



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

An Improved Living Environment? Housing Quality Outcomes for HOPE VI Relocatees

Jennifer Comey

A principal objective of the HOPE VI program is to improve the living environment for residents of the most severely distressed public housing (see page 7). Substandard conditions in public housing significantly affect residents' daily lives, exposing them to such hazards as lead paint, mold, inadequate heat, and infestations of cockroaches and other vermin. Living in substandard housing can have serious repercussions for residents' health (especially children), such as an increased incidence of asthma.¹

Because housing quality is important for residents' well-being, we asked HOPE VI Panel Study respondents in our 2001 baseline survey a series of detailed questions about various housing problems, similar to questions in the national American Housing Survey.² Our findings clearly indicated these developments were in extremely poor condition. Respondents at all five sites reported numerous pressing problems with their housing—more than those reported by other poor renters nationwide. About one-third of the respondents at the baseline survey reported having three or more housing problems such as water leaks, peeling paint or plaster, or a unit that was uncomfortably cold for more than 24 hours because of a broken heater.

Housing Quality Improved Dramatically for Relocatees

At the follow-up survey in 2003, respondents who had relocated from the public housing developments designated for redevelopment through the HOPE VI program reported significantly improved housing conditions. Fewer respondents reported multiple housing problems, and families that relocated reported better housing quality overall. In-depth interview respondents described amenities such as more space and fenced-in yards.

Multiple housing problems decreased for movers. The number of reported housing problems markedly decreased for respondents who moved from the original public housing development. At the baseline survey, 33 percent of residents reported three or more housing problems. At the follow-up survey, only about one-third as many (12 percent) who had relocated reported three or more problems. Figure 1 shows the decrease in the incidence of four housing problems for relocatees from the baseline survey to the follow-up survey. One of the biggest decreases was in the share of respondents with peeling paint or plaster: approximately one-third of relocatees reported a peeling paint problem at base-

Although the quality of HOPE VI relocatees' housing has improved, it still has lags behind that of other poor renters nationwide.

Like there's a person upstairs, the toilet leaks...and this infects the walls. Water was coming all up the side of the wall, see how the wall is broke off? It's dangerous to your health because there [is] an odor to it. You wake up in the morning and it smells so bad you have to open doors. You have to open the doors and windows in the morning time.

—*Ida Wells resident, Chicago, 2001*

line, but only 14 percent had the same problem in their new unit.

Movers gave high ratings to their new housing. We asked respondents in the follow-up survey to describe the overall condition of their new housing units as either excellent, good, fair, or poor. More than two-thirds (67 percent) of relocatees rated their new housing excellent or good, compared with approximately one-third of those still living in the original development. We also asked relocatees whether they considered their current housing better, worse, or the same as their former public housing development. The vast majority (75 percent) reported their current housing was better than the distressed development they left behind.

Movers enjoy their new housing because it is larger, quiet, and has more privacy. In in-depth interviews, movers identified several aspects of their new housing that they enjoyed, particularly having additional rooms for their children, more space in general, fenced-in yards where children could play, and the quiet that comes from having fewer neighbors. Some movers also reported that they appreciated leaving

behind the stigma of living in public housing.

Many improvements reflect the fact that relocatees moved into less dense housing. Findings from the survey indicate that more than 50 percent of relocatees moved into single-family homes, either attached or detached, and one-quarter moved into one- to three-story multifamily buildings.

