Mobility in the Neoliberal City: Atlanta's Left Behind Neighborhoods

Mechelle Puckett

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MOBILITY IN THE NEOLIBERAL CITY: ATLANTA’S LEFT BEHIND NEIGHBORHOODS

by

MECHELLE PUCKETT

Under the Direction of Katherine Hankins

ABSTRACT

Neoliberal reforms alter cities all the way down to their very urban form. This research expands our knowledge of residential mobility brought on by neoliberalizing forces by examining two particular approaches to housing reform that resulted in intense periods of residential mobility- the closure and demolition of public housing projects and relaxed regulations on mortgage lending practices which contributed to bursting the housing bubble and a steep rise in foreclosures. These events brought significant change to Atlanta’s neighborhoods, leaving some with high rates of vacancy. Through GIS and qualitative research involving the analysis of semi-structured interviews with forty residents of four affected neighborhoods on the southwest side of Atlanta- Pittsburg/Mechanicsville, English Avenue, Beecher Hills, and Greenbriar, this research will tell the story of how residents of these neighborhoods experienced being left behind by both outward residential mobility and the government agencies that no longer have the resources available to support neighborhood stability.

INDEX WORDS: Public housing, Mobility, Public schools, Foreclosure crisis, Atlanta
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MECHELLE PUCKETT

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NEIGHBORHOODS

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my former students at Perkerson Elementary School. The incredible accomplishments you made in our short time together are my everyday inspiration. May you go on to achieve your dreams.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It takes a village, a family, a faculty, a society, and a lifetime to educate an individual. My education thus far has been widely influenced, and I am grateful for this space to give thanks to those who contributed to that knowledge I hold in highest esteem. Dr. Katherine Hankins, I found your guidance and advisement to be invaluable over the last three years. You provided me with challenging opportunities and let me navigate them in my own way, but of course, you were always there when I was stuck on some concept or overthinking the process. Thank you for the incredible conversations among brilliant women held on your front porch and for entrusting me with your students in my last year of study. These opportunities made graduate school the experience I dreamed of.

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I will conclude here by adding that this research would not have been possible without contributions of time, knowledge, and guidance from neighborhood residents and school district personnel. I give my gratitude to each and every one of you.
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1 INTRODUCTION

The closure of public housing projects in the city of Atlanta was an upheaval and a paradigm shift that played out on the landscape of urban low-income housing in this southern city. Once dubbed “the city too busy to hate” during Mayor William Hartsfield’s administration (Kruse 2005:41), the history of Atlanta is one characterized as rich with innovation and an indomitable entrepreneurial spirit, yet rife with segregation and plagued by a large section of its population living in poverty (Stone 1989, Kruse 2005, Keating 2001). The deconcentration of that poverty was the justification for the upheaval of public housing tenants, and what resulted was a shift in the direction of federal housing assistance towards favoring a market-centered delivery of funds via housing choice vouchers. At the same time public housing projects met their demise, Atlanta, like many of the nation’s cities, experienced a wave of properties entering foreclosure during what has been called the Great Recession or the Housing Crisis. What did these concurrently running phenomena mean for Atlanta’s neighborhoods?

These approaches to housing reform- the closure of public housing projects and relaxed mortgage lending regulations- are part of a broader trend in the economy which favors the free market and a reduction in the role of government, a phenomenon referred to scholars of political economy as neoliberalism (Hackworth 2007, Harvey 2005). This study seeks to contribute to literature on neoliberalism and to that of mobility, which involves the politics of movement, by investigating how residential mobility occurs in the context of urban neoliberalism. Hackworth (2007) contends that cities are the scale at which neoliberalism can best be understood. Cities are places, yet they are subject to increasing fiscal pressures as states and the federal government shift the costs of social welfare to the urban scale. Harvey (1989) describes how, in response to
this shift, cities are forced to take on an entrepreneurial stance in order to compete for new jobs, grants, and residents. This competition alters cities all the way down to the very urban form itself, as evidenced in Atlanta’s built environment with the demolition of public housing projects that are now left as acres and acres of vast empty fields. While neoliberalizing processes affect many dimensions of urban life, in this work, I focus on those reforms that bring about changes in housing and access to housing, therefore resulting in intense periods of residential mobility.

Before going too far with the housing story, it is important to discuss relevant history regarding public housing and residential mobility in the city. In 1934, Atlanta became the first city in the United States to receive approval and federal funding for the development of public housing (Lapping 1973, Oakley, Ruel and Reid 2010, Bayor 1996). What began as a slum clearance project initiated by the entrepreneurial vision of a developer named Charles Palmer (Palmer 1955) eventually came to be project-based public housing for over 50,000 tenants under the management of the Atlanta Housing Authority. Over time, due to the reduction of federal funding for housing and the continued racist practices of Atlanta’s urban regime (Stone 1989), the projects began to suffer. Through years of neglect, Atlanta’s public housing projects had become notorious as crime ridden slum housing by the 1990’s (McNulty and Holloway 2000). With the upcoming 1996 Olympics, slum clearance began again in the city in a process that brought the end of project-based housing in Atlanta.

Techwood Homes and Clark Howell homes were the first projects to go. Their location in prime real estate situated within close proximity to the Olympic athletes’ housing and what would be the tourist laden Centennial Olympic Park was the catalyst the city needed to take action. These games bring tourists, and the tourists bring money to spend, but they also bring a watchful eye reinforced by a near constant stream of visual media distributed via international
television networks. Because of this, the process of preparing the city for the 1996 Olympic Games was not unlike urban renewal in that a large portion of the city’s low-income African American residents were moved away from the prime real estate in the core of the city and forced into the outskirts, away from much needed public services (Bayor 1996).

The federal Hope VI program made available funding which was initially used to either remodel or demolish and rebuild public housing projects into Mixed Income Communities (MICs) (Ruel et al. 2013). These MICs were meant to re-house only a portion of the previous residents who were displaced during the development (Lake 2009), but the process did not stop when the Olympics were over. The demolition of public housing projects continued until 2011, when the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) demolished the last of its project-based housing, and concluded a process that ended in the removal of approximately 10,000 of Atlanta’s housing units originally designed for extremely low income singles, seniors, and families. In this process, thousands of individuals and families were scattered across the city, some with financial assistance through the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program, formerly known as Section 8, while others were left without public-housing assistance.

In 2007, the Atlanta Housing Authority announced it would move residents out of the city’s last ten family-housing projects and two of the senior/disabled projects (Ruel et al. 2013). Unlike the federal HOPE VI project that allowed for development of MICs and required rehousing a portion of former public housing tenants, this new round of demolition held no such requirement. Instead, this process was completed under the guidelines of Section 18 of the 1937 Housing Act, which meant the AHA had no immediate requirement to rebuild housing (Ruel et al. 2013). Some saw this massive movement of people as beacon of hope that these individuals and families would benefit from living in areas with greater upward social mobility (Glover
Others reckoned the situation akin to an urban-scale Trail of Tears in which this predominately African American population was forced out of their homes, disrupting social networks, and pushing them further into the outskirts of the city away from jobs, city services, and transportation (Bayor 1996, Tester et al. 2011). During this three year time period, the receiving neighborhoods were in many cases plagued with their own rapidly evolving situation-the foreclosure crisis (Aka 2012). In the course of my own field research, I saw that in some receiving neighborhoods, as many as three out of four homes on a block were boarded up. Businesses, no longer having a customer base, were forced to close, and those who remained were left to question their sense of place in spaces of absence.

A third element to this “perfect storm” of mobility that affected Atlanta’s neighborhoods was that among those relocated out of public housing were school-age children. Children of families in public housing or in foreclosed homes were often forced to change schools. Schools themselves were sometimes shuttered, as families moved, leaving behind fewer school-age children in their catchment areas. Likewise, receiving schools were not without problems. The influx of children from former public housing projects did not go unnoticed in cafeterias and classrooms and in neighborhoods across the city.

**Purpose of the Study**

This research seeks to explore what mobility looks like in urban areas under neoliberal reforms. Using four Atlanta neighborhoods as the case studies, the empirical research examines the effects of the residential relocation on neighborhoods during this period of intense residential mobility. Chapter two covers a review of the historical and emerging literature on neoliberalism.

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1 Maps in Appendix C show the rates of vacancy in Atlanta’s census tracts between 2006-2012
and mobility that suggests that research is needed to better understand the relationship between neoliberal reforms and mobility. Chapter three details the research questions for this project.

Chapter four covers a description of the methodology. This study involved the use of qualitative analysis of policy documents from the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) and Atlanta Public Schools (APS) and semi-structured interviews with forty residents from four neighborhoods in southwest Atlanta. Additionally, I used NVIVO 9 to assist with coding and analysis and ArcG.I.S 10.1 to create maps which help to visualize the number of vacant properties around Atlanta and in neighborhoods featured in this research.

Chapters five and six include a discussion of the foreclosure crisis. On November 2, 2009, the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Domestic Policy held a hearing to discuss the real estate crisis in Atlanta. At just two years into the crisis, the numbers participants discussed were quite grim: 1 in 85 homes were in foreclosure and over 9,500 homes from the 13-county metropolitan area were on the auction block- for only one day’s auctions (U.S. Congressional Hearing 2009). What these numbers do not reflect, however, is that many of those foreclosures were concentrated in hard-hit and often low-income neighborhoods, while more affluent neighborhoods bore little of this burden.

Chapter seven details the neighborhoods’ responses to this period of intense residential mobility. Neighborhood activism varied widely, in some ways without regard to differences in income levels. One neighborhood featured informal activities by churches and non-profit agencies, which aimed to provide social welfare needs such as food and shelter housing to those affected by this transition. Other neighborhoods had highly organized neighborhood associations, which were both a source of resistance to residents from public housing while at the
same time contributing financially to the reduction of vacant properties in order to protect property values.

Chapter eight focuses on public schools, looking into how both neighborhoods and the schools themselves experienced this period of mobility. During the closure of public housing, students who moved to new school district zones faced not only the challenge of being the “new kid in school,” but also the accompanying stigma of being from public housing. Schools had to adjust to the influx of new students and deal with skirmishes between students from rival housing projects who were previously educated in two or more different school zones. Neighborhoods dealt with the challenges associated with vacant school buildings or the threat of school closures.

The final chapter discusses the findings and implications of this research within the context of mobility and neoliberal policy reforms. This section includes a nod towards potential uses of this research for school districts, neighborhoods, and urban policymakers.
2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Both neoliberalism and mobility have been subjects of much academic scrutiny over time. This review of the literature examines the historical and emerging trends in these bodies of literature. It also clarifies the working definitions used for the purpose of this research. The latter sections examine the linkages between neoliberalism and mobility and also research related to residential mobility in Atlanta.

2.1 Neoliberalism

Over the past twenty years, a major trend in public housing has been the demolition of thousands of low-income housing units and the forced relocation of residents to the private sector through the use of a voucher payment system (Purcell 2008). This trend is part of a larger series of neoliberal reforms, which gained a solid political backing during the leadership of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, although shifts toward neoliberalism began pushing into markets as far back as the early 1970’s (Harvey 2005). During this time there was a paradigm shift in social ideologies which moved from Keynesian policies geared toward strong central government and labor unions to “pulling oneself up by the bootstraps” in order to reach one’s fullest personal potential through industriousness and innovation. Harvey (2005:2) attests to this new ideological framework by defining neoliberalism as follows:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.

Harvey goes on to claim that the neoliberal turn is “in some way and to some degree associated with the restoration or reconstruction of the power of economic elites” (19). Neoliberalizing processes have been so powerful, in fact, that much of the rhetoric of the Occupy movement
which started in 2011 was directed at exposing and pushing back against income inequality which has been on the rise over the past few decades.

Parekh (2005) describes the way neoliberalism came out of a split between three factions of liberalism. According to Parekh, Manchester liberalism (later called neoliberalism in the post Thatcher/Reagan era) was bitterly opposed to trade unions, minimum wages, and workplace regulations, but in favor entirely of laissez-faire economics. Other liberalisms, termed classical liberalism and social liberalism, rested in the center and left end of the spectrum respectively, favoring at least some amount of government intervention to protect “individual liberty and social order” (Parekh 2005:200)

Peck and Tickell (2002) recognize the progression of neoliberal practice, acknowledging that “Neoliberalism seems to be everywhere (380).” They further Harvey’s definition by noting that neoliberalism aims for free markets and free trade, with an inherent anti-Keynesian element. Neoliberalism strips away the security of welfare for the poor in support of “best practices” in business. Social services that were once fulfilled, or attempted to be fulfilled, with collectivist strategies are increasingly left to the will of the market.

These researchers note that neoliberalism reinvents itself in an ongoing process of transformation. According to Peck and Tickell (2002), neoliberalism’s most recent addition has been a type of remobilization of government efforts to expand the policing of immigration, welfare, and surveillance, with the most deleterious effects being felt by those already marginalized by neoliberal policies (389). For example, the policing of welfare requires that one seeking benefits must go through an extensive certification process to ensure that she works enough hours per week and does not earn over a certain dollar limit. Gone are the days of just walking up to the welfare window, reminiscent of pictures from the Great Depression. The
initial process can take well over a month, and that is in the best of circumstances when one has access to a computer with internet service. Waiting for an appointment to complete the application with a representative could take longer. The process starts all over again when it is time to recertify.

