The HOPE VI Resident Tracking Study



A Snapshot of the Current Living Situation of Original Residents from Eight Sites

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Executive Summary

The HOPE VI Resident Tracking Study represents the first systematic look at what has happened to original residents of distressed public housing developments targeted for revitalization under the HOPE VI program. It provides a snapshot of the living conditions and well-being of former residents of eight properties as of the spring of 2001—between two and seven years after the PHA was awarded a HOPE VI grant. At that time, the redevelopment process was still under way in six of the eight study sites, so the results describe a "work in progress."

Created by Congress in 1992, the HOPE VI Program represents the federal government's most ambitious effort to date to address the problem of severely distressed public housing. The goals of the program are to improve the living environment for residents of distressed public housing, to revitalize the site and contribute to improvements in the surrounding neighborhood, to decrease (or avoid) the concentration of very low-income households, and to build sustainable communities. To achieve these goals, the program combines physical revitalization with management improvements and supportive services for the public housing residents. As the program has evolved, it has increased its emphasis on providing mixed-income housing, leveraging HOPE VI money to raise other funding, and broadening the focus of revitalization beyond the original public housing site to incorporate neighborhood revitalization goals. Between 1993 and 2001, a total of 165 revitalization grants were funded, representing $4.5 billion in HOPE VI funds for redevelopment and supportive service activities.

This study focuses on a single aspect of the HOPE VI experience: What has happened to original residents of eight HOPE VI properties since revitalization got under way and how their living situations have changed. The study includes some residents who have returned to the HOPE VI sites and some who are living in other locations, either as a temporary or permanent relocation.

The study findings are based on a survey of 818 residents who lived in one of eight study developments at the time of the HOPE VI award. While the eight study sites were selected to reflect a range of HOPE VI initiatives and relocation strategies, they are not expected to be representative of the program as a whole. Moreover, since each HOPE VI site is unique in some respects, a major focus of this report is on understanding the survey results in the context of the individual sites, their revitalization strategies, and the local housing market. Although this summary focuses on cross-site findings, readers are encouraged to delve into the individual case studies, which provide a rich source of information about the current situation of original HOPE VI residents at each site.

Summary of Major Findings

The findings of this study fall into three broad domains: the type and quality of housing now occupied by the original HOPE VI residents; their current neighborhood and social

environments; and their employment, material hardship, and health. The living conditions of former HOPE VI residents are of interest because of the program's goals of improving conditions for public housing residents of severely distressed public housing regardless of where they choose to relocate. Indeed, the results indicate that different housing environments offer relocatees different opportunities and challenges.

Housing Type and Household Characteristics

At the time of the resident survey in the spring of 2001, two of the eight study sites were completed and fully reoccupied, four of the sites were partially reoccupied, and two sites were in the midst of on-site construction and had not yet begun reocuppying the site. At this point, we do not know how many residents in the eight study sites may ultimately return to the HOPE VI property or what additional changes in their housing situation they may make before the redevelopment programs are completed. This study reflects their housing assistance status and living conditions as of the spring of 2001.

- Of the 818 households in our sample, 19 percent now live in a revitalized HOPE VI development, 29 percent live in other public housing properties, 33 percent are renting units using housing vouchers, and 18 percent have left assisted housing altogether. Nationally, a larger share of original residents relocated to other public housing developments (37 percent) or are using a housing voucher (35 percent) than in this study sample, and a smaller share now live in a revitalized HOPE VI development (14 percent) or have left assisted housing altogether (14 percent).[1]
- At the two completed sites and one nearly completed property, more than 40 percent of the original residents had returned to a unit in the revitalized development. All three of these sites had conditions that may have led to a high return rate: San Francisco's Hayes Valley had an extremely tight and expensive housing market in the city, and Newark's Walsh Homes and Denver's Quigg Newton developed the new housing in stages so residents could move directly from their original public housing units into the revitalized housing.

Overall, a number of factors may affect the number of residents who return to the revitalized development, including resident preferences for the greater flexibility and anonymity of voucher assistance, the condition of other public housing developments where residents may relocate, the availability of decent affordable housing in the private market, the length of time between relocation and reoccupancy, the extent to which public housing authorities (PHAs) track original residents and inform them of the option to move back, resident perceptions of the desirability of the revitalized housing, and the strictness of the screening criteria. (Strict screening can have both negative and positive effects on the return rate: some original residents will be ineligible to move back, but others may choose to return because they think the screening has made the development a safer or better place to live.)

[1] In addition, at the end of March 2002, 15,770 original residents from 1993 to 2000 sites had not yet been relocated and still lived in a distressed public housing development scheduled for HOPE VI demolition. All national figures are from HUD (2002, p. 64).

