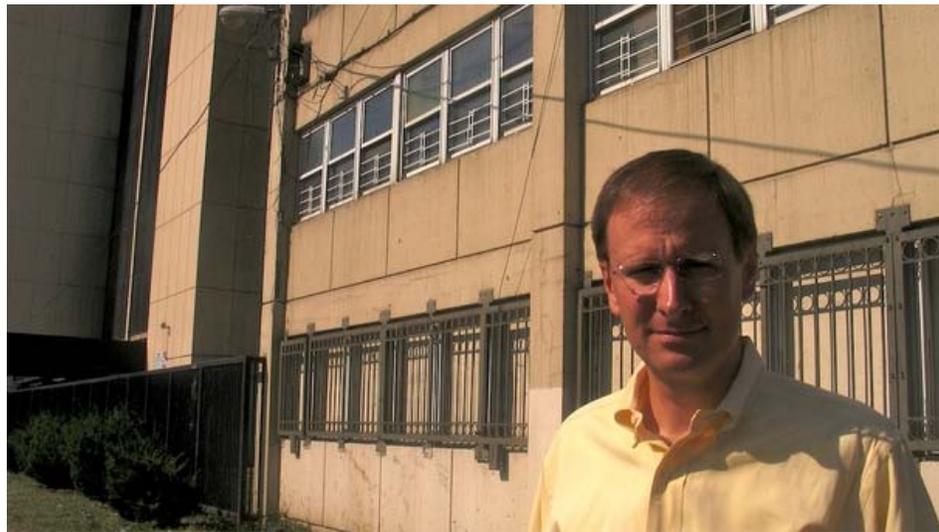


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## Straddling high-rises and the ivory tower, a scholar examines Chicago's public housing



Brad Hunt stands in front of a building at Cabrini-Green. | Credit: Adrian G. Uribarri

By Adrian G. Uribarri • Staff Writer • August 13, 2009 @ 7:00 AM



On a recent morning, Brad Hunt walks through the Cabrini-Green public-housing development in Chicago's West Side. He is the only blond white guy visible in the neighborhood, and surely the only one caught wearing slacks and a button-down Oxford shirt.

He chats with security guards and a few residents. One glances at him suspiciously, leans out of her window in a decrepit high-rise and shoots pictures of him, yelling, "Who are you?"

Hunt, a Roosevelt University professor, looks and talks like an outsider in the world of public housing. He grew up in Chicago's western suburbs, in what he calls a middle- to upper-middle class neighborhood. He attended elite schools on both coasts of the United States.

Yet it is at Cabrini and Chicago's other public-housing complexes that Hunt spends much of his working life, trying to figure out how officials house the city's needy. He outlined some of his conclusions in a book published last month, "Blueprint for Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing."

It builds on a paper he published fresh out of his doctoral program in 2001, about the city's now-defunct Robert Taylor Homes, and it chronicles a series of missteps that brought Chicago's public housing to a violent low point by the 1980s, about four decades after Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal established a sweeping American ideal for social welfare.

Hunt has staked out an academic territory with perennial questions and elusive answers.

The problems of homelessness and affordable housing have persisted since the dawn of recorded human history, he says. But when he looks at projects such as Cabrini — projects that once held the promise of bringing families up from poverty — he wonders how even modern

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American society has failed so miserably at creating safe, functional homes for people in need.

It is a problem he has looked at from a variety of perspectives: in Chicago, when he was first fascinated by public housing as a teenager roaming from the suburbs into the city; from Washington, as a policy staffer in Congress; and inside academia, as a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, and now a professor at Roosevelt.

According to Hunt, public housing in the city has failed primarily because of four factors: a rental system based on income, the large-scale concentration of high-rise buildings, a high ratio of children to adults and a lack of city leadership.

In reference to the first factor, he admits that he does not have a better alternative. But he says the development of an income-based rental program has historically provided incentives for poor people to hide their income, which has made it more difficult for Chicago officials to collect rents for maintenance of federally built housing.

"The deal was, Washington, D.C., was going to pay to build these things. Then the local housing authority had to charge enough rent to maintain buildings," he explains. But income-based rents, which create a disincentive to earn, or at least disclose, better wages, "created this downward pressure on income that then made it harder to collect.

"There now wasn't enough rent to maintain the buildings," Hunt says. "When the roof can't get fixed ... the plumbing can't get fixed ... it becomes a downward spiral. Who's going to move out? The people who have options."

Hunt explains that as working-class families moved out of public housing, the projects became increasingly homogenized with lower-income tenants.

Officials have tried to counter that lack of diversity recently by building more mixed-income communities and emphasizing vouchers for housing in the private rental market. Both efforts have presented some challenges for government-subsidized residents, including cultural tensions with higher-income tenants.

Hunt says those problems are preferable to previous ones of violence and rampant substance abuse — problems which he says led to the downfall of the Taylor Homes, for example. There, gang violence, an illicit drug trade and vandalism eventually led officials to tear down the whole development rather than try to fix it.

"The worse problems are behind us," he says. "The problems that we're dealing with now are social- and community-based. They are worrisome, but not fatal. Those problems are going to be more solvable over time."

Hunt says he has also seen improvements in how Chicago officials build public housing, moving away from blocks of high-rises with large apartments to smaller units scattered more broadly across neighborhoods.

He again uses the example of the Taylor Homes, where four- and five-bedroom apartments housed one or two adults and many more children. The housing design allowed youngsters to outnumber their elders and live mostly unsupervised in large buildings with ample space to hide.

"It made it very hard for the adults to maintain social order," Hunt says. "There was no one there to say, 'Stop throwing rocks at the windows. Stop breaking the elevators. Stop selling drugs.'"

There was also a lack of leadership at the city level, Hunt says. He says that for years, officials at the Chicago Housing Authority ran a "politicized," "wasteful" and "inefficient" agency — a familiar critique with which sitting authority officials hardly quarrel. The CHA's Web site itself recalls how, "by 1996, the operations of the Authority were in such disarray that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development took control of the agency."

"This was a painful episode in Chicago history," Hunt says. "It's just kind of tragic that public housing, which first cleared the slums and made life better for so many, by the 1990s had made life worse for so many."

On his way back to Roosevelt, Hunt sits at a bus stop and thinks out loud after his visit to the crumbling Cabrini Homes, about why things fell apart there.

"Why do these questions still frustrate me?" he asks himself. "We've been trying to solve the problem for the last 25 years. We want to make sure that we get the lessons right."

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