

Moving From the 'Hood: The Mixed Success of Integrating Suburbia

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In theory, dispersing the poor to better suburban schools, jobs, and housing was a bipartisan alternative to housing projects and ghetto unemployment. But, surprise, nobody wanted them in the neighborhood.

Saxophone player Bill Clinton and blues legend Luther Allison haven't conferred on urban policy, but both are singing the same tune. In his new song, "Move From the 'Hood," Allison wails:

I know some of you are doin' your best;

You want a good job, not a welfare check.

But you gotta move;

You gotta move from the 'hood.

As politicians and policy analysts revisited the thorny problems of urban poverty in recent years, they seemed to be arriving at a rare consensus: Poor people are hurt by their concentration in large, inner-city neighborhoods that further social isolation and racial segregation. In this view, it would be better to disperse poor people and minorities, putting them in closer proximity to jobs, decent suburban schools, and safe communities. This idea of helping individuals, rather than funneling aid to localities, came to be known as helping "people, not places."

In principle, this approach enjoyed bipartisan support. As an instrument of integration and community renewal, it entailed a far lower scale of "social engineering" than massive school busing or subsidized housing construction. It relied more heavily on private market forces, by inviting the poor to use housing vouchers to move to better market-rate housing, or to commute to suburban jobs. It was exactly the blend of conservative means and liberal goals that appealed to, say, a Republican like Jack Kemp or a Democrat like Bill Clinton. It seemed well suited to a moment when the goals of social policy became incremental rather than grandiose.

But lately, this sort of benign alternative has been swamped by the tides of extreme conservatism--the strictures on public spending, the attack on government regulation, and the sidelining of the deferred agenda of racial justice. In Congress, the deconcentration strategy is the victim both of Republican budget-cutting and the resistance by many politicians, including some Democrats, even to token measures to encourage integration of the suburbs. And in suburbia itself, deeply entrenched racial practices lead to stubborn resistance against even moderate integration, and to resegregation when black migration occurs.

Today, residential segregation remains at the heart of the American dilemma. Poverty alone does not explain why blacks (and to a lesser extent, Latinos) live in ghettos and barrios. Studies show that while many of the white poor live in mixed-income areas (including suburbs), the black poor are much more highly concentrated in high-poverty neighborhoods. Discrimination by lenders, landlords, and real estate brokers accounts for much of this "hyper-segregation." Overall, about two-thirds of African Americans live in segregated areas—a figure that has scarcely changed in three decades. Deconcentration may seem a gentler, more marketlike remedy than earlier forms of social engineering, but the resistance to it suggests just how deeply segregation is still entrenched.

GAUTREAU'S CHILDREN

The strategy of giving the minority poor more choice in where they live can be traced in part to the relative success of a plan in Chicago that grew out of a 1966 lawsuit. Attorney Alexander Polikoff and residents of the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA)—led by Dorothy Gautreaux—charged that the CHA reinforced segregation by locating nearly all public housing in overwhelmingly African American neighborhoods. In upholding their claim, Judge Richard Austin ordered the CHA to build low-rise scattered-site housing throughout Chicago. The CHA strenuously resisted and little new housing was built.

In response to this resistance, the plaintiffs successfully sued to force HUD and the CHA to fund a rent-subsidy voucher program throughout the six-county Chicago area. The court appointed a nonprofit, open housing advocate—the Leadership Council for Metropolitan Open Communities—to manage the program. Since then, with the aid of the Gautreaux mobility program, about 5,700 CHA families have moved to largely white neighborhoods with relatively few poor people, primarily in the suburbs.

Eligible CHA families scramble to get their names on a selection list each year. The Leadership Council screens the candidates to eliminate those who lack the credit history, housekeeping skills, and other attributes that make them likely to succeed in finding a suburban apartment. They are then counseled on how to search for a rental unit, even how to impress a potential new landlord, but they then conduct the hunt for a suitable apartment on their own. (In the early years the Leadership Council helped them find apartments.)

