Memphis Murder Mystery? No, Just Mistaken Identity

A group of the nation's leading scholars and experts on housing and urban policy* respond to The Atlantic's "American Murder Mystery"

By XAVIER DE SOUZA BRIGGS AND PETER DREIER

When it comes to long-avoided social problems, one can always take the perspective of a former celebrity long out of the limelight: Any attention, even the most sensational, is better than none at all. It's especially tempting, in an election year, to be grateful when a deliberately provocative story by a talented journalist draws attention to something as out of the limelight as inner-city poverty or low-income housing policy. But when that story sensationalizes some facts, misstates others, skews the views of policy experts to fit a narrow storyline, and confuses the public policies it means to address—as Hanna Rosin's recent article, "American Murder Mystery" (The Atlantic, July/August 2008) does—it reinforces misleading stereotypes rather than contributes to a much-needed dialogue. This is part investigative reporting, part misleading caricature.

Rosin paints a lurid, stark picture, using Memphis as a case study, to indict a number of national efforts begun in the early 1990s to tackle the thorny problem of geographically concentrated "ghetto" poverty. Rosin chooses to focus on two major federal housing programs, both of which use federal funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and are implemented by local agencies. One of them—still known as "Section 8," though its official name is the Housing Choice Voucher Program—was launched in the Nixon administration. Section 8 gives low-income families housing vouchers so they can rent apartments in the private market and perhaps escape some of America's poorest and most dangerous neighborhoods. Nationwide, there are currently about two million families with housing vouchers.

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Another program, called HOPE VI, has provided local public housing agencies in about 200 cities with funds to tear down some old, badly deteriorated public housing developments and replace them with newly constructed “mixed-income” developments. The latter become home to both professionals and low-income families. In total, roughly 150,000 units out of the nation’s stock of roughly 1.2 million public housing units were slated for demolition and replacement with about 50,000 units in order to create livable, mixed-income development.

HOPE VI’s track record—on displacement and other measures—varies widely from city to city. In some projects, almost everyone who was displaced by the bulldozer eventually returned to live in the renovated mixed-income developments. Elsewhere, less than 5 percent came back. Susan Popkin of the Urban Institute estimates that overall, about 30 percent of tenants in HOPE VI projects have moved back so far. Some who moved elsewhere found housing that satisfied them, especially those who were given Section 8 vouchers to help them pay the rent. A study of 49,000 displaced public housing residents by the General Accounting Office found that about 50 percent moved to other public housing, about 30 percent moved with vouchers, and the rest were either evicted for lease violations or relocated on their own, i.e. without assistance (some had earned more income and were no longer eligible to receive assistance).

In general, families with rent vouchers, but especially those displaced from public housing as a result of HOPE VI redevelopment, tended to move to dramatically safer neighborhoods, with much lower crime rates and correspondingly lower levels of resident fear and anxiety. Few relocatees moved to solidly middle-income enclaves, but most found apartments in areas with somewhat less poverty.

Rosin’s major point is that these two quite dissimilar efforts to address the problems in urban ghettos backfired because the poor brought their problems with them, including violent crime. She treats a spike in murder as an unintended consequence of policy reform. She asserts, without much evidence, that a veritable tidal wave of low-income families has destabilized once-safe neighborhoods. Gangs and their drug dealing and violence apparently “migrated” as a direct result of Hope VI and Section 8—as part of what she calls a grand “anti-poverty experiment.” Complex and mixed crime trends in other cities are quickly thrown in to help make the case. For example, Rosin links the reduction of crime in New York City to its rising rents, forcing poor families, using Section 8 vouchers, to move to New Jersey’s cities and suburbs, where crime is growing. In fact, fewer than 240 families have used vouchers to move from New York City to New Jersey.

The “mystery” of a spike in murder rates, particularly in Memphis and other mid-sized cities where police chiefs and citizens are alarmed, is not so mysterious, according to Rosin, when one follows the trail of misguided housing policy. She blames Henry Cisneros, Clinton’s first HUD Secretary, and other naive liberal reformers for failing to anticipate what she misleadingly claims are the severe negative consequences of these policies.

