Racial Inequality and the Black Ghetto

by Alexander Polikoff

Reading Jason DeParle’s new book *American Dream* (Viking), one is struck once again by the unrelenting, intergenerational persistence of ghetto poverty. From W.E.B. Du Bois through James Baldwin, Kenneth Clark, and Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, in compelling reportage by Nicholas Lemann, Alex Kotlowitz and DeParle, in endless statistical analyses, ethnographic studies and academic research papers, the point is made over and over again: The concentrated poverty of urban ghettos condemns generation after generation of black Americans to what Clark called lives of impotence and despair.

Yet, some may object, only 2.8 million black Americans live in concentrated urban poverty — metropolitan census tracts with poverty populations of 40% or more. That’s only 1% of Americans. Sad, to be sure, but not a big enough deal to get worked up about unless you’re a bleeding heart liberal. The country has more pressing matters to attend to.

Some 170 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville called racial inequality “the most formidable evil threatening the future of the United States.” Tocqueville went on to prophesy that the evil of racial inequality would not be resolved — indeed, that it would eventually bring America to disaster. How could that be? How could 1% of Americans, confined to ghettos, be a nation-threatening matter? Bear with me, and I’ll try to explain.

First, take small comfort from small numbers. In an earlier *New York Times* piece, DeParle makes this point about the small ghetto population:

The poverty and disorder of the inner cities lacerate a larger civic fabric, drawing people from shared institutions like subways, buses, parks, schools and even cities themselves. Perhaps most damaging of all is the effect that urban poverty has on race relations. It is like a poison in the national groundwater that is producing a thousand deformed fruits.

What deformed fruits? Among them is nothing less than breaking up the coalition that birthed the New Deal and the Civil Rights Movement, a political sea-change that began in the World War II years, gained strength over the next two decades, then led to Richard Nixon’s election in 1968, followed in 1980 by the triumph of Ronald Reagan. In November 1968, American character changed. From a nation concerned with equality we became a nation that closed the doors on school and housing desegregation. Under Reagan, we became an uncaring nation, obsessed with the free market and with crafting rules to foster still more personal acquisition by the most favored.

There is no single explanation for America’s character change. But a major factor was disaffection by white ethnics and blue-collar workers, long core elements of the New Deal coalition. Disaffection over what? The answer is over blacks trapped in ghettos trying to penetrate white neighborhoods. Hubert Humphrey, civil rights champion, not Richard Nixon, with his coded anti-black speeches and shameless pandering to Southern segregationists, suffered the consequences. There were other 1968 election issues, to be sure, but a number of historians make a powerful case that it was fear of blacks from ghettos “invading” white neighborhoods that finally sun-

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dered the coalition that had given America its reigning consensus liberalism creed.

Another example of a deformed fruit is the War on Drugs, targeted on black ghettos. Since Reagan assumed office, we have built over 1,000 new prisons and jails, many crowded beyond capacity. Crowded with whom? The answer is blacks from ghettos. By 1990, nearly one of every four young black males in the United States was under the control of the criminal justice system, more in major cities (over 40% in Washington, over 50% in Baltimore). In his book, Malign Neglect, Michael Tonry observes that the rising levels of black incarceration were the foreseeable effect of deliberate policies: “Anyone with knowledge of drug-trafficking patterns and of police arrest policies and incentives could have foreseen that the enemy troops in the War on Drugs would consist largely of young, inner-city minority males.” Part and parcel of our mass incarceration policy are “three strikes” laws that mandate long prison terms for third convictions. California has meted out a 25-year sentence for the third strike theft of a slice of pizza, another for pilfering some chocolate chip cookies. Thirteen-year olds have received mandatory, life-without-parole sentences.

In short, as a nation we are doggedly pursuing a ghetto-targeted mass incarceration policy that is both mindless and destructive of traditional American values. It is mindless because at enormous cost we insist on sticking with a policy that is having no demonstrable effect on drug availability, drug crime rates or crime rates generally. It is destructive of values because it has driven us to extremities that no fair-minded person can defend.

A final example of disfigured produce is the demise of welfare, but without the jobs supposed to have been part of the deal. At the heart of Newt Gingrich’s successful, dump-welfare campaign, was a stick-figure caricature of the ghetto: “You can’t maintain civilization with twelve-year-olds having babies and fifteen-year-olds killing each other and seventeen-year-olds dying of AIDS” (Gingrich, as quoted in DeParle’s new book).

