

Chicago yields mixed results with unfinished public housing efforts

October 7 2010, By Patti Richards



Image: Chicago Housing Authority

After a rocky start, Chicago's controversial efforts to overhaul its public housing have showed gradual improvement, [according to a new report](#) by researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The Chicago Housing Authority's Plan for Transformation, launched in 2000, is a dramatic effort to replace, refurbish or redevelop nearly 25,000 units of the city's public housing, while relocating residents either to rehabilitated public housing, new mixed-income communities, or into the private housing market using vouchers that subsidize their rent.

With the Plan reaching its 10th year of implementation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur foundation commissioned the MIT team to

conduct a comprehensive review of collected research findings. The MIT report provides the first overview and analysis of more than 80 studies conducted over the last decade by researchers from Chicago and elsewhere. Overall, the research published to date suggests that some tenants have fared better than others during the process. Those using vouchers to move into private rental housing have experienced many gains while those remaining in family public housing (especially if it has not yet been rehabilitated) have often found their situation worsening.

Scholars from a wide range of disciplines and housing advocates have debated the impact of the Plan for Transformation, which is currently slated for completion by 2015. Many hoped that the Plan for Transformation would help public housing residents move out of some of the country's most distressed housing and direct them toward better job and educational opportunities. But others warned that the effort might disrupt residents' lives in negative ways. "We did not know if the literature, taken as a whole, would point to the successes of the Plan for Transformation or its shortcomings," said Lawrence J. Vale, Ford Professor of Urban Design and Planning and co-author of the paper. "Overall, we see a mixed picture. Some research shows that for one set of residents, the Plan has truly transformed their lives. They are living in neighborhoods that are safer and have somewhat lower levels of concentrated poverty. But for another set of residents, especially those remaining in non-rehabbed housing, there has been an increase in crime and these residents show higher levels of stress. And many residents have lost vital social networks due to relocation."

The report covers three areas of research: implementation of the plan, outcomes for residents, and outcomes for neighborhoods. The research consistently shows that the implementation was flawed in the early years, with residents receiving inadequate relocation counseling so that many were directed to housing in very poor neighborhoods.

"Yet later research shows that as the plan progressed, the Chicago Housing Authority significantly improved counseling systems," Vale adds. "So some residents have received more support in finding a better place to live. Unfortunately, by that point all too many residents had already been relocated so it is too late for them to benefit from the newly reformulated relocation counseling."

Some residents' lives have improved following the Plan for Transformation. "Probably the clearest benefit for some residents is the reduction of stress that accompanies moving out of high crime public housing," noted Erin Graves, a research fellow in the MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning and co-author of the report. Yet the situation for many remains unclear. "Nearly half of the residents who lived in CHA housing in 1999 and had a 'Right of Return' are no longer in the CHA system. While a good deal of attrition is to be expected over 10 years, the rate since the Plan for Transformation began is higher than it had been previously." Thus, the report concludes, it still is not clear how many residents have lost their housing because they were displaced by the Plan for Transformation.

Overall, the research shows generally positive conditions in the affected Chicago neighborhoods. The Chicago Housing Authority demolished much of its high-rise public housing stock and replaced it with attractive, functional housing, some of it mixed-income. No study has shown an increase in crime in neighborhoods where public housing [residents](#) relocated.

Finally, the report considers the extent of consensus on research findings and discusses untapped areas of importance that require new research efforts. "The Plan for Transformation will not be complete for at least another five years, and the question of the long-term impact on residents' lives or on neighborhoods will remain unanswered for some time," Vale concludes. "So this review of what researchers have found so far will

hopefully help suggest mid-course corrections in those areas where the Plan has fallen short of its ambitious goals."

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Provided by Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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