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“It Was Love in All the Buildings They Tore Down”: How Caregiving Grandmothers Create and Experience a Sense of Community in Chicago Public Housing

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Abstract

About 16,000 families residing in Chicago’s public housing have been relocated over the last two decades through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE VI) redevelopment initiative. We situate this paper within a larger conversation about the presence and utilization of community ties within public housing despite the territorial stigmatization of traditional public housing. Utilizing in-depth interviews with 20 Black caregiving grandmothers relocated from Chicago public housing we explore how women charged with performing the lion’s share of the kinwork needed to ensure family stability experienced and created a sense of community while living in public housing. We show that by providing (1) safety nets for multiple generations, (2) social support and connections to neighborhood institutions, as well as (3) opportunities for Black activist mothering, these women, often at the heart of vertical lineages, created a sense of community amidst the problems in their communities.

INTRODUCTION

When the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) launched its Plan for Transformation in 2000, its goal was to redevelop the city’s distressed public housing stocks to provide residents better housing and economic opportunities (Popkin 2010). As a result, approximately 16,000 families have been relocated. The primary mechanism for this transformation has been the Homeownership and Opportunity for People Everywhere (HOPE VI) initiative, begun in 1993. HOPE VI was designed to improve public housing neighborhoods as well as former public housing residents’ lives by deconcentrating the poverty and social disorganization long associated with traditional project-based public housing (Axtell and Tooley 2015; Castells 2010; Curley 2010; Joseph 2006; Vale 2007).

The initiative has involved the demolition of traditional public housing and the forced relocation of residents. Subsequent redevelopments have housed only a fraction of the

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original residents. Federal devolution and funding cuts had already resulted in rapidly deteriorating public housing stocks (Goetz, 2003, 2013; Stone 1993; Vale 2013). Finally, the territorial stigmatization associated with public housing has overshadowed the lived experiences of public housing residents, many of whom have reported that public housing has provided a sense of community (August 2014; Clampet-Lundquist 2004a; Gibson 2007; Manzo et al. 2008; Popkin et al. 2009; Tester et al. 2011). Manzo et al. (2008) define sense of community as “feelings of membership or belonging to a group and an emotional connection to neighbors based on shared history, interests and/or concerns. ... Feelings of mutual trust and social connection are also at the root of a sense of community” (pp. 1860).

This paper examines how members of a population identified by Martin and Martin (1978) as “dominant family figure[s]”—women heading multigenerational families—build and experience community in public housing, using data from in-depth interviews with 20 Black grandmothers raising grandchildren who have been relocated from public housing to subsidized private market-rate rental housing. By foregrounding the experiences of grandmothers raising grandchildren, we have a unique opportunity to understand how public housing residents experienced, defined, created, and recreated a sense of community while grappling with the social problems associated with concentrated poverty.

Research suggests that in public housing households’ needs cannot always be met by the formal and informal resources of their networks (Anderson 1999; Desmond 2012; Miller-Cribbs and Farber 2008; Newman 2003; Pittman, 2015, 2017; Sanchez-Jankowski 2008; Smith 2007). Although the positive social and community support of these networks have been well documented (Dominguez and Watkins 2003; Hogan et al. 1990; Kahn and Berkowitz 1995), so too have their limitations and their sometimes exploitative or “draining” nature (Desmond 2012; Elliot and Sims 2000; Kleit 2010; Patterson 1998; Smith 2007; Stack 1974).

As Venkatesh points out, “In Chicago, many of the large high-rise complexes house people who lived there for generations” (2000, p. 20). Often at the heart of these vertical lineages we find grandmothers and aunts (fictive and biological kin) who form the backbones of their families and are viewed by public housing residents as community pillars (Clampet-Lundquist 2010; Keene and Ruel 2013). African Americans comprise only 13 percent of the U.S. population, but in 2010 they accounted for 24 percent of grandparent-headed households (GPHHs) and are nearly twice as likely to live in skipped-generation households (SGHs)—defined as GPHHs where parents are absent—than their white counterparts (13 percent vs. 7 percent; Livingston and Parker 2010). Black children are twice as likely to live with grandparents or other relatives than are whites and Hispanics (U.S. Census 2010).

Grandmothers shoulder the lion’s share of grandparent caregiving, comprising 64 percent of the 2.7 million grandparents primarily responsible for caring for their grandchildren. One-fifth of GPHH are poor and two-thirds live more than three times below the federal poverty level (FPL; Livingston and Parker 2010). Poverty rates worsen for SGHs, in which one-third (32 percent) live below the FPL, with two-thirds headed by custodial grandmothers living at or below the FPL (Livingston and Parker 2010). This raises important questions: (1) What intergenerational community support exists in public housing for women charged with

performing the lion's share of the kinwork needed to ensure family stability? (2) How do women experience and construct a sense of community while living in public housing? (3) What role if any do place attachment and social support networks play? (4) What are the limitations and strengths of community ties? (5) How does experiencing community intersect with the demands of carework?

We begin with a brief overview of the foundational sociological literature on the nature of community in public housing, juxtaposed with key findings concerning community-building and supports within public housing communities. We then review public housing transformation initiatives as well as the community implications of poverty deconcentration. After discussing the role of community ties among poor Blacks, we describe our data and methods, report our findings, and discuss their implications for current and future housing policy.

THE NATURE OF COMMUNITY IN PUBLIC HOUSING

The devaluation of public housing communities overshadows residents' real experience of community ties and supports. Indeed, poverty deconcentration discourse focuses on the social disorganization of communities fraught by draining social networks. The foundation of this thesis is that concentrated poverty creates a "culture of poverty," "underclass behavior," and "contagion effects" (Leventhal et al. 1997; Lewis 1968; Moynihan 1965; Small and Newman 2001; Wilson 1987). Research shows, however, that most public housing residents regard themselves as living in "communities with problems" (Vale 1997, p. 173) rather than "problem communities" (Manzo et al. 2008, p. 1860).

Like residents of other neighborhoods, public housing residents view their communities as permanent residences (Vale 1997), and in one study most residents in such a community were unwilling to leave (Varady and Walker 2000; Manzo et al. 2008, p. 1860). Gibson (2007) found that two-thirds of public housing residents in Portland's Columbia Valley did not want to move. Manzo et al. (2008) found that many public housing residents were unhappy about forced relocation. These findings suggest that inner-city public housing residents might feel neither trapped nor lacking in place attachment—defined as emotional bonds between people and places (Manzo et al. 2008, p. 1860). In other words, these residents might experience community in a way that policymakers do not see, because the "outside" world focuses almost exclusively on the perceived negative effects of public housing's concentrated poverty.