Can these deformed fruits be blamed solely on black ghettos? No, they cannot. Ending black ghettos wouldn’t end anti-black attitudes any more than ending Jewish ghettos ended antisemitism. But it is not easy to find anything in American society that matches the black ghetto for its poisoning effect on attitudes, values and conduct.

Sixty years ago, Gunnar Myrdal wrote: “White prejudice and discrimination keep the Negro low in standards of living, health, education, manners and morals. This, in its turn, gives support to white prejudice.” Decades later, sociologist Elijah Anderson’s studies of a ghetto and an adjacent non-ghetto neighborhood led him to conclude: “The public awareness is color-coded. White skin denotes civility, law-abidingness, and trustworthiness, while black skin is strongly associated with poverty, crime, incivility, and distrust.” In American society at large, most whites act like the ones Anderson studied — their public awareness is also color-coded, and they steer clear of poor blacks and keep them in their ghettos. Predictable ghetto behavior then intensifies whites’ sense of danger, validates their color-coding and drives their conduct.

Urban economist George Galster describes a self-reinforcing “ghettoizing cycle.” First, ghettoization induces “behavioral adaptations” by ghetto dwellers. Widely reported by the media, ghetto behavior is then seen as validating and legitimizing whites’ prejudicial attitudes toward blacks. The prejudices translate into withdrawal from blacks, and into discriminatory conduct in housing, zoning, employment and institutional arrangements of all sorts, which in turn lead to more ghettoization.

Ghettoization is growing, in spite of many reasons to have expected the contrary (the Kerner Commission admonition; passage of anti-discrimination laws; the substantial growth of the black middle class; the unprecedented good times of the 1990s). From 1970 to 2000, the number of metropolitan ghetto census tracts (40% or more poverty population) doubled, from around 1,100 to over 2,200, and the number of blacks in metropolitan ghettos increased from under 2.5 to over 2.8 million. And there’s every reason to believe the problem has grown since the 2000 Census.

In a nutshell, that is why I think we’d be well advised to play it safe with respect to Toqueville’s prophecy. Color-coded poison continues to flow into our groundwater, with disfiguring results that are plain to see. Disaster may not come in the form of riots and race wars, as Carl Rowan predicts in his recent book, The Coming Race War in America. But it will be disaster no less if American values are sufficiently deformed.

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A National Gautreaux Program

So what can we do about it? One answer is the Gautreaux lawsuit's housing mobility program writ large (high quality pre- and post-move family counseling, coupled with housing search assistance and unit identification, to enable inner-city families to move with housing vouchers into middle-class neighborhoods far from the ghetto). Let me lay out the elements of what I believe would be a workable program, and then respond to some of the multiple objections that will probably flood your minds — a sketch only: A full rendition would take more than the allotted space.

Suppose 50,000 housing choice vouchers were made available annually, were earmarked for use by black families living in urban ghettos, and could be used only in non-ghetto locations — say, census tracts with less than 10% poverty and not minority impacted. Suppose that the vouchers were allocated to our 125 largest metropolitan areas. Suppose also that to avoid "threatening" any receiving community, no more than a specified number of families (an arbitrary number — say, ten, or a small fraction of occupied housing units) could move into any city, town or village in a year.

If an average of 40 municipalities in each metropolitan area served as "receiving communities," the result would be — using ten as the hypothetical annual move-in ceiling — that 500,000 families each year, or 500,000 in a decade, would move "in Gautreaux fashion." Notably, the 500,000 moves would equal almost half the black families living in metropolitan ghetto tracts.

We cannot, of course, assume that half of all black families in metropolitan ghettos would choose to participate. But neither would it require the departure of every black household to change radically the black ghetto as we know it. With enough participants, radical change would be inevitable. Whatever the time frame, we would at last be treating a disease that has festered untreated in the body politic for over a century.

The hypothetical is plainly intended only to show that a national Gautreaux program could operate at a meaningful scale; it is not a real-life working model. Metropolitan areas vary in size — in 2000, the 35 largest of the 331 metropolitan areas contained over half the metropolitan ghetto tracts. An actual program would be tailored to these variations, operating at greater scale in big ghetto areas and at lesser scale (or not at all) in metropolitan areas with small black ghettos.

