

Mixed-Income Development Study

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SERVICE ADMINISTRATION
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The New Public Housing Stigma in Mixed-Income Developments

MARCH 2013



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Acknowledgements

This research was supported with funding from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation with additional support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We are grateful to our research team led by Sara Voelker that has included Marisa Berwald, Brenda Copley, James Crawford, Ranada Harrison, April Hirsh, Amy Khare, Danielle Raudenbush, Indira Samuels, and Florian Sichling. We also want to thank the many individuals who have helped facilitate this research project including representatives of the Chicago Housing Authority, development staff at the study sites, community leaders, and most importantly, the relocated residents who shared with us their experiences and contributed their insights.

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<http://nimc.case.edu>.

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The New Public Housing Stigma in Mixed-Income Developments¹

Public housing residents have long experienced stigma as members of an urban “underclass.” By deconcentrating poverty and integrating public housing residents into mixed-income communities where their residences are indistinguishable from those of their higher-income neighbors, some policymakers hope that the stigma these residents have experienced will be reduced or eliminated. Through interviews with relocated public housing residents at three mixed-income developments being built as part of Chicago’s Plan for Transformation, we find that this is not the case. While stigma associated with living in public housing has subsided, residents report that their experience of stigma has intensified in new ways. The negative response of higher-income residents, along with stringent screening and rule enforcement, amplifies the sense of difference felt by many residents. This new experience with stigma has generated a range of coping responses from relocated public housing residents as they adjust to these new, mixed-income environments.

Defining Stigma

Although scholarly definitions of stigma vary widely, a common thread is the suggestion that stigma is a way for one group to maintain power through discrediting individuals they perceive to be outside of the mainstream. In this way, stigma is used to justify the disadvantaged positions of certain groups in our society, thus maintaining inequality. Public housing residents are one group that has experienced this stigma. In Chicago and other cities, public housing communities have become characterized by physical deterioration, low-quality services, joblessness, violence, and crime. As a result, residents have experienced social and economic isolation and residing in public housing has come to signal differentness from “normal” society.

DESCRIPTION OF MIXED-INCOME DEVELOPMENT STUDY SITES

Oakwood Shores, on the south side of the city, is being built in place of Ida B. Wells/Madden Park, and will ultimately be one of the largest mixed-income developments in Chicago with 3,000 projected total units. One-third of these units will be occupied by relocated public housing residents, with the remainder split between affordable (23%) and market-rate (44%) residents. It is being developed by a national non-profit organization, The Community Builders, in partnership with Chicago-based private developer Granite Development Corporation.

Park Boulevard is being built in place of Stateway Gardens on the city’s south side. Projected to have 1,315 units, occupancy will be split equally with one-third of units reserved for relocated public housing residents, one-third for affordable residents, and one-third for market-rate residents. Park Boulevard is being developed by Stateway Associates, LLC, a team of private developers.

Westhaven Park, is the second phase of the redevelopment of Henry Horner Homes on the city’s west side, the first phase of which was completed prior to the launch of the Plan for Transformation. Units produced in the initial pre-Transformation phase were only for public housing residents. The entire development will consist of 1,316 units, 63% of which will be set aside for relocated public housing residents (including some off-site housing), 10% for affordable residents, and 27% for market-rate residents. Westhaven Park is being developed by Brinshore Michaels, a team of private developers.

¹ This brief is based on a longer paper, “The New Stigma of Relocated Public Housing Residents: Challenges to Social Identity in Mixed-Income Developments” (McCormick, Joseph, and Chaskin, 2012, *City & Community*, 11(3): 285-308).

In the last two decades, many of the most deteriorated public housing high-rises have been demolished and replaced with mixed-income developments, with the expectation that mixed-income communities will address this stigma and provide relocated public housing residents with improved physical housing, increased safety, better community amenities, and a more economically diverse population. A closer look at how mixed-income development is being implemented in Chicago reveals intentional efforts to counteract public housing stigma, including renaming communities, making subsidized units indistinguishable from market-rate units, and developing stringent screening and monitoring procedures intended to help public housing residents assimilate smoothly. For relocated public housing residents living in these new environments, however, the results are mixed.