C. J. Gaplin (1915) coined the term "community" to illuminate how social networks support and structure a way of life (Brint 2001). Durkheim's disaggregated approach to community rescued it from its entanglement with social structure and physical entities and instead conceptualized community as rooted in human interaction regardless of place. Durkheim saw communal bonds as moving beyond locally based institutions (Brint 2001; Durkheim 1897, 1979 [1911]).

Subsequent interpretations of such conceptualizations of community generated a body of twentieth-century literature on losses and gains of traditional communal ties due to urban

growth (see Anderson 1999; Fischer, 1976, 1982; Gans 1962; Greer, 1962, 1972; Guest 1999; Jacobs 1961; Logan and Molotch 1987; Suttles 1972; Wellman 1979; Whyte 1943; Wirth 1938). In his seminal 1979 study, Wellman delineates the evolution of research and debates inspired by the “Community Question”—“the question of how large-scale social systemic divisions of labor affect the organization and content of primary ties” (p. 1201).

The “Community Lost” argument was the first urban sociological response to the Community Question. The Lost argument contends that city living was pluralistic and fragmented (see also Wirth 1938 and Wellman and Leighton 1979); connecting urbanites to multiple loosely bound social networks. As such, “their weak, narrowly defined, and disorganized ties are rarely available and useful for help in dealing with contingencies” (Wellman 1979, p. 1204).

In response to the Lost argument, there emerged what Wellman calls the “Community Saved” approach (p. 1205), which by the early 1960s had become the new orthodoxy, documenting how community bonds and supports remained viable in urban settings and primary kinship systems. In spite of their differences, the Lost and Saved arguments share a place-based focus, but the “Community Liberated” argument, says Wellman (1979), holds that social networks transcend place-based ties, pointing to communities that are spatially dispersed and constitute both loose and tight networks of friends, kin, and work (see also Granovetter 1973). Community Liberated has been made possible by automobiles, telephones, and later, virtual networks (see Wellman 1999), creating dispersed and diverse social ties.

Transcending specific geographic spaces is not always possible, however, for very low-income families and individuals living in poor urban communities. Belying urban ecological theory, the communities in which most inner-city residents live are not transitional zones they occupy only temporarily (Curley 2005; Park and Burgess 1925). Involuntary segregation and the ghettoization of people and places bring ghettos into being (Gans 2008), and therefore the experience of community for inner-city residents involves both people and place.

The characteristics associated with ghettos, especially high rates of pathology, contribute to their devaluation and the idea that they are “Lost” communities. Ghetto life reflects economic, social, and political marginalization, greater land-use diversity, qualitatively inferior housing and infrastructure, and demographically more homogenous *and* heterogeneous populations than are found in other urban and suburban neighborhoods (Gans 2008).

Studies highlighting the positive aspects or benefits of living in public housing do not ignore the challenges its residents experience, as “crowded, dangerous, and noisy settings all appear to inhibit the formation of social ties among community members ... and individuals are less likely to contribute to community activities in loud or noisy settings” (Kuo et al. 1998, p. 825). Still, residents report depending on the communities they build to mitigate the negative aspects of living in public housing.

In a qualitative study of more than thirty tenants of Toronto's Regent Park—Canada's first and largest public housing estate—residents reported benefits and advantages of living in an area of concentrated poverty, including place attachment, a strong sense of community, access to dense networks of friendship and support, local amenities and conveniences, and services and agencies that suit their needs (August 2014, p. 1317), and in another project “residents ... valued local mechanisms of social control, [and] relied on peer and kin networks for childcare, friendship, and temporary shelter” (p. 1320). In a study of HOPE VI revitalization projects in Louisville, Walker and Hanchette (2015) found that residents had experienced a sense of place even in demolished public housing communities.

HOPE VI AND THE DEVOLUTION OF COMMUNITY TIES

Public housing communities became stigmatized through a combination of academic support for the deconcentration of poverty that emerged from Wilson's (1987) influential work, research on the negative neighborhood effects of poverty concentration (see Small and Newman 2001 for an overview), and urban planning and market-driven housing policies that prioritize income-mixing and the redevelopment and privatization of public housing (Khare 2013; Kost 2012). These factors have also contributed to a significant decline in traditional place-based public housing.

The Chicago Plan for Transformation exemplifies such rethinking. As of 2015, more than 22,000 traditional public units had been demolished (Chaskin and Joseph 2015). As Popkin (2016) points out, many extremely low-income households and those considered “hard to house” have been left behind. “Hard to House” denotes a population comprising former public housing households which (a) do not qualify for housing choice vouchers (HCVs) and therefore live in unaffordable and often substandard private market-price rental housing or (b) face multiple social and family challenges that make such housing difficult to access (see also Desmond 2016).

High levels of neighborhood poverty have been associated with lower educational attainment, joblessness, a disproportionately higher share of single female-headed households, social isolation, and increased crime (Kost 2012; Richardson et al. 2014; Strait 2006; Wilson, 1987, 1996). Moreover, scholarly and journalistic work has generated several tropes about public housing communities and residents according to which, among other things, they have been regarded as (a) disorganized and lacking in sense of community or viable community support; (b) “negative archetypal symbols of ... high rises, gangs, and garbage” (Bennett 2000, p. 272); and (c) in “spectacular decline” (Goetz 2011, p. 270) and characterized by “horrific living conditions” (August 2014, p. 1319).

Popkin et al. (2013) note that CHA families “endured considerable upheaval as the agency redeveloped its housing” (p. 2), a circumstance that has been examined across a number of populations, programs, locations, and outcomes (see Goetz 2013; Chaskin and Joseph 2015 for reviews). Research examining the outcomes of relocated CHA families has revealed a compelling contradiction: On the one hand, many residents are now living in better housing in safer, less impoverished (but not low-poverty) neighborhoods (Burton and Hayes 2013). On the other hand, however, the neighborhoods to which these families have been moved are

as racially segregated as those with public housing, and improvements in socioeconomic quality of life are slight or nonexistent (Goetz 2013; Oakley et al. 2013). Chaskin et al. (2012) found evidence of decreased earnings after relocation.

