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Upfront

Debunking Empowerment

Feeling strong has little to do with mobilization in public housing

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SOCIAL CHANGE

Debunking Empowerment

Feeling strong has little to do with mobilization in public housing

Many nonprofit and community development organizations seek to "empower" low-income residents to help them better their living conditions and achieve personal goals. Studies have shown that individual empowerment, as demonstrated by a "sense of competence, control, and entitlement," is a key to personal success and community betterment. People who feel empowered tend to vote more regularly, attend civic meetings, contact public officials, and sign petitions. But, according to a recent report, feelings of empowerment may actually have little impact on whether low-income public housing residents take action to change their surroundings.

"Individuals who feel personally empowered may not direct their energy into neighborhood mobilization efforts," wrote John M. Bolland and Debra Moehle McCallum in the September 2002 *Urban Affairs Review*, "but rather into leaving their neighborhood for more satisfactory surroundings."

Bolland and McCallum, both social scientists at the University of Alabama, based their analysis on a 1993 telephone survey of adult residents in six public housing neighborhoods in Huntsville, Ala. Pollsters reached out to residents in 428 households, and completed 257 interviews, each of which included 140 questions. The respondents reflected the makeup of public housing residents nationwide: The vast majority were single-parent households headed by African-American women with a median income of $4,260 a year. In 1997 the authors conducted a follow-up survey of residents in the same communities.

The authors gauged community participation by respondents' answers to three questions: "Have you ever worked with others in this neighborhood to try to solve some neighborhood problem?" "Have you ever personally contacted an elected official about some need or problem?" and "How often have you talked with your neighbors about teen pregnancy, STDs/AIDS, or violence?"

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According to the survey, 36.6 percent of residents had worked with neighbors to solve a problem and 11.3 percent had contacted an elected official; 33 percent had talked to neighbors about teen pregnancy, 34.5 percent had discussions about sexually transmitted diseases, and 55.5 percent had spoken to neighbors about teen violence.

The authors then analyzed whether those surveyed felt individually empowered, based on whether they agreed with several statements, including "I do not have much influence over the things that happen to me" and "The world is too complicated for me to understand."

The results of the analysis showed that feelings of empowerment had only a limited impact on whether residents spoke with their neighbors about sex, pregnancy, and violence; feelings of empowerment were found to be totally irrelevant when it came to working with neighbors or contacting elected officials.

On the other hand, Bolland and McCallum found that residents who engaged in "neighboring behavior" – for instance, informal visiting, borrowing or lending tools, or asking for help in an emergency – were more often also active participants in their communities.

The authors called their findings "somewhat surprising," noting that "among the factors considered, empowerment is one of the most often invoked in discussions of political participation, and neighborhood organizing activities most often attempt to enhance it as a way of achieving desired outcomes."

Why didn't empowerment matter?

For one thing, according to the survey, 80 percent of the public housing residents said they would move out if they could. And often, empowerment goes hand-in-hand with mobility. Additionally, the authors suggest, empowerment is a "psychological construct," and as such it may not be the best predictor of behavior.

–Kari Lydersen