



Public Housing in Durham, NC: Persisting Residential Segregation and Racial Disparity

Summary

The Fair Housing Act (FHA) of 1968 has reached its 50th anniversary as of 2018. Unlike the anticipation that FHA would accomplish residential integration, many areas in the US are still highly segregated. The myth of *de facto* segregation (which refers to the practice of segregation) has affected continuing high segregation in housing, overlooking underlying impact of race. Public housing program was initially designed to provide affordable housing options to low-income families and individuals who are highly likely to be minorities due to the intersectionality of race and socioeconomic status. In Durham, NC, most public housing units are located in minority neighborhoods with a higher concentration of poverty and less resource compared to white neighborhoods. I examine how public housing program in Durham, NC has contributed to the perpetuation of racial residential segregation by concentrating public housing units in black neighborhoods. My proposal includes building more public housing units in areas with abundant opportunity and resources as well as providing moving counseling and support to whom may need financial and physical assistance in the moving process.

Fair Housing Act of 1968

Also known as Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act, which was enacted by President Lyndon Johnson after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. This act, for the first time in American history, passed a legislation, prohibiting racial discrimination in rental and sale of housing. It was expected that the Act would end the residential segregation and begin the new era of residential integration.¹ However, due to the perpetuation of implicit practices and institutionalization of segregation, many metropolitan areas are still hyper or highly segregated.²

“Housing is not an abstract social and political problem, but an extension of a man’s personality.”

- Kenneth B. Clark (American social psychologist)

Persisting Racial Residential Segregation Targeting Minorities

Even after the Fair Housing Act of 1968, most of the black population has remained to reside in predominantly black neighborhoods. Despite the prohibition of *de jure* segregation (referring to segregation by law), the US still maintains the high levels of residential segregation. The decline in segregation has been slow and significantly much slower in metropolitan areas, constantly maintaining urban ghettos and racial residential segregation in every metropolitan area in the US.² Perpetuating racial residential segregation has exacerbated racial disparities in accumulated wealth and concentration of poverty which essentially result in disparities in education, health, social capital

and other vital components of society.³ This is exactly why we should pay a closer attention to racial segregation in housing. The concentration of public housing units in minority neighborhoods is one of the factors that perpetuates racial residential segregation. The segregation contributes to maintaining racial disparities in many areas since minority neighborhoods are high in poverty and under-resourced.⁴ Studies have shown the positive impacts of residential integration. The low-income black family moved from so-called a depressed neighborhood to opportunity-rich neighborhood, which most likely to be a predominantly white neighborhood, has proved positive outcomes include, but are not limited to mental well-being⁵, children’s academic attainment, and significantly, ending intergenerational poverty.⁴



The Myth of Residential Segregation Based on Preferences

A commonly known myth of racial residential segregation is that people tend to live in a neighborhood with a group of people with shared racial or ethnic identities based on preferences. In addition, the persisting residential segregation is often deemed to be based on disparate socioeconomic backgrounds without regard to the intersectionality of race and class in the US.⁶ Although we observe clear evidence of systematic reinforcement of segregation, due to this myth manifested in society, the underlying racial component of housing segregation and its effects on minority citizens have not been well considered when local or state actors create or reform their policies.

Public Housing Built in Minority Neighborhoods: The Case of Durham, NC

Public housing is designed to support these low-income families and individuals in 1937. Given the intersectionality of race and class, low-income populations are highly likely to be racial/ ethnic minorities. Public housing has further led black residents to constantly reside in poor and racially isolated neighborhoods by building units in areas with high poverty and minority populations.⁷

Where Is Durham's Public Housing Located? Who Lives There?

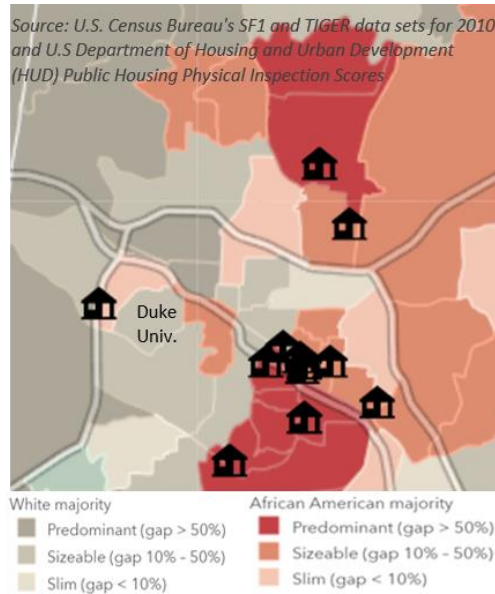
- Durham's public housing has started to be built in specific locations, *Southeast Durham* and *North Durham*; where residents are predominantly **black** (Reference to the map1.).
- Minority populations, living **below poverty** (Reference to the map2.) who have a limited selection of housings.

What Are These Areas Like?

