



*Building 7 at Newark's Scudder Homes demolished in summer 1997*¹

A Home is Half the Promise

How market forces undermined the promise of public housing in Newark

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To bring about integration, the first to do is to do it. [...] The change-over to a policy of nonsegregation is not so difficult and troublesome as one anticipates. [...] If a housing authority shows complete sincerity in the change and never retreat from their announced position with respect to non-segregation, the change will be successful. This, in any case, is what we have found to be true in Newark.

– Newark Housing Authority Executive Director Louis Danzig, 1952²

In 1962, the future of racial integration in Newark looked promising. Newark's newly elected Mayor Hugh Addonizio praised the movement toward racial integration before a meeting of the United States Commission on Civil Rights in Newark City Hall. He described the apparent success of urban renewal to build high-quality public housing projects in black neighborhoods. Thousands of families once lived in wood frame tenements without central heating, interior plumbing, and private bathrooms. They now lived in public housing where,

¹ Kenneth Stahl, "Newark – The Anti-Climax," *Detroit's Great Rebellion*, <http://www.detroits-great-rebellion.com/Newark---1967.html>.

² Newark Housing Authority and Louis Danzig, "Progress Report on Integration," June 1952, Newark Public Library accessed via Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/details/NewarkHousing045/page/n1/mode/2up>.

for the first time in their lives, they had their own bedrooms, bathrooms, and year-round steam heating.³

Newark's program of urban renewal cost taxpayers at least 128 million in federal funds (1.4 billion in 2020 dollars) and 53 million in local funds (550 million in 2020 dollars). This program costing by 19677 two billion (adjusted for inflation) gave Newark the fifth most expensive urban renewal program in the nation after New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston. An estimated 55,000 more were displaced from their homes in the process, 45,000 for urban renewal and 10,000 for highway construction. By the end of this program, some 37 thousand people, representing about one in every ten Newark residents, lived in public housing.⁴

Just eight years before in 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that separate was not equal and that racial segregation laws were not legally enforceable. In the few years before *Brown*, Newark had already moved to desegregate public housing and to assign residents to whichever of the city's approximately fourteen public housing projects they preferred. Newark public schools also seemed to offer the promise of racial integration. The city's population was 66 percent white in 1960 and 34 percent black. This would mean that every public school, if fully integrated city wide, would have two white children for every black child. The mixed incomes and races across Newark seemed to offer the possibility of a future egalitarian metropolis: schools and neighborhoods of both diverse races and diverse incomes.⁵

For all its promises, this program of urban renewal failed spectacularly. By the 1980s, opponents and activists described urban renewal and public housing as "The Second Ghetto," as high-rise slum housing as dangerous as the ghettos they were supposed to replace.⁶ By 2010, most of Newark's public housing from the urban renewal age had been demolished. Other lands cleared of homes to build urban renewal projects never found the financing to build and remain vacant lots. Among dozens of high-rise towers of public housing containing thousands of apartments, all but seven towers were demolished. The urban poor were expelled from public housing towers that had become concentrations of crime, drugs, poverty, and decay.

The program had fallen far from its hopeful origins when President Harry Truman signed urban renewal into law with the 1949 Housing Act. Truman announced at the program's launch: "The private housing industry cannot in the foreseeable future provide decent housing for these families. Their incomes are far too low to cover the cost of new housing of any adequate standard. [...] We have a national responsibility to assure that decent housing is available to all our people."⁷ By 1963 at the height of the civil rights

³ Hugh J. Addonizio and United States Commission on Civil Rights, "Introductory Statement of Hon. Hugh J. Addonizio, Mayor, City of Newark," *Hearings Before the United States Commission on Civil Rights, Newark, New Jersey, September 11-12, 1962* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, January 1963), p. 4-8.

⁴ Myles Zhang, "Urban Renewal by the Numbers," *Newark Changing*, June 2022: <https://newarkchanging.org/urban-renewal-by-the-numbers/>.

⁵ Newark Housing Authority and Louis Danzig, "Progress Report on Integration," June 1952, Newark Public Library accessed via Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/details/NewarkHousing045/page/n1/mode/2up>.

⁶ Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago 1940-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

⁷ Harry S. Truman, "Text of Truman Message on Housing and Rent Control," *New York Times*, February 24, 1948, p. 36.

movement, James Baldwin famously characterized urban renewal as something “most northern cities now are engaged; it is something called urban renewal, which means moving the Negroes out. Getting it means Negro removal; that is what it means. And the federal government is an accomplice to this fact.”⁸ In the span of these fourteen years, a program Truman described as the fight to create “decent housing” had evolved into what Baldwin characterized as “Negro removal.”

The reasons behind the failure of public housing are more complex than simple reasons like “Negro removal,” poorly designed architecture, or state hatred for black people. Urbanist thinker Jane Jacobs blamed the failure of public housing on architecture. High-rise towers of public housing, she claimed, were too tall and too modern an architecture for families used to living in old tenements, Victorian townhouses, and rural farms.⁹ But the failure of social housing in Newark was not caused by poor design choices, low-quality architecture, or the supposed prejudice of the people who built and directed the program of urban renewal. Nor was the failure of social housing caused by the poor families, and especially rural black families who lived in these houses and were – the legend claims – unprepared for urban life. Instead, the failure has more to do with employment discrimination, urban abandonment, and market policies that chose to under-invest in Newark and its people. These private forces collectively ensured the public failure of the Newark Housing Authority’s two billion dollar program of urban renewal.

Fundamentally, public housing in Newark was a two-part promise. Good homes at affordable prices for poor families were one half the promise: a promise met and provided by the public sector. Economic mobility and non-discrimination in employment for those living in public housing was the missing half of the promise. It was a promise that the private sector failed to meet in an age of de-industrialization and suburbanization.

1. A Diverse But Divided Urban Economy

Housing from the state was only half the picture. Employment from the private sector was the other half. Without private finance and employment desegregation efforts to match state investment in cities, the state-funded program of urban renewal was headed toward failure. The Newark Housing Authority and President Johnson’s Great Society programs could offer welfare programs and decent quality public housing, but they could not offer jobs. Employment opportunities for black social mobility, if rolled out en masse in the scale of millions jobs, had to come from the private sector.

However, many jobs remained closed to blacks as late as 1962. For instance, of the approximately 4,000 employees in Essex County banks, only 150 were black. If the banks employed blacks in the same percentage that blacks were a percentage of Essex County’s population, then there should have been closer to 1,000 black employees. Of these 150, only three were employed as tellers and none had any positions where they supervised others. The others all held jobs as cleaners, messengers, or menial tasks. According to the Industrial

⁸ James Baldwin TV interview with Kenneth Clark, “Perspectives: Negro and the American Promise,” WGBH, May 24, 1963, accessed via YouTube and the American Archive of Public: <https://youtu.be/zhop-eFB0sI?t=854>.

⁹ Jane Jacobs, “The Peculiar Nature of Cities: The Uses of Sidewalks, Safety,” in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), p. 29-54.

Relations Secretary of the civil rights defense group known as the Urban League,¹⁰ the local union chapters of the “International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers,” the “Bridge, Structural, and Ornamental Ironworkers,” and the “United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters” had between them not a single dues-paying union member who was black.¹¹ As the Newark Housing Authority recognized in its February 1967 annual report: “Decent housing cannot exist in a vacuum: employment opportunities, shopping emporiums, educational, and cultural establishments, entertainment facilities and medical and health centers are integral parts of the Good Life. [...] An emphasis on the building of dwelling units while ignoring the health of the community is futile.”¹² A home for the family and a job for the money comprised two halves of the new deal that the City of Newark would have to offer black migrants.

The patterns of northern and southern Jim Crow appeared different on paper but were similar in practice. Newark and New Jersey passed no rules and made no laws mandating the separation of races. There were no signs in public spaces or public transit indicating areas for whites only and blacks only. There were no signs on advertisements or rental accommodations that “Negroes need not apply.” These visible markers of segregation were southern events. However, unwritten rules shaped and guided Newark to reproduce in the north racialized spaces that mirrored the American south. As late as 1945, the Urban League surveyed downtown department stores and retailers and asked why they employed so few or no black people. They responded: “the public was not ready to accept them [negroes]” and “present department store salespeople would probably resent working with Negroes in this capacity.”¹³

By the 1950s, Newark had a strong economy diversified around different sectors. The economy offered both low-paid entry-level jobs for unskilled groups and high-paid senior jobs for skilled labor. Newark Westinghouse, for instance, employed some 2,000 people to make meters and electrical devices. In its first major contract with the U.S. Army, the M&M factory in Newark’s majority-black Central Ward made colorful sugar-covered chocolate candies, designed so that they could be transported to the battlefield without melting. There was unionized labor in large factories like Western Electric (just across the river in Kearny), Westinghouse Electric, and Ballantine Brewery, Pabst Blue Ribbon. There was non-unionized labor in hundreds of small machine shops like Watts-Campbell that dated back to the 1850s. The hope of unskilled labor – sometimes realized and often unrealized – in these and a thousand other factories attracted blacks to Newark.

