

Waiting for Gautreaux:

**Reflections and Conundrums About Chicago's Long-Running Public Housing
Desegregation Case**

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The title for this colloquium was obviously selected so that, as long as it was remotely related to *Gautreaux*, I could pretty much talk about whatever I wished. The topic I have chosen is: Whether the destruction of public housing developments such as Cabrini-Green and Robert Taylor Homes can be justified as sound policy given the enormous amount of human suffering caused by the forced dislocation of thousands of CHA families.

You may wonder what this question has to do with *Gautreaux*. The answer is that the tear-down plans all involve rebuilding some public housing back on site, in predominantly African-American neighborhoods. *Gautreaux* orders prohibit new public housing in such neighborhoods without an okay from the *Gautreaux* Court. Therefore, CHA must obtain a *Gautreaux* order each time it wishes to build new public housing on the site of a demolished Cabrini or Robert Taylor.

The theory of these "revitalizing orders" is that the tearing down and building anew fosters neighborhood improvement because concentrated poverty is replaced with unsubsidized dwellings as well as new public housing. The economic mix in the new resident population, along with other redevelopment activity, is supposed to help "revitalize" the community.

The first time we did this was at Henry Horner Homes in 1995, when we drafted precise language for the judge to express the theory. The order said that although the principle remedial purpose of *Gautreaux* was to provide families with desegregated housing opportunities, new public housing should be permitted in racially segregated areas if, upon a sufficient showing of revitalizing circumstances, a responsible forecast

of economic integration, with a longer term possibility of racial desegregation, could be made.

Because of all the good things going on in the Horner neighborhood in 1995, which was then being fixed up for the 1996 Democratic convention to be held in the adjacent United Center, we were able to supply the Judge with lots of revitalizing evidence. The order, which Judge Aspen signed with some enthusiasm, was a watershed, because in the redevelopment context it marked a transformation of *Gautreaux* from a racial desegregation case into a vehicle for economic integration.

Turning to our topic for today, one might begin the story of our tear-down policy exactly ten years ago last month, at a time when a strong, bipartisan constituency in Congress still supported public housing. In those days you could not demolish a public housing building without replacing it, unit for demolished unit. Even as high-rise public housing had begun to turn into the terrible kinds of places we are now so familiar with, the bipartisan sentiment against demolition, and against relaxation of the one-for-one replacement rule, persisted. Jack Kemp, the Secretary of HUD in the first Bush Administration, was a strong proponent of high-rise rehabilitation. Kemp used to say that he did not want to become known as the Secretary of Demolition.

But the sentiment against rehabilitation — perceived as throwing good money after bad — was growing. In October, 1992, it finally prevailed. That was the month in which Dantrell Davis, a seven-year-old resident of Cabrini-Green, was felled by a sniper's bullet as he walked through the project, holding his mother's hand, on his way to school. Dantrell's slaying was big news throughout the country — perhaps it was the image of holding his mother's hand. Suddenly there were cries to close down Cabrini-Green.

In the same month two pieces of legislation were enacted in Washington. The first was a program which is today known as HOPE VI (the acronym stands for Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere). HOPE VI provided grants to public housing authorities to revitalize what were called "severely distressed public housing developments." Demolition and mixed-income replacement communities were authorized as a revitalizing technique. The second legislative action began what

became a steady relaxation and eventual elimination of the one-for-one replacement rule.

In just a few short years following October 1992, federal policy completed a 180 degree shift, moving from Jack Kemp's resolute stand against demolition to actually compelling it. In 1996 Congress enacted a so-called viability test requirement for every public housing development with 300 or more units and at least a ten percent vacancy rate. Public housing authorities were ordered to compare the cost of rehabilitating a building with the cost of demolishing it and giving each resident a Section 8 rent subsidy voucher to secure housing in the private market. The housing authority was then required to develop a five-year plan to tear down any building whose rehabilitation cost was the higher of the two figures.

Chicago had many more high-rises than any place else in the country. To no one's surprise, nearly 19,000 CHA units failed the viability test and theoretically had to be torn down. Eventually, as a way of carrying out the federal mandate, CHA and HUD entered into a formal written agreement, signed in early 2000, under which CHA would demolish about 14,000 units, cutting its family public housing stock from 39,000 apartments (many of which were vacant because they were uninhabitable) to about 25,000.

The CHA plan is supposed to run for ten years, roughly through the current decade. At the end we will have demolished nearly a dozen public housing developments, not only the ones I've mentioned but also Stateway Gardens, Rockwell Gardens, ABLA Homes, Ida B. Wells, and others. The theory is that these developments will be replaced by mixed-income communities with, however, fewer public housing units than they had before the wrecking balls began to swing.