Another example of the remobilization of government lies in the expansion of the prison industrial complex, which today houses over two million prisoners compared to less than 350,000 in 1972 (Alexander 2012). In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, legal scholar Michelle Alexander (2012), makes the claim that racial caste has not ended in the United States, but rather, it has been redesigned into a system in which far too many young black men and women are incarcerated under the guise of the War on Drugs. With many federal and state prisons now privatized, the business of incarceration is one in which great profit can be earned off of the housing and surveillance of those who are at an incredible disadvantage. This restructuring of neoliberal policy which leans toward privatization can also be referred to as “creative destruction” (Brenner and Theodore 2002, Harvey 2007).

Scholars have devoted their efforts toward trying to establish at what scale neoliberalism is best understood. The links between globalization, and therefore the global scale, and neoliberalism have been clearly established (Harvey 2005, Kingfisher 2002). It is at this scale that terms like time-space compression, global financial markets, spatial fixes, and competitive advantage can best be understood, but this certainly does not capture the entire picture. Instead, some authors focus their work on the urban scale. For example, Mark Purcell (2008) claims that capitalism has been a dominant urbanizing force over time, and it is at this urban scale that problems of neoliberalism can best be dealt with to achieve the highest positive impact. Jason Hackworth (2007) agrees that neoliberalism can best be understood at the urban scale, but
contends that neoliberalism itself has been an urbanizing force. Hackworth introduces *The Neoliberal City: Governance, Ideology, and Development in American Urbanism* with a chapter about bond rating agencies that disciplined cities by forcing them to cut back on social services in order to improve their lending scores and remain competitive against other cities. Drawing on the work of David Harvey, Hackworth describes a transformation in which the spatial fix to the Great Depression has shifted to a spatial fix on uneven development within and between cities, affecting the very urban form in that the urban core becomes reinvested with inner suburbs become disinvested.

David Harvey claims that, “neoliberalism has meant, in short, the financialization of everything” (33). Milton Friedman and Friedrich von Hayek, the fathers of neoliberal thinking, may not have placed housing policy at the top of the list of concerns for what would eventually be a shift in the management of the world economy. However, since its inception, neoliberal reforms have steadily made their way into federal, state, and local housing policies. For example, Rolnik (2013) focuses her attention on how the commodification of housing hijacked “the conceptual meaning of housing as a social good” (1059). According to Rolnik, rather than a social good, housing is now considered a means to wealth, and the invitation of low and moderate income earners into the housing market was an opportunity to speed the sale of transactions which brings about the possibility of creating more value. With the rollback of federal oversight into these kinds of transactions, the stage was set for serious trouble. Immergluck (2009) describes how a rise in risky lending wreaked havoc on communities which were left with high vacancies after homes went into foreclosure.

Another example of this change in meaning of housing is the transition from housing low-income earners in publicly funded structures managed by municipal housing authorities to
housing them in the private rental market. The funding for tenants to relocate from public housing into the market comes from the Housing Choice Voucher Program (formerly Section 8), which is a federal program that is administered locally by public housing authorities. Smith (2006) describes how public housing is being “reinvented and represented as ‘new and improved,’” yet the risks involved in this transition have not yet received enough attention (20). The potential loss of tens of thousands of low-income housing units across the country signals an incredible shift in federal housing policy, especially since many of the tenants of these units will not be re-housed in mixed income communities, but rather, they will receive vouchers which put them at the mercy of the private housing market. This program fits exceptionally well into Harvey’s (2005) definition of neoliberalism, as the voucher system effectively removes tenants from state sponsored housing, leaving them to the will of the market.

The devolution of central government processes to local agencies and the private market is typical under neoliberal reform, as central governments tend to “roll back” economic regulation and social welfare, and “roll out” support for capital (Peck and Tickell 2002). Under this program, the private rental market receives an obvious boost, as tenants flood the market with funds that are practically “guaranteed” since they are backed by the federal government. For voucher holders, however, the benefits are less certain. The market has a limited number of low cost housing units, which tend to be clustered in the most disadvantaged areas of the city (Fainstein 2010). In Atlanta, the market was flooded with so many vouchers that landlords had the unprecedented opportunity to pick and choose applicants based upon the most desirable traits (Hankins et al, forthcoming). Voucher holders with negative credit marks, criminal backgrounds, children, handicaps, and minority ethnicities were sometimes passed over, whereas in public housing, strict regulations were put in place to avoid such discrimination.
While proponents of neoliberalism argue that it is a good system for advancing human well-being (Friedman 2006, Birdsell and Fukuyama 2011), critics of the economic reforms note their tendency toward uneven economic development, finding it to be a system in which a few people and locations benefit at the expense of others (Harvey 1989, Harvey 2005, Peck and Tickell 2002, Brenner, Peck and Theodore 2010, Smith 1984, Purcell 2008). Sometimes the demolition of public housing is associated with public-private partnership plans for the development of mixed-use communities to be placed at the demolition sites and house a percentage of former residents (Goetz 2010). There is evidence to support the critics’ claim, in that the percentage of residents who are able to return to their old communities is often merely a fraction, as investors find it more lucrative to build premium housing which is priced beyond the limits voucher holders can pay (Hightower and DeMarco 2008). Fainstein (2010) cites substantial evidence of this phenomenon in her case study of New York, particularly under the leadership of Robert Moses and Rudolf Giuliani. Sugrue (1996) found similar results in various neighborhoods across Detroit. In this way, the developers benefit from increased revenue and access to prime real estate, while the majority of former tenants are left to find housing away from their old communities, in neighborhoods that are sometimes the most undesirable or underserved in the city.

Neoliberal reforms in housing policy had the effect of increasing residential mobility. Relaxed lending regulations, innovative schemes aimed at inviting low and moderate income earners into homeownership, and the closure of public housing were specifically designed to bring about movement through space- as in movement of people and goods out of one housing situation and into another. The Housing Choice voucher program also has an explicit goal of bringing about social mobility, meaning, a change (hopefully upward) in the social position of
voucher holders. Before one can really assess these goals and understand their implications, however, it is important to review the literature surrounding mobility studies, as the term is deeply entrenched in several arenas of academic study in the social sciences.

2.2 Mobility

Scholars of mobility studies come from departments such as geography, sociology, urban planning, transportation planning, public health and engineering. While this multidisciplinary approach to studying phenomena can certainly add richness to our available knowledge, it can also become an obstacle to understanding what kind of mobility one is referring to. According to Kaufmann (Kaufmann 2011), the social sciences first saw the term “mobility” used by geographers from the Chicago school in the 1920’s. When examining the dynamics of cities, geographers used an analytical framework which included residential and daily mobility of residents. In this sense, mobility was seen by geographers as *movement through space* (Kaufmann 2011).

The automobile revolution in the early twentieth century saw mobility used by transportation scientists to mean *transportation flows* (Kaufmann 2011). According to Adey (2010), early transportation mobility studies involved the analysis and planning of transportation patterns, infrastructures, and policies in a very abstract manor which emphasized the movement of objects or people in a void of social or political context. Likewise, Kaufmann (2011) highlights how transportation mobility was understood as flow patterns in space, which contrasted with spatial mobility which focused on a changes in position from point “A” to “B” without necessarily delving into the flows used to get there. The key concern of transportation studies involved the removal of impediments to this mobility flow (Freudendal-Pedersen 2009). On the temporal scale, these flows also tend to be limited to relatively short time periods of
seconds, minutes, hours, or days, which differ from other kinds of mobility patterns that could span years, such as the process of public-housing demolition or, on the other hand, gentrification in urban neighborhoods.

In the 1950’s, the social sciences adopted a new meaning of mobility which focused on topics such as career paths and “social inequality resulting from the social reproduction and movement (or not) on the occupational ladder” (Kaufmann 2011). Earlier examples of social mobility referred to changes in social positions or roles. At the time sociologists adopted this focus on employment trends, sociologists already used terms such as vertical mobility, meaning the upward or downward movement in a social position, and horizontal mobility, meaning a lateral move in a social position. Pitirim Sorokin (Sorokin 1927) illustrated these terms by placing them social stratification pyramids. For example, in an employment pyramid for a nation, there may be four tiers, with the lowest (and largest) level comprised of low-wage service sector jobs. The next tier might be manufacturing positions, topped by a tier with professional positions such as banking, scientists, and finance. The highest (and smallest) tier would be comprised of high-paid executive level positions such as CEOs and COOs of large corporations. Vertical mobility would signal a change upward or downward from one tier to another, while horizontal mobility would signal a change from one position in a tier to another position in the same tier, such as moving from a food service job to a retail job. This framework provided a strong foundation for analyzing how professional positions were relegated to people of various socio-economic groups in the post-World War II period.

In the post-World War II period, spatial mobility also experienced some changes. The field became fragmented into four subfields- daily mobility, migration, tourism, and residential mobility (Kaufmann 2011). Daily mobility studies are characterized by in-home surveys which
track peoples’ destination and origin points, as well as demographic data. Later, time parameters made their way into these surveys, which enabled researchers to better understand how people allocate their time, whether that be working, in transit, or participating in leisure activities either in or outside of the home. Migration looks at the movement of groups of people within and outside of their home lands, and even on smaller scales such as across cities. Tourism examines trips people make outside of their typical patterns on a for-pleasure basis as opposed to work trips. Access to speedier and cheaper methods of transportation encourages greater amounts of tourism, so this is a field of study that will continue to evolve over time. Finally, residential mobility aims at “understanding changes in residential locations within a given geographical area focusing primarily on its causes, links and consequences” (Kaufmann 2011)(27). Residential transitions can be positive or negative, depending upon how closely the results of movement align with the intended purpose.

The mobility turn

In mobility studies, a new paradigm has evolved over time as researchers have come to realize that these earlier mobility studies were lacking in context. Rather than seeing mobility as one-dimensional and abstract, these researchers called for developing a better understanding of the meanings associated with movement (Adey 2010, Cresswell 2010, Kaufmann 2011, Sheller and Urry 2006). Adey (2010) reminds us that mobility in itself is neither good nor bad, but rather it is “given or inscribed with meaning” (36). Drawing on the work of multiple scholars, Adey conceptualizes mobility as not just movement, but rather, a relationship through which the world is understood and lived in. Formerly, researches may have asked, “Where are you coming from or going to?”, but Kaufmann (2011) claims that the “entire question” is “Why do we move?” (35). Sheller and Urry (2006) call this new line of inquiry the ‘mobility turn.’
According to Cresswell (2006), mobility involves physical movement, representations, and practices and the delicate entanglement thereof. He follows this up with an examination of the politics of mobile practice in which he discusses not only constellations of mobility over time, but also the political implications of six facets of mobility: rhythm, route, speed, motivating force, friction, and experience (Cresswell 2010). With this analytical framework Cresswell provides, one can instantly begin to see the value of new mobilities literature, for example, by applying these facets of mobility to residential mobility patterns. Hankins et al (forthcoming) utilize this framework to arrive at a deeply contextualized understanding of the many challenges faced by public housing tenants as they moved into the private rental market. Rather than taking a limited look at the origin and destination addresses of public housing tenants, we were able to discover the significant amount of friction experienced in the process of relocation, such as incredible time delays associated with waiting for vouchers or inspections, not having enough money for utilities deposits, racism and classism, and a general lack of available rental properties with affordable rental prices. This kind of research confirms Kaufmann’s (2011) claim that we can no longer attempt to understand mobility without considering the “experiences and aspirations of the actors in question” (2). In fact, I would posit here that the entire question is not “Why do we move?” (Kaufmann 2011), but rather, the mobilities turn provides us the opportunity to ask a multitude of questions- How was the experience of moving? What resources were available? What could have made this movement better?

**Mobility in the neoliberal city**

According to Kaufmann (2011), we live in an age when “residential attachment and stability have come to symbolize elements of insecurity” (32). How could this be? After all, owning a home is, in fact, the very foundation of the American dream (Jackson 1985). The
answer to this lies in the connection between neoliberalizing forces and mobility. In its purest form, the most basic nature of neoliberalism is the desire for freedom, for completely unfettered markets. In pursuit of this freedom, we created an infrastructure for making instant transactions in the global financial market, we moved millions of jobs to distant corners of the Earth, we made advancements in technology which allow us to transport billions of dollars of goods across the globe at unprecedented speeds (Harvey 2005, Peck and Tickell 2002), and yet, baffling as it is, in the face of this constant buzz of mobility, we still hold on to the hegemonic idea that the white picket fence surrounding the neat (suburban) home is the penultimate symbol of what we must own to reach contentment or validation of our status as worthy citizens who have done their civic duty. The reality is that the hegemony of the American dream is dismantling more quickly than the masses are catching on, and it is because neoliberalism requires mobility at all scales from global down to the individual. Decaying manufacturing plants in the American Rust Belt reveal precisely this kind of creative destruction. Home ownership—or property ownership more broadly—presents a dilemma for the twenty-first century family.

The problem with home ownership can perhaps best be illustrated by motility studies, which seek to understand the link between mobility and opportunity. Kaufmann (2004) defines motility as simply the ability or potential to move. Freudendal-Pedersen (2009) adds to this by describing how motility is linked with freedom in that it shapes the idea of what options a person has. Motility becomes mobility when one makes the decision to move, in whatever format that movement takes. Homeowners have serious impediments to motility, especially if they live in undesirable neighborhoods or lack equity in their homes, yet, in this era of globalization, there are countless examples of the motility that jobs have. For instance, India has a comparative advantage in that it has a highly educated, English speaking workforce, and a low cost of labor.
With the development of favorable internet platforms, Americans now have Indian tutors providing online lessons in various academic subjects, and Indian radiologists providing diagnostic reports on CT scans administered thousands of miles away. Insecurity comes in this disconnection between the motility of homeowners and the motility of the very jobs that pay homeowners’ wages which are used to keep up with mortgages.

