

# *Policy Directions: Race, Poverty, and Housing*

Despite recent reports of declining levels of racial segregation, many of our urban areas remain deeply racially divided. While many structural and cultural forces work to maintain these racial separations, our federal housing policies have played a central role—most notably the location of high rise housing projects built after WWII in poor, racially segregated neighborhoods. Over the past thirty years, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has shifted away from the construction of public housing projects, and thousands have actually been demolished. Instead, HUD has moved increasingly toward the use of Housing Choice Vouchers (formerly called Section 8 vouchers) to house some of the nation’s poorest families.

In theory, these vouchers should help poor and minority families escape disadvantaged and segregated neighborhoods because, unlike the projects, which meant families were tied to a specific set of housing units, the vouchers can be used to rent any unit (priced at the HUD-calculated “fair market rent”) where a landlord will accept the voucher. However, research has shown that while the voucher helps families live in lower-poverty neighborhoods than public housing, many voucher holders (especially African American voucher holders) still end up in moderate- to high-poverty neighborhoods with high concentrations of other minority families.

Through the encouragement of the fair housing community, researchers, and other housing advocates, HUD is considering desegregative measures in the

voucher program. These include clarifying and streamlining procedures for public housing authorities so that voucher holders can move to any jurisdiction, regardless of where their voucher was originally issued (“portability”), and rewarding housing authorities for helping voucher families move to neighborhoods with high quality schools. Both of these developments could increase voucher families’ access to neighborhoods of higher socioeconomic opportunity and better educational options. To date, neither of these policy developments have been enacted, but HUD staff have been briefed on these topics.

What HUD has done is launch a small area fair market rent demonstration project to gauge the possible benefits of setting voucher rents by zip code, instead of using metropolitan area median rent. This could help prevent landlords from getting paid too much for units in higher poverty parts of a metropolitan area, and increase the rents that voucher holders can afford in more affluent communities. Together, these policy directions could increase the potential for the housing voucher program to deconcentrate poverty and reduce racial segregation by opening up the “geography of opportunity” for low-income families.

### *Discouraging Policy Directions*

The academic achievement of minority children has lagged behind that of their white counterparts for decades. In 2001, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was reauthorized as the bipartisan-supported *No Child Left Behind* law, a strategy to hold low performing schools accountable for the achievement of their students, and to eradicate the achievement gap between white and minority students. Among other requirements, the law stipulates that all students should be proficient in reading and mathematics by 2014. There has been much controversy over the law, as some argue that it

encourages “teaching to the test” and the reduction of art and music curricula. The lack of adequate funding to meet the mandates has led multiple districts and states to file lawsuits.

Most recently, however, there has been an alarming policy response on the part of some states to cope with the fast approaching 2014 proficiency deadline. Just last week, as part of the state of Virginia’s waiver to opt out of some of the requirements of the law, the state board of education has set new education goals for its students—but goals that differ by racial and ethnic subgroups, as well as students with disabilities. Passing rates are set higher for Asian and white students than they are for black, Latino, and disabled students. For example, in math, the state set the acceptable passing rate for Asian students at 82 percent, 68 percent for whites, 52 percent for Latinos, 45 percent for African American students, and only 33 percent for those students with disabilities. While supporters argue that the policy gives more time for low performing and minority students to reach the proficiency goals, it also formalizes lower standards for students of color and those students whose academic struggles are compounded by disabilities.

This kind of policy has other potentially dangerous implications as well. For example, it could encourage more “tracking” or grouping of students by ability, which research has shown leads to lower quality teachers and curriculum, as well as classrooms segregated by race and socioeconomic status. Ability grouping geared toward test performance can also undermine the attempts a number of school districts are making to integrate by race and class, by creating unequal environments within the same school. Such a policy also holds entire schools serving mostly minority or disabled students to a lower standard of academic achievement. While Virginia has already proposed these changes, over thirty other states have now received waivers

from the proficiency goals of NCLB, so the door has been opened for such an example to be adopted elsewhere.

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