization activities, especially crime reduction, is a long lasting process, if happens at all (Ellen & O'Reagan, 2010).

The main objective of the paper was to analyse the stimulation of suburbanization trends through the degradation of central areas in Polish cities. There was also raised a question whether negative social phenomena are the cause of the outflow of people from degraded areas in Poland. The research was an attempt to verify the relationships observed in other countries where negative social phenomena (poverty, crime) are the main causes of the flight from blight phenomenon. Other questions raised was also where the outflow of inhabitants takes place and whether revitalization will counteract suburbanization trends in Poland. This questions are of particular importance in Poland where the revitalization is getting pace in the entire country. Nearly 60% of all communes (gminas) prepared a revitalization program and conduct the revitalization measures in the programming period 2014-2020 (till 2023).

The literature uses the term holding capacity to refer to city centers which functions, history and the spirit of a place should retain or attract residents. The outflow of downtown residents caused by poor housing conditions and blight has been the subject of analysis in the context of

suburbanization for many years. These issues have been rarely analysed in Polish literature yet.

The first part of the article is a literature review which traces the evolution of the concept of blight and explains the phenomenon of flight from blight and its relationship with urban sprawl. Then the research methodology is presented, and in the third part – the results of the research together with the discussion of the results. The summary includes key conclusions and indicates potential directions for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

At the beginning of the 21st century, the term degraded areas has many meanings and refers to degradation on a different scale. It includes both houses with garbage and entire abandoned districts that will not be of interest to any investor (Greenberg & Schneider, 1996). However, the meaning of this concept has evolved to the present almost 100 years, starting in the 1920s, when the term blight was used to describe public health threats due to poor sanitation in a specific area of the city. This term for plant blight was particularly appropriate because there was a fear of the spread of diseases in the dense downtown districts (Fisher, 1942). The medical metaphor has also been used to describe responses to the problems of neighbourhoods affected by degradation. It was the slum clearance programs compared to amputation (Holliman, 2009). The change in approach to solving the problem of degradation took place after the Great Depression, when concern for public health gave way to economic reasons in the debate. Thus, the term blight began to be used primarily to refer to technically degraded areas, deprived of infrastructure, suffering from high unemployment and economic stagnation, and then started on a small scale initially. After World War II, the economic rationale for these activities was clearly established, returning to the idea of demolition, but no longer for the sake of public health, but freeing land for investment (Chronopoulos, 2014). Civilization changes and growing social aversion to demolition programs meant that from 1954 in the USA they began to abandon them in favour of rehabilitation programs and reconstruction of parts of cities affected by crisis (Gordon, 2004). As many researchers note, this did not change the situation of the inhabitants of the areas affected by negative phenomena in any way. They were still and are politically and economically weaker and exposed to the risk of marginalization in social life (De Marco, 2009). Negative symptoms spread at a given location, and it is impossible to exit the downward spiral without public intervention (Kivell, 1987).

In accordance with the literature, it should be assumed that the degradation of some urban areas results from the combination of many overlapping causes, which prevent unambiguous identification (Wagenaar, 2007). Nevertheless, it is possible to theoretically explain the emergence of a crisis in urban neighbourhoods (Grigsby et al., 1987; Megbolugbe et al., 1996). The first comprehensive explanation of the crisis in the adopted meaning was formulated in 1967 by G.E. Berger, opposing the then prevailing opinion that blight is a capacious metaphor and does not enrich theoretical knowledge (Berger, 1967). G.E. Berger noticed a common notions in the differentiation of symptoms of a crisis and on this basis he built a theory that remains valid to this day. The three key concepts of this theory are nonacceptance, depreciation, and immobility. Nonacceptance is a community's response to degradation by gradually stigmatizing the area. It is the rejection that results in the loss of property value. G.E. Berger distinguished two types of decline in value:

- functional - loss of the ability to bring income (productivity),
- social - loss of prestige, lower status.

