

Impact of Rental Assistance Demonstration Program Conversions on Public Housing Tenants

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Abstract

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) program launched 9 years ago to test a new strategy intended to maintain public housing stock in light of long-term capital needs shortfalls. The program could transform public housing by allowing the conversion of public housing units to project-based Section 8 contracts (either project-based vouchers, which are part of the Housing Choice Voucher program, or project-based rental assistance). Housing authorities could eventually convert over 40 percent of the public housing units in existence before the program began, based on caps set by Congress, although currently approved targets remain well short of that goal.

Until recently, relatively little has been known about the impact of these conversions on tenants. Assisted housing advocates and others have raised concerns about relocation, protection of tenant rights, accommodations for vulnerable populations like seniors and people with disabilities, and the long-term stability of converted developments. This article is based on research done by Econometrica and the Urban Institute, as part of an evaluation of the RAD program funded by HUD, between 2013 and 2018 on short-term outcomes for tenants in the first group of conversions approved.

Overall, we found that the early experience is positive or neutral. The survey of residents living in a sample of RAD projects revealed that most tenants were generally satisfied with their public housing authority (PHA)'s communications about RAD and its management of the RAD process. Tenants thought that property maintenance and property management were as good as or better than before conversion. Most tenants in our sample have not had to relocate because of the conversion, and all but a few have returned to the original property. Because little time has passed since the conversion, the findings on how RAD might affect tenant well-being—employment, health, and safety perceptions—are unclear. However, it is clear that many of the surveyed tenants were vulnerable, with most cycling in and out of jobs and reporting fair or poor health and a substantial minority reporting feeling unsafe, especially outside at night. These findings reinforce the importance of ensuring that housing authorities address tenants' needs as central to their RAD planning.

Introduction to the Rental Assistance Demonstration Program

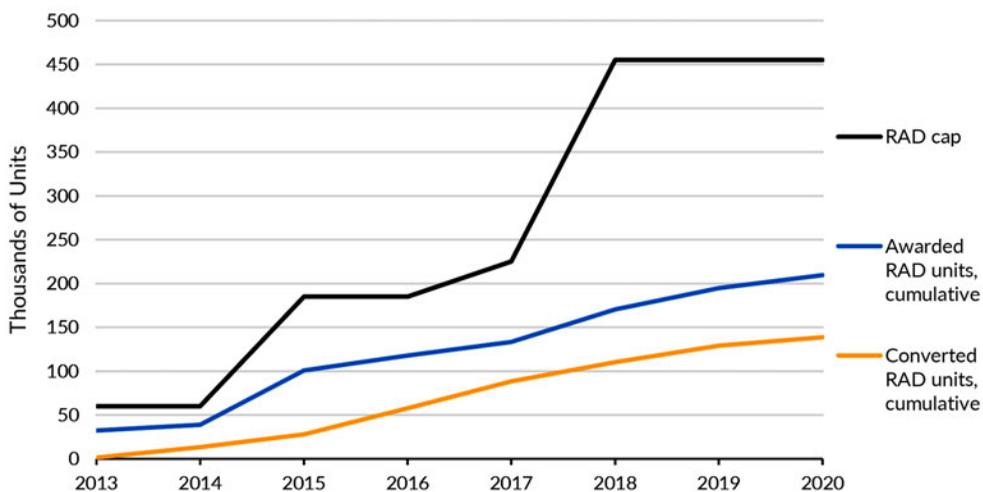
The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) launched the Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) program 9 years ago to test a new strategy addressing long-term capital needs shortfalls by maintaining public housing stock. The program entailed converting public housing units to project-based Section 8 contracts (either project-based vouchers, part of the Housing Choice Voucher [HCV] program, or project-based rental assistance). Public housing authorities (PHAs) could eventually convert more than 40 percent of the public housing units that existed before the program began, based on caps set by Congress, although currently approved targets remain well short of that 40-percent goal.

Stakeholders, including assisted housing advocates, have raised concerns about relocation, tenant rights protection, accommodations for vulnerable populations like seniors and people with disabilities, and the long-term stability of converted developments. However, there is relatively little evidence about the impact of these conversions on public housing tenants. In this article, we contribute to that evidence base by drawing on research conducted between 2013 and 2018 by Econometrica and the Urban Institute (and funded by HUD) on short-term outcomes for tenants in the first cohort of approved RAD conversions.

The RAD program has undergone a series of increases in scale. The number of units eligible for conversion was initially capped at 65,000. Congress has increased the cap periodically. In fiscal year 2018, it raised it to 455,000 units, almost 45 percent of the country's public housing stock. As of September 2020, almost 140,000 public housing units had been converted through the program (exhibit 1). Although the total number of converted RAD units is growing, such units remain a small part of the nation's assisted housing (federal programs that provide subsidies to reduce rents for tenants with low incomes).

Exhibit 1

Yearly Increases in Rental Assistance Demonstration Conversions Have Been Gradual



RAD = rental assistance demonstration.

