

Understanding the Neighborhood: From Residents' Perceptions and Needs to Action

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Abstract

Community development corporations (CDCs) frequently serve as champions for inner-city, low-income neighborhoods and strive to revitalize these neighborhoods and develop programs for residents. To better serve their target community, CDCs will often team with researchers to study a neighborhood and gather information directly from residents. This article presents the results of a collaborative, comprehensive study conducted by a CDC in New Orleans, together with university researchers. We collected data from multiple sources, including a random sample of residents, a resident focus group, a survey of the physical condition of housing, published materials, and interviews with CDC staff and board members.

Results indicate that for this neighborhood, housing conditions and safety are important explanations of neighborhood satisfaction and that neighborhood satisfaction is a key predictor of housing satisfaction. We discuss the application of these results to the CDC's revitalization efforts and conclude with the contributions of this research to scholarship and practice.

Keywords: Community development; Housing; Neighborhood

Introduction

The past 40 years witnessed a significant decline in many inner-city neighborhoods. This decline reflects the interaction among the flight of middle-income residents and jobs to the suburbs, federal and local policies that supported this flight and razed neighborhoods, an aging building stock in central cities, and other factors (Apgar, Masnick, and McArdle 1991; Jackson 1985; Kantor 1988; Kasarda 1995; Mitchell 1985; Moss 1997). Over the same period, various responses to neighborhood decline emerged, and neighborhood revitalization became a goal for community activists, planners, and public officials. Beginning in the 1960s, community development corporations (CDCs) appeared as neighborhood advocates and revitalization strategists. While CDCs have evolved over time, they continue to be the champions of revitalization efforts in many low-income, inner-city neighborhoods (Peterman 2000; Stoecker 1997; Vidal 1992).

CDCs typically employ a relatively small staff managed by an executive director, with oversight from a board of directors. Board members often include neighborhood residents, bankers, attorneys, architects, planners, and other professionals (Ahlbrandt and Brophy 1975; Robinson 1996). Resident board members are thought to represent the views of neighborhood residents (Vidal 1992). However, it is not known whether these board members are representative voices for the neighborhood. In other words, board members are not a random sample and may have very different views and needs from those of the average neighborhood resident. Understanding the neighborhood from the residents' perspective is critical if CDCs are to effectively serve the neighborhood population.

CDCs use several strategies such as neighborhood forums to better understand their target area and its residents. Working with university researchers to identify neighborhood needs can also be a successful strategy for a CDC. In this article, we discuss a comprehensive neighborhood study conducted as a collaboration between a CDC in New Orleans and university researchers. The impetus for this study was twofold. First, the CDC needed specific information about the neighborhood to integrate into its strategic planning. It desired an objective assessment from the research team about neighborhood conditions, as well as subjective views from the residents' perspective. Second, researchers were asked to evaluate an ongoing neighborhood revitalization project.

The article presents results based on in-person survey data collected during the study period. Results include residents' perceptions of the neighborhood, obstacles to homeownership, and explanations of neighborhood and housing satisfaction in the target neighborhood. In addition, we describe how the CDC is using this information in its revitalization efforts. The article contributes to community development planning and policy in two ways: First, the residents' survey was based on previous studies of residential satisfaction. However, many of these studies were conducted in the general population and were not focused specifically on low-income households. This research reveals the similarity in findings between previous research and the lower-income neighborhood in this study.

Second, the article provides housing researchers, students, and practitioners with a successful example of research informing practice. In particular, the study reveals the value of previous research in framing a study for applied purposes, the strength of using a collaborative approach to neighborhood research, and the importance of tapping into residents' views for neighborhood revitalization programs.

The remainder of the article is divided into six sections. The first provides a brief overview of the target neighborhood and the CDC. The second discusses previous studies on neighborhood and housing satisfaction and the relationship between homeownership and satisfaction. Following this discussion, we describe the methodology we used in the study. In the fourth section, we present results from our statistical analyses. The fifth section considers the CDC's use of study results in furthering revitalization efforts. Finally, in the last section, we discuss the contributions of this collaborative study to scholarship and practice.

Overview of the target neighborhood and the CDC

The target neighborhood is bounded on three sides by major thoroughfares and on the south by a quiet residential street. A commercial shopping corridor is found near the southern border of the neighborhood, which was developed in the early 20th century as engineering advances improved drainage and streetcar lines extended farther out from the city's central business district (Warner 1999). Today, the neighborhood is located in the Uptown area of New Orleans, within a relatively short drive from the Tulane and Loyola University campuses and the central business district.

