Commentary

These comments relate to the articles in this Cityscape *symposium by Basolo, by Skobba and Goetz, and by Oakley, Ruel, and Reid.*

Market-Driven Public Housing Reforms: Inadequacy for Poverty Alleviation

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The three preceding articles in this symposium raise the similar question of how very low-income households (some of whom move with the assistance of the Housing Choice Voucher Program [HCVP]) fare across a range of potential outcomes, including employment, residential stability, housing satisfaction, school quality, and neighborhood economic conditions. In this commentary, I first briefly frame the historical and political context that led to public housing policy reforms, before summarizing the findings from the three articles in this section. Coinciding with the implications suggested by the authors, I make strategic recommendations for programmatic and structural changes that aim to create greater access to affordable rental apartments and to supportive housing interventions. My central argument throughout this commentary is that market-based housing strategies aimed at mobility alone will not significantly shift economic and social outcomes for extremely low-income households. As these articles suggest, poverty alleviation requires more than access to private-market rental housing. In closing, I offer policy recommendations that aim to reallocate federal housing assistance by increasing the supply of affordable housing units, providing universal tax incentives for renters, expanding the use of vouchers to unsaturated neighborhoods, and creating supportive housing interventions to address deep and persistent poverty.

Public Housing Transformation and Market-Driven Policy Reforms

The underlying rationale of the HCVP, particularly as it relates to public housing reforms, prioritizes the private-market provision of affordable rental housing. The historical and political context is relevant in order to assess the findings and implications of these three studies, as well as the others in this symposium on mixed-income housing strategies.

Since the late 1960s, the federal governments' role for the provision of affordable rental housing has steadily embraced strategies that subsidize private owners of rental properties. As opposed to publically owned properties, most new affordable housing units have been built through federal initiatives—such as the Low Income Housing Tax Credit (1986) and HOME funds from the National Affordable Housing Act (1990)—that use public funding to leverage private financing (Erikson, 2009; Fraser, Oakley, and Bazuin, 2012; McCarty, 2012; Schwartz, 2010). Subsidizing private development has been argued by political opponents of large government bureaucracy as a more efficient and timely method for producing affordable rental housing. Advocates of privatization claim the U.S. government has historically failed to adequately deliver necessary quality services, in part because of the inefficient state bureaucracies that are poorly managed and not properly incentivized. The reduction of government services encourages private-sector entities to enter new markets that were previously untapped. Private-sector actors, seeking to maximize their economic interests, will deliver better quality services, at lower costs. Individual citizens benefit by having an expanded market with more attractive alternatives than were previously available when the public service was the only option (Ellickson, 2010; Glaeser and Gyourko, 2008; Husock, 2003; Marcuse and Keating, 2006).

The underlying rationale for reforms suggests that market investment into the built environment of places long associated with concentrated poverty is necessary because the public-sector interventions have failed. If urban neighborhoods are to be radically reshaped, then a significant portion of the subsidized public housing rental units (and the renters living in them) will need to be replaced with housing and other related amenities that increase the potential for economic development.

These housing policy reforms reflect a broader movement of the U.S. welfare state that increasingly shifts responsibility from the public sector to the private sector for the provision of necessary goods and services, such as affordable rental housing. The trend in U.S. policymaking, which is increasing, has been to retrench government programs that meet basic needs for vulnerable citizens (such as for food, shelter, safety, and health) and to implement a private-sector model in which nongovernmental institutions are engaged by public policies to respond to individual needs. This shift places the role of the state in a removed or hidden position, as the government contracts out the direct operations of rental housing to private actors (Dreier, 2006; Hacker, 2002; Marcuse and Keating, 2006). These alterations in housing policy became widely embraced in the 1970s with federal housing assistance models that used rental subsidies to essentially reserve existing units in the private housing market. Rather than making an investment in rehabbing the old public housing units or constructing new units, the federal government policies since the mid-1980s responded to criticisms and shortcomings of the public housing program by inducing the private market to deliver affordable rental units.

