

## **Public Housing Destruction: Is It Worth It?**

*The following is an excerpt of a speech delivered by BPI Senior Staff Counsel Alex Polikoff at the Northwestern University Institute for Policy Research Colloquium on November 4, 2002.*

### **Can the destruction of public housing developments be justified as sound policy given the enormous amount of human suffering caused by the forced dislocation of thousands of CHA families?**

What could be wrong with a policy of getting rid of CHA's terrible high-rises, 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 of the Urban Institute in Washington.

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.

Although I am less skeptical than Popkin about the potential benefits of mixed-income communities for poor families, I believe her 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 a rehabilitation policy? 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?

I propose to look separately at two recommendations offered by critics: first, no demolition without one-for-one replacement of units, and second, more services for those displaced.

There are two ways to replace units — new construction or rehabilitation. One obstacle to new construction is that HUD doesn't have the money from Congress to build more 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 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 the 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 would be to rehabilitate our high-rises. This, I believe, would be a seriously wrong policy decision. 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.

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 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 social 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.

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. 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.

As for the 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.

So, if we make the pessimistic but probably realistic assumption that we will not provide the necessary supportive services, 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 Cabrinis the families left.

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, there is a slight, positive twist here. The supportive or transitional housing possibilities that Popkin recommends may 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 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.

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. Even so, 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.

My bottom line, therefore, is that -- painful though it is -- we should stick with our present course. 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 high-rise concentrated poverty.

*(The full text of this address can be viewed on BPIG's website at [www.bpichicago.org](http://www.bpichicago.org).)*