

## Race and Public Housing: Revisiting the Federal Role

by Richard Rothstein

**R**esidential racial segregation, accompanied by social and economic hardship, burdens the learning of many urban children. But school reformers often express hope that, harsh though these obstacles may be, children in high-poverty, racially isolated neighborhoods could typically still be successful if only they had better teachers, more orderly schools and more hours of instruction.

To support this hope, advocates seek examples of disadvantaged children who succeeded, overcoming great socioeconomic handicaps. Some such cases exist, of course—there is a range of outcomes for any human condition—but the reality that some who grew up in “truly disadvantaged” neighborhoods (Wilson 1987, 2012) beat the odds does not mean that many can. Frequently-cited examples of such success usually turn out, upon examination, to be chimeras (Rothstein 2001, 2002).

A claim by U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, referring to former New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein, is one. Mr. Duncan said: “Klein knows, as I do, that great

teachers can transform a child's life chances—and that poverty is not destiny. It's a belief deeply rooted in his childhood, as a kid growing up in public housing in Queens... He understands that education is ...the force that lifts children from public housing projects to first-generation college students....” (Duncan 2010).

Our credulity about Duncan's well-intentioned observation reveals a shocking loss of collective memory about how public policy created and remains responsible for the hopeless segregated ghettos in which too many children live today.

True, Joel Klein grew up in public housing. But from the Depression into the early 1950s, faced with housing shortages compounded by a flood of returning war veterans, cities constructed public housing for white working- and middle-class families. These projects, for stable white families like Joel Klein's, became highly-prized treasures, the most desirable housing available, their lucky residents the object of envy. The projects were located in mostly all-white neighborhoods, and admitted only a token few black residents, if any.

### NYC's Subsidized Housing

Meanwhile, cities also built projects for low-income African Americans in ghetto neighborhoods, or sometimes

in neighborhoods to which planners wanted to relocate a ghetto. Unlike projects for middle-class whites who paid market rents that fully covered construction and operating costs, projects for low-income blacks were heavily subsidized with federal and sometimes state and local funds.

There were also privately-built and -owned developments that were subsidized by public land clearance and tax breaks—such as the whites-only Stuyvesant Town in New York City. These remain today as middle-class urban islands, but forgotten have been the truly public projects—built, owned and operated by government—for working- and middle-class whites. The Woodside Houses in Queens, New York, where Joel Klein lived as a boy, was one of these.

The New York City Housing Authority carefully screened applicants for projects like Woodside. Preference

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was given to war veterans. Only two-parent families were accepted, and applicants had to produce marriage licenses to prove their status. Investigators visited potential tenants to verify they had good furniture and housekeeping habits, and well-behaved children. Stable post-war employment records, good credit, no teenage pregnant daughters and no alcohol or drug problems were also required (Bloom 2008). Tenants typically had civil service jobs (like Klein's father, a postal worker) or worked in trades or manufacturing. Some were small business owners.

When the unsubsidized Woodside project opened in 1949, its tenants were 92% white. In the surrounding neighborhood was nary a black face. Across the borough in South Jamaica, the Authority built a project for low-income tenants: 30% white when it opened pre-war and down to 12% white by the mid-1950s. Citywide, the Authority respected applicants' preferences regarding which project they wished to occupy, guided by a rule established during the New Deal by Harold Ickes, head of the Public Works Administration: public projects could not alter neighborhood racial composition.

As applied by New York City, the rule ensured that few low-income whites would live in South Jamaica, and few middle-income blacks would live in Woodside. Housing Authority

board minutes explain that the South Jamaica project should house minorities because it was "located in a neighborhood having a preponderance of colored people" (Bloom 2008). The project had lower income limits than Woodside, and rental rates were subsidized with federal funds, but not all projects designed for African Americans were low-income: A project the Housing Authority built contemporaneously with Woodside, also designed for stable higher-income working families where rents covered the full

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### ***A shocking loss of collective memory.***

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housing cost, was the Colonial Park Houses in Harlem—it was 92% black, 7% Puerto Rican, and 1% white.