But Rosin gets key facts wrong and uses others in misleading ways. She provides no evidence that the low-income families who moved to neighborhoods outside the traditional ghetto contributed significantly

to the growth of poverty in those areas, let alone that they were responsible for the uptick in crime. She briefly acknowledges, but fails to explore, the other factors that have contributed to an increase in murders, other violent crimes, and neighborhood instability in Memphis and other American cities—leaving the reader inappropriately confident in her ghetto-migration hypothesis about the crime increase. Though Rosin has stated, in subsequent media appearances, that her intention was to help "start a conversation," the article leads—from the title down—with an exaggerated and circumstantial case.

Lt. Barnes at the Memphis Zoo

Rosin leads her story with the observations of one Memphis police officer, Lt. Doug Barnes, who sets the tone for the article. He reports that certain neighborhoods—which Rosin calls "suburban" but are actually within the Memphis city limits—used to be quite peaceful until the displaced families, gang members and violence moved in. This is asserted despite a long history from the early 1990s of high levels of crime in Memphis. It had high levels of crime long before the current spike.

She then reports Barnes' view of working in this largely African-American area. Barnes tells Rosin that "my job right now is to protect the people from all the animals." The "animals," we easily infer, are the drug dealers and other criminals, who the article confounds with former residents of public housing. Without providing any proof that the former residents of Memphis' public housing projects are responsible for the rise in crimes, the article uses this racist code language to stigmatize both the tenants and the programs. It is not guilt by association but by mere proximity.

Ghetto Poverty and Its Discontents

So has Rosin really found the answer to the "murder mystery," as she claims? How did we get here as a nation?

In the first Clinton administration, reformers did make serious, though relatively small-scale, efforts to address ghetto poverty and the ways in which the nation's housing policies had concentrated that poverty in dangerous and neglected racial ghettos. This was a response to increased attention, in the media as well as scholarly research, to a persistently poor "urban underclass." The idea was to do something about the fact that policies meant to help the poor had effectively isolated them instead. The other major aim was to learn, through careful research, how to do a better job of offering the inner-city poor more choices than life in "the projects."

But broader market forces and policy changes figure in the picture as well. In the late 1990s, poverty in the U.S. declined, due in large measure to a strong economy, with relatively full employment and the first wage increases on the bottom in roughly a generation, and a few specific policies—most notably an

expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit, a wage supplement for the working poor. As a result, the number of Americans living below the poverty line declined from 38 million (14.8 percent of the population) in 1992 to 31.6 million (11.3 percent) by 2000. By 2005, however, that number had grown to 36.9 million (12.6 percent), thanks to a "jobless" economy recovery, widening inequality in wages and wealth, and the Bush administration's shredding of an already fragile social safety net.

In the U.S., more than in other democratic countries, poor people are often concentrated in neighborhoods with other poor people. In particular, low-income African Americans and Latinos—who face the additional burden of racial discrimination by landlords, real estate agents, and banks—are more likely than low-income whites to live in high-poverty areas.

In 1990, about 17 percent of the poor in the nation's 100 largest metropolitan areas lived in very high-poverty census tracts—those where at least 40 percent of the residents are poor. Another 14 percent of the poor lived in moderately high-poverty census tracts—where between 20 percent and 40 percent of residents are poor. These are typically referred to as "ghettos," and they are, in almost all cases and by a large margin, majority-minority areas in terms of racial make-up. Most people who live in ghettos are not poor, but most of them are just a notch above poverty. People living in the high-poverty areas, the vast majority of whom work hard and play by the rules, face the nation's most dangerous streets, the worst schools, and the poorest parks and other amenities, on average, in our society.

During the 1990s, as overall poverty declined, the proportion of the poor in the 100 largest metro areas living in very high (40 percent+) poverty areas declined to 12 percent, while the proportion of the poor living in moderately high (20 to 40 percent) poverty areas remained the same, at 14 percent. Combined, the proportion of the poor living in ghettoes dropped from 31 percent to 26 percent—from 7.1 million to 6.7 million poor people. In Memphis, the number of people living in high-poverty neighborhoods (those with more than 40 percent poverty) dropped to 68,987 in 2000, down from 127,030 in 1990, while, as Rosin reported, the number of people living in neighborhoods where 20 to 40 percent are poor increased to 227,468, up from 148,631.

Nationwide, poverty concentration in high-poverty neighborhoods dropped both because some poor people stayed put as their incomes rose (making them no longer poor) and because some poor people moved to other neighborhoods. Though no estimates are available to indicate how much of the decline owes to one factor versus the other, Rosin's comment about "tens of thousands" of poor people migrating from inner-city ghettos skips that distinction entirely.

