The New Stigma of Relocated Public Housing Residents: Challenges to Social Identity in Mixed-Income Developments

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Abstract

Public housing residents long experienced stigma as members of an urban ‘underclass.’ One policy response is the creation of mixed-income developments; by deconcentrating poverty and integrating residents into communities in which their residences are indistinguishable from neighbors, such efforts purport to reduce stigma associated with residency in traditional public housing. Through in-depth interviews with relocated public housing residents and observation at three mixed-income developments in Chicago, we find this is not the case. Stigma associated with living in public housing is ameliorated, yet residents report that their experience of stigma has intensified in other ways. The negative response of higher-income residents, along with stringent screening and rule enforcement, amplifies the sense of difference that many residents feel in these contexts. We demonstrate that this new form of stigma has generated a range of coping responses as relocated public housing residents seek to maintain eligibility while buttressing their social identity.

Introduction

Residents of public housing developments have long been stigmatized for their reliance on government subsidies, perceived self-destructive and non-mainstream behavior, and the crime and gang culture entrenched in and around the “projects” (Wacquant, 2008; Macleod, 1987). A host of scholarship focused on ghetto culture and the “underclass” has posited that the circumstances and anti-social behavior of the urban poor can be characterized as an outcome of “concentration effects” that resulted from their social isolation in high-poverty neighborhoods (e.g., Hannerz, 1969; Jencks and Peterson, 1991; Wilson, 1987). Thus the enduring stigma of public housing residents is exacerbated, if not generated, by their segregation from the rest of “mainstream” society. Indeed, Xavier de Souza Briggs and his colleagues have suggested that in the aftermath of welfare reform in the 1990s, public housing residents have replaced welfare recipients as the primary focus of the general public’s resentment of the “undeserving poor” (Briggs, Popkin, and Goering 2010; Katz, 1990).
The last two decades have seen a concerted effort by policymakers in the U.S. to deconcentrate poverty through the dispersal of public housing residents into lower-poverty neighborhoods and through the replacement of selected public housing developments with mixed-income housing (Cisneros and Engdahl, 2009; Joseph, Chaskin, and Webber, 2007; Khadduri, 2001; Kleit, 2005; Popkin et al., 2004). Although dispersal strategies have often been stymied by NIMBY (not in my backyard) resistance and public housing residents’ limited familiarity with low-poverty neighborhoods (Goetz 2000, 2003; Varady and Walker, 2003), mixed-income housing, often built on the original public housing site, offers a path around both concerns. Furthermore, with its strategic focus on high-quality design with externally indistinguishable units, extensive (if controversial) screening criteria, and a balance of higher- and low-income residents, mixed-income development holds the promise, according to its proponents, of creating environments where public housing residents might be able to shed the stigma with which they were formerly burdened, integrating them into new, well-functioning, better-connected neighborhoods (Chicago Housing Authority, 2000).

To what extent does a change of address and transformation of the surrounding environment translate into reduced stigmatization for public housing residents? This article explores this question. Drawing from research at three new, mixed-income developments in Chicago, we examine changes in the regulatory and social environment and the perspectives and experiences of public housing residents living there. We find that although some forms of stigma may have been ameliorated in these new settings, in other ways the experience of stigma and sense of isolation has intensified. The often tense, and at times caustic, response of some higher-income residents in reaction to their proximity to relocated public housing residents, coupled with systematic efforts by the housing authority and property management to monitor activity, change behavior, and enforce rules amplifies the sense of difference and alienation that many public housing residents feel in these contexts. As such, stigma appears to have shifted from being associated with the residents’ place of residence (the “projects”) to being linked to where they used to live and what that implies (or what their neighbors infer) about their character, values, and human potential. We will demonstrate that this new form of stigma has generated a range of coping responses on the part of relocated public housing residents as they seek to maintain their eligibility to live in these revitalizing environments while buttressing their social identity and sense of self-worth.

This article proceeds as follows. First, we draw on the seminal work of Erving Goffman (1963) to lay out a theoretical framework with which to consider the phenomenon of social stigma in mixed-income settings. We then establish some theoretical expectations for how the relocation of residents from public housing to mixed-income housing might influence their sense of stigmatization and provide a scan of existing research on resident experiences in mixed-income developments, with a particular examination of findings regarding stigmatization. After introducing the context, methods, and data for our study, we consider the extent to which living in mixed-income environments has engendered positive changes in residents’ pride and sense of identity or created new kinds of stigmatizing dynamics in the regulatory and social environment they must navigate. Finally, we investigate the types of defensive and self-affirming responses that are emerging as these residents assert their identities in these new environments. We conclude by considering implications for ways in which the massive investment in the creation of mixed-income communities in Chicago and elsewhere might be better leveraged to create a path towards a more accepted social status for relocated public housing residents.

Theorizing stigma: The social construction of the “discredited”

In a large body of social science literature over the last 50 years, scholars have sought to define stigma and explain its societal function (e.g., Crocker, Major, and Steele 1998; Goffman, 1963, 1967; Fanon, 1967; Foucault, 2003; Link and Phelan, 2001; Povinelli, 2002; Wacquant, 2008). Though definitions vary widely (Link and Phelan, 2001), a common thread to this scholarship is the suggestion that stigma serves a social-regulatory purpose by maintaining hierarchical positions of power through
shunning and discrediting those individuals who are presumed to exist outside the confines of mainstream social roles and norms (Goffman, 1963; Foucault, 2003; Povinelli, 2002). Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998, p. 505) provide a concise definition of social stigma as “an attribute, or characteristic, that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context.” However, as Goffman points out, stigma is socially constructed and relational; although conceptualizations of stigma often focus on individual attributes, “a language of relationships, not attributes, is really needed” (1963, p. 3).

Goffman pioneered the contemporary investigation of the sociology of stigma with his (1963) book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Although not without limitations, his incisive exploration remains remarkably cogent some fifty years later, and when applied to today’s social dynamics in mixed-income developments appears tailor-made for analyzing some of the challenges experienced by relocated public housing residents. Indeed, Goffman (1963, p. 12) explicitly stated his interest in “the issue of ‘mixed contacts’: the moments when stigmatized and normal are in the same ‘social situation,’ that is, in one another’s immediate physical presence.”

