

Reactions of Rural Elderly To High Rise Environments

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This study investigates the reactions of non-urban elderly to age segregated high rise housing. It was found that rural elderly reacted more negatively to high rise living than previous studies have reported for urban elderly. Some suggestions are offered for further research and for improving the existing high rise environments in rural areas.

Most Americans, if given a free choice, would choose to live in a single family detached house which they themselves own. This is essentially our culture's idea of "home." For most people, the word "home" conjures up a picture of a house with a yard set slightly apart from its neighbors (Meyerson, Terrett and Wheaton, 1962; Cooper, 1976). The single family home is seen as offering more independence and more freedom of choice in redecoration, remodeling, landscaping, and repair than do other types of housing (Cooper, 1976; Montgomery, 1976).

The elderly as a group are quite committed to this ideal and the independence associated with it. Early studies showed that older individuals valued independence in housing more than did younger individuals (Meyerson, Terrett, and

Wheaton, 1962), while more recent studies indicate that today's elderly also desire to maintain their independence in single family residences (Beck, 1975). Possibly no group of people values this ideal more than the elderly who live in areas that are wholly or partially rural. Certainly this is the group that has been most often able to actualize the cultural ideal. About 78 percent of elderly heads of households in non-SMSA areas own their own homes, and over 81 percent of elderly in non-SMSA areas live in single family homes. In SMSA areas, about 65 percent of the elderly own their own homes and 62 percent live in single family homes (USDHUD, 1979). Other estimates place the percentage of rural elderly who own their homes as high as 84 percent and the percentage of those who live in single family homes as high as 95 percent (Struyk, 1976).

Even though rural elderly tend to regard owner-occupied, single family, detached housing as the most desirable, factors associated with the process of growing old in our society may cause

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many rural elderly to settle for housing that does not match their ideal. Decreasing health, strength, and mobility can render routine maintenance physically difficult or even impossible, while previously insignificant architectural features such as stairs may become barriers. Fixed incomes devalued by inflation may not stretch to cover maintenance costs or the increased costs of heating. Faced with these age associated problems, many rural elderly seek out other housing options. One such option available in many urban centers in rural counties is an age segregated federally assisted high rise.

The High Rise Option

Although researchers have long known that most Americans have difficulty in thinking of apartments in high rise buildings as homes, it has generally been thought that the elderly formed an exception to this rule. Privacy, availability of neighbors, ease of upkeep, security, and communal facilities are often cited as features which cause the elderly to adapt well to the environment of a high rise (Cooper, 1976). Other research suggests that the positive reaction is a function of the high percentage of neighbors of similar age with whom the occupant can share interests, activities, and minor resources (Rosow, 1967).

The studies which are usually used to defend the contention that the elderly adapt well to high rise life examined reactions to high rise buildings for the elderly in urban settings (Carp, 1975, 1976; Rosow, 1967). They also studied persons either already living in a high rise or having indicated a desire to. Thus, there may be a bias in favor of high rise living due to self selection, and, it may be erroneous to conclude from the research on high rise residents that elderly as a whole either like high rise living or adapt well to it. Since non-urban elderly seem to value the ideal of the single family, detached home, and since they have had greater success in acquiring this type of housing and less experience with high rise buildings than their urban counterparts, it is very likely that they

would react differently to an age-segregated federally assisted high rise.

Previous Research

Victoria Plaza in San Antonio, Texas, is the high rise for the elderly which has been most extensively studied (Carp, 1970, 1975, 1976). Victoria Plaza residents were experienced city dwellers, familiar with a high population density, as San Antonio has a density of 2935 per square mile, and the residents of Victoria Plaza were all residents of San Antonio before they moved to Victoria Plaza. The typical Victoria Plaza resident had moved from an "apartment" which consisted of one room without a private kitchen or bath (Carp, 1970). None had previously lived in a high rise, (Carp, 1970) and only 1 percent had lived in a building with an elevator (Carp, 1976). Carp reported that "No one was affluent, nor was anyone extremely poor" (Carp, 1975: 411).

