



CENTER FOR
PUBLIC JUSTICE

HATFIELD PRIZE 2026

- “Doing Better by Our Boys”:
Lessons from Chicago to Advance the
Flourishing of Boys and Young Men

Jonathan Porteous | Wheaton College

- Refocusing the Priorities of
Affordable Rental Housing: Investing
in Quality and Child Well-being

Emma Scott | Gordon College

- Walking Alongside: Institutional
Partnership and Transitional Housing
in Chattanooga

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About the Hatfield Prize



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The Hatfield Prize is awarded annually to three student-faculty pairs at a four-year college or university. Recipients conduct research on social policies that impact vulnerable children, families, and communities, and explore the impact of these policies in their local communities. This semester-long research project culminates in three policy reports that make recommendations for both government and civil society institutions in contributing to policies that promote flourishing communities.

The Hatfield Prize is named in honor of the late Senator Mark O. Hatfield, who served as a United States senator from Oregon for three decades, and was known for his principled Christian faith and for his commitment to working across differences to find common ground.



CENTER FOR
PUBLIC JUSTICE

The Center for Public Justice (CPJ) is a nonpartisan, Christian, civic education and policy organization based in Alexandria, VA. Working outside the familiar categories of right and left, conservative and liberal, we seek to help citizens and public officeholders respond to God's call to do justice. Our mission is to serve God by equipping citizens, developing leaders, and shaping policy to advance justice for the transformation of public life.

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Hearts for our neighbor, hands caked with the soil of common ground: such describes those who draw up weeds of injustice and sow seeds of peace. Stories of these kinds of people are the heart of the Hatfield Prize.

Page through this booklet to explore three social policies from a Christian perspective. Three student-faculty pairs conducted research on policies that impact vulnerable children, families, and communities. They provide a comprehensive look at the work for justice in a local community: from tackling transitional homelessness in Chattanooga, TN, to addressing affordable housing quality in Massachusetts, to supporting boys and men of color in Chicago, IL.

Each report includes three sections:

DISCOVER

Introduces a specific U.S. social policy and examines its impact on individuals, families, and communities, as well as the current federal response to the issue.

FRAME

Articulates the normative Christian principles that support the social safety net, considers the unique responsibilities and contributions of government and civil society institutions, and makes concrete recommendations.

ENGAGE

Tells the stories of impacted individuals and communities. This section features original reporting by the student-faculty pairs in Chattanooga, TN, Salem and Lynn, MA, and Chicago, IL.

Each report details the stories of both individuals and institutions who press into the challenges faced by their communities and find solutions for the sake of the vulnerable. These reports paint beautiful portraits of collaboration for public justice in local communities.

We would like to thank authors, Michael Mawhinney and Margot Kapic, Emma Scott, and Jonathan Porteous for their diligence in researching, writing, and editing their reports. Thank you to faculty advisors Lance Wescher, Ivy George, and Brian Howell for the guidance and direction they provided these students. Thank you all for illuminating public justice policy solutions.

Thank you, our community, for giving your attention to these reports and learning more about the issues therein. We each have our own plot to till, drawing up weeds of injustice and sowing seeds of peace. We hope the stories in the Hatfield Prize encourage you to get your hands dirty in your own backyard, in your neighborhood, and in your city.



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“Doing Better by Our Boys”:

Lessons from Chicago to Advance the Flourishing of Boys and Young Men

Research Question:

What approaches are organizational and institutional networks on Chicago’s South Side using to support the vocational and educational formation of boys and young men, how effective are these efforts, and what policy gaps or disparities affect positive prosocial development?

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Discover

In the summer of 2025, former President Barack Obama joined his wife Michelle and his brother-in-law Craig Robinson for an episode of their podcast “IMO.” The trio spent much of the conversation discussing boys and men, commenting on everything from male friendship, fatherhood, and raising sons to questions of education, work, and purpose. “We rightly have tried to invest in girls,” the former president said at one point, “but we haven’t been as willing, I think, to be intentional about investing in the boys. And that’s been a mistake... We gotta do better by our boys.”¹

Why does Obama say we must do better by our boys? What challenges do boys face that demand “intentional investment”? Why do boys and men deserve attention when significant inequities affecting girls and women persist? Unequivocally, efforts to support girls and women remain crucial and should continue. At the same time, a growing body of research suggests that boys and men in the United States face a variety of challenges, many of which manifest in gender-specific ways and are shaped by intersectional factors. These challenges are particularly visible in the areas of education, health, work, and social integration.² If we are to promote the flourishing of our society, we must work to support boys and men alongside women and girls. Together, flourishing is more in reach for all.

This report looks specifically to Chicago for insight into existing local-level responses to these challenges and for suggestions regarding the ways in which government and civil society could best collaborate to advance the flourishing of boys and young men in Chicago and beyond. By connecting a brief overview of the state of boys and men in the United States today with normative framing and local research, this report aims to put longstanding efforts in Chicago to support young

men, particularly young men of color, in productive conversation with the growing national discussion around boys and men.

Throughout this report, the term *young men* refers broadly to everyone from early adolescent boys to men in their twenties. This allows for a more holistic appraisal of the diverse ways and time frames in which boys and young men develop and grow into their role as adults in society. Many of the organizations and individuals featured later cater particularly to boys and young men in high school and their early twenties, and the report reflects this focus to some degree. To work within the constraints of available data and provide a larger context in which to understand the world boys live in, the report also at times draws on research that examines boys and men more broadly.

Boys and Men: A National Statistical Snapshot

A growing body of research highlights the interconnected challenges affecting boys and men in the United States, especially visible in the areas of health and mental health, education, and work and employment. Researchers are also increasingly scrutinizing the effects of new online spaces and technologies. Across all these areas, important questions surrounding purpose and social integration shape the lives of boys and men.

Several headline statistics illustrate the scope of these concerns. In the United States, men are four times more likely than women to die by suicide. Since 2010, suicide rates among boys and men between the ages of 5 and 24 have risen by 26%, and by 30% among men ages 25 to 34.³ In 2021, men accounted for only 42% of the country’s total undergraduate enrollment,⁴ and “one in ten men aged 20 to 24 is effectively doing nothing—neither enrolled in school nor working.”⁵ Many of these trends are particularly significant among men of lower socioeconomic status, and, notably, among men of color, particularly Black boys and men.⁶ Yet despite these struggles, many men feel like nobody is paying attention: in 2025, 69% of male respondents between the ages of 18 and 24 in a national survey conducted by Equimundo agreed with the statement, “No one cares if men are okay.”⁷

Broader health outcomes reveal further disparities. In addition to elevated suicide rates, men experience higher rates of a broader phenomenon that scholars Anne Case and Angus Deaton describe as “deaths of despair,”⁸ which also includes fatalities related to drug overdoses and alcohol use.⁹ Men account for 71% of deaths due to opioid addiction in the United States.¹⁰ Despite high rates of such deaths, and what has been referred to as a nationwide epidemic of loneliness for both men and women,¹¹

men are less likely than women to access mental health care—by ten percentage points.¹²

In 2021, men's life expectancy was nearly six years shorter than women's, compared to a gap of only about five years in 2010.¹³ As the authors of Movember's 2025 U.S. *The Real Face of Men's Health* report say, "Factors such as workplace exposures, violence, health behaviors, access to care, social norms, and chronic stress all contribute [to this gap], and these are shaped by policy choices, economic conditions, systemic inequalities, and cultural expectations, not just genetics."¹⁴ Heart disease and cancer continue to be the leading causes of death in the United States, with "accidents, intentional injuries, and drug overdoses" a significant third cause of death.¹⁵

Young men feel some of these challenges acutely: men between the ages of 15 to 24 make up 73% of total deaths for both men and women in that specific age bracket; for individuals 25 to 34 years old, that figure is 70%.¹⁶ Boys and young men also face significantly higher mortality rates due to violence: among those ages 15 to 20, homicide is the leading cause of death, occurring at almost 700% the rate for women.¹⁷

In education, boys and young men are in general falling behind at multiple stages, from elementary school through college. Boys are less prepared to start school,¹⁸ more likely to drop out of high school,¹⁹ and consistently receive worse grades during high school.²⁰ Boys are notably behind girls in literacy rates across the world.²¹ They are three times more likely than girls to be expelled during their K-12 career.²² Fewer men than women enroll in college, more drop out, and fewer graduate.²³ The years-long decline of technical and vocational education opportunities has also affected boys disproportionately, taking away access to career-ready skills and better-paying jobs.²⁴

Although it is difficult to draw direct lines of causation, various scholars have highlighted a range of possible underlying factors. These include a lack of male teachers in classrooms, the unique interaction of school discipline with the criminal justice system, not enough early intervention or individual attention, and a failure on the part of many educational institutions to seem relevant to students' lives in meaningful ways beyond their walls and into students' futures.

In the labor market, many men are also struggling. As of December 2025, over seven million prime-age men (ages 25 to 54) were classified as Not in the Labor Force (NILF), meaning they were neither employed nor seeking employment.²⁵ The overall gender pay gap favoring men in the United States persists, with the median woman earning 82% of the median salary

for men.²⁶ As researchers have demonstrated, however, this pay gap has too frequently masked the fact that "lower down the economic ladder, it is often the men who are struggling."²⁷ As labor markets have evolved over the last decades, many men of low socioeconomic status have been hit particularly hard. Men without college degrees, for example, have seen only a 3% rise in median earnings since 1979,²⁸ meaning that real wages for this group have effectively been falling since the 1970s.²⁹

A newer area of concern, particularly for boys and younger men, is the influence of fast evolving online spaces. Social media, online gambling,³⁰ video gaming, pornography,³¹ and associated addictions increasingly shape patterns of attention, behavior, and mental health.³² Sectors like online gambling are rapidly developing and are not well regulated. Jonathan Haidt, author of the bestselling 2024 book *The Anxious Generation*, warns that "the virtual world is becoming ever more immersive and addictive. Every year it will pull harder and harder on boys, urging them to abandon the real world."³³

A newer area of concern, particularly for boys and younger men, is the influence of fast evolving online spaces.

Many of these struggles are particularly acute for Black boys and men. In a cultural context that often labels Black boys and men as perennially "left behind" in damaging and limiting ways,³⁴ these challenges are exacerbated by the potent "combination of racism and sexism faced by Black men"³⁵ which fuels stereotyped narratives of violence and fear. Black boys score far lower on reading proficiency tests across their school careers compared to their White peers,³⁶ are more likely to drop out of high school,³⁷ and are far less likely to attend and graduate from college than Black women. Only 35% of bachelor's degrees awarded to Black students go to men.³⁸ The interrelation of educational policies resulting in suspension and expulsion with the juvenile justice system also poses a significant challenge for many Black young men, contributing to their disproportionate representation in the U.S. crisis of mass incarceration, which weakens communities and limits opportunities for individuals after release.³⁹ Post schooling, Black men earn only about 75% as much as their White counterparts. Their life expectancy is, on average, almost 4.5 years shorter than that of White men.⁴⁰

For men of all races, these challenges in education, health, and work take place in a broader cultural landscape which informs men's understanding of themselves and their place in society. That landscape is shifting in important ways, and at least some boys and men have been left with significant questions surrounding social integration, gender roles and equality, and more. According to a recent report from the Sutherland Institute, 36% of men surveyed across the U.S. at least somewhat agreed with the statement "I am struggling to understand my place in my community or in broader society."⁴¹ To understand these complex questions and how they are experienced by boys and young men, it is important to briefly look to the past for a better understanding of the contexts out of which these challenges have developed.

A Hundred-Year-Old 'Boy Problem'

While some of the challenges highlighted earlier are unique in their specific manifestations, concerns about the development of boys and their advancement into manhood are nothing new. At the turn of the twentieth century, Americans were preoccupied with what was then known as "the boy problem."⁴² Rapid urbanization, alongside changing structures of family and work, led many people across socioeconomic statuses to worry that boys were not maturing in healthy ways. Particular concerns were voiced regarding crowds of poor, uneducated boys in urban contexts; in the early 1900s these groups were often largely made up of immigrant youth. With changing migration patterns in cities like Chicago, many of the groups of young men characterized as a "peril to society" shifted over time to include many Black youth.⁴³ These concerns coincided with developing ideas around childhood, adolescence, and specifically boyhood, reflected in works such as psychologist Stanley Hall's *Adolescence* (1904) and William Byron Forbush's *The Boy Problem* (1901).

These new theories and developments led to a variety of responses shaped by the ideals of the Progressive Era—in all their complexities—while also at times harkening back to a nostalgic imagination of a simpler past. Many elites were concerned that their boys were failing to receive a proper education while also lacking necessary outlets for 'boyhood' in the midst of urban life and what was sometimes described as a feminization of childhood.⁴⁴ Responses to these concerns took a variety of institutional shapes and were especially visible in the elite summer camp movement which began in the 1880s. For more middle-class boys and their families, the YMCA, the fledgling Boy Scouts, fast-growing organized athletics, and the rise of 'muscular Christianity' all sought to assuage similar concerns about boys and their development.

These organizations and movements intended most of all to "produce respectable men."⁴⁵

More systematic, government-led reforms were aimed at poor, urban boys, including the expansion of compulsory schooling, reformatories, special schools, and a variety of other institutions; many of these were inconsistently regulated by the state. Although many of these reforms failed in their implementation and reports of abuse were widespread, some of these institutions truly sought to work for the betterment of boys. Others certainly did not and at times embodied everything from eugenic sensibilities to damaging ideas of race and class. Around this time, the juvenile justice system also began to take shape and interacted with these other new institutions in complex ways. New policies related to school attendance and truancy added to the likelihood of interaction with the justice system.⁴⁶

At the turn of the twentieth century, Americans were preoccupied with what was then known as "the boy problem."

Policy initiatives and state-sponsored efforts were not the only responses to the needs of urban boys, however. Mirroring the rise of groups like the Boy Scouts, organizations like Big Brothers, settlement houses, boys clubs, and sports teams all sought to support these young men by offering them access to relational networks and attempting to connect them with better education and opportunities.

The large-scale civic response to the turn-of-the-century 'boy problem' deeply shaped America,⁴⁷ as did governmental interventions. Over time, however, many of these structures declined in influence, and their long-term effectiveness has been widely debated.⁴⁸ Even so, this historical moment offers valuable context for understanding both the persistence of concern about boys and young men and the variety of actors engaging with young men in the United States today.

What's Being Done? Cultural Conversations, Nascent Policy, and Other Institutional Responses

Cultural Conversations

Efforts to address the challenges faced by boys and men must often navigate tense cultural conversations surrounding gender and gender roles. Discussions around toxic masculinity, the manosphere, and the changing shape of fatherhood have all been common across a variety of public and private forums. The manosphere⁴⁹—a word used to describe an informal online network of influencers, some of whom promote misogynistic and otherwise socially unconstructive views—has recently been a lightning rod for tense conversations around boys and men.⁵⁰ In general, the discourse around the proper roles of boys and men, and men's relationships with women, has often been wrapped up in various culture war rhetoric and become fraught, partisan, and unproductive.

In recent years, however, a discursive shift has begun to emerge. Across partisan and religious lines, a growing body of people, including politicians, educators, researchers, parents, and many others, have sought to articulate and advocate for a more positive, responsible, and prosocial vision of what it means to be a man or boy in America today. This vision allows for a more careful appraisal of the issues which face boys and men while also emphasizing that support for boys and men must occur alongside support for girls and women, and for all of society. The 2022 publication of the book *Of Boys and Men* marked an important turning point in this conversation. Written by then Brookings Institute fellow and now president of the American Society for Boys and Men (AIBM) Richard Reeves, the book helped to open up space for productive dialogue and action. These developments have contributed to a greater awareness of the need to support boys and men and begin the process of better understanding how that could be done in a variety of ways, including through governmental action.

Institutional Responses

But people have done more than just talk about boys and men; government, particularly at the state and local levels, has been active in addressing these concerns, as has civil society. At the federal level, there has not yet been a comprehensive policy response specifically designed to address the challenges faced by men and boys across the country,⁵¹ although a proposed bipartisan bill—the State of Men's Health Act—would, if passed, change that to a certain degree. This legislation would support federal research on men's health, focusing on shorter life expectancies and mental health, and establish a Men's

Health Office.⁵² Many other existing federal policies and governmental actions also directly affect boys and young men: educational policies and funding, workforce development programs, technical education, and apprenticeships programs, for example, play important roles.⁵³

One notable example of explicit federal action is the U.S. Commission on the Social Status of Black Men and Boys,⁵⁴ established by Congress in August 2020.⁵⁵ The Commission was created to “conduct a systematic study of the conditions affecting Black men and boys, including homicide rates, arrest and incarceration rates, poverty, violence, fatherhood, mentorship, drug abuse, death rates, disparate income and wealth levels, school performance in all grade levels including postsecondary education and college, and health issues.”⁵⁶ The Commission is notable for its holistic focus on advancing the well-being of Black boys and men and its recognition of the unique challenges they face.

Governments at the state level have been more active than the federal government in responding to the challenges faced by boys and men. As of March 2026, five states—Utah,⁵⁷ California, Maryland, Michigan,⁵⁸ and Virginia—have taken various actions directly related to the issues faced by boys and men, with other states discussing or considering similar action.

In all these states but Virginia, governors have led the way through executive action.⁵⁹ These state-level directives have highlighted the need to recognize the unique challenges faced by boys and men and directed resources toward service and workforce programs, initiatives aimed at increasing percentages of male teachers, and more. Governor Wes Moore of Maryland, for example, has been working to meet the needs of boys and men through a service year program,⁶⁰ educational policy shifts, and the procurement of grant funding for programs that work with men and boys.⁶¹ In his 2025 State of the State address, he said that “I will be directing my entire administration to begin implementing targeted solutions to uplift our men and boys.”⁶² In December 2025, Moore launched an initiative to strengthen Maryland's teacher network to advance “work to support young men and boys by fostering opportunities for mentorship as well as social and emotional development in the classroom.”⁶³ Governor Gavin Newsom of California took similar executive action in 2025, highlighting “the particularly urgent need to confront California's growing crisis of opportunity for men and boys”⁶⁴ and announcing a Men's Service Challenge which is asking 10,000 men across the state to step into service, volunteer, and mentorship roles.⁶⁵ Virginia, meanwhile, made history in March 2026 as the first state to pass legislation directly aimed at supporting boys and men, establishing the Virginia Boys and Men Advisory Commission with significant

bipartisan support;⁶⁶ this bill was later signed into law by Governor Abigail Spanberger. The Commission will “advise the General Assembly regarding the following issues as such issues relate to boys and men in the Commonwealth: education inequity, economic opportunities, disparity in health outcomes, family life, and the impact of social media use” and conduct research and present recommendations.⁶⁷ State-led initiatives such as these transcend party lines and highlight a growing recognition across the country to explicitly seek to advance the flourishing of boys and men.

