

**The Bill Blackwood
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**A Stepping Stone to Independence:
Public Housing That Works**

**A Leadership White Paper
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ABSTRACT

This paper considers some of the challenges posed to the public housing administration. Public housing is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because the need for police service in these neighborhoods have continued to go up over the years. Studies have shown that when neighborhoods are constantly faced with a bad element, the whole community tends to lend toward the element (Roncek, Bell, & Francik, 1981). People who live in public housing face these elements every day. Some blame it on the residents; some blame it on non-residents; and others blame it on the public housing management. Through this paper, the researcher will use this topic to shed some light on some of the criminal elements that come with public housing, as well as a look at the outdated housing structures of the 1930s that are still occupied. Upgrading to single family housing can be a good thing if managed properly, but this is not a paper to campaign for the elimination of public housing.

The position of the researcher is that as a police officer and having to work these neighborhoods, it is hard to see families living the way they do, especially when there is a better life out there. Public housing residents have the same desires and the same rights as other Americans to live in peace and be free from being threatened by gangs and drug dealers (Roncek, Bell, & Francik, 1981). It is the hope that the federal government will continue to address the problems of American's poorest citizens.

The types of information used to support the researcher's position included articles from competent internet sites and articles from journals. There is also a review of the results of older public housing verses newer public housing concepts and the statistics related to this issue. These will show how crime was reduced when public

housing built the single family homes in scattered sites across the city. The conclusion drawn from this position paper is that the obstacles in the United States to housing the poor adequately are profound and those obstacles are less a matter of means and money than of will and ideology.

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INTRODUCTION

Since its creation, public housing has offered millions of American families a way into the economic mainstream with a home in which to raise their children and the opportunity to hold down a steady job. This gives them the ability to save for their future so they can ultimately move into a home of their own. It is the belief that public housing serves a critical role in society. Since 1937, the federal government has invested some 90 billion in the federal housing inventory. Approximately 1.3 million households live in public housing developments that are operated by some 3,400 public agencies. Approximately 45% of these households are families with children, 35% house the elderly, and another 10% house people with disabilities (U.S. Department of Public Housing, 1996). However, despite serving this critical function, the current public system is plagued by a series of deeply rooted and systemic problems. This is the reason for this paper.

Public housing has been plagued with crime and gang activity, and there are, at times, four generations of families living in public housing, with no hope for future plans to get out and do better. It is as if they have given up hope of ever getting out of assisted living. Some of the challenges that face these families are that public housing is concentrated in high poverty neighborhoods and federal law penalizes public housing tenants who work. Additionally, the discipline of the real estate market does not apply to public housing, and law enforcement often looks the other way when crimes are committed by the tenants. All these factors lead to the point that the federal government should not continue to support and maintain housing projects as it is functioning now.

POSITION

For years, public housing units have been referred in many forms of negative conations such as the ghetto, the hood and the jungle. With some believing that a large concentration of people in a small area helps to perpetuate the sense of bad behavior. Housing projects, particularly in big cities, turn into dangerous, demoralized slums.

Goetz, Lam, and Heitlinger (1996) stated that concentration of public and subsidized housing has had negative impacts on many neighborhoods. Living in an area of concentrated poverty and unemployment, public housing residents are vulnerable to harmful environmental and neighborhood effects. They are exposed to an elevated risk of victimization that may also cause them to become more isolated through fear (p. 30-31). Husock (2003) stated that housing projects radiate dysfunction and social problems outward, damaging local businesses and neighborhood property values. They hurt cities by inhibiting or even preventing these run down areas from coming back to life by attracting higher –income homesteaders and new business investment (p. 30).

Housing projects are an eyesore to the community, and they are a noxious environment for the tenants. Barrack style public housing has been the norm for years, the buildings were basically built to last, with concrete roofs and floors and tile block interior and exterior walls. The universal name for these structures is the “projects” because of their drab and gloomy appearance. These apartments, built with extremely durable materials, have survived with a minimum of repairs for almost 60 years. Their design provides rather cramped, uncomfortable and outdated apartments that cannot be

cooled during the summer, and this is not acceptable. The reason for this design is that it was economically feasible and provided high population density.

The federal government has now proposed that the “project-like” styled apartments should be torn down to make room for homes to create a community that will be a neighborhood reinvestment, and this will provide an opportunity for low-income residents to provide a home for their family. In addition, there will be scattered sites that will be scattered throughout diverse, middle-class neighborhoods. This should hinder some of the issues of crime and disorder.

Public housing is the product of many social ills. It seems to encourage welfare dependent single mothers whose children are sometimes from many fathers. The children are not well disciplined and, at times, may be left to fend for themselves. The fathers of these kids are not in their lives, and most of these fathers have served some jail time. These are not the families that public housing was originally aimed for.

As the U.S. economy boomed after World War II, the lower middle class working families for whom the projects had been built discovered that they could afford privately built homes in America’s burgeoning suburbs. By the 1960s, these families had completely abandoned public housing (Morales, 2012). A sentiment shared by many is that low income females give birth to illegitimate kids, which automatically qualify them for public housing which allows the family to get a check from the government and a place to live without any restrictions. This is sometimes repeated for generations.

The federal government should change this practice of allowing this effortless way to gain a home. The applicant household should have to meet or exceed any Resident Selection Criteria established by the Housing Authority rules to protect the

rights and needs of the public housing communities for a decent, safe, and livable environment (GHA Agency Plans, n.d.). Some of the general requirements could be that the residents are to maintain their property in a healthy, safe environment, and cannot have been convicted of a serious crime (child abuse, welfare fraud, sex abuse). They should also be willing to take parenting classes and open to learning a trade to help get off of welfare.