Source: HUD RAD Resource Desk data, as of September 2020

Although the RAD program is relatively new, it has raised concerns, particularly about the loss of deeply subsidized housing and the potential for displacement of tenants. Such concerns have prompted research on its impact, particularly on tenants. In 2017, the Turner Center for Housing Innovation at the University of California Berkeley published a report assessing the program's impact (Reid, 2017). Relatively few conversions had occurred by its publication. However, it highlighted several incidents that raised concerns that tenant rights had been violated and elevated the growing community advocacy around conversions in New York City and San Francisco. Moreover, a 2018 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report called for more active oversight, finding that HUD was not yet fully monitoring the implementation of the safeguards written into the RAD conversion rules (GAO, 2018). Anecdotal evidence of violations of those rules has been cited in other publications (Cohen, 2017; Roller and Cassella, 2018), and jurisdictions like New York City and San Francisco have taken steps to protect tenants from such violations.

The Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health conducted an indepth study of the impact of RAD on families with children in Fresno, California. Its study, which HUD published in November 2019, concluded that the RAD projects resulted in significantly improved housing conditions and better connections to amenities and services and were only moderately disruptive to residents (Aratani et al., 2019). The report largely credited Fresno's resident engagement strategy for ameliorating negative impacts on tenants during the conversions.

Background of This Study

HUD's priorities for the RAD program are to improve the living situations of public housing residents by improving the quality of their housing and offering them the opportunity to move using HCVs under the choice mobility option. In addition, it is prioritizing not causing inordinate disruption in tenants' lives, that is, by having them relocate frequently or move great distances. In an evaluation conducted for HUD, researchers from Econometrica and Urban Institute assessed how the RAD program affected residents by surveying residents living in a sample of RAD properties after improvements were completed (Stout et al., 2019). The survey was intended to provide answers to the following key questions:

- Are tenant rights being protected?
- Are tenants aware of those rights?
- Have tenants been well informed about the program?
- What has been tenants' experience with relocation?
- Have housing conditions improved?
- Are residents better off?

Because those conversions had occurred recently (often within the previous year), we could only examine short-term outcomes for residents. In this article, we explore those short-term outcomes by examining the results of the survey.

Summary of Our Findings

Overall, we found that experiences with RAD conversions among a sample of tenants were positive or neutral. Most tenants were generally satisfied with their PHAs' communications about RAD and its management of the RAD process. Roughly one-third of tenants thought property maintenance and property management were better after the conversions, and most of the remaining tenants reported that these were roughly the same.

Regarding relocation, only 10 percent of tenants had moved to a different property, and 23 percent had moved to a different unit in the same property. Most tenants who had moved to a different unit because of RAD reported having received relocation assistance, and most were satisfied with the assistance they received.

Most tenants were satisfied with their housing units and developments and thought that they were better than before the conversions. A slight majority of tenants reported that they were not informed about the choice mobility option during the RAD process. However, PHAs were required to communicate with tenants about it, and a slight majority indicated they would prefer the choice mobility option to living in their current unit.

How RAD might affect tenant well-being—employment, health, and perceptions of safety—is unclear. It is clear that most surveyed tenants are vulnerable: many are older adults, live with disabilities, cycle in and out of jobs, or report having fair or poor health, and a minority but significant share reported feeling unsafe, especially outside at night. These findings reinforce the importance of ensuring that PHAs address tenants' needs as a central part of their RAD planning.

In the rest of this article, we present an overview of the survey's methodology and explore each of the findings in detail.

Methodology

To gauge residents' experiences with the RAD program, the research team surveyed residents living in a sample of properties undergoing RAD conversion. Only projects approved for the program's first round of conversions were included. The study enrolled residents in RAD properties before they closed, enabling the research team to track them if they left the properties. Enrollment and tracking needed to begin as early as possible to ensure we could obtain residents' contact information before leaving the properties. Each resident was surveyed after their property was converted. To capture the full range of resident outcomes, we surveyed residents regardless of where they were living after any construction or rehabilitation work under RAD had been completed. It was important to include former residents who did not return to converted units as well as those who did. A representative sample of these affected residents was surveyed via mail, telephone, and direct contact, as needed, to determine their experiences with property rehabilitation, communications from their PHAs, and any relocation assistance. We supplemented the survey data with administrative data and interviews with staff at select PHAs.

The process for selecting residents to survey involved two phases. In the first phase, we created a sample of properties designed to represent the universe of 260 properties in the first round of RAD

conversions. In the second phase, we selected a sample of residents in that sample of properties and invited them to participate in the study.

Property Selection

We applied the system used to stratify properties in the other components of this evaluation, dividing PHAs into “large,” “medium,” and “small” and properties into “high,” “standard,” and “substandard” performance categories. The study design only included properties where residents experienced RAD conversions. Because many properties failed to proceed to closing, properties became eligible for sampling only after receiving the RAD conversion commitment (RCC), a major milestone in project timelines after which properties are likely to proceed to closing. Because properties moved through the pipeline at different rates, sample selection took 9 months, from June 2015 through March 2016.

