

www.urban.org


INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- HOST Families are large and diverse.
- Parents face multiple barriers to employment, such as low levels of education and health problems.
- Despite their housing subsidy, many HOST families experience acute financial hardships.

Serving HOST Families: The Challenges to Overcome

Molly M. Scott, Susan J. Popkin, Marla McDaniel, Priya Saxena, and Reed Jordan

Many years of research have documented the hardships that vulnerable people in public and subsidized housing face—long-term unemployment, poverty, declining health, and even early mortality (Popkin et al. 2010; Popkin and Getsinger 2010). But there is also evidence that comprehensive, place-based interventions can help alleviate some of these challenges. The Urban Institute’s Chicago Family Case Management Demonstration showed that intensive one-on-one support for adults living in public housing can lead to meaningful improvements, particularly in terms of labor market participation and health outcomes (Popkin and Davies 2013). To build on the lessons learned from the Chicago Demonstration, the Urban Institute launched the HOST demonstration in four communities across the country to test the viability of a two-generation approach to improve outcomes not only for adults, but for whole families (see page 6) (Scott et al. 2013; Popkin et al. 2012). This brief focuses on the first two sites to launch: Chicago and Portland.

HOST’s diverse parents struggle with significant barriers to employment, including low levels of education and literacy, as well as chronic mental and physical health problems and histories of trauma and violence. As a result, many HOST parents cycle in and out of the labor market or languish in low-wage jobs with few chances for advancement. Faced with limited income, HOST families do their best to get by, but often have to make hard choices between paying rent and utilities and buying essentials like food.

This brief provides an in-depth profile of HOST parents to contextualize the work of the first two HOST sites as well as to set the

scene for the changes we hope to see over the demonstration’s duration.

HOST Families are Large and Diverse

To receive wraparound dual-generation HOST services, each of the roughly 230 families in Chicago and another 136 in Portland is assigned a personal case manager who touches base with at least the head of household once a week. In Chicago, the head of household is almost always a single mother. Nearly 90 percent of heads of household in this site are neither married nor living with a partner. While the majority of households in Portland are also female-headed, there are many more families

**HOST seeks to
address parents’
barriers to
employment
and bolster
families’ well-
being.**

with a mother and a partner or spouse—more than one out of every three households.

One of the unusual features of HOST is that the case managers are tasked with serving the whole family, not just the head of household. This strategy is challenging, especially since public housing is one of the last sources of affordable housing for large families (Hunt 2010). In Chicago, family size ranges from two to nine persons; but 75 percent are families of four people or less. Portland families tend to be bigger, with up to 13 different people in a household. Though family size stands at four or less among about one-half of Portland HOST families, nearly one in five consists of seven or more adults and children. As a key part of HOST, case managers in both sites often bring in support from other professionals, including job specialists, mental health clinicians, and separate youth case managers, to meet the needs of all family members.

HOST sites must tailor their approaches not only to accommodate the number of people in a household, but also to ensure that services are delivered in a culturally competent

way. In Chicago, where 95 percent of the residents are African American, that means having staff who can effectively connect with the public housing population. In Portland, the extremely diverse population poses a much different challenge. No single racial or ethnic group makes up a clear majority and residents are both immigrant and foreign born. Native-born African Americans and Caucasians make up the largest two groups—30 and 21 percent, respectively—but African immigrants as well as Latin American immigrants each account for sizeable segments of the HOST population (17 and 16 percent, respectively). The remaining 16 percent represent an eclectic mix of immigrants and native-born Latinos, Asians, and others. To meet the needs of this diverse population, Home Forward has hired case managers and youth liaisons who speak multiple languages and come from similar backgrounds as HOST families (Scott et al. 2013).