Shedding the Stigma of Place

Relocated public housing residents described two clear benefits to moving into the new, mixed-income developments related to a reduction in stigma: improved external perceptions and increased quality of surroundings.

Perceptions of Place

Living in the old public housing high-rises, residents had become used to outsiders' negative perceptions of their community and refusal to come to the so-called "projects." Now, with the demolition of the old buildings and construction of the new developments, residents report a change in outside perception (restaurants will now deliver to the development) and increased pride about where they live. As an Oakwood Shores resident explains:

[Moving here] has helped us a whole lot. It is so funny because when I go places and tell them my address, people start treating me different like I've got all this money: "Wow, you're over there." 'Cause I had a person tell me, "Oh you got money," and I didn't dispute it, if you didn't know, of course. So it's affected me in a really good way, you know. And I'm on the Board of Directors at my son's school...I'm sitting up on the Board with all these rich attorneys and all these people, and they drive me home when meeting is over. Back in the day, I was embarrassed.

In discussing the benefits of moving to the new developments, almost two-thirds of respondents across the three sites reported being more at ease when telling outsiders their address and feeling proud when their families come to visit them at their new homes.

Quality of the Surrounding Environment

In addition to appreciating the improved perceptions of outsiders, relocated public housing residents describe a number of substantive changes to the surrounding environment that help them feel better about themselves and their place in society. These changes include:

- Physical revitalization—the improved look and feel of their homes
- Decreased crime
- Increased population diversity—residents report positive feelings about the decrease in poverty concentration and increase in racial and ethnic diversity, but also voice concerns about possible gentrification and social dynamics
- Improved services and amenities



Clearly the redevelopment of public housing into mixed-income developments has provided relocated public housing residents with an address they can be proud of and eliminated some the stigma associated with being a public housing resident. Unfortunately, the new environments have also generated new social challenges for the residents that have resulted in subtle and not-so-subtle shifts in the nature of stigmatization.

New Forms of Stigma—Administrative Intrusion

Although most respondents describe no longer feeling stigmatized by their residence and its surroundings, many indicate that this improvement has been off-set by the sense of stigma they feel from insiders, including feeling singled-out and differentially treated by the administrative procedures of the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) and development staff.

Pre-occupancy: The Screening and Readiness Process

At most sites, selection criteria for the new developments include housekeeping checks, lease compliance, criminal background checks, credit reports, employment verification, and in some cases, drug testing.² Relocated public housing residents also had to attend orientation sessions prior to moving in where they were shown such things as how to use certain appliances and care for their new homes. Several respondents described these classes as condescending. According to one resident:

We had a workshop on how to wash dishes. Don't tell me how to wash dishes. I know what I'm doing... Y'all trying to bring me down. This is supposed to be a change for the good.

² Although these criteria were designed to screen public housing residents, legal advocates have successfully argued that any lease compliance regulations, including drug testing, must be applied to renters of all income levels. The criteria do not apply to homeowners. Due to a consent decree in place, relocated public housing residents moving into Westhaven Park were not originally subject to any selection criteria beyond lease compliance.

Post-occupancy: New Rules and Regulations

In addition to careful screening, the CHA and the private property managers of the new developments are concerned with maintaining strict norms of behavior through comprehensive rules and vigilant monitoring. Relocated public housing residents are subject to frequent unit inspections that are considered by many to be invasive and anxiety-provoking, as poor marks can lead to write-ups and even transfer or eviction.

In addition to regulations around unit upkeep, all three developments have rules about gathering in public spaces outside and inside the buildings. In meetings, we heard property managers discuss the challenges of maintaining a certain image and marketability for the property if there are large gatherings of people in the lobbies and entrances at all hours of the day, as was common in the old public housing developments. Other rules—regarding barbecuing, pets, and use of balconies—apply only to renters and not to homeowners living within the developments.

