THE RISE AND FALL OF A MODERN GHETTO

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To my mother, my father, and Urmila

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.

William Julius Wilson
Harvard University

Preface

The idea for this book began taking shape in 1990, when I was conducting interviews for a research project on African Americans in Chicago. I came to the University of Chicago to begin graduate studies in the Department of Sociology. Until then, my exposure to cities had been minimal. Although I was born in the bustling city of Madras, on the southeastern Indian coast, I left the subcontinent as a child and lived in various mid-size suburban communities in upstate New York and Southern California. My college years at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), were spent mostly in the all-white beach towns neighboring La Jolla, far away from the vibrant, multiethnic downtown area. Cities struck me as inhospitable, unnatural environments.

I had completed a bachelor's degree in mathematics, but toward the end of my undergraduate education, I met Aaron Cicourel and Hugh Mehan, two sociologists at UCSD who introduced me to social science, where even the assumptions about reality were up for debate. Nothing seemed quite so certain anymore, not only in scholarship but also in my personal life, as issues relating to my own identity and place in the social world became more salient. The halcyon pace of suburban San Diego belied my own uneasiness as a young South Asian–American, and I made a decision that is hardly uncommon for immigrant youth: I thought a radical change in physical setting would lead to emotional and psychic betterment, and with the encouragement of my advisors and my family, I left for urbane Chicago.

Soon after my arrival, I collected data for an urban poverty research project, which required me to travel into the poor, predomi-

nantly African-American neighborhoods surrounding the University of Chicago. I met with many young people, some of whom belonged to a street gang. My repeated visits sparked brief conversations regarding the nature of my interviews and the focus of the research. I explained that the project compared poor African-American households with their middle-class counterparts in an effort to document the different effects that neighborhood structure has on social-mobility opportunities among the young. They read my survey instrument, informed me that I was "not going to learn shit by asking these questions," and said I would need to "hang out with them" if I really wanted to understand the experiences of African-American youth in the city. Over the next few months, I met with many of them informally to play racquetball, drink beer on the shores of Lake Michigan, attend their parties, and eat dinner with their families. A relationship was emerging, largely out of my curiosity and theirs. Most students at the university do not have occasion to venture into the disenfranchised communities surrounding their own enclave, so I was an obvious source of interest to them. In turn, their views on life, getting ahead in America, the status of blacks, and "gangland" challenged some of my preconceived notions about these topics.

Some of the youth lived in the Robert Taylor Homes housing development. Over an eighteen-month period, I logged notes on the activities of their gang, called the Black Kings. But it was the gang's relationship with other people in the housing development that piqued my interest. Gang members were also schoolchildren, nephews, churchgoers, fathers, husbands, and so on. They were "gang members" at certain times and in certain contexts, such as narcotics trafficking and meetings in open park space, but most of the time their lives were characterized by involvement with work, family, school, and peers. Their identity as "gang members" sometimes conflicted with other identities they held. For example, family dinners were occasions not only to discuss their school performance or work history, but also to see parents and relatives challenge their involvement in the Black Kings. The young people I met were deeply

concerned about their future in America and the role that gang membership played in their life course. So, too, was there a deep-seated compassion in the broader Robert Taylor community for wayward youth, which manifested itself in a range of emotions, from sadness to anger to disbelief.

Graduate student apprenticeship is invaluable because it affords an unprecedented opportunity to devote years of continuous time to participant-observation in a fieldwork setting. I took advantage of the situation to learn about different segments of the housing development population and how each perceived and related to the street gang. My travels around the community were motivated by the basic need to understand the range of social relations through which the gang was woven into the fabric of the housing development. Men on the street corner and underground entrepreneurs exhibited views on, and interactions with, gangs that differed from those of non-gang-affiliated youth, both of which differed from the views of young women, and all of which were somewhat askew from the relations of gang members with older residents who had arrived in Robert Taylor during the 1960s and 1970s. As the fieldwork progressed, I formed loose impressions of different social roles, all the while realizing that they were not mutually exclusive and that the same individuals could often take on various roles, depending on the context. Just as the gang member was also a nephew, a student, and so on, depending on the circumstances, so too were the men who spent time outside the local liquor store invested in other roles, including that of parent, advocate, and part-time laborer.

