

Race, Socioeconomic Status and the First Public Housing Residents of the United States

David Van Riper
Minnesota Population Center
University of Minnesota

Ryan Allen,
Humphrey School of Public Affairs
University of Minnesota

Scott Dallman
Minnesota Population Center
University of Minnesota

Angira Mondal
University of Minnesota

The U.S. Federal Government built and leased over 30,000 units of public housing in 71 developments in 46 cities in 22 states, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands during the latter half the 1930s (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2004) (Figure 1).¹ Built under the auspices of the New Deal’s Public Works Administration (PWA) and the U.S. Housing Authority (USHA), initial public housing developments were targeted towards families negatively affected by the Great Depression (Friedman, 1966). Public housing was viewed as a mechanism to help the so-called “submerged middle class” rebound from economic distress and help inject capital into the construction industry. While race was not explicitly discussed in the enabling legislation, it played a key role in early public housing. Following policy precedent and the *de jure* racial residential segregation of the era, a significant majority (88%) of public housing developments in 1940 were restricted to residents of a particular race (Table 1).

Research based on archival materials indicates that public housing targeted families impacted by the Great Depression and that developments were segregated by race. We know little, though, about the actual residents of these early public housing developments. Existing research (Bloom, 2008; Radford, 1996) and preliminary evidence from New York City indicate that public housing households in New York City reflected a “nuclear family” household structure and had higher incomes than the pool of households eligible to live in public housing in 1940 (Allen and Van Riper, 2018). In the one African American

¹ The complete-count 1940 census data are unavailable for Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Therefore, we leave the five public housing developments in those territories out of our analysis. Our dataset includes 66 public housing developments in 41 cities.

development in New York City, public housing residents had higher measures of socioeconomic status, including educational attainment and income than their white counterparts.

Building on this prior work, this paper examines how widespread and systematic the exceptional nature of African American public housing residents was in early public housing developments. In particular, we assess regional variations in the characteristics of black and white public housing residents in racially segregated projects, as well as in integrated projects. We use a newly created dataset to compare the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of African American and white public housing households across the United States in 1940. Through this analysis we make two contributions. First, we describe a methodological innovation that allows researchers to identify populations of interest in complete count census data. Second, these comparisons of white and black residents of public housing in 1940 help shed new light on how race shaped conceptions among policymakers and government bureaucrats about who deserved access to public housing during an early period of the public housing program in the U.S.

Data

To identify public housing residents in the 1940 census, we combine the restricted-access version of the 1940 census microdata (Ruggles et al., 2018), enumeration district maps and descriptions (Morse and Weintraub, 2017), a list of the 66 public housing developments built and occupied between 1936 and April 1, 1940 (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2004) and Sanborn fire insurance maps (Wrigley, 1949; Sanborn Map Company 1983) depicting building footprints and street addresses of the public housing developments. Public housing developments often consist of multiple buildings, each with its own address. We obtained a list of all building addresses for each development from the Sanborn fire insurance maps. We then entered the addresses into Google Maps to get a general sense of the development's location. Next, we used One-Step Webpages to access 1940 enumeration district (ED) map(s) in the vicinity of the development. We created a list of the EDs that contained the development. Finally, we selected census microdata records included in that list of EDs. In most cases, the EDs that included public housing developments also included addresses that were not public housing units, so it was necessary to distinguish the households living in public housing. Working from the building addresses on the Sanborn maps and the street addresses in the restricted-access census microdata, we manually flagged census records whose addresses matches one of the building addresses in the public housing development. Finally, we performed quality checks on the flagged households and excluded households reporting that they owned their housing unit.

