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School of Social Work
University of Windsor
167 Ferry Street
Windsor, Ontario N9A 0C5
Email: cswedit@uwindsor.ca

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“I Didn’t Really Want to Leave”: A Case Study of Public Housing Relocation under Pressure

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Molly W. Metzger¹ and Jane E. Oliphant^{1, 2}

¹Washington University in St. Louis; ²Center for Social Development

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Abstract

With the United States’ welfare state coming to rely on market-based policies, the notion of *choice* has come to the forefront of public housing policy. This study investigated *choice* within a Chicago public housing community slated for redevelopment. In theory, the utilization of the private market creates broader options, empowering citizens to exercise greater autonomy in major life decisions. The housing authority emphasized the choices available to tenants, including the choice to remain on-site during redevelopment. Yet relocatees reported experiencing pressure to relocate, through either explicit actions from housing authority officials or nuanced channels including steering and coercion tactics. The incongruence between the narratives presented by the housing authority and those presented by the public housing residents demonstrates that the distinction between “voluntary” and “involuntary” relocation is not always clear. We offer several areas for consideration moving forward, including substantive inclusion of residents in planning processes, development of a more effective incentive structure to reward public housing agencies for relocating residents into higher quality neighborhoods, and shifting the overall framing of subsidized housing residents from consumers to civic agents who hold the potential to shape the future directions of their communities.

Keywords: public housing, Section 8, relocation, housing policy, interviews

Background

Master Narratives in Public Housing Policy

An emphasis on individual choice has come to imbue social policies in a number of spheres in the United States. From the health insurance marketplaces of the Affordable Care Act to the growth of charter schools and school voucher programs, citizens are framed increasingly as consumers (Hankins & Martin, 2006). This pattern is perhaps most evident in recent trends in affordable housing policy. The predominant movement in housing programs for low-income people has shifted from the more centralized public housing system of the early- and mid-20th century to policies that seek to diversify and privatize the housing choices of poor households. Mixed-income housing developments and the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV, historically known as Section 8) program are prime examples of this new paradigm.

Within federal housing policy, the discourse of choice exists alongside the goal of poverty deconcentration. The deconcentration paradigm emerged from a growing focus on the consequences of urban poverty in the United States. In the 1980s and 1990s, a critical mass of researchers reported that concentrated poverty chronically produced criminal activity, unemployment, adverse health outcomes, social isolation, educational under-achievement, and intergenerational poverty (Briggs, 2005; Cisneros & Engdahl, 2009; Curley, 2010; Ellen & Turner, 1997; Keels, Duncan, DeLuca, Mendenhall, & Rosenbaum, 2005; Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum, 2000; Wilson, 1987; Wilson, 1996). In order to remedy these problems, policymakers advocated for deconcentrating poverty by moving from a place-based to a tenant-based subsidized housing system. Most dramatically, the federal Housing Opportunity for People Everywhere (HOPE VI) program of 1992 overhauled the nation's original means of subsidized housing by funding the demolition of public housing. Areas once occupied by higher-density public housing were largely replaced by lower-density, mixed-income housing developments, which typically included housing units built for market-rate tenants, public housing tenants, and other subsidized tenants (Cisneros & Engdahl, 2009). In these redevelopment processes, many original public housing residents have been permanently or temporarily relocated (Goetz, 2010).

Some researchers have suggested that the HOPE VI shift from a concentrated subsidized housing policy to a system of deconcentrated subsidized housing fits within a neoliberal paradigm (Goetz & Chapple, 2010; Lipman, 2008; Pfeiffer, 2006). Weber (2002) defines urban neoliberalism as a “hypermarketized style of governance” wherein private markets are considered the “superior allocative mechanisms for the distribution of public resources” (p. 520). Neoliberalism posits that the most optimal outcomes are produced when the consumer has the freedom to choose products in an uninhibited market (McCluskey, 2003). Within federal housing subsidy programs, this “choice” model is reflected in the movement toward using federal housing subsidy dollars on the private market in programs such as the Housing Choice Voucher program, mixed-income housing, and privately managed scattered-site public housing (Von Hoffman, 2016). Each of these programs limits the state's involvement in an effort to promote the participation of private investors and to expand the number of housing options available for housing subsidy users. In the HOPE VI redevelopment process, many public housing tenants became either HCV participants or residents in mixed-income housing (Cunningham & Popkin, 2004; Sard & Staub, 2008).

Smith (2006) has critiqued the HOPE VI program, characterizing it as transforming the state into a consumer of the private development market. Under HOPE VI, the task of providing low-income subsidized housing ceased to belong to the state, instead becoming the work of private developers and property managers. Lipman (2008) has added to the critique of mixed-income housing by suggesting that the shift to neoliberalism has been driven in part by the decrease of federal funding available to cities, which in turn has caused cities to become more reliant upon property taxes to maintain the city's budget. In order to stimulate growth and increase city revenue, cities have increasingly incentivized private development, providing increased access to coveted city-owned land and property for private companies and market-rate tenants (Lipman 2008; Patillo, 2009). The decrease in federal funding further incentivizes city governments to transform project-style developments into mixed income housing because market-rate units are expected to provide more revenue for the city (Lipman, 2008). Neoliberalism assumes that market forces will work for the public good, but this assumption is strongly challenged by critics of the neoliberal paradigm (e.g., Khare, 2013; Lipman, 2008; Smith, 2006).