Because of the prolonged process, we could not randomly select the sample from a pool of properties in the same stratum and had to select properties for the sample as they became eligible. Therefore, the sample may be biased in favor of projects and PHAs that moved through the pipeline faster than others, and one cannot be sure what impact that has had on the sample’s representativeness.

Using this process, we selected 19 properties. Our target was 24, but too few properties became eligible to reach the target before the property sampling phase ended. We were able to draw a sufficient sample to include projects from all categories except for the large PHA stratum and substandard property performance (exhibit 2). Moreover, even though it had received an RCC, the single property in the stratum of medium PHA and substandard property performance never proceeded to closing, so residents from that property are not included in the analysis.

Exhibit 2

Development Sample by Public Housing Authority Size and Property Performance

PHA Size	Property Performance	Universe		Sample		Actual	
		Universe	Share	Design Target	Share	Sampled	Actual
Large	High	27	10.4%	3	12.5%	2	10.5%
	Standard	36	13.8%	3	12.5%	2	10.5%
	Substandard	12	4.6%	1	4.2%	0	0%
Medium	High	57	21.9%	5	20.8%	5	26.3%
	Standard	72	27.7%	6	25.0%	4	21.1%
	Substandard ^a	8	3.1%	1	4.2%	1	5.3%
Small	High	23	8.8%	2	8.3%	2	10.5%
	Standard	21	8.1%	2	8.3%	2	10.5%
	Substandard	4	1.5%	1	4.2%	1	5.3%
Total		260	100%	24	100%	19	100%

PHA = public housing authority.

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

^aProject dropped from the sample; did not proceed to closing.

Source: Econometrica and Urban Institute sample selection from the first cohort of HUD Rental Assistance Demonstration property conversions, June 2015 to March 2016

The sampled and nonsampled PHAs were at different stages of the RAD conversion process. Exhibit 3 shows the shares of sampled and nonsampled PHAs that HUD had issued an RCC to as of February 2018. Though projects were selected for the sample based on whether they were scheduled to receive an RCC within the sample selection timeframe, some of the projects in our sample were not issued RCCs as expected. Receiving an RCC is the last step in the RAD conversion process before a PHA's property can proceed to RAD closing. A larger share of sampled PHAs had received an RCC by February 2018 (94.7 percent, compared with 77.6 percent of the nonsampled group). The one property in our original sample of 19 that did not proceed to closing is not included in the analysis, leaving 18 total sample properties.

Exhibit 3

Shares of Properties Issued Rental Assistance Demonstration Conversion Commitments by HUD

Region	Sampled	Not Sampled	Total
Not issued an RCC	5.3%	22.4%	21.2%
Issued an RCC	94.7%	77.6%	78.9%
Total	100% (N = 19)	100% (N = 241)	100% (N = 260)

RCC = Rental Assistance Demonstration conversion commitment.

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Econometrica and Urban Institute sample selection from the first cohort of HUD Rental Assistance Demonstration property conversions, June 2015 to March 2016

Moreover, as exhibit 4 shows, more of the 18 sampled PHAs are in the South than the nonsampled PHAs. Notably, almost one-third of sampled PHAs are in Alabama, compared with just 3 percent of the other 241 PHAs. This distribution reflects the early stages of the RAD program when authorized units were disproportionately from the South and does not reflect the current universe of grantees. Although the South still has many projects in later RAD cohorts, geographic distribution has become more balanced.

Exhibit 4

Geographic Distribution of Rental Assistance Demonstration Properties

Region	Sampled	Not Sampled	Total
Midwest	5.6%	13.3%	12.7%
Northeast	5.6%	9.1%	8.9%
South	83.3%	64.3%	65.8%
West	5.6%	13.3%	12.7%
Total	100% (N = 18)	100% (N = 241)	100% (N = 259)

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Econometrica and Urban Institute sample selection from the first cohort of HUD Rental Assistance Demonstration property conversions, June 2015 to March 2016

The sampled and nonsampled PHAs correspond more closely on some characteristics. They have comparable inspection scores: the average inspection score for the 18 sampled PHAs was 83, and the average inspection score for the other 241 PHAs was 85. In addition, the average number of units converted through the RAD process is similar for both groups (145 units for the 18 sampled PHAs and

129 for the other 241), although the spread of unit sizes is smaller for the 18 sampled PHAs. Moreover, properties in both groups were more likely to convert under the project-based rental assistance (PBRA) program than under the project-based voucher (PBV) program (exhibit 5).

Exhibit 5

Shares of Properties Converted under Project-Based Rental Assistance and Project-Based Voucher

Conversion Type	Sampled	Not Sampled	Total
PBRA	55.6%	56.0%	56.0%
PBV	44.4%	44.0%	44.0%
Total	100% (N = 18)	100% (N = 241)	100% (N = 259)

PBRA = Project-Based Rental Assistance. PBV = project-based vouchers.

