About the Authors

This report was a collaborative effort by several grassroots base-building organizations and three resource organizations, which provided research, policy, and writing support for this project. All the participating organizations are members of Right to the City, a national alliance of membership-based organizations and allies organizing to build a united response to gentrification and displacement in our cities.

Research Team

**Advancement Project**

*Anita Sinha, Senior Attorney & Alexi Nunn, Staff Attorney*

Advancement Project is an innovative civil rights law, policy, and communications “action tank” that advances universal opportunity and a just democracy for those left behind in America. Advancement Project believes that sustainable progress can be made when multiple tools – law, policy analysis, strategic communications, technology, and research – are coordinated with grassroots movements.

**Community Voices Heard**

*Vincent Villano, Policy and Research Coordinator & Sondra Youdelman, Executive Director*

Community Voices Heard is a base-building member organization of low-income people working to build power in New York to improve the lives of families and communities.

**DataCenter**

*Saba Waheed, Research Director*

DataCenter supports organizing efforts led by poor and working class people of color to reclaim community knowledge and access information in order to strategically utilize research that strengthens the movement for liberation and social justice and dismantles the structural inequities in research.

**Miami Workers Center**

*Hashim Benford, Community Organizer & Tony Romano, formerly Organizing Director*

Miami Workers Center is a strategy and action center that builds the collective strength of working class and poor Black and Latino communities in Miami.

**POWER**

*Jaron Browne, Bayview Organizing Project Director*

POWER unites low-income residents and workers in Bayview Hunters Point to impact the decisions around affordable housing, living wage employment, and environmental justice, all in the face of ferocious attempts to gentrify the community.

**Urban Justice Center – Community Development Project**

*Alexa Kasdan, Director of Research and Policy; David Dodge, Policy and Research Associate; & Lindsay Cattell, Policy and Research Associate*

The Community Development Project of the Urban Justice Center utilizes a participatory action research model to provide methodological and technical assistance to community organizing groups working in low-income communities of color throughout New York City and beyond.
In America’s cities, community is one of the most valuable resources for low-income people – family, friends, and places of worship provide essential support such as childcare, jobs, transportation, and senior care. Housing that is affordable, safe, and stable is central to ensuring low-income families’ right to that community. But for many, the right to remain in their neighborhoods has been in danger. Over the past few decades, the availability of housing that is truly affordable for low-income people has been diminishing at an alarming rate – a trend that has become painfully obvious with the recent housing and economic crises.

The Right to the City (RTTC) Alliance is a grassroots coalition that emerged in 2007 as a unified response to gentrification, calling for a halt to displacement of low-income people (disproportionately people of color, LGBTQ, and youth of color) from their historic neighborhoods. RTTC stands firmly in the conviction that building and maintaining strong communities requires undoing neo-liberal economic policies. These policies promote, among other tenets, deregulation – reducing government regulation of anything that could diminish profits, and privatization – selling government-owned enterprises and services to private investors.

In this report, RTTC is focused on the effects of these policies on public housing and its residents. We chose this focus because public housing represents the most urgent level of need in this country, and because immediate federal action could have a long-term impact in terms of stabilizing the quality of life for low-income communities across the United States. Public housing traditionally has not relied on the private market, making it one of the last sources of stable and permanently affordable housing. But this is precisely why it has been under attack. For public housing, neo-liberalism has fueled policies of disinvestment, demolition, and privatization of government-provided affordable housing. Rather than invest in low-income communities and build opportunity for those that live there, the government has prioritized the deconcentration of poverty and the displacement of low-income people from their communities through programs such as Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere, better known as HOPE VI. We Call These Projects Home counters the underlying premise of the deconcentration theory by providing evidence that the problems with public housing are due to lack of resources and services in low-income communities, rather than simply the concentration of low-income people.

This research and the resulting report is a collaborative effort, designed and implemented by organizations across seven cities that participate in RTTC and work to preserve and improve public housing in their communities. Because RTTC believes that solutions to the U.S. housing crisis should come from those with first-hand experience, this report places the voices of public housing residents at the forefront. The quotes and profiles included in this report come from public housing residents who participated in focus groups and interviews held in each of the participating cities. We Call These Projects Home provides evidence directly from the experience of residents, who argue that public housing is a valuable resource that should be expanded and maintained. In addition, we offer a new vision of housing and call on the federal government to make stable, safe, and permanently affordable housing a universal right. We offer policy recommendations for public housing that are grounded in this vision.

