

After the projects

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Of the many lousy things the City of Chicago has done in the years I've lived here, perhaps none has left a moral stain quite like that of the "reform" of public housing. The housing authority, once known widely for its high-rise housing projects, systematically tore them down and sold the property to developers. The idea was to replace the projects with mixed-income developments, comprised of equal parts public, affordable and market-rate units. But it was never clear how there would be enough public units to replace the many that were demolished—i.e., where all those poor, mostly African-American people were supposed to *go*.

Most received rental vouchers and looked for privately owned places. But vouchers were about the only support they got—a tremendous missed opportunity, [as the Chicago Reader explains well in this article](#) from last year's mayoral election:

The tearing down of the high-rises offered an extraordinary chance for widespread desegregation, which might have happened had the displaced residents gotten more counseling and support to help them move to middle-class neighborhoods. But a study of the plan in the 2009 Journal of Public Affairs found that most of the displaced residents merely moved from their vertical ghettos to horizontal ones, settling in "disadvantaged, predominantly black neighborhoods."

Recently the housing authority has made some improvements to its services to residents. But it's [having trouble filling](#) the market-rate units in its mixed-income developments. And as Ben Austen [reports for Harper's](#), these places have not exactly been idyllic for low-income residents:

The families that made it in [to the Chicago Housing Authority's new public units] are required by the CHA to work thirty hours a week or enroll in job training or school for a comparable amount of time (the housing authority arranged for city colleges to be free to tenants). Public-housing residents found other rules applying to them but not to the condo owners next door especially onerous:

regular home inspections and drug tests; restrictions on owning dogs, barbecuing, gathering in public areas, and hosting guests. . . . At Westhaven Park, a mixed-income community that replaced the Henry Horner Homes on the city's Near West Side, market-rate families felt threatened when their new neighbors hung out in groups in the lobby, so the condo board simply removed all the furniture from the area.

Later Austen talks to Deborah Hope, a black woman who used to live in the Cabrini Green projects—where her family dealt with much violence and tragedy—and now lives in a mixed-income development nearby. Here are two of the saddest paragraphs I've read in a while:

Recently two families on [Hope's] floor had large gatherings. One was a wake for a child who died of asthma. The other was a wedding celebration. Both events were crowded and got a little rowdy; beer was drunk and bottles were broken. The next day, Hope said, the public-housing family with the dead child got an eviction notice slipped under its door. The market-rate unit with the newlyweds got nothing. They even made a rule that public-housing people could have parties only between eight in the morning and eight at night. “Where do parties end at 8 P.M.?” Hope wanted to know. When she saw her white neighbors in the hallways or foyer, she always greeted them. “Have a tremendous Thursday! See you on fantastic Friday!” It was how she spoke to everyone. But none of them ever spoke back. Sometimes their dogs would run up to her, Hope said, but that’s because animals can always tell when a person is nice.

Before, when she lived in the [Cabrini Green] row houses, she had floods, rats, roaches, undesirable people. She couldn’t stand to deal with all that. Where she lived now was better. But it was lonely. She didn’t see it as a home. She wanted me to understand that. She was trying to make it feel like a home, but it mostly felt like a hotel.

In the days of the projects, residents were routinely demonized by the racist, classist assumptions of people far away. Now, some of the few who still live in public housing face the same kind of bigotry—from their next-door neighbors. And city housing policy itself continues to value some people far more than others.