

Letter from the CURA Director

The trend in urban policy these days is to stress the regional character of problems that manifest themselves in any particular community. Many argue that the problems of neighborhoods of “concentrated poverty,” for example, are best addressed by re-engaging those communities into regional economic dynamics, and by connecting the residents of those neighborhoods to “high-opportunity” neighborhoods. Thus, for the better part of 20 years now, federal and local initiatives have been organized around the concept of the “geography of opportunity.” This policy paradigm conceptualizes core neighborhoods as deficient in opportunity and aims to improve the ability of low-income families of color to move out of those neighborhoods and into high-opportunity areas. An entire vocabulary has emerged to support this policy initiative. Programs that facilitate the movement of lower income people of color out of their disadvantaged neighborhoods are “mobility programs.” Programs that demolish low-cost public housing in core neighborhoods, forcing people out of their communities, are euphemistically called “transformation” initiatives. The intended destinations for families moved out of core neighborhoods are called “neighborhoods of opportunity.” Indeed, many regions around the nation are developing “opportunity indices” so that we can all tell which neighborhoods have the most opportunity and which have the least.

Of course, all efforts to give low-income people of color access to opportunity neighborhoods run straight into the stiff opposition of those already residing in such areas. Thus, the federal government’s Moving to Opportunity Program, which was enacted in 1992, ran less than two years before generating a buzz saw of resistance from suburban politicians and residents who wanted no part of having lower income people of color move into their neighborhoods. Efforts to build more affordable housing in high-opportunity neighborhoods have long been vehemently resisted in that way. This resistance has severely limited the effectiveness of these efforts. It has also forced a sizable contingent of fair-housing advocates across the country to work steadily and tirelessly to provide more housing options for lower income people in high-opportunity neighborhoods.

As for the core neighborhoods left behind by families moving to high-opportunity areas, the current policy prescription is to facilitate greater income diversity there as well. What this means in practice is fewer affordable-housing options and more upscale housing. This is often accomplished through the demolition of low-cost housing, the development of mixed-income communities, and sometimes through gentrification. In fact, the federal government’s program of public housing redevelopment and demolition gave preference to projects where just such greater neighborhood transformation was expected.

Finally, and importantly, there are those who argue that provision of subsidized, affordable housing in core neighborhoods should be sharply curtailed because it has the effect of reinforcing spatial patterns of inequality and segregation. Lawsuits in New Jersey and Texas, for example, have challenged what the plaintiff parties regard as the overconcentration of subsidized affordable housing in core neighborhoods and not directing enough affordable housing to high-opportunity areas. Fair-housing advocates are loudly warning that the federal government’s plan to coordinate subsidized housing and transit investment will result in too much affordable housing in core neighborhoods and not enough in high-opportunity areas.

These efforts, and indeed the entire “opportunity-neighborhood” paradigm, run the risk, however, of oversimplifying the reality of core neighborhoods in American cities. These areas, according to the logic of the opportunity paradigm, are filled with people desperate to move out if only they could, and are overrun with

affordable and subsidized housing that is anchoring low-income families of color in those communities.

As we progress along this path of facilitating/forcing greater income and racial integration, it is worth noting that both of those assumptions are faulty. First, not all low-income people of color are anxious to leave their communities. Some see value in their communities where others may not. They may value (and depend heavily upon) their social networks, they may value the historic connection of their community to the neighborhood, or they may value the range of services (including transit) available to them in those neighborhoods. For many who can easily identify the ways in which their neighborhoods are disadvantaged, they see the solution not in leaving but rather in seeking improvement of their neighborhoods. Rather than moving to opportunity, they would like to see opportunity move to them. Second, although these neighborhoods may have a great deal of low-cost housing, a severe shortage of decent, safe, and well-managed affordable housing nevertheless exists. In cities across the country, the long waiting lists for subsidized housing attest to the dire need for better and more affordable housing among people living in core neighborhoods.

We need a housing policy for those unable to move to opportunity neighborhoods and for those who choose to remain in the communities that they know and value. Everyone, even those who do not wish to move to predominantly white, suburban neighborhoods, deserves to live in opportunity-rich communities. Community-development corporations, faith-based nonprofit organizations, neighborhood associations, and other organizations pursuing community development have been pursuing better conditions in central neighborhoods for decades. An important part of that effort is the provision of affordable, subsidized housing. We need to strike a balance in our urban policy that recognizes the legitimacy and importance of these efforts while simultaneously working to expand access to opportunity throughout regions. Forsaking or reducing efforts aimed at increasing affordable housing and community development in the core in the service of a regional-opportunity agenda is short-sighted at best and, at worst, little more than the publicly sponsored redlining of core neighborhoods.



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