

# Was the development of public housing in Newark after World War II a success?

## Document A: Newark Housing Authority Report

*In 1956, the Newark Housing Authority published a construction report that described its work over the previous years. The excerpt below is from the construction report. It describes the experiences of a family that moved into one of the city's housing projects.*

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It's fine to see modern buildings with trees and grass standing where little but garbage had blossomed before. But this obvious improvement is merely **incidental** to the end purpose: giving families a place where they can live with decency and dignity.

Mrs. Walsky [and] her husband . . . were married on June 1, 1941, but it was not until November 1945 [after the war] that they were reunited and ready to begin married life. Newark did not roll out the red carpet for the young veteran and his wife. Several landlords offered unheated apartments at **unsentimental** prices. The Walskys finally had to do as thousands of others. They moved in with Mrs. Walsky's father, who had a 4-room cold water flat at 417 15<sup>th</sup> Avenue. There they stayed for eight unhappy years while they had their three children: Donald, 9, Jeffrey, 8, and Barry, 5.

"It was a nightmare," Mrs. Walsky says. "Every day we carried kerosene up from the basement. We got sick of the smell from the oil stove. There was no wash basin in the bathroom, only a tub and toilet. The two older boys slept in my father's room and Barry shared our bedroom. The place was falling apart. My husband bought paint and did our bedroom over. Two weeks later the ceiling fell on Barry and me. . . ."

"We moved in here on July 20, 1953, and things began to change right away. Here we have a living room, three bedrooms, and kitchen and a bath—all clean and modern. The children have new friends and play wherever they like. They sleep better. . . ."

"Being here is a good thing for my husband and me," Mrs. Walsky continued. "It has changed our life for the better. I was down to 113 pounds in the slum. I've gained 14 pounds. And these five rooms cost us only \$39 a month with gas and electric, which is just about the same as in the cold water flat."

**Source:** *Newark Housing Authority, Construction Report, 1956.*

### Vocabulary

**incidental:** occurring by chance in connection with something else

**unsentimental:** unfriendly or not generous

## Document B: Louis Danzig

*In August 1967, New Jersey Governor Richard J. Hughes created the Governor's Select Commission on Civil Disorder to explore causes of the violence that erupted in Newark earlier that year. The Commission held dozens of meetings and examined over 100 witnesses. Below is an excerpt of sworn testimony provided by Louis Danzig, the head of the Newark Housing Authority.*

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Housing conditions in Newark are now better than they have been in our time. The greatest improvement has been made in recent years by means of urban renewal and the public housing program.

Both of these programs have been given the utmost support by the City Administration with the result that, in proportion to the size, Newark has the most public housing units and the largest urban renewal program of any of the large cities in the country.

Since 1950, 18,016 new dwelling units have been built in the city. Of these new units, 9,752 apartments are low-rent federally assisted public housing for low-income families. During the 1950-1967 period, 7,415 dwellings have been demolished almost entirely as slum clearance in the urban renewal and public housing programs. The demolished dwellings were substandard by reason of physical condition, lack of sanitary facilities and location.

Other indications of improvement in housing conditions for the 1950-1960 period are shown by the 1960 U.S. Census. For example, dwellings classified as dilapidated, the worst category of condition, were reduced from 12,143 to 8,521. Dwellings lacking in plumbing facilities were reduced from 16,159 to 5,928. Dwellings lacking hot water were reduced from 15,950 to 7,700. Undoubtedly, this rate of improvement for the 1950s has been continued into the 1960s.

**Source:** *Testimony of Louis Danzig before the Governor's Select Commission on Civil Disorder, December 5, 1967.*

## Document C: Public Housing in Newark's Central Ward

*From June 29 to 30, 1966 the New Jersey State Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights held public meetings in Newark on public housing in the Central Ward. The Committee, charged with investigating discrimination cases in the state, published a report on the meetings. Below are excerpts from the Committee's conclusions.*

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1. There appears to be racial discrimination in the assignment of tenants to public housing.

2. A disparity in maintenance exists between the predominately Negro and the predominately white projects. Tenants in the four predominately Negro projects in the Central Ward complained of inadequate janitorial services, poorly kept grounds, delays in restoring elevator service, and in making repairs to apartments. In addition, it was charged that the halls and stairways were frequently dirty and darkened. Comparable complaints were not heard from the two residents of a predominately white project.

3. There is inadequate police protection in the Central Ward projects. A high rate of break-ins, rifling of mail boxes, and the presence of many loiterers was also alleged. . . . Central Ward project tenants are also fearful of the police. The police, rather than being protectors, are looked upon as a threat to their security and safety.

