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# How Section 8 became a 'racial slur'

A history of public housing in America.

By [Emily Badger](#) June 15 at 7:53 AM

Coded language, by definition, conveys much saying very little. And so those words allegedly uttered in McKinney, Tex., before a confrontation between police and black teens — [“Go back to your Section 8 home”](#) — evoked a particular and vivid set of assumptions.

The words were offensive because of what we think they meant in the charged context earlier this month in which police were called on black teens using a private community pool in a mostly white neighborhood. The teen who recounted what happened described those words as a "racial slur." We can imagine they meant that these children came from poor families, that the government helped their mothers pay the rent, that their quality as people was reflected in the quality of their housing.

In a broad sense, this is an American tradition: conflating *where* people live with *who* they are. “We’ve been doing that as a society for a really, really long time,” says Lawrence Vale, an MIT professor who has written extensively about public housing. “And it’s been racialized for a lot of that history.”

This is the history of how public housing in the United States — originally conceived as enviable housing for working whites — has become a prism through which some Americans see poor blacks. It’s a history that explains how some of the most visible public projects in big cities became, over decades, almost exclusively black, how the residents living there came to be among the country’s most deeply impoverished. Today, households receiving government housing assistance — from traditional public housing to the private-market vouchers it inspired — live on average incomes of [less than \\$13,000 a year](#).

This is a history that also helps explain how the outdated name of a bureaucratic-sounding federal program, Section 8, became a racially coded put-down.

The main public housing program in the United States was originally created in 1937 as the one of the last major acts

of the New Deal. The goal of that act, though, was not to house the poor, but to revive the housing industry. In the middle of the Depression, housing construction had collapsed, and many communities faced a severe housing shortage.

In response, the federal government paid for the construction of hundreds of thousands of new housing units, many built on land where slums had been razed. The homes were considered modern and pristine, a dramatic step toward better housing from overcrowded urban tenements. Residents paid rent that was supposed to cover the costs of upkeep.

Most of these early projects were built for whites, and whites of a particular kind: the “barely poor,” as Vale puts it — the upwardly mobile working class, with fathers working in factory jobs. Housing agencies required tenant families to have stable work and married parents. Children out of wedlock were rejected. Housing authority managers visited prospective tenants, often unannounced, to check on the cleanliness of their homes and their housekeeping habits.

“The idea — although people didn’t tend to voice it explicitly — was that you could be *too* poor for public housing,” Vale says. In many cities, the truly poor remained in the tenements.

Where comparable public housing was developed for blacks, it was strictly segregated. St. Louis’s Pruitt-Igoe project, completed in 1954, housed whites in the Igoe Apartments and blacks in the Pruitt Homes. More often, though, housing for blacks and whites was located in separate parts of a city.

By the 1960s, the tenants living in public housing began to grow more deeply poor and, particularly in big cities, much less white, in large part thanks to another set of active housing policies pushed next by the federal government.

In cities like Chicago and Detroit, public housing “became a black program,” says the Economic Policy Institute’s Richard Rothstein, “because the Federal Housing Administration created a different program for whites, which was a single-family suburban program.”

## From barely poor to deep poverty

The Federal Housing Administration [financed the construction of new single-family homes in suburban developments](#) (and government money plotted and paved the roads to get there). The FHA and the Veteran’s Administration also guaranteed cheap mortgages for the families who moved there, making this new kind of owner-occupied housing often just as affordable as rents had been in public housing projects in the city. Like many of those original projects, though, the new homes were explicitly unavailable to blacks. The FHA required developers to [use restrictive covenants barring blacks](#), and it denied black families the mortgages that allowed working-class whites to leave public housing.

As the white “barely poor” moved out — and as the strict criteria for who could live in public housing faded — the