Two city-led initiatives also stand out for their focus on the particular challenges faced by Black boys and men. In 2021, the Boston, MA City Council established a Commission on Black Boys and Men to fulfill the city’s “obligation to continue the work of uplifting the lived experiences of Black men and boys to ensure that we are designing all spaces from a framework of equity and justice.”⁶⁸ Across the country in Birmingham, Alabama, the recently launched “Black Male Initiative” offers “a community-driven strategy focused on improving outcomes for Black boys and men by addressing root causes—not just symptoms—of disconnection and harm.”⁶⁹ Beyond these more explicit initiatives, all local municipalities interact with boys and men through, to name just a few, school policies, work and service programs, and funding allotments. In cities like Chicago, many of these programs depend on collaboration with a variety of civic institutions, often community-based.

State-led initiatives such as these transcend party lines and highlight a growing recognition across the country to explicitly seek to advance the flourishing of boys and men.

In addition to governmental action, a primary way of addressing the needs of young men across the country is through local civic institutions and efforts, whether in the contexts of families, blocks, neighborhoods, faith communities, or other organizations. These efforts often aim to reconnect men with rich relational networks and to prepare them for responsible, gainfully employed adulthood. The Engage section of this report looks more closely at the specific local institutional ecosystem that has developed to work with men and boys in Chicago; this example is instructive in understanding the work of similar organizations across the country.

Toward a Response

While concerns about the development of boys and young men are not a new phenomenon, a unique landscape of responses is taking shape today. This diversity of responses underlines the ways in which the challenges faced by young men in the areas of education, work, health, and social integration can be understood as a network of strained or distorted relationships requiring sustained attention to the specific challenges and disparities facing boys and men. Distorted relationships such as these are characterized by injustice and call out for action. We will have to set about working to mend these strained relationships if we truly are to “do better by our boys.”

Frame

Finding a Shared Framework

All young people, including young men, deserve a responsible, connected vision for their role in society and access to practical and reliable educational and vocational pathways. As a society which ideally hopes to promote the flourishing of all its members, however, we cannot ignore the fact that this vision and these pathways are not a reality for all young men. Many are struggling. All of society—including families, government, civil society, schools, and faith communities—has a role to play in efforts to advance the flourishing of boys and young men.

Working toward flourishing in both a pluralistic and polarized national context, however, is often messy and difficult. How can individuals and institutions articulate and work toward a shared vision of flourishing while constructively collaborating across lines of difference? There are no easy answers here. A vision of public justice, however, offers a constructive emphasis on the shared responsibility of a variety of institutions across families, government, and civil society to support young men while also recognizing these institutions’ distinct roles and the diverse, communally formed responsibilities of individuals. Central to this vision is the framework of principled pluralism, which holds that the “state is one institutional community among others in society” and emphasizes government’s role in protecting and ensuring equitable relations between the diversity of both institutions and beliefs present in “public and private life.”⁷¹

In this pluralistic manner, public justice effectively requires that we acknowledge and work from our own personal convictions. Why should people of faith, specifically Christians, care about advancing the flourishing of boys and men? Christian faith demands that we pursue justice, which necessitates both caring and acting on that care where possible. A biblical conception of justice has much to offer Christians working to address the challenges facing boys and young men.

Biblical Justice and a Flourishing Society

The call to justice conveyed in Christian Scripture² is grounded in the story of God and God's work in the world;³ Christian social efforts grow out of that call and story. In answering that call, however, Christians can often overlook a key element of justice: the necessity of describing the world around us well through the lens of God's work. The call to justice—to what *should be*—involves careful attention to what *is*. Justice is, in one sense, a right and truthful naming and telling of reality which brings to light that which has been hidden and untangles that which has been obscured. While this aspect of justice ultimately finds meaning in God's final, truthful telling of the human story,⁴ Christians must nonetheless work to do justice now, in the now-and-not-yet of God's kingdom, by seeking to describe reality well—with concrete implications for action.

Working toward a just society, Christians should highlight what is good while naming the ways our current context falls short of the biblical vision of *shalom*, or "flourishing in all dimensions of our existence."⁵ When reality is described truthfully in this way, the distance between what is and what God intends becomes impossible to ignore. Many boys and young men are experiencing something far short of the flourishing God desires for them. Naming that gap honestly is itself an act of justice, and the necessary first step toward addressing it.

This process of attentive description requires thoughtful engagement with the complex discourse around young men, a discourse which, although in some ways improving, still cries out for careful, constructive engagement. Such engagement is a collaborative effort. In conversation across lines of difference with academics and policymakers, with teachers and parents, and with government and a variety of secular and faith-based organizations, Christians can better understand the real nature of the challenges facing young men.

Describing reality well also requires attentive listening. To properly understand what is actually happening with boys and young men, we need to listen to young men themselves and the people who walk alongside them on a daily basis, such as local practitioners and teachers.

Intentional listening is especially important in often-stereotyped contexts like Chicago.

In seeking to describe reality well, the distance between what is and God's vision of *shalom* becomes apparent. This awareness allows for an informed pursuit of reconciled relationships and an active affirmation of the dignity of every human being. The complex challenges facing boys and men often grow out of a web of distorted relationships which lead to a lack of flourishing that takes many forms. Some forms are more visible, such as high unemployment, the prevalence of violence, unjust incarceration, or limited access to quality education. Others, like depression and detachment from relationships and responsibilities, are harder to see but no less real. Whether more easily visible or not, however, this absence of flourishing is experienced relationally. Christians, then, are not called to simply uplift individuals. Rather, real flourishing occurs when we work to form society into a place that allows us to be more human in relationship with others; this includes learning to live well into our creational diversity as gendered beings.

Flourishing communities uphold the true dignity of each human being. As the focus of this section shifts to the various institutions which intersect with the lives of boys and young men and what their roles are or could best be, that emphasis on human dignity in the context of societal relationships must remain central. Sustained, local service cannot succeed unless it centers that dignity and works toward a flourishing society, particularly as it relates to boys and young men.

Public Justice: Diverse Institutions, Diverse Yet Shared Responsibilities

Many institutions have crucial roles to play in the lives of young men. The pluralistic framework of public justice emphasizes the various areas of responsibility these institutions inhabit, underlining the importance of protecting the diversity of institutions and their various beliefs while also fostering collaboration. This collaboration takes place, however, in complex contexts. Recommendations for action, then, must recognize that tradeoffs are real and that no perfect policies exist. Focusing especially on the local interplay of families, communities, government, and civil society, this section offers limited recommendations which grow out of the lived experiences and expertise of local residents and practitioners in Chicago.

Family and Local Community

Perhaps the most foundational institution in young men's lives is the family.⁶ As James Skillen writes, "Child development begins for the newborn in the all-embracing social context of the family, and then, in our kind of society, gradually widens out to the differentiated world of institutions and relationships that a child experiences as he or she matures."⁷ Every family has its own complex identity, and family ties, however fraught, extend across generations. Regardless of specific structure, healthy families "help nurture future citizens, prepare future employers and employees, decrease public costs resulting from fragmented families, and build up strong social and cultural capital."⁸

Family structures today are evolving, and many familial relationships face strain or instability.⁹ Without simplistically blaming dysfunctional families for the struggles young men face, a response that can get in the way of other necessary interventions, it remains important to acknowledge the ways unstable family contexts can contribute to a lack of flourishing, and to keep the family's centrality in view while protecting the diversity of families and their beliefs.

Young men and their families also live somewhere, and flourishing happens in particular places. The local, organic communities surrounding young men, such as city blocks and neighborhoods, function as important institutions even when not formally recognized as such. Neighborhoods marked by violence, distrust, or simple disconnection pose real obstacles to flourishing, while neighborhoods marked by care and shared responsibility support it. Families, blocks, and neighborhoods all bear a responsibility of neighborly care and love that must include young men. Interventions aimed at supporting them should be developed with and for these hyperlocal contexts rather than imposed on them.

Government

Beyond the family and the neighborhoods that surround it, government has its own distinct responsibility to young men. In a pluralistic society, government is a constituting institution which "bears responsibility to legislate, enforce, and adjudicate public laws for the safety, welfare, and public order of everyone within its jurisdiction."¹⁰ Government should protect the diversity of institutions and beliefs present in society, ensure equitable relations between them, and work with them to maintain the conditions which allow for flourishing. In this way, government has a crucial role in addressing the distorted webs of relationships in which many young men are entangled.

At the federal level, little explicit action has been aimed at supporting young men. This gap leaves open a wide range of opportunities for thoughtful involvement. The federal government should consider and research the challenges facing boys and men, redress structural inequities, and prevent harm to young men through regulatory guardrails. Specifically, this could involve everything from comprehensive juvenile justice reform¹¹ to better regulation of fast-evolving sectors like sports betting.¹² The federal government should additionally continue to recognize that intersectional factors must be considered, researched, and addressed. Black young men face particular challenges, amplified by their context, which need specific and particular attention.¹³ Across the country, ongoing conversations and research continue to offer a variety of new, constructive directions for federal policy which take these factors into account, although they are not the focus here.¹⁴

State and local governments have been more active recently in working to support young men.¹⁵ These efforts, in places like California and Virginia, provide helpful examples for policymakers and leaders across the country to consider. The current context of marked instability in regard to federal funding and programs¹⁶ presents an opportunity for state and local governments to continue to work with the communities they govern to build more sustainable and effective social support networks. This offers a chance for the development of social infrastructure that would equitably support young men through robust government and civil society partnerships. This social infrastructure could consist of everything from accessible mentoring services and coordinated community violence intervention (CVI) networks to service opportunities and entry-level career pathways. In this setting, government has the responsibility to ensure equitable funding and support and to fulfill a coordinating role, ensuring communication and collaboration between a variety of locally engaged organizations which work with young men. What this looks like in daily practice in Chicago is shown in the Engage section of this report.

Civil Society

The development of more robust social infrastructure for young men depends on the participation of the diverse institutions that constitute civil society. Civil society is an "arena of un-coerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values"¹⁷ encompassing a broad "array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations."¹⁸ It is important, however, to avoid drawing hard lines around civil society as a mediating "third sector." Civil institutions participate in public life alongside government and business, and represent one of the many holistic ways in which human beings take up and inhabit a range of

responsibilities and talents, developing their own unique identities even in collaborative work for the common good.¹⁹

Local nonprofits, larger-scale non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and faith-based organizations (FBOs) all engage in efforts to support young men. Equipped with local knowledge and, ideally, locally based leadership and staff, civil society organizations are uniquely able to meet the needs of many young men. These organizations work to prevent violence, provide resources, increase access to educational and vocational opportunities, and create safe places of belonging, mentorship, and support. Government has an important role in protecting the diversity of these organizations and their beliefs, while ensuring an accessible range of faith-based and secular options in a pluralistic society.

Two key areas stand out as important focal points for civil society. The first is the necessity of collaboration with other NGOs and nonprofits, with government, with families, with schools, and with faith communities. While specific, close-knit institutional communities can provide important spaces of belonging and connection, few organizations can single-handedly support every young man in everything that he needs. Civil society organizations must resist working in isolation, competing for funding and recognition rather than collaborating toward shared goals. Through genuine collaboration, civil society can more successfully and proactively meet the needs of more young men, allow fewer to slip through the cracks, and provide real and practical pathways to educational and vocational opportunities.

Civil society organizations must resist working in isolation, competing for funding and recognition rather than collaborating toward shared goals.

The second focal point is the need to approach young men not as a problem to be solved but as part of the solution to everything from gun violence to quiet crises of dislocation. While some civic responses to the “boy problem” of a century ago had lasting positive impacts, many of the more formally institutionalized responses were characterized by abuse and distrust and ultimately failed.²⁰ Young men need to be welcomed as key players in their own formation and the transformation of their communities, alongside the intentional and involved efforts of adults. In

contexts like Chicago, a lot of collaboration is already happening and many organizations are working hard to highlight the strengths of young men and affirm the ways in which young men themselves really are a key solution to the modern “boy crisis.” The Engage section of this report shows what collaboration and helping young men to “be the solution” looks like in practice.

Schools

Schools occupy a unique and influential place in the formation of young men, and they carry a responsibility to both be aware of the challenges facing young men and diligent in seeking to address them. Schools should acknowledge that “parents bear primary responsibility for the nurture and education of their children,” while government has a role in “upholding public equity provisions” to assure that “each child has fair access to quality education.”²¹ In too many instances, this does not happen. A variety of disparities are evident in education, and these are often felt particularly acutely by young Black men and their families: “Black boys, their families, and their communities are too often silenced in schools”²² and Black boys are left struggling.²³ Increasing the participation of male teachers who look like the young men they serve is likely an important part of bridging the gap and deserves more sustained attention in policy discussions than it has typically received up until recently.²⁴

Two key areas for schools to focus on are collaboration and approaching young men as the solution rather than the problem. Schools cannot adequately meet all the individualized needs of many young men and do not always have the resources to connect young men to meaningful opportunities. Through an openness to collaboration with civil society, including FBOs, and more open relationships with their communities, schools can play a key role in coordinating efforts to support young men. Additionally, if schools can work to approach young men through a lens of restorative responsibility and positive, solution-oriented thinking as opposed to a more simplistic, punitive approach, they can play a role in helping young men to grow into more responsible roles in their communities.

Faith Communities

Religion, for millions of people, is not merely one institution among many but a true way of understanding and ordering the cosmos. At the same time, religion can often become a key social institution, alongside work and the family, which plays an important stabilizing role in the lives of men.²⁵ Yet today, many men’s connections with these core institutions are rather tenuous.²⁶ This can contribute to a lack of flourishing.

Formalized religion is often practiced in faith communities such as churches, mosques, or synagogues. These communities are crucial institutional presences in the social landscape and should be both acknowledged and protected in their diversity; “government does not have the authority to define true religion and thus must protect the religious freedom of all citizens.”²⁷ Faith communities carry a responsibility to their belief structures and their members, but they also must be responsible participants in public social infrastructure and have a role in providing places of guidance, security, and belonging for young men.

Grounded in their respective beliefs, faith communities have potential to help young men inhabit a more stable conception of themselves as men, oriented toward community and service. With intergenerational spaces of community and mentorship, faith-based rites of passage, and opportunities for growth and responsibility, local communities of faith have a lot to offer young men.²⁸ Government and civil society should recognize the powerful potential of faith communities for boys and men and work alongside them in pluralistic partnership. To support young men, faith communities must cultivate awareness of their local contexts and the specific challenges facing young men, reaching out in welcoming and relevant ways.

Government and civil society should recognize the powerful potential of faith communities for boys and men and work alongside them in pluralistic partnership.

A Visible, Socially Responsible Role

Looking at these issues as a whole, perhaps the most vital work to which all these institutions, and all of us, are called is the work of casting a responsible, positive, prosocial vision for manhood in our world today. Prosocial manhood will not look the same in every context. But we must insist that young men have a resilient, socially responsible role to play, and we must tell the stories, build the institutions, and craft the policy that highlights that role and connects it to real pathways and opportunities.

Near the end of Ralph Ellison’s 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, the protagonist, an unnamed Black man, has learned through a difficult life to recognize himself as invisible to much of society. Nevertheless, he dares to reemerge from his hidden home in an abandoned basement to assert

with hope: “maybe there’s a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play.”²⁹ Tragically, more than seventy years later, many young Black men are still largely invisible to society, and many young men of all races are currently wondering if they truly do have a socially responsible role to play. The call to affirm the inherent dignity of all human beings means that the answer must be a resounding yes: these young men have a responsible role to play, and what is more, society needs that role to be filled. Although many individuals and institutions are already involved in the work of advancing the flourishing of young men, there is much left to do. This is the work to which we are called, and to make a start, we should learn from those who have already begun.

Engage

Brilliant and Excellent: Seeing Young Men and Their Strengths in Chicago

On a Thursday morning in April, a couple of hundred people gathered on the South Side of Chicago for the Obama Foundation’s My Brother’s Keeper (MBK) Alliance quarterly citywide convening. The event was facilitated by Brilliance and Excellence, the local coordinating partner for MBK. The men and women in the room represented a wide range of organizations and institutions, from the Chicago Mayor’s office to small local nonprofits, reflecting the MBK Alliance’s vision of effecting collaborative, community-level change to “realize improved outcomes for boys and young men of color.”¹ Signage around the room affirmed that collective desire to move toward “building safe and supportive communities for boys and young men of color where they feel valued and have clear pathways to opportunity.” With over 300 organizations represented in MBK Chicago’s network, there is a lot of work being done in Chicago to advance the flourishing of young men, particularly boys and young men of color. The insight and expertise of these practitioners helps us to better understand what government, civil society, schools, and faith communities could be doing to further advance it.

But to get a fuller picture of why these efforts are crucial, it is necessary to look carefully at the context and history of Chicago. As Damien Howard, a board member at Brilliance and Excellence and Director of Education Initiatives at Together Chicago said, “the reality is that Chicago is how it is very intentionally.”² The city’s history has included everything from complicated patterns of migration, immigration, and population change to redlining and segregation. Today, Chicago—although a diverse city,

with significant Black, Latino, and White populations—is still one of the most segregated major cities in the country.³ Many majority Black neighborhoods in the South and West Sides wrestle with the ongoing impacts of segregation, including disinvestment, population loss, and a scarcity of resources.⁴ Majority Latino neighborhoods, mostly on the West Side, have also faced locally specific challenges; the disproportionate effect of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids on neighborhoods like Little Village (South Lawndale) is a recent example.⁵ Growing out of many of these factors, and the attendant differences in institutional presence and law enforcement, the national crisis of mass incarceration is also acutely felt in many neighborhoods on the South and West Sides.⁶ Failing to consider these realities when looking at boys and young men in Chicago means missing the full picture. As Howard said, “When we don’t take into credit the fact that there were systems in play decades ago that drove poverty to certain areas and basically in many ways called for the realities that we’re still trying to grow out of right now, then I think it’s just a very unfortunate one-sided story and narrative that’s told.”

