Public housing in the United States and Canada

In the United States and Canada, public housing is a federal, state, provincial, or local program designed to provide subsidized assistance for low-income and poor people. Increasingly provided in a variety of settings, public housing used to be one or more blocks of low-rise and/or high-rise housing operated by a government agency. They are often referred to as "the projects".

History

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, government involvement in housing for the poor was chiefly in the area of requiring new buildings to meet certain standards - like having airshafts - for decent livability.

Most housing communities developed from the 1930s onward under the auspices of the housing division of the Public Works Administration and, after 1937, the United States Housing Authority created by the Wagner-Steagall Housing Act. Most of the initial public housing could be considered slum clearance; there wasn't a national initiative in place to build housing for the poor and so the number of units didn't increase. This helped ease the concerns of a health-conscious public by eliminating or altering neighborhoods commonly considered dangerous, and reflected progressive-era sanitation initiatives. However, the advent of make-shift tent communities during the Great Depression caused concern in the Administration. Franklin Delano Roosevelt wrote in 1938, "Today, we are launching an attack on the slums of this country."

Public housing in its earliest decades was usually much more working-class and middle-class and white than it was by the 1960s and after. Many Americans associate large, multi-story towers with public housing, but early projects, like the Ida B. Wells projects in Chicago, were actually low-rise,
though Le Corbusier superblocks caught on before World War II, as seen in the (union built) Penn South houses in New York.

What Kenneth T. Jackson and other historians have called the "ghettofication" of public housing occurred for several reasons. One reason was the general weakening of the urban working classes.

Other reasons for the ghettofication of public housing can be attributed to broad public policy decisions. Federal law required that no person could pay more than a quarter of his or her income for rent in public housing. Since middle class people would pay as much, or more, for rent in public housing as they would in superior private housing, middle class people had no incentive to live in public housing at all. Another public policy factor that led to the decline in public housing was that, in general, city housing agencies ceased to screen tenants (New York City was an exception). In the 1940s, some public housing agencies, such as the Chicago Housing Authority under Elizabeth Wood, would only accept married tenants and gave special benefits to war veterans.

The federal government no longer pays to build housing projects. Since the early 1990s, it has given money under HOPE VI to tear down distressed projects, to be replaced by mixed communities built with private partners.[1]

Deterioration

Public housing was only built with the blessing of the local government. Hence, unlike France, projects were almost never built on suburban greenfields. Usually projects were built in older neighborhoods, whose old housing was demolished to make way for them. The destruction of tenements and eviction of their low-income residents consistently created problems in nearby neighborhoods with "soft" real estate markets.

The destruction of deteriorating buildings to make room for public housing often created problems in adjacent neighborhoods. An excellent example of this phenomenon can be found in Brooklyn. When blocks of slums in the Brownsville district were cleared to make room for public housing in the
1920s, thousands of displaced families moved into the neighboring district of East New York, which at that time was a predominantly white, middle-class area with a stable economy. The sudden influx of large, lower-income black and Hispanic families from Brownsville strained the physical and social services of the community. A mass exodus of the white population began (see white flight). Within six years a healthy community became one of the most decayed and dangerous neighborhoods in the United States. A similar situation occurred when Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania attempted to tear down public housing in the Polish Hill area to make way for a Civic Arena.[2]

Currently

Houses, apartments or other residential units are usually subsidized on a rent-g geared-to-income (RGI) basis. Some communities have now embraced a mixed income, with both assisted and market rents, when allocating homes as they become available. Low Income Housing Tax Credits have been used to create mixed income units.

In recent years, many such projects have been torn down, renovated or replaced after criticism that the concentration of poverty in economically depressed areas, inadequate management of the buildings, and government indifference have contributed to increased crime. U.S. public housing continues to have a reputation for violence, drug use, and prostitution, leading to the passage, in 1996, of a federal "one strike you're out" law, calling for the eviction of project tenants whose housing units are the scene of certain types of criminal activity, especially that which is drug-related.

In reaction to the problems surrounding public housing, the US Congress passed legislation enacting the Section 8 Housing Program in 1974, which Richard Nixon signed into law, to encourage the private sector to construct affordable homes. This kind of housing assistance assists poor tenants by giving a monthly subsidy to their landlords. This assistance can be 'project based,' which applies to specific properties, or 'tenant based,' which provides tenants with a voucher they can use anywhere vouchers are
accepted. Virtually no new project based Section 8 housing has been produced since 1983. Effective October 1, 1999, existing tenant based voucher programs were merged into the Housing Choice Voucher Program, which is today the primary means of providing subsidies to low income renters. The George W. Bush Administration has recently proposed controversial changes to the Housing Choice Voucher Program.

The Housing Choice Voucher Program
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Housing_Choice_Voucher_Program
is a type of Federal assistance provided by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) dedicated to sponsoring subsidized housing for low-income families and individuals. It is more commonly known as Section 8, in reference to the portion of the U.S. Housing Act of 1937 under which the original subsidy program was authorized.