What I have just described in shorthand fashion is known as CHA's Plan for Transformation, and it provides the context in which our Cabrinis and Taylors are today being torn down.

Now what could be wrong with a policy of getting rid of these terrible places, in which life for residents is hellish, and replacing them with communities that will not be entirely impoverished and should therefore give their residents a better chance for

decent lives? I'm going to paraphrase the criticisms as they appear in an article by Susan Popkin, a Northwestern graduate now with the Urban Institute in Washington, and in a recent report on the HOPE VI program by the National Housing Law Project, a respected advocacy organization.

Popkin's article is called, "The *Gautreaux* Legacy: What Might Mixed-Income and Dispersal Strategies Mean for the Poorest Public Housing Tenants?" According to Popkin, the *Gautreaux* legacy was a major change in thinking about urban public housing. Public housing was now to be scattered, or deconcentrated, in non-poor communities, providing an opportunity for the black poor to live among the non-black, non-poor, thereby to reap the benefits non-poor communities are thought to offer. This view, according to Popkin, has become a driving force behind the transformation of public housing as HUD promotes two major strategies: one is dispersing tenants into private housing throughout metropolitan areas using Section 8 housing vouchers; the second is creating mixed-income communities through the demolition and revitalization of severely distressed public housing developments.

The impetus for the *Gautreaux* bequest, according to Popkin, was none other than Jim Rosenbaum. In the 1980s, Jim began studying the experiences of *Gautreaux* families who, in the 1970s and '80s, had moved into private housing in suburbia under the *Gautreaux* Section 8 program. The Rosenbaum studies, which both Popkin and Len Rubinowitz participated in, were reported widely in the press and on television. They supplied evidence that, indeed, good things could and did happen in the lives of poor families who moved from concentrated poverty neighborhoods into predominantly white, affluent or middle-class communities.

Popkin wrote that the changed attitude about public housing reflected a growing social science consensus that — as the experiences of *Gautreaux* families seemed to show -- the problems of concentrated poverty might be overcome by exposing poor families to middle-class role models and communities. Popkin herself was skeptical about that — policymakers, she wrote, were "gambling" that deconcentration would lead to positive outcomes for poor families -- but her two main criticisms of CHA's Transformation Plan didn't depend on rebutting the consensus.

The first of the criticisms was that even if deconcentration did give rise to hoped-for benefits for poor families, the Transformation Plan beneficiaries would only be the least troubled of CHA families. The larger population of what Popkin called “vulnerable families” lacked job experience and skills, and was plagued with multiple social problems, including substance abuse, domestic violence, depression, lack of motivation and hopelessness. Such families, Popkin wrote, could not be expected to survive screening by private landlords in the Section 8 market, or by the private managers of the replacement mixed-income communities.

The second criticism was that the mixed-income replacement strategy further reduced the already limited supply of public housing units for the poorest tenants. This reduction would force many families into poor housing in bad neighborhoods and, in some cases, out of subsidized housing altogether.

The overall result would be that deconcentration created serious risks for many vulnerable families, while providing benefits only for the least troubled public housing residents.

The National Housing Law Project report, entitled *False Hope*, was published earlier this year, two years after Popkin’s article. It vigorously lambasted HUD and HOPE VI for the same sins Popkin had identified. Based on HUD’s own figures for the first decade of HOPE VI, covering over 150 projects in nearly 100 cities, *False Hope* supplied sobering data. Only 11.4 percent of the families who had lived in HOPE VI demolished buildings had been able to or were expected to return to the new mixed-income communities, and tens of thousands of public housing units had simply been done away with. At a time when the nation’s poorest families were suffering from an excruciating shortage of affordable housing, with HUD itself acknowledging that only 40 units of affordable housing were available for every 100 extremely low income households, and with the homeless population apparently growing, these were powerful criticisms.

I want to make it clear that although I am less skeptical than Popkin and *False Hope* about the potential benefits of mixed-income communities for poor families, I believe their two main criticisms are factually correct. The enormous reduction in the number of public housing units available to the very poorest families in a time of supply

crisis is a harsh fact. So is the fact that only a small percentage of present residents of the developments to be demolished are likely to gain entry to the replacement mixed-income communities, or to decent neighborhoods via Section 8 housing subsidies.

The question then is, Should we, because of these two harsh facts, reverse our demolition course and revert to the rehabilitation policy Jack Kemp and Congress used to favor? If not, what do we say, and do, about the thousands of families being forced to move out of their CHA apartments, who are likely to wind up in bad housing in bad neighborhoods, or even homeless?