Part of telling a better, more complete story involves challenging untrue, dehumanizing narratives about youth in the city, especially young men of color. Michael Trout is the Director of the Young Men’s Educational Network (YMEN), a youth organization based in the majority Black West Side neighborhood of North Lawndale. Speaking about the type of support he wishes his organization could receive, he said, “We would love more of time, of people leaning in, of people humanizing African American youth, of people changing their assumptions about Chicago and North Lawndale.”⁷ And this is exactly the type of shift that many organizations, like Brilliance and Excellence, seek to spark. Damien Howard (Brilliance and Excellence) put it this way: “When we give young people an opportunity to articulate what their narrative and what their story is, and find a way to not be driven and led by stereotypes, you’re going to see brilliance in just about any young person from the South Side, from the West Side that you talk to, that’s a Black or Brown boy specifically.”⁸ This means listening to young men, walking alongside them, and recognizing that they are and need to be key players in their communities’ health and transformation. As Will Chatman, Program Director at YMEN and himself one of the original participants in the program, said, “we have to empower youth to understand that they are the solution to the problems in the community.”⁹

Young men in Chicago bring many strengths to the table. Anthony Montoya works with youth in the majority Latino neighborhood of Little Village as an employee of New Life Centers, a multi-site Chicago nonprofit. He sees the young men he interacts with as “smart, curious, and loyal.”¹⁰

His colleague Mario Vega, Director of Mentoring at New Life Centers, similarly attests to the fortitude and resilience of the youth he has gotten to know.¹¹ Across the city, many people affirm these observations. Paul Robinson is the Chief Program Officer at Chicago CRED, a gun violence prevention organization; reflecting on a recent check-in experience with program participants, he described the young men he was speaking with as the “most remarkable, thoughtful, intelligent, self-reflective, caring” individuals.¹² And this is not uncommon: “What I get to see every day is just these remarkable, remarkable human beings. I can’t emphasize that enough. And I’m not dismissing any bad behavior... They’ve had to make some difficult decisions, but when they come to us, they’re just ready to do great with their lives.”¹³ This awareness allows Robinson to assert, as Chicago CRED consistently affirms as an organization, that these young men “are the solution, not the problem.”¹⁴

Across the city, the individuals and organizations working with boys and young men—whether through mentoring, community violence intervention, sports, or more—are demanding that society see young Chicagoan men in all their complexity and strength. Through this, they are also inviting young men into important, meaningful roles in their communities. Such work is a key part of answering the call to cast a visible, socially responsible role for young men today and to help them grow into it. But as the Discover section showed, many challenges do exist for young men which, despite their strengths, limit their opportunities. A visible role is important, but so are real pathways to socially responsible, economically viable adult roles. In Chicago, government, civil society, schools, and faith communities are all working to open up these pathways, although more remains to be done.

Real Opportunities and a “Village to Tap Into:” Civil Society Collaboration

Jayden,¹⁵ a Chicago counselor with the school-based mentoring program Becoming a Man (BAM), run by Youth Guidance, highlighted a couple of areas of focus for organizations working with boys and men in Chicago. First was the importance of real opportunity. “I do think that a lot of those negative statistics that are out there would not exist if there were more opportunities for these young Black men,” Jayden said. “Whether it be financial opportunities, economic opportunities... Also the lack of opportunities that they are given to them as far as what they think that they can be.”¹⁶ But for those opportunities to take shape, robust communal networks are key. Commenting on the phrase “it takes a village to raise a child,” Jayden continued: “With some of these situations that some of these kids are going through, I don’t even think it’s a village anymore. They need the whole community.”¹⁷ Will Chatman (YMEN)

stuck with the word “village” but the sentiment was the same. “I want kids to be able to see they have a village. They have a village that they can tap into,” he said.¹⁸

"With some of these situations that some of these kids are going through, I don't even think it's a village anymore. They need the whole community."

But in many neighborhoods in Chicago, the social infrastructure which makes up the “village” is under strain. Jeremy Foster, CEO and President of Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) Chicago, said this is one of the reasons he sees mentoring and the development of sustainable relational networks as such crucial work. “It’s the human capital, the human connection that many of our young people need, especially our young men of color. Because many of our young men of color reside in what we would call social deserts. In a lot of our communities the mentoring ecosystem’s been fractured, and it’s been fractured for many systemic, historical reasons.”¹⁹ For Foster, a key mission of BBBS and similar organizations is to help “bring that ecosystem back into place through these long-term, quality, safe relationships.”²⁰

Revitalizing that ecosystem and creating the proverbial village requires a lot of collaboration; no one group or institutional type can offer all the services that many boys and young men need. Practitioners in Chicago have been working hard to make this collaboration happen. As Mario Vega (New Life Centers) said, “everything that I do is literally done in collaboration with other people. It is actually one of the pillars of how we work.”²¹ In describing the landscape of youth nonprofits in Chicago and the importance of collaboration, Michael Trout (YMEN) similarly said that “the competitive silos that used to exist don’t to me make any sense.”²² Paul Robinson (CRED), speaking specifically of community violence intervention (CVI) work, noted that “we’ve made leaps and bounds over the last decade, but we’re not there yet. The nonprofit industry has still been conditioned to compete for resources, to have a scarcity mindset.”²³

To work to overcome this, practitioners have been building closer relationships with their communities, other nonprofits, faith-based

organizations (FBOs), schools, faith communities, families, and government. This allows for the sharing of information, the pooling of resources, better opportunities for wraparound care, and the meeting of a variety of needs, from mentoring and safe places for play to career training. The team at Chicago CRED, for example, partners with other organizations, like New Life Centers or the Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN) to coordinate CVI strategies in the neighborhoods where they operate.²⁴ With collaborative funding and scaling models, and information sharing and coordination, these resources are better spread out across service areas.

This type of collaboration works beyond CVI as well. BBBS Chicago, through intentional outreach, local neighborhood offices, and an embedded in-school program with full-time mentors, has been able to reduce the wait time for a match with a mentor for young men of color in areas like the South and West Sides. The wait used to be around two years; now it is closer to two months.²⁵ Creative collaboration also means that organizations are more able to connect young men with the resources they need, even if those needs go beyond the scope of the organization. School-based mentoring programs like Becoming a Man (BAM), for example, support young male students’ holistic life journeys. But participants, even if they excel in such a program, might also need access to job readiness training or paid part-time work; if they are no longer in school, they might drop off the radar of school-based programs altogether. This is where organizations, by communicating with each other, are able to more meaningfully open up real pathways into opportunities.

But even when these pathways do exist, organizations and programs need to maintain a real, collaborative presence in their communities in order to ensure that young men are aware of them. Will Chatman (YMEN) spoke to this issue:

I think I want young men to see that they have more opportunities than they physically can see. And when you grow up in an urban community like North Lawndale, you don’t see much opportunity, you see the negative things. Partially because that’s what the media shows... but there’s also a lot of positive that’s going on in our neighborhood. There are a lot of nonprofit organizations that are trying to help young kids be successful... I think the issue is the kids don’t always know how to tap into these programs, and that’s why we have to go to them.²⁶

With the help of groups like My Brother’s Keeper Alliance and Brilliance and Excellence, many organizations in Chicago are collaboratively working to

holistically meet the needs of boys and young men and advance their flourishing. They are helping young men gain access to experienced mentors who understand their lives and can guide them thoughtfully. But civil society can only do so much. Paul Robinson (CRED), speaking again of his work with CVI, said that, despite new strides in collaboration, “the nonprofit approach that we have is patchy and it’s not well coordinated. And so, I think that the role of government is to try to help bring that network tighter together.”²⁷

Sustainable, Effective, and Equitable Social Infrastructure: The Role of Government

While organizations in Chicago have had a range of interactions with various levels of government, many of the practitioners consulted for this report see the need for local and state government to invest in sustainable and equitable government-coordinated social infrastructure for boys and young men. This infrastructure would depend on government coordination and at times funding, but many of its programs would be firmly based in civil society efforts. Mentoring networks, educational and vocational youth programming, community violence intervention programs, and more, would be constitutive components of this social infrastructure aimed at helping youth, and especially young men of color, flourish in Chicago. Importantly, such social infrastructure should not be seen as replacing existing services but rather as adding another critical layer to them.

This type of policy would also be an important step away from simply reactive, punitive governmental approaches to youth. Mario Vega (New Life Centers) pointed out that “for the most part, we’re really good at punitive measures. We have different policies for first, second, third crimes, and then automatically, XY and Z things happen. But we don’t necessarily have so many things where we work off people’s strengths.”²⁸ Policy which works off of and seeks to develop the strengths of youth and communities is critical. In the midst of continued instability at the Federal level, practitioners see particular opportunities for these sorts of initiatives to take place in sustained and responsive collaboration with state and local governments.

In Chicago, the city government already has a robust selection of youth-focused programs, which are often facilitated in collaboration with a variety of other organizations. Programs like the newly rebranded Youth Works offer meaningful employment opportunities, both in the summer and year-round.²⁹ Initiatives from various offices and programs within City Hall, such as My CHI. My Future. (MCMF)³⁰ or youth strategies from the Mayor’s Office of Community Safety,³¹ have worked with youth to

build collaborative approaches to keeping them safe, offering productive spaces for recreation, and connecting them to constructive activities and jobs. But practitioners still see room to grow toward a more holistic social infrastructure that is specifically attentive to the needs of boys and young men.

A key role for local government would be developing more robust coordination systems for CVI, mentoring, and educational and vocational opportunities. As Paul Robinson pointed out, Chicago does not yet have a centralized community violence intervention coordination system. Looking to the example of other cities, like Los Angeles, Robinson sees this as something that “the government could help with a lot.”³² By centralizing data and ensuring communication among organizations, some of the “patchwork” problems identified by Robinson could be addressed.

In terms of other youth-focused initiatives and mentoring programs, local government could similarly function in a coordinating role. This coordination could take a variety of shapes. Damien Howard (Brilliance and Excellence and Together Chicago), for example, is developing a “mentor training and data management app” called SELvie. SELvie aims to serve as a “collaborative space where we can coordinate care and serve young people together” and offer a platform to record both quantitative and qualitative data about mentees and track their journeys across many different organizations in the city.³³ Youth participants would be cross-listed in the database of any organizations they interacted with, enabling meaningful collaboration. But for an approach like this to really work, Howard highlighted the key role that government could play in its adoption. By sustainably supporting and implementing a platform like SELvie, Chicago could see the growth of a “technological infrastructure that is government supported and allows us to coordinate care across regions,” Howard said, without placing an additional cost or resource burden on existing organizations.³⁴ Given the large numbers of FBOs engaged in work with youth, including boys and young men in Chicago, such coordination would need to involve pluralistically affirming the place of FBOs in such work while ensuring a diversity of faith-informed options.

In addition to coordination, government would have a key role in providing sustainable funding to secure equitable access to this social infrastructure. Whether by supporting a platform like SELvie, creating a more dependable funding landscape for many locally engaged organizations, or developing more robust workforce development and service programs, the state, county, and city governments would all have a role to play. Jeremy Foster (BBBS) said that in talks with state legislators

he has highlighted the need to approach this type of support from an “infrastructure standpoint.” He posed a key question: “can we really afford not to do this?”³⁵ Such support could enable larger organizations like BBBS to scale their relationally focused operations, while also supporting a plurality of other organizations.

Through careful coordination, the government would also be able to identify disparities in access to resources such as community youth centers or mentoring programs. This would allow government to target funding and support to mend those disparities, whether through one-time funds or sustained investments. A couple of practitioners highlighted the need to recognize that, just as is the case with fire stations or roads, every community needs access to a robust social infrastructure. And while foundations and individual donors are important, they cannot carry the burden of infrastructure alone. Paul Robinson (CRED) spoke to this, saying “local foundations can’t cover the gap, so it really requires state, county, city dollars and sustained promises to invest.”³⁶

In taking on a role in supporting and coordinating social infrastructure which is sensitive to the needs of young men, government would have to respect the local expertise of organizations and their responsibilities to their communities. For some organizations, like YMEN in North Lawndale, that responsiveness to their communities has meant building a funding model which does not include reliance on government grants. A government sustained social infrastructure would have to be designed to work respectfully with such models. Taken as a whole, the social infrastructure envisioned by practitioners in Chicago would be a way to address the needs of individual boys and young men (and in many cases women and girls) while also enveloping them in protective communal contexts and offering them real pathways to “gainful employment”³⁷ and socially responsible participation in society.

Room to Grow: Schools, Faith Communities, and Starting Young

Looking to schools, Mario Vega (New Life Centers) models what productive school and civil society collaboration can look like in practice. He hosts regular meetings which bring together school counselors, nonprofits, and elected officials in order to build healthy relationships and coordinate wraparound care.³⁸ This type of collaboration would be invaluable across the city. Vega noted that in Chicago, where many of the organizations working with youth and young men are faith-based organizations, it is crucial that schools thoughtfully work with FBOs, and vice versa. For example, New Life Centers, where Vega works, is an organization which grows out of New Life Community Church, a multi-

site church in the city; Vega has still been able to establish good and productive relationships with local schools.

Many practitioners also highlighted the unique potential of faith communities in efforts to help boys and young men. Churches, mosques, synagogues, and other faith institutions are important social resources which also provide young men with a certain degree of rootedness and a deeper framework for living well in the world. Damien Howard expressed that he is “a strong proponent that the faith community, when mobilized and when activated, will impact positive change for young people by way of mentorship.”³⁹ Across the city, plenty of organizations, like New Life Centers, do grow out of established faith communities, while others, like the Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN), grow out of broader faith traditions. Many of these organizations also work together across lines of difference in faith-based partnerships.

Yet many faith communities are not as attentive to and engaged with young men as they need to be. For Mario Vega (New Life Centers), who is a Christian, churches need to be more active in their communities. Describing responses to needs in Chicago, he said, “the spaces we [the church] were called to be in, the churches weren’t there, the church wasn’t responsive.”⁴⁰ For Michael Trout (YMEN), some of this disconnect is due to the ways in which churches, and other faith communities, have failed to engage with youth and young men. “Kids are being disconnected from the church. Most of our kids don’t go to church,” Trout said. “And if you ask them why, they’ll say ‘it’s not relevant. It’s not for me. What they talk about doesn’t affect my life. I’m not being summoned to something greater.’”⁴¹ Speaking into this situation, Will Chatman (YMEN) said that if youth “are not going to the church, how then do we bring the church to them? And so I feel like we have to do more community initiatives that bring the church into the community but then serve the youth of the community.”⁴² In a time when many people, especially young men, are looking for a better sense of how to be in the world and what their role is, faith communities have a crucial role to play.

A final area on the minds of practitioners in Chicago is the importance of ensuring that support for boys and young men starts early. Reading at grade level by third grade, for example, is a powerful indicator of future success; for this reason, organizations like My Brother’s Keeper or the Chicago Black Boy Literacy Campaign focus on reading at grade level by third grade as a key milestone. More broadly, from citywide gatherings to individual conversations, many people emphasize the need to invest in boys proactively and constructively, before they are exposed to situations of violence or begin to slip through institutional cracks. Many people only react to young men once they see them as a problem;

recognizing and walking alongside boys at a younger age is a way of combating this issue. As Michael Trout (YMEN) thought about his work in North Lawndale, which currently starts when youth are in sixth grade, he expressed this feeling: “How can you help work on the preventative side? Our next tweaking and changing of the work that we’re doing is we probably need to go younger.”⁴³

National Connections? Putting Chicago in Conversation with the Country

With all these multifaceted efforts in mind, how does Chicago fit into the broader conversation around men and boys happening in the U.S. today? While many practitioners in Chicago are aware of and have learned from other cities’ efforts and initiatives across the U.S. and the world, many are quite focused on the work and the young men directly in front of them. As Michael Trout (YMEN) said, “I believe any type of macro change has to happen at the micro level.”⁴⁴ And much of this impactful, yet micro-level, relational work with young men in Chicago has been happening for a good while longer than the more recent policy conversations of the last few years; YMEN, for example, is thirty years old.

Large-scale collaboration is also hard; while Damien Howard (Brilliance and Excellence and Together Chicago) is hopeful and optimistic about the future of the national My Brother’s Keeper Alliance, in general he is a bit more cautious. “At least for us as Chicagoans, now dreaming of what does it look like to find those type of synergies even beyond Chicago to attach to a larger and growing narrative that’s centered around boys and young men, I’m hard-pressed to have a lot of hope in what that looks like as I know we have got a lot of work to do to figure that out on a local level first.”⁴⁵

The context of Chicago of course makes a big difference. As various practitioners pointed out, a White middle-class boy in a suburb might make very similar choices as a Black boy in a neighborhood of Chicago and yet end up in vastly different places. But although outcomes often tragically differ, there are nonetheless meaningful similarities. Paul Robinson, speaking of his former work with the Becoming a Man program, said that “reestablishing this idea of what constitutes manhood, what are the values that you want to reflect as a man, as you mature—I think that’s universal regardless of race or income... I think there are a lot of parallels regardless of race or income around what boys and young men need.”⁴⁶

In Chicago it largely remains to be seen what impact the growing national conversation around boys and men will actually have on the lived experiences of young men in the city. But there are many possibilities

for mutual benefit. Many of the policy desires voiced by practitioners in Chicago line up with efforts beginning to take shape in states across the country; these efforts have the potential to make room for similar, positive change in Chicago and in Illinois. Chicago, meanwhile, also carries lessons for the nation. Efforts in the city model what sustained engagement with young men on a local level really looks like and highlight the importance of continuing to consider and address the impact of intersectional factors like race and class. There is much work to be done in connecting Chicago to larger national efforts, and vice versa, but this must be a process marked by respectful collaboration and communication, not co-option or coercion.

Looking Toward Flourishing: The Future Needs These Young Men

Practitioners in Chicago are convinced that their efforts with youth, especially young men, are a key part of helping their broader communities flourish. As so many say, young men are not the problem but a necessary part of the solution. The future needs these young men to have visible, socially responsible roles in society. This is the essence of the work that is being done in Chicago, and it is what we must work toward across the country.

In places like Chicago, this requires an attentive, listening-focused approach to young men and their communities; real, sustained investment; and creative, careful collaboration. Michael Trout hopes for a future in which his organization, YMEN, is like one small fruit tree in a large orchard, with each tree offering the community their own distinct fruit within easy reach.⁴⁷ In this image, no one tree can be too big; otherwise, its fruit becomes inaccessible and oversupplied, and it takes resources away from other trees. This picture of a balanced, thriving orchard is an informative one for the idea of social infrastructure: it highlights the diversity of approaches, care, and collaboration needed to advance the flourishing of boys and young men, and their communities, in Chicago.

The narrator of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* dares to imagine a socially responsible role for his life, even if most of society will continue to fail to see him in all his humanity. In Chicago today, many young men, especially young men of color, still fight that invisibility as they seek to imagine and grow into socially responsible roles. But, both in the city and across the country, many people are working to bring about change. We all have a role to play and responsibilities to fulfill in seeing and humanizing young men, in imagining their roles alongside them, and in investing ourselves to help them get there and help our communities flourish. ■



Refocusing the Priorities of Affordable Rental Housing: Investing in Quality and Child Well-being

Research Question:

What is the relationship between housing quality and child well-being in urban contexts, how does housing quality shape outcomes beyond affordability, and what disparities exist in housing conditions and child well-being?