Like many inner-city neighborhoods, this one has experienced periods of prosperity and decline. After significant growth during the first six decades of the century, the neighborhood declined, fueled by racial integration and suburbanization (Warner 1999). In the 1980s, the entire New Orleans area experienced a severe economic downturn because of its heavy dependence on the struggling oil and gas industries. As a result, the housing market suffered, and abandonment as well as foreclosure rates escalated throughout the city (Lauria and Baxter 1999). The target neighborhood felt the effects of this citywide depression and declined further. From 1980 to 1990, the neighborhood population decreased by almost 25 percent, and the number of housing units fell by slightly more than 12 percent. In 1990, the neighborhood had a population of 2,529, of which slightly over 90 percent were African Americans. The unemployment rate increased from 7.7 percent to 14.8 percent, and the poverty rate rose by almost 10 percentage points between 1980 and 1990; the 1989 median household income in the neighborhood was \$14,104 (Capstone Studio Class Project 1997; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992).

The neighborhood's once-thriving commercial corridor lost many businesses during the 1960s and 1970s. Then, in 1984, a longtime neighborhood businessman, the owner of a popular bakery, was gunned down in his store during a robbery (Warner 1999). The murder shocked the

neighborhood and spurred fears about personal safety in the area. Even today, longtime neighborhood residents recall the incident when expressing concerns about their safety.

The New Orleans economy improved slowly during the 1990s. The depression, however, had taken a toll on local neighborhoods. Activists for neighborhoods, including residents, historic preservationists, and other concerned individuals, launched a revitalization movement that continues today. Also, CDCs have emerged as key participants in many city neighborhoods.

The CDC in the target neighborhood opened in 1976 and is very active. It has 13 paid staff and an annual budget of approximately \$600,000. The activities of the organization are diverse and reflect the goal of comprehensive neighborhood revitalization. For example, the CDC has cleared vacant lots of weeds and garbage, established a community garden, offered an environmental program to area children, developed a graffiti removal and painting program, cosponsored the annual street festival, and mobilized business owners along the neighborhood's commercial corridor. The CDC also purchases, rehabilitates, and sells rental and for-ownership properties identified as blighted (Capstone Studio Class Project 1997; Warner 1999).

A major goal of the organization has been to increase the homeownership rate in the neighborhood as well as throughout the city. The CDC provides assistance to potential homeowners by identifying mortgage financing, offering homeownership training, and responding to a wide variety of questions about homeownership opportunities. From 1995 to 1999, the CDC originated 86 loans, trained 1,661 hopeful home buyers, and provided prepurchase counseling to almost 2,400 individuals.

Although the CDC offers its services across the city, it is located in the target area and has always had a special interest in it. The CDC recently vacated its old office on the eastern end of the neighborhood's commercial corridor to occupy a more spacious building. As part of its commitment to the neighborhood, where it is an enduring institution, the organization remained on the commercial corridor, west of the old location, and fully rehabilitated an existing building for its use.

Neighborhood and housing satisfaction

The framework for the study, creating neighborhoods of choice, was suggested by the CDC's national partner. The research team discussed various operationalizations of a neighborhood of choice with CDC staff. We opted to associate the neighborhood of choice concept with

residential satisfaction for two reasons. First, we assumed that residents choose to live in neighborhoods that satisfy, to the degree possible given supply and budget constraints, their preferences for a living environment. At the same time, we recognize that satisfaction will vary by individual and neighborhood characteristics. The study aimed to identify the neighborhood characteristics that failed, on average, to satisfy residents. These characteristics would inform the CDC of the major problems in the neighborhood from the residents' perspective. Second, by using this approach, we were able to benefit from the rich literature on residential satisfaction. Existing studies provided a set of possible key indicators of neighborhood and housing satisfaction and helped with the development of an effective interview instrument.

Investigations of neighborhood and housing satisfaction appear often in the literature. These concepts appear in studies investigating neighborhood and housing satisfaction specifically (Baillie 1990; Cook 1988; Jagun et al. 1990; Miller et al. 1980), community indicators and quality of life (Connerly and Marans 1988; Marans and Rodgers 1975), neighborhood attachment (Lee and Guest 1983), and residential mobility (Landale and Guest 1985; McHugh, Gober, and Reid 1990; Varady 1983).

The mobility literature, in particular, has provided numerous studies that contribute to our understanding of housing and neighborhood satisfaction. Much of this literature stems from the two-stage, stress-threshold model of mobility proposed by Alden Speare (1974), who posited that residential satisfaction was an intervening variable between background variables such as individual characteristics and mobility. His additive, weighted index measure of residential satisfaction included housing, locational, and neighborhood elements. Some researchers have decomposed this endogenous variable into housing or neighborhood satisfaction or both (Landale and Guest 1985; Newman and Duncan 1979). Therefore, previous investigations of Speare's mobility model help identify influences on housing and neighborhood satisfaction.

Empirical studies suggest that a number of attributes are associated with neighborhood satisfaction. These may be classified into two general categories: neighborhood and individual characteristics. Connerly and Marans (1988) discussed the former in their overview of neighborhood indicators and identified four dimensions of neighborhood quality indicators: (1) physical environmental conditions, (2) locational characteristics, (3) local services/facilities, and (4) sociocultural environment. Researchers have studied each of these dimensions separately or in combination. Measures of physical conditions include the housing conditions and property upkeep in the neighborhood (Jagun et al. 1990;

Marans and Rodgers 1975; Miller et al. 1980), the presence of abandoned buildings (Jagun et al. 1990), and neighborhood cleanliness (Newman and Duncan 1979). Results typically indicate that better physical conditions are associated with higher levels of neighborhood satisfaction.