While research examining how relocated public housing residents fare across a range of potential outcomes—including employment, residential stability, housing satisfaction, school quality, and neighborhood economic conditions—has been nuanced and at times contradictory (see, e.g., Goetz 2013; Glover 2010), the disruption of community ties and place attachments among residents who either receive a HCV or move into the new HOPE IV redevelopments have been well documented. As Clampet-Lunquist (2004a, b, 2010) and Greenbaum (2002, 2008) point out, forced relocation from public housing can result in social isolation in an unfamiliar new community. According to Keene and Ruel (2013) and Newman (2003), such a loss of community can be compounded by older age. In their qualitative study of people relocated through HOPE VI, Greenbaum et al. (2008) reported diminished social networks in comparison with prior conditions in public housing. Similarly, in a sample of Atlanta public housing residents prior to relocation, Tester et al. (2011) found that 41 percent of the 290 residents in their study expressed place attachment, and a large percentage expressed some level of community attachment.

Integrating 25,000 public housing households and 56,000 individuals into “the larger social, economic and physical fabric of Chicago” is a chief focus of the Plan, with the hope that residential proximity would “bridge differences and build personal networks that might promote access to opportunity” (Chaskin and Joseph 2015, p. x). However, in high- and low-poverty relocation sites in Tampa, Florida, Greenbaum et al. (2008) found that relocation did not enhance social capital for former public housing residents. In a study of relocated Chicago public housing residents living in new mixed-income communities that replaced traditional public housing, Chaskin and Joseph (2015) found that residents felt stigmatized and marginalized by their new, more affluent neighbors. This sense of exclusion and separation in the new developments was exacerbated by the lack of inclusion in decision-making bodies (p. xii). Skobba and Goetz (2013) argue that informal social support systems enhance residential stability and should be considered in the design of housing policies.

THE TIES THAT BIND AFRICAN AMERICANS

DeFilippis (2001) describes how the exclusion of low-income communities and African Americans from full participation in societal institutions is largely missing from Putnam’s (1993, 1996, 2000) notions of social capital: “If social capital as sets of networks means anything, it means that some people will be connected and others will not” (p. 792). DeFilippis (2001) highlights our tendency to “render invisible social networks unable to generate capital” (p. 798), arguing that Putnam’s definition of social capital “as something that is possessed, or not possessed, by individuals, communities, cities, nations ...” is problematic because “places are not things. A community cannot possess anything.... Communities are outcomes, not actors” (p. 789). So, while the bridging capital emphasized by Putnam (2000) is important for low-income community residents on the “losing end of a set of power relations,” DeFilippis (2001) maintains, “what needs to change are those power relations, not the level of connections” (p. 790).

Although their communal ties fail to generate capital that is equivalent to that of their more affluent or white counterparts, poor African Americans have a long history of creating and utilizing informal social support networks. Carol Stack's *All Our Kin* (1974) illuminated the importance of insular, local, and extended family-based networks to mostly female-headed poor Black families. Stack (1974) found that locally based social networks revolving around extended family and friends allowed families living in "the Flats," a pseudonym for a poor Black neighborhood, to get by on a day-to-day basis through mutual support even though they were all very poor. Such studies suggest that Black women learn to be resourceful, devising creative strategies for coping with the historical and continuous racism and poverty that pervades their lives. More recent studies have continued to document the significant role played by informal support systems in the lives of poor families, including single parents (Clampet-Lundquist 2010; Dominguez and Watkins 2003; Edin and Kafalas 2005; Edin and Lein 1997; Edin and Nelson 2003, 2013; Fernandez-Kelly 2015; Newman 1999; Small 2007; Venkatesh 2000, 2002). These studies suggest that, for many relocated public housing residents, social networks and community ties continued to provide support.

Recent studies of low-income single parents find that the absence of affordable housing for very-low-income households increases the need for informal social networks and supports—and family, friends, and fictive kin are crucial if such households are to remain stably housed (Clampet-Lundquist 2003; Cook et al. 2002; Skobba 2008; Skobba and Goetz 2013). Nationwide, over 40 percent of such households are on long waiting lists for housing assistance, forcing them to "double up" or live in substandard housing (Leopold 2012).

It has been difficult to identify and measure positive social support in a context in which social ties often drain residents of resources. Stereotypes about the draining nature of social ties within public housing emerged by the late 1970s (Wilson 1978). By then, the reported exploitative aspect of such networks within poor inner-city public housing neighborhoods subsumed any research on positive community supports. This led advocates for transformation efforts to assume that *all* social networks within and around public housing were draining and therefore worth losing through relocation, demolition, or redevelopment (Glover 2010). However, scholars studying the impact of public housing relocation continued to point out that positive and draining social networks existed alongside each other in public housing, confounding efforts to understand how social networks are affected by displacement (Clampet-Lundquist 2010; Curley 2010; Kleit 2010). Another factor that such an approach overlooks is the *activist mothering* performed by low-income Black women (McDonald 1997), reflecting the complex ways in which these women blend labor, politics, and mothering to bring much-needed change to their communities.

DATA AND METHODS

Primary data for this research come from a 2007–2011 qualitative study that the first author conducted on the strategies that low-income African American grandmothers in the greater Chicago metropolitan area deployed to provide daily care for their grandchildren. Data were collected through in-depth semistructured interviews and participant observation sessions with 77 custodial grandmothers between the ages of 38 and 83, a group small enough to conduct in-depth analysis but large enough to generate the analytic depth necessary to

generate clear response patterns. Seventy-seven interviews and 19 participation–observation sessions at a site relevant to the caregiving experience (e.g., guardianship hearings, school or doctor’s visits, public aid office visits, case worker appointments, child care facilities, etc.) were conducted. We use a subset of data from this study (20 transcripts from interviews with grandmothers who were also former public housing residents displaced through HOPE IV) for the present analysis.

Potential participants were alerted to the study through Chicago-area social service agencies, flyers posted in targeted communities, and word-of-mouth, and were prompted to call a toll-free number and leave contact information. The first author conducted brief screening interviews to determine whether a potential participant qualified for the study, asking questions pertaining to household structure (SGH vs. multigenerational), income, and care-type (e.g., informal, legal guardianship, adoption). Potential participants who qualified for the study were asked to determine an interview time and location to meet with the first author. Per Human Subjects guidelines, informed consent was obtained from each participant.