Source: Econometrica and Urban Institute sample selection from the first cohort of HUD Rental Assistance Demonstration property conversions, June 2015 to March 2016

Tenant Selection

For each of the 18 properties sampled, we drew a sample of residents representative of the property’s total population based on race/ethnicity, gender, elderly status, and disability status. Because properties were brought into the sample individually and the study could not wait until the sample of properties was complete before enrolling tenants, we drew resident samples as soon as properties were selected. Of 2,548 heads of household across all 18 sampled properties, 1,669 were invited to participate, and 522 (31 percent) enrolled.

Tracking

Enrolled residents filled out forms with complete contact information, including phone numbers and alternate contacts, and granted their inclusion in the study. They received a reminder postcard a year after enrollment with a request to update any information that had changed. Approximately 10 percent of enrollees provided updates.

Surveying

We began the survey phase by contacting PHAs and ensuring that work on all properties and any moves by residents back into them were complete. Conversations with representatives of the PHAs and property management conducted before surveying began indicated that, despite the extended period since the properties were sampled (presumably just before closing), work was still ongoing at three properties and had only recently been completed at four others. This is consistent with challenges identified in our interviews with external stakeholders, who cited delays caused by complications in coordinating tenant relocation and construction work.

Interviewers also asked a few questions on the nature of the work and how it affected residents to provide context that might be important for interpreting the resident survey results. All 522 enrollees were targeted for the survey, which we began fielding on March 6, 2018.¹

¹ At one property, temporary relocation of residents within the property was still ongoing. Although this did not affect our ability to locate enrollees, the timing may have affected those residents’ perceptions of RAD.

The final sample included 318 residents who completed the survey. Eight enrollees were reported as deceased. Without eliminating invalid numbers or enrollees who had moved and could not be located, the survey achieved a response rate of 62 percent. After eliminating the surveys completed by residents of the project dropped from the sample, 298 completed surveys remain (57 percent of all enrollees).

For this article, we calculated weights based on the inverse of the probability of a resident being selected, adjusted for nonresponse, multiplied by the probability of the property being selected based on the sampling frame. Because we could not survey residents from properties with substandard inspection scores in large and medium PHAs, the results are not representative of that population.

Residents were surveyed at a single point in time after most of the RAD work was complete. Residents were reminded of the RAD program and their enrollment in the evaluation before taking the survey. When residents were enrolled in the evaluation’s survey component, before RAD closed at their property, they received a letter describing the RAD program and its possible impact on their housing. Invitations to participate in the survey—sent approximately 12 to 18 months later—and the survey introduction reminded recipients of RAD and their enrollment date in the study.

Because the survey included many questions about residents’ experiences before RAD conversions to compare with current attitudes and perceptions, and because the timeframes could be confusing, questions referenced the month and year that the residents enrolled in the survey. Therefore, although residents’ memories may be inaccurate, they had a reference point for context.

Exhibit 6 shows respondents’ self-reported demographic characteristics. Characteristics of residents in the 18 sampled projects were comparable to those of public housing residents in general, and similar shares were older adults and people who identified as disabled.

Exhibit 6

Characteristics of Survey Respondents (N = 298)

Response	Percentage
Male	20.7
Female	75.9
Working-age (18–62)	57.5
63 or older	40.3
Person with disabilities	45.0
Older adults or person with disabilities	72.5
Married/living with partner	8.9
Single	43.9
Widowed/divorced/separated	44.7
One-person household	62.7
Two-person household	16.6
Three+-person household	18.7
5 years or less in assisted housing	20.7
6 years or more in assisted housing	74.4

Notes: Due to nonresponse, categories do not sum to 100 percent. Responses are weighted for the probability of selection and representative of the first round of Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) projects proceeding to closing.

Source: Econometrica and Urban Institute survey of residents from the first cohort of HUD RAD property conversions, March 2018 to April 2018

Tenant Rights and the Conversion from Public Housing

A public housing conversion can affect tenants before any investments are made in the converted property. Conversion also involves certain tenant protections, including the right of tenants who are temporarily relocated to return and the opportunity for them to use housing vouchers to move from the property after conversion. In this section, we present findings on how well PHAs communicated with residents, whether residents were aware of the RAD program, whether they were required to temporarily or permanently relocate during the conversion, and whether they were aware of the option to request an HCV.

Tenant Rights and Their Understanding of the Rental Assistance Demonstration

Although most residents were familiar with RAD, more than one-fourth said they had not heard of the program before the survey described it to them. In addition, they were asked whether they were satisfied or not satisfied with how their PHAs communicated with them about RAD and any changes they experienced as a result of the program. They were also asked how they felt about their PHAs' management of the RAD program—for instance, how long the work took and whether the work made it difficult to navigate the property. Residents indicated a high level of satisfaction with their PHAs' communication and management (exhibit 7).

Exhibit 7

Residents' Satisfaction with Public Housing Authorities' Communication about and Management of the Rental Assistance Demonstration

Response	Communication	Management
Very satisfied or somewhat satisfied	79.2%	75.6%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	4.0%	3.1%
Very dissatisfied or somewhat dissatisfied	15.9%	17.6%
Didn't know or declined to answer	1.6%	2.3%
Total	100% (N = 298)	100% (N = 294)

Notes: Weighting for preliminary numbers in this report was calculated based on the inverse probability of selection, adjusted for nonresponse. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Econometrica and Urban Institute survey of residents from the first cohort of HUD Rental Assistance Demonstration property conversions, March 2018 to April 2018 Relocation

Relocation

Tenants were asked whether they moved to a different unit because of the RAD conversion process (exhibit 8). A greater share of older tenants moved to a different unit during the renovation than working-age adults.

