MULTI-FAMILY HOUSING CHARACTERISTICS WITHIN THE DOUGLAS COUNTY HOUSING AUTHORITY GEOGRAPHIC AREA*

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Introduction

The Douglas County Housing Authority (DCHA) was formed in 1976 to address the particular housing needs of the modest income residents of rural Douglas County, Nebraska and suburban fringe areas outside the Omaha corporate limits. The geographic area served by the DCHA includes the suburban fringe, the five incorporated cities and villages of Bennington, Elkhorn, Ralston, Valley, Waterloo, and the remaining rural portions of Douglas County. This area is bounded by the Platte River on the west and the Omaha City limits on the east, and contains about 210 square miles, or approximately 63 percent of the land area in Douglas County, Nebraska. The DCHA geographic area notably excludes the City of Omaha, Nebraska, which is served by the Omaha Housing Authority (Map 1).

The Douglas County Housing Authority’s initial information concerning the housing needs of its constituents was obtained from census reports and locally and regionally adopted housing plans. The Authority’s analysis of preliminary housing needs and the housing supply characteristics enumerated in these reports enabled the Authority to understand the magnitude and nature of the unmet housing needs among people with fixed or limited incomes. The DCHA then applied for and received federal funding under Section 8, Leased Housing Assistance Payment Program, of the Housing and Community Development Act, which provides rental assistance payments on behalf of limited incomes. The DCHA then applied for and received federal funding under Section 8, Leased Housing Assistance Payments Program, of the Housing and Community Development Act, which provides rental assistance payments on behalf of modest income persons renting housing within the area served by the Housing Authority.

Research Procedure

Housing information in this report relies largely on currently available housing information obtained from the tax assessment records of Douglas County, Nebraska. A list of all multi-family parcels in the DCHA area was manually abstracted from field book entries coded “M” for multi-family housing. The address of each multi-family parcel in the DCHA area, the owner’s name and address, age of structure(s), the number of units and the values (land and improvements) were then obtained from the property record card for each multi-family parcel abstracted from the Assessor’s records. Unfortunately, little information has been recorded concerning the specific characteristics of poorly housed persons. Information about types and numbers of units needed, their location distribution, and the associated social services that are required to serve housing needs would be particularly valuable. Without it, measurement of housing need and supply information is imprecise at best. However, analysis of certain housing indicators can lead to a better understanding of housing characteristics within the DCHA jurisdiction.

The regionally adopted housing plan identified multi-family housing units as recording the most significant change over the past 10 years. The Authority’s interest in multi-family housing is partially based upon the thrust of multi-family construction activity, which has generally been located in the suburban fringe area surrounding Omaha, Nebraska.

The inventory of multi-family housing characteristics in the DCHA area has identified (a) the number and construction date of existing multi-family units, by tax district; (b) the parcel size of these units; (c) the average and total value of these units; and (d) the extent of out-of-state ownership.

DCHA Multi-Family Housing Inventory

The vast majority of multi-family units in Douglas County are situated in the suburban area tax districts, Douglas, Union, Millard, and McArdle (Table 1). Multi-family housing units in

1Detailed data on individual multi-family parcels have been obtained by the Douglas County Housing Authority, although these data are not presented in this report.


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The suburban fringe area is characterized by new subdivision development interspersed with some remaining agricultural land. In the rapidly developing area, with incidence of overbuilding in multi-family apartment units. Most of the multi-family housing construction took place during the local construction industry's boom years, 1970-1974. During this period, 5,292 units or 81 percent of the DCHA area's stock of multi-family units were constructed. According to the City of Omaha's Housing Plan Appendix, a large percentage of the units in this rapidly developing area are vacant. A vacancy rate of 11.3 percent for 1976 was reported in the Omaha-Douglas County suburban fringe area. Using this estimate, 14 percent of the units in this area are vacant. A declining trend in out-of-state ownership of multi-family development. The five rural multi-family districts in Jefferson, Chicago, Wayne, Dakota, and Valley and Florence show no out-of-state ownership. However, the level of out-of-state ownership in suburban districts is substantial. Out-of-state ownership in these districts varies from 15 percent in McAdie, to 96.6 percent in Union. Out-of-state owners of multi-family housing account for 38 percent of today's multi-family housing supply within the entire DCHA geographic area. Units with out-of-state owners are generally newer, more expensive, and the multi-family unit owners are usually not the average suburban area family in the Douglas County Housing Authority jurisdiction.3

As of January, 1978, 6,543 multi-family housing units exist within the geographic area served by the Douglas County Housing Authority in Omaha, Nebraska. To a great extent, most multi-family construction occurred within the Omaha-Douglas County suburban fringe area between 1970 and 1974. Multi-family housing developments within the suburban fringe area have had a significant effect on the supply of existing multi-family units and have fueled local vacancy rates. The multi-family development activity in the suburban fringe area was locally built for out-of-state owners. These owner's perceptions of the local housing need was significantly higher than the local measurement of units locating nearest existing housing.