But more important, this "deconcentration" of poverty was not, as Rosin implies, the accomplishment of low-income housing policy, which affects a small share of all households. It had much more to do with

market forces—a strong job market and gentrification of urban neighborhoods—as well as income transfers, from the EITC most important, to the working poor.

During the 1990s, many poor people left the worst ghettos. Most ended up living in areas that were only somewhat better, although hardly stable middle-class neighborhoods. Some of the poor who left the worst urban ghettoes moved to suburban areas, typically to older neighborhoods adjacent to inner city areas, often referred to as the "inner suburbs." Since the 1970s, in fact, the number and proportion of poor Americans living in suburbs has grown dramatically. In 1970, 5.2 million poor people—20.5 percent of the nation's 25.4 million poor—lived in suburbs. But by 2000, 11.4 million poor people—36 percent of the nation's 31.6 million poor—were suburbanites. And that growth has continued in the current decade. By 2003, 13.8 million poor Americans—38.5 percent of all 35.8 million poor people—lived in suburbia, but typically in neighborhoods that were only somewhat better off than the urban areas they'd left behind. (The poverty rate also increased modestly in the Memphis suburbs, from 9.9 percent to 11.2 percent, between 2000 and 2005.) Meanwhile, crime dropped in most cities and rose in some suburban areas, thanks to new stresses.

Why was housing policy a small factor in the decline of extreme poverty concentration? Because the programs designed to dismantle public housing projects and promote "mobility" out of ghettoes involved a small proportion of the poor—across the country and in Memphis—and because, again, much larger forces drove the pattern. During the 1970s and 1980s, for example, as America shed industrial jobs and neighborhoods that had been home to high-wage union workers were hardest hit, the number of high poverty neighborhoods and the number of people living in these neighborhoods grew dramatically. The 1990s saw a partial reversal of that trend, as suburbs became more economically diverse and many urban neighborhoods got safer and gentrified. But the main point is that that deconcentration wasn't "accomplished" by reforms in low-income housing.

An Exaggerated View of Housing Subsidies and Their Impact

Contrary to the portrait in Rosin's article, very few of the "migratory" poor had any government subsidies to help them pay the rent, because federal housing programs provide subsidies for very few poor people. Only one-quarter of all eligible low-income households in America get any federal housing subsidy—a housing voucher or an apartment in a subsidized building. In the U.S., housing subsidy for the poor is a lottery, not an entitlement. The 2 million poor and near-poor families who get Section 8 vouchers constitute a fraction of the nation's poor.

Most poor families are forced to find apartments in the private rental marketplace or double up with other families. In almost every region in the country, but especially in economically healthy metro areas, rents have been rising much faster than incomes, especially for the poor. Not surprisingly, the proportion of

household income that the poor pay for rent has been spiraling. In 2006, 35 percent of all American households, and 55 percent of those on the bottom half of the income ladder, paid over 30 percent of their income for housing, according to the State of the Nation's Housing report released in June by Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies.

Beyond confusing relocation by the poor with relatively small-scale housing reforms, Rosin exaggerates the potential threat that these programs pose for "good" neighborhoods.

Both the Section 8 voucher program and the HOPE VI program to raze distressed public housing projects serve to "deconcentrate" the poor out of the worst ghetto areas. But do they result in higher crime rates in the new neighborhoods to which clients of these programs move? Rosin thinks they do, but she provides absolutely no evidence to demonstrate that she's correct. She offers a few anecdotes of violent crimes and gang activity in Memphis neighborhoods outside the inner city. She has no proof that any of those crimes were committed by individuals, including gang members, who live in apartments with Section 8 subsidies.

She cites no court records, for example, showing that the people who perpetrated their crimes paid their rent in private apartments with Section 8 vouchers. If there are, say, 10 families with Section 8 vouchers in a 100-unit building, can we attribute any violent crimes in or near that building to someone in one of those families with rent subsidies? Of course not. All Rosin offers are the fears—some would say stereotypes—of police officers who believe that the families relocated out of demolished housing projects are the culprits.

Of course, some of the criminals may well live in subsidized, low-income housing, and distressed public housing projects are particularly infamous as drug selling hot spots used by dealers. But there's no evidence that former residents of public housing are responsible for Memphis' spike in violent crime. Moreover, criminologists know that a sizable proportion of all violent crimes are committed by a very small number of people. Even in the poorest neighborhoods, a few people commit multiple crimes, preying on the rest of the population.

