Omaha Focus, 91-1

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The Omaha Housing Authority's Scattered Site Housing Program: Nearby Residents' Perceptions

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Andrew Wilch, and Adele Johnson*

Introduction

The traditional, congregate, low-income public housing has been plagued with many problems, both in Omaha and throughout the nation. For example, the Logan-Fontenelle housing project in Omaha, built in 1936, has been the scene of many gang and drug related crime problems as well as being the oldest public housing project in Omaha. Within recent years, much controversy has surrounded the plans to tear down the Logan-Fontenelle project and to expand the scattered site housing (SSH) program as a more viable housing alternative for low income families.

The Omaha Housing Authority (OHA) first purchased single family dwellings in 1985. The goal was to provide housing—known as scattered site housing—for low income families throughout the city as an alternative to the traditional concentration of low income congregate housing. Mr. Robert Armstrong became the current OHA director in 1986 and has given special attention to developing the scattered site housing program by carefully preparing low income families for the responsibilities of home ownership. He also continued to expand OHA's purchases of single family dwellings throughout the city.

Purpose of the Study

During the spring of 1991, Professor Clute and his students conducted a study of the SSH program for OHA under the sponsorship of the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Center for Public Affairs Research. The study sought to evaluate the SSH program as seen by the immediate neighbors of the scattered site homes throughout the city.

The study was designed to assess (1) the neighbors' knowledge of the OHA housing program, (2) their knowledge of the current SSH residents, and (3) their attitudes toward the OHA program and its current residents.

During the first weeks of April, 1991, a telephone survey was conducted among a random sample of neighbors living within one block of each of the OHA scattered site homes. A professional survey company conducted the interviews which were about ten minutes long. The survey was limited to the scattered site homes purchased since 1987 to assess the neighbors' perceptions of the SSH program under the current administration. Four interviews were conducted for each of the 75 sites which included 24 sites in 1987 (N = 96 interviews), 30 sites in 1989 (N = 120), and 21 sites in 1991 (N = 84) for a total of 300 interviews. OHA was in the process of purchasing the sites in 1991 at the time of the survey so there were no OHA residents in these homes yet.

*Students enrolled in Soc 4820/8826; Team Research Seminar (Spring, 1991).
Characteristics of the Respondents

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the respondents in the survey of whom 54.2 percent were female; 53.0 percent were 46 years of age and older; 98.0 percent were white; 73.2 percent were married; 59.4 percent had no children under 18 living in the household; 58.3 percent were white; 73.2 percent were married; 59.4 percent had no children in the survey of whom 54.2 percent were female; 73.2 percent were married; 59.4 percent had no children under 18 living in the household; 58.3 percent had education beyond high school; 58.3 percent had lived in their homes for over 10 years (over one-third for more than 20 years); 92.2 percent were homeowners, and 76.1 percent valued their homes as over $50,000 (over 50 percent estimated their homes were worth $50,770,000). Thus the most typical respondent was a middle-aged, white, married, female homeowner with no children in the household.

Housing Values

In comparing the respondents by the three years in which the SSH units were purchased, there were few, if any, demographic differences among the respondents with one major exception. As shown in table 2, there appear to be very clear differences in the housing values of each of the three years. For example, 71.8 percent of the respondents from the 1987 SSH neighborhoods valued their homes to be worth $60,000 or more, whereas only 57.1 percent of those in 1989 and 24.7 percent of those in 1991 valued their homes to be worth $50,000 or more. While there are no other demographic differences, further analyses will focus on the differences in attitudes during the three years.

Neighbours’ Knowledge of OHA’s Programs

Table 3 summarizes the respondents’ knowledge of the various OHA housing programs, especially the SSH program. The vast majority (96.3 percent) of the respondents indicated that they had heard of the SSH program. Most respondents were familiar with the various OHA housing options such as housing projects (83.5 percent), high-rise towers for the elderly (84.0 percent), apartment buildings (69.4 percent), duplexes (58.8 percent), and single family dwellings (64.7 percent).

Sources of Information on SSH Program

Most of the respondents learned about the scattered site housing program through the mass media (table 4). While they indicated multiple sources of information, the newspaper was the most often mentioned (85.7 percent) followed by television (64.7 percent). Over one-half (51.4 percent) indicated that they had discussed the SSH program with their neighbors, and there was no difference among the respondents by the year OHA purchased the SSH unit (table 6). Of those respondents who said they had discussed the SSH program with their neighbors, over 70 percent believed that their neighbors were unfavorable toward the SSH program (table 7).

