

Comment on Sandra J. Newman and Ann B. Schnare's “ ‘... And a Suitable Living Environment’: The Failure of Housing Programs to Deliver on Neighborhood Quality”

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Abstract

Newman and Schnare assume that neighborhood quality is a key determinant in improving social mobility among the poor. Recent research suggests that family characteristics outweigh those of the neighborhood in predicting outcomes for youth. While a lawless, chaotic neighborhood unquestionably poses great risks to a child's moral development, a strong family can act as a powerful buffer.

Using a database that highlights neighborhood quality, Newman and Schnare conclude that vouchers provide the poor with the best means of accessing good neighborhoods, but they fail to consider the possible consequences. Recipients will include not only the victims of poor neighborhood quality, but the perpetrators as well, who may then spread social problems to marginal but stable working-class neighborhoods. Also, by removing good families from poor neighborhoods, vouchering leaves behind an even more troubled population with even fewer social resources.

Keywords: Neighborhood; Low-income housing; Mobility

Newman and Schnare have sidestepped the central issue in the inner city: moral character. As a result, their solution for urban problems is both counterproductive and morally dubious.

The role of the family

The implicit premise of their voucher proposal is that “neighborhood quality” is the most important determinant of juvenile success; this is not necessarily true. Imagine two inner-city residents, John and Frank, 13-year-olds who live next door to each other in a troubled Brooklyn neighborhood. John's father works at minimum wage, and his mother works part-time. Despite their low income, they manage to send John to a local church school, where he wears a uniform and serves as an altar

boy on Sundays. At home, he is expected to help with chores after he finishes his schoolwork. His mother talks to his teachers regularly about his academic progress. Though John has to navigate a path through drug dealers on his way to school, he ignores them. He hopes to go to college.

Next door lives Frank, who has never met his father; nor have his two sisters met their respective fathers. Frank's two sisters receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) for behavioral disorders; his mother also receives SSI for asthma and back pain, as well as an Aid to Families with Dependent Children check and food stamps for Frank. The household's income, including Medicaid benefits, is roughly equivalent to the amount John's family makes. Frank's mother has a new boyfriend, who brings her marijuana and, occasionally, crack. She is often absent when Frank and his sisters come home from school; as a result, he usually stays on the streets in the evenings with a group of older high school dropouts. He is increasingly truant, but when school staff call his mother, they rarely find anyone at home. His mother has never attended a parent-teacher conference either, even though Frank's grades have been getting progressively worse.

Intuition and experience suggest the probable future for these two boys: John will likely graduate from high school and go on to college, whereas Frank will soon replace his academic career with a criminal one. Newman and Schnare present us with no means of explaining that difference. Both John and Frank are subject to the same "poor neighborhood quality"; both therefore, according to the authors' analysis, should experience the same deleterious effects.

But between a child and the neighborhood environment lies the family, and therein lies a crucial difference. While a lawless, chaotic neighborhood unquestionably poses great risks to a child's moral development, a strong family can act as a powerful buffer. Indeed, recent research suggests that family characteristics outweigh those of the neighborhood in predicting outcomes for youth (Anderson 1991; Ellen and Turner 1997).

Any urban policy with the slightest hope of success would try to inculcate in mothers like Frank's the values of parents like John's. This must be a hands-on, on-site effort. When turn-of-the-century social reformers decided to help poor immigrants assimilate to American ways, they did not ship the tenement dwellers off to town houses on Fifth Avenue; they built settlement houses in the slums and lived there themselves.

Assimilating the underclass into mainstream society today is nearly as great a challenge.

But this hands-on effort is not what Newman and Schnare have in mind. Instead, they propose to move people out of poor neighborhoods and into middle- and upper-income neighborhoods in the hope that middle-class values will simply rub off on them. Ever so indirectly, then, the authors acknowledge the central place values occupy in creating the tenor of a neighborhood, but rather than focusing on the role of a child's own family in teaching those values, they intend that *other* children's families will serve as unwitting surrogate teachers for the newly suburban child.

