



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

## Resilient Children in Distressed Neighborhoods: Evidence from the HOPE VI Panel Study

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*Some children in the HOPE VI Panel Study are doing surprisingly well, apparently succeeding in school and thriving despite the challenges they face.*

The HOPE VI program (see page 7) targets the nation's most distressed public housing—impoverished communities with substandard housing and extreme levels of drug trafficking and violent crime. Children growing up in these environments confront numerous obstacles, including a social world dominated by the drug economy, bad schools, and, frequently, parents coping with problems of their own. These obstacles place them at risk for serious consequences including developmental delays, behavior problems, and poor school outcomes (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and Aber 1997; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000). Children in HOPE VI sites face the additional hurdle of involuntary relocation, which can disrupt academic achievement and increase behavior problems, especially if children are forced to change schools mid-year (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2003; Hartmann 2002; Wood et al. 1993).

The HOPE VI Panel Study tracks outcomes for original residents at five sites where redevelopment activities began in 2001 (see page 7). A primary goal of the HOPE VI program is to improve residents' living environment. The program can profoundly affect the lives of children, who are the most vulnerable residents of distressed public housing and particularly likely to suffer from the stress of relocation (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2003). At baseline in 2001, our surveys with residents docu-

mented many potential risk factors for HOPE VI Panel Study children—even before relocation. But our in-depth interviews showed that some children were doing surprisingly well, apparently succeeding in school and thriving despite the challenges they faced. In this brief, we explore the factors that help make these children more resilient than others and better able to cope successfully with the obstacles in their environment.

### Resilient Children in the HOPE VI Panel Study Sample

Our earlier brief (Popkin, Eiseman, and Cove 2004) found a mixed picture overall for HOPE VI Panel Study children two years after revitalization began. Children whose families had relocated—especially those who had moved with vouchers—were attending schools that were less poor and that parents perceived as higher quality. A substantial proportion (about half) of relocatees had changed schools. Although these moves were, in some cases, to better schools, many children had to move mid-year, and some had difficulty adjusting. Further, the type of housing assistance the family chose seemed to affect how children fared after relocation: parents who moved to other public housing reported that their children's behavior problems increased at follow-up, while those who relocated with

vouchers reported improvements in their children's behavior.

A large body of research examines the risk factors that lead to negative outcomes for children. However, researchers understand less about why some children faced with the same obstacles manage to succeed where others do not. Understanding the factors that help children succeed is a complex challenge, requiring researchers to consider a wide range of personal, familial, social, and environmental factors that could contribute to "a process of, or capacity for, or the outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging and threatening circumstances" (Garnezy and Masten 1991). Previous research has focused on several potential contributors to resilient outcomes for children, including

- *individual psychological characteristics* that allow children to cope effectively with stress, including "belief in one's own self-efficacy, the ability to deal with change, and a repertoire of social problem-solving skills" (Rutter 1985);
- *social and economic factors*, such as socioeconomic status, family dynamics, parenting quality, quality of and relationships with teachers and other adults (Werner and Smith 1993), neighborhood effects, and exposure to violence or trauma; and
- *access to quality educational and recreational opportunities*, such as schools, sports teams, churches, and Boys and Girls clubs (Smokowski 1998).

In this exploratory research, we seek to understand why some HOPE VI children seemed better able than others to cope with

the stresses of high-poverty environments. For the purposes of this research, we define a resilient child as one who has managed to avoid each of several serious problems, and one whose parent or caregiver described as highly engaged in school (table 1).<sup>1</sup>

Based on the above criteria, 21 percent of the HOPE VI sample is resilient.<sup>2</sup> Of the negative behaviors that contribute to our definition, behavior problems affect the largest percentage of children in the overall HOPE VI Panel Study sample (50 percent), followed by suspension or expulsion (31 percent), grade retention (25 percent), and delinquency (7 percent). Over half of the HOPE VI children (59 percent) were not counted as resilient because their parent or caregiver did not report that the child was highly engaged in school.<sup>3</sup> More girls than boys in our sample are resilient, with 25 percent of girls and 17 percent of boys considered resilient by our standard.<sup>4</sup>

However, simply defining which children appear resilient does not tell us why they are faring better than other children faced with the same circumstances. The remainder of this brief examines the factors associated with resiliency for the HOPE VI Panel Study sample.

