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Voucher Users and Revitalized Public Housing Residents Six Years After
Displacement

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Abstract

Objective: Six years after displacement by a HOPE VI project this research examines residents who returned to the redeveloped community and residents who decided to keep their vouchers and were living in private sector housing. Respondents were compared on the following variables: application process and decision to move back, satisfaction with housing, material hardships, and perception of economic well-being. *Method:* The study employed a static group comparison research design. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from 56 respondents through five focus groups. *Results:* Residents who moved back to the revitalized public housing were highly satisfied with their housing, had significantly fewer material hardships, and perceived their economic well-being more positively compared to residents remaining in the voucher program. *Conclusions:* Our results both support and expand upon previous empirical findings on the complex comparisons between voucher users and revitalized public housing residents.

Voucher Users and Revitalized Public Housing Residents Six Years after Displacement

This study reports findings from the last wave of focus groups conducted with 56 former residents of Harris Homes, a 493 unit public housing complex located in Atlanta, Georgia. Harris Homes was demolished in 2000 and redeveloped as a mixed income community, renamed College Town, through the federal HOPE VI program. The goals of mixed-income developments are to deconcentrate poverty and physically upgrade distressed housing units to attract market-rate renters, with the hope of improving the quality of life for low-income, public housing. The College Town mixed-income development opened on the same location in 2005. Two-hundred and sixty of the proposed 520 new units were reserved for public housing residents (the other units were either market-rate, Low Income Tax Credit, or homeownership). Therefore, displaced residents of the original Harris Homes had an option of keeping their housing vouchers and continue living in private rental housing, of giving up their housing vouchers and moving back to redeveloped College Town, or of remaining in other public housing projects where they were relocated after Harris Homes was demolished.

In the first two waves of focus groups, conducted in 2002 and 2004, residents who selected housing vouchers and moved into private rental housing were compared to residents who moved into other public housing projects. These earlier studies examined how displaced Harris Homes residents perceived their new housing situations after relocation. These focus groups generally found voucher recipients perceived their families as doing better socioeconomically. Additionally, they were significantly more satisfied with their private housing conditions, neighborhoods, and overall living situations than displaced residents who were relocated to other public housing projects

(see Brooks, Zugazaga, Wolk, & Adams, 2005). In 2006 a final wave of focus groups compared housing voucher recipients who were living in apartments or private homes with residents who returned to College Town.

In this final wave of focus groups, voucher recipients and College Town residents were compared on the following variables: the application process, decisions about returning to College Town, satisfaction with housing situations, measures of material hardship, and perceptions of economic well-being. Findings from the 2006 focus groups paint a different and more complex picture about the well-being of residents displaced by a HOPE VI project. After reviewing relevant empirical literature on other HOPE VI redevelopments, we present our research questions, methods, results, discussion and implications for housing policy and social work practice.

Literature Review

In 1993, Congress created the Homeownership and Opportunity for People Everywhere (HOPE VI) program to help communities revitalize their severely distressed public housing units. From 1993 to 2009, at least \$16 billion had been leveraged and invested in the HOPE VI program to improve the socioeconomic and residential conditions of public housing residents living in distressed developments (Abrevanel, Levy, & McFarland, 2009). During that time, 127 communities received HOPE VI funding for 236 distressed public housing developments in select communities in the United States (Abrevanel et al., 2009).

There are over 96,000 public housing units throughout the nation that have been scheduled for demolition due to distressed conditions (Abravanel, et al. 2009). Of these planned demolitions, it has been estimated that over 78,000 have been completed, but

only 31,080 of the 95,100 planned replacement units have been built, resulting in nearly half of the units being lost for low-income families who need affordable housing (Oakley, Ruel, Reid & Reed, 2010; Turner, Wooley, Kingsley, Popkin, Levy, & Cove, 2007). The net decrease in units, along with a decrease in the number of vouchers available for displaced families (Sard and Staub, 2008), has put the original residents of HOPE VI developments in precarious housing situations (Popkin, Levy & Buron, 2009).

Few original public housing residents return to the HOPE VI developments (Crowley, 2009; Popkin, Levy & Buron, 2009) since many of the replacement mixed-income units are sold or rented at market rates, making them unaffordable and unavailable for many families (Oakley Ruel, Reid & Reed, 2010). Most of the residents who are displaced by the HOPE VI developments are relocated to other public housing units (50%) or use Section 8 vouchers to move into the private rental market (31%). Those who do return to HOPE VI redevelopments tend to be older, less educated, and have a fewer number of children than those who use vouchers (Popkin & Levy, et al., 2004). Those who choose housing vouchers tend to be younger females who have high school diplomas, are employed, and are living with their children (Buron, Levy & Gallagher, 2007; Brooks, Zugazaga, Wolk, & Adams, 2005).

