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The Built Environment, Social Justice and Gender

A study of the housing conditions of single mother headed households in the Portland Metropolitan Region using 1995 and 2002 American Housing Survey Data

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A feminist approach to housing development would take into account women's multiple roles both within and outside the home. This approach suggests environments supportive of women should consist of characteristics of higher housing densities and mixed land uses. Recently, this line of thinking finds its match in the urban planning field, where many planners are starting to realize that compact (i.e., higher density) and mixed-use neighborhoods are socially beneficial and more desirable for several population groups, particularly working mothers. After witnessing the dominance of low-density, single-use urbanization in past decades, many communities now actively promote more compact and mixed-use development patterns through land use policies.

Questions remain, however, about the effects of the land use policies on built environment forms and the ability of the resulting built environments to serve women's needs. One concern about compact urban environments is that the implementation of some of the policies (e.g., urban growth boundaries) is likely to result in land price increases, thus making housing less affordable. Another criticism of the compact urban environment is that many older high-density, mixed-use locations are prone to various kinds of problems; these include possible overcrowding, social conflicts and traffic congestion. These issues are especially salient to single-mother headed families which are socially and economically vulnerable and likely to

be in a disadvantaged position in the housing market, particularly in the competition for housing of good quality.

This research examined single-mother households' residential environment changes and their perceived environmental quality change in the Portland (Oregon) Metropolitan Area from 1995 to 2002. During this period, the Portland region was known for its success in implementing effective land use policies to control urban sprawl and produce more compact and mixed-use neighborhoods (Song and Knapp, 2004).¹

Using the 1995 and 2002 waves of American Housing Survey (AHS) data, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How did the residential environments of single-mother headed households change over this period in the context of Portland's intelligent growth policies?
2. How did the perceived neighborhood quality changes of single mothers compare to the responses of other types of households, especially families with children?
3. What factors might have contributed to the changes in perceived environmental qualities?

The built environment characteristics investigated in this study include neighborhood conditions and features typically related to the level of compact and mixed-use development: higher housing densities (defined as a neighborhood that has housing of row/town houses and/or multi-unit

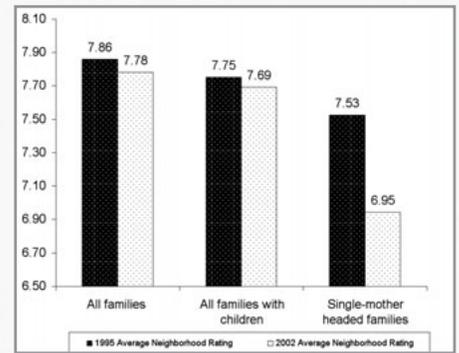


Fig. 1. Average neighborhood rating 1995 and 2002.

buildings); mixed land uses (defined as a neighborhood that has business and/or commercial buildings); access to service (defined as a neighborhood that has good stores and/or public transportation); and access to open space. Environmental qualities examined in this study are based on survey respondents' reports of some neighborhood conditions (e.g., heavy traffic, crime, school quality and adequacy) and the rating of one's neighborhood as a place to live.

There are 3,593 survey responses in the 1995 wave of AHS and 3,979 in the 2002 AHS. Among the samples, 153 single mothers were surveyed in 1995 and 147 in 2002. There are 3,076 cases in which surveys were conducted at the same housing unit in the two surveys, and 1,098 cases where the same respondent answered the survey in the two waves.

The main findings from this research are summarized below:

1. Consistent with findings from other studies, the Portland metropolitan

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region became more compact in land use density and more diverse in land use mix at the neighborhood scale. Compared with overall respondents, the living environments of single-mother headed households experienced a greater degree of increase in neighborhood housing densities and land use-mixture (see Table 1). These increases reinforced the finding that single-parent families, among all families with children, had the highest percentages living in neighborhoods of high-density, mixed-land uses, with access to public transportation. However, single-mother headed households had the lowest percentage living in neighborhoods with access to open space. This condition remained true despite

the finding that, in the Portland region, the percentage of single mothers reported living in close proximity to open space has increased substantially during the 1995 to 2002 period.

2. Despite the fact that more single mothers lived in environments with characteristics presumably beneficial to them, the average neighborhood satisfaction levels reported by single mothers declined substantially from 1995 to 2002 (see Figure 1). When neighborhood satisfaction changes were examined in relation to neighborhood built environment characteristics, it appears that distinctive declines in neighborhood satisfaction have taken place for single mothers living in neighborhoods with mixed land uses and with access to public transportation (see Table 2).

3. Changes in single-mothers' perceived environment and social qualities offer some explanation for the observed decline in their neighborhood satisfaction. From 1995 to 2002, the percentage of single mothers living in mixed-use neighborhoods who reported experiencing problems of neighborhood crime and heavy traffic increased by 15.9 percent and 11.1 percent respectively (see Table 3). Significantly, more single mothers living in close proximity to open space also reported the presence of these problems. Within the overall sample, a lower percentage of respondents reported the existence of these problems from 1995 to 2002.

Another aspect that may have an impact on single mothers' neighborhood satisfaction is the deterioration of housing unit affordability and housing quality. Historically, acquiring an affordable housing unit has been a major concern for single mother families. In 1995, almost 39 percent of the surveyed single mothers lived in owner-occupied housing; this number declined to 33 percent in 2002. In contrast, for all other families with children, the home ownership rate increased from 69.3 percent to 72.2 percent. The average rating of one's housing unit (i.e., housing unit satisfaction) also declined for single mothers. The largest declines occurred for single mothers living in neighborhoods with mixed land uses.