### Parental Characteristics Affect Resiliency

In general, children of better-educated parents are more likely to be successful in school (NCES 1999). Our analysis indicates that this holds true even in the HOPE VI Panel Study sample, a population where levels of education are relatively low. Just under half (45 percent) of the adult heads

TABLE 1. Definition of a Resilient Child

	Yes	No
The child is highly engaged in school.	x	
The child has two or more behavior problems.		x
The child has participated in any of the following delinquent or risky activities: gone to juvenile court, had a problem with alcohol or drugs, gotten into trouble with the police, done something illegal to get money, been pregnant or gotten someone else pregnant, been in a gang, been arrested.		x
The child has ever been suspended or expelled from school.		x
The child has ever been retained in school.		x

of household in our sample had a high school diploma. Children of parents who had high school diplomas are 70 percent more likely to be resilient than other children, even when controlling for such factors as gender, age, site, and whether the child's family relocated as part of HOPE VI.<sup>5</sup> However, children in families where the head of household had not finished high school but had a GED (17 percent of the sample) are not more likely to be resilient than children in a family where the head of household had not finished high school.

Having a parent who is actively engaged in a child's education is an important factor that can help children cope with the obstacles in their environment (Nord and West 2001). Helping a child with homework, paying close attention to grades, and attending school and after-school events can demonstrate the importance of education and perhaps improve a child's commitment to school. Our findings show that HOPE VI Panel Study children in families where the head of household is actively engaged in the child's education are also twice as likely to be resilient as other children.<sup>6</sup> However, even many parents who are high school graduates are not engaged in their children's educations: 54 percent of high school graduates are engaged in their child's education, compared with 39 percent of those who did not complete high school.

In-depth interview respondents described many ways in which parents were involved in their children's education (box 1). Both children and parents described

parents enforcing rules about homework. For example, a child from Richmond said that her mother was "always trying to tell us to do our homework," while a mother from Washington, D.C., said she was "strict on 'em when it comes to school." Most parents of resilient children talked about visiting teachers, attending PTA meetings, and making extra visits as necessary when their child's performance fell.

In some cases, nonparental adults such as mentors or older siblings also served as educational supports for resilient children, both formally and informally. One child whose parents spoke limited English drew on school-provided mentors for both homework help and career counseling. Other children had older siblings who had succeeded in school and encouraged them to succeed as well.

Maternal depression is often associated with negative outcomes for children (Werner and Smith 1989). Our analysis of resiliency shows that depression in the head of household reduces by about half the odds that a child in our sample will be classified as resilient.<sup>7</sup> This relationship stems from the positive and strongly significant relationship between depression in the head of household and two or more behavior problems in the child (Popkin et al. 2004).

### **Socially Competent Children Are More Resilient**

Other research on resiliency has identified individual characteristics that help children cope with stress, including social

#### **Box 1. A Mother Focused on Education**

Brenda's family was relocated in 2003 from Washington's East Capitol to another nearby public housing development. Brenda says her new development is dangerous for her children, with a rampant drug trade, many substance abusers, and even gunfire. The family had to cope with a bullet shot through her son's bedroom window the first week they moved into their new apartment. Despite these dangers, Brenda keeps herself and her children focused on moving ahead. She works part-time as a teacher's aide and is going to school to get her teaching certification. Although Brenda had to move her family mid-year, she kept her son Kevin in his old school to avoid disrupting his education. Noting Kevin's strong interest in math and science, she enrolled him in a charter high school with a pre-engineering program that may allow him to graduate with up to 15 college credits. Kevin says that the kids in his new community are less disruptive and more successful in school than those he knew in East Capitol. He does not feel stressed, is in good health, gets along with his teachers, and plays on his school's football team. His dream is to play football for the University of Maryland and eventually make it to the NFL.

competence. Our findings provide some indication that socially competent children in the HOPE VI Panel Study sample are more likely to be resilient. Specifically, children whose parents report that they are “admired and well-liked by other children” are about five times as likely to be resilient as other children.<sup>8</sup>

In our in-depth interviews, resilient children generally demonstrated high levels of confidence regarding their relationships with family, teachers, and peers and their ability to succeed in school (box 2). Resilient children usually described positive relationships with their teachers, often with statements like “teachers like me.” Most described school as fun or easy and provided several examples of their favorite class subjects. Many said they drew on parents, siblings, peers, and teachers for help with homework, or stated that they did not need help. As another sign that resilient children were faring better academically, the survey indicated that resilient children were significantly more likely than other children to read for pleasure regularly.<sup>9</sup>