In Atlanta, Georgia, a city considered to be a community leader in the HOPE VI planning and redevelopment of public housing, the Housing Authority demolished 13 public housing projects, built 10 mixed-income properties, and planned the demolition of 12 additional communities from 1994-2007 (Oakley, Ruel, Reid & Reed, 2010). By 2009, all of the communities that were slated for demolition in Atlanta had been emptied (Oakley, Ruel, Reid & Reed, 2010).

It has been estimated that only 17% of Atlanta's original public-housing residents return to redeveloped mixed-income communities (Oakley, Ruel, Reid & Reed, 2010). Although some public housing residents might prefer to return to the redeveloped housing, they may be unable due to restrictive screening criteria for the newly built units (Popkin & Levy, et al., 2004; Krohe, 2006). Additionally, many of the HOPE VI mixed-income housing developments in Atlanta reserve 40-60% of housing units for market-rate renters or buyers, 10-20% are reserved for families that qualify for the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Program, and only 20-40% of these units are reserved for public-housing assisted families (Glover, 2009).

Renee Glover, CEO of the Atlanta Housing Authority, does not view the low number of returning residents as a failure of HOPE VI, but rather, a success. According to Glover, residents choose to keep their vouchers rather than move back to the redeveloped units because they do not want to relive painful past experiences in public housing. Instead, voucher recipients enjoy choosing their residences and have found better life opportunities as a result (Glover, 2009). In fact, one study by Boston (2005) found that families in Atlanta who relocated using vouchers had considerably higher levels of workforce participation, improved school performance by their children, and increased family income. In 2009, more than 10,000 households in Atlanta had "successfully relocated, primarily by using Section 8 vouchers" (Glover, 2009, p. 162).

However, public housing families who enter the private housing market are also faced with a number of unfamiliar challenges. These challenges often include navigating landlord relationships and locating/ competing for affordable housing. Additionally, these families become vulnerable to possible evictions, unforgiving rent timelines, expensive

security deposits, relocation stressors, broken communities ties, and increasing rent/household expenses (Buron, Levy & Gallagher, 2007; Sard and Staub, 2008; Smith, 2002; Turner et al., 2000). Living in private rental housing is quite different from living in public housing units where utility bills are generally included in rent payments. Instead, relocated voucher recipients may be unaccustomed to budgeting for utility bills and the fluctuation of these bills across seasons (Buron et al., 2002; Orr, Feins, Jacob & Beecroft, 2003). In a study by Brooks, Zugazaga, Wolk & Adams (2005), 50% of voucher users stated that their utility bills were worse over the past year. Increases in utility bills and other household expenses often cause voucher residents to struggle to meet basic needs. Therefore, they must choose to pay rent on time instead of paying utilities and purchasing food (Buron et al., 2007). Vouchers users with credit concerns or complicated family issues, such as relatives with disabilities, are even more disadvantaged when attempting to locate accessible and affordable housing in the private market (Popkin, & Levy et al., 2004).

Outcome studies have been conducted to determine the effectiveness of the HOPE VI initiatives and goals. As stated, major goals of Hope VI initiatives are to deconcentrate poverty and improve the economic well-being of public housing residents by opening opportunities to engage in the private rental market and/or reside in an upgraded mixed-income development that shares improved community resources. Additionally, the economically-balanced communities should enhance the quality of life for public housing residents who gain access to a revitalized community and improved physical dwelling.

Deconcentrating Poverty

Research suggests that HOPE VI programs only partially achieve the goal of deconcentrating poverty, as many previous residents of public housing move to areas with similar demographics but with slightly higher income and employment. (Comey, 2007; Popkin & Levy et al., 2004). Approximately 30% of residents from public housing communities continue to live in high-poverty and high-crime neighborhoods (Couch, 2009). In a study by Oakley, Ruel, Reid, & Reed (2010), ninety-five percent of families received relocation vouchers and often moved to neighborhoods with significantly less concentrated poverty, but similar socio-demographic characteristics with regard to race, employment, and household type. Contrary to these findings, seniors tended to move into mixed-income developments in neighborhoods of highly concentrated poverty.

