



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

How Are HOPE VI Families Faring? Children

Susan J. Popkin, Michael Eiseman, and Elizabeth Cove

*Respondents who
relocated with vouchers
reported the greatest
improvement in school
quality.*

The HOPE VI program 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 communities face special challenges: the dangers of their physical environment, a social world dominated by the drug economy, poor schools, and the likelihood that the adults in the household have personal challenges that prevent them from parenting effectively. These conditions put children at risk for serious consequences, including developmental delays, teen parenthood, and academic failure (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and Aber 1997; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000). The HOPE VI program can improve the life chances for these children by improving their neighborhoods and helping families move to less distressed communities (see page 7).

The HOPE VI Panel Study tracks outcomes for original residents at five sites where redevelopment activities began in 2001 (see page 7). At the 2001 baseline survey, the challenges facing children growing up in the HOPE VI Panel Study sites were extreme. Their families were very poor; the majority of households with children reported incomes below \$10,000 a year. The children faced many hazards of living in substandard housing, such as lead paint, mold, inadequate heat, and infestations of cockroaches and other vermin, all of which could seriously affect their health and well-being (Comey 2004). Further, all five devel-

opments were very dangerous. The majority of survey respondents reported major problems with drugs and shootings in their communities (Popkin et al. 2002). In-depth interview respondents—both parents and children—spoke poignantly of bullets shot into their homes, of children caught in the cross-fire, and of keeping children indoors to shield them from the drug dealing and violence. Even inside their homes, these families never felt completely safe.

Most schools the children attended at baseline were also troubled—students were virtually all minority and poor, and most students performed below grade level on standardized tests.¹ About half the survey respondents said they viewed school quality in their community as a problem. In-depth interview respondents complained about poor teachers and chaotic school environments; their children told of fights, gang activity, and shootings.

Although some children seemed to thrive despite these challenges, many were experiencing significant problems. According to parents, many children were struggling in school: a substantial proportion—23 percent—were in special education, about two-thirds had one or more reported behavior problems, and about half had two or more, with boys reportedly having more problems than girls. About one in four children had been suspended or expelled from school (Popkin et al. 2002).² Further, HOPE VI children were in worse physical health at baseline than other poor children in

People get killed around here. Like when I first moved around here there was a man over there dead. They've also found bodies over there dead. That's the reason why I don't let my kids go out. If they do go out, we go out of the neighborhood and we'll be back by dark.

—East Capitol resident,
Washington, D.C., 2001

When we first moved over here, I think they [my kids] was a little, I'm not going to say depressed, but by them moving it was different on them and they wasn't adjusting quite well. When school started, their grades have fallen down. My kids always been B and A average. But when they moved over here, I think it was the change of scenery, the new school, and they fell off a little bit, but they picked themselves up.

—Former Ida Wells resident, Chicago, 2003

national samples. In particular, they were far more likely to be diagnosed with asthma; the prevalence of asthma among older HOPE VI children was nearly twice the national average.

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 in the dangerous environment of distressed public housing and particularly likely to suffer from the stress of relocation (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2001). Earlier briefs in this series documented that two years after relocation began at the HOPE VI Panel Study sites, relocatees were living in better housing in neighborhoods that were less poor and dramatically safer (Comey 2004; Buron 2004). Those who relocated with Section 8 Housing Choice vouchers or no longer received assistance—mostly because their incomes had increased—reported the largest improvements (Cunningham 2004). In contrast, those who moved to other public housing reported modest changes. In this brief, we examine the impact of these changes on children and youth in HOPE VI households. Have these children benefited from the changes, or has the disruption of relocation—even to a better neighborhood—simply created more challenges for them in school, at least in the short term? Future research will examine the long-term impacts as families adjust to their new situations or return to the revitalized HOPE VI sites.