As Table 1 demonstrates, our strategy for identifying public housing households proved to be highly accurate. We identified 29,416 of 31,341 households (94 percent). Vacancies at the time of the census because of a household transition in the unit, no one at home during the enumeration or uninhabited units in a project that opened immediately before the date of the census could help to explain the slight undercount in our final data set. Small overcounts in some of the housing projects are likely due to inadvertently flagging a non-public housing household as living in public housing because of a data error in the address field of the enumeration sheets used to digitize the 1940 Census data. Overall, the 1940

Census indicated a vacancy rate of 7 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 1943), suggesting that our identification of about 94 percent of the households living in public housing projects effectively captured the universe of public housing residents at the time of the 1940 Census.

Preliminary work

Public housing households by race of householder and development

The first public housing developments in the United States provided affordable, decent housing for its residents, though in keeping with patterns of residential racial segregation and official policies that created and reinforced this segregation most public housing projects were racially segregated (Radford, 1996). How strictly local housing authorities enforced official racial segregation policies is uncertain based on existing research. Overall, of the 29,416 households living in public housing, approximately 27 percent were headed by African Americans (Table 2). In comparison, 10 percent of all households had African American heads at the time of the 1940 Census (Ruggles et al., 2018). As Table 1 indicates, officially only 12 percent of developments, representing 11 percent of housing public housing units, were designated as racially integrated. One-third of developments, representing 23 percent of housing units, were restricted to African Americans. The remaining developments (56 percent of developments representing 66 percent of public housing units) were restricted to whites.

Assessing the race of the householder by the race of development indicates that white- and African American-only developments were predominantly occupied by householders of those races. Still, some racial heterogeneity existed among householders in racially segregated developments, indicating some discretion on the part of local housing authorities with respect to race during the selection process for public housing. Specifically, 47 households headed by an African American lived in white-only developments, and 131 households headed by whites lived in black-only developments. A majority of households in integrated developments were headed by a white householder (Table 1). Given the slight racial variation in householders in segregated developments and the relatively small rates of interracial marriages during this era of U.S. history (Fryer, 2007), we expect to find small amounts of racial heterogeneity within the segregated developments when we move past an analysis of householders to consider the racial distribution of all public housing residents. We will calculate these statistics for the final paper and include a discussion here.

Public housing developments by race of development by region

Focusing on the racial distribution of public housing households and projects at the national level obscures important differences by region. A regional assessment of race in public housing in 1940 is particularly relevant given differences in the racial composition, economic conditions and policies related to race across the regions of the U.S. An assessment of the racial composition of public housing developments by census region (Figure 3) indicates that the Northeast has the most uneven allocation of housing units (Table 3). African American-only developments contained only 8.0 percent of the housing

units in the Northeast compared to about 24 percent in the Midwest and nearly 49 percent in the South. While integrated developments comprised a small share of housing units by region, the regional variation with respect to the race of householders in these developments is stark. In the Northeast, there were one-fifth as many African American heads of households in integrated developments as there were white heads of household. In the Midwest, one-third of integrated development households were headed by African Americans. The South was the only region where African American heads of household outnumbered white heads in integrated developments (Table 3).

Socioeconomic characteristics of households by race and by race and region

Prior work on New York City public housing households (Allen and Van Riper, 2018) found that African American-headed households had higher measures of socioeconomic status than white-headed households. We use our nationwide dataset to determine whether this pattern holds outside of New York City.² Nationally, African American-headed households comprised 28 percent of public housing households. Regionally, the percentage of public housing households headed by an African American ranged from 9 percent in the Northeast to 52 percent in the South (Table 4).

If we consider all public housing households in the United States, median household income was \$858 and \$1,035 for African American-headed and white-headed households, respectively. Regionally, African American households had a slightly higher median income than white households in the Northeast and lower median incomes in the Midwest and South.

In comparison to white householders in public housing, the educational attainment for African American householders in public housing was more heavily represented at the low and high ends of the educational attainment distribution. Nationally, about one-third of African American householders had less than an eighth grade education compared to less than one-quarter of white householders. In contrast, 10 percent of African American householders had more than a high school degree compared to less than six percent of white householders.

