

## Girls in the 'Hood: Evidence on the Impact of Safety

by Susan J. Popkin, Tama Leventhal, and Gretchen Weismann

They come at them wrong ways. They'll talk about their bootie or they'll just come to them straight, "Do you want to have sex?," or they talking about they use a girl. Yeah, they'll use a girl and they said—they call it "pimp a girl out."

Adolescents growing up in neighborhoods marked by concentrated poverty are at risk for a range of problems, including poor physical and mental health, risky sexual behavior and delinquency. And, as Charmaine's description of life in her neighborhood above indicates, girls growing up in high poverty face specific risks because of their gender—the demoralizing effects of omnipresent and constant harassment; the pervasive domestic violence; and the high risk of sexual assault. These girls also experience pressure to become sexually active at increasingly younger ages, with early sexual initiation bringing its own hazards: pregnancy, the risk of sexually transmitted disease, and dropping out of school to care for children. All of these hazards have serious, long-term implications for the life chances of low-income adolescent girls.

The federal government's Moving to Opportunity for Fair Housing Demonstration (MTO) was a unique effort to try to improve the life chances of very poor families with children by helping them leave the disadvantaged environments that contribute to these kinds of poor outcomes. MTO targeted families living in some of the nation's poorest neighborhoods—distressed public housing—and used housing subsidies to offer them a chance to move to lower-poverty communities. The hope was that moving would provide access to safer neighborhoods with better schools. In these safer neighborhoods, adolescents—both girls and boys—would be exposed to fewer

negative influences like gangs and drugs, and should then be at lower risk for mental health problems and delinquency and other risky behavior. In this article, we use data from recent research on MTO to explore how these changed neighborhood environments may have influenced outcomes for adolescent girls.

### The MTO Demonstration

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) launched MTO in 1994 in five cities: Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles and New York. MTO was a voluntary relocation program for very-low-income residents of public housing in high-poverty neighborhoods in

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these cities. Those who volunteered were randomly assigned to one of three treatment groups: a control group (families retained their public housing unit, but received no new assistance); a Section 8 comparison group (families received the standard counseling and voucher subsidy, for use in the private housing market); or an experimental group. The experimental-group families received *special relocation counseling* (focused on opportunities to live in low-poverty areas) and *search assistance*. They also received a voucher usable only in a low-poverty neighborhood (less than 10% poor as of the 1990 Census), with the requirement that the family live there for at least one year.

Of the 1,820 families assigned to the experimental group, just under half (48%, or 860) found a suitable apartment and moved successfully. The MTO Interim Evaluation—conducted in 2002, approximately 5-7 years after families relocated—found that many of the experimental group families had moved again, some of them several times. Also complicating the picture, by 2002, about 70% of the control group had moved out of public housing, albeit mostly to other poor urban neighborhoods. However, families in the MTO experimental group were still more likely to be living in low-poverty areas (whether the original placement areas or other areas), and had lived for longer periods of time in low-poverty areas, than families in the control group. Thus, MTO tells us the effect of living in a low-poverty neighborhood, at least for some period of time.

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### Victoria Gray Adams

We dedicate this issue of *P&R* to Victoria Gray Adams, who passed away in August. In 1964 she became the first woman in Mississippi to run for the US Senate, challenging segregationist John Stennis. The decision that she and her colleagues in the Miss. Freedom Democratic Party took became a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement and the Democratic Party. Although she lost by an overwhelming margin because the state had effectively disenfranchised Black voters, MFDP went on to challenge the state's all-white official delegation at the 1964 Atlantic City National Convention—the rest is history.

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## MTO Seems To Have Benefited Adolescent Girls, But Not Boys

MTO families were surveyed in 2002 for the Interim Evaluation. Surprisingly, these findings showed that only adolescent girls seem to have benefited from moving to better neighborhoods. Specifically, girls in the experimental group reported less psychological distress, anxiety and substance use, and were less likely to be arrested (especially for violent and property crimes) relative to girls in the control group. In contrast, adolescent boys in the experimental group reported *more* behavior problems and substance use, and were *more* likely to be arrested for property crimes than their counterparts in the control group.

