

American Opportunity - or its 'Murder'

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May I begin by thanking the *Atlantic Monthly* for publishing an article that has provoked - through its mixture of sensible analysis and misleading rhetoric - a dialogue about what affordable rental housing policies should be in the United States.

Rarely do the complicated subjects of housing, poverty, race, public policies, research, and crime come up in a way that seriously and sensibly wrestles with all of them. The author has helped by calling attention to this complex of issues – although in a way that reinforces many American's biased views about public housing at the same time that it raises critical issues and policy problems.

However in its simplified, condensed and now blogged message about black criminals dispersed by bad housing programs, it is approximate slander against tens of thousands of poor and working poor families living in thousand of public housing authorities across this country. Hanna Rosin, in her story "American Murder", provides us a gripping tale of black criminals, bad public policies, and valiant police trying to fight off "animals" dispersed by a 1990s era federal housing programs. Not quite good cops versus bad public policy but close enough for her analysis to mislead readers.

She begins, early on in her story, to draw an emotion laden portrait of the issues she is wrestling with and uses an interview with a local police lieutenant to highlight what he and she believe to be the crux of the problem in Memphis. This police officer says: "I'm like a zookeeper now" (after an apparent rise in local crime). I hold the key, and my job right now is to protect the people from all the animals." It is local police who have suggested to her, as they tell her on page 42, that they know the central cause of the spread of crime in their city has been the demotion of public housing projects in the inner city and the dispersal of the families who used to live there into surrounding, previously peaceful neighborhoods. These are the animals the police are protecting "the people" from. The problem is not poverty, poor police practices, inadequate city funding, a crumbling rental housing market in the city, a weak labor market, or even gangs and drugs. The culprit she selects is federal housing policies.

Through the limited prism through which she views the world, *American Murder* is then a well-written, frightening, and misleading story. The core of my reply to her is not to defend all of the programs she lists but rather to point to some of the ways in which the programs and research she partially describes and distorts are part of helping solve the problems faced in Memphis. Some examples of where it misleads the reader follow:

- Central to Ms. Rosin's article is her causal, indeed casual, assertion that every family that moved out of public housing in Memphis is potentially a criminal.

They all get painted with her accusatory brush. It is, though, a long distance to go from showing dots on a map of Section 8 vouchers and crime to concluding that first caused the second. There are simply too many reasons why people commit violent, property, or drug related crimes that have nothing to do with the fact that they have received a Section 8 voucher or moved out of a public housing project. Thousands of public housing residents move out of their projects annually and there is no evidence that they, like a plague, carry crime with them.

- Comments from a Memphis resident, posted after her article appeared, also suggest – but do not prove – that the communities she alleges were previously peaceful were not in fact. This commentator writes: “I do have to take exception to the notion that North Memphis or Frayser were little slices of heaven as late as 2000. It may be worse now, but it was pretty rough in those areas before. Plus, equating the Rhodes area with Frayser is a stretch in anyone’s book...well, except in this article.(City-Data.com.)
- Should she not have told us of evidence or cases showing that former public housing tenants have been shown, say in court, to have caused specific crimes? The one map she shows is not the necessary smoking gun. The heart of her American Murder Mystery is, then, left mysteriously vague and once again misleading. A contrary case could be made, if she wished, that the majority of public housing residents are just like everyone else -- law abiding and more likely to become a victim of crime than a perpetrator.
- Much of the fear her story generates are the fears of police officers who have created in their minds a certified set of perpetrators. It is the police officers she cites who believe that the families relocated out of demolished projects are the culprits. These families are guiltily of turning the home of Elvis into, as she says, ‘the South Bronx’. (“But why has Elvis’s hometown turned into America’s new South Bronx” p. 42).
- Using simulation evidence from one researcher, that suggests that if too many of these families move into a neighborhood it will “tip”, is not the same thing as a well-proven iron clad rule. There are exceptions to any ‘rule’ of tipping and flight in part because local residents and city officials can intervene to slow or reverse the changes within their neighborhood. There are a host of reasons why neighborhoods change, for better or worse and no single factor – like the arrival of black Section 8 families - can shape their future. Scaring readers with the thought that black families are using Section 8 rental vouchers to invade and irreparably harm their neighborhoods is a core reason why Ms. Rosin’s article is flawed and ultimately harmful for solving the problems she addresses.
- One of the federal programs she discusses that was part of what she terms a ‘grand experiment’ is called the Moving to Opportunity Demonstration (MTO) that I helped design and manage for its first years. It was designed to do two things. First, Congress and the administration of former HUD Secretary Jack Kemp created the demonstration to learn whether it was possible to encourage and counsel volunteer public housing families to move to neighborhoods whose main characteristic is that only ten percent or less of the residents living there were poor. This small, five-city research focused demonstration was aimed at learning

whether and how the dispersal of these families could be managed by local housing authorities and non-profit counseling agencies.

