

Letter to the Editor

As attorneys who care deeply about housing equality and opportunity, we are compelled to respond to Hanna Rosin's recent article, "American Murder Mystery." The article, which is laced with racial overtones and innuendos, fails to give its readers the full picture of the American social landscape and the enormous potential of housing mobility programs to reduce inequality and decrease spatial segregation. Instead, the article stirs up old anxieties and ends without providing guidance on how to address the difficult problems facing America's urban and suburban areas.

We reject the article's core premise that affordable housing has contributed to blight and geographic crime dispersion. The article does not acknowledge that hundreds of thousands of units of affordable rental housing have been developed under the Low Income Housing Tax Credit program in the past 20 years, that Section 8 vouchers assist thousands of low to moderate income tenants each year, and that there are many models of successful scattered site developments and HOPE VI projects throughout the United States. The article also ignores studies showing the opposite of its thesis - studies showing that links between public housing and crime are overstated, that the many cases of crime and dilapidation attributed to the Section 8 program are misattributed, and that tenants, especially women and children, do in fact benefit from the deconcentration of poverty that is a hallmark of the HOPE VI program. The new direction of affordable housing has been to remove the stigma and stereotype associated with 'warehousing' the nation's poor behind fences and gated public housing communities and to provide them with wider vistas.

Federal housing programs remain crucial weapons in our nation's fight against poverty and racial segregation. This is especially true in light of the Supreme Court's recent decisions to curtail school desegregation efforts. Why are housing programs so important? Simply put, place matters. Place matters for school quality. Place matters for employment. Place matters for access to services. Place matters for individual health and safety. Late in her article, Ms. Rosin poses the question: have we overestimated the role of place in shaping social outcomes? Our answer is no. Not only have we *not* overestimated the role of place, we have *underestimated* it.

The American metropolis remains heavily segregated. Residential segregation, whether it is economic or racial, has pernicious effects. Even within the bounds of Ms. Rosin's article, the harmful effects of segregation are clear. Voucher recipients in Memphis and across the country are not moving to wealthy communities. Rather, the "recipients of Section 8 vouchers have tended to choose moderately poor neighborhoods that were already on the decline, not low-poverty neighborhoods." Not surprisingly, these poor neighborhoods are ill-equipped to handle vulnerable populations. Not surprisingly, they lack the services, infrastructure, and resources of wealthier areas. Not surprisingly, they fail to provide inner-city movers with an opportunity to thrive.

We as a society can do better. Instead of giving into old fears, we need to make equal opportunity a reality. We cannot merely transport voucher recipients from poor

communities to less poor communities. We need to provide movers with the chance to enter communities that have excellent schools, superior services, and real opportunities for success. Achieving equal opportunity is not easy—it requires us to break down the barriers of exclusivity and diffuse social prejudices. It also requires policymakers to recognize the ongoing decline of America’s suburban areas and to design regional solutions for change.

In the end, we cannot become victims of our own shortsightedness. Rather, we must summon the courage to improve the tools we have at our disposal and use these tools to provide people with genuine opportunities to pursue the American dream.

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[All of the foregoing are members of the governing committee of the American Bar Association Forum on Affordable Housing and Community Development. The letter represents their views only and is not the official position of the ABA.]