

Copyright (c) 1997 by UMI Company. All rights reserved.

Access No: 19182519970520 ProQuest - The New York Times (R) Ondisc  
Title: Half-Right on Public Housing  
Authors: Christopher Jencks  
Source: New York Times, Late Edition (East Coast)  
Date: May 20, 1997 Sec: A Editorial Desk p: 23  
Length: Long (1162 words) Type: Commentary  
Memo: [Op-Ed ]  
Subjects: Public housing; Welfare reform; Federal legislation; Low income groups; Housing subsidies; Public assistance programs; Housing; Law & Legislation; Public Housing  
Names: Lazio, Rick; Jencks, Christopher (Prof); United States  
Companies: Republican Party

Abstract: Prof Christopher Jencks Op-Ed article says recent bill passed by House, aimed at turning crime-ridden welfare housing into respectable havens for working poor, is good idea but has serious problems; says legislation, in present form, could end up doing more harm than good since it would cut number of available housing slots for very poor families while raising number for moderate-income families; drwing (M)

Copyright 1997 The New York Times Company.

Article Text:

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. -- The House passed a bill last week sponsored by Representative Rick Lazio, a New York Republican, that is supposed to transform public housing, turning crime-ridden welfare warehouses into respectable havens for the working poor. This is a good idea. But the Lazio bill also has serious problems. In its present form, it could end up doing more harm than good.

The Government has two housing programs for low-income tenants: public housing and Section 8 vouchers, which provide rent subsidies for low-income families in private housing. The House Republicans' proposals would change both these programs in precisely the same way, cutting the number of slots for very poor families and raising the number for moderate-income families. While this change is a good idea for public housing, it is a terrible idea for Section 8. The two programs are completely different, and a 'one size fits all' solution to their problems makes no sense.

Public housing dates back to 1937. The idea was for Washington to give local housing authorities money with which to build low-income housing. Tenants would then pay enough rent to cover maintenance costs. Later, however, Congress ignored the requirement that low-income tenants' rents had to cover a project's maintenance bills and passed rules requiring local authorities to fill the projects with the poorest applicants. Rent receipts fell, and maintenance deteriorated. Local housing authorities kept asking for Federal help, but most didn't receive enough.

Worse yet, when cities concentrated their poorest and most troubled families in a handful of projects, the rule of law often collapsed. In the late 1960's, when crime rates soared everywhere, many big-city projects were taken over by gangs.

In an unforgettable moment, St. Louis decided in 1974 that its big Pruitt-Igoe project was beyond redemption, moved everyone out and dynamited the buildings. The picture ran on front pages around the country, and political support for public housing vanished.

Congress has not authorized any new public housing, except for the elderly, since the early 1970's. But it has not given up on most of the old projects. To do that, Congress would either have to give current residents new Section 8 certificates so they could move elsewhere, or it would have to put a lot of very poor families out on the streets.

So public housing has staggered along. Today about 1.3 million families live in public housing. About half are on welfare. Most of the rest live in projects for the elderly, which work pretty well. The projects that mainly house welfare recipients vary in quality. Some are surprisingly good, while others are unimaginably awful.

Since 1974, the Federal Government has focused on making private housing more affordable for the poor. It now provides 1.5 million poor families with Section 8 vouchers, which make up the difference between the market rent of a family's housing and what Congress thinks the family can afford (currently 30 percent of a family's cash income).

Instead of concentrating very poor, troubled families in a few projects, Section 8 spreads them around. This is supposed to encourage poor tenants and their children to behave more like everyone else -- though there is not much hard evidence to prove or disprove that belief.

Recent debate about Federal housing policy has focused almost exclusively on public housing. House Republicans want to tackle public housing's problems by letting local housing authorities cut the number of units they rent to very poor families on public assistance and increase the number they rent to the working poor.

Despite the Clinton Administration's objections on behalf of poor families, this proposal makes a lot of sense. Raising the proportion of tenants with jobs would improve the social environment in most projects. If tenants could pay more rent, local housing authorities could also better maintain the buildings.

Many of the workers who would benefit from the Republican plan are likely to be single mothers whom the new welfare law will soon push into low-wage jobs. Most of these mothers will be earning between \$10,000 and \$15,000 a year. That is more cash than they would get on welfare. But unlike welfare recipients, most of these working mothers will have to pay for their own groceries, medical bills and child care expenses.