Neoliberal reforms in housing result in greater mobility. We can clearly see this in the forced relocation of public housing tenants into the private rental market, and in the relaxed lending regulations that eventually resulted in foreclosures and the eviction of people from their homes. Since greater mobility has been associated with greater power and upward social opportunity (Cresswell 2010), does this mean the thousands of people who experienced these two phenomena received some kind of advantage over stable homeowners in this process? Not necessarily. While neoliberalism requires mobility, when social, political, and economic context is added into the picture, we can see that those who are forced into this kind of mobility continue to suffer hardship, such as the inability to find or afford appropriate housing, social rejection in their new neighborhoods, and sometimes even homelessness (Kingsley and Austin Turner 1993).

**Residential mobility in Atlanta**

Scholars from various disciplines have examined the effects of forced relocation by the Atlanta Housing Authority, drawing attention to benefits and drawbacks for those relocated, as well as the neighborhoods surrounding the demolition sites. The economist Thomas Boston (2005) finds that relocation brought former housing project residents to better socioeconomic standing, increased their mobility, and allowed them to reside in better neighborhoods. In contrast, urban planner Larry Keating (2000) finds that the experience for relocated individuals was troublesome, in that they had little agency in the relocation process and suffered distress in
finding replacement housing. This study reviewed the displacement of mostly black residents from the Techwood and Clark Howell projects and notes that the reclaimed land was used in the process of gentrifying the neighborhood to prepare for the 1996 Olympics. Due to this process, displaced residents were very unlikely to return to their former neighborhood due to increased rental prices (Keating 2000). The obvious discrepancies in the above research reflect the sometimes vastly different perceptions and experiences of thousands of individuals and families who have been relocated from public housing.

The mobility of students who move to a new school as a result of residential relocation is another area which has received some attention. Rumberger (1998) defines student mobility as a “non-promotional school change” and finds that students in grades 8-12 with even limited non-promotional mobility are up to twice as likely to drop out of high school. Student achievement also suffers with high mobility, according to Isernhagen and Bulkin (2011) who found that high student mobility negatively effects performance on standardized testing. The residential mobility of students from public housing in many cases resulted in the movement of students from one school district to another. Large-scale movement of students presents challenges for school districts as well as affected neighborhoods—not to mention in the arena of student achievement. As students moved out of the public housing projects into various neighborhoods across the city, many of them lost their educational “anchors.” One study by Ruel, et al (2012) found that average tenure of families in Atlanta Housing Properties was 6.01 years. After up to an average of six years of attending one school, students from public housing experienced not only the initial move to a new school, but potentially movement to a different school every year, as those who received vouchers can move every year.

**Gaps in the literature**
The literature surrounding neoliberalism and mobility covers a wide range of topics. Mobility is grounded in many academic disciplines, and even within those disciplines, mobility studies were fragmented into sub-fields. The ‘mobility turn’ saw the addition of context to the analysis of mobility patterns which were previously viewed as abstract. With this new direction in research, investigators are able to look for the meaning embedded in movement, which added for the extraction of far greater deal of analytical depth. Neoliberalism is a theoretical approach to social economic systems wherein human well-being can best be advanced through free markets. Scholars have examined the many approaches to freeing markets, such as deregulation, privatization, and the reduction of government at multiple scales. Creative destruction is the process through which neoliberalism reinvents itself, and one example of this is the two phase process which started with a roll back of social welfare measures followed by a roll out of policing and surveillance efforts.

The link between neoliberalism and mobility is that neoliberalism requires mobility in order for this process of creation and destruction to continue. While there is literature devoted to understanding the effects of neoliberal reforms on residential mobility at the household level, there is a gap in the research that this work seeks to fill regarding neighborhoods. Neighborhoods are constituted by people who live in them, and yet they are subject to the logics of the housing markets and waves of investment and disinvestment by public institutions. By their very nature, neighborhoods lack motility. They are effectively immobile, yet they are greatly affected by residential mobility. As neoliberalism brings about changes in housing and access to housing, the resulting dynamics of residents at the margins who move into and out of those neighborhoods reveals yet another instance of the precariousness of the poor and the growing inequalities in American society.
3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research investigates mobility in the context of neoliberal reforms in urban areas. Specifically, this thesis is a case study which investigates two particular approaches to housing reform that have resulted in large scale residential mobility- the closure of public housing projects with the resultant transition to market-based housing choice vouchers and relaxed regulations on mortgage lending practices which contributed to bursting the housing bubble and a steep rise in foreclosures.

To reveal the contours of this mobility, I focus on these more specific empirical questions, which will help to shed light on this period of mobility:

**Empirical question 1:** How did the occupancy of properties change over the years from 2006-2012 in Atlanta neighborhoods? In particular, as I explain below, I focus on the four neighborhoods of Greenbriar, Beecher Hills, Pittsburgh/Mechanicsville, and English Avenue. I ask, how did residents of these neighborhoods explain vacancy rates in their neighborhoods?

**Empirical question 2:** What concerns do neighborhood residents express regarding the lived experience of neighborhood change in light of residential mobility? Just as the experience of mobility varies based upon social stature and access to resources (Cresswell 2010, Hankins et al. forthcoming), so does the experience of being “left behind” during periods of intense residential mobility.

**Empirical question 3:** What are the characteristics of acceptance or resistance to residential mobility? How welcoming are neighborhood residents to the influx of former public housing occupants? How do neighborhoods provide guidance to new residents?

**Empirical question 4:** What are the impacts of residential mobility on public schools? Public schools and housing projects are traditionally linked due to spatial proximity. In this
reciprocal relationship between these two iconic public institutions, when housing projects close, nearby schools face vulnerability as their enrollment numbers decline when housing tenants move away. Because schools affect property values (Brunner and Sonstelie 2003), an investigation of the implications of this process must be considered.
4 DATA AND METHODS

This case study consisted of interviews with residents from four neighborhoods in southwest Atlanta, a review of archival documents from Atlanta Public Schools and Atlanta Housing Authority, and the use of GIS to visualize data. Specifically regarding public schools, this study was a good fit for qualitative approach because multiple factors contributed to demographic shifts in Atlanta Public Schools districts during the study period. In addition to the closure of public housing and the foreclosure crisis, which hit Atlanta with great force in 2007, the Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) scandal, which was exposed in 2009, left Atlanta Public Schools with an array of challenges. While a quantitative study would expose demographic shifts, a qualitative study was needed to disentangle mobility patterns and understand the nuance of these demographic shifts.

4.1 Case Studies: Four Atlanta Neighborhoods

Neighborhoods that received tenants from public housing were selected for inclusion in the study. Table 1 shows the percentage of housing (either apartment complexes or individual homes) that accepts Housing Choice Vouchers. The range for all Atlanta neighborhoods was 0% to 16.4%. The vast majority of census tracts in these selected neighborhoods are in the 5.01%-10% acceptance range, putting them in the middle of the data set. These neighborhoods were identified using data from a longitudinal study on the closure of Atlanta’s public housing projects, which was conducted by the Urban Health Initiative at Georgia State University. Additionally, table 1 shows that neighborhoods included in this study have poverty rates ranging between 10% to 32% and above. Because mobility is felt differently depending upon one’s access to resources and social stature, this choice of neighborhoods provided a way to better understand the effects of mobility on neighborhoods at a variety of economic conditions.
Appendix B includes a map which depicts the location of these neighborhoods and their economic characteristics.

Table 1: Neighborhood Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neighborhood Name</th>
<th>Poverty Rate</th>
<th>Percent of Housing That Accepts Housing Choice Vouchers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English Avenue</td>
<td>32% and above</td>
<td>Varies by area from 1.01% - 5% and 5.01% - 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pittsburgh/Mechanicsville&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Varies by area from 19%-31% and 32% and above</td>
<td>Varies by area from 1.01% - 5% and 5.01%-10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beecher Hills</td>
<td>10%-19%</td>
<td>5.01%-10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenbriar</td>
<td>19%-32%</td>
<td>5.01%-10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.1.1 English Avenue

English Avenue is located in the center of Atlanta and is closely linked with Vine City just to its south. The neighborhood’s history dates back to a land purchase by James English in 1891, and during this time of segregation, English Avenue was designated as a white area. The area was home to middle class families and a street car line, which made it very desirable. The Atlanta fire of 1917 and general housing shortage for African Americans in Atlanta resulted in continuous pressure to desegregate the neighborhood, and because of this, English Avenue was one of the earlier Atlanta neighborhoods to transition due to white flight. Herndon Homes, a 520 unit public housing project, was built in the neighborhood in 1941.

The neighborhood has proximity to the Georgia Dome, but it is more known for a section of the neighborhood called “The Bluff,”<sup>3</sup> which is notorious throughout Atlanta for the availability of illegal drugs. Today, English Avenue faces very high crime rates, extreme

<sup>2</sup> Data for Pittsburgh and Mechanicsville include the views of three residents of Mechanicsville and seven residents of Pittsburgh. For the purpose of this study, this data was combined due to the proximity of the Mechanicsville residents to the Pittsburgh neighborhood border. Their homes were located across the street from the line that divides the two neighborhoods.

<sup>3</sup> Some sources refer to the entire English Avenue area as “the Bluff”
poverty, and a troublesome lack of development (Jonsson 2008). There are few businesses, and residents struggle to purchase home goods and groceries due to the distance to markets and poor public transportation service. During the course of my field research in English Avenue, I could see that on some streets as many as three out of four homes were boarded up. Small apartment buildings, one after the other, were boarded and overgrown.

4.1.2 Pittsburgh/Mechanicsville

Pittsburgh/Mechanicsville is just a bit south of the center of Atlanta. The neighborhood is part of Neighborhood Planning Unit (NPU)-V, which its spirited residents will tell you is short for victory. Established by African Americans in 1883, Pittsburgh is one of Atlanta’s oldest neighborhoods. The neighborhood was named for its likeness to the steel mills in Pittsburgh, PA (www.pcia-atlanta.org). A rail line divides Pittsburgh from Mechanicsville, which was named for the Mechanics who worked at the nearby rail yard. Pittsburgh was home to four streetcar lines, which led the area to attract many businesses, until the era of white flight. During this time, middle and upper class African Americans also fled the neighborhood, which depleted the customer base for the businesses that eventually closed down (www.pcia-atlanta.org).

Today, Pittsburgh is home to an optimistic group of residents who are hoping to help the neighborhood redevelop and attract new residents. Led by the Pittsburgh Community Improvement Association (PCIA), the community works toward securing public private partnerships to increase investment into the area. Many residents of Pittsburgh are very hopeful that the Atlanta Beltline project will result in much needed investment. On one of my visits to the neighborhood for field work, I participated in an event called “Positive Loitering.” Community leaders and activists join hands with the local police department in this crime prevention initiative. By regularly gathering in high-traffic negative loitering areas (areas of
drug trafficking or prostitution), positive loiterers hope to send a message to those in the area that unacceptable behaviors are not welcome in the community. At these events, one will see community members and police playing cards, handing out brochures about community events, and even cleaning up vacant lots.

4.1.3 Beecher Hills

Beecher Hills is located on the west side of Atlanta, almost equidistant between Langford Parkway and I-20. It is a small neighborhood that is comprised of large homes that are often brick and two stories, with large lots. True to its name, the neighborhood is very hilly, but many of the participants report that they are adamant about walking its roads every day. Beecher Hills elementary school is hidden away in the back of the neighborhood, but otherwise it seems that the neighborhood is entirely residential. The neighborhood features a large nature preserve. A one mile section of a wooded trail will eventually connect to the Atlanta Beltline, which some residents are concerned might result in an uptick in property crime.

Homes in Beecher Hills were built in the mid-1960’s. Many interview participants reported moving to the neighborhood during the period of white flight in Atlanta. The neighborhood was considered very desirable because of its location, which has easy access to interstates and downtown Atlanta. There is an active and longstanding neighborhood club, named BBF for the major streets in the neighborhood- Beecher Circle, Boilingbrook Drive, and Fleetwood Circle. The club is largely geared toward fostering social activities for the many aging residents.

4.1.4 Greenbriar

Greenbriar is located on the far southwest side of Atlanta, bordering I-285 and Langford Parkway. The neighborhood is comprised of two distinct housing sections with additional large
tracts of land dedicated to Greenbriar Mall and Tyler Perry studios. On the north end of Greenbriar is a community that calls itself Continental Colony, named after the nearby elementary school. Residents of Continental Colony do not always identify as being part of the greater Greenbriar area, in an attempt, perhaps, to retain a measure of exclusivity. Homes in this area are large and brick with sprawling lots. It is an incredibly well kept area, resembling an enclave subdivision one might see in Cobb or Cherokee county, outside the I285 perimeter. The Continental Colony section has a very active neighborhood organization named Continental Colony Community Association (CCCA), which hosts social activities, fundraising events for the nearby elementary school, and a neighborhood watch. On the south side of Greenbriar, there are multiple large apartment complexes, with 200-400 units or more.

Based on participants’ accounts, the history of the neighborhood dates back to the late 1950’s or early 1960’s. Greenbriar mall was built in 1965, and the area attracted a wide variety of eateries and shopping opportunities. The area was originally occupied by whites, many of whom worked at Hartsfield Airport just a short drive away. This neighborhood also seems to be one of the later neighborhoods to transition, as African Americans reported moving here in the mid 1970’s. One study participant discussed how excited she was to move to the Greenbriar area when the opportunity arose for African Americans to move in. She claimed it was “all the rage” for her and her peers to move to an area with so many shopping outlets, restaurants, and entertainment options.