Our findings, although preliminary, suggest that household characteristics also play some role in determining which housing option residents selected.

- HOPE VI returnees and those who relocated to other public housing units tend to be older and to have fewer children than voucher users or unsubsidized households. The decision to relocate to other public housing also appears to be influenced by the condition of the local public housing stock and may represent a trade-off between the greater flexibility and anonymity of a voucher subsidy and the social networks and housing stability offered by public housing.

- The unsubsidized households in our sample tend to have higher incomes, higher employment rates, and more education than those still receiving housing assistance. These households are also more likely than other households to be married and in their prime earning years (ages 35 to 49). Nevertheless, the majority of these households still have extremely low incomes, with approximately two-thirds reporting incomes below 30 percent of the area median.

- Voucher users are similar to unsubsidized households in that they are younger, more educated, and have children. However, they are similar to public housing households in that single females head most households and almost all have incomes below 30 percent of the area median.

Housing Conditions

HOPE VI families came from severely distressed developments. Relocating to revitalized units, other public housing, or the private market is expected to improve their housing conditions. Our findings suggest that, in fact, a majority of the original residents in our sample have experienced the expected improvement in housing quality. Nearly two-thirds of residents (63 percent) reported that their housing unit is in good or excellent condition, and most (85 percent) said that their current unit is in the same or better condition as their public housing unit prior to revitalization.

- Overall, 56 percent of respondents reported their current housing unit is in better condition than their original public housing unit; 29 percent reported it is in about the same condition; and 15 percent reported it is in worse condition.

The level of improvement in housing quality varies by housing assistance status.

- HOPE VI returnees, who are living in newly revitalized developments, reported significantly better housing conditions than other respondents in our sample. However, while 76 percent of HOPE VI returnees reported that their current unit was in better condition than their original public housing unit, a surprising share of returnees reported their housing was in similar (14 percent) or worse condition (10 percent). We cannot fully explain this finding, but it appears that a number of returnees to the Quigg Newton site in Denver (the only site in the study where units were rehabilitated as opposed to newly constructed) did not perceive a major change in the condition of their unit as a result of the program. In addition, about half the

returnees who rated their unit in worse condition also reported unit-specific problems (such as broken plumbing) that might have led to their negative rating.

- About two-thirds of those who relocated to other public housing developments described their housing units in good or excellent physical condition. In Tucson, where many former residents of Connie Chambers now live in scattered-site public housing, almost all the relocatees in public housing rated the condition of their unit favorably. In addition, in some other cities original residents appear to have been offered public housing units in desirable developments, although the pattern varies from site to site.

- Voucher users are less satisfied with their housing than other groups, and nearly half reported their unit is in fair or poor condition. Only 46 percent of voucher users reported that their current unit is in better condition than their original public housing unit. Voucher users from Albany's Edwin Corning are particularly likely to say that their former public housing unit was better than their current voucher unit. This may reflect the fact that, while outdated in many respects, Edwin Corning appears to have been in fairly good physical shape at the time of the HOPE VI grant. San Francisco and Paterson, which both have tight, expensive housing markets, also have low rates of satisfaction for voucher users. By contrast, voucher users in Louisville and Springfield reported good housing conditions. The quality of housing that voucher holders have obtained is presumably related to the tightness of the local housing market, the quality of the housing stock, the extent of discrimination faced by minorities (especially former public housing residents), and aspects of the counseling and relocation process that may have affected their housing search.

In a small number of in-depth interviews with original residents who chose to relocate with a voucher, respondents who complained about their housing still said they preferred a voucher to public housing. Their main reasons were the increased flexibility in choosing where to live and the greater privacy or anonymity inherent in a private market unit compared with a public housing development.

Neighborhood Environment

One of the goals of the HOPE VI program is to deconcentrate (or avoid concentrating) very low-income households and to contribute to the improvement of the original public housing neighborhood. Our findings indicate that original residents who are in private housing—voucher users, unsubsidized renters, or homeowners—are not clustered in a few communities but are dispersed across a range of neighborhoods. We also find that most original residents are living in areas with substantially lower poverty rates than the neighborhood around the original public housing development.

- About 40 percent of non-returnees (those who have not returned to the original HOPE VI site) now live in low-poverty census tracts with poverty rates of less than 20 percent. None of the residents started out in low-poverty areas, so the 40 percent share in low poverty areas is a net improvement and represents substantial

progress. However, 40 percent of non-returnees still live in neighborhoods where more than 30 percent of the residents are poor.