Voucher Holders Rate Their Housing Quality Higher than Other Movers

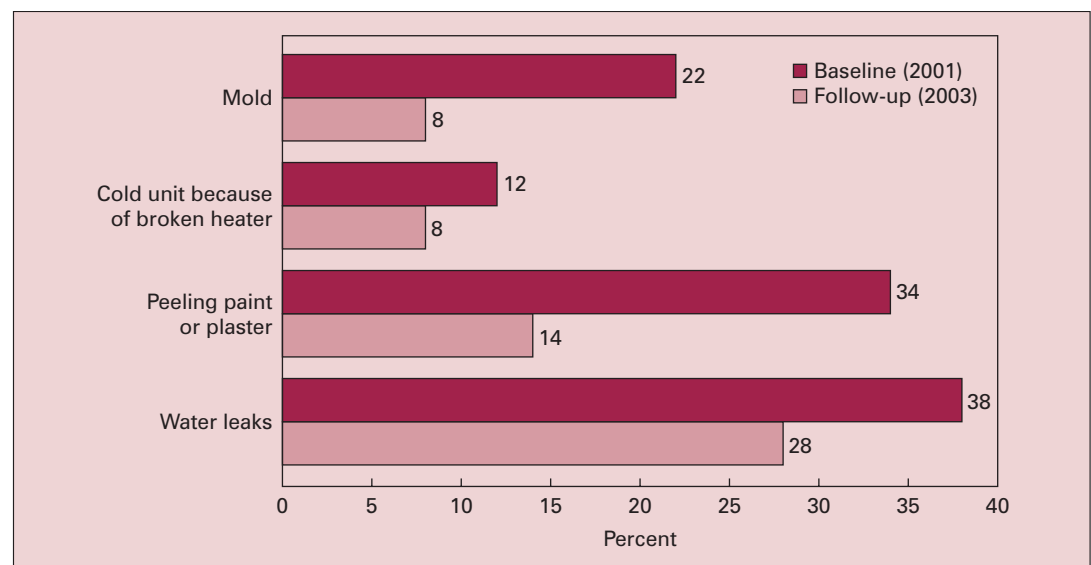
Movers who relocated with vouchers reported slightly better housing than respondents who moved to other public housing developments or are now unassisted. Voucher holders were slightly less likely to report multiple housing problems than other movers, although these differences are not statistically significant.

More notably, voucher holders rated their housing significantly higher than other movers. As shown in table 1, nearly three-quarters of those who relocated with vouchers gave their new housing a rating

There's no comparison [between my new housing and Few Gardens]. There is no comparison whatsoever. It's a big difference. The apartment complex itself is different. It's quiet. There's no shooting. There's people not all night long walking, you know, around your windows and your doors and outside your back doors. Maintenance, when you call, they come. It's a big difference. And I'm at ease. I'm at peace. I don't have to worry about my children like I did before.

—Former Few Gardens resident, current voucher holder, 2003

FIGURE 1. Housing Problems for Movers



Sources: HOPE VI Panel Baseline Survey (2001) and HOPE VI Panel Follow-up Survey (2003).

Notes: Data include only those who moved from the original HOPE VI sites. All differences for movers between baseline and follow-up are statistically significant at the .10 level, except the difference for mold. The total sample size at baseline is 450, at follow-up is 447.

of excellent or good compared with two-thirds of those who relocated into other public housing developments. Likewise, about the same proportion of voucher holders reported their current unit was better than their original public housing unit.

Relocatee Housing Quality Still Lags behind That of Other Poor People Nationwide

The follow-up survey indicates that housing quality improved overall for movers, especially voucher holders. However, comparing the figures on housing quality from the panel study respondents to housing quality figures of other poor people indicates that, even with this substantial improvement, these residents are still living in lower quality housing than other poor renters.

Using four similar housing quality measures, we compared the reported housing quality for HOPE VI Panel Study respondents with that of a national sample of poor households.³ Panel study relocatees were more likely than other poor households in central cities to report at least one housing problem. This difference holds even when we compare the panel study relocatees only to other poor, African American renters in central cities: 38 percent of the panel study relocatees reported at least one of the four housing problems compared with 31 percent of poor African American central city renters.

In addition, a greater share of HOPE VI Panel Study relocatees reported having three of the four housing problems than did other poor households (figure 2).⁴ For instance, more than one-quarter of panel study respondents who moved with a voucher or into other public housing reported having water leaks compared with less than one-fifth of poor African American renters. The same pattern holds for having a cold unit because of a broken heater and for peeling paint or broken plaster, although panel study relocatees using vouchers did not report more broken toilets.

Our findings indicate that respondents from two panel study sites—Richmond and Durham—fared better than those from Atlantic City, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. Respondents from Richmond and Durham reported housing that was as good as other poor renters in the American Housing Survey. For instance, 13 percent of Richmond relocatees and 21 percent of Durham relocatees reported water leaks compared with 19 percent of poor African American renters, and 9 percent of Durham and Richmond relocatees reported peeling paint compared with 8 percent of poor African American renters. In addition, respondents from Richmond and Durham reported significantly fewer housing problems than those from the other three panel study sites. In contrast, respondents from Washington, D.C., particularly those who had relocated to other public housing, reported a multitude of pressing problems.