The residents seemed to be extremely satisfied with their high rise housing. At the end of a year, 96 percent rated the facility as either "good" or "very good" (Carp, 1976). Carp and other observers expressed surprise at the speed and ease with which the residents adjusted to all aspects of the new environment (Carp, 1970). Carp also noted that "the modern, high-rise design of the building was enthusiastically appreciated by its residents" (Carp, 1970: 166). The residents also "enjoyed the view- both the panoramic view of San Antonio on one side and the intimate view of the lives of other residents on the other" (Carp, 1970: 168). There is an indication that these feelings were widespread in Carp's comment that "almost without exception, tenants were delighted with their apartments" (Carp, 1970: 168).

Nearly all of the factors that bothered the Victoria Plaza tenants related specifically to features of that particular building. For example, residents were bothered by the design of the medicine chests, the quality of the neighborhood, the height of the clothes rods, and the position of the mail box. Only two factors which could be interpreted as characteristics of high rises in general were

(284 units), built under Section 221 d 3 as part of a large-scale urban renewal effort, the federal government is underwriting part of the rental income of 53 percent of the units. Five percent of the tenants receive Existing Housing subsidies. Instead of promoting the mobility of tenants, housing authorities are using Section 8 to promote the solvency of landlords.

Bureaucratic Detractors

The prime scapegoat is always the bureaucracy. Inept bureaucrats, or so the argument goes, thwarted the beneficial goals of the new housing legislation. To some extent, bureaucratic mishandling hampered Section 8 and probably served as a disincentive for landlords to participate. In Rhode Island, for instance, HUD promises landlords annual rent increases; yet one year HUD was three months late in issuing increases. Landlords who renewed leases were paid retroactively for those months; but, understandably, landlords may balk at signing a lease on trust, even with the federal government. Regulations change even before officials have mastered them. Initial legislation did not allow Section 8 families with young children to live in high-rise apartments; yet, as housing authorities continued to allow the practice, regulations relaxed (Comptroller General, 1977:46-47). Similarly, initial regulations did not let certificate holders live in federally subsidized buildings. Later regulations allowed the practice, in buildings where less than 40 percent of the tenants received Rent Supplement assistance. Even then HUD permitted special appeals. HUD promises to review Fair Market Rents upon request; yet the procedure is lengthy. Finally, paperwork can overwhelm even a diligent housing authority. One Providence Housing Authority official remarked that the forms HUD requires steadily and inexorably increase with each year of a program.

Market Factors

Certain market factors are also a prerequisite for rent subsidies to successfully spur mobility.

There must be an adequate supply of standard rental units available, and these standard rental units must be at rent levels at or below the HUD Fair Market levels. Critics suggest that HUD Economic and Marketing Analysis Division set rents low to allow mobility. In other words, HUD rates cemented people in their own neighborhoods. To some extent, the argument is valid, especially in the case of three plus bedroom units where HUD rates were often inadequate (Office of Program Analysis, 1976a). Also, some communities have little rental housing, and those scarce units rent far above Fair Market levels. Extraneous factors such as a low vacancy rate or limits on new construction may skew a community's rent schedules, making rental housing beyond the reach of even moderate income tenants. In Newport, for example, a renaissance as a tourist mecca has caused housing costs to rise dramatically.

Nevertheless, many Rhode Island communities do offer two or three bedroom units renting at Fair Market levels. Some Department of Community Affairs certificate holders secured units below Fair Market rates, receiving rent credits. Low Fair Market rents may explain the failure of Providence residents to move to Warwick, but not their failure to move to Cranston or Pawtucket.

Conclusion

Through rent subsidies, Section 8 Existing Housing hoped to reduce the isolation and geographic concentration of poor people. Thus far, Section 8 has failed to meet that particular legislative goal. Before and after Section 8, the poor live in the same communities, in the same neighborhoods, frequently in the same housing. The program, though, is not dysfunctional. Apart from its stated goals, Section 8 Existing Housing has efficiently served as an income transfer program, both to hard-pressed tenants and to their city landlords, one of these being HUD itself.

