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A Roof Over Their Heads:
Changes and Challenges for Public Housing Residents

An Improved Living Environment? Neighborhood Outcomes for HOPE VI Relocatees

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Neighborhood conditions have greatly improved for relocatees, particularly those who now live in private housing.

> It's like a lot of times, you are in the house, your kid is outside and you hear gun shots and you drop everything and you run to make sure it's not your child.
>
> *—Ida Wells resident, Chicago, 2001*

The HOPE VI program targets the nation's most distressed public housing developments, which are almost always part of the worst neighborhoods in any city (see page 7). Not surprisingly, the five HOPE VI Panel Study developments were located in high poverty, racially segregated, and extremely high crime neighborhoods. Four of the five sites had poverty rates over 30 percent and minority concentrations of at least 90 percent. At baseline, more than three-quarters of the survey respondents reported that drug trafficking and crime were serious problems in their neighborhood, and two-thirds reported major problems with shootings and violence in their community (Popkin et al. 2002). In-depth interview respondents raised concerns about the safety of their children; parents told of bullets shot into their apartments or their children caught in the crossfire of gun battles. Parents also described their efforts to shield their children from the visible drug dealing and violence, including keeping their children indoors or taking them to safer neighborhoods to play.

The HOPE VI program aims to improve neighborhood living conditions by revitalizing the site and helping residents move to less distressed neighborhoods. The goals of the HOPE VI program include "improving the living environment for residents of severely distressed public housing" and "providing housing that will avoid or decrease the concentration of very low-income families."

This brief examines the progress toward those goals two years after the start of relocation at the five HOPE VI panel study sites. At the time of the 2003 follow-up survey, only one site (Shore Park/Shore Terrace in Atlantic City) had built any replacement housing and only one site (Few Gardens in Durham) had relocated all its original residents. Overall, 61 percent of the 736 respondents had relocated by the time of the follow-up survey. The findings for most relocatees are based on the initial neighborhood they moved to after relocation, although some respondents had already moved multiple times. Future research will examine the living environment after the replacement housing is built and some original residents move back to the revitalized site.

Relocatees Moved to Better Neighborhoods

Our findings indicate that relocatees generally moved to neighborhoods with lower levels of poverty, slightly more racial diversity, and significantly less criminal activity than their original public housing neighborhood.

Poverty concentration is lower in new neighborhoods. The average neighborhood poverty rate for relocatees decreased from 40 percent at baseline to 28 percent at follow-up. In addition, 32 percent of movers now live in low-poverty neighborhoods where less than 20 percent of the population lives in poverty. Before relocation, no respondents lived in such neighborhoods (table 1).

The poverty rates in the new neighborhoods also compare reasonably to the city averages. Just under one-quarter of the relocatees now live in neighborhoods with a lower poverty rate than the city as a whole. For relocatees, the average neighborhood poverty rate now ranges between 1.2 times the city average in Atlantic City and Richmond to 1.7 times the city average in Chicago, Durham, and Washington, D.C. The improvement in Chicago is particularly large, as the poverty rate of the original public housing neighborhood was over three times higher than the city average.

New neighborhoods are slightly more racially diverse. Four of the five original panel study sites were located in neighborhoods that were at least 90 percent minority, primarily African American. The exception was Richmond, where the development was in a diverse neighborhood with substantial shares of African Americans, Hispanics, whites, and Asians. After relocation, three-quarters (76 percent) of relocatees still live in neighborhoods with at least 80 percent minorities. However, a handful of respondents now live in neighborhoods that are predominantly white, non-Hispanic and 23 percent live in what could be characterized as racially diverse neighborhoods—neighborhoods containing a mix of at least 20 percent minorities and at least 20 percent whites. Still, while some relocatees have moved to more diverse communities, the average minority concentration only declined from 92 to 87 percent.