A recent book, 'Making Ends Meet,' by Kathryn Edin, a sociologist at Rutgers University, and Laura Lein, a researcher at the School of Social Work at the University of Texas, shows the result: Low-wage mothers are currently as likely as welfare mothers to suffer serious material hardship. That will be even more true in the years ahead; so giving the working mothers top priority for public housing makes sense.

But what will become of the mothers who still get public assistance, either because they have just had babies and have not yet hit their time limit to start working, or because they have such serious problems that they are exempt from work requirements?

The obvious solution would be to set aside more Section 8 vouchers for such mothers. But that is not what the House Republicans have proposed. Instead, the House bill allows local housing authorities to redistribute Section 8 certificates from the unemployable poor to the more affluent. This part of the Republican proposal is a terrible idea.

Some Republicans claim that redistributing these vouchers to working families would give the jobless poor more incentive to find work. That is a plausible argument when the head of the family is really employable and the family lives in a community where jobs are available.

But no amount of tinkering with incentives will insure that every last single mother can find a steady job. There really are people whom no private employer will hire. There are also communities where not enough jobs are available.

Reluctant as the Republicans are to admit it, these families need our help. If we want them to work, we will have to give them 'community



## The Family Housing Act

The collapse of the traditional family has had a dramatic, destructive influence on children. Children in single-parent households, most of whom lack a father, are more vulnerable to sexual abuse, poverty, violence, low educational achievement, crime, drug abuse, and suicide.

But when whole communities lack stable families, the destruction is even more concentrated. A father in a neighborhood is an example and source of restraint, not only for his own children, but for other children without a model of male behavior. It is an important goal of public policy, in areas where the federal government has a role, to ensure that communities are "integrated" with intact families. Too many children grow up, not only lacking a father, but never knowing anyone who has a father.

The Family Housing Act is designed to reintroduce families into public housing, where government rules have put them at a disadvantage. The presence of these families would create a new environment, in which children would have a model of marriage.

---

This legislation would:

- Set-aside 15 percent of public housing units for families headed by two individuals who are legally married.
- Avoid the displacement of current residents by meeting the 15 percent goal through a preference as vacancies gradually open.
- Ensure that increased family earnings do not force intact families from public housing by dramatically increasing rents.

---

• The current environment in public housing is in need of transformation. Forty-two percent of public housing residents in one survey said they had heard gunfire nearby. Nearly half of residents say their neighborhoods are troubled by drug trafficking.

• Public housing residents are three times more likely to be victims of violent crime than the average of households nationwide.

*"Permitting married couples in public housing will constitute an important test case for a larger idea: the fatherhood idea. Perhaps married fathers can do what mothers, the police, social workers and public housing officials are all too often unable to do: turn public housing developments into reasonably safe and hospitable environments for raising children."*

*— David Blankenhorn, President of the Institute for American Values and author of Fatherless America.*

A recent article in the Chicago Tribune (June 20, 1995), made the point that placing families in public housing is not radical reform. It is a return to the history of public housing:

"The first public housing developments were intended for the 'deserving poor,' people temporarily out of work or those whose limited income would not allow them to pay the rent private landlords demanded. Single mothers on welfare were not admitted. Families on public aid were. The mix of welfare families and the working poor provided a measure of social and fiscal stability. Working families served as role models for those striving to achieve economic independence, according to housing analyst Mary Nenno."

The legislation is another step in Republican efforts to compel more people to get off welfare and join the work force or at the very least, repay the community through volunteer neighborhood work.

'There will be no bill that is signed that will end poverty,' said Representative Rick A. Lazio, the New York Republican who sponsored the measure. 'The best that we can hope for is that we will begin to set a set of incentives for work, for family, for local control, for responsibility and for accountability.'

Only a single Republican, Representative Ron Paul of Texas, opposed the measure, while 71 Democrats supported it.

The Senate is expected to take up its version of the bill later this spring. That legislation does not go as far as the House measure and is closer to a Clinton Administration proposal. Last year, similar bills were passed by both houses but died in a House-Senate conference.

The Housing Act of 1937 was designed to provide shelter on a temporary basis to working-class people who had lost their jobs during the Depression and were forced out of their homes. Sixty years later, housing projects are set aside almost entirely for extremely poor tenants, most of whom receive public assistance. Critics say many of the regulations passed during the last several decades have encouraged tenants to remain unemployed, turning public housing into violent ghettos.

Representative Jim Leach, the Iowa Republican who heads the Banking Committee, which developed the bill, said his party wants to 'break the dependency cycle.'

