

## Public Housing

by Michael Markowitz  
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To [Fiorello LaGuardia](#) , housing the poor was a personal crusade. The diminutive mayor blamed the damp squalor of the tenements where his first wife grew up for the tuberculosis that eventually took her life and that of their child. And for the rest of his life, LaGuardia dedicated himself to razing New York's dank slums and replacing them with modern, sanitary housing. By 1941, under his guidance, New York had already erected 13 public housing projects with 17,000 apartments, more than any other city in the country.

Fast-forward to late 2002. Another "fusion" mayor, Democrat-turned-Republican Michael Bloomberg, unveils the city's most sweeping [housing initiative](#) in more than 20 years. Like LaGuardia, Bloomberg hopes to replenish the city's housing stock at a time when New York is struggling through an economic downturn. For Bloomberg, however, towering housing projects are not part of the mix. Instead, reflecting current thinking on low-income housing and the political realities of his era, Bloomberg proposes a combination of government and private initiatives aimed at creating or rehabilitating 65,000 units for people of various income levels. The objective, according to Bloomberg, is "to jump-start and complement private sector investment."

Even though the city may never build large public housing projects again, the existing developments contain 9 percent of the rental housing in the city and are home to more than 400,000 people. And while nationally such projects have fallen into disrepute, in New York, tens of thousands of people clamor to move in. Can these projects continue to survive in an era when federal support for housing is dwindling and cities are increasingly turning to private and community-based housing programs?

## THE RISE AND FALL OF THE HOUSING PROJECT

The notion that the problems of the poor could be eased by improving their environment has a long history in New York. Starting in the 1850s, charity-minded New Yorkers began setting up "model tenements" in slums such as [Five Points](#) -- with only mixed success. In 1891, Jacob Riis's powerful "[How the Other Half Lives](#) " spurred further efforts to end the squalor plaguing some New Yorkers.

In the LaGuardia years, New York decided to get into the housing business itself. The city's first housing project was, appropriately named the First Houses on East 3rd Street near Avenue A,

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built by the New York City Public Housing Authority and opened in 1936. A year later, the city dedicated the first federally subsidized housing in the United States, the Harlem River Houses, at 153rd Street and the Harlem River.

The post-war era brought about a huge boom in public housing construction. Title I of the federal Housing Act of 1949, which sought to provide "a decent home in a suitable living environment for every American family," sent torrents of housing money into New York and other cities. This money created public housing - projects built largely with federal money and managed by a housing authority, such as the New York City Housing Authority. Cities remade scores of neighborhoods, razing slum districts and building landscaped, high-rise developments. Robert Moses, the planner who reshaped so much of New York City, funneled billions of those federal dollars into New York, giving him another tool to rebuild the city in his image.

But the heyday of the housing project in the United States lasted just a few decades. By the mid 1960s, policymakers were becoming disenchanted with housing projects. Stacking low-income families in isolated, expensive-to-maintain apartment buildings no longer seemed like reform. Planners began to understand that the neighborhoods they were bulldozing in the name of slum clearance, although crowded, were vital and vibrant. In Chicago, authorities conceded that the projects they created were as bad, or worse, than the slums they replaced.

Other ideas, such as creating mixed-income developments, rehabilitating older buildings, and encouraging community-run redevelopment programs began to take center stage. Programs such as [Section 8](#), which provides rent subsidies in the form of vouchers to qualified low-income families, supplanted the great public housing construction initiatives of the 1940s and '50s.

New York was always the greatest exponent of public housing and it remains one of the last holdouts. Unlike other cities across the country, which emptied their worst projects in the 1980s and '90s and [demolished](#) them, New York never gave up on its public housing. Today, the city's [Housing Authority](#), though undoubtedly troubled, enjoys a reputation as the nation's most successful public housing agency, carrying on despite drastic reductions in federal support and widespread disdain for the traditional housing project.

"It's ironic," says Joseph Weisbord, director of Housing First!, an alliance of organizations that promotes investment in housing. "Now that we've learned the lessons of how to do public

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housing, we've pulled the plug on the federal resources."

### A RELATIVE SUCCESS

The Housing Authority runs 345 developments containing 2,702 apartment buildings that house 174,195 families or 418,810 residents, more than the entire populations of Atlanta or Miami. New York's public housing stock dwarfs that of its nearest rivals, San Juan and [Chicago](#) . Queensbridge Houses is New York's biggest development. It alone contains 3,101 apartments. Among the city's developments, 42 are exclusively for senior citizens.