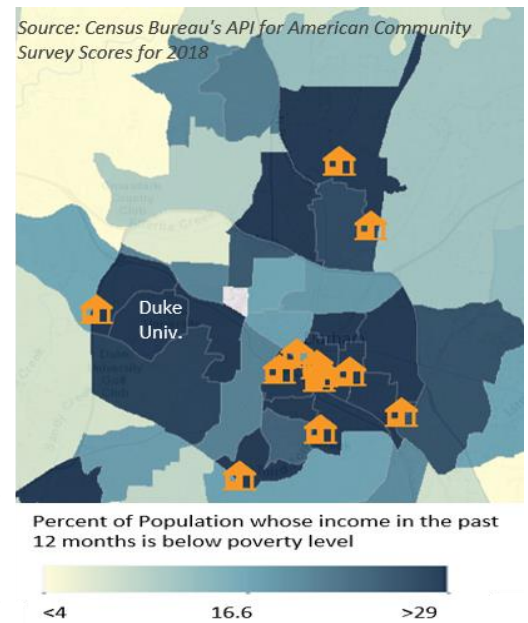
- Areas where the majority of public housing units locate:
 - Racially segregated.
 - A higher concentration of poverty and less resource compared to white neighborhoods (i.e. Duke University & many options for restaurants & other resources in downtown Durham).⁸

Note: the area where Duke Univ. is located demonstrate income below the poverty level since most of the residents are students

Map1. Race & Public Housing



Map2. Poverty & Public Housing



What Does It Indicate?

- Intentional concentration of public housings in predominantly black neighborhoods.
- The perpetuation of racial residential segregation.
- Disparities in resources between white and black.
- Immobility – a high likelihood for residents to stay in the similar neighborhood in terms of racial composition and available resources
- **Public housing residents = Black populations whose income is below poverty level**

Housing Mobility

Housing mobility is a concept of providing opportunities to move to a neighborhood with low poverty rate and high resource to public housing residents who live in distressed neighborhoods. Black residents have historically been unable to move to opportunity rich neighborhoods due to many reasons⁹ (lack of affordable housings in those neighborhoods, inability to afford cost of moving, lack of information of housing in the new areas).



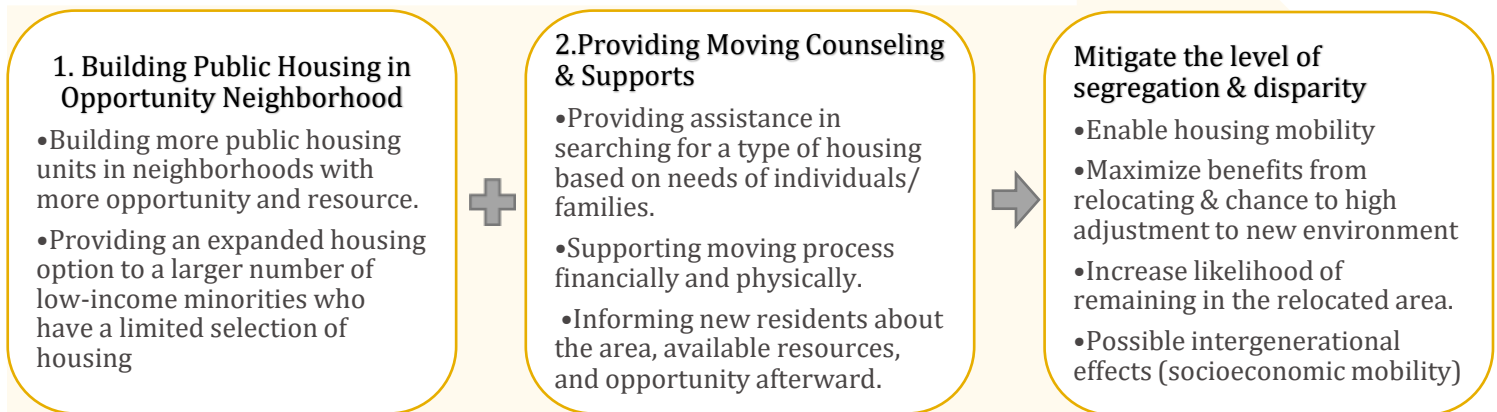
What Is Being Done Now?

Durham Housing Authority (DHA) has proposed a redevelopment plan for the Southeast Central Durham community, including some of its public housing units, attempting to transit public housing in Durham into mixed-income neighborhoods.^{10, 11} Redevelopment would help facilitate housing conditions for residents and may be able to diversify its racial and socioeconomic composition by bringing in middle-income residents. Due to the difficulty to implement a policy that explicitly approaches racial inequality issues in housing, it seems most feasible to focus on diversifying neighborhoods in terms of socioeconomic status. Furthermore, DHA has provided assistance to very low-income families and individuals in paying rent for private houses through *Housing Choice Vouchers (Section 8)**, which possibly broadens their choice of neighborhoods. Nevertheless, it is limited to a small number of people, only available in private markets and has a long waitlist¹².

**Please refer to the glossary on the last page for further information.*

Moving Forward

Despite the advantages of revitalizing distressed community along with existing public housing units, DHA should also consider integrating neighborhoods by enabling minorities to move into opportunity neighborhood. Here are two proposals that DHA should take into a consideration for their future plans. First, the new development of public housing in areas with less concentration of poverty and more resources and opportunity. Second, providing moving counseling and supports for public housing residents before and afterward since moving can be intimidating and unaffordable.



I acknowledge limitations of these proposals given that mobility alone cannot achieve positive outcomes in reducing racial disparity in every area though it may be able to mitigate the level of racial segregation. However, given that DHA has limitedly enabled housing mobility in the private market through *Section 8*, supporting housing mobility to a larger number of residents through public housing would be a step to move forward.

“You have to send this message that racial change in a community can be a very enriching experience, that it can make a better community. That is a hard lesson for a lot of people to learn.”

Roberta Raymond (Oak Park Regional Housing Center)

Photo credit: Wilfamor, James



Citation

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Glossary

**Housing Choice Vouchers (Section 8)*: “The Housing Choice Voucher program (Section 8) is a rent subsidy program designed to assist very low-income families in paying rent for private housing of their choice. Applicants are limited to very low-income families, elderly, handicapped or disabled persons, and families physically displaced by public housing demolition.”¹²