Relatively few studies explicitly investigate the impact of location and quality of public services on neighborhood satisfaction. Locational characteristics such as proximity to shopping and jobs are thought to be positively related to neighborhood satisfaction. Speare, Goldstein, and Frey (1974) found that distance to job and shopping was only moderately important to their residential satisfaction index. Marans and Rodgers (1975) found a significant and positive, but very low, correlation between neighborhood convenience and satisfaction.

Higher levels of satisfaction with public services have been found to be related to increased neighborhood satisfaction in some studies (Ahlbrandt 1984). Although neighborhood traffic and congestion have been found to be associated with dissatisfaction among residents (Marans and Rodgers 1975; Newman and Duncan 1979), it is not clear whether residents considered traffic problems to be a public service quality issue. Varady (1983) used the Speare model to investigate the relationship between public services and mobility. However, he does not report on neighborhood satisfaction, since his initial analysis suggested that it contributed little to the mobility model's results.

Social relations fall within the sociocultural dimension. These social ties include both proximity to family and friends and relationships among neighbors. Some studies indicate a positive, but weak, relationship between the number of family and friends in the neighborhood and residential satisfaction (Speare 1974; Speare, Goldstein, and Frey 1974). Ahlbrandt (1984) found the number of good friends living in the neighborhood to be positively related to neighborhood satisfaction, but a family member living in the neighborhood had no effect on satisfaction. Perceptions of neighbors and frequency of neighbor interactions are thought to influence levels of satisfaction. Previous studies indicate that the friendliness of neighbors and neighboring have a positive impact on neighborhood satisfaction¹ (Ahlbrandt 1984; Marans and Rodgers 1975).

Neighborhood safety is also considered an important sociocultural attribute. Safety may be measured as perceived safety, fear or

¹ Social ties are also considered important in other types of related neighborhood studies. For example, network, attachment, stability, and change studies often include some measure of neighborhood social cohesion.

perception of crime, or level of reported crime. The first two measures address perception rather than actual crime and are generally used interchangeably (Wilson-Doenges 2000). Research shows that perception and actual crime do not correlate highly (Fowler and Mangione 1986), and research often assumes that individual attitudes and behavior are more related to perception of safety than to actual crime rates. Research tends to show a positive, statistically significant relationship between level of neighborhood satisfaction and perception of safety (Marans and Rodgers 1975; Miller et al. 1980). A study by Newman and Duncan (1979) is an exception. They found no significant association between perception of crime and neighborhood satisfaction.²

The literature identifies a number of individual characteristics as potentially influencing an analysis of neighborhood satisfaction. These may be used as substantive or control variables, and empirical results for these variables are inconsistent. For example, many studies include the length of residence in a neighborhood as an independent variable. Some studies show a positive relationship between time in residence (Marans and Rodgers 1975; Speare 1974), while others indicate a negative relationship (Ahlbrandt 1984; Lu 1999). Other personal characteristics found in analyses of neighborhood satisfaction include age and income (Ahlbrandt 1984; Jagun et al. 1990; Lu 1999; Miller et al. 1980; Speare 1974), gender (Lu 1999), children in the household (Ahlbrandt 1984; Lu 1999), race (Ahlbrandt 1984; Marans and Rodgers 1975; Lu 1999), education (Jagun et al. 1990; Lu 1999; Marans and Rodgers 1975; Miller et al. 1980; Speare 1974), marital status³ (Jagun et al. 1990; Lu 1999), and tenure status (Ahlbrandt 1984; Lu 1999; Speare 1974).

The same set of individual characteristics used in neighborhood satisfaction models is also found as variables in housing satisfaction models. Although the direction and magnitude of these variables tend to vary across studies, one relatively consistent finding is the positive impact of homeownership on housing satisfaction⁴ (Kinsey and Lane 1983; Lu 1999; Speare 1974; Varady 1983). Other variables in housing

² These researchers measured perception of crime with a question that included examples of particular crimes such as muggings, types of people such as junkies, and level of police presence. It is possible that the question failed to clearly measure perception of crime.

³ In some research, for example Marans and Rodgers (1975), a life-cycle variable may be used as a control variable. This variable typically includes some combination of marital status, age, and the presence of children in the home.

⁴ We remind the reader that residential satisfaction as developed by Speare (1974) included both neighborhood and housing elements.

satisfaction models include housing problems such as structural and plumbing deficiencies (Newman and Duncan 1979; Varady 1983). Problems of this nature have a negative impact on satisfaction. In addition to structural issues, the adequacy of the house size and other dwelling unit characteristics have been reported as important indicators of housing satisfaction (Lam 1985; Lu 1999).