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Several Questions

The hypothetical raises several questions. Would 50,000 vouchers a year be feasible? Could such an enlarged mobility program be administered responsibly? Would enough families volunteer to participate? Could 50,000 private homes and apartments be found each year for the program?

The answers are necessarily speculative because mobility on such a scale has never been tried, but answers there are. The 50,000 annual vouchers, an arbitrary figure chosen for purposes of the hypothetical, really contemplates 100,000 new vouchers each year, with 50,000 of them earmarked for the Gautreaux-type program. The point would be to leave 50,000 new "regular" vouchers for other entering families ineligible for the mobility program or who, for a multitude of perfectly understandable reasons, were unable or unwilling to participate in it. Fairness to non-participants would make the "extra" 50,000 vouchers a necessity. However, 100,000 new vouchers per year is not a fanciful figure; Congress authorized more than that number as recently as the year 2000.

But the hypothetical program could be run without issuing any new vouchers at all. Currently, about 2.1 million vouchers are in circulation. The annual "turnover rate" is about 11%, meaning that for various reasons (for example, a family's income rises above the eligibility ceiling), some 230,000 vouchers are turned back to housing authorities each year for reissuance to other families. A Congressional enactment could direct 50,000 of these turnover vouchers to the hypothetical program.

The cost of assisting mobility moves must of course be included in the calculation. But at an average of $4,000 per family — a reasonable, even generous, figure based on the Gautreaux experience — we are talking about $200 million a year, $2 billion over ten years (excluding inflation). To put that figure in perspective and address the question of whether we could "afford" it, consider that for a single year (FY 2004), the Bush Administration proposed a military budget of some $400 billion, which (excluding inflation) would amount to $4,000 billion over ten years.

It is true that almost any program can be viewed as affordable by comparison with our military budget. But we aren't talking about "any" program. We are talking about a program to end the successor to slavery and Jim Crow that is perpetuating a caste structure in the United States and threatening incalculable harm to American society. Achieving that, for a negligible fraction — .0005 — of our military budget, would be our best bargain since the Louisiana Purchase.

That negligible fraction is the pittance for mobility assistance only; it does not include the cost of the vouchers themselves. At the current annual cost of about $6,500 per voucher, the ten-year voucher tab for 100,000 new vouchers each year would be just under $36 billion (again excluding inflation). Adding roughly
7% for the administrative fee HUD pays to housing authorities brings the total to about $38.5 billion, less than 1% of the $4,000 billion military figure. Our affordable housing crisis is so severe that, entirely apart from mobility and ghetto-dismantling, we should be — and politics will some day dictate — making affordable housing expenditures of this magnitude. Housing expenditures “the Gautreaux way” would give us the double payback of ameliorating both our affordable housing and our black ghetto crises.

Suppose, however, that the country isn’t ready to spend $38.5 billion over ten years for new “double payback” vouchers. Running the hypothetical program with turnover vouchers instead would eliminate entirely the $38.5 billion cost of new vouchers. This would mean that the only additional tab for the hypothetical program — beyond the costs we are today already incurring for the existing voucher program — would be about $200 million a year, taking us back to that .0005 fraction of our military budget. It is mind-boggling to think that, for an infinitesimal expenditure in budgetary terms, we could mount a program that could — to use a storied location — end the ghetto as we know it.

What about administration? Under a consent decree in a housing desegregation case, the Dallas Housing Authority in a little over two years assisted some 2,200 families, most of them black, to move to “non-impacted” areas (census tracts in which a few Section 8 vouchers were already in use, but in practice the receiving areas turned out to be predominantly non-black). Dallas was a case of direct administration by a housing authority. The Gautreaux Program was administered by a nonprofit organization. Moving to Opportunity, HUD’s five-city Gautreaux-like demonstration program (using poverty, however, not race, as the measure), involves partnerships between housing authorities and nonprofits. These varied and largely positive experiences suggest that we could handle the administrative challenge of a nationwide Gautreaux-type program.

