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Investigating the Support Networks for Mothers of a High-density Public Housing Community and the Effects of Housing Closures on These Support Systems

Jennifer Smith · Soyang Kwon · Maryann Mason · Karen Sheehan

Abstract Over the past few decades, public housing initiatives have focused on the decentralization of poverty by replacing high-density public housing (HDPH) models with lower-density, mixed-income models. This action has resulted in the displacement of families who had lived in these developments for generations. In past studies, public housing residents have been shown to have stronger social ties than those living in other types of assisted housing. Research on the dismemberment of US public housing has demonstrated a "root shock" or disruption in the support infrastructure in these resource-limited communities. The purpose of this study was to use intergenerational analysis to analyze support systems of mothers in a low-income community and to investigate how the dismemberment of a Chicago HDPH community, Cabrini Green, affected parenting experiences and support infrastructure. Two generations of the former HDPH community were interviewed: (Gen1) mothers who raised their children in Cabrini Green and (Gen2) their daughter(s) who were raised in Cabrini Green but who now raise their children elsewhere. Interviews were analyzed for common themes in relation to mental health, social support networks, and parenting experiences. Four main components of parenting support were identified: familial support, father of child support, community support, and institutional support. Interviews suggest that the closing of Cabrini-Green high-rise buildings impacted relative contributions from specific components of mothers' support infrastructure, particularly community and institutional support. Mothers with support void in one component of support had better outcomes if they had the reserve to compensate by increasing one or more other areas of support. Programs that foster other sources of parenting support during and after public housing closures may help to improve outcomes for mothers and their families. By analyzing the experiences of mothers of both generations, we also gain insight into how experiences of motherhood and support systems compared before and after Cabrini Green's dissolution as well as insight into the participants' views on the impact of the housing closing on the parenting experience.

Keywords Cabrini Green · Chicago · High-density public housing · Parenting · Motherhood

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Introduction

Cabrini-Green Homes was a Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) public housing development located on Chicago's Near North Side. The high-rise housing development, which dates back to 1942, was home to generations of Chicago's low-income families. The last of the high-rise buildings on the 70-acre plot was demolished in 2011 as part of the CHA's Plan for Transformation to replace high-density public housing (HDPH) with lower-density, mixed-income housing [1].

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Fullilove [2] suggests that the demolition of public housing causes a root shock, a "traumatic stress reaction to the destruction of all or part of one's emotional ecosystem," that deeply impacts the daily social routines and support that help to meet the basic needs of a resource-limited population. Studies of displaced public housing residents in Seattle, WA showed that residents depended on the housing structure for "personal projects of living and survival." [3]

Public housing residents have been shown to have stronger social ties than those living in other types of assisted housing. An increased level of community-based support has been associated with lower levels of food insecurity in these communities [4]. Higher levels of social support and social capital have long been shown to impact physical and mental health. In particular, they have been associated with lower cardiovascular disease and cancer mortality, even when controlling for income and race [5]. They are also associated with lower levels of depression and higher levels of self-reported health [6, 7]. High levels of social support have been associated with positive outcomes for both mother and child, showing the multi-generational implications of support systems [8].

Unsurprisingly, transitions in the socio-physical environment cause shifts in social structure and support [2, 9]. While programs that increase mobility out of low-income housing are largely grounded in the idea that mobility will result in positive outcomes, these outcomes are not so straightforward. According to Greene et al. [9], the impact of housing displacement is felt by multiple generations and includes disrupted group connections and non-transferrable social capital after displacement.

This study aimed to gain a greater understanding of the support infrastructure of two generations of Cabrini-Green mothers and how shifts in this infrastructure, specifically HDPH closures, impacted their motherhood experiences, mental health, and sources of support. Through an intergenerational analysis of this former Chicago HDPH community, this report discusses the implications of housing closures in Cabrini Green on support for mothers and provides recommendations for future public housing decisions and necessary support services.

Methods

Study Design The design of this study was a qualitative, retrospective analysis.