“These projects they are considered as family…. When you have an older lady 60 or 70 living alone, these projects are their home…[and] these kids… they got somewhere. They got a home.”

-Miami Focus Group Participant #8
Research Methods

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH
This research project was a joint effort by various organizations across seven cities (New York, Miami, Washington, D.C., San Francisco, Oakland, New Orleans, and Los Angeles) that participate in the HUD Workgroup of the Right to the City Alliance. Utilizing a Participatory Action Research (PAR) model, the HUD Workgroup employed various research methods to interject residents’ voices into policy discussions about public housing.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS: Researchers completed a comparison analysis of HUD Resident Characteristic Reports (RCRs) in five cities from 2009 and data from “A Picture of Subsidized Households” from 2000. In addition, an analysis of rent and income data from the “American Community Survey” was completed for all seven cities. Additional data was collected through conversations with representatives from Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) in the participating cities for information on vacancies and waiting lists, and Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests submitted to the same PHAs for RCRs to obtain the following information: units, income, total tenant payment, race/ethnicity, household, and length of stay.

DATA WORKSHOPS: In April of 2009, the RTTC HUD Workgroup held community data workshops in NYC, Washington, D.C., San Francisco, Oakland, Miami, Los Angeles, and New Orleans. Each workshop brought together public housing residents to discuss and analyze the public housing data that the project’s researchers collected, and to identify additional information to explore. Popular education methods were used to share and gather feedback on the data.

MEDIA REVIEW: Researchers reviewed and analyzed 400 articles from eight cities (50 per city). At the time, the eight cities were all cities where grassroots organizations were participating in the research project. The articles reviewed have appeared in major newspapers over the last three years, were randomly selected using Westlaw media search, and were analyzed using N6, a qualitative data analysis program. Researchers looked for the most prevalent themes in each city and nationally, while also identifying what issues were not mentioned in the coverage of public housing.

LITERATURE REVIEW: In order to understand the history, legal framework, benefits, potential downsides, and current practices of the public housing system, researchers reviewed and analyzed an extensive number of articles, essays, and books by academics, lawyers, policy analysts, and advocates. Members of the Advisory Board assisted in referring researchers to pertinent literature. Researchers also reviewed legislation focusing on public housing and the most recent Annual Plan for each of the PHAs in the seven cities being studied.
The Right to the City Vision for Public Housing

Public housing can take various forms: from high rise apartment buildings like those in New York, to low-rise, multi-family homes in Miami and New Orleans, to converted vacant units in condominiums. We believe that public housing that already exists should be fully funded and restored to meet high living standards, and that new public housing should be built or created from existing housing in the private market. The government should think creatively about new public housing and ensure that it is developed in a holistic manner – with strong community services, job creation and training for public housing residents, educational programs, and environmentally focused design and construction. We do not think public housing should be confined to any specific aesthetic, but we do believe that all public housing should include vibrant, healthy, accessible developments that support long-term stability and quality of life for poor and working class families and communities.
Selected Findings

1. Public Housing is one of the only options available to very low-income people for secure, stable, and permanently affordable housing.

Millions of low-income people desperately need the safety net that public housing can provide. This research shows that public housing is increasingly important in these uncertain economic times because it is actually affordable and does not depend on fluctuations in the private market.

2. Policies of disinvestment are the root cause of many of the current problems in public housing.

Despite the well-documented increase in the need for low-income housing over the last decade, the federal government has continuously disinvested in public housing, one of the best options for housing low-income people.

- Disinvestment causes disrepair and dangerous living conditions for residents.
- Residents are bearing the brunt of disinvestment as rents and fees rise and resident services are cut.
- Disinvestment causes vacancies: Over 1 in 10 units sit vacant in the cities included in this study.

3. Rather than build more units of housing for low-income people, HUD continues to demolish units of public housing without adequately replacing them.

As a result of the Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE VI) program, around 104,000 public housing units nationwide have been lost since 1995, without adequate replacement.

- Demolition of public housing results in the displacement of low-income people, the destruction of communities, and hardships in the lives of those displaced.
- The demolition of public housing has created a culture of fear amongst public housing residents around the country.
WHAT HAPPENS TO RESIDENTS UNDER HOPE VI?

When a development enters the Hope VI program, the buildings are slated for demolition and/or renovation . . .

and the residents are relocated.

If there are vacancies in another development, residents can be relocated within the housing authority. (But in most public housing systems, vacancies are rare. In New York the waiting list for a vacant apartment is over eight years.)