The majority of respondents across sites complained about the level of monitoring and its differential impact on low-income and relocated public housing residents. Residents reported feelings of being watched, anxiety over the threat of eviction for rules infractions, and having to “walk on eggshells” in their own homes and communities.

Well, believe me, you are being watched. They watch you come in and watch you got out.... The cameras. The cameras. And if anything goes wrong and they pull you in the office, they're gonna tell you every detail....'Cause the [property manager] told us, she said there's some other people in here paying some good, tall money for staying here, and they ain't gonna let nobody just, you know, mess up the deal. They'll throw you out and put somebody else in here.



Many relocated public housing residents (three-quarters of the sample at Westhaven Park, over half at Park Boulevard, and over a third at Oakwood Shores) also expressed concerns that the rules are being unevenly enforced and that they are monitored and investigated more often than their higher-income neighbors.



New Forms of Stigma – Social Dynamics, Prejudice, and Uneven Power

In addition to the increased stigmatization residents experience from administrative procedures and the perceived differential treatment by management, relocated public housing residents also experience new forms of stigma from their higher-income neighbors.

In community meetings, many higher-income residents assume that relocated public housing residents are at fault for the majority of rule infractions and undesirable behaviors (e.g., littering, noise disturbances) at the development. Higher-income residents have also expressed frustration at feeling misled in the marketing process with regard to the nature of the mix at the new developments and their proximity to relocated public housing residents. As one owner stated at a community policing meeting: “I did not pay \$300,000 for a condo to live next to the projects.” Relocated public housing residents are aware of the opinions of their higher-income neighbors. A Westhaven Park resident describes:

They don't want to live with us, and I see a lot of that. And they be saying that behind our back because like I said, they can't whisper. We can hear what they be saying. And then when they have their [condo] board meeting downstairs, they don't have their door closed, they have it opened.

About half of the respondents at Oakwood Shores and about a quarter of respondents at Westhaven Park and Park Boulevard expressed concerns that higher-income residents were actually aiming to push relocated public housing residents out of the neighborhood and, as one said, “take it over for themselves.” One resident expressed her concern that “write-ups” by property management for rule infractions would be used to evict public housing residents:

It's three write-ups. I guess I don't know how many call-ins but it's three write-ups. I mean they want to try to put you out....And see, [this is now] a different neighborhood. We got mixed people over here. You have some white. And you got people that's paying a lot of money for rent that's probably mad 'cause you ain't paying as much rent as they paying.

It is important to note that while units are built to make income level indistinguishable, virtually all relocated public housing residents in these developments are African American. Race—combined with dress, behavior, and other signifiers of socioeconomic status—serves as a quick proxy of housing status at Westhaven Park and Park Boulevard where a greater proportion of higher-income residents are non-African American. While race is not often explicitly mentioned in public meetings, relocated public housing residents raised it frequently in our interviews as one reason they feel they are looked down upon by their higher-income neighbors.

Further exacerbating the stigmatization felt by relocated public housing residents is their uneven access to institutional decision-makers with responsibility for the development. Institutional stakeholders at times privilege the demands of market-rate units, particularly owners. For example, owners at the three sites have used their networks and organization to secure meetings with Police Commanders, CHA officials, local aldermen, and other leaders, typically in response to concerns about safety and security measures.

Coping Responses to Stigma

We found that relocated public housing residents have developed specific coping mechanisms in response to the new forms of stigma they are encountering in the mixed-income developments: maintaining a positive sense of self while recognizing the opportunity for some change, interacting with higher-income residents when deemed safe and positive, and distancing themselves from their own stigmatized group while connecting and acting collectively when necessary.

Stance toward Self

We found that most relocated public housing residents, despite feelings of stigmatization, retain a healthy sense of self. This was reflected in their descriptions of their experiences, perspectives, and outlook. An Oakwood Shores resident described her strong sense of self and her perception that her values and outlook are similar to those of her higher-income neighbors, stating that she has “a lot of things” in common with them:

I eat, sleep, get up, I love my family. I want good things. I want to stay in a beautiful community, neighborhood. I want to have somewhere decent to raise my family....But like I said, my personality, my character, I have very high self-esteem. Nobody could make me feel any less anyway, you know.

