

The failure of fair housing

Kevin Kelley

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- It was late at night last June when Mabel Gant, 66, her daughter and her grandchildren were startled by a crash at the window and a sudden burst of flames. Within minutes the old frame house rented by the black family in a 99-percent-white Cleveland neighborhood was completely gutted. The firebombing, for which no one has yet been convicted, killed Mabel Gant and forced the rest of the family back to an all-black project they had left only a year earlier.

Scores of physical attacks on black occupied homes have been reported in the past year, with most outbreaks now occurring in the North or Midwest, not the South. The violence reinforces an already pervasive pattern of housing segregation in the United States, a pattern that many say must be broken in order to cure other social ills.

"Segregated neighborhoods insure the continuation of the poverty cycle," says Oscar Newman, a national housing expert. "When poor people are able to move into more affluent areas, which is often the same thing as racial integration, then they benefit from better schools, law enforcement, sanitation, and generally improved social services."

His analysis has been upheld in court. Late last year, for example, a federal judge ruled that the city of Yonkers, N.Y. had in effect created inferior, mostly minority schools by perpetuating all-black neighborhoods.

Overall, the Justice Department reports 65 cases of housing discrimination involving violence

last year, as compared to 47 in 1984. Complaints about bias received by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) are also on the upswing, with 4882 recorded last year -- 350 more than in 1984. And these formal filings apparently represent just a fraction of the actual number of housing discrimination cases. HUD estimates that there are at least 2 million such incidents annually.

One reason for the difference, explains Katrina Ross of HUD's fair housing unit, is that "most instances of bias are now so subtle and sophisticated that many people don't even realize they've been victimized."

The practice of "steering" by real estate brokers may be the most common -- and least visible -- method of segregating. Many agents show homes to blacks only in mostly minority areas, steering them away from all-white neighborhoods.

Last year the New York state attorney general brought bias charges against four real estate companies in suburban Nassau County after undercover teams found that the firms treated black and white clients much differently. Of 78 homes offered to investigators posing as prospective buyers with similar incomes, only three were shown to blacks as well as whites.

In addition, the teams discovered that some sales agents would accommodate whites without an appointment but not blacks, and would routinely tell blacks but not whites that only homes beyond their specified price ranges were available.

Some mortgage lenders and insurance companies add to

segregation by "redlining" -- refusing to do business with home-owners or buyers in so-called transitional neighborhoods. The practice "is still a factor in keeping some areas all black," says Kale Williams, an integration activist in Chicago.

The federal government itself plays a major role in dividing communities along racial lines, according to various studies. A 14-month survey by the Dallas Morning News found a consistent pattern of government-sponsored segregation in 47 cities. The paper reported last year that it could not find a single locality where federally subsidized low-income housing was fully integrated or where conditions were roughly equal for whites and blacks living in separate projects.

Whites account for about 60 percent of the 10 million living in public housing in the United States, but they usually get placed in developments that house few minorities.

A bipartisan group of 15 former federal officials charged in 1983 that the Reagan administration was encouraging segregation by failing to enforce the 1968 Fair Housing Act. The Act, by the Supreme Court's interpretation, mandates not just anti-discrimination enforcement but actively promoting integration.

The administration's stand, however, is reflected in Assistant Attorney General William Bradford Reynolds' remark in 1984 that "the natural consequences of people's choices of housing is not something the federal government ought to regulate."

Drafters of the Fair Housing Act would no doubt be disappointed by the findings of Karl Taeuber, a University of Wisconsin demographer, 18 years after its passage. Using a scale in which 100 equals total segregation and zero represents full integration, Taeuber places the national average at 81, based on 1980

census data, as compared to 87 ten years earlier. He rates Chicago, Philadelphia and St. Louis the most segregated of large cities, while Oakland, Calif., with a 59 score, ranks as the most relatively integrated.

The lack of progress, coupled with a rise in racial clashes over housing issues, have spurred legislative initiatives on Capitol Hill.

The major reform measure is being sponsored in the Senate by Charles Mathias (R-Md.) and Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.). It would set up a system of administrative judges empowered to rule on housing discrimination complaints, with cases being brought at no charge to the plaintiff. At present, the Justice Department can bring such suits in federal court only when it detects a "pattern or practice" of discrimination. Supporters of the bill say it will streamline the process and help target individual cases of bias.

The Reagan administration has a competing measure. It expands the Justice Department's jurisdiction and sets a \$50,000 fine for first conviction, but it does not contain the administrative law judge provision. With civil rights activists calling the administration proposal unacceptable, a stalemate seems likely.

On a different legislative front, the Reagan administration is allied with civil rights forces in pushing for a \$4 million HUD program to aid fair housing enforcement efforts by local nongovernmental groups. Half that money would be set aside to promote undercover testing of real estate firms in ways similar to those used in Nassau County, N.Y.

Intense opposition from the powerful National Association of Realtors may kill the proposal, however.

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South Africa and America's cities

Franz Schurmann

As the spate of recent media coverage of the bleakness of ghetto life indicates, establishments are again worried about the place of blacks in American society. An unspoken conclusion from that coverage is that, except for a successful black middle class, there may be no place for them.

Such was the tacit message from a recent book-length series in the Chicago Tribune on life in largely black North Lawndale on Chicago's west side. Page after page detailed crime, despair, babies born to children, no jobs, degraded standards of living. Readers got the sense of people just vegetating as if in some film about the world after nuclear war.

Even more reminiscent of such films is the fact that young people predominate, reflecting the rising proportion of black teenagers and young adults in most ghettos in recent decades.

To someone old enough to remember, the current establishment worry is different from earlier decades. In the 1950s, people of power and influence felt that blacks were just too valuable a manpower resource to waste. In the 1960s, the New Frontier zealots wanted to show the newly emerging Third World abroad that the U.S., contrary to communism's claims, could become a racially integrated society. Then there was an optimistic tenor to the new race policies. This time, however, the establishment mood is as bleak as ghetto landscapes.

It is a fair guess that what got the establishments into this new mood of worry had something to do with South Africa. Last year, night after night, American TV viewers could see anger exploding

out of black townships. Those who read the papers carefully learned that the explosive energy came largely from youngsters, some of whom were barely past grade school. And it did not take much imagination to realize that exactly the same kind of youth tinder lies strewn about the ghettos of U.S. inner cities.

In South Africa, the townships have no economies, only people who stream out every day to work elsewhere in the white man's economy. North Lawndale once had Sears' world headquarters, the famed Hawthorne plant of Western Electric, International Harvester, Ryerson Steel. All are gone now.

But unlike South Africa, North Lawndale's people have little to stream out to. To the west they are hemmed in by truculent white suburbs, and to the east by downtown Chicago's booming yuppie economy for whites, upwardly mobile minorities, and, increasingly, Latino menial workers.

In previous decades, the establishments believed it was time for the mighty machinery of government to get moving and do something about racism and poverty. Now the mood is that even lots of money -- which is not available anyway -- would not make much of a difference. The problem, they now believe, goes deeper to differing "values" between the underclasses and the mainstream.

The media which have long been sympathetic to government's efforts to improve the social scene have recently found kind things to write about the new "conservative" mood among blacks. "Blacks must save themselves," goes the new mood. The papers feature people like Bertha Gilkey