Those that cannot be moved to another development will be given vouchers, but these vouchers can only be used with housing that meets particular rent criteria - so this housing tends to be in low-income neighborhoods - often lower-income than the neighborhood the displaced residents are coming from. It’s also common for landlords to discriminate against voucher holders (even though it’s illegal).

Those that do find housing with vouchers will have new expenses such as security deposits and utilities.

AND find that the support networks that had sustained them in their past have been scattered to the wind.

MEANWHILE . . .

If the building is completed (thus far only 65% of Hope VI projects that have begun have been completed) the new building is likely to have fewer units of public housing available than in the original development.

MOST RESIDENTS WON’T MAKE IT BACK

The housing authority will have lost touch with many of them . . .

Several more will be denied right of return due to problems with their paperwork . . .

and a small group of families will return to rebuild their lives in their old neighborhood.
4. Negative images and stereotypes dominate the media’s coverage of public housing and perpetuate misconceptions about residents.

A review of 400 randomly selected newspaper articles revealed the prevalence of negative images about public housing.

- Guns and poverty are the two most prevalent words found in the articles about public housing.
- Although most reporting on public housing in the mass media focuses on crime and violence, residents see public housing as a vibrant community and a good place to live and raise a family.

5. Residents do not feel that they have adequate input into decisions that are made about public housing and have difficulty holding HUD and Public Housing Authorities accountable for their actions.

Currently, HUD does not have strong enough mechanisms in place to ensure that residents have a meaningful voice in decision-making and consequently, residents do not feel like they have adequate power in shaping decisions about public housing.

“When you hear public housing [in the media] you think gunshots, fires, crimes, and drugs, and murders, and killings. But they also do not tell you that the next-door neighbor is there for you. They got your back. These projects – they are considered a family. We call these projects home. That is what people really need to know. That’s the positive side of it.”
- Miami Focus Group Participant #8

“I’m the one who lives [in public housing]... the people who control the budget at the housing authority, they never lived in the public housing. They don’t know what we need in public housing. They don’t sit out at night and watch the children play. They don’t know what goes on in public housing.”
- New Orleans Focus Group Participant #2
Selected Recommendations

Based on the findings of this report, it is clear that the federal government must recognize public housing as a critical resource and sensible option for providing housing to low-income people. In order to save our communities, the Right to the City Alliance calls for the United States federal government, including the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Congress, and the Obama Administration to take the following actions to remedy the housing crisis:

1. Preserve and strengthen existing public housing.

   • Congress immediately restore full funding to the Public Housing Operating Fund by allocating $5.08 billion in funds in 2011 and provide full funding in subsequent years.

   • Congress pass the Together We Care Act to create jobs and increase access to services for public housing residents; alternatively, HUD could create such a program through its Resident Opportunities and Self Sufficiency (ROSS) program.

   • HUD allocate adequate amounts of stimulus funds towards Public Housing Operating and Capital Funds.

   • Congress oppose the Transforming Rental Assistance program proposed by HUD and keep public housing public by not converting it to a new type of project-based voucher, or by generally fusing funding with the Section 8 voucher program.

2. Stop demolition.

   • Congress enact a moratorium on the demolition on all public housing.

   • Congress ensure that the Choice Neighborhood Initiative truly invests in communities by prohibiting funds to be used to demolish public housing and mandating one-for-one replacement of all hard units that have been lost.

3. Ensure all public housing is community controlled, fully transparent, and fully accountable to the residents.

   • HUD restore funds for resident participation and use these funds for resident decision-making activities.

   • HUD collect and make publicly available data on public housing in a manner that is consistent and accessible, including Section 3 reporting forms, data from Moving to Work cities, vacancies, and number of people on waitlists.
4. Fill vacancies.
   - Congress allocate $7,999 billion over five years to rehabilitate all 120,000 vacant units of public housing.
   - HUD create and implement streamlined rules and regulations for the management of public housing waitlists so that there is a consistent and effective waitlist process across PHAs.

5. Expand public housing.
   - Congress amend the Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act (QHWRA) so that there are no barriers to constructing new public housing units.
   - HUD prioritize current public housing residents for jobs associated with new construction by enforcing Section 3.
   - HUD and PHAs create and implement plans to convert vacant condominiums and foreclosed properties into public housing.