But as projects like Woodside filled up with middle-class whites, other federal policies lured these families out of projects into even whiter suburbs. These were the mortgage insurance programs of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the Veterans Administration (VA), from which black families were mostly excluded. In the 1950s, as single-family home construction accelerated, the housing shortage eased and white families took advantage of these guarantees to decamp from Woodside and similar projects for the suburbs. FHA- and VA-guaranteed mortgages were so favorable that monthly carrying charges were often less, for comparable rooms and square footage, than rents in the public projects.

Whether in the city or suburbs, the FHA required developers seeking its financing to include restrictive covenants in their homeowner deeds, prohibiting sales or re-sales to African Americans. For example, Levittown, a suburb just east of Queens, was built in 1947 with 17,500 mass-produced two-bedroom houses, requiring veterans to put nothing down and make monthly payments of only \$56. (Compare this to the \$75 unsubsidized charge in Woodside Houses for apartments of comparable size.) At the FHA's insistence, developer William

Levitt did not sell homes to blacks, and each deed included a prohibition of such re-sales in the future (TIME 1950; Jackson 1985).

Of 300 large private subdivisions built from 1935 to 1947 in New York's Queens, Nassau, and Westchester Counties, 83% had racially restrictive deeds, with preambles like, "Whereas the Federal Housing Administration requires that the existing mortgages on the said premises be subject and subordinated to the said [racial] restrictions ... [except for] domestic servants of a different race domiciled with an owner or tenant..." (Dean 1947).

As whites fled cities, public housing units were filled with lower-income African Americans. In 1968, New York City abandoned its middle-class public housing program, accepting federal subsidies for Woodside Houses and several other such projects. Long-term tenants with middle-class incomes who did not leave voluntarily were evicted. The Authority announced that it would abandon previous requirements of employment, stability and orderliness and would no longer consider "morals of the applicants." Many economically and socially distressed minority tenants, some with unruly teenagers, were funneled into once-middle-class projects. Changed population characteristics were accompanied by a deterioration in project upkeep. Students attending neighborhood schools now had drastically different, and greater, needs.

As public housing nationwide became racially identifiable and associated solely with poverty, public and media stereotypes of public housing changed. By 1973, President Richard Nixon could describe many public housing projects as "monstrous, depressing places—rundown, overcrowded, crime-ridden" (Nixon 1973).

These patterns were not unique to New York, but were repeated nationwide.

● **St. Louis:** In the 1960s, Pruitt-Igoe homes became a national symbol of dysfunctional public housing, high-rise towers packed with welfare-depen-

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in San Francisco by the regional planning association, Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG), also shows that the City did a good job meeting its very-low-income and market-rate housing needs between 1999 and 2006, but fell woefully short in meeting its housing needs for low- and moderate-income households—those earning between about 50% and 120% of AMI. In response to these obstacles, a proposed Housing Trust Fund, which has broad community, government, and business support, is being placed before the San Francisco voters in November 2012, which, if approved, will more than replace the lost redevelopment revenues. Also, the Mayor's Office of Housing has been exploring options to produce housing for low- to moderate-income households through various programs and funding modifications. Despite the quick response, however, it is evident that San Francisco will continue to need to be inventive and its housing advocates strong in order to meet the challenges ahead.

## New on PRRAC's Website

*Do Federally Assisted Households Have Access to High Performing Public Schools?* by Ingrid Gould Ellen & Keren Mertens Horn (a 50-state analysis of the location of family housing units in the four largest federally-assisted housing programs)

*An Early Assessment of Off-Site Replacement Housing, Relocation Planning and Housing Mobility Counseling in HUD's Choice Neighborhoods Initiative*, by Martha Galvez (is the Choice Neighborhoods program living up to its fair housing commitments?)

*"Why socio-economic integration alone is not enough – a statement on Fisher v. Texas"*

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San Francisco must continue to evolve its policy to fill in the gaps in its housing needs and find creative and substantial sources of funding to develop and maintain affordable housing in one of the nation's most expensive housing markets. By also ensuring that the needs of local residents are heard, San Francisco is demonstrating

that the early urban renewal and displacement days are gone and have been replaced with a vision of creating the housing, jobs and services required to maintain and build thriving, diverse and inclusive communities within the city. □

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dent families, many of which were headed by barely literate single parents. Youth gang activity became more frequent. A combination of deteriorating social conditions and public disinvestment made life in the projects so untenable that the federal government evicted all residents and dynamited the 33 towers in 1972.