In addition, HOST sites recognize that the life experiences of HOST participants affect the intensity of the support they need to overcome barriers and improve their economic circumstances. For example, one-quarter of Chicago

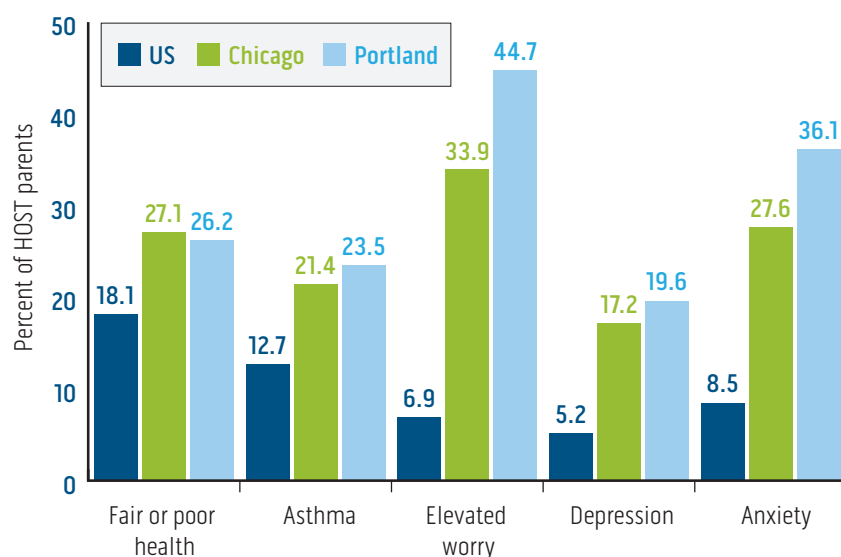
HOST parents and 1 in 10 Portland HOST parents have lived in public housing for 10 or more years. This factor alone can cause harmful stress to residents (Popkin and Cove 2007). Research shows that the concentrated disadvantages of public housing, including violent crime, drug trafficking, substance abuse, high rates of incarceration, and the absence of basic amenities often take a toll on residents (Popkin and McDaniel 2013). And HOST parents report many of these issues in their neighborhoods (Hailey and Saxena 2013). Other factors—in particular, traumas associated with the immigrant experience—can also prompt the need for more intensive intervention. Immigrant families have often experienced significant violence or deprivation during migration or time spent in refugee camps, or extended spells of separation from one or more family members.

HOST Parents Face Multiple Barriers to Self-Sufficiency

The HOST demonstration aims to help parents gain and sustain meaningful employment as a means to improving the economic stability of their families. However, because HOST parents start at a considerable disadvantage in the labor market, case managers must first help their clients navigate substantial barriers including low levels of education and literacy, poor physical and mental health, and insufficient child care support.

Low levels of education make it difficult for many HOST parents to access jobs that offer economic stability and opportunities for advancement. Almost one-half (44 percent) of all HOST parents have less than a high school diploma, compared with 13 percent nationwide. In Portland, more than one-third of these individuals—most of whom are immigrants—never even advanced past eighth grade. These low levels of education mean that beyond facing a skills gap, many HOST participants struggle with basic literacy and math skills. Language barriers exacerbate these problems. About 18 percent of Portland HOST parents who had looked for

Figure 1. HOST Parents Confront Serious Physical and Mental Health Challenges



work in the past year reported that not speaking English made that process difficult.

Poor physical health can also seriously limit many HOST participants' ability to work and go to school (Popkin and Getsinger 2010). Nationally, only about 18 percent of adults under the age 65 report fair or poor health,¹ but more than a quarter of HOST parents in both Chicago and Portland rated their health this way (figure 1). Rates of asthma are also about twice as high among HOST participants than among other American adults.²

Moreover, many HOST parents deal with mental health issues that complicate their day-to-day functioning. In both Portland and Chicago, participants report much higher levels of elevated worry,³ depression,⁴ and anxiety than other adults in the US.⁵ In part, this is not surprising, since these issues disproportionately affect women, people of color, and persons with low levels of education and unstable employment—many of the principal characteristics of the survey respondents (Gonzalez et al. 2010). However, mental health distress among HOST parents rivals or surpasses the levels for the “high-risk” group in the Chicago Demonstration, particularly in Portland (Popkin et al. 2010). As a result, it is no surprise that youth in these households exhibit mental health challenges of a similar magnitude (Jordan et al. 2013).

In addition, HOST parents often have difficulty finding someone to take care of their children. Almost 40 percent of Portland HOST participants who sought employment in the last 12 months cited child care as a key barrier, as did nearly 20 percent of Chicago participants. Child care becomes even more complicated for parents of children with a disability or chronic illness. About 1 in 10 HOST parents reported that this complicated their job search.

