

A Window Into Park Life: Findings From a Resident Survey of Nine Mobile Home Park Communities in Vermont

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Abstract

Affordable housing is a critical issue facing many rural communities. Mobile home parks are a form of affordable housing prevalent in rural areas that is being lost as parks close across the United States and few new parks are developed. Limited research on how residents view their parks and the public perception that mobile home parks are undesirable may diminish efforts to prevent park closures. This paper considers how mobile home residents view their quality of life and housing issues living in this type of rural community. Findings from a survey of two hundred and fifty-six residents at nine mobile home parks in Vermont are reported. Respondents were asked how they viewed their housing, neighborhood, park management, and infrastructure. Residents were found to have lower incomes than other households in the state. Most were satisfied with life in the park, though lower income residents were significantly happier with the social atmosphere than those with higher incomes. For many households mobile home parks are not transitional housing but are rather places they have lived, and plan to live, for many years. This research can aid rural planners improve and develop future affordable housing, including the evolution of the mobile home park.

Keywords: affordable housing, manufactured housing, mobile home parks, rural communities

1.0 Introduction

Mobile home parks are an important, yet understudied form of affordable housing in rural communities whose value can often be overlooked by planners, housing advocates, and local governments (Aman & Yarnal, 2010; MacTavish & Salamon, 2001). Rural areas rely on this particular type of housing to a much greater extent than do urban populations (Collins, 2003). Despite being a major source of rural

affordable housing, there is relatively little information on mobile homes in land-lease settings, commonly referred to as mobile home parks (Housing Assistance Council, 2011). This paper reports the findings from a survey of 256 residents living in nine mobile home parks in the rural and suburbanizing region around Burlington, Vermont. The study was designed to provide information for rural planners seeking to increase the involvement of mobile home park residents in community development efforts.

Mobile home parks are often seen as a vestige of a previous age yet today are home to more than 2.6 million households in an estimated 60,000 parks across the United States (Foremost Insurance Group, 2005; Housing Assistance Council, 2011). Parks are often viewed negatively and residents are characterized by negative associations communicated through derogatory phrases like “trailer trash” and assumptions that only the “newly-wed or nearly dead” live in parks. The lack of objective research on park residents creates a vacuum in which these biases persist, and may contribute to the low status of the mobile home park among the options considered by affordable housing advocates (Beamish, Goss, Atilas, & Kim, 2001; Kusenbach, 2009). In addition to the challenges presented by social stigmatization of residents, mobile home parks often have significant and expensive infrastructure challenges related to water, wastewater and internal roads. These directly affect the quality of life within the parks and can lead to sale of the parks and conversion to more profitable land uses. This has led to a recent and dramatic increase in park closures across the United States (Corporation for Enterprise Development, 2009; Housing Assistance Council, 2011).

In the small, rural state of Vermont the loss of mobile home parks has worsened an already critical lack of affordable housing in the state of Vermont. During the past decade, seventeen parks have closed in the state resulting in the loss of 169 lots (Hamlin, 2011). Despite its idyllic pastoral landscape and reputation as a tourism destination, Vermont’s residents face a steadily worsening affordable housing situation. Vermont housing costs relative to income have persistently made housing among the most expensive in the United States, placing the state 17th nationally for the share of income required to pay for housing (Collins, 2011). Lack of affordable housing is a leading contributor to growing homelessness statewide, where not only are there more people experiencing homelessness but the length of stay in shelters has increased as well, from an average of 13 days in 2000 to 34 days in 2010, an increase of 162% in ten years. Among those in need of emergency shelter, families with children outpace individuals as the fastest growing segment of Vermont’s homeless population (VT Office of Economic Opportunity, 2009; VT Office of Economic Opportunity, 2010).

Closures of mobile home parks raise important questions for rural community planners and affordable housing advocates. Initially, what are the demographic characteristics of the population living in parks? Given the widespread discrimination against mobile home parks, how do residents themselves perceive their quality of life in the parks and the challenges they face? And what opportunities exist to foster positive development in these communities and how do, or don’t, park residents engage with the larger communities within which they live?

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Mobile Home Parks: Past and Present

Originally introduced in the 1930s as recreational units, mobile homes eventually became used as permanent housing during the construction boom following World War II (Apgar, Calder, Collins, & Duda, 2002; George & Barr, 2005; Vermeer & Louie, 1997). Variable design and construction practices led the federal government to enact the HUD Code in 1976 to regulate the mobile home industry (George et al., 2005; Housing Assistance Council, 2011). Another major revision to the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) code was implemented in 1994 that included additional structural standards including wind-load amendments (Grosskopf, 2005).

Factory-built homes constructed before the creation of the 1976 HUD Code are correctly referred to as “mobile homes.” Following the changes to the HUD Code, the term “manufactured homes” was adopted. Manufactured homes are defined as “movable dwellings”, 8 feet or more wide and 40 feet or more long, designed to be towed on its own chassis with transportation gear integral to the unit when it leaves the factory and without need of a permanent foundation,” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). However, the association of “mobile” with these homes is often misleading, as the majority (66%) remain placed on their original sites and are not relocated (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). In common parlance, today the term “mobile home” persists in common usage, regardless of when the units were constructed. Asked in a market study what residents call their manufactured homes, 57% referred to their house as a “mobile home”, compared to 16% who used the technically-correct term “manufactured home,” (Foremost Insurance Group, 2005). In this paper we use the term mobile home and manufactured home interchangeably.