Would enough families volunteer to participate? We will not know until we try, but the Gautreaux experience suggests that they may. An average of 400 families moving each year in each participating metropolitan area would be required to reach the hypothetical goal (a smaller average number if more metropolitan areas were used). The 400-per-year number was surpassed more than once by the Gautreaux Program even though the number of entering families was artificially limited, not by lack of demand or market factors but by the funding and staff that could be extracted from HUD in the Gautreaux consent decree bargaining process.

Finally, could 50,000 homes and apartments be found each year? The Gautreaux Program was able to place families in over 100 cities, towns and villages in the Chicago area, while the hypothetical assumes an average of only 40. The Census Bureau counts 331 metropolitan areas in the country, while the hypothetical assumes that the mobility program would operate in only 125. Each assumption is conservative with respect to unit supply. Most importantly, the potential supply of units is not a fixed-sum. More fine-tuning of Fair Market Rents (increasing them in low vacancy times and places, reducing them where they exceed market rents) and more creativity about responding to landlord concerns (for example, paying rent for the several weeks it sometimes takes a housing authority to “clear” a family for an apartment being held off the market) can make a big difference. If the 50,000 annual goal were made a bureaucratic imperative, and if local administrators were given the right tools, it is possible — indeed, likely — that the goal would be achieved.

A Legal Question

A different kind of question is prompted by the notion of setting aside 50,000 vouchers each year for black families. How can one justify denying poor whites, poor Latinos and poor Asians, many also living in high-poverty neighborhoods, an opportunity to participate in the mobility program? Would it even be legal? A dual justification can be offered. The first is that the proposal is designed to help the nation confront its “most formidable evil,” an evil that results in significant degree from fears and conduct generated by confining black Americans, not others, to ghettos. The second is that the country is responsible for the confinement of blacks to ghettos in a manner and degree that is not the case with other groups. This is obviously so for poor whites, who already live mostly among the non-

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poor. Latinos and Asians, for all of the discrimination they have suffered, do not have slavery or Jim Crow in their histories. Nor have they been confined among their own to a comparable degree. Devoting 50,000 vouchers exclusively to blacks in ghettos can thus be justified both by the purpose of the proposal and by the unique history and current situation of blacks in ghettos.

As for legality, no one can be certain in a time when 5-4 Supreme Court decisions are routine. But when in 1988 Congress authorized compensation to Japanese citizens who had been herded into World War II detention camps, no serious legal question was even raised. Though the analogy is obviously imperfect, housing choice vouchers as "compensation" for confining blacks in ghettos is not a bad rationale. It is unlikely that even today's Supreme Court would upset an express Congressional determination to make partial amends in this way for a history of slavery, Jim Crow and ghettoization. (Even so, one can imagine that for reasons of policy or politics, Congress would choose to offer the mobility program to all residents of metropolitan ghettos. That would require a reworking of the numbers, and possibly prioritizing poverty families, but would not affect the basic structure or feasibility of the proposed program.)

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Those Who Remain

Even if a national Gautreaux-type program were doable and legal, objections remain to be addressed. One is that the program would be harmful to the moving families, severing them from family, friends and institutional support systems, and subjecting them to hostility and racial discrimination. An answer is to ask who are "we" to withhold a purely voluntary opportunity from "them" on the ground that we know better than they what is in their interest. Moreover, studies of the Gautreaux program show that mobility works well for many participating families.

A variation on this argument is that dismantling the ghetto will undermine black institutions, political power and ghetto communities that have values deserving preservation. As for black institutional and political strength, Italians, Irish, Jews and others have survived far more mobility than black Americans are likely to experience; it is absurd to contend that the strong, resilient black American culture has anything to fear from a Gautreaux-type program. As for values in ghetto communities, it is plain to any objective observer that the bad far outweighs the good.

A further variation on the bad-for-them argument is that non-movers will be worse off once some of the ablest and most motivated among ghetto residents leave. Even if true, this is not a sufficient reason to reject the approach. Should we not have passed the Fair Housing Act because the departure of better-off ghetto residents may have left those who remained worse off? Moreover, the likelihood that deconcentration will foster redevelopment means that even many of those who choose to remain will be benefited over time.

The latter point may raise eyebrows. Why will redevelopment be fostered? And if it is, won't gentrification simply drive out remaining ghetto residents? The answer to the first question is a matter of pressure: When, like a balloon being filled, migrants poured in, the ghetto expanded outward; as deconcentration lets out some of the air, the pressure will be reversed. When ghettos are located near desirable areas, redevelopment pressures will be strong. When they are not, the redevelopment pump may need to be primed with government assistance.