There are many reasons that families from voucher recipients relocate to similar areas as previous public housing communities. Common reasons include having short move-out timelines, inadequate relocation services, and insufficient social support. Some residents remain in these communities due to advice from familiar relocation counselors and certain landlords (Krohe, 2006; Popkin, et al. 2009). In a study in 2002, Buron, Popkin, Levy, Harris and Khadduri found that more than half of voucher users remained within one mile of their original public housing site, but a HOPE VI panel study in 2005 found that voucher users moved a median distance of 3.4 miles away (Comey, 2007). Although the deconcentration of poverty is a goal of HOPE VI, this has only been partially realized since voucher recipients still cluster in poverty concentrated areas (Galvez, 2010; Oakely, Ruel, Reid & Sims, 2010; Popkin & Katz, et al., 2004).

Improving Quality of Life

Residents who move from demolished public housing experience improved quality of life since they often move into better-quality housing and neighborhoods (Brooks et al, 2005; Popkin & Levy et al., 2004; Popkin and Cove, 2007; Popkin et al., 2009). Current research found voucher users reported reduced mental stressors (Buron et al., 2007) and more positive behavior in their children (Gallagher and Bajaj, 2007; Popkin, Eiseman, & Cove, 2004). In one study comparing residents who relocated to other public housing units with those who used vouchers to move into the private rental market, Buron, et al. (2007) found that both public housing residents and voucher users reported improved housing and neighborhood conditions four years after relocation. Yet, voucher users reported significantly better improvements in housing conditions and a decrease in anxiety and mental health stress, despite having more financial challenges, risk of eviction, and multiple moves (Buron, et al., 2007). Further, in a study conducted by Brooks et al. in 2005, researchers found voucher users cited an increase in self-esteem, fiscal responsibility, and self-reliance due to relocating to private rental units.

Despite the improvements in housing, neighborhoods, mental health, and children's behaviors, Manjarrez, Popkin, and Guernsey (2007) found, in a panel study of 887 HOPE VI residents, that residents did not report any improvements in their physical well-being four years after relocation, whether subsidized in private market rentals, mixed-income units, or other public housing. In fact, 76% of residents reported no change in their health, not even a decline. However, many individuals suffered with a number of chronic illness conditions and fell into a higher than average mortality rate. With these types of health concerns, relocated residents can have difficulty securing stable employment (Levy & Woolley, 2007; Popkin & Levy, et al., 2004).

In many of the earlier studies, researchers have evaluated the effectiveness of HOPE VI by comparing voucher users to public housing residents. However, little attention has been paid to comparisons of voucher users to residents who moved into the redeveloped mixed-income units. Since mixed-income developments have become a major intervention to remedy the past ills of public housing and improve the living conditions of poor families, it is important to continue to evaluate the effectiveness of this solution. Therefore, the present study aims to expand the body of outcome research on displaced public housing residents by examining how voucher users are faring compared to those who have moved back to a redeveloped mixed-income unit; in this case, residents who returned to College Town in Atlanta.

Method

Research Questions

1. How did participants experience the application process of moving back to College Town?
2. How many residents moved back to College Town, and what reasons did they give for returning?
3. What reasons did residents give for not applying to move back to College Town?
4. How satisfied were residents who returned to College Town?
5. How did public housing residents compare to voucher users on standardized measures of material hardship?
6. Six years after displacement, how did public housing residents compare to voucher users for overall economic well-being?

Design & Sample

Since funding for the present study was received three years after Harris Homes was torn down, a pre-test post-test quasi-experimental design was impossible to construct. Although in the discussion section we make some comparisons between the 2006 data and the previous two waves of data collection, the current study compares residents who were living in public housing in 2006 (16 returning to College Town and five seniors who remained in their current housing) to the 32 residents who remained in the voucher program. Therefore, the present research design is a static group comparison.

Sampling techniques and data collection instruments for the 2002 and 2004 focus groups are detailed in Brooks et al. (2005). For the 2006 focus groups, we called all 72 participants from our 2004 focus groups. We were unable to contact 12 people due to disconnected phone numbers or the respondent had moved without leaving a forwarding number. We talked to 60 respondents and 57 were scheduled for focus group interviews; three respondents were unable to participate due to health problems or scheduling conflicts. Fifty-six participants showed up, resulting in a 79% participation rate. Four focus groups were held at Georgia State University School of Social Work. These were attended by 32 voucher users, 6 public housing residents (one who was living in College Town), and 3 participants no longer affiliated with Atlanta Housing Authority. One had been removed from the program for a violation of policy, while two participants had purchased their own homes. Since these three respondents were not in either public housing or the voucher program and no longer affiliated with AHA they were excluded from the present analysis. We conducted one focus group at College Town which had 15 participants.