The location of housing within the context of a neighborhood suggests that neighborhood satisfaction may affect housing satisfaction. That is, residents may be less satisfied with their home, because they are dissatisfied with the environment surrounding their home (Galster 1987).

Study methodology

The analyses are based on survey data from personal interviews with a random sample of neighborhood residents conducted from fall 1999 through winter 2000. For the purposes of this study, we used the census tract to define the neighborhood.⁵ The overall study had two goals: (1) identify the strengths and weaknesses of the neighborhood, especially as perceived by residents, and (2) evaluate an ongoing neighborhood revitalization project. The evaluation emphasized a formative process to allow the CDC to receive feedback during the evaluation period. This feedback can be used to improve the revitalization program and to plan future efforts (Comer 1981; Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation 1994).⁶

In addition to published materials, we used four sources of data. First, we collected information on the exterior, physical condition of every dwelling in the neighborhood. The housing conditions field team consisted of the investigators, graduate students, and community volunteers. A systematic, reliable survey developed for a similar survey was employed. All team members attended a training workshop and received field training from a CDC housing inspector. Second, we

⁵ Although research shows that the concept of neighborhood varies among people (Connerly and Marans 1988; Lee, Oropesa, and Kanan 1994), the census tract definition in this case was considered reasonable by CDC staff. The choice was also practical since data from this study may be compared with existing and future decennial census tract data. Finally, we had to identify a distinct geographic area for sampling purposes.

⁶ The nature and conditions of the study prevented measurement of direct impacts. More rigorous quasi-experimental designs such as using a matched control group are generally too costly for local CDC-sponsored research. However, information from this study can be immediately useful for CDC program adjustments, and the data provide an excellent baseline for future evaluations.

interviewed the CDC executive director, the president of the CDC board, and several other board members. Third, we conducted a focus group of residents to better understand their views on the neighborhood. Finally, we gathered data from a random sample of neighborhood heads of household.

The resident survey questionnaire was developed using the findings from the residential satisfaction literature and existing instruments. A pretest of the questionnaire revealed minor clarity problems that were corrected before field implementation. Interviewers included the study investigators, graduate students, and community volunteers. Interviewer training involved a discussion of the purpose of the survey, a review of implementation procedures, and familiarization with the survey instrument. The interviewers visited the addresses of nonrespondents at least four times during the field period. At the close of this period, we had 125 completed face-to-face interviews with residents.

Sampling and response rate

The sample for the residents' survey was selected from a population list of addresses compiled during a house-by-house survey of physical conditions in the neighborhood ($N = 950$). We selected 325 addresses randomly from the population list. During the field period, we identified a number of vacant units associated with our population address list. Vacancies were identified in one or more of the following ways: (1) A neighbor informed the interviewer that the unit was vacant; (2) there was strong physical evidence such as no furniture and other personal property in the unit (as seen through the window) or the unit was empty except for construction materials (as seen through the window); and (3) the post office identified the unit as vacant on mail returned to the researchers. The post office also returned mail with the word "unknown" written on the envelope. Some of the unknown addresses may have been vacant units. In addition, we suspect that some of these unknown addresses were artifacts of double-to-single conversions, a relatively common occurrence in many New Orleans neighborhoods.⁷ Although two addresses may have been listed by the housing conditions field team, in the case of a conversion to a single, only one address would remain for postal delivery purposes.

⁷ A check on a sample of the problematic addresses provided little additional information. Several of the houses had two addresses (or remnants of two addresses) and also two electric meters. It is not uncommon in New Orleans for conversions to retain multiple electric meters, thus making it difficult to assess the number of units from the outside.

The number of vacant and unknown addresses on our population list was based on returns from a mailing. However, for the sample, we had more information, including field observation and an additional mailing to the addresses on the sample list. This information is useful in discussing the response rate. Clearly, the response rate of 38.5 percent (125 of 325) ignores the issue of vacancies and unknown addresses on our population list. In other words, vacant units guarantee no response and should not be considered in an effective response rate. In doing the resident survey, we identified 23 vacancies in our sample. If we remove the vacancies, the response rate rises to 41.4 percent (125 of 302). However, we also might assume that the same proportion of vacancies exists for the addresses where we received no response. If we multiply the known vacancy rate of 0.0708 by 129 or the number of addresses with no response, we get approximately 9 additional vacant units for an effective response rate of 42.7 percent (125 of 293).⁸ See table 1 for a complete breakdown.

