

Georgia State University

ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University

---

SW Publications

School of Social Work

---

2005

## Resident Perception of Housing, Neighborhood, and Economic Conditions After Relocation From Public Housing Undergoing HOPE VI Redevelopment

Fred Brooks

*Georgia State University*, [fbrooks2@gsu.edu](mailto:fbrooks2@gsu.edu)

Carol Zugazaga

James L. Wolk

*Georgia State University*, [jwolk@gsu.edu](mailto:jwolk@gsu.edu)

Mary Anne Adams

*Georgia State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/ssw\\_facpub](https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/ssw_facpub)



Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Brooks, F., Zugazaga, C., Wolk, J., & Adams, M.A. (2005). Resident perception of housing, neighborhood, and economic conditions after relocation from public housing undergoing HOPE VI redevelopment. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 15(6), 481-490. doi: 10.1177/1049731505276038

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Social Work at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in SW Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gsu.edu).

Running head: HOPE VI EVALUATION

Resident Perception of Housing, Neighborhood, and Economic Conditions After  
Relocation From Public Housing Undergoing HOPE VI Redevelopment

Fred Brooks

Georgia State University

Carole Zugazaga

Auburn University

James Wolk and Mary Anne Adams

Georgia State University

Article published, proper reference:

Brooks, F., Zugazaga, C., Wolk, J., & Adams, M.A. (2005). Resident perception of housing, neighborhood, and economic conditions after relocation from public housing undergoing HOPE VI redevelopment. Research on Social Work Practice, 15, 481-490.

Resident Perception of Housing, Neighborhood, and Economic Conditions After  
Relocation From Public Housing Undergoing HOPE VI Redevelopment

Abstract

**Objective:** This study evaluates participant perception of neighborhood, economic, and housing well-being of residents four and five years after forced relocation from a public housing complex in Atlanta, Georgia. **Method:** The study utilized a mixed-method posttest-only design with two data points. Focus groups with 93 participants combined qualitative, open-ended questions with quantitative measures. **Results:** Four years after relocation, residents living in homes/apartments found with Section 8 housing vouchers were faring better than residents who moved to other public housing projects. A majority of voucher users believed their house, neighborhood, and overall global living situation had improved since relocation. In the year between the first and second wave of focus groups 40% of voucher users had moved to a new house/apartment. Moving was associated with residents perceiving their situations improving in many categories. **Implications:** Our findings suggest HOPE VI developments are more likely to accomplish their objectives if the current administration continues full funding of the voucher program rather than implements the cutbacks it is currently proposing.

## Introduction

This study presents findings from the first two waves of data collection of a four year study on resident perception of the impact of relocation on residents of a public housing project in Atlanta, Georgia undergoing HOPE VI redevelopment. In 1999 residents moved out of Smith Homes<sup>1</sup> into either a home/apartment they found in the private market with a housing voucher (formerly called Section 8, currently called Housing Choice), or another public housing complex. Our first wave of data collection took place four years after relocation and addressed the following research questions: 1) Four years after relocation, how do residents perceive their well-being in the areas of housing and neighborhood conditions, finances, and overall living situation? 2) How do residents perceive their current housing, neighborhood and living conditions compared to their memory of living in Smith Homes? Wave two data were collected one year after wave one data with the same participants. Wave two<sup>2</sup> data addressed the following research question: How have residents lives changed over the past year in terms of housing, neighborhood, and economic conditions, and overall global living situation?

## Literature Review

By the early 1990's, public housing in the United States was widely regarded as a failure, trapping tens of thousands of extremely low-income families in crumbling, problem-plagued developments with neighborhood poverty rates upwards of 40 percent (The Urban Institute, 2002). In 1989, in an effort to obtain a better understanding of the problems facing public housing, Congress established the National Commission on Severely Distressed Housing. The purpose of this commission was to closely examine

---

<sup>1</sup> All names of housing projects in the paper are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> A final wave of focus groups will take place in 2006.

public housing in this country and to identify both problems and solutions to improve this system. In 1992, the Commission issued its report, designating 86,000 of the 1.3 million public housing units nationwide as “severely distressed” housing that needed to be demolished (Bacon, 1998). Severely distressed housing was defined as housing that:

- 1) requires major redesign, reconstruction, redevelopment, or partial or total demolition...
- 2) is a significant contributing factor to the physical decline and disinvestment...in the surrounding neighborhood
- 3) is occupied predominantly by ... families with children that are very low income, whose members are unemployed and dependent on various forms of public assistance, or has high rates of vandalism and criminal activity, and
- 4) cannot be revitalized through assistance under other programs (Popkin et al., 2004, p.8)