A few respondents asserted that they did not need to move into a mixed-income development to “fix” themselves. Another quarter of respondents described their background as having been “raised right.” In total, about half of all respondents asserted that they had gotten to the place they are now in life on their own and not through the CHA or anyone else’s help or example.

At the same time, almost half of the respondents saw some value in and described ways in which they were trying to adapt their behavior and attitudes to meet the demands and expectations of the new developments. While the new expectations of the developments caused some degree of anxiety for many, it does not appear that residents are internalizing this through feelings of self-doubt or shame. According to a relocated public housing resident at Westhaven Park:

I feel that's the whole purpose of [the mixed-income developments]...Don't just sit back and depend on government assistance for the rest of your life. Use [this opportunity] to move ahead.

Stance toward Higher-Income Residents

While theories of mixed-income development present higher-income residents as positive role models, they can also be a source of blame and marginalization to relocated public housing residents. In response to this, almost half of respondents described adopting self-protective strategies, isolating themselves and avoiding contact with other residents, including other relocated public housing residents. Respondents explained that this self-protection was to avoid trouble and not risk having complaints made against them. As a Westhaven Park resident describes:

I pretty much stay to myself. That's how you live longer around here, stay out of trouble....That's why I say it's best to just mind your own business and just speak to people "hi" and "bye" and not socialize or fraternize with them, then that way you won't be one of the ones that they calling into the office on.

Despite asserting that they are similar in many ways to their higher-income neighbors, relocated public housing residents also describe concealing their identity by altering their language and mannerisms in an effort to ease tension and create comfortable interactions. An Oakwood Shores resident explains:

I have found myself that when I talk to the people at market rent or homeowners, it will have to be on a different kind of behavior, and I think it's psychological, 'cause they don't tell me to or ask me to, but I immediately want to impress them that, you know, "I can blend over here with you all."



Some respondents also report not revealing their public housing status in community meetings, particularly when confronted by complaints from other residents.

And the lady [homeowner] was sitting up there saying, "I'm telling everything. The people from the projects, they ain't no good." I'm from the projects but I didn't, you know, I didn't say nothing. I'm getting heated and my blood getting heated. And [other] people from the projects was there.

In general, the greater the distance (socially and physically) from the development itself, the easier it is for residents to conceal their public housing identity. Their better-reputed address provides significant camouflage in settings away from the neighborhood. Broader neighborhood meetings allow anonymity to a degree, but around the development, race and other aspects of appearance often limit the effectiveness of concealing strategies.

Stance toward Other Relocated Public Housing Residents

In response to the new forms of stigma relocated public housing residents encounter in the mixed-income developments, many have found ways to distance themselves from other members of their group. About three-fifths of respondents talked about how they themselves were different from those relocated public housing residents who more closely fit the stereotypes being assigned to all relocated public housing residents. As a Westhaven Park resident describes:

Some of them still be running back and forth all, you know, doing any of the things that they don't 'posed to be doing, but they do it anyway. That's everywhere....Goin' to the corner, looking for drugs...so I ain't got nothing to do with it. No one don't bother me, I don't bother them. They'll do their own thing.



No respondents articulated a willingness to interact only with other relocated public housing residents; those who report withdrawing from interactions with the larger population report withdrawing from virtually everyone in the development. However, we observed numerous situations where relocated public housing residents were in social situations at the developments with no higher-income residents present, and they appeared quite comfortable with the situation. Further, at several contentious meetings, relocated public housing residents were observed coming together to defend against complaints by new neighbors and institutional actors targeted broadly at all relocated public housing residents.

Stigma Not Perceived By All

About one-fifth of respondents did not raise the issue of stigma as a significant part of their experience in the mixed-income developments. These respondents tended to describe their residential experience in positive terms. In general, they were younger, had fewer children, more education, and were less likely to be unemployed. In these ways, they are relocated public housing residents who could be considered closer to the social and economic “mainstream.” Unlike other relocated public housing respondents, none of these residents discussed changes that they personally needed to make to maintain residence in the new developments. If they raised the issue of stigma, it was with reference to the stigma associated with living in previous public housing and how this sense of marginalization had decreased since their move to a mixed-income development.