Sources of Information on SSH Units in Neighborhood

When the neighbors were asked about their sources of information on the scattered site home in their neighborhood, 51.9 percent identified the news media and 48.8 percent indicated their neighbors as some of their multiple sources of information (table 8). The mass media was more important to the neighbors of the 1989 and 1991 sites, whereas the neighbors of the 1987 site were more likely to have received information from sources other than the neighbors. The main source of information about the OHA programs and the scattered site home in their neighborhood was the mass media. Over one-half of them had discussed the SSH program with their neighbors, and most of them believed that their neighbors were unfavorable to the SSH program.
Neighbors' Evaluation of SSH Program

Table 9 summarizes the major findings regarding the respondents evaluation of the SSH program. Almost one-half (45.2 percent) stated that they supported the program; another one-fourth (26.1 percent) said they were neutral, and about another one-fourth (28.7 percent) were opposed. Statistically, there was no significant difference between those who had more experience with the program (i.e., 1987 and 1989) and those who had limited experience (i.e., 1991). When asked about their attitude toward OHA's purchase of a SSH in their neighborhood, however, 26.4 percent were favorable, 35.1 percent were neutral, and about another one-fourth (26.1 percent) said they were opposed. Clearly, there was a shift toward greater opposition when people were asked about their attitude on an OHA SSH purchase in their neighborhood. For example, 45.2 percent supported the program overall, but only 26.4 percent favored the OHA purchase in their neighborhood. Likewise, 28.7 percent opposed the SSH program in the general, but 38.4 percent opposed the OHA purchase in their neighborhood. It also should be noted that there are some differences between the years of the OHA purchases (table 9). For example, the greatest opposition came for the neighbors of the 1987 sites, whereas the greatest favorable response to the purchase came from the 1989 sites. It is difficult to interpret this exactly; however, there were important differences in the housing values between 1987 and 1989, with the 1987 neighborhoods being more expensive. On the other hand, the 1991 sites were in general less expensive overall, but the neighbors also had limited experience with the program at this point.

Over two-thirds felt the purchase would not affect their housing values.

As further evidence of the neighbors attitudes toward the SSH program, it should be noted that 80.6 percent approved of Mr. Armstrong's job performance, and over two-thirds (67.4 percent) felt that the OHA purchase in their neighborhood would not affect their housing values (table 9). Also, 80.2 percent judged the OHA SSH program to be effective in helping low income people better their lives. Most people (60.7 percent) indicated that their attitudes toward the program had not changed since they first heard about it, while the remaining 40 percent were about equally divided between being more favorable (18.9 percent) and less favorable (20.4 percent). Over three-fourths (76.0 percent) thought that OHA should hold neighborhood meetings to describe and explain the program, and 80.8 percent stated that they would attend such a meeting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 9. Respondents' Evaluation of OHA's Scattered Site Housing Program</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Attitude toward SSH program</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Neutral</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Oppose</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Attitude toward SSH purchase in neighborhood</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Neutral</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Oppose</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Approve of OHA director's job performance</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Favorable impressions of SSH residents</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Support</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Neutral</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Oppose</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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Neighbors' Knowledge and Perceptions of SSH Residents

Almost one-half (45.2 percent) of the respondents who were aware of the SSH unit in their neighborhood indicated that they had met the SSH residents (table 10). Over one-half of the neighbors of the 1987 and 1989 sites stated that they had met the SSH residents, whereas of those neighbors interviewed at the 1991 sites, the five who said that they had met the SSH residents appear to be giving erroneous information because there were no residents in these houses yet. As also shown in table 10, the vast majority (86.1 percent) of those who had met the SSH residents judged them to be satisfactory neighbors. Most neighbors (85.5 percent) thought that SSH residents were employed, and most (75.6 percent) thought they wanted to purchase the OHA home in which they were living. Finally, most neighbors (71.3 percent) stated that the SSH residents maintained the property as well as others in the neighborhood. Of those respondents who were unsure of there being a SSH unit in their neighborhood, 85 percent indicated that they did not think they would be able to identify the SSH by its appearance, and 76 percent did not think that the SSH residents would behave any different­ly than others in their neighborhood. Thus most respondents who had met the SSH residents tended to have favorable impressions of them, and those who were unaware of them generally did not seem to be prejudiced against them.