Goffman explored the situation of individuals who are “discredited” from full social acceptance. The Greek origin of the term stigma referred to the actual marks burned into the bodies of those alleged to have transgressed societal norms to signify that they were to be avoided by other citizens. Goffman pointed out that in modern society certain traits and attributes—physical disability, mental illness, race, social class—have taken on the function of a stigmatizing mark that signals an “undesired differentness” from other members of society (1963, p. 5). In a helpful review of the literature on social stigma, Link and Phelan (2001) build on Goffman’s treatment of stigma by emphasizing an explicit emphasis on the role of power and societal position. Link and Phelan suggest that the elements of stigma include the labeling of persons based on distinguishing characteristics to place individuals into different categories (often with substantial oversimplification), the linking of those labels to negative stereotypes, the establishment of social position and distance from those labeled, the assumption of fundamental and inherent differences between groups, and, finally, status loss, differential treatment, and unequal outcomes for those labeled.

Link and Phelan (2001) draw on the field of social psychology to explain the function of stigma and why this phenomenon is so inherent and durable in our society. They explain that stigma is essentially a form of mental shortcutting, facilitating quick and effortless judgments about people we encounter so that we can determine the threat or opportunity they represent and shape our actions towards them. Their essential contribution to the analysis of stigma is that differential access to social, economic, and political power is critical to the construction and maintenance of stigma and its consequences. Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998) further explicate the mutually reinforcing relationship between social stigma and social inequity by pointing out that stigma also serves to justify the disadvantaged positions of certain groups in our society, thus preserving inequality.

How then does stigma manifest itself in our daily routines and what are the implications for the stigmatized? Goffman explained that as we encounter strangers, we use their appearance to develop expectations about them. These often unconscious expectations lead to a “discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity.” What we perceive of this stranger is not necessarily an accurate representation of their capabilities. By adopting these expectations, we “spoil” the individual’s social identity. Even more perniciously, this initial categorization is linked to much broader and profound generalizations that ultimately reduce a person’s social opportunity, constructing “an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences, such as those of social class” and “imput[ing] a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one” (1963, p. 5).

Goffman was particularly interested in the coping responses of stigmatized individuals. He pointed out that many may accept and internalize their “undesired differentness” and carry a sense of anxiety, insecurity, and shame. Some may become very self-conscious about their behavior, constantly aware
of how they are being perceived and judged. Some may “arrange life so as to avoid” social contact with those unlike them (Goffman 1963, p. 12). Goffman suggested that the task for those whose stigma could not be hidden became one of “tension management,” whereas those who could conceal their stigma could cope through “information management” (1963, p. 135). However, Crocker, Major, and Steele’s research (1998) finds that prejudice against stigmatized groups does not necessarily result in lower self-esteem for members of those groups.

An important dimension of coping for those who are stigmatized is their relationship to others who are similarly marginalized from society. For some, isolating themselves among others like them can provide a means of self-protection: “among his own, the stigmatized individual can use his disadvantage as a basis for organizing life, but he must resign himself to a half-world to do so” (Goffman, 1963, p. 21). Within this “half-world,” a collective identity can be formed that can provide some social support and a degree of self-affirmation. On the other hand, because that collective identity also incorporates notions of inferiority and aberration from the social norm, there is likely to be ambivalence: “oscillations may occur in his support of, identification with, and participation among his own” (Goffman, 1963, p. 38).

**Mixed-income development and social identity: Mainstreaming or a new stigma?**

Public housing in the U.S. was initially established in the late 1930s to provide transitional housing for individuals and families facing temporary economic distress. Over time, driven by a variety of factors, public housing and the resident population it housed took on a vastly different character from the original intent (Bowly, 1978; Hunt, 2009). The result, in Chicago and other major cities across the U.S., has been the social and economic isolation of tens of thousands of low-income, largely African-American households in communities characterized by physical deterioration, low quality services, joblessness, and violence and crime (Hunt, 2009; Popkin et al., 2000).

The national push towards poverty deconcentration was initiated in the early 1990s. A formal assessment of the extent of severely distressed public housing led to bipartisan consensus in Congress to begin a major restructuring of public housing and, funded by the $1.5 billion HOPE VI program, dilapidated and crime-ridden public housing high-rises began to be demolished across the United States, many to be replaced by mixed-income developments (Brophy and Smith, 1997; Cisneros and Engdahl, 2009; Popkin, 2007; Popkin et. al., 2004).

Several theoretical propositions undergird the expectation that mixed-income development will have benefits for relocated public housing residents who are able to secure units in the new developments (see Joseph, Chaskin, and Webber, 2007, for a critical review). Some of these focus on the presumed dysfunctional personal attributes and behavior of the urban poor (DeFilippis and Fraser, 2010), reflecting a generally accepted stigma about public housing residents (Briggs, Popkin, and Goering, 2010) and leading to an emphasis on the need for behavior modification through heightened rules, monitoring, and role modeling. As Pattillo (2007) has argued, this emphasis relies on an incomplete reading of William Julius Wilson’s (1987) analysis of the causes of persistent urban poverty. Although Wilson did suggest that social isolation and a lack of mainstream role models contributes to deviant behavioral patterns and value frameworks (Wilson, 1987; Wilson, 1996; Pattillo, 2007), his analysis primarily focused on major structural constraints—economic restructuring, spatial mismatch—that led to the creation of areas of concentrated disadvantage. This focus on structural barriers to opportunity has been largely overshadowed by the public’s pre-occupation with the social deviance of public housing residents.

Link and Phelan (2001) explain that a critical dynamic in stigmatization is when one becomes identified by his or her stigma, as if it is an inherent attribute rather than simply a situational condition. “Public housing resident” has become a term that carries informational weight about the presumed nature of the individual, rather than simply a description of place of residence. Residing in public
housing has come to signal differentness from “normal” society (Briggs, Popkin, and Goering, 2010). In theory, by moving public housing residents out of the housing complexes that are the mark of their stigmatization, these individuals and their families might be freed up to seek more social and economic opportunities.