Study Sample Two generations of former Cabrini-Green residents were interviewed: Generation1 (mothers who raised their children in Cabrini Green) and Generation2 (their daughter(s) who were raised in Cabrini Green but now live and raise their children in another area of Chicago). A total of 30 women, 11 from Generation1 (Gen1) and 19 from Generation2 (Gen2), were recruited through the Chicago Youth Programs (CYP) database of past Cabrini-Green residents, which is limited to individuals who had past involvement with CYP programs. CYP is a nonprofit organization founded in 1984 by a core of volunteers dedicated to providing comprehensive services to the Cabrini-Green community. It has now expanded to multiple underserved areas of Chicago [10]. During recruitment, the interviewer explained to the participants that the study was not associated with CYP, but CYP resources were helpful in identifying members of this now scattered community. Mothers recruited were limited to those who fit the Gen1 and Gen2 definitions stated above and had a working telephone number to be contacted. No participants contacted declined an interview. Participants were given a $25 gift card as compensation for their time. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago (Table 1).

Data collection and analysis. One in-depth audio-recorded interview was conducted with each participant from September 2013 to April 2014. The majority of interviews were in-person, and the remaining were

Table 1 Participant demographics

	Generation1 (n = 11)	Generation2 (n = 19)
Average age (years)	52.1 ± 8.9	27.4 ± 6.7
Ethnicity		
African-American	11 (100%)	19 (100%)
Education level		
Some high school	2 (18.2%)	3 (15.8%)
HS diploma or GED	3 (27.3)	8 (42.1%)
Some college	4 (36.4%)	8 (42.1%)
Bachelor's degree	1 (9.1%)	0 (0%)
Graduate degree	1 (9.1%)	0 (0%)
Average years in Cabrini	27.5 ± 11.1	15.9 ± 6.8
Average number of children	5.6 ± 2.7	2.5 ± 1.6
Total number of participants	11	19

phone interviews. Each interview was de-identified and transcribed by a third-party service. Two researchers independently analyzed each de-identified interview transcript and used spreadsheets to summarize responses to assess recurrent or uniting themes. The goals of the study were to assess the support infrastructure of a low resource community, particularly as it relates to motherhood, and to use generational comparisons to evaluate changes in support and parenting environment with the closing of Cabrini Green's HDPH buildings.

Results

Four main components of parenting support infrastructure emerged from interview analysis. These components applied across generations: [1] familial support, [2] father of child (FOC)/FOC's family support, [3] community support, and [4] institutional support.

Components of Support Infrastructure

Familial support. Parents and siblings of young mothers often serve as providers of shelter, childcare, and other resources. Depending on the involvement of the child's father, a family member may sometimes fill the role of co-parent. Within our study group, the mother's siblings and the child's maternal grandmother were often the main sources of familial support.

> "I always had my momma there. My sisters was there. So if I needed them to help out or just get [my daughter] for a few hours so I could take a doze or whatever…So it really wasn't too much stress." (Generation2)
> "I didn't really want to put them in daycare. So, me and my sister, we rotated. I used to do morning, she worked at night." (Generation2)

For those who had childcare help, most were from family members (mother, siblings, older children), who serve as familiar, trusted resources. It was common for several family members to live within Cabrini Green, so Gen1 mothers who raised their children here often benefited from the proximity and convenience of familial support. The contribution of family support for Gen2 mothers was especially apparent as these mothers rarely cited neighbors as sources of support, as opposed to

Gen1 mothers who often described a mixture of family and neighbor support.

> "I had to send [my son] to my mother…for 5 months so I could complete my first semester [of college]." (Generation1)

> "My mom, you know, she has a drinking problem. Living with her, under her roof, you know a lot of yelling…[my son's] dad really [did] the same things…Once I left my mom's house I was staying with him and his family…After a while, I just took me and my child and I went to a shelter…That's where I got my most relief from it. I just felt like at peace." (Generation2)

While the mother in the first quote above was able to utilize family support to continue her education, the second mother quoted lacked this resource. Due to this void in familial support, FOC involvement, and community support, the second mother had to resort to emergency institutional support (a local shelter) to compensate for this loss.

FOC/FOC's family support Another important support component is involvement and assistance from the child(ren)'s father and his family.

