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Do Social Mixing Policies Work?

Does social mixing as public policy result in more equitable cities, more culturally diverse neighbourhoods, and less social marginalization? These are some of the goals to which social mixing policies have aspired, but they have often fallen drastically short. In some cases, social mixing policies have even been shown to impede equality and encourage further urban ghettoization. While a more socially just and equitable city is worth working towards, some of the means by which policymakers, planners, and activists have attempted to get there – in this case social mixing policies – deserve close scrutiny.

For example, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development’s “HOPE VI” program, initiated in 1992, aims to introduce social mix in cities by dispersing lower income households across larger geographic areas and into wealthier neighbourhoods, through the demolition or rehabilitation of public housing projects into mixed-use and mixed-income developments. Although the redevelopments usually include some public housing units, most units are converted to market rate rents, meaning that public housing families are involuntarily displaced, and forced to find housing elsewhere. While they can be given subsidies to relocate, this involuntary dispersal doesn’t necessarily result in bringing

people of diverse incomes into closer proximity: displaced households often simply move to other neighbourhoods of concentrated poverty, and often report less positive experiences in their new communities (Goetz 2003).

While dispersal programs seek to decentralize and scatter lower income households into more affluent areas, mixed-income development programs aim to bring higher-income groups into economically disadvantaged areas. Proponents of this approach argue that a mixing of incomes in one location ensures that any public housing will fit more seamlessly into that community and will not be viewed as a centre of poverty within an affluent neighbourhood. They also hold that low-income households will benefit from the inclusion of more affluent households, despite the fact that these developments often result in people from diverse income brackets merely living in proximity without much actual social interaction (Goetz 2003).

Another criticism of social mixing initiatives in low-income areas is that they risk pathologizing poorer populations, eventually displacing them altogether. This was demonstrated in a 2008 study by Martine August on Toronto’s *Regent Park Revitalization Plan*. That particular *Plan* purported that “Behavioural patterns of lower-



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income tenants will be altered by interaction with higher income neighbours. For example, social norms about workforce participation will be passed on to lower income residents” (Regent Park Collaborative Team 2002, quoted in August 2008). Such language evokes the overt paternalism of nineteenth-century urban moral reformers more than it does notions of social equality and economic justice.

August’s study also points out that many social mix initiatives, while seemingly motivated by equality and social harmony, are actually more driven by neoliberal economic factors. These factors – attracting capital investment and become competitive, while developing an image of the city as an safe, exciting, innovative, and livable place – often result in social mix policies that displace and exclude certain people in order to “achieve a desired social composition” (August 2008).

Are there any models that come closer to achieving social mix without the baggage of paternalism, gentrification, or elitism? Swedish social mix policies contain some stark differences from other North American and European strategies, particularly in their more general scope directed across all urban neighbourhoods, rather than on specific areas or groups of people. One implication of this wider scope in Sweden is that social mix is to be implemented through normal planning activities as opposed to specialized housing programs. With this focus on building a diverse housing stock for all people in all areas of the city, Swedish social mix policy can be seen as “enabling social mixing in all parts of the city, rather than directly creating it through relocating or directing households to other neighbourhoods” (Holmqvist & Bergsten 2009).

Additionally, unlike policies that have in the past sought to counter the segregation of certain ethnic groups, the Swedish policy is to address socioeconomic segregation, not ethnic segregation specifically. The belief here is that,

if socioeconomic segregation is targeted first, then an ethnic mix will follow, since, as one Swedish study pointed out, ethnic segregation of immigrants is rooted largely in their socioeconomic position (Holmqvist & Bergsten 2009). Although this example from Sweden might seem to avoid some of the pitfalls noted in other contexts, it is not without some unfortunate complications. Most notably, social mix goals in that country have sometimes been used to justify the denial of housing for minority groups in ethnically concentrated neighbourhoods (Bolt 2010) – a problem that once again brings up the issues of paternalism present in the social mix policies discussed earlier.

The rhetoric of social mixing seems to indicate a tempting way for policymakers and planners to help foster more equitable and diverse neighbourhoods without displacing people or diminishing affordable housing options. The track record of social mix policies discussed above shows that this might not be the case. Cities are facing issues such as the social and economic discrepancies between inner cities and suburbs, the loss of affordable rental units through gentrification and condominium conversions (under the guise of ‘rehabilitating’ inner cities), and the social and geographic displacement resulting from gentrification. Social mix policies might be a way of addressing these issues, but if cities wish to initiate such policies as a way toward social and economic justice, they should first ask whom might such policies favour, and whom might they ignore?

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