- Change in racial segregation is more modest. Original residents at two sites now live in substantially less-segregated neighborhoods, while at five sites the current neighborhood is slightly less segregated.
- While neighborhood conditions have improved for original residents at seven of the eight study sites, at one site original residents now live in census tracts that are, on average, slightly poorer and more segregated than their original public housing neighborhood. This site (Albany's Edwin Corning) is unique among the study sites because the original public housing neighborhood had a relatively low level of poverty (22 percent) and was diverse (45 percent minority). Hence, even though original residents relocated to higher-poverty and less diverse neighborhoods on average, the new neighborhoods still have a relatively low average poverty rate (25 percent) and are diverse (54 percent minority).

Policymakers hope that by assisting households to move to lower-poverty areas, they will experience a reduction in exposure to crime and disorder and thus improve their overall well-being. Because we lack baseline data, we cannot assess whether original residents perceive their current neighborhoods to be substantially safer than their original public housing developments. However, our data indicate that many public housing residents and voucher holders continue to live in areas that they perceive as having problems related to crime.[2]

- Overall, about 40 percent of the respondents reported "big problems" with drug trafficking and gang activity in their current neighborhood, and just fewer than 20 percent reported big problems with violent crime. Unsubsidized households were the least likely to report big problems with drug trafficking and gang activity, while returning HOPE VI residents were the most likely to report big problems.
- Perceptions of crime vary considerably across sites: Less than a quarter of original residents from Denver's Quigg Newton, Springfield's John Hay Homes, and Tucson's Connie Chambers reported problems with drug trafficking in their current neighborhood, compared with relatively high fractions at San Francisco's Hayes Valley and Newark's Archbishop Walsh.

Our findings regarding perceptions of crime for current residents of HOPE VI sites should not be taken as indicative of HOPE VI sites overall. The study includes only three sites with a substantial number of reoccupied HOPE VI units, including two sites with unusually serious crime problems in the HOPE VI neighborhood and one with low levels of perceived crime. At the two sites where residents reported continued problems with drugs and crime, PHA staff acknowledge the situations and have been working to address them. Other research on the HOPE VI program (Holin et al. 2001) indicates that crime has decreased at many HOPE VI sites, based both on resident perceptions of crime and on official crime statistics.

[2] As discussed in Chapter 4, our information about levels of crime is based exclusively on respondent perceptions.

Social Environment

"Collective efficacy" is an indicator of neighborhood health that has been found to be associated with lower neighborhood crime rates and better health outcomes for residents. Our survey included two measures of collective efficacy, neighborhood social cohesion (e.g., helpful neighbors) and social control (e.g., neighborhood monitoring of the behavior of children and youth).

- Unsubsidized households in our sample reported significantly higher levels of collective efficacy than those living in public housing or using vouchers. This finding is consistent with the fact that these households reported the lowest levels of crime of any group. However, one of the HOPE VI sites where residents reported high levels of problems with crime—Newark's Archbishop Walsh—also reported high levels of collective efficacy. It may be that the high level of social organization at that site can support efforts to reduce crime in the future.

One of the premises of the HOPE VI program is that deconcentrating poverty and creating mixed-income communities will benefit the poor. Low-income families will interact with neighbors in their new communities, forming new social networks. These networks are hypothesized to offer a range of benefits for original residents, including positive role models for adults and children, access to information about economic opportunities, and peer groups for children and youth that are less likely to support delinquent activity. However, survey respondents reported fairly low levels of social interaction with neighbors.

- About half the respondents in our sample reported having friends in their current neighborhood, and slightly fewer reported having family in the area. Relatively few respondents reported having more than limited interactions with their current neighbors.

- Unsubsidized households and voucher holders are less likely than public housing residents to report having friends and family in the area and reported the lowest levels of interaction with their neighbors. Our in-depth interviews suggest that the low levels of interaction are associated with a number of factors, including lack of opportunity (e.g., respondents or neighbors are not around during the day), language or cultural barriers, and personal preferences for keeping social distance from neighbors.

Employment, Hardship, and Health

Employment. One of the main goals of HOPE VI's community and supportive services is to enhance the self-sufficiency of original residents. Because these communities have been so distressed, the assumption is that many residents lack work experience or labor force connections and that the combination of improved neighborhood conditions and supportive services can help many residents find work. Our findings suggest a complex picture, with more residents than expected in the labor force, as well as some residents facing significant barriers that keep them out of the labor force.

