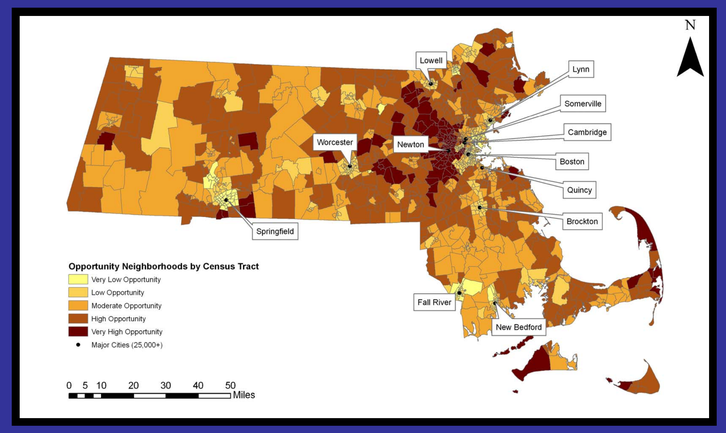
PLACE MATTERS: Opportunity Mapping of Massachusetts Public Housing

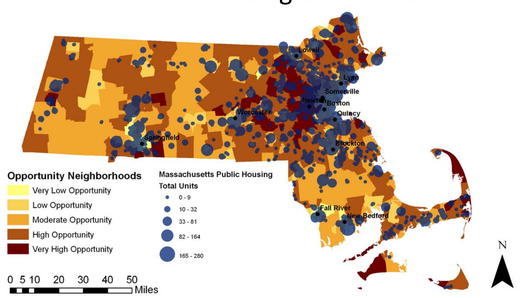
Overview

The majority of academic research and literature indicates that where a person lives determines the opportunities afforded to them. In 2009, the Kirwan Institute completed a project to map the geography of opportunity in Massachusetts. The Institute used 19 different indicators of opportunity such as: unemployment, crime statistics, dropout and graduation rates, proximity to toxic waste sites and others. Through statistical analysis, the data was then compiled into levels of opportunity that were mapped by census tract (the "neighborhoods"). Using ArcGIS, the goal of this project was to examine the distribution of both federal and state-assisted public housing units over these opportunity neighborhoods. In particular, this project aimed to: draw comparisons between the federal and state programs; compare public housing to private affordable housing (Low Income Housing Tax Projects); and to compare the distribution of state-assisted family units to those from the elderly and disabled housing programs.