There was also highly skilled labor like the dozens of jewelry businesses still concentrated south of downtown. There were clerical workers and management jobs at companies like Prudential, whose five towers each about fifteen stories spanned five city blocks and employed thousands of accountants, actuaries, and data entry personnel. During

¹⁰ Hugh J. Addonizio and United States Commission on Civil Rights, “Testimony of Adolph Holmes, Industrial Relations Secretary, Urban League of Essex County,” *Hearings Before the United States Commission on Civil Rights, Newark, New Jersey, September 11-12, 1962* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, January 1963), p. 12.

¹¹ Ibid., Table of Contents (for list of non-participating unions).

¹² Department of Research Information and Statistics, “Introduction” in *Annual Report: Statistical Data Pertaining to Public Housing* (Newark Housing Authority, 1967), p. 1-2, Newark Public Library accessed via Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/details/NewarkHousing003/page/n1/mode/2up>.

¹³ State of New Jersey Department of Education Division Against Discrimination, “Employment Practices in Selected Retail Stores,” 1956, Accessed via Rutgers University Libraries: <https://libguides.rutgers.edu/c.php?g=336802&p=2272301>

WWII, the U.S. Military requisitioned these offices to manage payroll and veteran's benefits for millions of soldiers fighting abroad. And finally for females historically excluded from working there was growing employment, for instance, as secretaries for insurance companies, operators for Bell Telephone headquartered in Newark, or as sales ladies in the dozens of department stores lining Broad Street.

This diversity produced in Newark an urban economy that could be described as a revolving door. The door pulled in migrant groups with promises of low-wage employment, offered them opportunities for advancement, skill development, and later for them – or their children – a higher education and better-paid jobs than their parents. From blue collar to white collar, the economy succeeded at attracting immigrant groups and filtering them upward to higher income and higher skilled jobs over time. Outside the revolving door were Europe, foreign lands, and places with a quality of life low enough that their residents were motivated to migrate to the United States. Inside the revolving door were the United States, the Newark metro area, and the suburbs of homeowners where immigrants moved to after they – or their children – had made it in America.

In the middle of the revolving door were dozens of cities, like Newark on the coast or Detroit and Chicago in the American interior. They had the concentrations of resources, jobs, and the flow of trade through them that linked interior and exterior: foreign and local markets, skilled and unskilled labor. The strength of the urban economy kept the revolving door moving. Some groups in Newark passed through the door quickly, such as German and English immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century that came to Newark, lived in its tenements, and soon left. Other groups passed more slowly through the city, such as the Italian and non-German Jewish immigrants. Less favored and skilled immigrant groups required several decades or a few generations before they, too, passed through the revolving door of Newark's Central Ward and onto the suburbs.

However strong Newark's economy appeared in 1950 – if judging from retail sales, industrial output, and real estate – deindustrialization and unemployment was coming. The economy was slowly hollowed out from below of its manufacturing and unionized labor jobs, which had provided earlier generations of immigrants a foothold and entry-level jobs for future career growth. For instance, the number of manufacturing jobs fell from 94,000 in 1950 to 67,000 in 1969. The number of jobs in small and miscellaneous manufacturers fell from 14,000 to 3,000.¹⁴ Blacks entered a shrinking urban economy with fewer opportunities – through entry-level jobs – for them to begin climbing the employment ladder toward middle-class wealth. So rather than passing through the city and Newark neighborhoods like the Central Ward – as all previous groups had – blacks came and stayed. The slowing revolving door caught them between the threats of southern Jim Crow on one side of the door and the suburbs they could never move to on the other side.

Manufacturing processes were also changing in ways that left behind Newark and black families in Newark. In the early 20th century, most Newark factories were built as multi-story mills in brick. Coal-powered steam engines drove a system of leather belts and steel shafts that, in turn, linked to machines on each floor. The length of drive belts limited both the size of a factory and the distance each machine could physically be from its power source. The result was dense factories of multiple floors in or near Newark's urban center.

¹⁴ Direction Associates, "Draft Environmental Impact Statement Old Third Ward Urban Renewal Project, N.J. R-6" (Newark Housing Authority, 1974).

Factories also needed to be in walking distance of the thousands of tenements where their employees lived.

By mid-century, factories were becoming larger, evolving from steam-powered multi-story mills into electric-powered single-floor assembly lines. Corporate mergers reduced the numbers of factories and increased the size of each. The new factories were also more malleable. Machines on large floors could be picked up and moved around to adapt for seasonal demand or, in the case of cars, the latest model produced that year. For instance, Henry Ford's Highland Park Plant from the 1910s was a multi-story affair designed to excel in the production of just one vehicle and model for over twenty years: the Model T. By contrast, Ford's River Rouge Plant from the 1940s was a single-story at the edge of Detroit suburbs, spanning thousands of acres in a complex to produce all aspects and all varieties of the car. Due to mechanization, the number of employees required in the final stage of Model T production declined from about 500 to 100 in the 20 twenty years since 1908. Both locally and nationally, the methods of manufacturing were changing, and with that came changes in whom they employed and where factories were located, either in cities accessible to blacks or in suburbs that remained inaccessible to blacks.

These changes in manufacturing penalized Newark. The city was short on land, dense in population, and with little power to grow through municipal annexation of neighboring suburbs. The larger and more profitable factories moved beyond Newark, to suburbs, to the south or to other regions with less powerful organized labor unions and more room. Many of the smaller and less profitable factories either closed or stayed behind, such as Watts-Campbell, a company with too little capital to expand, too old machinery to update, and too niche a market in specialty steam engine maintenance and repair to move elsewhere.

While the economy of the majority-black Newark was falling, the economy of the majority-white metro area and its suburbs were growing. From 1950 to 1970, the population of the New York Metro Area – that is Newark, its suburbs, and New York City – grew by one third from 12.3 million to 16.0 million.¹⁵ In these same years, the average amount a New York City metro household spent on living expenses and consumer products increased from \$4,600 to \$9,700.¹⁶

Despite growth in the region, the number of wholesale and retail jobs in Newark declined from 42,000 to 40,000. The trend began first with suburban branch offices for banks like Howard Savings & Loan, later as branch department stores like Bamberger's at Garden State Plaza, and still later as entire corporate headquarters like Bell Labs relocated to the suburbs. Suburban retail sales replaced urban sales in Downtown Newark as the primary source of profit for dozens of companies.

Car ownership also increased in the New York City area from 39 percent in 1950 to 56 percent of families in 1970.¹⁷ As a result, new population growth was concentrated in car-

¹⁵ U.S. Census, "New York City Metro Area Population 1950-2023," Macro Trends Charts: <https://www.macrotrends.net/23083/new-york-city/population>.

¹⁶ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *100 Years of U.S. Consumer Spending: Data for the Nation, New York City, and Boston* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, 2006), p. 23-34: <https://www.bls.gov/opub/100-years-of-u-s-consumer-spending.pdf>.

¹⁷ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *100 Years of U.S. Consumer Spending: Data for the Nation, New York City, and Boston* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, 2006), p. 23-34: <https://www.bls.gov/opub/100-years-of-u-s-consumer-spending.pdf>.

centered suburbs. For instance, 44 percent of the Newark metro area's population in 1920 lived within the city limits of Newark. The remaining 54 percent lived in suburbs adjacent to Newark. They either commuted back to Newark for work or commuted elsewhere in the New York City metro area. By 1970, just 19 percent of the region's population lived in Newark. The remaining 81 percent of Newark's population was in the suburbs. The region was growing and become more spatially mobile in cars, leaving behind Newark jobs, industries, and retailers. A majority urban Newark region in 1920 had become a majority suburban region by 1980.¹⁸

2. The Promise of Public Housing

In a landscape of shrinking urban employment, deindustrialization, suburbanization, and systemic racism, the Newark Central Planning Board and Newark Housing Authority responded with the tools of urban renewal. City Hall hoped that providing more room and tax breaks to industries would encourage them to stay in Newark and offer more jobs to Newark residents. (This strategy of tax abatements to attract economic growth persists today in Newark, with questionable community benefit.) At the same time, the Newark Housing Authority hoped that providing quality public housing would attract a better class of tenants and therefore a better class of companies who desired to be near these tenants. If people were leaving the city in search of better housing, Newark government could encourage them to stay by providing housing. As early as 1943, the Central Planning Board discussed at its first meeting the need to adapt from an industrial wartime economy to a peacetime economy of deindustrialization and decentralization.¹⁹

Some Newark Housing Authority projects were explicit in encouraging industry to return to the city. For instance, the Central Ward Industrial Area would have cleared 5,900 families (~20,000 people) to open up 240 acres of land at a cost of 15 million (150 million adjusted for inflation). Planners claimed in 1962 that: "This would comprise the largest urban industrial park yet planned in the nation."²⁰ The cleared land was to be sold at discounted rates to small and large manufacturers who would agree to build there and employ Newark residents. Most of this project was never realized, but the small part that was cleared is now a strip mall for Rainbow Shops women's clothing store, 99¢ Lot party supply, and other discount retailers. Hundreds of acres nearby remain vacant, while the Clinton Hill urban renewal area across the street was cleared of homes but never developed for lack of financing. Still larger was the Industrial River Project that, at a cost of 14.5 million (150 million adjusted for inflation) redeveloped the meadowlands as prime industrial land for Port Newark. That the Newark Housing Authority funded and planned sites for industrial uses reflected the importance of full employment as one condition necessary for a successful public housing program. Public housing could not succeed in a failing economy.²¹

¹⁸ Newark Housing Authority and Seton Hall University, "Table 10 – Population, Newark Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area 1920-1960," in *Economic Base Study: City of Newark, New Jersey* (South Orange, NJ: Division of Business Research, 1964), p. 31.

