

Mixed-Income Development Study

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SERVICE ADMINISTRATION

CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY MANDEL SCHOOL OF APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENCES

Unexpected Challenges: Youth, Public Housing Reform and Mixed-Income Development

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<http://nimc.case.edu>.

Youth in Mixed-Income Communities¹

Mixed-income development has been embraced by policymakers across the United States as a response to urban poverty and the problems of traditional public housing. Several of the theories that drive the rationale for mixed-income development are directly concerned with children and youth. Relocation to mixed-income communities is meant to have a beneficial effect on young people by removing them from negative influences, providing a safer and healthier environment, and better connecting them to positive social contexts and resources from which they were isolated in public housing. Neighborhood influence is difficult to untangle, however, and it requires focusing not just on the ways in which neighborhoods may affect youth, but also on the ways in which young people shape and have an impact on their local environments.

In this brief, we explore the role of and responses to youth in three mixed-income communities in Chicago—Oakwood Shores, Park Boulevard, and Westhaven Park—built on the footprint of large public housing complexes as part of the Chicago Housing Authority’s (CHA) Plan for Transformation. We draw on the perspectives of residents and development professionals expressed in interviews, focus groups, and through field observation, although we were not able to speak with youth directly. We examine both expectations about youth in mixed-income developments and perceptions of how young people contribute to social dynamics and interaction in these contexts. We also explore the nature of their engagement in community organizations and activities and their role in shaping community concerns about and responses to crime, safety, and social control. We find that there have been improvements in the lives of young people who have been able to move into these new developments in terms of living in safer, more orderly communities. However, their overall experiences are not altogether positive for them and are proving to be problematic for the broader community.

DESCRIPTION OF MIXED-INCOME DEVELOPMENT STUDY SITES

Oakwood Shores, on the south side of the city, is being built in place of Ida B. Wells/Madden Park, and will ultimately be one of the largest mixed-income developments in Chicago with 3,000 projected total units. One-third of these units will be occupied by relocated public housing residents, with the remainder split between affordable (23%) and market-rate (44%) residents. It is being developed by a national non-profit organization, The Community Builders, in partnership with Chicago-based private developer Granite Development Corporation.

Park Boulevard is being built in place of Stateway Gardens on the city’s south side. Projected to have 1,315 units, occupancy will be split equally with one-third of units reserved for relocated public housing residents, one-third for affordable residents, and one-third for market-rate residents. Park Boulevard is being developed by Stateway Associates, LLC, a team of private developers.

Westhaven Park, is the second phase of the redevelopment of Henry Horner Homes on the city’s west side, the first phase of which was completed prior to the launch of the Plan for Transformation. Units produced in the initial pre-Transformation phase were only for public housing residents. The entire development will consist of 1,316 units, 63% of which will be set aside for relocated public housing residents (including some off-site housing), 10% for affordable residents, and 27% for market-rate residents. Westhaven Park is being developed by Brinshore Michaels, a team of private developers.

¹ This brief is based on a longer paper, “Youth in mixed-income communities replacing public housing complexes: Context, dynamics, and response.” (Chaskin, Sichling and Joseph, 2013, *Cities* 35: 423-431).



Perspectives on Youth in Mixed-Income Communities

The neighborhood environments provided by the new mixed-income developments are dramatically different from the public housing complexes from which relocated public housing residents came. The built environment is significantly improved. There is also less violence and crime, better neighborhood amenities, and more supportive services for families and their children. And there are new neighbors, most of whom differ from relocated public housing residents in terms of income, occupation, education, cultural background, family structure, life experience, and (in some cases) race. These mixed-income communities are seen by proponents as having the potential to provide safe, healthy environments in which young people can grow up, removed from the negative influences of delinquent peers and the dangers of crime and unsafe conditions. In addition, mixed-income communities are thought to better connect youth to resources, opportunities, and the positive influence of higher-income neighbors.

