

## Bias theories contributing to the enduring negative perceptions of Greenspoint, a rebounding Houston neighborhood

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**ABSTRACT:** This article presents continuing negative perceptions of Greenspoint, a suburban-urban neighborhood in greater-Houston, even as the community seeks to reinvent itself as a business destination hub. Recent public safety, infrastructure and beautification projects have lessened crime rates, and fostered social, economic, and business revitalization, but biases about crime and persist. The paper examines bias theories and negative perceptions that drive and reinforce these views even with evidence to the contrary.

**KEYWORDS:** Greenspoint, Houston, economic development, normalcy bias, confirmation bias, bias theories

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### I. BACKGROUND

Greenspoint is a neighborhood in north Houston, a city of over two million residents, that was once a planned community complete with mall, neighborhoods, and commercial development. Largely centering around a central mall and an adjoining office park known as Greenspoint Place, developed by Friendswood Development Company, a real estate group then-owned Exxon. In 1995, homebuilder Lennar one of the nation's largest homebuilders closed on a deal to purchase Friendswood Development Company for \$110 million (Brown, 1995), and with that purchase, much of the commercial property in Greenspoint. Greater Greenspoint had a population of 41,392 with a density (persons per square mile) of 5,951 (City of Houston Planning & Development Department, 2017). The majority of residents over the age of 18 was 63 percent. The ethnic breakdown of was Non-Hispanic Whites, 5 percent; Non-Hispanic Blacks, 27 percent; Hispanics, 67 percent; Other, 2 percent. The media household income was \$33,909 with over 46 percent having no diploma, and 28 percent holding a high school diploma. Median home values in Greater Greenspoint were \$55,134. Sixty-two percent speak Spanish at home and unemployment was 9 percent. Seventeen percent of housing was occupied. According to this publication (2017), a large number of housing units, 49 percent, were built between 1979 – 1979 with 0 percent built from 2010 or later.

The history of Greenspoint began in 1974 when Federated Stores Realty began construction of a 1.2 million square foot shopping mall at the corner of I-45 and North Belt. The mall promised an indoor promenade, large enough for planted trees, and the mall eventually housed high-end stores such as Lord & Taylor and Joske's (Gonzales, 2016). Currently, development and redevelopment initiatives are being driven in large part by the North Houston Development Corporation (formerly the Greater Greenspoint Redevelopment Authority) which was created in August 1998 to "significantly enhance the value of all taxable real property in the proposed zone and will be a great benefit to the City" (City of Houston TIRZ 11 Greater Greenspoint, 1998). The development authority is a Tax Incremental Reinvestment Zone (TIRZ 11) which was established by Harris County. TIRZs in general are specifically empowered to "substantially arrest or impart the sound growth of the municipality creating the zone, retard the provision of housing accommodations, or constitute an economic or social liability and be a menace to the public health, safety, morals, or welfare in its present condition." (Allen Boone Humphrey Robinson LLP, n.d.). Additionally, TIRZs may address issues related to the presence of substandard, slum, or deteriorated housing, issues with sidewalks, unsanitary and unsafe conditions. These TIRZs may receive funding from taxing entities or municipalities and enter into contracts with said municipalities to work on area improvements. Among the items previously listed, TIRZs may also address such issues as pedestrian improvements, parks, plazas and open spaces, recreational facilities, affordable housing, environmental mitigation, and removal of slum and blight conditions.

In 2019, TIRZ 11 Greater Greenspoint, covering the Greenspoint District had a budget of \$43.7 million of which \$13.5 million derived from "incremental property tax revenue," comprised of a variety of city, county, Lone Star College District, Spring ISD and Aldine ISD tax revenue. This budget represents a sharp decline from the 2018 budget of \$53 million dollars. In 2017, TIRZ #11 had a budget of \$47.9 million, and in 2016, \$49 million. In 2015, the entities budget was \$44 million (City of Houston, 2020). An average of these years is \$47.5 million in infrastructure, beautification, and support activities in the Greenspoint area.

### **Where is Greenspoint?**

According to City-Data ([City-Data.com](http://City-Data.com), n.d.), Greenspoint encompasses the following zip codes: 77037, 77038, 77060, 77067 representing 7.1 square miles in the northern end of Houston. Greenspoint is generally considered to be bordered by West Road to the south, Gears Road to the West, Airtex to the north, and Hardy Toll Road to the east. This area represents a total of 18,186 and falls within the jurisdiction of Harris County Precinct 1 currently represented by Commissioner Rodney Ellis. The North Houston area is home to more than 118,500 residents, 3,800 businesses, 68,000 employees with employers and major corporations in the district including Coca Cola, United Airlines, Lennar, Sysco, Our Lady of the Lake University-Houston, and Texas Children's Health Plan—The Center for Children and Women (North Houston District YouTube, 2018).

