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Mixed-Income Development Study

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The Nature of Social Interaction in Mixed-Income Developments

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Cover Photo: New construction at Westhaven Park.
All photos by Brenda Copley.

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The Nature of Social Interaction in Mixed-Income Developments¹

This brief focuses on early social relations in two mixed-income developments, Oakwood Shores and Westhaven Park, that are part of the City of Chicago's Plan for Transformation. We investigate how different residents—relocated public housing residents,² affordable and market-rate renters, and affordable and market-rate owners—describe and assess their social interactions with their neighbors. We first discuss three main types of interactions among residents:

- Casual relations among neighbors
- “Instrumental” exchanges of information or favors
- Negative interactions

We then explore how these interactions compare to where residents used to live. Finally, we analyze barriers and challenges to interaction.

¹ This brief is based on a longer paper currently being reviewed for publication, *Relational Expectations and Emerging Reality: The Nature of Social Interaction in Mixed-Income Developments* (Chaskin and Joseph, in review). 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.

² We use the term “relocated public housing residents” to refer specifically to those residents who moved from traditional public housing into mixed-income developments, whether they have returned to the development built on the site of the complex in which they lived prior to demolition or have moved to a mixed-income development from a different complex. They are thus distinct from residents of traditional public housing, in which buildings are owned and operated by the public housing authority, and from those who moved into the subsidized private housing market using Housing Choice Vouchers.

DESCRIPTION OF MIXED-INCOME DEVELOPMENT STUDY SITES

- Oakwood Shores, on the south side of the city, is being built in place of Ida B. Wells/Madden Park, and will ultimately be one of the largest mixed-income developments in Chicago with 3,000 projected total units. One-third of these units will be occupied by relocated public housing residents, with the remainder split between affordable (23%) and market-rate (44%) residents. It is being developed by a national non-profit organization, The Community Builders, in partnership with Chicago-based private developer Granite Development Corporation.
- Westhaven Park is the second phase of the redevelopment of Henry Horner Homes on the city's west side, the first phase of which was completed prior to the launch of the Plan for Transformation. Units produced in the initial pre-Transformation phase were only for public housing residents. The entire development will consist of 1,316 units, 63% of which will be set aside for relocated public housing residents (including some off-site housing), 10% for affordable residents, and 27% for market-rate residents. Westhaven Park is being developed by Brinshore Michaels, a team of private developers.
- Park Boulevard is being built in place of Stateway Gardens on the city's south side. Projected to have 1,315 units, occupancy will be split equally between relocated public housing, affordable, and market-rate residents. Park Boulevard is being developed by Stateway Associates, LLC, a team of private developers. Due to delayed construction and occupancy at Park Boulevard, no resident interviews were conducted at that site for this research brief.

In general, at both sites, residents report low to modest levels of interaction, and the interaction they describe is overwhelmingly casual. Most interactions appear to be among residents in relatively close spatial and social proximity, though there is some evidence of casual interaction across income and housing tenure groups, as well. We did find differences between the two developments in the overall extent and nature of interaction among residents. Although negative interactions are sometimes noted, for the most part the climate of social interaction in Oakwood Shores is described by respondents as largely pleasant, casual, and respectful, if notably distant. In Westhaven Park, although specific social interactions are often described as cordial, residents more frequently describe contentious exchanges, and the climate of social interaction has been more problematic overall.

Casual Relations among Neighbors

When asked to estimate the number of people with whom they had some casual interaction (those they “know well enough to have a conversation with”), 80 percent of respondents across the two sites said they know at least 3 people in this way, and about 40 percent of our small sample claimed to know more than 10 neighbors well enough to converse with. This was particularly true among relocated public housing residents (in Oakwood Shores) and market-rate owners (in both sites) and less so among market-rate renters.

Figure 1
Number of Neighbors Known Well Enough to Converse With

	Relocated Public Housing Residents	Affordable Renters	Affordable Owners	Market-Rate Renters	Market-Rate Owners
Total	N = 23	N = 10	N = 11	N = 11	N = 10
None	4%	10%	0%	27%	0%
One or Two	17%	0%	0%	18%	20%
Three to Five	17%	20%	45%	18%	0%
Six to Ten	13%	30%	18%	18%	30%
More than Ten	48%	40%	36%	18%	50%

For the most part, the interactions described are characterized as very casual indeed, essentially conversations in passing, on the way in and out of the building or while passing on the street.

