

Challenging Assumptions:

Doctoral Candidate Questions Mixed-Income Housing Policy

By the 1990s, most Americans were aware that there were profound problems with government-subsidized housing. Social science research had documented the unforeseen negative outcomes of these low-income housing developments, and, in 1993, the government responded by passing legislation known as HOPE-VI that enabled private developers to receive government funding to revitalize distressed public housing. Since then, mixed-income housing has emerged in cities across the country, and some of the most dangerous and depressed areas have improved.

According to Laura Tach AM '07, a fourth-year sociology and social policy student in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (GSAS), the working assumption has been that the addition of higher-income residents is the “silver bullet” that will turn around distressed neighborhoods. But Tach’s research suggests a different perspective that may spark a new dialogue between academics and policymakers.

“For a long time, I have been interested in understanding how different social contexts influence people’s opportunities for mobility,” says Tach, a native of the Philadelphia area who attended the Honors College at Penn State University—the first member of her family to go to college. She paid her way through Penn State by serving as a research assistant in the department of sociology. The idea of society as an interesting object of study was instilled in her by a family friend who was a sociologist.

At Harvard, she fine-tuned her policy interests and has focused on housing. During the summer of 2006, she initiated a project that would eventually lead to her dissertation. She studied the changes that one low-income public housing complex



Laura Tach, a sociology and social policy doctoral candidate at GSAS, conducts research on affordable housing policy.

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in Boston has experienced over the past 15 years.

For several months, Tach visited the community in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood. She interviewed 50 residents, and absorbed the culture and history of the development. Clearly, the complex had made vast improvements since receiving HOPE-VI funding: violent crime dropped from 383 incidents in 1990 to 103 in 2000. The well-lit, aesthetically improved complex now has a social services office and recreation center. Police no longer refuse to go to the neighborhood for fear of their own safety. And the 50 percent vacancy rate, which encouraged illegal activity in empty apartments, has vanished.

"It sounds like a good thing," says Tach. "There was a huge influx of resources aimed at undoing a lot of the damage that had been done in the previous twenty-five years."

Although improvements are evident, Tach found major problems and obstacles as well. Many long-time residents were displaced during the renovations, and some were not allowed to return because they did not meet the new requirements. The goal was, after all, to break up the concentrated poverty—and so room needed to be made for residents with a range of income levels.

Tach's surprising discovery was that the gains made by the neighborhood since the revitalization may have actually occurred in spite of the mixed-income component.

"Poverty decreased, crime dropped, employment increased, and everyone agrees it's a better place," says Tach. But it has been the long-term residents, the ones who lived in the complex before the revitalization, who have powered the community support, Tach found. They are the ones with a positive perception of the neighborhood, strong social ties with their neighbors, and a commitment to work together to keep the area safe. They have participated in the tenants association and have worked to create a safe community. The newcomers, on the

other hand, tend to have a negative perception of the neighborhood and have felt stigmatized by living there. They have weak social ties within the community and have remained isolated from their neighbors.

"In fact, newcomers sometimes inhibited community-building efforts by failing to report criminal activity and deliberately resisting integration into the community," writes Tach in a paper about the effects of HOPE-VI legislation. "Therefore, the community did not necessarily need mixed income to achieve the improvements. The residents may simply have needed an infusion of resources, power, and safety to improve their own communities."

With the data from her initial study in Roxbury, Tach defended her dissertation prospectus in the summer of 2007. In her dissertation, she will evaluate

mixed-income developments by analyzing a number of social, political, and economic factors. Tach is curious about the long-term stability of mixed-income housing. So far, she has found that most mixed-income neighborhoods are "on their way to being gentrified or on their way to decline."

"Everyone talks about how much better it would be if we could have more economically and racially diverse neighborhoods—we have very few of them," says Christopher Jencks, Malcolm Wiener Professor of Social Policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, and Tach's adviser. "Laura is trying to understand why economic diversity is so unlikely to persist, and instead usually leads to

largely middle-class, working-class, or poor neighborhoods."

The interfaculty sociology and social policy program at Harvard, administered by GSAS in concert with the Kennedy School of Government, has offered Tach enormous resources to take on such a significant research project. Working across disciplines with "incredibly supportive" faculty in two Schools, Tach has learned by example. "The faculty members are exceptional at social science research and influential in the policy world," says Tach. "They serve as great examples of how to marry the academic and policymaker."

The recipient of a graduate research fellowship from the National Science Foundation and a research grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Tach has had the financial resources, as well as the faculty guidance, necessary for her work. Her time as a

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teaching fellow for the College course, "American Society and Public Policy," supplemented her income and experience. Tach plans to apply for a dissertation completion fellowship from GSAS to finish her research.

Tach's graduate school experience has fueled her desire to take part in the continuing dance between academia and policymaking. "Being here has inspired me to take that career path," she says. "I want to do high-quality social science research and have it bear on important public policy questions." ■