HOST Families Struggle to Make Ends Meet

Given the multiple barriers that HOST parents face, many find obtaining stable employment extremely challenging. About one-half

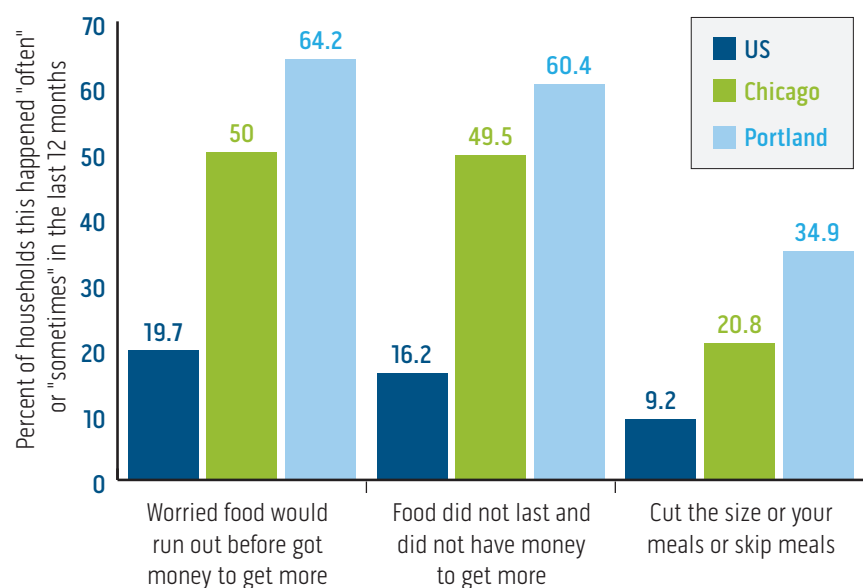
of HOST participants in both sites reported working at some time in the last 12 months. Nevertheless, at the time of the survey, unemployment rates registered 56 percent in Portland and 73 percent in Chicago—at a time when the national unemployment rate hovered around 8 percent.⁶ Despite its magnitude, the rate in the Chicago site may actually reflect early gains from HOST since the parents targeted for the demonstration were, by definition, not meeting the Chicago Housing Authority's work requirement at the time of their selection (Popkin et al. 2012).

With these stark employment realities, the great majority of HOST families in both sites fall below the federal poverty line—94 percent in Chicago and 80 percent in Portland. As a result, even though HOST families live in deeply-subsidized housing, they report that they often have to delay rent or utility payments to get by on their limited incomes. For example, 45 percent of Chicago parents and 15

percent of Portland parents reported paying their rent more than 15 days late at least once in the last year. Utility arrearages are actually the bigger issue in Portland, where nearly 70 percent of HOST families reported being more than 15 days behind on their utility bills at least once in the last year as opposed to only 7 percent in Chicago.

With their limited resources, a disproportionate number of HOST families also experience food insecurity (figure 2). About 50 percent of Chicago HOST families and 60 percent of Portland HOST families reported worrying at least once in the last 12 months that their food supply would run out before they received money to buy more. In comparison, only about 20 percent of American households share this concern. The survey also reveals that worry about food security among HOST families is not unfounded. Chicago HOST families report cutting the size of their meals or skipping meals altogether twice as

Figure 2. HOST Families Experience High Levels of Food Insecurity



Source: Calculated by USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the Current Populations Survey Food Security Supplements.

frequently as other American households; Portland HOST families have a rate more than three times higher.

It is not just the chronically unemployed who must deal with these hardships. Rates of poverty, particularly in Chicago, were only modestly lower among HOST families with a parent working at the time of the survey. Those parents who had worked at some point in the last 12 months reported food insecurity and delayed rent or utility payments just as frequently as HOST parents who stayed out of the labor market entirely. The data gathered by HOST case managers at this time reveals that those parents who were working made little more than the minimum wage and worked only part-time. This low wage work is often unstable and reflects the difficulties that even successful HOST parents have keeping up with costs as their federal safety benefits are phased out.