History

Federal housing assistance programs began during the Great Depression to address the country’s housing crisis. In the 1960s and 1970s, the federal government created subsidy programs to increase the production of low-income housing and to help families pay their rent. In 1961, the Section 23 Leased Housing Program amended the U.S. Housing Act. This subsidy program, the predecessor to the modern program, was not a pure housing allowance program. Housing authorities selected eligible families from their waiting list, placed them in housing from a master list of available units, and determined the rent that tenants would have to pay. The housing authority would then sign a lease with the private landlord and pay the difference between the tenant’s rent and the market rate for the same size unit. In the agreement with the private landlord, housing authorities agreed to perform regular building maintenance and leasing functions for Section 23 tenants, and annually reviewed the tenant’s income for program eligibility and rent calculations.

In the 1970s, when studies showed that the low income housing crisis was no longer substandard housing, but the high percentage of income spent on housing, Congress passed the Housing and Community Development
Act of 1974, further amending the U.S. Housing Act of 1937 to create the Section 8 Program. In the Section 8 Program, tenants pay about 30 percent of their income for rent, while the rest of the rent is paid with federal money.

The Section 8 program initially had three subprograms — New Construction, Substantial Rehabilitation, and Existing Housing Certificate programs. The Moderate Rehabilitation Program was added in 1978, the Voucher Program in 1983, and the Project-based Certificate program in 1991. The numbers of units a local housing authority can subsidize under its Section 8 programs is determined by Congressional funding. Since its inception, some Section 8 programs have been phased out and new ones created, although Congress has always renewed existing subsidies.

Summary of the program

Currently, the main Section 8 program involves the Voucher Program. A voucher may be either "project-based" (where its use is limited to a specific apartment complex; Public Housing Authorities (PHA's) may reserve up to 25% of its vouchers as such) or "tenant-based" (where the tenant is free to choose a unit in the private sector, is not limited to specific complexes, and may reside anywhere in the United States or Puerto Rico where a PHA operates a Section 8 program, though in practice such portability is very difficult).

Under the voucher program, individuals or families with a voucher find and lease a unit (either within a specified complex or in the private sector) and pay a portion of the rent (based on income, but generally no more than 30% of the family's income). The PHA pays the landlord the remainder of the rent, subject to a cap referred to as "Fair Market Rent" (FMR) which is determined by HUD. FMR is determined by several factors, including:

0. the geographic area (city or county) where the unit is located (generally, a unit in a metropolitan area will have a higher FMR),
0. the unit size (in terms of the number of bedrooms; generally, the more
bedrooms the higher the FMR, while a **studio apartment** would be at the low end), and

0. whether the owner or tenant will pay utilities (generally, FMR is higher for units where the owner pays utilities).

The landlord cannot charge a Section 8 tenant more than FMR, even if the landlord does so for non-Section 8 tenants in similar units.

In addition, landlords, though required to meet fair housing laws, are not required to participate in the Section 8 program. As a result, some landlords will not accept a Section 8 tenant. This can be attributed to such factors as:

0. not wanting the government involved in their business, such as having a full inspection of their premises for HUD's Housing Quality Standards (HQS) and the possible remediations required,[1],

0. fear that a Section 8 tenant will not properly maintain the premises,

0. a desire to charge a rent for the unit above FMR,

0. inability to collect for damages caused by tenants, or when the tenant does not pay his/her share of the rent (neither HUD nor the PHA will pay for such items), and/or

0. unwillingness to initiate judicial action for eviction of a tenant (HUD does not permit a landlord to change the lock or cut off utilities as a means of evicting a Section 8 tenant, even when state law does permit such).[citation needed]

However, other landlords willingly accept Section 8 tenants, due to:

0. a large available pool of potential renters (the waiting list for new Section 8 tenants is usually very long, see below),

0. generally prompt regular payments from the PHA for its share of the rent, and/or

0. a perceived higher quality of tenants, since a tenant can be permanently removed from the Section 8 program if s/he damages the rental unit and/or fails to pay his/her share of the rent.

Whether voucher or project-based, all subsidized units must meet HQS, thus ensuring that the family has a healthy and safe place to live. This
improvement in the housing stock is an important by-product of this program, both for the individual families and for the larger goal of community development.

In many localities, the PHA waiting lists for Section 8 vouchers may be thousands of families long, waits of three to five years to access vouchers is common, and many lists are closed to new applicants.

Families who participate in the program must abide by a series of rules and regulations, often referred to as "family obligations," in order to maintain their voucher, including accurately reporting to the PHA all changes in household income and/or family composition so the amount of their subsidy (and the applicable rental unit size limitation) can be updated accordingly. In recent years, the HUD Office of the Inspector General has spent more time and money on fraud detection and prevention.

Currently, there are no time limits for family participation in the program, though occasionally reform bills are introduced in Congress that suggest time limiting the program.