Nomenclature aside, the years 1976 and 1994 are critical benchmarks for mobile homes. The adoption of the HUD codes standardized the quality of mobile homes and markedly improved safety. A study conducted in Florida that compared hurricane damage to mobile homes found significantly greater hurricane resilience among mobile homes following the adoption of each of the standards (Grosskopf, 2005). Despite the improvements the standards have made to the construction of these housing units, the 2007 median age of manufactured homes in the United States was 21 years, indicating that half of the manufactured homes in the US pre-date the 1994 standard (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). A recent study estimated that about 20% of the currently occupied manufactured housing was built before 1976 (Housing Assistance Council, 2011).

2.2 Prevalence of the Manufactured Home

There are approximately 7 million occupied mobile homes in the United States providing between 6.3% and 7% of the total occupied housing stock in the United States (Housing Assistance Council, 2011; U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Manufactured homes are most prevalent in rural areas of the United States. While 22% of all households live in rural areas, those households occupy more than 50% of manufactured homes in the United States (Collins, 2003). While the majority of homes are primarily “singlewides” (84%), market trends show that a growing number of consumers are purchasing larger, doublewide models (Foremost Insurance Group, 2005; U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

The affordability of this housing type relative to more traditional site-built housing is supported by a U.S. Census Bureau study in 2007 that found the average manufactured home without land cost \$65,100 compared to a site-built home that averaged \$229,332 after the value of the land was removed (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). The difference in price is even greater if only single-wide manufactured homes are considered.

Manufactured housing expands homeownership opportunities for low-income consumers (Genz, 2001). Owners value affordability highly, but also appreciate other aspects of the housing itself. Aman and Yarnal (2009) recently surveyed mobile home owners in rural Pennsylvania and found that most residents were somewhat pleased (39%) or very pleased (50%) with their housing choice. When residents were asked what they liked about their mobile homes their responses included affordability (48%), interior layout (47%), and ease of maintenance (25%) (Aman et al., 2009).

2.3 Mobile Home Park Communities

More than 1/3 of all occupied mobile homes in the US are situated in an estimated 60,000 land-lease manufactured home communities, accounting for 2.6 million mobile homes (Housing Assistance Council, 2011). Every state in the country has mobile home parks, although some regions, such as the northeastern US have a higher percentage of all mobile homes in parks compared to other regions (Corporation for Enterprise Development, 2009; Foremost Insurance Group, 2005; Housing Assistance Council, 2011). Homeownership is high within parks, with 80% of homes owned by the people who live in them (Housing Assistance Council, 2011).

Mobile homes, and particularly mobile home parks, have struggled with negative stereotypes. In a study comparing perspectives on mobile home residents between mobile home residents and non-mobile home residents, Beamish et al. (2001) found that both groups held negative views of mobile home parks—specifically that they were poorly managed, ill-maintained, and home to “trailer trash”. Stigmatization may contribute to the development of local land use laws that limit where homes can be located, or direct placement in areas with less potential for appreciating in value (Apgar et al., 2002; Schmitz, 2004).

In one of the few studies conducted specifically about residents of rural mobile home park communities and their views regarding park life, MacTavish and Salamon (2001) studied a large mobile home park (560 units) community in central Illinois. Largely a blue-collar community, the employment rate was high (94%) yet the median household was less than half of the median income of an adjacent small town. They also found that residents experienced park life in different ways depending on their investment in developing social ties within the park. Younger residents identifying themselves as “temporary” park residents were more likely to feel isolated and dissatisfied with park life. However, in contrast, older and long-term residents reported a more cohesive sense of community and neighborliness in the same park.

2.4 Non-Profit and Cooperative Park Ownership Models

More than 100 parks have closed in 18 states in recent years and a recent study estimates that an additional 1,500 are at risk (Corporation for Enterprise

Development, 2009). The high levels of home ownership on leased land create a unique tension for many residents in mobile home parks. They have high levels of personal investment in their homes but little control over the land on which their house sits. They enjoy a tenuous status as both homeowner and tenant (Aman et al., 2009). Park owners possess significant, if not complete, control over regulations and services, leaving park residents with little bargaining leverage (George et al., 2005; Schmitz, 2004). Furthermore, despite the appellation “mobile”, the costs associated with moving mobile homes can be worth more than the home itself, leaving the homeowner in a precarious situation if the park closed or was sold (Schmitz, 2004).

