

# The Cincinnati riots and the housing crisis in the US

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*This is the third in a series of articles on the economic, social and political roots of the riots that erupted in Cincinnati, Ohio in April, following the police killing of an unarmed black teenager. The previous parts were posted on the WSWS on May 24 and June 26.*

One factor that contributed to the level of anger that erupted during the April riots in Cincinnati, Ohio is the chronic shortage of affordable housing for the city's low-income residents, a problem that has become more acute throughout the US during the stock market boom of the last decade. It is not surprising that the street protests and rioting that followed the police killing of 19-year-old Timothy Thomas began in the city's poorest neighborhood—Over-the-Rhine—where residents endure terrible housing conditions, abuse by slumlords and a high rate of homelessness.

In the late 1960s Over-the-Rhine received tens of millions of dollars from the newly-established federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) agency to rehabilitate more than 2,000 housing units for the neighborhood's mostly poor black and Appalachian residents. Over the years, however, government budget cuts, neglect by absentee landlords and worsening social problems left much of the neighborhood's housing stock—originally built by 19th century German immigrants—uninhabitable. Today over 500 buildings, 2,500 residential units and 250 storefronts stand vacant.

These long-standing problems have been exacerbated in recent years by the city government's efforts to encourage real estate developers and other businesses to build upscale housing, entertainment establishments and dot.com businesses to attract young professionals to Over-the-Rhine. The gentrification of the neighborhood has pushed up rents and further reduced the availability of low-rent housing in the neighborhood, where average annual income is only \$8,600 and more than 90 percent of the residents live below the official poverty level.

Although the blocks of abandoned and decaying buildings are a daily reminder of the degraded conditions poor people in Cincinnati face, this urban blight turns out to be a good opportunity for enterprising investors. According to the 2001 Economic Outlook published by the Partnership for Greater Cincinnati and the Greater Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce, over \$100 million has already been invested by venture capitalists in what they describe as the Digital Rhine. "Cincinnati," the report says, "seems to have some of the key ingredients that could create

a local technology boom. Cheap land and buildings in the Over-the-Rhine area, access to local universities, and the overall quality of life in Cincinnati makes this area quite attractive as a location for new technology firms."

The Chamber report notes that vacant buildings are well suited for e-commerce firms, which need "Carrier hotels" or Internet Service Provider buildings to house computers serving a network. "All they need are air conditioning, a safe location near a T1 line, and a redundant power supply," the report says. The abandoned houses of poor people also, reportedly make good warehouses for "high throughput distribution" (HTD) businesses like Amazon.com.

While trying to block funding for a non-profit group that builds low-income housing in the area and providing a piddling \$225,000 to assess lead poisoning risks for children, the city administration, headed by Democratic Mayor Charlie Luken, is spending tens of millions in its 2001-02 budget for upscale housing and new retail development. This is in addition to the hundreds of millions the city spent in past years to subsidize the \$1 billion riverfront development project, which includes two brand new sports stadiums.

Another key element of the city's efforts to attract investors and affluent young professionals to the area is the police crackdown on homeless people, panhandlers and unemployed youth in the neighborhood. The April 7 killing of Thomas, which triggered several nights of rioting and a declaration of martial law in the city, was one product of this repression, aimed at marginalizing poor and minority residents and ultimately driving them from the neighborhood.

More than three decades ago, in reaction to the wave of riots that spread through Cincinnati and many other American cities in the late 1960s, the federal government embarked on a crash program of public housing construction and other large-scale "urban renewal" projects. But these reforms—which were inadequate from the outset and were all but scuttled due to the cost of the Vietnam War and the deepening economic crisis of the mid-1970s—failed to solve the pressing social problems in the cities. During the Reagan-Bush years the decay of the cities—and the social ills such as crime and drugs that were produced by it—were used by Republicans to justify massive spending cuts and tax breaks to the rich.

Under Bill Clinton, who epitomized the Democrats' abandonment of liberal reformism and embrace of free market policies, the attack on public housing and other anti-poverty

programs was intensified. Government policy towards poor people in America's inner cities was best described as urban removal, rather than urban renewal. The operative dictums of the Clinton administration were: If poor people were on welfare, end welfare. If schools were failing, close them down. If poor people were concentrated in public housing projects, demolish the buildings.

