Foreword

In the United States, the rights of citizens to basic economic welfare and security, according to the prevailing standards in the society, have been experienced at levels significantly below those enjoyed by the citizens of Canada and Western Europe.[1] The discrepancy is particularly evident in the area of public housing. Whereas it is common in European welfare states to provide direct financial housing subsidies for low-income families, this practice is rare to nonexistent in the United States.[2] The state support of housing for poor American citizens tends to be confined to a limited number of public projects largely concentrated in inner-city neighborhoods, neighborhoods that feature weak, informal job-information networks and that tend to be removed from areas of employment opportunities.

Indeed, the location of public housing projects in neighborhoods of highest poverty concentration is the result of federal toleration of extensive segregation against African Americans in urban housing markets, as well as acquiescence to organized neighborhood groups' opposition to public housing construction in their communities. However, this has not always been the case. The federal public housing program in the United States has featured two stages representing two distinct approaches. Initially, the program mainly helped two-parent families displaced temporarily by the Depression or in need of housing following the end of World War II. Public housing for many of these families was the first step on the road toward economic recovery, and their stay in the projects tended to be brief. Their economic mobility "contributed to the sociological stability of the first

public housing communities, and explains the program's initial success."[3]

The passage of the Housing Act of 1949 ushered in the second policy stage. It instituted and funded the urban-renewal program to abolish urban slums: "Public housing was now meant to collect the ghetto residents left homeless by the urban renewal bulldozers."[4] The Federal Public Housing Authority lowered the income ceiling for public housing residency and evicted families with incomes above that ceiling. Access to public housing was thereby restricted to the most economically disadvantaged segments of the population.

The mass migration of African Americans from the rural South to the cities of the Northeast and Midwest coincided with the change in federal housing policy. Since white urban and suburban communities prevented the construction of public housing in their neighborhoods, the units were overwhelmingly concentrated in the overcrowded inner-city areas; indeed, "this growing population of politically weak urban poor was unable to counteract the desires of vocal middle- and working-class whites for segregated housing."[5] In short, public housing in the United States, as a federally funded institution, has significantly contributed to the isolation of families by race and class.

No scholar better captures the consequences of the second stage of federal housing policy in the United States than Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh in this insightful book. As Venkatesh points out, the Robert Taylor Homes housing project in Chicago was a mammoth social-engineering experiment built in the early 1960s to provide the overcrowded African-American population in Chicago with affordable, decent housing. But its construction in the heart of the inner city reinforced the concentration of poverty in the city's segregated black neighborhood.

Venkatesh carefully demonstrates, however, that the decision to build Robert Taylor Homes in the heart of the black ghetto drew the support not only of city officials concerned about keeping the black poor out of white neighborhoods, but also of those with good intentions. Among the latter were those concerned about the severe short-

age of housing for low-income residents in the ghetto, including black politicians who confronted the difficult choice of either ghetto public housing or no low-income housing for blacks at all.

Venkatesh provides a comprehensive framework that enables the reader to understand how the fate of the Robert Taylor Homes and prospects for life in the projects were inextricably linked to the economic and social transformations of the larger society. The steps that Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) officials, urban designers, service providers, and politicians could take to improve conditions at Robert Taylor Homes were thwarted by forces that were both local and national in scope. The local forces that stymied their efforts included, most notably, the law enforcement agencies' explicit failure to police and secure the housing project. The national forces included those that were ostensibly related to public housing, such as the dramatic federal cuts in the nation's public housing program since the mid-1960s; and those that were indirectly or subtly related, such as the disappearance of job opportunities for black workers owing to the decreased relative demand for low-skilled labor.

Venkatesh brilliantly describes how, in the face of these negative forces, the tenants of Robert Taylor Homes made impressive efforts—through various innovative strategies, ranging from tenants' networks and associations to tactics that involved working outside the law—to enhance the social organization of the projects and ensure their welfare and safety. They displayed considerable resilience, but their efforts amounted to short-term solutions that proved to be inadequate given the continuing hardships of life in this enormous housing development and the declining support from the broader society.

After reading this important book, readers will come to realize the extent to which the tenants of public housing developments like Robert Taylor Homes lack the basic entitlements that the rest of society takes for granted. As the twenty-first century dawns, we can hope that *American Project* will trigger a discussion on the need to restructure in major ways the institutions that serve these truly disadvantaged

communities. In the process our nation might become more appreciative of the need to confront seriously the institutionalized racism—rooted in our economic, political, and social structures—that shapes the larger society's response to impoverished public housing projects.

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