Table 1 shows the demographic data for voucher users, College Town residents and other public housing residents in 2006. In the 2002 focus groups voucher users and public housing residents were similar in most demographic areas (race, gender, income) except for age (for complete details see Brooks et al., 2005). Public housing residents were older compared to voucher users (mean age 53 compared to 38 respectively). This age difference was again apparent in the 2006 data collection. In 2006, the average age of College Town participants was 58 compared to 43 for voucher users. The mean age of the five residents who were in other public housing complexes was 70. Since these senior citizens decided to remain in public housing, we grouped them with the College Town residents for statistical purposes. AHA administrative data reported mean household income of all ex-Harris Homes residents in their data base was \$10,831 per year (Sjoquist, 2006).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Variables and Instruments

The primary independent variable was the housing program, which, had two attributes: 1) public housing ($n = 21$), or 2) the voucher program ($n = 32$). Dependent variables included: (a) contact, decision and desire to move back to College Town, (b) resident perception of current satisfaction with housing and living conditions, (c) material hardships (security in the areas of food, and ability to pay rent and utilities), (d) monthly out of pocket expenses for utility bills, and (e) perception of economic well-being.

All of the questions measuring resident perception used in this study were the same instruments we constructed for the 2002 and 2004 focus groups (see Brooks et al., 2005 for details). These questions were designed in collaboration with the Atlanta

Housing Authority to answer questions pertinent to their HOPE VI application, thus there were no prior psychometric properties established for these questions. The questions and instruments were designed using Krueger's (1998) guidelines for designing focus group questions (Brooks et al., 2005).

We constructed a new set of questions that explored the decision making process about moving back to the revitalized College Town. Residents were asked: 1) Were you contacted about moving back to College Town? 2) Did you apply to move back to College Town? 3) Why did you not apply to move back? The six questions measuring material hardship were taken from standardized questionnaires used in previous studies (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004). These questions asked residents about their security over the past 12 months in the areas of purchasing food, paying rent and utilities, and access to health care. Two of the hardship questions were the following: "In the past 12 months, was there a time when you did not pay the full amount of the gas or electric bill? In the past 12 months, did the gas or electric company turn off your service?" While there is little research on the validity and reliability of these measures (U.S. DHHS, 2004), according to Beverly (2001, p. 145) "several studies have documented the validity of the food insufficiency indicator." Some of the questions we selected had been used in nine prior studies (U.S. DHHS, 2004). We also asked residents to estimate their current monthly out-of-pocket costs for rent and utility bills (gas, electric, and phone).

Data Collection Procedures

All focus groups were conducted by the lead and fourth authors of this article. A MSW trained Research Associate assisted with turnout, logistics, and sat in on all of the

focus groups. Focus groups began with participants filling out the standardized questionnaire. Members of the research team were in the room, observed this process and answered any questions participants had about the questionnaire, which typically took 15 – 20 minutes. Participants kept the questionnaire with them during the remainder of the focus group which took another 1 to 1.5 hours to complete. Verbal, open-ended questions followed the outline of the questionnaire and asked participants to follow-up on issues raised in the standardized questionnaire. For example, we asked voucher users who had decided to remain in the voucher program and not move back to College Town to explain the reasons behind their decision to stay in the voucher program. All focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The research protocol was presented to the Georgia State University Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects and was adjudicated exempt from review.

Data Analysis

Qualitative responses were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Since the open-ended focus group interview protocol followed the quantitative questionnaire qualitative responses were used primarily to complement quantitative results and provide explanatory quotes.

Nominal measured quantitative data were analyzed by cross tabulations and Chi Square significance tests. Effect sizes were measured by Kramer's V statistics. Ratio measured data were compared using T-tests. We used .05 as the level for statistical significance. We interpreted P values less than .10 but greater than .05 as suggesting a trend toward significance (Huck & Cormier, 1996). Qualitative responses to focus group

questions were used to provide a deeper and richer understanding of resident perceptions of the variables.