These findings have been very controversial, with much research and policy attention focused on why the boys did not fare as well. However, focusing solely on the disappointing results for boys discounts the importance of the positive effects for girls. Clearly, MTO was very successful in improving the overall well-being of girls who moved to low-poverty neighborhoods, and exploring the factors that led to these unexpectedly positive outcomes could tell us a great deal about the importance of good neighborhood environments for adolescents.

There is a large body of research

that shows that living in high-poverty neighborhoods can lead to a range of bad outcomes for adolescents, including depression, delinquency and crime, and increased risk of teen pregnancy and risky sexual behavior. Moving to a lower-poverty neighborhood might benefit adolescents in several ways: (1) providing higher levels of social organization (collective efficacy) that promote monitoring of residents' behavior and reduce the threat of violent crime and disorder; (2) offering stronger institutional resources for youth, notably high-quality schools, youth programs and health services; (3) providing access to more positive peer groups; and (4) promoting

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changes in parents' well-being and behavior.

Findings from our recent research on MTO suggest that it is the difference in neighborhood organization and safety that is driving the positive effects for girls. In particular, girls seem to be benefiting from a reduction in what Margo Gordon and Stephanie Riger's book labeled *The Female Fear*—the fear of sexual victimization, verbal and physical harassment, and

## Thank\$

Thank you to everyone who responded to our recent subscription renewal letter—we really appreciate your encouragement and support.

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sexual exploitation. When social control mechanisms fail, as is the case in distressed public housing communities like the ones where the MTO families lived, all residents must cope with violence and disorder. But the physical and social threats that adolescent girls confront are very different from those facing boys. Girls in all types of communities experience at least some verbal and physical harassment, but as Popkin and her colleagues describe in *The Hidden War*, in the socially isolated world of distressed public housing, the pressures for sexual activity are much greater, the threats more blatant, and the risk of rape and assault very real. To avoid these threats, parents often monitor their daughters closely, making them spend much of their time indoors. Thus, we argue that it is the reduction of these gender-specific threats that has so benefited MTO girls.

## The Three-City Study of MTO

We used qualitative data from the Three-City Study of MTO, a large-scale, mixed-method study focusing on three of the MTO cities—Boston, Los Angeles and New York—to examine whether the substantial improvement in safety gained by moving to lower-poverty neighborhoods resulted in reductions in “female fear.” We also explore how potential reductions in this fear may have benefited adolescent girls' health and behavior compared to their counterparts who re-

### “For Better or Worse: The Implications of Poverty, Gender & Race on African-American Women & Their Families”

This forum, co-sponsored by the Center for Research on African American Women & PRRAC, will be held on Thursday, Sept. 28, 4-6, at the Leadership Conf. on Civil Rights (1629 K St. NW, DC - 10th flr. Conf. Room). Panelists include Avis Jones-DeWeever (Inst. for Women's Policy Research), William Spriggs (Howard Univ. Econ. Dept.), Roderick Harrison (Jt. Ctr. for Pol. & Econ. Studies) & Susan Popkin (Urban Inst.). PRRAC's Dir. of Research Chester Hartman will be moderator. RSVP if you plan to come (so we have enough refreshments—and if we need to shift to a larger facility): [RSpraggins@deltafoundation.net](mailto:RSpraggins@deltafoundation.net) or 202/347-1337.

mained in high-poverty neighborhoods.

The Three-City Study of MTO was designed to examine key puzzles that emerged in previous MTO research, such as the gender differences described above. Our family-level data were collected in 2004 and 2005—about 6-10 years after families' initial placement through the MTO program and two years after the Interim Evaluation data collection.

