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Building Affordable Housing Across DC Will Help Families and Children Succeed

By Claire Zippel

There's new evidence for why DC policymakers should care about having mixed-income neighborhoods in the city: children in poor families have higher incomes as adults, and are more likely to attend college, when they move to a low-poverty neighborhood. The District can support mixed-income neighborhoods – and improve the chances for children to succeed – by making sure affordable housing is built and preserved throughout the city.

New research from Harvard University researchers¹ shows that simply giving low-income families the opportunity to move to a low-poverty neighborhood – without any other social service interventions – helps their children do better as adults in striking ways. Children who moved to a low-poverty neighborhood:

- Had 31 percent higher incomes as adults than children who remained in high-poverty neighborhoods
- Were 16 percent more likely to attend college
- Were more likely to live as adults in a low-poverty, less racially segregated neighborhood



You can read a summary of the groundbreaking study [here](#).

Yet as housing costs in the District have ballooned, it's gotten even harder for low-income families to live in neighborhoods with good job opportunities, high-performing [schools](#), and access to transportation. This suggests that the District's efforts to increase the stock of affordable housing also should focus on *where* that housing is located. Here are two ways to do that:

- **Use District-owned land to get as much affordable housing as possible:** When the District sells city-owned land for housing development, up to [30 percent](#) of the homes must be affordable. That's good. But the District should go even further when it sells land in neighborhoods that offer greater economic opportunity to low-income families. For instance, the District could use the [upcoming sale](#) of the Hebrew Home site in Petworth to create significant affordable housing in a low-poverty, transit-adjacent neighborhood. Using housing tools like the Housing Production Trust Fund, even more than 30 percent of the homes built on the Hebrew Home site could be affordable.
- **Preserve affordable housing in high-cost or gentrifying neighborhoods:** Existing affordable homes in hot or rising housing markets face significant pressure to become market-rate. One recent example is [Museum Square](#), a subsidized affordable building in Chinatown whose owners have chosen to redevelop and opt-out of the subsidy program.

¹ Chetty, Raj, Nathaniel Hendren & Lawrence F. Katz (2015). "The Effects of Exposure to Better Neighborhoods on Children: New Evidence from the Moving to Opportunity Experiment." Harvard University and the National Bureau of Economic Research. Published in American Economic Review 106 (4). Available at www.equality-of-opportunity.org

When such buildings are no longer affordable, it's unlikely that low-income residents will be able to stay in the neighborhood. The Mayor's [Housing Preservation Strike Force](#) will soon offer ways to keep subsidized housing like Museum Square, including identifying buildings at risk and utilizing the District's right to buy them (under the [District Opportunity to Purchase Act](#)). The District should act quickly to implement the Preservation Strike Force's recommendations.