¹⁹ "Joint Conference Building Commissioners and Planning Board, November 23, 1943," Central Planning Board Minutes 1943-53, accessed via City of Newark Archives, box 455, nap.rutgers.edu/repository.php?id=18.

²⁰ Newark Housing Authority, *A City Reborn*, 1962, p. 8-9: <https://archive.org/details/NewarkHousing050/page/n41/mode/2up>.

²¹ Ibid. Also see the plans for the Industrial River urban renewal project in the Newark Public Library: Engineering report by Porter, Armstrong, Ripa, & Associates for the Newark Housing Authority, *Industrial river: Urban Renewal Project N.J. R-121, Essex County, Newark, New Jersey*, 1965: <https://archive.org/details/NewarkHousing052/page/n25/mode/2up?q=million>.

The success of Newark's program of public housing had at least three preconditions: 1) continued state investment, 2) employment opportunities, and 3) racial integration. All three of these conditions were present in 1950 when public housing was opened and succeeded, but they were absent just two decades later, resulting in the failure of public housing.

Firstly, state aid was critical to both build and fund public housing. The 1949 Housing Act allowed cities to clear land identified as slums and to sell this land at below market rates to private developers. The state also covered two third of land acquisition costs, as well as a fixed rate of about \$2,000 per each new unit of public housing built on the cleared land. State aid covered the cost of building public housing. State aid did not cover the cost of maintaining. However, infrastructure costs as much as five times to maintain over its lifespan as it cost to build. And so generous state aid to build housing but not maintain it challenged cities financially.

Initially, Newark public housing was supposed to be self-sufficient. The rent collected from tenants alone was supposed to cover all maintenance fees and any property taxes. Annual reports from the 1950s boasted of the amount each project paid in property taxes. Planning identified that public housing towers paid more in taxes than the slum neighborhoods they replaced. However, the financial model assumed an occupancy rate near 100 percent. For instance, as late as the 1967, only between two and five percent of public housing units were vacant. As late as 1966, there were as many as 4,000 families on the waiting list to live in the 11,000 units of public housing. So popular was the program that families would need to wait for as long as two years to join. Filling public housing and using tenant rents to fund maintenance was not a problem when these projects first opened.

This all changed in the early 1970s. As Newark continued losing population, the housing shortage eased up; small numbers of blacks moved into the neighborhoods that large numbers of whites were abandoning for the suburbs. From 1967 to 1978, the population of public housing fell from 37,000 to 31,000. By 1989, the occupancy rate in public housing fell as low as 62 percent. The result was income from rents barely enough to cover the cost of maintenance. At Columbus Homes: "The maintenance staff once included one janitor per building. [...] By 1970 one janitor covered two buildings, and often failed to complete the work that needed to get done daily. The street sweeper machines that had at one time kept the playgrounds cleaned vanished, so it was rare if the maintenance staff swept more than the immediate vicinity of buildings entrances."²² Trash piled up in common areas, and tenants set the garbage on fire when the incinerators and trash compactors broke down. At Scudder Homes, the number of social programs for residents declined and then almost disappeared: Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Junior Leagues, job education programs, and the network of community enrichment programs that low-income residents required. From 1970 to 1974, thousands of tenants at the Columbus Homes and the Stella Wright Homes led the longest rent strike in the history of American public housing. Foremost among their demands: Basic maintenance of livable, quality housing.²³

Continued state funding was essential to close the gap between maintenance costs and rental revenues. However, after the 1972 demolition of Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis, the nation

²² George Langston Cook, "Transitions," in *The War Zone: A Story of Christopher Columbus Homes, Newark, New Jersey Projects*, self published in 2005/2008 by author, p. 54.

²³ Rudy Johnson, "Newark Tenants End Rent Strike: Accord After 4 Years Gives Them Voice in Managing Stella Wright Homes Unprecedented Agreement" *New York Times*, July 18, 1974, p. 73-74.

turned against public housing: its hopes, ambitions, and possibility of success. State aid was no longer forthcoming.

Secondly, public housing had to be near job opportunities for social mobility. On average in public housing, there were only one parking spot for every three units of public housing. This implies residents expected either to carpool to work or, more commonly, to use public transportation. As the 1939 Federal Housing Authority redlining map of Newark described the area around Baxter Terrace and the Columbus Homes public housing: "It is an area of minimum values and useful only to those in lowest income brackets who need to be in walking distance of work. A slum clearance – U.S. Housing – is under way on Orange Street [Baxter Terrace], others are proposed."²⁴ For instance, when Columbus Homes opened in 1956, at least fifty factories employing between 50 and 100 people each were within a mile walk, and at least one hundred mostly Italian-owned businesses lined Seventh Avenue across the street. Today, so thorough is the economic loss that every last one of these businesses and factories are closed.

With social mobility and employment in mind, the Newark Housing Authority introduced a widespread program of tenant education. The program aimed to introduce tenants to the demands of urban living, through exhibitions of how to furnish a model for less than \$350 in used and salvaged furnishings,²⁵ twice-annual visits to each tenant's apartment to review how they lived in the rented space, and other social services. The program also aimed to educate the group of largely black males looking for employment. For instance, tenant education classes in the Columbus Homes and Baxter Terrace recreation centers included stenography, resume writing, and basic math. As part of its "Curriculum for Americanization Program," the Newark Housing Authority drew up a list of so-called "survival words." These words were taught to immigrants and blacks living in Newark's public housing projects, in addition to lessons in democracy, voting, and the U.S. Bill of Rights. They included the commands: "Private Property," "Danger," "No Smoking," and "Keep Off The Grass." The Americanization program also taught residents to stop "blight from creeping into their neighborhoods" and to "stimulate pride of ownership."²⁶ For a nation fighting communism abroad and poverty at home, public housing became a space to engineer the image of the ideal citizen. Well into the 1950s, Newark Housing Authority required that all residents sign a "loyalty pledge" affirming they were not a member of some 200 subversive groups, foremost among them the communist party and labor unions sympathetic to socialism.²⁷

Thirdly, public housing had to be racially integrated. Among the Newark Housing Authority fourteen large projects, the numbers of whites in each project by the 1960s ranged from less than ten percent in the Stella Wright Homes (of the majority-black Central Ward)

²⁴ LaDale Winling et al., HOLC tracts "D4 Third Ward" for Essex County, NJ," *Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America*:

<https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=11/40.802/-74.431&maps=0&city=essex-co.-nj&area=D4>.

²⁵ Newark Housing Authority, "Welcome to model apartment, Rev. William P. Hayes Homes, 41 17th Avenue, Apt. 1F, Newark 3, New Jersey," 1959, Newark Public Library accessed via Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/details/NewarkHousing046/mode/2up>.

²⁶ "Curriculum for Americanization Program 1959," Minutes of Newark Committee for Neighborhood Conservation and Rehabilitation, 1963-66, accessed via City of Newark Archives, box 456, nap.rutgers.edu/repository.php?id=18.

²⁷ "Newark Housing Authority Called To Court on Tenant's Loyalty Oath: American Civil Liberties Union Counsel Files Suit Seeking Restraint Against Eviction of Non-Signers in Federal-Aid Project," *New York Times*, February 3, 1953, p. 27, accessed via Times Machine.

to upwards of 80 percent in the Stephen Crane Homes (of the majority-Italian and Irish North Ward). Public housing by 1967 maintained a split of about 60 non-white residents for every 40 white residents. In a 1966 statement read aloud to the N.J. Committee on Civil Rights, housing authority director Louis Danzig identified that black residents could choose whichever of the 14 projects they preferred. However, many remained in Central Ward projects from a desire to be nearest family and places of employment: “People want to be near their friends. Perhaps there is a grandmother who will baby-sit or there may be church ties or a job situation. It happens in the projects, it happens elsewhere in the City.”²⁸

As public housing projects were under construction in the 1950s, all three of these factors were present in Newark to support the program: social mobility, employment opportunities, and a decent number of white families spread across majority-black public housing projects. Just ten years later, as suburbanization and deindustrialization took more visible effect on Newark’s economy, the conditions for successful public housing were vanishing.