Popkin does not advocate explicitly, perhaps not even implicitly, a return to the rehabilitation policy. Having rendered her criticisms in quite a few pages, she concludes with a few paragraphs advocating better social services for the displaced, vulnerable families.

False Hope, on the other hand, argues that we should not destroy even a single public housing unit. It forthrightly recommends: "All public housing rental units affected by demolition or redevelopment should be replaced with new or redeveloped public housing rental units on a one-for-one basis." This position, by the way, is supported by a number of advocacy organizations including, here in Chicago, the Coalition to Protect Public Housing and the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, and (understandably) by very many CHA residents.

Although, like Popkin, it is skeptical about the benefits of income-mixing, *False Hope* says these benefits -- assuming they exist — can be pursued without the displacement of public housing residents. Instead, it contends, we should promote self-sufficiency among present high-rise residents. Mixed-income public housing might be accomplished "from within," *False Hope* argues, "by assisting current residents to secure new or better-paying employment, rather than . . . forcing residents out." Instead of bringing residents higher income neighbors, *False Hope* says we should encourage self-sufficiency "by providing jobs — and training, childcare, and other services to allow residents to take those jobs."

I propose to look separately at these two recommendations, first, no demolition without one-for-one replacement, and second, more services for those displaced.

If you are tearing down a high-rise public housing development that has 300 units, and you want to replace it with a mixed-income community, the going formula these days is one-third, one-third, one-third, meaning one-third public housing, one-third affordable housing, usually financed with a low-income housing tax credit, and one-third unsubsidized or market rate housing. Our 300-unit high-rise development is replaced by a combination, then, of low- and mid-rise buildings and townhomes having 100 public housing units, 100 affordable units, and 100 unsubsidized units, with the public housing apartments scattered among the non-public dwellings. We have lost, you will note, 200 public housing units in the process of creating this mixed-income community.

There are two ways to replace those 200 units — new construction or rehabilitation. One obstacle to new construction is that HUD doesn't have the money from Congress to build 300 rather than 100 public housing apartments. Indeed, CHA may be short of the money required to build its promised 25,000 units.

A second obstacle is that even if we did have the public housing money, we would have no place to put the additional units. We can't put them back on site without changing the one-third, one-third, one-third ratio, at least within acceptable densities, and thereby prejudicing the chances of creating a mixed-income community. The conventional wisdom, probably correct, is that in most locations it will be impossible to market new housing to unsubsidized families in a community in which public housing families predominate.

Neither can we build our 200 lost units elsewhere as scattered sites. Community opposition — the not-in-my-back-yard syndrome — is alive and well. The *Gautreaux* case itself testifies to the political impracticability of building scattered site public housing on a significant scale even when a court order requires it.

The alternative, as *False Hope* urges, would be to rehabilitate our high-rises, thereby to avoid losing our 200 units but also foregoing our mixed-income replacement community. This, I believe, would be a seriously wrong policy decision.

If as a society we are forced to choose between rehabilitating our high-rises in order to retain those 200 units, and getting rid of them at the cost of losing 200 units, I believe we are making the correct, albeit painful, choice. The reason, simply, is that the high-rises are terrible places for the people who live in them, not to mention for the

larger community that lives near them. In my opinion we should, above all, seize the moment and tear them down.

To say merely that the high-rises are terrible places fails utterly to convey the reality. Nicholas Lemann, in his excellent book, *The Promised Land*, says of a particular building in Taylor that it was quite possibly the worst place in the country to raise a family. Its census tract was the third poorest in the United States. The poorest, immediately to the north, was also wholly within Robert Taylor.

Lemann writes of Ruby Haynes and her children who moved into Taylor soon after it opened in 1962. Of Haynes's six sons, the eldest either committed suicide or was murdered, another barely managed to survive beatings by rival gang members, a third was sent back to Mississippi, from whence Haynes had come, to live with a childless relative, a fourth went as a gift child to a friend in Ohio. On the first anniversary of her eldest son's death, after 17 years in Taylor, Haynes moved back to Mississippi.

Haynes's only daughter then moved into the Haynes Taylor apartment. Twenty years old, she was on welfare, a prison widow and a single mother. Soon she had a second child, then became hopelessly addicted to cocaine. Deeply in debt to her dope man, she began to beg and steal. She became pregnant again, and sent her two oldest children to live with her mother in Mississippi. At the end of a cocaine session, she went into cardiac arrest and had to be taken to a hospital to be revived. Terrified, she packed her things and with her remaining child took a Greyhound Bus to Mississippi where they too moved in with her mother.