### **“Gunspoint”**

While it is unclear when the term ‘gunspoint’ became synonymous with Greenspoint, conducting a Google search for the term gunspoint resulted in a total of 113,100 as of June 2, 2020. The same search for ‘Greenspoint’ resulted in over 722,000 hits. In other words, gunspoint terminology represents approximately 15% of the legitimate comparable terms for Gunspoint. A search for ‘gunspoint Houston’ resulted in 16,800 hits. Similarly, a search for ‘Greenspoint Houston’ resulted in 404,000 hits. Negative mentions were approximately 4% of all posts compared to regular searches for the area. A related Google search for search terms ‘Twitter’ and “Gunspoint” resulted in 5,160 hits posts. The term Greenspoint and safe combined resulted in over 279,000 hits from such websites as Trulia, City-Data, StreetAdvisor, and even the Houston Chronicle. There is clearly a perception and concern by those doing these searches, comments, and posts—earned or otherwise—that Greenspoint is considered an unsafe area.

### **Violence & Crime**

North Houston District is represented by two police beats (6B50, and 6B60). According to figures pulled from North Houston District, only 3 percent of all crimes committed in the city of Houston occur in the North Houston District (North Houston District, 2018 March).

### **Revitalization Efforts**

Revitalization efforts for Greenspoint/North Houston appear to take two approaches: parks and recreational facilities, and development of infrastructure and public works projects. At the heart of Greenspoint lies Greens Bayou, which “threads a green corridor, tracing both banks of its namesake bayou in northern Houston” (TrailLink, 2019). This bayou begins northwest Houston and runs through the heart of Greenspoint, eventually reaching the Houston Ship Channel, but not before passing through Thomas R. Wussow and City View (two vital areas within Greenspoint). The Houston Parks board is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) which helps provide greenspace in and around the city, and create and advocate for parkland in the region. The Parks Board is leading these efforts with \$220 million in development efforts to connect over 150 miles of trails along Houston's bayous (Bayou Greenways 2020, 2019). In the Greenspoint portion of the bayou, these efforts have led to new hike-and-bike trails and pedestrian bridges, and other improvements. According to Sally Bradford, executive director of North Houston Development Corporation (NHDC), over 1,500 attended the grand opening of the new Rockstar Energy Bike Park on August 16, 2019. While not their only mission, one of NHDC goal's according to Bradford is to rebrand the area by working with Houston Sports Authority and others on outdoor projects.

NHDC has installed 30 pieces of public art and works closely with five partners to complete their plan including City of Houston, Harris County, Aldine ISD, and Lone Star College System. They operate on a small budget of \$275,000 but leverage millions of tax dollars through TIRZ monies. Greenspoint Redevelopment Authority beautification and improvement projects include the Benmar Bridges arts projects, Airline Corridor Street and Median Improvements, Greenspoint Bridge, Greenspoint Drive & Underground Utilities, Greenspoint Streetscape, the aforementioned North Houston Bike Park, Greens Road Improvement, and Dylan Skate Park. Future projects include construction of a \$12 million police division which will serve the Willowbrook, Greenspoint, and IAH Airport and eventually house a staff of over 150. The other predominant organization is The North Houston District, originally named the Greater Greenspoint Management District, which was established in 1991 after a petition by area property owners to the Texas legislature to “form the organization to supplement existing government services and advocate for the District's needs and growth.” (North Houston District, n.d.). According to The District's website, the main operational focus is to “provide enhanced services in public safety, planning and development, beautification and maintenance of public rights of way, and development of parks and trails.”

North Houston District's work also includes marquee signage, and an ongoing Gateway Improvement Project spanning both sides of Interstate 45 which bisects the community which has improved the visual appeal of the area, and called attention to the various boundaries and roadways. Recently, ARCA Continental which bills itself as "the second largest Coca-Cola bottlers" broke ground on an expansive one million square foot, \$250 million bottling facility (Trovall, 2018).

### **Bias Theories**

With all of the positive activities taking place in Greenspoint, it is important to understand what still drives negative perceptions of the area. Several cognitive biases and related theories including confirmation bias, failures of awareness, and perceptions, stigmas, and bias related to race may play a role in understanding why Greenspoint is still largely considered in a negative light.

### **Confirmation Bias**

One theory that may account for people's irrational understanding of how dangerous the Greenspoint area is confirmation bias. According to Bullard (2019), confirmation bias is when someone only accepts certain facts that corroborate or reinforce their pre-established opinions about something; when they encounter facts or opinions that contradict that belief, they largely ignore those facts and opinion or manipulate them to fit their pre-existing beliefs. Confirmation bias can be used in odd ways to reinforce what we think, rather than confirm what we do not know to true as in the rig workers who examined British Petroleum's Deepwater rig that exploded in 2010. According Howgego (2015), when researcher Andrew Hopkins, a disaster analyst at Australian National University in Canberra looked at workers who were examining the seals, they started with tests as a "means of confirming [that] the well was sealed, not finding out whether or not it was."

In a similar fashion, it is reasonable for people who have a negative perception of the Greenspoint to seek out news reports, anecdotes, and other 'facts' that perpetuate the perception they have that the area is crime-ridden and dangerous.