Numerous factors combine to restrict housing choice for low-income renters, regardless of whether they receive a housing subsidy. First, due in part to low-density zoning, many middle class suburban areas contain little to no rental housing (Massey, Rothwell, & Domina, 2009; Pendall, 2000). For those suburbs that do contain rental housing, the unaffordability of units and the dearth of access to public transportation options often make existing rental housing inaccessible to the poorest households (Glaeser, Kahn, & Rappaport, 2008). Across metropolitan areas, the cost of rental housing has increased markedly in recent years, as credit constraints decreased home ownership rates and moved demand into rental markets (Joint Center for Housing Studies, 2008). In particularly hot housing markets, such as the site of the present case study on the north side of Chicago, the economic, cultural, and political forces of gentrification can further drive up housing demand and hence rental prices (Lees, Slater, & Wyly, 2008; Smith, 1987). In addition to cost constraints, housing discrimination presents an ongoing obstacle to housing choice for people of color, with Black, Latino, and Asian households told about and shown fewer apartments than prospective White renters (Turner et al., 2013).

Public Housing Resident Experiences of “Choice”

The processes by which public housing residents transitioned into different housing subsidy programs during HOPE VI were markedly constrained in terms of choice. Analyses of HOPE VI transitions, including those by Kleit and Manzo (2006), Popkin (2002), Popkin et al. (2004), and Popkin, Levy, and Buron (2009), found that residents experienced confusion, and that the housing counseling services available to relocating residents were inadequate. The task of finding affordable rental housing in a tight housing market further limited the choices of residents transitioning during HOPE VI projects (Goetz & Chapple, 2010; Kleit & Manzo, 2006).

Several ethnographers have also identified coercive methods used by housing authorities to steer residents towards moving out of public housing projects in the midst of HOPE VI transitions. For example, using critical discourse analysis methods, Pfeffer (2006) found that the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) used its discursive advantages to steer residents away from

continued residence in the Cabrini Green development. Since 1999, approximately 21,000 CHA units have been either rehabbed or rebuilt and the remaining 17,000 units have been demolished without replacement (Chicago Housing Authority, 2011). In a major program called the “Plan for Transformation,” over 20,000 households have been displaced, with many leaving CHA housing altogether (Chicago Housing Authority, 2011; Vale & Graves, 2010). Although some of Chicago’s 22 major family developments have been rehabbed, the predominant pattern has been one of demolition and redevelopment into newly constructed, mixed-income communities. While CHA tactics steered residents towards moving elsewhere, they publicly reported respecting residents’ autonomy in choosing to stay or leave the Cabrini Green housing development (Pfeiffer, 2006). Eventually, Cabrini Green was torn down and redeveloped into mixed income housing; however, the majority of the residents were unable to move into the new mixed-income units, instead receiving HCVs (Pfeiffer, 2006). Joseph and Chaskin (2012) found similar outcomes. In their study, which included 115 former public housing residents who lived in three different public housing developments of Chicago and did not return to the newly built mixed income housing (during Chicago’s Plan for Transformation), they similarly found that former residents reported experiencing both implicit pressure to move (due to information and time constraints) and explicit pressure to move. The pressure came from the housing counselors who steered them towards relocation (Joseph & Chaskin, 2012).

Venkatesh, Çelimli, Miller, Murphy, and Turner (2004) conducted another similar ethnographic study, which equally examined the issue of pressure within Chicago public housing residents’ relocations. This study took place at the Robert Taylor Homes on Chicago’s south side. Based on their findings, Venkatesh and colleagues suggested that there were serious problems with the CHA’s relocation services, which included, but were not limited to: (a) overly quick pacing of relocation, such that families were forced to move with little notice and often little support; and (b) relocation specialists using “pressure tactics” to compel families to take whatever housing was available to them, regardless of the location of that housing (2004, p. iii).

Together, these case studies call into question the supposed “choice” exercised by public housing tenants experiencing housing transitions within the neoliberal model. Our case study complements these ethnographies, further describing the disconnect between the neoliberal discourse of choice and residents’ lived experiences of public housing transformation.

Methods

Site Description

Drawing from a series of interviews with former residents of the Julia C. Lathrop Homes, a public housing project on Chicago’s north side, the current study portrays how former residents understood the choices available to them as redevelopment plans for their home slowly emerged. Following the national shift toward a neoliberal subsidized housing system, we sought to uncover the understandings of *choice* among tenants who left Lathrop Homes, which at the time of the study, was a public housing project slated for demolition and redevelopment as mixed income housing. The Lathrop Homes is a unique case in the history of the Plan for Transformation. Comprised of rowhouses and low-rise apartment buildings, it was built during

the New Deal, predating Chicago's high-rise public housing stock by 15 years. Figure 1 provides a basic map of Lathrop Homes' major streets.

Lathrop Homes is located on Chicago's North Side, whereas the vast majority of public housing is located on the South and West Sides. In contrast to other public housing developments, which in recent past decades have typically housed populations that are more than 90% African American, Lathrop has housed a mix of Black, White, Latino, and mixed-race residents since the 1970s. As of 2010, Lathrop Homes' racial/ethnic composition was 24% Latino/a, 59% African American, 17% White, and less than 1% "Other" (Chicago Housing Authority, 2010).

Figure 1. Major Streets of Lathrop Homes

While other public housing developments across the city were demolished — and in some cases rebuilt — during the first decade of the 21st century, no major demolition, redevelopment, or rehabilitation has taken place at Lathrop Homes (as of this study). Despite being mentioned in Chicago's annual reports of the Plan for Transformation since its onset in 1999, the blueprint for Lathrop's redevelopment is still being created, having changed dramatically since initial planning began 15 years prior. The initial plan for Lathrop Homes, as presented in the original Plan for Transformation documentation, suggested that all of Lathrop's 747 occupied units would be rehabbed and maintained as public housing stock (Chicago Housing Authority, 2000, p. 17). However, over the course of 15 years, the plans for Lathrop Homes have been discussed, put on hold, and redrafted several times with varying levels of community input over time. As of May 2014, the housing authority had not approved an official "master plan" for

the redevelopment of Lathrop Homes. As the uncertainty of Lathrop Homes' future mounted, and following from the CHA's decision to freeze new leasing in 2000, the occupancy of Lathrop homes declined steadily over time (Piemonte, 2011).

