

Housing and Society
Vol. 12, No. 3, 1985

A Research Note on:

ASSESSING FAMILY NEEDS FOR HOUSING INFORMATION

Kenneth R. Tremblay, Jr., Anne L. Sweaney, and Eleanor Walls

ABSTRACT

As part of a southern regional survey, 1,804 households were asked questions pertaining to housing information needs. The results revealed that the respondents most frequently relied on family members in reaching housing decisions. Information on energy conservation and financing was most needed. A majority would also use free housing information. Additionally, differences were found regarding family housing information needs by state of residence.

INTRODUCTION

American families eagerly seek and consume vast quantities of information that can potentially improve their quality of life (Crosby and Taylor, 1981). One important component of life quality is housing that satisfies family needs (Dillman, Tremblay, and Dillman, 1979). Most families acquire considerable amounts of information before reaching housing decisions. The role of housing information has become more essential in recent years given fluctuating mortgage interest rates, confusing mortgage alternatives, rising energy costs and high housing prices and rents (Tremblay and Dillman, 1983). Housing professionals can provide a valuable service by ensuring that needed housing information is available to families.

Studies on consumer information-seeking have focused primarily on information acquisition, amount of information sought, information processing and information overload (Crosby and Taylor, 1981; Gould, 1981; Malhotra, 1981). Jacoby (1977) reports that consumers want and are willing to pay for some types of information. Gould (1981) attempts to determine specific housing information needs of consumer, public and community groups. Cattarella (1982) presents ways in which prescriptive and motivational needs can be addressed through information programs.

Kenneth R. Tremblay, Jr., is Associate Professor, Department of Consumer Sciences and Housing, Colorado State University. Anne L. Sweaney is Assistant Professor, Department of Housing, Home Management and Consumer Economics, University of Georgia. Eleanor Walls is Extension Housing Specialist, Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service. This is a contributing paper to the Southern Region Housing Research Project (S-141), "Housing for Low- and Moderate-Income Families."

Although some evidence exists regarding housing information needs, we do not know yet, 1) whom families rely upon when making housing decisions, 2) what types of housing information are most needed, 3) if available housing information would be used and 4) if family housing information needs vary by state of residency. The purpose of this paper is to address these four issues by presenting relevant results of a southern regional survey.

PROCEDURES

As part of the Southern Region Housing Research Project (S-141), personal interviews were completed in 1981-82 with 1,804 households residing in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Oklahoma and Virginia. Based on a two-stage sampling process involving median family income and number of nonfarm households, four counties were selected from each state. Households were then randomly selected from the property tax rolls of the respective counties. This procedure resulted in a sample reasonably representative of the nonmetropolitan nonfarm population in the seven states studied (Shelton et al., 1983).

The results of three items included in the personal interviews are reported in this paper. First, respondents were asked: "How much do these people help in making decisions about your housing?" The responses include "not at all", "some", or "very much" to the following list of people: male head/co-head, female head/co-head, children, other household members, other relatives, housing professionals and friends. The respondents were then asked: "If you wanted to modify or change your dwelling, what kinds of information would be most helpful to you?" The items that could be checked were financing, energy conservation, building methods, buying a house, housing maintenance, remodeling, insurance and taxes, other, and do not want to change dwelling. Finally, the respondents were asked: "Some local areas are now providing free housing information services. If it were available in your community, would you use it?" The responses were "yes, definitely", "yes, maybe", "no", and "don't know".

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 reports the percentages of respondents, by state, indicating certain people as helping a great deal ("very much") in making housing decisions. The results reveal that housing-related decisions are definitely a *family affair*, with about three-fourths of the respondents relying on the male head/co-head or female head/co-head. Children were also mentioned as helping in housing decisions by 7.2 percent of the respondents. Other household members, relatives, housing professionals and friends were mentioned by 1.0 percent or less of the respondents. The differences between the seven states regarding help in decision-making were minor. These results have an important implication for the dissemination of housing information -- namely, information must be accessible and understandable to members of the family involved in the housing decision-making process.

Tremblay, Sweaney and Walls

Table 1. People Who Are Considered by Respondents as Helping a Great Deal in Making Housing Decisions by State*

	STATES			
	AL	AR	FL	GA
	N=216	N=215	N=157	N=320
Those who help in decision-making	PERCENT			
Female head/co-head	78.7	84.7	77.7	76.6
Male head/co-head	68.1	71.6	75.8	66.9
Children	7.4	5.1	4.5	5.0
Other relatives	0.0	0.5	0.6	1.9
Other household members	0.9	0.9	0.6	1.3
Housing professionals	0.9	0.0	0.0	0.3
Friends	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	NC	OK	VA	TOTAL
	N=415	N=169	N=312	N=1804
Those who help in decision-making	PERCENT			
Female head/co-head	75.2	75.2	87.1	79.3
Male head/co-head	70.1	71.4	78.2	71.5
Children	11.1	4.8	8.4	7.2
Other relatives	0.7	1.2	1.6	1.0
Other household members	0.5	0.6	1.6	0.9
Housing professionals	0.0	0.6	0.3	0.3
Friends	0.0	0.6	0.3	0.1

*Multiple responses do not add to 100 percent.