A spiral of degradation is triggered. The more the value of the property decreases, the more stigmatization of a specific property progresses, and then the neighbourhood, housing estate or district. Gradually, the signs of degradation become visible, not just palpable. Then, it can be clearly stated that the entire area is affected by the phenomenon of degradation and is in a crisis state. G.E. Berger defined blight as a critical state of functional and social depreciation of real estate, from which it is rejected by the community because of its technical condition or use (Berger, 1967, p 372). The general nature of this definition makes it independent of the diversity of forms and the advancement of degradation processes. Indeed, for different communities, the state of crisis may have a different meaning, depending on social, cultural and historical conditions, but above all on the economic status of its members. It should be emphasized that the crisis has a strong spatial dimension, affecting not only individual properties, but larger areas, causing a decline in the quality of the offer of public goods and services and negative social consequences (e.g. increased crime). The contribution of G.E. Berger into a scientific debate on the social condition of the inhabitants of a degraded area. In this respect, his voice was revolutionary, as he clearly stated that it was inadequate and harmful to the inhabitants of these areas to blame them or the responsibility for the crisis, because the inhabitants were (and still are) victims of the crisis and economic mechanisms.

This idea was continued by C. Gordon, who defined the blight as a disturbance, and in a critical situation the lack of a mechanism for allocation and redistribution of resources, in which both public entities (providers of services and public goods) and property owners give up satisfying the needs of the local community (Gordon, 2004).

R.C. Weaver modernized the theory of degradation, presenting a comprehensive explanation of the causes of the phenomenon, starting from his original concept of evolutionary economic geography, in which multilevel selection theory (MLS) plays an important role (Weaver, 2014). He considered evolutionary theories adequate for describing urban phenomena, although the phenomena observed (including the degradation of city quarters) are such complex processes that:

- the influence of many mechanisms obscures the possibility of isolating the influence of community evolution (Hodgson & Knudsen, 2010),
- it is not possible to indicate a limited number of causes of community behavior (Glaeser & Gyourko, 2005).

As a result, the main difficulty in applying the evolutionary technique in this case is the limitation of the universality of explanations for the causes of the observed phenomena. While these limitations cannot be turned off, R.C. Weaver made an attempt to adapt the evolutionary approach to the needs of explaining the problem of the emergence of a blight in the city, assuming that in fact it is not causality that is the foundation of the analysis, and that the multi-level selection theory may allow for a new, multi-causal view of the analysed phenomena. An individual's success in a particular community depends not only on their personal characteristics, but also on how their traits and habits interact with the environment, including the habits and routines of other members of the community. R.C. Weaver gave an example of a situation in which most of the residents of a district take care of the real estate they live in with great commitment. As a result, routine social behaviour emerges, the pressure of which on "those who do not care" about real estate is stronger, the more people care for it. Their behaviour will gradually change, with the scale of the changes depending on the "negligent" characteristics and their fitness to impact. Consequently, the change in the community will be a function of individual and group characteristics and the tendency to adapt. Since communities are rarely homogeneous in terms of economic status, education, and cultural norms, there is a multi-level selection of routine behavior that is acceptable to different fractions of the community and a common set.

In the literature, the dominant opinion prevails that the occurrence of blight is a result of the poverty of the population living in a specific area and the increasing criminalization of the area, and the spiral of degradation causes further poverty of the inhabitants, flight from blight due to crime and filtration of the housing market (Bayoh et al., 2006). Ultimately, only those who cannot move because of insufficient income remain in the degraded area (Krumm & Vaughan, 1976).

Even in the case of single properties, one can expect a rapid impact of deteriorating buildings on the surroundings and, as a result, the emergence of symptoms of a crisis (Weaver, 2013). As a result, there is an outflow of inhabitants to the suburban area. Wassmer's research shows that urban sprawl, even in the United States, is less a derivative of the development of individual car transport than the flight from the city centre in response to the stigmatization of the area due to increasing poverty and crime, and the gradual withdrawal of investments (Wassmer, 2008). From this perspective, the evolutionary approach is particularly valuable cognitively, thanks to the presentation of urban districts as a multi-level complex network of dependencies of various social groups, whose decisions, habits and routine behaviours determine the state of the entire area and determine the holding capacity.

In Polish literature, the term flight from blight does not appear directly, although its echo is noticeable in the analysis of the causes of suburbanization, when the suburban area is more attractive as a location. Therefore, it can be said that the city centres are less attractive. This is where the greatest outflow of population occurs. At the same time, it is the central areas that dominate the structure of degraded areas in Polish cities (Jarczewski & Kułaczkowska, 2019). For this reason, it is particularly interesting to link the outflow of people from degraded areas in Polish municipalities with the characteristics of these areas in terms of negative social phenomena as the main analysed problems in foreign literature in the context of flight from blight.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Revitalization activities in Poland have become the subject of detailed studies within official statistics. Works on the methodology of monitoring of revitalization and the pilot study "Statistical data on revitalization at the level of municipalities" were carried out in 2015-2018, i.e. after the implementation of the Revitalization Act. The systemic approach and almost 100% return of information from communes allowed for the inclusion of the

Revitalization in a commune study in the Statistical Research Program 2020 of the Central Statistical Office (GUS) (Bal-Domańska & Buciak, 2018).