But few knew another side of St. Louis history. When federal housing funds became available during the New Deal, St. Louis proposed to raze a racially integrated low-income neighborhood whose population was about ¾ white and ¼ black, to construct on that land a whites-only low-rise project for two-parent families with steady employment. When Washington objected, St. Louis proposed an additional blacks-only project removed from the white one, but also in a previously integrated area. This met the federal government's conditions, insisted upon by liberals and civil rights

leaders, for non-discriminatory funding. The segregated projects were opened in 1945 with preference for veterans. The white project remained predominantly so until the late 1950s, when most early residents had relocated to suburbs, many with FHA- and VA-guaranteed mortgages and restrictive covenants (Heathcott 2011).

● **Cleveland:** Public housing constructed during WW II was open only to white workers, at the insistence of the Ohio Congressional delegation. Towards the war's end, a few African

### ***Only two-parent families were accepted.***

Americans were admitted to previously white-only projects, in token compliance with nominal (but unenforced) federal non-discrimination policy. By 1945, black presence in Cleveland's four designated-for-whites projects ranged from 0.3% to 3% (Weaver 1948, 1967).

● **Detroit:** In 1941, the govern-

ment built the Ford Willow Run bomber plant in a previously undeveloped suburb without pre-existing racial housing patterns. The Federal Public Housing Agency then built housing for white workers only. Thus, the workforce necessarily was overwhelmingly white, in contrast to Ford's city operations. By 1944, as whites left public housing for FHA-subsidized single-family suburban homes, 3,000 Detroit public housing units were vacant, while black workers in desperate need of housing were barred from occupancy in the city as well as from employment opportunities in the suburbs (Weaver 1948, 1967).

As the post-war housing shortage eased, whites' opposition to public housing grew. In 1948-49, the Detroit City Council proposed 12 projects in white areas. The mayor vetoed them all; only housing in predominantly black areas was approved (Sugrue 1995).

● **Los Angeles:** Over 10,000 Af-  
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rican-American families migrated during WW II for work in shipyards, aircraft plants and other war industries that, desperately in need of labor, hired blacks for the first time. But little or no adequate housing was open to blacks. Public housing was built in

white neighborhoods, and the city's Housing Authority did not permit blacks to reside there. African Americans eligible for public housing remained homeless while units set aside for whites remained vacant. The Housing Authority chairman explained in 1943 that "the Authority selects its residents by following the previous racial

pattern of the neighborhoods in which [projects] are located" (California Eagle 1943).

But faced with a growing housing crisis and civil rights protests, the Los Angeles Housing Authority soon reversed itself and adopted a non-discrimination policy for all projects. It even adopted a lease clause that promised eviction for those who contributed to a disturbance based on "racial intolerance." The new policy was swiftly implemented, and by 1947 Los Angeles public housing was extensively integrated. But this was only temporary. As white tenants left the projects for homes in more solidly middle-class suburbs, blacks—for whom housing elsewhere was barred—disproportionately remained. Whereas in 1947 Los Angeles public housing tenants were 55% white and 30% black, by 1959, they were only 14% white and 65% black, with Mexican-origin tenants another 19%. Los Angeles public housing came to be perceived as "Negro housing," and whites began to protest the location of new projects in their neighborhoods. Public officials caved in, and projects initially designated for white areas were relocated to Watts. A project designated for Santa Monica, for example, was cancelled after such protests and relocated to Watts. Three new projects were built in Watts between 1953 and 1955 alone, turning Watts from an area where some blacks were already residing to an impoverished and racially isolated ghetto.

But best known in Los Angeles' public housing history was an attempt to build a racially integrated project in Chavez Ravine, northwest of downtown and far from Watts. By the end of 1951, land had been cleared and construction begun. But the City Council called an emergency meeting and cancelled the project. The California Supreme Court voided the cancellation, but the Council sponsored a 1952 referendum and voters overwhelmingly rejected the public housing. The city then sold the land that had been cleared to the Dodgers baseball team for its stadium (Sides 2003).