3. Failure

In the 1950s, Newark public housing had the foundation it needed for success: public investment, social mobility for residents, and racial integration. By the 1970s and 80s, public investment evaporated, social mobility became more difficult, and racial integration became impossible. The declining landscape of Newark had immediate consequences on the viability of public housing.

The failure of public housing was sudden and, at least for the program’s administrators, unexpected. As late as the 1966 master plan of Newark, created on the event of the 300th anniversary of Newark’s founding, planners spoke glowingly of the success of urban renewal and the possibility of urban change.²⁹ For instance, the Newark Housing Authority’s studies from 1964 predicted that Newark’s population decline would reverse course and reach 410,000 by 1985. Instead, from 1960 to 1990, Newark lost 130,000 people.³⁰ Rather than reversing urban decline – or even causing it – urban renewal had merely slowed it. The appearance of new housing and new towers in 1960s Downtown Newark blunted and made less physically visible in Newark’s built environment the underlying economic realities of decline.

The 1950s were a period of post-WWII prosperity unprecedented in American history. As Philip Roth described the feeling of growing up in Newark’s Jewish Weequahic six months after WWII: “The miraculous conclusion of this towering event, the clock of history reset and a whole people’s aims limited no longer by the past – there was the neighborhood, the communal determination that we, the children, should escape poverty.”³¹

²⁸ Louis Danzig, “Statement to N.J. Committee on Civil Rights by Louis Danzig, Executive Director, Newark Housing Authority,” June 29, 1966, p. 4, accessed via City of Newark Archives, box 486, nap.rutgers.edu/repository.php?id=18.

²⁹ City of Newark Community Renewal Program, Newark Housing Authority, 1966, archive.org/details/NewarkHousing057/page/n1/mode/2up.

³⁰ Newark Housing Authority and Seton Hall University, “Table 9 – Trends in Population, New York Metropolitan Region 1920-1960 With Projections to 1985 (in thousands),” in *Community Renewal Program Economic Base Study*, 1964.

³¹ Philip Roth, “Chapter 2: Paradise Remembered,” in *American Pastoral* (New York: Random House, 1997) p. 40-41.

As the alleged threat diminished of German and Japanese air raid attacks on American cities, nighttime blackouts were suspended. Residents were, once again, allowed to turn their lights on at night and remove from their windows the mandatory blackout curtains. War rationing and stamps for fabric, food, and cigarettes were ended. The lieutenant general – appointed to manage wartime production and air raid readiness for Newark’s Central Planning Board – stepped down. From the metaphorical and literal darkness of war, Newark – and cities like Newark – emerged from the Great Depression in the light of a growing American Empire.

For all the hope by summer 1945, there was a housing shortage. Warships with thousands of soldiers on deck – packed tight with standing room only on deck – sailed into New York Harbor and landed at the same docks where Ellis Island immigrants had arrived a generation before. In Newark, hundreds of veterans and their wives doubled up in the Central Ward tenements of their parents. In other parts and other cities, government erected hasty bungalows and Quonset hut sheds for veteran families. Newark public housing remained around 70 percent white and an attractive first home for soldiers returned home, looking for good housing in a crowded market.

The housing market gradually caught up to the demand for housing by the 1950s. By 1955, the *Newark Evening News* and *Star-Ledger* featured dozens of advertisements almost every day for suburban tract homes, mass-produced consumer goods, refrigerators, televisions, radios, and all the appliances essential to equip millions of newly built American homes. The technologies of assembly line mass production – applied first to war and prefabricated military encampments – were applied to the home, to what the architect LeCorbusier described as “machines for living.” The 1950s was the age of the “consumer citizen,” the products one bought defined what it meant to be an American, to be considered a citizen.

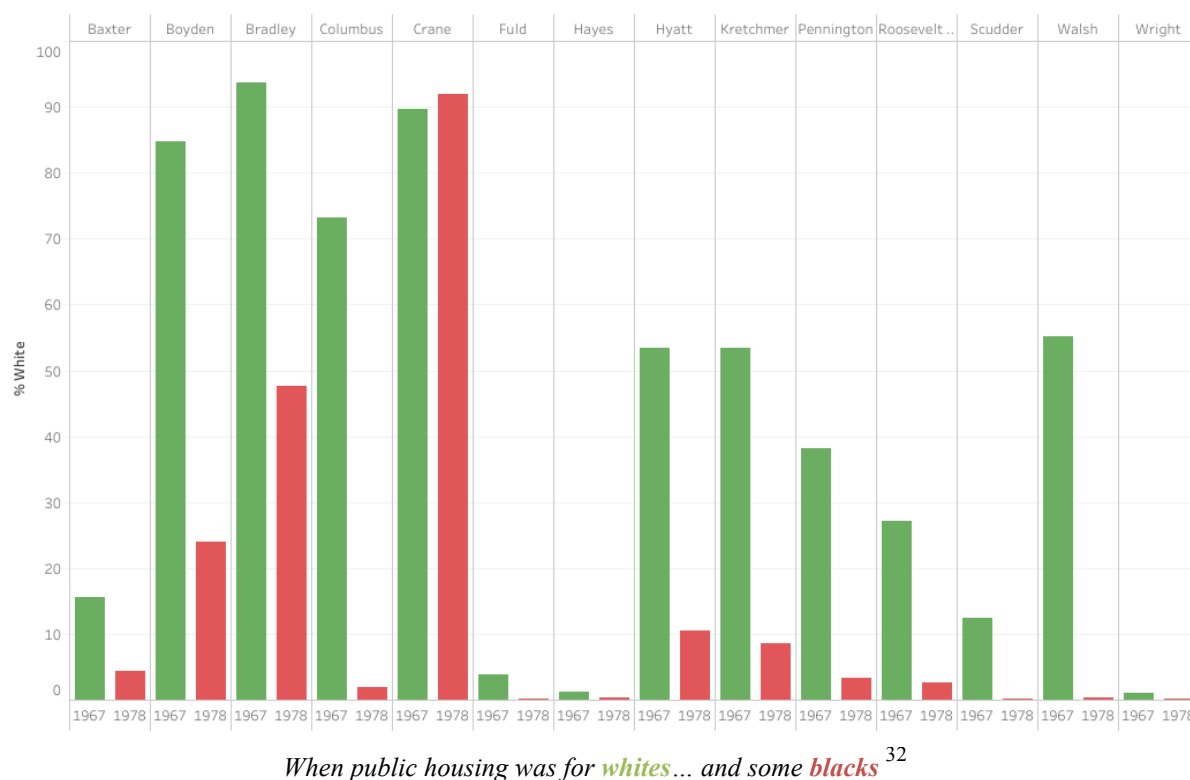
Newark was in transition. Out of war-devastated Europe and Asia few immigrants could or were allowed to immigrate. Since 1924, U.S. law barred almost all nationalities from migrating to America, except for those from Western and Northern Europe – that is, those deemed white enough to be American. In the landscape of 1950s prosperity, working-class whites of immigrant heritage cycled through public housing. Within years, most had found mortgages as first-time homebuyers in the suburbs. Few immigrants from Europe or from abroad migrated to Newark to replace the white families who were leaving. More people were leaving Newark than arriving. Left behind in Newark were the blacks, discriminated against in housing and in employment.

However, the landscape of suburban home ownership – and the benefits that came with living here – was closed to blacks. As late as 1960, the Federal Housing Administration’s Newark branch office insured loans from banks to developers and did not discipline developers for building racially segregated housing. In one concession to civil rights activists, the FHA attached a half page pink sheet to loan applications; the form asked developers to “promise” they would not discriminate. Developers were indeed required to sign a non-discrimination clause and agree to sell the homes they built to all races. But the FHA had no mechanism to enforce this clause and would not refuse to serve developers like William Levitt who built thousands of New Jersey homes for whites only. Furthermore, the FHA promised that no developer would be denied an FHA loan guarantee, even when a developer was under active federal investigation for civil rights abuses.

The state built and funded Newark public housing, as tool of social mobility for all races. But market forces ensured that only blacks would live there. The market allowed whites to graduate from public housing to homeownership. Blacks were restricted.

Percent of white families

33.6% white in 1967 vs. 10.4% white in 1978



As suburbanization picked up, and as whites converted from urban renters into suburban homeowners, the number of whites in public housing fell year on year. In 1950, when the Newark Housing Authority began desegregating public housing, the promise of racially integrated neighborhoods seemed real. In early days, there were still a substantial number of white applicants for public housing that the authority could assign to apartments in black neighborhoods. The housing authority managed 14 projects total. By 1967, seven of these were majority black; by 1978, 13 out of 14 were majority black. The only majority white project remained Stephen Crane Village in Newark's North Ward, an area defended by ethnic whites from the black invasion. By 1967, the number of whites in public housing fell to 34 percent; by 1978, the white population fell to just 10 percent.