Data collected by the Central Statistical Office in communes for the years 2018-2019 were used in the work on the article. According to the GUS report, the degraded area in 2019 was indicated by 1,526 communes, of which 1,514 communes had a revitalization program. It was 15 communes more than in 2018. Both in 2019 and 2018, approximately 47% of communes that provided information on the designation of a degraded area were rural communes.

The first step to take revitalization activities in Poland is to designate a degraded area, where - in accordance with the Revitalization Act - negative social phenomena are concentrated, in particular unemployment, poverty, crime, low level of education or social capital, as well as insufficient level of participation in public and cultural life, as well as other negative phenomena in at least one of the following spheres: economic, environmental, spatial-functional or technical (Jadach-Sepioło & Spadło, 2018).

In 2019, 8,955.5 thousand inhabitants lived in the degraded areas in 1 439 municipalities where the degraded area was designated at the time of its establishment. Compared to 2018, this number increased by 27.6 thousand inhabitants. On average, the degraded area was inhabited by 6,223 people in 2019, and 6,323 in 2018 (GUS, 2020). From the degraded areas, one can distinguish areas of revitalization, where the commune concentrates actions counteracting the identified problems. The number of inhabitants of the revitalization areas was determined for 1,500 communes in Poland and in 2018 it amounted to 5,968.1 thousand inhabitants, which means a decrease by 1.4% (83.5 thousand inhabitants) compared to 2018 (GUS, 2020).

Negative social phenomena had the greatest impact on the designation of degraded areas, which is a derivative of statutory requirements. There are also available data on changes in the population number in the degraded area and in the area of revitalization in individual years. In addition to the analysis of the impact of negative phenomena on the relocation decisions of the population in degraded areas, the study also attempted to assess whether these decisions are part of suburbanization trends. In order to verify this relationship (or just the coexistence of phenomena), it was checked whether the outflow of population was stronger in degraded areas in urban communes than in communes with a less urbanized profile (urban-rural and rural). A similar analysis was performed for population changes in the areas of revitalization.

The research was focused on verifying the following hypotheses:

1) The intensity of negative social phenomena has a stronger impact on the outflow of people from the degraded area (flight from blight) than other negative phenomena.
2) Outflow of people from degraded areas (flight from blight) in urban communes is higher than in urban-rural and rural communes.
3) Outflow of people from the revitalization areas (flight from blight) in urban communes is higher than in urban-rural and rural communes.

In order to verify statistical significancy of the above-mentioned relations, the Chi-square test of independence was used for the adopted significance level p <0.005. To check the defined relationships, the Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was used. Detailed data from public statistics (GUS) and available in the revitalization programs of individual communes were used. The analysis was carried out on a sample of 1,439 municipalities where the number of inhabitants of degraded areas was provided in the GUS forms.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The analysis of the relationship between the intensity of negative phenomena in the social sphere and in other spheres and the scale of outflow of people from degraded areas (flight from blight) was carried out for all analysed communes (n = 1,439). The conducted analysis showed (Tab. 1) in the case of negative phenomena in each of the spheres, a statistically significant positive correlation between their occurrence and the outflow of people from the degraded area.

Table 1. Values of Spearman correlation coefficients between the impact of negative social phenomena and negative phenomena in other spheres and the outflow of people from the degraded area

Variable	Measure		
	R_s	$t_{(N-2)}$	p
Negative social phenomena	0.521*	3.978	0.001
Negative economic phenomena	0.278*	4.298	0.001
Negative environmental phenomena	0.117*	8.187	0.000
Negative spatial phenomena	0.312*	5.232	0.000
Negative technical phenomena	0.283*	4.796	0.000

* value significant at the level of significance α = 0.05
Source: own elaboration.