Table 1. Final Status of Sample

	Number	Percent
Interviews	125	38.5
Refusals	4	1.2
Vacant	23	7.1
Unknown	44	13.5
No response	129	39.7
Total	325	100

Representativeness of the sample

The sample was randomly chosen for generalization to the neighborhood population. Survey respondents, however, may differ from nonrespondents in a systematic manner. If so, the results are no longer representative of the population. By comparing respondents with nonrespondents, it is possible to determine the representativeness of the final results. Since resident survey data were unavailable for nonrespondents, we used two variables collected during the housing conditions survey to test for nonresponse bias. These variables concerned

⁸ We could also eliminate the unknown addresses from the sample and achieve an even higher response rate of 50 percent (125 of 249). The higher response rate may be reasonable, since field team members reported only four explicit refusals (1.2 percent). However, we choose to err on the conservative side and claim an effective response rate of 42.7 percent.

the property only and include the number of units on the lot and the housing conditions rating.⁹ A logistic regression using response as the dependent variable (1 = responded, 0 = no response) and the property characteristics as independent variables revealed that the coefficient for the number of units was negative and significant at the 0.05 level. Therefore, the results may not be representative of residents living in multiunit properties.

Statistical analysis

The literature on neighborhood and housing satisfaction provides substantial guidance on model development. Two conditions of this study, however, limit our model specifications: First, the sample (125 cases) is relatively small, and as a result, we must restrict our choice of independent variables to a reasonable number.¹⁰ Second, our resident survey did not ask about specific housing problems. For this reason, we use two variables from the housing conditions survey in the housing satisfaction model: the external condition of the unit (recoded as good or excellent versus fair) and the number of units on the property (recoded to one unit or more than one unit).

Results from existing studies are not entirely consistent for several reasons: First, specification of the dependent variable varies from one-indicator, Likert-type scales to indexes of residential satisfaction. Second, many of the studies use multiple regression (ordinary least squares) on an ordered categorical dependent variable. This model approach has been shown to produce incorrect results (Lu 1999). Third, different model specifications most likely contribute to differences in findings. Fourth, different populations may return dissimilar results.

⁹ Personal characteristics of nonrespondents would be superior for a test of bias; however, these data were unavailable, so we used the only available variables as proxies. That is, in our sample, the number of units and their physical conditions are correlated to personal characteristics such as income. Two issues should be raised about this analysis: First, we removed the vacant units from the database before running the regression, since the probability of response from these addresses was zero. Second, we expect some measurement error on the number of units because of the possible conversion of at least a few of the doubles to singles.

¹⁰ A rule of thumb in multiple regression suggests at least 5 cases per independent variable in the model. We ran logistic regression models using maximum likelihood estimation. Under these conditions, Long (1997) suggests at least 10 cases per independent variable. The neighborhood satisfaction model contains 13 variables, just over this recommended threshold, and the housing satisfaction model has 12 variables, slightly more than 10 cases per variable. Neither model experienced convergence problems.

Despite these inconsistencies, we found enough evidence to posit the expected direction of several variables used in the analysis. Table 2 displays this information. Although we include many individual characteristics in our models, we do not show the expected results for most of these variables because of the ambiguity of previous results and our use of these variables primarily as controls.

Table 2. **Expected Relationships in Our Model**

	Neighborhood Satisfaction	Housing Satisfaction
Housing conditions on the block	+	
Neighbor social contact	+	
Safety	+	
Public services	+	
Homeowner	+	+
Neighborhood satisfaction		+
Home condition		+
Units on the lot		-

We manipulated the data before analysis to address missing cases and recode poorly distributed categorical variables.¹¹ Several variables were missing a few values, and we used the mean or mode of the relevant variable for these cases.¹²

The satisfaction measures had a pattern common in similar studies. That is, the ordinal measure is skewed toward higher levels of satisfaction (see table 3). We recoded the five category variables into dichotomous variables. We chose to model on very satisfied versus other levels of satisfaction for two reasons: First, we wanted to determine the factors that influence residents to be very satisfied versus dissatisfied and the more ambiguous somewhat satisfied and neutral attitudes. In other words, very satisfied is a strong statement of residents' attitudes. Second, we wanted to maximize variability for these dependent variables.

¹¹ The skewness and kurtosis values for the continuous variables, as well as graphs of their distributions, were examined for nonnormality. Education, income, and quality of public services had slight skews. Transformations of the variables shifted the direction of the skewness without a marked improvement in the shape of the distribution. Therefore, the original variables are used in the analysis. We also checked for multicollinearity in the model by inspecting the zero-order correlations among independent variables. There were no strong bivariate associations ($r = 0.7$ or above). As an additional check for possible multicollinearity, we ran the models several times, each time adding variables in blocks. Coefficients did not change dramatically, nor did their signs shift during this process.

¹² Income was missing for 14 respondents, so we employed conditional mean imputation to predict income for them.

Table 3. Neighborhood and Housing Satisfaction on Five Category Measures

	Neighborhood		Housing	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Very satisfied	39	31.2	46	36.8
Somewhat satisfied	63	50.4	58	46.4
Neutral	8	6.4	9	7.2
Somewhat dissatisfied	11	8.8	9	7.2
Very dissatisfied	4	3.2	3	2.4
Total	125	100.0	125	100.0

If we combined very satisfied and somewhat satisfied, over 80 percent of the cases would fall into this category on both satisfaction variables. For some of the independent variables, there was no alternative for recoding that would address limited variation. For example, 88 percent of the respondents live in homes rated as good or excellent by the housing conditions survey. Descriptions of the variables used in the analyses, as well as their statistics, are shown in table 4.