Armed with the information from the National Commission on Severely Distressed Housing, Congress created the Homeownership and Opportunity for People Everywhere (HOPE VI) program in 1992 (Pub.L. 102-389). HOPE VI provides public housing authorities with both “demolition” and “revitalization” grants. Demolition grants fund demolition of severely distressed public housing and resident relocation services, while revitalization grants fund major rehabilitation and new construction, as well as community and supportive services programs for all residents (Harvard Law Review, 2003). The goals of HOPE VI include improvement of the living environment for public housing residents, revitalization of sites on which public housing is located, deconcentration of poverty and to build sustainable communities [U.S. General

Accounting Office (GAO), 2003]. To achieve these goals, “severely distressed” public housing “projects” would be demolished and replaced with mixed-income housing in which low-income families would be living next door to middle-income families. The new housing “communities” were designed to replace traditional public housing projects with a mix of public housing units, subsidized apartments and private town homes. The goal was to occupy these units with individuals from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, thereby reducing isolation of public housing residents, building community, and reducing crime and violence in public housing.

Since 1992, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has awarded 446 HOPE VI grants in 166 cities, investing approximately 5 billion dollars in the effort (HUD, 2004). To date, 63,100 severely distressed units have been demolished and another 20,300 units are slated for redevelopment (Holin, Buron, Locke & Cortes, 2003). As of the end of 2002, 15 of 165 funded HOPE VI programs were fully complete (U.S. GAO 2003).

It is estimated that approximately 49,000 residents have been displaced since 1992 as a result of the HOPE VI demolition and revitalization grants (U.S. GAO, 2003). Little peer-reviewed research is available regarding the plight of these displaced residents. In one of the first efforts to examine the affects of revitalization on original residents, Popkin, Buron, Levy and Cunningham (2000), explored relocation effects on public housing residents in Chicago. The Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) received HOPE VI grants for one of its largest housing developments, one of which was Henry Horner. In 1995, the CHA began its work on Horner. Horner had a history of poor conditions such as backed-up incinerators, infestations of roaches, rats, mice, frequently

broken elevators and dark hallways. Because of these horrid conditions a group of Horner residents filed suit against the CHA in 1991. The case was settled in 1995 with CHA and HUD agreeing to a revitalization that would transform the development into a mixed-income community.

In 1998, Popkin et al. (2000) conducted a preliminary assessment of the Horner Revitalization Initiative which included focus groups with resident leaders and face to face surveys with 289 Horner residents. Their results indicated that three years into the revitalization, physical conditions had improved. There were however some concerns due to the delays in construction which caused only 160 of the planned 446 new town homes to be completed. Most of the original buildings were still occupied and only 3 buildings had been demolished. In addition, in 1998, crime remained a serious problem in the development. Residents also expressed concerns regarding the differences in the screening of former Horner residents and the screening process for new residents which was more rigorous. The final problem identified was that of poor construction of the new units. Some units had serious maintenance problems including those associated with foundations. The study results indicated that Horner remained considerably more economically and socially distressed than the surrounding community, itself a poor African American neighborhood.

The researchers also surveyed 208 residents of the surrounding community and compared them to residents of Horner (Popkin et al., 2000). They found that respondents in both Horner and the community sample were almost entirely African American. They had little formal education and very low incomes. Horner residents were on average even less educated and poorer than the community residents – over one half of Horner

residents had not completed high school compared to 34% of community residents. They also found that 55% of Horner residents had annual income for 1997 that was below \$5,000, and 8% reported household income above \$20,000. In contrast, 20% of the community residents had incomes below \$5,000, and 25% reported incomes above \$20,000. Horner residents were younger, more likely to be women, more likely to have children living with them and less likely to have a working phone.

Another study (Buron, Popkin, Levy, Harris & Khadduri, 2002) examined the living conditions of 818 original residents from eight HOPE VI sites. The authors found that of the 818 households, 19% were living in a revitalized HOPE VI development, 29% in other public housing properties, 33% were renting with housing vouchers, and 18% had left assisted housing altogether. Nationally, a smaller share of original residents live in revitalized HOPE VI developments (14%), or have left assisted living altogether (14%), while a larger share of original residents relocated to other public housing developments (37%), or used a voucher (35%) (Buron, et al., 2002). Overall, their study found that 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 unsubsidized households in their sample tended to have higher incomes, higher employment rates, and more education than those still receiving housing assistance. Voucher users were similar to unsubsidized households in that they were younger, more educated, and had more children. They were similar to public housing households in that single females head most households and almost all have incomes below 30% of the area median.