## How Safer Neighborhoods Help Adolescent Girls

When participants volunteered for MTO, the most common reason they cited was to get their families away from drugs and gangs. And, according to the Interim Evaluation, the majority of experimental group movers believed they attained that goal, reporting feeling safer in their neighborhoods at night than those in the control group, and much less likely to report problems with drug trafficking and gangs. But evidence from the Three-City Study interviews shows that women and girls gained even more than a general sense of safety—they gained a dramatic reduction in “the female fear.” Compared with their counterparts still living in high-poverty neighborhoods, experimental group movers reported less harassment from men and boys, less pressure to engage in sexual behavior, and, as a result, said they were less fearful. Generally, experimental group movers were confident that they were safe from harassment. For example, Terri, a young girl in the experimental group in Los Angeles, could not even imagine that men in her low-poverty community might treat women badly:

I don't really know because like everybody that I know they have husbands and stuff. Their moms and dads are together, so I don't know.

These girls—and their mothers—often talked poignantly about what happened to their friends who still lived in public housing and how they felt

### New on PRRAC's Website

- “Building Opportunity: Civil Rights Best Practices in the Low Income Housing Tax Credit Program”—a 50-state survey of annual state plans in our largest affordable housing development program, highlighting examples of states that take fair housing issues into account in allocating housing dollars.
- Selected amicus briefs in the “voluntary school integration cases” from Louisville & Seattle currently pending in the US Supreme Court—including briefs submitted by PRRAC, the Inst. on Race & Poverty, the Kirwan Inst. for the Study of Race & Ethnicity, the Harvard Civil Rights Project, ACLU, NAACP Legal Defense Fund & others.

they have avoided their fate. Many, like Antionette, a young woman in her early 20s whose family initially moved to a low-poverty neighborhood in The Bronx, referred to friends who already had children of their own:

...Because a lot of kids in my [old] neighborhood, like the girls,

### Women and girls gained a dramatic reduction in “the female fear.”

wound up not finishing junior high or just starting high school like one of my best friends. I mean, we were in every single class since we started school together. We even went to the same high school. And then like ninth grade she had a kid and that was it.

An issue of particular concern for many of the mothers and girls was the pressure for early sexual initiation. Brianna, a mother from the experimental complier group in Los Angeles, talked about how hard it would be to raise her daughter if she had stayed in public housing, especially her fears about men preying on little girls.

I have thought about that before, if I was living there still, how would it be. I think the type of person I am, I would have control of it, but I wouldn't be able to trust it because of the guys...that try to hit on younger girls. So I wouldn't trust it....That's what they're like. They don't like the women my age. They

go for the 12-year-old, the 11-year-olds, and give them drugs and that's not good... I have seen a lot of young girls like that...I refuse for my daughter to be like that.

In contrast to the experimental group movers, nearly all of the girls—and mothers raising girls—who were still living in high-poverty neighborhoods (both control group families and experimental non-compliers) talked about the risks and their own fears. Carla and her teenage children moved back to public housing in New York after living for many years in a lower-poverty neighborhood. Carla described the bad things that had happened to her daughter since moving back—getting involved in risky sexual activity, catching herpes and being exposed to violence. She expressed an urgent need to get her daughter away from the risks of the neighborhood:

I really want to get out of this neighborhood. Because Maribel [her daughter] gets involved in things she shouldn't [referring to the drug dealer ex-boyfriend who gave Maribel herpes]. And, her best friend was in trouble. I didn't even know what was going on....

Sexual violence and coerced sex are a sad reality for girls living in high-poverty neighborhoods. Nearly all of the mothers and girls who were still living in high-poverty neighborhoods talked about how badly men in their community treat women. These comments from Charmaine, an experi-

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mental group mover in Los Angeles whose family had moved back to a high-poverty neighborhood, were typical. She said that guys in her neighborhood treated women “terrible”:

They come at them wrong ways. They’ll talk about their bootie or they’ll just come to them straight, “Do you want to have sex?,” or they talking about they use a girl. Yeah, they’ll use a girl and they said—they call it “pimp a girl out.”....Just get between her legs and just go on like nothing.