4.2 Data Collection

Interviews with residents of these four neighborhoods were semi-structured and lasted for approximately forty-five minutes. Participants were given $40.00 as remuneration for their participation. This was funded through grants from the National Science Foundation and the
National Institutes of Health. The main technique for recruitment was a snowball process, which began by contacting residents who had participated in a previous short five to ten minute survey. This survey was conducted as part of a longitudinal study by the Urban Health Initiative of Georgia State to better understand the person-environment-fit of former public housing tenants as they transitioned into their new neighborhoods. Interviews were completed with those who wished to participate, and referrals were also accepted. Finally, in some areas where there were not enough contacts available, it was necessary to simply knock on doors in the neighborhoods and introduce the project in hopes of setting up interviews with potential participants. A limitation of this study is that the interview sample is not necessarily a representation of neighborhood demographics, rather, it was a convenience sample. All participants' names were changed in order to protect their privacy. Table 2 shows characteristics of participants by neighborhood.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English Avenue</th>
<th>Pittsburgh/ Mechanicsville</th>
<th>Beecher Hills</th>
<th>Greenbriar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average Age</strong></td>
<td>41</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age Range</strong></td>
<td>19-69</td>
<td>29-74</td>
<td>21-79</td>
<td>28-91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average Income Range</strong></td>
<td>$5000-15,000</td>
<td>$5,000-15,000</td>
<td>$35,000-45,000</td>
<td>$45,000-55,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average Tenure in Neighborhood</strong></td>
<td>34 years</td>
<td>31 years</td>
<td>21 years</td>
<td>28 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3 Analysis

In order to examine the effects mobility had upon neighborhoods, interviews were coded using the computer assisted qualitative analysis software package, NVivo 9. While some skeptics fear that the use of computer assisted qualitative analysis software may cause a disconnection from the broad themes of the data or an over-simplification of complex social
processes, like many other researchers who have worked with such software (Walsh 2003, Cambra-Fierro and Wilson 2011), I found it to be an innovative technique which was invaluable in keeping up with the demands of large datasets. Rather than over-simplifying complex problems, the use of NVivo illuminated these problems through the simplicity of the way data are tagged and easily retrieved later on in the process.

After uploading the transcriptions into NVivo, I initially read through them without searching for any particular themes. The purpose of using this open coding process was to allow the data to “speak for itself.” During this read, I found repeated references to schools as resources for the neighborhood, fear of vacant buildings, and activism. During second read of the data, I searched specifically for text that aligned with several themes—resistance or acceptance of former public housing tenants, perceptions of vacancy, and neighborhood response. On the third and final read-through of the data, I focused on clarifying the findings. Finally, I was able to utilize the analysis capabilities of NVivo to query terms for the creation of word trees, tag clouds, and charts which were helpful in drawing attention to important concepts that may have been missed without this step.

4.4 GIS Methods

In order to answer Empirical Question 1—How did residents in neighborhoods of various economic patterns feel the lived experience of neighborhood change in light of residential mobility—it is important to first understand what the economic patterns actually are and where residential mobility occurred. To this aim, I used Arc GIS to conduct a geospatial analysis, and the methods of this analysis are described in this section. The analysis required two data sources. Places and Census Tracts TIGER/Line geodatabases (2010 data) were downloaded from Census.gov. The Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Aggregated United States Postal
Service (USPS) Administrative Data on Address Vacancies was downloaded from HUD.gov. This dataset includes quarterly aggregated data on residences, businesses, and other types of properties that are identified as having been vacant during the previous quarter. These data are provided at the census tract level (choice of 2000 or 2010) for urban routes throughout the entire United States. HUD defines “vacant” properties as having been vacant for 90 days or longer. One limitation of this data, which has potential impacts on the analysis is that the USPS began implementing new procedures to improve accuracy in March 2010. Comparisons of data between years may show more vacancies after 2010 as a result of increased accuracy in data collection. However, because this study examines data from many years- 2006-2012, general trends are still clearly visible.

Arriving at a visualization of vacancy levels in the study neighborhoods required several analytical processes. First, the USPS vacancy data required the removal of large amounts of extraneous data and the calculation of percentages of vacant properties. The data was assembled into one spreadsheet that included a single time column, as opposed to the original format of one spreadsheet for each year. The preparation of this data was the most time consuming aspect of this analysis.

The Census data required a series of geoprocesses that resulted in the creation of new layers. First, from the Places data set, I selected by attribute places with Atlanta as the city name. This yielded five results. I exported this layer and saved it as Atlanta_US. From the Atlanta_US layer, I used the selection tool to select Atlanta, GA. I exported this as a layer and saved it as Atlanta_Boundary. Next, I joined the USPS data table to the Census tract shapefile, using Geoid10 as the common column. I then intersected the Census tracts layer with Atlanta_boundary. I exported this new layer and saved it as Atlanta_tracts_intersect. The result
of this process is a layer featuring the city of Atlanta, GA divided into Census tracts with the joined table of vacancy data.

In order to highlight the neighborhoods of interest, I used Google Earth to create polygons for Pittsburgh, Mechanicsville, Greenbriar, English Avenue, and Beecher Hills. I saved these as .kmz files and used the KML to layer tool in ArcGIS to add them to the map. While I could have intersected these neighborhood layers with the census tract data to yield a map featuring only the specific neighborhood vacancy data, I felt that showing these neighborhoods in the context of the greater Atlanta area yielded a better understanding of the vacancy trends. For this reason, I opted to display these layers as hollow with a strong black border for highlighting. At this point, I enabled time on the map and focused on improving the display by using cartographic design principles. The final product of this work is a series of maps showing the selected vacancy data for Atlanta and selected neighborhoods from 2006-2012 (included in Appendix C). In the following chapter, I describe the results of this analysis.
5 IDENTIFYING AND UNDERSTANDING SPACES OF ABSENCE

Neoliberal reforms in housing result in increased residential mobility, as evidenced by the closure of public housing and the housing crisis. Understanding the impacts of this in the four neighborhoods included in this study required an initial investigation to assess vacancy levels. Identifying the extent to which the study neighborhoods were actually affected by vacancy helps to add context to participants’ perceptions of the vacant properties they see around them and try to understand or explain. Beginning with identifying vacant space over time and followed by a discussion of what study participants felt were reasons their neighborhoods were either safe or greatly affected, the story of Atlanta’s neighborhoods receives much needed attention.

Identifying spaces of absence with GIS

This section describes geospatial analysis aimed at answering the question: How did the occupancy of properties change over the years from 2006-2012 in the Atlanta neighborhoods of Greenbriar, Beecher Hills, Pittsburgh/Mechanicsville, and English Avenue? Because mobility is faced differently based upon economic status (Cresswell 2010), these four neighborhoods were included in the study as a representatives based on the number of residents living at poverty level, which ranges from 10% to greater than 32% (see Table 1 in chapter 4). While Atlanta in general was particularly hard-hit by the foreclosure crisis (Immergluck 2009, Lee and Immergluck 2012), the analysis shows a correlation between lower income neighborhoods and increased incidents of vacancy.

The analytical procedures for this study are described in detail in Chapter 4: Data and Methodology. All maps are included in Appendix C. Here, I present the results of the analysis, which shows that there is large variation in the percentage of vacant properties for each neighborhood by income, but that there was little variation in the amount of vacancy by
neighborhood over the duration 2006-2012. High vacancy neighborhoods remained high and low vacancy neighborhoods remained low. The two lowest income neighborhoods, Pittsburgh and English Avenue, had high vacancy rates before the foreclosure crisis became widespread throughout the rest of Atlanta. The 2006 map shows vacancies of 19% and above, with Pittsburgh being on the most extreme end, having vacancies between 28.89% and 72.73%.4 In only two years, the situation reversed, and in 2008, English Avenue had extreme amounts of vacancy while Pittsburgh had slightly recovered. Vacancy rates in these two neighborhoods remained consistently high throughout the entire study time period.

Greenbriar is in the middle of the range of residents living in poverty. The amount of vacancy remained consistently low throughout the study period. In fact, this was the lowest vacancy rate of all four study neighborhoods, even though Beecher Hills has fewer residents at poverty. Beginning in 2006 with vacancy rates between 4.56% and 8.2%, and ending in 2012 with rates at 0% to 4.55%, Greenbriar seems particularly resilient in light of the housing crisis. One would expect Beecher Hills to have the lowest vacancy rate because it has the highest income. However, the geography of Greenbriar contributes to the lack of correlation with income data. Greenbriar functions more like two distinct neighborhoods lumped into one. The north side of Greenbriar features large homes with rambling lawns, and it looks more like a classic suburban subdivision. There were very few foreclosures in this neighborhood. Study participants from this section had a median income of $45,000, with the highest income at over $250,000 annually. The south end of Greenbriar hosts apartment complexes, many of which receive low income tax credits. For these reasons, the vacancy rate remains low, and the average

4 While Mechanicsville is drawn separately on this map, for the purpose of this study, data from Pittsburgh and Mechanicsville are presented together. The three study participants from the Mechanicsville neighborhood live directly across the street from the Pittsburgh boundary, and their housing characteristics align more closely with Pittsburgh than the larger Mechanicsville area.
income remains on the lower end because it reflects a dense population of lower-income residents from the apartment complexes.

Beecher Hills featured the most variation in occupancy, although it continued to reflect values in the middle of the spectrum. From 2006-2008, the neighborhood had between 13.09% to 19.62% vacancy rates. From 2009-2012 the neighborhood bounced back between 4.56% to 8.2% and 8.21% and 13.08% vacant. One final note about the geospatial analysis is that general trends across the city of Atlanta show that for all study years, there were higher vacancy rates from the center of Atlanta going westward. Lowest vacancy rates could be found consistently on the north side of Atlanta, from the center heading eastward, and in the far southwest.

**Reasons for foreclosure rates in neighborhoods- participants’ perceptions**

From 2008 until around the past year, watching the nightly news without hearing the latest ills of the housing crisis was just not possible. There were stories about speculative or subprime lenders, absentee landlords, irresponsible lenders, irresponsible buyers, a lack of government oversight, mortgage fraud, and house flipping. It seems the mortgage crisis came from many different angles. Here, I would like to present the views of participants on what caused the mortgage crisis in their neighborhoods. So many times, we hear the analysts, the politicians, big bankers, yet we rarely hear the voices of those who really lived through this experience. I would like to take this further by positing that, with the exception of individual homeowners who lost their homes, the mortgage crisis is something experienced most profoundly at the neighborhood scale, and therefore, these voices are incredibly important if we really want to understand the crisis.

Participants were asked about the kinds of changes they had witnessed in their neighborhoods over the last few years, and if they had noticed new people moving in or long-
term residents moving out. Some readily noted they saw many homes had been abandoned, and they personally knew long-term residents who moved away due to losing their homes. Others noted that a few residents had passed away as a result of old age, but the homes were usually taken over by children or grandchildren. In these instances, the neighborhoods seemed to remain very stable. When asked about why their neighborhoods may have experienced a great deal of foreclosures, or very few, participants’ responses aligned with four main themes. Those with many vacancies cited mortgage fraud, homeowners “giving up” or not paying taxes, and there were quite a few responses recounting experiences where landlords received money for homes that were in foreclosure. Greenbriar and Beecher Hills were the two neighborhoods where residents noted few vacancies, and their explanation requires a closer look.

Having only two or three vacancies in a neighborhood does not lead to much awareness of change according to many participants from Greenbriar and Beecher Hills. When asked if she saw evidence of the housing crisis, Brittany from Beecher Hills said, “I don’t know of that foreclosure. I read about it in the paper, and that kind of thing, but just right around here, I’m not aware of that.” In Greenbriar, participants from both the apartment complexes and subdivision homes all claimed to see very little evidence. Their main complaint was that there were some vacant businesses around and in Greenbriar Mall, but housing seemed to remain very stable. In response to why their neighborhoods seemed to be so stable when Atlanta is considered a hard hit city, Toni from Greenbriar says:

It avoided so many foreclosures because the houses were paid for. The neighbors have been out here long years, [a] lot of them I know. And they came the same time during that year that I came, and so the houses are paid for. And now, the values of them have dropped so tremendously that it wouldn’t do any good to sell them right now. Because they have dropped, really dropped. There is just not much value in the house out here now. Compared to what it was maybe a couple years ago.
Toni purchased her home in the late 1970’s, at a time when the neighborhood was transitioning from white occupancy to largely African American occupancy. The home she bought was six years old at the time of purchase, which was common for many of the homes in her part of Greenbriar. Participants from Beecher Hills owned homes that were built in the mid-1960’s. Again, these homeowners bought at a time when the neighborhood was going through a racial transition. This thirty to forty year timespan gave homeowners plenty of time to pay off mortgages and begin enjoying retirement (most of participants from these neighborhoods came from professional occupations such as teachers and agents or pilots at Delta). The decreased values on their homes meant that homeowners were staying put, but some acknowledged they would like to retire in Florida or closer to family.

Some residents of Pittsburgh/Mechanicsville and English Avenue felt that there were so many vacancies in their neighborhoods because homeowners could not afford the taxes, or simply “gave up” on their mortgages because they could not afford payments. These two neighborhoods are much older than the lower vacancy neighborhoods. The homes are older and have gone through more owners. Many residents talked about long-term residents passing away, and they felt that the children did not want the homes that were inherited, possibly because of the quality of the neighborhood. In this case, the properties fell into disrepair and taxes went unpaid.

