

## **Editors' Introduction** **Bringing Neighborhood Back In:** **Housing in a Community Context**

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Most housing practitioners and policy makers would agree that we know how to build housing better than we know how to build communities. Yet the success of housing is inexorably linked to neighborhood quality. Over the past few decades, we have lost sight of this connection, which was codified in the 1949 Housing Act's call to provide all Americans with decent housing "and a suitable living environment."

This issue of *Housing Policy Debate* considers the connection between housing and environment. Our authors examine how neighborhood context influences the success or failure of housing. In particular, they highlight the most salient neighborhood characteristics that affect social and economic mobility.

In the first half of this century, sociologists working in the tradition of the Chicago School used urban neighborhoods as living laboratories for understanding societal processes (for an overview of this thinking, see Wirth 1938). They viewed ethnic identity, poverty, social mobility, and class relations through the lens of neighborhood. Unfortunately for neighborhood studies, sociology soon shifted its emphasis toward macrotheories of society and advanced statistical methods. In the process, the focus on social interaction at the neighborhood level was lost. By the 1940s, when the federal government began in earnest to tackle housing problems, knowledge of how neighborhoods worked had atrophied. Thus, modern housing policy has never been paired with a deep understanding of neighborhood.

The disconnect between housing and community in postwar housing policy had dire consequences. Massive, yet unsuccessful, housing projects like the Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago and Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis are a direct result of policies that built housing units with little regard for how suitable the living environment was. Policy makers sought to house large numbers of residents without considering how to create healthy communities

in the process. Meanwhile, private developers and lenders who built the vast postwar suburban environment clearly understood the value of investing in places that most viewed as decent and safe.

A recent resurgence in neighborhood studies now provides housing policy makers with an opportunity to develop community-building skills that complement their expertise in housing. Scholars such as William Julius Wilson (1987), Elijah Anderson (1990), and George Galster (1995) focus on how neighborhoods influence the behavior of their residents. Their graphic depiction of dysfunctional urban neighborhoods provides a powerful impetus for policy makers to relocate residents into better environments.

This issue's Forum offers contrasting views on what are often referred to as "neighborhood effects," or the role of environment in shaping an individual's life. In our first article, Sandra J. Newman and Ann B. Schnare introduce a census of subsidized housing that precisely locates the use of housing assistance by neighborhood type. They believe that America, unfortunately, has made significant housing investments in the wrong neighborhoods. To paraphrase David Rusk, former mayor of Albuquerque, they imply that "bad neighborhoods defeat good programs." That bad neighborhoods can drag down well-intended programs is hardly a startling revelation. But Newman and Schnare's research empirically validates this long-held belief.

Because we do not know enough about how to systematically improve distressed neighborhoods, Newman and Schnare argue against continued federal investment in the housing stock in those areas. They conclude we can improve life chances for the poor by allowing them to find better neighborhoods through mobility programs such as Section 8 certificates and vouchers.

Newman and Schnare's findings dovetail with the current housing policy efforts that emphasize mobility. Their research supports the approach taken by Chicago's Gautreaux program, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Moving to Opportunity (MTO) initiative, and numerous court-ordered desegregation efforts. Despite early research that suggests mobility programs work (see Rosenbaum 1991), political resistance to relocating the poor limits their wide-scale use. For example, the MTO demonstration site in Baltimore met with resistance at both ends: Suburbanites worried about the relocation of inner-city poor into their community, while city residents

were concerned with the future of the original neighborhood once the more upwardly mobile residents left.

Newman and Schnare's conclusion that it is easier to relocate individuals to healthy neighborhoods than to turn distressed neighborhoods into healthy ones rings true. However, in the long term, housing mobility programs may leave in their wake a large number of troubled neighborhoods that will eventually have to be improved. This is not to say that we must choose one strategy over another. Interestingly, the same knowledge that provides insight into which neighborhoods people should be relocated to via mobility programs may in time help revitalize the neighborhoods from which they moved. Ironically, mobility programs could prove the savior of project-based assistance.

In a comment, Heather Mac Donald writes that the neighborhood effects Newman and Schnare identify pale in comparison to the influence parents have on their children. To Mac Donald, the concrete role model provided by a hard-working parent is worth more than the abstract environmental influence of neighborhood. In essence, Mac Donald contends that "it's the family, stupid!" Furthermore, she worries that the "social engineering" inherent in housing mobility programs will lead to unforeseen consequences. Mac Donald contends that either the good families will leave, robbing poor neighborhoods of their best citizens, or the worst families will spread social pathologies, tipping often marginal neighborhoods into a downward spiral.

In a second comment, Xavier Briggs argues that Newman and Schnare's use of the U.S. census definition of neighborhoods is an artificial construct, disconnected from the reality of people's lives. Briggs notes that the real neighborhood boundaries influencing people's behavior are not represented in Newman and Schnare's research methodology. Rather than depending on rigid statistical definitions, Briggs advocates a better understanding of neighborhood politics and the power relations that often influence the decision to locate subsidized housing for the very poor in already struggling areas.

The articles that follow the Forum section also offer insight into neighborhood effects and their policy implications. Together these articles document the many ways that housing and community connect.

Ingrid Ellen and Margery Turner review existing literature on neighborhood effects, with an eye toward applying this knowledge to public policy. They establish a conceptual framework for

understanding how neighborhoods affect households at different stages in their lives. Despite evidence that there are critical neighborhood effects, there is no consensus on the mechanisms for how such effects translate into individual outcomes, or where neighborhood-focused initiatives should target their attention.

In the interest of situating housing in areas that can provide low-income residents with better opportunity, Charles Field offers an innovative method for overcoming community resistance to such projects. Newman and Schnare, as well as Briggs, show that the development process often forces affordable housing into the wrong location. Field proposes changing this often antagonistic process to one that emphasizes building consensus among interest groups.

Reynolds Farley et al. explore the individual preferences that underlie the possibility of achieving a consensus on affordable housing location. The authors identify threshold tolerances among white and black households for racial integration at the neighborhood level. Farley et al. find that tolerance for integrated neighborhoods varies tremendously among metropolitan areas. The research suggests that there may be good opportunities for creating economically and socially diverse neighborhoods of the type that often provide positive neighborhood effects.

Robert Lang and Karen Danielsen, in introducing a scholarly discussion on gated communities, find that neighborhood effects are paramount in the minds of gated-community residents. In fact, they are a commodity bought and sold on the mere perception that gated communities constitute good neighborhoods. Are gated communities good neighborhoods? The jury is still out, but developers of these places have clearly found a segment of the market that is willing to bet that they are.

To improve the quality of our housing policy, we must ensure that an active dialogue between housing studies and community studies continues. The articles that follow highlight how the quality of a neighborhood can influence housing outcomes. We encourage more work along these lines in the future.

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