Buron et al. (2002) found that the majority of HOPE VI returnees (76%) reported that their current unit was in better condition than their original unit, and that about two-thirds of those who relocated to other public housing developments described their housing units in good or excellent physical condition. Finally, the authors report that voucher users were less satisfied with their housing than other groups, with nearly half reporting their unit to be in fair or poor condition. In a small number of interviews with original residents who chose to relocate with a voucher, even though they complained about their current housing, these residents expressed preference for the voucher as opposed to public housing. Their main reasons for this preference were increased flexibility in choosing where to live, and greater privacy as a result of living in the private sector as opposed to a public housing development.

The findings from this 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 the Buron study were living in decent housing in neighborhoods that have lower poverty rates than their original public housing developments, and most were satisfied with their current living situation. Overall, 56% of participants reported their current housing unit was in better condition than their original public housing unit; 29% reported that it was in about the same condition; and 15% reported it was in worse condition.

A substantial proportion of public housing residents and voucher users reported problems with drug trafficking and violent crime in their neighborhood. In addition, about half of voucher users and unsubsidized households reported having problems meeting housing expenses. Overall, there was no evidence that as a group, original

residents were worse off as a result of HOPE VI, and most are considerably better off as a result of the changes associated with leaving distressed public housing.

The available literature demonstrates that overall, a small majority of HOPE VI original residents find that their present housing (whether it be other public housing, vouchers, or unsubsidized housing) is more favorable than their original site. Of the three groups, voucher users were the least satisfied. Many residents continue to see that crime is a problem in their new neighborhood. The present research aims to build on existing research to gain a better understanding of the impact of relocation on the lives of public housing residents.

## Method

### *Design and Sample*

Funding for the current study was received three years after relocation of residents precluding a pretest posttest quasi-experimental research design. The research design is a posttest-only design with two data points (four and five years post-relocation). The intervention<sup>3</sup> was the relocation of residents through the HOPE VI redevelopment grant. Mixed methods included both fixed-choice questionnaires and open-ended questions with residents in focus groups.

Atlanta Housing Authority provided a list of contact information for the head of the 493 households who lived in Smith Homes at the time of relocation in 1999. Random sampling was not possible because over 90% of the phone numbers were either disconnected, no longer in service, or the contact person no longer resided at the home of the phone number. Through snowball sampling methods we found and scheduled 116 ex-

Smith Homes residents for focus groups. Participants received a \$100 honorarium for completing a focus group. The \$100 participant incentive appeared helpful to the snowball sampling technique.

In late 2002 and early 2003 we held 10 focus groups attended by 93 former Smith Homes residents. A total of 116 ex-residents were scheduled for focus group interviews, resulting in an 80% participation rate. The largest focus group had 13 participants; the smallest group was attended by 5 residents. The average focus group had 8 participants. Focus groups were stratified based on whether residents were in private housing found with vouchers or in another public housing complex. Thirty-one participants were in public housing, while 62 were voucher users. We were unable to contact any former Smith Homes residents who were no longer associated with the Atlanta Housing Authority.

Our second wave of focus groups were held in the Spring of 2004 which was just over a year after the first set of focus groups. We called all 93 participants from our previous focus groups. We were unable to contact 12 people due to disconnected phone numbers or respondent had moved without leaving a forwarding number. We talked to 81 respondents and 77 were scheduled for focus group interviews. Seventy-one participants showed up, resulting in an 85% participation rate.

#### *Variables and Instruments*

The independent variable was relocation. Several sets of dependent variables included: 1) resident satisfaction with their current house/apartment, neighborhood, and neighborhood and neighborhood conveniences, 2) resident perceptions comparing current

---

<sup>3</sup> Like most HOPE VI projects this one offered various social services to residents such as job training and programs for youth and senior citizens. So few residents in our sample and in all of Smith Homes

housing, living conditions, health and financial security with their memory of same in Smith Homes, and 3) resident perceptions of changes in the same variables over the 15 months between wave one and wave two focus groups.

The questions that guided the focus groups were developed to cover the objectives in the research contract with Atlanta Housing Authority. Because the targeted sample size of 100 participants was large enough to run statistical analyses of quantitative data, we constructed four (two for each wave of data collection) standardized measures and administered them during the focus groups. Kreuger's (1998) guide for developing focus group questions was used to construct Likert scaled questions to assess participant perceptions of current housing/neighborhood conditions and comparisons between current housing/neighborhood conditions and residents' memories of living conditions at Smith Homes.