Exhibit 8

Shares of Residents Who Did and Did Not Move to a Different Unit during Rental Assistance Demonstration Conversions, by Age

Response	Percentage of Older Adults	Percentage of Working-Age Adults
Yes	42.0	27.1
No	55.6	70.0
Declined to answer	2.4	3.0
Total	100 (N = 135)	100 (N = 154)

Notes: Responses are weighted for the probability of selection and representative of the first round of Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) projects proceeding to closing. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Econometrica and Urban Institute survey of residents from the first cohort of HUD RAD property conversions, March 2018 to April 2018

Only roughly one-third of tenants relocated during conversion. Although older residents were slightly more likely than working-age adults to move during conversion, more than three-fourths were back in their original unit when they responded to the survey. Almost all were in the original property. The shares were similarly high for working-age adults (exhibit 9).

Exhibit 9

Types of Moves Made during Rental Assistance Demonstration Changes among Older and Working-Age Tenants

Response	Percentage of all older respondents	Percentage of older movers	Percentage of all working-age respondents	Percentage of working-age movers
Stayed in unit	55.0	–	69.3	–
Moved, returned to original unit	20.9	48.5	2.9	9.3
Moved, did not return to original unit	19.5	45.2	25.4	82.8
Moved and no longer in assisted housing	2.3	5.3	2.4	8.0
Don't know if moved to a different unit during RAD, but in original unit now	1.8	–	0	–
Moved to a different unit and now in original property, but unknown where they moved and whether they returned to their original unit	0.4	1.0	0	0
Total	100 (N = 135)	100	100 (N = 154)	100

RAD = rental assistance demonstration.

Notes: Responses are weighted for the probability of selection and representative of the first round of Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) projects proceeding to closing. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Econometrica and Urban Institute survey of residents from the first cohort of HUD RAD property conversions, March 2018 to April 2018

Relocation Assistance

Tenants who moved to a different unit because of RAD conversions were asked to indicate whether they received relocation assistance. Most respondents (78 percent) said that they did receive

assistance, and almost all (90 percent) of those who received relocation assistance were either somewhat or very satisfied with that assistance.

Tenants who temporarily moved during RAD conversions and returned to their original unit were more likely to say they received help with moving or moving expenses than those who permanently moved to a different unit and/or property (exhibit 10).

Exhibit 10

Shares of Tenants Who Did and Did Not Receive Help with Moving or Moving Expenses		
Response	Temporary Mover	Permanent Mover
Yes	88.6%	74.0%
No	11.4%	26.0%
Total (N = 104)	100% (N = 33)	100% (N = 71)

*Note: Responses are weighted for the probability of selection and representative of the first round of RAD projects proceeding to closing.
Source: Econometrica and Urban Institute survey of residents from the first cohort of HUD RAD property conversions, March 2018 to April 2018*

Choice Mobility Option

Although tenants have the right to request an HCV after living in a converted property for a certain duration,² the survey was fielded before most residents were eligible to receive a voucher under the RAD program's choice mobility option. Fewer than half of respondents were aware of the option. Roughly one-half said they would be interested in moving using a voucher rather than stay in their current unit. Urban Institute and Econometrica are studying the take-up of the choice mobility option in an ongoing evaluation for HUD.

Impact of Conversion on Property Conditions

After a property is converted and any renovations are completed, changes in housing conditions and property management may impact tenants. In this section, we present findings on whether residents were aware of any changes to property maintenance and management and of improvements to units and buildings.

Property Maintenance and Management

Respondents were asked to indicate how property maintenance and management compared with maintenance and management before RAD conversions were completed. A majority of residents perceived no change in property maintenance and management, but those who perceived a change were more likely to report that things were better (roughly one-third of respondents) than worse (roughly one-tenth of respondents) (exhibit 11).

² These durations are 1 year for project-based voucher developments and 2 years for project-based rental assistance developments.

Exhibit 11

Shares of Residents Who Considered Property Maintenance and Management Better and Worse after Rental Assistance Demonstration Conversions Were Completed

Response	Property Maintenance	Property Management
Better than before	34.4%	32.1%
Worse than before	9.2%	12.3%
About the same as before	53.8%	53.0%
Didn't know	1.1%	0.7%
Declined to answer	1.4%	1.9%
Total (N = 294)	100%	100%

Notes: Responses are weighted for the probability of selection and representative of the first round of Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) projects proceeding to closing. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Econometrica and Urban Institute survey of residents from the first cohort of HUD RAD property conversions, March 2018 to April 2018

Housing Quality

To gauge housing quality, tenants were asked to indicate their satisfaction with their current housing unit and development. Residents showed high levels of satisfaction with both (exhibit 12). Satisfaction with housing units was greater among residents served by large PHAs (90 percent) than among those served by medium (77 percent) and small (84 percent) PHAs.