In fact, crime has been shifting to areas outside the worst ghetto neighborhoods for many years—since long before HUD began dismantling some public housing projects under HOPE VI. And tighter housing laws, including "zero tolerance" policies promoted in the 1990s by both the Clinton Administration and the then-Republican-controlled Congress, compelled many housing agencies to evict tenants linked, even by association—a boyfriend, say, or a sibling—to drug dealing and other crime. Memphis may or may not be enforcing these rules effectively—a question Rosin might have pursued but didn't—but the point is that tenants on government housing assistance are even more at risk of eviction, if they misbehave, than poor tenants generally. They also risk losing vital assistance altogether.

The confusion continues where Rosin conflates the demolition and redevelopment of public housing, the use of rental housing vouchers to let former public housing residents relocate to new neighborhoods, and several small-scale initiatives, such as the Moving to Opportunity experiment, to counsel families and help them move to neighborhoods of "opportunity." Those efforts get trashed in the article, though they have no precedent in the Memphis experience.

For starters, Rosin focuses much of her article on the demolition of public housing. But much of this demolition, in Memphis and other cities, did not reflect a liberal do-gooder program to fight poverty. In fact, it was a Republican-led Congress that required, in 1996, that the largest and most distressed public-housing developments—those that failed a mandated "viability" inspection—be demolished rather than repaired. The Clinton administration supported this move. (Consider that the national backlog of needed repairs at the time was estimated by HUD to be at least $24 billion in 1998. So far Congress has only provided about $6 billion for the HOPE VI program.)

That policy, and not HOPE VI, not some "grand anti-poverty experiment," as Rosin claims, is what led to most of the demolition in Memphis. It wasn't a liberal reformer's pipe dream but a fiscal push, from the federal level, to tear down crime-ridden, decrepit projects and re-allocate funds to the much more flexible, lower-cost housing voucher program.

Furthermore, it's true that living alongside higher-income neighbors was not conceived as a cure-all for poverty. But mixed-income developments are dramatically safer than the distressed public housing they replaced. All in all, surveys show, mixed-income developments are popular with the few former public-housing residents who live in them, although they want—and at the most innovative sites do receive—more supportive services, as well as opportunities to socialize with neighbors, share recreational facilities, and make the environment welcoming for all, regardless of income level.

But Rosin uses the image from one HOPE VI site in Memphis to characterize a program operating in many cities. It's misleading and unfair, though the challenges she identifies are important. There is evidence, for example, from tenant-review Web sites, in-depth interviews with tenants, and other sources, that property management is much more effective at some mixed-income developments than others, also that relations can be tense between tenants on housing assistance and their higher-income neighbors in some mixed-income developments. These issues deserve close attention and follow-up.

As for the Section 8 voucher program, in 1974, under Nixon, HUD stopped financing large-scale public housing "projects" and focused instead on providing very low-income families with housing vouchers, similar to food stamps, which enabled families to rent apartments in the private market. The new laws also authorized a small number of units for housing for the elderly and for new construction and

management by private developers. Waiting lists for Section 8 are often years long, especially in tight housing markets, when the lists are open at all. Funding cuts have led to many closings. And those are precisely the regions where much economic growth is concentrated in America.

What is more, in many places, landlords, especially those with apartments in middle-class areas, routinely refuse to accept families with Section 8 vouchers. A few states ban discrimination on the basis of "source of income," but these laws are hard to enforce, in part because the violations are hard to detect or go unreported by frustrated tenants. Plus, HUD puts a ceiling on voucher payments, which leaves many decent apartments, especially in high-cost markets, out of reach for voucher holders.

In spite of its limitations, the housing voucher program has been very successful at fulfilling its main objective: making housing affordable for very low-income people. Families that otherwise pay between one-half and three-quarters of their income, on average, to meet housing costs pay just the program standard—30 percent of household income—leaving money to buy food, transportation, clothing, healthcare, and other essentials.

As a result, the program reduces homelessness, exposure to domestic violence, and housing instability, which in turn spares costly-to-run shelters, crisis services, hospital emergency rooms, and other systems. Though the Bush administration has consistently proposed deep cuts in the program even as housing costs climbed around the country, the Section 8 housing voucher program has enjoyed steady, bipartisan support, and rates well in federal audits in terms of overall program performance versus expenditure. Many families who receive a voucher use it to help the pay the rent in the unit they are currently living in. They "lease in place" and rarely move.