> "[The main source of stress] was like constantly being around [my daughter] with no help. Like the father not being there. It was tough like the first year." (Generation2)
> "[With my mother] working and everything like that, she wasn't big in my support system…[My children] are blessed. I have a strong support system. [The father's family members] are always there." (Generation2)

The majority of mothers of both generations in this study had little or intermittent FOC support, which often led to stress, requiring mothers to use other resources such as family members and neighbors to compensate. Conversely, some mothers explained how contributions from the father and his family could compensate for other voids in familial support.

> "[My youngest son] never got a chance to meet or greet [his father], but my oldest son's father, he treat him just like his own." (Generation2)

As quoted above, some mothers explained that the father of a younger child would sometimes also fill this role for their older children. Others had to compensate for lack of FOC support by increasing their dependence on other components of their support system. Mothers who did not have access to other sources of support discussed the added burden and stress that this caused. Additionally, involved fathers could contribute to the financial stability of the family, which added to overall resources and lowered stress levels for mothers.

Community support A common theme across interviews was the impact of community parenting, with special emphasis on Cabrini Green as an extended family.

> "Whether it's being hungry, you stayed in the building [so] you could knock on the next door, and you could have gotten something to eat or…if you needed a babysitter, you know…You had people, you had nice and you had bad people too…but at the end of the day it was like a family." (Generation2)
> "In Cabrini, everybody is family so everybody watched everybody's kids. Now, where we are now, that don't happen like that." (Generation1)

Mothers with limited monetary resources often relied on support within the housing community as supplementation to meet the material needs of their child(ren) and family. Types of community support described by interviewees included both tangible and intangible resources such as childcare, transportation, groceries, employment resources, and parenting or general life advice. We repeatedly hear the analogy of the Cabrini community as being like a family and the concepts of community parenting and mutual accountability. The new community, where one mother lives now with her daughter and grandchildren, lacks this quality.

> "[In Cabrini, my daughter] would have had lots of friends, like children to play with, but in this new neighborhood, we don't interact with people…It's a dangerous community just like Cabrini…but minus the friends." (Generation2)

> "You just be bored. Whereas in the projects, you wouldn't be bored…There was always somewhere, somebody, something going on." (Generation1)

Social isolation in the new living environments was a recurring theme. The close proximity of neighbors in Cabrini Green and the longevity of family residence often fostered social connections that led to friendships and sources of emotional and instrumental support that may have otherwise been nonexistent. The scattering of Cabrini residents during the dismemberment distanced these ties that were often difficult to reproduce in their new settings.

Institutional support Institutional support refers to both instrumental and emotional resources provided by community organizations. While institutional support is provided in many areas, Cabrini Green, like other HDPH developments, provided a central location for organizations to connect with individuals who could benefit from their services and resources.

> "I felt like I had a lot of support especially because [Chicago Youth Programs] always helps whenever you need it. Like if you need school supplies, they help with that. Like some family household things, they help with that. They always assist you whenever needed." (Generation2)
> "The doctors and case worker have been with me every step from when I was a kid to me making, you know, the craziest decisions…to helping me remember to stay on track." (Generation2)

Due to the recruitment methods, the participants were often united by a connection with Chicago Youth Programs. Mothers had varying levels of involvement with CYP. CYP provides many resources from a pediatric clinic to after-school/summer programs to employment opportunities. Due to its long history in Cabrini Green, it has served multiple generations and has established trust and a positive reputation in the community. The two quotes above highlight two features that were repeatedly mentioned by participants when asked about helpful or needed sources of support: [1] the impact of tangible/instrumental resources (food, clothing, transportation) and [2] the importance of program longevity/continuity.

> "When I first had my son, I used to go to [a community] program but they faded out like so many programs by the time you had your baby. The next time you had another baby, the program would be gone." (Generation1)

"In Cabrini, there was more opportunities for activities and different stuff [for] the kids...and more activities and everything [was] over there, but out of Cabrini, it's activities, but they're a distance away." (Generation1)

Here, one mother describes the benefit of community programs as well as her disappointment about their sometimes short-lived nature. For example, there may have been a local program dedicated to supporting women through pregnancy, but there may have been a void in support after delivery. Another mother explained that proximity and accessibility are important aspects of support sources, especially given that transportation was often limited or inconvenient. Participants identified obstacles such as lack of a vehicle, competing child care responsibilities, and long work hours as limiting factors for utilizing institutional support resources outside of their community.