Regional variation in educational attainment by race was broadly similar to the national trend. In the Northeast, the percentage of African Americans householders with some high school, a high school degree, or more than a high school education was higher than white householders in all three categories. In the Midwest, the percentage of African American householders with some high school or a high school degree was lower than white householders. For the “more than a high school education” category, however, the percentage for African Americans (9.5%) was higher than for whites (6.5%). In the South, percentages for African American householders was starkly lower than white householders

² We drop households from the Mary Ellen McCormack public housing development in Boston from this analysis. The version of the complete-count 1940 census data that we used are missing income, educational attainment and employment status variables for Boston.

for some high school and a high school degree. The percentages for “more than a high school education” were closer, but African American householders still trailed white householders. Notably, nearly 40 percent of African American householders had less than an eighth grade education in the South, compared to about 16 percent of white householders.

Nationally, African American householders were more likely to be employed compared to white householders living in public housing. Likewise, a lower percentage of African American householders were not in the labor force compared to white householders. This pattern holds across all census regions. The percentage of African American householders who were employed was consistently higher than the percentage of white householders.

Socioeconomic characteristics of households by race and region for cities with African American and white-only developments

Public housing authorities were administered by municipal governments. We wondered how the socioeconomic characteristics varied by region if we only analyze households in the 14 cities with at least one African American- and one white-only development (Figure 2). Would we see the same regional variation as we saw when examining all public housing households?

Differences in median household income narrowed nationally and in the Midwest, but the gap widened in the Northeast and South (Table 5). Educational attainment and employment status variation was consistent with variation when we examined all public housing households in the US. African American heads of household had lower educational attainment and were more likely to be employed than whites.

Our preliminary analysis of African American and white households living in public housing in 1940 indicates some interesting points of divergence between the two groups. With the exception of the Northeast, African American households living in public housing earned less than white households living in public housing. Despite this earnings gap, a larger proportion of African American householders had education beyond high school compared to white householders. At the same time a larger proportion of African American public housing householders had less than an eighth grade education than white public housing householders.

Future analysis plans for PAA paper

For our full PAA paper, we will extend our analysis along two dimensions. First, we will examine the socioeconomic characteristics of households living in integrated developments. We will compare median household income, educational attainment, and employment status for African American and white households. Were households more similar in integrated developments compared to African American or white-only developments? We will also complete this analysis by region. Did integrated developments vary by region as well as race? We will answer these questions in the full paper.

Second, we will expand our analysis beyond the head of household to include all adults living public housing as of the 1940 Census. Public housing authorities interviewed entire

families for selection in public housing, including spouses. How did educational attainment and employment status vary by race and census region for all adults? Were patterns similar to what we see when analyzing heads of households?

References

- Allen, Ryan and David Van Riper. (2018) "The New Deal, the deserving poor and the first public housing residents in New York City." Unpublished manuscript, 30 pp.
- Bloom, Nicholas Dagen. (2008) *Public Housing That Worked: New York in the Twentieth Century*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Friedman, Lawrence M. (1966) "Public housing and the poor: An overview." *California Law Review* 54 (2): 642-669.
- Fryer, Roland G. (2007) "Guess who's been coming to dinner? Trends in interracial marriage over the 20th century." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 21(2): 71-90.
- Morse, Stephen P. and Joel D. Weintraub. (2017) Unified 1940 census ED finder. <https://stevemorse.org/census/unified.html>
- Radford, Gail. (1996) *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sanborn Map Company. (1983) *Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps* [microform]. Teaneck, NJ: Chadwyck-Healy.
- Ruggles, Steven, Sarah Flood, Ronald Goeken, Josiah Grover, Erin Meyer, Jose Pacas, and Matthew Sobek. (2018) *IPUMS USA: Version 8.0* [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS. <https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V8.0>
- U.S. Census Bureau. (1943) *Census of Housing: Volume II: General Characteristics*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1940/housing-volume-2/housing-v2p1-ch1.pdf>
- U.S. Department of the Interior. (2004) *Public Housing in the United States, 1933-1949*. Washington, DC: National Park Service.
- Wrigley, Robert L. (1949) "The Sanborn Map as a source of land use information for city planning." *Land Economics* 25(2): 216-219.