TABLE 1. Housing Quality Ratings for Movers

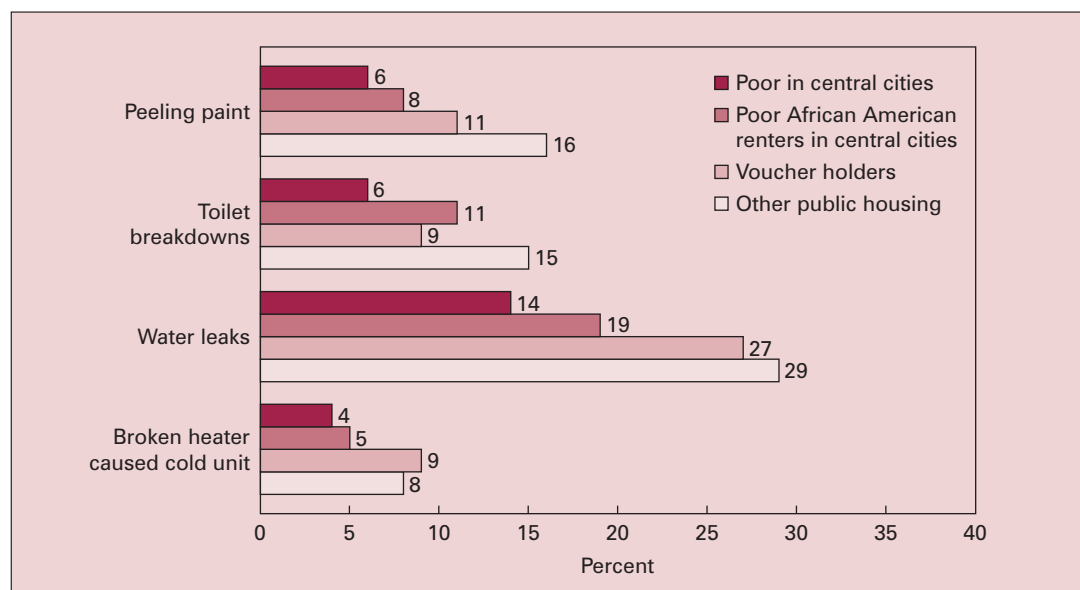
	Other public housing	Voucher	Unassisted	All
Excellent or good (percent)	64*	72*	67	67
Current housing better (percent)	59*	73*	70	66

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

Note: Sample sizes are as follows: other public housing = 166, voucher holders = 221, unassisted = 63, and all = 450.

* Difference between voucher and other public housing is significant at the .05 level.

FIGURE 2. Housing Quality Comparison, Movers and National Sample



Sources: HOPE VI Panel Follow-up Survey (2003) and American Housing Survey (2001).

Notes: Poor AHS respondents are those households with incomes below the federal poverty level. Sample sizes are as follows: HOPE VI other public housing = 166, HOPE VI voucher holders = 221, AHS poor in central cities = 2,089, and AHS poor African American renters in central cities = 507.

For Residents Awaiting Relocation, Housing Conditions Remain Very Poor

Panel study respondents still awaiting relocation in 2003 reported that their housing conditions had changed little since 2001. At the follow up, more than one-third (42 percent) of those remaining in the original public housing developments reported three or more housing problems, almost the same proportion as in 2001 (39 percent).

Policy Implications

HOPE VI Panel Study relocatees moved from some of the worst housing in the nation—severely distressed developments that exposed them to multiple hazards. Our findings indicate that housing conditions have improved for HOPE VI relocatees, particularly those who received vouchers. Relocatees report fewer problems with their housing, rate it as substantially better than the public housing slated for redevelopment, and say they have gained amenities

such as larger units and fenced-in yards. These findings indicate that the HOPE VI program is achieving its goal of improving original residents' living environment, which can contribute to other aspects of quality of life such as health and overall well-being.

However, while these relocatees have dramatically improved their housing situation, comparisons with national data indicate that many still live in worse housing than other poor households. This finding is particularly troubling considering these relocatees almost all live in assisted housing and receive significant subsidies that should theoretically provide them with access to better quality housing.

These findings raise questions about the following factors that contribute to the quality of relocatees' housing:

- **Relocation services.** One critical factor in ensuring relocatees receive better quality housing, particularly those moving into the private market, is adequate relocation services. As our brief

on relocation outcomes states, for most original residents, relocation is *the* main intervention; previous research and the planned reduction in units at most HOPE VI sites suggests that relatively few will return to the new, revitalized development (Cunningham 2004).⁵ Even residents who eventually move back are in their relocation housing for several years. We did not evaluate specific relocation services in the panel study; however, the relatively low housing quality outcomes raise the point that housing authorities' relocation services need the same attention as the demolition and rebuilding at the original sites.

