

SAFE AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING Fact Sheet

Public Housing and Social Determinants of Health

Overview

Housing is an important social determinant of health. Housing conditions, neighborhood, and community resources significantly influence a person's health, and housing availability and affordability play important roles.¹ Public housing is one of three forms of rental assistance programs used in the United States (with housing choice vouchers and project-based rental assistance, both discussed in the Network resource [Community-Based Measures to Promote Housing Stability](#)). It has been employed in countries around the world with varying levels of success, highlighting the influence that social and political attitudes, funding structures, and the physical location of the housing can have on outcomes. Public housing in the U.S. has the potential to fill the need for quality affordable housing and improve public health, but significant changes are needed to match the successes seen in other countries.

Public housing refers to rental housing - from multi-unit apartment buildings to single-family homes - that is owned by the government, managed by a local public housing authority (PHA), and rented for a below-market price.² In the United States, about two million people live in just over one million public housing units.³ Eligibility for public housing varies by locality, but the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which distributes the funding for the program, sets the income limit for households at 80% of the median income for the county or metropolitan area where the housing is located, taking into consideration family size and age.⁴ HUD also requires PHAs to meet a threshold number of households that qualify as "extremely low-income." At least 40% of households admitted into public housing must have incomes no more than 30% of the area median or of the federal poverty line, whichever is lower.⁵ Most PHAs have no problem satisfying this requirement. In 2016, 72% of households in public housing qualified as "extremely low-income" (91% of households earned less than 50% of their area median).⁶ Once families are placed into public housing units, they typically are only required to pay 30% of their income for rent and utilities: the amount determined by HUD to be "affordable" for housing.⁷ In some circumstances, households may be required to pay at least \$50 per month for rent, even if that exceeds 30% of their income, or they may be charged a flat rate based on market conditions regardless of their income.⁸

Almost half the country's renters currently reside in unaffordable housing, and housing stock in the United States has reached historically low levels, with some estimates placing the shortage between 5 and 5.5 million units.⁹ For extremely low-income renters, the shortage increases to about 6.8 million units.¹⁰ Investing in new public housing developments across the country would both address the housing stock shortage and ease the financial burdens of low-income families.



Public housing programs in other countries offer lessons for successful implementation in the U.S.

To design a robust and cost-effective public housing program and mitigate the risk of unintentionally pushing families with low incomes into substandard living conditions plagued by stigma, the U.S. should learn from similar programs throughout the world and observe their successes and failures. Many countries have their own versions of public housing, though the level of investment, eligibility requirements, social attitudes, and perception, and primary purpose of the housing vary significantly. In Israel, initial investment in public housing in the 1950s was motivated by the need to house an influx of Jewish immigrants and to spread the nation's population to the limits of its geopolitical borders for security against their Arab neighbors.¹¹ Low building standards and disinvestment led to abysmal conditions in public housing units, and the rural location and strict eligibility standards have caused significant stigma. Public housing residents, who are primarily Jewish nationals, are viewed as the nation's most disadvantaged population, even though national minorities such as Christian and Muslim Arabs are in fact the most disadvantaged.¹²

In Sweden, investment in public housing (referred to by Swedes as “social housing”) was viewed as part of the social obligation to ensure safe and healthy housing for all.¹³ There, 17% of the population lives in public housing (as opposed to less than 1% in the U.S.), and family income is only one of many eligibility considerations. Most of the Swedish population is eligible to rent public housing units, which are high quality and often located in the most desirable areas. The quality and popularity of Swedish public housing has led to long waitlists (though rural units often have immediate availability) and a small “black market,” but has essentially eliminated any associated stigma.¹⁴ Public housing in France has seen similar success. As in Sweden, 17% of households live in public housing and income is not the sole consideration for eligibility.¹⁵ In 2013 more than three quarters of French households were eligible for public housing.¹⁶ The availability and quality of French public housing has remained stable as a result of substantial public support and mandatory employer contributions dating back to 1943, but public housing still struggles with some stigma in larger cities where public housing developments are located in higher crime and more segregated areas.¹⁷