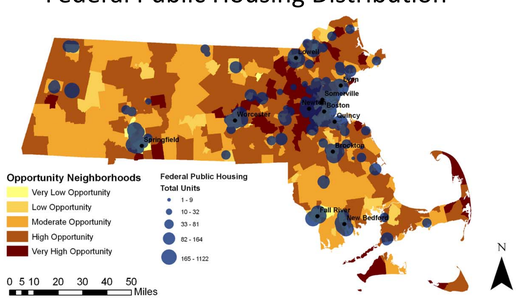


The Geography of Housing Opportunity

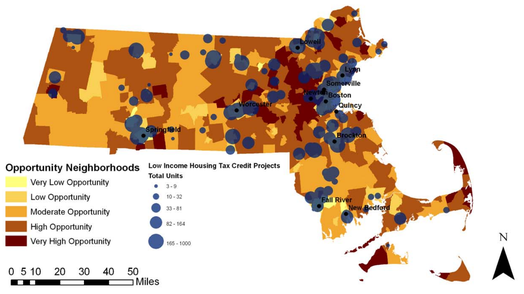
State Public Housing Distribution



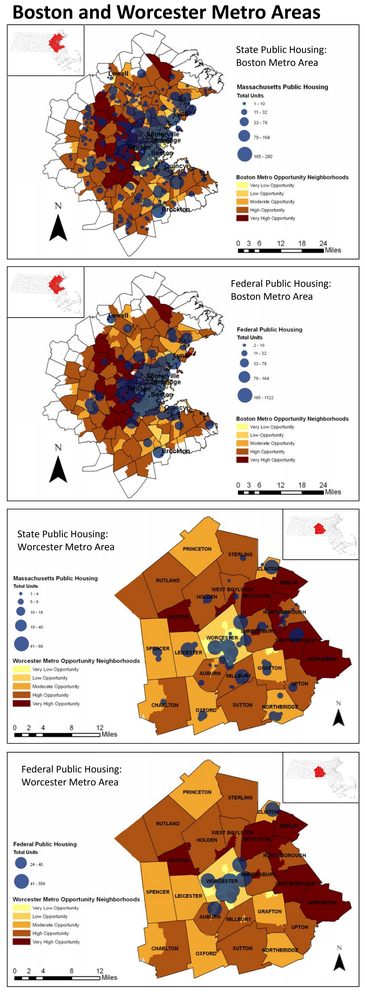
Federal Public Housing Distribution



LIHTC Public Housing Distribution

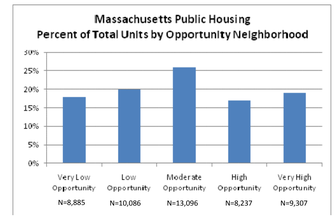


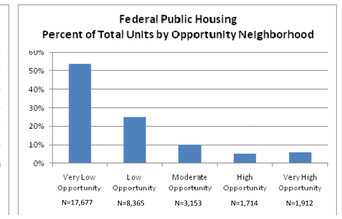
A Closer Look: Boston and Worcester Metro Areas



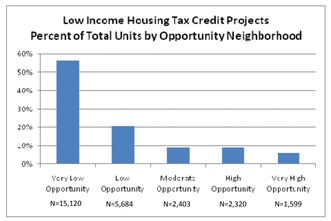
Findings

State vs. Federal Public Housing





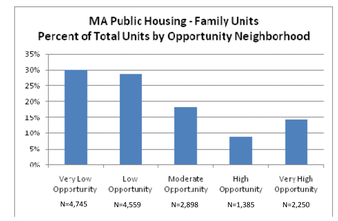
The state and federal public housing programs have a sharp contrast in the number of units distributed across the various opportunity neighborhoods. It would appear that the state-assisted public housing is better distributed among higher opportunity neighborhoods with 36 percent of units located in high or very high opportunity neighborhoods, while only 11 percent of federal units fall in the same areas. This is not to say, however, that one program is currently failing to target high opportunity areas, since most public housing is decades old. In addition, the federal portfolio tends to consist of larger developments in larger cities and, as the Opportunity Neighborhood maps indicate, most large cities in Massachusetts tend to be lower opportunity areas.

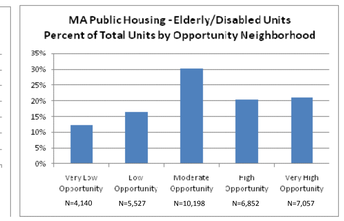


Public Versus Private Approaches

In order to evaluate public and private approaches to affordable housing, this project looked at the distribution of Low Income Housing Tax Credit Projects (LIHTC) which funds private development of affordable housing. In this analysis, it appears that LIHTC projects are distributed similarly to the federal public housing program— mostly in low and very low opportunity areas. Again, it would appear that Massachusetts state-assisted public housing tends to be the best distributed among these three programs.

Distribution of State Public Housing Among Housing Programs





The state public housing program includes two main types of housing: family and elderly and disabled. While it is important that both types of housing be located in higher opportunity areas, it might be argued that there is greater importance in housing families in areas of higher opportunity that have more access to jobs, better education opportunities and commute times. This analysis concludes that the majority of family public housing is located in lower opportunity areas, while elderly and disabled housing tends to lie in areas of higher opportunity. Only 23 percent of family units are located in areas of high and very high opportunity, while 41 percent of the elderly and disabled housing is located in the same opportunity areas.

Limitations

This project was reliant on creating the data for the state public housing layer from a database provided by the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development. The database contains information inputted by more than 200 housing authorities, which without standardization, led to the need for significant cleaning of address data. While the data is fairly reliable at the census tract level which is the level of this analysis, should the state wish to perform further analysis, more data cleaning may be necessary.

Tufts UNIVERSITY

Cartographer: Brendan Goodwin
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Maps compiled December 2009 with data from: Kirwan Institute for Race and Ethnicity; Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development; MassGIS; StreetMap USA