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Mixed-Income Development Study

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO SCHOOL OF
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The Enduring Significance of Race in Mixed-Income Communities[1]

Mixed-income developments, like those being built as part of the Chicago Housing Authority's Plan for Transformation, are part of a policy effort that seeks to deconcentrate poverty by demolishing public housing sites and attracting higher-income residents to live alongside former public housing residents in the redeveloped communities. The primary focus of these efforts has been on economic integration, with little attention paid to the issue of racial integration despite a public housing population in Chicago and many other U.S. cities that is predominantly African American.

In this brief, we examine how race remains relevant to the everyday lives and experiences of residents in three mixed-income communities in Chicago—Oakwood Shores, Park Boulevard, and Westhaven Park. Based on interviews and focus groups with residents and professional stakeholders, we find that concerns about "ghetto culture" continue to inform in the attitudes of many higher-income, non-black homeowners and development professionals in these contexts. The relative privilege and power these groups have to establish and enforce norms, policies, and rules leads to challenging interracial dynamics at the developments. We also find complex intraracial dynamics at play in these communities. Relocated public housing residents and other low-income black renters experience targeting and marginalization from black, as well as non-black, neighbors.

The Mixed-Income Development Context

African Americans continue to make up the majority of the population within the three mixed-income developments that are the focus of this brief. While the influx of new buyers is changing racial demographics somewhat, all of the relocated public housing residents in these developments are African American, and almost all of the affordable and market-rate rental units have been leased to black renters. Racial diversity is more pronounced at Westhaven Park and Park Boulevard, where not only whites, but also some Asians and Latinos, are among the new homeowners. In contrast, the majority of the new homeowners at Oakwood Shores are African American. Many residents and professional stakeholders describe a lack of racial diversity compared to what they had hoped would result from the mixed-income development strategy. An African American owner at Oakwood Shores commented on the small number of non-black residents there by stating, "If you can count 'em, then that's not really diversity, is it?"

Interracial Dynamics

While the racial makeup of the former public housing sites and surrounding neighborhoods has not changed much, race remains a salient factor in residents' experiences in these new contexts. Interracial dynamics are more intense at Westhaven Park and Park Boulevard where there is greater racial diversity and residents describe more frequent interaction and conflict with others of different racial backgrounds.

Targeting of Relocated Public Housing Residents

African American respondents across economic backgrounds view their racial identity as central to how they are treated by others. Relocated public housing residents in particular consider themselves targets of stigmatization based on perceived values, culture, and behavior associated with their race and class. Indeed, many of the non-black homeowners and professionals working at the developments describe relocated public housing residents as having a fundamentally different sense of values and norms that play out in their daily behaviors. For example, according to one staff member at Park Boulevard, homeowners complain about their low-income African American neighbors "sitting on milk crates" and "standing outside cussing, hollering, and screaming," activities that the owners associate with the standards and behaviors of the "ghetto."

Some of these owners and professional stakeholders contend that relocated public housing residents experience poverty due to their own lack of motivation, desire to remain on public assistance, and refusal to adhere to dominant, white middle-class norms. In order to be successful in the new mixed-income environment, according to these respondents, relocated public housing residents must change their internal values. Others view relocated public housing residents' lifestyle routines, shaped by the history of public housing and its legacy of disadvantage, as problematic. These respondents argue that relocated public housing residents must change their behavior in order to adapt to the new mixed-income environment. The institutional power afforded to those owning and working in the developments gives them greater control over setting and enforcing the norms and standards of behavior to which low-income renters are expected to adhere. Owners exert this power primarily through informal monitoring and making complaints to property management or police. Development staff establish rules, leasing policies, and procedures that restrict renters' behaviors and respond to owners' complaints. This results in differential enforcement of rules and sanctions on low-income black residents.