But the voucher program has been less successful at two things: helping families find an apartment when apartment vacancies are low (that is, in tight markets), and helping very low-income families move to predominantly middle-class areas.

Because many communities, especially in the suburbs, refuse to permit construction of apartments, rents in those communities are often above the program caps mandated by Congress, and because many landlords, as we noted above, refuse to rent to low-income families, the recipients of housing vouchers cluster somewhat where there are vacant and affordable apartments—and cluster more extremely in some cities.

As research shows and Rosin acknowledges, this clustering is typically in moderately poor and relatively segregated neighborhoods—neighborhoods not far from the high-poverty ghettoes. Despite this, there is, on the whole, relatively little concentration of voucher holders within a given neighborhood (census

tract). According to HUD research, in the central cities of the 50 largest metro areas in 2000, Section 8 voucher holders comprised 10 percent or more of all households in only 5 percent of the census tracts. That is, in only 1 in 20 neighborhoods do voucher holders make up even 1 in 10 of the households. More recent research indicates, however, that in some cities, vouchers cluster in certain “hot spots” and may add to neighborhood distress. Rosin is right that the vulnerability of these receiving neighborhoods, as well as the concerns of their residents, are issues that local housing programs should take seriously and address carefully. This may not have happened in Memphis.

Still, most of the people living in these neighborhoods, even areas becoming poorer, do not live in subsidized housing. Moreover, researchers at The Urban Institute have found no evidence that families who left HOPE VI public housing projects were “clustered” in high-poverty areas.

Revisiting the Facts on the Ground: Memphis

Notwithstanding valid concerns about the dispersal of poor families, the facts on the ground regarding both the HOPE VI and the Section 8 programs in Memphis belie Rosin’s murder mystery scenario.

In 1990, Memphis was a city of 618,652. The city’s poverty rate was 22.9 percent—139,767 people lived below poverty. By 2000, Memphis had grown to 650,100. Along with the rest of the nation, its poverty rate had declined—to 20.6 percent—or 133,920 people. By 2005, however, while the city’s population fell to 642,251, its poverty rate spiked to 23.6 percent—or 151,571 people. While the overall number of poor people increased by about 12 percent, the number of poor adolescents (12-17) increased by about 45 percent.

If one is looking for a prime suspect for rising crime rates, there it is. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of violent crimes (murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) increased slightly, from 9,085 to 9,610. By 2005, while the city population was falling, the number of violent crimes increased sharply—to 12,629.

Over the entire period, from 1990 to 2005, the number of very low-income Memphis residents living in subsidized housing remained roughly the same. As public-housing projects were torn down, Memphis allocated a roughly equal number of Section 8 vouchers to its poor families, although not all the displaced families got a voucher.

Rosin fails to address the dramatic increase in the overall number of violent crimes during a period when the number of people living in subsidized housing remained roughly the same. Instead, she is mainly concerned with an alleged geographic shift in the location of violent crimes. But there are many reasons why crime may relocate, including police practices.

Police departments routinely focus their attention on crime “hot spots,” including gang activities. The criminals don’t stay put but move to other areas of the city. Police then shift their focus to the new “hot spot,” leading gangbangers and others to seek new areas. Too often, crime doesn’t go down. It just moves around. Except that in Memphis’ case, it went up and it moved around. Clearly, the Memphis Police Department was struggling to keep up as Memphis became one of the nation’s most violent cities. But why blame the Section 8 and HOPE VI program for the problem, when they operate in many other cities that have not experienced an uptick in crime?

The reporting is sloppy as well. Early in her article, Rosin states that between 1997 and 2006, “tens of thousands” of formerly public housing residents were dispersed “into the wider metro community” of Memphis as a result of the razing of public housing projects. Later, she claims that “the number of people displaced from public housing” was “well over 20,000.” The reality is that during that period, about 5,000 (out of abut 7,000) units of Memphis’ public housing stock were torn down—again, only some of them through HUD’s HOPE VI program. At least one-quarter of those units were already vacant. So, at most, 4,000 public housing families were displaced by the bulldozer. Even if the average public housing household had four persons—a figure considered high by public housing standards—the number of people who lost their homes would total 16,000—not “well over” 20,000. And a small share of those families returned to live in the same neighborhoods after their developments were redeveloped as mixed-income housing.