Tables

Table 1. Public housing developments, housing units and households by race of development at the time of the 1940 Census

Race	Developments	Housing Units	Households	White	African American	Other
African American	21	7,262	6,949	47	6,902	0
White	37	20,757	19,618	19,476	131	11
Integrated	8	3,322	2,849	1,880	968	1
<i>Total</i>	<i>66</i>	<i>31,341</i>	<i>29,416</i>	<i>21,403</i>	<i>8,001</i>	<i>12</i>

Radford, 1996; Author's calculations of complete-count 1940 census data (Ruggles et al., 2018)

Table 2. Public housing households by race of householder

Race of Householder	Households
White	21,403
African American	8,001
American Indian or Alaska Native	2
Japanese	1
Other Asian or Pacific Islander	9
<i>Total</i>	<i>29,416</i>

Author's calculations of complete-count 1940 census data (Ruggles et al., 2018)

Table 3. Public housing developments and households by race of development by census region

Census Region	Race	Developments	Housing Units	Households	White	African American	Other
Northeast		19	13,472	12,873			
	White	13	11,482 (85.2%)	11,290	11,219	69	3
	African American	4	1,076 (8.0%)	1,072	23	1,049	0
	Integrated	2	914 (6.8%)	511	419	92	0
Midwest		18	10,240	9,454			
	White	10	5,970 (58.3%)	5,188	5,121	59	6
	African American	5	2,483 (24.2%)	2,543	21	2,522	0
	Integrated	3	1,787 (17.5%)	1,723	1,195	527	1
South		29	7,629	7,089			
	White	14	3,305 (43.3%)	3,140	3,137	3	0
	African American	12	3,703 (48.5%)	3,334	3	3,331	0
	Integrated	3	621 (8.1%)	615	266	349	0

Radford, 1996; Author's calculations of complete-count 1940 census data (Ruggles et al., 2018)

Table 4. Socioeconomic characteristics of white- and African American headed households by census region

Household Characteristics	Nationwide		Northeast		Midwest		South	
	White	African American	White	African American	White	African American	White	African American
Households (N)	20,415	8,001	10,672	1,210	6,337	3,108	3,406	3,683
Race of Householder (%)	71.8	28.2	89.8	10.2	67.1	32.9	48.0	52.0
Household income (\$, median)	1,035.0	858.0	1,000.0	1,009.0	1,115.0	900.0	918.5	780.0
Educational Attainment of Householder (%)								
No school	3.2	1.0	5.1	0.7	1.7	0.9	0.3	1.3
K - 7th grade	19.8	32.1	24.8	28.3	13.8	27.4	15.4	37.3
8th grade	29.3	21.0	34.0	25.5	29.3	21.5	14.5	19.1
High school, no degree	24.3	21.7	19.6	22.6	28.9	25.2	30.2	18.5
High school degree	15.8	13.3	10.3	12.8	18.7	14.8	27.7	12.3
More than high school	5.8	10.0	3.6	9.3	6.5	9.5	11.4	10.8
Missing	1.8	0.8	2.6	0.9	1.2	0.6	0.5	0.8
Employment Status of Householder (%)								
Employed	84.7	92.1	81.8	87.8	88.0	89.9	87.6	95.3
Unemployed	5.2	2.9	6.7	3.5	3.5	4.2	3.4	1.7
Not in labor force	10.1	5.0	11.5	8.8	8.5	5.9	8.9	3.0

Author's calculations of complete-count 1940 Census data (Ruggles et al., 2018)