The majority of Democrats who opposed the measure objected to the community service requirement, which Representative Jesse L. Jackson Jr. of Illinois called a form of slavery. But they were most disturbed by provisions that they said would abandon the nation's poorest people, denying them admission to public housing at a time when the housing stock is considerably diminished.

'So we turn our back on the very poor,' said Representative Joseph P. Kennedy 2d, Democrat of Massachusetts, whose substitute bill was voted down today, 261 to 163.

'We can allow public housing to go to more working families, but we don't have to do it by abandoning the poor,' Mr. Kennedy said in debate on the floor.

Convinced that the New Deal-era housing law had grown cumbersome and out of touch in the last two decades, House Republicans called for the new legislation to incorporate notions of responsibility and accountability. It was time, they argued, to grant local housing authorities the discretion to remedy deep-seated problems of violence and neglect in public housing.

Chief among their proposals in the bill is to allow local housing authorities, which depend primarily on Federal money, to reconfigure the mix of tenants in housing projects. The bill would free housing authorities from rules that give preference in subsidies and apartments almost exclusively to the country's poorest people.

Under the bill, the agencies will be allowed to set aside most units, as they open up, in public housing projects for the working poor -- tenants who hold jobs and earn as much as 80 percent of an area's median income. The bill would not allow them to evict very poor tenants -- who earn 30 percent or less of an area's median income -- to make room for higher-income tenants. The local housing authorities would also be permitted to give the working poor a greater number of subsidized housing vouchers, which give residents a choice of where they want to live.

More than 3,400 local housing authorities own and operate about 13,200 public housing developments, which shelter 1.4 million families. About 2.7 million households receive Federal rent assistance. The bill would cover all such housing.

Just as crucial, Republicans said, the new measure would not link rent

service' jobs. But that is expensive, especially when we also have to provide child care for a worker's children. Neither Republicans nor Democrats are sufficiently committed to the work ethic to pay for this solution. Even if they were, such families would still need housing subsidies.

Affordable housing for the poorest of the poor has long been in desperately short supply. That is why so many families are doubled up with relatives, and why some families keep showing up in shelters.

If Congress wants to reduce the number of very poor families in public housing, it should make it easier for such families to get Section 8 certificates.

Even if all future vouchers were reserved for families in which no adult is currently employable, there would not be enough to go around. A housing law that simply denies the existence of such families could easily turn out to be worse than what we have now.

Caption:

Christopher Jencks, a professor of public policy at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, is the author of 'The Homeless.'

Drawing (Richard Downs)

Copyright (c) 1997 by UMI Company. All rights reserved.

Access No: 12124019970515 ProQuest - The New York Times (R) Ondisc  
Title: Bill to Redesign Housing Policy Clears Hurdle  
Authors: Lizette Alvarez  
Source: New York Times, Late Edition (East Coast)  
Date: May 15, 1997 Sec: A National Desk p: 1  
Length: Medium (996 words) Type: News  
Subjects: Public housing; Federal legislation; Social policy; Welfare reform

Copyright 1997 The New York Times Company.

Article Text:

WASHINGTON, May 14 -- Challenging decades of housing policy that favored the neediest, the House voted today to change the face of public housing by providing shelter to more of the working poor.

The bill, which passed 293 to 132, would repeal a landmark 1937 Depression-era housing law that Republicans say has turned once livable housing projects into miserable ghettos for the unemployed. It would replace the old framework with a system that made way for higher-income tenants and created what the bill's supporters said would be more self-sufficient communities, requiring less Government aid.

The measure, which is opposed by the Clinton Administration as too harsh, could cut roughly in half the percentage of extremely poor tenants living in public housing, now roughly 75 percent, through attrition. It would also retool rent policies so that every tenant's monthly payments would not necessarily rise along with income, a practice criticized as discouraging public housing residents from getting off welfare.

The measure would also require many public housing tenants who are unemployed to perform eight hours of community service a month, or in most cases, risk eviction.

levels to income, a rule that both Republicans and Democrats agree discourages tenants from working. Currently, tenants pay rent that is up to 30 percent of their income. The House bill gives residents a choice. They can pay 30 percent of their income or a flat rate set by their local housing authority.

And in keeping with the welfare system's new work policy, tenants who are able-bodied, unemployed and not students or enrolled in a public assistance work program would be required to perform at last eight hours a month of community service. That would affect 450,000 people who get Federal housing subsidies.