Although the Gautreaux plans were originally remedies for racial segregation, housing mobility also emerged as a potential weapon against poverty. Northwestern University sociologist James Rosenbaum and his colleagues found that the children of CHA families who moved to the suburbs—and to some extent the parents themselves—fared better than those who moved out of public housing but remained in the city. While 63.8 percent of suburban movers had a job after moving, only 50.9 percent of city movers did. The jobs found by city and suburban movers paid about the same hourly wages—in both cases about 20 percent higher than their previous jobs. Though the children of suburban movers often had school troubles at first, eventually they were more likely to stay in school and to attend college or land full-time, better-paying jobs than those in the city. The new black suburbanites also reported that they felt safer and that their children were more likely to interact socially with white kids than if they had stayed in the ghetto.

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OUTWARD HO

The results from the relatively small-scale Gautreaux mobility plan have led enthusiasts, including the editorial writers of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, to compare the migration of urban poor to the suburbs to the westward march of pioneers or even the underground railroad from slavery.

This somewhat exaggerated enthusiasm reflects in part a disillusionment with conventional federal efforts to rebuild the inner city, a view articulated by journalist Nicholas Lemann in the *New York Times Magazine* last year. Lemann's piece contended that much of the money was wasted because these communities were economically and socially doomed. Urban renewal, Model Cities, Urban Development Action Grants, revenue sharing, the Community Reinvestment Act and the new federal empowerment zones all attempted to use public investment to lure private capital into central cities. Despite some successes, it is clear that other forces—including capital flight, technological change, racial discrimination, and the much greater federal subsidies to the suburbs through highways and mortgage deductions—have overwhelmed most of the public urban initiatives of the past three decades. Of course, people-centered policies, such as welfare payments or job training, have lost political support as well.

A key instrument of the geographic dispersal strategy is housing vouchers, which have been part of federal housing policy for two decades. In 1974 the federal government began shifting the emphasis away from subsidizing construction of low-income housing complexes. Instead, the government offered vouchers to allow poor people to rent apartments on the private market. Families who receive a housing certificate, under Section 8 of the Housing and Community Development Act, pay 30 percent of their income and HUD picks up the rest, up to a "fair market rent" ceiling. (Congressional Republicans recently proposed raising the tenant share to 32 percent and lowering the fair market rent, thus reducing the choice of housing available, especially in middle-income suburbs.) There are currently about 1.4 million households with Section 8 vouchers. These subsidies cost about \$7 billion annually.

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Though some inner-city black poor over the years used these certificates to move to the suburbs, such migration alone has not guaranteed new or better opportunities. Black suburbanites often end up living in resegregated communities that can't provide adequate education or other public services and may still be far from potential jobs. For example, in Chicago, more than 91 percent of Section 8 families are black. According to research by Paul Fischer of Lake Forest College, more than half of the families live in seven suburban communities, six of them in nearby south suburbs that are largely black and increasingly stressed economically. Ironically, Polikoff may now sue to break up these new suburban Section 8 ghettos. So Gautreaux-like programs are often necessary if Section 8 is to work effectively as a dispersal strategy.

ENTER CLINTON

The Clinton administration, albeit minimally, has promoted policies that target both places and people. Its place-oriented urban policies (empowerment zones, tougher regulations against bank redlining, encouragement of community development banks, and federal aid to hire police), have met fierce Republican opposition. Under the influence of sociologists William Julius Wilson of the University of Chicago and Douglas Massey of the University of Pennsylvania, HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros became an enthusiastic supporter of the strategy of breaking up inner-city high concentrations of poor minorities, to pursue racial justice, fight poverty, and improve urban life. Toward that goal, the Clinton administration has partly shifted in the direction of "people, not places." It has selectively given local housing authorities the right to tear down central city projects. It has also proposed privatizing federally subsidized housing developments and giving current residents Section 8 vouchers to help them afford apartments in the private market. In addition, the administration hopes to expand successful "reverse commuting" pilot programs in Philadelphia, Milwaukee, and Chicago that help inner-city residents get to suburban jobs, and bring income back into poverty neighborhoods.