This leads into the next point of public housing, which is that it penalizes housing tenants who work. Over the past several decades, many public housing developments became places of high employment and concentrated poverty. It is widely believed that traditional public housing rent policies are partly to blame, since they created a disincentive for residents to work. Under those rules, rent was calculated as 30% of a family's adjusted income (defined as total income minus certain deductions, or disregards). This income-based rent structure functioned as an implicit tax: as a family income increased, so did their rent. Residents who took jobs saw their cash grants reduced, and this was exacerbated by the potential loss of Medicaid coverage and increased child care costs (Miller & Ricco, 2002). In short, residents did not work because they could get more for nothing, instead of less for something.

In the past several years, some changes have been made to increase the benefits for those low income families – including public housing residents. The Federal housing legislation passed in 1990 and 1998 included increased work incentives and rent rules designed to encourage employment among public housing residents. Welfare reform legislation (1990) implementing this policy prevented recipients from losing all of their welfare benefits when they went to work. Congress enacted The

Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act (1998), which required public housing authorities to disregard 100% of new earnings for one year when calculating rents for certain groups of residents, including those who move from welfare to work.

Housing authorities can increase rents for certain groups by only half as much as would be permitted under the old rules. At the housing authority's discretion, they may implement such policies as establishing lower ceiling rents, which cap how high income-based rents can go. The Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act policies represent one of the most ambitious legislative efforts to date to promote employment among public housing residents by increasing their financial incentive to work (Ricco & Bliss 2001).

So with this in place, public housing residents, like other low income groups, can now benefit from going to work, but the question remains of why there are not more people taking advantage of this. A possible answer is that the information is not being passed on. Studies have shown that these programs are being used by fewer families than are eligible, and many families remain unaware of these services. A survey indicated that only 40% said they had heard about the programs (Ricco & Bliss, 2001). The Housing Authority should set up classes to educate those who are not receiving assistance to take advantage of this act. This should not only help people to maintain employment but give them a sense of pride by knowing that they can work and provide for their family.

One consistent theme is that public housing is nothing more than a place to warehouse the unemployed and an incubator for crime. This is why there is a need for the residents to work. When residents work, there is a greater likelihood that they will

not get into trouble. Public housing is intended to provide a place to live and raise families, not a place to commit crime, to use or sell drugs, or terrorize neighbors.

Unfortunately, this is a negative perception of public housing that has to change. A start for helping this perception change would be to initiate a partnership with the police department. When there is police involvement, safety concerns can be addressed and preventative measures can be developed in an effort to develop good relationships with the residents. The Housing Authority will also aid in this mission by screening for drug abuse and other criminal activities. They could also initiate termination of a lease for criminal activity if valid reason(s) exist. By doing this, the Housing Authority will help create and maintain an environment where children can live safely, learn, and grow up to be productive citizens

COUNTER POSITION

Advocates of public housing do not want the current system as it is now to change. Proponents argue that if mixed-income communities are the goal, then there are several factors to be considered, while still serving the public housing population. Such as community and tenant's needs and the potential constraint on the public school system that may have more students moving into the district. By keeping the projects as they are now, the strain on the neighborhoods will not pose a problem.

Emphasis has also been placed on the fact that the private market cannot and will not provide adequate housing within the means of the poor. If public housing continues, the poor will always have a place they can afford. Housing advocates misunderstand the nature of public housing and often cannot see its crucial role in

weaving a healthy social fabric and inspiring individuals to advance. The question that must be asked is whether the federal housing program is counterproductive.

CONCLUSION

The belief that public housing projects are a breeding ground for crime has been responsible for much opposition to public housing in the U.S. for many years. Many people do not want public housing to change because of the fear of them being too expensive for them to afford. Another fear is that when they are moved into a mixed income neighborhood, they will not have access to public transportation and other things that is necessary to survive on a fixed income. Others are opposed because of the belief that public housing is for lazy minorities and the condition of the neighborhood will deteriorate if low income families are mixed with middle income families.

Whatever the reasons, public housing is here to stay, and it can be just as beneficial as any government program. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has many missions. Its first mission is to increase home ownership by redesigning spaces into single family homes instead of apartment style housing, which will help people achieve the goal of home ownership. Its second mission is to assist low-income renters and low income wage earners who have the same desires and the same rights as other Americans to live in a nice home and good neighborhood. Thirdly, they have a mission to improve the physical social and economic health of cities. The redesign and structure of public housing will improve the poverty stricken areas, and when these homes are blended with middle income housing, this will give the individual homeowner more of an incentive to take pride in their home.

Resident safety plays a crucial role because of the negative perceptions of public housing. A newly redesigned public housing should help in changing some of the problems, like the large gatherings of people in parking lots and police chasing suspects through complexes. Hopefully, this activity will become a thing of the past because of the redesign and strict rules that the tenants will have to abide by. In addition, the police department will also play a crucial role by providing support with community meetings.

This paper has provided a small overview of public housing in the United States. In addition to the information that has been presented, it is also important to note that the current economic crisis will have a greater effect on public housing. It seems inevitable that as the economy continues to be in a state of flux, more and more Americans are going to struggle to make ends meet and potentially lose their homes. The days of thinking that public housing is for “lazy minorities” will fall by the wayside because of the increasing percentage of people looking for housing that is affordable. The need for public housing will most likely continue to grow as the economy suffers. This will lead society to place a greater importance on public housing and the residents, which will ultimately help public housing be viewed in a more positive light (Quercia & Galster, 1997).

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