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Hard Lessons From Chicago's Public Housing Reform

Two decades ago, the city embarked on an ambitious—and controversial—plan to transform its troubled public housing system, uprooting thousands of low-income residents. Today, researcher Susan Popkin reflects on what worked—and what failed.

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End of an era: Workers prepare to demolish the Robert Taylor Homes complex in 1998. (Scott Olson/Reuters)

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My first trip to the Robert Taylor Homes—a high-rise housing project on Chicago’s South Side—was after a shooting. Dust blew everywhere because there was no grass to hold down the dirt. The elevator was covered with graffiti and stank of urine. There were police cars and an ambulance in front of the 16-story building, which was one of a complex of 28 concrete towers that comprised an enormous public housing development. At one point, more than 20,000 people lived there.

That was nearly 30 years ago; I was a 25-year-old Northwestern graduate student collecting data for my dissertation. The [many visits that followed](#) opened my eyes to the often sad and frustrating story of public housing in America: Too many children were growing up in terrible places because they had the bad luck to be poor and brown in cities that had long neglected those residents. That neglect was born of a toxic combination of racial segregation, failed government policies, and gross indifference. In Chicago and other cities, economic investment was minimal at best, the schools were lousy, parks and libraries were an afterthought, and grocery stores and other basic amenities were hard to find.

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The kids in Chicago's projects—never stable oases—and their counterparts in other cities grew up too familiar with guns, fights, and drugs. Many mothers tried to keep their children inside to protect them from the violence and disorder. But the apartments offered their own hazards, from lead paint to broken faucets that continuously spewed scalding hot water.

[Homicides and shootings are shockingly common](#) and a daily occurrence in Chicago today, but the violence remains concentrated in the city's low-income African American and Latino communities. It was even worse 20 years ago, when there were nearly twice as many homicides, and the [Chicago Housing Authority's \(CHA's\) projects were among the poorest and most dangerous communities in the country.](#)

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) took control of the CHA in 1995, the federal government's highest-profile effort to salvage public housing. HUD sent in its top leadership to fix the agency's management and set the stage for bigger changes. In 1999, with the CHA returned to local control, it

launched its enormously ambitious [Plan for Transformation](#), which called for demolishing the worst CHA properties and replacing them with new mixed-income communities.

It was the era of Clinton-style welfare reform and the beginning of efforts to shrink the federal role; that meant that private developers—both for-profit and nonprofit—would own and manage these new properties. Today, the effect on Chicago's West and South Sides is evident: The forbidding high-rises are gone. Though the pace of new construction has been frustratingly slow, the area now has seven new safe and attractive communities (with three more in the works), as well as parks, stores, and other signs of economic renewal.

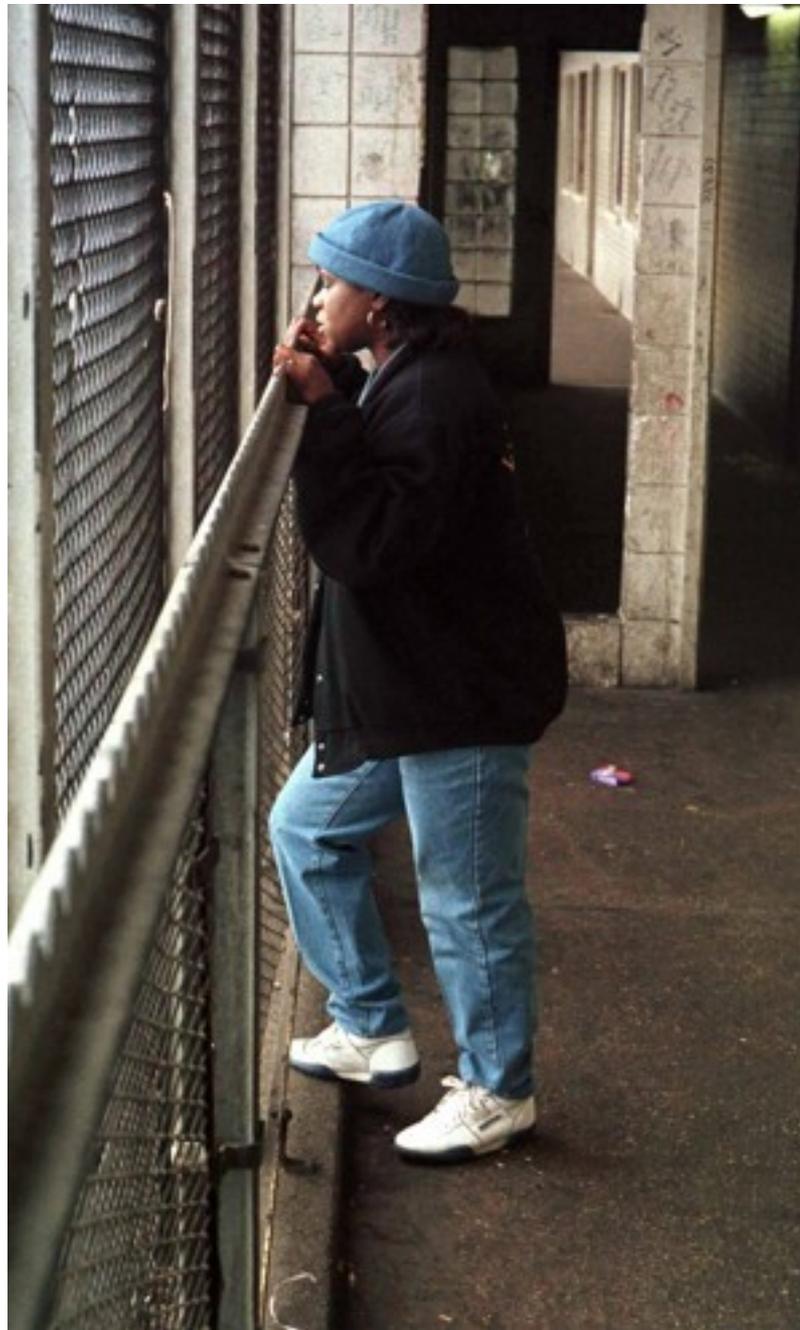
We can accomplish only so much with better housing and slightly better circumstances. It was naïve to think that relocation was going to address all the problems families were having.