The notion of tenant *choice* has framed official discourse at Lathrop Homes since plans for redevelopment began to progress. Throughout the Plan for Transformation, the CHA stated that Lathrop Homes residents were welcome to remain on-site during the planning and eventual revitalization of the complex. A CHA development manager explained residents moving out as follows:

[Lathrop] residents have chosen to move off site, which is much different from the CHA moving them off the site. And I want to be very intentional about that language. The residents have an option and they elect, you know, for what they feel might be best for their families. [Veronica Gonzalez in radio interview with Alison Cuddy (2011)]

Although the meaning of 'revitalization' was not clear, Lathrop residents reported that the CHA promised that anyone who resided at Lathrop Homes as of October 1, 1999 — and who remained lease-compliant — would be able to remain at the development if they so chose. Residents who opted to leave had several options, including using a temporary housing voucher to temporarily live elsewhere while revitalization took place, taking a permanent housing voucher that eliminated the possibility of returning to Lathrop Homes, or relocating to other traditional or mixed-income public housing developments (options that are detailed in this paper). At various points from 1999 through 2013, the CHA and its agents met with residents to provide planning updates. In 2001 and 2009, they conducted Housing Choice Surveys to gauge residents' housing preferences. Yet despite this ongoing outreach, there remained a substantial disconnect between the CHA's account of the relocation process and residents' portrayals of their own experiences, as documented in this study. In this paper, we utilize 40 ethnographic interviews to detail the first-hand relocation experiences of residents who moved out of Lathrop Homes between 2000 and 2011.

Interviewing Methods

Partnering with a group of current Lathrop residents, we employed a community-based participatory research approach to understand the experiences of those households who had relocated from Lathrop Homes during the Plan for Transformation, which we term "leaver" households (For fuller discussion of the experiences of "stayer" families, see Metzger, 2012). Our initial entry into the Lathrop Homes community came via the Lathrop Leadership Team, a group of current and former public housing residents, residents of the neighborhoods surrounding Lathrop Homes, professional community organizers, and other "allies" of Lathrop Homes. During the period of data collection, May 2010 through December 2011, this group met roughly every other week with the mission of advocating to preserve Lathrop Homes as public and affordable housing. Collaborating with current Lathrop Homes residents and a long-standing community organization made it possible to find participants from a highly mobile population. Two community research assistants ("Manny" and "Sonya") were hired, both current residents of Lathrop Homes, who worked with us to locate participants and conduct ethnographic interviews.

Manny was a very active member of the Lathrop Leadership Team, whereas Sonya was only an occasional participant.

The interview guide was developed collaboratively with a small group of members of the Lathrop Leadership Team and was comprised of 32 questions falling under nine broad categories: life before Lathrop, Lathrop experiences, life after Lathrop, the Section 8 housing program, social support, attitudes toward diversity, school transitions, work and finances, and the future of Lathrop. We tested and revised the interview guide during training with the coders, which included interview simulations with current Lathrop residents and community organizers. Interviewer training, led by the first author, also emphasized qualitative interviewing skills, such as allowing sufficient time for participants to think and respond, guidelines for prompts and follow-up questions, and appropriate, non-judgmental demeanor. Typically in pairs — either Manny or Sonya along with the first author — 40 interviews were conducted with tenants who had left Lathrop Homes since October 1999. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes, on average.

Our sample was generated through a process of snowball sampling, the sole sampling technique available to researchers who seek to access hard-to-track populations for whom a census-type list is not available (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Goodman, 2011). While we make no claims to statistical generalizability, we nonetheless made efforts to strive for a relatively diffuse and diverse sample, in order to capture as wide a range of experiences as possible. We began the sampling process with five key informants (Table 1). These initial sources were diverse with regard to the nature of their connection to Lathrop Homes (professional community organizer, current resident, or former resident), their sex, race, and ethnicity, and their degree of involvement with the Lathrop Leadership Team (ranging from no involvement to core leadership). Participants were compensated with a \$40 Visa gift card in return for their participation.

Table 1. Initial Sources for Snowball Sampling

	Initial Source #1	Initial Source #2	Initial Source #3	Initial Source #4	Initial Source #5
Connection to Lathrop Homes	Community organizer	Community organizer	Current resident	Current resident	Former resident
Role on Lathrop Leadership Team	Active member	Active member	Active member	Peripheral member	Never a member
Race or Ethnicity	White	African American	Puerto Rican	African American	African American
Sex	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Interviews Referred	8	6	4	15	7

Note. “Interviews Referred” includes those referred directly, as well two and three degrees of separation from the initial source.

Table 2 presents some of the demographic characteristics for our study sample. Reflecting the pattern of heads of households at Lathrop Homes, the sample of participants was predominantly female (29 of 40 participants). The sample somewhat over-represented African Americans compared to the broader Lathrop community: 90% of participants self-identified as Black or African American, 8% as Latino/a, and 3% as biracial (compared to a population of Lathrop residents who were 59% Black or African American, 24% Latino/a, 17% White, and 1% other as of 2010; Chicago Housing Authority, 2010). Finally, participants were, on average, 41.3 years old ($SD = 12.8$; range: 18-69) and resided at Lathrop Homes for an average of 16.6 years ($SD = 9.6$; range: 1-49 years).