Relocated public housing residents and other low-income renters express frustration at being stereotyped and unfairly targeted by their neighbors and property management. At Westhaven Park and Park Boulevard, in particular, these residents view changes in expectations and enforcement to be a direct result of the influx of non-black owners, and they often frame their experiences with new and changing social norms in terms of race. A relocated public housing resident at Westhaven Park described how non-black homeowners hold different expectations for the use of public space in the neighborhood:

> *They have a problem with us standing on the corner. We're colored. That's what we do. We gather in groups. We don't have to be no drug activity or nothing like that for us to gather round. That's how we mingle.*

Similarly, a relocated public housing resident at Oakwood Shores referenced race as a factor in an owner's response to behavior in a neighboring park and decision to move out of the community:

> *I think a white lady owned it and they moved out because to them too many black people [were] coming to this park. They bothered them. She would always call the police on them for barbequing in the park. Isn't that where you're supposed to barbeque at? In the park?*

Owners' Experiences of Racial Prejudice

While much of the interracial tension in these contexts is focused on low-income blacks, African American owners also report being targeted by racial prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination in the mixed-income developments and surrounding neighborhoods. Half of the black homeowners who were interviewed described negative incidents in which race was an important factor in how non-black neighbors interacted with them. According to an African American owner at Westhaven Park:

> As far as the atmosphere goes, it's gonna take some adjustment because by me being African American… when you try to talk to other people of different cultures, how sometimes they tend to shy away from you, and don't want to speak, and if they do speak, they feel like they have to because you're here…. But that's the only thing that makes me feel uncomfortable, and sometimes it infuriates me. It really does. It pisses me off.

About half of the non-black homeowners who were interviewed also described negative incidents that were driven by race. Some of these involved face-to-face interactions with African American residents who made comments like "go back to your land" and "too many white people in the neighborhood." Others involved property vandalism where owners speculated they were targeted because of their race. While some of these owners acknowledged their own stereotyping of African Americans, most also expressed fear for their personal safety due to their minority status in majority African American neighborhoods. As a white homeowner at Westhaven Park put it:

> Just being [in this neighborhood], you put 100 black people and me together and of those 100 people, 99 of them are not gonna do anything, but there's that one nutball that because of the situation, wants to go make an example of somebody…. If racial tensions really flare up, this is an obvious place where someone's gonna want to make a point. Here comes a gentrified neighborhood…let's take care of this guy.

Intraracial Dynamics

Complicated dynamics emerge in these communities among African American residents as well. Although shared racial identities could help facilitate connections among black residents across class differences, these connections are compromised when higher-income African Americans stereotype and target the norms and behaviors of their lower-income neighbors in the same way that many non-black homeowners and professional stakeholders do. This dynamic was present at all three developments but more common at Oakwood Shores, where more homeowners are African American.

Racial Solidarity among African American Residents

Only some higher-income black residents describe a sense of connection with their lower-income neighbors based on their shared racial backgrounds. These residents share examples of how they engage in casual interactions, such as speaking to each other in the hallways, socializing at nearby parks, or talking while at bus stops. Informal interactions among African American residents of different class backgrounds occur more frequently than interactions between low-income black and higher-income non-black neighbors. For black homeowners and market-rate renters, this sense of racial solidarity with their lower-income neighbors stems from sentiments of "having been there" due to their shared experience of being black or, in some cases, growing up in a low-income home. An African American homeowner at Oakwood Shores described her interactions with a lower-income neighbor and the role that their shared racial identity played in that connection:

> *We're black females…. It's like my sister…. Right away when she was like, "Hey, what's up? I was like, "Hey, what's up?" We sat on the bus and started running our mouths like we were family.*

A few black homeowners criticized other owners for a lack of understanding about the life circumstances of their black lower-income neighbors. As an African American homeowner at Westhaven Park put it:

> *This is not Lincoln Park…. I think [some homeowners] expect [the renters] to…act like they act… behave like they behave. But it's totally different. I mean you've gotta go deeper into their history, why, and their family…. They don't have the income that most of the people in the neighborhood have…. They are not as fortunate as others are.*

"Secondary Marginalization" of Low-Income Black Renters

At the same time, some black owners and market-rate renters, particularly at Oakwood Shores, criticized the perceived behavioral norms of low-income black residents at the development. According to an African American homeowner at Park Boulevard:

> *Renters who come from places who don't have a sense of pride…who have no understanding of what homeownership means.… I really don't want to see people hanging out on the porch, loud music, people who blow their horn to get people to come out…. It's a cultural thing.*