Exhibit 12

Shares of Residents Who Were and Were Not Satisfied with Current Housing Unit and Development

Response	Housing Unit	Development
Very satisfied or somewhat satisfied	82.4%	80.8%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	3.7%	4.2%
Very dissatisfied or somewhat dissatisfied	11.7%	12.8%
Declined to answer	2.2%	2.2%
Total (N = 294)	100%	100%

Note: Responses are weighted for the probability of selection and representative of the first round of Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) projects proceeding to closing.

Source: Econometrica and Urban Institute survey of residents from the first cohort of HUD RAD property conversions, March 2018 to April 2018

Tenants were also asked to compare the condition of their current housing and property with the condition of their housing before RAD closing (exhibit 13). Large shares of tenants indicated that their current housing and development were better than before. Those who moved were significantly more likely than those who did not to indicate better conditions, both for the housing unit (82 percent versus 43 percent) and the property (77 percent versus 48 percent), likely reflecting that residents who moved were moved to accommodate a more significant renovation of units. Most of the difference owes to the fact that a greater share of nonmovers indicated that conditions were roughly the same; nonmovers were only slightly more likely to indicate that conditions were worse.

Exhibit 13

The Quality of Residents' Current Housing Compared with That of Housing before Rental Assistance Demonstration Conversions

Response	Housing Unit	Property
Either much better or somewhat better	55.2%	56.6%
About the same	35.3%	36.1%
Either much worse or somewhat worse	9.1%	6.7%
Declined to answer	0.4%	0.5%
Total (N = 294)	100%	100%

Notes: Responses are weighted for the probability of selection and representative of the first round of Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) projects proceeding to closing. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Econometrica and Urban Institute survey of residents from the first cohort of HUD RAD property conversions, March 2018 to April 2018

When asked about specific problems with their current housing compared with their housing before RAD, residents identified no significant positive or negative differences (exhibit 14). It is important to note that these responses reflect what residents recalled about specific housing conditions more than a year earlier. Similarities in residents' perceptions of problems before and after RAD may also reflect that for some RAD properties, work was done on the exterior of the buildings, not individual units.

Residents reported problems for certain housing conditions at higher rates (both before and after RAD conversions) than public housing residents responding to the American Housing Survey. Respondents in the sample were more likely to report holes and cracks in walls, peeling paint or broken plaster, and signs of mold than public housing residents responding to the American Housing Survey. Plumbing and heating issues and broken windows were not more prevalent in the RAD sample. As a whole, RAD units in this sample were rated as being in slightly worse condition (both before and after conversions) than the universe of public housing units. However, we know that our sample and the set of approved RAD projects it was drawn from are not representative of all public housing; differences in perceptions of housing conditions could owe to selection bias.

Exhibit 14

Residents' Perceptions of Housing Conditions before and after Rental Assistance Demonstration

Housing Condition	Before RAD	After RAD	AHS
HU ever uncomfortably cold	13.5%	12.8%	12.5%
HU ever completely without running water	7.1%	9.0%	5.0%
All toilets in HU ever unusable	8.8%	8.6%	4.0%
Cracks or holes in wall of HU	11.6%	15.0%	7.9%
Peeling paint or broken plaster in HU	17.5%	18.2%	4.4%
Signs of mice or rats in HU	14.1%	10.7%	10.1%
Signs of mold or mildew in HU	20.6%	14.5%	8.2%
Broken or damaged windows in HU	8.2%	4.5%	5.9%
Broken or damaged doors in HU	8.4%	8.4%	N/A
Missing door locks in HU	2.4%	4.0%	N/A
N = 298			

AHS = American Housing Survey, HU = housing unit, RAD = rental assistance demonstration.

Note: Responses are weighted for the probability of selection and representative of the first round of RAD projects proceeding to closing.

Source: Econometrica and Urban Institute survey of residents from the first cohort of HUD RAD property conversions, March 2018 to April 2018; 2015 American Housing Survey

Improvements to Tenants' Original Developments

Tenants living in their original developments were asked to indicate whether they had noticed specific changes to indoor spaces, outdoor spaces, or their housing units. They were prompted with general descriptions of what was meant by each area but were not given detail of what changes might have been made. Most tenants said they did not notice changes to indoor or outdoor spaces, and more than half noticed changes to their housing units. (Note that some residents live in developments where no improvements were made or where improvements had not been completed when they took the survey.) Among residents who noticed differences, most agreed that conditions had improved (exhibit 15).

