

Where Does Crime Go After Public Housing Projects Are Demolished?

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As critics have lamented for years, the mega American public housing projects built during the 1960s and '70s were often so flawed in their design as to harm residents – and the neighborhoods around them – more than they helped anyone. They were designed on super blocks that cut residents off from the surrounding community and that kept police from easily accessing the grounds. They were built in shoddy barracks and imposing towers, neither of which gave residents any control over the safety of their communal outdoor spaces. They were, in a sense, dangerous by design (although no one thought of it that way at the time).

“There’s this combination of all of these issues serving to perpetuate that stereotype about people who live there, that public housing itself were bad areas, and they were havens for crime,” says Megan Cahill, a researcher at the Urban Institute. “But in a way, they did become havens for

crime. It's hard for police to police them, you had a lot of low-income people living there, a lot of people who might have been marginalized economically, and not a lot of job opportunity in neighborhoods where the housing was built.”

Eventually, cities started razing a lot of the worst projects, many under the [Hope VI federal grant program](#) that offered financing for a new generation of public housing that wasn't supposed to look like public housing at all. Hope VI called for rebuilding mixed-income communities on shorter blocks with less institutional town homes and designing streets, lawns, and porches that people would want to cherish and protect.



Above: D.C.'s old Capitol Gateway housing project during demolition in 2005 (DC Housing Enterprises) . Below: Capitol Gateway today. (Henson Development) .



It wasn't clear though what would happen to all that crime when old public-housing fortresses were demolished. Would it move with the residents when they were dispersed? Would it just cross the street? And would any improvements really last over time?

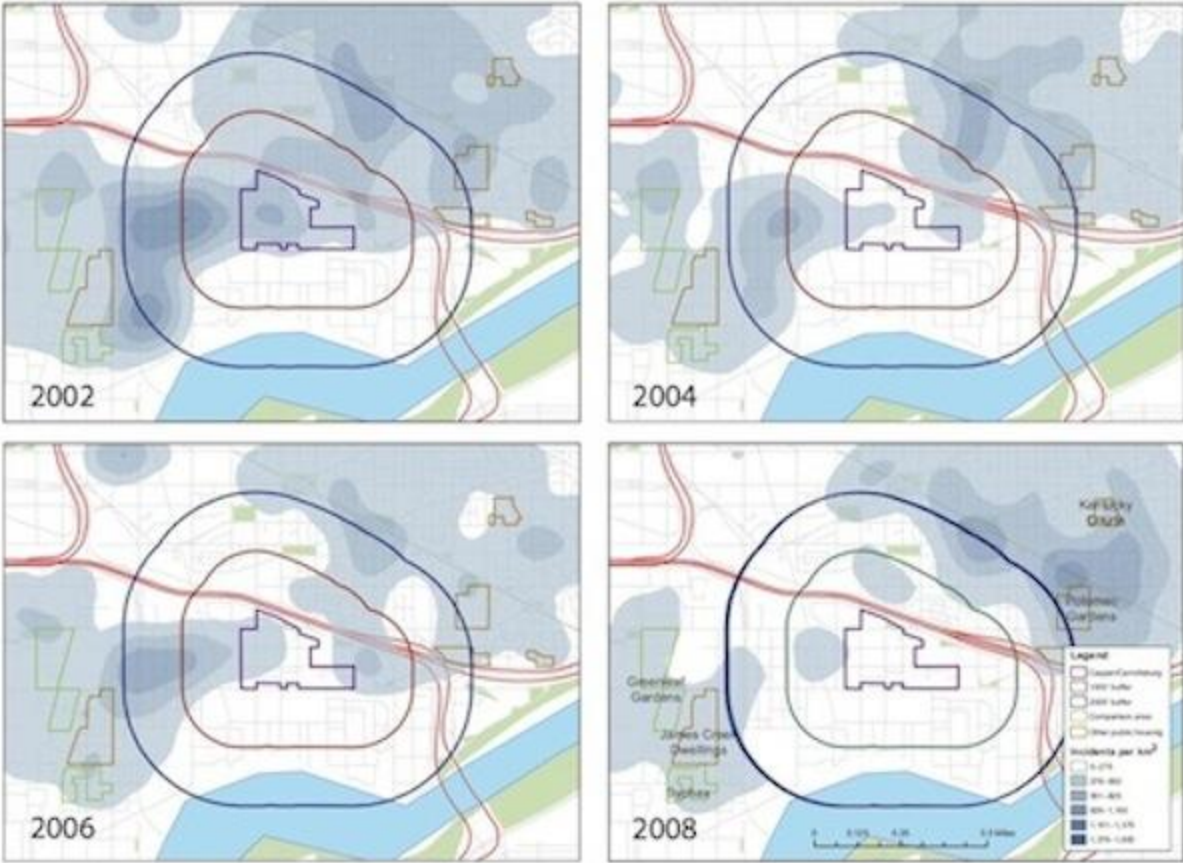
Cahill and several researchers at the Urban Institute have tried to answer these questions in a series of [fascinating case studies](#) in Washington, D.C. and Milwaukee, and the results of their research speak to the power of design to potentially alter the course of even crime statistics.

They looked at two of the worst projects in Washington, in the [Capper/Carollsborg](#) and Capitol Gateway areas of the city, and a third site on the north side of Milwaukee. All three had been exemplars of the old, flawed public-housing model, and they were all redeveloped under Hope VI over the last decade, on the same sites, into communities that wouldn't be easily recognized as public housing today. In Washington, the redevelopment took so many years that a mostly new population moved in. In Milwaukee, the residents remained in place throughout the construction and make up a similar group today to the one that lived in the project before.

In both cities, the researchers watched crime fall – at the sites themselves and in the neighborhoods around them.

“I actually honestly was pretty surprised that it was that dramatic,” Cahill says of the results. “I think they are pretty impressive.”

This is what the diffusion of crime looked like over time at the Capper/Carollsborg site:



And this is how it appeared around Capitol Gateway:

address. This is returning that sense of power to the residents, increasing the community's capacity to do something about their situation.”

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