In some cases, participants discussed feelings of indignation because homes or apartments they were renting went into foreclosure. They felt that landlords, either absentee or local, were being dishonest for taking their money but not paying the mortgage. In these cases, landlords were blamed for the high numbers of vacancies in neighborhoods. Two participants were in their third rental in as many years because of foreclosure, and a third participant was in her fourth rental. When renters are forced into mobility due to property foreclosure, they are put
into a very precarious position. Many times, they are given little notice, and this is particularly troublesome for low-income renters because it takes time to save deposit money and find a new place. Participants who had this experience talked about having to take rentals they would have otherwise found unacceptable due to the challenges of finding a new residence in a short amount of time.

Mortgage fraud and speculative lending came up as a response less than expected when participants were asked why their neighborhoods had so many foreclosures. Participants from Pittsburgh/Mechanicsville were most outspoken on their thoughts about mortgage fraud. This quote from Clark describes the general consensus of the neighborhood:

> Like this was a joke for real estate. They came over here, they falsified documents. They cheated with the . . . comps and stuff on property. They over-valued properties. They really raped this community; the real estate (industry) raped this community.

When asked for more details, Sondra, a long-term elderly resident, said:

> I know some houses was sold at least 10 times what they would have sold if they just went from one person to another person, at least ten times, you know. It was a minute before we caught on to what was going on, but the minute we caught on to what was going on, we had to put a stop to it. We had to. They came out here building houses without permits, you know, and we let a lot of that get past us.

Residents of Pittsburgh/Mechanicsville may have been more active with identifying and fighting mortgage fraud and speculative lending due to the efforts of a non-profit named the Dirty Truth Campaign.\(^5\) The Dirty Truth Campaign is a community organization that identifies neglected and dangerous properties in NPU-V. At the time of publication, the organization’s website claims there were 1296 vacant properties in NPU-V (www.dirtytruth.org/index.html). PCIA worked closely with the Dirty Truth Campaign, and they identified inflated housing prices as a major concern. A map on the organization’s website shows changes in appraisal values for

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\(^5\) Now known as the 303 Community Coalition
homes from 2001-2005 sometimes rose by as much as $97,000 to $408,600. This level of inflation could definitely put a neighborhood in danger, and when exacerbated by the financial crisis, this was a recipe for disaster.

Neoliberal reforms in housing policy, particularly the relaxed regulations on the lending and mortgage industry, brought about changes in housing and access to housing, which resulted in a significant amount of vacancy in the four study neighborhoods. This was most apparent in lower income neighborhoods, although the more moderate and middle class neighborhoods were not entirely spared. According to participants’ perceptions, the history of a neighborhood may also play a very significant role in determining the amount of vacancy neighborhoods experienced during the housing crisis. Younger neighborhoods that transitioned from white ownership to black ownership during desegregation had a 30-40 year period of time for mortgages to be paid off, while older neighborhoods featured homes that may have been bought and sold multiple times, and therefore, they are less likely to be owned outright. When a vast majority of the homes in a neighborhood are completely paid off and occupied by the owners, predatory lending and foreclosures seem to be negated. The vacancy rate in a neighborhood contributes strongly to how participants felt the lived experience of the housing crisis, and this next chapter sheds light on some of the concerns participants noted about living in left-behind neighborhoods.
6 LEFT-BEHIND NEIGHBORHOODS

Neoliberal reforms in the banking and mortgage industry introduced a level of insecurity in neighborhoods, as evidenced by the housing crisis that became increasingly visible as of 2008 (Immergluck 2009). In neighborhoods affected by outward residential mobility resulting in vacancies, those residents left behind are immobile, sometimes by choice and other times against their wishes, such as when their housing values have fallen too low to consider selling. For each of them, there is a real and valid experience of this phenomenon that is deserving of attention from academia, the media, and policymakers. Concerns expressed here regarding the lived experience of residing in a left-behind neighborhood bring to light how intense residential mobility can have seriously unsettling results.

Concerns expressed by participants

Having a neighborhood full of boarded up homes comes with consequences. Throughout the process of this analysis, it became clear that neighborhood foreclosures are associated with an underlying but pervasive sense of fear. There is fear about vacant buildings, increased crime, lowering property values, and then there is fear that “we could be next,” which is a real and profound psychological effect of watching so many of one’s long term neighbors suffer the loss of a home. Concerns about vacant houses largely shadow the neighborhood’s concerns about vacant school buildings: poor property maintenance, property damage, the potential for violent crime, and squatters. The scale of the problem, however, is much more widespread in neighborhoods with high vacancy rates.

When asked if she saw many boarded up homes in the neighborhood, Mandy from Greenbriar said:

You don’t see that many boarded up, you see a lot of empty, but not a lot of boarded up. . . and I think that’s because maybe the, because of the crime – see in
certain areas they have to board them up because of break-ins and stuff, but you don’t see a lot of boarded up houses in this area. . . What they do, in the area like this, they usually have somebody come every so often and cut their grass and keep you know, keep them up to make the rest of the neighborhood look decent. So they keep it, I think they keep it up pretty good even the empty houses. You don’t see really tall grass all grown out of proportion you know, stuff like that, you don’t see that.

In contrast, residents from Pittsburgh/Mechanicsville reported having as many as eight to twenty abandoned homes in near proximity to their own residences. While there are certainly a large number of boarded up homes in these lower-income neighborhoods, there is also an astoundingly large number of properties that are clearly abandoned but no measures have been taken to secure them. On these lots, the grass and weeds grow waist high, trash and used tires are dumped on the lawns, rats and snakes infest the lawns, and kudzu vines crawl along the buildings and creep into busted windows and doors which were left wide open either by owners or intruders. With the exception of a couple of homes I saw while working in Beecher Hills, in the two higher income neighborhoods, empty homes were maintained, and the real estate signs on the lawns indicated that actions were clearly being taken to change the status of the property from vacant to occupied.

Residents in neighborhoods with large numbers of abandoned properties expressed feelings of indignation over landlords and owners who refused to maintain the homes. When asked if landlords took care of existing homes in English Avenue, Racine had this to say:

You know what? I think that if a landlord got a house over here, why not check on your house every 3 or four days? You don’t know what done happened! You don’t know who broke in! You don’t know what they stole. They just leave them, “oh, hell let them take what they want to take. I’m going to sell it anyway…” but it’s not good for the neighbors that live there. They don’t care.

Additionally, several participants from this neighborhood noted that new houses were built, and then left unattended, not boarded, and vacant. About these properties, Jackie from English
Avenue questioned, “I was going to say why build new houses when they’re just going to tear them down before you get done building? They got peoples tearing down houses and tearing out copper out the walls before you can even get started building them.” Copper piping was listed as a major target for theft, along with other fixtures such as faucets and fans. One resident recalled a builder in the neighborhood who complained that on one afternoon, he installed a new hot water heater into one of these new homes. That night, the water heater was stolen. The next day, someone came by with the same water heater in a vehicle and asked if the builder was interested in buying it. The builder declined and wrote off his loss.

Because these unkempt properties are such a problem for neighborhoods, several participants discussed dismay at the City of Atlanta’s inability or refusal to force negligent property owners to take necessary actions. Robert from English Avenue said:

A lady down the street called the bank about them houses, but you know, they don’t never send nobody out here. Code enforcement, it comes out here every so often. They come pretty regular over here, taking pictures of these abandoned houses, but they never come back and do nothing about it. They never clean them or nothing. All of them are stripped. We talked to code enforcement down there, they, well they said, they were going to get in touch with the owner. A lot of time they say they can’t find the owner. I know somewhere down in city hall, they know who owns these houses. That shouldn’t be a problem, finding out who owns these houses, because it’s on record down there. But as far as keeping them up or keeping the property clean, even if they ain’t nobody in it, they could keep the property clean, you know. But they don’t do that.

Some residents from Pittsburgh/Mechanicsville took it upon themselves to find out who owned the abandoned homes. Shelia discussed her findings, saying, “I did find out just in my own research, some of these homes are bought by the banks and they’re just not doing what they are supposed to, and I looked at the tax assessor’s office and seen some of that. Some investors’ banks are just not doing what they are supposed to do.” Shelia’s research yielded that not just
individual owners and investors, but also that banks contribute to the run-down appearance in neighborhoods by failing to maintain properties.

What participants had to say about what happens inside vacant homes far out measured what they had to say about the outside of homes. Figure 1 below shows a graphic from an NVivo analytical tool that allows the researcher to quantify the coding references made regarding certain topics. For this particular graphic, I included all of the nodes that I included in the hierarchy under the main node, foreclosures. These sub-nodes were added during second and third rounds of coding, in order to better refine the main themes participants discussed when referencing the foreclosed properties. Many of the topics from the smaller rectangles have already been covered, but the largest rectangle, homeless population is a theme that came up on numerous occasions.

![Figure 1: Nodes coded for foreclosed properties](image)

*Homeless population* is a node I used to capture conversations or comments regarding squatting, homesteaders, people using homes for drug and prostitution transactions, and references to happenings, or fear of happenings of a more sinister nature. Just like vacant school
buildings, empty houses can be sites of violent crime, and sadly, far too many of my participants recalled first-hand accounts of what can happen in these unmonitored spaces. Carla from English Avenue recounts her story:

I done even had a friend . . . She was on her way to work. A guy approached her like he wanted a cigarette. She gon’ give him a cigarette. Then he wanted a lighter, she gon’ give him a lighter. He pulled out a knife on her and made her walk up to Griffin Street in one of them abandoned houses and raped her. And having to be out early that morning, I heard her coming down the street. I’m like now, “What is that? I hear somebody hollering.” And when I seen her, she was just hollering. And I couldn’t do nothing but open my arms and grab her, like “Baby, what’s wrong?” She said, “Somebody had raped me.” I took her to the Vine City, right here Zone 1, right there at Magnolia and Vine. I took her over there. She didn’t even want to – she couldn’t even stand still. I said, “No, you ain’t goin’ nowhere.” She had done walked out, I was still beating on the door. I said y’all need to get her and see about her. She said somebody just raped her. And they took care of everything, and eventually she identified him and showed ‘em where everything happened, and I don’t know if he’s still locked up, but she – then they pressed charges. I mean, the houses that’s – I mean, that could happen in any of these houses, I mean, and even – even going on about that situation, we got ladies around here. Say, it might even be the prostitutes. They might end up going in one of these abandoned houses with a guy. A guy might abuse her, beat her, and might not nobody even know it. So, they really need to do something about these houses over here. It’s a way they can do it and fix these houses. It’s so many homeless people around here.

This is one of many such stories reported by participants. One mother from Pittsburgh/Mechanicsville worries about the young girls in her neighborhood, her daughters included, because their bus stop is located in front of a row of abandoned houses. Another man recollected reports of dead bodies found in an abandoned house. Considering the multiple accounts of violent crimes in high vacancy neighborhoods, it seems logical that these spaces elicit fear and angst. Still, significant anecdotal evidence does not always correlate with higher rates of crime in high foreclosure neighborhoods. There are conflicting reports from other cities, where some find evidence of higher crime (Stucky, Ottensmann and Payton 2012, Ingrid Gould, Johanna and Claudia Ayanna 2013) and others find no significant change in crime levels during

“Homesteading” or squatting is viewed in different contexts. Racine discusses positives and negatives to having houses occupied by unofficial tenants:

This neighborhood, I’m going to give you an example. A lot of people stay in these houses over here that has no electricity, no gas, no lights, but the people want them to live in these houses like this. You know they don’t mind these people live in these houses like this . . . The landlords want them to live like that so nobody don’t steal the pipes and the copper, but the whole thing is, that’s unsanitary. If you go back to this stop sign, you make that left. The second house on the right, people have been staying in that house four years- no lights, no water, no nothing, because . . . they are just stuck over there, don’t want to move.

According to Racine, homesteaders serve as a deterrent for theft of copper piping, which is incredibly expensive to replace because it is accompanied by extensive damage to drywall and other plumbing parts. In this way, some landlords may overlook homesteaders who do not cause other problems. Negative aspects of homesteading include the unsanitary nature of living without water service, and the association with places where drug users go to have privacy while enjoy a fix, or places where dealers stash drugs. Interestingly, nearly half of residents from the two lower income neighborhoods noted that the vacant houses should be “opened up” in one way or another to allow for occupancy by those without homes. One participant mentioned hearing about other cities that rent abandoned properties out for just a dollar a month in order to reduce the amount of vacancies. Others mentioned that empty houses could be used as drug treatment centers or shelters.

These accounts of the lived experience of being left behind while neighborhoods become vacant are legitimate expressions of concern and sometimes fear. What these participants’ stories tell us about the relationship between neoliberal forms and residential mobility is that the
increase in mobility can be scary, emotionally challenging, and ultimately uncomfortable. Residents who chose to remain, or have no choice but to remain, in neighborhoods with high vacancy rates are sometimes forced to take on activities such as providing upkeep for unkempt properties and identifying and notifying absentee property owners when dangerous situations arise. Traditionally, these activities are the responsibility of city governments to handle, but as Hackworth (2007) and Harvey (1989) describe, cities are faced with increasing responsibility at the same time they are provided with fewer resources. Ultimately, this leaves residents, particularly those in the lower-income neighborhoods which were most affected by vacancy, to bear the burden of neoliberal reforms without the assistance of organizations of scale which were previously able to assist in handling problems. This is only one side of the situation, however, because while the housing crisis steadily garnered increasing attention from the media, neighborhoods were facing a second phenomenon- the influx of housing choice voucher holders from former public housing projects.
7 RECEIVING NEW RESIDENTS

The demolition of public housing projects in Atlanta, for better or worse, forever altered the landscape of the city’s low-income housing. An examination of residential mobility in the “neoliberal city” (Hackworth 2007) would be remiss not to consider the broad effects of this process which relocated former public housing tenants into private rental homes and apartments. Through a qualitative analysis, Hankins et al (forthcoming) detailed the many forms of friction involved in the process, such as delays in receiving vouchers, delays associated with inspections, classism and racism, and the challenges associated with groups that were considered hard to house (senior citizens, the disabled, those with poor credit or criminal backgrounds). In this chapter, a discussion of the neighborhoods’ perceptions and experiences of the influx of former public housing tenants shows that this process was met with mixed degrees of acceptance and resistance.

