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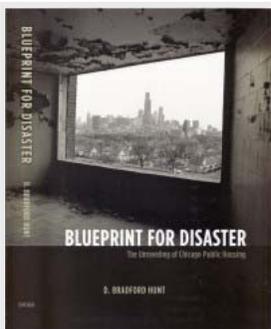
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Friday, January 1

Book Reviews: Blueprint For Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing

Book Reviews, Reviewed by Joel L. Rubin, MSW, CAE

by D. Bradford Hunt



The University of Chicago Press, 2009

The NASW Policy Statement on Housing notes that adequate, affordable housing is a basic right that is critical for the flourishing of individuals and families (Social Work Speaks 2009–2012). An individual or a family's housing situation is therefore critical to social work intervention and support. As a profession dedicated to serving the underserved, it is imperative to understand how policies impact access to affordable housing and to realize when those policies outlive their usefulness. With this in mind, D. Bradford Hunt's comprehensive review of the failed large-scale housing policies over the past seventy years and their negative impact upon

public housing are instructive for both social workers working in the policy arena and those working with families that have been impacted by these failed policies.

The fact that the some of the first housing projects built in Chicago had names such as the Jane Addams Homes, Julia Lathrop Homes, and Grace Abbott Homes immediately invokes the influence of social work.

Hunt begins his comprehensive review of what went wrong with Chicago public housing by noting that that "early public housing residents had an intense affinity for their new communities and that the word "paradise" often surfaced in interviews with initial residents of public housing. But over time, "CHA projects slipped downhill," and "by the late 1980s, Chicago's largest public housing projects were dysfunctional," producing conditions that led to tragic human consequences, especially for children, most notably described in the 1991 book by Alex Kotlowitz, There Are No Children Here.

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So how did public housing descend to this? Hunt makes a strong contention that policy choices made by players at both the federal and local level led public housing in Chicago (as well as other major cities in the country, with the exception of some cases in New York City) towards a downward spiral. Moreover, a major driving force that led to the public housing demise in Chicago was that “public housing changed from working-class housing to welfare housing in the early 1970s,” because it could not match the offerings of private housing down this path.

Hunt reviews the historical significance of the 1937 Housing Act whose passage was significantly influenced by reformers, including Jane Addams, “to shape public opinions about urban slums.” The bill represented a compromise between progressive slum reformers and modern housing planners. The Act, as Hunt notes, established three overarching principles that defined the program for decades:

- 1) Federal-local implementation partnership with deference to local officials,
- 2) the law’s deep subsidies, and
- 3) market-failure ideology that justified state intervention.

Hunt provides an in-depth look at Elizabeth Wood, the Chicago Housing Authority’s first director who worked as a social worker prior to her 17 year tenure (1937–1954) as Executive Secretary of the CHA. It was during this time that initial debates grew regarding site selections for public housing. The construction and quality of public housing units was impacted by the United States Housing Authority’s emphasis on construction cost restrictions. The CHA also prioritized black housing needs under Wood and Robert Taylor’s (CHA Chairman 1942–1950) leadership “because African-Americans faced the most desperate conditions in the overcrowded and substandard black belt.” No other city agency at the time had the resources or inclinations to relieve the situation. As a result, between 1945 and 1966, the CHA built 23,400 apartments for low-income families, nearly all in African-American neighborhoods. Hunt’s contention is that the location of postwar public housing in Chicago was only partly determined by the racist actions of whites. Another major factor was the city’s slum clearance agenda, promoted by the progressive leaders of the CHA in the 1940s. It was during that decade that a general consensus formed that the city’s worst neighborhoods needed immediate clearance and rebuilding.

Ultimately most public housing reformers had little interest in the rehabilitation of slum neighborhoods. Thus, we witnessed in Chicago the building of the large high-rises of the “State Street corridor,” that included the Harold Ickes Home, Stateway Gardens, and eventually the Robert Taylor Homes.

Hunt also notes on a closer analysis how the city’s long standing progressive vision for clearing slums played a major role in location decisions, not just that “public housing was hijacked by racist forces to impose state sponsored residential segregation.” Hunt assesses that the CHA wanted to build both large projects on vacant land to expedite slum clearance and to replace a substantial portion of the city’s slums with public housing. In the long run, slum clearance became considerably more expensive than building on vacant land.

One of the more fascinating parts of Hunt’s analysis was that during the 1950s, the CHA programmed its high-rise projects to accommodate large families with many children, with 80% of the apartments having three, four, and even five bedrooms. What this choice did was to create an unprecedented ratio of youths to adults in public housing communities—which had devastating implications. The magnitude of the CHA’s youth demographics becomes clear when comparing youth-adult ratiocomparisons. This ratio grew from 1.42 youths per adult in 1951 to a peak of 2.39 in 1970. These extraordinary youth ratios were due to a policy decision to build housing specifically to accommodate large families, and the implications for large concentrations of youth was simply not understood. Hunt discusses the how this high youth-adult ratio had a catalytic effect on social disorder and made informal policing unmanageable, which then drove out those residents with other options, which then concentrated poverty, which then diminished the CHA’s financial resources—a vicious cycle.

Hunt also chronicles the tight control that the city of Chicago (represented by successful Mayors Kelly, Kennelly, Daley Senior, Bilandic, Byrne, Washington, Sawyer, and Daley Junior) had on the CHA Board of Directors, most notably the infamous reign of CHA board chairman Charles Swible (1963–1982). By the 1970s, the original vision for public housing lay in shambles with the CHA remaining immune to reform and residents increasingly living in buildings with shoddy maintenance. Hunt provides an intricate description of the problems with elevator repair in CHA high-rises, their malfunction a danger to residents.

In short, by the 1980s, the CHA had ironically become a slumlord, with tenants at its large scale projects enduring hostile surroundings. Inoperable elevators, erratic heat, leaky roofs, uncollected garbage, infested apartments, darkened hallways, and unrepaired playground equipment were



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norms not aberrations. By the mid 1990s, as African American housing developer Vincent Lane became the CHA new head promising a turnaround and change, the authority was near total collapse. By 1995, the CHA was taken over by HUD, with HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros telling Congress, "Residents have suffered long enough." The federal takeover of the CHA was temporary as Mayor Richard Daley brought in a new team and unveiled his Plan for Transformation in 1999 that envisioned a complete remaking of the CHA and its mission. Hunt admits that the jury is still on the Plan and perhaps is too quick to evaluate a major overhaul of a public housing system, something not seen anywhere else in the country.

Hunt effectively sheds light on the right of tenant advocacy over the years with a lengthy discussion of Chicago Housing Tenants Organization.

Throughout Hunt's book, I was constantly reminded of the mantra of implementing sound public policy to advance and improve the lives of individuals and families. And for social workers, a reminder of this key value for our profession.

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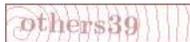
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