Design Limitations

This study suffers from two weaknesses that limit our ability to generalize our findings and infer causality. The first weakness is sampling. In 2006, our sample consisted of 57 residents from an original list of 491 heads of household who were living in Harris Homes in 1999. Fifty-four out of 57 residents were still receiving assistance from Atlanta Housing Authority. Although our results are probably generalizable to the population of former Harris Homes residents who remained affiliated with AHA in 2006, our results might not be generalizable to the population of former Harris Homes residents who were either terminated or left AHA assistance voluntarily. The research designs we draw upon for this study---static group comparison and post-test only with three data points---do not allow causal inference between independent and dependent variables. Due to these weaknesses we are cautious about policy implications derived from the current study.

Results

Research Question 1: How did participants experience the application process of moving back to College Town?

Eighty-six percent ($n=47$) of our sample ($N=56$) stated they were contacted by AHA about moving back to College Town. Everyone was contacted by mail. Thirty-percent ($n=16$) of our sample of 56 applied, were accepted and moved back to College Town. Fifteen percent ($n=8$) of our sample applied to move back, but their applications were denied. A little over a quarter of our sample, 26.4 percent, stated they had mixed

feelings about moving back but did not apply. Another 25% stated they had no desire to move back to College Town when they received the notice for applications. We heard very few complaints in the focus groups about the application process, and most respondents seemed to think the process was reasonable and fair even if they applied and were rejected. The people who applied and were rejected were disappointed but matter-of-fact about it.

Research Question 2: How many residents returned to College Town and what reasons did they give for returning?

AHA administrative data reports 8% (n=37) of the 491 families living in Harris Homes in 1999 were living in the redeveloped College Town in the fall of 2005. Seventeen percent (n=16) of our original 2003 sample of 93 former Harris Homes residents were living in College Town in 2006. The most likely reason for a higher rate of returning residents from our sample is because our sample was skewed toward residents who remained affiliated with AHA programs from 1999 through 2006. The AHA data set included evictions, terminations, and voluntary moves out of the program. We had no contact information for these residents. Fifteen of the 16 returning residents had remained in the public housing program since displacement, while only one returnee gave up her voucher to return to College Town.

Practically all of the residents who returned to College Town had been living the past six years in older (not revitalized) public housing projects in Atlanta (mostly Grady Homes). Primary reasons given for moving back to College Town were very straightforward: residents always liked the location of College Town and the brand new revitalized apartments were far superior to apartments they had been living in for the past

six years. The following two quotes typify these responses: 1) “Who wouldn’t want to move back? When I first walked into the apartment, I was just, I couldn’t believe that it was going to be living like this!” 2) “It’s very nice, comfortable in the community, much better than before. I was transferred from Grady Homes and Grady Homes compared to [College Town] is like a pig sty in every way you can imagine!”

Research Question 3. What reasons did residents give for not applying to move back to College Town?

While a strong majority of residents who were living in public housing applied to move back to College Town, a strong majority of voucher users did not apply to move back to College Town. The most frequent response voucher users gave for not applying to move back was because they would lose their voucher and would probably never get it back. This was an overwhelming disincentive for applying to move back to public housing. Six respondents stated they would like to move back if they could retain the option of getting another housing voucher if they did not like College Town. The majority of voucher users felt that the voucher was a more valuable commodity than living in the revitalized College Town.

Although some respondents wished they could move back to College Town with the option to receive another voucher if it did not work out, the majority of our sample seemed to think the application process was clear, straightforward, and fair. Few respondents had criticisms of the process.

Research Question 4: How satisfied were residents who returned to College Town?

The majority of the College Town residents participating in the focus group were older, without children, and with a manifest health problem. All of the participants voiced

pleasure with being in College Town and they were overwhelming in praising the apartments, the grounds, and the community. A vast majority of the residents, 86%, were very satisfied with their current apartment. This was more than twice the 39% of voucher users who reported being very satisfied with their apartment/house in 2006. Moreover, 87% of College Town residents were very satisfied with the neighborhood, and 73% were very satisfied with the safety of the neighborhood. In all cases, the remaining residents reported that they were somewhat satisfied. No current resident of College Town reported that they were dissatisfied. The returning residents' satisfaction with living in the revitalized College Town was further strengthened when they compared their current living situation to two years ago when they were in other public housing and compared to their memories of living in Harris Homes. For example, 100% of the current residents of College Town report their situation as being better today than it was two years ago in the areas of housing, and the conditions and safety of the neighborhood. This high satisfaction rate was only slightly less when participants compared their current living situation to their memories of living in Harris Homes. This satisfaction is reflected in their overall rating of their living situation with 100% stating it is better today than 2 years ago and 75% reporting that it is better today than at Harris Homes.