So when we go out to our cars in the morning some of us leave at the same time, or like on a weekend if we're doing something in our garages, planting some pots or whatever, we'll stop and talk.

Market-Rate Owner, Westhaven Park

This level of neighborly relations seems to sit comfortably with most residents, though some residents had higher expectations for their interactions with neighbors. Indeed, most respondents who described casual, unproblematic relations among neighbors saw significant *benefit* to maintaining some distance.

Several relocated public housing residents, in particular, talked about the benefits of friendly but distant relations with neighbors, in part to avoid entanglements.

When you start talking about at home, you don't want too much of that personal interaction because it's like your home is supposed to be like a private area, so if you really get to know these people and you start receiving things from them in any form... if that don't work, you're right here in the same building if it don't go right or if you start to—like the lady wanted me to babysit. I don't want that personal—if something goes wrong, that means we got to feud with each other right here in our own building.

Relocated Public Housing Resident, Oakwood Shores

Or, in the words of a market-rate renter:

But as far as neighborly, where you come over and you're in and out of each other's houses all the time, I just don't socialize like that with the people—fraternize with them, I should say. So I would say it's cordial. And it's neighborly. That's good enough for me.

Market-Rate Renter, Westhaven Park

For some relocated public housing residents, maintaining this social distance is described as a strategy of “keep[ing] myself to myself.” This self-protective behavior is often described as a result of their past experience in public housing and due to the increased monitoring and scrutiny of their behavior in the new mixed-income developments.



Instrumental Exchanges

The vast majority of casual interactions reported by our respondents were not characterized by instrumental exchanges, such as practical information or specific favors. Nearly a quarter of our small sample of residents across the two sites reported not knowing *any* of their neighbors well enough to ask a favor or invite into their home, and another third claimed only one or two such acquaintances in the development. However, several respondents did mention instrumental interactions. Residents with whom we spoke at Oakwood Shores reported somewhat higher levels of these kinds of exchanges, as did owners at both sites.

For the most part, instrumental interactions were described as exchanges of favors or information between one resident and another, largely between residents within income and tenure groups. Often, the favors exchanged were described as small but important acts of basic good neighboring, like placing lost keys on top of a mailbox for their owner to find, jump-starting a car in cold weather, or helping to carry a heavy package or groceries. In a few cases, respondents described more fundamental assistance, including the kind of “looking out” for one another that is grounded in a more concrete knowledge of neighbors’ needs and circumstances, such as illness. These examples were mostly provided by relocated public housing residents in each site and, as near as can be determined, are almost exclusively examples of within-group exchanges.

Figure 2
Number of Neighbors Known Well Enough to Ask a Favor or Invite into Home

	Relocated Public Housing Residents	Affordable Renters	Affordable Owners	Market-Rate Renters	Market-Rate Owners
Total	N = 23	N = 10	N = 11	N = 11	N = 10
None	26%	30%	9%	36%	0%
One or Two	30%	40%	27%	45%	40%
Three to Five	17%	10%	36%	18%	20%
Six to Ten	13%	0%	18%	0%	20%
More than Ten	13%	20%	9%	0%	20%

Beyond one-on-one exchanges of favors and information, some respondents described ways in which their interactions with neighbors’ children helped make an intergenerational connection. These exchanges, however, were largely reported as occurring between residents and their neighbors’ younger children. Dynamics around older youth tended to be more complicated and often contentious, particularly in Westhaven Park, where dynamics around social control and public behavior are more highly pitched.

Finally, in a few instances, instrumental exchanges were described by residents as moving beyond one-on-one interactions to include mobilizing broader networks or relations leading to collective action. This was particularly true among owners, and particularly in response to perceived problems concerning safety, behavior, and the use of public space.

I think we were talking to a couple of the neighbors, and you know, we had asked them, do you have a problem with this issue? And they said yes. And then somebody else said hey, we do too. And so then we said well, you know, instead of maybe going to the developer individually, maybe we can all get together as a group, and then we can try and schedule something.