Racial segregation and racial stereotyping is a critical factor in the powerful and enduring stigmatization of public housing residents. Brad Hunt’s thorough review of the history of Chicago public housing (2009) demonstrates how public housing, while intended to provide transitional, subsidized housing to both blacks and whites, came to be built mostly in black slum areas and therefore seen publicly as being a government policy just for African Americans. Even where public housing was built in predominantly white areas of the city, or intentionally integrated when first populated, as more blacks moved into the developments, whites moved out. As conditions in public housing deteriorated and the “projects” became characterized by crime, violence and disrepair, prevailing racial stereotypes about African Americans as inferior and the public perception of public housing residents as the undeserving poor became conflated.

A closer look at how mixed-income development is being implemented in Chicago reveals intentional efforts to counteract public housing stigma but also exposes countervailing factors that may reduce the overall destigmatizing effect. The developers and housing authority in Chicago are seeking to reduce the stigmatization of public housing in the new mixed-income developments through several strategies. For example, design choices have been made to insure that the units are externally indistinguishable and, to a large extent, integrated throughout the developments so that it is harder to identify relocated public housing residents by the appearance or location of their housing unit. In addition, stringent screening and monitoring procedures and rules have been implemented with the stated objective of ensuring that the public housing residents who move into mixed-income developments are well-positioned to attempt to assimilate smoothly among residents of other backgrounds.

However, the very screening and monitoring procedures that are intended to help make mixed-income housing successful may also exacerbate public housing residents’ feelings of scrutiny and differential treatment and increase their sense of insecurity and anxiety. Furthermore, the high public profile of the public housing transformation has surfaced public resentment about the nature of the accommodations being made for public housing residents, especially the quality and expense of housing for those who are so heavily dependent on government subsidies. To the extent that this resentment is shared, or perhaps even heightened, among those higher-income residents who decide to rent or purchase units in a mixed-income development, this may exacerbate us-versus-them tensions even before there is any actual interaction.

There is deep skepticism about the integrationist claims of mixed-income policy by those who argue that it is fundamentally driven by a neoliberal approach to urban redevelopment and, therefore, oriented towards creating environments that will generate market demand rather than facilitating access to opportunity for the urban poor (August, 2008; DeFilippis and Fraser, 2010; Fraser and Kick, 2007; Imbroscio, 2008; Lees, 2008; Smith and Stovall, 2008). Ruming, Mee, and McGuirk (2004 p. 235) assert that the stigmatization of public housing residents has its roots not in the personal prejudices of individual homeowners, but in the entire system that gave rise to subsidized housing: “Housing policy has, since the early 1900’s, been implicated in the development of a system of binary opposites which positions ownership as the natural and correct tenure, and public housing as abnormal and, hence, inferior.” It is this premise, they argue, which provides a justification for the stigmatization of public housing residents and betrays the false hope for what social mixing can accomplish.
Emerging evidence from other mixed-income development research

A small but growing number of empirical studies in countries such as Australia, Canada, Ireland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the U.S. have analyzed the social dynamics in emerging mixed-income communities. Findings are quite consistent that strong stigma exists prior to the redevelopment and that the mixing of tenures and incomes does not appear to reduce the stigma but, in many cases, can exacerbate it. Jupp (1999) suggests that the tenure and income differences do not cause tensions among residents but certainly appear to compound the problems. A starting point for several authors is that, by virtue of their reliance on a public subsidy for their housing, residents of public housing are widely stigmatized and associated with negative characteristics such as a propensity for criminal behavior and a low work ethic (Arthurson, 2010; Jupp, 1999; Ruming, Mee, and McGuirk, 2004).

This pre-existing stigma is carried into the new developments and serves as a basis for alienation, resentment, and differential treatment. From their study of a mixed-income development in Australia, Ruming, Mee, and McGuirk (2004, p. 244) concluded that “public tenants actively experience oppression and stigmatization” in the new development and found a “clear association between social problems and public housing tenants” identified by owners and a willingness to attribute a general perception of social instability to the presence of public housing tenants. Residents at a mixed-income development in Scotland felt that they were being purposely excluded from meetings among other residents (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2000). At new developments in the U.S., Graves (2010) and Joseph (2008) found that the stigmatization of public housing residents was promulgated not only by higher-income residents, but also by management staff at the developments. Graves (2010, p. 127) reports that subsidized residents felt that rules and regulations were specifically directed against their lifestyle choices, which left “subsidized residents feeling marginalized and alienated from their market-rate neighbors” (cf. Chaskin and Joseph, 2010). As Arthurson (2010, p. 61) states, “stigma appears to undermine the anticipated opportunities for cross-tenure social interaction” (cf. Atkinson and Kintrea, 2000; Graves, 2010).

On a positive note, some studies indicate that while stigma associated with residents of public housing persisted, the stigma associated with the actual housing complex was ameliorated. Atkinson and Kintrea (2000, p.105) conclude that; “it seems clear that the presence of homeowners helps to alleviate the stigma, which is part of the experience of being a resident in the most deprived estates.”

Given this emerging empirical evidence, we strongly question the expectation that there will be positive effects on the stigmatization of public housing residents through social mixing. Rather than an end to stigma through economic and (sometimes) racial integration, we might just as likely expect stigma to be exacerbated. In addition to investigating this assertion in the context of mixed-income developments replacing public housing in Chicago, there are several other questions we can probe more deeply here regarding the dynamics of stigma in these new environments. For example, to the extent that forms of stigma are perpetuated, what is the role of formal actors and regulations versus informal actions and attitudes of higher-income residents? To the extent that they are needed, what are the coping strategies adopted by relocated public housing residents? What types of dynamics emerge among relocated public housing residents, and is there evidence of a perpetuation of the “half-world” anticipated by Goffman?

Context, data, and methods

Announced in 1999 as a 10-year, $1.5 billion strategy and now slated to last at least 15 years and cost considerably more, the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) Plan for Transformation involves the demolition of about 22,000 units of public housing, the rehabbing of over 17,000 units, and new construction of about 7,700 public housing units in 10 new mixed-income developments with a total of about 17,000 units (CHA, 2008). All of the developments are being built and managed through public/private partnerships with eight different private developers having lead responsibility at various sites for securing financing, overseeing design and construction, marketing to subsidized and
unsubsidized residents, and contracting for property management and social service provision. The mix of units is negotiated among the developer, CHA, and local community stakeholders according to a rough guideline of one-third public housing, one-third subsidized, and one-third market-rate. Most of the developments include a mix of rental and for-sale housing (for more details on the developments in Chicago see Joseph, 2010).