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Interview Sample

	Interview Sample ($N = 40$)
Sex	
Female	72.5%
Male	27.5%
Age (Years)	41.3
Average Length of Living in Public Housing (Years)	16.6
Race or Ethnicity	
African American	90.0%
Latino/a	7.5%
Other	2.5%

The range of post-Lathrop housing situations and neighborhoods among our sample roughly mirrored the known population of Lathrop Homes relocatees (Table 3). Lathrop's departing households moved into a variety of housing situations, including rental housing via Housing Choice Vouchers (either "permanent" or "temporary," the latter allowing for the right to return to Lathrop Homes at a later date), other CHA properties, unsubsidized, market-rate rentals, and a range of tenuous and temporary housing.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for major themes using Atlas TI. A hybrid inductive and deductive analytic process was employed (Saldaña, 2013, pp. 175–183). This approach allowed the coding process to capture the questions of noted importance to the Lathrop Leadership Team, while also providing the flexibility to allow new themes to emerge. A single coder (the first author) began with a list of nine themes, indicating respondents' direct responses to the nine discrete questions from the interview guide (e.g., responses to "How did you come to leave Lathrop Homes?"). Additional codes were established a priori to indicate broad topics that the interviewers' noted arising during the interview process, but which were not directly asked about, such as challenges with crime and health problems. Line-by-line open coding was then conducted by the first author, resulting in 33 additional codes and subcodes

(e.g., subcodes indicating categories of responses to a given question). Due to resource constraints, double coding of the data was not possible.

The present study focused on participants' answers to two specific questions: "How did you come to leave Lathrop Homes?" and "If you had the opportunity to return to Lathrop Homes, would you?" The responses to each of these questions were further coded into major subcategories distinguishing between the major factors that played into participants' departures from Lathrop Homes. Numerous analytic memos were written throughout data analysis and discussed with an informal working group of advisors and colleagues, which aided in clarifying major themes and identifying trends across participants. Results were presented and discussed with the Lathrop Leadership Team at several community meetings, though community members were not directly involved in the coding process.

Analytic memos helped to clarify codes and discuss themes emerging during the coding process. Furthermore, an excel spreadsheet was developed, including participant demographics and other characteristics (post-Lathrop residence), as well as columns for whether certain key subcodes were identified in that participants' interview (e.g., specific reasons for leaving Lathrop Homes). This spreadsheet allowed for analysis of differences in responses by participant subgroups.

Results

Analysis of the interview data shows that while participants actively strove to make informed and strategic housing decisions, they rarely framed their relocation experiences as purely self-determined. Rather, they typically described their moves as reactive or occurring under pressure. Across our 40 interviews, many factors played into the processes of relocation from Lathrop Homes, including violence and property maintenance concerns, caregiving requirements, and the transition to adulthood. This paper focuses on the theme of pressure to move, which was the most commonly cited reason for moving. (For full discussion of the other factors involved in relocation, see Metzger, 2012.)

"How Did You Come to Leave?"

Running counter to the CHA's official narrative of resident-driven choice, 21 of the 40 people we interviewed reported that their departure from Lathrop Homes occurred under pressure from the housing authority. These residents described their moves not in the language of *choice*, but in the context of major constraints and insecurity about the future of their homes and their community. These respondents left Lathrop Homes in order to get out "while the getting was good," rather than waiting until the last minute and risking being forcibly relocated to a relatively dangerous, unfamiliar, or otherwise undesirable neighborhood. According to these participants, CHA staff promulgated this sense of urgency and housing insecurity. For example, one former Lathrop resident who took a "temporary" housing voucher in 2009 recalled the pressure she felt at the time. She recalled a sense of urgency in the early 2000s, followed by frustration at seeing the subsequent decade of planning delays. As was the case with many other public housing residents, she used the general pronoun "they" to refer to the CHA:

They made it seem like you had to get out now, you know what I'm saying? That the process was in motion and you had to hurry up and get out now. So now to know that they're sitting here, confused, not knowing what they're gonna do, it's like... I should've stayed.

She felt pressured to move, but would have remained in her Lathrop Homes unit had she known that years would pass without any major demolition or rehabilitation occurring. Another former resident spoke of her fear of being forced to move quickly if demolition began: "The last thing I wanted was to go to the South Side [of Chicago]... I was afraid that, if I don't make a quick decision, if I don't do something, they just gonna put me where they want to put me." This former resident strove to predict the options available to her and to react in her best interest given those options, yet the decision to leave Lathrop Homes could hardly be construed simply as "choice." The CHA's "Relocation Rights Contract" substantiated her fear that the CHA could conceivably "make a decision for her" if she waited too long to make a decision. Per that contract, the CHA is required to present two housing options for lease-compliant tenants of properties undergoing redevelopment. Should a tenant reject both of these options, potential consequences include the possibility of a "mandatory transfer" or the loss of one's housing subsidy altogether (Chicago Housing Authority, 2010, p. 45).

A third participant, who was born at Lathrop Homes and had moved out just two months before her interview with us, cited the fear of homelessness in her decision to leave:

Everybody was talking about "changing" and "everybody had to leave [Lathrop Homes]." And I was hearing all the projects, they were knocking them down. It was a very scary feeling knowing that I'm at Lathrop one minute and the next minute I'm gonna be homeless. So that was a big, big issue for me and my kids. I'm like, "Where am I going to put my kids' heads at?"

Consolidation of remaining households. For many of the respondents who reported experiencing pressure to relocate, the CHA's decision to vacate the north side of the development, and consolidate Lathrop's remaining households within the south side of the development, added to the urgency of the relocation decision. Although there was a substantial waiting list for public housing, the CHA froze new leasing at Lathrop Homes in 2000, resulting in large vacancies as residents left (Piemonte, 2011). By 2010, roughly three quarters of the units were vacant (Chicago Housing Authority, 2010). Discussion over consolidating remaining households began as early as 2006, and was set into motion in March of 2011. Lathrop residents were given 180 days' notice to vacate the north side of the development and move to the south side on Hoyne Avenue. Many Lathrop residents were frustrated by the CHA's choice of Hoyne Avenue as the destination for consolidated households. Hoyne had a reputation as the "bad" side of the development; residents reported that most of the violent crime that took place at Lathrop during a period of heightened violence in the early 1990s had occurred in this part of the development. The south end of the development was farther from major neighborhood amenities, such as the Boys and Girls Club and Head Start center and the neighborhood's public schools.