7.1 Mixed reception

Greenbriar, Beecher Hills, English Avenue and Pittsburgh/Mechanicsville all received former public housing tenants. Interestingly, half of the forty study participants felt that their neighborhoods were minimally, if at all, affected by the demolition of public housing projects. Figure 2 below, again a graphic from an Nvivo analytical tool, shows that the largest sub-node under Section 8 includes citations of participants who felt that their neighborhood received very few new residents from public housing. This shows that it is possible for voucher holders to assimilate into receiving neighborhoods and by being able to come in unnoticed, they can perhaps avoid the stigma associated with previous tenure in public housing. That long-term residents claim that there are negligible effects when former public housing residents move in, helps to dispel negative stereotypes associated with residents from public housing. When asked
if she could see evidence of people from public housing moving into the neighborhood, Tamika from Beecher Hills said:

I don’t. If they did I can’t. . . I wouldn’t know. I can’t tell. ‘Cause the – everybody to me, based off of what I see, they own their home. They work or they’re retired. I don’t see families moving in that I feel would have been from a project home. ‘Cause I wouldn’t know. I wouldn’t know what to look for…but I see normal people, everyday people that I see every day walking… and those are just people. They live somewhere around here. So I haven’t seen any new people.

Figure 2: Nodes under the Section 8 hierarchy

While it is reassuring that half of study participants had no complaints about their new neighbors, it is equally disheartening that other participants were vehemently opposed to the influx of public housing tenants, often associating them with neighborhood disruption in various forms. Very few of these participants had any first-hand anecdotal evidence of harm being done.
When asked if they could cite evidence of people from public housing moving into the neighborhood, several participants began with a preface that goes something like “now I don’t know if they are from public housing…” and this would be followed by complaints about undesirable behaviors. Gwendolyn from Greenbriar claimed she could identify a former public housing resident “by the way they dress, the way they talk, the way they act….” Marcus from Pittsburgh/Mechanicsville felt that many of the single mothers on his street were on Housing Choice Vouchers. In Beecher Hills, which has many retired residents, families with multiple children were cited as possibly being from public housing.

Participants from all four neighborhoods claimed there are concrete distinctions between homeowners verses renters in terms of neighborhood maintenance and stability. When asked if she noticed evidence of people from public housing moving into the neighborhood, Teresa from Beecher Hills illustrated the homeowner verses renters issue:

I don’t know that they have been in public housing. I just know that they have not been homeowners, and it’s evident because they don’t know what to do. They don’t maintain their property… It’s obvious that they’re not accustomed to being part of a well-established neighborhood… We had a neighbor who came in and they were moving and maybe they had more furniture, and all I know is a couch ended up on the front yard and of course that was the topic of one of our monthly meetings, because we were like ‘we don’t do that in our neighborhood.’ If it’s going to be lawn furniture, okay, but this was a couch, a cloth couch in the front yard, and, um, you know just things like that, and the families that come with multiple children who were running up and down the street, walking across neighbors’ yards, doing all kinds of things that typically children who are raised in the neighborhood would know you don’t walk across anybody’s yard without their permission. There are just certain, you don’t pick other people’s flowers… You know when you come into the neighborhood, turn your volume down. Everybody doesn’t need to hear your bump, bump, bump going up here now. And like I said we can always tell the caliber of people who move in, especially when they’re not homeowners, because when homeowners move in, we can tell. We’ve had some wonderful new, um, homeowners move in, and they fallen right in line with the quality of people we’re accustomed to in this neighborhood, because they’re looking for the same things that most of us were looking for when we bought a home. Not just a nice house with a nice yard… I don’t know the exact
mindset of someone who’s lived in public housing having never lived there myself. Like I said, it’s just very obvious though.

The Housing Choice Voucher program is inherently renter based. In the public housing projects, everyone was a renter, so there was no place for an owner/renter hierarchy. The recipients of Housing Choice Vouchers who were able to rent a house instead of an apartment (where all residents are renters) now are subject to a new system of social order where words like “quality” and “caliber” are applied to people regarding their housing situation. While living in a nice house in an established neighborhood can certainly be viewed as a step up from housing projects, former AHA tenants are confronted with new sets of obstacles.

Resistance to Housing Choice vouchers, for some participants, was more a matter of principle, rather than fear of property damage or value decline. The sentiment here is that the philosophy behind Housing Choice- the idea that deconcentrating poverty will result in better life opportunities and upward social mobility- often does not work. Two perspectives on this matter of principle became apparent in the analysis. In the first camp are neighborhood residents who ascribe to neoliberal views of personal responsibility and accountability, for example, Toni from Greenbriar said, “Anything come easy, goes easy, and if you haven’t worked hard for it, you just seem not to appreciate it as much.” Furthering this concept, Brenda adds,

It’s so interesting, how people think…that a voucher would better an individual’s circumstances without education, without training, without someone to provide guidance and counseling…And a voucher certainly doesn’t serve as encouragement for individuals to become involved with the community…What else can we do, to give them the skills, the desires or the motivations or something to really want life better, or better quality of life…

In the other camp, resistance to Housing Choice comes from an acknowledgement of the flaws in the program. Clark from Pittsburgh/Mechanicsville exclaimed, “We don’t need no more poor folks, with the poor folks we’ve already got!” Here, Clark recognizes that moving people
from public housing projects into a neighborhood that is already suffering from the consequences of poverty really fails to benefit either party. Sharon, another resident from Pittsburgh/Mechanicsville who receives a Housing Choice voucher, expressed her dismay at the selection of neighborhoods that accept the vouchers by saying,

It’s like they accept Section 8 where it’s mainly black and they keep them like, all together…I think it’s good because it gives you a place to go, and I think it’s bad because I know it’s not just by coincidence that, that these neighborhoods don’t accept it…but the ones that are run down do accept it…If you stay in Atlanta, the only place you really gonna be able to stay with one (a voucher) is in the “hood.”

While it is illegal to “steer” potential tenants toward or away from certain neighborhoods based upon race, through the voucher program, the Atlanta Housing Authority’s (AHA) ability to steer clients toward certain areas went seemingly unquestioned. As part of the relocation service provided by the AHA as the public housing units were readying for demolition, AHA relocation specialists sponsored tours to specific apartment complexes across the city that would accept vouchers. This, tied with high market values of rental properties in desirable neighborhoods, ensured that voucher holders had limited options which often landed them in neighborhoods where potential for upward social mobility was already compromised due to an existing high poverty level. In this sense, the forced increase in residential mobility of public housing tenants seems largely unjustified, yet this is how neoliberal reforms work- the public arena (public housing projects in this case) suffers while private markets are bolstered, sometimes with public funds such as through the Housing Choice voucher program.

7.2 Guidance and discipline

In the limited number of cases where participants had first-hand accounts of negative experiences with Housing Choice voucher users moving into the neighborhood, their complaints ranged from minor to highly disruptive. There were issues such as failure to upkeep lawns to
neighborhood standards or failure to pull the trashcan back up the driveway after pickup to more troublesome issues such as cars sitting on blocks and leaking fluids for extended periods of time or noise ordinance violations and streets littered with vehicles during parties that left elderly residents unable to access their driveways. These complaints came from the three neighborhoods with more formally established neighborhood organizations- Greenbriar, Beecher Hills, and Pittsburgh/Mechanicsville. In order to deal with these situations, actions are taken both individually and as an organization, utilizing both neighborhood resources and help from outside.

7.2.1 Handling challenging situations

Housing Choice voucher holders are subject to a great deal of scrutiny in their housing situations. Their rentals are inspected by the housing authority prior to move-in in order to verify certain minimum standards of maintenance. They have strict regulations based upon who can live at their residences, and all tenants must submit to extensive background checks. They are subject to annual inspections and if any complaints are filed against the tenant, they receive additional scrutiny, which could lead to the loss of their voucher. Some landlords are happy to do business with voucher holders because of the guarantee of government-backed funds every month, and the extra level of security that comes from knowing that complaints against tenants will be handled with care by the housing authority.

How neighborhoods responded to troublesome situations varied significantly. In Beecher Hills, residents spoke about an “unwritten code” of conduct to which they hold residents. Of this, Krista says:

It’s like unwritten rules… that we have, that if we put it in writing, people probably you know get teed off, some of the new ones, so what we do, we have some unwritten rules and we go around and we see things – I know I’m one. The house on the corner, uh, used to have cars, two cars on a rock or something, and it stayed like that for weeks, and you know what I did? I called the police. What happened – this guy had these cars and worked on the cars on that corner and uh,
they were staying propped up on rocks or something, so I just called and they came and put a sign on and then after [the] 7 o’clock hour, they towed the car in.

Krista says that the neighborhood organization does not confront the troublemaker, but rather, the organization contacts the authorities - in this case the police, but in other cases the organization speaks to representatives at City Hall. In this way, the offender is unaware of who registered the complaint. In one situation where a voucher holder hosted parties which blocked up the neighborhood streets, the neighborhood organization decided to contact the housing authority directly. The AHA was highly responsive, and sent a representative to visit the neighborhood organization, BBF. BBF was provided with a contact number to report any further problems, and the offending tenants eventually left the area.

In the Continental Colony section of Greenbriar, a different approach was taken when residents failed to maintain neighborhood standards. The Continental Colony Community Association (CCCA) initially tried to provide guidance for newcomers to the neighborhood. Brenda discusses this here:

We tried to make contact with the individuals, and we prepared a document that talked about the standards that we would like to see maintained in our neighborhood, and we gave suggestions for painting and cleaning and whatever needed to be done and gave names and numbers for them to call, and… it’s amazing how that it seems when you share that kind of information individuals um, the things that are going on seem to intensify in terms of worsening you know. It’s like a determination not to, not to participate, or comply, that… you don’t tell me how to keep my property kind of attitude.

In Continental Colony, a few houses became vacant after the occupying owners passed away. In this particular case, a Housing Choice voucher tenant moved into one of these and did not maintain the yard properly or adhere to trash pickup schedules for special items (items too large for regularly scheduled pickups or yard debris). The association’s attempt at guidance was not accepted by the tenant and the neighborhood had to contact the housing authority for further
assistance. The closure of public housing projects is certainly an example of the scaled-back role of government under neoliberal reforms. What this means though, is that housing authorities are stretched quite thin in the process of managing tenants. No longer is there immediate oversight, such as a housing manager who watches over the housing project on a daily basis. Rather, the housing authority must rely on the surveillance and sometimes disciplining of public housing tenants by neighbors and neighborhood associations.

7.2.2 The situation in Pittsburgh

At the time of my field research, participants from Pittsburgh were actively involved in preparing a comprehensive redevelopment plan for presentation to the necessary governmental agencies. Residents from this neighborhood were highly interested in gaining capital inputs and support through public-private partnerships as well as attracting new middle or creative class residents. Clark illustrates these ideas here:

I tell you, that what we need to do is try to encourage some middle class, moderate to middle class residents to move into here. My daughter’s aged, and stuff like that. You know, somebody who is willing to take a chance, somebody who’s willing to dream of what this community can be, and what it used to be.

It seems that there was no place for recipients of Housing Choice vouchers in this plan. When asked if he saw evidence of people with Section 8 vouchers moving in, Jerome had this to say:

Well, some did. I think, it was restricted. The rumor was all around. I’ll talk to people, they say, guess what, they are not going to let any Section 8 people here. I heard that, all the time. People said that, say they can’t get a place here, yeah, that was said! All over the community, because I be talking, guess what, no section 8. Some did lease, very few, leased. But most couldn’t move back here. They said no, we are not going to allow that. I saw signs up, section 8 accepted. I saw those posted, but in many cases, they said, they are not going to give…that was from the head folks, don’t give any Section 8 to Pittsburgh. And at that time too, like I said, they know there is too much crime, they see the blogger. They are not going to add to that. That’s what really happened. People are talking about it.
The story of what happened with the Atlanta Housing Authority’s decision to not approve Housing Choice vouchers in Pittsburgh varies from participant to participant. Considering the high level of organization in the neighborhood, without more specific information, one can only speculate as to why residents had different versions of this story. Some participants, like Jerome, felt that the Atlanta Housing Authority would not approve Housing Choice vouchers in Pittsburgh because there was too much crime or too many vacant properties in the area. This is perfectly plausible, because housing authorities do have the responsibility to ensure that voucher holders are moving into neighborhoods with certain characteristics, levels of safety, and properties in a good state of maintenance. However, several voucher holders did in fact receive approval to move into Pittsburgh/Mechanicsville, English Avenue and other neighborhoods with high crime or extremely high vacancies during the housing crisis.

Pushing for more information, it came out that other participants claimed that it was the landlords in Pittsburgh who stopped accepting vouchers or that AHA would not pay enough for houses in the neighborhood. Again, these are both plausible situations, but what came out of one interview in particular was quite provocative- the neighborhood organization asked the AHA to refuse vouchers in the neighborhood. Clark discusses this here:

I think that the community really, when they got into the experience of section 8, people don’t behave nice and stuff like that. We asked that they shut down the section 8 program. We just asked them not to qualify housing in this community through section 8. And they did put a halt on it, because we were trying to get our redevelopment plan together, and so that’s what happened.