Relocatees Attend Better Schools

The children of relocatees attended schools whose students were still virtually all minority, but substantially less poor than the students at the schools in relocatees' original neighborhoods. At baseline, HOPE VI children attended schools that were 86 percent African American and 14 percent Hispanic on average, and where 85 percent of children qualified for free school lunches. At follow-up in 2003, 45 percent of children whose families had relocated had changed schools for reasons other than promotion.³ These children now attended schools where 68 percent of children receive free lunches, a significant improvement from baseline and compared

with children who still lived in their original development.⁴

In addition, relocatees had fewer concerns about school quality. At baseline, just under half of survey respondents with children said the quality of local schools was a problem. At follow-up, respondents still living in their original development were significantly more likely than movers to report problems with the quality of schools in their community (59 percent). On average, just 31 percent of relocatees said school quality was a problem.⁵ Finally, relocatees were slightly less likely than those still in the original development to report that violence was a problem in their children's schools (25 percent versus 32 percent). Interview respondents generally reported that their new schools were better than their old schools, citing better programs and less violence.

Although relocatees were attending schools that were less poor and that parents perceived as higher quality, changing schools may have created extra stress and academic challenges for these children. Moving can negatively affect children's school performance, particularly when they have to attend a new school. Researchers have documented that changing schools, particularly mid-year, can cause children to lose up to six months of academic achievement (Hartman 2002). Moving is especially disruptive for adolescents, and can cause an increase in behavior problems (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2001). Because of relocation, a substantial proportion of children in the HOPE VI Panel Study sample—39 percent—had changed schools since baseline for reasons other than promotion. Just over half of children whose families relocated with vouchers had changed schools, a rate significantly higher than for other relocatees.⁶ Redevelopment schedules for at least some HOPE VI Panel Study sites meant that some moves occurred during the school year—for example, the final moves for residents in Richmond and Washington, D.C., took place in spring 2003.

Interview respondents frequently mentioned their children's problems adjusting to new schools. One child from Durham who moved mid-year said he simply stopped going to school because he "didn't really know nobody or anything about

Raleigh.” Future research will explore whether these effects abate over time as children become more accustomed to their new communities.

Families Who Relocated with Vouchers Report the Biggest Improvements

Respondents who relocated with vouchers reported the greatest improvement in school quality. Relocatees who moved to other public housing developments or who are now unassisted saw some improvement, but it was not as substantial. As figure 1 shows, voucher holders attended schools where 60 percent of the children receive free lunches, compared with 70 percent for those who moved to other public housing and 69 percent for unassisted households. More significantly, as shown in figure 2, voucher holders reported the greatest improvement in school quality, with just 21 percent still citing school quality as a problem at follow-up, compared with more than 50 percent at baseline. Further, voucher holders reported fewer concerns than other relocatees; 34 percent of those who moved to other public housing and 37 percent of unassisted households cited problems with school quality.⁷ Finally, voucher holders and those who are now unassisted were significantly less likely to report that violence is a problem in their children’s school: about 20 percent of each reported problems with violence, compared with more than 30 per-

cent of those still living in public housing. However, there are no evident differences in parental assessments of other aspects of their children’s school environments, such as whether the schools have good teachers or enough books and materials, suggesting that the improvement in safety may be the major factor affecting parents’ perceptions of school quality.

Children Who Relocated to Other Public Housing Have More Behavior Problems

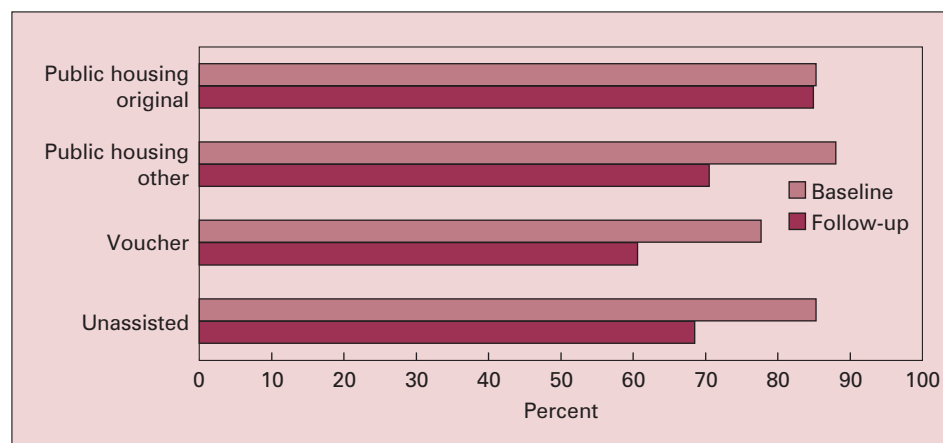
Children’s behavior is an indicator of their emotional well-being and overall mental health. When children are stressed or unhappy, they tend to act out (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2001). The children in the HOPE VI Panel Study sample, who lived in extreme poverty in dangerous environments and who then faced the stress of relocation, are at very high risk for mental health problems. At baseline, about two-thirds of the children had one or more reported behavior problems and about half had two or more, a rate about 10 percentage points higher than that of poor children in other national studies (Brooks-Gunn et al. 1997).⁸

