

Mixed-Income Development Study

University of Chicago

Research Brief #3: The Nature of Social Interaction in Mixed-Income Developments¹

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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Overall Question:

What are interactions like among residents of mixed-income developments?

Research Overview:

Two developments: Oakwood Shores and Westhaven Park

In-depth interviews: 65 residents (June to October 2007)

Findings:

Casual interaction

- There are low to modest levels of interaction among residents. Most interactions are described as very casual, such as greetings in passing or brief conversations; most residents are comfortable with this.
- Many residents saw some benefit to maintaining friendly but distant relations with neighbors; former public housing residents often described this as a way to avoid entanglements or in response to increased monitoring.

Instrumental (useful) exchanges

- When they occurred, interactions leading to exchanges of actual favors were rare; when they did happen they were largely among residents of similar backgrounds. Examples of favors exchanged were provided mostly by former public housing residents; owners more often discussed exchanges of information.
- In a few instances, groups of people, particularly owners, have come together to address shared concerns.

Negative interaction

- Negative interactions were mostly described in general terms: a lack of friendliness, a degree of caution toward one another, or a sense of being judged. Concerns with norms and common courtesy are prevalent.
- Specific instances, especially with unsupervised children, have led residents to pursue more formal social control.
- Often negative interactions were discussed in the context of tension over newcomers "taking over;" sometimes, race was explicitly raised as part of this dynamic.

Comparison with interactions in previous neighborhood

- Nearly everyone across sites, income levels, and tenure has fewer relationships in their new neighborhood than in their previous neighborhood, especially former public housing residents.
- Children relocated from public housing enjoyed more freedom of movement in the new developments, while children of market-rate and ownership units were often more limited.

Barriers and challenges to interaction

- Barriers include short time at development, fear and avoidance, lack of time, physical layout and design.
- Perceived differences that set residents apart from each other lead residents to continue to interact mostly within their own groups.

Implications for Consideration:

- What type of social interaction is necessary for the success of the development? How can this be achieved?
- Minor tensions and social friction seem to be becoming a bigger issue; how might they be addressed, and by whom? To what extent are race, income, and housing status factors to acknowledge and confront?
- Unsupervised children and youth at and around the development seem to be an issue of particular contention. What are the current plans for youth activities and what more can be done?
- What has been and can be done to build a sense of shared interests among such a diverse population?

¹ This brief is based on a longer paper, "Social Interaction in Mixed-Income Developments: Relational Expectations and Emerging Reality" (Chaskin and Joseph, forthcoming, *Journal of Urban Affairs*). For more information about the Mixed-Income Development Study at the University of Chicago, please contact svoelker@uchicago.edu. This study is funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.