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Editors' Note

Is it an **overstatement** to characterize the housing reforms of the last 40 years as revolutionary? No! The transition away from the infamous projects was, first of all, very rapid: Relative to the usual slow-as-syrup reform, the United States rather abruptly rejected traditional public housing for families, with President Nixon halting funding in 1973 and President Ford then expanding the voucher system in 1974. The postwar urban renewal projects, ushered in with great fanfare as part of President Truman's Fair Deal, were quickly left with few defenders.

The tide turned quickly because, as with most revolutions, we were quite convinced that we knew what had gone wrong and why. The main concern among social scientists was that traditional public housing served to concentrate the poor and to isolate them from others. As Jane Jacobs so famously put it, the projects had become "worse centers of delinquency, vandalism, and general social hopelessness than the slums they were supposed to replace." This concern with concentrated poverty has informed our low-income housing policy ever since.

But of course other competing principles are also behind our housing policy. For some commentators, the rise of a voucher system was instead the headline development, a system that was characterized as demand side, market-based, and choice-enhancing. The showcase principles, by this accounting, weren't so much desegregation and deconcentration as a new reliance on the private sector to supply housing and on voucher recipients to choose housing. Although there's no denying that today's housing policy embodies liberal and conservative principles alike, it's hard to find anyone on either side trumpeting the virtues of concentrated poverty. We all want our housing policy to deliver poor people from poor neighborhoods.

It's instructive in this regard that our supply-side housing programs are, like vouchers, also partly rooted in a commitment to desegregation. These programs, which operate by incentivizing developers to construct and operate low-income units, are again complicated amalgams that are partly celebrated for their commitment to harnessing the market and involving the private sector. But at no point is our concern with concentrated poverty dropped altogether. In evaluating these programs, we in fact worry endlessly that such private-sector involvement may compromise our commitment to desegregation, a worry that only reveals how seriously we take that commitment.

The simple point, then, is that our country's housing policy is more radical than is sometimes appreciated, more radical precisely because it evinces a nontrivial commitment to desegregation and deconcentration. Does our education policy likewise commit to desegregation? Certainly not to the same extent. Does our welfare policy? Not at all. But our housing policy does. Although it's sometimes a commitment more honored in the breach than in the observance, it's nonetheless an achievement of social science that it's honored at all.

It's therefore fitting to step back and take a close look at whether our "radical" housing policy has served us well. In a collaborative project with the MacArthur Foundation, we've dedicated this issue to taking on just such an evaluation. The contributors to this issue, all leading figures, ask the simple but important questions: Are voucher recipients moving to better neighborhoods? Are they less likely to be unemployed or in poverty? Is their health affected? Are new "inclusionary zoning policies" getting poor children into good schools?

These are broad questions about broad effects. They pertain to children as well as parents and to the full range of educational, social, and health effects for both. The evaluation is complicated because the policy is holistic: When housing policy is also neighborhood policy, when one of the objectives is not just to provide shelter but to change the context of that shelter, then there's no alternative but to consider effects as wide-ranging as the policy itself. It's precisely this reach that gives housing policy, when broadened out in this way, the potential to become our centerpiece policy on poverty.

—David Grusky, Michelle Poulin, Senior Editors