Logistic regression models were run for both neighborhood satisfaction and housing satisfaction.¹³ Results of the neighborhood satisfaction model are shown in table 5. Four variables are statistically significant at $p = 0.10$ or better, and all have a positive effect on neighborhood satisfaction. They include average housing conditions on the block ($p = 0.05$), neighborhood social contact ($p = 0.10$), perception of neighborhood safety ($p = 0.01$), and perception of the quality of public services ($p = 0.10$). The exponentiated coefficients for these variables provide an odds ratio interpretation of the results. For example, respondents living on blocks with better housing conditions are eight times more likely than those living on blocks with lower average housing conditions to be very satisfied with their neighborhood. None of the coefficients for the control variables were statistically significant. The results for neighborhood satisfaction are consistent with our expectations, except for the nonsignificant result on the homeownership variable.

¹³ Lu (1999) has shown that multiple regression analysis is inappropriate for satisfaction variables measured on an ordinal scale. He recommends the ordered logit model for these types of dependent variables. Earlier in the article, we discussed the tendency of satisfaction measures to be skewed toward higher levels of satisfaction. In our case, the variable followed the typical pattern, with relatively few cases in the neutral and dissatisfied categories. Even so, we attempted to run an ordered logit model after dropping the neutral cases. The model converged, but the score test indicated a violation of the proportional odds assumption. Given the distribution of the satisfaction variables, the violation of a key assumption of the ordered logit model, and our limited sample size, we decided that logistic regression was the best modeling approach for this analysis.

Table 4. Variable Descriptions and Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Description	Mean	Standard Deviation
African American	1 = African American 0 = Other	0.848	0.361
Age	Age of respondent	48.923	16.700
Annual household income	Interval scale, ranges from 1 to 7	3.296	0.301
Child under 18 present in the home	1 = Yes 0 = No	0.384	0.488
Education	Ranges from 1 (less than high school) to 5 (graduate degree)	2.520	1.082
Gender	1 = Male 0 = Female	0.336	0.474
Home condition	1 = Excellent or good 0 = Fair	0.888	0.317
Homeowner*	1 = Homeowner 0 = Renter	0.440	0.498
Housing conditions on the block	Average rating for all houses on block (houses rated 1 (unsound) to 5 (excellent))	3.943	0.301
Housing satisfaction	1 = Very satisfied 0 = Other	0.368	0.484
Marital status	1 = Married 0 = Other	0.456	0.500
Neighbor social contact	1 = Speaks with neighbor every day 0 = Speaks with neighbor less than every day	0.512	0.502
Neighborhood satisfaction	1 = Very satisfied 0 = Other	0.312	0.465
Public services	Respondents' rating of quality of public services, ranges from 1 (very bad) to 7 (very good)	4.824	1.690
Safety	Respondents' rating of safety in neighborhood ranges from 1 (very unsafe) to 7 (very safe)	4.328	1.835
Units on the lot*	1 = One unit on the lot 0 = More than one unit	0.440	0.498
Length of residence in the neighborhood	1 = Four or more years 0 = Less than four years	0.648	0.480

* The identical means and standard deviations for these two variables raised the possibility that homeowner and number of units on the lot may have the same values. However, a cross-tabulation of these variables shows that only about 64 percent of the owners live on lots with one unit. This finding is not surprising, because it is common in New Orleans, especially for owners of doubles, to live in one unit and rent the other. For additional confidence in our model results, we ran the model shown in table 4 with and without the units on the lot variable, and substantive results did not change.

The housing satisfaction model results are displayed in table 6. Only three coefficients were statistically significant at $p = 0.10$ or better. As expected, homeownership had a positive effect on housing satisfaction ($p = 0.10$). The negative coefficient on gender indicates that men were less likely to be very satisfied with their housing than women ($p = 0.10$). Neighborhood satisfaction had a highly significant, positive

Table 5. Neighborhood Satisfaction

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Deviation	Exponentiated Coefficient
Housing conditions on the block	2.186**	1.120	8.897
Neighbor social contact	1.075*	0.580	2.931
Safety	0.620***	0.195	1.859
Public services	0.367*	0.192	1.443
African American	-0.475	0.761	
Age	-0.027	0.019	
Annual household income	0.022	0.301	
Child under 18 present in the home	-0.463	0.573	
Education	-0.218	0.302	
Gender	-0.037	0.614	
Homeowner	0.223	0.609	
Length of residence in the neighborhood	0.600	0.690	
Marital status	-0.305	0.564	

n = 125
 Model $\chi^2 = 51.04$ *** with 13 *df*

* $p = 0.10$. ** $p = 0.05$. *** $p = 0.01$. **** $p = 0.001$. ***** $p = 0.0001$.