For wave one data collection residents were asked "How satisfied are you with your current...house/apartment, amount or rent you pay, neighborhood, etc. (see Table 2 for all variables). Responses were recorded on a five point Likert scale ranging from very satisfied (1) to very dissatisfied (5). We created another instrument that asked residents to compare these same variables (house, neighborhood, etc., see Table 3) today with their memory of living in Smith Homes. The responses for these questions were Better Now, About the Same, or Better at Smith Homes. Using these same fixed-choice responses we asked residents to compare their overall financial situation, health, and overall living situation today with their memory of living in Smith Homes.

For wave two data collection we asked participants to compare their current situation today with their situation a year ago at the time of the first focus group. We

asked residents to compare all the same variables we asked in wave one with the addition of several variables that emerged as important from our analysis of wave one data. We added the following variables: cost of utility bills, employment, stress, alcohol/drug use, children's physical health, children's stress, children's performance in school, and support from family and friends. Response choices for these questions were About the Same, Better Today, or Worse Today...compared to the time of last year's focus group.

Questionnaires were reviewed and revised by the entire research team and with Atlanta Housing Authority's research office before data collection began. Questionnaires went through several drafts before a final consensus was reached. Because questionnaires were designed to meet the specific needs of the research contract we have no reliability data on the questionnaires. The Likert-scaled responses measuring resident satisfaction used widely adopted predetermined choices (Krueger, 1998). Face and content validity of the fixed-choice questionnaires was supported by the peer review questionnaire construction process utilized by the research team. Concurrent validity of the questionnaires was supported by analysis of the qualitative data which strongly supported the quantitative findings.

### *Procedure*

The fixed-choice rating scales were used to introduce most of the pertinent variables to the respondents, and respondents kept the rating scales during discussions of the variables. Having participants fill out rating scales and then later respond verbally accommodates respondents who may be less inclined to offer spontaneous verbal reactions to issues (Krueger, 1998). After several icebreaker questions the moderator

distributed a fixed choice questionnaire. After respondents completed the questionnaire the moderator asked for verbal responses to the issues just rated.

Focus groups also inquired about issues/variables that were not on the fixed-choice rating scales. After discussing the issues listed on the rating scales we asked respondents if there were other important housing/neighborhood/living condition issues that we did not ask about. This open-ended question generated discussions around issues like utility rates.

Focus groups were attended by three authors of this report. One author moderated the focus groups, while the other two took notes, passed out forms, and assisted with probing and follow-up questions to insure topics were thoroughly covered. All focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

#### *Data Analysis*

To compare responses on the fixed-choice rating scales between Voucher users and Public Housing residents we used chi-square statistics for nominal variables and T-Tests for interval measured variables. We used .05 as the level for statistical significance. Effect sizes for cross tabulations were measured by Cramer's V statistics.

Focus group transcripts were analyzed using the most basic form of open coding and content analysis (Berg, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Since most of the variables were pre-identified before data collection the analysis was largely driven by the variables and categories identified on the fixed-choice scales. However, as noted above, some new categories emerged throughout the focus groups. After a category emerged (e.g., such as utility rates, or substance abuse) we began asking specific questions about those issues in subsequent focus groups.

### *Limitations of Research Design*

A posttest-only design with a snowball sample does not allow causal inference between independent and dependent variables. Allowing residents to self-select either vouchers or public housing introduces a selection bias and further diminishes causal inference. The four year time period between relocation and data collection allows ample time for many other variables to affect resident perceptions. As the next section demonstrates, demographic variable analysis suggests our sample is very similar to the 685 residents of another public housing complex undergoing HOPE VI revitalization in Atlanta. Our results are probably generalizable to displaced residents of other HOPE VI projects in Atlanta. Our inability to locate and interview any of the 12.7% (n = 63) of ex-Smith Home residents no longer connected to the public housing system, suggests our results are not generalizable to folks who have completely dropped out of the system.

## Results

### *Wave One Data*

#### *Sample demographics*

Voucher users and public housing residents were virtually the same for gender, race, ethnicity, marital status, number of children, education level, and employment (see Table 1). Voucher users and public housing residents differed in terms of age and primary means of transportation. The mean age of voucher users was 38 years old compared to 53 for public housing residents. Public housing residents were on average 15 years older than voucher users. While only 10% of public housing residents owned an automobile, 39% of voucher users owned automobiles.

| Insert Table 1 About Here |

The demographic characteristics of our sample are similar to those of ex-residents of Drake Homes, another Atlanta public housing project undergoing HOPE VI redevelopment. The median age of Drake Homes heads of households was 41 years old. Ex-residents of Drake Homes were 90% female, 99% African-American, 98% single, and had mean incomes of \$7,938 in 2003 (Holmes et al., 2003). The demographic similarity of our sample to Drake Homes residents suggests our findings are probably generalizable to residents displaced from other HOPE VI developments in Atlanta.