Conclusion

This project's findings underscore the observation that the effects of any physical form on women's lives are contingent upon social and economic qualities associated with the built environment. While the Portland region has been successful in providing more housing in neighborhoods of mixed land uses as well as good access to services such as stores, public transportation and open space, a correlation continues between some social and environmental problems and compact and mixed-use neighborhood conditions. On average, single mothers living in this area were not able to compete successfully in the acquisition of housing possessing good social qualities; this has contributed to the declining neighborhood satisfaction reported by single mothers. ■

Footnotes

1. Song, Y., & Knaap, G. (2004). Measuring urban form: Is Portland winning the war on sprawl? *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 70 (2): 210-225.

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Table 1: Percent of households living in a neighborhood with the following characteristics

		Neighborhood density types			Land use mix			
		Low density ¹	Medium-density ²	High density ³	Neighborhood has mixed land uses ⁴	Good neighborhood stores within 1 mile	Public transportation available	Open space in neighborhood
All families	1995 (N=3593)	65.3%	31.5%	3.3%	18.6%	71.7%	77.1%	25.4%
	2002 (N=3979)	60.9%	34.9%	4.2%	26.0%	72.8%	76.9%	39.1%
	Δ	-4.4%	3.4%	1.0%	7.4%	1.1%	-0.1%	13.7%
All families with children	1995 (N=1289)	74.0%	25.4%	.6%	15.1%	70.1%	73.2%	26.2%
	2002 (N=1346)	67.1%	30.3%	2.6%	23.5%	71.2%	76.0%	43.6%
	Δ	-6.8%	4.9%	1.9%	8.4%	1.1%	2.8%	17.4%
Single-mother headed families	1995 (N=153)	45.1%	53.6%	1.3%	29.4%	78.3%	86.9%	19.0%
	2002 (N=147)	40.1%	56.5%	3.4%	40.8%	77.9%	85.6%	36.1%
	Δ	-5.0%	2.9%	2.1%	11.4%	-4%	-1.3%	17.1%

Table 2: Neighborhood rating by neighborhood characteristics

		All families			All families with children			Single-mother headed families			
		1995 (N=3593)	2002 (N=3979)	Δ	1995 (N=1289)	2002 (N=1346)	Δ	1995 (N=153)	2002 (N=147)	Δ	
Neighborhood Density Types	Low density ¹	8.09	8.05	-.05	8.03	8.01	-.01	7.97	7.49	-.48	
	Medium-density ²	7.43	7.33	-.10	6.94	7.01	.06	7.15	6.67	-.48	
	High density ³	7.65	7.74	.09	8.14	7.45	-.69	8.20	5.00	-3.20	
Land Use Mix Conditions	Neighborhood has mixed land uses ⁴	no	8.00	7.96	-.04	7.88	7.87	.00	7.58	7.38	-.20
	yes	7.33	7.32	-.02	7.04	7.10	.06	7.40	6.32	-1.08	
	Good neighborhood stores within 1 mile	no	7.90	7.95	.05	7.73	7.87	.14	7.42	6.88	-.55
	yes	7.86	7.74	-.13	7.75	7.61	-.13	7.53	6.96	-.57	
	Public transportation available	no	8.09	8.21	.12	7.89	8.08	.19	8.05	7.88	-.17
	yes	7.82	7.66	-.16	7.70	7.46	-.23	7.45	6.72	-.73	
Open space present in neighborhood	no	7.82	7.70	-.12	7.70	7.60	-.10	7.33	6.94	-.39	
	yes	8.04	7.94	-.09	7.90	7.82	-.08	8.38	6.96	-1.42	

Table 3: Percent of respondents reporting neighborhood problems and average housing unit ratio

		Neighborhood crime			Heavy street traffic and noise			Average housing unit satisfaction		
		1995	2000	Δ	1995	2000	Δ	1995	2000	Δ
All families		31.6%	24.3%	-7.3%	37.8%	33.0%	-4.8%	8.19	7.93	-0.26
All Families with children		32.8%	28.6%	-4.2%	34.3%	31.4%	-3.0%	8.08	7.83	-0.25
All single mother headed families		42.5%	47.0%	4.5%	41.2%	33.8%	-7.3%	7.58	7.43	-0.15
Single-mother headed families by environment characteristics										
neighborhood has	no	44.4%	42.4%	-2.1%	38.0%	26.7%	-11.2%	7.68	7.64	-0.04
commercial/institutional/business land uses	yes	37.8%	53.7%	15.9%	48.9%	60.0%	11.1%			
Good neighborhood stores within 1 mile	no	45.5%	36.0%	-9.5%	48.5%	37.5%	-11.0%	7.33	7.13	-0.20
yes	42.0%	50.7%	8.6%	39.5%	41.6%	2.1%	7.63	7.45	-0.18	
Public transportation available	no	20.0%	36.0%	16.0%	25.0%	19.0%	-6.0%	7.65	8.12	0.47
yes	45.9%	50.7%	4.8%	43.6%	44.0%	0.4%	7.57	7.21	-0.36	
Open space present in neighborhood	no	46.0%	46.2%	0.2%	43.5%	39.4%	-4.2%	7.50	7.38	-0.12
yes	27.6%	48.6%	21.0%	31.0%	42.3%	11.3%	7.90	7.52	-0.38	

Note: Neighborhood is defined as a block (about 300 feet) around one respondent's residence

- 1 Neighborhood contains only single-family dwellings
- 2 Neighborhood contains row/town houses
- 3 Neighborhood contains multi-unit apartment buildings
- 4 Neighborhood contains commercial and/or business land uses