It is not rewarding to those in the housing field to realize that only 0.3 percent of the respondents mentioned housing professionals as helping a great deal in their housing decision-making. However, it is likely that various family members do obtain information from the publications and programs of housing professionals, share this information with other family members and then reach final housing decisions within the family context. Future research might address directly the sources of housing information used by families in the housing decision-making process. It could provide a clearer picture of the perceived role of housing professionals.

One way to enhance housing dissemination efforts is to discover what information is most needed by families. Table 2 illustrates the percentages of respondents, by state, indicating that certain kinds of housing information would be most useful. The results show that the respondents felt they were most in need of information about energy conservation (44.6 percent) and financing (37.1 percent). About one-fourth of the respondents wanted information about remodeling (27.6 percent), building methods (22.5 percent), insurance and taxes (21.8 percent) and housing maintenance (20.7 percent). Only a small percentage of the respondents mentioned buying a house (11.1 percent), other (3.3 percent), or did not want to change their dwelling (0.9 percent).

These results are interesting because they indicate that the respondents were receptive to knowledge and ideas about methods of acquiring better housing. New and nontraditional information about energy conservation and financing was most desired by respondents. It may reflect concern about escalating energy costs and the emergence of complicated financial options associated with purchasing a house. These results might be used to rank efforts to develop and disseminate housing information. However, future research should differentiate between the housing information needs of those families planning to remain in their present home and those planning to change their residence.

An examination of Table 2 reveals that family needs for housing information differed among the seven states. Generally, Virginia and North Carolina respondents expressed the strongest need for housing information while Arkansas and Oklahoma respondents expressed the weakest need. Some state differences are striking. This finding suggests that housing professionals should identify housing information needs at the state level, as families face different housing markets depending on location. In this way, the most relevant information can be delivered to the families of a particular state.

If housing dissemination programs could be organized to provide relevant housing information at no cost, many families would probably use this information in making housing decisions. In fact, the respondents answered favorably to a survey question asking them if they would use free housing information if available. Twenty-three percent replied they would "definitely" and 32.7 percent said they would "maybe" use free housing information. Future research might examine the best ways to deliver such free housing information to families.

IMPLICATIONS

A golden opportunity exists for housing professionals to provide information to American families that would aid in the housing decision-making process. The results of a southern regional survey indicate that such housing information programs should provide housing information that is understandable to all family members

Tremblay, Sweaney and Walls

Table 2. Kinds of Housing Information Which Would Be Most Helpful By State*

Kinds of Housing Information	STATES			
	AL	AR	FL	GA
	N=216	N=215	N=157	N=320
	PERCENT			
Energy conservation	46.7	39.5	39.5	42.5
Financing	36.6	33.0	23.6	40.9
Remodeling	15.3	19.1	24.2	30.6
Building methods	15.3	17.7	21.0	19.4
Insurance and taxes	13.0	13.5	20.4	25.3
Housing maintenance	9.3	18.1	17.2	20.6
Buying a house	11.1	7.0	8.9	9.4
Other	6.5	5.1	3.8	1.6
Do not want to change dwelling	4.1	0.0	2.2	0.0

Kinds of Housing Information	NC	OK	VA	TOTAL
	N=415	N=169	N=312	N=1804
	PERCENT			
Energy conservation	49.6	35.5	53.2	44.6
Financing	39.6	26.0	45.5	37.1
Remodeling	36.9	26.6	28.5	27.6
Building methods	24.6	20.7	33.0	22.5
Insurance and taxes	29.2	14.2	25.3	21.8
Housing maintenance	28.9	16.0	24.0	20.7
Buying a house	17.4	6.5	10.9	11.1
Other	2.2	2.2	1.8	3.3
Do not want to change dwelling	0.3	0.9	0.0	0.9

*Multiple responses do not add up to 100 percent.

involved in making housing decisions, focus on the preparation and distribution of information on energy conservation and financing, direct different types of housing information according to the expressed needs of the families of a specific state and provide housing information that is free and readily accessible. Dissemination programs following these guidelines would serve the dual purpose of helping families to make informed housing decisions and increasing the visibility of housing professionals.

Housing and Society, Vol. 12, No. 3, 1985

REFERENCES

- Cattarella, R.S. Identifying client needs. *Journal of Extension*, 1982, 20, 5-11.
- Crosby, L.A., and Taylor, J.A. Effects of consumer information and education on cognition and choice. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 1981, 8, 43-56.
- Dillman, D.A., Tremblay, K.R., Jr., and Dillman, J.J. Influence of housing norms and personal characteristics on stated housing preferences. *Housing and Society*, 1979, 6, 2-19.
- Gould, T.F. The development and evolution of a housing information center. *Housing and Society*, 1981, 8, 39-43.
- Jacoby, J. Information load and decision quality. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 1977, 14, 569-573.
- Malhotra, N.K. *Consumer Information Seeking and Information Processing*. Buffalo, NY: State University of New York, 1981.
- Shelton, G.G., Sweaney, A.L., Day, S.S., Lentner, M.M., Lowe, J.E., Jr., McCray, J.W., Montgomery, J.E., Navin, J.L., Plowman, F.T., Tremblay, K.R., Jr., and Weber, M.J. *Perceptions of Alternative Housing*. Athens, GA: Southern Cooperative Series Bulletin 298, 1983.
- Tremblay, K.R., Jr., and Dillman, D.A. *Beyond the American Housing Dream*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983.