Over the same decade, Memphis gained some 3,077 Section 8 housing vouchers, most of them targeted to the public housing tenants who lost their homes and moved elsewhere. In 2007, 5,144 families—some of them former public housing residents—lived in apartments using Section 8 housing vouchers. This is a small number in a city of 642,000 people.

Where do the families with Section 8 vouchers live? For cost and other reasons, a small share live outside the Memphis city limits. Rosin’s notion that Section 8 families were bringing a crime wave to once-bucolic suburban neighborhoods is simply baseless.

There is some evidence that most Memphis families with Section 8 vouchers, including those displaced from public housing, moved to areas that were already on the decline, with rising crime rates, caused by private disinvestment and the exodus of middle income families to Memphis’ suburbs. Comments by a Memphis resident, posted after Rosin’s article appeared, challenge her notion that these areas were peaceful prior to the alleged influx of Section 8 families. “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.”

The most casual and unfortunate part of Rosin's analysis of crime and public housing relocation is her assertion that there must be a direct causal link somehow mirrored in the maps she discusses and shows, between a federal program and the patterns of crime in one city. She indicts a program, without any hint of direct or clear evidence, using the simple version of an ongoing mapping project by two University of Memphis researchers. Basic statistics textbooks tell us: correlation is not causality. Such guilt by association is suggestive but irresponsible without better evidence. Similar claims have been made in other cities and been debunked after careful examination of the facts.

Moving to Opportunity

Finally, Rosin dismisses a small-scale but important federal demonstration program—Moving to Opportunity (MTO)—that did not operate in Memphis, seemingly to question the wisdom of the poverty deconcentration "theory" itself.

The MTO concept was hatched during the George H. W. Bush administration and implemented by the Clinton administration. The goal was to test whether the then two-decade old Section 8 voucher program could be made more effective in deconcentrating the poverty in public housing. Starting in 1994, HUD launched this voluntary program in five big cities—Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York—to help about 4,600 families who were living in dangerous, distressed public housing relocate to low-poverty neighborhoods. Out of more than one million families living in public housing, fewer than 1,900 families were assigned, via MTO, to make the "experimental" moves to low-poverty neighborhoods (for purposes of comparison, the other 2,700 were randomly assigned to receive a different program "treatment").

The purpose of this demonstration was to learn if these families could find apartments in low poverty neighborhoods (areas less than 10 percent poor as of the 1990 census), if they could then manage to stay living in them, and if they would benefit in a variety of ways from these new neighborhoods. The hope was that greater safety, better schools, and other advantages would help the poor improve their lives. MTO was modeled, as Rosin notes in her article, after the Gautreaux mobility program, a court-ordered and long-researched desegregation effort in greater Chicago. Gautreaux pointed to major benefits, especially for low-income black children who relocated to middle-class suburbs with strong schools, but the early evidence was largely suggestive.

The most important reason why MTO participants volunteered for the program was straightforward: they were afraid for their children and themselves because of the high crime in the inner city projects. So far, research has found that the MTO families who escaped high-poverty ghettos were thrilled at the safety and security they found, in new neighborhoods, for themselves and their kids. They also experienced

major reductions in stress and anxiety; their mental health improved, as did their physical health.

Not every family managed, however to stay in a low-poverty area. Rents went up, landlords sold their buildings, some neighbors harassed the newcomers, or they missed their families. Most, however, did not miss their former neighbors. They feared and avoided their former public housing developments, because those areas remained so threatening.

Most families, then, got out of the program what they hoped and asked for—safety. None of the employment and educational effects found in the Gautreaux program occurred in MTO, at least not yet—as research continues.

Why didn't MTO lead to the greater economic opportunities that its planners hoped it would provide? One important reason is that the metro areas where MTO was tried simply became too expensive. For the most part, the MTO renters with vouchers were priced out of the suburban middle-class neighborhoods with the excellent schools and greater job opportunities. Also, MTO was not designed to address the fact that about one-quarter of the families were headed by an adult unable to work because of disabling, chronic illness, while many more needed childcare and transportation that, likewise, were not in the package. Similar families appear in Rosin's article, and she is right: they need intensive services, not just a new address, both for their own sakes and for the sake of their neighbors.