● **Boston:** In the late 1930s, the city razed a dilapidated, overcrowded

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and low-cost neighborhood, to replace it with public housing for white middle-class families. Slum dwellers whose homes were demolished could not afford to live in the new public units with their relatively high rents. When the first project, Old Harbor, was opened in 1938, median monthly rent of \$26 was only \$3 below the citywide median. In 1940, only 9% of project residents were unemployed, compared to 30% in the surrounding neighborhood who were either unemployed or on public work relief; neighborhood median rent was \$15. The project accepted families whose income was five times the citywide median rent (six times for families with three or more children). Another nearby development, the D Street Project, opened in 1949, mostly for veterans; tenants' median education level included some college, considerably higher than typical levels at the time.

As in New York, Boston disqualified prospective tenants for cohabitation, out-of-wedlock children, excessive drinking and unsanitary house-keeping. Inspectors entered prospective tenants' apartments without notice (or permission) to evaluate their household habits. Applicants had to provide references from previous landlords and prove stable employment histories. After WW II, veterans were given preference.

Also like New York, Boston assigned a token number of African Americans to Old Harbor and D Street, while maintaining other projects where few whites resided. But a 1962 discrimination complaint forced the city to assign additional black tenants to the middle-class projects. Initially, only middle-class families were assigned, but as more whites took advantage of FHA and VA subsidies to move, earlier residents were gradually replaced by much lower-income minorities.

D Street had initially accepted only two-parent families, but by 1960, there were 50% more adult females than males. It had opened with higher rents than those in the surrounding distressed area, but by 1970, rents were below those in any nearby community. Early

tenants had more than high school education, but by 1975 the median adult level was 10th grade (Vale 2002).

● **And Elsewhere:** Examples nationwide abound of how public housing was used by federal, state and local governments to create the segregated metropolitan areas we know today. In 1960, Savannah (Georgia) evicted all white residents from its Francis Bartow Place project, creating an all-black neighborhood where integration previously existed. The Housing Authority asserted that with national (and local) housing shortages abating, whites could easily find housing elsewhere and blacks needed the housing more. In Miami, where black tenants had been assigned to segregated projects while whites were given vouchers to subsidize private apartment rentals, it was not until 1998 that a legal settlement required that vouchers also be offered to blacks. The remedy was insufficient to undo the segregation that public policy had created and abetted.

In 1984, *The Dallas Morning News* investigated federally-funded projects in 47 cities, reporting that the nation's nearly 10 million public housing residents were still almost always segregated by race. The few remaining predominantly white projects had superior facilities, amenities, services and maintenance in comparison to predominantly black ones.

In 1976, the Supreme Court found that the Chicago Housing Authority, collaborating with federal agencies, had unconstitutionally selected sites to maintain segregation. Mayor Richard Daley had stated, in rejecting projects for predominantly white neighborhoods, that public housing should only go "where this kind of housing is most needed and accepted" (Polikoff 2006). President Richard Nixon told a news conference: "I believe that forced integration of the suburbs is not in the national interest," and then followed up with a formal policy pledging not to require any suburb to accept public housing over the suburb's protest (Nixon 1970). In the Chicago case, President Gerald Ford's Solicitor General Robert Bork stated the

## Thanks

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government's opposition to public housing in white communities: "There will be an enormous practical impact on innocent communities who have to bear the burden of the housing, who will have to house a plaintiff class from Chicago, which they wronged in no way" (Polikoff 2006). The federal government thus defined nondiscriminatory housing as punishment visited on innocent suburbanites.

Other court decisions, for example in Baltimore, Yonkers and Dallas, have also confirmed that the federal government created or perpetuated ghettos with its public housing site location and tenant assignment policies.

## The Government's One-Two Punch

The result has been a one-two punch. With public housing, federal and local government increased African Americans' isolation in urban ghettos. An with mortgage guarantees, the government subsidized whites to abandon urban areas for suburbs. The combination contributed heavily to creation of the segregated neighborhoods and schools we know today, with truly disadvantaged minority students isolated in poverty-concentrated schools where

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teachers struggle unsuccessfully to overcome families' multiple needs. Without these public policies, the racial achievement gap that has been so daunting to educators would be a very different, and lesser, challenge. That gap can't be addressed by nostalgia for a fanciful past when whites grew up in public housing and succeeded solely by benefiting from good teachers.

