

Comment on Sandra J. Newman and Ann B. Schnare's “‘... And a Suitable Living Environment’: The Failure of Housing Programs to Deliver on Neighborhood Quality”

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Abstract

Newman and Schnare provide a useful portrait of where housing assistance ends up geographically. The evidence that certificate and voucher holders are less likely than public housing residents to live in the poorest neighborhoods is encouraging, as well as important for policy decisions. Unresolved in the article, and unresolvable with the data, as the authors themselves note, is the matter of how neighborhood quality is *affected* by housing assistance. The least popular housing developments have long been relegated to neighborhoods of least political resistance, a fact that constrains most local efforts to deconcentrate poverty. Furthermore, through the tax code, America spends about three times as much on housing assistance for middle- and upper-income households as it does on assistance to low- and moderate-income households. Thus far, we have not applied “fair share” principles either to the *location* of housing assistance or to its *allocation* across the income spectrum.

Keywords: Neighborhood; Low-income housing; Mobility

Reading Newman and Schnare, and then Mac Donald's comment, makes one feel a bit like the proverbial blind man struggling to figure out the essence of an elephant by touch alone: Which part of the huge beast—tusk, hide, or something else—defines it? They all do, of course, but relying on partial information can lead to some unproductive and even dangerous conclusions. The same is true for those who would make policy decisions that relate housing assistance to neighborhood quality. Measures of neighborhood poverty provide clues to how a neighborhood functions or fails to function but seldom as many clear lessons as we could use. And although discussions of moral character should not, as Mac Donald points out, be brushed aside in favor of statistical abstractions, rarely are character and values as easy to pin down as some observers would have us believe.

Newman and Schnare provide a detailed, useful portrait of where housing assistance ends up geographically, and the evidence that certificate and voucher holders are (at a minimum) less likely than public housing residents to live in the worst neighborhoods is encouraging. This finding is also important for policy decisions in an era of welfare reform. Moreover, they have constructed a remarkable database that should serve researchers and policy makers alike for years to come.

Newman and Schnare remind us that several forms of housing assistance, public housing most of all, are highly concentrated thanks mainly to deliberate policy decisions. While this may not seem like news, it is rarely profiled so well or on such a national scale. In addition, the root causes of such geographically uneven assistance are often ignored by those who would oppose dispersal or housing mobility programs out of the obtuse belief that poverty concentrates via some sort of organic process, that in engineering mobility we would be breaking up “natural communities.” The absurdity of this premise is clearest at the extremes—where thousands of families are crowded into the Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago. But in many places, most less extreme than the infamous high-rise public housing projects so visible in the media, poor people of color are housed together mainly because of ignorant fear and pervasive discrimination in housing markets and because key policy decisions protect certain neighborhoods from imagined ills, not simply because those who are excluded prefer to be among their own.

The second factor—ethnic group solidarity—is not at all trivial, and it leads many who do move “up and out” because of housing assistance to retain important ties to people outside their new neighborhoods (Briggs 1997). But surely this is not a rationale for expecting the invisible hand of the market to correct inequities rooted in (private) race and class discrimination and blessed and reinforced by public policy. Furthermore, there is little reason to believe that the dramatic improvements in public services Mac Donald advocates, especially in education, will come faster in our resource-poor cities than wider housing choice aided by voucher programs.

I will focus here on how housing assistance affects neighborhoods, on those sought-after “role models” supposedly waiting for children whose families obtain better housing choices, and on questions that Mac Donald emphasizes.

Impacts on neighborhoods: Working politics, not statistics

Unresolved in Newman and Schnare's article, and unresolvable with their data, as the authors themselves note, is the matter of how neighborhood quality is affected by housing assistance. While some will continue to pursue a kind of statistical Holy Grail on this one, I would encourage a less mechanical, and more political, service by researchers. The least popular housing developments have long been relegated to neighborhoods of least political resistance. It would be wonderful if those involved in studying the impact of housing aid on neighborhoods spent more time communicating their encouraging evidence (see Briggs and Darden 1998; Goetz, Lam, and Heitlinger 1996) to local decision makers, whose often myopic siting decisions not only discriminate against poor people but in some instances do more affluent households a disservice as well.

Yonkers, NY, is a case in point. There, in 1988, following the nastiest housing desegregation battle in anyone's memory, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), together with city officials, opted to concentrate 200 low-rise public housing units on only seven sites. The idea was to spare additional neighborhoods the "contagion" of public housing (Newman 1996).¹ This forced the court-appointed architect to build three sites with more than 40 units apiece.