Table 6. Housing Satisfaction

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Deviation	Exponentiated Coefficient
Neighborhood satisfaction	1.839*****	0.482	6.293
Home condition	-0.700	0.778	
Units on the lot	0.040	0.485	
African American	-0.609	0.705	
Age	0.017	0.016	
Annual household income	0.255	0.249	
Children under 18 present in the home	-0.301	0.504	
Education	-0.004	0.259	
Gender	-1.010*	0.531	0.364
Homeowner	0.887*	0.533	2.427
Length of residence in the neighborhood	0.331	0.558	
Marital status	-0.060	0.469	

Model $\chi^2 = 35.03$ ***** with 12 *df*

* $p = 0.10$. ** $p = 0.05$. *** $p = 0.01$. **** $p = 0.001$. ***** $p = 0.0001$.

influence on housing satisfaction ($p = 0.0001$). The exponentiated coefficient indicates that individuals who were very satisfied with their neighborhood, compared with other levels of satisfaction or neutral attitudes about the neighborhood, were approximately six times more likely to be very satisfied with their home.

The housing characteristic variables did not fare well in the analysis. Neither the home condition rating nor units on lot coefficients were statistically significant. For the home condition variable, we suspect that the lack of variability in the variable's distribution, as discussed earlier, is responsible for the nonsignificant result.

The importance of homeownership in housing satisfaction studies supports efforts to encourage this form of tenure for many renter households. Since the CDC aims to increase the homeownership rate in the target neighborhood, the organization asked us to collect information specifically about renters and their desire to buy in the neighborhood.

Most of the respondents to the resident survey (56 percent) were renters, that is, possible candidates for homeownership in the neighborhood.¹⁴ They have already chosen the neighborhood for their current residence and may have developed social ties in the area. We asked renters about their desire to purchase a home in the neighborhood: 39 of 69 renters (56.5 percent) said they would like to buy in the neighborhood. Of those interested in buying there, the majority (26 of 39) cited insufficient income as a major obstacle to purchasing a home (see table 7), and 44.7 percent (17 of 38) said it was the main reason they have not purchased a home. However, it is important to note that 66.7 percent (26 of 39) of the renters identified more than one obstacle to homeownership.

Table 7. Obstacles to Buying a Home

	Number	Percent
Insufficient income to buy	26	66.7
Credit problems	11	28.2
Insufficient money for a down payment	17	43.6
Cannot find a good house	3	7.7
Unsure how to find a house	6	15.4
Unsure how to get a mortgage loan	9	23.1
Not ready to buy a home at this time	9	23.1

¹⁴ In 1990, the homeownership rate in the neighborhood was about 30 percent—not substantially different from the citywide rate; however, the homeownership rate in New Orleans is considerably lower than the national rate of approximately 67 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000).

The reasons that renters did not want to buy in the neighborhood are similar to the findings from the whole sample: 40 percent of this subset of renters (12 of 30) identified poor housing conditions and crime as deterrents to purchasing a home in the neighborhood.

Putting knowledge into action

The study provided direct and indirect benefits to the CDC. An indirect consequence was increased visibility among neighborhood residents. While the CDC offers counseling and training for potential homeowners, staff felt that many residents were unaware of these services. In fact, many residents commented during the housing conditions and resident surveys that they did not know about the organization's programs. The study's field work brought the survey field teams in contact with residents on a regular basis for approximately six months. As a result, the survey process identified the CDC as an involved neighbor and informed residents about its revitalization efforts. In addition, the study helped the CDC's marketing campaign, which was launched after the field period. The housing conditions survey provided a complete listing for all residential properties in the neighborhood. This list was extracted from the original database and organized in mail merge form for the CDC, which uses this list for neighborhood mailings.

The direct benefit of the study came in meeting its objective: to identify the strengths and weaknesses in the neighborhood. While the neighborhood has many strengths, including a friendly atmosphere and generally good public services, our analysis reveals the negative effects of poor housing conditions and safety concerns on residents' satisfaction. These dissatisfied views also emerged from a focus group of residents held months before the field survey. For example, one resident opined, "[I dislike] the lack of upkeep on some of the houses that people own.... A few on my block they're not keeping up anymore." Another resident concerned with her child's safety stated, "I don't think it's safe here. I wouldn't send my 12-year-old daughter around the corner."¹⁵ The combined evidence from the sample survey and focus group indicates that safety and housing maintenance are critical issues for neighborhood residents.

¹⁵ The focus group was held in the summer of 1999 and helped clarify issues and identify key questions for the field survey. Questions asked at the focus group included the following: What do you like and dislike about your neighborhood? How do you envision the neighborhood in the next few years? What changes would you like to see in the neighborhood?