"When we did live out in the Westside, we had like different churches that would give us hot meals and stuff like that." (Generation2)

Like this mother, some mothers were able to take advantage of new sources of support in their new neighborhoods. However, the majority of mothers interviewed commented that there were fewer opportunities for support outside of Cabrini Green. When asked about resources that would have made being a mother easier in either community, the most common response was that they either had sufficient resources or could not think of other resources. Many explained that their families were very helpful with providing for additional needs. Other responses included the need for more babysitting/daycare services, reliable housing support during relocation, transportation, and mentoring/support classes for mothers and families.

Dissolution of Cabrini Green: the mothers' perspectives To conclude the interview, mothers were asked how they thought the demolition of Cabrini Green's high-rise buildings and relocation of residents affected the community and, more specifically, the experience of motherhood. Overall, this question received some of the longest responses.

"They should have thought about it a little harder, because they may have thought that it was a high-

rise, but to [Cabrini residents], it was family." (Generation2)

"I had more help in Cabrini. It showed me different things. Then I lived on the Southside, and it was just like nobody didn't even really care what I needed to be doing…[In Cabrini], people would come see about you." (Generation1)

While participants were divided about whether or not they thought the decision to demolish the high-rise buildings was an overall benefit to former residents, most participants from both generations commented and agreed on a perception of Cabrini Green as a "family" and the benefits of community parenting and close relationships within the housing project. In line with that perception, many also commented about various sources of support that were lost during the relocation including emotional and instrumental support between residents, proximity of family members, and support programs and resources intrinsic to the neighborhood. Most interviewees also agreed that the separation of families and friends had a negative effect.

"[My son] gets to see more…I take him everywhere. His dad takes him everywhere…He's definitely exposed to more." (Generation2)

"I think it affected the community in a positive way because now it gives them a mixture of mixed income. I didn't want to see my original home being gone, but at the rate it was declining, it was a good thing…You know, it's a safe community now and it's a little safer for the children to go out and play." (Generation1)

The interviewees above believed that, overall, the housing dismemberment was positive. While there was intrinsic support within Cabrini Green, some mothers noted that the benefits of the community were not without challenges. Specifically, these women focused on both increased safety and exposure/diversity of people and experiences in their new communities.

"[The closing of Cabrini Green affected the community] for the bad. They didn't treat the people before they let them go. They just let them loose in
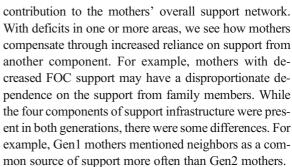
the big 'ol world…It wasn't going to be better for the world nor is it going to be better for them… Just imagine, everybody over there was basically like family. If you kill your family, what would you do to a stranger?…You got bigger issues because you didn't wash. You didn't clean it… They didn't do that. Now they wondering why we got hell going on everyday you wake up." (Generation2)

"You done took these people away from their family, their cousins, their mothers, and everybody they done lived with for all their lives, and now it's like they're alone…I think they should have prepared them a little bit more. Classes, hands-on with the families, for some of the families that needed it…I'll say 35 percent were probably okay and ready to make a move. And I believe it gave them the opportunity to move, and I think that was awesome. But on the other hand, with the family members or the families that wasn't ready for it, it brought them much depression." (Generation2)

These mothers described the persistence or increase of violence in new neighborhoods, and decreased amount of resources/support after relocation. One mother discussed increased violence in Chicago as one of the effects of Cabrini Green's dissolution. She explained how a lack of preparation and foresight may have been detrimental to former residents. Another mother discussed the negative influences of isolation and separation on former residents. She also commented that residents of this former community were affected differently and had different outcomes. Both mothers commented on the lack of adequate preparation before relocation and its contribution to negative outcomes for some residents.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that the support infrastructure of mothers investigated consists of four common components, regardless of generation: familial support, FOC/FOC's family support, community support, and institutional support. Through the interviews, we are able to see the importance of each component's

contribution to the mothers' overall support network. With deficits in one or more areas, we see how mothers compensate through increased reliance on support from another component. For example, mothers with decreased FOC support may have a disproportionate dependence on the support from family members. While the four components of support infrastructure were present in both generations, there were some differences. For example, Gen1 mothers mentioned neighbors as a common source of support more often than Gen2 mothers.

