



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

## An Improved Living Environment? Relocation Outcomes for HOPE VI Relocateses

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*If handled properly, relocation could significantly improve residents' lives by helping them move to quality housing in safe neighborhoods.*

As distressed public housing is demolished and replaced with mixed-income communities under the HOPE VI program, one of the most difficult challenges has been to design and implement relocation programs that effectively address residents' myriad needs (see page 7). When a building is slated for demolition, residents are typically offered the choice of moving with a voucher or to another public housing unit. Some residents are also offered the option to return to the revitalized HOPE VI site, although screening requirements (e.g., employment, drug testing, criminal background) may preclude them from eligibility. There are often long delays between the demolition of the original units and the construction of the new housing on the HOPE VI site.

To assist with the move, housing agencies are required by the Uniform Relocation Act to provide displaced residents with a "comparable unit" and cover moving expenses. Typical relocation services include moving expenses and assistance in finding a new public housing or voucher unit. Sometimes housing agencies go further and assist with the actual move.

Moving is difficult. For many residents, receiving quality relocation assistance when moving from distressed public housing will help provide access to future opportunities, whether living in a lower-poverty neighborhood, a mixed-income community, or, in the case of the elderly, a senior building. Similarly, ineffective and inadequate relocation services can lead to families living in the

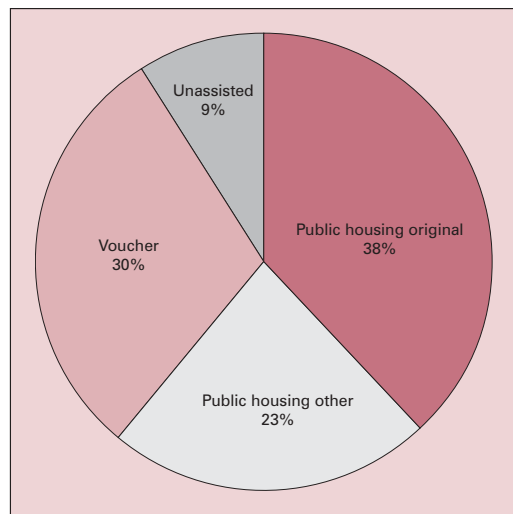
same dreadful conditions they left behind. Because what happens during relocation to a large extent drives where families will end up, housing assistance tools, and the design and implementation of relocation, are critical to the success of HOPE VI.

This brief examines relocation assistance for public housing residents at five sites that make up the HOPE VI Panel Study: Ida B. Wells in Chicago, Illinois; Shore Park Terrace in Atlantic City, New Jersey; Easter Hill in Richmond, California; East Capitol in Washington, D.C.; and Few Gardens in Durham, North Carolina. We look specifically at the housing assistance tools (e.g., vouchers, other public housing units, homeownership) agencies used to relocate residents and barriers to successful relocation. We further explore how many residents want to return to the revitalized development and how many are leaving subsidized housing altogether. Our analysis reveals the following eight findings.

### **Vouchers Are a Primary Relocation Tool**

Housing Choice Vouchers are the primary housing assistance tool used to relocate residents at the five HOPE VI Panel Study sites, although reliance on vouchers varies from site to site. Overall, 61 percent of the sample had relocated from their original public housing development at the time of the follow-up survey (39 percent remain in their original development because it had

FIGURE 1. Housing Assistance



Source: HOPE VI Panel Study Follow-up Survey (2003).  
Note: The total sample size is 736.

A lot of people don't want to rent to people with Section 8. That's the only concern that I'm skeptical of.

—Easter Hill resident,  
Richmond, 2001

not yet been necessary for them to move).<sup>1</sup> Figure 1 shows what type of housing assistance public housing residents were using at the time of the follow-up survey. The largest share of respondents moved with vouchers (30 percent), followed by those that moved to other public housing units (23 percent). About 9 percent of all respondents no longer receive a housing assistance subsidy (“unassisted”).