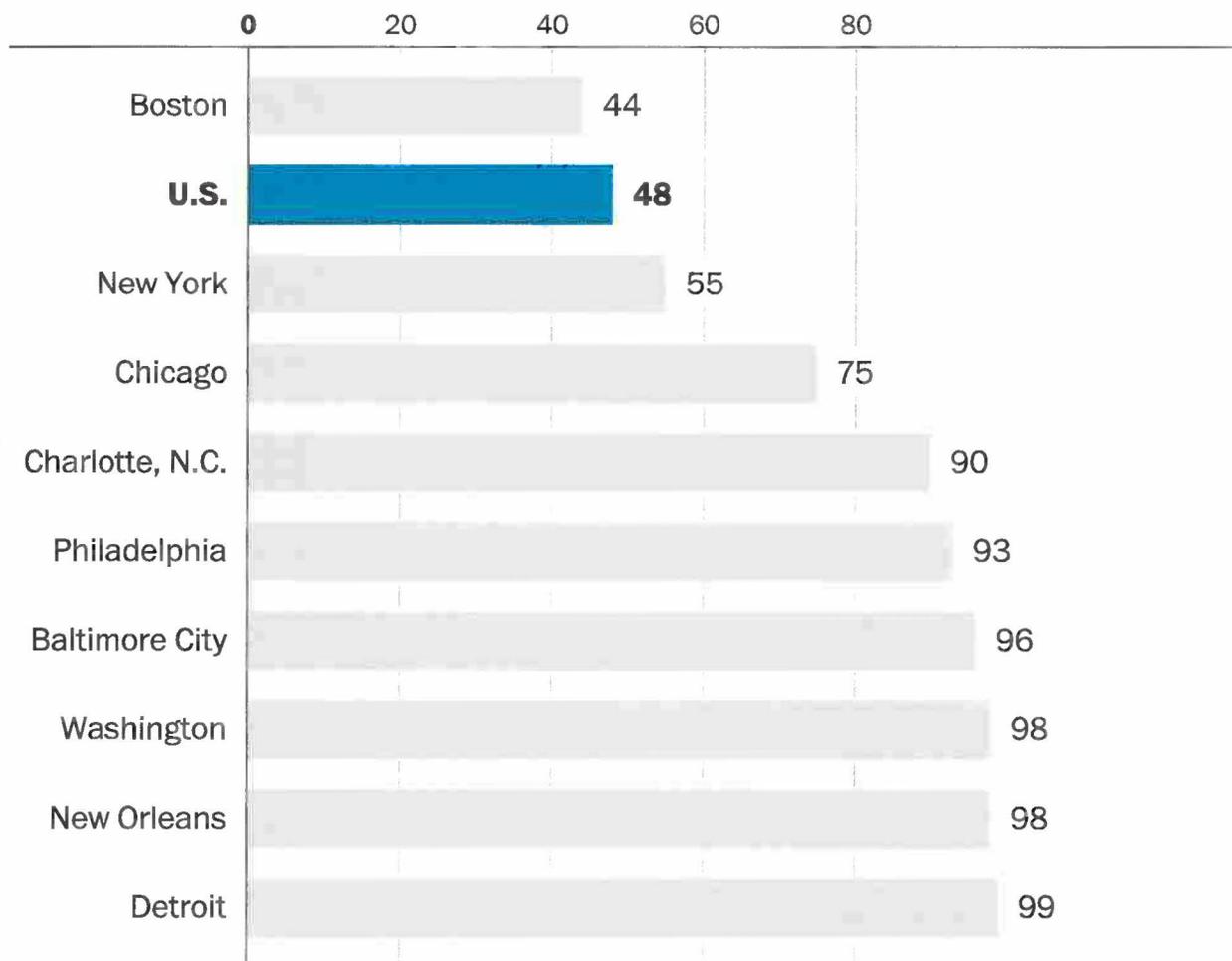
median incomes of the families there began to fall. In 1950, the median household in public housing earned about 57 percent of the national median income. That number fell to 41 percent by 1960, then 29 percent by 1970. By the 1990s, the median family in public housing made only about 17 percent what the median family in America made.

Relatively speaking, that means public-housing residents by the 1990s were about three times as poor as they had been in the 1950s.

Blacks don't in fact make up a majority of residents receiving housing assistance nationwide today (the number is closer to about 44 percent). But the picture looks starkly different in the public housing projects of big cities where much of that image is cultivated. Within the Detroit Housing Commission, according to HUD data, 99 percent of public housing residents are black. Within the D.C. Housing Authority and the Housing Authority of New Orleans, 98 percent are.

### Black share of public housing residents (2013)

By housing authority in each city.



Includes only public housing residents, not voucher holders.

Source: A Picture of Subsidized Households, HUD

THE WASHINGTON POST

The condition of the public housing that these residents have lived in has suffered from a fatal flaw in the program going all the way back to 1937. Because rents were supposed to cover the costs of upkeep, housing authorities across the country have never had enough money to maintain these buildings. As a result, repair backlogs in cities such as New York stretch for years. And as residents have grown progressively poorer, the capacity of their rent to maintain these buildings has dwindled, too.