A movement in the mid-1990s to reform public housing and deconcentrate poverty resulted in two major approaches that continue to dominate the policy agenda. The first focuses on dispersing public housing tenants and relocating them primarily through the use of the HCVP. Instead of living in public housing projects they would move to privately owned apartments where their rent would be subsidized by vouchers (Goetz, 2003; Varady et al., 2005). The second framework of mixed-income development focuses on redeveloping public housing sites through demolition, renovation, and the construction of new housing, primarily as embodied in the Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE VI) Program. The new developments would, it was argued, attract residents with higher incomes to urban low-income neighborhoods while maintaining a portion of the units for lower income residents (Fraser, Oakley, and Bazuin, 2012; Joseph, Chaskin, and Webber, 2007; Popkin et al., 2004; Smith, 2006). The policy framework of mixed-income development depends on the first strategy of dispersal because the mixed-income model necessitates the removal of tenants who live in redeveloping public housing sites, only a portion of whom are eligible and able to return the site. In contrast to the mixed-income development strategy, the dispersal strategy through housing vouchers does not aim to integrate public housing residents in close proximity to housing units that are not considered to be public or subsidized housing. Rather, voucher holders have the freedom to choose their housing and neighborhoods, although in a context of real constraints given the lack of affordable rental housing options truly available to residents who obtain vouchers.

A growing body of literature critiques housing reforms centered on mixed-income development and dispersal strategies. At the core of these analyses is the value to be extracted from otherwise underdeveloped areas of a city. Critics see government policies that encourage mixed-income housing and mobility initiatives as examples of neoliberal urban redevelopment—a process aimed at generating profits for economic and political elites who reclaim centrally located neighborhoods from the poor (Arena, 2012; Chaskin and Joseph, 2013; DeFilippis and Fraser, 2010; Fraser, DeFilippis, and Bazuin, 2012; Hackworth, 2009, 2007; Hyra, 2012; Imbroscio, 2011, 2008; Lees, 2008; Lipman, 2008; Smith and Stovall, 2008; Steinberg, 2010). What these policies do not do accomplish, critics say, is addressing systemic economic inequality, expanding opportunities for low-income families, or making efforts toward equitable urban redevelopment.

HOPE VI and the HCVP are illustrative of neoliberal policies that use government incentives to induce property owners to lease apartments to low-income households through the use of portable vouchers. Because these strategies are not structured to expand the availability of rental housing in tight markets, the strategies aim to address the problem of housing affordability, while leaving vague the problem of housing availability. This dilemma is the case because the policies are structured around the consumption rather than the production of new affordable rental units (Hays, 2012; Pierson, 1994; Schwartz, 2010). Since passage of the Quality Housing and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1998, public housing reforms have resulted in the reduction of approximately 200,000 units of public housing (McCarty, 2012). Furthermore, the 2008 recession affected the rental housing market in tremendous ways, primarily by increasing the numbers of households in need of rental housing. In fact, the number of households seeking rental housing rose by 1 million in 2011, representing the single largest increase in a 1-year period since the early 1980s (JCHS, 2012). As the rental housing market booms, the vacancy rates decrease and create a tighter rental market in which rents can be increased. According to the report from the National Low Income Housing Coalition, Out of Reach 2013, "for every 100 extremely low-income renter households, there are just 30 affordable and available units" (NLIHC, 2013: 1). During this same period, the federal government has continued to reduce the amount of funds for the HOME Investment Partnerships program, the Community Development Block Grant program, the Public Housing Operating and Capital Funds, and other programs that support federal rental assistance. It is within this historical and political context that research on public housing reforms that work to rely on market mechanisms need to be interrogated, a topic to which I now turn.

Victoria Basolo's study investigates the neighborhood poverty levels, employment status, and school quality for residents moving with housing vouchers compared with nonmovers who also have housing vouchers; it also examines these same factors for the movers before their move and subsequently afterwards. Basolo has a unique dataset comprising primary survey data and secondary administrative data from two local housing authorities in California collected between 2002 and 2004. Her literature review helps to contextualize the policy shifts that led to the expansion of the HCVP. She finds that movers do not have any significant differences when compared with nonmovers. It is more interesting that she finds that movers live in neighborhoods with very slight improvements in poverty rates and school quality, but that their employment status significantly drops after their move. These findings support previous research that the HCVP does not result in significant poverty deconcentration or produce mixed-income neighborhoods. In the aggregate, the HCVP may amount to a reshuffling of low-income households into other concentrated and segregated neighborhoods.

