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

BY

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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 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.1

Unfortunately, little information has been recorded concerning the specific characteristics of poorly housed persons. Information about types and numbers of units needed, the 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.2 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 McArthur (Table 1). Multi-family housing units in

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

TABLE 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Multi-Family Units within Tax District and Construction Period, Douglas County Geographical Area, 1977</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suburb/Fringe Area</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
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<td>Waterloo</td>
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<td>North Omaha</td>
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<td>Elkhorn</td>
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<td>Nebraska Springs</td>
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<tr>
<td>1975-76</td>
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<tr>
<td>1977-78</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The average value of multi-family housing developments by the value per unit is shown in Figure 1 and Table 1. These values were derived from the Tax Assessor's records by dividing the total value of all multi-family parcels by the number of apartment units situated on each parcel. Care was taken to account for units constructed prior to the year 1977. Average unit values in the rural tax districts, generally characterized as being older units, range from $4,421 in Waterloo to $5,050 in Jefferson, whereas those in the suburban tax districts of Union, McDade and Millard all exceed $12,000. Obviously, newer units have not become obsolete, nor has depreciation been fully accrued. Newer construction in the suburban area, which is characterized by fewer and smaller parcels interspersed with some remaining rural zoning jurisdiction, was accompanied by higher costs of land, water and sewer, schools and other related services. The higher costs of materials and labor associated with maintenance of older units contributes to those units becoming obsolete.

The total value of multi-family units and percentage of out-of-state ownership by tax district is shown in Figure 2. Housing within an active development area, in general, tends to serve a higher range of income earning persons attracted to their suburban areas. The McDade Tax District, which has the highest total multi-family value, is situated in the most active development corridor within the DCHA area, Fort to Pacific Streets west of 1480. Figure 2 also presents a large percentage of out-of-state ownership of multi-family development. The five rural tax districts of Jefferson, Chicago, Wahoo, 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 those tax districts varies from 15 percent in McDade, 96.6 percent in Union. Out-of-state owners of multi-family housing account for 38 percent of today's suburban population. In the case of existing multi-family housing supplied within the entire DCHA geographic area, Units with out-of-state owners are generally newer, more expensive, and the multi-family unit parcels are very close to the average suburban age. Older multi-family parcels in the Douglas County Housing Authority Jurisdiction are generally characterized by lower values than the above.

It should be noted that an out-of-state tax address does not preclude the possibility that local residents are participants via syndication.

Conclusion

As of January, 1978, 6,543 multi-family housing units exist within the geographic area served by the Douglas County Housing Authority in Douglas County, 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. Much of the 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 actual measurement of units locally existing near Omaha.

The Tax Assessor records used for this report contain a number of valuable data items which can be compared and analyzed to provide information on multi-family developments. The data used in this report can be 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 was established as a residence, college preparation program, a business program and a general program.

However, the School has experienced a continuous decline in enrollment since 1969.1978. This represents an average annual decrease of 10 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 1976-77, enrollment in Omaha Public Schools has declined by nearly ten percent. Catholic school enrollment for the same period declined by more than 12.6 percent. The trend westward for young families has added a second dimension to enrollment decline. This trend has been the result of both factors: families moving westward in 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 schools. Omaha's Mercy High School and other Catholic schools within the Omaha area have experienced the consequences of declining birth rate and an out-migration of young families.

Faced with a declining birth rate and an out-migration of households from their western suburbs, the neighborhood surrounding Mercy High has been losing population, particularly in families with school-age children. With a potential secondary school population in the area, Mercy High has experienced increasing competition for the area's students from other schools such as Grand High and Ryan High.

Accompanying 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 been equivocal. Therefore, Mercy High has been involved relatively, or would be potentially involved with Mercy High School toward five proposed alternative plans, to evaluate these alternatives and stimulate possible changes.

Four surveys were conducted. Client populations included parents, Mercy High students, parents of students attending other Omaha Catholic schools and Mercy High alumni.

Method of Interview and Quality Control.

Questionnaires were distributed to Mercy High students by their 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 also mailed to a sample of Alumni of Mercy High. Respondents were asked to return the completed questionnaires in pre-paid postal envelopes within ten days. A second questionnaire was sent 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 questionnaire. 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 new directions the school might take. In addition, they were asked to respond to pre- and post-program alternatives that make no major changes. Responses are summarized in Table 1.
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 High 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 cross-section options; (2) estimates result from an attitude survey and do not necessarily represent respondents’ behavior; and (3) in weighing enrollment potentials 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 $6800 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 elective 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 its unique image.

Review of Applied Urban Research

Vol. 6 April 1978 No. 4

Published monthly by the Center for Applied Urban Research as a public service and mailed free upon request in Nebraska. Annual subscription rate outside Nebraska $3.00. The views and opinions expressed in the Review are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent those of the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Material in this report may be reproduced with proper credit.

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