Table 5. Socioeconomic characteristics of white- and African American headed households in cities with white- *and* African American-only developments

Household Characteristics	Nationwide		Northeast		Midwest		South	
	White	African American	White	African American	White	African American	White	African American
Households (N)	13,129	4,948	8,566	800	2,169	1,598	2,394	2,550
Race of Householder (%)	72.6	27.4	91.5	8.5	57.6	42.4	48.4	51.6
Household income (\$, median)	1,000.0	889.5	988.0	1,080.0	1,150.0	1,040.0	950.0	780.0
Educational Attainment of Householder (%)								
No school	4.1	1.0	6.0	0.4	1.1	0.9	0.3	1.2
K - 7th grade	22.2	34.2	25.7	24.1	14.4	30.0	16.7	40.0
8th grade	30.0	21.1	35.9	25.8	22.3	20.4	15.6	20.1
High school, no degree	22.8	21.7	18.1	24.1	32.2	24.8	31.3	18.9
High school degree	13.5	12.3	8.0	14.6	22.0	14.6	25.4	10.1
More than high school	5.3	9.1	3.5	10.5	7.1	8.7	10.1	8.8
Missing	2.1	0.7	2.8	0.5	0.9	0.6	0.7	0.9
Employment Status of Householder (%)								
Employed	82.6	92.3	80.1	86.1	87.4	91.7	87.1	94.5
Unemployed	6.4	2.5	7.9	3.1	3.3	2.8	3.9	2.2
Not in labor force	10.9	5.2	11.9	10.8	9.3	5.5	8.9	3.3

Author's calculations of complete-count 1940 Census data (Ruggles et al., 2018)

