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BLOG POST 1

Silverman, Patterson, Wang: Taking on Stereotypes to Protect Fair and Affordable Housing Policies



Photograph courtesy of unsplash.

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Introduction: Our article, “Questioning Stereotypes about U.S. Site-Based Subsidized Housing” (forthcoming in the *International Journal of Housing Markets and Analysis*), grew out of work done with the support of a Baldy Center research grant. The research examined data for all public housing and other site-based subsidized properties in the U.S. in order to determine the veracity of long-standing stereotypes about these properties. Stereotypes about government subsidized housing have dominated public discourse since the early 1950s. In many respects, these stereotypes have penetrated debates about public policies designed to address the shortage of affordable housing and become a mainstay in American society. This is true when public housing is discussed, but also with respect to the spectrum of fair and affordable housing policy.

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Taking on Stereotypes to Protect Fair and Affordable Housing Policies

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Our article, “Questioning Stereotypes about U.S. Site-Based Subsidized Housing” (forthcoming in the *International Journal of Housing Markets and Analysis*), grew out of work done with the support of a Baldy Center research grant. The research examined data for all public housing and other site-based subsidized properties in the U.S. in order to determine the veracity of long-standing stereotypes about these properties.

Stereotypes about government subsidized housing have dominated public discourse since the early 1950s. In many respects, these stereotypes have penetrated debates about public policies designed to address the shortage of affordable housing and become a mainstay in American society. This is true when public housing is discussed, but also with respect to the spectrum of fair and affordable housing policy.

Today, these stereotypes have become ubiquitous. In their crudest expressions, government subsidized housing is portrayed as being composed of clusters of dilapidated, overcrowded high-rise buildings inhabited by welfare dependent black women and their children. These stereotypes are expressed in subtle and overtly ugly forms. Perhaps the most negative example of these stereotypes is the image of the welfare queen living in public housing, which has been used repeatedly to support arguments for the retrenchment of fair and affordable housing policies.

Notwithstanding the omnipresence of these stereotypes, there is scant empirical evidence to support them. For instance, our article shows that the typical government subsidized housing project is a low-rise development with fewer than 91 units, and more than 96% of government subsidized properties pass inspection. Moreover, we found that government subsidized properties provided safe and affordable housing to a diverse population of families, seniors and the disabled. Across that population most were dependent on social security and disability insurance, followed by about ¼ who were working poor families actively participating in the labor force. In fact, less than 6% of the households living in government subsidized housing identified welfare as their primary source of income.

Despite these findings, stereotypes about government subsidized housing continue to drive public discourse. It is important to recognize that these stereotypes emerged during a moment in U.S. history when landmark legislation was passed to promote fair housing and desegregate other institutions like public schools. Stereotypes about government subsidized housing must be understood against that backdrop and as a component of a sustained backlash against civil rights in America. This backlash has hampered the implementation and enforcement of laws passed to make the U.S. a more just society. For instance, many of the policies adopted during the Great Society were short lived, losing their potency after a few short years or incrementally chipped away at by opponents to change over a longer historic arc.

We have seen this pattern repeat itself with respect to other policies. For example, after a decade of development, HUD's affirmatively furthering fair housing (AFFH) rule was suspended by the Trump Administration. This action blocked the implementation of the rule, and dismantled the databases and evaluation tools designed to allow communities to use evidence-based analysis to identify discriminatory housing patterns.

In the absence of empirical evidence, stereotypes about government subsidized housing continue to be mobilized to block fair housing initiatives and derail affordable housing programs. This is visible at the local level today, and experienced by those who attend countless public meetings where not in my backyard (NIMBY) groups reference stereotypes in their efforts to deny minority families access to housing and schools. In essence, stereotypes are mobilized to deny African Americans, Latinos and others access to the American dream. Equally troubling, these stereotypes are often the bedrock of resistance to public policy reforms at the local, state and national levels. They have even emerged in the subtext of the 2020 presidential election as the Trump campaign endeavors to instill fear in the suburbs.

Our article was written to cast light on stereotypes about government subsidized housing. Dispelling these stereotypes and other myths about housing is an important component of efforts to advocate for policy reform and legal protections afforded to historically disadvantaged communities. We encourage others to build on this work.

We welcome your comments

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