When it came to other comparisons between living in College Town and two years ago, the differences were not quite as stark. For example, 43% report their utilities bill are about the same as they were 2 years ago, 50% reported that their proximity to MARTA and vicinity to their place of employment, 37% reported that their proximity to shopping stores and their financial situation is about the same. There was some reporting of deterioration in personal health issues, with 31% of the respondents reporting that their

physical health is worse than 2 years ago, and 12.5% reporting that their emotional health and stress level is worse than 2 years ago. Finally, while the number of respondents regarding children was too small to be statistically useful, there was no evidence that the children's situations were worse than two years ago. On the contrary, the anecdotal reports suggest the situation had improved for their children. Below are two representative comments that reflect this satisfaction with College Town: 1) "I can't complain. Its better, the environment is better, the neighborhood is better. I am not complaining about nothing." 2) "I love it, my kids, I have two girls, my kids love it, and they have their own rooms"

However, all of these positive feelings about moving back to College Town were tempered by some criticisms of the development. There were a number of complaints voiced by multiple residents during the College Town focus group. Three residents with first floor apartments experienced flooding after heavy rains. Three residents complained about the construction of decks with gaps between the boards. Residents stated that whenever someone swept off a deck from the floor above much of the debris fell through the gaps in the boards and rained down on their deck. Three residents complained about excessive partying behavior of some of the college students now living in College Town. The following quote typifies this response: "They smoke dope, they drink beer, they party. You can go up and down some of these (stairs) I bet you now, they're partying now. Most of us are tired, want to go to sleep."

To summarize, the 16 former Harris Homes residents who returned to College Town were generally very pleased to be in such a new, safe environment. This pleasure is in part a function of this older, childless population because most had been living in

other deteriorating public housing units since they were displaced from Harris Homes; they were delighted to be back in a familiar and convenient section of the city that was viewed as a strength of Harris Homes. And, despite some of the issues the residents have experienced described above, they are very satisfied with their situation.

Research Question 5: How did public housing residents compare to voucher users on standardized measures of material hardship?

[insert Table 2 about here]

Significant differences emerged between voucher users and public housing residents on several measures of material hardships. Voucher users were significantly more likely than public housing residents to report being unable to pay the full amount of a utility bill and having their gas or electricity shut-off over the past 12 months. Voucher families were almost two and one half times as likely (72% to 29%) to have gotten behind on a utility bill compared to public housing residents. While no public housing residents reported having their gas or electricity shut-off over the past 12 months, 22 % of voucher users reported losing one or the other of these services. Although the p value for the food hardship question is just above .05, the raw data suggests that voucher users were approximately 3 times as likely as public housing residents to report at least one time over the past 12 months when they were unable to buy food.

We asked participants to estimate the combined costs of their utility bills (gas, electric, and phone) over the past month. Voucher users reported their utility costs as three times as expensive as public housing residents (\$376 compared to \$127 per month, respectively). A T-test suggested these differences were significant, $t(47, N= 49) = 4.1, p = .000$.

Qualitative focus group responses supported the hardship trends we found with the quantitative data. While many housing choice residents described being overwhelmed with their utility bills, very few public housing residents reported significant stress paying their utilities. More than one voucher recipient cited the stress associated with trying to pay utility bills as a reason they would consider moving back to public housing.

Combining the findings from the hardship questions, mean monthly utility costs, and qualitative responses suggest voucher users were having a significantly more difficult time paying their utility bills compared to public housing residents.

Research Question 6: Six years after displacement, how did public housing residents compare to voucher users for overall economic well-being?

Responses to two other questions offer more empirical support for voucher users experiencing more financial hardship compared to public housing residents. Table 3 reports resident perception of changes in personal financial situation between 2004 and 2006 by housing program. While 15 percent of voucher users reported improved finances, 43 percent of public housing residents reported improved finances over the past two years. Conversely, while only 5 percent of public housing residents reported worse finances in 2006, 41 percent of housing choice residents reported they were in worse financial shape in 2006 compared to 2004.

[insert Table 3 about here]

Differences also emerged between residents of the two housing programs when comparing their perception of their current financial situation compared to their memory of their finances at Harris Homes.

[insert table 4 about here]

While two out of three public housing residents felt like their finances were better today compared to when they lived in Harris Homes, only 28 percent of housing choice residents felt the same way. Another 28 percent of housing choice residents stated their finances were better six years ago living in the distressed Harris Homes project, and almost half, 44 percent, stated their finances were about the same as six years ago. Six years after displacement from a distressed public housing project, it is quite astounding that 72% of voucher users state their personal financial situation is either about the same or worse than it was 6 years ago.