"New York's Housing Authority is so extraordinary in size and scale and scope that it really stands alone," says Sunia Zaterman, executive director of the Washington-based Council of Large Public Housing Authorities ( [CLPHA](#) ), an association representing 55 of the nation's largest housing agencies. "They have a policy of not demolishing units but of trying to preserve units. I think clearly it's viewed as a high-performing agency that is innovative in a lot of ways and different in a lot of ways."

There are a number of reasons projects have retained a place in New York's housing mix. For one thing, Zaterman notes, New Yorkers are used to living in apartments: "High-rise living doesn't have the stigma it does in Chicago or Baltimore or other cities where if you were living in a high-rise you were clearly low-income."

Moreover, the Housing Authority for a long time has carefully screened prospective tenants. In addition, the city's tight housing market has made rent vouchers less attractive than in other cities, where there are more vacant private apartments available at a decent price.

In housing projects, residents pay no more than 30 percent of their family income as rent. Because of the combination of low costs -- the average housing project rent is \$302 a month - relatively attractive apartments, and the city's chronic housing shortage, there is a long waiting list for public housing. As of last July, 144,988 applicants awaited apartments in city housing projects and another 148,748 were on the list for the Section 8 voucher program, which subsidizes rents in privately owned buildings. To be placed on the waiting list, applicants must

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earn less than 80 percent of the area's median income. They must also submit to an [interview](#) .

New York's housing projects never fell into the disrepair that plagued other cities. Residents of some developments, along with Housing Authority employees, might not agree (a publication called [NYCHA Spotlight](#) , run by a former Housing Authority employee, regularly exposes problems at the agency), but the city's projects enjoy a reputation for being among the best-maintained in the country. Even in the face of declining federal support, the authority has continued to invest in public housing, winning praise from analysts and advocates for doing what it can to keep the buildings in good shape.

### PERSISTENT PROBLEMS

But while many people seek to get into the projects, some of those already there say conditions are far from perfect. Many projects present a forbidding face to the rest of the city, leaving residents cut off from surrounding communities. Some projects are in remote neighborhoods such as Coney Island and Far Rockaway, leaving their residents far from jobs and educational opportunities. Throughout the public housing system, maintenance and safety continue to be concerns.

"Best housing authority -- I think that depends how you define it," says Ethel Velez, who has lived in the [James Weldon Johnson Houses](#) in East Harlem for more than 50 years.

"Personally, I do think that the Housing Authority tries its best to manage these buildings the best they can, but we have problems just like everyone across the country with maintenance, management and standards of materials," says Velez, the director of the Public Housing Residents Alliance. "The good about these buildings is they are built very well and in spite of the vandalism that goes on in these buildings the housing authority does try to maintain them. But it's like trying to patch a hole with bubble gum instead of cement."

Velez says that over the years she has seen her project suffer ups and downs depending on budget considerations and the crime rate in the city as a whole. The advent of social and support programs for residents has helped improve conditions, she says, and tenants have made efforts to build a sense of community and make their buildings safer. Still, Velez says, project residents also have to battle perceptions that crime is rampant: "Folks who live in public

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housing are labeled."

And indeed, across the country, housing projects remain more dangerous than other neighborhoods. A federal government study issued last year reported that project residents are more than twice as likely to be shot as Americans in general.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, crime rates in public housing in New York developments [rose more sharply](#) than in the city as a whole. Since then, though, crimes rates in public housing have been falling even faster than in the city as a whole. A Housing Authority report last year said that while serious crime in the city fell 5.6 percent from 1999 to 2000, it dropped 6.2 percent in the projects. In 2001, major crime was down 11.2 percent in New York's public housing.

Still, the city recognizes that projects remain potential sources of crime. Last year, the Housing Authority finished installing closed-circuit monitors at 15 developments. The Bloomberg administration's new Operation Impact is flooding high-crime areas of the city, among them housing projects, with 1,400 rookie officers in a bid to keep a lid on violent offenses. Police officials have said that shootings and robberies are increasing at certain projects in the Bronx and Brooklyn even as homicides continue to decline.

The crime rate in public housing may be linked to who lives there. Beginning in the 1980s, the Housing Authority began admitting the very poor and homeless, a change that some critics link to a deterioration of the buildings and increase in crime. New York had previously favored working families.

In the '90s, the Housing Authority instituted what it calls the [Working Families Preference](#) , under which it set aside half its vacancies for low-income but employed residents.