Relocatees report living in significantly safer neighborhoods. Relocatees reported much lower levels of serious criminal activity in their new neighborhoods and perceived their new neighborhoods as substantially safer. Table 2 shows dramatic changes: the share of relocatees who reported big problems with shootings and violence in their neighborhood dropped by more than half, from 67 to 20 percent. Likewise, the share reporting big problems

TABLE 1. Changes in Neighborhood Poverty and Racial Characteristics (percent)

	Baseline (2001)	Follow-up (2003)
Respondents' neighborhood poverty rates		
≤ 20% or lower poverty	0	32*
21–30% poverty	17	25*
31–40% poverty	32	21*
> 40% poverty	52	21*
Average poverty rate	40	28*
Respondents' neighborhood poverty rates		
Below the city average	0	26*
More than twice as high as city average	73	28*
Minority concentration of respondents' neighborhood		
< 20% minority	0	1*
21–49% minority	0	6*
50–80% minority	16	17*
> 80% minority	84	76*
Average % minority	92	87*

Sources: 2000 Census, HOPE VI Panel Baseline Survey (2001), and HOPE VI Panel Study Follow-up Survey (2003).
Note: The total sample size is 450.
* Difference between follow-up and baseline is statistically significant at the .10 level.

TABLE 2. Changes in Perceptions of Crime and Safety (percent)

	Baseline (2001)	Follow-up (2003)
Respondents perceive big problems in neighborhood with:		
Shootings and violence	67	20*
People selling drugs	77	30*
Gangs	49	17*
People being attacked or robbed	25	9*
Respondent perception of safety		
Feel very or somewhat safe outside house at night	50	76*
Feel safer in current neighborhood than old neighborhood[a]	NA	72

Sources: HOPE VI Panel Study Baseline Survey (2001) and HOPE VI Panel Study Follow-up Survey (2003).
NA = not applicable.
Note: The total sample size is 450 (all movers).
* Difference between follow-up and baseline statistically significant at the 10 percent level.
[a] Only movers who self-reported moving to a different neighborhood were asked this question. This number was 87 percent of all movers (391).

with drug trafficking decreased from 77 to 30 percent. There were similar decreases in indicators of other types of criminal activities (gang activity, assaults, and drug use).

Conversely, the proportion of respondents reporting feeling safe alone outside their house at night increased considerably from when they were living in the original public housing development, from 50 to 76 percent. In a direct comparison of neighborhoods, 72 percent of respondents reported that their current neighborhood was safer than their original neighborhood.

Comments from the in-depth interviews reflected the dramatic change in perceptions of safety. Parents reported feeling less worried about the threat of violence and having more freedom to let their children play outside. Several interview respondents also mentioned the difficulty adjusting to the quiet and lack of activity in their new neighborhood.

People Who Relocated to the Private Market Report the Most Improvement in Neighborhood Conditions

Voucher holders and respondents that no longer receive housing assistance reported the largest improvements in neighborhood conditions. Relocatees that moved to another public housing development saw some improvement in neighborhood conditions, but the change was not nearly as substantial. While all movers experienced significant improvements, 45 percent of those who moved to another public housing development still reported serious problems with drug dealing in their neighborhood in the follow-up survey, compared with just 23 percent of voucher holders and 17 percent of respondents no longer receiving housing assistance. As seen in table 3, these findings are similar for other neighborhood crime problems and the respondents' perception of their safety.

This pattern of voucher holders and unassisted households reporting greater neighborhood improvements than those who relocated to another public housing development is consistent across all five sites. However, Washington, D.C., is the only site where respondents that moved to other public housing developments reported neighborhood conditions similar to their original distressed public housing neighborhood. Two-thirds of those who lived in public housing both at baseline and follow-up reported big problems with drug selling in their neighborhood, and more than 40 percent reported feeling unsafe outside their building at night. Further, although 38 percent of Washington, D.C., relocatees reported their new

> Well, in Few Gardens, there was drug selling and gunshots constantly. When I came home at night, I would just be fearful just getting out the car, because the young guys were hanging around and stuff like that. But here, I haven't heard gunshots since I moved here. You don't see nobody hanging out. Really, you don't see nobody outside, but on Saturday morning, they're like cutting the grass and stuff like that. So I mean sometimes it's so quiet it is on the edge of being boring.
>
> *—Former Few Gardens resident, Durham, 2003*

TABLE 3. Perceptions of Current Neighborhood by Housing Assistance Status (percent)

	Baseline (2001)	Nonmovers at Follow-up (2003)	Movers at Follow-up (2003)		
	All	In original development	Public housing	Voucher holders	Unassisted
Big problems with drug selling	77	72	45*	23*	17*
Big problem with shootings and violence	66	48*	32*	11*	21*
Feel very or somewhat safe outside house at night	55	57	68*	83*	74*
Feel new neighborhood is safer than original neighborhood	NA	NA	57	80	87