*Satisfaction With Current Housing and Neighborhood*

Table two reports the percentages of the total sample who stated they were either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with various housing and neighborhood conditions. Overall, residents reported high levels of satisfaction with their home/apartment, rent, neighborhood, and neighborhood conveniences.

| Insert Table 2 About Here |

Cross tabulations of all variables in Table 2 indicated voucher users and public housing residents reported similar levels of satisfaction for all variables except for safety of neighborhood and convenience to medical care. While 75% of voucher users expressed satisfaction with the safety of the neighborhood, only 43 % of public housing residents were satisfied with the safety of the neighborhood,  $\chi^2(4, N= 84) = 13.39, p = .01$ , Cramer's  $V = .40$ . One voucher user stated: "I feel like a Queen now; No ducking bullets." Only 16% of voucher users were dissatisfied with neighborhood safety compared to 43% of public housing residents stating they were dissatisfied with the safety in their neighborhood. This is how one public housing resident described her dissatisfaction with the safety of her neighborhood: "It's an unsafe neighborhood.



Somebody is always getting killed. In fact three have been killed this year. And drugs, drugs, drugs...”

Ninety-three percent of public housing residents were satisfied with the proximity of their current home to medical care compared to 74% of voucher users,  $\chi^2(4, N=84) = 10.30, p = .04, \text{Cramer's } V = .34$ . The majority of public housing residents were relocated to another public housing project adjacent to the primary public hospital that treats indigent patients. This probably explains the high level of satisfaction of public housing residents concerning access to medical care.

#### *Comparing Current Housing and Neighborhood to Smith Homes*

Although few differences emerged between voucher users and public housing residents when asked about how satisfied they were with current housing and living conditions; many significant differences emerged when between voucher users and public housing residents when asked to compare their current situation with their memory of Smith Homes. We asked residents a series of questions about their current living conditions and to compare their current conditions with their memory of living in Smith Homes. For each variable we asked residents if their situation was better today, about the same, or better at Smith Homes. Table 3 shows the percent of voucher users and public housing residents who stated their situation was better today or better at Smith Homes.

| Insert Table 3 About Here |

Compared to public housing residents voucher users were much more likely to say their house itself, amount of rent paid, neighborhood, safety of neighborhood, physical health, and overall living situation were better today compared to living at Smith Homes. In most categories the differences were quite large, for example, voucher users

were more than five times as likely as public housing residents to say their neighborhood were better today compared to Smith Homes (64% to 11% respectively).

The following two quotes represent the differences between voucher users and public housing residents in regards to neighborhood safety:

Well for me, I don't have to get woke up out of the bed because I hear gunshots. There have been a lot of times [at Smith Homes] I felt like [the gunfire] was so close I didn't get up, I just rolled on out. I am more comfortable and relaxed now, more at ease.—Voucher User

I'm not happy where I am [now]. When I was in Smith Homes I did not see the drug activity; where I am now, it's right there at the end of the driveway. You walk out the door; there they are. The police is up and down the street all the time, but they can't seem to clean that up. As soon as the police go, they're right back out there doing the same thing.—

Public Housing Resident

For most of the variables listed in Table 3, a greater percentage of public housing residents stated that life was better in Smith Homes compared to the public housing complex they had relocated to. More public housing residents stated that the apartment itself, rent, neighborhood, safety of neighborhood, health, convenience to jobs, and overall living situations were better at Smith Homes compared to their new public housing complex. There is no empirical evidence suggesting the housing project most public housing residents moved to was more distressed than Smith Homes. The public housing resident quoted above doesn't say she thinks Smith Homes had less drug activity

than her new complex she states she didn't observe the drug activity in Smith Homes. This response was common among many public housing residents; even though criminal activity was rampant in Smith Homes most residents had worked out their own "comfort zones" where the drug activity was not as observable as it was in the complex they moved to.

For the variables convenience to mass transit, medical care, and children's schools more public housing residents felt like life had improved compared to the numbers who stated life had declined in these categories. Although 55% of public housing residents reported no financial change since moving from Smith Homes, 28% reported financial improvements over the past 4 years.

Forty-one percent of voucher users stated their overall financial situation had improved since they lived in Smith Homes. The most common reasons given for financial improvements were finding employment or getting a raise. One resident put it this way: "My financial situation is better... because I have a job now. I was drinking then and I'm not doing that now."

#### *Biggest Impact of Relocation*

One of our concluding questions in the focus groups was "Thinking back on all that we have discussed tonight, what has been the biggest single impact relocating from Smith Homes has had on your life?" The majority of responses to this question were positive. Most participants spoke about some aspect of personal growth or development they associated with relocation. Although most of the positive responses to this question came from voucher users, some public housing residents described positive experiences related to relocation. Respondents described different positive impacts of relocation.