Keep in mind, the Pittsburgh/Mechanicsville area is a lower income area, and as such, it experienced this period of intense residential mobility in acute ways. The neighborhood experienced extremely high vacancy as a result of fraudulent lending practices, and because of the lower rental prices in the neighborhood, initially, voucher holders found homes in suitable
price ranges which brought an onslaught of new faces onto the neighborhood landscape. Over a short period of time, the neighborhood became resistant to voucher holders.

The closure of public housing projects offered the city an unprecedented opportunity to collaborate with neighborhoods to address needs during the housing crisis. Perhaps because of poor organization, lack of interest, or because the relocation of the last 10,000 public housing residents happened so fast⁶, this opportunity was largely missed. The AHA required tenants who received Housing Choice vouchers to attend an instructional program called the Good Neighbor Program. This was conducted in partnership with Georgia State University, and over 3,000 public housing tenants participated. The Atlanta Housing Authority (2011) MTW Annual Report describes the goals of the program which were to provide “guidance to AHA-assisted families on values, roles and responsibilities associated with being a good neighbor in a mainstream, mixed-income environment (10).” Obviously, with some of the complaints neighborhoods registered about voucher holders, the goals of this program were not always realized. The point here is that the housing authority was responsive to neighborhoods, and through this program it did attempt to clear the way for good relations between voucher holders and receiving neighborhoods.

In regards to the ownership of vacant homes by banks and absentee landlords, in this era where state and city governments are increasingly pressured to roll back support for community and social welfare, it is challenging to imagine new initiatives aimed at garnering public and private support for housing low-income populations. However, necessity is the mother of invention, and in Atlanta, one of the most vacant cities in the country during the housing crisis,

⁶ The last 10,000 residents of public housing were relocated by the end of 2009, and demolition of the buildings was completed in 2011.
the need was overwhelming. Pittsburgh Community Improvement Association (PCIA) works to combat physical and psychological community deterioration by purchasing, rehabilitating, and maintaining properties for perpetual ownership in a community land trust. Some of the homes in the land trust are rented and others are sold, all to residents from very low to moderate income levels (www.pcia-atlanta.org). Additionally, a study participant reported that PCIA helped her find housing after her home was foreclosed on, and another participant reported that PCIA helped rental owners screen potential tenants.

Because nearly half of the study participants indicated that their neighborhoods were minimally, if at all, affected by the demolition of public housing projects, we can infer that some Housing Choice voucher holders were able to move into neighborhoods with a degree of acceptance, or at least ambivalence on the part of long-term residents. It seems that voucher holders quickly adopting the standards of yard upkeep, appearance, and behavior is essential to reducing resistance from receiving neighborhoods. In situations where legitimate problems arose, individuals and neighborhood organizations discovered that they lacked the necessary influence to bring around improvements. This is a negative aspect of neoliberal housing reforms that reduce the scale of government agencies- responsibility is pushed down the line to smaller and smaller scales (from the federal to the state to the city to the organization to the individual), but the power (money) goes to the market. Unlike public housing project funding, Housing Choice voucher dollars go into the hands of landlords who are free to use the money as they wish, without oversight. Neighbors and neighborhoods with unruly tenants do not share in those voucher dollars, yet they must share in the responsibility for handling the problem.
8 RESIDENTIAL MOBILITY AND PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Much like public housing, public schools are subject to funding cuts and restrictions under neoliberal policy reforms. Public schools are iconic powerhouses of American public institutions, but the past decade has seen various initiatives aimed at changing how schools deliver services in order to increase efficiency and save money. The growing charter school movement (Hankins and Martin 2006, Saiger 2013), large scale implementation of voucher based school systems such as that found in post-Katrina New Orleans (Akers 2012), and alternative routes to teacher certification such as Teach for America and The New Teacher Project (Lahann and Reagan 2011, Lahann 2010) all signify cracks in the system of traditional public school education in the United States. During the 2008-2012 time period in which this study focuses, the climate in which Atlanta Public Schools (A.P.S.) found itself operating was characterized by not only financial distress resulting from these targeted neoliberal reforms, but also the Great Recession which saw an unprecedented turn toward furlough days- mandatory unpaid time off work to reduce district expenditures- in public schools, whose stable employment had traditionally been thought of as recession proof. In light of these issues, how did this period of intense residential mobility further impact public schools?

Public school funding is a complex process. In the first few weeks of school, there is a huge push to instill in students the importance of good attendance. Then the big day comes- student count day. On this day, each student who receives instruction counts for a predetermined amount of state funding for that school year. As a former teacher at an Atlanta Public Schools elementary school, I can attest to the way teachers are encouraged to ensure attendance by offering special treats to students, and even administrators visit homes of students who are tardy in order to encourage them to attend school on count day. In a cost-benefit
analysis, empty desks are a bad sign. Schools operate at maximum efficiency when occupancy of desks is high, and underutilized schools cost districts money. Telephone lines, internet service, heating and cooling costs, maintenance costs, and media center stocking are all examples of expenses which vary little in a school, no matter whether there are one hundred students or five hundred students. Atlanta Public Schools had a student population that dwindled to only 47,000 students by 2011. These 47,000 students were attending schools in buildings which could accommodate up to 60,000 students, meaning there was a 13,000 seat excess, and the district identified this as an area in which budget expenditures could be reduced. The district devised a plan to reduce the number of elementary and middle schools under the 450 target enrollment from thirty-eight to twenty-five. This chapter examines the role of the demolition of public housing and the foreclosure crisis into these school closures, and in turn, looks back at the neighborhoods in the attempt to understand what closed schools mean to the left behind residents.

8.1 Emptying neighborhoods empty schools

In the Superintendent’s Final Redistricting and Closure Recommendations report from Atlanta Public Schools, posted May 7, 2012, the district cites two reasons for the 13,000 vacant seats within the district: 1.) Families with school-aged children have moved and 2.) The perception or reality that the school lacks academic rigor and adequate support. While the latter is certainly a topic worthy of review, particularly in light of the Criterion Referenced

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
Competency Test (C.R.C.T.) cheating scandal, which was exposed in A.P.S. in 2009, the former engages directly with mobility.

The relocation of students both within A.P.S. and outside to other districts is certainly no new phenomenon. At 47,000 students, A.P.S. has declined in enrollment by over fifty-eight percent since its peak of over 113,000 students in the 1967-1968 school year.\textsuperscript{11} Prior to 1967, the school district had been in a steady state of increasing enrollment each year, but desegregation proved troublesome for the school district in terms of securing annual funding based upon the number of enrolled students. In response to desegregation, white flight resulted in significant and rapid demographic shifts from the city radiating toward the suburbs. This kind of mobility has been well documented by scholars of various disciplines (Bayor 1996, Keating 2001, Kruse 2005). However, large-scale contemporary residential mobility in Atlanta emerges from very different causes, and scholars are just beginning to delve into understanding its causes and effects. Just as in the case with white flight of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, residential mobility of the last few years is intricately linked with the closure of public housing.

\textbf{8.1.1 Public schools and the demolition of public housing}

In the city of Atlanta, public housing projects and public school development sometimes happened in tandem. The first public housing projects, built between 1936 and 1945, had an average of 553 family housing units, while those built between 1946 and 1974 were smaller, but still managed had an average of 320 family housing units.\textsuperscript{12} Herman E. Perry Homes was a massive housing project, featuring over 1050 homes, including a 128 unit annex built in 1969.\textsuperscript{13} The development of these mega-housing projects necessitated the development of nearby public

\textsuperscript{11} Data provided by Atlanta Public Schools in facsimile
\textsuperscript{12} Data gathered from the Atlanta Housing Authority Annual Report, 1991
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
schools to handle the new students moving into areas of the city that were often characterized by little to no services or prior development (Bayor 1996). Schools built near public housing projects often had a student population comprised almost entirely of students who lived in the nearby project. In the 1990’s, Renee Glover, former CEO of the Atlanta Housing Authority, noted that, “Atlanta’s public housing was home to 13 percent of the city’s population and, even more remarkably, housed about 40 percent of the students attending the city’s public schools. Clearly the fate of the schools and the public housing were deeply intertwined.” (Glover cited in Vale 2013:137). Unsurprisingly, when tenants began relocating from public housing to the private rental market, nearby schools rapidly became under-populated.

The relationship between the closure of public housing projects and the closure of public schools is openly acknowledged by A.P.S. In an informal conversation with a school district official, I was informed that five schools closed as a direct result of the last round of housing project demolition which saw the end of 10,000 low income housing units in 12 projects, and it occurred between 2008 and 2010. These schools and their nearby housing projects are listed in the table below.

**Table 3: Schools Closed Upon the Closure of a Housing Project**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Closed Public School</th>
<th>Nearby Public Housing Project(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.D. William</td>
<td>Bowen Homes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blalock</td>
<td>Bankhead Courts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.W. Hill</td>
<td>U-Rescue Villa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tull Waters</td>
<td>Jonesboro North, Jonesboro South, Leila Valley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walden Middle</td>
<td>Antoine Graves, Antoine Graves Annex, Henry Grady Homes, Capitol Homes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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14 Phone call, January 17, 2012
These five schools were located very close to a public housing project, in most cases, less than one quarter of a mile away. In one instance, depicted in Figure 3, below, the Bankhead Courts project was located directly across the street from Blalock Elementary.\textsuperscript{15}

![Figure 3: Bankhead Courts looking toward the former Blalock Elementary](image)

The effects of the closure of public housing likely carry farther than just these five identified schools. Figure 4, below, shows the initial five schools that were closed in red schoolhouse symbols. Their proximity to a former public housing project, depicted with black dots, is clear. Schools represented with the green school house symbol have a three-quarters of a mile buffer indicated on the map.\textsuperscript{16} An additional five schools out of the last ten schools closed by A.P.S. are identified as being very close to a former public housing project.

\textsuperscript{15} This building now hosts the West End Academy, which operates as an alternative school with up to seventy-five students.

\textsuperscript{16} Using a three-quarters of a mile buffer was an arbitrary decision. After the production of this map, I found this website from Atlanta Public Schools (http://www.atlanta.k12.ga.us/domain/7427), which shows the district’s “walk zone,” meaning a zone with no bus service, is one mile for elementary students and one and one half
Atlanta Public Schools also explicitly and publicly identified the closure of Atlanta Housing Authority properties as the reason for school closures. The following is text is taken from a letter that was distributed to parents of students at Tull Waters elementary. The same text was included in a letter addressed to faculty members of the school, concerning job placement in other A.P.S. schools.

As you are aware, the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) has closed Jonesboro North and Jonesboro South communities. These closures have resulted in declining enrollment at Tull Waters Elementary School. We have projected that the in-zone population for the 2008-2009 school year will decline to approximately 210 students. In addition, with the closing of another Atlanta Housing Authority community, Leila Valley, there is

mile for middle and high school students. Using these distances as buffers would add an additional two schools within close proximity of a former public housing complex.
significant under-utilization of school facilities in the area. As a result, we are recommending that Tull Waters close at the end of the 2007-2008 school year.\textsuperscript{17}

These acknowledgements place the responsibility for the closure of schools directly in the hands of the housing authority.

Combined with the history of this relationship between public housing and public schools, it seems that public schools are situated in a reactionary position, being forced to respond to external pressures without always having an opportunity to participate in the decision making process.

**Neighborhoods left behind by student mobility**

The closure and demolition of public housing significantly affected the city of Atlanta. When the projects closed, the students became mobile, resulting in the closure of schools. Neighborhoods were affected by this because they either lost a school when housing tenants left, or their neighborhood school received new students as a result of this move from public housing into the private rental market. Of the four neighborhoods that were included in this study, Greenbriar, Beecher Hills, Pittsburgh/Mechanicsville, and English Avenue, two lost schools (see Table 4, below), one had to campaign to keep its elementary school open, and one did not have closures, but did receive many new students from public housing. The two neighborhoods that lost schools were higher poverty neighborhoods.

\textsuperscript{17} Sample letter can be viewed in the school closure manual found at http://www.atlanta.k12.ga.us//Domain/45
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neighborhood Name</th>
<th>School Closings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English Avenue</td>
<td>2 schools closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pittsburgh/Mechanicsville¹⁸</td>
<td>1 school up for closure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beecher Hills</td>
<td>1 school proposed for closure, but school will remain open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenbriar</td>
<td>No schools affected</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From coding the semi-structured interviews, it was clear that residents from all four neighborhoods felt that having a school in the neighborhood was very important. Pittsburgh has a highly active neighborhood association that is in the process of attempting to earn approval of its redevelopment plan. A community leader listed improving schools as one of the top three priorities for the neighborhood; of the redevelopment plan, he says, “If you build good schools, you build a safe community, and a clean community. People will come (Clark, interview).” Teresa from Greenbriar felt that the neighborhood school was vital because it protects property values and influences the stability of the neighborhood. She says:

I think that is one of the reasons that our neighborhood has maintained the level of stability that it has… because we have…stable homeowners who understand that a lot of the value of their homes is tied to the fact that the school is in this neighborhood…even last year when there was talk about closing the school, while many of the neighbors don’t have children or grandchildren who attend that school, they were very supportive in maintaining that the school remain open (interview with Teresa).

In addition to stability, participants reported that neighborhoods schools provided healthcare for students, vital access to breakfast and lunch for students in high poverty situations, opportunities for relationship building and involvement in the neighborhood, and even the buildings

¹⁸ Data for Pittsburgh and Mechanicsville include the views of three residents of Mechanicsville and seven residents of Pittsburgh. For the purpose of this study, this data was combined due to the proximity of the Mechanicsville residents to the Pittsburgh neighborhood border. Their homes were located across the street from the line that divides the two neighborhoods.
themselves were useful as schools were often the place where neighborhood associations held meetings.