Perhaps the goal of mobility itself was too ambitious, even naive. European rent supplement

by the researcher and fourteen trained interviewers. The main goal was to gather data that would enable the housing authority to evaluate the various aspects of the buildings. During this visit, each one of the 175 persons who were then living in the buildings (74 in the Streater Hi-Rise and 101 in Fornof Manor) were interviewed in an approximately one hour session. Several types of questions were asked covering such subjects as attitudes and opinions concerning their living environment and their housing and work histories.

Although some difficulties in the collection of data in federally assisted housing for the elderly and a subsequent concern over the quality and meaning of the resultant data have been reported in the literature (Larson, 1974), these difficulties did not occur in the Streater study. In fact, the reception was the opposite of that received by Larson's group, with residents participating in the study being almost and unanimously cooperative.

Findings

The Residents

More than 80 percent of the residents moved into the two buildings from in or near Streater or from one of the adjacent agricultural counties. Excluding the six individuals under age 55 whose residential eligibility stemmed from a handicap rather than from age, the mean age was slightly over 72. The mean family income in 1978 was \$4,119 with a range from \$1,247 to \$10,949. Although none of the residents could be considered to be wealthy, most did have some assets in addition to their incomes. Only 46 of the 175 residents had savings accounts under \$500, while 63 had assets greater than \$10,000. In general, the residents could be characterized as mostly working class people or farm people who had practiced careful planning and thrift throughout their lives. The residents tend to be very clean and tidy. All residents are white and all but one resident consider themselves either Catholic or Protestant.

Previous Residential History

Nearly all residents had residential experiences which would have given them the most familiarity with single family, detached housing. Almost all of the residents had spent most of their lives in a single family home. Slightly over 60 percent had moved into the buildings directly from a single family detached home, and, of these, 74 percent had owned the homes. No one had moved from a building with more than three stories and no one had moved from a building which had an elevator. Most had quite stable residential histories. Over half had lived in their previous residence for more than 10 years and almost one third had lived there for more than 20 years (Table 1).

Nearly a third stated they had moved into the high rise because they were forced to by circumstances. The rest felt that they had voluntarily chosen this option. The most common major reason given for moving was that the respondent was living in a residence for which too much rent was being charged, with almost 20 percent of the respondents giving high rent as their major reason

Table 1. Previous Housing Experiences

Previous Type Of Home	Percent of Respondents
Single family detached	61.7
Apartment building having fewer than five units	22.8
Apartment building having five or more units	8.0
Mobile home	5.7
Rooming house, hotel	1.7
	(N=171)
Length Of Residence In Previous Home	
Less than two years	24.0
Two to five years	22.8
Six to ten years	17.5
Eleven to twenty years	18.7
Twenty-one to fifty years	28.6
More than fifty years	4.1
	(N=171)

for moving. Those who had owned their own homes gave reasons including such things as financial inability to provide maintenance and repair of their dwellings and a feeling that the loss of other family members had made the house too big for them. Some individuals reported that their major reason for moving was failing health or mobility problems (Table 2).

Reactions to the High Rise Buildings

Fornof Manor

Since the new building had been in operation only a few months at the time of the study, the responses represent a short term reaction to the new environment. As indicated in Table 3, of the 101 residents about 16 percent said that they felt negative about having made the move. Five percent of the residents also volunteered the information that they were suffering from depression

and/or anxiety as a result of the move. Ten percent felt so negative about their new environment that they wanted to move from the high rise in which they lived. When asked what "type of place" they would like to move to, one of the ten answered with a geographical answer saying that she would like to move to a warmer climate, while the other nine all gave answers which described single family detached housing (such as "my own home", "back to my home," and "a real home with a yard").