Tonya, another girl growing up in public housing in Los Angeles, described more intense physical violence:

Foul. Just like in any other projects. They’ll call them B’s [bitches], ho’s, tramps, sluts, stuff like that. They don’t care. They don’t have no respect for females at all. They beat up females over here and all that, throw them out of windows. Oh, my God. These projects is crazy. They throw their girlfriends out of windows and everything else, pull out guns on them and stuff. They don’t really too much care for females over here.

Girls growing up in these communities say they respond to the threat of harassment and violence by walking, talking and dressing in ways that show that they are tough. When they can, they avoid risky places where they know they might face danger, including staying to themselves and staying inside the house. Mothers adopt a range of strategies to cope with the

sexual pressures, from allowing their daughters to have a boyfriend “so they won’t do it behind my back” to closely monitoring their daughters’ friends and activities.

Those who have managed to move to lower-poverty neighborhoods are aware of having escaped from a dangerous environment; those who are still living in high poverty are aware of the risks and the constant need to be alert, aware and protective. The reduced anxiety for those who are no longer living in high poverty is notable, and participants themselves see it as one of the biggest benefits of making an MTO move. Robin, a mom from LA in the experimental group, talked at length about the impact of moving from a public housing development in

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### **Sexual violence and coerced sex are a sad reality for girls living in high-poverty neighborhoods.**

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Watts to a suburban neighborhood has had on her children. Robin is struggling with health problems and is relieved that she does not have to worry so much about her daughter’s safety and the pressure to become sexually active. As she put it:

I’m glad we are out here, far as that part, I’m glad we are living out here, cuz there is more intimidation and everything down there [in Watts]... Those boys down there are bad, say all kind of stuff... I’m like “man look at these kids.” It’s a faster

pace. My kids are slow, so when my kids go down there now and they look at them, like, “you guys are different.” ... They tell ‘em that they are different or whatever, “you guys changed since you lived out there.” They talk about them. That’s why I say, it’s kind of good that we are living out here. I know me, even if I was living in LA, it’d be hard for me, because the kids that they hang around, or the environment that they are around, it would be hard for them as kids too, and then by me, being the way I am, it would be just a mess.

## **Safety: The Potential for Long-Term Benefits**

The evidence from our research on MTO shows real benefits for adolescent girls and their mothers. These powerful findings highlight the potential benefits of mobility. MTO participants cite safety as their biggest gain—and the evidence from the Three-City Study shows that safety has meaning for women and girls beyond the lower exposure to gang violence and drug trafficking documented in the Interim Evaluation. We do not know what the long-term benefits of these improvements in these young women’s mental health and quality of life may be, but it seems plausible that they might include delayed child-bearing, better parenting, and maybe even more success in education and employment. Following the MTO sample over the long term is critical if we hope to understand the long-term implications of the reduction in the “female fear” that these young women are experiencing.

Further, these findings also highlight the importance of creating mobility programs that do more than simply help participants make an initial move to low poverty. Given the evidence of such important benefits for women and girls, helping families *stay* in better neighborhoods is as important as helping them get there in the first place. The Interim Evaluation of MTO showed that many participants make subsequent moves to higher-pov-

## **Teaching for Social Justice**

PRRAC, along with Teaching for Change, our partner organization in publishing *Putting the Movement Back Into Civil Rights Teaching* ([www.civilrights-teaching.org](http://www.civilrights-teaching.org)), is co-sponsoring “Teaching for Social Justice: From Moments to Movement,” along with the Bay Area group Teachers 4 Social Justice. The free conference, supported by a grant from the Akonadi Foundation, is Saturday, Oct. 14, at Mission High School in San Francisco. Keynote is Asa Hilliard, and there will be lots of interesting workshops. Contact Chester Hartman ([chartman@prrac.org](mailto:chartman@prrac.org)) for more details or if you are interested in attending.

erty communities—and our forthcoming research suggests that these moves often happen for economic reasons or because of a lack of knowledge about other options. The comments of the women we interviewed make clear the distress many feel about returning to an environment where their daughters are once more subject to the pervasive harassment and pressure for sex. Any benefits these families have gained by living in safer communities can be quickly lost once they return to these distressed communities. Therefore, to be truly successful, any new mobility efforts must include long-term supports to help families stay in the types of neighborhoods that can provide the kinds of environments that enable children and adolescents to thrive.