### Voucher Use for Relocation Varies by Site

The type of housing assistance provided to relocatees (e.g., vouchers, public housing, homeownership) is driven by rental markets and local administrative decisions about relocation plans. So it is not surprising that reliance on vouchers as a housing assistance relocation tool varies by site. At the time of the follow-up survey in 2003, the five sites were at different stages of relocation. The three sites that had fully or partially completed the relocation phase—Durham, Richmond, and Washington, D.C.—relied heavily on vouchers (47 percent, 28 percent, and 40 percent, respectively). The two sites (Chicago and Atlantic City) where more than 50 percent of residents remain in the original public housing development have smaller shares of residents relocated with vouchers (figure 2). In Chicago, these percentages are likely to change as the site completes relocation. In Atlantic City, reliance on vouchers will likely stay low because, according to the site's relocation

plan, most residents will remain on site until new public housing is constructed.<sup>2</sup>

### Many Residents Await Relocation

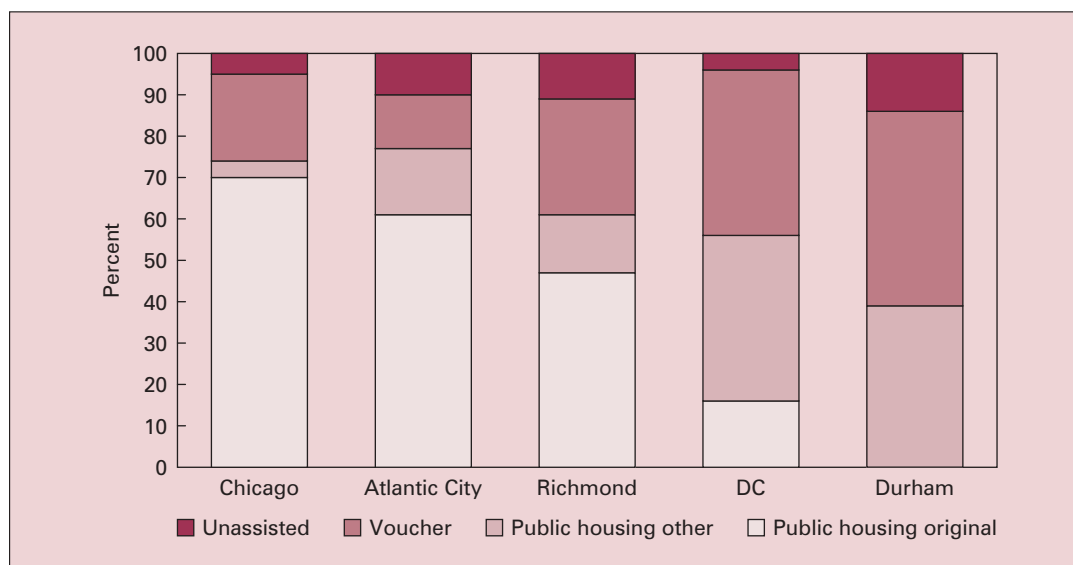
At several sites, relocation has been hindered by unexpected delays, leaving residents in distressed public housing units that are in extremely poor and potentially hazardous condition. HOPE VI Panel Study respondents still in their original public housing development reported little change in their housing conditions. At follow-up, among those who remained on the HOPE VI sites, about 39 percent reported three or more housing problems. Further, as more residents move out of the development, building maintenance (such as snow removal or trash collection) becomes more difficult because many buildings (particularly places such as Wells in Chicago) have only a few occupied units.

We asked respondents still living in their original development why they had not yet moved. Over one-third (39 percent) of the respondents still live in the original development. In most cases, they have not yet entered the relocation process or been issued a voucher. This is particularly true in Chicago (70 percent) and Atlantic City (61 percent) where housing authority plans call for relocation to wait until construction has started or is completed. In Richmond and Washington, D.C., fewer than half are waiting for relocation (47 percent and 16 percent, respectively). Durham completed relocation in October 2002.

### Tight Rental Markets Contribute to Problems with Voucher Relocation

Finding a unit with a voucher is challenging in some markets. Problems with finding units were highest in Richmond, where 52 percent of nonmovers reported they hadn't moved because they couldn't find a unit. In Atlantic City, 19 percent reported having problems, followed by Washington, D.C. (17 percent), and Chicago (10 percent). Although we didn't ask about specific barriers to finding a unit, the literature points to several reasons. Many landlords are apprehensive about participating in the program; this apprehension is especially problematic in tight rental markets where landlords can more easily find private-market tenants to rent their units (Cunningham, Sylvester, and Turner 2000;

FIGURE 2. Relocation Assistance by Site



Source: HOPE VI Panel Study Follow-up Survey (2003).