In addition, the bill would allow local governments to develop their own low-income housing programs and receive Federal housing money.

Representative James P. Moran, a Democrat from Virginia, said the new bill goes a long way toward revisiting the intent of Roosevelt's 1937 law. 'Housing was never supposed to be a permanent entitlement,' Mr. Moran said. 'The purpose of assisted housing was to help families get on their feet, give them an opportunity to become self-sufficient and then enter the economic and social mainstream of society.'

Copyright (c) 1997 by UMI Company. All rights reserved.

Access No: 9300124319 ProQuest - The New York Times (R) Ondisc  
Title: A HARTFORD PROGRAM TO PUT FATHERS BACK IN THE FAMILY  
Authors: JONATHAN RABINOVITZ  
Source: The New York Times, Late Edition - Final  
Date: Sunday Jun 16, 1996 Sec: 1 Metropolitan Desk p: 1  
Length: Long (1405 words) Illus: Photo  
Subjects: WELFARE (US); WELFARE RECIPIENTS, EMPLOYMENT OF; FAMILIES & FAMILY LIFE; HOUSING; PUBLIC HOUSING; HARTFORD (CONN)

Abstract: In a program that federal officials say could be a national model, the Hartford Housing Authority is offering jobs to absentee fathers if they in turn take their children off welfare and, if possible, move in with their partners.

Copyright 1996 The New York Times Company. Data supplied by NEXIS (R) Service.

#### Article Text:

HARTFORD, June 15 -- A few weeks ago, when Benjamin Compton walked through the door of his apartment, his 2-year-old son dropped his toy, squealed 'Daddy' and ran into his arms.

For many fathers, this would be a commonplace, if tender, ritual. But for Mr. Compton, a towering 22-year-old who was in prison during Benjamin Jr.'s birth, the moment meant much more. It was the first time his son had called him 'Daddy.'

'It felt good,' Mr. Compton, a soft-spoken man, said Thursday, appearing almost embarrassed by his own affection. 'Father's Day is going to be different this year.'

The change can be credited to an unusual new program run by the Hartford Housing Authority, which Federal officials are seeing as a blueprint for a national model. Its goal is to reunite fathers with their families in the projects here, where about 85 percent of the households are headed by single mothers. Most are on welfare. The rest, like Mr. Compton's girlfriend, struggle to survive on low-paying jobs.

The three-month-old Family Reunification Program is still small -- only nine men -- but it represents a new way to move people from poverty to self-sufficiency. The program offers fathers \$22-an-hour demolition and asbestos-abatement jobs at the projects, along with other incentives. In return, the fathers take their children off welfare, and, if possible, move in with their partners.

In a nutshell, the program seeks nothing less than restoring some traditional families in communities where they have almost ceased to exist. The Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Henry G. Cisneros, is encouraging housing authorities nationwide to develop their own versions. A similar and even larger program, aimed at the partners of pregnant women, is under way in Baltimore.

'We need to take steps to actively reconnect fathers with their families,' Mr. Cisneros said. 'When these fathers have established a bond with their sons and daughters, some deeply spiritual transformation occurs. They see the waste of guns and gangs and drugs, and they leave that life behind.'

The Hartford program was the brainchild of John Wardlaw, the executive director of the Hartford Housing Authority, who was inspired to create the program after the Million Man March in Washington in October with its call for black men to be accountable for their actions. Not only has it been embraced by the Clinton Administration, but Gov. John G. Rowland's Republican administration has also supported it.

The Hartford program seems to solve the debate over welfare reform by agreeing with both sides. It subscribes to the liberal idea that people fall into poverty because of larger economic forces over which they have no control, forces the government can intervene to improve. It also accepts the conservative notion that individuals must take responsibility for their actions and that welfare has perpetuated dependency.

For instance, the program's founders realized that the housing policy of setting rent at 30 percent of a family's income discouraged fathers from moving back in, so in the program, when a father returns, the rent is frozen for 18 months.

Although the potential of this program, here and in other cities, turns on whether there are jobs to give, Mr. Wardlaw is confident that the program will grow. The Hartford Housing Authority, with 15,000 tenants, has at least \$45 million to tear down units and rebuild, and it plans to require contractors to hire more of these fathers.

No one questions that it will be an uphill battle. Many fathers cannot even be found. Already one man has dropped out of the program, and others are likely to follow. The hard jobs could wear down even enthusiastic fathers. So could family life.