Inspired by Chicago's Gautreaux experience, congressional Democrats in 1992 inserted into HUD's budget a new pilot program to encourage inner-city public housing residents to move to the suburbs, called "Moving To Opportunity" (MTO). Although it was strongly embraced by Bush's HUD Secretary, Jack Kemp, Cisneros implemented MTO and became its champion. The MTO initiative provides \$164 million to five cities--Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles won the grant competition--to work with local nonprofit groups to implement small-scale, metropolitan-wide "housing mobility" programs. HUD also is funding research to see how the 1,305 families who moved fare compared to those who remain in the projects. Smaller Gautreaux-like programs already operate in Cincinnati, Memphis, Dallas, Milwaukee, and Hartford.

On the surface, with its reliance on markets and choice, MTO should appeal to Republicans, as it did to Kemp and others at the end of Bush's administration. But congressional Republicans are now largely hostile to any housing and urban aid and see MTO as a Democratic program that can be race baited. MTO and Gautreaux can be seen as reducing inefficiencies, prejudices, and consumer ignorance to make housing markets more fair, effective, and efficient. But conservatives in Congress and in the pages of right-wing publications like *National Review* and *American Spectator* have attacked MTO as a new version of school busing, assailing the hardly new or radical idea of mixed-income communities as denying middle- or upper-middle-class residents the right to choose to live in an exclusive community. Clearly, race as much as income motivated the attack.

In Baltimore, Louis De Pazzo, a conservative Democratic candidate for County Council in the hard-pressed blue-collar and white areas of eastern Baltimore county, seized on MTO as an issue in early 1994. His opponent was the president of the nonprofit group selected to help Baltimore's public housing agency implement MTO. DePazzo encouraged opponents to organize protests; some Republican candidates joined the chorus; and near-panic swept some white neighborhoods. Already anxious about the loss of industrial jobs and decaying public infrastructure and services, they thought Baltimore Mayor Kurt Schmoke's call for razing some public housing projects meant that MTO would lead to a flood of poor blacks into their communities. Ironically, no MTO participants would have gone to many of these neighborhoods because the neighborhoods didn't meet program requirements. (Their poverty rates already exceeded 10 percent.) In any case, MTO provided enough money to move only 285 families, many of whom would probably stay in Baltimore or disperse to more affluent suburbs.

But with one exception, no prominent Maryland politician defended MTO. In the midst of the controversy, Maryland Democratic Senator Barbara Mikulski, a liberal populist, killed the planned expansion of MTO in her role as chair of the subcommittee overseeing HUD. Ironically, within a few months of the election, the controversy had died down, the plan was being implemented smoothly, and several of the politicians opposed to MTO were in deep political trouble on other issues.

When the MTO extension was killed, most of the money was redirected into a broader, less focused housing mobility program, "Choice In Residency." Under this HUD plan, nonprofit agencies in selected cities will provide counseling on housing choices to any Section 8 voucher recipient who wants it. But it will not require recipients to move out of the central city or poverty areas. Nor will it provide HUD with funds to evaluate whether the counseling program helps participants find better housing or jobs. Though the plan is still going forward, Republican-mandated cutbacks in the Section 8 program, increasing the tenant share of rent payments and limiting the total rent that can be paid, will limit the plan's effectiveness by making middle-income communities more out of reach.

The success of the Clinton administration's plan to help the poor move out of urban concentrations depends on overcoming suburban resistance and assuring that there is adequate affordable rental housing in the suburbs. Both premises are now in doubt. Housing shortages limit the scale of any residential mobility strategy. Fewer than 30 percent of the nation's 13 million low-income renter families eligible for vouchers or subsidized housing receive any aid. In many cities, both regular Section 8 and special vouchers under Gautreaux-like programs go unused because renters can't find suitable housing outside the ghettos. The result is like giving people food stamps when grocery shelves are empty. Construction of affordable rental housing plummeted under the Reagan and Bush administrations as subsidies were cut. Developers have even found it difficult to build market-rate rental apartments, partly because suburbs have increasingly imposed "snob zoning" restrictions that effectively keep out multifamily residences and, hence, low-income people.