### Box 2. Succeeding in School

Robert and his family used to live in Washington’s East Capitol development, but relocated to an apartment in a better neighborhood with a voucher. The most striking thing about Robert is his optimism. He is comfortable in his new neighborhood and talks about how people here help each other out. While he made friends easily in his new neighborhood, he still maintains regular contact with his old friends. He says “basically I like all of my classes” and describes himself as a quick learner. He is involved in Junior ROTC and the drill team at school. His sister Carmen, who is in college and also participated in ROTC, visits regularly and helps him with his homework. His mother, Monique, works full time and is confident about her son’s future, saying that he is “going to follow into his sister’s footsteps.” Robert agrees; when asked what he thinks he’ll be doing in five years, he says he plans to be studying accounting in college.

Pro-social behaviors (voluntary behaviors intended to benefit another person) are also associated with positive social and emotional outcomes for children (Hair, Jager, and Garrett 2001). In our in-depth interviews, children we identified as resilient described positive experiences with caregiving activities such as sibling care, mentoring younger children, camp counseling, and even providing language support for parents. Interestingly, children who engaged in caregiving activities often described aspirations for future careers that also involved caregiving, including teaching, nursing, and child psychology.

Resilient children’s relatively strong sense of self-efficacy was also evident in their matter-of-fact descriptions of their neighborhoods in in-depth interviews. Although they seemed very aware of the dangers in their neighborhoods, resilient children managed those dangers by taking such precautions as going indoors at night and avoiding certain areas. By comparison, some nonresilient children appeared overwhelmed by neighborhood threats, choosing instead to remain indoors and away from their neighbors.

Resilient children also emphasized the positive aspects of their environments, including having friends and family nearby, neighbors who watched out for one another, block parties, and a sense of community. Quoting her male friends in the neighborhood, one resilient girl from Chicago noted, “I live in the ghetto . . . but I’m not going act like the ghetto.” In sum, resilient children appeared to feel capable of handling stressors in their environments while remaining optimistic about the value of their communities.

### Relocation Does Not Affect Resilience

Children whose families relocated between baseline and follow-up are not significantly more or less likely to be resilient than children whose families remained in their original HOPE VI development. In addition, the type of housing assistance a child’s family receives after relocation is not significantly correlated with resiliency. However, several factors contributing to our resiliency index (such as whether the

child has ever been held back in school, suspended or expelled from school, and engaged in risky behavior) accumulate over time. The two-year interval between baseline and follow-up may not have been long enough to adequately measure the impact of relocation on a child's well-being. We will continue to track this issue at the next follow-up in 2005.

### After-School Programs May Increase Resilience

Participation in after-school activities may somewhat decrease the potency of environmental risk factors such as violence, drug activity, and gangs by reducing children's exposure to these negative influences. Some organized activities may also improve children's social skills and self-efficacy (Hair et al. 2001), ultimately contributing to positive social adjustment in adulthood (Werner and Smith 1989). External supports like after-school activities become increasingly important as children age (Werner and Smith 2001). Children in the HOPE VI Panel Study sample whose parents reported that they participated in after-school activities almost every day are about 70 percent more likely to be resilient than other children.<sup>10</sup>

Our in-depth interviews with resilient children suggest that participating in after-school programs may contribute to children's social competence and interpersonal skills. For example, resilient children who participated in after-school activities expressed a preference for working in teams. One child who had participated in a local youth center from a very young age reported how he and his friends were "like a team together," while another child who had worked as a camp counselor expressed interest in a future career involving "teamwork."

However, our in-depth interviews with parents suggest that their concerns about safety can limit their children's ability to participate in potentially beneficial activities. Some parents spoke of keeping their children indoors and out of other children's homes to protect them from drug dealers and shootings. While this is a rational approach to danger, it raises the con-

cern that parents are trading the social competence of their children for safety. A few parents also noted that not all after-school activities are conducted in a controlled, safe environment. One mother said she prevented her daughter from attending a local recreation center because her daughter was often beaten up there. This mother's experience suggests that the quality of the after-school activity is crucial to the activity's effectiveness in improving outcomes for children.