Sources: HOPE VI Panel Study Baseline Survey (2001) and HOPE VI Panel Study Follow-up Survey (2003).
NA = not applicable.
Notes: The total sample size for baseline and follow-up is 736 (all respondents). In 2003, the sample sizes for each group are as follows: original development = 286, public housing = 166, voucher holders = 221, and unassisted = 63.
* Difference between follow-up and baseline is statistically significant at the 10 percent level.

public housing neighborhood was safer than their old neighborhood, 34 percent reported it was similar in terms of safety, and 28 percent reported it was less safe. In the other four sites, only 9 percent of those who moved to another public housing development reported it was less safe than their original neighborhood. It appears that many Washington, D.C., respondents that relocated to a public housing unit moved from one distressed development to another.

Some Relocatees Still Live in Poor, Troubled Neighborhoods

Although relocatees generally moved to neighborhoods with lower levels of poverty and violent crime than their original public housing communities, a substantial proportion still live in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty, a predominantly minority population, and serious crime problems.

Forty-two percent of movers still live in neighborhoods with poverty rates greater than 30 percent, and 76 percent still live in neighborhoods with at least 80 percent minorities. Further, while perceptions of serious crime problems have gone down considerably, 30 percent of relocatees still reported that drug trafficking was a big problem in their neighborhood and almost as many reported seeing drug dealing on a regular basis, usually daily. Hence, while almost all relocatees appeared to have moved to better neighborhoods than their original, distressed public housing neighborhoods, three-quarters still live in segregated neighborhoods, and 30 to 40 percent still live in high-poverty and high-crime neighborhoods.

Households in Original Developments Remain in Distressed Neighborhoods

At the time of the 2003 follow-up, 39 percent of study participants had not moved out of the original development. The neighborhood conditions they reported were very similar to those reported at baseline. In other words, study participants were still living in a distressed neighborhood. As shown in table 3, three-quarters still reported serious problems with drug dealing in the neighborhood and over 40 percent still reported feeling unsafe outside their building at night. However, the percent reporting big problems with shootings and violence in the neighborhood decreased substantially from 66 to 48 percent.

Policy Implications

Our findings indicate that neighborhood conditions have greatly improved for respondents that relocated, particularly

those that now live in private housing. Nearly three-quarters of movers report their new neighborhood is safer, one-third now live in neighborhoods with a poverty rate below 20 percent, and almost all live in a neighborhood with a lower poverty rate than their original neighborhood. The degree of racial segregation in the neighborhood did not change as much, but 23 percent now live in a racially diverse neighborhood. Before relocation, no respondents lived in a low-poverty neighborhood and very few lived in a racially diverse one, so these are real improvements. Thus, the relocation phase of the HOPE VI program has generally met its goals of improving the living conditions of residents of distressed public housing and decreasing the concentration of very low income families for most relocatees.

However, these positive findings are tempered by the fact that these residents moved from some of the worst neighborhoods in their cities and some of the new, better neighborhoods are nonetheless troubled. Many respondents remain in high-poverty or high-crime locations, either because they have not yet left the original public housing development or because the new neighborhood still has a high poverty rate or serious crime problems.

We have several recommendations to improve outcomes for the people affected by the HOPE VI revitalization.

- **Recognize that relocation is the major HOPE VI intervention for most residents of distressed public housing and needs the same careful planning and adequate resources as the physical redevelopment.** As our brief on relocation outcomes indicates, relocation should not be viewed as an operational step to clear the site for demolition and rebuilding, expecting that residents will benefit when they move back (Cunningham 2004). Prior research has suggested that one-third or fewer of the original residents move back to the revitalized development.[1] Even residents that move back are in their relocation housing for several years. The HOPE VI relocation and supportive services will affect all original residents, and for most of them it will be the only effect of HOPE VI. The revitalization of the site itself will not affect them, because they will never live there. Nevertheless, relocation itself can improve the neighborhood conditions in which the original residents live. With an increased emphasis on this part of the HOPE VI revitalization effort, more residents can successfully move to higher quality neighborhoods.
- **Avoid relocating residents to other distressed public housing developments.** Consistent with our findings on housing outcomes (Comey 2004), our analysis of neighborhood outcomes shows that some relocatees moved to public housing neighborhoods that were nearly as distressed as their original neighborhoods. The reasons for such relocation outcomes need to be explored. How much results from lack of time to find new housing or lack of knowledgeable, conscientious relocation assistance and how much from resident preferences, residents' inability to qualify for housing in the private market, or local housing market constraints? Relocating to another distressed development is a missed opportunity to improve the living conditions of residents in a development slated for HOPE VI revitalization.
- **Deal with on-site crime problems until all residents are relocated.** The finding of continued dangerous conditions at the original sites indicates an urgent need to either proceed faster with relocation or take immediate measures to make the site safer until relocation is complete. While time is needed to make and carry out careful relocation plans, residents who have not yet relocated should not be left in an unsafe neighborhood without an attempt to remedy the situation.
- **Continue to work with relocatees after the first move to ensure additional positive outcomes.** Many relocatees moved to a safer and less poor neighborhood, but a substantial number of neighbor-