This paper focuses on three mixed-income developments: Oakwood Shores, Park Boulevard, and Westhaven Park. Oakwood Shores replaces the Ida B. Wells/Madden Park development on the south side of Chicago and will be the largest of these three new developments at full build-out. Park Boulevard is being built in place of Stateway Gardens, a collection of eight high-rise buildings that was constructed as part of the “State Street Corridor,” which also included the 28 high-rise towers of the Robert Taylor homes, among other public housing developments. Westhaven Park is the second phase of the redevelopment of Henry Horner Homes, which was a primarily high-rise development on the city’s west side, and will have a larger proportion of public housing residents than any other site.

A few key differences should be noted among the three developments, and we will indicate throughout the paper instances where these differences may be relevant to our findings across sites. All redevelopment at Horner Homes is governed by a consent decree that is the result of a successful class-action lawsuit brought against the Chicago Housing Authority to redress the housing discrimination that created the racial segregation at the site (see Wilen, 2006 for a history of this lawsuit and the subsequent redevelopment at Horner Homes). Beyond lease compliance, residents from Horner who want to move into Westhaven Park are not subject to the kinds of eligibility requirements in place at other mixed-income developments, for example, with regard to employment or drug testing (Park Boulevard has a work requirement but no drug testing). Westhaven Park includes a 113-unit, 9-story midrise building that, at the time of our interviews, was the only building at any of the three sites to have such a critical mass of owners and renters living side-by-side within the same building. Occupancy at Park Boulevard took place later than at the other two sites due to financing and construction delays, so respondents have been living at the site for a shorter period of time.

Our analysis is based on three sources of data: 34 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with public housing residents residing in the three developments, 184 field notes from community meetings and events, and archival material on the Transformation and the developments in each site. The sample of residents from each site was randomly drawn from developer lists. Two waves of interviews were conducted at Westhaven Park and Oakwood Shores, roughly one year apart; the analysis here draws primarily on the second wave of interviews. Interviews at Park Boulevard were conducted once, during the second wave of data collection, as the development was not yet completed during the first phase. Interview protocols were semi-structured and provided latitude for respondents to reflect at length on a series of open-ended questions, including those asking for reflection on the challenges and positive features of current residence, thoughts on screening and rules, the nature of social interaction with their neighbors, and perspectives on their lives at these mixed-income developments. Interviews were transcribed in their entirety and analyzed qualitatively with a focus on themes related to stigma, social tensions, and coping mechanisms.

The paper also draws on extensive field observations that were conducted from 2006 to 2008 at all three sites. These consist of observations of various governance, management, and neighborhood meetings, as well as community activities and events. All relevant notes were reviewed and inductively coded to ascertain how relocated public housing residents are discussed by stakeholders and other residents, and how relocated public housing residents themselves discuss norm- and behavior-specific tensions in these public settings. In addition, materials such as court documents, newspaper articles, annual crime reports, annual CHA reports, and transcribed CHA public hearings were reviewed.
**Mixité**: an urban and housing issue?

Shedding the stigma of place: Address prestige and improved environment

Our interviews with relocated public housing residents who were able to move back into mixed-income developments made clear that the massive investment in the construction of brand new developments and associated physical revitalization of landscaping, streets, and parks has had a major payoff in terms of ending the stigma that they felt about living in an unattractive, deteriorated, unsafe public housing complex. They describe two related types of destigmatizing benefits from their new residence. First, there has been a shift of external perceptions about where they live leading to a greater willingness by others to come to the development. Second, the physical and social changes in the environment around them also provide direct substantive benefits to them and their families.

**Address stigma.** Living in the old public housing high-rises, residents had become used to the indignity of outsiders’ negative perceptions of their community and refusal to come to the “projects.” As a resident of Oakwood Shores explained:

I used to get my feelings hurt over and over, like special programs that my son is on…we had girlfriends that we know lived outside of [public housing]. Therapists would come to the home, you know do therapy on their children, but with me, they wouldn’t even come…you know, so people shut down on us because of where we lived.

Now, with the demolition of the old buildings and construction of the new developments has come a very different outside perception. Another Oakwood Shores resident discussed her pleasure that restaurants would now deliver to her door:

It’s hard, like where the food is good, they didn’t used to come over there to the area and stuff. All our food now is what do you call it, delivered? They’ll be like, “Where you live at?” I’ll tell them the new development, they hurry up and get over here.

Many of these residents had internalized a sense of shame and inferiority about their former communities. Their change of residence has led them to feel more pride about where they live. A current Oakwood Shores resident described how she felt more comfortable with others knowing her address:

[Moving here] has helped us a whole lot. It is so funny because when I go places and I tell them my address, people start treating me different like I’ve got all this money: “Wow, you’re over there.” ’Cause I had a person tell me, ‘Oh you got money,’ and I didn’t dispute it, if you didn’t know, of course. So it’s affected me in a really good way, you know. And I’m on the Board of Directors at my son’s school…. I’m sitting up on the Board with all these rich attorneys and all these people, and they drive me home when meeting is over. Back in the day, I was embarrassed.

Similarly, a Westhaven Park resident described how a family member now has a very different perception of where she lives:

She wouldn’t have never, ever came to where I was living….She had never came there, but here, she’s like, ‘It’s really nice.’ [She] thinks it’s a really nice apartment.

In discussing the benefits of moving to the new developments, almost two-thirds of the respondents across the three sites mentioned now being much more at ease when telling outsiders their address and discussed being proud when their families come to visit them at their new homes.

**Quality of the surrounding environment.** In addition to appreciating the improved perceptions by outsiders, respondents described a number of substantive changes to their surrounding environments helping them to feel better about themselves and their place in society. These changes include physical revitalization, decreased crime, increased population diversity, and improvements to services and amenities. In one example, a Park Boulevard resident described a situation where a family member coming to visit her for the first time had to keep calling to check to make sure he was not in the wrong place:

Compared to all them buildings that was tall up there, windows broken out, boarded up, fire [damage], people had fires and the outside caught on fire, oh it [now] looks – you can’t tell
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This is the [same area] after [redevelopment]. . . . One of my brothers came to visit me and he keep calling me [as he got closer]. “Where is you?” I’m like, “Thirty-fifth and State.” When he got here . . . he was like, “Girl, this don’t even look like State Street.”