'A lot of them don't know how to be fathers yet,' said Victor Rush, the program's administrator. 'They're still learning.'

Indeed, on Thursday afternoon, in a group interview, Mr. Compton and another program participant, Juan Ramos, compared notes about dressing their children. 'It's scary,' Mr. Compton said. 'He's so little.'

'You're worried you'll break something,' Mr. Ramos chimed in. 'But it's O.K. They're flexible.'

'Not me,' Mr. Compton insisted. 'I'm not going to touch him.'

Yet later that night, in his apartment at the Bowles Housing Project, Mr. Compton held his son, gave him a raspberry on the neck and squirted him with a water pistol. Then he plunked the child onto a rocking horse that he bought a few weeks ago, crying 'Yee-hah' as Benjamin Jr. laughed.

Only a few months ago, the little boy clung to his mother's legs when his father entered the room, and cried if he tried to touch him. Mr. Compton, who then was living with his mother, was working at a warehouse at minimum wage, and the boy's mother, Tommicka Riley, feared that he might return to the drug dealing that had landed him in jail. 'He was distancing himself because he wasn't able to do what he had to do,' Ms.

Riley said in a telephone interview. 'Now, he's able to provide, and that makes any man feel bigger.'

For Mr. Ramos, 37, who said he had spent years selling crack cocaine, the job is a step toward getting out of the Stowe Village projects and achieving the program's ultimate goal: home ownership.

Next month, for the first time since 1994, Christina Rodriguez, the 20-year-old mother of two of his children, will not get a welfare check. As required by the program, Mr. Ramos notified the welfare office of his new income shortly after starting his job in May and had his name added to his girlfriend's lease.

'I'm here to stay,' he said late Thursday afternoon, as he waited for his girlfriend to call from the doctor's office, where his 8-month-old daughter was being checked for an ear infection. He fidgeted nervously in his chair and added: 'It feels strange being here alone. I've gotten used to them being around.' The phone rang and he jumped. 'Is she O.K.?' he asked and looked relieved when told she just needed to take some medicine.

Mr. Ramos said that he would have moved in months ago, but that the job he had then -- as a maintenance man at an apartment -- paid only \$7 an hour. That modest income would have disqualified his girlfriend and the children from receiving welfare. Although he tried to visit as often as he could, he worried that spending too much time there could draw the attention of the Housing Authority. 'The system kept me away,' he said. 'This is the chance I've been waiting for.'

Not everyone in the program has moved in with a partner -- the decision is left to the father and mother -- and in at least one case, a child remains in troubling conditions.

Jesus Benitez, who turns 19 in two weeks, offered no hope that he and the mother of Jesus Jr. could be reconciled. Earlier this month, he stopped by to pick up his son, whose second birthday was Tuesday, only to find that the state had taken custody. The mother's boyfriend had been accused of breaking the child's arm.

Mr. Benitez, a former member of the Los Solidos gang who has his street name, 'Sycho,' tattooed on his arm, broke into tears. He said he was determined to win custody of his son and bring him to the project apartment where Mr. Benitez lives with his mother.

Mr. Benitez had planned a special birthday for his son at a Chuck E. Cheese restaurant. On Thursday, the birthday present he had bought -- a battery-powered four-by-four truck that his son could ride -- sat on a shelf in Mr. Benitez's room. 'This job has put me in a place where I can take care of my son,' he said. 'I was trying to do the things he wanted, let him have the fun I never had.'

Fathers voluntarily enter the program. The criteria are that the father has children in the project and is ready to sign a contract pledging to strive to be a role model, to move his family off welfare once employed and to try to participate in his children's activities. It demands that he not use drugs and submit to regular drug tests. If a father fails to abide by the rules, he can lose his job.

Mr. Rush, the Hartford Housing Authority official, who is also an ordained minister, said he had been moved by the fathers' efforts in the last few months. To honor them, he had wanted to help celebrate what for most of them would be their first true Father's Day and throw a Sunday brunch for the group. Much to his surprise, the men turned him down. 'They all wanted to be alone with their families,' he said.

Caption:

Photos: 'The system kept me away,' Juan Ramos, 37, said of welfare rules that made it difficult for him to move in with his two children. (pg. 1); Benjamin Compton, 22, playing with his 2-year-old son, Benjamin Jr., in a room recently decorated with a Chicago Bulls rug and blanket. A

few weeks ago Benjamin Jr. called his father 'Daddy' for the first time.  
(Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times) (pg. 28)