Market-Rate Owner, Oakwood Shores

Negative Interactions

Residents also talked about instances in which they found interactions with neighbors to be negative experiences. Most residents' reflections on negative interactions were described in fairly general terms as taking place within a broader context of mistrust, or avoidance, or differences with regard to expectations. This was especially true regarding expectations for behavior and adherence to norms, for example, of "common courtesy," such as keeping music and late-night noise to a minimum, keeping children under supervision and within bounds, and refraining from public drinking. Some described the tenor of such interactions in broad terms: a general lack of friendliness, a degree of caution toward one another, a sense of judgment being rendered. As one put it:

But most of the other ones sometime they—people are—sometime people because they have a little bit more than you, and I know it isn't my imagination. Sometime they tend to make you feel like maybe they're a little bit better than you, and some of these people they do kind of act like that like they a little better than the rest of us just because they got a little bit more money or whatever.

Relocated Public Housing Resident, Westhaven Park

Or, in the words of an owner:

I'm still trying to figure out who is who and what is your motive. You know? Are you a worker or are you a person that sits back and reaps the benefits of the workers?

Market-Rate Owner, Oakwood Shores

Others are more specific about the dynamics that lead to avoidance, or to specific negative interactions. Children are frequently invoked in describing these dynamics.

I don't really let him play with the kids out here because the kids out here, their parents—first of all, they're not attended. Their parents just sort of let them run wild. And they don't really respect, you know—like they'll play ball in front of the car and hit the car. So I don't really let him associate with any of the kids out here.

Market-Rate Renter, Westhaven Park

Although some residents did note uncomfortable interactions with younger children (refusing to move to let a returning homeowner climb the stairs; returning a cautionary look with "this hate stare"; the use of profane language, far more frequent and problematic were perceptions of and interactions with older youth.

In some cases, respondents discussed negative interactions with reference to particular examples of conflict, such as issues with noise and child management. These were more often reported at Westhaven Park, particularly by owners and market-rate renters in our sample. These negative interactions led to a tenor of discomfort, mistrust, or fear. This dynamic has led to a tendency for some residents to withdraw and to rely more on formal channels to maintain social control, like calling the police, rather than informal neighborly interactions and processes.

Race sometimes plays an explicit role in particular instances of conflict, adding to this tension, though in complicated ways. Some white respondents described themselves as having been at the receiving end of these conflicts. They described race and class dynamics, within the context of tension around newcomers “taking over” the neighborhood, as lying behind these incidents.

When we first moved in, we were the first ones in this building, and there was some animosity. There was some derogatory names called towards us from... people in the neighborhood that were here already, often in terms of race and stuff. They felt we were intruding, that we don't belong here.

Market-Rate Owner, Westhaven Park

Comparing Neighboring Experiences

One question raised by respondents' experiences with neighborly relations in their current circumstances as residents of new, intentionally mixed-income developments is how different they might be from what they had experienced in their prior neighborhoods. Nearly everyone—across sites, income levels, and tenures—suggested they have fewer relationships with neighbors, know fewer people well, and interact more casually (and in some cases less comfortably) overall in their new neighborhoods than in their old.

For relocated public housing residents, their local social networks are diminished, both in terms of casual relations and instrumental exchanges. Many of the relocated public housing residents we interviewed talked about knowing “everyone” in the public housing complexes from which they came, and the long-term relationships they had maintained prior to relocation.

You knew the whole—everybody's body, mamas, cousins. Their second generations. Their third generations. Actually, I loved Ida B. Wells. I would not downplay that. I loved Ida B. Wells. It was a family. We stuck together. You knew—you couldn't live there without knowing. The negative came in that you know too many people. You did. You couldn't get away.

Relocated Public Housing Resident, Oakwood Shores

On the other hand, the context in which these relations played out, and the dangers it presented to everyday life, were frequently invoked as a significant difference between old and new circumstances, and, for most, it was a worthwhile trade-off.

Barriers and Contributing Dynamics

In reflecting on their experience in living in these mixed-income developments, residents discussed a number of factors and dynamics that help shape their choices regarding interaction with neighbors, their interpretation of the actions of others, and their assessment of the social climate of the neighborhood in general. These include:

- the short timeframe that most residents have lived in these contexts
- a level of fear and avoidance that constrains their desire to become involved with their neighbors
- a desire for a degree of anonymity and freedom from entanglement
- a lack of time and the pressures of other responsibilities

- the physical infrastructure of the community (layout of buildings, the extent to which entrances to buildings are private rather than common, and, especially, the relative lack of “shared space” that could serve as a communal meeting place)