Unlike in Sweden and France, public housing in the U.S. is not widely available and does not meet the needs of the limited population it purports to serve. Only about a quarter of households eligible for rental assistance such as public housing actually receive it.¹⁸ The federal government initiated public housing investment in response to the high unemployment and unfriendly housing market that followed the Great Depression, but intentionally did not establish standards for construction to prevent competition with the private market.¹⁹ About half of the public housing units still standing today were built by 1975 and in 2010, HUD estimated that \$21 billion in maintenance and repairs was necessary.²⁰

Public housing in the U.S. has been underfunded since its inception, and federal policies and lack of funding operate as significant but surmountable barriers to improvement.

In addition to significant need for repairs, existing public housing tends to be located in low-income, racially segregated, high-density areas.²¹ In 2016, the poverty rate in census tracts that contained public housing was 33%, more than double the nationwide average of 12.7% that year.²² Public housing tends to be concentrated in racially segregated and under-resourced areas due to the country's history of discriminatory zoning and siting practices.²³ Racially segregated neighborhoods can widen health disparities as historical institutionalized racism leads to underfunded community resources such as schools and healthcare.²⁴ Thus, poverty and limited housing options continue to disproportionately affect people of color, with Black families making up approximately 45% of public housing tenants.²⁵

Supply has also been a major issue in the U.S. public housing scheme due to a 1998 amendment to federal law, which created a significant legal barrier, and overall disinvestment. The total number of public housing units peaked in the 1990s, but has been steadily declining ever since.²⁶ The 1998 federal amendment, called the “Faircloth Amendment,” capped the number of public housing units at the 1999 level and has likely had a significant influence on this decline.²⁷ Although the current public housing stock is below that 1999 cap due to conversion and destruction by severe weather, replacement with legally permissible levels of new construction

will not suffice to meet the extreme need.²⁸ Representative Acasio-Cortez (NY) introduced a Congressional bill in early 2021 that would repeal the Faircloth Amendment, allowing HUD to fund as many public housing units as it could, but barriers such as exclusionary zoning and lack of funding would still persist.²⁹

Another cause of public housing stock decline is conversion. As of 2018, more than 100,000 public housing units had been sold and converted to privately owned residences that were still eligible for other forms of rental assistance like housing choice vouchers but did not have the same benefits as public housing.³⁰

A 2010 HUD program called “Choice Neighborhoods,” introduced by the Obama administration, is the most significant re-investment in public housing in recent years. The program gives grants to local organizations such as PHAs to revitalize distressed public housing.³¹ However, communities can choose to use grant money in areas outside public housing to address other neighborhood issues such as struggling local businesses and schools, and the funding is only for *revitalization* – it is not used for building additional public housing units.

Although public housing in the U.S. is in many ways inadequate, residents still see improvements in mental and physical health.

Despite the poor and sometimes crowded conditions in public housing developments, residents experience improvements in mental and physical health. A study published in 2017 compared the mental and physical wellbeing of individuals waiting for housing assistance with individuals who had started receiving housing assistance within the last two years and found significant improvements for those in public housing.³² Current public housing residents reported less serious psychological distress (5.4 percentage points lower) than individuals waiting for placement in public housing as well as lower rates of “poor or fair health” (4.8 percentage points lower). The study did not find similar significant improvements in health for individuals receiving other forms of HUD housing assistance such as housing choice vouchers. Young adults living in public housing units also report increased feelings of safety relative to their previous situations.³³

Conclusion

Investment in public housing can address problems with affordability and availability of housing and improve public health by building stronger and safer communities, relieving financial strain on families with lower incomes and reducing individuals’ psychological stress.³⁴ Without federal policy changes and increased investment in public housing, millions of residents will be left in dangerous and unhealthy conditions, or without affordable housing altogether.

SUPPORTERS




Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Support for the Network provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.

This document was developed by Brianne Schell, J.D., M.A., Staff Attorney, Network for Public Health Law – Eastern Region Office. The legal information provided in this document does not constitute legal advice or legal representation. For legal advice, please consult specific legal counsel.

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