Table 6. Public housing developments at the time of the 1940 Census

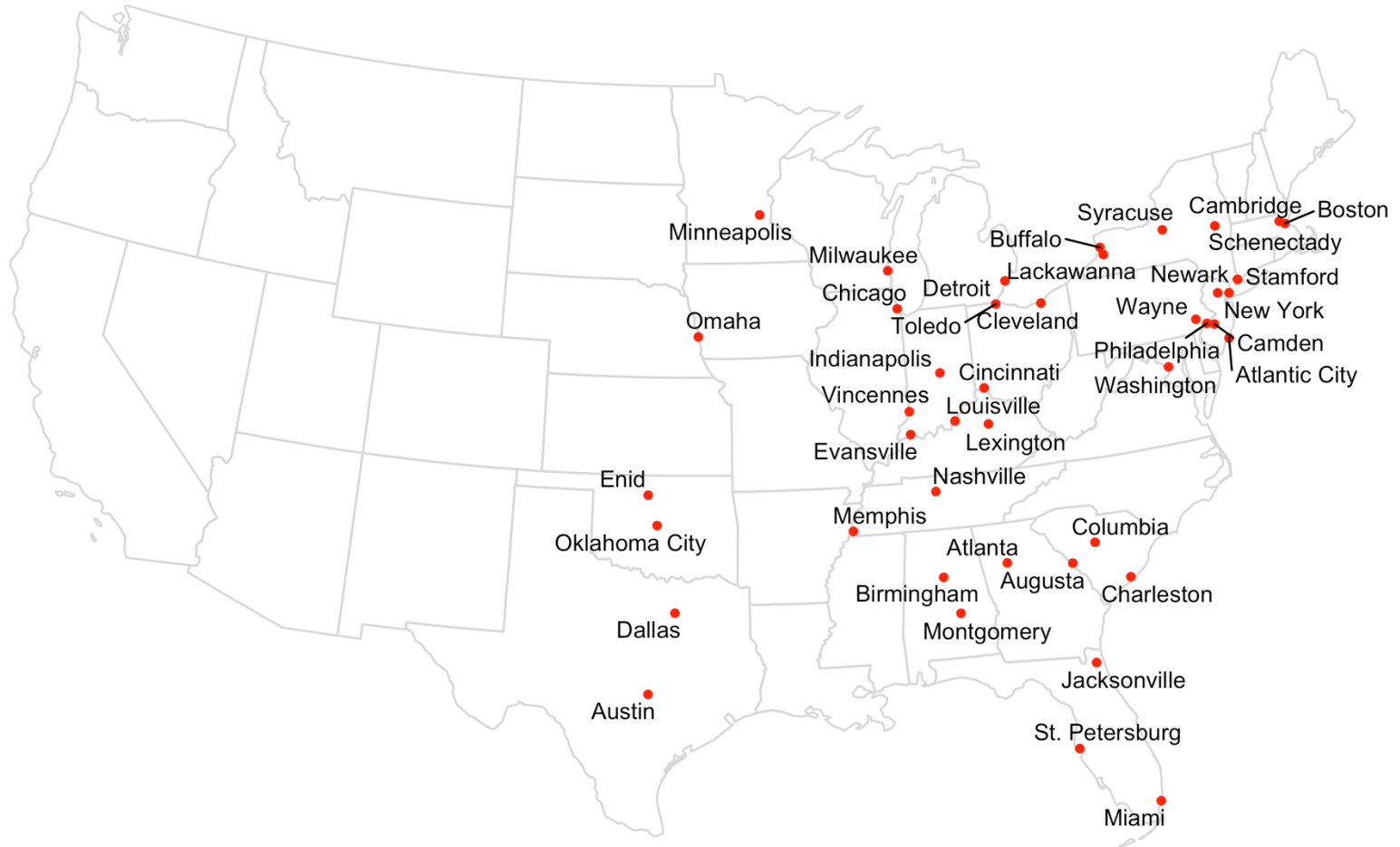
Public Housing Development	City	Program	Date Occupied	Race	Housing Units	1940 Census Households
Techwood Homes	Atlanta	PWA	8/1/1936	white	604	570
University Homes	Atlanta	PWA	4/1/1937	black	675	674
Stanley S. Holmes Village	Atlantic City	PWA	4/1/1937	black	277	276
Cherry Tree Crossing (Sunset Homes)	Augusta	USHA	3/1/1940	black	168	71
Olmstead Homes	Augusta	USHA	3/1/1940	white	167	87
Chalmers St	Austin	USHA	1/1/1940	white	87	88
Rosewood	Austin	USHA	9/1/1939	black	60	53
Santa Rita	Austin	USHA	7/1/1939	white	40	40
Smithfield Court	Birmingham	PWA	2/1/1938	black	512	502
Mary Ellen McCormack (Old Harbor Village)	Boston	PWA	5/1/1938	white	1,016	988
Red Hook	Brooklyn	USHA	7/1/1939	white	2,545	2,529
Williamsburg	Brooklyn	PWA	4/1/1938	white	1,622	1,607
A.D. Price Courts (Willert Park)	Buffalo	USHA	1/1/1940	black	173	171
Kenfield	Buffalo	PWA	10/1/1937	white	658	651
Lakeview Homes	Buffalo	USHA	12/1/1939	white	668	564
New Towne Courts	Cambridge	PWA	1/1/1938	white	294	274
Westfield Acres	Camden	PWA	5/1/1938	white	514	513
Meeting St Manor	Charleston	PWA	8/1/1937	both	212	210
Robert Mills Manor	Charleston	USHA	11/1/1939	white	140	140