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All names used in this article are pseudonyms. □

## Resources

John Goering and Judith Feins. 2003. *Choosing a Better Life? Evaluating the Moving to Opportunity Demonstration*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute Press.

Margo Gordon and Stephanie Riger. 1989. *The Female Fear*. New York: The Free Press.

Tama Leventhal and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn. 2000. "The Neighborhoods They Live In: The Effects of Neighborhood Residence on Child and Adolescent Outcomes." *Psychological Bulletin* 126(2): 309-337.

Larry Orr et al. 2003. *Moving to Opportunity for Fair Housing Demonstration Program: Interim Impacts Evaluation*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Susan Popkin, Tama Leventhal, and Gretchen Weismann, *Girls in the 'hood: Reframing safety and its impact on health and behavior*. Three-City Study of MTO Working Paper, The Urban Institute, August 2006.

Susan Popkin, Victoria Gwiasda, Lynn Olson, Dennis Rosenbaum, and Larry Buron. 2000. *The Hidden War: Crime and The Tragedy of Public Housing in Chicago*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

## Katrina Books

There are scads of books out on the hurricanes. Here are the best of them:

Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans & the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (Morrow, 2006, 716 pp., \$27.95)

Mike Tidwell, *The Ravaging Tide: Strange Weather, Future Katrinas & the Coming Death of America's Coastal Cities* (Free Press, 2006, 196 pp., \$24)

Mike Tidwell, *Bayou Farewell: The Rich Life & Tragic Death of Louisiana's Cajun Coast* (Vintage, 2003, 354 pp., \$14.95)

Christopher Cooper & Robert Block, *Disaster: Hurricane Katrina & the Failure of Homeland Security* (Times, 2006, 333 pp., \$26)

Chester Hartman & Gregory D. Squires, eds., *There Is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class & Hurricane Katrina* (Routledge, 2006, 311 pp., \$22.95)—among the 18 contributors: John Powell, Sheila Crowley, Wade Rathke, Mary Frances Berry, Peter Marcuse, John Taylor

John McQuaid & Mark Scheifstein, *Path of Destruction: The Devastation of New Orleans & The Coming Age of Superstorms* (Little Brown, 2006, 368 pp., \$25.99)

David Troutt, ed., *After the Storm: Black Intellectuals Explore the Meaning of Hurricane Katrina* (New Press, 2006, 164 pp., \$22.95)—among the 12 contributors: Sheryll

Cashin, Adolph Reed, Jr., Michael Eric Dyson, Charles Ogletree, Derrick Bell

Betsy Reed, ed., *Unnatural Disaster: The Nation on Hurricane Katrina* (Nation Books, 2006, 248 pp., \$14.95)—among the 36 contributors: Eric Foner, Alexander Cockburn, Adolph Reed, Jr., Mike Davis, Eric Alterman, Robert Scheer, Naomi Klein, Nicholas von Hoffman, William Greider, Katrina vanden Heuvel, Gary Younge

Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina & the Color of Disaster* (Basic, 2006, 258 pp., \$23)

Jed Horne, *Breach of Faith: Hurricane Katrina & the Near Death of a Great American City* (Random House, 2006, 412 pp., \$25.95)

John Brown Childs, ed., *Hurricane Katrina: Response & Responsibilities* (Pacific View Press, 2005, 82 pp., \$10)—among the 31 contributors: Wynton Marsalis, Bettina Aptheker, Grace Lee Boggs, David Cohen, Jeremy Brecher, Michael Lerner

Eric Mann, *Katrina's Legacy: White Racism & Black Reconstruction in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast* (Frontlines, 2006, 215 pp., \$15)

NB: Other miscellaneous Katrina-related items are to be found in the Resources section of this and future P&R issues and on the PRRAC website, [www.prrac.org/projects/katrina.php](http://www.prrac.org/projects/katrina.php).