Conclusions

Relocated public housing residents who have moved to mixed-income developments are benefitting in several ways from these comparatively safer and more stable residential environments. However, a combination of stringent screening and monitoring procedures from the housing authority and development staff and tense relations and perceived social prejudice from higher-income neighbors has generated new forms of stigma felt by relocated public housing residents.

While a complete end to the stigmatization of relocated public housing residents may be impossible without broader societal change, concerted action to confront and mitigate this stigma can have a significant impact on residents' experiences within these new environments and on the overall sustainability of mixed-income developments as places where residents of different backgrounds are able to live together comfortably. We offer the following recommendations:

Distinguish general stereotypes and perceptions from actual conduct of specific residents in the developments. More careful identification of those who are not following the rules may help lead to more equitable treatment and less scapegoating of relocated public housing residents. Property managers, developers, service providers, and leaders of resident associations have a key role in discouraging intolerance and assumptions, as well as providing transparency around negative incidents and issues in the developments.

Create more inclusive procedures for input into development-wide rules and standards of behavior. Formal and informal expectations should be reasonable and equitably monitored. Increased tolerance for behaviors that are more familiar to relocated public housing residents but are not particularly harmful (e.g., large family gatherings, congregating in front of buildings rather than in back) could prove to be beneficial.

Be transparent with potential community members. Be clear with potential residents of all income levels and tenures about the expected diversity in the new community and the need for tolerance of differences as well as a commitment to working together to establish shared norms and expectations.

Provide training and ongoing support for development staff charged with managing difficult expectations and social dynamics. Local and national intermediaries could provide ongoing technical assistance and brokered peer-to-peer exchanges and support for developers, property managers, service providers, housing authority staff, and other local partners. In addition, careful thought and policy development should be focused on the advisory and decision-making structures in the new developments, and on how residents will be selected and managed in inclusive and constructive ways.

Key Questions for Policy and Practice

There are a range of questions related to the stigmatization of relocated public housing residents in mixed-income developments that could prove helpful to stimulating discussion and sharing ongoing implementation lessons among policy-makers, advocates, developers, property managers, service providers, residents, and other stakeholders.

1. The assumption that relocated public housing residents are responsible for most or all rules transgressions and undesirable behaviors is key in maintaining stigma, yet these behaviors are often the acts of outsiders or other non-public housing residents. What procedures are currently in place—both within internal staff structures and at broader development and community meetings—to clearly and correctly identify the source of problematic behaviors? What more could be done to combat these assumptions when they are voiced by residents and other community members?
2. Many relocated public housing residents report feeling that they are the target of unreasonable and inequitable rules enforcement and monitoring. What structures exist to allow for resident input and deliberation around development rules and expectations? How are rules and consequences communicated to all members of the development community (relocated public housing residents, renters, and owners)? What recourse is available to residents who feel they have been the subject of unfair targeting? What has been the experience and response of the Office of the Ombudsman on this matter?
3. Some higher-income residents express frustration at the reality of life in a mixed-income development. How are expectations around inclusion and tolerance for differences handled in the marketing process? What opportunities could be provided to engage residents in discussions about these issues shortly after move-in and at other times during their tenure at the developments?
4. Some relocated public housing residents are responding to increased stigma in the mixed-income developments by withdrawing from community life. What supports are available to assist these residents in re-engaging in a safe and comfortable way?



Resident Sample Characteristics

(Random sample only, not full population at sites)

	Relocated Public Housing Residents
Number of respondents	35
% Female	89%
Race	
% African-American	100%
% White	0%
% Other	0%
Average age	44
% Married	6%
Education level	
% high school grad/GED	60%
% Bachelor's degree	0%
% Employed	43%
% With children in HH	66%
Income	
% Under \$20,000	83%
% Over \$70,000	0%



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