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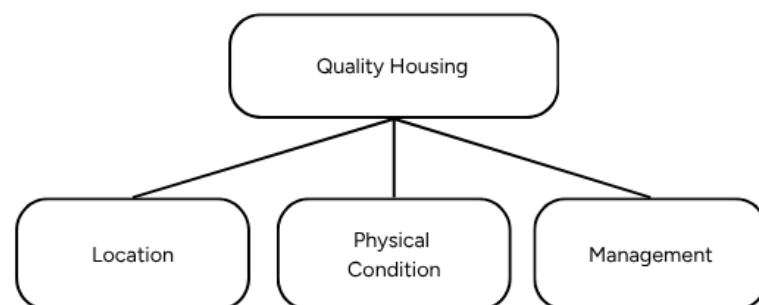
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Discover

Children have a wonderful sense of imagination, and they require space to allow it to flourish. One encounter in Salem, Massachusetts, brings this into focus: a family living in an overcrowded apartment complex where the only personal space available to the child was a shared bedroom, while the rest of the apartment was communal. That single observation raises a question this report takes seriously: what are the implications of housing conditions for children's well-being? Children spend up to 90% of their time indoors, making the quality of their housing environment especially consequential.¹ If the home is the primary environment in which a child spends most of her time, then the conditions of that home are critical. Because children have little control over where they live, they depend entirely on adults to shape their residential environments. Government, the private sector, and civil society institutions must therefore treat quality, not merely access, as a critical dimension of affordable rental housing in order to promote an environment conducive to child well-being.

Defining Quality Housing and Child Well-being

Figure One



Understanding how quality housing affects child well-being requires first defining both terms carefully.

Quality housing is measured across three categories: location, physical condition, and management. Location covers access to public transportation, grocery stores, parks, low crime rates, and effective law enforcement. The physical conditions should first meet the National Standards for the Physical Inspection of Real Estate (NSPIRE), which focuses on inspecting the residential unit and the inside and outside of the building to check for evidence of pests, adequate heating and plumbing, leaks, lead paint, mold, and other hazards.² Meeting minimum standards is the necessary first step, but it should not be the last. The physical condition of housing should also reflect an intentional commitment to beauty—understood here as going beyond minimum standards through deliberate choices in materials, design, and local amenities. The final category, management, refers to how attentive housing authorities, property owners, and property management companies are to resolving physical problems. This includes basic responsiveness: are non-life-threatening issues fixed within the designated time frame? Are life-threatening issues, such as the absence of smoke detectors, resolved within 24 hours?³ Each of these categories shapes the overall quality of a housing unit and has significant implications for child development.

Child well-being, for the purposes of this report, is understood across three domains of development: physical, cognitive, and psychosocial.⁴ The physical domain refers to bodily development of the child, which includes health concerns such as asthma and elevated blood lead levels.⁵ The cognitive domain refers to the child's mental processes, including the ability to learn, think, and understand.⁶ The psychosocial domain encompasses the child's emotional development and ability to interact with others.⁷ These three domains of development are interconnected and are all shaped by the environment in which a child grows up, which is why access to quality housing is necessary for children. Because children are uniquely vulnerable to the effects of inadequate housing, this report focuses particular attention on their needs within the family unit.

Consequences of Poor-Quality Housing for Child Well-being

The relationship between housing quality and child well-being operates across all three domains established above—physical, cognitive, and psychosocial—and the consequences of inadequate housing in each domain are significant and often lasting.

The physical condition of a home has direct consequences for children's physical and cognitive health. Indoor environmental hazards such as

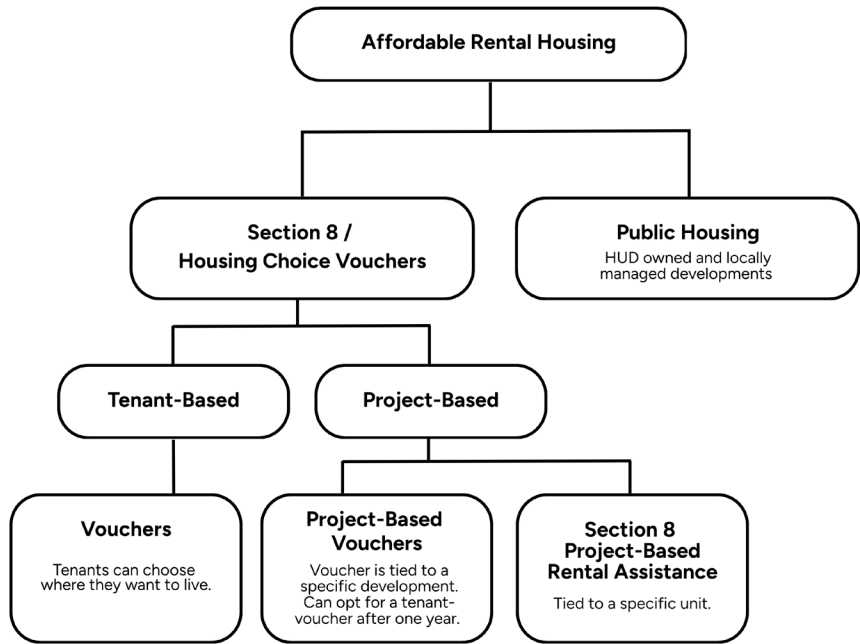
asbestos, radon, pesticides, and carbon monoxide pose serious risks to children’s development.⁸ Mold, dust, and pests can exacerbate or induce respiratory conditions like asthma.⁹ Lead exposure arising from lead paint dust can result in elevated blood lead levels in children, with life-changing implications including impaired cognitive function, behavior problems, and in some cases death.¹⁰ Children living in units with poor air quality, pest infestations, or inadequate heating are particularly vulnerable to these outcomes since they spend the majority of their time indoors. Therefore, it is essential to promote safe indoor environments to support children’s physical and cognitive development.

The location of housing can have equally significant consequences for children across all three domains. Neighborhoods represent an opportunity for the child and the family to build connections through social networks such as faith communities, after-school programs, and parks.¹¹ Living in a low-poverty neighborhood can also provide children with access to high-quality schools, with significant implications for the child’s academic performance.¹² Conversely, living in high-poverty neighborhoods can expose children to substance use, toxic stress, and violence, all of which can affect children’s cognitive, physical, and emotional health.¹³ Safety concerns in high-poverty neighborhoods may also lead parents to restrict children’s outdoor activity, limiting developmental opportunities and undermining the social connections essential to psychosocial well-being.¹⁴ The surrounding neighborhood is therefore just as influential for children as the physical condition of the housing unit itself.

These consequences underscore the critical importance of rigorous inspection standards and sufficient funding—the two areas where the current affordable housing system most consistently falls short.

Current Affordable Housing Programs in the United States

Figure 2



Federal Programs

The two major government-funded housing programs in the United States are overseen by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD): Section 8 and Public Housing. Section 8, also known as the Housing Choice Voucher program, is managed by HUD and local housing authorities and enables families to live in subsidized private market housing through either project-based or tenant-based units.¹⁵ Project-based voucher units are tied to specific properties through the private owners working with local housing authorities to rent their units.¹⁶ Similarly, Section 8 Project Based Rental Assistance (PBRA) is tied to specific properties through contracts with HUD.¹⁷ The main difference between the two is that families using project-based vouchers can opt for the tenant-based voucher option after one year, while families using PBRA cannot. Tenant-based vouchers provide families with the ability to choose where they want to live, which can have important implications for children’s access to low-crime neighborhoods and quality schools.¹⁸ However, vouchers still have their own pitfalls, with significant waitlists, the challenge of finding available units in the private market, and the risk of ending up in impoverished areas.¹⁹ Housing Choice Vouchers and PBRA provide important options for families to access private housing, yet they still do not fully meet the needs of all families requiring assistance.

Public Housing, in contrast to the Housing Choice Vouchers, consists of HUD-owned properties locally managed by housing authorities, ranging from single-family homes to apartment buildings.²⁰ These developments are frequently located in impoverished and racially segregated areas, yet Public Housing provides stability for families that may not qualify for or access other housing options.²¹ For children, that stability matters, but only if the physical conditions of the units meet basic standards of safety and quality. One of the most significant challenges facing Public Housing is the chronic shortage of operating and capital funds needed to keep up with day-to-day operations and upkeep, which has resulted in poor-quality units across many of these properties.²² Certain initiatives have been created to address this funding gap, most notably the Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) program, which converts the Public Housing units to one of the two project-based assistance options in order to leverage public and private funds for necessary repairs and modernization.²³ Public Housing remains a critical rental assistance program, yet the physical conditions of many units have consistently fallen short of what families need.

Housing Challenges

Amid the different methods for providing housing, two problems stand out: the need to maintain quality standards through effective inspections and a lack of sufficient funding to meet housing needs. Both challenges have direct consequences for children living in these homes.

Quality standards matter because children living in government-funded housing need access to environments that promote all aspects of well-being. Based on HUD's Physical Inspection Scores for Public Housing across the United States from 2013 to 2025, 652 buildings received a failing score below 60; 2,771 scored between 60 and 90; and 2,765 scored between 90 and 100.²⁴ Although most of the buildings did not receive a failing score, the frequency with which these buildings were inspected tells a different story. Half of the Public Housing buildings included in the HUD data had not been inspected since 2023. Furthermore, 21.38% of them should have received an annual inspection based on their score falling below 80, which is a requirement under HUD's standards.²⁵ This gap in inspection frequency places children in these units at risk. Failure to keep up to date with inspections could result in children living in units with poor air quality, exposure to lead, or other hazardous conditions that impair their development.

One example of the importance of meeting quality standards through thorough inspections is the Boston Housing Authority (BHA). In 2023, the Office of the Inspector General conducted two audits of the BHA

to assess their effectiveness in protecting families and residents from hazards. One reviewed 87 Housing Choice Voucher units and found that some had received passing inspection scores despite serious deficiencies, including electrical hazards, infestations, and missing carbon monoxide detectors.²⁶ The audit also found that the housing authority failed to follow the guidelines for elevated blood lead levels in children, such as monitoring owners to ensure they were adhering to the guidelines.²⁷

A separate audit of Boston's Public Housing examined 36 units and found serious defects as well, including poor air quality, infestations, and electrical hazards. Many life-threatening and non-life-threatening issues were not corrected within the designated time frame, in part because the authority did not have enough staff to keep up with inspections and work orders.²⁸ These findings illustrate the critical role of inspections and oversight: without a thorough inspection process, effective monitoring and enough staff members, families may remain living in unfit units, with children bearing the greatest cost.²⁹

These two audits highlight the role of housing authorities and inspectors in ensuring that the units families live in are suitable for children. Maintaining adequate housing conditions for low-income families is not possible without sufficient funds to keep up with the necessary repairs and modernization. This funding gap remains a persistent barrier. Public Housing currently needs approximately \$90 billion in capital funds to keep buildings in safe condition for families.³⁰

A Brief History of Affordable Rental Housing

The current state of federal programs and their challenges cannot be fully understood without a historical background. The federal government began providing affordable rental units for families, specifically White upwardly mobile working-class families, in the 1930s in response to a national housing crisis.³¹ The vehicle for doing so was Public Housing, established by the Wagner-Steagall Housing Act of 1937, with operating costs primarily supported by residents' rent.³² The federal role in housing was further solidified through the Housing Act of 1949, which called for decent housing for all and included the development of high-rise buildings.³³

Segregation and Public Housing

Throughout these years of increasing access to affordable rental housing for White families, Public Housing projects were used to reinforce the racial segregation in the United States. While the initial legislation called for housing opportunities for White working-class families, it did

not provide the same opportunities for Black and Latino families. Black families were pushed out of their communities for incoming White Public Housing developments, and developments designated for families of color were built in impoverished areas that represented significant barriers to the resources families need for healthy development.³⁴ From the outset of federal housing programs, Public Housing was used to further racial segregation, which can still be seen today in the concentration of families living in Public Housing in impoverished and segregated areas, with lasting consequences for family well-being.³⁵

While the initial legislation called for housing opportunities for White working-class families, it did not provide the same opportunities for Black and Latino families.

By the mid-20th century, a demographic shift had occurred in Public Housing, moving from serving White working-class families to low-income families who had been systematically excluded from other federal wealth-building programs, who were disproportionately Black.³⁶ As the resident population changed, rent revenues could no longer cover operating expenses, creating a structural funding gap that led to deteriorating conditions and resident protests.³⁷

Federal Legislation and Reform

A result of this was the 1969 Brooke Amendment, which instituted a cap on the amount families living in Public Housing had to pay for rent, set at “25% of income, which was later raised to the 30% standard.”³⁸ This cap on rent, combined with a lack of federal funds to meet the gap in operating costs, negatively affected Public Housing conditions.³⁹

By the latter half of the 20th century, the federal housing sector began to shift with the evolution of Section 8, which provided families a new housing choice and greater control over their child’s residential environment.⁴⁰ The program was first tested in the 1970s under the Experimental Housing Allowance Program, which provided families with rental assistance.⁴¹ Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Section 8 program was further solidified, initially focusing on construction,

rehabilitation, and housing certificates, the predecessor to tenant-based assistance.⁴² The construction and rehabilitation initiatives were contracted between HUD and private and nonprofit organizations; however, these options were eliminated and the voucher option was introduced.⁴³ The current Housing Choice Voucher program was created in 1998 by merging the certificates and voucher programs under the Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act.⁴⁴ This alternative to Public Housing represented an opportunity for families to have more control of their child’s immediate environment.⁴⁵

From 1993 to 2011, the Homeownership and Opportunity for People Everywhere (HOPE VI) initiative sought to address poor-quality Public Housing and the concentration of poverty, spanning nearly two decades and extending well into the 21st century.⁴⁶ Congressional funds were allotted for housing authorities to use in conjunction with private investment for activities such as the demolition of distressed developments and reinvestment in the quality of public housing and its surrounding neighborhoods.⁴⁷

From the beginning of the federal Public Housing program, there was a stated focus on improving the lives of American citizens. However, the policies and funding decisions of the latter half of the 20th century created significant barriers to safe units for families, barriers whose effects persist to this day.

Institutional Responsibilities in Promoting Quality Housing

Investing in housing and neighborhoods has required government at every level, the private sector, and civil society institutions to each play their part, contributing what they are distinctively positioned to provide.⁴⁸ A critical piece of this is federal programs in the form of tax credits allocated to the states and grants that are managed by HUD.⁴⁹ The Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) program highlights the role of states and cities investing in urban neighborhoods, such as housing, beautification, and lead paint elimination.⁵⁰ The Choice Neighborhoods Initiative further illustrates this by providing grants for private developers, nonprofits, and local housing authorities to invest in housing, management, and neighborhood resources.⁵¹ The Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC), established in 1986, provides private and nonprofit developers with tax credits when some of their new units are reserved for low-income residents or when they invest in existing affordable developments.⁵² These programs demonstrate the significant role of all institutions in expanding quality affordable housing and rehabilitating units for families.

Government Interest in Quality Housing

Providing access to affordable housing is critical, yet ensuring that the environment both inside and outside the unit is suitable for children is even more important. As its history shows, affordable housing has fallen short when it comes to maintaining units; however, government initiatives have increasingly focused on improving units for families. The federal Lead Hazard Control and Healthy Homes Programs focus on protecting residents living in private housing from pollutants like lead and mold by providing grants to states, local governments, nonprofits, and for-profit organizations.⁵³ At the state level, Massachusetts has provided significant funding to modernize and combat these dangers in state-funded Public Housing under the Affordable Homes Act.⁵⁴ These initiatives help ensure that children live in homes free from physical conditions that could harm their development.

The presence of hazards connects to the inspection standards established by HUD and implemented at the ground level through local housing authorities and owners.⁵⁵ Prior to the establishment of the National Standards for the Physical Inspection of Real Estate (NSPIRE) in 2023, two different quality standards were in use: the Uniform Physical Condition Standards (UPCS) for Public Housing and project-based units, and the Housing Quality Standards (HQS) for voucher programs.⁵⁶ The shift to the streamlined NSPIRE protocol was motivated by the inconsistency of previous standards, which focused more on the appearance of items rather than health and safety.⁵⁷ Quality housing depends on thorough inspections and management in order to catch and eliminate any hazards before they affect the children living in those units.⁵⁸

Affordable rental housing is necessary, yet the quality of the housing and the surrounding neighborhood should not be compromised. Reflecting on the family in Salem whose child's only personal space was a shared bedroom raises the question every institution in this network must grapple with: what would it mean for that child to have access to a safe, affordable, and well-maintained home? It is the responsibility of all institutions—government, private actors, and civil society—to provide an environment fit for child development.

Frame

Where a Child's Life Takes Root

The importance of beauty in residential environments is often overlooked or dismissed as a luxury when it comes to housing for disadvantaged populations. But beauty is not a luxury. It is a condition for human flourishing, and children who grow up in unfit or aesthetically neglected housing pay a real developmental cost. In this report, beauty refers to the intentional care with which housing is designed and maintained. As one dimension of housing quality, beauty finds its theological grounding in the creation narrative and its practical expression in the physical condition of the homes children grow up in. Housing should be more than the basics of a roof and four walls. It should reflect the dignity and enhance the worth of each person. As Matthew Desmond writes in the epilogue to his book *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*:

The home is a wellspring of personhood. It is where our identity takes root and blossoms, where as children, we imagine, play, and question, and as adolescents, we retreat and try. As we grow older, we hope to settle into a place to raise a family or pursue work. When we try to understand ourselves, we often begin by considering the kind of home in which we were raised. In languages spoken all over the world, the word for "home" encompasses not just shelter but warmth, safety, family—the womb.¹

Home is the primary place in which a child spends most of her time. She does not choose it. She cannot negotiate its condition, its location, or its maintenance. She is entirely dependent on the adults and institutions around her to provide a residential environment that supports rather than undermines her development. That dependence creates a clear moral and institutional obligation on the part of external institutions. Government, private actors, and civil society institutions share the responsibility to safeguard children by providing housing that promotes not merely access but quality—housing that is beautiful for every resident who lives within it.

Housing Grounded in the Christian Faith

Scripture places a clear obligation to care for the poor and vulnerable, and that obligation extends to the conditions in which they live. Quality housing connects directly to Christian teachings throughout Scripture and Christian thinkers on justice and housing. This obligation will be explored through three interconnected ideas: loving your neighbor, returning to the beauty and goodness of creation, and caring for children.

