CHAPTER FOUR

PUBLIC HOUSING REDEVELOPMENT AND THE DISPLACEMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

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Since the early 1990s the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and local public housing authorities (PHAs) have pursued an aggressive strategy of public housing demolition and redevelopment. The initiative has been accomplished through a mix of demolition, redevelopment, and sale of public housing units. The major—though not exclusive—tool in this effort has been the HOPE VI program. Hackworth (2007) argues that HOPE VI embodies neoliberal policy principles applied to the American urban setting. The program simultaneously retrenches the central New Deal housing policy aimed at providing safety-net housing for very low income families, while activating an urban regeneration effort characterized by the displacement of poor households on the one hand and by inducements to the entry of private sector investors and the urban gentry on the other.

Thousands of units of low-cost public housing, most of which was occupied by people of color, have thus been taken down in cities large and small all across the country. The displaced families have been for the most part relocated to other low-cost housing, usually in other low-income and/or racially segregated neighborhoods (Comey 2007; Buron et al. 2002). Where this redevelopment has succeeded in leveraging significant private sector real estate investments, the communities surrounding the former public housing sites have also undergone tremendous change. The dismantling of public housing in the U.S., thus, has both directly displaced thousands of low-income families through demolition and indirectly displaced thousands more through subsequent neighborhood change induced by redevelopment.

The direct and indirect displacement that is the central legacy of public housing redevelopment has had a disparate impact on people of color. The projects chosen for demolition disproportionately house people of color even given the very high minority residence rates throughout the public housing program, and the neighborhoods in which these projects are located are also typically high-minority neighborhoods.
This chapter addresses the degree of displacement and disparate impact of public housing redevelopment. Specifically, I find that the dismantling of public housing has had a disparate impact on African Americans. Projects that have been eliminated are, in general, disproportionately occupied by African Americans compared to other projects in the same cities that are left standing. The indirect displacement effects of public housing redevelopment are mixed. In some communities it is leading to gentrification and racial change, while in other cases one or neither of these phenomena result.

**Public Housing Redevelopment in the United States**

Public housing in the United States has been heavily concentrated in central cities, and within central cities it is concentrated in poorer communities and communities of color. This is due in part to the fact that public housing was historically tied to slum clearance activities (Hirsch 1996). But, local authority over site selection also led to the concentration of public housing in high minority and high poverty areas (Goetz 2003). At the outset of the program in the 1930s and 1940s, public housing residents were low-income families, but typically the heads of households were employed. Initially, families on welfare were generally excluded from public housing in favor of working class families (see Vale 2000, Bloom 2008, Hunt 2009, and Williams 2004). By the 1960s, larger numbers of welfare families were entering public housing as pressures increased to reserve public housing for the neediest (Hunt 2009). Over time Congress mandated resident preference rules that gave priority consideration to needy families (Spence 1993). Over the same period African Americans became the largest racial group in public housing in many of the country’s largest cities. In the post-war decades African American families, both the working class and the welfare-dependent, faced an absolute shortage of housing due to the strict maintenance of residential segregation in most U.S. cities, discrimination in the market, and the destruction of housing caused by the Urban Renewal program. Lower-income whites by comparison had greater choice in the housing market as the private sector began to meet the pent up demand caused by the Second World War. As more public housing was built, it was typically placed in racially-mixed or predominantly black neighborhoods (Newman and Schnare 1997), and was therefore more attractive to African American families than to whites (Vale 2000; Bloom 2008; Hunt 2009). In older projects, as whites moved out of public housing, blacks moved in.