Just blocks from Over-the-Rhine, in the city's West End neighborhood, wrecking balls and bulldozers have or are currently razing two public housing projects, which contained 1,700 units. Completed in the 1930s and 1940s, the Laurel Homes and Lincoln Court projects were built by the Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority under the New Deal housing programs, initially for defense workers and their families.

Lincoln Court, which once included 885 low-rent units, will be replaced by 80 town houses for low-income public housing tenants, 125 units for those qualifying for tax-credit and homeownership programs, and 50 new "market rate" homes, selling for between \$150,000 and \$240,000. Some of the displaced residents will be eligible for Section 8 housing vouchers to help pay to rent privately-owned apartments, but the average wait for a voucher is 28 months and many landlords refuse to rent to former public housing tenants.

The Cincinnati housing projects are being torn down under HUD's Homeownership and Opportunity for People Everywhere VI (HOPE VI) program, passed in 1992. Initially billed as a measure to "revitalize severely distressed public housing," HOPE VI has turned primarily into a demolition program. In the mid-90s Congress repealed the one-for-one replacement requirement, whereby every public housing unit demolished had to be replaced, and HUD, led by Clinton appointee Andrew Cuomo, son of the former New York governor, embarked on a program to demolish 100,000 public housing units by 2000. In Chicago alone, 40,000 units were destroyed.

According to HUD, the HOPE VI program is designed to reduce concentrations of poverty and African Americans, by encouraging a greater income mix in public housing projects and nearby neighborhoods. As housing advocates point out, HUD's efforts to de-concentrate poverty does not translate into de-concentrating wealth, i.e., building affordable housing in wealthy neighborhoods, which are also the most racially segregated. In the affluent suburbs that surround Cincinnati, for example, real estate developers, politicians and well-to-do homeowners use "exclusionary zoning" to prevent the building of apartments and smaller, affordable homes, thereby excluding the poor and minorities and keeping property values high.

HOPE VI has won the admiration of Cincinnati politicians who see it as a means of ridding the city of undesirables. Democratic City Councilman Jim Tarbell—a proponent of gentrification—praised HUD for giving public housing tenants "mobile certificates" to obtain housing elsewhere. "Now you can go anywhere you want in the federal system, not just in Cincinnati, you can go to Puerto Rico," he exclaimed.

In October 1998 President Clinton signed the Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act, which removed the requirement that families with urgent housing needs be granted preference for subsidized housing and only guaranteed that about half of all

housing assistance would go to low-income families. HUD also established Family Self Sufficiency (FSS) requirements that mandated all public housing tenants, except the elderly, the very young and a select few others with "special needs," participate in community and social service programs to get work, build up assets and eventually move out of public housing. New residents sign a contract outlining education and employment goals and are told that failure to make "demonstrable progress towards these goals will result in eviction."

Getting into the program requires a background check for criminal and credit histories. Many housing advocates see the programs as tailored to allow entrance to only those families most likely to succeed and who already have some resources. "There may not be real income thresholds, but the requirements of FSS discriminate against people with very low incomes," said Terri Andrews, a housing advocate in Charlotte, North Carolina.

The US Congress, led by several Republicans who called for the outright disbanding of HUD, barred the federal agency from issuing new rental assistance vouchers for five years. By the mid-1990s approximately 15 million households qualified for federal housing assistance, but only 4.5 million families received it. Of the more than 10 million poor families not receiving housing assistance, including the disabled, the elderly, and welfare recipients (as well as a sharply higher number of working families), approximately one-half spent at least 50 percent of their income on shelter.

During this same time the average time a family had to wait for public housing more than doubled, according to a recent HUD report. In Newark, New Jersey and Los Angeles the waiting period rose to 10 years, while in Cincinnati the waiting list was so long it was simply closed. The report concluded that the "current strong economy forces the poorest renters to compete for a shrinking pool of affordable units. With nowhere else to turn, millions of families with worst case housing needs join lists for HUD-assisted housing and are left waiting in vain."

The growth of the low-wage economy during the 1990s—coupled with the demolition of low-rent housing units and skyrocketing housing costs—has contributed to an explosion of homelessness in the US. In Cincinnati, there were 25,488 people who were homeless for at least one night in 2000, an increase of 5,000 from 1993, according to a new study by the Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless. During the same period the number of children in the city's shelters rose four-fold.



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