The largest change occurred at Newark's Columbus Homes. Its 1,556 apartments held upwards of 6,000 people in what was – when opened in 1956 – the largest project in the authority's history. Columbus homes were 73 percent white in winter 1967 but just five percent white in 1972. That is, in a span of just five years, Columbus Homes lost all 3,800 white residents – so thorough was the racial re-segregation of what was once integrated public housing.³³ In summer 1967, as racial unrest erupted across Newark's Central Ward,

³² As compiled from the 1967, 1972, and 1978 Newark Housing Authority Annual Reports, Newark Public Library accessed via Internet Archive:

public.tableau.com/app/profile/myles.zhang/viz/NewarkHousingAuthorityData196719721978/Welfare#1.

³³ Ibid.

leaving 26 million dead and \$10 million in property damage (\$100 million adjusted for inflation), the Columbus Homes were untouched. Yet, black resident George Langston Cook described his experience as a 15-year-old teenager seeing law enforcement shoot up the place:

Despite the fact that no rioting occurred in our neighborhood, within two days from the beginning of the central ward unrest, armed State Troopers and National Guardsmen patrolled through Columbus and harassed many of us. One day, while they were walking through the playgrounds, they started yelling then shot at several buildings, blowing out tens of windows. Had not the buildings been constructed with the materials they were, several innocent people would have died. Several days later, after the guardsmen and troopers were recalled, large numbers of Italian families began moving out.³⁴

As whites fled, jobs left, and population growth stalled, fewer tenants needed or applied for public. Fewer applicants meant the housing authority could no longer be so selective and had to admit poorer and poorer tenants each year.

Tenant selection was key to the initial success of public housing. The authority insisted in 1940 that no more than 15 percent of public housing residents could receive welfare or employment from the Works Progress Administration. Public housing residents could be poor, but they had to be fully employed. As a result, when the city's first public housing project opened at Hyatt Court, most residents were working-class families. About 75 percent of public housing residents were white, and the remaining 640 families were black.

Income limits were kept relatively high, making most of Newark's population eligible for public housing. In 1940, factories paid about \$25 per week, or about \$1,300 per year for full-time employees.³⁵ The average family in New York City was married with two children and made about \$1,800 per year.³⁶ If judging by income requirements alone, most of these working families would have been eligible for public housing. At Newark's Pennington Court, for instance, a family of four making on an annual salary of \$1,095 would have paid just \$20.50 per month for a three-room apartment in 1940. At Seth Boyden Court and Stephen Crane Village, the salary limit was as high as \$1,260 with rents of just \$23.75 a month. At all four of the oldest public housing projects – Pennington Court, Seth Boyden Court, Baxter Terrace, Stephen Crane Village – maximum allowable income requirements were just short of median incomes for the region. This meant that a poor family could move into public housing and continue to live there until their income rose as high as median incomes for the area. At that point, they would have to leave public housing and re-enter the private rental market. Generous eligibility requirements thus gave the Newark Housing

³⁴ George Langston Cook, "Transitions," in *The War Zone: A Story of Christopher Columbus Homes, Newark, New Jersey Projects*, self published in 2005/2008 by author, p. 59.

³⁵ Arthur J. Altmeyer, "Testimony of Arthur J. Altmeyer, Chairman, Social Security Board, Before Special Senate Subcommittee of Wartime Health & Education," January 28, 1944, accessed via Social Security Administration website: <https://www.ssa.gov/history/aja144.html>.

³⁶ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *100 Years of U.S. Consumer Spending: Data for the Nation, New York City, and Boston* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, 2006): <https://www.bls.gov/opub/100-years-of-u-s-consumer-spending.pdf>.

Authority a large enough applicant pool to select only for those tenants most likely to succeed at work, in marriage, and in climbing the social ladder out of poverty.³⁷

However, by the 1950s, eligibility requirements were changing. Throughout WWII and into the years after, both wages and inflation continued to rise. The eligibility requirements for public housing did not rise as fast. For instance, from 1940 to 1968, median family incomes for New York City rose from \$1,800 to \$12,000 – a 660 percent increase. In the same time span, maximum allowable income for a family of four in public housing rose from \$1,260 in 1940 to \$5,060 in 1968 – a 400 percent increase. In 1940, the gap between public housing eligibility and median comes was less than \$100. In 1968, this gap was about \$7,000. This meant that a poor family of four could move into public housing in 1968, but as soon as their income rose to \$5,060, they would be evicted into a private rental market geared toward incomes on average of \$12,000. Tenant leases were renewed on a month-to-month basis, so as to encourage rapid turnover and to evict tenants as soon as their incomes rose too high. In other words, public housing in 1940 that was open to a mix of incomes was, by 1968, restricted just to the poorest incomes. This further reduced the power of the housing authority to strategically select tenants, meaning that only the poorest of the poor and those least able to leave poverty were confined to public housing.

In 1962, Newark's Central Planning Board identified what it called "the middle income housing problem." They concluded that the middle-income family has "an annual income ranging between \$4,000 and \$8,000," which is "an excessive income for public housing occupancy but insufficient to meet the rents charged in new, unassisted residential construction."³⁸ Public housing was geared for incomes less than \$5,000. Private housing was rented to for incomes above \$12,000. The housing was therefore tightest for families that made too much to live in public housing and too little to live in private housing.

The revolving door analogy is again helpful. For public housing to succeed as a tool of social mobility, poor families must be able to live there until such time they can afford high-quality rental housing on the private market. A revolving door on a building moderates between inside and outside air temperatures; the temperature difference evens out and is equalized within the space of the door. By the previous analogy, Newark's urban economy of the early 20th century was a revolving door that pulled in low-income immigrants, assimilated them into the American mainstream, and then released them to the suburbs when their incomes were high enough. However, when low-income black families were evicted from public housing as soon as they made above \$5,000, they were left on their own: too wealthy for public housing and too poor for home ownership. Public housing could no longer serve as a revolving door, a ladder, and gateway to the middle class.

The success of Newark public housing required a healthy balance within projects of incomes, stable families, and low crime. Too many poor people and unstable families in one place and the project would be unable to attract wealthier peoples and stable families into the mix. By the 1950s, as Newark faced a housing shortage, stable families often chose to live in public housing. By the 1960s, as Newark hollowed out, the number of vacant apartments

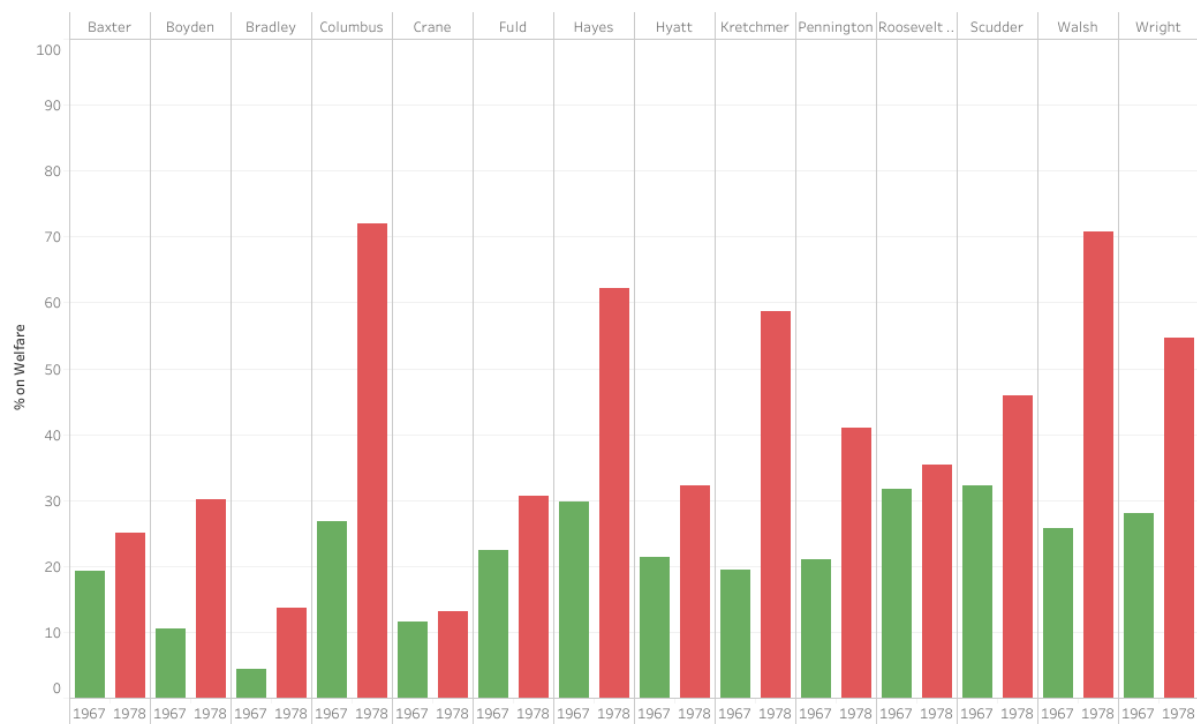
³⁷ Newark Housing Authority, "Who Will Live Here," in *Housing Authority of the City of Newark: report of progress – 1940*, p. 29-30, Newark Public Library accessed via Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/details/NewarkHousing020/page/n27/mode/2up>.

