Introduction

Advocates across the nation are engaged in important discussions about strategies to open access to housing and other opportunity structures for low-income African American communities. They appropriately examine the shortcomings of past approaches, including litigation. In the lead article, authors William P. Wilen and Wendy L. Stasell record the frustrating experience of advocates associated with Gautreaux and properly call for the creation of decent, affordable housing. The recognition that litigation has not fixed the problem should not, however, translate into a demand for the creation of this housing in areas of concentrated poverty, nor the abandonment of the struggle for true integration.

In areas other than Chicago, similar litigation followed Gautreaux. In Minneapolis, residents of racially segregated public housing projects sought to create mixed-income neighborhoods and choice for low-income residents throughout the metropolis. Hollman v. Cisneros, Civil 4-92-712 (consent decree, D. Minn. Apr. 21, 1995). Progress toward this end is still needed in the Twin Cities. Walther v. Mesquite, 169 F.3d 973 (5th Cir. 1999), is another effort (in Dallas, Texas), one that was severely undermined by the Fifth Circuit at the behest of white suburban homeowners who attacked the attempt to build low-income housing for minorities in white areas. Even in areas with no history of litigation, there are many obstacles to the creation of affordable housing in communities with job growth and high-performance schools.

The authors argue that the real obstacle to remedying racialized concentrated poverty is the tension between integration and the production of housing. Indeed, the integrationists are cited for supporting the process of gentrification that has the dual effect of pushing low-income residents out of gentrifying neighborhoods and reducing the net amount of affordable housing units.

There is no consensus on the definition of the term “gentrification”: revitalization, or the creation of a stable, mixed-income, integrated neighborhood; or displacement of low-income people of color by members of the white middle class. Certainly the first of these and possibly even the second should not be called gentrification. As to the latter, gentrification is not the opposite of racial and economic segregation, but, rather, it equates with the concentration of poverty. Concentrated poverty is a racializing process that agglomerates and isolates low-income people of color away from opportunity, historically at the urban core. Gentrification, as I use the term, is also a process that, by pushing them out, isolates people, usually of color, from opportunity. These displaced residents often end up living in other distressed communities, often again in concentrated poverty. And this relocation of concentrated poverty is a serious problem. But it is not integration.

In analyzing the particular concerns of the low-income families of color that live in these changing neighborhoods in Chicago and other metropolitan areas, we should reject a process that displaces residents to other distressed areas, but we should not valorize and romanticize the racial and economic segregation associated with concentrated poverty, which also isolates people from opportunity.

The authors’ call for the production of decent affordable housing must be heeded. The need is pressing both in areas that have adopted Gautreaux-type remedies and in those that have not, but to the extent that advocates try to solve the problem by ignoring the consequences of building low-income housing in isolated communities, they do a disservice to low-income people. The solution to the isolation caused by gentrification is not to embrace the isolation caused by concentrated poverty but rather to embrace a housing strategy that links people to opportunity broadly defined. To the extent this broad-based approach is embraced and implemented, much of the apparent tension between integration and housing, I believe, will disappear.

JOHN A. POWELL
Marvin J. Sonosky Chair in Law and Public Policy, University of Minnesota Law School; Executive Director, Institute on Race and Poverty