The increased diversity of community residents, both economic and racial, is another specific change that makes residents feel generally better about their surroundings and, by extension, themselves. Over two-thirds of respondents described their satisfaction with the end to concentrated poverty and increased presence of people of other races and ethnicities. A Westhaven Park resident discussed the changes in this way:

They’re making it better and it’s not just low income, low income, low income. You’re starting to see different people in the area which makes you feel like it’s – you’re not just labeled as one group of individuals, so that’s a good thing.

Several respondents hoped that the integration would help them and their children grow more comfortable among people of other races and backgrounds. As a Westhaven Park resident explained, “I think this community makes a lot of difference because this area used to be predominantly African American. We are learning to live with any culture.” Others felt that it would be good for their children to be exposed to a wide variety of people as they grew up. As an Oakwood Shores resident described it: “Just show your kids that you just – let them get used to different nationalities and different types of people and their views and their – how they live.” However, as will be described in more detail below, it is important to note that appreciation of increased diversity was tempered for some residents by fears about eventually being pushed out by the incoming white, affluent population.

Thus, as intended, the redevelopment of public housing into mixed-income developments with new names, high quality designs, and improved security has provided public housing relocatees who are able to take up residence there with an address they can be proud of and a diverse social environment that exposes them and their children to neighbors of different socioeconomic and (in some cases) racial backgrounds. Yet this is only part of the story. The new environments have generated new social challenges for the residents that have resulted in subtle and not-so-subtle shifts in the nature of stigmatization.

New forms of stigmatization: Administrative intrusion and social prejudice

Although most respondents described no longer feeling stigmatized by their residence and its surroundings, many of them indicated that this improvement was offset by the sense of stigma that they now felt based on how they were singled-out and differentially treated by both the administrative processes put in place for resident relocation and by their new, higher-income neighbors. These two forms of stigma amount to a new type of challenge to the social identity of relocated public housing residents.

Administrative intrusion. As mentioned above, in designing the resident relocation process, the Chicago Housing Authority has made it a priority to put stringent screening and monitoring procedures in place to attempt to closely select and manage the population of relocated public housing residents that move into the new mixed-income developments. These elements of the relocation process have increased many respondents’ sense of stigmatization and can be described in two categories: pre-occupancy screening and post-occupancy rules and monitoring.

Pre-occupancy: The screening and readiness process. One manifestation of stigmatization described by Goffman (1963) is that stigmatized groups often must deal publicly with those aspects of their lives that are the most personal in order to achieve certain rights and access. This is certainly reflected in the case at hand. At most sites, selection criteria include housekeeping checks, lease compliance, drug testing, criminal background checks, credit checks, and employment verification. Although these were designed to screen public housing residents, legal advocates have successfully argued that any lease compliance regulations, including drug testing, must be applied to renters of all income levels. The criteria do not apply to home purchasers. As mentioned earlier, due to the consent
decree in place, residents moving from Henry Horner Homes into Westhaven Park were not subject to any selection criteria beyond lease compliance, and at Park Boulevard the developer elected not to impose drug testing. In all three sites, relocating residents also had to attend orientation sessions where they were shown such things as how to wash dishes and use certain appliances.

Post-occupancy: New rules and regulations. In addition to careful screening of public housing residents, the CHA and the private property managers of the new developments were also concerned about maintaining strict norms of behavior in the new developments through explicit, comprehensive rules and vigilant monitoring. The rules concern both resident actions within their own units as well as in shared, common space in the development.

Some respondents found the development rules unduly restrictive. As one resident from Oakwood Shores complained:

I was very stressed out here because it takes more to live under these rules as opposed to [in my former public housing development]. We didn't have the rules and people here watch [your behavior]. [They] make sure you empty the garbage right or the kids [are not] too loud, so I've been stressed here.

Many, particularly those with children, found the rules difficult to follow because of the internal architectural differences between traditional public housing and housing in mixed-income developments. Unlike traditional public housing, which had cinderblock walls and gloss paint, housing in the mixed-income developments has cream carpets, matte paint, and thin walls. This makes the apartments more difficult to keep clean and quiet, especially when young children are in the home. As an Oakwood Shores resident explained:

Not that I have something to hide, because I really don’t, but I have three children and housekeeping is half, it is a major chore. It goes beyond chore…. [T]hese kids are carefree. They could care less about an inspection. So you know to have to always kind of like try to be you know like, ‘I can’t mess up the property up,’ or you know the carpet. I get my carpet cleaned at least maybe three or four times out of a year, but you know I’m due for a cleaning now. It’s expensive. It’s very expensive. This color is terrible for kids.

Relocated public housing residents at all three sites are required frequent housekeeping checks. These checks are considered by many to be invasive and anxiety-provoking, as poor marks can lead to write-ups and even transfer or eviction. The frustrations expressed by property managers and higher-income residents in private and public meetings about the rule infractions by relocated public housing residents often emphasize personal deficiencies on the part of these residents, without recognition that a contributing factor is unit design that is not conducive to the needs of families with children. At Park Boulevard, debates among property management, service providers and CHA staff around this issue led to the service provider volunteering to visit every relocated public housing resident’s unit to document a list of maintenance issues, hoping to avoid these issues being blamed on the residents themselves later.

The new regulations extend well beyond unit upkeep. All three sites have mandates against gathering in public spaces outside and inside the development buildings. In private meetings, property managers have discussed the challenges of maintaining a certain image and marketability for the development when there are large gatherings of people in the lobbies and entrances at all hours of the day, as there used to be in the public housing developments. Other rules, described in lease documents and by interviewees, include no loud music after a certain hour in the evening, no barbecuing on the balconies (which does not apply to owners whose barbecuing can be seen and smelled by their neighboring renters), no pets (also not applicable to owners), no unapproved furniture or belongings kept on the balconies, no unattended children, and no littering or inappropriate garbage disposal. Relocated public housing residents at Park Boulevard complained in particular about regulation of the local playlot, where the developer has established a rule that children over the age of ten are not allowed. While understanding the need to restrict teenagers, this has angered many mothers who feel that their older
children lack a local place to play. Also, given the demographics at these sites (relocated public housing residents tend to have more and older children than do their more affluent neighbors), this rule is felt by many as specifically targeted at relocated public housing residents.

