

Denmark Aims a Wrecking Ball at 'Non-Western' Neighborhoods

A government program is using demolition and relocation to remake neighborhoods with immigrants, poverty or crime.

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"I feel by removing us, they would like to hide us because we are foreigners," said Nasrin Bahrapour, left, with

her husband, Ali. Charlotte de la Fuente for The New York Times



By [Emma Bubola](#)

Emma Bubola visited several neighborhoods around Denmark that the government defines as “parallel societies.”

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After they fled Iran decades ago, Nasrin Bahrampour and her husband settled in a bright public housing apartment overlooking the university city of Aarhus, Denmark. They filled it with potted plants, family photographs and Persian carpets, and raised two children there.

Now they are being forced to leave their home under a government program that effectively mandates integration in certain low-income neighborhoods where many “non-Western” immigrants live.

In practice, that means thousands of apartments will be demolished, sold to private investors or replaced with new housing catering to wealthier (and often nonimmigrant) residents, to increase the social mix.

The Danish news [media](#) has called the program “the biggest social experiment of this century.” Critics [say](#) it is “social policy with a bulldozer.”

The government says the plan is meant to dismantle “parallel societies” — which officials describe as segregated enclaves where immigrants do not participate in the wider society or learn Danish, even as they benefit from

the country's generous welfare system.

Opponents say it is a blunt form of ethnic discrimination, and gratuitous in a country with low income inequality and where the level of deprivation in poor areas is much less pronounced than in many countries.

And while many other governments have experimented with solutions to fight urban deprivation and segregation, experts say that mandating a reduction in public housing largely based on the residents' ethnic background is an unusual, heavy-handed and counterproductive solution.

In areas like Vollsmose, a suburb of Odense where more than two-thirds of residents are from non-Western — mainly Muslim — countries, the government mandate is translating into wide-ranging demolitions.

Vollsmose, Denmark



Will be demolished

May be demolished

"I feel by removing us, they would like to hide us because we are foreigners," said Ms. Bahrampour, 73.

After months of searching around the city, she and her husband found a smaller apartment in a different public housing building close by. Still, Ms. Bahrampour said, being forced to leave her home was wrenching.

"It feels like I am always a refugee," she said.

The housing plan was announced [in 2018](#) by a conservative government, but it only started to take a tangible form more recently. It was [part of a broader package](#) signed into law that its supporters vowed would dismantle "parallel societies" by 2030. Among its mandates is a requirement that young children in certain areas spend at least 25 hours a week in preschools where they would be taught the Danish language and "Danish values."

In a country where the [world-famous welfare system](#) was originally built to serve a tiny, homogeneous population, the housing overhaul project has had broad support across the political spectrum. That includes the governing liberal Social Democrats, who changed the term used for the affected communities — substituting "parallel societies" for the much-criticized word "ghettos."

Buildings in the Vollsmose neighborhood of Odense, Denmark, where residents have been told to relocate. Charlotte de la Fuente for The New York Times

"The welfare society is fundamentally a community, which is based on a mutual trust that we all contribute," Denmark's prime minister, Mette Frederiksen, said in March at a summit of the country's municipalities. "All that is being seriously challenged by parallel societies."

The law mandates that in neighborhoods where at least half of the

population is of non-Western origin or descent, and where at least two of the following characteristics exist — low income, low education, high unemployment or a high percentage of residents who have had criminal convictions — the share of social housing needs to be reduced to no more than 40 percent by 2030.

That means more than 4,000 public housing units will need to be emptied or torn down. At least 430 already have been demolished.

The decision of which housing remains public will be made by local governments and housing associations. The association operating in Vollsmose said that it bases its decisions not so much on whether a building is dilapidated, but more on its location and whether it would do well on the open market. The residents displaced are offered alternative public housing options in other buildings or neighborhoods.

From the beginning, the program's targeting of communities largely based on the presence of non-Western immigrants or their descendants has attracted widespread criticism.

Several court cases based on the accusation that the law amounts to ethnic discrimination have reached the [Court of Justice of the European Union](#). Even the United Nations has weighed in, with a group of its human rights [experts saying](#) Denmark should halt the sale of properties to private investors until a ruling is made on the program's legality.