Loving Your Neighbor

Genesis 1:27 establishes that human beings are made in the image of God.² That foundation requires approaching others with intentionality. In the housing context, the construction and maintenance of affordable units should echo the Creator who formed us, ensuring, for example, that the units are hazard-free. Because every person is an image bearer, their housing and surrounding environment should reflect that dignity and worth rather than hinder it. This calling to love one's neighbor is further solidified through Jesus' ministry of caring for the poor, specifically through Matthew 7:12: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you."³ Applied to housing, Jesus' words require that the development and rehabilitation of units be approached with this question: Would I want to live in this unit and does it mirror the Imago Dei of each person residing within it? The biblical theme of loving our neighbor is a critical perspective because it outlines the care that needs to be incorporated into the construction of these units. Timothy Keller captures this obligation precisely in *Generous Justice*, where he writes, "Your neighbor comes into your presence with certain claims on you, that you treat him in ways that enhance his well-being."⁴ From the beginning of creation and through the ministry of Jesus, Christians are called to love and care for those around them in ways that enhance rather than diminish them. Loving our neighbor in the context of housing means more than providing shelter. It means providing the kind of home that reflects the beauty and goodness God intended for human life from the beginning of creation.

Would I want to live in this unit and does it mirror the Imago Dei of each person residing within it?

The Beauty and Goodness of Creation

Throughout the creation narrative in Genesis, God molded a world deemed "very good," from the light to the landscape to the wildlife that inhabited it.⁵ God entrusted this beautiful creation to human stewardship. The beauty and goodness woven into creation was not incidental but necessary for human flourishing. God could have provided the basic necessities for creatures of the earth to survive. Instead God meticulously wove together a "very good" creation for the flourishing of all people.⁶ The intrinsic linkage between beauty and God is further explored in Alejandro Garcia-Rivera's *The Community of the Beautiful*,

where he states that "Beauty originates in God's own self."⁷ The origins of the world we live in reflect the beauty found within God. Because of the Fall, the goodness of creation was replaced with chaos and brokenness. It is the responsibility of Christians and the institutions they inhabit to work toward restoring that beauty and order, not only in the abstract but in the concrete environments humans create, inhabit, and maintain. Affordable housing is one such environment, and the institutions that shape it bear a responsibility to reflect the beauty and goodness God intended. This beauty, both the goodness of creation and its reflection in the physical environments humans inhabit, is what affordable housing policy must take seriously.

Caring for Children

Christian teachings call us to care for the vulnerable, particularly children. In Matthew 18:2-5, Jesus welcomes a child and says to his disciples, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."⁸ Christians are called to safeguard children, and that charge extends to the physical environments in which children grow up. Welcoming children into quality housing is one concrete expression of welcoming Jesus himself. In Mark 10:13-16, Jesus again welcomes children and highlights that the "Kingdom of God belongs...[to] these."⁹ Jesus himself provides the model for how we are to care for children. If the Kingdom belongs to children, then Christians are called to advocate for housing conditions for children that are safe and reflective of their dignity.

The Importance of Safeguarding Families

The calling to love our neighbor, to restore the beauty of creation, and to care for children is not fulfilled through individual acts alone. It requires institutions with the resources, authority, and reach to meet the needs of those around us. The Center for Public Justice's (CPJ) guidelines on the family make clear that "Government should recognize and protect the family as an essential expression of its responsibility to uphold a just society."¹⁰ Housing is inseparable from family well-being, and quality housing is inseparable from the value of the families residing within it.¹¹ CPJ affirms that "Family is not primarily a means to other ends, whether economic, political, or cultural." When government and civil society institutions make decisions about housing, families and children must be the primary consideration rather than economic efficiency or political convenience. Children who grow up in safe, stable, and beautiful homes are more likely to thrive educationally, developmentally, and socially, and that benefits the whole community. The institutional recommendations that follow are grounded in this conviction: providing quality housing is one important way that government and civil society fulfill their shared

calling to protect families, contribute to restoring what the Fall has broken, and ensure that every child has access to a beautiful home.

Government's Role in Providing Quality Housing

Government bears responsibility to uphold public justice for all citizens, including the most vulnerable. As the Center for Public Justice outlines, government must “legislate, enforce, and adjudicate public laws” while “upholding the common good... which includes protecting citizens from domestic and foreign injustice.”¹² For families living in deteriorating, hazardous, or inadequately maintained affordable housing, that injustice is not abstract. It is the daily reality of a child growing up in conditions that undermine her development and her sense of worth. Government at every level has a responsibility to counter that injustice through funding, legislation, and inspection standards, which housing scholars have described as “a new ethic of care, manifested in how we design, govern, and value our housing systems.”¹³

Federal Government

At the federal level, Congress has the responsibility to pass legislation and allocate funding that promotes the construction, rehabilitation, and ongoing maintenance of affordable rental housing. To ensure this, Congress must increase and continue providing operating and capital funding needed for Public Housing to remain a viable option for families. There are about 800,000 children living in Public Housing units who deserve a place that is up-to-date on their renovations and maintenance.¹⁴ Allocating funds to meet the historic backlog must therefore be a priority.

Congress must also prioritize funding that demonstrates the significant role private actors, civil society institutions, and other levels of government play in meeting families’ housing needs and investing in the local communities. Hazards within a child’s immediate environment and neighborhood can have implications for their development. Congress should therefore prioritize allocating funds to HUD grant programs working toward protecting children inside and outside the unit, such as the Lead Hazard Control and Healthy Homes programs, which ensure that voucher housing is lead-free. The Choice Neighborhoods Initiative further illustrates how federal investment can support local housing authorities, private developers, and nonprofits in revitalizing distressed housing developments and the surrounding neighborhoods that families depend on.¹⁵

One federal agency with particular responsibility here is HUD, which sets quality standards for units that are meant to promote housing conducive

to well-being. The new NSPIRE inspection standards represent a meaningful step forward in combating hazards. However, as the shift from previous UPCS and HQS standards illustrates, the move away from evaluating the physical appearance of units risks losing something important, a dimension that earlier standards, for all their inconsistencies, took more seriously.¹⁶ The creation narrative establishes that beauty is not incidental to creation but an intentional expression of God’s good design, making attention to beauty an important aspect of human life and vocation. HUD’s inspection standards should therefore hold safety and beauty together: the safety and health of the unit and the physical condition that reflects the dignity of the family residing within it. One way to implement this approach is to add a category to the inspection forms that allows inspectors to account for the physical condition of each standard.¹⁷ In order for these standards to be followed, HUD must continue revising its inspection standards and lead paint hazard requirements to ensure that inspectors and housing authorities are held accountable.¹⁸ The federal framework created through HUD provides the foundation from which states and local entities can build to ensure secure and beautiful spaces for every child to grow up in.

State Government

State governments have a distinctive responsibility to exercise their authority over housing policy in ways that reflect the specific conditions of their communities—including local housing markets, residents’ needs, and existing infrastructure—building on the federal framework and enabling local housing authorities to fulfill their own responsibilities. When approaching legislation, the quality of the housing should be at the forefront to promote safe places for children to live in. One example is Massachusetts’ Affordable Homes Act, passed in 2024, which includes a “Restoring Dignity to Public Housing” initiative aimed at ensuring state-funded Public Housing is maintained to a standard that reflects the dignity of its residents through capital improvements and adequate operating support.¹⁹ All states should expand on the federal framework and quality standards through enacting legislation that builds on state-funded housing programs and prioritizes funding for the maintenance of these units, contributing to families having access to housing that is free from hazards.

States should additionally create grant programs that support municipalities in fostering community development, such as funding for community facilities, maintained parks, and transportation, which typically remain the responsibility of local government to plan and implement. States should also create grant programs focused on abating hazards that could significantly impact children, such as asbestos, lead,

carbon monoxide, and pests. This kind of community-specific investment is precisely where state government's proximity to local conditions proves most valuable, complementing rather than duplicating the federal government's role in setting minimum standards and providing funding. States should therefore create their own legislation that addresses the disparity in access to quality affordable rental housing within their states.²⁰ In all of these areas, creating spaces where families can thrive should be at the forefront.

Local Government

The local government holds authority over systemic, regulatory, and fiscal tools that are particularly suited to promoting quality affordable rental housing, such as zoning and land-use ordinances, building process requirements, local funding opportunities, collaborating on the implementation of state and federal programs, and the ability to collaborate with civil society institutions and housing authorities.²¹ In order to foster the building and maintenance of quality units that are safe for families to raise children in, the local government should offer tax exemption incentives, funding through an Affordable Housing Trust Fund, and other municipal programs to ensure that affordable units are kept up to date.²² The local government should continue investing in quality housing and community development through partnerships with housing authorities, civil society institutions, and other agencies.

Housing Authorities

Housing authorities are quasi-governmental public agencies created under state legislation and are in most instances distinct from local government.²³ These are independent agencies that manage housing programs most immediately affecting families' environments, such as Public Housing, the Housing Choice Voucher program, and federal funding opportunities. Because housing authorities are the agencies most directly responsible for the physical conditions of affordable housing, the work they administer should demonstrate the critical role they play in contributing to family well-being. Housing authorities should prioritize their inspection and maintenance processes to ensure that staff rigorously follow quality standards so that children's environments are hazard-free. When housing authorities are thinking through inspections, maintenance, annual plans, and community investment, they should have this question in mind: *Is this environment conducive to child flourishing?* If the answer is not a yes, their annual plan and the implementation should focus not only on the maintenance and repairs that will promote safe residential units, but on the intentional attention to physical condition and beauty that reflects the dignity of the families living within them.

For-Profit Contributions to Housing

For-profit organizations have the responsibility to contribute to affordable rental housing in order to safeguard families. For-profit organizations should promote quality affordable housing through utilizing their own specialized knowledge, which varies by role—developers and investors focus on housing development and rehabilitation, while inspection firms contribute through ensuring units meet quality standards. The role of for-profits aligns with the historical shift from the construction of Public Housing to incentivizing private participation in housing development, such as the Low Income Housing Tax Credit.²⁴ As a result, one of the responsibilities of for-profits that focus on developing and investing in affordable rental housing should be ensuring that they are creating housing that is restoring the beauty of creation and accounting for the families living within them so that they can have access to safe and beautiful housing and amenities.

When housing authorities are thinking through inspections, maintenance, annual plans, and community investment, they should have this question in mind: Is this environment conducive to child flourishing?

A significant barrier toward promoting quality housing has been the inspection process, where poor inspections result in families living in substandard housing. Although inspections are ultimately government's responsibility, third-party contractors represent an additional avenue for ensuring that affordable rental housing units are safe places, although they are not always successful in meeting this standard.²⁵ For-profit organizations should therefore be part of the inspection process to provide a third-party perspective on the state of the housing. A third-party organization specializing in inspections could provide another level of protection for families. This is illustrated by the past audit of the Boston Housing Authority, which found inadequate staffing and insufficiently rigorous inspections in some units. Private contractors hired by HUD to conduct inspections should follow the bare-minimum standards outlined by HUD inspection standards and training. Just as HUD standards should account for promoting quality housing, so, too, should private contractors work toward fostering environments that reflect

the dignity of the families residing in them. These contractors' purpose should first and foremost be safeguarding the well-being of children.

Civil Society Contributions to Housing

Civil society bears a distinctive responsibility to contribute to affordable rental housing, one rooted in the particular callings of the organizations that make it up. These organizations, often referred to as “nongovernmental entities that operate independently to promote social, cultural, and humanitarian goals,” bring specialized local knowledge, community trust, and a commitment to holistic well-being that complements the contributions of government programs and for-profit organizations.²⁶ Civil society institutions do not all share the same responsibilities. Rather, each type of institution contributes according to its own specialized mission-driven strategies and resources. Within civil society there are many different types of organizations, such as nonprofits, faith-based organizations, and houses of worship. Each of these institutions within affordable rental housing has its own value-driven approach toward meeting families' needs in order to protect families from living in substandard housing.

Nonprofit Organizations

Nonprofits are mission-driven organizations that serve specific populations and aspects of affordable rental housing that government programs and for-profit developers are not always oriented to address in the same way. Nonprofits should use their values to further the human focus of affordable housing, which can include amplifying the voices of those impacted, tailoring programs to specific populations' needs, and creating safe and beautiful environments. The Mass Union of Public Housing Tenants, for example, provides a voice to residents to ensure that developments are living situations residents can be proud of.²⁷ This organization's advocacy highlights the importance of beauty and pushing beyond minimum standards. Housing advocacy nonprofits should therefore amplify the voices of those affected by housing policy.

Nonprofits with a mission of developing and rehabilitating housing or investing in residents should promote quality environments for families from the physical environment inside and outside of the development to the services provided. The Community Builders, for example, develops mixed-income, high-quality housing for families, including renovating and adding more units and recreational spaces to the Faneuil Gardens Public Housing in conjunction with the Boston Housing Authority.²⁸ This project and their work in general with development, management, and their resident-centered approach to services illustrate the critical

role they play in promoting suitable living conditions for families across the country.²⁹ Nonprofits involved in the development of housing and investment in residents should strive to create environments and provide resources that allow families to thrive, including through supportive services that meet not only the physical needs of families but also their broader needs—such as case management and financial literacy programs for parents and guardians.

Faith-Based Organizations

Faith-based organizations bring a distinctive motivation to affordable housing work, grounded in their theological convictions of caring and serving the poor and vulnerable. These organizations may invest in housing in various ways, including through development and rehabilitation, advocacy, or direct services, guided by their calling to serve those around them. The Archdiocese of Boston's Planning Office for Urban Affairs (POUA), for example, is committed to building permanent affordable housing for families.³⁰ Where possible, POUA also develops mixed-income housing in communities with good schools, jobs, and recreational resources, though financing requirements mean this cannot always be achieved. Their work nonetheless illustrates the importance of faith-based organizations working toward restoring the beauty of creation through environments rich in opportunity for children.

Houses of Worship

The calling to care for the vulnerable is prominent throughout many houses of worship and translates into concrete affordable housing efforts. Christianity is not the sole religion involved in housing and economic justice. Islam values the *sadaqah jariya*, a form of ongoing charitable giving with positive implications for the community.³¹ Judaism's *tzedakah* entails joyful acts of charity toward those in need.³² These religious beliefs align with the work of providing housing, because justice cannot be fully achieved unless children have a home that promotes healthy development.

Houses of worship that discern a calling to housing ministry can contribute their distinctive gifts—land, relationships, trust, and moral vision—toward addressing the need for affordable housing. The Yes In God's Backyard (YIGBY) legislation would allow houses of worship and faith-based organizations to use their vacant land for affordable housing development that has historically been restricted by zoning laws, with developers contributing technical expertise and government providing the legal framework and funding mechanisms.³³ YIGBY legislation is currently being discussed at the federal level and in many states, with

California already having passed its own version and Massachusetts³⁴ having passed it in the House with Senate discussions ongoing.³⁵ This piece of legislation highlights the distinct roles of institutions involved in affordable housing—from the owners of the land, to government providing zoning laws, to partnerships needed to fund and develop housing. YIGBY is one example of how houses of worship that discern this calling could further children’s access to safe and beautiful housing.

Restoring the beauty of creation through housing, and welcoming families into this beauty, requires each institution, including the family itself, to fulfill its distinctive responsibilities.

Restoring the beauty of creation through housing, and welcoming families into this beauty, requires each institution, including the family itself, to fulfill its distinctive responsibilities. By approaching affordable rental housing through the question “Would I want to live in this unit?” institutions will promote housing that is fit for a family to thrive. Quality housing requires more intentionality and effort than meeting minimum standards. It is this intentionality that distinguishes housing that merely shelters from housing that truly supports a family’s flourishing. That commitment must therefore be reflected in legislation, funding, and inspection standards, the missions of nonprofits, faith-based organizations, and houses of worship. Together, they bear the responsibility to safeguard the well-being of families through providing quality housing, since the home is the primary environment in which a child’s life takes root.

Engage

Veronica Miranda, the Tenant Representative and tenant of state-funded Public Housing in Salem, describes quality housing as: “Housing that makes me feel safe... Housing that doesn’t have pests... When I think of dignified housing. I think of housing that the housing authority would be proud of just in terms of how the units are maintained. Having some level of feeling comfortable inside the unit... Being able to move around

and exist freely.”¹ Her insights, particularly the image of housing that the housing authority would be proud of, highlight the real implications of programming, inspections, and maintenance in creating environments for children to grow up in. It should not be a matter of meeting the bare minimum but rather striving to provide housing that is fit for a child to call home.

Welcome to Salem and Lynn, Massachusetts

The city Miranda lives in, Salem, and nearby Lynn, Massachusetts, are the settings for this report. Salem is home to over 45,000 people with 12.1% living in poverty.² These economic conditions contribute to significant demand for affordable rental housing that is not always met in terms of either availability or quality. The Salem Housing Authority manages 22 Public Housing sites and administers the Housing Choice Voucher program with a stated commitment to well-maintained and attractive housing.³ Their mission, however, is not consistently implemented. During a visit to one of the Public Housing developments as part of this research, a sense of home was immediately apparent through decorations and the presence of children’s toys. In another development, Miranda’s experience counters the housing authority’s stated commitment: she describes “perpetually overflowing dumpsters because they were not being maintained properly.”⁴ These two examples offer a small picture of the current housing landscape in Salem and the role of housing in providing stability for the families living there. They highlight the gap between housing authorities’ stated commitment to well-maintained and attractive units and the reality that this commitment is not always met.

Lynn is home to a diverse population of over 100,000 people, with beautiful murals lighting up the streets and after-school programs scattered across the city to foster safe places for children each day.⁵ Similar to Salem, Lynn struggles with meeting the housing needs of its residents, with thousands of households lacking access to affordable housing.⁶ Those living in Public Housing units still struggle with poor maintenance, as seen through a tenant survey conducted in partnership with the Lynn Housing Authority and the University of Massachusetts Boston. The survey found that 22% of the participating tenants rated the maintenance of the buildings as poor and 10% as good. These conditions have direct implications for the physical health, sense of security, and daily well-being of children living in those units.⁷ The Lynn Housing Authority and Neighborhood Development is working to address this quality crisis through programming like their Lead Abatement program, facilities and modernization department, and funding from the Healthy

Homes initiative.⁸ These efforts signal a local commitment to improving the conditions in which children grow and develop.

Lynn and Salem illustrate the realities of approaching a complex issue like affordable rental housing, yet each has stakeholders working toward meeting their residents' needs. The willingness of local and state leaders to engage with the specific challenges of affordable rental housing in their communities has contributed to this case study exploring efforts within these two cities.