- Half of our non-elderly respondents reported being employed full- or part-time at the time of the survey, and 64 percent reported having at least one wage earner in the household. But while employment levels were relatively high, respondents' wages were very low, with 82 percent of the non-elderly households reporting incomes below 30 percent of the area median. Our in-depth interviews also indicate that many work in lower paying jobs such as home-care assistants, retail and fast food clerks, janitors, hotel service workers, and school bus drivers.

- About a third of the non-elderly households reported receiving disability-related benefits, and 30 percent receive welfare. Unsubsidized households were significantly less likely to report receiving welfare, while receipt of disability-related benefits does not vary much by housing assistance type.

- Many working-age respondents face barriers that make attaining self-sufficiency challenging. The most common barrier cited (40 percent) was a lack of jobs in the neighborhood. Other obstacles frequently mentioned included lack of job experience, having a disability, lack of child care, and transportation problems. Nearly half the respondents identified multiple barriers to employment. The multiple barriers, combined with the generally low education and skill levels, point to the challenge of promoting self-sufficiency of residents from distressed public housing.

Material Hardship. The disruption of relocation, even if temporary, and the challenges of renting in the private market could present extremely low-income households with increased difficulties meeting their financial obligations and providing for their households. Overall, 40 percent of our sample reported problems paying rent and utilities, and about half reported having difficulty affording enough food.

- Private-market renters in our sample reported the highest levels of housing hardship: 59 percent of voucher users said that they had had difficulty paying rent or utilities in the past year, as did 52 percent of unsubsidized households.

- Unsubsidized households were more likely than public housing residents or voucher users to report doubling up with other families (13 versus 4 percent) and to report multiple moves since relocating.

Some of the reported problems may be the result of the unprecedented spike in utility costs that affected cities across the nation in the winter of 2000–01. However, other factors may have contributed to these problems as well, including poor insulation in affordable private market housing, which causes utility bills to exceed the utility allowances used in the voucher program; residents' inexperience in managing their utility expenses; and residents' generally low wages, which make it difficult to deal with unexpected costs.

We do not know whether the difficulties reported by voucher users meeting their housing costs are typical of all families using vouchers or are more likely to be experienced or perceived by our group of respondents, all of whom used to live in public housing.

Health. Health problems are a major issue for the former residents of distressed public housing. We do not have baseline measures of health, so we do not know how much health conditions have changed since the start of HOPE VI. However, problems reported during the survey point to the potential role health care could play in helping residents become self-sufficient and improve their quality of life.

- Thirty-nine percent of adults reported that their health was fair or poor, and thirty-five percent said someone in their household suffers from asthma. HOPE VI returnees are most likely to report bad health (52 percent), and unsubsidized and voucher households are least likely (32 percent).

- In the in-depth interviews, 23 out of 24 respondents mentioned a health problem for either themselves or one of the family members living with them. Interestingly, several respondents answered a direct question on their health status by saying they were fine, but later in the interview, the person would talk about health problems. Because they were not ill at the time of the interview, some people responded narrowly to a direct question on health. This reporting pattern suggests that health problems may be an even larger problem than indicated by the survey responses.

Conclusion

The findings from the HOPE VI Resident Tracking Study suggest that many relocated residents live in a new housing environment that is an improvement over their original distressed public housing. A majority of the original residents in our study sample are living in decent housing in neighborhoods that have lower poverty rates than their original public housing developments, and most are satisfied with their current living situation. Nevertheless, a substantial proportion of public housing residents and voucher users reported problems with drug trafficking and violent crime in their neighborhood, and about half of those in the private market—voucher users and unsubsidized households—reported having problems meeting housing expenses. Overall, however, there is no evidence that as a group original residents are worse off as a result of HOPE VI, and indeed most are considerably better off as a result of the changes associated with leaving distressed public housing.

While this study represents the first systematic examination of what has happened to original residents of eight distressed developments targeted for HOPE VI, it has several limitations that need to be kept in mind. First, as noted at the outset, the eight sites included in the study do not capture the entire range of HOPE VI scenarios and cannot be considered representative of the program as a whole. Second, this study started two to seven years after the public housing developments were slated for redevelopment. The timing means we have no information on resident perceptions of their living conditions or economic struggles prior to HOPE VI, so we cannot compare their current and pre-HOPE VI perceptions. Third, since we did not collect information during the relocation period, we do not know the specific relocation and supportive services utilized by residents, so we cannot tie variations in outcomes at a site to the types of services used.