Data were collected in two waves. During the first wave, subjects (custodial grandmothers) were recruited to clearly distinguish specific forms of caregiving, ranging from informal care to adoption, which helped to highlight the importance of several types of public assistance (TANF payments, foster care payments). During the second wave, subjects were recruited to maximize variation in the types of child care utilized by custodial grandmothers, whether from family, friends, and neighbors (FFN) or formal childcare arrangements. Although research was conducted in predominantly African American urban neighborhoods with concentrated poverty (at least 40 percent of residents living at or below the FPL), it spilled over into other Chicago Southside neighborhoods.

All 20 participants self-identified as U.S.-born Black women with an average age of 50 years; all were primary caregivers to at least one grandchild or great-grandchild under the age of 18 with no parents currently living in the home. Study participants bore an average of 4.25 children. Six were married (two of whom were separated), five were divorced, one was engaged, one was widowed, and the rest were single. All but three reported yearly household incomes of less than \$15,000, putting them at or below the FPL.¹ Of the three women who reported household incomes higher than \$15,000, all reported incomes between one-and-a-half times and twice the FPL, which is also considered low-income. Five of the women were working at the time of recruitment, one was retired, and 14 were unemployed.

Study participants were raising an average of two grandchildren for an average of 9 years. Eight grandmothers provided care informally, nine were legal guardians, and three had adopted their grandchildren. Participants had an average of nine grandchildren in total, although only four were caregivers to all of their grandchildren. Table 1 breaks this information down for each of the 20 grandmothers and provides information on the public housing community in which they lived and the number of years over which they resided

¹The federal poverty level during the years of data collection for families of two, three, four, and eight was \$13,690, \$17,170, \$20,650, and \$34,570, respectively.

there prior to relocation. While this paper focuses on the 20 of 77 caregivers who had lived in public housing, there were no relevant socioeconomic or household differences between those who had lived in public housing and those who had not.

Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and coded in two stages using *Dedoose* data analysis software. Transcripts were first coded following themes identified in the interview protocol, including codes related to the impetus for assuming the primary caregiving role, parental and state involvement, community and institutional experiences, carework demands, stressors, coping, and childcare experiences. These themes were identified in the literature as relevant to GPHH in general and SGH in particular. The interview data were then recoded using a new set of emergent codes related to their community experiences in public housing. Through this data analysis, an understanding of the mechanisms that facilitated community support emerged, revealing the explicit role of place-based support that existed in public housing, how grandmothers defined and experienced community, the role they and others played in constructing and utilizing a sense of community, and the difficulty they had creating new community ties and maintaining old ones in their new neighborhoods. Coding was crosschecked across all research assistants to ensure reliability. This multistage coding process therefore employed a grounded theory approach while maintaining connections with extant literature in drawing theoretical conclusions (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

Data reflecting grandmothers' experiences with public housing were retrospective, perhaps making them susceptible to "recall bias," which can impact both the completeness and accuracy of recollections and memories," although such retrospective research also "can be used to gain information about several years' experience in a short amount of time" (Richardson et al. 2014, p. 73). This approach also enables us to obtain information we would otherwise forgo having altogether. We acknowledge that perceptions of community in public housing for multigenerational households with lengthy tenures may differ from those of people residing there more briefly. We contend that gaining insight into multigenerational perspectives on public housing will better inform existing research concerning community and social support for such families, even after relocation. Moreover, African Americans remain overrepresented in concentrated high-poverty communities, making it all the more important to understand how those in multigenerational families build community.

While the first author enjoyed developing rapport with study subjects during data collection, there were challenges, including being inundated with calls by grandmothers acting as babysitters or who were prior but not current primary caregivers. A second challenge involved gaining access to more institutionally embedded grandmothers. Study participants caring for grandchildren under the auspices of the child welfare system were less likely to participate or divulge sensitive information that might threaten their care arrangements. Clarifying the author's status at the time as a graduate student, the confidentiality of the interview, and community-based organizations that assisted with recruitment helped in overcoming this challenge.

FINDINGS

Participants spoke candidly about the deterioration of public housing over time as government support waned and gang violence and the underground economy grew. However, participants also talked of having a strong sense of community with a range of supports that in some cases helped them manage their caregiving demands in spite of escalating social problems. Finding the support these women needed to ensure family stability required effort and agency on their part. We show that, by acting as a safety net for families experiencing housing instability, affordable public housing supported the demands of carework. As most study participants had to rely on neighborhood-based social support networks, we found that place attachment and social support networks factored prominently in participants' reports of experiencing a sense of community amid the social problems plaguing their communities. In their response, some grandmothers wielded their labor, concern for all children residing in the their neighborhoods, and political power to improve their communities. While their efforts were laudable and warrant documentation, they were often no match for negative environmental effects.

PUBLIC HOUSING AS A SAFETY NET

Participants defined and experienced community in public housing in terms of having a place that would enable them to meet their families' needs by (a) helping them achieve family stability and cohesion, (b) shoring up their families when experiencing the financial instability associated with poverty, and (c) enabling women serving as dominant family figures to act as safety nets for others. The loss of or inability to sustain private market-priced housing, the loss of husbands or partners, and employment challenges made public housing the only viable option for most study participants. For instance, 50-year-old Lauryn Oak (respondent N3) moved to Stateway Gardens when she was 15. Her single mother of eight children was also raising her deceased daughter's six children. Ms. Oak explained what motivated her mother's decision to move into public housing:

Ms. Oak: After we got burnt out in '73 the Red Cross sent my mother to CHA [Chicago Housing Authority] And that's how we moved to Stateway. Stateway was the only place that was big enough for all of us.

Ms. Oak's father's work required him to travel across the country. In his absence, and in lieu of his sporadic financial support, it was public housing and public assistance that gave the family stability.

Similarly, when Ms. Hedge's (respondent N1) mother left her father because of his drug addiction, she was unable to provide for her eleven children without public assistance. She moved her family into Robert Taylor Homes, when Ms. Hedge, as the eldest of her children, was 15 years old. Six years later, Ms. Hedge (who is now 41 years old) had four children of her own and moved into an apartment near her mother in Robert Taylor.