At follow-up in 2003, the *overall* rates of reported behavior problems remained much the same, with 67 percent of parents reporting that their child had one or more behavior problems, and about half reporting two or more behavior problems. However, there were notable differences

When my son was going to Woodburn, it seemed like he wasn’t learning much, but now that he goes to Freedom Hill, he’s learning more and he passed the in-grade test and he been doing real good. He made the B honor roll.

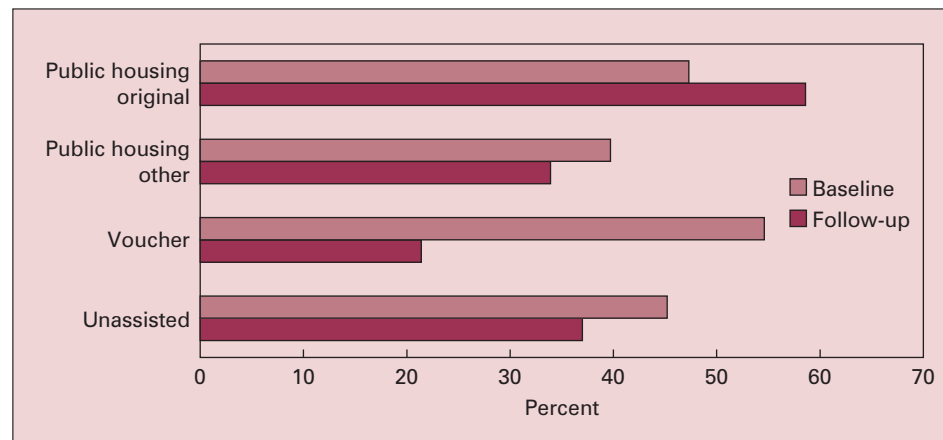
—Former Few Gardens resident, Durham, 2003
[school names have been changed]

FIGURE 1. Children Eligible for Free Lunches at Schools Attended by Older Focal Children, by Housing Assistance Status



Sources: HOPE VI Panel Baseline Survey (2001) and HOPE VI Panel Follow-up Survey (2003).
Note: The total sample size is 330.

FIGURE 2. *Parents of School-Age Children Reporting That School Quality Is a Problem in Their Neighborhood, by Housing Assistance Status*



Sources: HOPE VI Panel Study Baseline Survey (2001) and HOPE VI Panel Study Follow-up Survey (2003).
 Note: The total sample size is 348.

among subgroups. Parents who remained in their original development reported some improvements in their children's behavior, but parents who moved to other public housing reported increases in behavior problems at follow-up. In contrast, parents who relocated with vouchers reported improvements at follow-up.

The same pattern appears when we look at specific problem behaviors. Parents who moved to other public housing developments were more likely than other movers to report that their children had trouble getting along with teachers, were disobedient at school or at home, and hung around with kids who get in trouble. Interestingly, parents who selected vouchers were the most likely to report their children had behavior problems at baseline, which may have motivated them to leave public housing and remove their children—especially their sons—from what they perceived as a risky environment. Other evidence that children of voucher holders may have fared better is that they were significantly less likely than those who still lived in public housing to have been held back a grade, even when they had changed schools.⁹

These differences between children whose families relocated with vouchers and those who moved to public housing are even more notable when we compare the findings separately for boys and girls. Overall, girls were less likely than boys to have reported behavior problems at baseline—a finding consistent with most research on children and delinquency

(Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2003). At follow-up, the level of reported behavior problems for girls remained lower than that for boys, with little change for movers and a slight decrease for girls still living in their original developments. But the story for boys was more complex. As table 1 shows, while the overall proportion of boys reported to have two or more behavior problems remained about the same as at baseline (about 60 percent), there was a clear difference between boys whose families received vouchers and those whose families moved to other public housing. Boys whose families received vouchers were more likely to have had two or more behavior problems at baseline (67 percent compared with 61 percent for all boys), but at follow-up, their reported behavior had improved and they were no more likely to have two or more behavior problems than other boys. In contrast, parents who moved to other public housing were less likely to report that their sons had behavior problems at baseline (43 percent), but were dramatically more likely to report such problems at follow-up (62 percent). This difference is statistically significant even when controlling for baseline levels of behavior problems and maternal depression, a factor often associated with poor mental health outcomes for children.¹⁰

Finally, the same patterns are evident when we look at parents who reported that their children had engaged in two or more delinquent behaviors, including being suspended or expelled from school, going

TABLE 1. *Children with Two or More Behavior Problems, by Housing Assistance Type (percent)*

	Public Housing Original		Public Housing Other		Voucher		Unassisted	
	Baseline	Follow-up	Baseline	Follow-up	Baseline	Follow-up	Baseline	Follow-up
Girls	45	32	44	44	49	47	60	60
Boys	61	57	43	62	67	59	59	65

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

Notes: The total sample size is 294. This sample excludes Atlantic City respondents because of a data gathering error at baseline.

to juvenile court, using alcohol or drugs, belonging to a gang, getting into trouble with the police, becoming pregnant (or making someone pregnant), and being arrested. Overall, a very small proportion—5 percent—of parents reported their children engaging in two or more delinquent behaviors. But a multivariate analysis shows that parents who moved to public housing were significantly more likely than those who relocated with vouchers to report at follow-up that their children had problems (9 percent versus 5 percent).¹² The trend also holds for specific delinquent behaviors. For example, 36 percent of parents who moved to other public housing reported their children had been suspended or expelled, compared with 26 percent of those who moved with vouchers.

Together, these findings suggest that children whose families relocated to other public housing encountered more challenges in their new communities than those who moved with vouchers. As noted above, these public housing developments, although somewhat better than the original developments, were poorer and more dangerous than the neighborhoods where voucher holders moved. This difference is evident in the in-depth interviews, particularly in Washington D.C., where the housing authority relied heavily on public housing as a relocation option (Cunningham 2004). Children who moved to other public housing, particularly boys, spoke of getting into fights, of witnessing violence, and, in one instance, of having a bullet shot into a bedroom immediately after the family moved in.

Family Characteristics Matter

Because they live in extreme poverty, HOPE VI children are at high risk for all

sorts of negative outcomes. However, our baseline interviews indicated that some children were surprisingly resilient, doing well in school and feeling happy despite living in dangerous and oppressive environments. Although our findings indicate clear differences among subgroups in outcomes, they also suggest that some parental characteristics seem to consistently protect children. In particular, parents who reported engaging in their child's education (by going to meetings, school conferences, and after-school activities) and those who had graduated from high school or acquired a GED were more likely to report that their child was highly engaged in school, less likely to report that their child had been held back in school, and less likely to report behavior problems. By contrast, parents who suffered from depression themselves were more likely to report behavior problems in their children. Multivariate analysis indicates that these parental effects hold regardless of where families live—even those children who remained in traditional public housing environments seem to fare better when their parents were doing better and were more engaged in their education.¹² Other briefs in this series (Harris and Kaye 2004) have documented the high rate of mental health problems among HOPE VI Panel Study respondents. These findings about the protective value of parental characteristics suggest that interventions aimed at reducing stress and providing support to parents may also benefit children.

Policy Implications

Children in the HOPE VI Panel Study sample have generally benefited from relocation. Relocates live in better housing in safer neighborhoods, and their children

We seen a lot of shootin' [in our new development], all these kids down the street, they was selling drugs around there.

—Former East Capitol resident, Washington, D.C., 2003

attend schools that are less poor and, the parents believe, higher quality than those in their original developments. More significantly, respondents who relocated with vouchers have benefited more than those who moved to other public housing; voucher holders are less likely than other movers to report problems with local schools and more likely to perceive their children's schools as safe. And voucher holders report that their children have fewer behavior problems than they did at baseline, while respondents who moved to other public housing developments report that their children—especially boys—have *more* problems than they did originally. However, these positive findings about school quality for children of voucher holders are tempered by the fact that these children are also more likely to have changed schools since baseline, which may have presented them with more academic challenges, at least in the short term.