Public Housing Development	City	Program	Date Occupied	Race	Housing Units	1940 Census Households
Jane Addams Houses	Chicago	PWA	12/1/1938	white	1,027	936
Julia C. Lathrop Homes	Chicago	PWA	2/1/1938	white	925	921
Trumbull Park Homes	Chicago	PWA	2/1/1938	white	462	457
Laurel Homes	Cincinnati	PWA	8/1/1938	both	1,039	978
Lakeview Terrace	Cleveland	PWA	10/1/1937	white	620	559
Olde Cedar Apartments (Cedar-Central Apartments)	Cleveland	PWA	8/1/1937	white	654	560
Outhwaite Homes	Cleveland	PWA	8/1/1937	black	579	572
University Terrace	Columbia	PWA	8/1/1937	both	122	122
Cedar Springs Place	Dallas	PWA	10/1/1937	white	181	179
Brewster	Detroit	PWA	10/1/1938	black	701	779
Parkside	Detroit	PWA	10/1/1938	white	775	767
Cherokee Terrace	Enid	PWA	6/1/1938	white	80	80
Lincoln Gardens	Evansville	PWA	7/1/1938	black	191	191
Lockefield Garden Apartments	Indianapolis	PWA	8/1/1938	black	748	742
Brentwood Park	Jacksonville	USHA	11/1/1939	white	234	228
Durkeeville	Jacksonville	PWA	6/1/1937	black	215	207
Baker Homes	Lackawanna	PWA	7/1/1938	white	271	271
Bluegrass Park & Aspendale	Lexington	PWA	1/1/1938	both	287	283
Queensbridge Houses	Long Island City	USHA	10/1/1939	white	3,148	3,149
College Court	Louisville	PWA	1/1/1938	black	125	123

Public Housing Development	City	Program	Date Occupied	Race	Housing Units	1940 Census Households
Lasalle Place	Louisville	PWA	1/1/1938	white	210	210
Dixie Homes	Memphis	PWA	2/1/1938	black	636	652
Lauderdale Cts	Memphis	PWA	2/1/1938	white	449	445
Edison Courts	Miami	USHA	3/1/1940	white	345	321
Liberty Square	Miami	PWA	2/1/1937	black	242	242
Parklawn	Milwaukee	PWA	6/1/1937	white	518	510
Sumner Field Homes	Minneapolis	PWA	12/1/1938	both	464	461
Riverside Heights	Montgomery	PWA	6/1/1937	white	100	94
William B. Paterson Court	Montgomery	PWA	2/1/1937	black	156	154
Andrew Jackson Cts	Nashville	PWA	6/1/1938	black	398	373
Cheatham Place	Nashville	PWA	2/1/1938	white	314	312
First Houses	New York	PWA	5/1/1936	white	123	122
Harlem River Houses	New York	PWA	10/1/1937	black	576	576
Pennington Court	Newark	USHA	3/1/1940	both	236	187
Will Rogers Courts	Oklahoma City	PWA	12/1/1937	white	354	346
Logan Fontenelle	Omaha	PWA	8/1/1936	both	284	284
Southside Terrace Homes	Omaha	USHA	4/1/1940	white	522	155
Hill Creek	Philadelphia	PWA	3/1/1938	white	258	257
Schonowee Village	Schenectady	PWA	7/1/1938	white	219	219
Jordan Park	St. Petersburg	USHA	4/1/1940	black	242	12
Fairfield Court (Fairgate)	Stamford	PWA	9/1/1937	white	146	146