Some stated it made them stronger, more responsible or self-reliant; others stated relocation influenced them to give up drinking alcohol or taking drugs. Quite a few respondents stated they have become more fiscally responsible, and a few said they have improved self-esteem. Some participants stated the biggest impact of relocation was higher utility bills and more financial stress. The following quote from a voucher user reflects the complex nature of feeling more responsible in a positive fashion but feeling more stress at the same time:

Well, if I had stayed at [Smith] Homes I wouldn't have all these bills to pay... You've got to keep a job to keep all these bills going. I can't say anything negative, but you just have to put yourself in a place where you know your responsibilities. Well I complain about the utilities but I can keep my children together now because I don't have people all around doing all sorts of stuff. It made me a better parent. It made me look at what I want for myself and my children. It's hard, but it's better.

#### *Wave Two Data*

Table 4 shows resident perceptions of changes for key variables over the year between the two waves of focus groups. During wave two focus groups we discovered that 40% of voucher users had moved since the first focus group and no public housing residents moved during the interim period. Qualitative responses suggested moving was associated with residents perceiving improved outcomes in many areas, so in analyzing the quantitative data we created an additional respondent category of voucher users who had moved since the last focus group. As Table 4 shows, voucher users who moved were significantly more likely to perceive improvements in their house, rent, neighborhood,

utility bills, neighborhood safety, stress level, and overall living situations compared to voucher users who had not moved and public housing residents. Although 33% of voucher users who had moved perceived financial improvement over the past year, 58% of voucher users who had not moved stated their financial situation had improved over the past year.

Although the majority of public housing residents perceived no change in their situations over the past year; 40% stated their neighborhood was worse and almost one in four (23%) felt their overall global situation was worse at the time of the second focus group.

By far the biggest concern expressed by voucher users was difficulty paying utility bills. While 50% of voucher users stated their utility bills were worse this year compared to last, only 8% of public housing residents stated their utility bills were higher this year. At least one voucher user interviewed stated her utility bills were so bad she felt like moving back to “the projects” where her utility bills were never a problem for her. The two biggest complaints were about water and gas bills.

#### Discussion and Applications to Social Work Research and Practice

Probably the most robust finding to emerge from our study was that voucher users were much more likely to perceive their lives improving in multiple categories (housing, neighborhood, health) compared to those who moved into another public housing complex. Since 40% of voucher users moved during the year between the first and second focus group and moving was associated with even higher levels of satisfaction, the flexibility and choice associated with vouchers (at least in the Atlanta housing market) appears to be one of the most popular aspects of the program. Although

participants who were working still had very modest incomes (mean \$12,132) 41% of voucher users stated their financial situations had improved since moving from Smith Homes. The current findings both support and add to the empirical knowledge base on displaced HOPE VI public housing residents.

Similar to the present study, Garshick-Kleit & Manzo (2003, cited in Popkin et al., 2004) found younger women with children were more likely to select the voucher program, while older residents were more likely to select public housing. Our study is the first one we are aware of that found auto ownership significantly related to type of housing selected. Voucher users were four times as likely as public housing residents to have an automobile. Ninety percent of public housing residents primarily depended on public transit. Not having a car is probably a barrier for displaced residents even considering the voucher program.

Eighty-five percent of respondents in the HOPE VI Resident Tracking Study (Buron et al., 2002) stated their housing unit was in the same or better condition compared to their original public housing. While 68% of voucher users stated their current unit was better than Smith Homes, only 16% of public housing residents stated their current housing unit was better than the distressed housing unit they occupied at Smith Homes. This contrasts sharply with the two-thirds of public housing residents Buron et al., (2002) found who stated the unit they relocated to was in good or excellent condition. One explanation for this might be that the majority of ex-Smith Homes residents who chose public housing were relocated to another distressed housing unit that since resident relocation has been slated for demolition and redevelopment. Apparently,

in other HOPE VI projects residents selecting public housing were relocated to public housing that was in better condition compared to the residents' original public housing.

The relatively high level of satisfaction reported by ex-Smith Homes voucher users also departs from Buron et al.'s (2002) finding that voucher users were less satisfied with their housing compared to those living in public housing. They found only 46% of voucher users felt their current unit was in better condition than their original one from the severely distressed project they moved from. Buron et al. (2002) found variation in housing satisfaction among voucher users based on how tight the housing market was. The tighter the market the lower resident satisfaction. The soft rental market in Atlanta during the time period Smith homes residents moved out probably contributed to the high level of satisfaction reported by voucher users in Atlanta.