Exhibit 15

Shares of Residents Who Did and Did Not Notice Changes to Areas of Their Developments

Response	Noticed Changes to Indoor Spaces	Noticed Changes to Outdoor Spaces	Noticed Changes to Housing Unit
Yes	41.6%	46.9%	56.0%
No	53.5%	49.9%	40.2%
Didn't know	1.1%	0.6%	0.8%
Declined to answer	3.8%	2.6%	3.1%
Total (N = 252)	100%	100%	100%

Notes: Responses are weighted for the probability of selection and representative of the first round of Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) projects proceeding to closing. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Econometrica and Urban Institute survey of residents from the first cohort of HUD Rental Assistance Demonstration property conversions, March 2018 to April 2018

Impact of Rental Assistance Demonstration Conversions on Residents' Lives

Several survey questions asked residents to indicate how RAD had directly impacted their lives, including their housing costs, employment and income, health, and safety. Most residents did not seem to note major impacts. However, because we could not conduct surveys before and after conversions and rely on residents' recollections, our ability to conclude is limited—RAD conversions do not appear to have caused substantial issues across PHAs. However, this finding does not eliminate the possibility of localized problems.

Housing Costs

Half of all respondents indicated that they were paying more for rent than before RAD, and one-third of respondents were paying more in utilities. Most attributed rent increases to higher incomes. Future evaluations could use administrative data to determine whether increases in rent after conversion were commensurate with increases in income.

Employment and Income

Most assisted housing recipients nationwide are older adults or have a disability (Docter and Galvez, 2020). The RAD sample is younger and, therefore, possibly less likely to include heads of household with disabilities. However, the prevalence of household members with disabilities is slightly higher in the RAD sample. Still, reported employment rates in the RAD sample are slightly lower than rates among working-age public housing tenants: nationwide, 58 percent of working-age tenants without disabilities reported working in 2016, whereas slightly less than one-half of working-age respondents without disabilities in the RAD sample reported that they were currently working for pay.

Conclusions cannot be drawn from this survey about the impact of RAD on employment because too few employed residents experienced relocation. Moreover, other research on assisted tenants suggests that any effect, especially in the short term, is unlikely to be found (Sanbonmatsu et al., 2012; Wood et al., 2006).³ Furthermore, the evidence we do have is mixed—from older studies of housing assistance showing a short-term work disincentive effect (Wood et al., 2006) to research on Moving to Opportunity showing no effects on adult employment or income (more recent research has found long-term effects on children who moved). The only studies of public housing tenants showing effects on employment are of programs that include work supports and services—Jobs Plus, the Chicago Family Case Management Demonstration, Housing Opportunities and Services Together (HOST), and enhanced Family Self Sufficiency (FSS) (Popkin, 2018).

Health

A key question about RAD—one that concerns tenant advocates in particular—is how redevelopment and relocation affect residents' health and well-being. Public housing serves a very low-income and vulnerable population, including many residents who are seniors or who have disabilities that prevent them from working. As discussed in the previous section, the share of tenants who are disconnected from the labor market is higher in our sample than in the general public housing population. In addition, our sample appears to be more similar in their employment to the general public housing population of housing serving high-need populations (such as the D.C. Housing Authority) or to tenants from distressed developments targeted for redevelopment under the Choice Neighborhoods demonstration (Pendall et al., 2015).

Our survey findings on residents' self-reported health confirm that the RAD development sample is extremely vulnerable. Almost one-half of survey respondents reported that their current health was fair or poor (exhibit 16), far more than would be expected in a typical low-income population. Working-age residents were only slightly healthier: 46 percent reported their current health was fair or poor, compared with 53 percent of older respondents. These figures are comparable to those from the HOPE VI Panel Study, which focused on residents from five developments slated for demolition. That study noted how much higher those figures were than in national surveys of other low-income populations and women and raised concerns about the potential negative effects of relocation for such vulnerable populations (Popkin and Davies, 2013).

³ Looking at the Welfare to Work Voucher program, Wood et al. (2006) found that they initially reduced work effort, but effects disappeared over time. See also Sanbonmatsu and coauthors (2012); looking at Moving to Opportunity, the authors found no effects on adult employment or self-sufficiency.

In the RAD sample, respondents from large PHAs were the most likely to report being in fair or poor health (54 percent), although the share of respondents from small PHAs (38 percent) was also very high. Particularly concerning is that respondents reported that their health was worse after RAD, although only a small share of respondents attributed these changes to changes in their housing. There was little variation across groups: only residents who reported having a disability were more likely to report poor health than other respondents (60 percent versus 40 percent). The data about the health and vulnerability of residents of developments targeted for RAD underscore the need to provide support to residents throughout the process, especially residents who move to accommodate repairs or redevelopment.

Exhibit 16

Health of Survey Respondents

Response	Before RAD	Currently
Excellent or very good	24.9%	17.7%
Good	32.1%	32.8%
Fair or poor	41.9%	48.8%
Didn't know	0.5%	0%
Declined to answer	0.6%	0.8%
Total (N = 298)	100%	100%

RAD = rental assistance demonstration. Notes: Responses are weighted for the probability of selection and representative of the first round of RAD projects proceeding to closing. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Source: Econometrica and Urban Institute survey of residents from the first cohort of HUD RAD property conversions, March 2018 to April 2018

Safety

Nearly all respondents reported feeling very or somewhat safe in their homes and developments during the day (exhibit 17). A smaller share—roughly two-thirds—reported feeling safe outside at night. RAD seems to have had little impact on residents' perceptions of safety; roughly two-thirds said they felt about as safe as they did before RAD, only roughly one-fifth said they felt safer, and one-tenth said they felt less safe. There was relatively little variation across groups; unsurprisingly, respondents who were 63 and older or had disabilities reported feeling less safe than others. However, absent contextual data about other community changes that may have affected perceptions of safety, these results do not allow us to conclude how RAD might have affected this aspect of resident well-being.