The findings by Kimberly Skobba and Edward G. Goetz raise the question of why informal housing arrangements and support networks matter more to low-income households than mobility to neighborhoods with access to higher quality services, amenities, and resources. This qualitative study examines the role of neighborhood conditions in the relocation decisions that low-income households make. Findings suggest that very low-income households are likely to use family, friends, and previous landlords to conduct quick, unplanned housing searches characterized out of "convenience and necessity." It is most significant that this article critiques housing policy strategies that make false assumptions about the choices and benefits of moving to opportunity neighborhoods, suggesting that low-income households make decisions about their moves based on relationships rather than on neighborhood environments. The authors argue that the informal social-support systems of low-income families are valuable assets to their residential stability, and so should not be ignored in the design of housing policies.

In Deirdre Oakley, Erin Ruel, and Lesley Reid's empirical study of 232 former public housing residents who relocated in Atlanta, the author's present two major findings. First, they find that residents who were less satisfied with the relocation process are also less satisfied with their postrelocation home and neighborhood. This finding is not surprising, considering that the Atlanta Housing Authority required all residents to move regardless of their personal needs or interests. Residents may have perceived that they were under dictates by the policy initiative that forced them to move. As a result, they reported ongoing discomfort with the experience of relocation and the ultimate outcome of living in their new apartments and neighborhoods. This finding raises the question of how to best provide the prerelocation and postrelocation supports to maximize a more positive experience for residents who have no choice but to move. The finding also calls into question whether residents (the purported beneficiaries) perceive the reforms, which demolish existing public housing, as positive. The second major finding is that relocated residents are moving to neighborhoods characterized by poverty and racial segregation. These neighborhoods are only slightly safer and less disadvantaged than the neighborhoods where their public housing apartments were located. Across the sample, former public housing residents who reported high satisfaction with their relocation process moved to slightly more residentially stable neighborhoods. Those neighborhoods also had significantly higher proportions of female-headed households, unemployment, and racial segregation, however—all indicators of neighborhood disadvantage. This finding suggests that mobility initiatives may not deconcentrate poverty in central cities when programmatic requirements are not in place to ensure vouchers are used in housing markets that do not already have saturation of subsidized housing.

Poverty Deconcentration or Poverty Alleviation?

In response to the three articles presented here and the summarized historical and political context, I now critique the underlying assumption that mobility policies, as represented through the HCVP, may be a "mechanism for low-income people to achieve better neighborhoods and access to new opportunities," as Basolo says. The underlying assumption—made by some policymakers, advocates, researchers, housing providers and others—that public housing reforms aimed at deconcentrating poverty also aim to decrease poverty must be called into question (Goetz, 2013, 2010; Imbroscio, 2011, 2008). Several reasons exist as to why it is important to not confuse poverty deconcentration through housing mobility with poverty alleviation.

The first reason relates to the structures of benefits in the HCVP. Although the manifest aim of policy is to provide housing assistance to low-income households, the transfer of the benefit from the government goes directly to the private property owner. The rent burden is reduced for the low-income household, while the property owner benefits through access to stable rental income. Depending on the condition of the unit and the demand for rental housing, the costs to operate an apartment may be less than the rental income provided through the program. It is possible that the HCVP creates a higher profit margin for owners leasing to a subsidized renter. This higher profit is one reason that owners of mixed-income housing developments in Chicago (and likely other places) are leasing market-rate units to voucher holders. Although it is not always the case that significant profit is obtained by landlords who house residents in the HCVP (as can be seen by its spatial concentration in certain areas and not others), the market-driven policy structure enables wealth generation, such that the unintended consequence of the policy further expands income and asset inequalities between those who have the means to purchase property and those who do not.