Public housing not only facilitated cohesion in nuclear families, it also enabled extended families to live near one another. Living in Washington Park Homes for over 20 years and working for the CHA in various capacities provided 81-year-old Ms. Abdullah (respondent

N18) with first-hand knowledge of the multiple generations of women who relied on public housing as a safety net:

But see, a lot of 'em, a lot of young women, had their own apartments like at 18 and a lot of 'em lived in the buildings where their mothers lived and their grandmothers ... you had some nice mothers and grandmothers.

When Ms. Abdullah, her husband, and their seven children moved to Washington Park Homes it was to accommodate their large family on his meager income:

Ms. Abdullah: We moved down there in '63 when they built some high rises down there.... In '63 it was 2,300 kids over there.... My husband worked, but there was very few families that worked.... They [CHA] broke up a lot of families, you know.

Married couples also found that public housing made it easier to weather financial storms. For instance, 54-year-old Beulah Brooks (respondent N7), now the married mother of three, moved into Robert Taylor homes when she was eight. She indicated that public housing provided a safety net for poor families fighting to keep their families together when their efforts to achieve self-sufficiency outside of public housing failed:

Ms. Brooks We moved to Robert Taylor when they first built it. I was eight years old when we moved over there.

Interviewer How long did you stay?

Ms. Brooks 'Til I was 18. And then every time I had a problem I moved back to the projects. I'd move out, but I'd go back to rebuild myself.... We've been some of everywhere [laughs] but we stayed close, we stayed together.

Although they struggled financially, study participants agreed, public housing kept them out of deep poverty—and kept them housed.

Participants identified public housing as affordable and as a place to ease the burden of scarce resources, factors that were fundamental to experiencing community. By ensuring that they would not spend more than 30 percent of their incomes on rent, accommodating their large families, and keeping family and friends residing nearby in a central location, public housing provided the infrastructure needed to stabilize their families.

Ms. Erzen (respondent N9) knew well the important role public housing played when facing financial instability. She was 19 years old when she migrated to Chicago. Like many new migrants, she found a low-skill, low-wage job, met and married her husband, and had three children in quick succession. According to Ms. Erzen, her marriage “turned out terrible because he was a gambler.” She also lost her job after she became pregnant again:

Ms. Erzen: Oh dear, I done lost my job.... I had to rely on RC [husband]. That's when he stopped bringing his money home.... I didn't have a penny in my pocket.

After a short stint living with relatives, she and her four children ended up in Ida B. Wells Homes, where they remained for 15 years. For her, public housing provided the safety net she needed to make ends meet.

Not only was public housing a safety net for participants' immediate families, it also enabled *them* to be safety nets to other family members. Ms. Hedge described the important role played by these multigenerational households in public housing:

Ms. Hedge: [My husband] was like verbally abusive. I never got beat up but he was like verbally abusive and it was just, I left him, when I left him I left my apartment [in Robert Taylor]. I moved back home [Robert Taylor] with my mother. And my daughter was like a couple of months old.

Study participants and the women in their families (in Ms. Hedge's case, her mother), were able to provide stability in public housing. For example, when 45-year-old Imani Brooklyn (respondent N2) moved in with her boyfriend, she lost her apartment at Cabrini Green. When the relationship soured she was able to move back in with her daughter, who also had an apartment there:

Ms. Brooklyn: She had her own apartment. My daughter got her an apartment in Cabrini Green too. I moved up north and I lost my apartment. I had to move back with her in Cabrini Green.

Fifty-seven-year-old Angie Forna (respondent N8) provides another example of how, by serving as a safety net for dominant family figures, public housing enabled them to act as safety nets for others. Ms. Forna lived in public housing but kept her work activities secret because she needed to pay her ailing mother's rent. The mother of three described how living in "the projects" was a safety net for her as she operated as a safety net for her extended family:

Ms. Forna: My momma got sick, she couldn't work no more.... Honey, I moved my momma into the projects two doors from me. Paid her rent, paid her bills and mine.

In addition to caring for her three children and her ailing mother, Ms. Forna was also able to act as a safety net for her nieces and nephews when her sister was suddenly stricken with multiple sclerosis.

For women managing multiple caregiving responsibilities and health crises, then, public housing was the safety net *they* could rely on as they cared for others in need. For example, Ms. Brooklyn was 2 years old when a heart attack killed her mother. Her paternal grandmother took her widowed son and his three children into her home in Cabrini Green. When Ms. Brooklyn became pregnant with her first child at 16 and her second child at 18, she stayed with her father and grandmother in what was now a multigenerational household. She was 19 years old when she moved into her own apartment in Cabrini Green. Her daughter followed a similar pattern before they were relocated.

Ms. Brooklyn: It's not all bad in the projects. My grandkids, they experienced a little of the projects. My grandson's 10. He was there until he was about six. And my granddaughter ... she was one or two years old when we moved out the projects.

Many of the women we interviewed experienced community when utilizing public housing as a safety net safeguarded them and their families when they faced economic and personal challenges. Over time, their public housing communities provided them with a supportive

space where their lives and stories unfolded. However, the economic and social challenges their families faced meant that community also served an additional function—as a resource that gave them what they needed to survive and keep their families intact.

SOCIAL SUPPORT AND NEIGHBORHOOD INSTITUTIONS

Public housing enabled grandmothers to live in close physical proximity to social support and neighborhood institutions, including food pantries, churches, afterschool programs, and vocational training. Limited household resources led many study participants to rely on neighborhood-based social support networks, which provided timely word-of-mouth information about neighborhood resources and services (Curley 2010; Fischer 1982). Ms. Brooks, who had lived in Stateway Gardens and Robert Taylor Homes before being relocated, described how social support networks operated in public housing to shore up struggling community members, including sharing information about neighborhood resources:

Ms. Brooks: People helped. People looked out. If one person found out about something they was willing to tell the next person. If somebody got sick people came—anything I can do, you want something from the store, how can I help, I'll watch the kids, you need me to comb Sally's hair?

