PUBLIC HOUSING IN CHARLOTTESVILLE:  
THE BLACK EXPERIENCE IN A  
SMALL SOUTHERN CITY

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The history and public policies related to the public housing program are presented within the context of a small southern city, Charlottesville, Virginia. Consistent with the stormy beginnings of public housing nationally, the article reveals that the early days of the program in Charlottesville also were troubled. City policies to affect the residential mix of housing are shown to have limited the quality of affordable housing available to the poor and especially to low-income blacks. Programs designed by the city to overcome some of these disadvantages through both home ownership and renting also are discussed.

This article reviews the publicly assisted housing programs in Charlottesville, Virginia and describes the factors of race, income and public policy that are determinants of housing opportunities for the poor in this southern city. Of special concern are the impacts of public housing on the black community and, to ascertain these impacts, the study focuses on the actions of the Charlottesville Redevelopment and Housing Authority (CRHA). The article concludes with a summary of recommendations for the improvement of current policies related to public housing in the city.

HISTORY OF CHARLOTTESVILLE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF ITS RESIDENTS

Charlottesville is located in Albemarle County in central Virginia, amid the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Its picturesque beauty and social history have helped to create a city of diverse neighborhoods and southern culture.
A major influence on Charlottesville has been the University of Virginia. Thomas Jefferson located his "academical village," which opened in 1825, one mile west of Charlottesville. Today, with the city nearly surrounding the university, the institution is more than ever a major part of the city's economy, history, and culture.

In 1870 blacks comprised slightly more than the majority of the population of the city. Currently they make up nearly twenty percent of the city's approximately 40,000 residents, but include nearly one half of all families living below the poverty level. The incidence of female-headed families is nearly three times as great (44% v. 15%) among blacks as among whites. Similar to the national average, blacks are twice as likely to be unemployed as whites. Most employed blacks are concentrated in service occupations (38%) and are underrepresented in professional (7%) and administrative (8%) positions. In 1980 one quarter of all employed blacks earned less than $5,000; only 3 percent reported income of $35,000 to $50,000. While only 9 percent of blacks have completed four years or more of college, whites have a completion rate of 35 percent.

HOUSING POLICY IN CHARLOTTESVILLE SINCE 1950

In 1950, the Joint Board of Health conducted a housing survey which, along with a follow-up survey in 1957, identified housing in critical need of protection and rehabilitation. In order to respond to the housing needs, the Charlottesville Redevelopment and Housing Authority (CRHA) was established in 1954 by referendum. The objectives of the CRHA were to clear slum and blighted areas and to operate public housing programs. The Authority consisted of five citizen commissioners appointed by the city council. This was changed in 1978, when the city council appointed itself as commissioners of the Authority. At that time, the city manager was appointed executive director, with the daily operations of the Authority managed by a deputy executive director hired by the commissioners.

On March 11, 1960, the city council received an application by the CRHA under amendment 14A: Title 36 VA Code 1950.1 (This section, referred to as the McCue amendment, required a referendum vote on public housing projects; it was overturned in 1971.) The application called for the redevelopment of the Vinegar Hill area and the construction of public housing on Ridge Street and Hartman's Mill Road. The purpose of the project was to clear a substandard area for several reasons—to