Critics have noted that no scientific evidence has emerged that the neighborhoods were negatively affecting their residents' opportunities in Denmark. Charlotte de la Fuente for The New York Times

Critics in Denmark and elsewhere have said the country would be better off focusing on countering discrimination against minority communities — chiefly its Muslim population — if the goal is to get more people integrated into Danish society. They say the law that created the housing program actually makes the discrimination worse by characterizing those with

immigrant backgrounds as a societal problem to be solved.

They also argue that ethnic enclaves have historically served as landing points for new immigrants in many countries, places where they could get a foothold before subsequent generations assimilated.

Lawrence Katz, a Harvard University professor who has studied the effects of moving families from high- to low-poverty areas, said that [research on one experimental program](#) in the United States showed substantial improvements in outcomes for young children when they left impoverished areas for wealthier ones.

One big difference between the two programs was that the American program, Moving to Opportunity, was voluntary.

"I would be very worried about a policy of coercive moves," he said, adding that if a government relocates people, it is crucial that the improvement from one area to the other is significant. Otherwise, he said, "You're creating trauma without creating opportunity."

It will be difficult to assess if people forced to leave their homes are better off because the Danish authorities are not tracking them. What is clear, however, is that for some, moving has been traumatic.

On a recent day, Marc-Berco Fuhr sat among unpacked boxes in the suburban apartment where he and his aging mother, who emigrated from East Germany, had to move after their building was earmarked for demolition. He played a video of an interview his mother gave to a newspaper before they left.

Marc-Berco Fuhr in the suburban apartment where he and his aging mother, who emigrated from East Germany, had to move after their building was earmarked for demolition. Charlotte de la Fuente for The New York Times

Surrounded by her Chinese vases, sumptuous curtains and the golden

frescoes she had painted on the walls, his 82-year-old mother protested being forced to leave after nearly 40 years, saying that she might not survive the move. "It's my home," she said.

She has since died, and her son has kept her clock, vases and a mother-of-pearl chessboard which were broken by the movers.

"We were very happy in our flat," he said. "I don't really feel at home here."

The redevelopment plan is in its early stages, but the government says the program is bearing fruit based on the criteria it set up.

Those leaving affected neighborhoods are, on average, less educated, less likely to be fully employed and earn less than those moving in, according to a government report. It also noted that fewer non-Westerners are moving in than moving out.

"The blend of people from different layers of society is getting higher," Thomas Monberg, a member of Parliament and the Social Democrats' spokesman for housing, said in an email response to questions. He said the government acted because it could not afford to "wait until people are killing each other in gang wars."

On visits to several neighborhoods being redeveloped, some people — both those moving in and moving out — said they were happy with the changes.

"I think it's working," said Henriette Andersen, 34, a graphic designer who moved into the neighborhood of Gellerup, in Aarhus, more than two years ago. As she pushed a stroller into her newly built two-floor rowhouse, she said that she could see how the plan created problems for the people who were forced to leave the neighborhood. "But," she said, "it's necessary to do it if you want to make changes."

In Vollsmose, Faila Waenge said she was happy to be leaving. As she

shuttled back and forth from her house to a laundrette carrying blankets and sheets, she said that some of the area residents smoked marijuana, and that the neighborhood was too loud.

Ibrahim El-Hassan was born in Denmark to Palestinian parents and lives in Vollsmose. "On the basis of our ethnicity, we became the reason for them to demolish the buildings, to evict people," he said. Charlotte de la Fuente for The New York Times

Still, some experts and residents said the experiment that was upending people's lives was undertaken with too little proof that it would work.

Gunvor Christensen, until recently a chief research analyst at Denmark's national center for social science research, said that no scientific evidence had emerged that neighborhoods were negatively affecting their residents' opportunities in Denmark.

"If they made the program voluntary, most people would like to stay," said Ms. Christensen, who now works for a social housing organization. "The experiment would have failed."

On a recent day, Shirin Hadi Anad stood in a courtyard cluttered with furniture near her soon-to-be demolished rowhouse in Vollsmose, watching children play with friends with whom they have grown up. Unlike her neighbor, Ms. Waenge, Ms. Hadi Anad said she liked living there.

"We would have wanted to leave this neighborhood if there was gunfire, fighting, stabbings, police sirens around the clock," she said. "But we live in Vollsmose, not Chicago."

Jasmina Nielsen, Aaron Boxerman and Leily Nikounazar contributed reporting.

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