We have three recommendations to improve outcomes for children affected by HOPE VI revitalization.

■ **Families with children should be encouraged to select vouchers and should receive ongoing support to help them adjust.** Children are particularly vulnerable to suffering negative consequences from the stress of relocation, and our findings clearly suggest that the relocation assistance their families choose has important implications for their well-being. Children whose families move to other public housing—often little better than their original developments—may encounter violence from other residents and are more likely to engage in delinquent or risky behavior. Boys are particularly at risk, both because they are generally more likely to have behavior problems and because they are more likely to be perceived as threats by gangs or crews in other developments. Because of these potentially serious consequences, families with children—especially adolescent boys—should be encouraged to choose vouchers, and should

receive ongoing supportive services for an extended period after they leave public housing to help them adjust to their new communities. Parents should also receive extended support, to help them cope with the stress of relocation and address any underlying mental health problems. This type of “enhanced voucher” that couples housing assistance with ongoing counseling and supportive services could help ensure HOPE VI families successfully adjust to their new communities and begin taking steps to improve their economic circumstances.

■ **Voucher holders should receive counseling to help them move to better neighborhoods.** Children of families that relocated with vouchers are in schools that are less poor and higher quality than the schools they attended at baseline, but these schools are still highly racially and economically segregated. Housing authorities should offer mobility counseling to families are relocating or that have made a successful first move with a voucher, to encourage them to consider moving to a low-poverty community. Living in a truly low-poverty community with even better schools could lead to substantially better long-term outcomes for children.

■ **Housing authorities must recognize that families with children need special consideration in relocation planning.** Our findings indicate that the type of replacement housing that families receive can have profound effects—both positive and negative—for their children. When relocation involves changing schools, it can be particularly disruptive. Every effort should be made to implement relocation schedules that ensure children do not have to move during the school year. Further, housing authorities should consider providing targeted support services to children going through relocation, such as pre-move support groups or information sessions.

Notes

1. At baseline, in each household with children, we randomly picked up to two focal children, one under the age of 6 and the other between the ages of 6 and 14. We asked parents detailed questions about each child, including quality and access to schools, special education, behavior (both positive and negative), and delinquency (for older children only). This brief focuses on educational and behavioral results for the older focal children.
2. These rates were higher than those for other poor children nationally (Brooks-Gunn et al. 1997).
3. Race and free lunch data for baseline schools are taken from the 1999 NCES Common Core of Data, published in 2001. Chicago schools did not report free lunch data in 1999, so data for Chicago baseline schools are taken from the 2001 NCES Common Core of Data, published in 2003. Race and free lunch data for follow-up schools are also taken from the 2001 NCES Common Core of Data. For more information, see http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/pub_overview.asp.
4. The figures for children in their original development have not changed since baseline. This difference is significant at the .001 level.
5. This difference is significant at the .001 level.
6. This difference is significant at the .05 level.
7. This difference is significant at the .05 level.
8. We used a scale that asks parents to indicate how often their children exhibited six specific behaviors: trouble getting along with teachers; being disobedient in school; hanging around with kids who get in trouble; bullying; being restless or overly active; and being unhappy or depressed. The scale is the NHIS CHS 1988 (cited in Brooks-Gunn et al. 1997).
9. Logistic regression analysis showed that children who changed schools were significantly more likely to be held back even when controlling for other significant risk factors, but children whose families relocated with vouchers were not ($p < .05$). Boys were more likely to be held back than girls, as were children whose mothers had not finished high school, black children, children older than 12, and children who lived in Durham.
10. Logistic regression analysis showed that factors with a statistically significant ($p < .05$) effect on behavior problems at follow-up included living in other public housing, having two or more reported behavior problems at baseline, gender (male), and maternal depression at follow-up.
11. Logistic regression analysis showed that factors with a statistically significant ($p < .05$) effect on delinquent behavior included living in other public housing, gender (male), and age (over age 12).

12. Logistic regression showed that the relationships between parent characteristics and child characteristics held for all housing status groups.

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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 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.).

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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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