



## Olympics Impact Affordable Housing, Homeless People and Housing Rights

*The information included in this policy paper is taken from "Fair Play For Housing Rights: Mega-Events, Olympic Games and Housing Rights," a report by the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions of Geneva, Switzerland.*

As Chicago waits to hear whether our city will be chosen to host the 2016 Olympics, it is important for housing advocates to be aware of how housing rights have been impacted in other Olympic host cities around the globe. While the Olympics are an opportunity to showcase a city to the world, the development that comes with hosting the games can often have very negative consequences, particularly for poor and marginalized people.

Looking at the past 20 years of experiences of Olympic host cities, what is revealed are some rather devastating impacts on housing rights. In fact, all cities that have hosted the Olympic Games suffer similar negative consequences. The following information looks at experiences of the following Olympic host cities:

- Seoul, Korea, 1988
- Barcelona, Spain, 1992
- Atlanta, Georgia, 1996
- Sydney, Australia, 2000
- Athens, Greece, 2004
- Beijing, China, 2008

### Why do the Olympics lead to the violation of housing rights?

Hosting a major international event causes a certain fervor in Olympic host cities that often overrides the needs and input of local communities. Studies of the experiences of these cities have revealed some



common experiences, including:

- A need to inspire community support that makes opposition appear "unpatriotic"
- A "state of exception" mentality in which the community tolerates lower standards of fair process, greater restrictions of rights, and doing whatever is necessary to make vast changes quickly in order to host the Olympics
- A disproportionate effect on marginalized and vulnerable groups
- The initiation or intensification of gentrification and redevelopment which can lead to massive displacement of low-income individuals and families
- Attraction of large amounts of capital and massive infrastructure improvements

### Key Housing Impacts in Olympic Host Cities:

1. **Displacement and forced evictions of communities to make way for construction of Olympics-related infrastructure or related to gentrification.**

In Seoul in the five years before the Olympics, 48,000 buildings that housed 720,000 people were demolished for redevelopment. Ninety percent of the people evicted did not receive replacement housing within the redevelopment site. The use of violence was common in these evictions as developers hired private security companies to forcibly remove people from their homes. Violent acts included demolishing

homes and setting fires close to where people were still living, as well as sexual and physical assaults of protesting tenants.

In Beijing since 2000, as many as 1.5 million people have been evicted to make way for Olympic stadiums and new infrastructure. While many are compensated adequately, an estimated 20 percent have ended up in worse conditions, far from jobs and needed services. Many evictions were violent. In the Hujialou neighborhood where residents resisted, a demolition-relocation company tried to force the residents to leave by making their homes uninhabitable—removing windows and safety doors, breaking down walls, cutting off heat and electricity, scattering debris and even defecating in entryways.

It should be noted that gentrification and redevelopment due to the Olympics are not just byproducts of hosting the event, but in many cases a major motivating factor in bringing the Olympics to a city. For example, Atlanta's bid to host the Olympic Games was spearheaded by a commercial real estate lawyer, Billy Payne, and supported by business

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groups. Payne and these groups wanted to control development in the city and drive poor communities from the center of the city.

## 2. Escalation of housing costs

Rents in Barcelona increased by 145 percent between 1986 and 1993 due to redevelopment for the 1992 Olympics. In Seoul, as residents were evicted from their homes, thousands of people sought alternative low-cost housing in the surrounding areas. This huge increase in demand drove up housing costs fivefold in some areas.

## 3. Reduction in the availability of low-cost or public housing

In Atlanta, a public housing development called Techwood Clark Howell was redeveloped with a net loss of 800 public housing units. Over 3,330 people total, were evicted with only 44 percent receiving relocation assistance. In total, more than 2,000 units of public housing were lost during Olympic development in Atlanta and 5,813 residents were displaced.

In Barcelona, the number of new public housing units created fell from 2,647 in 1986 to just 9 in 1992.

## 4. "Cleansing" operations to remove homeless people from visible locations and criminalization of homelessness

In Atlanta, a local non-profit received thousands of dollars in local government grants to

purchase one-way bus tickets to send homeless people to Alabama and Florida. Atlanta also passed a series of laws called Quality of Life Ordinances the year after it won the Olympic bid. These laws criminalized sleeping in abandoned buildings, begging and walking through parking lots if one did not own a car. These new laws resulted in 9,000 arrest citations issued to homeless people in one year's time, more than four times the normal number. However, it was reported that judges were reluctant to enforce the laws because of questionable constitutionality. It was learned that police in Atlanta pre-printed arrest citations stating the following information: African-American, Male, Homeless. This resulted in a lawsuit which forced police to stop arresting people without probable cause. In Seoul, a facility was built 50 kilometers outside the city in the style of a prison camp to house 1,000 homeless people, poor people and people with addictions and mental illness.

## 5. Introduction of special legislation to help facilitate preparations for the Olympics, including measures to make it easier to take private property, to target homeless people, to increase police power and to restrict freedom of assembly

In Sydney, two acts were passed that gave police powers to remove people from public areas the city wanted cleaned up for the Olympics. The laws also gave private

security guards special powers of enforcement. The legislation made it possible to remove people from an area for indecent language or for causing an "annoyance or inconvenience." They also made it illegal to collect money, sleep overnight or use a skateboard or roller skates.

## 6. Discrimination against marginalized groups

In Athens, people of Romani ethnic origin were targeted for relocation. An estimated 2,700 Roma were adversely affected by the Olympics. Many were forcibly evicted. Others who had lived for many years in destitute settlements were promised relocation to better housing only to find the relocation plans abandoned because they would be in sight of Olympic visitors.

In Beijing, many groups of people were subjected to "Re-Education Through Labor," a form of imprisonment without charge. Those groups included vagrants and beggars.

## How can these housing impacts be avoided in future Olympic host cities?

Olympic host cities must agree to follow the principles laid out in the Olympic Charter and the Code of Ethics. The Olympic Charter is the overarching constitutional instrument of the Olympics and it binds all persons and organizations involved in the Olympics. Several of those principles are relevant to respecting housing rights including "the promise to safeguard the dignity of the individual,

the obligation not to discriminate, the promotion of sustainable development and of a positive legacy, and the commitment to fight against poverty and exclusion." In addition, the human right to housing is included in many sources of existing international human rights law unrelated to the Olympics. (See CCH policy paper, *Is Housing a Human Right?*:

<http://www.chicagohomeless.org/files/Archive/factsfigures/humanright.pdf>)

If Olympic host cities were to adhere truly to these principles, the described human rights violations should not have happened. Communities impacted by the Olympics should work to hold their cities accountable to these binding agreements.

The Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions, an independent non-governmental, non-profit housing rights organization, recommends the following for Olympic host cities:

- Carry out an independent Social Impact Assessment which incorporates a thorough examination of housing impacts
- Develop and implement strategies to monitor and manage housing impacts
- Develop temporary and permanent relocation and adequate compensation programs for those who will lose their homes
- Confer legal protection from eviction for those households that lack that protection
- Commit to dedicating Olympic accommodations to affordable housing post-Games
- Conduct a post-Olympic assessment of housing impact and measures taken to mitigate the impact and make the information available to future host cities.