Beyond annoyance at specific incidents and behaviors, some higher-income black residents are concerned with how the behavior of lower-income black neighbors reflects on them personally and on all African Americans more generally. One African American homeowner at Westhaven Park explained:

> *It bothers me because they're African American…. Why are they acting like that? Why do they always stand out and drink 40 ounces and smoke weed? That's a reflection on me. So it bothers me a lot and it frustrates me. It makes me angry.*

Almost all of the African American homeowners and about half of the African American market-rate renters who were interviewed describe trying to distance and distinguish themselves from low-income black neighbors due to negative perceptions of their behavior. As an African American market-rate renter at Oakwood Shores described:

> *I'm an African American black female. I have a master's degree. I mean I don't stunt my growth because of the environment that I'm in…. I can see that there's some jealousy and envy…because I'm not going to revert to some of their negative ways, which is, you know, the talk, the walk, the clothes. I'm not gonna do that. I'm gonna be me. And my car's been scratched up. My mirror's been broken off. I can't put my name on the mailbox. They keep taking it off…. It's very frustrating and very discouraging because it's my own people, you know.*

Like their non-black counterparts, the power and privilege of black owners due to their economic status and formal roles in homeowner associations allows them to informally monitor the behavior of relocated public housing residents and other low-income renters. For low-income black residents, this results in further marginalization. A white stakeholder at Westhaven Park observed that relocated public housing residents feel "looked down upon, not because they're looked down upon by white people, but they're looked down upon by the black people that live there too."

Conclusions

Taken as a whole, these findings show complex inter- and intraracial dynamics in the mixed-income developments where black relocated public housing residents and other low-income renters experience targeting and marginalization from both black and non-black neighbors. We offer the following recommendations:

Promote racially diverse, cross-tenure governance mechanisms. The economic privilege of white and black owners, particularly the formal positions of power for condominium and homeowner associations, provides them the authority to monitor the behaviors and norms of low-income African American renters. New governance mechanisms, such as a committee comprised of residents who differ in their racial and economic backgrounds, could work towards promoting a more integrated and equitable social environment at the development. Issues of common concern, such as safety or local amenities, could serve as potential bridge issues across real and perceived differences if these forums are inclusive and offer opportunities for leadership development and meaningful engagement.

Facilitate dialogue that addresses issues of racism and prejudice. Discussions among professional stakeholders and residents that explicitly address structural racism and the ways it plays out in the social dynamics of mixed-income developments could lead to deeper awareness of residents' experiences of perceived discrimination and more effective staff practices and interactions between neighbors. Developers, community leaders, property managers, and others should develop safe spaces to discuss these issues in mixed-race and mixed-class groups.

Key Questions for Policy and Practice

There are a range of questions about race and mixed-income communities that could prove helpful to stimulating discussion and sharing ongoing implementation lessons among policymakers, advocates, developers, property managers, services providers, residents, and other stakeholders.

1. Why are the stated aims of current public housing reform policies largely silent about addressing racial segregation and discrimination? Given the possibility that failing to focus explicitly on race may result in reproducing or even exacerbating the effects of institutionalized and individual racism, how can those responsible for shaping and managing these efforts be more explicit and intentional about understanding and addressing the enduring challenges of race? Depending on the local demographics and social dynamics, what could a more explicit focus on racial integration in each particular mixed-income setting entail?

2. What are the particular challenges and opportunities presented by intra-racial tensions and cleavages? Given our findings of some instances of positive solidarity among high-income and low-income African Americans, how might those working in developments leverage the possibilities for racial solidarity as constructive, common ground?

3. What are the barriers to the establishment of racially diverse, cross-tenure governance mechanisms? Given the imperative of facilitating greater voice and inclusion for low-income African American residents in these communities, what changes in policy and practice would promote the establishment of more inclusionary associations? In each particular community context, which common issues and aspirations might serve well as priority areas of focus to bring residents together?

4. How can informal, "safe spaces," be generated for constructive cross-race discussions of these difficult social issues? What might be learned from the role played by existing efforts to convene neighborhood leaders around these issues? What existing national resources might inform and guide local practitioners?