Notes: The total sample size is 736. Site differences are statistically significant at the .05 level.

Fosburg, Popkin, and Locke 1996; Lenz and Coles 1999). Further exacerbating the problem is the fact that long-time residents of distressed public housing may have serious personal problems that make it difficult for them to understand how the voucher program works (Turner, Popkin, and Cunningham 2000). In addition, relocatees may face discrimination in the housing market, both racial discrimination and discrimination against families with children. Finally, landlords who accept vouchers may find former public housing residents undesirable tenants and refuse to rent to them (Popkin and Cunningham 2002).

### Residents Dissatisfied with Public Housing Units Are More Likely to Move with Vouchers

The public housing developments targeted under HOPE VI were in extremely poor physical condition. Before relocation, about one-third of respondents reported two or three housing problems (e.g., peeling paint, water leaks, problems with roaches or rats) and about 40 percent reported not being satisfied with their housing. In the baseline survey, we asked respondents if they wanted to move from public housing. Those who preferred to leave generally said they wanted to improve their housing quality or move to a safer neighborhood. So it is not surprising that relocatees more dissatisfied with their public housing unit at baseline were 76 percent more likely to move with vouchers than

those not dissatisfied with their unit.<sup>3</sup> Households with children were also more likely to move with vouchers than those without children. Households with children may be more likely to choose vouchers as a relocation option so they can move to neighborhoods where problems with gang and drug-related crime are less prevalent.

### Positive Signs for Unassisted Renters, Still Reasons for Concern

One major concern with the HOPE VI program is that relocation would put families at risk for eviction or termination of their housing subsidy, particularly relocatees living in private-market units with vouchers. But our findings to date indicate little evidence that this phenomenon is occurring on a large scale. Only 63 public housing relocatees in the sample no longer receive a housing subsidy. And survey data show that most unassisted renters are more likely unassisted for positive reasons than negative ones. For example, about half (46 percent) of unassisted renters' incomes have increased to the point that they no longer meet the income eligibility requirements for public housing. Almost 6 percent left public housing and 6 percent became homeowners. However, our findings also indicate that 9 percent of unassisted households were evicted and about 3 percent lost their subsidy because of "problems with the PHA." We were also unable to locate 17 percent of the original sample and do

One young girl from Wells said she wanted to move to the suburbs to get away from shootings in her public housing neighborhood:

A: I want to move . . . they shoot too much.

Q: Where do you want to move?

A: The suburbs . . . 'cause it's far down and I don't think they shoot.

—Wells resident,  
Chicago, 2001

not have information about what has happened to those residents. There are many possible scenarios for why we could not find them. The best possible scenario is that they are doing well and have either become ineligible for a subsidy or left voluntarily. The worst possible scenario is that these residents have fallen through the cracks, been evicted or terminated from the program, and are now homeless or living in substandard housing. Still, although this worst-case scenario would increase the share of unassisted households that have lost their subsidy for negative reasons to 23 percent, that figure is still considerably lower than the proportion who have left because their economic situation has improved.

### Residents Want to Return to the New Developments

At the follow-up, more than half (64 percent) of respondents said they want to return to the public housing development after it is “fixed or revitalized.” This figure represents a slight decrease from the baseline, when 70 percent said they were interested in returning to the new site after revitalization. Respondents living in the original development or other public housing are more likely to report interest in returning to the site (65 percent and 78 percent, respectively), although interest in returning to the site among those who relocated with vouchers

is still high (60 percent). At all sites except Atlantic City, more than half of respondents want to return. In Atlantic City, only 43 percent of respondents want to return to the site after it is completed (figure 3).<sup>4</sup>

Only a small share of the movers who reported at baseline they wanted to return to the site no longer want to return. Of movers relocated with vouchers, 9 percent changed their minds about wanting to return to the development. The share of those who moved to other public housing, wanted to return, but changed their minds is also 9 percent.

There are several reasons residents might prefer to come back to the revitalized HOPE VI site. Residents—particularly those who are older or have lived in the development for many years—may want to return because of strong connections to the community. Residents may also want to return because they value the stability public housing offers, or think the new site is going to offer quality housing and supportive services. Others who have mental or physical health problems may want to remain in public housing because they find the prospect of searching for housing in the private market overwhelming. Finally, some may fear the challenges of finding—and retaining—housing in the private market (Popkin et al. 2004).