The Haynes apartment in Taylor then passed to another Haynes son, who invited a male friend to share it. The two began dealing cocaine out of the apartment, cheating not only their customers but each other by skimming the pouches they sold. A fight ensued which ended with the friend setting fire to the apartment. The fire terminated the fight, and also the quarter-century Taylor tenancies of Haynes and her children.

The saga of the Haynes family in Taylor is not atypical. You may remember Alex Kotlowitz's compelling tale about a Horner family, *There Are No Children Here*. Violence was a constant, Kotlowitz wrote, the surrounding neighborhood a black hole with an infant mortality rate higher than in a number of third world countries, eleven-year old Pharoah sat on his bed one day and cried because he worried that he might never

get out of the projects, and a friend of Pharoah's brother, who was able to move out, knelt at his bedside before he went to sleep and prayed that God would not make him move back to Horner. Dantrell Davis, when he was shot to death in Cabrini, became the third pupil from his school to be slain that year.

Although some social scientists dissent, or are skeptical, for me the case made by Harvard's William Julius Wilson is entirely persuasive. In his well-known book, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, Wilson says our ghetto neighborhoods are populated almost exclusively by the most disadvantaged segments of the black urban community, by people who are outside the mainstream of the American occupational system, by those who lack training and skills, who are engaged in street crime and other forms of aberrant behavior, and who are in long-term poverty. Wilson speaks of the social pathologies of ghetto communities, and adds that, if he had to use one term to capture the differences in the experiences of the ghetto poor from the poor who live outside, it would be concentration effects— meaning the pathologies generated when a neighborhood is composed exclusively of ghetto poor.

Concentrated poverty, in other words, blights life prospects for very many of the persons who live in such circumstances. In the long run we will do the residents no good by rehabilitating their concentrated poverty homes, and with them their failed life circumstances. I remember a poll some years ago in which the question was asked, Which is more important, a good home or a good neighborhood? Three-quarters of the respondents answered, a good neighborhood. Almost 30 years ago a HUD publication, referring to the disproportionate concentration of poverty within central cities, said, Improvements in the physical condition of their housing . . . may worsen the situation by reducing the migration of the poor out of an unsuitable environment.

Which brings me to the other major criticism of our present tear down policy — the lamentably small percentage of the poorest families who will truly benefit from mixed-income replacement communities or from Section 8 housing vouchers. We can and should, as Popkin urges, do much more than we have been doing to provide assistance to the families who will not benefit from present policies. Popkin refers to models of supportive and transitional housing, and to the manner in which we have helped refugee populations.

She is right. Ideally, there should be money, and trained people, to do what she says for as many of the vulnerable families as possible. However, it is important to include in Popkin's services prescription what is called mobility counseling, a service accompanying housing vouchers that enables families to escape to better neighborhoods from concentrated poverty circumstances, and thereby — as Rosenbaum's studies have shown — significantly improve their life chances.

Again, however, we confront a harsh reality. Unless spending priorities in Washington, Springfield or Chicago are changed, there won't be sufficient funds to do the job right. And, at least without a lot more money, we probably won't have the trained personnel to service this public housing population effectively. I have absolutely no confidence that CHA could handle the job. Its record of providing social services is awful.

The record of the City of Chicago, and its so-called delegate nonprofit agencies, I know less about, but the anecdotal information I do have gives me little ground for optimism. There are some few agencies that may do a good job of substance abuse or domestic violence counseling, more perhaps that do good job training work. But all too frequently, I am told, we find that there are too few really good agencies, that these are underfunded and understaffed, and that often they are located at a considerable distance from the populations that most need them. In the *Gautreaux* case we are trying right now to beef up mobility counseling, and to link it to needed social services, but that is an upstream swim that may or may not get us where we wish to go.

As for the *False Hope* argument that we can create a mixed-income community from within through jobs and training and other services that will bootstrap the present high-rise population into self-sufficiency, that is a pipe-dream. History does not provide us with so much as a single example of the successful redevelopment of a high-rise, concentrated poverty community through improved social services. Even in the much more favorable context of broader neighborhood redevelopment led by community development corporations, such as Bedford Stuyvesant in New York, the granddaddy of such efforts, hundreds of millions of government and private dollars over a period of many decades have produced distinctly mixed results. One has only to think of Ruby Haynes and her children in Robert Taylor to realize how impossible it is to imagine that

Taylor residents can be brought to self-sufficiency through improved social services while continuing to live in and around a rehabilitated but still impoverished Taylor.

So, if we make the pessimistic but probably realistic assumption that we will not provide the services that would be necessary to enable a much higher percentage of the vulnerable families to gain admission to mixed-income communities or well-located Section 8 housing, should that lead us to return to a rehabilitation policy?