It was confirmed that the correlation between negative social phenomena and the outflow of people from the degraded area is the strongest. This allows the first research hypothesis to be confirmed. Seemingly, this is a confirmation of the opinions formulated in the literature describing the phenomenon of flight from blight. However, attention should be paid to an important factor that undermines the unequivocal verification of the hypothesis. In the Polish Act on Revitalization, negative phenomena in the social sphere were treated as priorities in the analyzes. The communes undertook the analysis of these phenomena with the greatest care. Thanks to this, negative social phenomena are most precisely characterized in the programs, and communes also declared in the official statistics forms that they had the greatest impact on the designation of degraded areas. If communes were free to choose the sphere that best characterizes the degradation of the area, the obtained result of the study would convincingly confirm the hypothesis. The current legal regulations enforce it's true. So, it can be observed that the worst social situation in the commune occurs in a degraded area, but since communes may have characterized other spheres less accurately, it is not known whether the degradation in these spheres is less severe and therefore impacts the inhabitants more likely.

There is also a statistically significant relationship between the type of commune and the number of inhabitants who left the degraded area in the commune (Tab. 2).

Table 2. Values of Spearman correlation coefficients between the type of commune and the decrease in the number of inhabitants of a degraded area

Variable	Measure		
	R_s	$t_{(N-2)}$	p
Urban commune	0.328*	3.978	0.000
Urban-rural commune	0.011*	0.482	0.651
Rural commune	-0.187*	-4.800	0.000

* value significant at the level of significance $\alpha = 0.05$
Source: own elaboration.

In urban communes, the decline in the number of inhabitants of the degraded area is clearly observed. There is a statistically significant correlation (Rs = 0.328; p <0.001). There is no correlation in urban-rural communes, while in rural communes there is a negative, statistically significant correlation (Rs = -0.187; p <0.001). The second hypothesis was thus partially confirmed. The decrease in the number of inhabitants of degraded areas is correlated with the type of commune in the case of urban communes (positively) and rural communes (negatively). Clearly linking these

initial results (for 2018 and 2019) with suburbanization trends requires additional research and verification of detailed data on the direction of migration. However, another hypothesis can be formulated: The outflow of people from degraded areas (flight from blight) in urban communes to suburban areas in these communes or to neighbouring ones.

In the next step, the third hypothesis was analysed, linking the type of commune with the number of inhabitants who left the revitalization area in the commune. Analogous dependencies in terms of direction were observed (Tab. 3). The correlation coefficients showed a slightly greater strength of the relationships found than in Table 2.

Table 3. Values of Spearman correlation coefficients between the type of commune and the decrease in the number of inhabitants of the revitalization area

Variable	Measure		
	R_s	$t_{(N-2)}$	p
Urban commune	0.347*	4.234	0.000
Urban-rural commune	0.018*	0.237	0.870
Rural commune	-0.241*	-5.783	0.000

* value significant at the level of significance $\alpha = 0.05$
Source: own elaboration.

In urban communes, the decline in the number of inhabitants of the revitalization area (flight from blight) is clearly observed. There is a statistically significant correlation (Rs = 0.347; p <0.001). There is no correlation in urban-rural communes, while in rural communes there is a negative, statistically significant correlation (Rs = -0.241; p <0.001). Like the second one, the third hypothesis was partially confirmed. The decrease in the number of inhabitants of revitalization areas is correlated with the type of a commune in the case of urban communes (positively) and rural communes (negatively). Clearly linking these initial results (for 2018 and 2019) with suburbanization trends requires additional studies on the direction of migration.

CONCLUSION

Interpretation of the presented results in the context of the conclusions of the literature review opens up new research fields. First of all, in Polish conditions, the relationship between the occurrence of negative social phenomena in the area of revitalization and the outflow of people from these areas is observed and is statistically significant. However, it results from legal

conditions and not from autonomous decisions of communes. Communes cannot determine on their own which sphere contributes to the greatest extent to the degradation of the selected area, because it has been imposed as the basic social sphere.

The first step towards looking for a relationship between flight from blight and suburbanization trends in Poland are the results of the analysis of the last two hypotheses. In urban communes, a decrease in the number of inhabitants of the degraded area and the revitalization area is observed. The clear connection of these initial results (for 2018 and 2019) with suburbanization trends requires additional research. The data available in public statistics and revitalization programs do not allow tracing the direction of migration within individual commune. Therefore, it is necessary to obtain data on displacements from a degraded area and revitalization area to suburban areas in communes or neighbouring ones. Verification of the direction of these movements will bring us closer to recognizing the relationship between suburbanization tendencies in Poland and flight from blight, i.e. an escape from degraded areas. This, in turn, may facilitate the answer to the research question posed in the introduction, whether revitalization in Poland may lead to a return to the city centres.

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