[Federal legislation](#)

in 1998 that gave housing authorities greater flexibility in setting admissions standards bolstered the city's position. The Working Families Preference is credited with boosting the number of working families to close to 35 percent of all housing authority tenants.

But minority groups sued, saying the policy was slowing the desegregation of the city's housing. In January 2002, a federal appeals court agreed, ruling that New York City cannot give working

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families preference in housing projects where more than 30 percent of residents are white. Fourteen of the city's housing projects are affected by the ruling.

### HIGH MAINTENANCE

Despite its large presence in the city, public housing in New York faces an uncertain future. A February 1999 [report](#) by then-State Comptroller H. Carl McCall noted that while New York manages its properties better than most other cities, it only has money to fix the most dire problems. The Housing Authority, McCall said, faces a repair and maintenance "time bomb" unless it gets more capital funding. He estimated that the Housing Authority would need to spend \$43,000 per unit to make repairs and upgrades to all of its apartments.

A second [report](#) issued by McCall in July of that year said that buildings visited by his staff a decade earlier had deteriorated markedly and were in need of serious repairs. Victor Bach, a senior housing policy analyst with the [Community Service Society of New York](#), says that not much has changed since then. If anything, the problem has grown. "NYCHA is almost entirely funded by Washington, and the federal commitment to public housing and to subsidy programs keeps shrinking," he says. "As it stands now, the [Housing Authority's] capital budget is insufficient to meet backlogs and the operating budget is under pressure as well."

The shortage of capital funds mirrors the situation across the United States. Between 1993 and 2002, the housing authorities council contends, the federal government [underfunded the capital needs](#) of housing authorities by a total of \$16.7 billion.

In fiscal 2001 and 2002, the Housing Authority received more than \$1.2 billion a year from Washington under various grant programs. The amount of money for operations rose in '02 while capital funding fell 4.4 percent.

Just last month, public housing agencies were dealt an additional blow when the [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development](#) announced that it faced a budget shortfall and would cut funding for public housing and Section 8 up to 30 percent. The department has since backed off and said the cuts would be smaller,

## Public Housing

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but local agencies are bracing for more

[belt-tightening](#)

in the wake of the budget presented to Congress early this month.

## UNCERTAIN FUTURE

[Some insist](#) that public housing only exacerbates New York's housing shortage and saddles taxpayers with the costs of maintaining a vast and expensive infrastructure. In other cities, such as time Charlotte, North Carolina, public housing authorities have set limits on how long tenants can remain, transforming government-run housing into a temporary benefit, like welfare. Elsewhere, the Department of Housing and Urban Development has focused on programs aimed at turning Section 8 recipients into homeowners through programs that allow low-income people to use their vouchers to pay mortgages instead of rent. In New York, tenants tend to remain in public housing for a long time. The average length of stay in New York public housing is 17.7 years versus 7.7 years nationally, according to the federal government.

Many housing authorities have begun to seek other forms of financing, Zaterman says. The 1998 Quality Housing Act, for example, allows housing authorities to develop "mixed-finance" housing in partnership with the private sector. The HOPE Program (Homeownership and Opportunity for People Everywhere), begun under the first Bush administration, was designed to sell off public housing to its residents.

The Bloomberg plan announced in December calls for affordable housing, even for units for homeless and poor families. However unlike in the 1940s and '50s, this housing would not be built entirely with federal funds, and the Housing Authority would run little of it. Instead city money would go to private developers - both for profit and non-profit - who would build and then either manage the homes or sell them to the residents. There could be large apartment houses in some places, smaller scale developments in others.

While the private sector will play a big role in the plan - much as it did in the Koch housing plan -- widespread privatization of existing housing projects is unlikely, in New York, where public housing retains strong political support.

## Public Housing

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But new roles for the Housing Authority are a possibility. Bloomberg discussed having the Housing Authority work with the Department of Housing Preservation and Development to develop affordable housing on the large tracts of relatively inexpensive vacant land that the NYCHA owns. Weisbrod calls the proposal "a watershed" because the housing authority has long denied that it had any property on which to build.

Despite the national trend away from government-run projects, New York is likely to continue to rely on public housing and Washington will continue to support it in some form, experts say. "I may be naive but I don't think Washington is going to completely walk away from public housing," Bach says. "I don't think it will disappear -- that would be politically difficult to accomplish. But it may get slowly starved."