Study participants benefited from their lengthy tenures in public housing, which has been found to be positively associated with being embedded in a community, and came to know and trust their neighbors (Coleman 1988; Saegert and Winkel 2004). When Ms. Idera was 11 years old, her mother died. She and her siblings spent the next 7 years in foster care. When she met her husband at the age of 18, the young couple became one of the first families to move into Ida B. Wells Homes. She, her four children, and her grandchildren lived there for 38 years until they were relocated. Ms. Idera talked about how helpful social ties built over time contributed to her sense of community:

Ms. Idera: It was wonderful ... all the people I knew. All them knew me for years and I knew them for years. But it started getting a little bad when they started over there dealing with them drugs. That was the only problem. I never did have no trouble with nobody over there because most of 'em I knew, see.

Ms. Idera's experience echoed those of other study participants with lengthy stints in public housing, as they relied heavily on social support networks strengthened over time for information about available resources and services as well as to cope with the emerging presence of drug dealers.

Study participants identified three ways in which neighborhood institutions were important: (a) providing regular activities for their children and grandchildren that contributed to their educational and social development and kept them safe; (b) offering employment and educational opportunities that might otherwise be unavailable; and (c) providing information about *other* local institutions, including businesses, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies with needed resources. Ms. Brooks shed light on these functions:

Ms. Brooks: Okay, they built the center right there on 51st and Federal and the kids had somewhere to go where they could go and do art and dance and just hang out.... Focus on something positive.... The projects used to take buses and go on different trips and stuff. Go to Rainbow Beach or Starlight Beach. Go to Six Flags.

Ms. Brooklyn, who spent 40 years at Cabrini Green, reflected on how neighborhood institutions also took into account the needs of public housing residents by connecting them to the only job or vocational training many had ever had:

Ms. Brooklyn: You can go to, like, to job training schools. That's how I learned to be a cashier. At Cabrini there's a lotta help. You can go to job training school. They got a lot of after-school programs for the kids, school activities. Like when holidays come they take care of the kids a lot.

Similarly, Ms. Oak, who spent 24 years in Stateway Gardens before moving to another CHA subsidized complex, credited the vocational training she received through a program offered to public housing residents for enabling her to make more money than she had ever made. The program also required her to meet GED requirements, which she did.

Ms. Oak: They gave 300 residents a job to work. That's how I got into the maintenance field to learn how to repair the apartments.... The stipulation in getting a job was all that didn't have a high school diploma had to be pursuing it.

Although the program lasted only 2 years, the training and education it provided enabled Ms. Oak to maintain employment for nearly a decade before she injured her back. During this time she was able to purchase the car she now uses to commute to her low-wage, carework job and to transport her grandson to and from school.

Living in public housing enabled grandmothers to access information about local charitable organizations that provided household goods, food, clothing, and other resources. Ms. Weber (respondent N5), a 48-year-old mother of four, exemplified how study participants learned about other neighborhood institutions, including programs that connected them to job opportunities outside their social networks.

Ms. Weber: They helped you find jobs. If you needed clothes, furniture, anything, they would help you. They had places they could send you to. A lot of places. It was very helpful. Yes, I loved it.... I'd move back to the projects today.

Similarly, not only did Ms. Hedge find her job as a census taker during her approximately 23 years living in Robert Taylor Homes, she also received training on finding and keeping a job. Neighborhood institutions filled gaps in women's social support networks, providing access to formal training and educational opportunities, job leads, and tangible resources. CHA, local nonprofit organizations, and educational institutions made such available, addressing the unique needs of public housing residents. Social support and neighborhood institutions were important mechanisms that helped these women experience community while they lived in public housing.

BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH BLACK ACTIVIST MOTHERING

The grandmothers we studied struggled to provide social services, quality education, and political power to their families and other low-income residents while simultaneously negotiating encroaching violence and the devolution of CHA services. These women provided for others largely through established tenant and neighborhood organizations. U.S. public housing tenant organizations or councils have a long history (see Williams 2015; Drake 2014 for reviews). These organizations are approved and funded by public housing authorities (PHAs) and typically operate as independent nonprofit corporations (Drake 2014). Women often lead these associations' efforts (Levenstein 2015). Many of the women in our study were engaged in community-based work, which is reflected in the abovementioned concept of *activist mothering*. Study participants' limited income kept them in public housing, compelling them to cope with increasingly severe social problems. Enacting the activist mothering tradition, some study participants strived to improve the educational, safety, social, political, and economic experiences of those residing in public housing by (a) working *within* the PHAs through their tenant associations or through CHA resident-appointed positions, (b) making demands *on* public housing administrators, and (c) participating *in* institutions (both formal and informal) that served public housing residents.

In our study, activist mothering was most often a response to rising gang violence and increasingly limited CHA services. The women we interviewed described the social problems associated with project life as beleaguered, normalized, and in some cases anticipated. They also described negative impacts on their families. Some women had intimate knowledge of the drug activity and gang violence associated with racialized concentrated poverty. Ms. Abdullah best conveyed what it was like living and working in public housing as gang violence spread:

Ms. Abdullah: They threw a boy out the window over there on ... the 14th floor I think ... had them bad buildings. Them niggahs was bad in all them buildings. The gang members and things.... And it was a rivalry between them and them over there in the projects where I used to work.

Ms. Abdullah and her family lived in Washington Park Homes before being relocated. Ms. Abdullah's work in the Community and Tenant Relations Aid (CNTRA) program not only enabled her to observe the conditions of public housing in the greater Chicago area, but also gave her and other tenants a vehicle for improving them:

Ms. Abdullah: A community tenant relations aide ... is really [doing] social work because, see, you work with the families and the seniors and whoever. And your job is, like, to get the services for the people, families that you work with.

Although several of her sons succumbed to drug addiction and the underground economy—one of whose three children she was rearing—she nevertheless tried to make a difference in her community.

Overall, study participants engaged in activist mothering were motivated by the growing lack of educational and social activities for public housing children and families as well as the ineffectiveness of the legal system and CHA to reduce crime and violence. They

demanded attention from CHA officials on behalf of residents—sometimes working through their tenants' associations:

Ms. Abdullah: I worked the CHA summer lunch program one summer. I was director.... That's how I got to know all the presidents from all over CHA.... We were all involved. We had building councils, we had presidents, we would meet every month.... The people worked hard.

