

AFFORDABLE TOWNHOUSE DEVELOPMENTS FOR FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN: PARENTS' SATISFACTION AND ASSESSMENT

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This study explored factors influencing parents' residential satisfaction and assessment of their housing as a good place to raise children in newer affordable low-density multifamily housing developments. There is concern about the lack of safe and adequate play environments in many urban cities (Blakely, 1994). In addition, suburban and inner-city disparities include deteriorating inner-city neighborhoods where many subsidized housing developments are located. Given these concerns, many U.S. cities have challenged both the revitalization of the inner-city neighborhoods and the disparity of affordable housing throughout the metropolitan region. During the 1990s, U.S. multifamily housing development strategies for affordable and decent housing have led to the creation of smaller-scaled multifamily housing, such as townhouses and walk-up apartments that are more easily integrated into existing communities.

Based on a desire for safe and decent residential environments for children in this urban society, the following research question was addressed: what are the factors that influence parents' satisfaction and assessment of residential environments, focusing on children's play environments in newer affordable townhouse developments? The research objectives were: 1) to assess characteristics of the physical and social environment of newer affordable townhouse developments, 2) to assess the parents' residential satisfaction level with the physical, social, and psychological advantages and disadvantages of newer affordable townhouse developments, and 3) to analyze the relationships among the characteristics, overall residential satisfaction, and overall assessment of housing as a good place to raise children.

Three models were designed to examine parents' satisfaction and assessment toward their townhouse developments as a good place to raise children. The first model was based on the housing adjustment model by Morris and Winter (1978 & 1994). It was hypothesized that existence of housing deficits (space, expenditure, structure, location, and play areas) would elicit dissatisfaction with the residential environment, and prompt a propensity to move influenced by constraints. The second model was based on the attitude-based model by Weidemann and Anderson (1985). It was hypothesized that satisfaction level with each of the attributes from the physical and social environments of dwelling, development, management, and neighborhood would affect overall residential satisfaction and duration at current residence. The third model was developed from a literature review about parents' assessments of residential environments for their children. It was hypothesized that parents positively assess their residential environment as a good place to raise children if they are satisfied with the

play environment and the social environment of their housing, the safety of play areas, the adequacy of play places for children of all ages, and the sense of community.

A multi-setting case study was designed in 13 affordable townhouse developments in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area. The sample developments were selected from lists of developments utilizing the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit subsidy. The sample developments were selected based on age of development (no more than 10 years of age), size of development (from six to 49 units), and location (sites in both inner-city and suburban areas).

Data were collected from interviews with housing managers and/or developers, walk-through site observations, and self-administered resident surveys conducted in summer 1997. The resident survey asked residents about their residential satisfaction, perception toward children's play environments, and demographic information. Of the 285 units in the 13 developments, 76 parents with at least one child under 18 years completed the questionnaire (27%).

A majority of the parents were satisfied with their overall residential environments, especially with the affordable rent, appearance, development size, and most of the dwelling features. However, management, children's play environment (shared and private outdoor spaces, supervision, and traffic safety) and the social environment (safety, privacy, and neighborhood) were sources of dissatisfaction. The respondents' strong preferences for single-family homes resulted in a high percentage of the respondents with a structure deficit (78%). Location deficit was more frequently reported by inner-city respondents than suburban respondents. Results from the tests of models by regression analyses indicated that location deficit, satisfaction with children's play environments, and satisfaction with management were related to overall residential satisfaction. Satisfaction with children's play environments was the single strong predictor of the assessment of housing as a good place to raise children. Nonwhite parents were more likely to be satisfied with their social environment and children's play environment than white parents. Satisfaction with their social environment was related to residents' expected duration of residence. Residents with higher household incomes expected to move earlier.

In summary, most parents were satisfied with the overall residential environments of their newer affordable townhouse developments. However, inadequate management, inadequate children's play environments, and concerns about the social environment (safety, privacy, and social interaction) were sources of dissatisfaction. These findings supported other similar studies. A concern about current diverse families in need of affordable and decent housing suggests the need to focus on the following implications of the findings for housing policy, planning, and design: 1) guaranteed affordability of rent and adequate budget for maintenance, upkeep, and support programs in the development, 2) management staffs with a tenant-oriented

attitude and sensitivity to fostering better relationships among residents, and 3) adequate and safe private and shared outdoor spaces for children.

References

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