Most respondents saw these potential benefits of mixed-income development to hold particularly true for young people—in terms of the potential influence on their behavior, well-being, and aspirations for the future—rather than for their parents. According to a Chicago Housing Authority official who described the strategy as a “two-generation prospect” resting on the children of relocated public housing residents:

The children of these public housing residents have got to see, be exposed to on a day to day basis something different than that which they saw in the those developments. They have to be exposed to people going to school through college and see that as a norm, not as an exception because it's hard to build your life around being an exception.

Informed by a set of assumptions about the urban “underclass,” the potential effect of middle-class role models was particularly emphasized by professionals—housing authority officials, development team members, community leaders—and higher-income residents, especially homeowners. Relocated public housing residents also reflected on the benefits of these communities for their children, but most focused more on the benefits of greater safety and a better-maintained environment than on cross-class influence.

Young people (especially younger, school-aged children) were also seen by some respondents, particularly professionals at the mixed-income developments and particularly early on, as potential bridges between residents of different incomes and housing tenures. This bridging potential of youth, however, has fallen short of expectations due to three factors. First, there are demographic realities. Relocated public housing residents are more likely to have children, to have more children, and to have older children than higher-income renters and homeowners, limiting the likelihood of child-to-child relationship-building across income and tenure groups. Second, there are structural circumstances that restrict the contexts and spaces where young people from different backgrounds can get to know each other. For example, children in the developments tend to go to a range of different schools rather than a single neighborhood school. Third, lower-income residents and their higher-income neighbors experience these neighborhoods differently and respond with family management strategies and efforts to monitor and control youth behavior that reinforce separation rather than bring young people together.



Social Interaction and the Management of Neighborhood Relationships

Living in higher-quality housing in a safer, more stable environment is seen by relocated public housing residents and others as a major benefit for the youth who have moved from public housing into the new mixed-income developments. This has meant less anxiety and stress for parents as well as more freedom for youth to be outside by themselves. In spite of this, there has been limited interaction among young people of different backgrounds across the three communities. Cross-class interactions described by respondents are mostly among adults or between higher-income adults and relocated public housing youth (almost always younger children). These limited adult-youth encounters tend to be very casual, only among neighbors living in close proximity to one another, and facilitated by everyday activities (for example, dog-walking).

Overall, however, the relational dynamics between different income and tenure groups in these communities are best characterized as distant. This distance is significantly influenced by the different ways in which parents experience and evaluate the neighborhoods as places for their children to grow up. Most relocated public housing residents, for example, are very pleased with the relative safety of their new environments and allow their children greater freedom to play outside. As a relocated public housing resident at Oakwood Shores explains:

I thank the good Lord that I can finally release him to have some type of socialization because he could not play at all outside at Ida B. Wells. There was too much shootings and everything and it bothered him.



By contrast, higher-income parents perceive these environments to be less safe than their prior neighborhoods and express concerns about young people's destructive and disrespectful behavior in the neighborhood. These concerns have led many higher-income parents to closely monitor and manage their children's activities. As a market-rate renter at Oakwood Shores puts it:

I've never allowed my children to be out there playing with anybody. And that's not to be condescending, but I've never allowed it because I'm very—I'm in control of my children, and I don't want any negative influence, so I've always kind of kept them away from outside.

Such different assessments of the environment and the resulting parenting practices limit the opportunities for casual encounters among young people and the possibility of forming connections across different incomes and housing tenures. Underlying these strategies are tensions grounded in stereotypes that generate both fear and avoidance. A relocated public housing resident at Park Boulevard notes her neighbors' strategy of avoidance and interprets it in racial terms:

And then once our kids leave the playground, then the white people be bringing their kids out. So, to me, that's prejudice. You don't want your kids mixing with our kids. You don't want your kids getting to know our kids. Our kids is not bad. You just got to choose the right ones.

Avoidance on the part of higher-income residents is also often grounded in fear—of unknown (poor, black) youth or of potential conflict and retaliation. This has resulted in a non-interventionist stance among many higher-income adults who are hesitant to step in to engage youth themselves and a reliance on formal mechanisms of social control like contacting property management and police.