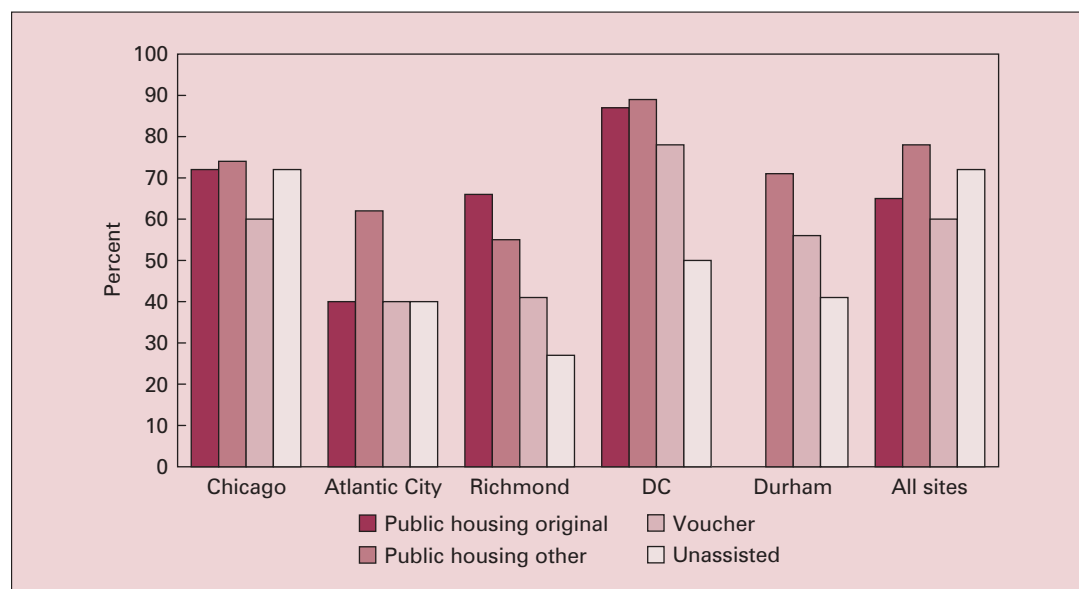
Although a high percentage of residents want to return to the site, most will likely not be able to. At all the sites in our sam-

**Q:** Why do you want to return to the site after revitalization?

**A:** Because I know the drug dealers won't be here. And the crack people, they won't be here. They know the people they don't want here. They're not coming back.

—Shore Park resident, Atlantic City, 2001

FIGURE 3. Housing Assistance Type by Residents Who Want to Return to the Site



Source: HOPE VI Panel Study Follow-up Survey (2003).

Notes: The total sample size is 736. Site differences are statistically significant at the .05 level.

ple, the HOPE VI plans reduce the number of units available for public housing residents. In Chicago, D.C., and Atlantic City the reductions are dramatic. Chicago is building back about 1,000 public housing units, a third of the original units. D.C. is replacing only 24 percent of the original units and Atlantic City is replacing 44 percent. Richmond and Durham reduced the number of public housing units, but their reductions are not as large as the other HOPE VI sites in our sample. Richmond is replacing 83 percent of the original units and Durham is replacing 67 percent.

Other factors, such as screening requirements (e.g., drug testing, employment requirements, background checks) will preclude some residents from returning to the new site. Despite plans for rigid requirements, most residents (90 percent across the five sites) believe they will be eligible to return to the development. These expectations appear unrealistic and may reflect the fact that only 61 percent of residents reported receiving information about screening requirements. Lack of knowledge about screening requirements may make residents ill prepared to return to the site.

Our qualitative data from in-depth interviews suggest that site screening requirements meet with mixed reviews. For some residents, screening requirements may prevent them from returning; they worry whether they will meet the requirements. Other residents support plans for screening and preventing “bad apples” from returning, hoping that weeding out drug dealers and gangs will mean a safer community.

### Residents Report Relocation Services Are Limited

The HOPE VI Panel Study focuses on tracking *outcomes* for residents, rather than evaluating the HOPE VI program or specific relocation services. However, to capture resident perceptions of relocation services, we asked relocatees if they received different types of information on relocation services from the housing authority. Generally, our qualitative data suggest that the relocation services were limited to basic assistance required by the Uniform Relocation Act, such as moving expenses and reimbursement for utility hook-ups. Our data further suggest that confusion, suspicion, and mistrust of the housing authorities among residents were a major relocation challenge at all sites. At two sites (Chicago and Atlantic City), a substantial number of respondents

appeared poorly informed about the HOPE VI plans for their developments.