As I met with all these people, it became apparent that their contemporary experience was inextricably linked to their past and to their history of residence in Chicago public housing. They understood their present-day circumstances, including the role of the gang in the community, in light of earlier periods of tenure in Robert Taylor. "Gangs have always been around," people would often remark, and their recollections of the changes and continuities in gang activity formed part of their overall memory of the shifting contours of

"project living." This appeared as a rich and colorful set of recollections, which they revisited and rewrote as they acted in the present to make their homes and their community a habitable place to live.

In the pages that follow, I present this collective memory of Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes. Field researchers are dependent on the kindness and cooperation of people who may never gain anything practical from the published studies and who may disagree with the story that is eventually told. Members of the Robert Taylor community tolerated my presence, which was often intrusive, and answered my questions and queries with patience. They allowed me to see at an intimate level their struggle to build a community amid poverty and minimal resources. But with equal resolve they imparted to me the lesson that their lives cannot be reduced to victimhood or equated with hardship alone. Only to the degree that observers of the social world faithfully reproduce the multilayered aspect of experience will our task merit the generosity of those who tolerate our presence.

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Introduction

On a hot afternoon in the middle of June 1992, four people met in the Robert Taylor Homes public housing development to address the recent escalation in gang-related violence. On one side of a large metal table sat Will Jackson, the director of the Grace Center, where the meeting was being held, and Edith Huddle, an officer of the Local Advisory Council (LAC), the elected tenant-management association representing the interests of Robert Taylor's twenty thousand residents.[1] They sat across from Prince Williams, a leader of the local Black Kings street gang, which was involved in recent shootings that had occurred at the Robert Taylor Homes, and Jeremy Coals, the founder and president of No More Wars, an agency specializing in dispute resolution between gangs in the city of Chicago. In the back of the room, several people, including myself, listened intently. The meeting at the Grace Center was arranged by Will Jackson and Jeremy Coals. Will had been working to establish lines of communication between street-gang leaders and tenant leaders; he brought Jeremy Coals to the meeting after learning of the influence that No More Wars had with the city's street gangs, among which the Sharks and Black Kings were two of the largest.

Several days before the meeting, the first gang war of the year had commenced in the Robert Taylor Homes. The Sharks had conducted drive-by shootings and injured two members of the enemy Black Kings gang. To retaliate, Prince declared "war" against the Sharks, and for the next thirty-six hours, there was an intermittent exchange of gunfire between the two gang families. After the injury of the two Black Kings members, a twelve-year-old girl was fatally shot, and her friend critically injured, while playing in an open concrete expanse that surrounded the housing development's high-rise buildings. A community already in shock from the injuries to the two youths now

grieved for the family of the young girl and for her friend, who lay in critical condition at a local hospital. The exhaustion on residents' faces showed the toll that the violence had taken on their lives: their energies were spent navigating safe excursions to the grocery store. Some took leaves of absence from work or rearranged their schedules to help other families, and they were all faced with restless children they had confined to apartments and areas inside the buildings.

The initial gathering at the Grace Center proved to be a catalyst for a novel forum that allowed tenants to address not only conflicts between street gangs but also a range of practices that involved gang members. Edith Huddle and Jeremy Coals formed a jury of peers that included themselves, staff members of the Grace Center, and a few ex-street-gang leaders. Several times each month, tenants would relay to this mediating body incidents in which gang members had harassed residents or been involved in domestic abuse or other criminal acts. Instead of immediately resorting to physical or armed conflict, the gang leaders from warring families would attempt to resolve their own disputes in front of this body. In public, the gang leaders justified their participation altruistically, with claims that they were "helping the community," but when pressed they did not deny more selfish motives: namely, reduced conflict also helped to stabilize their underground economic ventures—most notably their drug trade and extortion of local businesses and entrepreneurs. Edith Huddle and the other jurors adjudicated the reported infractions and then meted out punishments. They assigned monetary redress or commanded apologies from gang members, and, in their separate closed-door meetings, the gang leaders inflicted physical punishment and imposed their own monetary fines on their members.

In public and private forums, tenants passionately debated the value of this kind of local control. Their opinions regarding the community court were diverse. Some expressed outright disgust that gang members were being used for policing and enforcement; others shared this opinion but added that tenants should organize protests against law enforcement agencies that should have been performing