While some grandmothers joined other women working within existing structures to reduce the gap between needs and available resources, others leveraged their personal situations to make demands on others who shared their experience or on administrators. Ms. Weber is a case in point. She immediately stepped in to care for her developmentally delayed granddaughter, learning how to do so from other women in her community, who also told her about schools and medical providers best suited for such children. Ms. Weber became motivated to push the building's local council to provide social activities for disabled children. She and others were working on this project when she was relocated:

Ms. Weber: I had suggested to [the building manager] that she should take the second floor up there and have something for kids with disabilities because there were quite a few kids in the building with disabilities. Because there was a lot of programs going on for the normal kids. So, that's what we was gonna do at one moment.

Activist mothering not only served communities; it *built* and *protected* them. Coupling their activism with social support, neighborhood institutions, and tenant associations made grandmothers like Ms. Weber feel that a sense of community could exist alongside the negative aspects of living in public housing:

Ms. Weber: It was hard for my babies at first because you know the kids always wanna pick on the new kids. And then they got used to being over there over the years. But my kids was new so I had problems with them jumping on my kids until they got to really know my kids. But it was lovely to me ... Other than the shooting and stuff.

Similarly, Ms. Idera reported that the negative aspects of public housing she could not control were harmful to her children. She was not alone. Lacking other housing options, she shared her feelings about the role of the environment in contributing to three of her four children's lifelong struggle with crack cocaine drug addiction:

Ms. Idera: I probably would have changed my environment with my kids, if I could have. A better environment ... And I think if we could have been maybe in an environment where wasn't no drugs and so much stuff going on like it was ... I think we would have been better off.

Yet, despite personal and environmental constraints, activist mothers like Ms. Idera were motivated to improve the quality of life for public housing children by playing an active role in the school most children in her project, including her grandchildren, attended:

Ms. Idera: It was really beautiful though. I really liked Ida B. Wells. All the peoples in there and I got to work for Donahue school right across the street. I used to go to

school with my grandchildren. And the other little kids. I used to volunteer.... I had a whole bunch of order with them like that too.

Activist mothers not only deployed a range of mechanisms to advocate on behalf of their own and others' children, they also brought much-needed resources to public housing residents. Some grandmothers were aware of the marginalization of their communities and the race, class, and gender disadvantages of their residents. To this end, they used activist mothering to mitigate the conditions under which they were forced to live. Ms. Abdullah reflected on changes to public housing that occurred in the 1970s, when public support began to decline:

Ms. Abdullah: When the old white men, Gus Masters and Charlie Swibel, were in charge, it was different. But see, later on when they moved out things got kinda lousy and you didn't get the services that you needed. At first you could get your stoves or refrigerators when you needed 'em. Then it got to where it was kinda impossible to get a stove and a refrigerator. They just didn't care whether you had one or not.

Others brought resources to the community through informal paid childcare and hook-ups—opportunities to underpay for goods and services. Hook-ups could be legal or illegal, including buying items (household products, cigarettes, etc.) on sale or in bulk and reselling them at a higher price that was lower than most retailers charged, or selling stolen items or food stamps (Link Cards).

Although participants agreed that public housing provided a safety net and social support that enabled them to act in turn as safety nets to family and friends, not all of them used their agency to create an extended community beyond their immediate networks. In fact, some actively sought to limit the influence of the broader public housing community. For instance, Ms. Hedge limited her families' interaction with a community she deemed problematic:

Ms. Hedge: I did not want to live there! I didn't go outside for a long time. Because I wasn't used to that. I mean all these people in one building and everybody outside, ain't nobody doin' nothing ... that was something new to me ... wasn't nobody goin' to school, everybody just hangin' out doing nothing all day every day.

Although she and her extended family built a strong, tight social support network, Ms. Hedge rarely interacted with the larger public housing community.

Other grandmothers reported that, even after long tenures in public housing, they never felt connected to the wider community and they shielded their children from its negative influence. Fifty-year-old Elizabeth Fir did her best to provide her two children with opportunities by working and attending school. She and others described being unable to create a boundary strong enough against the negative aspects of the projects, but it did not stop them from trying:

Ms. Fir: I was workin'. Sometimes I was workin' two jobs. Tryin' to go to school. And, they became latchkey kids, on their own. This behavior started takin' place when I moved into the projects. She [her daughter] would latch on to some people

... and take on their values and attempt to bring it back to my house. And then, that's where the conflict starts.

When she was 15 years old, Ms. Fir's daughter Lindsey had her first child. She had another at 16 and eventually a third, one of whom her mother is currently raising. Similarly, Ms. Brooklyn, who felt no compulsion to build community through activist mothering, tried to shield her children from the negative aspects of public housing:

Ms. Brooklyn: I raised him to the fullest. I know I was at Cabrini Green, but it ain't where you came from it's how you gonna develop and deal with it.... My son, he messed up, but I was trying to be there on his butt about doing all the positive things. But he thought he had a new family and wanted to go that way. I did everything that I could for him but he wants to get out there and experience it and he's incarcerated now.

While activist mothering enabled some women living in public housing to build community and protect their families through participation in tenants groups, pestering administrators, and participating in service-providing institutions, these efforts often failed to mitigate the negative impact of a community riddled with crime and violence. It did, however, provide a vehicle through which to use agency to build a stronger community. This strategy sometimes succeeded. Yet other study participants, while utilizing community supports and services, attempted to establish protective boundaries by *not* participating in communitywide efforts, another strategy that sometimes succeeded and sometimes failed.

DISCUSSION

Study participants defined and experienced community through access to housing that provided them with a safety net as they in turn were safety nets to their families and friends. For most study participants, public housing was the only affordable housing option. Some who left public housing were forced by circumstances to return. When romantic relationships ended, they could not make ends meet, a health crisis occurred, or their caregiving responsibilities exceeded their individual resources, public housing was more than a way station. The ease with which they could procure public housing, coupled with being able to live in close physical proximity to their social support networks and neighborhood institutions, made living in the projects valuable to women serving as dominant family figures.

The social support and community-building functions of tenant and neighborhood institutions (both formal and informal) shaped how participants defined and experienced community, and they were more valuable to study participants who had spent lengthy stints in public housing. Indeed, their experience of community in public housing reminded us of descriptions of social support in the Flats (Stack 1974).