Further Analysis of Neighbors' Evaluation of the SSH Program

The survey contained several questions designed to assess the neighbors' general evaluation of the SSH program. For example, they were asked:

- their attitude toward the program;
- their attitude toward the purchase of a home in their neighborhood;
- their evaluation of the OHA director's job performance;
- whether their attitude had changed regarding the program since they first learned of it;
- whether they thought a SSH unit would affect their property values;
- what they thought should be the maximum price OHA should pay for a SSH unit, and
- whether they thought the SSH program was effective in helping low income people better their lives.

Further analysis attempted to identify any demographic variables related to the evaluations made by the neighbors. This demonstrated that demographic characteristics of the neighbors (i.e., age, sex, education, marital status, family status, homeownership status, length of residence in the neighborhood, and the value of their home) were generally NOT related to their evaluation of the SSH program. The exceptions were as follows:

1. Neighbors 45 years and younger were more apt to support the SSH program, and those 64 years and older were more apt to oppose it.
2. Neighbors who were between 36-45 were more apt to approve of higher OHA purchase prices than were those who were younger or older. (Two-thirds of age 36-45 years of age identified a maximum OHA price of over $50,000 with 34.8 percent in the 50-59,000 range and 30.3 percent in the over $60,000 range.)
3. Over one-half (54.1 percent) of the men approved of OHA purchase prices over $50,000, while 63 percent of the women identified maximum prices under $50,000.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 10. Respondents' Knowledge and Perceptions of SSH Residents When They Are Aware of SSH in Their Neighborhood</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>How often do you think the SSH residents live in the neighborhood?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Compared to others in your neighborhood, how would you evaluate the SSH residents?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Do you think the SSH resident is employed?</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Do you believe SSH residents want to purchase the house they are renting?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Would you say that SSH residents maintain their property?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Better than others</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Worse than others</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total respondents saying yes:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percent answering &quot;satisfactory&quot;</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
4. Respondents with graduate education were more likely to identify the SSH program as being effective in helping low income people better their lives than were those with a high school education or less. (It should be noted, however, that over three-fourths of all respondents believed it was effective.)

5. Neighbors with no children in the household under 18 years were more likely to favor the program than those with children.

6. On the other hand, those with children were more likely to become favorable toward the program as they had more experience with it.

7. Neighbors with children were more likely to approve of higher maximum OHA purchase prices, especially over $60,000.

8. Neighbors with homes valued at over $70,000 were more likely to approve of a maximum OHA purchase price of (at least $60,000), with two-thirds of those with homes valued at less than $50,000 expected OHA's maximum price to be less than $50,000.

Relationships of Evaluation Measures

There seemed to be a fair amount of consistency among the respondents' attitudes toward the program since the interrelationships among all seven measures of SSH program evaluation appear to be statistically significant (Table 11). These interrelationships are important because they show that respondents' attitudes toward the SSH program are not merely occurring by chance or at random, but that some confidence can be significant.

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2. Most respondents obtained information about the SSH program via the mass media with 85.7 percent indicating the newspaper and 64.7 percent the television as their major sources of information.

3. Over one-half (51.4 percent) of the respondents had discussed the SSH program with their neighbors, and of those, over 70 percent believed that their neighbors were unfavorable toward the SSH program.

4. Very few people (6.0 percent) gave the appearance of the program as a means for identifying it as an OHA property.

5. Almost one-half (45.2 percent) stated that they supported the SSH program, another one-fourth (26.1 percent) said they were neutral, and about one-fourth (28.7 percent) were opposed. Only 26.4 percent were favorable to the SSH purchase in their neighborhood, while 35.1 percent said they were neutral and 38.4 percent were opposed.

6. Over 80 percent approved of the OHA Director's job performance, and over two-thirds (67.4 percent) said that the OHA purchase in their neighborhood would affect housing values. Also, 80.2 percent judged the OHA SSH program to be effective in helping low income people better their lives.

7. Over three-fourths (76.9 percent) thought that OHA should hold neighborhood meetings to describe and explain the program: 80.8 percent said they would attend such a meeting.

8. Over one-half (56.7 percent) of the respondents for the 1987 and 1989 sites who were aware of the SSH in their neighborhood indicated that they had met the SSH residents; the vast majority (86.1 percent) of those who had met the residents judged them to be satisfactory neighbors. Most neighbors (73.4 percent) stated that the SSH residents maintained their property as well as other neighbors.

9. Generally, it was not possible to predict the neighbors' attitudes and evaluation of the SSH program based on the neighbors' demographic characteristics.

10. A high degree of consistency was found among the seven different evaluation measures of the OHA SSH program; therefore, it can be concluded that the measures had a high degree of reliability and validity.