Respondents across the sites complained about the level of monitoring, with over two-thirds of the sample across sites expressing concerns about this intrusion, and its differential impact on low-income and relocated public housing residents. An Oakwood Shores resident exclaimed:

Well, believe me, you are being watched. They watch you come in and watch you go out…. The cameras. The cameras. And if anything goes wrong and they pull you in the office, they’re gonna tell you every detail. I say damn! Damn! ’Cause the [property manager] told us, she said there’s some other people in here paying some good, tall money for staying here, and they ain’t gonna let nobody just, you know. mess up the deal. They’ll throw you out and put somebody else in here.

Respondents seemed keenly aware of the threat of eviction for rules infractions and, as one put, feel like they are constantly “walking on eggshells.” Over half of the respondents at Westhaven Park, almost half at Park Boulevard, and over a quarter at Oakwood Shores reported having been cited for a violation.

The anxiety about eviction seemed most broadly shared among Oakwood Shores respondents who do not have the protection of the consent decree at Westhaven Park, as described above, and, having lived in the new development for longer than residents at Park Boulevard have had more opportunity to reflect on their seemingly tenuous position in the development. CHA has no obligation to transfer households to other subsidized housing once they have been placed in a mixed-income development and CHA policy states that anyone who is evicted from a mixed-income development will forfeit the opportunity to live in any other one as their “permanent housing choice.” One resident explained that the biggest concerns she had for her future at Oakwood Shores was her job and her health because, as she explained, “if you get sick, you can’t get no job” and “you got to be working to live here.” Almost all respondents at Oakwood Shores expressed concern about maintaining employment, compared with about a quarter of those at Westhaven Park and Park Boulevard (where most of the residents in our sample were either exempt from the employment requirement or currently working).

The restrictiveness of the rules and threat of eviction is an issue that is a troubling but acceptable reality of the new developments for most of the respondents, especially if that is the price to be paid for an environment that is more orderly and peaceful. However, the rules become particular problematic and stigmatizing through their perceived enforcement. Many respondents (three-quarters of the sample at Westhaven Park, well over half at Park Boulevard, and over a third at Oakwood Shores) expressed concerns that the rules were being enforced in a discriminatory manner and feel that they, themselves, are monitored and investigated at a higher frequency than their higher-income neighbors. Unique among the sites at the time of these interviews, the midrise tower at Westhaven Park has a critical mass of relocated public housing residents living in close proximity to higher-income neighbors, which may help explain the more keen sense among residents of disparate treatment at that site. A Westhaven Park resident complained:

Like a [higher-income resident who lives] across from me—I don’t smoke weed, and every time I go to my front door, I smell it and it come from him. And when I go and complain about it [to property management], they put it as he don’t do that, it’s got to be one of us [relocated public-housing residents].

The stringent barriers and bureaucratic hurdles to eligibility for the new developments, along with the perceived differential treatment and rule enforcement by property management, have served to heighten public housing residents’ sense of alienation and inferiority. And this is without considering the informal social dynamics of prejudice and marginalizing treatment from their new higher-income neighbors, the topic to which we turn next.
Social dynamics: Prejudice and uneven power

In its most hopeful framing, mixed-income development is a strategy to move public housing residents from being trapped in poverty conditions into communities of opportunity where they can forge a new social identity and new social bonds and move their family into mainstream society. It appears that the reality, for many respondents is that the new developments offer a patronizing and unwelcoming social environment where they feel judged as a group, resented for their presence, and have unequal access to power brokers and decision-makers. As we will discuss in more detail below, these dynamics are further complicated by the fact that, as Goffman predicted, a substantial proportion of relocated public housing residents themselves voice similar blanket statements about the behaviors and attitudes of their fellow relocated public housing residents.

At meetings and public forums at all three sites, higher-income residents discussed the need to “fix” or “alter” the behaviors and values of public-housing residents. This stance has been endorsed at the highest levels of local government. In public statements both Mayor Daley and the current CEO of the CHA, Lewis Jordan, described the public housing transformation as being about much more than just “rebuilding buildings” but indeed about “rebuilding souls.” Echoing this theme, a Chicago Park District official at an Oakwood Shores residents meeting argued that the relocation process requires social services to teach public housing residents to be “better role models to their children” and better “citizens.”

From their public comments, higher-income residents, along with other institutional stakeholders, appear to, in many ways, imagine the worst about public housing residents. The individual actions of specific relocated public-housing families often become generalized to the entire population in meeting discussions (cf. Chaskin and Joseph 2010). The belief among many homeowners appears to be that relocated public housing residents are predominantly potential troublemakers who do not hold mainstream norm and values. As we have observed in condo association and community policing meetings, many of the higher-income residents operate under the assumption that if there has been a rule transgression, for example improperly disposing of trash, it must have been committed by a public housing resident. This serves as a justification for aggressive demands and scathing comments. For example, at one community policing meeting, a Westhaven Park homeowner asked Lewis Jordan if CHA would pay for damages to the buildings as they have been “caused by public housing residents.” Jordan refused to affirm this presumption and told the homeowner that while CHA would help to investigate who might be responsible, they would not take responsibility for paying for the damages, given that no one knew who was actually to blame.

Although unspoken, the specter of racial prejudice clearly hangs over these public and private accusations and denunciations of public housing residents and makes the stigmatization that much more devastating. Stereotypes about deviance or criminality that in a different era might have been expressed in racial terms are now subsumed under the label “public housing resident.” Given that virtually all relocated public housing residents in these developments are African American, race serves as a quick and easy signal of different housing status, particularly when combined with dress, comportment and other signifiers of socioeconomic status. Race, and the media-fueled images of danger that it represents, also heightens the sensitivity of higher-income residents to perceived transgressions by individuals around the development. An African-American stranger passing through the development may be seen as more of a threat, and a group of black teens is seen as loitering, not just hanging out.

Due to marketing decisions of some of the developers and property managers, some of the new homeowners express feeling misled with regard to their residential proximity to relocated public housing residents. Some state in meetings that they were never told they would be moving into a mixed-income development while others suggested that potential issues were glossed over in the marketing process. As one owner said: “I did not pay $300,000 for a condo to live next to the projects.” The economic recession that has gripped the nation has been difficult in many ways for the
mixed-income developments in Chicago. One of the impacts has been an increased sense of anxiety among homeowners about the decreasing value of their homes. There have been foreclosures within the new developments and some owners have unsuccessfully tried to sell their properties. This may be leading to a heightened assertiveness among homeowners that they must take a stand to protect the value of their investments. The homeowners’ low tolerance for adverse behavior given their investment get conveyed by property management in renters meetings (and repeated by relocated public housing residents privately).