Engagement in Services and Activities

The limited cross-class interaction among young people in these mixed-income developments is also the result of differences in institutional engagement. These differences are particularly apparent in patterns of school attendance. Overall, youth from public housing continue to attend the same schools that they attended prior to relocation or, in light of a wave of public school closings that coincided with public housing demolition in these neighborhoods, to transfer to schools far away from the new developments. Higher-income residents have largely abandoned the Chicago public school system in favor of private or, in some cases, competitive public school options such as charter schools and magnet schools.

Beyond school, there are some programs available for young people—after-school programs, internships, workforce training, summer jobs, sports programs—but they both fall short of demand and tend to engage different youth. Higher-income residents, for example, have greater access to youth programs that require fees for participation. A number of youth opportunities, particularly workforce opportunities for older youth, have been developed as part of the Plan for Transformation, but these programs are limited to public housing youth. A renter living in a non-public housing subsidized unit at Oakwood Shores comments on this separation:

Why the hell you put all this together for one community but you separate all the children? You say that only low-income kids can do this but mine can't? Ain't no Earn to Learn for him, ain't no community center for him, ain't no job for him, ain't no nothing for him because [I'm] not CHA.

Relocated public housing residents report that their children are more engaged in programs and activities and are benefitting from better institutional resources in the new developments than were available in the public housing complexes from which they came. However, respondents across income and housing tenure expressed a much greater demand for structured programs and supervised activities, particularly for older youth. As one community member describes it:

[T]here's nothing really here for them to do. You see the kids in the park. You see the teenagers kind of mingling, walking around. There's no real structure. There doesn't seem to be the kinds of structure in terms of sports to keep them busy. We've inquired over here at the [social services] center...across the street and they have some activities but not enough. They close too early. They don't have anything pretty much for the kids in late evenings, you know, just quick after school and that's it, kind of go home. There's just not enough for them to do.

Public Behavior and Public Space

These gaps in resource provision, the lack of dedicated space for youth activities, and the reliance on rules and formal methods of social control all contribute to contentious dynamics of youth behavior and use of space in these communities. As a CHA official explains:

There's nowhere for them kids to play. I'm like, where's the playground, guys? You're talking about communities with children; you need a playground. You need a sandbox. You know, and then you wonder why kids get in trouble? 'Cause they can't stay in the house all day, you know.

And, of course, young people don't "stay in the house." In the absence of dedicated space and programmed activities, many young people—largely relocated public housing residents and other low-income youth from the development or surrounding neighborhood—make use of available spaces that developers, property managers, and higher-income residents view as inappropriate for socializing. This contributes to negative perceptions and expectations of trouble. A development team member at Westhaven Park explains:

When you see a group of young African-American boys just hanging out on the corner, it doesn't necessarily mean they're up to no good; they're just talking, but if you don't understand that and all you've seen was what you've seen on television, then you make the implication that, you know you may imply, oh they must be up to no good, when that's not the case at all.

In light of this, young people who are seen "hanging out" (on street corners, in parking lots, in front of buildings) or riding bikes or playing ball in the streets become flashpoints for conflict. In response, formal rules are generated by property management to minimize youth presence, such as establishing curfews, privatizing access to playgrounds, and codifying certain behaviors as lease violations. While much of the rationale given for these rules is grounded in concerns about safety and fear of crime, most of residents' complaints focus more on issues of civility—loud noise, unruly behavior, trash—than on actual crime. As a market-rate owner at Park Boulevard puts it:

Sometimes we've had to find young adult teenagers sitting on the steps, loitering on the steps. A lot of noise outside...Standing outside in clusters and sometimes skipping, playing. I just feel—play out back, but instead they want to play out here and I just feel that it's a bit scary, especially when it's young teenaged boys. They were out throwing bottles, screaming, fighting.

These perceptions of youth and the resulting attempts to regulate a broad range of behaviors and use of space in these communities tend to deepen existing divisions between residents of different income levels and housing tenures. Many higher-income residents question the willingness (or ability) of relocated public housing parents to control the behavior of their children. Relocated public housing parents criticize the unfair targeting of their children through efforts to police youth behavior and control access to public spaces. Thus, rather than relocated public housing youth being motivated to change their behaviors and aspirations in light of new interactions with middle-class peers and role models, the presence and perceptions of low-income youth in these communities has contributed to cross-class division and the implementation of formal rules and social control mechanisms that reinforce separation.