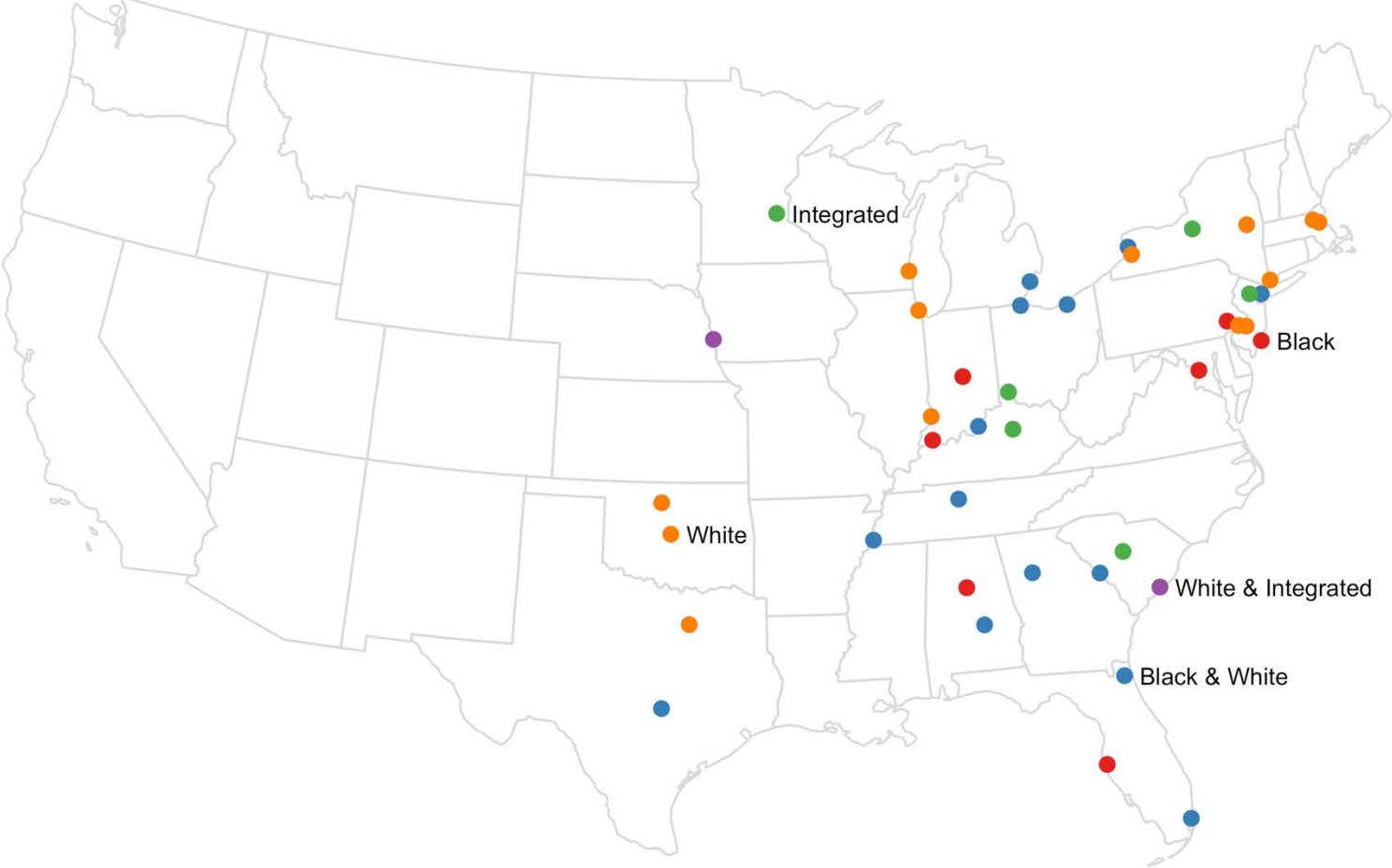
Public Housing Development	City	Program	Date Occupied	Race	Housing Units	1940 Census Households
Pioneer Homes	Syracuse	USHA	2/1/1940	both	678	324
Brand Whitlock Homes	Toledo	PWA	3/1/1938	black	264	259
Charles F. Weiler Homes	Toledo	USHA	3/1/1940	white	384	271
Major Bowman Terrace	Vincennes	USHA	4/1/1940	white	83	52
Langston Terrace	Washington	PWA	5/1/1938	black	274	271
Highland Homes	Wayne	PWA	3/1/1938	black	50	49

Figure 1. Cities with public housing developments as of the 1940 Census



Source: Radford 1996; U.S. Department of the Interior, 2004

Figure 2. Public housing developments by race of development



Source: Radford, 1996; U.S. Department of the Interior, 2004

Figure 3. Census regions