Relocated public housing residents are well aware of the opposition that many of their higher-income neighbors feel about their presence in the development. As one respondent from Westhaven Park stated:

They don’t want to live with us, and I see a lot of that. And they be saying that behind our back because like I said, they can’t whisper. We can hear what they be saying. And then when they have their board meeting downstairs, they don’t have they door closed, they have it opened.

Over half of the respondents at Oakwood Shores expressed concerns that higher-income residents were actually aiming to push relocated public housing residents out of the neighborhood and, as one said, “take it over for themselves,” whereas only about a quarter of respondents at Westhaven Park and Park Boulevard expressed this level of concern. The relatively lower proportion of respondents expressing concerns about displacement might be partially explained at Westhaven Park by the protection of the consent decree and at Park Boulevard by the relatively short period of time in residency with less time for higher-income residents to organize collectively to articulate their concerns. An Oakwood Shores resident expressed her concern about “write-ups” by property management for rules infractions being used to push public housing residents out:

It’s three write-ups. I guess I don’t know how many call-ins but it’s three write-ups. I mean they want to try to put you out…. And see, [this is now] a different neighborhood. We got mixed people over here. You have some white. And you got people that’s paying a lot of money for rent that’s probably mad ’cause you ain’t paying as much rent as they paying.

Further exacerbating the marginalization felt by relocated public housing residents is the uneven access to institutional decision makers with responsibility for the development. Institutional stakeholders appear to play into this by privileging the residents of market-rate units, particularly owners. For example, speaking at a meeting of mixed-income developers, one suggested that owners in the developments must set “the norms for the highest common denominator.” Owners at the three sites have used their networks and prestige to pressure both private developers and public-sector decision makers. Homeowners at Westhaven Park and Oakwood Shores have organized meetings with Police Commanders, the CEO of CHA, and other top officials such as local aldermen due to their economic, social, and political power. At one field site, a condominium association president sent an email to Mayor Daley and to the local Police Commander which resulted in a quickly arranged visit from Lewis Jordan to meet with the condo association.

Enjoying the benefits of residence in a revitalizing neighborhood but facing challenges of heightened scrutiny, prejudice from neighbors, and exclusion from decision-making about the new development, relocated public housing residents in mixed-income developments must determine how they will cope in order to retain the improved housing which they and their children now live in.

Coping responses to stigma in mixed-income developments

How are relocated public housing residents responding to the new forms of stigmatization that they are encountering in the mixed-income developments? Goffman (1968) proposed that stigmatized individuals will adopt two types of “stigma management” techniques: self-protective and self-affirming. We found both types of responses among residents we interviewed and find it helpful to distinguish among residents’ responses in terms of their stance towards themselves, towards the
stigmatizers, and towards other stigmatized individuals like themselves. These coping strategies were far from mutually exclusive; most residents interviewed expressed a combination of coping responses. As will be shown, however, some specific types of responses were more common among respondents than others.

**Stance towards self.** The new administrative procedures, with screening, stringent rules and monitoring, and the pervasive sense of social prejudice and undesirability can culminate in a severe attack on the social identity and esteem of the relocated public housing residents. A possible coping response is for them to internalize the external perceptions and prejudices and begin to question their self-worth. Goffman (1963) suggested that the stigmatized individual might demonstrate feelings of shame, self-doubt and even self-hate. However, Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998) reported that empirical research demonstrated that self-esteem of the stigmatized can remain high in the face of alienation. In this instance, we found that most respondents appeared to retain a quite healthy sense of self, at least in their interviews with us and descriptions of their experiences, perceptions, and outlook. A resident at Oakwood Shores described her strong sense of self and her perception that her values and outlook are similar to those of her higher-income neighbors, stating that she has “a lot of things” in common with them:

I eat, sleep, get up, I love my family. I want good things. I want to stay in a beautiful community, neighborhood. I want to have somewhere decent to raise my family. . . . You know, so if we’re given a chance to do that, they can find out that everybody is, you know, not on a negative path, whether your rent is $500,000 or whether you’re paying according to your income. . . . But like I said, my personality, my character, I have very high self-esteem. Nobody could make me feel any less anyway, you know.

A few respondents asserted that they did not “fit the mold” that was being forced upon them and that they did not need to move into a mixed-income development to “fix themselves.” About a quarter of the respondents described their background as having been “raised right.” For example, an Oakwood Shores resident told us:

I can’t give credit to Oakwood Shores about the lifestyle that I have adapted. I give credit to my mom who raised us to be this way, because even when I was living in Ida B. Wells, anybody who knows me would tell you what I called that. I called that my condominium. . . . Over there, it was scary. It’d be menacing. It went down over the years, but it wasn’t always a bad place to live. So I took pride over there.

In sum, about half of the residents asserted that they had gotten to the place they are now in life on their own and not through the CHA or anyone else’s help or example.

On the other hand, almost half of the respondents described ways in which they were attempting to adapt their behavior and attitudes to meet the demands and expectations of the new development. These respondents acknowledge that moving into the mixed-income development had provided them the opportunity to make changes in their lives they viewed as positive.

**Stance towards stigmatizers.** The generally accepted perception of the new population in mixed-income developments, promulgated by the media and by institutional actors responsible for the developments, is that the higher-income residents are upstanding, productive citizens who can serve as role models to relocated public housing residents who are lacking in values and social competence. However, these higher-income residents can also be a source of derogation and marginalization. In response to this, over two-fifths of respondents can be described as adopting a self-protective strategy, isolating themselves and avoiding contact with other residents, including other relocated public housing residents. They explained to us that they keep to themselves and minimize interaction with other residents because they don’t want to get in trouble and risk having complaints made against them. As a resident at Westhaven Park told us:

I pretty much stay to myself. That’s how you live longer around here, stay out of trouble. . . . That’s why I say it’s best to just mind your own business and just speak to people “hi” and “bye” and not socialize or fraternize with them, then that way you won’t be one of the ones that they calling in to the office on.
Although some chose to isolate themselves and made no effort to connect with other residents, almost half described ways in which they had tried to break down barriers with their higher-income neighbors. These residents talked about trying to be friendly, making small talk with their neighbors, petting their dogs. One resident at Westhaven Park described how her son was the one who made the first move to interact with some higher-income neighbors who had seemed very “mean” up until that point:

My son actually was the one that broke the ice. . . She was takin’ in groceries, and he went over and picked the milk up and was like, “Here, I’ll get it for you.”. . . And from that day on, this woman, I mean, she smiled more. She spoke more, and she was like real content.