Perhaps most important were issues of perceived “difference” that set residents apart from one another. These perceptions can lead individuals to continue to interact mostly within their own groups rather than across groups. For example, in the absence of dedicated space for social gathering, some residents (presumed to be relocated public housing residents) make use of public space that is not dedicated to civic use in ways that others (owners and higher-income people) find objectionable. Further, this type of behavior becomes a way that higher-income residents distinguish and set themselves apart from other resident groups. An owner described the way in which the behavior and attitude of others is judged:

You know there’s been a couple of moments of tension where people who are used to a certain lifestyle, they come in—and it’s not us, per se. But people who share like the same values. You know? Just like the same type of—just like the same mindset, in terms of how to be considerate and things like that. Ours might be a little bit different than theirs. So because of that, we may call the police on them a couple of times. And then all of a sudden, they think, oh, these guys are calling the police, they’re trying to alter my lifestyle as they come in. And so it has materialized.

Affordable Owner, Westhaven Park

Assumptions about neighbors based on their behavior go the other way, as well, and many relocated public housing residents, in particular, note a kind of standoffishness among presumed owners.

Well there’s some people, they think if making this amount and they higher than you, they look—you know, you could walk past and speak and you can tell they don’t want to speak or something so you know you ain’t on their level or something like that.

Relocated Public Housing Resident, Oakwood Shores

These perceptions of difference, as they are reinforced over time through interactions and conversations within groups, seem to be establishing themselves in ways that may become difficult to undo. This sense of difference is further supported by structural arrangements of the developments themselves, including:

- governance structures that include subsets of residents (e.g., owners on condominium boards) to the exclusion of others,
- programs and events that cater (intentionally or not) to specific portions of the population, and
- ways in which there remain some distinctions, within buildings and on blocks, where residents live according to housing category, despite an overall effort to mix and not distinguish unit types.

Key Questions for Policy and Practice

Given the early challenges of social interaction in mixed-income developments, there are a range of questions that could prove helpful to stimulating discussion and sharing ongoing implementation lessons among policy-makers, advocates, developers, property managers, service providers, residents, and other stakeholders.

1. Although expectations for social interaction are certainly modest, in the opinion of both residents and those working on the developments, this leaves open the questions of what level of social interaction is desirable, of what kind, and why does it matter. In what way, if any, is a certain level of social interaction important to the successful functioning of the new developments? What type of interaction and among which residents is most important? For what?
2. To the extent that there are certain minimal expectations for how residents interact with one another, how can these interactions be facilitated? Whose responsibility is it to facilitate them?
3. Our findings suggest that as residents live in the developments for longer periods of time, the minor tensions and social friction may be becoming more of an issue, not less. Is this perspective shared by others on the ground in these developments? If so, what seems to be at the root of this dynamic, how might it be addressed, and by whom? To what extent is race, as well as income level and housing status, an important factor to acknowledge and confront?
4. Unsupervised children and youth at and around the development seem to be an issue of particular contention, which is a very different emerging outcome than that expected by those who hoped that children and children's activities could be a way to bring different families together. What are the current plans for youth activities, supports, and opportunities? What more can be done?
5. We identify some factors, such as the make-up of resident associations and the participation in events and activities, which serve to deepen the sense of difference among residents. What has been learned by those working on the ground at the development about ways to build a sense of commonality and shared interests among such a diverse population?

Resident Sample Characteristics

(Random sample only, not full population at sites)

	Overall	RPH	AFF	MKT	RTR	FS
Number of respondents	65	23	21	21	44	21
% Female	77%	96%	81%	52%	88%	52%
Race						
% African-American	82%	100%	81%	62%	100%	43%
% White	9%	0%	10%	19%	0%	29%
% Other	9%	0%	9%	19%	0%	28%
Average age	41	41	40	41	43	36
% Married	25%	9%	24%	43%	18%	38%
Education level						
% high school grad	85%	61%	95%	100%	77%	100%
% college grad	38%	0%	52%	67%	18%	81%
% Employed	69%	39%	81%	90%	57%	95%
% With children in HH	43%	65%	33%	29%	55%	19%
Income						
% Under \$20,000	31%	74%	15%	0%	45%	0%
% Over \$70,000	14%	0%	10%	33%	7%	29%

RPH: Relocated public housing residents in units with a public housing subsidy

AFF: Renters and owners in units priced affordably

MKT: Renters and owners in units priced at market-rates

RTR: All renters including relocated public housing residents

FS: All owners

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