During interviews with the researchers, several board members commented on the importance of residents' perceptions and their effect on neighborhood stability.¹⁶ A better understanding of residents' needs allows for improved project development. As one board member commented, "The information will be used to develop new projects to help residents." Another board member emphasized the findings about housing conditions in the neighborhood. He stated, "The housing conditions information will be useful to formulate priorities and focus on one block at a time." A few of the board members noted that the study findings, especially the needs of the residents, will help the CDC in preparing competitive grant proposals.

Board members and CDC staff reviewed the study findings and recommendations before a board retreat held in the fall of 2000. The study results contributed to the shared vision document created at the retreat. Resident dissatisfaction with the housing conditions in sections of the neighborhood was a major concern at the retreat. The vision document identifies eliminating blight, specifically eradicating blighted and vacant houses in the neighborhood, as a primary goal of the organization. Moreover, senior staff commented that the study provided not only data on the physical condition of housing, but also valuable information about the occupancy status of many neighborhood properties. As a result, strategic planning for the neighborhood includes a targeted effort to redevelop properties in a subarea of the neighborhood with a high concentration of vacant and dilapidated housing. In addition, staff recently reported that to have "more impact on physical conditions" the CDC has "beefed up marketing for owner rehabilitation."

The issue of perceived safety was also recognized during the development of the shared vision document. According to comments from residents, perception of safety would be improved by a stronger presence of police officers in the neighborhood. However, there is also a perception among neighborhood residents that the police neglect their area. CDC staff recently met with the district police captain to initiate communication with the police and focus attention on neighborhood hot spots. Improved relationships with district police are the first step toward

¹⁶ The board interviews were completed during the latter part of the study. The CDC's executive director was interviewed three times: once at the beginning of the study, after a review of the study results, and after the CDC's strategic planning process. For confidentiality reasons, we chose not to identify any staff or board members by name. Interviews were semistructured and included the following types of questions: What are the positive and negative attributes of the neighborhood? How would you describe the neighborhood as a possible place to live? How will the study information be used in the CDC's programs and activities? How was the study information used in the CDC's strategic planning process and for program development?

achieving the goals of increasing police patrols throughout the neighborhood and assigning a community officer to walk the beat along the commercial corridor.

The housing satisfaction model revealed that homeowners are more satisfied with their dwelling unit than renters. This finding is consistent with previous studies and lends support to the CDC's strategic planning goal to increase neighborhood homeownership. Renter data help in understanding the needs of potential homeowners in the neighborhood. In addition to overarching concerns about housing conditions and safety, many renters thought their income levels and credit problems were barriers to homeownership. These concerns can be addressed through increasing the visibility of CDC's assistance to potential homeowners, including marketing the existing training workshops. As part of its recent planning process, the CDC also set the goal of improved tracking of workshop trainees, particularly trainee outcomes.

In sum, the CDC staff and board used study results to guide their visioning and planning process. While some of the findings confirmed the staff's experiential knowledge, the power of these findings lies in the source of the data—the residents themselves. These data identify critical neighborhood needs, contribute to stronger, more effective planning, and, as a result, strengthen requests for external funding. In addition, the results helped identify a priority subarea within the neighborhood for targeted housing rehabilitation and redevelopment. Finally, the study provided a solid baseline of data for comparison with future research in the neighborhood.

Conclusion: Study contributions

This research was a case study of one neighborhood in New Orleans, so generalizing these results is inappropriate. However, the findings from this study contribute to scholarship as well as practice by confirming previous findings on residential satisfaction, and, therefore, the application of this research to studies in lower-income, inner-city neighborhoods. More important, the research is an example of a successful collaborative model for neighborhood studies.

The research was guided by the abundant literature on housing and neighborhood satisfaction. This literature allowed the research team and the CDC to nestle the concept of a neighborhood of choice, the framework for the study, within well-defined boundaries. In addition, more recent findings on specification of satisfaction models (Lu 1999) also improved our study methodology. The previous satisfaction and

related studies, therefore, contributed to an effective, successful study. The consistency of the key results with previous studies indicates that initial concerns about the application of more general population results to a lower-income, inner-city neighborhood were unfounded.

The study serves as a model of a successful collaboration between a CDC and university-based researchers. The major elements of this collaboration included joint design of the study to ensure that results were useful and reliable, the enlistment of volunteers from the community, donated time from the research team, a contribution from the researcher's university through a substantially reduced indirect cost rate, and regular communication between CDC staff and the researchers. As a result of this approach, the study offered multiple benefits to the collaborators. The CDC received valuable information, at a relatively low cost, to improve planning for its ongoing revitalization program and better serve neighborhood clients. The researchers and their graduate students benefited through interacting with the community and gaining more insight into the importance of applied research.

The study conducted in the target neighborhood can be replicated across neighborhoods in many cities. It is important for CDCs to conduct these studies because residents' needs and perceptions will vary across time and place. For this reason, CDCs must understand current conditions as well as the future vision for the neighborhood from the perspective of the residents. With this knowledge, a CDC can develop strategies, policies, and services to serve the residents in a particular neighborhood.

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