4. Adequate recreational facilities and play areas are not available for youngsters in the four Central Ward public housing projects.

5. The tenants organizations have been ineffective. Many residents have little faith in the ability of the tenants associations to improve conditions. Some association officers have been frustrated in their attempts to communicate with Housing Authority officials.

6. Living conditions in Central Ward public housing are oppressive. Except for Felix Fuld Court, the high-rise, institutional appearance of the three Central Ward projects creates a feeling of depression and isolation on the part of the tenants. The projects are like islands, apart from the rest of the community. They are poorly designed . . .

7. Public housing the Central Ward has tended to concentrate the ghetto. The Committee recognizes that the Newark Housing Authority was primarily concerned with slum clearance and that substandard dwellings in the Central Ward constituted the worst slum area in the city. But in its efforts to deal with one problem, NHA, by concentrating the ghetto, has created another.

**Source:** *New Jersey State Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, Public Housing in Newark's Central Ward: A Report, April 1968.*

## Document D: Newark Star Ledger Article

*The Scudder Homes were one of the housing developments constructed in Newark as part of redevelopment efforts.*

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### Tenants Call for Rent Strike

Members on the Concerned Tenants of Scudder Homes yesterday called for a rent strike against the Newark Housing Authority, beginning today, to protest “oppressive living conditions” at the housing projects.

In addition, the tenant organization submitted a list of 24 demands which include “the immediate dismissal or resignation of Mr. Louis Danzig as executive director of the Housing Authority because he is insensitive to the needs of our community.” Danzig could not be reached for comment last night.

Rev. Dennis A. Westbrooks, coordinator of the strike, said that residents of Scudder Homes have repeatedly asked the Housing Authority to make repairs and improvements, but no action has been taken on the requests. . . .

Benjamin Haggans told an audience of about 200 project residents that it took seven months to have a window put in. “The situation in these housing projects is intolerable,” said Haggans. “There is no backing away.”

Demands made by the residents include repair of holes around pipes, around the clock elevator service, better security and protection, improved garbage disposal and incinerators, building directories, and repair of leaky ceilings. In addition, the tenants are asking for fire extinguishers, checkups of waste pipe, radiator covers, peepholes on apartment doors and laundry facilities within the project area . . .

The resident group accused the housing authority of being “extremely slow to act on improving the poor conditions” in Scudder Homes and expressed belief that racial discrimination is a factor in the tardiness of repairs.

**Source:** Newark Star-Ledger, “Tenants Call for Rent Strike,” April 1, 1969.

## Document E: History of the First Ward

*Michael Immerso is a life-long resident of Newark. His great-grandparents first moved to the First Ward in the 1890s. In 1994, he began the First Ward Documentary Project. This is an excerpt from his history of the First Ward that describes residents' reactions to the clearing of a large portion of the First Ward to build Columbus Homes, a public housing development.*

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The gutting of the neighborhood began in July 1953, and it proceeded through several phases over the next three years. One by one the little streets surrounding Saint Lucy's Church began to disappear. . . . Uprooted families felt profound grief, as if mourning a loved one who had passed away too soon. As one put it, "When they built Columbus Homes, they tore us apart." Said another, "It was a disaster. It broke people's hearts." Many felt betrayed. "It wasn't a choice," said one. "You had to get out." "They told us our homes were slums," said another, "they weren't slums." Many of the displaced had lived in the same building all their lives. Families were torn apart. Grandparents, aunts, and uncles who lived together under the same roof suddenly had to find new homes. Scores of family-owned business that thrived in the neighborhood were forced out and very few ever reopened. Properties were condemned and although the owners received compensation, it hardly mattered. Hardest hit were the elderly who had lived their entire lives amid family and neighbors and within walking distance of the church. They could not imagine living anywhere else. Some died as a result. "They were heartbroken," a former resident recalls. "A few months later you read their names in the obituaries." To this day, First Warders recall this period of dispersal with a feeling of sadness, bitterness, and betrayal. "We knew that it would never be the same," said one. "Everything came to an end."

On August 1, 1955, the Christopher Columbus Homes officially opened, but few displaced First Warders came back to live there . . . in the end, the scale of the buildings overwhelmed what was left of the old neighborhood. Rather than stabilize the community, urban renewal hastened its deterioration. As one First Warder put it, "Those projects killed the Ward. It was over after that." Another First Warder, commenting on the project's size, put it in even more bluntly: "They built monsters down there."

**Source:** *Michael Immerso, Newark's Little Italy, 1997.*