It is important to remember that the sites were at different stages of relocation when the follow-up survey was conducted. Further, our data show a pattern of movers reporting a higher rate of services than nonmovers. Nonmovers may not have entered the relocation process and therefore we should not expect them to have received services. This is particularly true in Chicago, where the HOPE VI plan calls for staged relocation and large numbers of residents still await relocation.

Generally, most respondents in our sample reported receiving information on their housing choices. Almost three-quarters (71 percent) received information on other developments and 80 percent received information on Section 8 or vouchers (figure 4). Although all study sites planned “affordable” homeownership units, only 66 percent of respondents received information on homeownership. The housing authority may not be providing homeownership information to all residents and is instead targeting higher-income residents more appropriate for the program. Only about half the sample received information on landlords and leases, security deposits or down payments, or paying utilities. Voucher holders generally report a higher rate of receiving services, although considering how critical information on landlords, security deposits, and paying utilities is to successfully navigating the voucher program, the numbers are low.

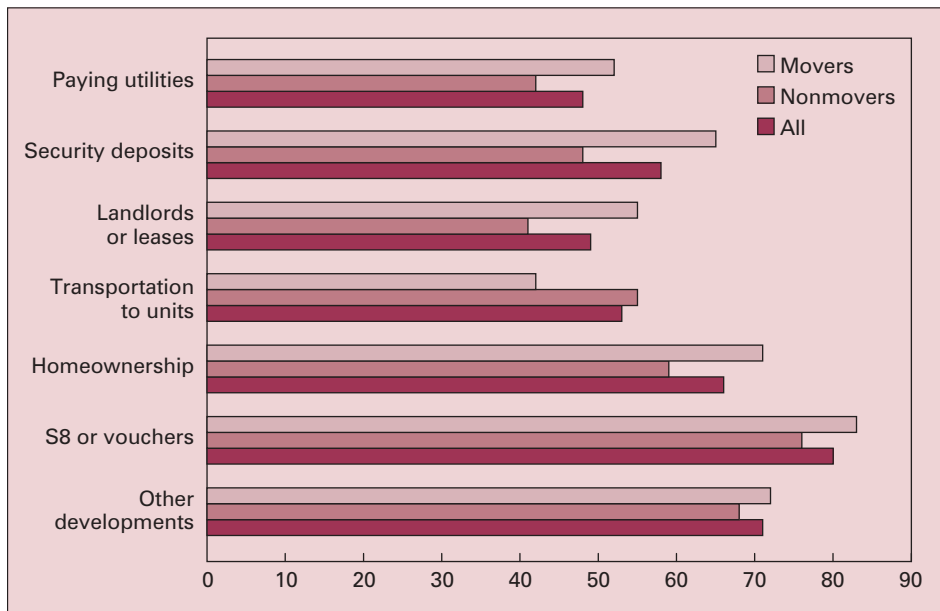
About one-third of the sample (28 percent) reported receiving limited services (table 1). Using the different measures of relocation services (received information on Section 8 vouchers, homeownership, transportation, landlords or leases, security deposits, paying utilities) we created an index to represent the intensity of relocation services received. About a third of HOPE VI relocatees scored “low,” about 28 percent scored “medium,” and 40 percent scored “high,” which means they reported receiving at least five of the relocation services we asked about. Movers were more likely to score high (35 percent compared with 28 percent of nonmovers) and less likely to score low (23 percent compared with 35 percent of nonmovers).

Relocatees at different sites may not receive the same information about relocation opportunities. Despite this possibility, there were only a few site differences in relocation services. Respon-

I probably would [like to return to the site], because I grew up in this neighborhood . . . by me thinking about leaving, it's kind of sad because . . . I've been her since I born so it's, like, this is my life around here. And that's just like me saying “I'm leaving my life, I'm going somewhere new,” like that's it. If I had a chance, I would come back over here.

—Wells resident,  
Chicago, 2001

FIGURE 4. Information Respondents Received about Relocation Services, by Move Status



Source: HOPE VI Panel Study Follow-up Survey (2003).