The best evidence we have suggests no significant withdrawal, financial or psychological, on the part of homeowners near the scattered sites, no impact on plans to move or fears of neighborhood tipping, no signs of increased crime, and no effects on the sale price of homes near most of the seven sites. There were, however, measurably negative effects on home prices near one large site (Briggs and Darden 1998). Beyond its scale, that site was the first built and the target of a bomb scare just before public housing tenants moved in. It seems to have borne the brunt of many homeowners' virulent, high-profile opposition to the court order. While there are several reasons to believe that even price effects near that site may not persist in the long run—and that they may in fact reflect fears of the unknown more than feelings toward public housing residents once they move in—it is still too early to tell. The moral of the story is simple and familiar: "Small is beautiful." HUD and the city of Yonkers should

¹ Oscar Newman reports that the plaintiffs in the Yonkers case, the Justice Department and the NAACP, wanted, worse yet, to concentrate the units in two high-rise projects.

have agreed to lower concentrations by building those 200 court-ordered units across a greater number of sites. Even where local leaders whip constituents into a furor over public housing development, as they surely did in Yonkers, careful attention to scale and community entrée can mitigate potentially negative impacts of housing assistance on residents' expectations and, in the longer run, on neighborhood quality.

Other localities should ride real estate booms in areas on the upswing, as Montgomery County, MD, has done through inclusionary zoning. They should include scattered-site units as well as regional voucher programs in the mix, instead of dumping concentrations of subsidized housing, as Newman and Schnare accurately note, on areas already in decline because of public and private disinvestment.

While market-savvy investments by HOPE VI revitalization programs (i.e., investments made with an eye toward overall neighborhood vitality) would be wise, Newman and Schnare are right that even the most concerted—and measurably successful—community development efforts in declining areas cannot completely turn around that which much larger forces have devastated. The largest-scale efforts are often supported by millions of low-income housing tax credit dollars and by a dizzying array of public and private grants assembled at street level. Our multiyear study of respected community development corporations (CDCs) at work in three very different cities (Newark, Boston, and Minneapolis) supports this seeming paradox: that CDCs can be very successful and yet unable to radically transform their neighborhoods (Briggs and Mueller 1997). The clear implication is that radical transformation is simply too heroic an expectation. One reason is that CDC neighborhoods often represent the lowest rung on the housing ladder in a given metropolitan area. Barring wider housing choices for low-income families, such neighborhoods will continue to “import” poverty as some families move up and out. The fact that community-based housing development groups provide opportunities to many families who carry their gains to other neighborhoods makes the impact of CDCs harder to measure but no less important.

Dramatic neighborhood revitalization demands many kinds of investment, and housing assistance could certainly do more. As recent articles in this journal have argued, homeownership subsidies ought to encourage reinvestment in urban areas that are not (yet) on the upswing instead of underwriting the tide of suburban withdrawal. Many would-be homeowners would opt to

be part of such reinvestment: Charlotte Street in the South Bronx, where assessed home prices have tripled in just a dozen years, is one extraordinary place where public dollars helped reveal market demand that few thought existed. Recipients of rental subsidies can be equipped to become more sophisticated consumers of housing and of neighborhoods, as they are through HUD's Moving to Opportunity demonstration, and local groups—such as those running the 50-plus housing mobility programs for low-income tenants nationwide—will learn to cultivate landlords (who are also their customers) and not just handle them. These investments, more than heavy restrictions on where vouchers are used, would have huge effects in the long run on segregation and the geography of opportunity.

Role models are not listed in the census

In making the kind of jump from fine description to prescriptive policy analysis that Newman and Schnare do, several essential points are often ignored. One is that most “statistical neighborhoods” are not social ones (Briggs 1997; Tienda 1991), which suggests that we be more open-minded about what “neighborhood quality” means and how to track it. There is a long-standing tradition across many ethnic groups of believing that, like the frontier towns or rural villages of old, people's immediate neighborhoods necessarily provide them with critical social influences and supports. This is less and less true for most adult Americans, since our important social ties usually lie outside our neighborhoods—that is, since “personal communities” tend to overlap only modestly with spatial ones (Wellman 1988). The exceptions are immigrant ethnic enclaves and a few other special places where ethnicity, language isolation, and other forms of social glue connect people (Fischer 1977, 1982). Only the poorest, most chronically jobless households in urban or suburban areas have highly localized ties, and this, again, is less a matter of choice than circumstance. Where higher-income families have local ties, they tend to be very segregated by race/ethnicity and class. In Gans's (1962) early formulation of this problem, neighbors are found, but friends are chosen, and class, race/ethnicity, and life stage, not spatial proximity, appear to be the key factors in this process.