The social ties and intrinsic networks within the Cabrini-Green community consisted of multiple familial and non-familial long-standing, trusted relationships that served as a source of community support during motherhood. It was initially hypothesized that the dismemberment of Cabrini Green would lead to a decrease in overall support for mothers due to a loss of intrinsic community assets in an already under-resourced community. Through interview analysis, we were able to highlight the complexity of shifts in the support infrastructure for the mothers studied. Interview data highlighted several shifts in support structure after the housing closure including some losses in community and institutional support. In addition, the findings from this study introduced the concepts of pre-existing maternal support reserve and support void in low socioeconomic communities as predictors of resilience and flexibility during stresses on support infrastructure. With losses in some component(s) of support, mothers with the best outcomes were able to compensate by utilizing support reserve in other areas. Examples of compensation among mothers with a support reserve included supportive family members who increased their level of involvement and longitudinal programs such as CYP that continued to provide resources during and after relocation. Unfortunately, not all mothers have sources of support adequate enough to replace support lost through transitions. For example, one Gen2 mother quoted described having to resort to a local shelter due to lack of support from other sources.

In the interviews, recurring topics when discussing the former Cabrini-Green community included the existence of community parenting and the lack of preparation for the transition to life after Cabrini. While the redistribution of public housing nationwide may surely have some positive effects, by ignoring potential negative repercussions of shifting the social support infrastructure in communities with limited baseline resources, detrimental short- and long-term effects on

mothers and their families are also a likely consequence. The transition from HDPH to mixed-income housing is not a movement that is unique to Chicago. These transitions are happening in large and small cities across the nation. Therefore, it is important to invest in understanding both the positive and negative implications of these changes that often shift generations-old, established support systems.

Based on these findings, future plans for public housing closures should include efforts to provide necessary support for all mothers and families during their transition and re-establishment of support resources to avoid deficits in maternal support and subsequent negative effects on child health. Future plans should also identify mothers with low baseline levels of support reserve who may have a harder time compensating for lost resources and may warrant additional assistance. These efforts would likely utilize institutional support systems to help supplement or enhance existing support networks. Unger [11] highlights the importance of continuous, co-located, and culturally relevant interventions as tools for overcoming adversity. These same concepts can be applied to create a positive institutional support model, which can help a community of people successfully transition through shifts in support infrastructure as a result of public housing closures. Additional research is needed to gain a more complete understanding of the effects of public housing closures on the communities affected and the necessary resources needed to improve outcomes for impacted individuals.

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of literature that challenge the concept of decentralizing poverty as a ticket to upward mobility for low socioeconomic communities [12, 13]. More evidence continues to show that these forced changes may also have unintended negative effects. Further investigation into the effects on other members of these communities would increase our understanding of these changes on entire families and households.

Limitations

The sample size was limited to 30 participants, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Participants were recruited through the Chicago Youth Programs (CYP). The organization's continued connection to many Cabrini-Green families made it a valuable resource for locating mothers from the former community.

The study participants had varied levels of involvement, but exposure to CYP provided a source of institutional support and support reserve that could have helped buffer shifts in support infrastructure such as those caused by housing relocation. Likewise, mothers often became involved in CYP due to childhood involvement and advice from their own mothers. Therefore, there may have been a greater amount of familial support in our cohort compared to that of the baseline mothers in the community. Compared to the participant pool, the average mother from this community may have had less support after relocation due to the lack of a continued support reserve provided by CYP. Although these possible factors were present, CYP resources were available to all residents of Cabrini Green and functioned as a component of institutional support for the entire community.

Another limitation was the absence of a control group. Future studies investigating the differences in parenting experience between generations of mothers in public housing who were not affected by displacement would provide insight into purely generational differences in parenting experiences and support. Given this context, a case-control study would allow for a better analysis of the effects of different parenting environments by controlling for generational differences.

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