With this in mind, it is easy to understand the discomfort neighborhood residents felt as students from public housing projects began leaving in droves, spreading out to other areas of the city. Over 10,000 public housing residents were relocated between 2008-2010, so this movement can be described as both rapid and large-scale. Participants described the ways in which they protested upcoming school closures that were announced by APS. Racine has a special needs child who receives special services from Georgia Tech volunteers at her school. She expressed concern about the loss of these services when she said:

So, my baby’s school is closing…but to me, it look like they would have taken those kids from Bethune because it’s a bigger school. I did a demographic study online with APS, and we stood outside with signs, I’m talking about everything… (interview with Racine).

In this particular case, protests were unsuccessful. Her neighborhood, English Avenue, lost both an elementary school and a middle school.

The desire to keep schools open was more than a sign of hope for a bright future for the neighborhoods. In English Avenue, Pittsburgh/Mechanicsville, and Beecher Hills, many participants reflected on their fear of having abandoned buildings in the area. Large, abandoned buildings, such as schools, are particularly troublesome for neighborhoods. Much like vacant housing, the hulking structures are symbols of decline and disinvestment in the area. Not only are they eyesores, they can be havens for crime. When asked to explain the fear, one Pittsburgh resident described the situation frankly, saying:

Well just the building being empty. Croghman Elementary stayed empty for over thirty years. They had murders. They found bodies in the school. The building was, like I said, just staying vacant for 30 years. So, I’m very scared that if this
building sit [sic] here, it’s going to be another eyesore for the community. It’s going to be another place for the homeless to hang out (interview with Brandon).

Croghman Elementary has since been converted into a bustling housing complex, but the neighborhood will be losing its middle school which is nearby. Another resident from the neighborhood reflected on the upcoming middle school closure, saying:

What kinds of problems arise? I mean all kinds of problems. You can have people hanging out in there. It can catch a fire, just a whole bunch of things. It’s just not safe. It’s not safe at all and we don’t want that…it would be worse than having vacant housing because it’s so big (interview with Nathan).

Residents of this community indicated that they felt APS did not put enough effort into maintaining vacant properties. They reported structures being left unsecured, landscaping going neglected, and a disinterested attitude from the district in terms of keeping the properties up.

Residents questioned why schools in their neighborhoods were being closed. In English Avenue, a resident seemed to indicate a belief that some schools were closing because they were being “punished” for involvement in the CRCT cheating scandal, which devastated APS at the same time the last twelve housing projects were closing. Of her thoughts on the closure of two neighborhood schools, Karina says:

They closing [sic] John F. Kennedy, A.F. Herndon. Now the A.F. Herndon kids, they wasn’t involved in the CRCT scandal. So, why did they close that school? They said they don’t have enough kids to go…but then you don’t have enough people living over here. You need to invite people to come stay over here (interview with Karina).19

Other residents felt that they could directly identify the reason neighborhood schools were closing or under the threat of closing. Just like APS implicated the housing authority, so

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19 Kennedy Middle School recently had two former staff members who were indicted in the cheating scandal, but based upon the proximity of Kennedy and Herndon to former public housing projects, it is likely that other factors played a role in the school closing.
did neighborhood residents. A resident who lived in Pittsburgh for more than fifty years explained her frustration, saying:

That’s where it started at, when all the public housing was being shut down and people were being forced out and all that stuff… It’s the housing authority’s fault. When they shut down all the public housing, and gave people vouchers and sent them here yonder and there, there go your students right there. They are gone (interview with Sondra).

Similarly, a resident of Beecher Hills said she felt like the closure of the housing projects was a “mistake,” and she felt that:

Tearing down the projects, that got rid of a lot of our children and the school systems are suffering. It really put a hurting on the schools because they are gone. The children are gone. That’s where the children were. I don’t know if they thought about that before knocking them over.

A resident of the Greenbriar neighborhood was angry at the housing authority for an entirely different reason. This low poverty neighborhood had no schools that were closed or threatened for closure. However, the neighborhood, particularly its apartment complexes, received a great number of students who were formerly residents of public housing. Gwendolyn, a long-term resident of the area, felt that her neighborhood was dramatically changed by the influx of these students. She describes a situation in which her granddaughter, who formerly attended a private school on the north side of the city, faced adversity when these new students came into town:

(My granddaughter) tried to change her way of dressing, her way of talking…she told me, ‘if I ride the school bus again, they are going to jump me.’ But most of those kids in that school are from Bankhead Courts, Perry Homes, Bowen Homes… (interview with Gwendolyn).

At one point, this resident, who was nearly 80 years old, was actually physically threatened by some youth in her neighborhood- youth which she perceived to be from public housing because of their behavior. These negatives stereotypes of public housing residents likely impede
necessary relationship building in neighborhoods that receive public housing tenants. McCormik et al (2012) found that, “The social project to deconcentrate poverty in public housing and create a path to social inclusion and acceptance of relocated public housing residents has proven to be considerably more difficult and complicated than anticipated.” This study found that while some challenges associated with living in public housing were ameliorated when tenants moved into private market housing, Housing Choice voucher holders felt a new kind of stigma in the continuous monitoring of their appearance and comportment. Students from Atlanta’s public housing projects seemed to experience this same kind of stigma in their new neighborhoods and schools.

The information presented here shows that public schools are undoubtedly affected by residential mobility of public housing tenants. The last 10,000 people to move out of Atlanta’s public housing projects included many students who were relocated to homes in new school zones, leaving schools near the housing projects depleted of students. Atlanta Public Schools (APS) found itself in a precarious position with many schools under-populated and therefore not operating at optimal efficiency. This, tied with budget cuts associated with the Great Recession, caused APS to need to make challenging decisions in order to reconfigure school attendance zones and close under-utilized schools. Because schools are often considered the cornerstone of neighborhoods, residents of neighborhoods with proposed closures mounted campaigns to keep the schools open and protect their neighborhood from vacant buildings and disinvestment. Receiving schools dealt with the influx of students from rival territories, sometimes resulting in school violence. As the evidence shows, neoliberal reforms on housing policy have effects which have a far greater reach than their original intentions. As other cities across the country follow Atlanta’s lead and transition to voucher-based housing assistance, it is clear that public
school districts need to be included in the planning process from the beginning in order to avoid some of the pitfalls APS encountered during this process.
9 CONCLUSIONS

Since it opened the doors to Techwood Homes, the first public housing project in the country, Atlanta has been the bellwether of public housing policy in the United States. Many cities across the country are following Atlanta’s lead and demolishing public housing projects in the process of converting to voucher-based housing subsidies. At the same time, the nation continues to recover from the Great Recession and the housing crisis. These kinds of residential mobilities that result are direct effects of neoliberal reforms in housing policy. This study adds to available literature by documenting the effects of this process on a variety of neighborhoods.

What does mobility look like in the neoliberal city? The literature shows that neoliberal reforms in housing result in greater mobility. Immergluck (2009) discusses in great detail how relaxed lending regulations in the mortgage industry resulted in greater mobility—this type of residential mobility is characterized by a move from rental housing into homeownership, and then a move back into rental housing when homeowners lose their homes. Authors such as Goetz (2010), Kingsley et al. (1993), and Lake (2009) describe mobility that results from changes in public housing policies at multiple scales of government. However, much of the research on residential mobility focuses on the individual household, urban, or even greater scales, but neighborhoods, because of their inherent immobility, are greatly affected by residential mobility. This study addresses an absence of literature on residential mobility at the neighborhood scale.

There are two broad findings of this study. First, as governments face reductions and cutbacks, not only are cities forced to take on the extra burden to compensate, but also neighborhood residents and organizations are left with increasing responsibility. Study participants reported mowing lawns and providing security at neighboring vacant properties, or
even identifying absentee landlords who neglect their properties and writing letters in the attempt to address the situation. A second general finding is that intense periods of residential mobility result in some level of fragmentation in neighborhoods. This develops both as a result of the loss of long-term residents and also the introduction of newcomers to the neighborhood who may face social stigma if they fail to adopt neighborhood standards. The most common complaints from residents in neighborhoods that received public housing tenants were related to a failure to upkeep the outside of homes or behavior which was not fitting in the neighborhood. In this way, newcomers to neighborhoods may face hostility or the stigma of being perceived to be from public housing, regardless of where they actually came from. In cases where truly disruptive behavior occurred, Housing Choice voucher holders were met with either complete rejection of their vouchers, or attempts by neighborhood associations to provide guidance and discipline—which also hints at the increased responsibility neighborhoods face under neoliberal reforms.

There are several more specific findings from this study. The GIS analysis shows that increasing mobility leaves some neighborhoods experiencing very high vacancy rates, particularly those with many low-income residents. Residents in these neighborhoods express fears about the very real dangers of having vacant homes and school buildings in their areas. Also, school districts are greatly affected by residential mobility. GIS analysis showed that ten schools within three-quarters of mile from a public housing project were closed after the closure of public housing. Residents protested in neighborhoods with schools that were facing closure. In the end, the lower-income neighborhoods experienced a greater degree of school closures.

In terms of education, this paper advances scholarly research into the field by responding to Thiem’s (2009) call for an “outward looking analysis” of how education affects change beyond its own industry. The residential mobility of students results in changes not only within
the district such as school closures, but also changes in the communities surrounding the schools that closed and the schools that received tenants. Atlanta is a city of neighborhoods, some bustling and vibrant, others afflicted with blight and disinvestment. Many Atlanta residents view having an excellent school as one of the most important factors in neighborhood desirability.

Residents in affected neighborhoods might find this project useful because it will help them to corroborate their lived experience of this demographic transition with real-world data. For many residents, this has been an emotionally charged experience, as they watched the liveliness of their neighborhoods pack up and move away, sometimes forcefully through the eviction process. In addition, policy makers and organizations interested in improving Atlanta neighborhoods might find this study useful, as it may help to direct funds or efforts to neighborhoods that were most affected. Finally, housing authorities and school districts in other cities need every available resource to help make the transition to voucher-based housing more efficient and effective in order to reach the goal of decentralizing poverty in meaningful ways.
REFERENCES


www.pcia-atlanta.org. Pittsburgh Community Improvement Association, Inc. PCIA.
APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Schedule for In Depth Neighborhood Interviews

1. What is your name?
2. How long have you lived in your current residence?
3. What is your neighborhood called?
4. What are the boundaries of your neighborhood?
5. How long have you lived in your neighborhood?
6. How long have you lived in Atlanta?
7. Where did you move from?
8. [If it the participant is not in a rental-apartment complex:] Do you own or rent?
9. Do you like owning/renting in this neighborhood?
10. Why did you choose this neighborhood?
11. Do you know many people who live in this neighborhood?
   a. If so, in what ways?
12. To what degree is your neighborhood important to you? On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is ‘not very important’ and 10 is ‘extremely important,’ how important is this neighborhood to you?
13. Why do you feel this way?
14. Has much changed in your neighborhood recently?
   a. If so, how would you describe the changes? In other words, what has changed?
15. Have new people moved in or long-time residents moved out? (if yes, explain.)
16. Do you see evidence of the housing crisis—where people have lost their homes to sub-prime mortgage fraud—or because landlords have foreclosed on properties?
   a. Has this affected your neighborhood? If so, in what ways?
   b. (if yes): Why do you think this happened here?
17. Do you see evidence that people from public housing have moved in? If so, in what ways?
   a. How has this been beneficial or challenging?
18. Do you know anyone in your neighborhood who used to live in public housing? If so, would you say that there are a lot? Or a few former public housing residents? Explain.
19. Are you involved in your neighborhood?
   a. Do you know your neighbors?
   b. Are you involved in any organizations in your neighborhood? (civic organization, PTA, etc.)?
      i. If yes, what is the nature of your involvement?
      ii. If no, do you know anyone who is involved in the neighborhood? In what ways?
      iii. Do you think neighborhood organizations are important for your neighborhood?
         1. Why or why not?
   iv. Do you think your neighborhood organization represents your interests?
      1. Why or why not?
20. Tell me about your neighbors. (How long have they lived here? What do they do?)
21. Are there non-profit organizations that you know of that work in your neighborhood? (like community development corporations or faith-based organizations).
   a. If so, which ones?
   b. How did you find out about it/them?
   c. What do they do?
   d. Are they important for your neighborhood? Why or why not?
22. What are your neighborhood’s most important resources (ie, school, community center, downtown area, etc.)?
a. Why do you think these are the most important?
b. Where are these located (using a map for identification)?

23. What would improve your neighborhood? Could you explain?
   a. Better access to transportation?
   b. More grocery store options?
   c. More involvement in democratic decision-making by other residents? That is, would you like more people to be involved in the neighborhood association or the PTA?
   d. Better representation by your city council representative? or the NPU?
   e. Better access to health care?
   f. More neighbors who care about the neighborhood?
      i. Do you think you have irresponsible neighbors? If so, why do you think this?
   g. Better housing?
   h. More landlords or residents who take care of existing housing?
   i. New housing?

24. What else do you want to tell us about you and your neighborhood?

Now I have a few demographic questions for you (if this isn’t already covered).

25. What is your ethnicity?
26. What is your household income range? (e.g., $10,000-$20,000; $20,000-$30,000; $30,000-$40,000)
27. What is your age?
28. What is your highest level of education completed?
29. What is your profession/occupation?
30. What is your gender?
31. What is your family status (single, married, with children in the home)?
Appendix B: Map of Neighborhoods and Poverty Rates

Map created by Jack Reed, GIS Coordinator at Georgia State University.
Appendix C: Maps of Atlanta Vacancies from 2006-2012