In both circumstances, the concern that gentrification will drive out the remaining poor can be addressed. Where government assists the redevelopment process, the assistance should be conditioned on housing for the poor as part of the mix. Where it does not (although usually some form of assistance will be involved), inclusionary zoning can mandate that some low-income housing be included in all new residential development above a threshold number of units. Other techniques — for example, property tax caps — are also available.

Revitalization as an Alternative?

Others reject the Gautreaux approach in favor of preferred alternatives. A major one is "revitalization," but analysis discloses that, absent poverty deconcentration, this is an inadequate alternative. A rudimentary form of revitalization is simply to go in — without worrying about poverty deconcentration through housing mobility — and improve shelter and services for present residents. But with the suburbs having become the locus of metropolitan employment growth, with the opportunity engine the ghetto once was now a destructive, jobless environment, it is hubris to think we could reverse decades-old economic forces through improved shelter and services alone. William Julius Wilson has concluded, correctly, that without increasing economic opportunities for poor blacks and reducing their segregation, programs that target ghettos are unlikely to have much success.

A more sophisticated revitalization approach is community redevelopment. With a nonprofit community development corporation generally leading the way, the idea is to attack all of a depressed community's needs comprehensively and simultaneously — not just housing, but commercial development, job creation, school improvement, health facilities, public and social services, credit supply,
crime and drug control. This form of revitalization is almost always aided by government funding of one sort or another.

The attraction of community revitalization is considerable. Residents of depressed neighborhoods need hope; the revitalizing possibility may supply it. Cities need redevelopment; the prospect of revitalization offers it. Democracy requires a strong citizenry; community-based revitalization builds strong citizens. No wonder community revitalization is the darling of philanthropy, supported by a growing national movement.

But cautions are in order. First, community redevelopment does not generally focus on ghettos, for few black ghettos boast the key instrument—a strong community development corporation. Second, even in the neighborhoods in which most revitalization has been attempted, the record is distinctly mixed. Revitalization is a difficult, multi-faceted, long-term undertaking. Numerous studies make it clear that even after decades of stupendously hard work and much achievement, jobs may still be scarce, neighborhood schools still problematic, poverty still widespread, crime and drugs still unvanquished. Two of revitalization’s most enthusiastic supporters, describing one of its most notable successes (Paul Grogan and Tony Prosco, in their book Comeback Cities, writing of the South Bronx), acknowledge that the poverty rate did not decline, that employment was mostly unchanged and that “substantial racial segregation and isolation will continue.”

The reason has to do with over five decades of metropolitan development patterns which David Rusk examines in his 1999 book, Inside Game Outside Game. The “inside game” is being played in many large cities and increasingly—in many older, inner-ring suburbs as well. Relative to their metropolitan regions, these “inside” places face declining employment, middle-class populations, buying power, relative incomes and tax bases, along with increasing, disproportionately poor minority populations. The “outside game” reverses these patterns, with most of the suburbs, particularly the newer, farther-out ones, garnering a steadily growing share of the region’s jobs, as well as middle-class families with their incomes, buying power and tax-paying capacities, while housing a disproportionately low fraction of the region’s poor.

Inside Game Outside Game analyzes the powerful social and economic forces that generate these metropolitan development patterns, and the institutional—including governmental—arrangements that foster them. The result is what Rusk calls the “tragic dilemma” of community-based redevelopment programs. “It is like helping a crowd of people run up a down escalator.” No matter how fast they run, Rusk writes, the escalator comes back down faster and faster. Some run so hard—some programs function so well—that a few succeed in getting to the top, but most are carried back down, and the climb becomes harder and harder for those trying later.