State Investment and the Maintenance of Public Housing

Luke O'Roark, the Research Director for the Joint Committee on Housing for the State of Massachusetts, provides an overview of the current housing landscape. He says that "Public Housing federally and on the state level hasn't been funded appropriately... With that, there are a lot of housing authorities... that just don't have enough resources, not enough people to actually man and help out, to keep up with the need and keep units online. There needs to be more emphasis, more push, more money on it."⁹ For families living in underfunded and poorly maintained units, the consequences are significant. For children, the presence of hazards can affect every domain of development, from physical health to cognitive function to psychosocial stability. For tenants like Miranda, who has lived in state-funded Public Housing in Salem for approximately seven years, these resource gaps are not abstract: they show up as maintenance requests that go unaddressed and hazards that go undetected. One avenue for addressing this is the Affordable Homes Act, specifically the "Restoring Dignity to Public Housing" section, which allocates \$2.2 billion for modernization and operation costs.¹⁰ O'Roark's words and this legislation together underscore that without sustained investment, the gap between what families need and what housing authorities can provide will only widen, and children will continue to bear the cost.

O'Roark addresses the child dimension directly: "If we keep our housing stock up to date, if we modernize it a little bit more, we make sure mold and asbestos isn't in our house stock. We essentially prevent our children from getting sick... More modern homes means we are going to have more healthy children."¹¹ Modern homes support children's development because they use lead-free paint and can prevent or remediate the hazards commonly found in older buildings. To promote safe and healthy housing, O'Roark emphasizes the need to "trust local communities to do their jobs," noting that "a lot of decisions on development, the setbacks... and the pipelines used for being built are done at the local level."¹² Upholding safe environments for families therefore requires the

state to promote legislation and programs, with local housing authorities and organizations responsible for implementing those protocols on the ground.

Growing Up in Public Housing: A Representative's Perspective

The lived experience and civic efforts of Representative Manny Cruz of Salem highlight the importance of policies to promote quality housing and child well-being. He recounts:

"The place that we were the happiest was when we got our Section 8 Voucher and were able to rent an actual house and a home that we didn't have to share with other people, really provided us with dignity... From a personal lived experience standpoint, I think it reminded me that housing is something that is really important for psychological, physical and emotional safety. I knew early on before even getting into civic leadership that we needed to ensure that every single person had the dignity of a home."¹³

Representative Cruz's perspective shows the need for children to have access to a home that reflects their worth. Providing affordable rental housing should not be solely focused on access—quality and safety matter just as much. Representative Cruz addresses this through two priorities. The first is the Massachusetts Healthy Homes program, which he championed as someone who grew up in Public Housing and is now raising children of his own. The program provides state funding for homeowners of multifamily and single-family homes "to actually remove hazardous materials from the home to try to curb determinants that could happen—asthma, lead poisoning, etc."¹⁴ For children, the removal of such threats directly protects physical health and reduces the risk of chronic conditions that affect sleep, concentration, school attendance, and long-term development.

The second priority Cruz discusses is the push for the governor and legislature "to release the funding related to updating our Public Housing stock, which I just find to be a statement of our values and recognizing that our residents that need us the most, who are low income, disabled, veterans, families, that we firmly believe that as we try to build newer homes that we need to take care of the housing stock that we have now. That means providing dignity to people within our public housing."¹⁵ Releasing funds for improving Public Housing developments highlights that the state government sees the need to promote dignified environments for families. Representative Cruz points to a local level example of this where the Salem Housing Authority has already acted on

this through securing a grant from the Affordable Homes Act “to be able to upgrade the housing stock to ensure again that our residents have the dignity of accessible, safe, environmentally sound housing.”¹⁶ These state and local efforts signal that Massachusetts leaders understand that quality housing is more than a matter of access, especially when it comes to housing children.

The City of Salem’s own budget materials reinforce this commitment. The “City of Salem Operating Budget and Capital Plan for 2026-2030” frames the city’s work around “enhancing quality of life for residents,” which includes housing.¹⁷ Its own definition of well-being makes the connection explicit: “Salem recognizes the community’s right to safe, affordable, and life-enriching housing.”¹⁸ The phrase “life-enriching” is significant. It acknowledges that housing shapes the neighborhood environment a child grows up in, the hazards they are or are not exposed to, and the stability of their daily life. Life-enriching housing, in this framing, requires units that are well-maintained and situated in neighborhoods that provide opportunities. Quality housing is not just affordable housing. It is housing that actively promotes a safe and healthy environment for children to grow up in. Representative Cruz and the Salem budget materials together illustrate how state funding and legislation can align with municipal planning and investment to foster housing and neighborhoods where children can thrive.

Yes in God’s Backyard: Role of Houses of Worship

“In our mission-driven attempt to bring the Shalom of God to the community, we have identified several significant needs... Affordable Housing is at the top of that list,” says Pastor Kurt Lange of East Coast International Church in Lynn.¹⁹ The top floors of the church building contain 24 permanent supportive housing units that were made possible in collaboration with the Haven Project, of which Pastor Kurt serves as board president, and Harborlight Homes.²⁰ The units toured were bright and welcoming spaces with refinished wood floors, natural light coming through the large windows, an inviting kitchen, and newly renovated common spaces waiting to be filled by residents.²¹ This catalyst housing provides stability for young adults experiencing homelessness by offering a place to call home alongside services to meet residents’ holistic needs.²² Pastor Kurt notes that the church’s involvement has been well received: “We did not experience internal pushback within the church. They are in fact extremely proud to be involved with this. We have received light resistance from uninformed community members... we met with them all.”²³ The efforts of the East Coast International Church are an example of taking steps toward bringing the Shalom of God to a community through housing.

Pastor Kurt further explained his stance on churches’ role with housing through his advocacy for the Yes in God’s Backyard legislation (YIGBY) that would allow houses of worship and faith-based organizations to use their land for affordable housing development.²⁴ He acknowledges the hesitations many faith leaders have: “They don’t think it’s their responsibility; they don’t think they have the finances, they don’t think they can do it without internal resistance from their church.”²⁵ However, the housing efforts of Pastor Kurt and his church illustrate what becomes possible when churches move past these concerns. As he says, “I am also confident that all 56 of our current residents would say they are currently living in the nicest place they have ever lived.”²⁶ This example illustrates how a church can faithfully contribute to addressing housing needs by leveraging their distinctive resources—vacant building space, relationships, trust, long-term community presence and moral vision—and partnering with organizations whose expertise lies in housing development. Housing development is one meaningful expression of Christian neighbor-love and service, and churches that discern this calling will find they have more to offer than they may realize.

“In our mission-driven attempt to bring the Shalom of God to the community, we have identified several significant needs... Affordable Housing is at the top of that list,”

Creativity is Necessary: What Nonprofits Can Do

“Everyone deserves a place to call home” is one of the values of the North Shore Community Development Coalition (CDC). Lisl Hacker, the Chief Program Officer, explains its meaning as “having safe, secure, affordable space like a roof over your head but also a connection to community. It’s not always enough to have a roof over your head and a room to sleep in but how are you actually functioning in the community?” Her elaboration illustrates the importance of not only the physical condition of housing but also the local community. Connecting this priority to child well-being, she says that “Quality housing for children living in our units means a place that allows for stability, health, and future opportunity. It is a place that ensures health and environmental safety, physical and emotional stability, and economic security which are key to a child not just surviving, but thriving.” Hacker’s words underscore that housing is a necessary factor in promoting the present and future development of children.

One of the ways the CDC invests in the community is through the Punto Urban Art Museum, which grew out of a community assessment finding that residents “wanted to feel more pride and connection in their community, especially to their immigrant roots.”³⁰ The result is 75 murals painted throughout the Point neighborhood in Salem, many of them on CDC buildings.³¹ For Hacker, the purpose is twofold: “it’s direct beautification of the city and taking away that stigma that affordable housing is run down and not nice to look at.”³² The CDC’s approach illustrates that affordable housing should not only be affordable but also beautiful, and that incorporating beauty into design requires deliberate reflection and concrete steps to implement it.

“Just because it’s affordable doesn’t mean it has to be not high-quality,” Hacker states.³³ Affordable housing should not be built to meet minimum standards alone, and one of the ways to ensure this is through day-to-day management and maintenance. The CDC’s approach is to partner with a property management company: “We hire a property management company to do the management of all of our properties because we found it to be the case that being both the landlord and the support provider was a tough role to play... It ensures that residents get the best of both worlds: mission-driven advocacy from the CDC and professional, high-scale operational expertise from the management firm.”³⁴ This model of partnering with an outside company is worth considering as a mechanism for improving quality across affordable rental units more broadly.

Hacker also emphasizes the role of creativity in housing programming, which the CDC intentionally implements. Their senior housing offers a telling example: “We opened a senior housing facility but we didn’t keep those just one bedrooms either because I think we realized that sometimes grandparents are raising grandkids, so making sure there are options for that.”³⁵ This attention to the actual composition of families, including the children within them, exhibits the kind of responsive, person-centered approach that affordable housing requires. The North Shore CDC’s work highlights the critical role of nonprofits in meeting specialized needs and implementing creative strategies in providing quality units and community development.

Housing That the Authority Would Be Proud Of: Miranda’s Story

Veronica Miranda has lived in state-funded Public Housing in Salem for approximately seven years. Her experience illuminates what is at stake when inspections and maintenance fall short, and what becomes possible when affordable housing truly delivers on its promise.

On inspections, Miranda is matter-of-fact: “At this point, our inspections are in-house. That has its pros and cons. I think some things are overlooked or just assumed this is what it is... I will just write a list of things I know need to be fixed.”³⁶ This speaks directly to the importance of rigorous inspection standards, particularly the new NSPIRE standards designed to promote safety and healthy homes. The maintenance of her building, she says, is “minimally maintained to try to stay in line with what’s required by the state, by the local board of health.”³⁷ Meeting the minimum is not enough. The question her experience raises is what it would take to provide housing that genuinely reflects the dignity of the families within it.

One story makes the stakes vivid:

My daughter is allergic to mold, and when we first moved into our apartment a couple of years ago, she told me that she ‘liked the smell here,’ but she was coughing every night and at that point, I didn’t know why. That experience stayed with me because it highlighted how kids often adapt to unhealthy conditions without fully understanding that something is wrong. No child should have to normalize mold, poor air quality, chronic pests, or unhealthy living conditions in their home. Conditions like that impact sleep, physical health, concentration, school attendance, and emotional well-being.³⁸

Miranda’s daughter adapted to mold without knowing it was harming her. That is what inadequate maintenance looks like for children, not a dramatic crisis but a quiet, invisible erosion of their health. The physical condition of housing has serious consequences that cannot be overlooked.

And yet Miranda is equally clear about what this program has made possible: “Public Housing has also been truly life-saving for me and my family. Without deeply affordable housing, I don’t know if I would have been able to complete graduate school or avoid focusing solely on working full-time just to survive. That opportunity has undoubtedly had positive effects on my child’s well-being and future, and I’m extremely grateful for that. Public Housing can be generationally transformative in the most positive ways.”³⁹ Her words hold two truths at once: the program’s life-saving potential and the urgent need to fulfill that potential through housing that is hazard-free, well-maintained, and dignified. Housing authorities must strive to provide housing that protects children’s physical health and ensures that parents’ time is not consumed by advocating for basic dignified housing. As the Center for Public Justice’s guidelines on the family note, public policy must “take carefully into account the ways that other institutions and the dynamics

of society impact families positively and negatively.”⁴⁰ When housing authorities do not fulfill this responsibility, they do not only fall short in their own institutional vocation; they create conditions that prevent families from fulfilling theirs. One approach Miranda sees promise in is “Piloting social housing... to better maintain the units,” a mixed-income model that could help sustain the quality families deserve.⁴¹ Her insights illuminate the complex nature of implementing housing programs while underscoring the importance of housing authorities exploring how to provide housing they could truly be proud of.

Everyone is Needed to Promote Quality Housing for Children

Conversations with these stakeholders emphasize that no single institution can fully meet the needs of families, each bears a distinctive responsibility within the broader landscape of affordable rental housing. As Miranda puts it, “[Children] learn from their environment whether they are valued, safe, and cared for by the systems and people around them.”⁴² These institutions must therefore work together to provide housing that goes beyond minimum standards, reflecting the beauty and goodness God intended for the environments in which children grow. It is one thing to provide affordable housing; it is another to provide quality housing that genuinely reflects the dignity and worth of the families within it, and above all, the children who call it home. Building and maintaining housing of that quality is a significant undertaking, but it is the standard every institution bears responsibility to work toward. ■



Walking Alongside: Institutional Partnership and Transitional Housing in Chattanooga

Research Question:

What opportunities and barriers exist for implementing a church-based transitional housing model using prefabricated shelters, how feasible and scalable is this approach, and what policy constraints or disparities affect its implementation?

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Discover

A group of city workers, nonprofit volunteers, and college students walked through downtown Chattanooga, Tennessee, on a cold January night with a shared purpose: to serve the city's unhoused population. The pavement of 11th Street was scattered with torn sleeping bags, empty cans, and other signs of prolonged outdoor living. As they distributed relief items, the group also participated in a nationwide effort known as the Point-in-Time (PIT) count.

Conducted annually across the United States, the PIT count attempts to tally the number of unhoused people in the country—both sheltered and unsheltered—on a single night.¹ Sheltered individuals may be staying in emergency shelters, rehab centers, or other forms of temporary subsidized housing, including government-funded hotel stays. Unsheltered individuals are those living in places not meant for habitation, such as streets, cars, and abandoned lots. Volunteers recorded information such as household type, age, race and ethnicity, veteran status, and additional subpopulation data including serious mental illness, substance use disorder, and domestic violence survivor status.² In the few weeks following the PIT count, city officials attempted to identify individuals not found on the official night of the count.

That night, 1,092 individuals were counted as unhoused in Chattanooga.³ The PIT count is widely understood to underestimate the true scale of homelessness.⁴

One of the individuals not counted is a man named Vernon.⁵ He has a full-time job, cooks meals regularly, and is building friendships. Vernon is transitionally homeless, meaning he has been caught between losing one form of housing and securing another.⁶ He was sleeping in his car

when a local pastor invited him to stay in a short-term housing structure on church property. Over the past few months, this stability has given him the chance to start earning income and save some money. Vernon's goal for the future is to own a space that welcomes individuals who are unhoused and helps them get back on their feet. He recognizes that broken relationships are at the core of the crisis of homelessness, and that restored relationships must be part of the solution.

Homelessness: Identification and Measurement

Homelessness is not an issue unique to Chattanooga; cities all across the United States struggle with the complex challenges that contribute to homelessness. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) serves as the primary federal agency responsible for addressing housing insecurity, establishing standards and providing federal funding to regional coordinating bodies known as Continuums of Care (CoCs).⁷ CoCs in turn allocate resources to local organizations that provide housing, counseling, and self-sufficiency programs to individuals who are unhoused.⁸ Continuums of Care are responsible for ensuring access to four types of support: local outreach, shelter relief, transitional housing, and permanent housing support. While this support can be spread throughout different organizations in the community, the CoC as a whole must provide access to all four types of support. CoCs also oversee the assessment and count of individuals experiencing homelessness each year in their region.⁹ In this case, the relevant region is Chattanooga.

Accurately measuring homelessness remains a persistent challenge. Individuals who are unhoused often lack stable or long-term locations of habitation, making data collection difficult. The PIT count, while widely used, is understood to underestimate the true extent of homelessness.¹⁰ Due to increasing criminalization of homelessness along with social pressures, many individuals who are unhoused and unsheltered tend to reside in hidden places. HUD guidelines discourage PIT volunteers from entering hidden or potentially unsafe areas, further contributing to undercounting.¹¹ Despite these limitations, the 2025 PIT count recorded 771,480 individuals experiencing homelessness nationwide.¹²

Definitions, Causes, and Consequences of Homelessness

To be homeless is much more than lacking a roof above one's head. The experience is never one-size-fits-all; in fact, there are four main types of homelessness.¹³ The most common form of homelessness is transitional, referring to individuals like Vernon who experience housing instability for a brief period, generally less than one year.¹⁴ Episodic homelessness describes individuals who experience homelessness

at least three times within a year, a pattern often associated with unstable income and substance use challenges.¹⁵ The third form of homelessness is chronic homelessness, the type most commonly invoked in cultural assumptions about what it means to be unhoused. HUD defines a person experiencing chronic homelessness as someone who has lived “in a place not meant for human habitation, a safe haven, or in an emergency shelter... for at least 12 months.”¹⁶ The final form, hidden homelessness, includes individuals who lack stable housing but are not captured in official counts, such as those who stay temporarily with friends or family or in short-term accommodations.¹⁷

The causes of homelessness are rarely isolated; they tend to compound one another and deepen over time. Common contributing factors include eviction, unexpected financial burdens, lack of affordable housing, domestic abuse, mental health challenges, and substance addiction. Eviction, in particular, has been shown to cause immense strain on individuals and families, especially those who are already rent burdened. The term rent burdened refers to the condition of spending 30% or more of one’s income on housing costs.¹⁸ Eviction increases the likelihood of homelessness, while also reducing long-term credit access and stable employment.¹⁹ Research indicates that these effects are disproportionately severe for Black and female tenants, compounding existing inequities.²⁰ Separately, a shortage of affordable housing creates vulnerability even for those with stable employment, as rising rents outpace wage growth for many working families.²¹

The causes of homelessness are rarely isolated; they tend to compound one another and deepen over time.

Domestic violence remains a significant pathway into homelessness, particularly for women. Research focusing on the experience of older women points to a strong correlation between the two, and finds that homelessness is further perpetuated by continued abuse once individuals are living on the streets.²² Substance abuse also plays a significant role. William Thomas Bogart’s book, *The Economics of Cities and Suburbs*, explains that homelessness rose dramatically with the rise of crack cocaine.²³ Mental health challenges are closely interconnected with substance abuse and are both a cause and a perpetuating factor of homelessness. Each of these factors tends to deepen the others, making homelessness increasingly difficult to escape once it takes hold.