Two questions were asked concerning the length of time needed to get used to the building. The first question included the lead in: "Most people find that it takes them a while to get used to a new place. Some people may get used to it in a short time, while others may take quite a long time. How long did it take you to become used to living here in this building?" The second such question immediately followed: "How long do you think it takes **most** people to get used to living here?" The residents of the new building were much more optimistic about their own adaptation than that of their neighbors. Seventy-five percent answered either "not long" or some time period of a month or less to the question concerning their own adaptation while only 19 percent of them thought that **most** people would get used to it in that time. About twelve percent qualified their answers by saying that they felt that they could not really answer it because they had not yet become used to living in the building.

An open-ended question was used to collect information on those aspects of the environment with which there were difficulties in adjusting. The question included a lead-in: "Different people find that different things bother them about a new place. What things did you find difficult to get used to after you moved here?" About 48 percent gave as their first answer a global response such as "no particular thing" or "just the change in general." The more specific responses included answers ranging from specific appliances such as the electric rather than gas stoves to major environmental features such as

TABLE 2. — Reasons For Moving

	Major Reason Number (Percent)	One Of Reasons Number (Percent)
High rent of previous home	34 (19.7)	40 (23.1)
Financial inability to provide maintenance and repair	27 (15.6)	45 (26.0)
Failing health and/or mobility problems	27 (15.6)	32 (18.4)
Previous housing in poor condition	16 (9.2)	16 (9.2)
Wanted independence	11 (6.4)	13 (7.5)
Wanted to be with other people	11 (6.4)	17 (9.8)
Loss of relative made home too big	8 (4.6)	13 (7.5)
Wanted more convenient location	8 (4.6)	14 (8.1)
Liked interior decorating	7 (4.0)	10 (5.8)
Wanted security	7 (4.0)	14 (8.1)
Other individual reasons	17 (9.8)	19 (11.0)

*Based on 173 cases.

the height of the building, which one of the residents described as "dizzying."

The specific characteristics that the respondents found difficult to get used to were divided into two categories. The first category included responses concerning characteristics of the specific building and the second category described characteristics of high rise buildings in general. Twenty persons gave as their first answer a characteristic specific to Fornof Manor, while thirty-one persons gave a response related to high rise buildings in general.

Streator Hi-Rise

Since the older building had been inhabited for thirteen years, the tenants' reactions to it represent more of a long term reaction. Sixteen of the respondents had lived in the building since it opened and the mean length of residency was slightly over six and a half years.

About 74 percent reported positive feelings about having moved to the high rise, while about 15 percent reported negative feelings. The rest felt ambivalent or indifferent (Table 3). Almost 14 percent of the respondents felt so negative that they wished to move, which is higher than the 10 percent in Fornof who expressed a desire to move. Only about 4 percent of the Streator Hi-Rise residents expressed a desire to move to a single family detached house, while the rest wished to move to homes which had more space or more rooms.

TABLE 3. General Feelings About the High-Rise Buildings

	Fornof (New Building)	Streator Hi-Rise (Old Building)
	<i>Percent distribution</i>	
Positive	71.3	74.3
Neutral or Ambivalent	12.8	10.8
Negative	15.8	14.8
	(N=101)	(N=74)

There are several explanations for this fairly high desire to move, which unfortunately this research did not test. For example, those who were content with high rise life may have become discontent with their own apartment space or layout after viewing the new building in which the spaces are arranged somewhat differently. Also, the research cannot measure the reactions of those most opposed to high rise living as those individuals most strongly desiring a single family, detached house may have moved from the building prior to the researchers' visits.

In regard to the length of time needed for adaptation to the environment, about 68 percent of the residents felt that they themselves had gotten used to living in the high rise in a month or less but only 12 percent felt that most people could adapt within that time limit. Looking back to the time when they moved into the building, the residents identified the factors that they had found difficult to get used to. Again, about sixty-eight percent gave as the first reason for a problem features which are common to all high rises and which are not found in single family, detached housing.