hoods were still high-poverty and high-crime. Continuing to work with residents after the initial move can improve the chances that they will make a second move that further improves their living environment, or help stabilize the housing situation for those who have moved to a desirable neighborhood.

Note

1. See Mary Joel Holin, Larry Buron, Gretchen Locke, and Alvaro Cortes, "Interim Assessment of the HOPE VI Program Cross-Site Report" (Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates, 2003); "False HOPE: A Critical Assessment of the HOPE VI Public Housing Redevelopment Program" (Oakland, CA: National Housing Law Project, 2002, available at http://www.nhlp.org); and Larry Buron, Susan Popkin, Diane Levy, Laura Harris, and Jill Khadduri, "The HOPE VI Resident Tracking Study" (Washington DC: The Urban Institute, 2002).

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About the Author

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HOPE VI Program

Created by Congress in 1992, the HOPE VI program was designed to address not only the bricks-and-mortar problems in severely distressed public housing developments, but also the social and economic needs of the residents and the health of surrounding neighborhoods. This extremely ambitious strategy targets developments identified as the worst public housing in the nation, with problems deemed too ingrained to yield to standard housing rehabilitation efforts.

The program's major objectives are

- to improve the living environment for residents of severely distressed public housing by demolishing, rehabilitating, reconfiguring, or replacing obsolete projects in part or whole;
- to revitalize the sites of public housing projects and help improve the surrounding neighborhood;
- to provide housing in ways that avoid or decrease the concentration of very low income families; and
- to build sustainable communities.

Under the $5 billion HOPE VI program, HUD has awarded 446 HOPE VI grants in 166 cities. To date, 63,100 severely distressed units have been demolished and another 20,300 units are slated for redevelopment. Housing authorities that receive HOPE VI grants must also develop supportive services to help both original and new residents attain self-sufficiency. HOPE VI funds will support the construction of 95,100 replacement units, but just 48,800 will be deeply subsidized public housing units. The rest will receive shallower subsidies or serve market-rate tenants or homebuyers.

HOPE VI Panel Study

The HOPE VI Panel Study tracks the living conditions and well-being of residents from five public housing developments where revitalization activities began in mid- to late 2001. At baseline in summer 2001, we conducted close-ended surveys with a sample of 887 heads of households across five sites and conducted in-depth interviews with 39 adult-child dyads. The second wave of surveys was conducted in 2003, 24 months after baseline. We conducted follow-up surveys with 736 households and interviews with 29 adults and 27 children. We also interviewed local HOPE VI staff on relocation and redevelopment progress, analyzed administrative data, and identified data on similar populations for comparative purposes.

The panel study sites are Shore Park/Shore Terrace (Atlantic City, New Jersey); Ida B. Wells Homes/Wells Extension/Madden Park Homes (Chicago, Illinois); Few Gardens (Durham, North Carolina); Easter Hill (Richmond, California); and East Capitol Dwellings (Washington, D.C.).

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A Roof Over Their Heads: Changes and Challenges for Public Housing Residents

The Urban Institute's "A Roof Over Their Heads: Changes and Challenges for Public Housing Residents" research initiative examines the impact of the radical changes in public housing policy over the past decade. A major focus is how large-scale public housing demolition and revitalization has affected the lives of original residents. A second key area of interest is the impact of neighborhood environments on outcomes for public housing families. A third focus is evaluating strategies for promoting mobility and choice for assisted housing residents.

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