These causes have real and lasting consequences. Poor physical and mental health are among the most common, alongside a greater vulnerability to abuse and assault. As enforcement of anti-camping laws has increased, more individuals who are unhoused are forced out of visible public spaces such as parks and benches and into hidden or dangerous locations, which in turn increases their exposure to abuse, assault, and weather-related hazards, and contributes to further physical health deterioration.²⁴ Compared to the general population, individuals who are unhoused are more likely to be hospitalized, to use emergency departments, to face higher mortality rates, to be incarcerated, and to be unemployed.²⁵ These consequences are particularly acute for families experiencing homelessness, and especially for children within those families, whose development and long-term prospects are most severely affected.²⁶

Federal Programs and Funding

In response to these challenges, the federal government has developed a range of programs aimed at addressing homelessness. Homelessness affects not only individuals but also families, and the programs designed to address it must account for their specific needs. One of these programs is Rapid Re-Housing (RRH), which provides short- to medium-term rental assistance combined with case management—that is, professional support to help individuals navigate housing services and work toward stability.²⁷ Funded through HUD and administered through CoC agencies and local nonprofits, RRH programs are designed to address transitional homelessness and provide emergency relief for those without a home or resource safety net.²⁸ Rent support is typically structured to decrease over time with the goal of the family assuming full rent on their own. This program seeks not only to quickly house individuals, but to ease them into a permanent housing situation that will keep them off the streets permanently.²⁹ According to research from the University of Notre Dame, RRH programs are effective for immediate relief of those experiencing a housing crisis and have been implemented across the country.³⁰ The long-term sustainability of RRH programs does raise possible concerns, as 20% of RRH graduates were in an emergency shelter within seven to eighteen months.³¹

When it comes to sustaining programs like RRH and emergency relief, much of the responsibility is placed on the HUD spending budget that must be approved by Congress. The HUD budget has historically been volatile, leading to inconsistent funding for many of the programs that serve individuals who are unhoused.³² For example, the initial proposed HUD budget for fiscal year 2026 involved a 44% cut to core spending. In response, advocacy groups such as the National Coalition for the

Homeless and the National Low Income Housing Coalition mobilized opposition, publishing statements, organizing letter-writing campaigns, and building a coalition letter that grew to include thousands of organizations.³³ A combination of these efforts led to a final bill providing a budget increase rather than a decrease, with the new bill allocating \$77.3 billion for HUD programs.³⁴

Among the programs funded through HUD, the Housing Choice Voucher program—also known as Section 8—represents one of the federal government's primary tools for addressing housing insecurity.³⁵ These government-issued subsidies help low-income families, the elderly, and the disabled afford private market housing by paying a portion of the rent directly to participating landlords.³⁶ The program serves millions of households across the country, with participants typically paying 30% of their adjusted monthly income toward rent and utilities, while the voucher covers a portion of the remaining cost, subject to program rules and payment limits. However, the Housing Choice Voucher program faces significant structural barriers.³⁷ Many landlords with decent, safe, and sanitary housing choose not to participate due to the administrative complexity of the voucher program and its inspection requirements. This can limit families' actual housing choices despite the program's stated emphasis on allowing participants to choose where they live.³⁸

The federal rental assistance landscape faces heightened uncertainty as programs evolve under competing budgetary and regulatory pressures. As of the time of this writing, the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher program continues to operate, and current voucher holders continue receiving assistance, following a final fiscal year 2026 budget that increased Tenant-Based Rental Assistance funding to \$34.9 billion.³⁹ However, the Emergency Housing Voucher (EHV) program, created during the COVID-19 pandemic to assist people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, is winding down.⁴⁰ Congress increased Tenant Protection Vouchers (TPV) funding to help transition EHV households, but housing advocates report that HUD's interpretation of congressional funding has delayed the release of TPVs designed to assist transitioning households, leaving EHV holders at risk of assistance termination.⁴¹ Looking ahead, the future of the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher program remains uncertain. The administration's proposed fiscal year 2027 budget includes a policy rider that would bar housing authorities from issuing any new vouchers, with narrow exceptions.⁴² And a proposed HUD rule would allow housing authorities to impose work requirements and time limits on non-elderly, non-disabled voucher holders.⁴³ These funding dynamics illustrate both the scale of federal investment in rental assistance and the challenges of sustaining and expanding that assistance as housing needs continue to grow.⁴⁴

Local Housing Infrastructure and Coordination

At the local level, both public agencies and nonprofit organizations play central roles in coordinating housing services, each contributing according to their distinctive institutional vocation. The Chattanooga Housing Authority (CHA), a public housing agency, works to provide access to safe, decent, affordable housing and administers housing vouchers.⁴⁵ The Chattanooga Regional Homeless Coalition (CRHC), which serves as the region's Continuum of Care lead organization, fosters collaboration among service providers to ensure individuals and families in need receive comprehensive housing support. Under what CRHC calls its "local commitment," the organization works to "build a seamless network that promotes stability, dignity, and a future where homelessness is rare, brief, and nonrecurring."⁴⁶

CRHC manages the region's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), a shared data platform that compiles information collected during the PIT count. CRHC also manages the region's Coordinated Entry (CE) system, a streamlined process designed to connect people experiencing homelessness to housing and services. In theory, this coordinated system enables efficient identification, prioritization, and referral of individuals who are unhoused to available resources, including transitional housing. In practice, the process faces significant time-consuming obstacles, including the difficulty of obtaining proper documentation, making it hard even for those who successfully navigate the coordination process. The CHA uses this system to help determine which individuals are the best fit for available housing programs and to administer housing assistance, such as Housing Choice Vouchers, to those who qualify. While federal funding for Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers has not been frozen, local public housing agencies, such as the Chattanooga Housing Authority, frequently freeze waiting lists due to funding shortages and market pressures.⁴⁷

Chattanooga's Crisis: The Gap in Transitional Housing

Housing in Chattanooga reflects these broader trends while also revealing unique local challenges. According to the Chattanooga Regional Homeless Coalition (CRHC), homelessness increased by 12% in 2025, with a total of 1,092 individuals identified as unhoused.⁴⁸ Of these, 876 individuals live in Hamilton County, while the remainder were spread out across surrounding counties. Notably, over 50% of individuals had been homeless for less than a year, and 85% for less than five years, indicating a significant population experiencing transitional homelessness. At the same time, the city's shelter capacity only meets about 22% of need,⁴⁹ leaving the majority of individuals in need of a shelter without access to

one. These statistics make clear that homelessness in Chattanooga is not a small issue; it is a genuine crisis. Economic factors further compound the problem. Individuals who are unhoused often face significant barriers to securing and maintaining employment, particularly in entry-level positions that frequently do not pay enough to cover housing costs. The average hourly wage required for a typical two-bedroom apartment is over \$27, and over 76% of the jobs in Chattanooga pay below that wage rate. As a result, many individuals remain unable to afford housing stability despite employment.⁵⁰

The most striking gap lies in the response to transitional homelessness. According to Chattanooga's 2025 PIT count, 40.6% of households experiencing homelessness had been unhoused for six months or less, and another 10.3% for six months to a year—meaning over half had been homeless for less than a year.⁵¹ By definition, individuals experiencing chronic homelessness face more entrenched and compounding barriers than those experiencing more temporary housing instability. As the duration of homelessness increases, individuals are more likely to lose access to basic resources such as running water, clean clothing, and other necessities required for daily functioning and employment. The consequences of homelessness compound over time, including deteriorating physical and mental health. Individuals experiencing transitional homelessness, facing fewer of these compounding consequences, are often well suited for transitional housing programs. These programs are not made to be permanent solutions but rather a bridge between homelessness and stable housing. Most begin with fully subsidized rent and gradually ease the subsidy over time. Throughout the program, various wraparound services support tenants in reaching stable, independent living, with the goal of having tenants paying full rent on their own by the program's end.

These programs are not made to be permanent solutions but rather a bridge between homelessness and stable housing.

Despite the proven effectiveness of transitional housing programs, access remains extremely limited.⁵² In Chattanooga, 96% of households experiencing short-term or crisis-related homelessness were not enrolled in transitional housing. Of the 1,092 individuals counted last year, only twelve were enrolled in such programs.⁵³ This disparity reflects both a severe lack of programs and services addressing transitional

homelessness and a failure to properly identify those who should be placed in them.⁵⁴ The early months of homelessness represent a pivotal window in which poverty can either be addressed directly or become increasingly intractable.

Government programs and services are available in Chattanooga, but accessing them is far from straightforward. Metropolitan Ministries, a local nonprofit, helps connect individuals who are unhoused to these government services, including providing an address for individuals without one—a basic requirement for many enrollment processes. Signing up for a housing voucher or a social service program as an individual who is unhoused is nearly impossible without this kind of support. Many enrollment processes require documentation and identification documents that can take months or even years to obtain. Without the assistance of a case manager, navigation becomes extraordinarily difficult.

The longer an individual or household experiences homelessness, the more barriers accumulate. Without stable housing, safe shelter, or reliable transportation, finding and keeping a job becomes increasingly difficult. And without a stable job, there is no income to break the cycle. This cycle leaves individuals suffering from housing instability in need of sustained external support to become self-sufficient.

A Different Story

Homelessness is a nationwide crisis. Millions live with the consequences of homelessness—present or past—often unseen by the community around them.⁵⁵ Despite significant federal investment, local coordination, and community engagement, existing systems fall short of addressing the full scope of the issue. The City of Chattanooga is home to 3,471 nonprofit organizations that employ 34,406 people and hold a combined \$8 billion in assets.⁵⁶ Many of these organizations work to connect individuals who are unhoused to federal programs and funding. Still, the narrative in Chattanooga mirrors that of the nation: organizations are spread thin, local Housing Choice Voucher waiting lists remain frozen to new applicants at the time of writing, and people remain hidden and uncounted.

Vernon's story, though, is different. By engaging with a local church, he has been connected to meaningful relationships and opportunities to support himself. He is actively engaging his new community by power washing the church building. Vernon is connected to multiple other congregants who were themselves formerly experiencing homelessness until they found community through the church. A path toward self-

sufficiency, meaningful work, and fellowship has opened before him. Maybe the church is a missing piece—one that existing systems have yet to fully utilize.

Frame

Across Scripture, God calls people to do justice and to love their neighbors. Central to this vision is the creation narrative. Genesis 1:26 reads, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.”¹ Human beings are created in the image of God—*Imago Dei*—which places a high value on human life and dignity. Because every person bears the image of God, every person deserves to be treated with dignity, care, and respect—including those who are experiencing homelessness.

Inherent to image bearing is the principle of loving your neighbor. Not only is this the second greatest commandment in the Christian faith, but it is also the governing standard for how image-bearers are called to treat one another. In Matthew 22:39, Jesus commands his followers to “love your neighbor as yourself.”² This principle pursues human flourishing for both the individual and the community. When a person loves their neighbor, the neighbor’s dignity as an image-bearer is affirmed. If communities look after one another, a greater number of needs can be addressed and more people are dignified and cared for.

The Old Testament develops this call with particular attention to the vulnerable. Leviticus 19:33 commands care for the stranger, and individuals who are unhoused are often strangers in precisely this biblical sense— isolated, estranged, or excluded from society due to their circumstances. Leviticus 25:35 adds: “If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you.” These commands are reaffirmed when Jesus says in Matthew 25:35-45, “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me... as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.” Jesus identifies himself with the most vulnerable and calls his followers to see and serve him in the faces of those who are suffering

Scripture models this principle in the parable of the Good Samaritan. This parable illustrates how loving your neighbor upholds and affirms the dignity of the vulnerable and provides a symbol of sacrifice and service. Jesus explained in Luke 10:33-35:

But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’³

In the midst of brokenness, abuse, and imminent death, the neighbor draws near, rescues, cleans, heals, and honors the vulnerable man’s dignity. This is radical hospitality. The Samaritan’s active choice to rescue someone in serious danger not only saved the man’s life but ensured that he was recognized and treated as an equal. Radical hospitality of this kind encompasses the principles of image bearing, human dignity, and loving one’s neighbor, responding directly to the needs of the vulnerable. This is the call of every Christian, though each is called to live it out according to their particular vocation. Yet addressing the needs of the unhoused is not solely an individual responsibility. It is a shared responsibility that requires the cooperation of families, churches, nonprofit organizations, communities, and government.

Government’s Role in Addressing Homelessness

Government bears the responsibility to uphold public justice for all citizens, including the most vulnerable. As the Center for Public Justice (CPJ) outlines, government must uphold “the common good of the political community in its own right, which includes protecting citizens from domestic and foreign injustice while recognizing in law the non-political responsibilities that belong to those who live in the territory of government’s jurisdiction.”⁴ This definition has direct implications for homelessness: the first dimension requires that government actively respond to the crisis, while the second acknowledges the essential partnership of civil society institutions and individuals in that response. The CPJ guidelines further state that government “bears responsibility to guard against the emergence of intractable poverty in society and to ensure that appropriate and effective steps are taken to address such poverty.”⁵ For individuals experiencing homelessness, this means the federal government establishing funding and standards, state and local actors administering programs and enforcing accountability, and municipal governments shaping the land use and zoning that make housing possible. There are currently major government programs pursuing these goals across these levels, but each faces significant complications that demand attention.

Housing Choice Vouchers

One of the most significant of these programs is the Housing Choice Voucher program: HUD sets program standards and funding at the federal level, while the local housing authorities administer vouchers to connect low-income families to stable housing. The program emphasizes participants choosing their own home, giving individuals a measure of autonomy in their housing situation. However, serious structural barriers limit its effectiveness and undermine the dignity of those it is meant to serve. The first barrier is landlord participation. Many landlords with decent, safe, and sanitary housing choose not to participate, severely restricting participants' actual choices. The second barrier is localized supply and operational capacity. While the final federal fiscal year 2026 HUD appropriations bill expanded nationwide voucher funding, the intersection of increasing market rents and fixed local budgets has made many municipal housing authorities implement localized functional freezes. In places such as Chattanooga, the master waiting lists remain frozen to new applicants.⁶

“[It] is a maddening system and I'm pretty tenacious... it feels impossible.”

Looking beyond these immediate local constraints, the long-term future of the Housing Choice Voucher program also faces uncertainty heading into fiscal year 2027. The third barrier is access. Even when vouchers are available, they can only be obtained through the referral of a homeless services case worker—a process that is itself difficult to navigate given the limited number of case workers available. Rachel Karman Hernandez, a former case worker who now serves as director of Young Life ONE working with youth experiencing homelessness, incarceration, or foster care, reflected on her experience navigating these systems: “[It] is a maddening system and I'm pretty tenacious... it feels impossible.”⁷ Her words capture what many case workers experience: a system so complex that even trained professionals struggle to move people through it. Without a streamlined and supportive system, case workers can become an unintentional barrier to housing for individuals experiencing transitional homelessness, despite their best efforts to help.

At the federal level, vouchers could be offered consistently and in increasing amounts as homelessness becomes more widespread. Growing demand should be followed by growing supply. A more comprehensive policy ensuring an adequate amount of decent, safe, and

sanitary housing would greatly benefit individuals who are unhoused. Stronger standards for what qualifies as decent, safe, and sanitary housing would provide long-term benefits to program participants and could increase the number of landlords willing to accept vouchers, by raising the quality and market value of housing besides subsidized units. Intentional changes to voucher programs could meet the needs of those who are experiencing homelessness by providing them access to places that affirm their dignity.

Streamlining Access to Social Services

There also needs to be a reworking of how individuals access social services. If a former case worker finds it nearly impossible to navigate these systems on behalf of those experiencing homelessness, those experiencing homelessness directly face even greater obstacles. The referral process should be streamlined and made genuinely accessible. More homeless services case workers should be hired and the process reworked so that it best connects participants to the programs they qualify for, ensuring that the system serves those it is designed to help rather than creating additional barriers.

Housing First

The Housing First model is another significant approach to addressing homelessness, though its federal funding priority has recently become a subject of significant policy dispute.⁸ The model prioritizes placing a program participant into a permanent home of their choice before tackling income, budgeting, substance abuse, and other complex circumstances.⁹ By prioritizing stable housing, this model recognizes that individuals cannot meaningfully address other challenges without first having a safe place to live. The effectiveness of this model has been debated, and in 2026 HUD explicitly deprioritized Housing First in its Continuum of Care funding, redirecting resources toward transitional housing and recovery-focused approaches instead.¹⁰ Its impact has also been limited by the extreme deficit of affordable housing, which restricts participants' actual choice of home. Without adequate economic incentive, affordable housing is not supplied at the pace of demand. Expanding the affordable housing supply therefore remains essential to any long-term approach to addressing homelessness.

Expanding the Affordable Housing Supply: Mixed-Income Housing

One possible solution is an increase in mixed-income housing development, which depends substantially on municipal governments

working alongside private developers who build and operate units at different price points within the same building or community. In this model, the majority of units are priced at market rate, generating enough revenue to cover shared costs such as facility maintenance and communal services.¹¹ Housing developments like these benefit families in several ways. By creating a mixed-income environment, these programs are believed to foster safer communities, deconcentrate poverty, and promote racial and economic integration.¹² Other options include workforce housing units, priced to be affordable for lower-income workers based on local wage rates. A smaller portion is more substantially subsidized for those most in need, including individuals experiencing homelessness. This model protects against poverty enclaves—communities where concentrated poverty prevents residents from affording basic communal services such as trash collection, facility upkeep, and green outdoor spaces that contribute to human flourishing. With an increase in mixed-income housing, more affordable options would become available while counteracting negative externalities that arise when expanding low-income housing alone.

Transitional Housing

Another major program serving those who experience homelessness is transitional housing. These programs provide temporary housing to individuals for up to one year along with wraparound services designed to equip individuals to eventually move into permanent housing. Programs like these seek to rehouse individuals quickly and then support them on their journey to attain employment, build connections, and pursue stable housing. While these programs have seen success in forming a stable avenue out of homelessness, they are far from perfect.¹³ Nationally transitional housing has declined significantly—falling by 4% between 2023 and 2024 and by 60% since 2007.¹⁴ In Chattanooga, this decline has led to only twelve beds being filled for transitional housing in the past year.¹⁵ With fewer and fewer transitional housing programs available, emergency shelters are overwhelmed and lack adequate bed capacity.

Government funding and policy at the federal level should therefore prioritize increasing the number of transitional housing beds available, so that human dignity might be honored for those who are unhoused. Beyond increasing capacity, some transitional housing programs must also be adapted to reflect the principle of loving one's neighbor. A recent study of transitional housing programs reported a significant lack of human warmth in their experience.¹⁶ One interviewee explained, "small improvements could be made, not even by investing a lot of money, but rather by dealing with the intention of helping... something beautiful, yes as a little bit of human warmth."¹⁷ Local housing authorities like the CHA,

in partnership with organizations like Metropolitan Ministries, could enlist the support of houses of worship to provide genuine hospitality to those these programs serve—an institutional partnership this report's Engage section illustrates in practice. Individuals experiencing homelessness are vulnerable, and stable housing alone is not sufficient. Radical hospitality is also needed to begin honoring their sense of dignity and belonging.

The Role of Civil Society

While government programs are essential, they cannot alone address the relational and spiritual dimensions of homelessness. Nonprofits, faith-based organizations, and houses of worship each bring distinct capacities that government programs cannot provide, and their partnership is essential to any adequate response.