### Implications

Children in the HOPE VI Panel Study sample face enormous challenges in becoming successful adults. Their families have extremely low incomes, they attend poor schools, and they live in communities where they have to cope daily with the hazards of drug trafficking and violent crime. Although our findings indicate that many of them are struggling in school and experiencing behavior problems (Popkin et al. 2004), our analysis also indicates that a substantial proportion—one in five—appear more resilient than others. The factors associated with resiliency in our sample are not surprising: parents who have finished high school, are more engaged with their children's education, and are not depressed; and children with higher levels of self-efficacy and social competence.

These findings certainly suggest the need for future phases of the study to explore whether these relationships change as children age. However, they also suggest policy interventions that may help support children as they cope with the stresses of distressed neighborhoods. Specifically, interventions that encourage parents' participation in school and help reduce parental stress and depression may lead to better outcomes for children. As we have suggested in our earlier briefs, the period when a family is relocating from public housing presents an opportunity to offer interventions, such as long-term counseling, that can help families cope with the challenges of poverty as well as the disruption of relocation.

In addition, our findings suggest a need for high-quality after-school activi-

ties that help protect children from the hazards of their environment. High-quality programs provide children important opportunities to develop confidence and social skills. However, it is critical that parents and children feel these programs are provided in a safe and secure environment and that children will be safe traveling to and from activities. Counseling accompanying relocation services should specifically focus on children's needs, linking families to high-quality programs in their new communities.

## Notes

- Children identified as "highly engaged in school" are those whose parents gave them the best possible rating on at least three of four options on the following four statements: The child cares about doing well in school; the child only works on schoolwork when forced to; the child does just enough schoolwork to get by; and the child always does his or her homework.
  - Our sample includes 374 children between 6 and 17 who were selected at random as focal children for purposes of the survey (see Popkin et al. 2002). Just over half (52 percent) are girls; the median age is 12.
  - The only notable difference across the five study sites is that parents from Chicago are significantly more likely to report that their children were highly engaged in school, so a higher proportion of children from Chicago scored as resilient overall.
  - Our sample of girls is better off on every measure in our definition of resiliency, and the average nonresilient boy has more problems than his nonresilient female counterpart. This finding is consistent with the literature on behavioral outcomes for boys and girls (Chung and Elias 1996; Reimer 2002).
  - After controlling for these factors, these children are more likely than the typical child in our sample to be highly engaged in school, less likely to have been held back in school, and less likely to have two or more behavior problems ( $p < .05$ ). However, they are not significantly more or less likely to have been suspended, excluded, or expelled from school, or to have engaged in a delinquent or risky behavior.
  - After controlling for factors including gender, age, site, and whether the child's family relocated because of HOPE VI re-
- development, children of engaged parents are more likely than other children in our sample to be highly engaged in school, less likely to have been held back in school, and less likely to have two or more behavior problems ( $p < .01$ ). We define an actively engaged head of household as one who reported having, in the past year, attended a school meeting, gone to a regularly scheduled parent-teacher conference, and attended a school or class event, such as a play, sports event, or science fair. Just under half (46 percent) of heads of household in our sample are actively engaged in their children's education.
- We use the term "parental depression" because HOPE VI Panel Study heads of household include some fathers or grandparents of focal children. The relationship between parental depression and resiliency for the HOPE VI sample is significant at the .10 level.
  - After controlling for factors including gender, age, site, and whether the child's family relocated because of HOPE VI redevelopment, children who are "admired and well-liked by other children" are significantly more likely than other children to be highly engaged in school and less likely to have two or more behavior problems ( $p < .001$ ).
  - After controlling for factors including gender, age, site, and whether the child's family relocated because of HOPE VI redevelopment, this relationship is significant at the .001 level.
  - We designated a child as participating in an after-school activity if his or her head of household reported that the child participates in a sports team, club, or after-school activity almost every day. After controlling for factors including gender, age, site, and whether the child's family relocated because of HOPE VI redevelopment, children who participate in after-school activities are less likely to have two or more behavior problems and less likely to have been held back than other children, but not significantly more or less likely than other children to have been suspended, expelled, or excluded from school, or to have engaged in any of the listed delinquent behaviors ( $p < .10$ ).

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### 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, NJ); Ida B. Wells Homes/Wells Extension/Madden Park Homes (Chicago, IL); Few Gardens (Durham, NC); Easter Hill (Richmond, CA); and East Capitol Dwellings (Washington, DC).

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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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