### **Failures of Awareness**

Another concept that may explain the negative perceptions surrounding why the Greenspoint and North Houston area have a negative perception, even in light of change, is through the concept of change blindness. According to Yao (2019), magicians have noted that an abrupt change in trajectory can induce change blindness or the inability of the observer to notice that a change has taken place. In this way, magicians (and others) are able to hide their method for a trick in plain sight. Change blindness can also occur in instances not related to motion. According to Murphy & Murphy (2018), perceptual load can affect the change blindness in the real world. They conducted a study where a person was replaced by someone when the other person was otherwise preoccupied (load); other activities engaged the participants who were then asked if they noticed anything different. Results of this research indicated that participants were less-like to notice changes when they were under a high perceptual load. As Houston is a large and busy metropolis where people most-often travel my automobile, it could be theorized that motorists are preoccupied with traffic congestion while driving in and through the Greenspoint and North Houston neighborhoods; as such they may actual not notice the real changes taking place in those communities because of their preoccupation with the mental load of driving. However, in both of those examples, sudden changes go unnoticed, whereas the positive (and often large-scale) changes affecting Greenspoint which have been occurring for the past decade or longer may go unnoticed because they have occurred at a much slower pace.

### **Willful Ignorance**

According to Lynch (2016) willful ignorance and self-deception willful ignorance is always intentional and those who are willfully ignorant can be fully aware of their ignorance. Sadly, those who deceive themselves are not always fully aware, indeed cannot be, aware of their self-deception. So, the question is, are people that continue to malign an entire community, simply ignorant of the facts, or are they deceiving themselves (and not know that they are doing so)? Willful ignorance is often chosen in social decisions where people may simply choose to look the other way, in order to "neutralize the demands of conscience and provide us with the excuses we need to behave selfishly" (Grossman & van der Weele, 2017, p. 207). This explanation may provide the basis for why people deliberately equate negative aspects to an area, look the other way, and indulge themselves in their own beliefs, in effect, reinforcing their reinforcing beliefs.

### **Stigma, Race, and Perceptions**

Quillian & Pager (2001), studied perceptions of crime and objective reality of those crimes in Baltimore, MD. According to these researchers, the percentage of young black men in a neighborhood is positively associated with perceived crime among neighborhood residents. They also found that this perception remains strong even when statistically controlling for two measures of crime rates and measures of neighborhood disorder. Whites and Hispanics. According to Sampson & Raudenbush (2004), seeing disorder in neighborhoods generates self-reinforcing processes that may account for perceptions of urban racial inequality. According to Besbris, Faber, Rich, & Sharkey (2015), black residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods affects individuals from an economic impact, but also through the stigmatized perceptions of others. Additionally, that stigma may extend to more than the racial makeup of the community, but also to the concentration of poverty, public housing, and crime rates. According to Sampson & Raudenbush (2005), the racial makeup of neighborhoods that are primarily black or Hispanic predicted the leader's perception of disorder—in effect, perceptions seem to be influenced by the racial composition of a community. Liey & Polson (2016) found that controlling for size of populations of Houston's African American, Hispanic, and other minority groups, the heterogeneity—the distribution of population among different racial and ethnic groups—effect on fear of crime for white respondents remains significant across neighborhoods—findings suggest that whites' fear of crime is influenced by population distributions of different racial and ethnic groups and little by the concentration of those minorities. Similarly, Hispanic residents reported higher levels of fear with neighborhoods containing higher percentages of Hispanics. According to Klineberg (2019), Houstonians ranked crime at 15 percent as one of the biggest problems facing people in the Houston area. This fell below traffic at 36 percent, but above the economy at 11 percent.

## II. MENTAL HEURISTICS

Mental heuristics is another likely culprit for why people overestimate the danger of the Greenspoint area. Mental heuristics accounts for why people overestimate how common events such as crime or terrorism occur. This is a process whereby “their brain fills in vivid examples” of problems (Feldman, 2017).

## III. CONCLUSION

This paper did not attempt to register the feelings of Houston residents about Greenspoint, but instead looked at various theories surround negative perceptions and how people reinforce their beliefs, even when evidence to the contrary exists and is visually and present to them. Further study may focus on developing a poll or questionnaire to find out specific reasons to this dilemma. No single theory will cover the negative perceptions surrounding the Greenspoint area, however, the theories presented, along with the evidence of increased growth, revitalization, and rejuvenation of the area will serve as a starting point for further research into the stigmas that affect people's perceptions of the Greenspoint community. Confirmation biases, failures of awareness, stigmas, stereotypes, race affect the negative perceptions of Greenspoint. Understanding these biases may also prove useful to the organizations and people helping to affect change in the area, and to better-understand the hidden negatives surrounding resistance to achieving a greater buy-in and support for their projects and revitalization efforts. Further research may examine the attempts by various community groups to combat these negative impressions through messaging, community outreach, and public awareness.

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