



Public housing relocations in Atlanta: Documenting residents' attitudes, concerns and experiences



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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the desire to move, concerns of residents being involuntarily relocated from Atlanta's public housing, and their post-relocation experiences. Using a residential mobility framework, we examined the correlates of desiring to move or desiring to renovate public housing as a function of hard-to-house characteristics, mobility characteristics, and concerns about relocating. Findings indicated that family public-housing residents were more likely to view relocation as an opportunity to improve their lives. Residents of the senior/disabled high-rise buildings were less likely to view relocation as an opportunity. Age was inversely related to wanting to move. Neighborhood satisfaction was associated with wanting to renovate public housing and not relocate. Transportation to see doctors was the primary concern associated with not wanting to relocate. Post-relocation findings demonstrate a significant degree of satisfaction among residents, improved financial situations, and declines in social support.

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Introduction

For almost two decades now much of federal low-income housing policy has been framed around issues of concentrated poverty in public housing (Goetz, 2010). Between 1993 and 2010, the Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE VI) program sought to transform public housing by demolishing large, spatially concentrated—and often deteriorating—developments, and replacing them with mixed-income housing (Goetz, 2000, 2010; Popkin, Levy, & Buron, 2009; Smith, 2002). Atlanta has been at the cutting edge of such efforts, having demolished 13 traditional public-housing projects and built 10 nationally acclaimed mixed-income projects between 1996 and 2004.

Then in 2007, the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) announced that the remaining ten family-housing projects and two senior/disabled housing projects would be demolished by the end of 2010 under Section 18 of the 1937 Housing Act (Demolition and Disposition; AHA, 2009) rather than HOPE VI. This meant the AHA would not be under any immediate obligation to build replacement housing. Instead, all public-housing residents would be relocated to the private rental market with Housing Choice Vouchers set aside for this purpose.

Under Section 18, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires resident input and must approve

demolition plans. To gain resident input, AHA held meetings at all housing projects slated for demolition. The AHA handed out a postcard “survey” at these meetings (see Fig. 1). The card offered residents the option of indicating whether or not they (a) want to move; (b) want a housing-choice voucher; and (c) support the demolition initiative. Residents were instructed to fill out the survey and return it to their on-site property manager.

Based on these postcard surveys, the AHA announced that 96% of residents were in favor of the plan. In a recent op-ed piece in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, AHA's Chief Executive Office Renee Glover restated, “As we have found in repeated surveys, when asked if they want to leave the housing projects, more than 90% of the residents replied with a resounding ‘yes.’” (AJC, 2012). Because they included no documentation on their methodology, it is not clear how many residents were surveyed or which projects they lived in.

This survey is highly questionable due to the biased questions, lack of confidentiality for public-housing residents, and lack of information on the sample. The *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* neither challenged these numbers nor investigated them, which is a typical media portrayal of public housing as negative (Right to the City Alliance, 2010). Most problematic is that HUD accepted this survey as resident input.

Given the methodological problems of the survey, residents clearly were not given a voice on the decision to demolish their public-housing homes. Why not? What would we learn if we spoke directly to public-housing residents and asked what they think of their public housing; if they would prefer to relocate or renovate their public-housing communities, and how relocation policies

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▶ LET MY VOICE BE HEARD

Name: _____

Community: _____ Apt. # _____

Street Address: _____

Atlanta, GA Zip: _____

As a resident in an Atlanta Housing Authority community, I wish to share my opinion regarding AHA's plans to demolish our community:

	Yes	No
I want to move.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I want a Housing Choice Voucher.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I support AHA's Quality of Life Initiative.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Fig. 1. Survey used by Atlanta housing authority.

may affect their day-to-day concerns? How might we improve housing policy if we asked residents about the experiences of relocating, and how it impacts their lives?

Using prospective, longitudinal survey data from residents of six Atlanta public-housing communities slated for demolition, we examine residents' attitudes and concerns toward relocation, as well as their post-relocation situation, to address housing policy implementation in Atlanta.

Background

Public-housing relocation is a form of residential mobility that differs from traditional mobility in that it is involuntary. Still, residential-mobility research may have important lessons for the relocation process. There is extensive literature on residential mobility and the intent to move. Intent to move is treated as an outcome as well as a predictor of actual mobility, though the intent to move does not always lead to actual mobility (Clark, 1982; Clark & Dieleman, 1996; Clark & Ledwith, 2006; Dieleman, 2001). A key factor predicting residential mobility at the individual level is lower residential satisfaction (Speare, 1984). Dissatisfaction, however, also can lead to staying in place and renovating the existing residence (Landale & Guest, 1985). Intent will lead to mobility only if desired housing is available in the local housing market.

The disequilibrium model of residential mobility focuses on housing consumption, arguing that mobility involves bringing the demand for housing in line with the supply of housing in local labor markets (Clark & Dieleman, 1996; Hanushek & Quigley, 1978; Quigley & Weinberg, 1978). If there is insufficient available housing, people cannot move despite intent to move. If there is available housing but it is too expensive, people do not move. At the aggregate level, these constraints can lead to concentrations of poverty and racial residential segregation (Quillian, 1999). Thus, the local housing market is an essential determinant of residential mobility.

The life-course model argues that changes in the life course lead to changes in the demand for housing space (Clark & Dieleman, 1996; Clark & Ledwith, 2006). As individuals age and their families grow, the demand for housing space grows as well. As we age into

retirement and children move out, the demand for housing space shrinks and we move again. This form of housing career is less extensive than originally thought, but housing careers tend to be stable for long stretches of time, particularly for homeowners (Clark, Deurloo, & Dieleman, 2003). Thus, this model is predicated on the presence of available desired housing, and assumes households have some financial resources. Clark and Ledwith (2006) expanded this research to include low-income and Latino households and found the decision to move is largely associated with age, housing tenure, and income.

Several obstacles arise in trying to apply this research to the involuntary relocations public-housing residents experience. Public-housing residents have very few financial resources and thus, they may have an intent or desire to move, but rarely can find suitable housing that is affordable. Over the last half century alone the low-income housing supply has been on the decline. The National Low Income Housing Coalition (2011) estimates the current affordable housing shortage at 3.5 million units. Today, there are approximately 38 affordable units for every 100 low-income households, whereas in 1970 there were 130 affordable units for every 100 low-income households (Urban Academic Scholars in Opposition to PETRA, 2010).

The lack of affordable low-income housing may artificially inflate tenure in public housing, as residents may have intent to move, but lack the means to do so. There is clear evidence of desire to move implicit in the lawsuits initiated against various housing authorities over the years, such as *Gautreaux vs. Chicago Housing Authority* (Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum, 2000), *United States vs. City of Yonkers* (Santos, 2007), and *Hollman vs. Cisneros* (Goetz, 2003). The primary complaints were neighborhood racial segregation and concentration of poverty.

The Chicago lawsuit resulted in the Gautreaux program, through which eligible public-housing residents could volunteer to relocate under the requirement that they move to low poverty, nonminority neighborhoods. It took over two decades to move 7000 former Chicago public-housing residents, far short of the program's original goal. Beyond the political stalling that hampered the program, relocated residents faced many hardships moving and adjusting to eligible nonminority, low-poverty neighborhoods (Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum, 2000). In fact, researchers consistently

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