The role of vouchers

How well will this initiative work? Newman and Schnare do not tell us who will receive their vouchers, so let us consider two possible scenarios. In the first, the vouchers would go to the most at-risk children, just as "family preservation" services target families most likely to lose a child to foster care. In this scenario, Frank's mother would be first in line for a voucher, since Frank is clearly headed for school failure and crime and is therefore most in need of help. Now maybe Frank's mother, newly relocated to a subsidized garden apartment, will suddenly start taking an interest in her son's schoolwork and kick her drug-dealing boyfriend out of the house. And maybe she will even start looking for, and find, work, though as Xavier de Souza Briggs (1997) has shown, placing underskilled people into upscale housing can make it even harder for them to find work, since they now have to compete with neighbors who are more highly skilled. Maybe, too, Frank will break his ties with his old friends and start going to math lab to catch up on algebra. Common sense, however, balks at these hopes. It is at least equally likely that Frank's mother will continue seeing her boyfriend to the detriment of her children's welfare and ignore the values of her new neighbors completely. It is also equally likely that Frank will continue hanging out with his old friends and getting into trouble with them (Ellen and Turner 1997). Should this familial status quo prevail, not only will the move have accomplished nothing for Frank and his family, but the consequences for the "host" neighborhood will be both dire and deeply unfair. (See the next section.)

A second possibility, equally true to the spirit of Newman and Schnare's work, is that everyone in a "poor-quality

neighborhood” should get a free ticket out. After all, they treat “poor neighborhood quality” as a sort of toxic cloud hanging over communities and assume that public officials have a responsibility to evacuate people. Such a total evacuation would decimate minority voting blocs, an outcome that would be bitterly opposed by civil rights advocates and minority political leaders. And what then of the vacated housing that is left behind? Ordinarily, when the poor move out of their old neighborhoods, others lower on the economic ladder take their place. How would Newman and Schnare prevent the poor from being concentrated in that neighborhood again? The task of the social engineer thus requires constant vigilance against the normal workings of the market.

Further, should Newman and Schnare succeed in getting everyone out, among their voucher recipients will be not only the victims of poor neighborhood quality, but the perpetrators as well. By what right do Newman and Schnare inflict crack-using mothers, their drug-dealing relatives and boyfriends, and gun-toting teens on either working-class or affluent neighborhoods? Many people in working-class areas have struggled to distance themselves from poor-quality neighborhoods; government has no right to introduce the very problems they fled into their new surroundings.

The problems created by vouchers

Voucher proponents will object that neither the first scenario (giving vouchers only to the most troubled families) nor the second (giving vouchers to everyone) matches actual practice. In reality, they will say, housing authorities covertly screen potential voucher recipients so as to minimize resistance in the host neighborhood. This procedure, too, has numerous problems. While housing authorities may try to select only responsible recipients, there is no guarantee that they will be successful; nor is there a guarantee that those recipients won't have in their orbit less responsible relatives and hangers-on. While voucher proponents like to point to allegedly trouble-free relocations, they ignore potential disasters. Even one case of grossly incompetent social engineering is too many, for it is profoundly unfair to the residents of the target neighborhood. Nor should the Gautreaux program be held up as proof of the proposal's harmlessness, for there only the most ambitious, entrepreneurial applicants obtained the small number of available vouchers. As the program is expanded to the scale of urban problems, as is now being attempted in the Moving to Opportunity demonstration project sponsored by the U.S. Department of Housing and

Urban Development, this high degree of selectivity will likely disappear.

Moreover, such selectivity creates its own set of problems. By removing the most responsible members from poor-quality neighborhoods, voucherizing social engineers leave behind an even more troubled population with fewer social resources. For these people, value-neutral social engineers have no solution, unless they intend to engineer even further and start dragooning middle-class people to live in the inner city and serve as role models.

Voucher proponents may object that upward mobility without social engineering results in the same problem: When the people who have been able to better themselves move out, they leave behind a further concentration of poverty and dysfunction. There is a huge difference, however, between achievement-based and voucher-based upward mobility. If people leave a troubled neighborhood because of their own efforts, they are leaving behind the message that hard work and responsible behavior pay off. Others (though not everyone) will be inspired to follow. By contrast, when people leave not by their own efforts but because they have been lucky enough to get a voucher, they may as well have won the lottery for all the moral inspiration and instruction they provide.

Finally, even if voucherizing were truly able, for the first time in its troubled history, to select only model neighbors, there is no guarantee that they will want to move. John's family, for example, our hypothetical church-going, two-parent working family, may prefer to stay close to the church and school. Newman and Schnare even acknowledge that recipients need counseling to persuade them to leave: Leaving is thus a benefit that no one seems to want, except the social engineers themselves.