- MTO has helped us learn how to do housing mobility counseling better. This MTO program plus its successor, the Regional Opportunity Counseling Program (ROC), were efforts to help public housing authorities to offer exactly the advice and help which many families in Memphis seem not to have been provided. These programs were part of, not a grand experiment, but the first serious effort on the part of HUD in decades to learn how to undo the harmful effects of lumping so many poor families into projects.
- MTO was also, second, designed as a research project aimed at learning whether Gautreaux researchers had got it right. What we have learned is that they did not. They missed that fact that, as MTO has shown us, it can reduce the mental and physical health problems of the families who moved. It shows us that families benefited in their first years in ways *they* thought most important for their lives – they wanted safety and security for themselves and their children and MTO offered that.
- There is further research underway now to see if improvements in educational and labor market outcomes have occurred. In some, but not all MTO cities, there have been improvements in labor force engagement and in reading scores of children that perhaps may be repeated in their other cities when the final research is completed. MTO then so far teaches us that it takes time for families from very distressed communities to begin to unwind from the stress disorders of ghetto life and to begin making use of all the resources around them.
- Ms Rosin's article also misleads readers with the expectation that what planners had set out to find out was that the poor families who moved using vouchers would become middle class. She remarks: "If replacing housing projects with vouchers had achieved its main goal – infusing the poor with middle-class habits - then higher crime rates might be a price worth paying. " This was not MTO's goal since we knew – as decades of research has shown - that becoming stably middle class requires a good education, good paying careers, an absence of discrimination, a thriving mortgage and home ownership market, and a thriving economy. MTO was never seen by any of us in government as a magic-wand portal into the middle class. It was not intended to be the silver bullet for all of the accumulated weight of life-long, concentrated poverty.
- MTO has shown us another important lesson about lives in deeply poor public housing projects. Although Ms Rosin mentions some nostalgia among former project residents for 'egg rolling' contests, those who moved through the MTO had virtually no desire to return unless it was to see immediate family. There was no "community" for them back there when crime, drugs, gangs and guns stamped out all semblance of normal civil society. This conservative yearning was also not shared by the city officials who saw in Hope VI grants a chance to replace decade's old buildings in poor condition with something better or for those families frightened of their surroundings and neighbors.
- MTO has then become a crucial tool for learning how poor families' lives may change through changing the way that housing programs are run in this country – an aim I believe Ms. Rosin supports. It was intended as one means to learn how to

undue the cruel punishment of having to live in deep racially isolated poverty in buildings that were deteriorating, surrounded by crime in vastly higher amounts than appeared outside of the projects. Certainly some of the project residents were committing crimes and were part of gangs. MTO included the screening-out of those with prior criminal histories as a central part of the process of learning how to manage housing mobility programs better.

- In the many decades after the city of Memphis and thousand of other cities helped build racially segregated public housing in the inner city, virtually nothing had been done except to regularly reduce the funding needed to maintain projects in livable condition. It was the 1990s-era policy planners that Ms. Rosin disparages who attempted to change those concentrations of poor tenants into something less terrifying and harmful for its residents and for its cities. They may have focused too exclusively on the lives of those families rather than upon the lives of the neighbors whom they would soon be living with but they carefully funded enough research for us to know that Hanna Rosin's portrait of Hope VI projects and families in Memphis is not replicated in every other Hope VI city.
- The housing planners did not succeed perfectly; no one thought they would given how little HUD knew in 1990 about rebuilding and changing lives. But these were the first major efforts since urban federal programs began, many decades before, to demolish and rebuild projects that were in deteriorated condition and to learn how to do housing mobility counseling better. Few of us would claim that the demolitions and relocations have been implemented by local housing authorities, like the one in Memphis, perfectly – few things involving the poor are ever funded to allow such a luxury. We can indeed do better – she is right.

What Ms. Rosin's article achieved is raising questions about how future housing programs can be better managed so that there is care for both the families who are moving outwards and the neighborhoods into which they might move. But in her stereotyped view of housing policy, blowing up public housing projects has meant sending criminals and their relatives into previously peaceful and safer communities risking tipping these neighborhoods into a never ending spiral of decay. Race, tipping, and bad government planners become her black beasts. Reading her article it is easy to conclude that it would have been far better to leave well enough alone and allow those segregated, deteriorated projects to remain in place so that crime could be better bottled up and managed through police mapping and targeting. She is absolutely correct though that: "Crossing your fingers and praying for self sufficiency is foolish." We can all do much better in both analyzing the huge, intractable urban problems we face and in creating new, improved policies.