Given its limitations, the HOPE VI Resident Tracking Study provides only a starting point for understanding how HOPE VI affects original residents of targeted developments. Additional research will help provide a more complete picture. A wide range of research on the HOPE VI program is under way, including local site-specific evaluations, and national studies focusing on the physical revitalization of the sites, the effects of HOPE VI on neighborhoods, and the effects of the program on residents. Lessons and questions from the current study are already being incorporated into some of these ongoing research projects. Together, this body of research should provide a comprehensive and long-term analysis of how HOPE VI affects residents' lives and how it impacts the communities where it has been implemented.

Housing Choice for HOPE VI Relocatees

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Robin Smith served as Principal Investigator and was responsible for all aspects of the conduct and management of this study. Ms. Smith developed the research design, designed the data collection instruments, conducted field work, and wrote the final report. Dr. Susan Popkin acted as Project Director contributing to the design and analysis phases of the work. Dr. Popkin coordinated this study as part of the Urban Institute's body of work on the HOPE VI and Section 8 programs. A driving force behind the original concept, Dr. Arthur Naparstek, conceived of the project, participated in field data collection, and established working relationships with the housing authorities profiled in the study.

A qualitative study relies on the efforts of a dedicated data collection team. Field data collection activities were organized in each city by Dr. Lesley Bartlett (Seattle), Lisa Bates (Louisville), Russell Crane (San Antonio), and Elisa Vinson (Baltimore). These researchers identified local respondents, conducted interviews, and assisted in focus group facilitation. The dedication of each of these individuals made this work happen.

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Finally, sincere thanks go to the many focus group participants who openly shared with us their experiences and opinions. The contributions of each of these individuals are the basis of this study.

HOUSING CHOICE FOR HOPE VI RELOCATEES

SUMMARY

In 1993, Congress authorized $300 million to create the HOPE VI program, intended to rebuild the most physically distressed public housing in the country. Growing over six years to a $4.2 billion dollar effort, HOPE VI reshapes distressed properties and their surrounding neighborhoods by significantly changing both the physical environment and the related social context. In most cases, altering the built environment requires demolition or substantial renovation during which residents are moved to other buildings within their development, relocated to other public and assisted housing or provided with housing assistance vouchers.

Many of the families which are facing the effects of HOPE VI's transformation of public housing are also experiencing the effects of welfare reform. Four years after welfare reform, there is growing evidence that the group of recipients having the most difficulty making the transition from welfare to work are troubled families living in the nation's largest cities (Allen and Kirby 2000). But while the effects of welfare reform are being studied extensively, relatively little is known about the impact of the transformation of public housing, including basic information about where residents of HOPE VI developments have moved, why they moved there, and what their lives are like.

This study, *Housing Choice for HOPE VI Relocatees*, highlights the housing choices made by former residents in four cities (Baltimore, MD; Louisville, KY; San Antonio, TX; and Seattle, WA) who used housing vouchers to move from developments reconstructed under the HOPE VI program. The issues addressed in this study include: decision-making strategies; search processes; neighborhood selection criteria; available housing choices; the effects of relocation on the respondents and the affected communities; and any difficulties related to the relocation experience. Focus groups were held with different segments of the relocatee respondent population at each of the four sites including persons who stayed close to their public housing developments and those who moved to neighborhoods away from their original developments. We used these focus groups to examine various aspects of the relocation process including where residents chose to live and influences and constraints on their housing choices.

This report presents comments from relocatee respondents about their strategies, decisions, and destinations. Because this study focuses on four cities, it is not a representative picture of the relocation experience and cannot be used to generalize the experiences of all residents who are relocated because of a HOPE VI award. However, the comments from the focus group participants provide important insights about the HOPE VI relocation process that have both practical and policy relevance.

Respondent Findings

This study reports on the housing choices of selected HOPE VI relocatees. Our findings suggest:

- Availability of housing and time constraints were the main influences on housing choice for both those families who stayed close to their original public housing developments and those who moved farther away.
- Most respondents were more concerned about finding an available and acceptable unit in a place that met their minimum community standards for safety and basic amenities than about moving to a neighborhood that might offer increased economic opportunity.
- The proximity of social services does not appear to be an important determinant.
- After moving to a new location, respondents continue to be more concerned about basic services (schools, shopping, transportation) than the availability of social services.[1]
- Relocatees make choices based on significant misinformation about Section 8 procedures, HOPE VI move-back criteria, and availability of relocation services.
- Some relocatees are troubled by negative neighborhood influences they attribute to a growing number of persons using housing assistance to move to their new neighborhoods.
- Respondents who move to neighborhoods away from their public housing communities are more likely to report increased job and school opportunity.

[1] This study focuses on households that used Section 8 to relocate. Persons opting for Section 8 may be more entrepreneurial and comfortable with local housing markets than those who decide to stay in public housing.

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