Discussion and Applications to Social Work Practice

Due to the limitations of our methodology, we hesitate to apply our findings to suggest specific policy reforms. At the same time, many of our findings comparing voucher users to public housing recipients provide additional empirical support for findings by other researchers.

Our finding of only 8% of the original 491 original families returning to College Town supports previous national findings (Popkin, Levy & Buron, 2009; Crowley, 2009; Popkin, & Levy, et al. 2004) but undercuts a local study that found a 17% return rate to mixed-income housing in Atlanta (Boston, 2005). In Brooks et al. (2005) we found that 50% of residents choose vouchers with the intent to move back into the mixed-income units after they were completed, while the other half preferred to remain on the voucher program. This is similar to the findings in from the HOPE VI Panel Study, which had 70% of original respondents indicating a desire to move back to the revitalized housing (Popkin & Levy, et al, 2004). In 2006, 15% of the residents in our study had applied to move into College Town, but their applications were denied. This leaves half of the

original Harris Homes residents who originally planned to apply to live in College Town after its completion choosing not to apply to move back into the mixed-income developments.

The HOPE VI Tracking Study found that those who chose to keep their vouchers did so because they liked their housing situation and did not want to uproot their family by moving again (Buron et al., 2002). A majority of voucher users in our study chose to keep their vouchers instead of moving back into the mixed-income developments for other reasons, including the belief that vouchers are seen as a more valuable commodity in the community and the risk that they would never have an opportunity to have a housing voucher again if they were ever unhappy with their housing situation in College Town. Only one person in our sample chose to forego her voucher for a unit in the new mixed-income development. Our study found that those who chose to return to the mixed-income development did so because of the location of the revitalized units. While the ability to relocate to a more desirable location has been seen as one of the values of having a housing voucher, being able to live in the College Town location was seen as a desirable outcome for our returning residents.

For the individuals in our study who did return to College Town, their experience has been very satisfactory. Our study supports other research that shows a majority (85%) of those who return to the mixed-income communities reporting a high satisfaction rating (Popkin, Levy & Buron, 2009). However, our study is the only one that we are aware of that illustrates some serious issues that residents who return to the mixed-income communities may experience, including problems with the construction of their unit and trouble sleeping due to younger residents drinking and throwing parties. While exposing

public housing residents to other socioeconomic classes was seen as a long-term benefit of HOPE VI redevelopments, it is clear that some of this exposure may be causing disruptions in the lives of public housing residents instead of increasing their social networking and providing them with role models (Khadduri & Martin, 1997 in Popkin & Katz et al., 2004).

Our findings also support the research that claims that, while relocation has severed some important community social ties, it has also allowed some individuals to free themselves from harmful relationships and situations (Popkin, Levy & Buron, 2009). In particular, some members from our focus groups reported that they would have never stopped using drugs and alcohol if they had not been displaced from Harris Homes (Brooks et al., 2005). While clearly not all participants have had this same outcome, it is important to note that leaving Harris Homes was cited as the main contributing factor for sobriety for a handful of participants.

Our findings provide further empirical support to studies suggesting that, while HOPE VI projects have succeeded in decentralizing urban poverty, they have not succeeded in lifting significant numbers of families out of poverty (Goetz, 2003). The challenges faced by many voucher users in our study are supported by other researchers that have found voucher users struggling to make ends meet due to increased living expenses, making it difficult to pay utility bills and provide food for their families (Popkin, Levy & Buron, 2009, Buron et al., 2007; Orr et al., 2003). Voucher users in our study are clearly experiencing more financial struggles than those who have moved back into College Town. Seventy-four percent of voucher users in our study reported that they have been behind on their utility payments in the past year while only 29% of public

housing residents had trouble paying their utility bills. Our findings show that there may be an increase in the amount of voucher users struggling to pay bills than the HOPE VI Panel Study found, with only 45% of voucher holders reporting trouble paying their utility bills (Buron, Levy & Gallagher, 2007), and from the HOPE VI Tracking Study, which found 59% of voucher users having trouble paying rent and utilities (Popkin & Levy et al., 2004).

