



FAQ: Opportunity Based Housing

What is Opportunity Based Housing?

Housing location is the primary mechanism for accessing opportunity in our society. It determines the quality of schools children attend, the quality of public services, access to employment and to transportation, as well as public safety. The importance of neighborhood conditions (or access to opportunity) is critical for improving the life chances of low-income families. The Kirwan Institute, under the leadership of our Executive Director John A. Powell, has taken a national leadership role in developing, advocating for and researching an opportunity based housing model. The central principle of this model is that residents of metropolitan regions are situated within a complex and interconnected web of opportunity structures that significantly shapes their quality of life. These opportunity structures include education, health care, employment, transportation, and civic engagement. The opportunity based housing model requires that the creation and preservation of affordable housing must be deliberately and intelligently connected on a regional scale to high performing schools, sustained employment, adequate and affordable transportation, and institutions that facilitate civic and political engagement. (Read more in [Update Spring/Summer 2005](#))

What is the relationship between opportunity based housing, regionalism, and spatial racism?

Opportunity based housing seeks to link up affordable or subsidized housing to opportunity structures, or those resources and services that contribute to stability and economic advancement. We cannot address the problems of segregation and the marginalization of people of color in high-poverty neighborhoods without considering the relationship between these neighborhoods and their opportunity-rich counterparts. It is for this reason that opportunity based housing is inherently linked to regional equity and, hence, regionalism. Equity-based regionalism is an approach to achieving regional equity, which asserts that because both opportunity-rich and opportunity-poor communities have been distributed on a regional scale, initiatives to remedy this disparity must also be regional in scope.

In essence, regionalism is one way to counteract the attributes of spatial racism. Spatial racism provides us with the overarching lens for understanding how institutional and structural racism is inscribed in the land via our land-use policies. It examines the broader issues of how land and space have been, and continue to be, used in racialized ways and includes consideration of such issues as our arrangement of metropolitan space, persistent segregation, concentrated poverty, and fragmented local governments. It also considers how space is used to sort and reinforce white privilege. Addressing spatial racism has been described as the civil rights challenge for the 21st century because the arrangement and use of space, particularly housing, has implications for individuals across numerous

indicators, including education, health, employment, and wealth. Thus, a regionalism approach is one way to remedy spatial racism, and opportunity based housing is one component of regionalism. When taken in consideration with other structural reforms, regionalism has the potential to alleviate geographically inscribed disparities and ultimately contributes to the dismantling of racial and ethnic hierarchy. (Read more in [UPdate Spring/Summer 2005](#))

Would an opportunity based housing model address concentrated poverty?

Concentrated poverty neighborhoods are those communities with poverty rates exceeding 40%. The concentration of poverty creates deplorable neighborhood conditions with mutually reinforcing conditions of economic and social isolation; hence, these concentrated poverty neighborhoods are the most opportunity deprived areas of our regions. Currently, high-poverty neighborhoods are the primary location for most subsidized housing and much of the nation's affordable housing stock. The opportunity based housing model is a policy response to concentrated poverty. It works to promote additional affordable housing choices outside these areas of extreme low opportunity. The opportunity based housing model would also work to counter the decades of over concentration of subsidized housing and affordable housing in these opportunity deprived communities.

Will an opportunity based housing model promote dislocation and gentrification?

The term gentrification is often mistakenly intermixed with urban revitalization or is used to describe any physical investment within a neighborhood. Gentrification is not simply reinvestment into the neighborhood; it is a process that extensively dislocates traditional low-income residents (usually residents of color) and extensively changes the social fabric of the neighborhood. Gentrification is the process of permanently changing a distressed community into an exclusive, upper-income community and does not simply equate with community reinvestment or redevelopment. The displacement caused by gentrification falls most heavily on disenfranchised low-income residents. It also does little to address concentrated poverty-instead, shifting the low-income population into neighboring communities, further concentrating poverty in nearby areas. Neighborhood improvement (or revitalization) is not synonymous with gentrification. Neighborhood reinvestment can occur and improve the quality of life for existing residents without the widespread displacement associated with gentrification. Several urban/social policy research institutions have been pushing for a new model of development that does not gentrify the community. These new development models have been labeled as "equitable development" or "community revitalization." All of these new models of development share certain characteristics:

- The distressed community transitions into a mixed-income, mixed-wealth, and diverse community.
- The social networks and services utilized by traditional residents are maintained and improved.
- Existing neighborhood businesses are supported while additional viable businesses are created in the community.

- Neighborhood improvement not only focuses on improving the physical environment but also creating wealth and opening opportunities (such as employment) to existing residents.

An opportunity based housing model would work within this conceptual framework, as it does not advocate merely for housing dispersal strategies. This housing model should not be utilized to force relocation of low-income families to other communities; rather, it advocates for offering the option of relocating to growing suburban communities for low-income residents. The opportunity based housing model would work to expand the housing choices available to low-income people of color (and all low-income residents), promote the preservation of affordable housing opportunities, counteract gentrification, and promote revitalization by avoiding displacement and promoting mixed-income communities.

(Read more in [Update Spring/Summer 2005](#))

Who would benefit more from an opportunity based housing model-cities or suburbs?

Traditional fair-housing strategies have primarily focused on increasing affordable housing opportunities in suburban areas, regardless if these areas contained real opportunities for low-income residents. The opportunity based housing model is a more nuanced and deliberate method of connecting affordable housing to opportunity, specifically focusing on empirically measuring opportunity rather than assuming suburban locations are more opportunity-rich, growing suburban communities. The opportunity based housing model would reprioritize affordable housing policy to focus on opportunity rich communities in both suburban and urban areas while providing benefits to the entire region, without prioritizing urban or suburban communities. The opportunity based housing model would also address labor shortages in job rich, growing suburban communities and help stabilize declining inner city neighborhoods and older suburbs, while avoiding gentrification and displacement in redeveloping urban neighborhoods.

(Read more in [Update Spring/Summer 2005](#))

How would an opportunity based housing model address the racial segregation in our metropolitan regions?

Racial segregation in metropolitan areas is more than just physical separation between races but often serves as a proxy for segregation from opportunities for people of color. African Americans and Latinos/as are more likely to be segregated into higher-poverty neighborhoods with more depressed real estate values, higher unemployment rates, and lower levels of educational attainment. African Americans are also more physically isolated from regional economic opportunity, and this isolation is growing faster in rapidly sprawling metropolitan areas. These communities are also located within the least functional urban school districts in the nation, where more students drop out of high school than graduate. This separation from opportunity often continues even for many people of color who leave the inner city for inner ring suburbs.

An opportunity based housing model directly addresses this issue of opportunity segregation for people of color in metropolitan regions. By linking affordable housing to high-opportunity areas, the opportunity based housing model seeks to remedy this

disparity. A goal of the opportunity based housing model is to integrate people of color into the opportunity structures needed to advance in contemporary society, such as good schools, child care, stable employment and neighborhood stability. This housing model seeks to create housing in areas of opportunity and to expand the residential choices available to people of color. This transformative integration is critical to transforming the structural arrangements and racialized boundaries that energize racial disparity and hierarchy.

(Read more in [UPdate Spring/Summer 2005](#))