Many of these properties also didn't wear well because they were designed on tight budgets and built with cheap materials — problems compounded in many cities by corruption in the construction deals, political patronage in the housing authorities and public resistance to putting these buildings anywhere other than in the ghetto.

In projects like Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes, the elevators often didn't stop on every floor. Boiler systems that should have served one building fed many. High-rise balconies that became hazardous were barred over, making them look like cages.

And because housing authorities designed these buildings specifically to house families — with units containing multiple bedrooms — they created demographics unlike those anywhere else in the country. Most communities, even during the baby boom, have more adults than children. Large housing projects had dramatically more children than adults, making it that much harder for adults to maintain order.

The stigma that would become attached to the residents was, in many ways, built into the buildings themselves.

“When they were first put up, the closets didn't have doors, the bathrooms didn't have showers, the light bulbs didn't have covers, the walls didn't have drywall,” says the Urban Institute's Susan Popkin, who has studied public housing in Chicago. “They were built like college dorms almost — bad college dorms.”

After residents in projects such as Pruitt-Igoe began to complain that they were paying rent for homes that weren't maintained, the federal government in the 1970s began to cap the rent for public-housing residents. Today, that cap is set at 30 percent of their income. The change, though, made paying for maintenance even harder as it further reduced rent revenue, and the deteriorating conditions helped drive out remaining families with a more stable income.

“That's the point at which you got the really deep concentration of poverty,” Popkin says. “You already had bad racial segregation. You already had bad living conditions. Now you had really deeply poor single mothers who had been left behind.”

That concentration of poverty then contributed to the problems that became closely associated with public housing: violence, broken families, drug use. But these ills were never so much inherent to the people who lived there — families who need housing assistance are not intrinsically more prone to violence than anyone else — as products of the way these places were created.

In 1974, a year after President Richard Nixon described public housing as “monstrous, depressing places,” Congress passed a new housing act that tried to leverage the private housing market to solve these problems. In creating “Section 8 housing,” it called for the construction of new homes, but also a voucher program that allowed residents to use their public subsidies with private landlords.

That model changed the shape of public housing — and enabled housing assistance to continue in a form that didn't *look* like traditional public housing — but it did not change the perceptions that had become attached to it.

“The stigma — somehow that translated to the people with vouchers, too,” Popkin says.

## 'Those Section 8 people'

As the federal government ramped up the voucher program, and later began to encourage new mixed-income developments, many of the old public housing projects were demolished ([sometimes spectacularly so](#)). The demolitions gave rise to a potent fear: that as housing authorities scattered residents, now with Section 8 vouchers, it also scattered the crime that had become associated with them. A [2008 piece in The Atlantic](#), arguing that precisely this had happened in Memphis, driving a crime wave there, fanned this fear. [Scholars](#) and [advocates](#) balked at the story, but elected officials far from Memphis began to cite it in their opposition to Section 8.

This fear was already widespread in many cities. In [research in Chicago and Atlanta](#), Popkin routinely heard residents in communities that had never contained public housing blame changes in their neighborhoods on *those Section 8 people*. At a time when industrial jobs were disappearing, cities were rapidly losing population and public resources were drying up as a result, people kept saying, “*It must be the Section 8 program.*” Even in neighborhoods where few voucher holders ever moved in.

People called Popkin from Iowa wanting to know whether crime occurring 250 miles away had been created by the Chicago Housing Authority. Residents of Lafayette, Ind., [became deeply convinced of this, too](#).

