

## **Barbara Sard Response to Atlantic "Murder Mystery" article**

Contrary to Rosin's framing of what happened to low-income housing in Memphis in the last decade "as part of a nationwide experiment to free the poor from the destructive effects of concentrated poverty" there hasn't been such a "nationwide experiment," and the limited experiment in five cities (the "Moving to Opportunity" program) wasn't implemented in Memphis. Changes in Memphis, like in many other cities, were driven by uncoordinated federal policies and funding shortfalls, as well as by local decisions and larger economic forces. The bottom line is that Memphis needs more federal housing assistance not less, combined with policy changes and other services that will help poor families and communities prosper.

After decades of neglect, the demolition of 5,000 public housing units in Memphis — and about 170,000 nationally — was precipitated by a policy adopted in 1996 not by liberal visionaries but by the Republican-controlled Congress, requiring the end of funding for severely distressed projects. Displaced families were sometimes given housing vouchers, but typically even if they got vouchers they received no relocation assistance or services. Under a separate program called "HOPE VI," grants were awarded to "revitalize" some of these developments. Memphis received such grants for less than half the demolished units. Sufficient funds were never available to replace all the lost affordable housing units. In recent years, Congress has reduced annual funding for the HOPE VI program by more than 80 percent in response to Bush Administration proposals to eliminate the program and to the overall drive to cut domestic appropriations.

The bipartisan supporters of HOPE VI understood that it would take more than a new physical environment to help the severely disadvantaged families that lived in much of the worst public housing progress towards self-sufficiency. The program requires relocation plans and the provision of supportive services to displaced families. Unfortunately, however, the human side of HOPE VI has been its weakest component, due to the absence of strong federal oversight and poor local implementation in many sites.

Contrary to what many believe, most displaced families did *not* receive housing vouchers. Many were shifted to other public housing projects and excluded from returning to the rebuilt communities. (Nationally, only a third of the units demolished have been replaced by equally affordable housing units.) Only 149 of the 403 families displaced from Memphis' first HOPE VI site received housing vouchers, and only 97 still had vouchers in April 2000. Many localities failed to assist families that did receive vouchers to use them in better-off areas, with good schools and improved access to jobs. Nonetheless, multi-year research in five cities (not including Memphis) found that former residents of demolished developments who relocated using housing vouchers live in substantially better housing in neighborhoods where, by and large, they feel dramatically safer than they did in their public housing developments. Both parents and children report feeling less worried and anxious and children show fewer behavior problems.

It's not surprising that the demolition of large, distressed public housing projects, with high rates of crime (often perpetrated by non-residents) would cause a shift in criminal activity to other areas in the absence of preventive measures. Without the shelter of isolated developments

and vacant units to carry out drug deals etc., enterprising criminals are likely to move on. Rosin's article provides no evidence, however, that families receiving Section 8 housing vouchers *caused* the dispersal of crime. She presents not a single fact that a member of a voucher-assisted family was even arrested for a crime. She states that a few boys who had moved out of public housing "were suspected" of breaking windows. That's hardly a "murder mystery." Indeed, only about 3,000 more Memphis families receive Section 8 benefits than before the demolition. It's unlikely that such a small change in a city of 690,000 people could drive the apparent changing pattern of criminal activity.

Rosin's thesis is not new. Since the early '90s, critics have tied Section 8-assisted families to increases in crime in other cities. Careful investigations have refuted the claim, and collaborations between housing agencies and police departments have proven successful in dispelling myths. Indeed, program rules encourage the end of voucher assistance if a family member has engaged in criminal activity. Administrators in Memphis and other cities vigorously pursue reports of criminal activity and enforce these rules.

It is possible, as Rosin discusses, that an influx of poor families into a neighborhood — particularly one that is already declining due to other economic forces — could have a "tipping" effect, accelerating the rate of decline and a concomitant increase in crime. Unfortunately, little is known about such neighborhood dynamics. Could Section 8 movers create such a tipping effect, even if members of section 8 households are not committing crimes? It's possible, but most unlikely. Nationally, in less than 3 percent of the neighborhoods with any voucher-assisted residents do voucher families occupy 10 percent or more of the housing stock, and less than 1 percent of neighborhoods are impacted by voucher use in more than a quarter of occupied units.

In Memphis, like in many metropolitan areas, poverty rates have risen in recent years outside of the urban core. This may be due to (1) poor people moving, pushed out by rising rents and condominium conversions as cities have become more desirable places to live and possibly by the demolition of public housing, (2) economic changes in outlying neighborhoods, or (3) both. In Memphis, poverty not only spread, it grew. From 1997 - 2004, there was a 14 percent increase in the share of Memphis school children living in poor families, while the total number of children ages 5 -17 in the Memphis schools remained about the same. National poverty rates declined slightly during this same period.

Rosin provides no evidence that Section 8 vouchers are driving rather than following this trend of poverty dispersal, and I know of no such evidence from other cities. What is likely is that many voucher holders gravitated to familiar neighborhoods where landlords were most willing to accept their vouchers due to declining demand from market renters. Some may have lived in these neighborhoods before receiving voucher assistance, and chose to stay.

That said, the voucher program — as well as HOPE VI relocation efforts — could be more effective at helping families live in low-poverty neighborhoods and avoiding "clustering" of voucher holders in particular neighborhoods, especially those where the concentration of poor or minority families is increasing. The voucher program performs better on these measures than any other federal housing program, but such a relative measure is not good enough. Legislation

passed by the House and pending in the Senate would modify a range of policies in the voucher program to encourage agencies to help families move to real “opportunity” areas and facilitate such moves. Changes also are needed in the HOPE VI program if it is to realize its promise to give families mired in deep poverty the chance for a healthier life. The House has passed a HOPE VI bill that makes some but not all of these changes, but Congress is unlikely to finish the job this year.

Vouchers are very effective at their primary task: enabling poor families to have a decent affordable home, with more income available to meet other critical needs. If voucher subsidies counted as income — which they don’t under our official poverty measures — few voucher families would be “deeply” poor (that is, have incomes below 75 percent of an adjusted poverty line). Millions of poor families with children don’t have housing assistance and need it. Expanding as well as improving the voucher program — and providing additional assistance to families that need it to increase their earnings or address other life crises — should be on the agenda of the next Administration. Rosin’s misleading article should not deter such efforts.