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A Chronicle of Suburban Pioneers


By Daniel P. Lindsey

Few of us will ever cross the vast racial and class divides navigated by the Guutreaux families. From 1976 to 1998, thousands of African American families moved out of low-income Chicago neighborhoods into white, middle-class suburbs. Few of us will travel the path these families took, but now we can get a better sense of their experiences in Crossing the Class and Color Lines: From Public Housing to White Suburbia.

This book is a good primer on Guutreaux—both the case and the mobility program which bears its name. It is well laid out and easy to read. The material is important and compelling. Readers already familiar with Guutreaux may, however, be disappointed since the core of the book is a repackaging of studies conducted in the 1980s.

While the material is not new, the authors do add a provocative spin: their aim is not merely to report the Guutreaux studies but, in so doing, to debunk the "culture of poverty" theory. By this the authors mean the notion that low-income African American families are inherently dysfunctional and cannot take advantage of opportunities to improve their lives. But, argue the authors, thousands of Guutreaux families did just that—they took advantage of the opportunity to move to the suburbs, to live in better housing, and to send their children to better schools. And the lives of these families did improve, testimony not to a "culture of poverty" but to a competing theory: the "geography of opportunity" (p. 189).

The book begins by charting the origin of this opportunity: the Guutreaux case, filed in 1966. Guutreaux was actually two cases, one against the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) and the other against the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). In both cases CHA residents and applicants alleged race discrimination in the siting of public housing, where African Americans were being warehoused in overwhelmingly segregated neighborhoods. The district court entered a judgment against CHA but dismissed the case against HUD. The appeals court, reversing the dismissal, ruled that HUD was liable for race-based practices that it had approved and funded.

The Guutreaux plaintiffs won two types of relief: the scattered-site program and the mobility program. Under the scattered-site program, CHA was ordered to build an unspecified number of new units, mostly in non-African-American neighborhoods. The authors discuss CHA's failure to carry out this mandate, the district court's 1987 decision to appoint a receiver, and the receiver's construction of several thousand scattered-site units.

The authors turn next to the book's focus: the mobility program, which evolved as a settlement of the Guutreaux

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plaintiffs’ case against HUD. Under the mobility program, which ran from 1976 to 1998, HUD provided portable Section 8 subsidies (certificates and vouchers) to approximately 7,100 families. The program was administered by the Leadership Council for Metropolitan Open Communities, which provided families with mobility counseling and landlord referrals. The majority of Gautreaux families moved from low-income, African American neighborhoods to white, middle-class suburbs. Studies in 1982 and again in 1988 and 1989 recorded the Gautreaux families’ experiences before and after moving. The studies also compared the experiences of suburban movers (families who moved to the suburbs) with city movers (families who moved within Chicago).

In discussing the studies, the authors do a good job of balancing statistics, anecdotes, and quotes. The text is appropriately heaviest on anecdotes and quotes—those in search of hard numbers can find them in the original studies. It is a bit frustrating, however, when the authors give hard numbers but fail to identify their source. For example, the authors state in Chapter 6 that 10 percent of suburban movers found their neighborhoods unsafe during the day, compared with 67 percent of city movers. (P. 94.) But the authors do not identify the source of these percentages, and so the reader is left guessing how many families made up the relevant data pool.

The discussion of the Gautreaux studies begins with the issue of safety. On the whole, suburban movers’ hopes for increased safety were realized. As reported by the families, gangs and violent crime were much less prevalent in the suburbs. Peace and quiet were the norm in suburban communities rather than the sound (or fear) of gunshots. But the suburban movers did experience a greater degree of racial harassment—slurs, taunts, and, on occasion, physical violence.

The researchers’ findings on social interactions were mixed but hopeful. Initially families who moved to the suburbs experienced more racial harassment—more than they had in the city, and more than was faced by city movers. Yet the harassment subsided over time in part because some neighbors rallied in support of the Gautreaux families. After several years, city and suburban movers experienced similar levels of friendly contact with neighbors, and they had similar numbers of friends. Compared with city movers, the suburban movers had more interracial friendships.

The researchers’ findings were generally positive as to the Gautreaux children’s schooling. Suburban movers reported that their children attended better, safer schools with smaller class sizes, superior facilities, and teachers more attentive to individual student needs. Discipline was less of a problem, and educational standards were higher. Suburban parents reported a far higher level of satisfaction with their children’s suburban schools, as compared with the city schools their children had attended (96 percent versus 55 percent). (P. 129.) On the negative side, some of the Gautreaux children felt stigmatized in the suburban school systems, and the parents of some children assigned to special education classes felt the assignments were race based.

The schooling research included a comparison between Gautreaux students in suburban and city schools. These two groups of students had very similar rates of behavior problems, similar grades, and similar class ranks. However, argue the authors, because the suburban children attended schools with higher academic and behavior standards, similar outcomes mask higher levels of achievement by the suburban schoolchildren.