Our study is the first one we are aware of that found moving within the voucher program related to even higher levels of satisfaction with housing and neighborhood conditions. Voucher users reported that moving to a new unit was relatively easy if you complied with the terms of your lease. This mobility appears related to residents perceiving positive outcomes.

Our study is the first one we are aware of that found a relationship between physical health and selecting the voucher program. Forty-one percent of voucher users stated their physical health was better today than it was in Smith Homes. Since respondent health was measured by self-report, this finding may reflect a more positive psychological outlook rather than improved physiological health per se, but improved physical health may be related to less stress. Popkin & Cunningham (2002, cited in Popkin et al., 2004, p. 30) found displaced HOPE VI residents in Chicago experienced

“almost immediate improvements in ...mental health, likely [as] a result of living in a safer neighborhood.” Although we didn’t include stress on the quantitative questionnaire until the second wave of focus groups voucher users qualitative responses suggested they were experiencing less stress and it was related to their perception of improved neighborhood safety.

Our findings suggest the administration should continue full funding of housing vouchers. Current Bush Administration Housing and Urban Development (HUD) policy is proposing fiscal constraints in the voucher program that could eliminate vouchers for 250,000 families in FY 2005 and 600,000 families (30% of the program) by 2009 (Sard & Fischer, 2004). Our findings suggest that at least in Atlanta, voucher users are faring better than residents relocated to other public housing projects. Since relatively few displaced residents ever move back to revitalized HOPE VI projects (Popkin et al., 2004), and vouchers are the program of choice, drastic cutbacks in vouchers would debilitate the housing program that appears to have the most potential to help residents realize the self-sufficiency goals of HOPE VI revitalization.

Housing Authorities should make efforts to relocate residents who select public housing to revitalized public housing projects. Our results suggest if residents are relocated to another distressed project they will likely perceive their housing, neighborhood and living situations as declining rather than improving due to relocation. In our focus groups with public housing residents we saw little evidence that many were moving toward the HOPE VI goals of financial and housing self-sufficiency. These goals may not be realistic for all residents.



To meet HOPE VI goals of economic and housing self-sufficiency for significant numbers of public housing clients more comprehensive interventions are probably going to be required. The self-sufficiency standard for a single mother with two children (the typical family in our study) for Atlanta Georgia is \$37,982 per year (Pearce & Brooks, 2002); this is more than four times the mean income of \$8,882 of ex Smith Homes residents. By themselves, housing authorities cannot be expected to solve problems deeply imbedded in the economic and social structure. The mean household income of \$12,132 for working families in our study (Sjoquist, 2002) suggests these families would benefit from programs that provide the working poor with more education & training, living wages, utility rate assistance, and health care to help them move toward financial and housing self-sufficiency.

## References

- Bacon, E. (1998). Transforming public housing. *Journal of Housing and Community Development* 55 (6), 7-10.
- Berg, B. (1995). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (Second ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Buron, L., Popkin, S.J., Levy, D., Harris, L.E. & Khadduri (2002). *The HOPE VI resident tracking study: A snapshot of the current living situation of original residents from eight sites*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.
- Garshick-Kleit, R. & Manzo, L. (2003). *To move or not to move: Determinants of resident relocation choices in HOPE VI*. Paper presented at the Joint Meeting of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning and the Association of European Schools of Planning, July.
- Harvard Law Review (2003). When hope falls short: HOPE VI, accountability, and the privatization of public housing. *Harvard Law Review* 116 (5), 1477-1499.
- Holin, M.J., Buron, L., Locke, G., and Cortes, A. (2003). *Interim assessment of the HOPE VI program Cross-site report*. Prepared by Abt Associates for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.
- Holmes, B., Moody, M., Hill, A., Hardison-Dayton, C., Green, N., Herd, R., Sisy, E., & Williams, J. (2003). *The [Drake Homes]HOPE VI evaluation baseline study*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Krueger, R. (1998). *Developing questions for focus groups*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Pearce, D., & Brooks, J. (2002). The self-sufficiency standard for Georgia. Retrieved August 26, 2004 from <http://www.womenspolicygroup.org/pdfs/GA-FINAL-fullreport.pdf>.
- Popkin, S.J., Buron, L.F., Levy, D.K. & Cunningham, M.K. (2000). The Gautreaux legacy: What might mixed-income and dispersal strategies mean for the poorest public housing tenants? *Housing Policy Debate* 11 (4), 911-942.
- Popkin, S., & Cunningham, M. (2002). *CHA relocation counseling assessment final report*. Report prepared for the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.
- Popkin, S.J., Katz, B., Cunningham, M.K., Brown, K.D., Gustafson, J., and Turner, M.A. (2004). *A decade of HOPE VI: Research findings and policy challenges*. The Urban Institute.
- Sard, B. & Fischer, W. (2004). *Administration seeks deep cuts in housing vouchers and conversion of program to a block grant*. Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Retrieved August 11, 2004: <http://www.centeronbudget.org/2-12-04hous.htm>
- Sjoquist, D. (2002). *Analysis of demographic characteristics of [Smith Homes] residents*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- The Urban Institute (2002). *HOPE VI helps many in America's worst public housing, but vulnerable families face significant barriers*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. Retrieved July 23, 2004: [www.urban.org/urlprint.cfm?ID=8048](http://www.urban.org/urlprint.cfm?ID=8048).