■ **Management of the voucher program.**

The relatively low quality of housing that voucher holders moved into compared with the housing quality of other poor populations raises the question of whether HUD's housing quality standards are strictly enforced and whether local housing authorities are conducting thorough pre-lease inspections. In addition, paying attention to the timing and phasing of relocation is important to ensure that relocatees with vouchers do not flood the local rental market, reducing the number of available quality units.

- **Landlords and the Housing Choice Voucher program.** Another aspect that can affect the housing quality for voucher holders is a limited pool of participating landlords. More may need to be done to attract a broader range of landlords to the Housing Choice Voucher program. This can be a challenge in some cities such as Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Richmond because of their tight housing markets. Landlords in tight rental markets can more easily find private market-rate tenants to rent their units—turning away potential voucher holders (Popkin and Cunningham 2002).

■ **Relocating into other public housing.**

Relocatees who moved into other public housing consistently reported more housing problems than those who moved using vouchers or without assistance. Housing authorities should ensure that the public housing units they use for relocatees are in adequate condition so residents do not encounter the same physical hazards they left behind in their original, distressed development.

Over 30 percent of HOPE VI Panel Study respondents are still waiting to be relocated before their public housing developments are rebuilt using HOPE VI funds. Given the importance of housing quality for residents' overall well-being, the challenge for housing authorities is not just to move residents to better housing, but also to make sure that they end up in housing that is as good as that of other renters.

Notes

1. For more information, see Susan J. Popkin et al., *HOPE VI Panel Study: Baseline Report* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2002).
2. We asked respondents if they experienced the following eight housing problems: whether their unit had been uncomfortably cold for more than 24 hours during the past winter because of a broken heating system; if there was any area of peeling paint or broken plaster bigger than 8 inches by 11 inches in the house/apartment; if their toilet had not worked in the past three months; if they had water leaks in the past three months; if the house/apartment was infested with rats or mice; if they had an exposed radiator without a cover; if the house/apartment was infested with cockroaches; and if the house/apartment had significant problems with mold on walls or ceilings. The first two problems are worded exactly the same as the AHS survey and the following two problems (water leaks and toilets) are similarly worded to the AHS survey. The degree of severity concerning the rat and mice problem differs from the AHS survey, and the remaining three questions are not found in the AHS 2001 survey.
3. The four measures include whether the unit had been uncomfortably cold for more than 24-hours during the past winter because of a broken heating system; if the toilet had not worked in the past

three months; if there were any water leaks in the past three months; and if there was any area of peeling paint or broken plaster bigger than 8 inches by 11 inches in the house/apartment. The national sample data are from the 2001 American Housing Survey (AHS). The first two problems are worded exactly the same as the AHS survey, the next two problems (water leaks and toilets) are similarly worded to the AHS survey.

4. The following differences between the HOPE VI Panel Study and American Housing Survey data are statistically significant at the .05 level: voucher holders and poor African American renters who had broken heaters causing a cold unit, other public housing and poor in central cities who had broken heaters causing a cold unit, voucher holders and poor in central cities who had broken heaters causing a cold unit, other public housing and poor African American renters who had water leaks, voucher holders and poor African American renters who had water leaks, other public housing and poor in central cities who had water leaks, voucher holders and poor in central cities who had water leaks, other public housing and poor in central cities who had toilet breakdowns, other public housing and poor African American renters who had peeling paint, other public housing and poor in central cities who had peeling paint, and voucher holders and poor in central cities who had peeling paint.
5. For more information see Mary Joel Holin, Larry Buron, Gretchen Locke, and Alvaro Cortes, "Interim Assessment of the HOPE VI Program

Cross-Site Report" (Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates, 2003); "False HOPE: A Critical Assessment of the HOPE VI Public Housing Redevelopment Program" (Oakland, CA: National Housing Law Project, 2002, available at <http://www.nhlp.org>); and Larry Buron, Susan Popkin, Diane Levy, Laura Harris, and Jill Khadduri, "The HOPE VI Resident Tracking Study" (Washington DC: The Urban Institute, 2002).

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About the Author



Jennifer Comey is a research associate in the Urban Institute's Center on Metropolitan Housing and Communities. Her research focuses on community development, affordable housing, and public housing.

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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