In conclusion, the immediate neighbors of OHA scattered site homes appeared to be well aware of the SSH program, but their perceptions of the program seemed to be mixed. The vast majority approved of the OHA director's job performance; they felt the program was effective in helping low income people, and they did not perceive the SSH unit as affecting their property values. They judged the SSH residents to be satisfactory neighbors and to maintain their property as well as other neighbors. They did not think the OHA home was distinguishable from others in the neighborhood. On the other hand, only about one-fourth of the respondents favored the SSH purchase in their neighborhood.

Summary and Conclusions

This survey consisted of 300 telephone interviews conducted with random sample of immediate neighbors to the scattered site homes purchased during the years 1987, 1989, and 1991. There were four interviews made with neighbors who lived within one block of each SSH. The interviews were obtained during early April, 1991 and were ten minutes long. The typical respondent was a middle-aged, white, married female homeowner with no children living in the household. The major findings of this survey were as follows:

1. The vast majority (96.3 percent) were familiar with the SSH program, and most respondents were aware of other OHA housing programs as well; 79.9 percent were aware that a SSH was within two blocks of their home.

2. Most respondents obtained information about the SSH program via the mass media with 85.7 percent indicating the newspaper and 64.7 percent the television as their major sources of information.

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Endnotes

1. The sample design involved creating a list of all addresses within one block of each of the 75 scattered site homes purchased by OHA between 1987 and 1991. The research team developed this list using city plat maps and a city address directory. Using a table of random numbers, each of the addresses within one block radius of the SSH unit was listed in random order along with the phone number for each address. The interviewers were instructed to call the neighbors in the random order in which they were listed. Four interviews were conducted for each of the 75 sites which included 24 sites in 1987 (N = 96 interviews), 30 sites in 1989 (N = 120), and 21 sites in 1991 (N = 84) for a total of 300 interviews. The margin of error for this study was plus or minus 5.8 percent at the 95 percent confidence level.

2. In December, 1989, the Omaha World-Herald conducted a survey of Omaha residents (N = 244) regarding their views on tearing down the Logan Fontenelle housing projects and their attitudes toward the scattered site housing program. The results showed that 64 percent approved the City Council's action which rejected OHA's plan to tear down the Logan Fontenelle projects. On the other hand, when they were asked the following question: "Would you favor or oppose having a single-family home or duplex or additional home in your neighborhood under the the low-income housing program?" 52 percent answered that they favored such an action.

Several observations need to made regarding any comparison with this study's findings. First, the present survey was of a very select, target population, namely, residents who lived within one block of a SSH unit as opposed to a survey of all Omaha residents. Second, the OWH survey gave their respondents only two choices either favor or oppose, whereas the present study gave three options: favor, neutral, or oppose. Finally, the margin of error in the OWH survey was plus or minus 6.3 percent which means that 46 to 58 percent of the Omaha residents probably favored an SSH home in their neighborhood.

3. The OHA survey of SSH residents consisted of 71 completed questionnaires and 58 interviews. Some interviews were a follow-up to the questionnaire while others were in place of them. The description of the SSH residents which emerges from these data is as follows: 75.2 percent were female; 60 percent were between 30-39 years of age and 21.4 percent, 40-49 years; 43.7 percent were married and 38 percent were divorced; 87.5 percent of those surveyed were the head of the household; the average number of children per household was 2.58 with an average age of 9.34 years; 60.6 percent had lived in their homes 1-3 years while 18.3 percent had lived there 4-6 years; 2.8 percent had less than a high school education, 51.4 percent were high school graduates, 31.4 percent had two years of college, 10.0 percent were college graduates, and 4.3 percent had graduate education. Thus the typical SSH resident was a female in her thirties, who was either married or divorced, with two or more children in the household, and one-half had at least a high school education and almost the other half had education beyond high school.

Most SSH residents (58.8 percent) said their homes were located close to their employment; 92.9 percent stated they owned an automobile; and 85.1 percent said that their neighborhood was located on or close to a bus route. All SSH residents were currently employed since that is a requirement of the program; 39.7 percent had been with their current employer 1-3 years while 41.2 percent, four or more years. The survey of SSH neighbors revealed that the residents were better educated and were more likely to be employed than the neighbors realized. The vast majority (83.9 percent) of the neighbors thought the SSH residents had a high school education or less, whereas 97.1 percent had a high school education or more (45.7 percent had education beyond high school). Thus, the SSH residents were not limited by education, but they simply had low incomes. As noted above, many of them were divorced, female heads of households with children which is a characteristic of contemporary poverty.

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