Notes: The total sample size is 736. Differences between movers and nonmovers are statistically significant at the .05 level.

dents from Atlantic City received significantly more information on homeownership opportunities because of the housing authority's homeownership program. Chicago residents reported receiving less information on all measures, but this is probably because most residents are still waiting for relocation.

## Policy Implications

This brief examines relocation services for public housing residents at five sites that received HOPE VI grants. Overall, we found vouchers were the primary relocation tool, although many relocatees have moved to other

public housing units or remain in their original public housing unit. Not surprisingly, relocatees who were most dissatisfied with their public housing units and households with children were more likely to leave behind their distressed public housing units and move with vouchers. Finally, almost all the relocatees still receive some type of housing assistance, and most of those no longer receiving assistance have left because their incomes have increased, not because of eviction or termination.

- **Housing agencies must set realistic expectations for residents about their right to return.** One of

the most controversial aspects of HOPE VI is the small number of original residents returning to the site. The debate over the appropriate numbers will likely continue without resolution. More than half our respondents want to return to the development, but due to dramatic reductions in public housing units and stringent screening requirements, it is unlikely they will be able to so.

- **The slow pace of redevelopment raises concerns for residents remaining on site.** At several sites, the relocation has been hindered by either planned or unexpected delays, leaving residents living in housing units that are in extremely poor and potentially hazardous condition. Conditions in the buildings remain the same and become more difficult to maintain over time.
- **Information about housing choice and relocation services could improve.** The HOPE VI Panel Study tracks outcomes for residents; it does not specifically evaluate the relocation services at each site. We did, however, ask residents their perceptions of the services they received. Relocatees were confused and had inadequate information about their housing choices. Voucher holders had trouble locating housing and continue to face numerous barriers to finding a unit, especially in tight rental markets. About a third of movers and nonmovers reported receiving few or no relocation services.

The success of HOPE VI will likely be measured along several dimensions. In the short term, perhaps the most important measure of success is effective resident relocation. Because relatively few residents will return to the completed sites, relocation is the main intervention for many. If handled properly, relocation could significantly improve residents' lives by helping them move to quality housing in safe neighborhoods. Similarly, poorly planned relocation can mean residents experience little or no improvement in their situation, or worse, fall through the cracks and become homeless. Because of the

TABLE 1. Relocation Services Score by Move Status

Score on Relocation Services Index	All	Movers	Nonmovers
Low (%)	28	23	35
Medium (%)	40	42	37
High (%)	32	35	28
<b>Total respondents surveyed</b>	<b>736</b>	<b>450</b>	<b>286</b>

Source: HOPE VI Panel Study Follow-up Survey (2003).

Notes: The relocation services score is a summary measure of the following questions: information on Section 8 or voucher programs; information on homeownership; information on transportation to an available unit; information on landlords or leases; information on security deposits or down payments; and information on paying utilities. The Cronbach's Alpha for this index is .80. "Low" represents respondents who report 0-2 relocation services; "medium" represents respondents who report 3-4; and "high" represents respondents who report 5-6.

importance of relocation, our findings thus far suggest that housing authorities with HOPE VI grants need to pay considerably more attention to ensuring their relocation services are effective and create positive outcomes for families that have lived in distressed public housing developments.

## Notes

1. See the HOPE VI Panel Study for more information on data and methods.
2. See the HOPE VI Panel Study Report for more information on relocation and site plans for revitalization.
3. We used logit regression to identify characteristics that predict housing assistance type. Both dissatisfaction and households with children were statistically significant at the .05 level. The odds ratio for "housing problems" was .267 and 4.035 for "households with children."
4. Atlantic City respondents might have found this question confusing because, according to the relocation plans, they will remain on site until new units are constructed. The

revitalization plan also calls for construction of "scattered site" units, so respondents may not find the notion of "returning to the site" meaningful.

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## About the Author



**Mary K. Cunningham** is a research associate in the Urban Institute's Center on Metropolitan Housing and Communities. Her research focuses on housing and

self-sufficiency programs for low-income families.

## HOPE VI Program

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

The program's major objectives are

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

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

## HOPE VI Panel Study

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

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

The principal investigator for the HOPE VI Panel Study is Susan J. Popkin, Ph.D., director of the Urban Institute's A Roof Over Their Heads research initiative. Funding for this research is provided by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Fannie Mae Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Chicago Community Trust.

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

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

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