Rather than moving to Hoyne during this consolidation process, some tenants opted to leave Lathrop Homes altogether. This former Lathrop resident echoed the common fear of having a decision “made for her” if she failed to relocate “voluntarily”:

They force you either to take up Section 8 or you deal with that crap that they doing now [consolidation]. And I said no, I want my freedom of speech. I wanna have the right to go wherever I want to go. That’s why I took the Section 8. I had waited like two or three years before I decided to make a decision. I was in limbo and they let me be in limbo. They told me, well you have to make a decision and we only gonna give you a certain amount more time to make a decision. If not, they’re gonna make a decision for me.

Another resident had specific reasons for wanting to avoid consolidation onto Hoyne Avenue. She associated Hoyne to a traumatizing experience:

They sent us a letter in the mail and said we had 180 days to vacate these units [on the north end of the development] that they were going to put me on Hoyne. And an incident happened to me on Hoyne Street. I was beaten up by [a family] over here real bad... and I didn’t want to go back to Hoyne Street... So I couldn’t live there... I would have stayed [at Lathrop], but like I said the only incident I’ve had has scarred me.

It may have been her choice to stay at Lathrop, but given the option, she would have remained in her original apartment to avoid triggering her traumatic experience on Hoyne.

A third resident took no issue with Hoyne Avenue per se, but the consolidation process led to an uncomfortable degree of uncertainty regarding her housing. She escaped this uncertainty by taking a “temporary” housing voucher and moving away from Lathrop—a decision she later regretted:

I didn’t really want to leave. But they kept promising me, “I’m going to move you from off of Leavitt [Street] and I’m going to move you to Hoyne [Avenue].” And every time I got ready to go to Hoyne, they would give the apartment to somebody else. So I said, “Man, I’m gone.” So I just packed my stuff and left, but I should’ve just stayed here. I should’ve just stayed.

The feeling of limbo during consolidation became uncomfortable for this resident, but she found that the decision to take a housing voucher only extended her uncomfortable housing status.

Housing choice surveys. The CHA instituted a series of surveys intended to gauge residents’ housing choices and to relocate people based on those choices. The CHA cited these surveys as evidence that residents did, in fact, move by choice. However, numerous Lathrop residents interpreted these surveys as yet another form of pressure to leave the development. Conducted at Lathrop Homes first in 2001 and then again 2009, the surveys required tenants to list three ranked housing preferences, which could include remaining at Lathrop, taking a temporary or permanent housing voucher, or moving to another public housing development. Explaining the 2009 Housing Choice Survey, the CHA’s CEO stated, “With the Plan for Transformation nearly 70% complete, we are exploring ways to allow residents with a right of

return and who have not officially started the relocation process the opportunity to have as many options and as much information about those options as possible” (Cottrell, 2009, para. 4). Another CHA spokesperson downplayed the role of the Housing Choice Surveys at Lathrop Homes, stating, “It’s not mandatory. It’s voluntary... It’s just an option to move if people are interested in moving” (Cottrell, 2009, para. 5).

As with the idea of *choice* more generally, some residents understood the purpose of these Housing Choice Surveys differently than how the CHA portrayed them. One resident reported that in the case of the 2001 Housing Choice Survey, CHA staff clearly warned residents that if they took a permanent housing voucher, they would relinquish their right to return to Lathrop Homes, such that potential risk associated with moving out was made clear. According to this resident, the CHA’s approach changed in the 2009 Survey, at which time “they revved up their enthusiasm to get people to go.” Around this time, the CHA took Lathrop residents on a bus tour to see the apartments that were available for relocation. One resident reported of this bus trip that the “CHA was making it look real good, ‘this is a wonderful thing for you: Take advantage of it now.’” Contrary to the statement that moving was “just an option” for residents, some residents felt as if they were being lured away from Lathrop Homes. As stated by one current resident, they felt like they were being “sold on moving.”

Forfeited rights. In addition to the many residents who reported feeling pressure to move, several residents reported “being moved.” Among our participants, each of these cases involved individuals who moved into other CHA developments (as opposed to receiving a Housing Choice Voucher or losing their housing subsidy altogether). When participants spoke of these moving experiences, they spoke in sentences in which the CHA was the subject and they themselves were the direct object. One resident described a pattern he had observed, in which many public housing residents—residents of Cabrini Green and Lathrop Homes — were relocated to Westhaven Park on Chicago’s west side, the mixed income development that replaced the original Henry Horner Homes public housing development: “They took the people from Lathrop and Cabrini Green and put them all right there together. And put them with what that was already, the Horner Homes.” The idea that the CHA “took” Lathrop residents and “put them” elsewhere stands in stark contrast to the CHA’s narrative, which entailed tenants “electing what they feel might be best for their families” (CHA development manager in Cuddy, 2011). Stories like this perpetuated the fear expressed by other former Lathrop residents: that failure to act could lead to forced relocation to undesirable neighborhoods.

Another former resident expressed a similar understanding of the relocation process. He shared the story of his former neighbor who was forced to move around the time of the consolidation, despite already living in a habitable unit on Hoyne Street. In the participant’s word, “They just moved them out...They gave them an ultimatum, if they want to go to 106th [on the far South Side] or over there where they at [on the west side].” Another resident described his understanding of his circumstances as follows:

Participant 3: They sent me some letters in the mail. And they gave me three choices to move. And I usually was throwing them away because I wanted to stay here. But they sent me another letter saying if I didn’t take these choices they was gonna send me,

like, to Altgeld Gardens [on the far South Side]... and I didn't want to go to the south side. I didn't want to move from here, actually.