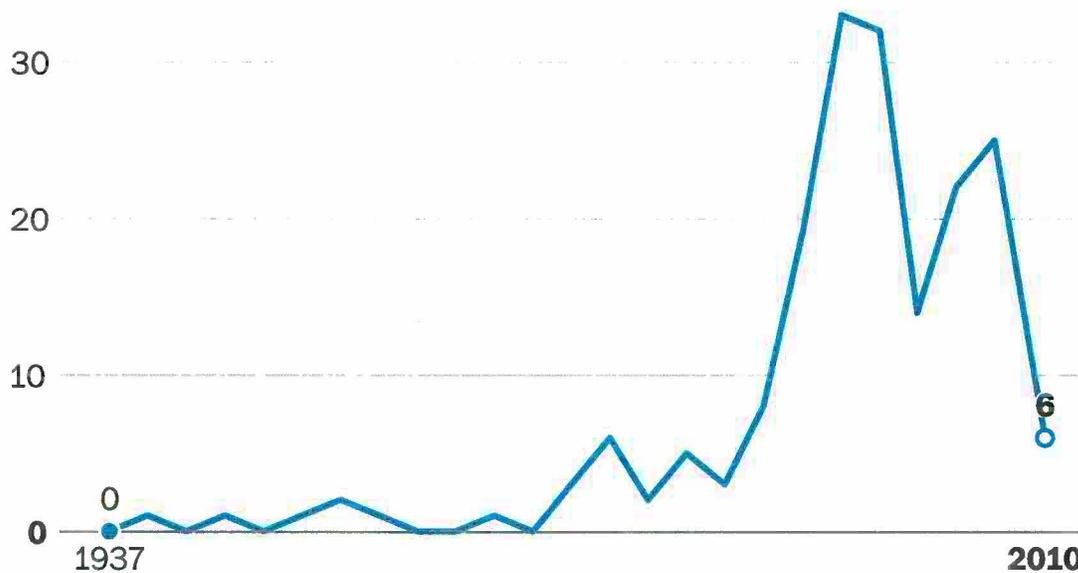
“We've found very little evidence that suggests that ‘those people are wrecking our neighborhood,’ ” Vale says. “But the perception of that — and the willingness to blame an extension of public housing — has continued.”

Vale has tried to measure these shifting perceptions with a simple study: He counted references to public housing as “notorious” in newspaper articles in Washington, Chicago, New York and Los Angeles. The two became increasingly intertwined, particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s in Chicago as the housing authority there was demolishing many of its biggest projects and relocating the people who lived there.

### The rise of "notorious" public housing

Number of articles mentioning "public housing" within 50 words of "notorious" in the

Chicago Tribune, New York Times, Los Angeles Times and Washington Post.



Data from Proquest Historical Newspapers; Proquest Archives

Source: Lawrence Vale, "Public Housing Myths: Perception, Reality and Social Policy"

THE WASHINGTON POST

HUD, [sensitive to what had become the negative perception](#) of "Section 8" vouchers during this time, began in the late 1990s to refer to the program more explicitly as "Housing Choice Vouchers."

"That's a great name, of course. It sounds like you're empowering tenants to decide their own residential location," Vale says. And the name quietly contrasts with the lack of choice associated with the earlier public housing projects. "You're naming it in a way that kind of masks the fact that you've provided the same level of deep public subsidy to tenants that you had in public housing projects," Vale adds.

Under the Housing Choice Voucher program, there are now about twice as many families receiving housing aid as live in traditional public housing. The name, though, hasn't supplanted the use of "Section 8" — either among recipients for whom the phrase isn't particularly pejorative or among neighbors and landlords for whom it is.

The "choice" implied in a housing choice voucher has also still not been fully realized. Landlords in many states and cities retain the right to reject a prospective tenant because he or she uses a voucher (a practice that no doubt stems in part from these same stigmas). And, for a variety of reasons, including the fact that [a profitable industry has grown up around them](#), vouchers are still often used in the same high-poverty communities where housing projects were once built — continuing the tightly wound association between housing aid and concentrated poverty.

The stigma attached to Section 8 today also reflects a rising hostility toward the poor that [touches programs far beyond housing](#). When public housing was created in the 1930s, it was a kind of reward for the working-class family trying

hard to make it. It evolved into more of an aid of last resort for the poorest. Vale argues that we are shifting again in how we think about who should get it. When the housing act was amended again in 1998, after welfare reform, the new law had a suggestive name: [The Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act](#).

“This is what John Winthrop would have called it in Puritan Boston in the 1630s,” Vale says. “The assumption that’s built into it is that the people who need these deep subsidies have somehow a moral failing that makes them incapable of affording the housing. It’s not about structural unemployment, it’s not about how maybe they are working full-time at a low-wage job that doesn’t cover rent.”

The way Americans think about public housing, he says, reflects how we understand much larger issues of social inequity, how we think about what aid should do and who should receive it. And so, “Go back to your Section 8 home” conveys, among those many other things, a judgment today that the family living there may not deserve it.

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