Adolescents have somewhat more neighborhood-centered social lives; their immediate peers and local opportunities, for good or ill, seem to loom large, and appropriate behavior is evaluated against the standard of local norms—of what appears to be “normal” to one's peers most of all (Sullivan 1989). The local

sphere is especially important for youth whose families cannot afford summer camp or private school—those whose social milieus are more restricted to the peer group and activities near at hand, on the streets. Even where some local community of others matters a great deal, though, it is risky to use census data as a proxy for social influences, let alone developmental effects. For many public housing residents, for example, it is the immediate complex and not the surrounding census block group—an administrative, not social geography—that counts. Studies that suggest role-modeling influences of “high-status” (professional) workers on teen development assume some meaningful social contact between the professionals and the teens (see, for example, Briggs 1997). Where race/ethnicity and class separate youth from a particular group of neighborhood adults, as they will in some voucher programs, that kind of assumption is problematic.

In plainer English, low-income African-American teens will not readily form bonds with white, middle-income professional workers except where strong, inclusive local institutions organize their coming together. Neighborhood churches, to take one common example, are unlikely to play that role in most places, since organized religion is among the most ethnically segregated institutions in American life. The African-American and Latino families we interviewed in Yonkers’s scattered-site public housing are returning to churches in their old neighborhoods. The churches in their new, mostly white neighborhoods serve mostly white people. This is not an accusation of racism but rather a matter of how churches define and pursue particular groups of people.

Around the country, desegregated schools—an increasingly endangered species because of the rollback of many court orders (Orfield et al. 1996)—are probably our best hope for creating social ties for young people across social divides of race/ethnicity and class (Crain and Wells 1994). Such ties are critical not only for economic performance, but also for civil society. Over the long run, those “bridging” ties tend to be the best insurance against riots and other such problems.

The main boon to low-income families living in neighborhoods with a lower concentration of poverty is lower crime (Yonkers Family and Community Project 1997), better schools and other services (Hogan 1996), and greater neighborhood clout at city hall, not the presumed osmosis of someone else’s values, moral character, or role modeling. Recalling the crime that pervaded every aspect of their lives in their prior, high-poverty neighborhoods, families in Boston’s Moving to Opportunity housing

demonstration told researchers that “bullets don’t got no name” (Katz, Kling, and Liebman 1996). Some of these families will get a boost from seeing new neighbors pursue jobs and get ahead, a “social comparison” gain that some Gautreaux families reported (Rosenbaum and Popkin 1991). But for many, access to safer streets in which to raise children is reason enough to move, and higher-quality, less segregated schools, where they come with the package of housing dollars and job search assistance, will also be a boon.

The application of “neighborhood standards” in the spatial allocation of housing assistance, while encouraging for reasons stated above, should not rest on heroic, mostly unfounded assumptions about neighboring, role modeling, and so on. Future policy to make our standards broader and more responsive to neighborhood change should, however, draw on the grounded, nuanced work under way on “community capacity” and “neighborhood indicators” at the Chapin Hall Center at the University of Chicago, the Urban Institute, and elsewhere.

Coping is not about “character”

I would be remiss to address moral character, Mac Donald’s central concern, only in passing. Consistency demands that we have high expectations across our society—for mortgage lenders and mayors, real estate agents and schoolteachers, professionals who engineer corporate mergers and workers who flip hamburgers, kids in rich as well as poor schools, and, yes, for jobless people who may, at some point or another, receive public assistance. To hide behind ideologies of the left or right, and in so doing to expect little of poor people because they lack political clout and have been and continue to be victims, is indeed to rob the poor of the power and obligation to make the best choices possible. This is paternalistic, and liberal ideologies are as guilty of it as conservatives.

However, should we wade into this water, we will quickly be reminded that discussions of character and family values are Teflon-like: The most systematic evidence from those who spend substantial amounts of time in high-poverty areas working with and talking to poor families seems unable to stick to the public conversation. Much of the Teflon effect has to do with a long history in politics and popular culture of distinguishing between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor and extending labels like “underclass,” which were originally about economic status only,

to include assumptions about pathological behavior and core values (Gans 1995).