Once such crude social engineering is accepted, there is no way to restrain it. If proximity to people in a higher economic class elevates one's character and life chances, why not move everyone a few rungs up the social ladder and improve society as a whole? A move to Park Avenue would undoubtedly improve my manners and social connections; I would greatly appreciate a voucher. There is no neutral, nonarbitrary economic principle by which Newman and Schnare could divide the voucher-eligible from the voucher-ineligible.

Voucherizing violates Americans' most deeply held sense of fairness, as advocates would discover if they talked to anyone other

than academics, liberal policy makers, and foundation executives. Most Americans work extremely hard to move up the housing ladder and are rightly upset when people get a free hand up through no effort of their own. By what right do Newman and Schnare ignore such sentiments? Moreover, vouchering creates class frictions by circumventing the normal acculturation process that occurs as people gain wealth and status. As much as we might wish it otherwise, there *are* class and cultural differences in America, as there are in most places. The behavior that is considered normal in some poor neighborhoods—throwing trash on the ground, spray-painting graffiti, or blasting loud music in the car—causes enormous distress in even slightly more affluent neighborhoods, whose occupants have learned a different set of behaviors. It is because of these value differences that the Section 8 program often creates “isolated, low-income enclaves within suburbia” (Calavita, Grimes, and Mallach 1997, 110).

The fact that voucher proponents are quick to dismiss such host-neighborhood distress as covert racism only shows how removed academics are from ordinary Americans. This is not to say that all the poor litter and let their housing run down, but to deny an average difference in social behavior between the neighborhoods to which Newman and Schnare want to give vouchers and those to which they want to send recipients is dishonest. It is also irresponsible, for when racial differences are added to class differences, true racial integration becomes all the more difficult.

Equally contemptible, in the eyes of voucher proponents, is blue-collar concern for property values; the facile response to such concern, as to all others, is to dismiss it also as mere racism. Doing so is the height of elitist arrogance toward people still teetering on the edge of economic stability.

But if forced relocation of the urban poor into middle- and upper-income neighborhoods is unfair, it is also counterproductive. True upward mobility is one of the strongest motivators in American culture. The hope of moving to a better home in a better neighborhood leads people to work hard, defer gratification, and act responsibly—just the traits, one imagines, that Newman and Schnare intend to instill in their voucher recipients. In the long run, however, their proposal would have precisely the opposite effect. By allowing recipients to improve their housing without having exerted the slightest effort in that direction, their proposal destroys the incentive that leads to hard work and self-discipline. Moreover, their vouchers would reinforce the deadly expectation that government is one’s primary hope for advancement or even basic support. Urban culture has

been destroyed by just such entitlement programs; it is folly to add another in the name of salvation. Ultimately, Newman and Schnare's proposal reveals liberalism's bankruptcy of ideas about how to reclaim the urban poor. Forced to speak in euphemisms about moral character, the best these authors can offer is a sort of passive osmosis: Put inner-city residents close to middle- and upper-class citizens and hope that some values rub off. This is a highly inefficient way to build character. It has the advantage, however, of allowing policy makers to remain safely ensconced in an ivory tower while someone else's neighborhood incurs all the risks of decline. Government policy makers are notoriously inept at predicting where job growth will occur. Rather than dropping poor people into supposed proximity to future jobs, we would do better to equip people educationally and morally to seize economic opportunity for themselves.

The role of government

Government has a role in this effort. It must make sure that inner-city residents are getting the police protection they need and that the justice system puts drug dealers and other criminals swiftly and decisively behind bars. Urban public schools must be dramatically improved, by whatever means necessary, and parks and other recreational facilities should be welcoming. Further, individual cases of housing discrimination should be severely punished. These are all measures that urban residents themselves support. The poor don't want to be shipped out to unfamiliar neighborhoods; they want order restored on their own streets.

Tellingly, not all poor neighborhoods are "poor quality." Many immigrant neighborhoods, for example, have low median income but high rates of upward mobility. First-generation Koreans in New York may be working 16-hour days in grocery stores, but their children are becoming doctors. The most important feature distinguishing their communities from those of the inner city is the intact family. Only if the family can be reconstructed will the inner city be saved. As long as mothers continue to raise children with no father in sight, juvenile delinquency will continue to climb, and poverty will be endemic. Housing has absolutely nothing to do with that problem; values have everything to do with it.

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