

Mothers, Children, Families and Housing: The Ongoing Crisis

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The theme of “Doing and Un-Doing Family” speaks to multiple and complex conditions that can enhance and support or disrupt and devastate households, relationships and kinship networks. Among the most critically important issues in the life of any family is access to housing. Over the years, I have examined family life in low-income communities with a particular focus on Black mothers as public housing activists (Rodriguez 2003; Rodriguez 2006; Rodriguez 2015). Since 1937, the public housing program has served some of the poorest families in the United States but these communities became the subjects of serious, ongoing debates as tenants became more impoverished, as appropriations for the program decreased, as the properties fell into severe disrepair and as they became sites of crime and violence (McCarty 2014). Exploring the critical intersection of race, gender, and place, I have been interested in the ways in which Black mothers advocate for the safety and health of their children and the strategies they use to push back against social, political and policy issues that threaten to “un-do” families and communities.

I witnessed Black women’s community activism in a number of extensive and engaged research contexts, including a project on public housing policy, that examined the ways in which race, class and gender situate Black women’s lives in the urban core and influence their relationships to the state. From 1999 to 2004 I was a member of an anthropological research team examining life in public housing communities as residents prepared for impending demolition and inevitable relocation. Our team examined multiple aspects of HOPE VI, a federal housing program that mandated massive demolition of public housing complexes, relaxation of the one-to-one unit replacement rule, the building of mixed-income, lower density housing, and vouchers to assist low-income families as they searched for housing in other locations (Greenbaum et al. 2008). In our study of HOPE VI in Tampa, Black women in various neighborhoods made significant contributions to our understanding of the politics of public housing (Williams 2004) and the layered difficulties poor families and children experience when forced to relocate (Popkin, Cunningham and Burt 2005). For example, women attended all meetings of the Public Housing Authority and challenged policies that did not align with the lived experiences of low-income families. These women, who had been leaders in their communities for many years, also called attention to inconsistent practices and policies that further oppressed families whose relationships to housing were already precarious. It was these women who helped us to understand the critical roles of social support networks in the lives of residents who were about to be disconnected from friends and family members by the HOPE VI project.

The research on HOPE VI reveals very mixed conclusions. While some studies have shown the possibility of positive outcomes for children (Chyn 2018; Popkin, Eiseman and Cove 2004), others have argued that poor families experience few benefits from mixed-income housing (Vale and Shamsuddin 2017). Our research in Tampa (which reflected a national trend in HOPE VI) showed that many families were simply moved to other public housing communities that were no better than those that were demolished (Greenbaum et al. 2008). What is clear is HOPE VI was not an effective solution to urban poverty. In fact, with fewer available public housing units, more families are threatened with homelessness, hunger and poor mental and physical health. This was predicted by some of the housing activists and residents whom we interviewed.

The contemporary lack of access to safe, decent, affordable housing has deep roots in U.S. policies and practices, including racial segregation, redlining, discrimination in lending and renting, urban renewal and highway construction. Through our research we will continue to show that public housing policy is also intricately connected to the legacies of these historic forces that affect how poor families survive in America.

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Cheryl R. Rodriguez is Professor of Africana Studies and Anthropology at the University of South Florida. She teaches courses on Black women and feminism, racism in America, and ethnographic community research methods. A Black feminist ethnographer and community anthropologist, her work occurs at the intersection race, gender, class and the city. She has written articles on Black women’s community activism, Black feminist pedagogy and research, and the history and culture of historically Black communities in Florida. Her most recent book is *The Power and Freedom of Black Feminist and Womanist Pedagogy* (2022), co-edited with Gary Lemons.

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