# WAS 1992–2000 THE BEST OF TIMES FOR AMERICAN URBAN NEIGHBORHOODS?*

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ABSTRACT. A survey of about 400 New Jersey residents was conducted in 2001 in order to determine whether people believed that their home neighborhood benefited during the unprecedented economic boom of the 1990s. In this analysis of public perceptions and trust, most respondents did not perceive that their neighborhood had improved. The strongest correlates of no neighborhood benefits were distrust of government officials and neighbors, low personal efficacy, and lack of civic engagement, as well as fair or poor neighborhood quality. These disillusioning results underscore the difficulty of maintaining healthy neighborhoods in low-trust environments. *Keywords: neighborhood quality, New Jersey, public perception, public trust, urban geography.*

Beginning in 1992 the U.S. economy expanded for an unprecedented 120 consecutive months into the year 2001, when it began to slow down. During the 1992–2000 period, jobs increased at an annual average of more than 2.6 million, or 2.2 percent a year (U.S. Census Bureau 2000a; Hughes and Seneca 2001a, 2001b). The annual unemployment rate fell from 7.5 percent in 1992 to 4.0 percent in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau 2001). Per capita personal consumption expenditures rose from $17,800 to $21,900 in 1996 dollars (U.S. Census Bureau 2000a). The homicide rate fell from 9.3 per 100,000 people to 6.3 (U.S. Census Bureau 2000a). Pew Foundation researchers reported that 20 percent of Americans trusted the federal government to do what is right always or most of the time in 1994, and the proportion increased to 39 percent by 1997 (Pew Research Center 1998, 4). Pew attributed the increasing trust to good times.

In New Jersey, the study area for this research, the economic picture was even greener. New Jersey, along with Connecticut, had the highest per capita income among states for several decades, and employment increased even more in New Jersey than in the nation as a whole, especially later in the decade. The U.S. average annual employment growth rate from December 1997 to December 2000 was 2.0 percent, compared with 2.3 percent in New Jersey. New Jersey's unemployment rate fell from 8.5 percent in 1992 to 3.8 percent in 2000. James Hughes and Joseph Seneca consider the growth during the second half of the 1990s extraordinary (2001a).

It was literally the best of economic times for the United States as a whole and New Jersey in particular, but how far into the urban fabric did the wealth penetrate? Did people perceive that their neighborhood benefited? Indirect answers to these

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