Exhibit 17

Residents' Perceptions of Safety at Different Times of Day

Response	Day		Night	
	In Unit	Outside	In Unit	Outside
Very safe or somewhat safe	91.9%	86.1%	83.6%	63.5%
Very unsafe or somewhat unsafe	6.3%	11.9%	14.6%	32.9%
Didn't know	0%	0.2%	0%	1.9%
Declined to answer	1.9%	1.9%	1.9%	1.7%
Total (N = 252)	100%	100%	100%	100%

Notes: Responses are weighted for the probability of selection and representative of the first round of Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) projects proceeding to closing. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Source: Econometrica and Urban Institute survey of residents from the first cohort of HUD RAD property conversions, March 2018 to April 2018

Most respondents did not feel that safety had changed since RAD conversions began (exhibit 18). However, 22 percent felt safer, and 12 percent felt less safe. Respondents were not asked directly whether changes in safety were attributable to RAD. In open-ended comments, respondents tended to cite good neighbors and the proximity of police or security patrols as key factors in perceptions of safety. Twenty-four respondents cited building characteristics but did not connect those characteristics to RAD improvements, and only 14 of these respondents felt safer than before.

Exhibit 18

Shares of Residents Who Felt Safer, Less Safe, and as Safe as before Rental Assistance Demonstration

Response	Currently
Safer	21.5%
Less safe	11.5%
About as safe as before	64.7%
Didn't know	0.6%
Declined to answer	1.7%
Total (N = 298)	100%

Note: Responses are weighted for the probability of selection and representative of the first round of RAD projects proceeding to closing.

Source: Econometrica and Urban Institute survey of residents from the first cohort of HUD RAD property conversions, March 2018 to April 2018

Neighborhood Outcomes

Improvements to RAD properties do not typically impact overall neighborhood conditions, but residents in most converted properties can request a voucher to move to a new neighborhood. Although the right to move using the choice mobility option is a key component of the RAD program (consistent with rules governing PBV and PBRA developments), conversion of most of the RAD properties in our sample had occurred too recently for us to analyze outcomes for people who moved from converted properties. Most residents were not even aware of the option to move (49 percent indicated they were not told about the option, and 46 percent indicated that they were). Tenants were asked whether they would like to use an HCV under the choice mobility option rather than stay in their current housing, and a slight majority said they would. Whether or not residents request vouchers, RAD does not represent an expansion of the HCV program; the primary impact of RAD conversions is felt by the occupants of units in converted developments.

Conclusion

For residents of public housing converted under the RAD program, we found that the good news and the bad news are the same: residents are not experiencing large effects. This is clearly bad news regarding housing conditions: tenants in converted properties reported housing problems (both before and after conversion) at a higher rate than tenants in public housing in general, and most did not notice changes to their housing after conversion. Ameliorating the significant maintenance issues that residents reported should be a primary goal of the program.

The better news is that most tenants did not experience major disruptions for this first cohort of conversions. Most were not moved, and most of those who were returned to the same units or units in the same properties. For every tenant who had to move, two remained in their units during RAD conversions. Of those who moved because of RAD, the majority moved to a different unit in the property they were living in when the RAD process began. In addition, most of the tenants who moved to a different unit because of RAD received some type of relocation assistance, and almost all were satisfied with the assistance they received.

In general, tenants living in projects during RAD conversions were satisfied with the conversion process and with the outcomes of that process. They expressed general satisfaction with how their PHAs communicated with them and managed the RAD process. A large majority thought that property maintenance and management were as good as or better than before conversion. Most tenants were very or somewhat satisfied with their housing units, particularly their housing developments in general. This could be related to the finding that repairs and rehabilitation did not require most tenants to move.

Regarding the choice mobility option under RAD, a slight majority of surveyed tenants reported that they were not informed about the option during the RAD process. A large share indicated that they would prefer that option to living in their current unit. An ongoing evaluation of RAD being conducted by Econometrica and Urban Institute is investigating whether this option is being properly communicated to affected residents and how many have taken advantage of it. Moreover, tenants' responses to survey questions about their health reflect the fragility of the population of public housing residents and highlight the need to ensure that relocation support is not taken lightly in RAD conversions.

Future research will have to address some of the larger concerns of assisted housing advocates. Does the conversion to voucher-based housing, including potential changes in property management, improve or worsen property maintenance? Are converted developments able to maintain high occupancy rates? Does foreclosure actually represent a substantial risk leading to the loss of assisted housing units? Future evaluations of the RAD program should consider these questions with an eye toward its impacts on tenants.

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