A new book takes a look at the policy makers behind Chicago’s public housing system

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In the quintessential baby boom town of Park Forest, Illinois, there was almost one child for every adult in the early 1960s. The ratio was high — nearly twice that of most places.

Chicago’s Robert Taylor Homes, the public housing development that once lined S. State Street, had a ratio of 2.86. Almost three children for every one adult.

Remember your elementary classroom on the day the substitute was in charge? Take that disorder and multiply it. Robert Taylor had almost 27,000 residents at its peak, living in 16-story high-rise buildings with too few elevators, shoddy construction and not enough playgrounds.

Put in a little crime, gangs and years of social decay, and the title of Roosevelt University professor Brad Hunt’s new book — Blueprint for Disaster: the Unraveling of Chicago’s Public Housing — seems appropriate.

Hunt worked on the book on and off for 10 years, sifting through the Chicago Housing Authority’s dilapidated and disorganized records. He pieced together the history of how federal and local officials had intended to do such great good, but wound up doing quite the opposite.

Too many kids is just one example. At the time public housing was built, large sections of the city were overrun by slums. It was difficult to find decent housing for low-income families. Housing advocates said it was “market failure,” and said the government had to step in.

And who needed housing the most? Large families. If it was hard for a small family to find a decent apartment, just imagine how much more difficult it was if you had four, five or six children.

Numerous CHA documents and memos celebrated how public housing would save a generation of children from a desolate environment. But three children for every one adult meant adults had little control. Hunt says public housing complexes like Taylor lacked “collective efficacy” — the ability to work together to fight social disorder and crime. Chaos reigned. Not just as Robert Taylor, but all over the city.

“Within a year of the opening of Cabrini Extension,” Hunt writes, “destruction of tenant mailboxes...
made mail delivery insecure, damaged laundry machines compelled tenants to wash clothes in their apartments, and profanity-laced graffiti in stairwells demoralized residents. Light-bulb breakage kept buildings fearfully in the dark; in 1958, the CHA reported replacing 18,000 light bulbs a month system wide.”

Instead of focusing on residents, who are often blamed for public housing’s destruction, Hunt focuses on policy makers. The high-rise construction, the union maintenance contracts, the push to help the poorest of the poor — these were all decisions made by city, state and federal officials — decisions Hunt says led to the creation of some of the worst living environments in American history.

Hunt’s book warns of public policy’s unintended consequences. Public housing was supposed to be the savior of the city’s poor. Instead, it may have been worse than the slums they came from. Chicago’s multi-billion dollar Plan for Transformation is trying new experiments, new policies to create better housing. We can only hope they’re better than the last.

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