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## HOW HOUSING MATTERS

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POLICY RESEARCH BRIEF

## The Link between Housing, Neighborhood, and Mental Health

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What is it about moving to a lower-poverty neighborhood that improves health and well-being among low-income families? Ever since *Gautreaux v. the Chicago Housing Authority* in 1966, policymakers, residents, and others have believed that helping low-income people move out of high-poverty neighborhoods could dramatically improve their lives.<sup>1</sup> Most recently, for example, the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) program found that moving to a lower-poverty neighborhood led to better mental and physical health for low-income mothers. But what about moving leads to these and other improvements? Is it higher-quality housing? More cohesive neighborhoods? Fewer worries about crime? Or something else entirely?

This brief examines three factors in the link between housing and mental health—housing quality, neighborhood conditions, and social cohesion among neighbors. The study focuses on 371 low-income Latino families in the Bronx who lived in public housing or rented a home in the private sector using a housing voucher to subsidize the cost. The findings show that regardless of whether they lived in public or private housing, the quality of that housing and the surrounding neighborhood mattered to their mental health.

### Housing Quality Contributes to Depression and Hostility

Homes with problems weigh on residents. Rodents, holes in the walls, broken windows, lack of heat take their emotional toll. The current study finds that poor housing conditions are associated with more depressive symptomology and hostility among the residents. The same is true for overcrowd-

#### KEY FINDINGS

- Poor housing conditions are associated with more depressive symptomology and hostility.
- Perceived overcrowding increases the risk of hostility.
- Housing quality and overcrowding are linked with poorer mental health regardless of whether a family lives in public housing or in subsidized private rentals.
- Neighborhood disarray is associated with greater hostility.
- Neighborhood social cohesion reduces the risk of depression and hostility.

ing: residents are at higher risk for depressive symptomology and hostility when they feel that they have no time or space to themselves or that people in the home are constantly in each other's way.<sup>2</sup> The risk is similar for those living in public housing and in subsidized private rentals and after controlling for education, gender, and existing physical health.

### Neighborhood Cohesion Supports Mental Health

Outside the home, neighborhood conditions also matter. An abundance of vacant lots or buildings, vandalism, graffiti, trash or broken glass are all associated with greater hostility. On the other hand, greater social cohesion, or the sense that people are willing to help their neighbors and that theirs is a close-knit neighborhood, is associated with less hostility and depressive symptomology.

## Policy Implications

As this study shows, the quality of housing and neighborhood cohesion are important to one's emotional well-being. Therefore, simply moving to a different neighborhood may not be enough without also considering housing quality and neighborhood cohesion. Therefore, **increasing federal resources to improve the quality of public housing is important.** In addition, housing counselors helping families who receive housing vouchers locate new homes should **prioritize the quality of that housing.**

**Creating incentives for landlords to do regular maintenance** on their buildings is also important. In markets where rents do not cover the cost of maintenance, tax abatements such as New York City's J-51 program could create incentives for upkeep. In markets where rents amply cover maintenance, more oversight might be needed. Other financial incentives for landlords include insurance rebates, loans or grants for improvements, and rebates from attending "good landlord" training programs. The Utah Good Landlord Program is one, for example.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to **address overcrowding**, as well, given the clear link between overcrowding and mental health. This may be a particularly important marker for low-income immigrant families, who tend to live in overcrowded housing more often than native-born families.<sup>4</sup> Surveys that capture perceived overcrowding as the current study did—not just objective measures of household density—are important in documenting the extent of the issue.

Finally, **building neighborhood supports and opportunities for neighbors to interact** is critical to social cohesion and improved mental health. Yet for families in trying circumstances and disadvantaged neighborhoods, community involvement is too often thwarted by the challenges in their lives. Drawing on a theory of "trauma-informed community building," researchers argue that traditional outreach, like community barbecues or even knocking on doors, will miss the mark in these distressed communities.<sup>5</sup> Instead, they argue for a new model of outreach that is responsive to the realities of families.<sup>6</sup>

## Study Description

The study participants were drawn from the Affordable Housing as an Obesity Mediating Environment (HOME) study, a cross-sectional study of low-income Latino adults living in the south and west Bronx. The survey was conducted between January 2011 and August 2012. All par-

ticipants were eligible based on their income for housing support. Depressive symptomology was measured with the Center for Epidemiological Studies scale, and hostility was measured using the Cook-Medley Hostility scale. Sample responses included, "there are certain people who I dislike so much that I am inwardly pleased when they are catching it for something they have done." Statistical analysis determined any associations between housing type or neighborhood condition and depressive symptomology or hostility, controlling for a range of factors that might also influence the likelihood of experiencing either. ■

## Endnotes

1. The Gautreaux class action lawsuit, brought by the ACLU, argued that the Chicago Housing Authority discriminated against black residents by de facto segregation in its housing policy, which built public housing only in high-poverty neighborhoods.
2. The findings support past research, which has found that poor housing conditions increase the risk of depression by up to 64 percent over a lifetime. See S. Galea et al., "Urban Built Environment and Depression: A Multilevel Analysis," *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 59 (10)(2005): 254-62. Overcrowding is associated with social withdrawal and feelings of helplessness. See W.C. Regoeczi, "Crowding in Context: An Examination of the Differential Responses of Men and Women to High-Density Living Environments," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 49 (2008): 254-68; and "When Context Matters: A Multilevel Analysis of Household and Neighborhood Crowding on Aggression and Withdrawal," *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 23 (2003): 457-70.
3. See website description: [www.ogdencity.com/en/doing\\_business/business\\_licensing/good\\_landlord.aspx](http://www.ogdencity.com/en/doing_business/business_licensing/good_landlord.aspx)
4. Ajay Chaudry and Karina Fortuny, "Children of Immigrants: Economic Well-Being" (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, November 2010), [www.urban.org/sites/default/files/alfresco/publication-pdfs/412270-Children-of-Immigrants-Economic-Well-Being.PDF](http://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/alfresco/publication-pdfs/412270-Children-of-Immigrants-Economic-Well-Being.PDF)
5. Emily Weinstein, Jessica Wolin, and Sharon Rose, "Trauma-Informed Community Building: A Model for Strengthening Community in Trauma Affected Neighborhoods" (San Francisco: Bridge Housing, 2004), <http://bridgehousing.com/PDFs/TICB.Paper5.14.pdf>
6. An evaluation report found that community participation increased after trauma-informed methods were put in place. See "Trauma Informed Community Building Evaluation" (San Francisco: HOPE SF Learning Center, July 2015), [http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/hope-TraumaInformedCommunity\\_Building-2015.pdf](http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/hope-TraumaInformedCommunity_Building-2015.pdf)

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## ABOUT THE HOW HOUSING MATTERS TO FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES RESEARCH INITIATIVE

This brief summarizes research funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of its How Housing Matters to Families and Communities Research Initiative. The initiative seeks to explore whether, and if so how, having a decent, stable, affordable home leads to strong families and vibrant communities. By illuminating the ways in which housing matters and highlighting innovative practices in the field, the Foundation hopes to encourage collaboration among leaders and policymakers in housing, education, health, and economic development to help families lead healthy, successful lives. The views expressed herein are not necessarily those of the MacArthur Foundation.

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