

Public housing didn't fail in the US, it was sabotaged

A brief history of how America's public housing experiment was designed to fail.

by [Abdallah Fayyad](#)

The stereotypical image of public housing in America is one of deteriorating buildings, urban blight, and [dysfunctional housing authorities](#) in seemingly never-ending crises. Residents routinely deal with [bad living conditions](#), including heat failures, pest infestations, mold, and leaks. And public housing projects are often found in [areas with concentrated poverty](#) and in underserved, racially segregated neighborhoods.

By and large, America's experiment with public housing has been [viewed as a failure](#) — so much so that housing authorities have [offloaded some of their responsibilities](#) to the private sector.

But the demise of public housing was not an inevitable outcome. As my colleague Rachel Cohen [has pointed out](#), other countries have successfully pulled it off. Governments around the world have shown that they can [operate mixed-income housing developments](#) that have reliable maintenance and upkeep and that public housing doesn't have to segregate poor people away from the middle class.

So why did public housing in the United States age so poorly?

A bold experiment that was designed to fail

The federal government's plans to build public housing started in the 1930s, as part of the New Deal, in an [effort to create jobs during the Great Depression](#) and address the country's housing shortage.

But efforts to undermine public housing are about as old as the efforts to build it. From the outset, opposition was fierce. Many Americans didn't like the idea of the government using their tax dollars to subsidize poor people's housing, and real estate developers [were concerned about having to compete](#) with the government.

The Housing Act of 1949, which had a goal of providing “a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family,” bolstered America's public housing plans by heavily investing in the construction of new housing units. But by then, the federal government had already [undermined its own stated plans](#) by capping construction costs (which encouraged using cheap materials and discouraged modern appliances) and allowing racial segregation. Congress had also doomed public housing authorities' ability to raise revenue through rents in 1936 when it passed the George-Healey Act, which [established income limits](#) for who can qualify for public housing — making mixed-income public housing models impossible for federally funded projects.

As housing projects started to draw more Black residents, white people who lived in public housing started leaving, especially after the Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s [banned racial discrimination in housing](#). This was partly because the Federal Housing Authority [pushed for more people to own homes](#)

and expanded its loans mostly to white people, helping white families move out of the projects. Black families didn't receive the same opportunity.

“You saw a change in the racial composition, which simply added to the stigma and the pattern of administrative neglect that characterized many housing authorities,” the historian Ed Goetz [told the Atlantic](#) in 2015.

Starting with President Richard Nixon — who [declared that the US government](#) had turned into “the biggest slumlord in history” and [suspended federal spending](#) on subsidized housing — public housing started facing serious austerity measures and never recovered. Federal investments shifted away from building new public housing units and toward housing vouchers and public-private partnerships.

In the decades that followed, public housing started declining in quality, and Congress [funded a program to demolish](#) dilapidated public housing units and replace them with newly constructed or renovated mixed-income developments. But [according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition](#), those demolitions were an “overcorrection”; public housing simply needed more funding and better management.

It didn't have to be this way

America's public housing was an ambitious program that consistently faced efforts by lawmakers to undermine it. Throughout the program's history, legislation deliberately limited its potential to house Americans as needed. In addition to the George-Healey Act, laws like the 1998 Faircloth Amendment [put a ceiling](#) on the number of homes public housing authorities are allowed to own.

But that doesn't mean that public housing in the United States is entirely devoid of successes. The general picture of decay and neglect ignores the many positive experiences people have had living in government-run dwellings. As Goetz, a public policy professor at the University of Minnesota, [writes](#), “The story of American public housing is one of quiet successes drowned out by loud failures.”

Related:

- [How state governments are reimagining American public housing](#)

More than [2 million people live in public housing](#) in the United States, and without it, many of them would struggle to find affordable shelter. Indeed, there are countless stories of people whose lives would be tangibly worse without public housing. Mike Connolly, a Massachusetts state representative who has proposed expanding public housing, is one example. “Personally, I view [public housing] as a success. I was raised in a public housing project in Norwood, Massachusetts,” he told me. “Having that stable environment — not being subject to eviction, not being necessarily subject to a particular cost burden around housing — I think was really terrific for me and gave me the opportunity to develop into someone who has been doing a lot of good things in life.”

These bright spots show that there's a solid foundation that the United States can build on rather than abandon its public housing experiment. “I think of [public housing] as a successful program that has provided low-cost, moderate-quality shelter to millions of people for almost a century across the United

States,” Paul E. Williams, the executive director of the Center for Public Enterprise, told Vox. “It has been hampered and limited in its ability to do more by policy mistakes over the past 80 years.”

So if America wants to be a public housing success story, it can. It just has to stop sabotaging its own efforts to get there.