

To the Editor:

We understand that Hanna Rosin's recent article (Murder Mystery, in the July-August issue) on crime and its potential relationship to housing policy in Memphis, Tennessee (and by implication in other cities) has been interpreted by many as a wholesale indictment of HOPE VI, housing vouchers, and other federally-supported housing interventions. As the University of Memphis researchers cited in the story, we would like to offer a reframing, some clarification, and some additional insight.

First, our emphasis was and is on the shift in the geographic distribution of poor and low-income people -- much of which is driven by market forces and the purportedly normal "filtering" of the housing stock from higher income groups to lower income groups -- and the issues that are raised by geographic shifts in poverty. The pattern in Memphis and elsewhere is a decline in the population of high poverty neighborhoods and a parallel increase in the poverty population in formerly low-poverty neighborhoods. Poverty began to decentralize in Memphis between 1990 and 2000. It is important to acknowledge that neither HOPE VI redevelopment (most of which occurred after 2000) nor vouchers (which did not increase much until after 2000) materially effected what was happening from 1990 to 2000.

It is also important to clarify that neighborhoods in Rosin's story are in the City of Memphis; we referred to many of these neighborhoods as "suburban-style" neighborhoods (built after WWII, with many recently annexed neighborhoods built up during the 1980's), but these neighborhoods are both in the city and are erstwhile middle-income African American neighborhoods. This is a story about the effects of decentralized poverty, not a story about racial or income integration in the suburbs of Memphis. That being said, Rosin argues, and we agree, that the decentralization of poverty into formerly low-poverty neighborhoods has consequences for neighborhoods where poverty is increasing and for poor people living in unfamiliar neighborhoods where support systems may be attenuated and supportive services absent.

Since we are motivated by problem solving we do not want to ignore strategies that are already in place. One asset we have going for us in Memphis (not mentioned in the article) is the non-profit Memphis HOPE initiative that supports an intensive case management strategy for families relocated from the last two public housing-HOPE VI redevelopments. With Memphis HOPE the emphasis is on workforce development and economic self-sufficiency. The Women's Foundation of Greater Memphis -- at the behest and encouragement of the Memphis Housing Authority -- is raising money from both the private sector and local foundations in support of the strategy. Although HOPE VI financing supports bricks and mortar redevelopment, there is little or no HUD funding for the people part of the equation.

Health issues among families relocating from public housing are well-documented. Nevertheless, movement into the labor force is being tracked and outcomes to date for Memphis HOPE case management are encouraging: of 360 working age adults (19-64), 95 adults have been employed ( already 76 percent of the goal for the period ending in February 2009); 77 residents have been employed 180 days or longer (140 percent of the goal); and 118 new job placements have been made since the start of the program (138 percent of the goal to date).

It is the absence of this Memphis HOPE-style attentiveness that shortchanges workforce investment and undermines neighborhoods. Unfortunately, this kind of attentiveness reaches too few people. Add to that reality the well-documented relationship between poverty and street crime (i.e. statistical correlation and the theory of poverty as the “root cause” for particular kinds of anti-social behavior), and it stands to reason that the geographic distribution of poverty matters for both law enforcement and longer-term crime prevention on the one hand and supportive outreach to low-income people (especially at-risk children and youth) on the other. *The basic take-away lesson we would wish for policy-makers is that neighborhoods experiencing increases in poverty are too often ignored until they reach a higher poverty threshold, and that earlier interventions from both law enforcement and crime prevention strategies such as education, workforce investment, and youth-oriented developmental outreach should be mobilized early and Memphis HOPE-style interventions taken to scale.*

Our data (only a little of which was presented in the article) clearly displays the link between decentralization of poverty and redistribution of crime; we do not know if redistribution is in turn linked with actual increases in volume. (Perhaps because of as-yet-unmeasured attributes of neighborhoods where crime increased.) As for a relationship between crime and housing policy? *When reconcentration of poverty becomes evident, then we have to ask ourselves if we could do more with housing policy to counter negative outcomes from decentralized poverty for neighborhoods and people.* If HOPE VI, vouchers, low income housing tax credits, and other housing programs are conceived as tools in a neighborhood quality toolbox, *are these tools being used to best advantage?*

Since we did not set out to model the effect of vouchers, HOPE VI, or any other single factor on crime, we do not know if low-income residents coming to new neighborhoods with vouchers or because of a HOPE VI relocation are more or less likely to be involved in street crime. Our motivation, working with both community development activists and law enforcement, was to identify neighborhoods under stress and link them with both law enforcement and community development interventions. It may be that possession of a valuable housing voucher offers a special incentive to disassociate from anti-social networks, especially if landlords and the housing authority are effective enforcers of HUD’s “zero tolerance” policy regarding criminal behavior. We unequivocally support vouchers as an indispensable intervention in a housing market where low-income people find it increasingly difficult to access decent and affordable housing. If vouchers are a positive influence for neighborhoods absorbing higher numbers of very low income people, then it is time to determine that locally and encourage their use accordingly.

Over and above housing policy, we also believe that an effective linkage between law enforcement – with an emphasis on removing the worse offenders from neighborhood to neighborhood – and crime prevention – with an emphasis on intervention with vulnerable youth and families, has been too long in coming. The Blue CRUSH (Crime Reduction Using Statistical History) collaboration between the Memphis Police Department and the Center for Community Criminology is producing some remarkable demonstration results in high-crime neighborhoods with concentrations of at-risk multi-family housing. These results are being analyzed and will be disseminated for replication in other cities. As for the linkages between law enforcement and people-oriented crime prevention, the Center for Community Criminology, the Center for

Community Building and Neighborhood Action, and the Southeast Memphis Community Development Corporation are collaborating on the US Department of Justice, Shelby County, and the Memphis Police Department “Safeways” Initiative that will facilitate, for example, intensive intervention with children and youth in households where adults are arrested. As it stands, the typical absence of linkages means (at best) “benign neglect”, waiting until those same kids wind up in juvenile court.

Benign neglect is even more likely when youth support and intervention programs are all back in the old neighborhoods and have not kept up with the reality of where vulnerable children and youth are now living. This is where housing authorities can play a role: by helping to develop support systems in new neighborhoods for their own clients (be they voucher holders or families relocated from public housing through HOPE VI to tax credit properties), neighborhoods can be made stronger for the benefit of both long-time residents and newcomers. But first, we have to understand how the debilitating conditions of public housing risk being recreated in newer and better-looking but no less unhealthy multi-family developments in Memphis – and we suspect – other similarly situated cities. You do not have to be a former resident of public housing to find yourself in a new “public-housing like” environment.

The difference between old-fashioned public housing and public-housing like environments is that in the latter accountability is more diffuse. New environments appear to be no longer a Memphis Housing Authority problem. In our view, it will take both acknowledgement on the part of *all* stakeholders *and* a concerted collaborative effort, to design and deliver strategies capable of both stabilizing neighborhoods and promoting economic mobility for the vast majority of poor families that are not included in the Memphis HOPE solution. That’s what “going public” with the story was all about, and local reaction is mobilizing us in the right direction.

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