The evidence generated by those who spend time in poor neighborhoods (like the ones Mac Donald describes) suggests that we think about people, the poor included, as indeed very strategic but sometimes in ways that are productive only in the narrowest of domains. To be more specific, human beings cope with extreme circumstances, including chronic poverty. Many young people in tough neighborhoods, for example, learn what Anderson (1994) has called a “code of the streets.” It dictates tough behavior in public and a self-image linked to violence, which may protect one in a high-risk neighborhood but be exactly the wrong behavior and image for a job interview (Dembo 1985; Wilson 1996). Learning to adapt appropriately (by switching codes, for example) depends on having access to corrective world-of-work information from some trusted other who is, or used to be, steadily employed.

The good news is that these codes, which are not deeply held “values” at all but rather coping strategies and norms, are sensitive to context. They can be changed. In Yonkers, for example, we find that young people living in low-poverty, low-crime neighborhoods because of the desegregation of public housing (the “movers”) are less likely to consider their neighborhoods “tough” and less likely to show early expectancies for delinquent peer involvement or substance abuse than their counterparts living in poor households in much poorer, high-crime neighborhoods (the “stayers”). Further, mover parents are also likely to be able to parent more effectively in lower-crime, lower-risk environments, and this should have big payoffs for their youngest children.

The bad news is that market discrimination and public policy have forced millions of American families to live in places that reward the defensive behavior that is often not productive in the larger society and that also threaten residents’ lives and mental health in ways that make effective parenting, job keeping, and other important functions hard. The contexts are tough not just because of choices by local people, but because the neighborhoods in question are deeply embedded in regional markets for illicit drugs (demand for which originates mostly outside of poor neighborhoods), because of poor schools, because of lax handgun laws that are convenient for weekend range shooters but deadly for people in low-income neighborhoods, and because of many other forces in the larger society that make concentration of poverty worse, and high-poverty neighborhoods more deadly, than years ago. More bad news is that, for the reasons outlined above, even the Yonkers youth in scattered-site public housing have little

contact with employed adults in the middle-income neighborhoods—the census block groups—that surround their immediate complexes. Their neighbors, in the social sense, are mostly the low-income families next door (in public housing), not the white families in the larger surrounding area.

Some observers, Mac Donald included, habitually assault the moral character of people who live in places these observers understand no more than the dark side of the moon. There is little helpful information in such broadside attacks.

More worrisome still, these attacks defer two kinds of work: that of creating structures of opportunity (everyone's job) and that of providing the appropriate moral invocations we all rely on to keep each other in check, to renew and clarify the standards of behavior we expect (mainly the community insider's job). There was little helpful information in the earlier versions of this script, which was applied to white ethnics in public housing. Rather than suggesting that values have no place in the housing debate, I will argue that places, including neighborhoods, have no reliably measurable values. Furthermore, we should distinguish deeply held "values," which are much more widely shared across rich and poor than Mac Donald apparently believes, from coping strategies and norms of behavior that are not a simple function of parental intent, ethnic tradition, household income, or the other usual suspects.

Zooming out: How big is "the elephant"?

A larger, more scandalous point is raised in neither Newman and Schnare's fine statistical portrait nor Mac Donald's rather polemic response. It is that we spend about three times as much money in America on housing for middle- and upper-income households as on all housing assistance for low- and moderate-income households. The former is "spent" through the mortgage interest tax deduction, which provides even the wealthiest Americans with help they do not need to live in increasingly isolated, fortresslike places. We know that incomes have not kept up with housing costs over the past few decades, that many of the hardest-working families on the bottom receive none of the housing aid for which they are eligible (Joint Center for Housing Studies 1996), that most of the families we idolize for having made it up the housing ladder generations ago faced lower real (inflation-adjusted) housing costs or received more direct or indirect government support or both, and that we have ended welfare as an entitlement, the biggest social policy leap in

decades, with no accompanying commitment to shore up housing markets that regularly brutalize those on the bottom.

Thus far we have not applied “fair share” principles either to the location of housing assistance or to its allocation across the income spectrum. Both insights are important lest we mistake the essence of the elephant or underestimate its proper scale. Where families on the bottom are concerned, housing assistance should be bigger, however it is administered, *and* distributed differently across our cities and suburbs.

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