

# Housing quality, psychological distress, and the mediating role of social withdrawal: A longitudinal study of low-income women

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## Abstract

This longitudinal study examined the relation between housing quality and psychological distress among a group of low-income women relocating from inadequate to newly constructed homes. Social withdrawal was examined as a potential underlying process to account for the predicted association between housing and psychological distress. Significant improvements occurred from pre-move to post-move in all variables measured including housing quality, psychological distress, and social withdrawal. Longitudinal results indicated that changes in housing quality predict post-move psychological distress, after controlling for pre-move psychological distress. Social withdrawal was found to mediate the relation between housing quality and mental health. Additional analyses suggest that improvement in psychological distress from improved housing was largely due to one subcomponent of housing quality—crowding. The implications of this finding for theory and policy are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Since 2000, the poverty rate has risen in the United States (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Lee, 2006). In 2005, 37 million Americans—or 12.6% of the population—were living below the official poverty line (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2006). Low-income families face an accumulation of physical, psychological, and environmental stressors (Evans, 2004). One of the most salient environmental stressors facing these families is deteriorated, substandard housing within low-income neighborhoods. Since women (14.1%) are more likely to be living in poverty than men (11.1%), they disproportionately experience the detrimental effects of poor quality housing (US Census Bureau, 2006). In response to both the feminization of poverty and the rising poverty rate, there is a pressing need to understand the experiences of women living in or moving out of poor housing conditions.

In addition to examining associations between housing quality and mental health among low-income women, we address three critical issues in housing quality—mental health research. First, documenting an association between housing quality and mental health leaves open the *question of causality*. Does housing quality influence mental health or is the opposite the case? It may be that a person with poor mental health selects into low-quality housing. A second question is why might housing quality and mental health be related? *What are the underlying psychosocial processes* that unfold in households of those inhabiting poor-quality housing and lead to deterioration of mental health? Further, assuming that poor housing quality does indeed lead to greater psychological distress, *what aspects of housing quality* are particularly salient in driving this relation?

In this paper, we explore the relations between changes in housing quality and a standardized index of mental health among a sample of low-income women who relocate. We examine a hypothesized mediating, or explanatory mechanism, social withdrawal, to account for the expected longitudinal linkages between housing quality

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and mental health. We then disaggregate housing quality into conceptually meaningful components to investigate whether one or more elements of housing quality are especially salient influences on mental health.

### 1.1. *Housing quality and psychological well-being*

There is considerable cross-sectional evidence of associations between housing quality and psychological distress or mental health. People in housing characterized by poor structural quality, dampness, or lack of plumbing, for example, have been found to be more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, and other signs of psychological distress (Dunn & Hayes, 2000; Evans, Saltzman, & Cooperman, 2001; Hopton & Hunt, 1996; for review see Evans, Wells, & Moch, 2003). Cross-sectional studies, however, are particularly subject to the internal validity threat of self-selection. In other words are people with poor mental health likely to end up in poor-quality housing because, for instance, they lack the emotional stamina or psychological resilience required to thoroughly search and find adequate housing? Or, does housing quality actually contribute to poor mental health? The self-selection bias is an important threat to internal validity that renders the causal direction ambiguous in cross-sectional studies.

A few longitudinal studies examining housing and psychological well-being have been conducted. For example, Wilner, Walkley, Pinkerton, and Tayback (1962) found that after relocating to better-quality public housing, residents' psychological well-being improved significantly compared to those who remained in poor-quality housing. Elton and Packer (1986) also compared the psychological well-being of relocated public housing occupants and found reduced depression and anxiety symptoms relative to the control group. Halpern (1995) conducted a study of public housing residences, half of which were improved through remodeling. Post-renovation, symptoms of anxiety and depression decreased in the intervention group. Evans, Wells, Chan, and Saltzman (2000) studied women relocating through a self-help housing program and found that change in housing quality was predictive of post-move psychological distress while controlling for pre-move psychological distress. While cross-sectional and longitudinal studies do converge in the conclusion that housing quality influences psychological well-being, the relative dearth of longitudinal studies makes apparent the need for further longitudinal research to more clearly establish causal relationships.

The second omission in the extant literature is an examination of the reasons why housing might be associated with psychological well-being. There is need for further understanding of the underlying processes or mechanisms that help to account for the housing quality—psychological well-being linkage. An understanding of such mechanisms would contribute to theoretical development within housing research and provide valuable insights related to policy

and practice. Social withdrawal is a viable candidate for such a mediating mechanism.

### 1.2. *Social withdrawal as a mediator*

While data document a relation between housing quality and psychological well-being, no empirical work has directly examined what mediating or explanatory mechanisms might underlie the association. Mediators explain how or why two variables are related. In this case, poor housing quality could lead to social withdrawal, which in turn may lead to psychological distress, or poor mental health. This might occur because individuals living in substandard housing are embarrassed by the appearance of their homes, feel stigmatized by their environment, or have inadequate space and are therefore reluctant to invite friends and family over. Some suggestive evidence is provided by a study which found that families who are poor, in comparison to families who are not, tended to have smaller social networks, were involved in fewer organizations, and had less frequent contact with social network members (House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988). Moreover, data from a British study showed that children from poor families were less likely than children from professional families to invite friends over to play in their home (Newson & Newson, 1976). This may be the case for adult women as well. People living in substandard housing may feel stigmatized by their living situations and as a result be less involved with their families, friends, and communities. Dunn and Leaver (2004) posit that:

“... the attributes of an individual's dwelling may confer upon them differential ability to make and maintain social ties, because for instance, the size, the standard of upkeep ... makes one's dwelling more or less attractive as a place to receive guests ...” (p. 4).

A reluctance to invite guests to one's home may lead occupants to severely limit their social networking opportunities. Thus, socially withdrawing may lead to a breakdown of existent social networks, a hindering of future social networks, and a subsequent increase in psychological distress. The proposition that social withdrawal mediates the relationship between housing quality and mental health has yet to be empirically examined.

### 1.3. *Subscales of housing quality*

In addition to the longitudinal research design and explanatory mediation variables, a third omission in the housing quality—mental health research is an examination of the aspects of housing quality that might most influence psychological distress. Prior studies have typically either examined one narrow aspect of housing quality (such as dampness) or studied overall housing quality without disaggregating subconstructs. So, while longitudinal studies indicate mental health improvements when people move to better housing (Elton & Packer, 1986; Evans,

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