Comparison of the Rural Study to Previous Research

The residents of the Streator Buildings appear to be less satisfied with their environments than were the residents in Carp's study of Victoria Plaza. Whereas only 4 percent of Victoria Plaza residents rated their building as less than good, about 28 percent of the Fornof Manor residents, and about 25 percent of the Streator Hi-Rise felt less than positive about moving into their buildings.

While both groups generally appreciated the clean, high-quality, barrier-free, rent-controlled accommodations of their respective buildings, the Streator residents seemed to react more negatively to their buildings. There were also differences in the factors that the residents identified as bothersome. Whereas most of the urban group was bothered only by things specific to their

building, the more rural group was troubled by the environmental aspects of high rise living as opposed to living in the much less concentrated low-rise or single family, detached housing which they were used to thinking of as home.

The rural residents seemed to take longer to adjust than the Victoria Plaza residents did. Here, there may be problems in making comparisons as the Victoria Plaza study does not report the residents' response, but that of outside observers.

In comparing the satisfaction of the Streator Hi-Rise residents to the long term satisfaction of Victoria Plaza residents, the rural high rise residents indicated lower satisfaction rates, with only 27 percent being very positive, whereas 87 percent of Carp's sample reported being very positive (Carp, 1976).

The previous housing situations of the residents of Victoria Plaza were quite different from those of the Streator sample. Whereas nearly all of the Streator sample had lived most of their lives in single family, detached housing, persons in the Victoria Plaza study came from rooms in slum areas. Thus, there was likely more of an increase in quality for those persons that could account for higher levels of satisfaction with the new housing.

Implications

Rural elderly persons seem to have more difficulties coping with relocation to high rise environments than do their urban counterparts. It is perhaps erroneous to conclude from urban research that high rise housing is desirable for and accepted by elderly persons. If all of our program efforts are aimed at high rise housing, elderly persons may choose to live there because there are few other options available, not because they are desirable.

If we are to offer housing programs which will enable elders to maintain their independence and dignity, it is important that the values of the elderly in relation to housing be considered. Certainly for those elderly who are comfortable with high rise living, this type of design offers an ex-

cellent solution to housing problems. For those elderly who have difficulty dealing with a high rise building, other alternatives should be made available. Low rise buildings such as those sponsored by FmHA offer one such alternative while other alternatives such as the "granny annex" suggested by Pringle (1978) could provide a solution to more persons if they were made more economically feasible. More extensive repair and in-home homemaker type services could also help many.

Until such alternatives are widely available in sufficient numbers to cover the need, many rural and small town elders may decide to relocate to the high rises which are available even if they find high rise environments threatening. Given their orientation toward independence and toward the single family, detached type of house that offers this independence, many may suffer severe adaptation problems. Some of these problems might be eliminated or reduced by the development of approaches such as more extensive orientation programs which allow prolonged, even overnight or weekend visits before relocation. The modification of the high rise environment to replicate some of the valued features of single family, detached housing might also have a positive effect. For example, Victoria Plaza's introduction of garden plots may have caused the reduction in concern about the loss of the yard. The introduction of outside sitting areas, screened or set off in some way so as to preserve the privacy of those using them, might be used to replace the sitting areas that the residents formerly had in their yards. The provision of a vestibule area for either each apartment or for small blocks of apartments might be used to provide an introductory area simulating the functions of a front yard and porch. Concern directed by architects toward incorporating design features that fulfill those functions could result in a number of usable alternatives to add to these few examples.

For those elderly who highly value their independence as it can be realized through living in a single family, detached home, a move to any other

type of housing can represent a feeling of reduction in independence as they lose the control over the remodeling, decorating, and landscaping of their homes and over the degree of privacy experienced in the areas immediately surrounding the home. Recognition of this feeling as it occurs among rural and small town elderly is vital if future planning is to develop a wider, more acceptable range of housing alternatives and if programs are to be developed to enable current and future residents of existing high rise housing for the elderly to more easily come to terms with high rise living.

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