Similarly, we heard little or nothing from study participants about so-called draining or exploitative social ties that many have assumed exist in public housing. Indeed, these women maximized the educational and social development opportunities provided by their networks, and also took advantage of employment and educational opportunities as well as the resource-brokering function of local institutions. Still, the social support networks and

neighborhood institutions associated with their lengthy tenures in public housing often failed to forestall the negative effects of gang violence, drug infestation, and declining government services. In response, many study participants used activist mothering to improve and make their communities safer, drawing on public housing organizations or councils to use their agency to construct community in the face of social problems that threatened its very existence.

While many of the grandmothers demonstrated agency through activist mothering, some also limited contact with the wider community out of fear that the crime and violence would harm their children and grandchildren. In doing so, these study participants demonstrate the structural constraints and tensions between community support and violence that afflict public housing residents. They also reveal heterogeneity in grandmothers' coping strategies.

Poverty deconcentration proponents argued that social networks within public housing reproduce poverty. Some housing policies have therefore sought to improve either the places where concentrated poverty exists or the lives of those who suffer from it. Policies such as HOPE VI and Chicago's Plan for Transformation demolished traditional public housing, replacing it with mixed-income dwellings or providing housing vouchers to enable those being relocated to take advantage of government subsidized private housing in putatively "better" communities on the assumption that infusing poor communities with higher-income neighbors or dispersing poorer residents across higher-income neighborhoods would improve their outcomes.

Neoliberal housing policies that support poverty deconcentration rather than alleviation, often through privatizing public housing, contributed not only to the territorial stigmatization of public housing communities, but also to a significant loss of affordable and accessible housing units. While outcomes for relocated people have been mixed, many displaced public housing residents report the loss of community ties.

Our study, as have similar studies, has shown that residents who describe the experience of community in public housing projects refer both to a place *and* the relationships that develop in that place. Although the tension between place-based and nonplace-based definitions of community can be seen in early sociological conceptualizations of the idea, that distinction applies to a lesser extent to poor families and individuals. For these families, informal support networks are critical to their survival, providing them and their loved ones with access to affordable housing when facing housing or job instability or the dissolution of intimate relationships. Household heads such as Ms. Oak, Ms. Ezren, Ms. Hedge, and Ms. Brooks, and grandmothers such as Ms. Forna and Ms. Brooklyn, served as safety nets for family members in need because the projects gave them housing stability. Indeed, the ripple effect of public housing as a safety net could be seen across multiple generations in these families.

We found that informal support systems and neighborhood institutions gave poor families living in public housing access to the goods and services they needed. Such networks and institutional knowledge were strengthened by lengthy tenures in public housing. In other words, age mattered (see Keene and Ruel 2013; Newman 2003; Tester et al. 2011). We also

assert that family form matters. We found, as had Drake and Cayton (1945), that heads of multigenerational families, extending at times across multiple households, played critical roles enabling African American families in disadvantaged neighborhoods to develop into “mutual aid societies, originated and maintained by economic necessity (58).”

Although participants’ experience or sense of community in public housing factored prominently in in-depth interviews, it was not the main focus of the primary study. Therefore, we could not systematically explore all of the factors that shape and are shaped by the experience or sense of community reported by former residents of public housing. Our study is also limited by its focus on women who experienced forced relocation.

We acknowledge as well the role nostalgia might have played in respondents’ recollections. As Clampet-Lundquist (2010) observes in the conclusion of her study of public housing residents in Philadelphia who were forced to relocate: “... we cannot rule out nostalgia as an ‘omitted’ variable” (p. 105), noting that relocated public housing residents often express fondness for the sense of community they experienced in public housing. Nevertheless, our study participants candidly acknowledged the role that increasing violence played in their daily lives, suggesting that their positive perceptions of community support reflected more than simple nostalgia. Despite these study limitations, however, our examination has shed light on how residents in multigenerational families experienced a sense of community in public housing and adds new data to previous research on both the good and bad aspects of traditional public housing.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Public housing continues to be eliminated all over the country. Atlanta demolished all of its traditional project-based public housing stock by 2011; New Orleans and Chicago are not far behind; San Francisco is privatizing its stock; and New York City is considering a proposal to sell off some public housing properties to pay for needed repairs at others. This trend is forcing tens of thousands of public housing residents to relocate. Although a voucher subsidy is typically provided to assist qualified residents shifting to market-priced rental housing, relocated residents cannot take their place-based supportive and vital social networks with them (Kleit 2010).

While such networks can be reformulated over time in new places (Venkatesh, 2000, 2002), building new networks can take several years and therefore these residents can risk unemployment, inadequate childcare, and disadvantages in new locations. Some PHAs are attempting to remedy this situation formally, having found that relocated residents are not adequately accessing the services that they need (Atlanta Housing Authority 2015). However, it remains unclear whether a more formal response can replace the organic social networks built within public housing communities. Therefore PHAs and policymakers should consider residents’ community ties when devising strategies.

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TABLE 1.

Respondent #	Age	Children	Total # of Grandchildren/ Grandchildren in Care	Public Housing Project	Length of Residence
N1	41	4	1/1	Robert Taylor Homes	22–23 years
N2	45	2	2/2	Cabrini Green	40 years
N3	50	2	1/1	Stateway Gardens	24 years
N4	47	6	7/1	Stateway Gardens & Harold Ickes Homes	Approx. 24 years
N5	48	4	9/1	Robert Taylor Homes	14 years
N6	48	3	1/1	Bethel Pace Center	Not disclosed
N7	54	3	5/5	Stateway Gardens & Robert Taylor Homes	Approx. 14 years
N8	41	3	4/2	Undisclosed housing projects	Not disclosed
N9	76	4	14/4	Ida B. Wells Homes	15 years
N10	51	4	48/4	Robert Taylor Homes	Approx. 20 years
N11	49	3	4/1	Stateway Gardens	Approx. 20 years
N12	51	7	13/1	Washington Park Homes	Approx. 10 years
N13	62	12	18/2	Undisclosed housing projects	Not disclosed
N14	50	4	10/1	Randolph Towers	2 years
N15	48	3	5/1	The Bungalows	11 years
N16	57	3	9/3	Rockwell Gardens	1 year
N17	63	4	8/2	Ida B. Wells Homes	38 years
N18	81	7	9/1	Washington Park Homes	23 years
N19	52	4	11/5	Stateway Gardens	9 years
N20	50	2	3/1	Robert Taylor Homes	Approx. 18 years