There is a second reason to be cautious to not assume the aims of poverty deconcentration through housing mobility are the same as poverty alleviation. These strategies do nothing to create equity in federal housing tax policy among citizens with low incomes and those with higher incomes (as signified by their ownership of a home). As is well documented, homeowners derive additional income through tax benefits (Dreier, 2006). Tax-based subsidies benefiting the affluent come in a variety of forms, including the federal home-mortgage interest deduction. This policy universally benefits higher income households who own homes because it lowers taxes for these households, at a cost of more than $60 billion to the federal government (NLIHC, 2013). This tax benefit has the effect of stimulating the demand and raising prices of owner-occupied housing units, which in turn negatively affects the supply of low- and moderate-income housing. If the most economically challenged proportion of the population is forced out of the private market (in part, because of government policies), then the solution may not be to further expand the use of market-driven policy mechanisms through vouchers but rather to find ways to expand access to income and wealth generating opportunities. One policy solution for this expansion could be in the form of a tax benefit for low-income renters that provides a similar tax benefit as the home-mortgage interest deduction, thus creating more equity between renters and homeowners alike.

The third reason to be cautious not to assume the aims of poverty deconcentration through housing mobility are poverty alleviation is that housing vouchers do not in and by themselves create access to more economically stable neighborhoods with greater resources, institutions, and amenities.

The research presented here suggests that the opposite is true—that low-income households with vouchers remain housed in neighborhoods that are racially segregated and economically disconnected. Although Skobba and Goetz suggest that this phenomenon may be because of individual desires to remain close to informal social-support networks, they also recognize that the portability of the vouchers are limited because of discrimination in certain local markets. By design, the policy does not necessitate that vouchers be distributed across municipalities or regions. This flexibility in how low-income households can use the vouchers (particularly in this case across spatial boundaries) may appear as a positive aspect of the program because households have the freedom to relocate to the area of their "choice." As the findings in these studies and others demonstrate, however, the voucher program is less flexible in implementation than in policy design because vouchers are clearly not a ticket to any neighborhood (Buron, Hayes, and Hailey, 2013; Chaskin et al., 2012). These articles demonstrate the real constraints of the voucher program because, in all three studies, most households remained in areas characterized by concentrated poverty and racial segregation. Because the federal policy lacks requirements (and proper incentives) for owners in stronger housing markets to participate, the outcomes of this housing mobility program are largely predictable. Municipalities with more economic stability (and usually where most of the population is nonminority) have very little enticement to take advantage of the program if the limited rental housing that exists can easily be rented through traditional market-rate methods. Thus, the current implementation of the voucher program does little to stem racial segregation and poverty concentration. Again, poverty deconcentration strategies should not be confused with poverty alleviation.

The final reason to be cautious about the underlying policy assumptions is that the policy is designed as a nonentitlement and nonuniversal program. As mentioned previously, many more households are eligible for federal rental housing assistance than who are awarded it. Although the access to rental subsidies certainly helps to reduce the rent burden on households lucky enough to receive it, it does not aim to address deep and persistent poverty on a systemic level for the nearly 30 percent of renter households who live below the federal poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

Public housing reforms aimed at deconcentrating poverty through mobility strategies, embodied by the HCVP, are not fundamentally aimed at decreasing poverty among most households who face risky housing and neighborhood environments. Instead, these strategies enable a portion of eligible households to access a subsidized housing benefit, thus reducing their rent burden. If this policy systemically aimed to alleviate poverty, then this benefit would be universally awarded while also expanding the overall number of permanent affordable housing units.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This analysis suggests that shifts in federal policy and local implementation will be necessary to create better outcomes for low-income households needing affordable rental housing. These market-driven housing strategies of housing vouchers have been embedded in the political structures and processes since the mid-1970s. These strategies are likely to be maintained unless significant political disruption occurs, such as social movement organizing that leads to a more radical transition in housing policy. Until a larger movement erupts, avenues for incremental reforms could restructure access and affordability to housing, such as the ones I recommend here.