Even so, the research about MTO families reveals that it contributed to a significant decline in depression and distress for women, as well as major declines in risky behavior for girls. These mental-health improvements are on a scale comparable to the effects of the most successful therapies offered. Surprise: Helping people move away from the constant threat of gun violence, and other "weathering" effects of life in stressful ghettos, can dramatically enhance their outlook and ability to cope with other challenges.

Meanwhile, boys who relocated do show modestly higher rates of involvement in property crime, on average, but there is some evidence that this reflects trips back to the old neighborhood—or other high-poverty areas where relatives and peers get the movers into trouble.

MTO is teaching government officials and researchers a great deal more about the need for a much bigger supply of rental housing that stays affordable, as well as how to develop better housing mobility counseling programs to guide families in choosing better communities for themselves, including better school districts. MTO did its main job—it has taught us how to design and implement such efforts more wisely, and beyond that, it has shown major benefits for families. Not the ones predicted but still very important ones, prized by the families themselves.

MTO was not intended to be a cure-all for poverty, but it illustrates what a modest relocation effort can accomplish when families receive counseling, search assistance and other supports to find a better neighborhood to live in. It can improve the quality of life of the poor significantly, even if it's not enough to help them escape poverty. What's more, with added supports and better targeting, MTO-type efforts could have broader benefits for thousands of additional low-income families.

How Not to Learn from Mistakes

Academics and policymakers have learned a great deal from both the mistakes and the successes of anti-poverty programs, including those focused on ghetto neighborhoods, since the 1960s.

We know, for example, that the best anti-poverty program is a good job. Full employment at living wages is the best solution to America's poverty quagmire. We also need to invest in education and job training, to raise the minimum wage at least to the poverty level, to expand the EITC so it reaches more families, and to provide low-income parents with the support they need to enter the job market, such as child care and health insurance. Redoubled efforts to fight crime in the most violent neighborhoods, and to protect those places, which tend to be poor racial ghettos, from an utterly disproportionate share of our society's environmental hazards, are vital too.

Back to escaping poverty: Those adults who have not been able to maintain regular employment, including some extremely disadvantaged families who found a foothold in public housing, need additional supports. Chronic mental and physical ailments keep them from functioning in the private housing market, let alone the job market.

Housing policy is a vital piece of the agenda for both groups, but now more than ever, we understand why it can't lift people out of poverty on its own. Section 8 vouchers, especially when tied to counseling for tenants and recruitment of landlords, can be an important tool to help families choose where they want to live and pay the rent, so long as there's an adequate supply of rental housing and so long as the relocation programs are run carefully alongside efforts to strengthen vulnerable or declining neighborhoods.

Where there is not adequate supply, public policy should promote the construction of mixed-income housing in both central cities and suburbs. We no longer build traditional public housing projects. If one excludes special units restricted to the elderly, we haven't done so in more than 30 years. Instead, we have a sophisticated industry of both private and nonprofit developers who have experience building well-designed, well-managed mixed-income housing, and there too, careful studies of HOPE VI and other programs point the way to stronger, more equitable efforts in the years to come.

Rosin heard these ideas when she interviewed a number of the nation's top housing researchers, but she chose to misconstrue what they said in order to produce the dramatic, but misleading, conclusion that low-income housing programs had the unintended consequence of driving up crime, including murder—all the way out in the once-healthy Memphis suburbs and city neighborhoods too. We have not claimed that this effect is impossible, only that she never presents adequate evidence for it.

The questions that Rosin fails to ask her in her article are the most fundamental ones. Why does the U.S. have the highest poverty rate among the world's affluent nations, and why is it far more segregated by race and income?

Despite America's vast wealth, no other major industrial nation has allowed the level of sheer destitution that exists in the U.S. Americans accept as "normal" levels of poverty and inequality—as well as homelessness, hunger, malnutrition and diseases, and geographic concentrations of same—that would cause national alarm in Canada, Western Europe or other wealthy regions.

Recently, the Center for American Progress, along with a number of community groups and former Senator John Edwards, announced an ambitious plan, "Half in Ten," to cut the nation's poverty rate in half in the next 10 years. If we are to launch such an effort, and do it smart, we need journalists to help explain what policies do and don't work and what it would really take to build public support. But by casting such a circumstantial case, Rosin's Atlantic article confuses more than it clarifies.

We've learned a great deal, over the past decade, about the role that low-income housing policy—the successes and failures alike—can play. It's a shame the sensationalized "murder mystery" didn't find a story there.