³⁸ Aldo Giacchino for Newark Central Planning Board, "Definition of Terms," in *The middle income housing problem in Newark, New Jersey: a study and framework for an effective program*, June 1962, p. 2, <https://archive.org/details/NewarkPlanningBoard034/page/n7/mode/2up>.

increased across the city. Many white neighborhoods became black. Poor families in need of housing could search elsewhere in city. As a result, the blacks left behind in public housing were as a whole poorer than, more likely to have broken families, more likely to be unemployed, and more likely to be single mothers than the demographics of black Newark as a whole.

In addition to income limits that evicted stable working families from public housing, federal policies undermined the power of the Newark Housing Authority to select tenants. In the 1940s, urban renewal projects were limited in scale and displaced people on the scale of hundreds. The first slum clearance projects built homes on vacant land and industrial land. Few people were displaced. However, in the 1950s and 1960s, the scale of slum clearance projects changed. New projects evicted thousands of families to build the campuses of Rutgers University, the Newark College of Engineering, Interstate 78, and Interstate 280. These were all projects that demolished more homes than they replaced. As Louis Danzig described: “Huge highway and urban renewal programs and many other public works were undertaken, Congress granted to families to be displaced absolute priority for occupancy in public housing. To some extent, this eliminated the screening that had been done in Tenant Selection. Displaced families were accepted as tenants regardless of prior police records, credit ratings or social agency experience.”³⁹

Percent of families on welfare 1967 vs. 1978



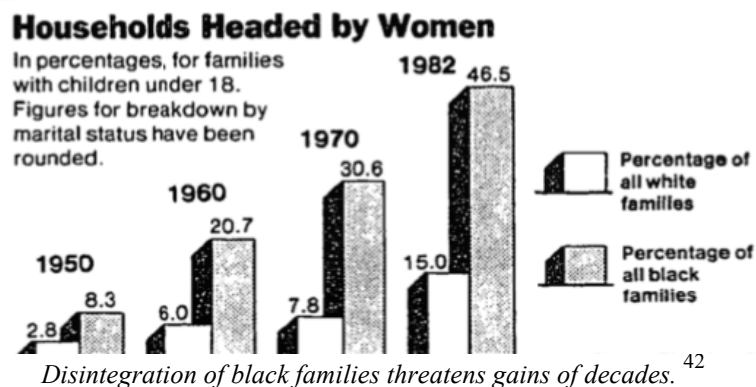
*The biggest shift among all projects citywide was at Columbus Homes, where in the span of just ten years the percentage of families on welfare increased from 27 percent in 1967 to 72 percent in 1978, a 45 percent increase.*⁴⁰

³⁹ Louis Danzig, “Statement to N.J. Committee on Civil Rights by Louis Danzig, Executive Director, Newark Housing Authority,” June 29, 1966, p. 9, accessed via City of Newark Archives, box 486, nap.rutgers.edu/repository.php?id=18.

⁴⁰ As compiled from the 1967, 1972, and 1978 Newark Housing Authority Annual Reports, Newark Public Library accessed via Internet Archive: public.tableau.com/app/profile/myles.zhang/viz/NewarkHousingAuthorityData196719721978/Welfare#1

In the 1940s, some six million blacks migrated north as families, and most of these families were intact two-parent households with male breadwinner. Fewer than five percent of these families were headed by women, and almost no families were headed by single mothers. The black unemployment rate in the American south was low, both because of the availability of low-paying sharecropper jobs, the strength of black family units where different generations clustered in the same household or street, and the very real threat of imprisonment as vagrant if found loitering and unemployed. Blacks, however, entered the urban economy in the same decades that its revolving door was slowing down. Newark's engines of economic growth were leaving.

Over each following decade of deindustrialization, the black male breadwinner and black family was stretched financially. The number of households nationwide headed by black women increased from just 8.3 percent in 1950 to 46.5 percent in 1982. Single motherhood – once rare among black women – became the social norm. By contrast, among white families in 1982, only 15 percent had female heads. In the same years, while the number of black women and white women in the labor force grew, the number of unemployed black men grew. From 1965 to 1983, the percentage of unemployed black men tripled nationwide from 5.9 percent to 16.3 percent.⁴¹ The popular image of the black single mother and the unemployed, absent black father is a modern construction, a product of policies after Martin Luther King and the push to end segregation.



The result of black unemployment was a growing number of single black women with children and with no other male means of support to build a family. Compound the absence of black males with the gender pay gap that, by 1982, paid black women on average \$2,700 less than black men and \$8,200 less than white men. The result was residents in public housing with few means to escape the cycle of poverty. As child psychiatrist Dr. James Comer described to *The New York Times* in 1983: “In a society where the male is supposed to be the breadwinner, something that’s still deep in our psychology, it’s a tremendous psychological burden when you know you don’t have a snowball’s change in hell of taking care of your family. One of the defenses is not to care, to not do, not try.”⁴³

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Judith Cummings, “Disintegration of Black Families Threatens Gains of Decades,” *New York Times*, November 20, 1983, p. 1-56, accessed via Times Machine.

⁴³ Ibid.

Black unemployment in a shrinking urban economy threatened the quality and viability of public housing.

From 1967 to 1978, the increasing number of single-mother households and broken families in Newark public housing mirrored the larger national destruction of the black family. When public housing first opened, and as late as the 1950s, there were equal numbers of black males and black females in public housing. Black families were intact. By 1967, there were 45 adult men for every 55 adult women in public housing. By 1978, there were just 30 black men for every 70 black women in public housing. This meant that by 1978 upwards of sixty percent of all black women in public housing were either divorced, unmarried, widowed, or single mothers with children.

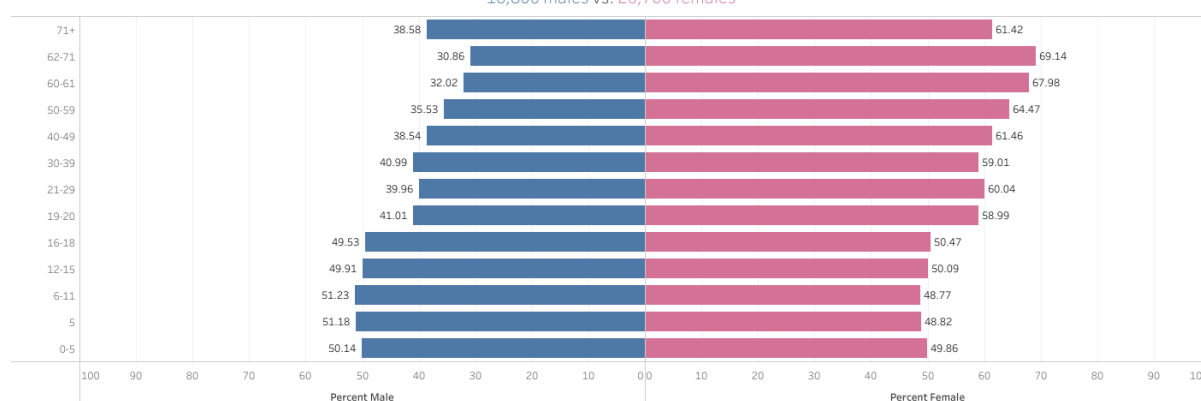
Up until age 20, there equal numbers of black boys and black girls in public housing. However for residents in public housing above age 20, the population of working-age black males evaporated. Below age 20: equal numbers of boys and girls. Above age 20: families without men, and black men without families. When black boys became black men, they vanished from the public life of public housing – pulled into the system of homelessness, unemployment, and mass incarceration.