First, one solution to meeting the increasing demand for affordable rental housing is simply to increase the supply of it. Several policy strategies are available to increase the supply of affordable rental housing, some of which are politically tricky. One important step that should be taken while the Obama Administration is still in office is to secure funding for the National Housing Trust Fund, which was authorized in the 2008 Housing and Economic Recovery Act (Hays, 2012). The appropriations for the fund have yet to be awarded. To finance the fund, The National Low Income Housing Coalition is proposing to reform the mortgage interest deduction, converting it to a nonrefundable 15-percent tax credit and reducing the cap on the maximum mortgage to receive a tax break from $1 million to $500,000 (NLIHC, 2013).

My second proposal suggests the need to ensure the existing public housing stock has sufficient funding for capital improvements. The period in history when repairs and maintenance on public housing could not be addressed needs to be over; but it is not. Instead, most existing public housing properties and other federally assisted multifamily properties (such as those properties that fall under Section 8 Mod Rehab or Section 236 regulations) need significant capital repairs and face a significant lack of funding to address capital risks. HUD's new Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) program allows for the conversion of these properties to long-term Section 8 project-based rent subsidies, while also creating the ability to obtain private equity and debt to pay for necessary renovations. As of January 2013, HUD awarded new Housing Assistance Payment contracts on approximately 13,000 units through the RAD program (HUD, 2013). I hope this program will represent a shift toward more creative economic feasibility and sustainability of the rental housing stock. The maintenance of the existing public housing stock through federal programs such as RAD is of utmost importance.

Third, it may be time to rethink the benefits of the HCVP and call into question the extent that it may be contributing to maintaining urban poverty. If vouchers are unintentionally contributing to reconcentrating poverty in the areas where public housing projects once stood and where mixed-income developments are now located, then resources may be better allocated to investing in strategies that stem the downward cycling of the economic instability in these areas. It may be time to better invest in other economic development and housing strategies that aim to comprehensively redevelop urban neighborhoods. As an alternative, local housing advocates, government officials, and program operators may also need to develop expertise in accessing rental housing outside high-poverty neighborhoods to create better access to residential options. Regional initiatives, such as Chicago's Preservation Compact that preserves existing affordable rental housing and increases access to it for low-income households, may serve as a model for other municipalities attempting to expand the use of housing vouchers outside of central-city areas (Preservation Compact, 2012).

My final recommendation relates to the importance of ongoing support services for relocated families. The literature review and findings from all three articles suggest that families who are relocated through public housing transformation initiatives face an array of economic and social challenges that are not fundamentally altered by housing initiatives alone. Recent research by the Urban Institute demonstrates that intensive case management to support a particular group of "high need" residents and their children may enable conditions under which some families will be able to address the trauma, violence, and poverty they have endured (Theodos et al., 2012). The Urban Institute's multisite Housing Opportunity and Services Together demonstration is developing a model for innovative strategies for equipping young people and their adult family members with tools to overcome the effects of concentrated disadvantages with the goal of interrupting intergenerational poverty (Scott et al., 2013). Although this demonstration aims at a place-based strategy in family public housing and mixed-income developments, a need still exists to develop and test social-support interventions for those residents who relocate into apartments in the private market through the use of a housing voucher. As evidenced by all these articles, many families who endured the worst of distressed public housing and who are in the midst of relocation face extremely complex challenges, such as long-term disconnection from the labor force, extremely low incomes, and larger household sizes. This reality points to questions about how former public housing residents relocating with vouchers will fare during and after their moves, because they may be in particularly precarious positions and further disconnected from formal community and social supports. It is for these reasons that relocating residents may benefit by providing increased access to and funding for neighborhood-based community and social supports.

In conclusion, the research presented in this symposium, along with the commentaries, enables us to see the importance of developing housing policies that aim to significantly reduce the conditions that create economic inequality and poverty. Public housing reforms that deconcentrate poverty through housing mobility and mixed-income development strategies do not necessarily shift the opportunities and outcomes for very low-income households. Rather, these market-based housing strategies aimed at mobility need to be partnered with other economic and social development policies that together may more fundamentally shift the poverty in the United States.

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