Looking Ahead

During their planning periods, the Chicago and Portland sites sought to target some of their most vulnerable families for the demonstration. Early signs from the baseline survey illustrate that they achieved this goal. And despite significant differences in the Chicago and Portland neighborhoods where HOST families live (Hailey and Saxena 2013), they endure remarkably similar economic hardships and will need to confront multiple barriers and challenges to overcome their circumstances. In the coming year, the HOST teams in Chicago and Portland will continue engaging with HOST families in hopes of boosting employment and alleviating the stress, poor health, food insecurity, and financial instability that reduce their quality of life; and the Urban Institute will revisit these outcomes to assess the effectiveness of their efforts (see page 5). The results will help inform federal housing policy and whole-family approaches to multi-generation poverty alleviation for the field more broadly. ■

Notes

1. "Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed September 30, 2013, <http://www.cdc.gov/brfss/>.
2. "National Health Interview Survey," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis.htm>.
3. The question measuring elevated worry is one of the components of the CIDI depression screener. Respondents were asked, "Did you have a time in the past 12 months when you worried a lot more than most people?" Those answering "Yes" are defined as having elevated worry. National data are from the 1999 National Health Interview Survey. "Integrated Health Interview Series: Worried more than most people, past 12 months," Minnesota Population Center, University of Minnesota, accessed September 30, 2013, https://www.ihis.us/ihis-action/variables/WORMORE#description_section.
4. Depression is measured by the CIDI, a validated depression screening tool used in the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS). In the baseline survey, adults were asked a series of seven questions to determine major depression—gauging behavior such as loss of interest in hobbies, trouble concentrating, thoughts of death, and feeling worthless. Answering "Yes" to three or more of these questions (a score of at least 3 on a scale of 0 to 7) classified respondents as having major depressive symptoms. National depression comparisons were calculated using the same method in the 1999 National Health Interview Survey "Integrated Health Interview Series: Major depression score for dysphoric mood: WHO CIDI-SF," Minnesota Population Center, University of Minnesota, accessed September 30, 2013, https://www.ihis.us/ihis-action/variables/DEPDYSWHO#description_section.
5. The question measuring anxiety is one of the components of the CIDI depression screener. Respondents were asked "During the past 12 months, have you ever had a period of time lasting one month or longer when most of the time you felt worried, tense, or anxious?"

Those answering "Yes" are defined as having anxiety. National data are from the 1999 National Health Interview Survey. "Integrated Health Interview Series: Felt worried/tense/anxious most of the time for 1+ months, past 12 months," Minnesota Population Center, University of Minnesota, accessed September 30, 2013, https://www.ihis.us/ihis-action/variables/WORIMO#description_section.

6. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey: Unemployment Rate for Population 16 and over. 2011–2013, accessed July 2013, <http://data.bls.gov/pdg/SurveyOutputServlet>. The range of unemployment statistics cited in the report reflects the fluctuation during the HOST baseline survey field period.

References

- Coleman-Jenson, Alisha, Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews, Steven Carlson. 2012. "Household Food Security in the United States in 2011. Economic Research Report No. 141. Washington, DC: US Department of Agriculture. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/884525/err141.pdf>.
- Hunt, D. Bradford. 2010. *Blueprint for Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gonzalez, O., J. T. Berry, L. R. McKnight-Eily, T. Strine, V. J. Edwards, H. Lu, J. B. Croft. 2010. "Current Depression among Adults—United States, 2006 and 2008." *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 59 (38): 1229–1235.
- Hailey, Chantal and Priya Saxena. 2013. "HOST: Helping Families, Building Community." Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. *HOST* Brief 5. <http://www.urban.org/publications/412914.html>.
- Popkin, Susan J., and Elizabeth Cove. 2007. "Safety is the Most Important Thing: How HOPE VI Helped Families." Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. <http://www.urban.org/publications/311486.html>.

Popkin, Susan J., and Elizabeth Davies. 2013. "Improving the Lives of Public Housing's Most Vulnerable Families." *Long-term Outcomes for CHA Residents* Brief 4. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. <http://www.urban.org/publications/412763.html>.

Popkin, Susan J., and Liza Getsinger. 2010. "Tackling the Biggest Challenge: Intensive Case Management and CHA Residents' Health." *Supporting Vulnerable Public Housing Families* Brief 3. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. <http://www.urban.org/publications/412257.html>.

Popkin, Susan J., Diane K. Levy, Larry Buron, Megan Gallagher, and David Price. 2010. "The CHA's Plan for Transformation: How Have Residents Fared?" CHA Families and the Plan for Transformation Series. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. <http://www.urban.org/publications/412190.html>.

Popkin, Susan J., and Marla McDaniel. 2013. *HOST: Can Public Housing be a Platform for Change?* Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. <http://www.urban.org/publications/412915.html>.