Public Housing Residents by Age and Gender in 1967 ⁴⁴

45% male vs. 55% female
16,800 males vs. 20,700 females

Public Housing Residents by Age and Gender in 1967

45% male vs. 55% female
16,800 males vs. 20,700 females



Public Housing Residents by Age and Gender in 1978 ⁴⁵

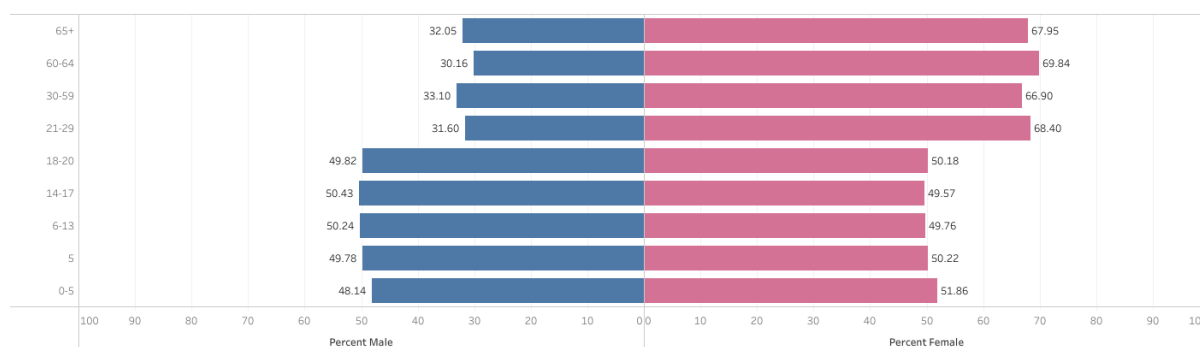
41% male vs. 59% female
12,900 males vs. 18,400 females

⁴⁴ As compiled from data on table 4 of the Newark Housing Authority's *Annual Report: Statistical Data Pertaining to Public Housing, 1967*,

<https://public.tableau.com/views/NewarkHousingAuthorityAgeData196719721978/1967GenderBreakdown>.

⁴⁵ As compiled from data on page 26 of the Newark Housing Authority's *Low Rent Public Housing Resident Statistics 1978*, Newark Public Library accessed via Internet Archive:

<https://public.tableau.com/views/NewarkHousingAuthorityAgeData196719721978/1978GenderBreakdown>.



Notice how above drop in black males above age 20.

The percent of broken families in public housing increased from 22 percent in 1967 to 50 percent in 1978. Broken was defined by a family missing a father, with orphaned children, or both parents unemployed. That is, in just these ten years, the number of broken families in Newark public housing increased 225 percent. In the Columbus Homes, 60 percent of all residents were children and teenager under age 17. For 1,836 children in the Columbus Homes, there were just 395 adult men, that is, just 395 men and fathers in their immediate buildings who could have served as male role models for 1,836 children.⁴⁶

In the 1960s, the majority of families in public housing had breadwinners who made enough money to support their families. Thousands of families may have lived in public housing, but many received no other source of support. In 1967, 54 percent of families had wages that represented the majority of their income. By 1972, just five years after the riots, the number of families in public housing who were gainfully employed fell to just 20 percent. That is, 80 percent of families were either unemployed or made wages that covered less than half their living expenses. Public housing was once home to the upwardly mobile and racially diverse working class. By the 1970s, Newark public housing became home to the poorest of poor, intergenerational cycles of poverty, unemployment, and divorce.⁴⁷

* * *

We have demolished most of Columbus Homes with the remainder of the buildings slated to come down within the next few months. And, beautiful new townhouses are already dotting the landscape where the other Columbus Homes highrises were just a short time ago. [...] Newark will enter an era where only high quality housing will be erected to foster dignity, self-esteem, and pride in all Newark residents.⁴⁸

On April 21, 1996, after a two-minute speech by Newark Mayor Sharpe James, the Kretchmer Homes collapsed into a pile of rubble before the assembled and cheering crowd. The explosions were timed in stages to first crack the building down its central spine of

⁴⁶ As compiled from the 1967, 1972, and 1978 Newark Housing Authority Annual Reports, Newark Public Library accessed via Internet Archive:

public.tableau.com/app/profile/myles.zhang/viz/NewarkHousingAuthorityData196719721978/Welfare#1

⁴⁷ As compiled from the 1967, 1972, and 1978 Newark Housing Authority Annual Reports, Newark Public Library accessed via Internet Archive:

public.tableau.com/app/profile/myles.zhang/viz/NewarkHousingAuthorityData196719721978/Welfare#1

⁴⁸ Sharpe James and Newark Housing Authority, "Mayor Sharpe James' Statement on Implosion of Kretchmer Homes," April 21, 1996, Newark Public Library accessed via Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/details/Goldstein237>.

columns, and then to watch as the brick floors collapsed onto each other in a controlled freefall. The result was a neat pile of rubble, all the easier to sweep, clear the land, and construct moderate-income prefabricated homes where there once stood “towers in the park.”⁴⁹

Some sixty years after urban renewal, the words of Sharpe James expressed a hope both old yet unrealized: the dream of a home. Built 1953, the five buildings of eight stories each at Kretchmer contained between them 730 homes for 3,000 people. Reverend Thomas J. Finnegan, former Chairman of the Newark Housing Authority, said that public housing must be built to last “like the ancient Mesopotamians did with their homes. A house for one family needs some 30,000 bricks.” A priest turned social activist and public servant, Reverend Finnegan described in 1969: “Look around. You’ll see the clearance of slums and the evidence of a city moving forward. In Newark there are not only new buildings, but also new efforts at social improvement and new determination to overcome racial injustice.”⁵⁰ Built to last for centuries but planned for failure from the start, Newark’s public housing was almost all demolished from 1994 to 1999.

Controlled freefall. The physical destruction of the homes by demolition and the spiritual destruction of their occupants by discrimination were both acts of controlled freefall, planned and orchestrated by powerful forces. The appearance of collapse – the sounds, smells, and violence of destruction – masked the reality that demolition was calculated.

To replace the state-funded and state-managed public housing, Newark turned to private rentals from private landlords. In a system known as Section 8, the state subsidized private landlords to offer their units to low-income tenants at discounted rates. From 1989 to 2006, the number of Section 8 units in Newark increased from 1,100 to 4,800. The number of private landlords profiting from low-income housing rentals increased from 675 to 1,706. A public good – once provided by the state as if a public utility like water and electricity – was now privatized and its profits distributed across thousands of buildings and hundreds of landowners.⁵¹

The balance between public and private is an old debate: For people too poor and too undesirable for private developers and homebuilders to serve, should the public be responsible for their care? In a public statement, made at the White House after signing the 1949 Housing Act, President Truman described that public housing must be a collaboration between public and private. The state could build public housing, but it could and should not interfere with private developers.

It was the government that ensured loans for developers to build discriminatory suburbs like Levittown. It was the government that built the roads to support these suburbs and the auto industries that sold the cars that ran on these roads. And it was the government that stepped aside and set the eligibility requirements for public housing so low as to almost ensure the failure of these public projects. But it was also the government that attempted to desegregate public housing and to build projects that specifically benefitted black families – at least for the first few years when these public housing projects served crowded families in

⁴⁹ “Kretchmer Homes,” Langan Demolition: <https://www.langan.com/portfolio/kretchmer-homes>.

⁵⁰ “Cities still form part of the picture,” *Star-Ledger*, June 15, 1969, p. 28.

⁵¹ Newark Housing Authority, “Housing Authority of the City of Newark Dwelling Units Trend (LIH + Sec. 8) – 1989 to 2006,” Newark Public Library accessed via Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/details/Goldstein239/page/n1/mode/2up>.

a crowded city. The story of urban renewal in Newark – its highways, public housing projects, and public institutions built on land that once belonged to black families – illustrates the tensions and contradictions of state policy. The Newark Housing Authority – as an unlikely alliance between business interests, social justice activists, and public entrepreneurs like Louis Danzig – illustrates the tensions central to the program of urban renewal. As Truman described in 1949:

These policies are thoroughly consistent with American ideals and traditions. They recognize and preserve local responsibility, and the primary role of private enterprise, in meeting the Nation's housing needs. But they also recognize clearly the necessity for appropriate Federal aid to supplement the resources of communities and private enterprise.⁵²

The challenge in 1960 was that well-paid and unionized entry-level jobs were widely available, but they just were not open to blacks. The challenge was to fight – through legislation and activism – that these jobs be opened to blacks. The challenge today in the 2020s is the opposite: these manufacturing jobs are open to blacks, but they are no longer widely available or – in many cases – simply do not exist for blacks or whites. In other cases, old manufacturing jobs have been replaced with the likes of Amazon's new fulfillment centers that are notoriously not unionized.