Author 1: Did they give you a reason why you had to move?

Participant 3: Uh. Nope.

We proceeded to ask this participant about how he ended up at his current location, and it seemed that he did not fully understand the process. However, his comment regarding letters concerning relocation — “I was usually throwing them away”—suggests that he experienced a mandatory transfer because he failed to comply with the Housing Choice Survey process. The CHA’s Relocation Rights Contract states, “During the relocation process, the Leaseholder shall be bound by certain duties and responsibilities. Failure to adhere to these duties and responsibilities may result in the delay or forfeiture of the right of return as provided for in this Contract” (Chicago Housing Authority, 2010, p. 54). According to this list of duties and responsibilities, tenants are mandated to complete and sign a Housing Choice Survey.

Even residents who appeared more organized and perceptive than “Participant 3” experienced difficulties with the Housing Choice Survey process. For instance, several participants mentioned the CHA’s “Housing Choice Survey Clinic” in 2009, in which tenants received information about their relocation options and received assistance completing the surveys. Though the following participant went to the 2009 clinic seeking a temporary voucher, allowing her to return to Lathrop Homes following its redevelopment, she reported being lumped in with a group of people receiving permanent vouchers:

I’ve been having problems with Section 8 where—the women that gave me the papers had turned around, and I was with eight or nine other women and we were sitting there and I told her, “Wait a minute, are these temporary or are they permanent Section 8?” She goes, “Oh, they’re all permanent.” And I said, “Wait a minute, wait a minute.” I says, “I asked for a temporary.” “Well I changed it,” she said like that to me. And I was kind of upset. Who are you? I didn't authorize you to change it!

Ultimately, the woman quoted above obtained her temporary voucher. Several years after moving out of Lathrop Homes, she still considered her living situation to be “temporary,” and was adamant about moving back to Lathrop Homes if that became possible.

Worn down and tired. In addition to the residents who reported moving under explicit pressure, there were many current and former residents of Lathrop Homes who reported being generally “tired,” or being “worn down” by years of housing insecurity. Again referring to the CHA as “they,” one woman in her early 30s summarized the pattern of departures from Lathrop Homes — including her own departure — as follows:

I think people got tired of waiting. They [CHA] steady saying they gonna do this and we’re going to keep this and we’re just going to restore it and we’re just going to move you over here and then you’re going to be able to come back. It was five years and then it became ten years. People are like, you know, should I go ahead and accept the Section 8

or stay here? Because we don't know when they're just going to say, "You got to go!"

Another resident, when asked how he came to leave, stated simply "I just got tired." While some households' decisions to leave Lathrop came under pressure, other tenants finally moved because they were exhausted by the waiting game.

"Would You Return?"

While residents' transitions out of Lathrop Homes were typically quite difficult, it is nonetheless possible that these transitions ultimately led to improved residential outcomes. This plausible outcome would reinforce the argument that even if residents' autonomy was diluted or altogether revoked by being pressured to move, the paternalism would at least lead to better tenant outcomes. Thus, to gauge whether or not this was the case, we asked participants, "Given the opportunity, would you come back to Lathrop Homes?" In short, we found that responses correlated with tenants' current neighborhood characteristics.

For the 200 relocatees for whom the CHA maintained current residence information, their new neighborhoods were relatively disadvantaged compared to the communities surrounding Lathrop Homes. Community poverty rates were 26.5% and unemployment rates were 13.3%, on average, compared to 10.6% poverty and 4.0% unemployment in Lathrop's surrounding communities (Table 3). The 40 former residents participating in our research interviews resided in neighborhoods comparable to the broader population of Lathrop movers for whom residence information was known; our sample population moved into neighborhoods with poverty rates averaging 23.2% and unemployment rates averaging 11.8%.

Table 3. Neighborhood Characteristics for Lathrop Homes Current Residents and Relocatees

	Lathrop Neighborhood	Relocatees' Neighborhoods: Interview Sample (<i>N</i> = 40)	Relocatees' Neighborhoods: All Known Relocatees (<i>N</i> = 200)
Individual Poverty Rate	10.6%	23.2%	26.5%
Unemployment Rate for Age ≥16	4.0%	11.8%	13.3%
Index Crimes per 100,000 Population (Mean)	4,172	6,326	6,674
Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population (Mean)	544	1,539	1,447

Note. Poverty and unemployment statistics are calculated from the American Community Survey 5-year estimates, 2006-2010. Community area crime rates are calculated using (a) Chicago Police Department's "ClearMap," 2/7/2011 to 2/7/2012 and (b) community-level population estimates from U.S. Census 2010. "Violent crime" includes homicide, criminal sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault and battery. "Index crime" includes the above-listed violent crimes, as well as burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, and arson. "Lathrop Neighborhood" estimates reflect the population-weighted average of Chicago's North Center and Lincoln Park community areas. Relocation outcomes for all known relocatees provided via Freedom of

Information Acts requests to the CHA and reflect known relocation outcomes as of December 2011.

As shown in Table 4, when asked if they would return to Lathrop Homes given the opportunity, one-quarter of the residents interviewed answered with a clear “no.” These residents, relatively settled in their current living arrangements, were disproportionately likely either to have remained on Chicago’s north side or to have moved to the suburbs after leaving Lathrop. Yet the remaining three-quarters would move back to Lathrop, either “in a heartbeat” or under certain conditions.

Table 4.