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(IMMERSION: Continued from page 8)

scores, have better attendance records, and get referred for behavior problems far less frequently. English language learners, English-speaking Latino children, African-American students and white students all performed better in dual immersion schools.

Dual immersion schools also enjoy enduring popularity among parents from a variety of racial and economic backgrounds. Under Cambridge's controlled choice policy designed to ensure socioeconomic diversity, parents list schools in order of preference. Consistently, for several years, Amigos is among the top three choices of parents. Every year, at Barbieri, at Boston's schools and the Amigos School, the requests for admission far outnumber the available seats.

"I didn't know anything about the research," says Kristen Jelstrup, whose two sons attend Amigos. Breathless, Jelstrup's first-grader, Alex, shows off his robot drawings and then runs back to his friends on the playground after school.

"We had visited other schools and then we came here to Amigos and it was a no-brainer. It just felt right, and then my husband and I talked about it and for our kids to graduate fluent in a second language? It was an unbelievable opportunity."

Jelstrup is learning Spanish bit by bit with help from Yanina Hillion, a native of Argentina whose four children attend Amigos. Hillion offers Spanish classes for parents and also provides advice in how to assist kids with homework and adjust to a bilin-

The conventional idea that we now suffer from "de facto" segregation, created by vague market and demographic forces (Justice Potter Stewart once termed them "unknown and perhaps unknowable") is urban mythology. Residential segregation was as much the product of purposeful public policy as was "de jure" school segregation. The legacy of both endures. □

gual school.

"I have seen a genuine interest among parents to learn Spanish," Hillion says. "There is a completely open attitude and desire to really embrace Latin cultures.... But you know it is challenging. It is not easy to have your child learning in two languages

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### ***The ultimate aspiration is biculturalism.***

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when you do not know one of them. It is a true commitment."

Like Jelstrup, Lisa Downing, who also has two sons at Amigos, praises the school's high academic standards. The mothers agree, however, that they could not have predicted and cannot quantify some of school's most important benefits.

"I do think that the kids here develop an incredible empathy that comes from having to learn a second language and being so immersed with other cultures," Downing says. "Maybe that's because when you have to learn a second language, you do need to take risks.... go out on a limb."

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The dual immersion model has long been common in the border states of Texas and New Mexico and in regions of California. But more recently it has spread to other states, including, most notably, Utah, where 11 school districts maintain dual immersion programs. Though there is no official accounting of dual immersion programs in the nation, Rosa Molina, executive director of the Two-Way California Association of Bilingual Educators

(CABE), which provides technical assistance to two-way bilingual educators, estimates that there are more than 900 of what she defines as "true" dual immersion programs in 46 states, with about 400 in Texas and 300 in California. To give some sense of the method's increased popularity, in 1990 the Center for Applied Linguistics estimated that just 35 two-way immersion programs were operating across the nation. Molina and other experts caution, though, that it is difficult to determine how many such programs exist because increasingly educators in recent years have started "Spanish" or "Chinese" immersion schools that do not enroll a significant share of native Spanish or Chinese students.

"That's not what the original idea of two-way bilingual is," Molina explains. "It involves, at its heart, sharing language. When you do not see any other language but English represented in the enrollment, we don't see this as a two-way program."

Molina cautions educators against allowing dual immersion to become dominated by middle-class, English-speaking families as its popularity grows. "... How we design these programs should ensure that it is English language learners getting to benefit from this method just as much as English-speaking students who want to learn another language and learn about another culture," she says.

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The research on the benefits of bilingualism is increasingly clear. The cognitive neuroscientist Ellen Bialystok of York University in Toronto has published some of the most convincing findings. In repeated studies, Bialystok finds that bilingual children tend to master letters and numbers more quickly than monolingual children. Also, she finds that children who have been exposed to stories in two languages tend to have advantages as they learn to read. More recently, Bialystok has studied bilingual adults, finding that they tend to be less prone to cognitive decline in their older years and more efficient multi-taskers, likely