Faith-Based Organizations

Walking alongside individuals who are unhoused can also be effectively done by nongovernmental organizations. Local nonprofits and faith-based organizations (FBOs) can provide unique avenues for relationships that government programs alone cannot replicate. FBOs account for two of every five emergency shelter beds in the United States, making them not a secondary supporter but rather a prominent and essential player in the pursuit of ending homelessness.¹⁸ Their contributions vary by institutional type: some FBOs directly operate shelters or transitional housing, while others function primarily as service coordinators, connecting people to resources without providing housing themselves. Because of their strong community connections, these organizations have access to volunteers and flexible donor funds. Members of these groups are often leaders in Continuum of Care services and participate in HUD-funded projects.¹⁹ Rather than assigning identical responsibilities to every FBO, government partnerships are most effective when they draw on each organization's particular expertise—whether that is direct shelter provision, relational care, or system navigation. FBOs would be particularly effective partners in transitional housing programs because they are already connected to the population they serve and better equipped to provide the relational care that government programs often lack. HUD and local housing authorities like the CHA should support FBOs to help fill in the gaps in existing services, recognizing that the partnership of civil society institutions is essential to any adequate response to homelessness.²⁰

Houses of Worship

For every house of worship in the United States²¹ there are just over two individuals who are unhoused.²² This ratio suggests real capacity, even if not every congregation is positioned to act on it in the same way. These statistics should motivate those who want to help but are not sure where to start. It does not take a miracle to provide the encouragement and hospitality a neighbor might need. The Good Samaritan was no billionaire, nor was he a miracle worker. He was a neighbor who cared for the vulnerable individual in front of him. Walking alongside someone who is experiencing homelessness can be as simple as being their friend—seeking them out for a conversation, inviting them to dinner, offering to buy them new work clothes. Letting someone know that you believe in them and see their dignity can be a meaningful first step toward restoration. This is an opportunity for churches, synagogues, mosques, and other religious groups who want to expand their ministry of compassion. Many of these groups already serve this vulnerable population in a variety of ways, yet there remains a great need for increased radical hospitality and wraparound care.

For every house of worship in the United States there are just over two individuals who are unhoused.

Christians have a particular call to this ministry, rooted in scriptural obligations established earlier in this section. Bill Rush, CEO of Metropolitan Ministries in Chattanooga, advocates for keeping this work small-scale. As he puts it, “Christ only disciplined twelve”—meaning Jesus was intentional with a select few people who in turn spread the message far. Sincere personal hospitality is difficult to sustain on a large scale. Genuine care and love require intentionality: getting to know someone, meeting their needs, entering into their life, and walking alongside them over time. The lives and hearts of the disciples were changed by Jesus over the course of three years. Rush’s approach at Metropolitan Ministries reflects the kind of small, intentional, personal care for individuals experiencing homelessness. Churches that embrace this kind of radical hospitality can fulfill their call to love their neighbor in a way that honors the dignity often overlooked by larger institutional responses. A church is often the first place someone will go for help, giving faith communities a unique ability to provide small-scale shelters and radical hospitality. Believing that all people are created in the image of God should be a catalyst to seeking the dignity and holistic restoration of each of these image-bearers, especially the most vulnerable.

A Unified Response

In an ideal world, every person made in the image of God would be treated according to that truth through the universal application of loving one’s neighbor. Individuals would be met by their neighbors and welcomed into community, their dignity recognized rather than overlooked. This ideal is not yet realized. Homelessness continues to grow, and too many individuals go unseen and excluded from the community around them. Yet there is still hope. Many organizations, houses of worship, and government agencies are already working toward a society in which every individual is stably and permanently housed. Government, nonprofits, houses of worship, and faith-based organizations each serves its community with diligence and brings unique strengths to this shared work. Houses of worship in particular have a unique opportunity to provide small-scale shelters and radical hospitality for individuals who are experiencing homelessness within their local community. Together, these institutions can present the unified front that the crisis of homelessness requires—one grounded in the conviction that every person bears the image of God and deserves to be seen, welcomed, and treated as such.

Engage

Case Study: A Small-Scale Transitional Housing Pilot

Just off I-24 sits the heart of this case study. The large property of the First Church of the Nazarene in Chattanooga, Tennessee, contains four small short-term housing units. Each “cabin” is 8-by-8-foot and home to a bed, drawers, a simple light fixture, and a heating and cooling unit. The two small windows are fitted with privacy curtains while light streams in from the skylight in the slanted roof. The ceiling feels high even with the minimal square footage. Perhaps most importantly, the door can lock at night, giving residents enough peace to sleep. These four cabins are a few paces from the bottom floor of the church, which is home to bathrooms, showers, a warming kitchen, and a community room. Pastor Eric Johnson envisions this space to be a connection point between the congregation and residents—a place where small groups and Sunday school classes can form long-term relationships, and where social workers visit regularly to link residents to available government services or programs.¹ Vernon—whose story opened this report—is currently one of those residents. The stability of a locked door and a community around him has allowed him to find employment and begin making his way toward permanent

housing. His story, and the pilot program that made it possible, illustrate what radical hospitality can look like in practice.

A Coalition Response

The program is a year-long pilot placing short-term living structures on church properties. It brings together local government officials, nonprofit organizations, a for-profit company, and multiple houses of worship to address the needs of individuals who are transitionally homeless. These shelters are primarily 3D printed and designed for transitional, not permanent, living. Funding comes from the Maclellan Foundation, a faith-based foundation dedicated to discipleship, community transformation, and supporting ministries that meet practical and spiritual needs. The Foundation was seeking new ways to address rising homelessness in Chattanooga when Branch Technology came to them with the 3D-printed structures. The Foundation's focus on Christian discipleship and community transformation shaped the pilot's design, which is rooted explicitly in a Christian response to homelessness. The model itself, however, is one that other houses of worship across faith traditions could adapt and adopt. The Foundation chose to fund the program on the condition that all money and consulting ran through Metropolitan Ministries. The organization provides emergency financial assistance for utilities, rent subsidies, and hygiene supplies, as well as rapid rehousing connections, supplemental nutrition, English as Second Language classes, General Educational Development classes, and chapel services. Much of this work is supported by HUD funding. Its leader, Bill Rush, brings decades of experience and vast connections in the Chattanooga homelessness landscape.² The physical structures are printed by Branch Technology, a local for-profit business whose work typically ranges from Apple stores to high-end hotels worldwide. Based in Chattanooga and led by a mostly Christian leadership team, Branch responded to a call to serve their city. The pilot has been approved and endorsed by city officials, including the mayor, the homeless outreach coordinator, and zoning regulators. An advisory board composed of local leaders, established by the Maclellan Foundation, provides oversight and functions as a decision-maker and sounding board. The authors of this report, Dr. Lance Wescher, Margot Kapic, and Michael Mawhinney, serve as third-party assessors for the pilot, documenting the process from start to finish and producing a final report for the Maclellan Foundation at the end of 2026.

From City Hall to the Job Site

At the beginning of this pilot project, Ben Beatty served as the Homeless Outreach Coordinator for the City of Chattanooga, working largely

through the Regional Outreach Cooperative (ROC), the hands and feet of the city's efforts to reach individuals who are unhoused.³ Beatty had embraced the role out of a desire to care for the city's unhoused population, and his approach centered on building relationships with those he served. As federal policy shifted toward the criminalization of homelessness,⁴ Beatty found that a deeper partnership with local houses of worship offered a constructive path forward. He helped coordinate Shower Up, a mobile showering service that sets up regularly in church parking lots and is run entirely by church volunteers. Other houses of worship function as food pantries, lending their space and resources to the city's outreach efforts.

Early in his tenure, Beatty was handed the tail end of a homelessness shelter initiative and tasked with seeing it to completion. These shelters were similar to the pilot program but were located near a cluster of government services and a food pantry. The intention was to place tenants near sources of assistance, but in practice, the location also kept many residents close to the environments and circumstances they had been trying to leave behind. Beatty dealt with nightly break-ins and unwanted visitors and concluded that the model did not work. That experience made him particularly enthusiastic about this pilot program, which introduces a critical new element: churches. This is precisely the kind of holistic approach that Beatty believes is most effective when addressing a problem as complicated as homelessness. As he put it simply, "People need a door to lock at night."⁵ At the site of the previous program, fences surrounding the property were not kept up, resulting in unwanted visitors. This negated much of the stability these shelters offered. With shelters on church properties, residents are often in environments that offer greater security and stability, allowing for restorative rest and genuine relationship-building. They are not only removed from circumstances that may have contributed to their instability but placed in a setting with immediate care, stability, and community.

Beatty has since moved to Branch Technology, where he brings years of expertise in federal funding and homelessness policy to this new position. As he transitioned roles, he observed that the city of Chattanooga is nearing a point where it can no longer ignore public pressure to address rising homelessness. The city is currently unwilling to approve low-barrier, high-volume shelters, which Beatty sees as an opportunity for the kind of low-volume, high-barrier model this pilot employs. As Branch CFO Dan Wykoff observed, Beatty is no longer a solution seeker but a solution provider.⁶

David Norman, Beatty's predecessor at Branch, laid the foundation for handling and implementing the 3D-printed shelters and brought a

distinctive vision to the work.⁷ Even at a for-profit company, he wanted to use their unique technology to address the needs of those not reached by efficient markets. His guiding principle was simple: “remember the poor.” Norman believes not only that each individual bears the image of God, but that “we bear the divine image cooperatively,” a conviction evident in how the entire pilot is structured around collective care.⁸ His work raised the question that drives the pilot: what would it look like for a church to honor the dignity of image-bearers experiencing transitional homelessness?

Hosting the Pilot

Churches seeking to host a structure must sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) committing to provide relational, physical, economic, institutional, and spiritual support to a resident. Pastor Eric Johnson of the First Church of the Nazarene is working to select residents through existing church connections—among them a woman facing eviction after years of receiving church assistance for overdue bills, and another woman who had left an abusive relationship and was working toward sobriety. Each tenant will sign their own agreement detailing the terms of living on church property, covering provisions around smoking, substances, key lending, and property care, designed to protect the resident, the congregation, and the surrounding community alike. The church walks alongside the tenant for six to twelve months, following a roadmap aimed at self-sufficiency and permanent housing that moves through four stages: immediate care and stabilization, documentation and job readiness, application and action, and movement toward permanent housing. Through the city and nonprofit connections of the pilot collaboration, churches are provided with an extensive network to draw on throughout the journey.

Pastor Eric Johnson has spent fifteen years working with individuals who are unhoused and the last two years searching for transitional housing opportunities, driven by the recognition that existing resources in Chattanooga do not consistently meet this critical need. That search connected him to Branch Technology and eventually the pilot program. Johnson believes that a replicable model can be established if more churches share in this kind of transitional housing work, and he is grateful that Branch Technology, a for-profit business, has been willing to look at solutions for a community need. Their leadership, he noted, has been an essential part of moving the program forward. His efforts have been pivotal: organizing zoning meetings, working with his neighborhood association, involving his congregation, and ultimately finding tenants for the structures. As a solo pastor, he has done immense work on his own, yet he is keenly aware of the necessity of community. As the

pilot got underway, Pastor Eric organized a service day to clean up the area surrounding the cabins and gut the future community room and bathrooms downstairs. As plans came together, Pastor Eric said in his calm and collected tone, “I’m tickled by how the Holy Spirit is drawing everyone into cooperative work.”⁹ This rang true on the service day itself, as a high school youth group, college students, faculty volunteers, and church members all worked alongside one another. One group was made up of a college student, a high school student, a faculty spouse, and Vernon.

“I’m tickled by how the Holy Spirit is drawing everyone into cooperative work.”

Vernon is transitionally homeless and currently resides at the First Church of the Nazarene.¹⁰ The stability the program has provided has given him enough footing to find a job, earn income, and begin making his way toward permanent housing. He is connected to the community and an active participant in it—as the service day made clear. Fiercely independent by nature, Vernon is keenly aware of what it means to lack support, and equally aware of what it means to receive it. As he gains more stability, he hopes eventually to purchase space dedicated to those who are transitionally homeless, to provide the kind of support that allows people to get back on their feet. As he put it, “God says—look, there is someone without a home. Are you feeding them? Are you clothing them?”¹¹ Sometimes, Vernon reflected, all it takes is a roof over your head and someone who cares about you.

Walking Alongside: The Relational Core

Homelessness is a multifaceted issue. Individuals who are unhoused often lack supportive relationships and social networks, leaving them with no one to turn to in their need. They may lack the necessary skills to navigate government services, apply for jobs, or maintain daily routines, including personal care and medical appointments. Each of these challenges can be easier to navigate with someone walking alongside a resident. Rachel Karman Hernandez, director of Young Life ONE and former homeless services case worker, captured this balance well: “I will work really hard at your life, but I will never work harder than you do,” describing her approach to working day-to-day with young people experiencing homelessness.¹² With homeless services case workers facing higher demand than ever, additional sources of support are essential. The church—with its focus

on loving relationships, flexible funding, and a large volunteer base—is uniquely positioned to fill that gap.

Bill Rush brings that same philosophy and over forty years of experience to the pilot program. Even with recent federal cuts to HUD funding,¹³ Rush remains focused on what money alone cannot provide: “Dollars aren’t going to solve it, people are.”¹⁴ The rising need for Metropolitan Ministries’ services is striking: in recent months the organization’s daily call count has risen from approximately 200 to over 700 calls per day. This increase reflects just how much demand is growing for support among this vulnerable population. Rush notes that this pilot has been the most challenging and yet one of the most interesting he has been involved in. The smaller-scale shelters made possible by spreading the tenants across churches are precisely what appeals to him. In a meeting, he noted that Christ only disciplined twelve. Large-scale models can create distance from the individual circumstances and relationships at the heart of the problem. Individuals who are unhoused come with unique stories, and there is no one-size-fits-all program. A small-scale approach, paired with an intensive servant leadership model, allows for those stories to be heard and addressed with the attention and detail they deserve. Rush summarized the philosophy simply as “walking with people, not doing it for them.”¹⁵ When a whole congregation walks alongside one to four residents, it can help them navigate the roadmap to permanent housing without requiring them to face that journey alone. After all, as Genesis 2:18 reminds: “It is not good that the man should be alone.”¹⁶

The Path Forward

Pastor Eric Johnson, Bill Rush, Ben Beatty, Rachel Karman Hernandez, and David Norman are doing more than responding to a housing crisis. Through their work in the church, the city, Metropolitan Ministries, Young Life ONE, and Branch Technology, they are seeking to honor the dignity of image-bearers. The cooperation of multiple institutions through this pilot represents one step toward Beatty’s vision: a holistic approach to alleviating homelessness in Chattanooga.

Vernon’s story testifies to what can become possible when a congregation commits to radical hospitality. He is not an exception—he is an example. At the First Church of the Nazarene, four women experiencing transitional homelessness are now being welcomed into the same program, their space prepared and their community ready to walk alongside them. The pilot is still young, but its early evidence points to what may be possible: when a church is able and willing to provide support, a relational community, and a roadmap toward permanent

housing, individuals experiencing transitional homelessness can have a real path forward.

While this pilot grows out of a specifically Christian vision of radical hospitality, its approach may offer a model for other faith communities to consider. Where a congregation or house of worship has appropriate space, resources, leadership, and capacity for sustained involvement, it may be able to adapt elements of the model to its own context. The pilot’s broader invitation is not simply to replicate a program, but to consider what can happen when communities with the capacity to do so open their doors, commit their resources, partner with other institutions, and build relationships with people experiencing transitional homelessness. ■

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“Doing Better by Our Boys”: Lessons from Chicago to Advance the Flourishing of Boys and Young Men

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Jonathan Porteous is a student at Wheaton College, IL majoring in cultural anthropology and urban studies and pursuing a certificate in Human Needs and Global Resources (HNGR). Born in Johannesburg, South Africa, he mostly grew up near Boston, MA and has also lived in rural New Jersey and southern Florida. He followed a vocational high school track and spent a few wonderful and formative years working as an equine professional in high performance sport. He stepped back from this work to allow for a time of discernment and travel, spending time at places like L’Abri Fellowship in England, which eventually led him to college. He is interested in the development and function of educational ecosystems and their formational effects, and hopes to pursue graduate studies related to these topics following his undergraduate years. Jonathan is an alumnus of Wheaton in Chicago, an experiential urban studies program, and was the recipient of the 2025 Wheaton College Global Scholar Award.



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Refocusing the Priorities of Affordable Rental Housing: Investing in Quality and Child Well-being

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Emma Scott grew up in Central New Hampshire and loved to spend time at the beaches with her family and friends. She just received her Bachelors of Arts degree in Social Welfare from Gordon College. She plans to continue working to cultivate spaces for children to thrive by using her countless years of experience in doing just that through tutoring, leading summer camps, and interning at a Head Start agency. She is excited to work with others who are focused on serving children and families in a way that reflects their dignity and worth.



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Walking Alongside: Institutional Partnership and Transitional Housing in Chattanooga

MARGOT KAPIC | MICHAEL MAWHINNEY | LANCE WESCHER, PH.D.



Margot Kapic is pursuing a degree in economics. One of her favorite courses was U.S. Urban Poverty, taught by Dr. Lance Wescher. It opened her eyes to the structural and systematic brokenness that is a contributing factor of poverty in our country. Being born and raised in Chattanooga has deepened her interest in the alleviation of homelessness within her city. Working with organizations such as Metropolitan Ministries and The Chalmers Center gives her much hope. Daughter of a theologian and a non-profit innovation consultant, Margot's background has laid the foundation for her to address social injustice and inequality. Her mom especially has instilled in her a drive to seek after justice for those without a voice. She is an active member of Northshore Fellowship Church, located in the center of north Chattanooga. Margot loves hiking and making latte art in her free time.



Michael Mawhinney, originating from Sarasota FL, is pursuing an economics degree. Throughout his time at Covenant, he has been intrigued by the issues of poverty and homelessness. Michael is pursuing vocational ministry to help reach the poor and marginalized through whatever ministry the Lord puts him in. Michael has been deeply concerned about how churches are reaching the poor and needy like the gospel of Luke commands. He sees a prevalent need in the community and that churches have the opportunity to meet if they are presented with the resources. He hopes to synthesize his economic analysis and research with his heart for ministry to contribute to this project in a way that cares for those without a roof over their head.

Covenant College

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Lance Wescher, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor of Economics and the Chairman of the Department of Economics and Community Development at Covenant College. He also serves as the US Economic Development Specialist and is the Director of the IDA Pilot Program for the Chalmers Center for Economic and Community Development at Covenant College. Dr. Wescher earned his B.A. in Economics with a minor in Theology from Wheaton College and an M.A. and Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Notre Dame. Lance has worked in banking with Wells Fargo and Company and consulting with Hewitt Associates. His areas of research include Labor Economics, Health Economics, Pensions and Finance. Prior to coming to Covenant College, he taught Economics at Wheaton College.

End Notes

“Doing Better by Our Boys”: Lessons from Chicago to Advance the Flourishing of Boys and Young Men

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Refocusing the Priorities of Affordable Rental Housing: Investing in Quality and Child Well-being

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