Mixed results

SSA researcher Robert Chaskin talks to new residents of mixed-income communities.

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Photography by Marc Panknin


What the marketing material doesn’t mention is that Westhaven Park is part of a massive citywide experiment. Situated near the United Center on the grounds of the former Henry Horner Homes public-housing project, the complex is one of ten mixed-income developments in the city's Plan for Transformation. Launched in 2000 the initiative aims to rebuild poverty-stricken communities by bringing together middle-income renters and buyers and public-housing residents in more than 25,000 high-quality living spaces that replace public-housing complexes.

"There are a set of arguments about why having higher-income people living with very poor people matters," says Robert Chaskin, AM’90, PhD’96, an associate professor in the School of Social Service Administration who has spent the past four years studying the social dynamics in mixed-income communities. A key driver behind efforts like Westhaven, he explains, is the belief that fostering relationships and interactions between people of diverse income levels will give public-housing residents access to social networks and economic opportunities they wouldn’t otherwise have.

But when it comes to building community, reality doesn’t always live up to policy rhetoric, says Chaskin. Along with Case Western urban-policy scholar Mark L. Joseph, AM’94, PhD’02, Chaskin published a series of recent findings in Urban Affairs Review and Urban Studies that explore residents’ experience. The research focuses on three mixed-income developments: Westhaven Park, Oakwood Shores (formerly the Ida B. Wells/Madden Park project), and Park Boulevard (formerly the Stateway Gardens project). All offer a mix of market-rate, affordable tax-subsidized, and public-housing units.

In interviews with more than 200 residents and stakeholders such as building developers and neighborhood officials, Chaskin found some overlap among income groups to be fairly limited, with the most significant get-togethers being town hall–type meetings about crime and safety. As one development stakeholder told him, "I think we came in with the idea that it was going to be like this big happy community where all mixed income—you know, public housing, market rate—were going to be playing together, neighbors were going to be chatting it up. And we’ve scaled that back."

Residents seemed to have more modest expectations from the beginning. "Mostly what people were hoping for was unproblematic, cordial relationships with one’s neighbors in a safe and well-cared-for physical environment," says Chaskin. Indeed, several public-housing residents reported an improved sense of security. "I don’t feel that I’m stressed out about being worried about if I go outside that they’re gonna start a gang fight or somebody’s gonna start shooting, or do I gotta sit close to the entrance of the building if I go to relax outside, or if I gotta stay close to home," said one Westhaven tenant. "That’s a stressful situation I don’t have to worry about."

Creating a sense of community among income groups remains challenging. Developers and local partners have tried bringing people together with planning and governance meetings, community events like block parties or bingo nights, and neighborhood service projects, but these events have largely ended up segregated by resident type. Although market-rate owners might gather at condo board meetings, for example, there was little opportunity for all residents to discuss issues as a single deliberative body. Social events drew mostly public-housing residents. Very few residents of market-rate or affordable units attended classes or outings, one community stakeholder explained, "because there was a stigma that any offerings were sort of social service."

The comment highlights that perceived difference limits social interaction among groups.
Although housing units are intentionally designed to make market-rate, affordable, and public-housing spaces indistinguishable from one another, residents tended to label their neighbors based on behavior. "I guess in theory you’re not supposed to be able to tell who’s low income, who’s middle income, who’s high income," said one owner of an affordable unit. "But even in this mixed-income neighborhood, you can tell."

Chaskin sat in on several community meetings and events and found that "market-rate residents and owners in particular talk about how their lower-income neighbors come from a fundamentally different culture with different behavioral norms," he says. Although regulations within mixed-income communities—make payments on time, be courteous about late-night noise, keep unit exteriors presentable—mirror those of other residential developments, residents may have different ideas of what is inappropriate. Tensions have arisen over noise levels, littering, and the use of spaces like lobbies and parking lots as social gathering places.

"These things," says Chaskin, "become flash points for conflict instead of collaboration," derailing positive interaction between groups. His most recent mixed-income paper, currently under review at the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, examines how building design within these communities exacerbates the issue by offering few public areas where people can hang out freely. Rules that limit congregating in the front of the property, alleyways, and other common areas aim to minimize loitering but are seen by some residents as overly restrictive. "I ain’t never lived nowhere where you can’t go out to the back of your house and barbeque," said one Westhaven affordable-unit renter.

"The expectations for community life get complicated in this context of engineered diversity," says Chaskin, who has shared his findings with the Chicago Housing Authority and other policy makers. To strengthen mixed-income developments, he says, more opportunities must be created for residents to come together "to think through and work through their different perspectives on how things are playing out and make decisions about possible solutions." Another focus should be making sure there are spaces and events where families from different groups can gather and "just be neighbors." As many stakeholders pointed out, children may help bridge divides, rallying parents to push for better schools and youth opportunities.

Ultimately, he says, "you can’t fix this problem of poverty just by focusing on housing."

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