Relocatees’ Preferences Regarding Returning to Lathrop Homes by Present Location

<u>“Would You Return to Lathrop Homes?”</u>				
Present Location	Definitely No	Maybe or Under Certain Conditions	Definitely Yes	Total
West Side of Chicago	2	7	7	16 (40%)
South Side of Chicago	1	2	8	11 (28%)
North Side of Chicago	4	2	3	9 (23%)
Suburbs	3	0	1	4 (10%)
Total	10 (25%)	11 (28%)	19 (48%)	40 (100%)

A common characteristic among most of the residents not interested in returning to Lathrop Homes was their present location on the north side or in relatively advantaged suburbs. Among our participants, former Lathrop residents who did not wish to move back to Lathrop were living in community areas with poverty rates of 18% and unemployment rates of 7%, compared to neighborhoods with 26% poverty and 14% unemployment for participants reporting that, given the opportunity, they would move back. Slightly over a quarter (28%) of participants stated that they would return to Lathrop only under certain conditions, often having to do with issues of tenant screening.

Almost half of the people we interviewed (19 of 40) said that they would come back to Lathrop immediately, given the opportunity. Most frequently, the people we interviewed gave a simple answer to the question of whether or not they would return: “Yes, I would.” Some were exuberant about the idea of returning:

Participant 7: I wish I could come back. NOW!

Participant 8: Yes! Yes! Today! Right now! Yes!

Participant 10: I would love to come back. I would love to come back. I don’t know how long it’s gonna take, but if there was a chance for me to come back, I would love to come back. I would love to come back.

Most of the residents hoping to return had left Lathrop Homes on what they had understood to be a temporary basis. For instance, this respondent took a “temporary” housing voucher in 2000, when the CHA first discussed the idea of rehabbing the Lathrop Homes development: “When they told us we were going to get the Section 8, the ‘temporary,’ they always said, ‘Oh, you’ll be able to move back, you’ll be able to move back.’ But they never really did anything to make it possible for us to move back.” Though twelve years had passed since she had moved out of Lathrop Homes, she still considered her housing situation to be “temporary.”

Discussion

The present study both affirms the previous research on public housing tenants’ experiences of relocation and generates some new themes. While some residents moved in the context of the confusion of the Housing Choice Surveys, or the fear of “being moved” later for consolidation or redevelopment, other former residents of Lathrop Homes had more direct experiences of being pressured to move or losing their ability to choose when the choice was made for them. The answers gathered from the question, “Would you return?” provide more varied responses: Some former Lathrop residents were more satisfied with the quality of their new housing and the location of their home, but others still missed Lathrop and wanted to return.

The overarching theme of *pressure* that former Lathrop residents experienced in their housing relocations mirrors the conclusions drawn from several other case studies. In their analysis of the transition for residents out of the Robert Taylor Homes, Venkatesh and colleagues (2004) found that public housing residents and housing counselors reported that counselors used pressure tactics to expedite the relocation process. Drawing from the experiences of former residents from three different public housing developments, Joseph and Chaskin (2012) similarly found that a third of residents reported feeling pressure or other constraints that led them to making a housing choice under duress. Both of these studies took place in Chicago while the Plan for Transformation was underway and a master plan for redevelopment of the specific study sites was in place. However, no master plan was approved at Lathrop Homes throughout the 2000s and thus, the pressure related to timing operated differently there. Lathrop residents felt both hurried out of their homes and caught in a long-term waiting game while the planning process stagnated between 1999 and present day. As one resident put it, Lathrop Homes residents “lived in fear” for years, asking themselves, “[Are we] gonna be here tomorrow, this week, or this month? These people are living in fear of being put out of where they live.”

In the case of Lathrop Homes, change occurred too slowly, with the timeline for redevelopment delayed for years beyond the CHA’s original promise to tenants. Residents tried to understand plans for Lathrop Homes so that they could make informed decisions. However, the slow and unpredictable pace of planning made it impossible to know what the redevelopment of Lathrop would look like, when it would happen, and who would have access to new or rehabbed units. The messages around these issues changed dramatically over more than 15 years of planning. Given that redevelopment was not imminent during the time our participants moved out, it seems that the CHA had other motives to pressure residents to leave Lathrop Homes. Venkatesh and colleagues (2004, p. ii) draw analysis from other advocates and scholars in

suggesting that the CHA had a “demolition initiative” for public housing structures instead of a plan to transform the lives of impoverished public housing residents.

The outcomes we observed revealed that housing *choice* was not granted to many of the former Lathrop Homes residents. Choice was absent for these residents either through explicit action from housing authority officials that disabled residents’ autonomy, or through nuanced channels including steering and coercion tactics, each of which have been found in previous case study analyses (Joseph & Chaskin, 2012; Pfieffer, 2006; Venkatesh et al., 2004). While Lathrop residents were told they could choose to stay at Lathrop Homes during the process of redevelopment, the majority of those interviewed relayed stories that stood in stark contrast to the official *choice* narrative.

The results drawn from our interview question “Would you return?” provide resident perspectives of the deconcentration paradigm that have been lacking in previous research. We found answers to this question highly variable. For those former Lathrop residents who did not want to move back to Lathrop, the majority lived on the north side of Chicago in more advantaged neighborhoods and cited their improved living conditions as a pivotal factor in their experience. Their outcomes align with the stated policy goal of moving people into better neighborhoods. However, nearly half of those interviewed in our study reported that they would move back into Lathrop Homes given the opportunity, and over a fourth of respondents reported that they would move back given a few conditions. Overall, while many residents felt pressured to move, their experiences of their new housing situations were more nuanced and do not provide a clear link between being pressured to move and having better housing situations after leaving Lathrop.

The results of this study come with several strengths and limitations. Perhaps the greatest strength of the analysis is the examination of (a) this unique public housing rebuild project that was already in a mixed income neighborhood, which (b) prioritized tenants’ perspectives. To our knowledge, this perspective has not before been documented. A second strength of study is the examination of the process of redevelopment – how households came to move – rather than just the outcomes of the redevelopment. Third, the analysis contributes to the growing area of literature of actually existing neoliberalism, which Brenner and Theodore (2002) describe as documenting the actual context and outcome of neoliberalism, rather than using neoliberalism to describe resurgence of laissez-faire ideology (for further review, also see Hackworth, 2005).