Conclusions

In large part, expectations for the positive influence that a mixed-income environment would have on youth in terms of their social experiences and the positive role that youth would have on the community building process are proving to be elusive. Rather than children and youth serving as a shared point of connection, the different monitoring and management strategies employed by parents of different backgrounds serve as barriers to engagement and a sense of commonality. Rather than the socially diverse environment serving as a positive influence in shaping the development of young people, the overriding dynamic in these communities is informed by the negative influences that youth are perceived to have on the broader community. Although the “negative” activities by youth are primarily minor issues such as littering, unruly play, and discourteous behavior, the response demanded by residents (particularly higher-income residents) is focused on increased policing and formal social control.



Our findings raise concerns about the future of these environments in the absence of more intentional and effective investments in structured supports for youth. We offer the following recommendations:

Provide more structured activities that engage youth of all income levels. Respondents identified a number of factors constraining youth engagement. These include problems of access due to distance and transportation, a lack of information about what is available, and insufficient year-round programs during late evening and weekend hours. Service providers, resident leaders, and other city and neighborhood agencies should work together to identify and develop programs that more effectively target the needs of the young people living in the new developments. Ideally the programming should be carefully designed, marketed, and implemented to appeal to a diverse group of youth.

Develop more constructive ways of agreeing to and setting standards for behavior. Youth and adults across income levels and housing tenures should be engaged in developing shared norms of behavior. Inclusive procedures for input into development rules, particularly those targeting public behavior of youth and use of space, should be established. Consequences for infractions should be reasonable and consistently applied.

Foster a shift in negative perceptions and attitudes about youth. These perspectives, reinforced by media portrayals, view youth gathered in public (particularly poor, urban youth of color) as likely threats to be controlled rather than young people engaged in the developmentally normative activities of informal socializing, relationship building, and exploring autonomy. Punitive responses, such as zero tolerance policies and the privatizing of civic space, reflect these negative perceptions. Local professionals and community members should work hard to shift the focus to examples of positive local youth and constructive activities that contribute to the community.

Invest in broader systems. Youth in these contexts face a number of significant challenges beyond micro-level interactions and perceptions. These include the quality of urban schooling, a lack of employment opportunities for young people, and limited resources to support constructive out-of-school time. More attention to and investment in these resources and opportunities is critical; perhaps the significant public profile of the Plan for Transformation can be leveraged to promote greater attention to these issues.

Key Questions for Policy and Practice

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

1. Higher-income parents view the relative safety of the mixed-income environments differently than their lower-income neighbors do and respond with parent management strategies that generally keep higher-income youth separated from their lower-income peers. What has been done to promote connections among parents and children of different incomes, and what has been the result? What role might service providers and other development professionals play in addressing the fear and avoidance displayed by some higher-income residents when it comes to youth?
2. Peer-to-peer interactions are limited by the lack of institutions and programs that serve youth of different income levels and housing tenures in the mixed-income developments and surrounding neighborhoods. How can developers, service providers, the CHA, other city officials, youth-serving agencies and neighborhood organizations work together to plan for more inclusive contexts and spaces where young people can get to know each other? How might youth and their advocates be engaged in these discussions, for example, around school and program planning or designing community or recreational space?

3. Property managers have established strict rules in response to (mostly higher-income) adults' complaints about youth behavior. How are these rules and restrictions communicated to youth living in the developments? What opportunities currently exist for young people (particularly older youth) to participate in deliberation and decision-making around issues of rules and expectations for behavior? What can be learned from these?
4. Youth in mixed-income developments, like other poor urban youth of color, are often viewed as threatening and detrimental to the broader community? What can be done to combat these negative perceptions of youth? How are youth recognized (or not) as members of the mixed-income community, and what messages are conveyed by development professionals and others in leadership positions about the role(s) youth play in neighborhood dynamics?
5. A youth leadership team facilitated by Stateway Community Partners at Park Boulevard has been particularly successful at engaging youth from the development and neighborhood. What can be learned from this program model, and how can it be adapted for use?





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