As [many critics have noted](#), the Plan for Transformation meant involuntary displacement for many thousands of African-American residents, a process that was painful and stressful for most of them. Only a portion of the units in the new developments were meant for public-housing families, and relatively few original residents moved back. Most either took vouchers and rented private-market housing or moved to another refurbished public-housing community. Still, when contacted years later, nearly all the relocated CHA residents I studied said they were living in better housing in safer neighborhoods. The fact that no child is growing up in a place as bad as Robert Taylor Homes was when I first walked into it is a real and important victory.

But it is only a partial one. The majority of the families who moved still live in places that are poorer, more racially segregated, and more violent than the rest

of the city. Such places will not fundamentally change children's life trajectories.

A key lesson from Chicago's experience is that we can accomplish only so much with better housing and slightly better circumstances. It was perhaps naïve to think that relocation was going to address all the problems families were having. Even those who were doing the best after they moved were still struggling. Young women I got to know who seemed college bound ended up getting pregnant in their late teens. Boys on promising paths in high school got sucked into gangs. Kids doing well in school still talked about getting into fights and having to avoid the local drug dealers.



Lois Densmore lived at Robert Taylor homes for 26 years. Demolition of the complex began in 1998. (Scott Olson/Reuters)

Outcomes were worse for others. Take Annette, a mother who grew up in the projects and had a history of substance abuse, mental health problems, and

violent relationships. Her two older kids, Robert and Denise, were equally depressed. Robert ended up lost to the streets, and Denise was forced into adulthood too early, doing whatever it took to help support Annette's younger kids, including trading sex for money so she could buy food or help pay the bills.

Yes, much progress has been made in Chicago and elsewhere in remedying public housing's worst failures. The CHA post-federal takeover was more successful than I ever would have predicted. But addressing the needs of families like Annette's requires significant and sustained investments that tackle the problems of poor neighborhoods, enable residents to move to places that offer better opportunities for themselves and their children, and provide intensive, long-term services that might mitigate the traumatic legacy of racial segregation and discrimination.

That visit to Robert Taylor Homes shaped my career in ways that I could not have imagined. I have spent the past 30 years following the CHA, watching how its trajectory influenced housing policy nationally, and thinking about the impact on low-income families and neighborhoods. The lessons I've learned about the implications of failed policies are particularly pertinent now, as the Trump administration begins formulating its housing strategies and cities brace for a possible rollback in federal commitments to addressing the problems of poor people of color. But the CHA experience has shown that we can use housing as a platform for delivering services and support to vulnerable families. The Plan for Transformation was a product of the last wave of federal reform that encouraged shifting responsibility to the private sector. Private developers now own and manage a substantial proportion of CHA's portfolio, and private landlords benefit from its much-larger voucher program.

Having stable tenants who can pay the rent and don't cause problems for other residents is in the best interest of all who manage and own affordable housing, whether they are developers or government-run housing agencies. These groups should look to the CHA's service models to protect their investments. For example, my team from the Urban Institute helped the [CHA develop a family case management program](#) that provides support and access to on-site mental health and employment services. They can also learn from the

relationships the CHA built with Chicago's workforce agencies and city colleges; links like these will be even more important if residents are to take advantage of any job creation opportunities.

Today, the Robert Taylor Homes housing project is gone. Where it once stood are vast tracks of vacant land awaiting development. There is some replacement housing in the neighborhood, but nowhere near the more than 4,000 units that were demolished.

It may be too early to know what the Trump era will mean for places like this, and for affordable housing policy in general. But Chicago offers lessons that the new administration—and developers and housing agencies—would be wise to consider.

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