Whether or not they attempted to engage with other residents, an extremely high proportion of residents, over four-fifths, rejected the idea that their higher-income neighbors were any different from them in terms of value systems. For example, a resident at Park Boulevard explained:

Well, I don’t feel [the owners are] different. They might feel they different, but I don’t feel that they’re different from me….Well, I know they have more…but the way I was raised, my parents were strict. So some of these with money, I probably had got a better upbringing.

When asked to describe any ways in which she considered herself to be different from her higher-income neighbors, a resident at Westhaven Park stated: “Just the color of their skin, that’s all. They ain’t no different from me. Just straighter hair, that’s it!” This determination by respondents to articulate their commonalities with their new neighbors may be heightened by the challenges they perceive to their own social identity.

Goffman found that stigmatized individuals very often had ambivalent feelings about members of their own group and faced a choice of accepting a collective identity apart from the norm or distancing themselves from others who are stigmatized and claiming to be different and therefore less discredited. He underscored the fact to distance themselves from others supposedly like them required the affirmation of the stigma itself. We found that about three-fifths of the respondents talked about how they themselves were different from those public housing residents who more closely fit the stereotypes that were being assigned to all relocated public housing residents. A resident at Westhaven Park described keeping her distance from those relocated public housing residents who were described as carrying themselves very differently from how she does:

Some of them still be running back and forth all, you know, doing any of the things that they don’t ‘posed to be doing, but they do it anyway. That’s everywhere. . . Goin’ to the corner, looking for drugs. That’s what they be doing, and I know the peoples in this building know what they are, ’cause the way they carry theirselves. So I ain’t got nothing to do with it. No one don’t bother me, I don’t bother them. They’ll do their own thing.

No respondents articulated a willingness to just interact with other relocated public housing residents and live in the “half-world” that Goffman described. Those who withdrew from interactions with the larger population, withdrew from virtually everyone in the development. However, while respondents may not have claimed to be accepting an enclave for themselves within the development, we observed numerous situations where relocated public housing residents were in social situations at the development with no other residents and appeared quite comfortable with the situation. Further, at several contentious meetings, relocated public housing residents were observed coming together both spatially and verbally, to defend against the character threat promulgated by new neighbors and institutional actors.

Conclusion

The relocated public housing residents who have been able to navigate the screening criteria and administrative hurdles to move to the new mixed-income developments are benefitting from these relatively more peaceful and stable residential environments. However, although the residents no longer need hide their address from co-workers or avoid visits from family members, there are offsetting factors that have intensified their feelings of being stigmatized. A combination of intrusive screening and vigilant monitoring by institutional staff and social prejudice from higher-income
neighbors generates a pervasive sense that they are undesirable and unworthy of living in the new developments.

Relocated public housing residents living in mixed-income developments will not be able to reshape, in Goffman’s terms, their “spoiled social identity” without the breaking down of prevailing assumptions about the link between public housing residence, values and behavior, and social worth and status. Perhaps these stereotypes about public housing residents are so deeply held by their fellow neighbors, the actors responsible for managing the developments, and broader society, that destigmatization cannot be expected in an environment where individuals can be identified as former residents of high-poverty public housing. Enduring stigma, and finding ways to boost self-esteem within the face of ongoing prejudice, may simply be an unfortunate fact of life for relocated public housing residents who wish to take advantage of the physical quality of life offered by new mixed-income developments. Shedding of the burden of stigma may require a generational shift, to be experienced by the children in these households who will go out into the world from a stable environment, respectable address, and revitalizing community.

More optimistically, it might be possible to confront and mitigate the stigma experienced by relocated public housing residents in mixed-income developments through concerted action. One element of this might focus on changing faulty perceptions about specific actions that lead to claims-making about relocated public housing residents in general. The enduring stigma about antisocial norms and behavior is maintained in large part through assumptions that relocated public housing residents are the individuals responsible for transgressions, but these actions are often the acts of individuals from outside the development or by other residents of the development. Where possible, residents and stakeholders should help distinguish general stereotypes and perceptions from the actual conduct of specific residents within the development. Acknowledging the importance of race as a marker that facilitates stigma is a highly sensitive but critical topic. How much of the discomfort about unfamiliar individuals passing through the development is associated with their race? How do fellow residents judge the inappropriateness or threat of a group of individuals who are hanging out in the development?

Most residents would agree that rules and norms are necessary to establish and uphold expectations for appropriate behavior. However, those formal and informal expectations should be reasonable and, most importantly, fairly monitored. Procedures that enable more inclusive input into the settings of standards and provide more careful identification of transgressors may help lead to more equitable treatment and less scapegoating of relocated public housing residents.

To the extent that the behaviors of relocated public housing residents are indeed different from a “norm” more familiar to other residents but are not particularly harmful, like lively public gatherings and congregating in front of buildings rather than in back, it seems that greater tolerance would go a long way. Underlying the enduring stigma is a strong conviction that residents who were living in public housing are inherently different from others and thus unworthy of acceptance. To the extent that differences in behavior can be accepted without blanket judgments about personal character and potential, this could reduce the stigmatization. Actors responsible for the development—property managers, developers, service providers, leaders of resident associations—have a key role to play here in discouraging intolerance and providing transparency about the community building and constructive problem solving that will be needed for the development to be successful.

The social project to deconcentrate public housing poverty and create a path to social inclusion and acceptance for relocated public housing residents has proven to be considerably more difficult and complicated than anticipated. The “natural” course of mixed-income development seems to be leading to increased stigma and isolation for relocated public housing residents. It appears that it will take a more intentional effort to create the space and openness for more compromise and tolerance among residents of such vastly different backgrounds.
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'Mixité': an urban and housing issue?