Absent really good services and mobility counseling for the displaced, vulnerable families, I believe there are three possibilities: first, the families may be rehoused in other public housing developments; second, they may move into the private housing market, with or without subsidies, perhaps in some cases doubling up with friends or family; and finally, in the worst case scenario, they may actually wind up homeless.

Let's look at each of the possibilities in order. For the families who move to other, low- or mid-rise public housing developments, I believe they will not be worse off than they were at Taylor and the like. Bad as their new homes may be, they cannot be any worse than the high-rises from which the families came. Their circumstances in their new public housing developments may not be any better than they were, but they will not be worse.

The second group of families is composed of those who move into private housing in high poverty, racially segregated neighborhoods. Poor as these moves may be, they too can be no worse than the Taylors and Cabrini the families left. The calculus here, however, includes an additional point -- if we have too many of such moves to particular neighborhoods, the receiving communities may become new ghettos. This is a separate problem — the problem of Section 8 clustering, it is called — and it really requires a separate colloquium. But although I am pessimistic about our ability to do well on the services problem, I think the clustering problem is easier to solve and more likely to be addressed successfully, especially if we succeed to some degree in our mobility counseling initiative. What the chances for that really are is something I leave for the Q and A period. My point here is that even if we fail to end clustering, these families too will not be worse off than they were in Taylor and Cabrini.

The final group of families is composed of those who actually wind up homeless, the worst case scenario. What can we say about them?

Though my answer is that the risk of homelessness for some displaced families is not a reason to rebuild our high-rise enclaves and condemn thousands of other families to continue to live in Taylor-style concentrated poverty, there is a slight, positive twist here. The supportive or transitional housing possibilities that Popkin recommends for the high-rise population can of course also be made available in the homeless context. Yet it may be that they can be deployed for the homeless population even more successfully than in the high-rises. Because the dispersal of the families results in lesser numbers at any one location, removed from the gang rule and the social pathologies constantly being generated and regenerated in the high-rises, we may actually have a better, not a poorer, chance of bringing useful social services to bear than we do in the gang-controlled, high-rise environment. High-rise concentrated poverty, as the Haynes story illustrates, becomes intergenerational, while many homeless families cycle in and out of homelessness.

It is true that in this third, homeless case, I am comparing apples and oranges — a family with a home, compared to one without. But, so persuaded am I of the life-blighting consequences of Wilson's concentrated poverty circumstances, that I do not view even homelessness as clearly a greater evil.

Perhaps, however, I overstate when I say that in each of my three cases the new circumstances cannot be worse than the old. For individual families, due to severance from friends and family, institutional supports, and the like, a forced move to a new neighborhood that is no better than the old, or into homelessness, may constitute a net loss. Yet even if the number of such instances is not negligible, I believe the macro benefits justify continuing on course. The benefits I refer to include improvement in life circumstances for the thousands of families who leave high-rise, concentrated poverty for better environments, and the benefits for the larger communities adjacent to the high-rise enclaves that flow from elimination of the high-rise blight. There is also a long run hope for improving public housing funding prospects once we emerge from the long shadow the image of our high-rise disasters has cast over all public housing.

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My bottom line, therefore, is that -- painful though it is -- we should stick with our present course. Of course, we shouldn't be incurring any net losses. We should have more money for more and better relocation services, including mobility counseling, and more replacement housing. As I speak today, BPI is poised to initiate litigation if we can't negotiate substantial improvement in the relocation process. But I believe that even if we don't get more money, and even if efforts to improve relocation don't succeed, society should continue to tear down its public housing high-rises. The alternative of returning to a rehabilitation policy would be unwise. Once and for all we should end the high-rise concentrated poverty that has brought us the sagas of Ruby Haynes and her children, and of Pharoah and Dantrell, and countless others.

As some of you know, I am working on a biography of the *Gautreaux* case, the current working title of which is, *Waiting for Gautreaux: Will the Mainstream Door Open for Black Americans?* The book suggests that America's ghettoization of the public housing high-rise population during the last half-century can be seen as a metaphor for the way our society has treated blacks since Reconstruction.

Adam Fairclough, of the University of East Anglia in England, has from that unlikely location written several highly acclaimed books on the history of black Americans. His most recent, an account of the black American struggle from the end of Reconstruction, is entitled, *Better Day Coming*. Notwithstanding its optimistic-sounding title, the last sentence of Fairclough's book reads, "More than thirty years after the death of [Martin Luther] King, the next road — the right road — is hard to discern."

Though the right road may be hard to discern, I believe that the destruction of our high-rise ghettos is a small, painful, but important step in the right direction.

And now I'd be happy to take questions.

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