A home is one half the promise. The other half is a job and a living wage. The homeownership gap – between the majorities of suburban whites in Newark metro who own their homes vs. the majority of urban blacks who do not – is one part of the racial wealth gap. While 23 percent of blacks in Newark city are homeowners, 67 percent of whites in Newark suburbs are homeowners.⁵³ Whites in Newark suburbs are three times more likely than urban blacks in Newark to be homeowners. The other half – the missing half – is the racial earnings gap between black families and white families. The median income of white families in Newark metro is \$110,000, while the median income of black families is \$46,000.⁵⁴ The racial wealth gap, which was closing before the 1960s, has since stalled: Black family wealth remains one sixth to one seventh of white family wealth.⁵⁵

⁵² Harry S. Truman, "Statement by the President Upon Signing the Housing Act of 1949," July 15, 1949, *The American Presidency Project*, University of California Santa Barbara:

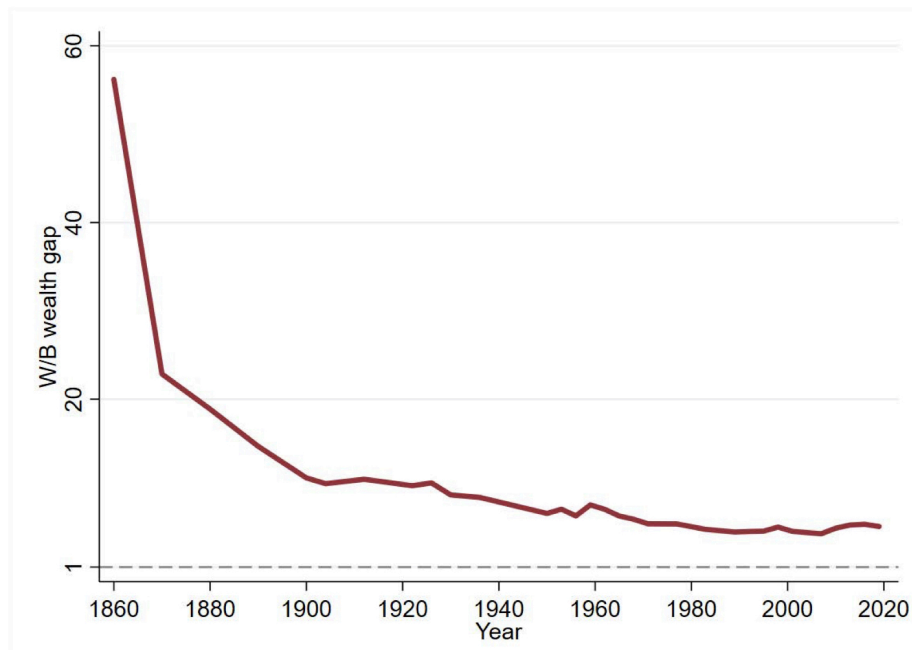
<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-the-president-upon-signing-the-housing-act-1949>.

⁵³ New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, "Figure 1: Racial Disparities in Homeownership Rates in Newark, Essex County and New Jersey, (2019 American Community Survey)," in *Black Homeownership Matters*, May 2022, p. 7:

https://assets.nationbuilder.com/njisj/pages/689/attachments/original/1651592853/Black_Homeownership_Matters_Report_5.3.22_web.pdf.

⁵⁴ 2020 U.S. Census Data accessed via Social Explorer.

⁵⁵ Ellora Derenoncourt, Chi Hyun Kim, Moritz Kuhn, and Moritz Schularick, "Wealth of Two Nations: The U.S. Racial Wealth Gap, 1960-2020 (Working Paper 30101)" Working Paper Series, National Bureau of Economic Research, June 2022: <http://www.nber.org/papers/w30101>.



White-black per capita wealth ratio, 1860-2020:

*More movement to close the racial wealth gap was made before the 1960s than after the 1960s.*⁵⁶

Newark – and similar Rust Belt cities – was and remains a rental market. Newark suburbs – and the suburbs of other rust belt cities – were and remain homeowner markets. By the 1960s, about 80 percent of Newark residents were renters. But the majority of people in Newark’s suburbs were homeowners. This pattern holds is identical today in Newark, and across the landscape of American cities: Urban renters vs. suburban homeowners. Public housing and urban jobs were bottom rungs on that ladder. Occupants of public housing in low paid jobs would remain occupants of public housing in low wage jobs as long as suburbs near Newark remained closed to them.

In its urban renewal and slum clearance efforts, the Newark Housing Authority addressed the housing gap: to deliver to all families the promise of a home. But the authority failed to deliver the other half of the promise that could be fulfilled by market forces alone: non-discrimination in employment and opportunities for social mobility in a growing urban economy. The failure to give social mobility to black families ensured that public housing for black families – no matter how well built, designed, or managed – would have to fail.

Newark Housing Authority Louis Danzig said in 1952 that: “To bring about integration, the first to do is to do it.” For a brief few years, between the end of segregation in the 1950s and the growth of white flight in the 1960s, Newark public housing seemed to work, as tool of social mobility as stepping stone toward homeownership for a generation of white families. With the simple command just “to do it,” state action alone caused the desegregation of Newark public housing. But market forces re-segregated this housing along lines of social class, gender, and race. Some seventy years after desegregation in Newark, the goals of integration remain both unrealized and yet seemingly within reach. For a region as wealthy as Newark metro to contain within it a city a segregated city as poor as Newark reveals that the problem is not poverty; the problem is the inequitable distribution of wealth. Newark does not have a poverty problem; Newark has a wealth problem. As Martin Luther King described in 1963 from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial: “One hundred years later,

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 33.

the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.”⁵⁷

Acknowledgements

I thank the archivists of the Newark Public Library and City of Newark Archives for granting me access to the primary sources that make my work possible. I also thank Newark-native Brendan O’Flaherty. His textbook on urban economics framed my understanding of Newark. His unpublished text chapter “How did Newark get to be a city where people aren’t rich?” also provided me a framework to understand the contemporary landscape of poverty in Newark. I am grateful to Zemin Zhang for his research on Louis Danzig and the history of the Newark Housing Authority. Last of all, I am grateful to the residents of Newark public housing, for their struggle and their perseverance to live in a system rigged against them.

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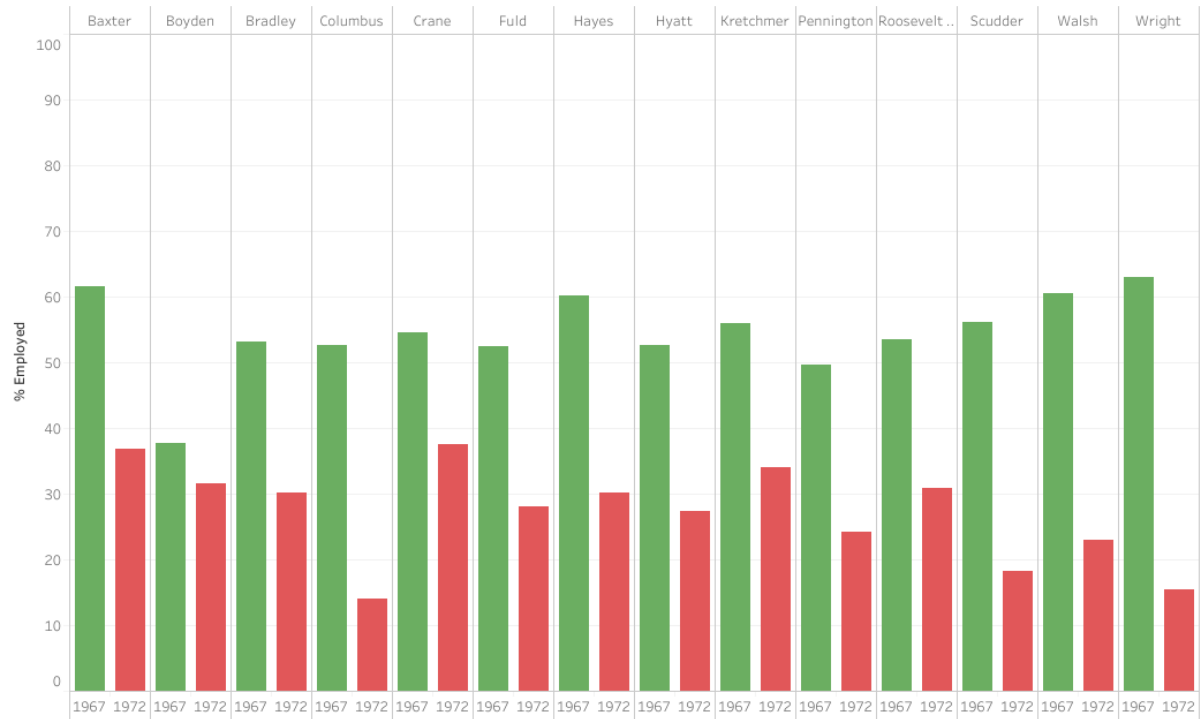
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⁵⁷ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have a Dream,” August 28, 1963, Lincoln Memorial, accessed via NPR: <https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety>.

Percent of families gainfully employed*

53.7% employed in 1967 vs. 20.3% employed in 1972

*Defined as family making >51% income from wages alone



Percent of families broken*

21.7% broken in 1967 vs. 50.3% broken in 1978

*Defined as missing father, children orphaned, or both parents unemployed