Popkin, Susan J., Molly M. Scott, Joe Parilla, Elsa Falkenburger, Marla McDaniel, and Shinwon Kyung. 2012. "Planning the Housing Opportunity and Services Together Demonstration: Challenges and Lessons Learned." *HOST* Brief 1. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. <http://www.urban.org/publications/412516.html>.

Jordan, Reed, Amanda Mireles, and Susan J. Popkin. 2013. *HOST Youth: The Challenges of Growing Up in Low-Income Housing*. *HOST* Brief 4. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. <http://www.urban.org/publications/412913.html>.

Scott, Molly M., Elsa Falkenburger, Marla McDaniel, Amy Khare, and Susan J. Popkin. 2013. "HOST Year 2: Implementation and Expansion." *HOST* Brief 2. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. <http://www.urban.org/publications/412824.html>.

Baseline Survey

During this first year, the Urban Institute fielded two surveys—an adult survey and a youth survey—to capture baseline outcomes for HOST families and their communities. The adult survey asked respondents about themselves and up to two focal children—one between the age of 6 and 11, and another between the age of 12 and 16. Parents with a child in the older age range could then consent for that child to participate in a separate youth survey. Overall, response rate exceeded 80 percent among adults and 90 percent among eligible youth in both sites. The survey table describes the basic characteristics of adults, focal children, and youth respondents.

Survey Response Rates and Respondent Characteristics.

| | TOTAL | CHICAGO | PORTLAND |
|-----------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Total HOST families | 366 | 230 | 136 |
| Adult Survey | | | |
| Number of adult respondents | 299.0 | 192.0 | 107.0 |
| Percent female | 93.3 | 95.3 | 89.5 |
| Mean age | 36.7 | 36.5 | 37.2 |
| Number of focal children 6–11 | 165.0 | 98.0 | 67.0 |
| Percent female | 54.7 | 57.9 | 50.0 |
| Mean age | 9.3 | 9.1 | 9.5 |
| Number of focal children 12–16 | 175.0 | 130.0 | 45.0 |
| Percent female | 53.3 | 53.8 | 51.5 |
| Mean age | 14.6 | 14.5 | 14.8 |
| Youth Survey | | | |
| Number of youth respondents 12–16 | 145.0 | 113.0 | 32.0 |
| Percent female | 55.9 | 54.9 | 59.4 |
| Mean age | 14.0 | 13.9 | 14.2 |

Upcoming Research Tasks

A follow-up survey will be fielded in Chicago and Portland late in 2014. Before the survey, the Urban Institute will conduct focus groups, interviews with staff, and program observations, as well as gather program data on HOST participants. The additional data will provide valuable feedback to the sites to continually refine their HOST model, contribute to a robust outcomes evaluation, and provide context for the larger evaluation findings.

HOST Demonstration Program and Funding Overview

Housing Opportunities and Services Together (HOST), launched by the Urban Institute with support of the Open Society Foundations in December 2010, is an innovative approach to coordinating services and programs for adults and youth in public and mixed-income housing. HOST's core case management component helps parents in low-income neighborhoods confront key barrier to self-sufficiency—poor physical and mental health, addictions, low literacy and education attainment, and historically weak connections to the labor force—while simultaneously integrating services for children and youth. The results of the multisite research project will influence how federal agencies such as the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, local housing authorities, and private developers create place-based, multigenerational programs and supportive environments for their residents.

HOST's current funders include Open Society Foundations, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kresge Foundation, Paul G. Allen Family Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, National Institutes of Health, and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

About the Authors

Molly M. Scott is a research associate in the Urban Institute's Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center.

Susan J. Popkin is both director of the Urban Institute's Program on Neighborhoods and Youth Development and a senior fellow in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center.

Marla McDaniel is a senior research Associate with the Center on Labor, Human Services and Population.

Priya Saxena is a research assistant with the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center.

Reed Jordan is a research assistant with the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center.

Housing Opportunity and Services Together Demonstration

Copyright © October, 2013

The Urban Institute. Permission is granted for reproduction of this file, with attribution to the Urban Institute.

The Urban Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan policy research and educational organization that examines the social, economic, and governance problems facing the nation. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.

Photo courtesy of UCAN

URBAN INSTITUTE
2100 M Street, NW Washington, DC 20037-1231
(202) 833-7200
paffairs@urban.org www.urban.org