The Tax Assessor records used for this report contain a number of valuable data items which can be compared and analyzed. The data used in this report can be constantly updated through annual reviews of recent changes in multi-family development patterns.

### A SURVEY OF ATTITUDES TOWARD MERCY HIGH SCHOOL

**Paul S. T. Lee**

**Introduction**

For the past 20 years, Mercy High School (1501 South 48th Street, Omaha, Nebraska) has served the Omaha community. The school has maintained a careful internal training program, a business program and a general program. However, the School has experienced a continuous decline in enrollment since 1966-67. And 1974. This represents an average annual decrease of ten percent for the past ten years. Contributing factors are numerous. Enrollment declines resulting from lower birth rates have characterized all educational systems during the 1970's. For the five years between school years 1971-72 and 1975-76, enrollment in Omaha Public Schools has declined by nearly ten percent. Catholic school enrollment for the same period declined by more than ten percent. The trend westward for young families adds a second dimension to enrollment decline. The new parishes have not been able to assimilate persons from the Omaha's older neighborhoods. Both these conditions, in addition to changing attitudes toward private education, may be related to enrollment declines at Omaha's Catholic high schools. A one-half time rate of decline for all Omaha Catholic high schools.

Faced with a declining birth rate and an out-migration of households from Omaha to suburban areas, the neighborhood surrounding Mercy High has been losing population, particularly in families with students attending Mercy High. This has significantly reduced the potential secondary school students in the area, Mercy High has experienced increasing competition for the area's students from other schools such as Gross High and Ryan High.

Acommodating enrollment decline, the school's financial situation has weakened. Both School Board members and administrative officials of Mercy High have sought solutions to these problems. New directions and alternative programs have been proposed. However, information on the implications of each of these alternatives has yet to be solved in the context of the School.

**Students currently enrolled in Mercy High and their parents are its immediate clientele, alumnae of Mercy High its past clientele, and Catholic Schools and Catholic-school-age children in the Omaha area its potential clientele since they are most likely to send their children to a Catholic secondary school such as Mercy High. These three groups are important in the development of the educational program. Hence, a survey of Mercy High's present, past and future clients would generate considerable information on the type of education they expect from Mercy High.

**Survey Design**

**Sampling Procedure.** Major purposes of the study are to analyze the importance of education has been involved directly or indirectly, or would be potentially involved with Mercy High School toward five proposed alternative programs, to evaluate these alternatives and stimulate possible changes. Four surveys were

**Conduct.** Client populations included parents, Mercy High students, parents of students attending other Omaha Catholic schools and Mercy High alumnae.

**Method of Interview and Quality Control.** Questionnaires were distributed to Mercy High students by their class officers; parents of students were given the equivalent of one class period to complete questionnaires. The Center for Applied Urban Research mailed surveys to all parents of students currently enrolled at Mercy High and to a sample of parents of students attending Catholic elementary and secondary schools other than Mercy High. Surveys were mailed in a sealed envelope, to parents who failed to respond within 14 days. Parents of students at Mercy High who failed to respond to the first mailing of questionnaires were telephoned to encourage them to return the questionnaires. All returned questionnaires were checked for completion and verified for possible errors prior to being sent to data processing.

**New Directions and Alternatives**

Representatives of the four Mercy client populations were asked to respond to four proposed alternatives for major directions the school might take. In addition, they were asked to respond to the proposed alternatives which may be perceived by the other client groups.
Change Versus Status Quo. The question of whether to continue to operate Mercy High at its present location and in its present form brought an encouraging favorable response from Mercy parents and students (Table 1). The majority (66 percent of Mercy parents and 61 percent of Mercy students) supported maintenance of the status quo. These favorable responses were anticipated. Although parents of students at other Catholic schools and Mercy alumnae (30 percent and 39 percent respectively) were not strongly in favor of continuing Mercy High in its present form, even fewer voted to change the present situation (26 percent and 27 percent respectively). Nearly half of the parents of students at other Catholic schools (45 percent) and one-third of Mercy alumnae (34 percent) expressed a lack of knowledge about Mercy’s present situation.

Change from All Girl to Coeducational. The question of whether Mercy should become coeducational received few favorable responses. In all four groups surveyed, the highest percentage opposed such a modification. Among Mercy parents, students and alumnae, respectively, 84 percent, 77 percent and 56 percent opposed this change. Parents of students at other Catholic schools were more divided, with 31 percent in support of changing to coeducational. Yet almost 40 percent of these parents opposed such a transformation and another 30 percent were uncertain.

Those in favor of a coeducational Mercy High School considered that such a change would increase school enrollment and add new courses and activities and thereby improve the quality of Mercy’s education and help the school financially. The majority of those who opposed such a change gave no reasons for their opposition.