The book’s penultimate chapter focuses on education and employment outcomes. The research showed that the children of suburban movers (versus the children of city movers) were more likely to stay in school, take college-track courses, go to college, and get and retain jobs. Also, the jobs taken by the children of suburban movers paid more and were more likely to include benefits. The comparisons made in this chapter did, however, involve a relatively small sample—a total of only 55 Gautreaux youth 18 years old or older. (P. 165.)

Through their comprehensive review of the survey data, the authors make a persuasive case for the success of the
Gautreaux mobility program. Nonetheless the authors are careful to point out the qualified nature of that success.

First, as the above summary of research findings indicates, the story of the Gautreaux families is a mixed one. On the whole, most Gautreaux families did improve their lives. But their eagerness to do so was not always matched by the willingness of their suburban neighbors to receive them. Becoming suburban pioneers took a psychic toll on families forced to experience isolation, hostility, and harassment. As Alex Kotlowitz states in the books foreword, the Gautreaux mobility program “reminds us how far we’ve come and how far we still have to go” (p. xi).

Equally important, while the Gautreaux mobility program was a success for the families it served, even Gautreaux—the largest-scale mobility program ever—was quite limited in scope. On average, only a few hundred families per year were dispersed throughout several hundred metropolitan communities. Those few hundred families were carefully screened, and larger families (those requiring units with three bedrooms or more) were ineligible due to a lack of available housing. Between 1988 and 1992, due to screening, self-selection, or the inability to secure a unit in the time allotted, only 19 percent of the families accepted into the program actually got housed. (p. 67.)

Indeed, the Gautreaux program’s success was due in part to its limited scope, by virtue of which it faced little community opposition. The authors acknowledge this and concede that mobility programs cannot do all of the work of housing low-income families. Instead such programs “must be part of comprehensive strategies that address the problems of deteriorating communities, improve the life chances of the people who live there, and give families realistic choices of where to live” (p. 173).

And yet today, in Chicago and in many other cities throughout the country, federal policymakers are asking Gautreaux-style mobility programs to do more and more of the work—often too much. The authors note the shift in federal policy toward the use of Section 8 vouchers, but they do not really give a sense of how strong—and how problematic—that shift is.

Federal policymakers have set forth the goal of eliminating 100,000 units of public housing and “vouchering out” displaced tenants. Chicago—the birthplace of Gautreaux—stands to lose at least 14,000 units. Likewise, thousands of units nationwide (including many in Chicago) are exiting the project-based Section 8 inventory, as Section 8 buildings are demolished or converted to market-rate uses. These tenants, too, are being “vouchered out.” So, while two of the three largest federally subsidized housing programs (public housing and project-based Section 8) are being downsized, the third (Section 8 vouchers) is being asked to make up the difference.

But in cities with tight rental markets, the private market simply cannot absorb all of the families being “vouchered out” of public housing and project-based Section 8 buildings—even where these families are supported by good mobility programs. In the Chicago metropolitan area, there is a deficit of some 150,000 units affordable to the lowest-income families. There is also a very tight rental market (with a vacancy rate of approximately 4 percent). Landlords can afford to be choosy, and many are choosing not to rent to Section 8 families. In Chicago, where the “vouchering out” of families is only beginning, participants are already having difficulty finding good units in good neighborhoods. And there are already signs of community opposition to the influx of Section 8 families.

Yet many still view the Section 8 program as a cure-all for our low-income housing woes, both real and imagined. In the public mind-set, government-run programs are out; privatization is in. Government-owned housing is perceived as having failed, although most of it has not. Depending upon local conditions, Section 8 vouchers can be a good option. Yet, in many other places, Section 8 vouchers cannot be the cure-all, or even the centerpiece, of good housing policy.

Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum do not view mobility programs as a panacea, but their failure to examine the shortcomings...
of the Section 8 program in more detail is a bit disappointing. Likewise, while they mention the importance of community revitalization as an option for low-income housing policy, they do not give it any real treatment in the book's final chapter, "The Road Ahead." Surely the road ahead does not consist solely of mobility programs. It would seem appropriate then for the authors to spend a little time examining the option of community revitalization, at least citing some examples of where it has worked.

This same shortcoming is manifested when, in concluding, the authors discuss the competing theories of "culture of poverty" and "geography of opportunity." The authors claim, rightly, that the Gautreaux mobility program undercuts the "culture of poverty" theory. They correctly state that low-income African American families are not inherently dysfunctional: these families can take advantage of opportunities to improve their lives.

The authors falter, however, when they go on to define their competing theory, the "geography of opportunity." In their words, the basic premise of this theory is that "people who move to better areas can improve their opportunities and attainments" (p. 189). This is right, but only half-right. The authors' core theory is a good one, but they need to define it with care. Their definition of "geography of opportunity" overlooks the fact that low-income families can also benefit from opportunities brought into the communities where they now live. The authors acknowledge this elsewhere, but they need to acknowledge it here in defining their core theory.

Even so, Crossing the Class and Color Lines is a worthy addition to the housing policy bookshelf. It may not be for everyone, but, within limits, it works. Just like Gautreaux.