Some housing and civil rights advocates argue that the federal government should work to eliminate exclusionary zoning by conditioning federal funds for localities on strategies to encourage a mix of housing. Massachusetts, California, and New Jersey have enacted laws against "snob zoning" that enable developers of low-income housing to override local zoning restrictions. The Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area has gone even further. State Representative Myron Orfield, acting on behalf of the communities in the metro area, sponsored legislation to create an elected metropolitan council with the authority to establish "fair share" housing goals for each municipality. This legislation gave the council the power to withhold sewer, highway, infrastructure, and other state funds from communities that refuse to comply. Orfield's legislative package also included a tax-base sharing plan to reduce property tax disparities among municipalities in the region, so that inner-ring suburbs and the two major cities had a stake in regional cooperation plans.

A more proactive HUD could provide incentives to make Section 8 a metropolitan-wide program run by regional agencies rather than local housing authorities.

A few black politicians and community leaders in Chicago have criticized efforts to break up the concentration of black poor as a landgrab by white politicians and real estate interests. Others see suburban mobility programs as diluting black political power. Critics also say these initiatives skim the most motivated and talented of the poor out of the city, although initially what most distinguishes MTO applicants from their neighbors remaining in public housing appears to be concern about crime. Clearly politicians have their own agendas that contribute to cynicism: With Clinton administration aid, Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley has begun tearing down projects near the site of the 1996 Democratic Convention and building a less dense, more mixed-income project.

However, many black leaders—even those who want to encourage blacks to stay in the city—also favor the creation of more mixed-income communities, even within public housing projects. Deconcentration of the poor has widespread support in principle, but there is far less agreement about where the poor should go. There are also no clear answers about where they will find jobs, wherever they end up living. Even the limited number of Gautreaux participants made only marginal employment gains by moving to the suburbs; the biggest beneficiaries were their children. Blacks continue to face dwindling job opportunities and lingering employment discrimination, as several recent studies document. A move to the suburbs will not quickly eliminate their problems in finding jobs.

HALF FULL, HALF EMPTY

The saga of the Gautreaux program and its progeny suggests that while dispersal strategies have a place, they are no panacea. If there is no disposition among white voters to pump massive resources into cities, neither is there a welcome wagon for a mass minority exodus to suburbia. Moreover, whatever its merits, the residential strategy accepts the trend toward ever-expanding suburbanization, a trend that poses serious problems for economic efficiency, environmental protection, and the livability of cities.

Since this sprawl is partly driven by flight from the problems of the cities, it may be more productive to encourage greater city-suburban cooperation within metropolitan areas to revive central cities rather than counting on the poor finding their place in the flight from the center. Some suburban voters, perhaps, can be wooed on the basis of conscience (helping the disadvantaged) or fear (that urban problems will "spill over" to suburbs). A more productive approach is to recognize the common ground between cities and suburbs. In particular, older, inner-ring working-class suburbs now face many of the same problems, ranging from traffic gridlock to unequal distribution of resources. The common problem is that affluent suburbs contribute too little to the common metropolitan tax base, get more than their share of public amenities, and exclude nearly all of the poor. Several recent studies show that cities and suburbs rise and fall together.

Even where deconcentration strategies enjoy modest success, the danger is that politicians may see housing mobility programs as a cheap, easy alternative to either the financial support and counseling that new suburban residents need, or to strategies to help the vast majority of the poor who remain in the central city. Even worse, "deconcentration" without a strategy to create affordable housing outside the ghetto may be simply a way of driving the poor away, to someone else's backyard.

Kale Williams, former director of the Leadership Council that carried out the Gautreaux program, says that the program has achieved partial success because "it hasn't been large enough to threaten anyone and hasn't been concentrated enough to arouse apprehension." When Mayor Daley and the former chairman of the Chicago Housing Authority Vince Lane proposed razing many CHA projects and dispersing residents, there was a flurry of suburban mayoral opposition. That subsided when it became clear that budgetary constraints would limit the dispersal program to token numbers.

Dispersal programs can help end the de facto "apartheid" that urban blacks continue to experience despite three decades of civil rights laws. It is sad, however, that this approach seems to be acceptable to white society only when it is limited and small-scale. In the end, residential mobility plans are only a small part of the unfinished business of reviving old inner cities and integrating America.

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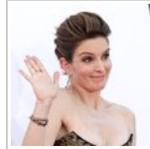
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