Merge with Another School. The proposal to merge Mercy High with another school was not favored by a majority of respondents in three survey groups. Fewer than ten percent of respondents in all categories except current students supported the option, while 83 percent of Mercy parents, 78 percent of Mercy students and 56 percent of alumnae opposed it. Forty-two percent of parents of students in other Catholic schools opposed a merger, but 48 percent of them said they were undecided. Thus, nearly half the parents of children in Catholic schools felt they lacked the knowledge to judge the options on this question.

Relocate to West Omaha. An option involving a move for Mercy High to west Omaha brought another clear-cut response against change. Only about one of eight persons in each category supported relocation, while more than half opposed it. Nearly one-third of parents of students at other schools responded they had no opinion as did approximately one-fourth of alumnae respondents.

Establish Joint Program with College of St. Mary. The option for change which received the most support from Mercy parents and alumnae was a suggestion to develop a joint program between Mercy and the College of St. Mary. About one out of six Mercy High parents and one of five Mercy High students supported this option, while more than one-third of alumnae believed it a viable alternative. Over one-fourth of parents of students at other Catholic schools liked this option, a preference second only to their support of changing Mercy to a coeducational school. The percentages of responses against this option are still high, but if a change must be made in the Mercy High program this alternative appears least objectionable.

Evaluation of Options

Evidence has shown that the majority of Mercy High’s students, parents and most of Mercy’s alumnae were in favor of retaining the current status of Mercy High School. However, maintaining the status quo implies that Mercy High would have to live with its problems. If administrative officials of Mercy determine a change is necessary for Mercy’s survival, the options brought out in the questionnaire must be examined and evaluated against their respective impacts on student enrollment.

Options Preferred. Table 1 shows a comparison of options preferred by those who expressed that a change has to be made. Among respondents in three of the four survey groups who favored a change, the support was greatest for development of a joint program with the College of St. Mary. About one-sixth Mercy High parents and one-fifth of Mercy High students favored this option, while over one-third of Mercy High alumnae approved this alternative. The fourth group, parents of students attending other Catholic schools, most strongly supported changing Mercy to a coeducational school by a vote of 31 percent. Their second choice was the College of St. Mary option, supported by 28 percent of respondents to the question. In comparison, the other three groups (parents of Mercy High students, Mercy High students and Mercy High alumnae) chose the coeducational option as their second alternative.

Thus, considering Mercy parents, students and alumnae, the only change receiving significant support was the option to organize a joint system with the College of St. Mary. The option favored by parents of other Catholic students, change to a coeducational school, would require further examination before it could be considered a viable alternative.

Enrollment Estimations. One way to evaluate the options is to examine their impact on Mercy High’s enrollment against the number of families who would send their children to Mercy High if their options were put into effect. Table 2 shows the enrollment estimates under various options from survey responses of parents of students attending other Catholic schools. It can be seen that changing Mercy into a coeducational school has the greatest enrollment potential. If this option were put into effect, Mercy High would be likely to gain more students, although the ages of the students in question would spread this increase over a ten-year period. The option with the least enrollment impact (Continued on page 6.)
appears to be merger with another school, with a possibility of 204 more students. In studying this table, however, the reader is cautioned: (1) these figures are not additive among different options, one should consider program costs and the possibility of losing a portion of Mercy's current students who attend the school mainly because of its unique image.

Conclusions

A survey of four segments of the Mercy High client population suggests the following conclusions:

Transportation to and from the school is a problem that may cause some families from sending their children to Mercy High. Although the majority of Mercy parents did not consider transportation a problem, nearly half of the parents of students attending other Catholic schools expressed the opposite opinion.

Mercy High's $800 tuition is relatively high compared to other Catholic high schools. Over half of Mercy parents and students voiced their complaints.

Mercy High's current curriculum may not be adequately meeting student desires. More advanced offerings in academic areas such as science and language, and more electives such as gymnastics, short sessions of driver training and auto mechanics were among student suggestions.

Attracted by Mercy High's image and its nearby location, the majority of Mercy High parents and current students oppose any drastic form of change. They prefer that the school maintain the status quo with improvement in the general quality of education and adding creative courses if possible.

The option for change receiving the most positive votes from respondents of all four groups is the development of a joint program with the College of St. Mary. This option appeals to all four groups because it has several features: it permits Mercy High to retain its own image; it leads toward improvement in quality of education; and it is probably the least-cost option.

The second most popular option for change is to develop a coeducational program. This alternative received the most positive votes from both Mercy High alumnae and parents of students attending other Catholic schools. This choice would result in the greatest enrollment potential with a possible increase of students at its present location. The feasibility of this option cannot be determined without evaluation of the costs involved and the possibility of losing a portion of Mercy's current students who attend the school mainly because of Mercy's tradition.