While our findings support the HOPE VI Tracking Study and Panel Study regarding utility hardships, our findings regarding food hardship show a decrease in the amount of people, both voucher users and public housing residents, experiencing trouble securing food in Atlanta. In our study, 31% of voucher users reported hardships regarding food while only 10% of public housing residents had trouble securing food. The Hope VI Panel Study found much higher percentages of voucher users reporting food hardships at 62% with 47% of public housing residents reporting food hardships (Popkin, Levy & Buron, 2009). Popkin, Levy & Buron (2009) predict that financial hardships regarding utilities and food are likely to affect residents who return to mixed-income developments because utilities are not included in all rent payments; our findings support this hypothesis and show that residents who do return to mixed-income developments struggle to pay some utility bills, but not to the same extent as the voucher users.

Further, our findings show that the economic struggles of many voucher users have put them at a less well-off financial position than those who have moved back into the mixed-income development. In Brooks et. al., (2005), we stated that we believed those residents who were using Housing Choice vouchers were better off than those who returned to other Public Housing communities. However, in our final wave of focus

groups in 2006, it is clear that Housing Choice voucher users may not believe this to be true. In 2006, around 86% of voucher users stated that they believed their financial situation was worse or about the same as it was two years prior. When voucher users were asked to compare their financial situation in 1996 to their previous financial situation when they were in their original public housing site, Harris Homes, 72% stated that their situation was better before or about the same.

Despite these economic hardships and the fact that a majority of voucher users view their situation as the same or worse off as 2 years prior, voucher users in our study still chose and want to maintain their voucher status. This finding seems to support the HOPE VI Panel Study finding that most voucher users are satisfied with their new housing and not interested in returning (Popkin, Levy & Buron, 2009). Most participants in our study had a clear understanding of the application process for the College Town and still chose not to apply because they feared they would lose their housing vouchers. Because of this reality, it is important that voucher users are connected to services that assist residents with their utility payments and food security. We support the recommendations of other researchers that suggest an emphasis on relocation assistance, utility allowances that keep pace with heating costs, an overall increase of support services and effective case management for individuals who use the Housing Choice program (Popkin, Levy & Buron, 2009; Popkin & Levy et al., 2004, Buron, Levy & Gallagher, 2007).

While our study (and others) sheds light on the social and economic well-being of public housing residents still affiliated with public housing authorities six years after displacement, we know very little about the fate of families no longer connected with

public housing authorities after HOPE VI displacement. In 2006 we were only able to locate three residents who were no longer affiliated with AHA, and while two of the three respondents had purchased their own homes and were clear success stories, the other respondent appeared to be struggling. Obviously nothing can be generalized from an N of three. Although it would be quite difficult, future research needs to evaluate the well-being of representative samples of families displaced by HOPE VI projects that are no longer affiliated with public housing authorities. This important but difficult research is essential to fully evaluating the impact of HOPE VI redevelopment programs.

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Table 1: Sample Demographics 2006

Variable	Voucher Users (n=32)	College Town Public Housing (n=16)	Public Housing (n=5)
Mean Age (<i>SD</i>)	43 (10.0)	58 (12.9)	70 (10.3)
Race			
African American	100%	100%	100%
Gender			
Female	94%	94%	60%
Male	6%	6%	40%
Employment Status			
Employed	41%	43%	20%
Not Employed/Retired	59%	57%	80%

Table 2: Comparing Material Hardships and Mean Monthly Utility Costs Between
Voucher Users and Public Housing Residents

Type of Hardship	Voucher Users (n=32)	Public Housing Residents (n=21)	Effect Size
Food*	31%	10%	.254
Medical Care	25%	10%	NS
Behind on Utility Payment ***	74%	29%	.451
Utility Shut-Off**	22%	0%	.316
Telephone Shut-Off	2%	5%	.234
Total Mean Monthly Out-of- Pocket Utility Costs *** (Gas + Phone + Electric)	\$376	\$127	NA

Note: Percentages refer to the number of respondents reporting their hardships by housing program.

*p < .10, **p < .05, ***p < .01

Table 3: Resident Perception of Changes in Finances, 2004-2006

	Voucher Users	Public Housing Residents
Better Today	13.3%	42.9%
About the Same	46.7%	52.4%
Worse Today	40%	4.8%

Note: χ^2 (2, N=51) = 10.3, p = .006, Cramer's V = .450

Table 4: Resident Perception of Financial Situation in 2006 Compared to Living in Harris Homes in 1999

	Voucher Users	Public Housing Residents
Better Today	28.1%	66.7%
About the Same	43.8%	23.8%
Better at Harris Homes	28.1%	9.5%

Note: $\chi^2 (2, N=53) = 7.86, p = .020, \text{Cramer's } V = .385$