

*"Housing mobility." The term is questionable because houses don't move. But the concept is significant because families do. In fact, as one of the most important books of the last decade points out, residential mobility has been the crucial avenue for social mobility in America, the central mechanism by which families improve socio-economic prospects for themselves and their children. (American Apartheid, by Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton.)*

For most American groups, the book says, socio-economic mobility is a cumulative process: economic advancement (a better job) is translated into residential progress (a neighborhood with better schools and services, social contacts, etc.), which in turn leads to additional socio-economic gains (children get better education and jobs). A poll tells us that nearly three-quarters of Americans believe that a good neighborhood is more important than a good house.

Yet, this normal avenue for cumulative socio-economic advancement is largely blocked for African Americans because of racial barriers to residential mobility. In addition, because African Americans in general have lower incomes and higher poverty rates than whites, predominantly black neighborhoods are likely to have the highest concentrations of poverty. Decreases in inner-city blue-collar jobs disproportionately affect such neighborhoods. The result is that growing concentrations of poverty reinforce themselves.

Among the archetypal examples of such poverty concentrations are CHA's racially segregated highrise enclaves. As BPI Newsletter readers know, BPI supports CHA's "Plan for Transformation" effort to eliminate these enclaves and replace them with mixed-income communities. Our support, however, is conditioned upon compassionate relocation for the thousands of families who must be

involuntarily moved, only a fraction of whom will return to the new mixed-income communities (which will have far fewer public housing units than the enclaves they replace).

Enter housing mobility. If the relocated families are to have a chance to make new lives for themselves, rather than being shifted from one ghetto to another, they must be afforded a realistic opportunity to move to the better neighborhoods of which *American Apartheid* speaks. By communicating effectively the employment, schooling, safety and other benefits of better neighborhoods, and providing housing search assistance (individualized counseling, neighborhood-specific information, landlord contacts, transportation, etc.), housing mobility programs are the principal mechanism for affording that opportunity to families who wish to make such moves.

Housing mobility began with Gautreaux. In 1976 the United States Supreme Court ruled that HUD could be required to provide metropolitan-wide relief for Gautreaux families through the Section 8 rent subsidy program. By agreement between HUD and BPI, the Gautreaux program was then started. For 22 years it was effectively administered by the Leadership Council for Metropolitan Open Communities. Thousands of Gautreaux families were enabled to move from segregated, impoverished inner-city neighborhoods to over 100 predominantly white middle-class suburbs throughout the Chicago metropolitan area.

The results were spectacular. Children finished high school and went on to college and jobs, as did their mothers, in startlingly higher percentages than was the case with families who stayed in the city. The Gautreaux program ended in 1998 when it achieved its targeted numbers, thus ending the Gautreaux case against HUD and with it the obligatory basis for the program. But by then Gautreaux-inspired

mobility programs had proliferated throughout the country, and Congress had authorized a five-city Gautreaux-type demonstration program that continues today.

Yet, by an accident of timing, housing mobility in Chicago ended just as CHA's Plan for Transformation was getting under way. Insisting that housing mobility was required under the still continuing Gautreaux case against CHA, BPI threatened legal action. At CHA's request, however, we agreed to negotiate. The negotiations, stretching over several years, are just now beginning to bear fruit. Two agreements have so far been achieved:

1. A new Gautreaux program has been started under the administration of the Leadership Council for up to 500 CHA relocating families. The expectation is that the program will be enlarged if initial results are favorable. (Over 1,000 CHA families applied for the November 2001 registration.)

2. CHA has just issued a "Request for Proposals" for relocation counselors which, thanks to BPI's input, strongly emphasizes mobility counseling.

As a result of these two steps, relocation of families under the Plan for Transformation will now include a distinct housing mobility thrust.

A third step, about to begin, is to negotiate housing mobility components in CHA's "regular" Section 8 program. Under this program, for which the waiting list is years long, some 5,000 low-income families move each year. These families should have the same "better neighborhood" opportunities that are now to be offered to relocatee families.

Housing mobility is not without its critics, who advance four basic arguments. The first three are without any merit – that housing mobility isn't a good idea for the families who make the moves to suburbia, that it

isn't fair to working families who had to earn their way into better neighborhoods, and that on a large enough scale to be meaningful housing mobility would undermine the stability of "receiving" neighborhoods.

To answer the first, "it's not good for them" argument, one need only point to the contrary evidence of the Gautreaux program studies. We can also refer to what *New York Times* columnist Brent Staples calls the "butchery" of children on inner-city streets. Who are "we," we may ask, to withhold an available, escape-the-ghetto opportunity from "them" on the ground that we know better than they what is in their interest?

The second, "fairness" argument, proceeds from a faulty premise – that suburban homeowners "earned" their way into their communities without government assistance. In fact, buying suburban homes was made possible for millions of post-World War II homeowners by federal highway money, FHA insurance and homeowner tax deductions. These subsidies were of course designed to further public policies – to build an expressway system, to foster home ownership. Yet most of our subsidies similarly have the dual purposes of benefiting individuals or families and helping achieve some public purpose. In the case of housing mobility subsidies, the public purposes include the compelling one – although there are many others – of saving the lives of inner-city children victimized by gang warfare and enabling them to become functional citizens instead of costly ciphers in our criminal justice and welfare systems.

As to the third argument about operating on a meaningful scale, the fact is that in the entire country, according to the 1990 census, only about 1.8 million poor families live in extreme urban poverty areas. After the prosperity of the '90s, the figure may be even lower (we will

*continued on page 6*



## BPI Perspective

continued from page 5

know when the 2000 census results are finally in later this year). If, through housing mobility programs, one-third of the 1.8 million were enabled to escape over a ten-year period, that would in a single decade put a substantial dent in our urban poverty concentrations. Based on the Gautreaux experience of families moving to over 100 different suburban communities, the one-third goal could be reached using only 50 suburbs in each of our 100

largest metropolitan areas at a rate of a mere 12 families per year per suburb, which is hardly enough to "undermine" communities.

Unfortunately, the fourth argument of the critics does have merit – that some relocating families have been allowed to "cluster" in a few communities, threatening the creation of new ghettos. This problem can easily be remedied by importing into the Housing Choice Vouchers Program, formerly known as Section 8, the Gautreaux program requirement of placing families in a "dispersed"

fashion. So far HUD has stubbornly refused to address the clustering issue, although it has been studying the matter for years. Even without national program guidelines, however, a litigation settlement can include the Gautreaux anti-clustering provision. BPI intends to insert it into the forthcoming, third-step negotiations.

Housing mobility is not a panacea. For completely understandable reasons many families, perhaps most, do not wish to decamp and undergo the hardships involved in moving to new

communities. Even if more wished to do so, there are serious questions about the supply of available dwellings in good neighborhoods. But as one of many tools for maximizing the chances that the Plan for Transformation will succeed, and that families who wish to do so will have a realistic opportunity to travel the normal American road to better life circumstances, housing mobility is of singular importance. BPI intends to see to it that this tool is sharpened for use in Chicago.