Study of mixed-income development in Chicago offers insights for future anti-poverty initiatives

Creating mixed-income communities is a promising policy response to the social isolation and economic disinvestment that characterize high-poverty neighborhoods. The objective is to attract residents with higher incomes while maintaining affordable and public housing for lower-income residents.

Policymakers hope that this strategy will generate housing developments and perhaps entire neighborhoods that provide strong social networks for accessing employment opportunities and other resources, more effective demand for high-quality amenities and public services, more support for positive behavior, and more positive role models for youth.

Mark Joseph, Ph.D., Assistant Professor and Chair of the Community and Social Development concentration at the Mandel School, has been studying mixed-income developments in Chicago for over five years. He and his research team are conducting case studies at five new mixed-income developments that are part of that city’s massive transformation of public housing.

Along with colleagues at the University of Chicago, Joseph has raised over $1.6 million to support this research from funders that include the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, The Rockefeller Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Research Methods
Joseph’s research analyzes the strategies used to build mixed-income developments and the perspectives and experiences of residents of all income levels. The research methods include in-depth interviews with hundreds of residents, development staff, and community stakeholders; structured observations of meetings and community activities; and analyses of documents and administrative data.

Early Findings
Joseph says the transformation of public housing in Chicago is turning out to be vastly more complex than anticipated. For instance, prior to the economic crisis, there was high demand for the market-rate units, because of the prime locations of the redevelopments, the high-quality designs, and the seamless physical integration of market-rate and subsidized units. However, the national economic recession and the stalled housing market in Chicago have slowed sales.

In addition, there have been some difficulties finding public-housing residents who are eligible to live in the new developments and who are willing to move there. Nearly half of the relocated public-housing residents who were interviewed report experiencing stress from strict rules that govern behavior in the developments, such as not loitering in public spaces and limiting noise levels of children, among others.

Yet, the residents also report high satisfaction with the physical environment and the peace and quiet of their new surroundings. Many report a decrease in the stress they used to feel because of safety concerns and crime.

Social interaction across income levels has been very low, due in part to assumptions and stereotypes that different groups have about each other but also due to a lack of opportunities for residents to engage with one another. There are also concerns expressed by relocated public-housing residents about increased stigma and scrutiny, double standards in terms of rules, and a lack of access to decision-making entities such as condo associations.

Implications
Recently, Joseph testified before Congress about his research. He proposed several “key factors for success” based upon his early findings, including the need to balance the screening of applicants with inclusion of as many low-income households as possible, an increased focus on strategic roles for property management and support services, and implementation of strategies for resident engagement, community building, and inclusive governance.

“The class division within a mixed neighborhood can make it difficult for residents to develop new social networks or shared agendas,” Joseph says. “However, I think this can be overcome with active community building and support programs.”