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2004). About HOPE VI.

Retrieved 7/23/04 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.hud.gov>.

U. S. General Accounting Office (2003). *Public Housing: HOPE VI resident issues and changes in neighborhoods surrounding grant sites*. Report to the Ranking Minority Member, Subcommittee on Housing and Transportation, Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs, U.S. Senate. Washington, DC: General Accounting Office.

Table 1. Sample Demographic Characteristics

	Full Sample N	FS %	Voucher Users n	VU %	Public Housing n	PH %
Count	93		61		32	
Mean Age**	44.5		38		53	
Gender						
Female	84	90	56	92	28	88
Male	9	10	5	8	4	12
Ethnicity						
Hispanic	0	0	0	0	0	0
Non-Hispanic	93	100	61	100	32	100
Race						
African American	93	100	61	100	32	100
Marital Status						
Never Married	45	53	31	56	14	47
Married	2	2	2	4	0	0
Separated/divorced	30	35	19	34	11	37
Widowed	8	9	3	6	5	16
Mean Number of Children	3.1		3.3		2.7	
Education						
< 12 Years	26	37	13	36	12	38
High School Diploma	36	51	17	44	19	59
> High School	9	12	5	13	1	3
Transportation**						
Public Transit	53	74	25	61	28	90
Automobile	19	26	16	39	3	10
Employment						
Full Time	20	23	18	30	2	7
Part Time	18	20	10	17	8	27
Not Employed/Retired	52	57	31	53	19	66
Annual Income, mean	\$8,823					

Note. \*\*  $p < .00$ . Income is the mean income of all ex-Smith Homes residents in 2002, not counting those families that had no income (Sjoquist, 2002).

Table 2. Resident Satisfaction With Current Housing and Neighborhood Conveniences

Variable	% Very/Somewhat Satisfied	n
House	77	87
Rent	86	87
Neighborhood	69	85
Safety of Neighborhood	64	84
Convenience to Rapid Transit	95	86
Convenience to Shopping	76	88
Convenience to Schools	89	64
Convenience to Medical Care	81	87
Convenience to Jobs	70	63
Convenience to Child Care	80	45

Table 3. Voucher Users and Public Housing Resident Perceptions of House and Living Conditions Compared to Smith Homes Four Years After Relocation

	Better Today		Better at Smith Homes		Cramer's V
	Voucher Users	Public Housing	Voucher Users	Public Housing	
House*, %	68	36	16	42	.33
Rent**	43	17	20	20	.28
Neighborhood*	64	11	14	43	.51
Safety of Neighborhood*	64	14	13	28	.48
Convenience to Rapid Transit*	31	68	17	13	.36
Convenience to Medical Care*	18	60	22	17	.44
Health*	41	17	10	33	.33
Overall Living Situation*	60	27	14	40	.35
Convenience to schools	44	53	22	20	NA
Convenience to jobs	26	27	30	40	NA
Overall financial situation	41	28	24	17	NA

Note. \*  $p < .00$  \*\* $p < .05$ . Likert response scale had three choices Better Today, About the Same, or Better at Smith Homes. The percentage of respondents stating About the Same was eliminated to make the Table more readable.

Table 4. Resident Perception of Changes Since the Last Focus Group

Variable	Cramer's V	Voucher Users Moved (n=18)		Voucher Users Not Moved (n=27)		Public Housing (n=26)	
		Better	Worse	Better	Worse	Better	Worse
House**, %	.52	78	6	11	4	4	15
Rent**	.31	50	6	23	12	4	23
Utility Bills**	.40	22	56	4	48	4	8
Neighborhood**	.47	78	0	22	22	4	40
Neighborhood Safety**	.40	67	6	19	15	8	31
Financial Situation*	.05	33	22	58	4	23	12
Stress	NA	41	18	27	19	12	31
Overall Situation**	.42	77	0	38	8	8	23

**Note.** \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$