The limitations of the study derive from the somewhat unusual predicament of Lathrop homes, and the resources available for the study. Because Lathrop Homes was a mixed income and interracial development in Chicago, the experiences of the residents may be unique to their situation and make the results of this study difficult to generalize to other public housing residents both around the country and within the city of Chicago. Two items merit consideration in terms of resources. First, due to human capital and time constraints, a snowball sampling method was chosen, which may have potentially biased the results. For the same reasons, only one researcher coded the data, which could have been further validated with the work of two or more coders. Despite these limitations, the strengths of the study offer important contributions to the social work practice, policy, and the knowledge of the subsidized housing field.

Contribution to Social Work Practice, Policy, and Knowledge

The experiences of the former Lathrop residents documented in this study add to the literature that is critical of the shift towards using the private market to supply subsidized housing. Many of the participants' stories fit Imbroscio's (2008, p.115) description of public housing relocations as "a desperate response to a set of desperate conditions, with little to do with any real notion of freedom of choice." Whereas the transition from public housing to mixed income housing and Housing Choice Vouchers was ostensibly intended to promote choice for former public housing residents, the results of this analysis reflect a different experience among former public housing residents. Relocation of Lathrop residents occurred within a context marked by intense housing insecurity, consolidation within the development, slowly evolving redevelopment plans over the course of 15 years, inconsistent information over those future plans, and perceived pressure by CHA staff to get out while the getting was good. These experiences suggest that the discourse of "choice" obscured a fraught set of resident experiences. Residents' relocation from Lathrop Homes were often pseudo-voluntary processes, contextualized by procedures that made the choice of remaining in one's original home and community extremely difficult and unlikely.

If policymakers continue to call explicitly for choice in United States' subsidized housing programs, then it is imperative to understand the subjective experiences of choice among participants of those programs. Thus, the adverse experiences of residents found in this study (Table 2) are keenly important to current and future housing policy. Drawing on our results and from the work of other researchers who have similarly recognized HOPE VI as part of the neoliberalization of the social welfare system, we offer several areas for improvement as subsidized housing programs move forward.

First, policymakers should consider how to develop real choice and autonomy in housing options for people utilizing housing subsidies. This objective could be fulfilled through improved oversight and management of public housing agencies like the CHA or through a reward system for public housing authorities, whose clientele report high satisfaction rates in their interactions with public housing agency officials. Better choice for residents might also be established through more substantive inclusion of subsidized housing residents in the planning processes for new development projects. Each CHA development undergoing redevelopment was guided by a "working group" comprised of representatives of the CHA, the City of Chicago, the Habitat Company (a court-appointed receiver for the CHA), Business and Professional People for the Public Interest (known as the Gautreaux council), the private development team contracted by the CHA to conduct redevelopment and others. While working groups included public housing tenants elected to their developments' Local Advisory Council, tenants were sharply outnumbered and consistently overpowered by professional members of the Working Group (Metzger, 2012). Moreover, analysis of minutes from Working Group meetings, which were only obtainable via the Freedom of Information Act, suggested that major decisions — such as the future mix of public housing, affordable housing, and market-rate units — were made outside of the context of the Working Group. In short, decision-making was largely hidden from public view. This lack of transparency posed a major challenge to residents' collective efforts, via the Local Advisory Council and the Lathrop Leadership Team, to understand and influence the purpose and process of redevelopment. Unfortunately, community driven redevelopment models during HOPE VI redevelopment are hard to come by. Instead, most redevelopment projects with tenant input have been hard-fought through community organizing, activism, and litigation

(Hackworth, 2005). One noted exception is the Boston Housing Authority, which was unusual or perhaps unique in its early and substantive inclusion of public housing tenants in planning for the Orchard Gardens community (Shamsuddin & Vale, 2017). This meaningful participation led to a redevelopment outcome in which fewer public housing residents were displaced, compared to a typical HOPE VI project: It serves as one model for inclusive community development.

The incentive structures for cities considering developing new subsidized housing must also be improved. One explanation for why Lathrop residents were pressured and coerced into leaving Lathrop Homes is because the CHA had already unilaterally decided to redevelop Lathrop Homes due to the property's ascendance into a coveted piece of real estate. Cities have also become increasingly reliant on property taxes for city budgets, further incentivizing redevelopment of public housing into mixed income housing (Lipman, 2008). The transition from the HOPE VI redevelopment process to the Choice Neighborhoods model has not improved this system. A more effective incentive structure would reward public housing agencies for relocating former public housing residents into higher quality neighborhoods compared to the neighborhood of the previous housing development (see Sard and Rice's (2014) discussion of opportunity neighborhoods for HCV users). Another avenue for reform might be to provide public housing agencies with the money gained from the property taxes of mixed income housing developments, rather than cities, so that city governments are no longer incentivized to tear down developments. Public housing agencies would then have more money to put into subsidized housing projects.

A final option to improve the experiences of subsidized housing users is to reconsider the overall framing of subsidized housing residents as individual consumers as a way to promote individual choice. In their analysis of several HOPE VI Plans for Transformation, Fraser and Kick (2007) found that without strong advocates for the people-based goals within the transformation process, the place-based goals dominated the actions taken and the people-based goals did not come to fruition. Similarly, our analysis suggests that experiencing choice was atypical in the redevelopment process of Lathrop Homes even though it was an explicitly stated goal of CHA officials. Instead of framing subsidized housing residents as individual consumers, policy makers, practitioners, and researchers should consider them as civic and political agents who hold the potential to shape the future directions of their communities. Tenants' substantive inclusion in decision-making is a necessary component for the development of subsidized housing programs that respect and support the complex lives of low-income individuals and communities.

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