A Call to Action

This report clearly documents the public housing crisis. The vision we present of a Right to Housing is an alternative to this crisis. Our recommendations provide a sensible and clear path to realize this vision. For this report, residents testified that the root causes of the current problems with public housing are HUD’s policies to deconcentrate poverty, including disinvestment, displacement, and privatization of public housing. These policies manifest in specific HUD programs, such as HOPE VI, which demolish affordable units without replacing them. This report shows that current policies take isolated and disconnected approaches, preventing public housing from reaching its full potential, and detrimentally impacting the lives of low-income people of color. As the country continues to suffer from the worst recession in decades, the housing crisis has hit a breaking point. The resident voices in this report make it clear that, in order to solve this crisis, the federal government must invest in and expand public housing. We must act now. Under the leadership of President Obama and Congress, Shaun Donovan and HUD have the opportunity to heed RTTC’s recommendations and change current policies. The voices in this report, as well as current grassroots movements across the country, indicate the urgency with which public housing residents want and need comprehensive change.

1 - The Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act includes a provision, § 9g(3), that prohibits PHAs from using money from their capital or operating budgets to create new public housing units if it would increase the number of public housing units of the PHA – essentially an amount that would exceed what was already constructed.
Resident Snapshot

“**It’s wrong the way they treat people; seems like they don’t care.**”

Emma is a 57-year-old woman who has lived in San Francisco her whole life. She has been active in People Organized to Win Employment Rights (POWER) since it was founded almost 13 years ago. After spending many years on the waiting list, Emma finally got into public housing in 2008. Currently Emma is a leader in POWER's Bayview Organizing Project fighting for environmental justice and accountable development in the community of Bayview Hunters Point.

Emma spent two years trying to get on the waitlist for public housing.

“I wanted better housing; I wanted to have my own place. So I thought that would be a good idea; to put my name on the [public housing] list...First time I tried to get on the list, they [San Francisco Housing Authority (SFHA)] had a lottery. That was 1998 and I didn’t get picked for that one, so they sent me a card, 'sorry try again later.' And then [in 1999] I called the housing authority, to give my information... but I had to wait several months [till 2000] to get on the list.”

SFHA told Emma she would only have to wait two or three years for public housing, but she spent seven years on the waitlist.

“When I first got on, they [SFHA] didn’t tell me where I was on the list. They didn’t tell me anything about it. So I waited. Finally, I kept calling and calling, and then the lady gave me an appointment to come down, and then they told me where I was on the list. I called a lot to see where I was and how long it would take. But it seemed like they [SFHA] would give you the run around. They’d tell you, ‘you can’t call at this certain time,’ and they’d tell you they’ll let you know, or to call your worker and give you the number to call. But a lot of the time she wasn’t there or told you to call back: seemed like they didn’t want to tell you anything.”

Emma's health suffered because she was forced to live a rundown single occupancy hotel.

“You have to share a bathroom and you don’t have a kitchen...The bathroom would be so bad you didn’t want to go in there... It’s not healthy when you are not clean. I got colds a lot there, I was sick a lot... I got depressed. I stayed in my room and I wouldn’t come out for nothing”

In 2007 Emma finally got into public housing.

“I did, last year [2008], my first thanksgiving dinner there. It felt good because I hadn’t cooked in so long, because of the whole thing. Now it’s good to be able to do that. And eat better, because I couldn’t do that at the other place... Eat my vegetables and stuff that I need to eat. But I feel good there; it’s like home now”
ORGANIZATIONS THAT PARTICIPATED IN THIS REPORT:

GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS

Community Voices Heard (regional coordinator, NYC)
Families United for Racial and Economic Equality
Friends and Residents of Arthur Cappers and Carrollsburg (regional coordinator, DC)
Good Old Lower East Side/Public Housing Residents of the Lower East Side
Just Cause Oakland (regional coordinator, Oakland)
Make the Road NY
Miami Workers Center (regional coordinator, Miami)
Mothers on the Move
Picture the Homeless
POWER (regional coordinator, San Francisco)
Survivors’ Village (regional coordinator, New Orleans)
Union de Vecinos

RESOURCE ORGANIZATIONS

Advancement Project
DataCenter
Community Development Project of the Urban Justice Center

FOR MORE INFORMATION

visit www.righttothecity.org

Right to the City is a national alliance of membership-based organizations and allies organizing to build a united response to gentrification and displacement in our cities. Our goal is to build a national urban movement for housing, education, health, racial justice, and democracy. Right to the City includes more than forty member organizations and resource allies in seven states and more than a dozen local jurisdictions.

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