To be sure, no effort to improve housing and services for poor families should be gainsaid. Some revitalization activity may actually prevent marginal neighborhoods from becoming ghettos. Yet there is a danger that the appeal of community revitalization will lead to plans that leave ghettos intact by focusing exclusively on improving conditions within them for their impoverished populations. We should not be about the business of fostering self-contained ghetto communities apart from the mainstream. We should instead be trying to bring the ghetto poor into the mainstream. The critical point is that only by enabling the poor to live among the non-poor will significant long-term im-

Selected Readings

Elijah Anderson, Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990)


Thomas G. Kingsley & Margery Austin Turner, eds., Housing Markets and Residential Mobility (Urban Institute Press, 1993)

Nicholas Lemann, The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America (Knopf, 1991)


David Rusk, Inside Game Outside Game: Winning Strategies for Saving Urban America (Brookings Institution Press, 1999)

John Yinger, Closed Doors, Opportunities Lost: The Continuing Costs of Housing Discrimination (Russell Sage Foundation, 1995)
provements be made possible in the life circumstances of most impoverished families trapped in ghettos.

Experience demonstrates that community revitalization can best be achieved through a mixed-income approach that attracts higher-income families to (formerly) poverty neighborhoods, thereby creating an incentive for private profit and investment. Like housing mobility, mixed-income development also brings with it the crucial benefit of enabling the poor to live among the non-poor. Community revitalization should thus be seen not as an opposing or alternate strategy but as a follow-on, mixed-income complement to housing mobility.

The Politics

A final objection is that my entire proposal is an indulgent fantasy. Don’t we clearly lack the political stomach for facilitating the movement of large numbers of black families from inner-city ghettos to white neighborhoods? What on earth makes me think that a nation that has treated blacks the way America has through most of its history — the way it still treats the black poor — would give a moment’s consideration to the course I am proposing? This very black ghetto issue was instrumental in shifting the political alignment of the entire country just a few decades ago, changing American character in the bargain. We remain today the uncaring nation we then became. Indeed, as this is being written, the Bush Administration is proposing to cut back radically on housing choice vouchers. A Gautreaux-type program would certainly be portrayed as liberal social engineering. Should it ever be seriously considered, wouldn’t some modern-day George Wallace whip up the country’s hardly dormantNegrophobia, perhaps especially easy to do at a time when working- and even middle-class Americans are having a hard time?

Maybe. Still, history is full of close calls and surprises. England might have succumbed to the Nazis if Roosevelt had not dreamed up lend-lease and persuaded a reluctant America First Congress to go along. Truman beat Dewey. Nixon went to China. The Soviet Union collapsed. In one decade, the Civil Rights Movement ended generations of seemingly impregnable Jim Crow. In a single fair housing enactment, Congress stripped historically sacred private property rights from American landowners. Even with respect to black Americans, history tells us that we can sometimes manage to take forward steps. Leadership is key, but we will not have a Bush in the White House forever.

It is the fear — anxiety about inundation and anti-social conduct — that explains a good deal (though not all) of white attitudes toward blacks in general, and white rejection of in-mov ing blacks in particular. If the black ghetto were replaced, over time those fears and anxieties would be ameliorated. Gautreaux teaches that the threshold fear of “them” can be overcome by effective pre- and post-move counseling; by certification from a credible agency that the moving families will be good tenants; and, most importantly, by keeping the numbers down. No more than a handful of families a year entering any receiving community makes for a different ball game.

Two Courses

America confronts two courses. The first is to continue to co-exist with black ghettos. The second is to dismantle and transform them. The prospect along the first course, as Tocqueville prophesied, is that the evil of racial inequality will not be solved.

So long as black ghettos exist, threatening inundation should there be a break in any neighborhood’s dike, most white Americans will fear the entry of blacks, any blacks, into their communities. And so long as that is the case, America’s “most formidable evil” will continue to afflict the nation.

The other part of Tocqueville’s prophecy — result in disaster — is less certain. Yet so long as we continue to tolerate the black ghetto, the prospect is for continuation of the two unequal societies described by the Kerner Commission Report, and continued fear of blacks by white Americans. As long as that fear persists, whites will continue to treat black Americans as the feared Other. They are likely to continue to act fearfully and repressively, possibly to incarcerate still more black Americans in still more prisons. In that event, the Tocqueville prophecy of disaster may indeed become the American reality.

The alternative is to dismantle our highest-poverty black ghettos and replace them wherever possible with mixed-income communities, thereby to lessen the fear and the fearful conduct they generate. Nothing can bring that about overnight, and any approach will be fraught with difficulty and uncertainty. But a national Gautreaux mobility program is a sensible way to begin a task that we postpone at our peril.

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