To address the vulnerability of the mobile home park resident many states, including Vermont, New Hampshire, and California, have taken legal steps to provide consumer protections such as requiring specific time periods for giving notice to residents about park sales and closures (Genz, 2001). In addition to state regulations that provide park residents with legal recourse in case of park closures, two important movements have developed to offer park residents alternatives if an owner decides to sell. The first, non-profit ownership has been promoted in many parts of the United States since the 1960's (Berlin, 2011). Non-profit affordable housing organizations began buying parks to prevent their sale and conversion to other uses (Genz, 2001). Given their missions to provide affordable housing, non-profit park ownership may be more stable compared to investor-owned parks. Less common than investor-owned parks, but with substantial benefits, are initiatives that enable park residents to purchase and cooperatively own their parks. New Hampshire, in particular, has seen a significant number of parks move to cooperative ownership with subsequent improvements in quality of life and property values for resident-owners. There are 82 resident-owned communities in New Hampshire; a recent study of these parks found that mobile homes located within cooperative parks sold faster and at higher prices compared to those within investor-owned parks (Ward, French, & Giraud, 2006). Other benefits enjoyed by residents of cooperative parks include: lower monthly lot rent fees, increased access to non-predatory financing, more control over decision-making and greater security over their futures (French, Giraud, & Ward, 2008).

2.5 Study Context: Manufactured Housing in Vermont

As is common with other rural areas in the United States, manufactured homes are an important part of Vermont's housing stock; 22,627 manufactured homes accounted for about 8% of the state's total dwellings in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). There are 245 mobile home parks with 7,224 lots statewide in Vermont (Vermont Department of Housing & Community Affairs, 2011). Currently, 70% of mobile home lots in parks are privately owned, 24% are owned by non-profits, and 6% are cooperatively owned.

Without mobile home parks, low-income Vermonters would be hard-pressed to find another homeownership option. The median purchase price of a single-family home was \$195,000 in 2010 (Collins, 2011). This home would require an annual household income of \$58,000 and \$16,000 cash for down payment and closing costs in 2010 (Collins, 2011). With a median income of \$52,000 many Vermonters are either living in unaffordable housing or are shut out of the conventional home market entirely. In contrast, the 2010 median price of a mobile home with land was \$70,000; the median sale price for a mobile home without land was \$27,500

(Vermont Department of Taxes, 2011). The median monthly lot rent in 2010 was \$300 (Hamlin, 2011).

In recent years there has been a steady loss in the number of parks in the state. Since 2001, there has been a net decrease of 14 mobile home parks, and the total supply of available lots has decreased by 110. The loss of parks is due to a variety of factors, including major infrastructure problems such as lack of adequate water supply or sewage disposal. Some owners choose to close their parks in order to use the land for another purpose, sell the land, or retire from the business (Hamlin, 2008). Substandard infrastructure, particularly water and wastewater, can also lead to violations and the possible shutdown of a park—putting residents in a precarious situation (Calder, 2006).

The loss of parks has made the role of non-profit organizations dedicated to mobile home park issues ever more important. In Vermont, the Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity's (CVOEO) Mobile Home Project is an organization that helps mobile home park residents assert their rights under state law. Through organizing, housing counseling, and outreach initiatives, this program promotes park residents' interests and advocates for additional consumer protection for this sector of the affordable housing market (CVOEO, 2008).

2.6 Park Ownership in Vermont

Non-profit ownership of mobile home parks has been the major strategy used in the state to prevent park closures. Currently, there are 45 non-profit owned parks, representing 18% of all parks in Vermont. These parks have been successful in maintaining lower park rents compared to privately-owned parks. In 2007 the median lot rent of non-profit owned parks was \$246 compared to \$285 in privately owned parks (Hamlin, 2008). Also, given their mission to provide affordable housing, non-profit owners appear less likely to sell or close their parks. Of the eleven parks sold since 2004, none were non-profit owned parks (Hamlin, 2008). Lack of financing has proven to become a challenge for non-profit owners; no park purchases were made by non-profit owners between 2008 and 2010 due to inability to obtain financing (Hamlin, 2011).

Vermont's statewide planning law requires that affordable housing be included in municipal plans. Furthermore, state law prevents municipalities from discriminating against mobile home parks (VT Department of Housing and Community Affairs, 2007). However, data on mobile home parks is limited to a statewide park registry reporting ownership and number of lots. Town planners are left with little detailed information on who is living in the parks or what issues residents face. Planning for affordable housing, designing appropriate zoning regulations and addressing issues of economic development are all stymied by the lack of functioning resident organizations within the park that could represent the community's issues to the municipality.

3.0 Methodology

This study was initially motivated by concerns of a municipal planning commission that they knew little about the nearly 20% of the town's population living in three mobile home parks. It was subsequently expanded to a total of nine mobile home parks located in the rural and suburbanizing region around Burlington, Vermont.

3.1 Study Framework

The desire to gather information about the parks with the aim of organizing the community to improve housing led to the adoption of a community-based action research approach for the project. Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, and Donahue (2003) state this research, “has as its goal social action and social change for the purpose of achieving social justice,” (p. 8). In this project, collaborators included academics, non-profit park owners, housing advocates and members of the local planning commission. Following the initial survey, residents of the mobile home parks were involved in evaluating how accurately the survey captured their issues and determining which issues to use as the basis for community organizing.

Given the scarcity of data available about mobile home park communities in Vermont, the survey was expanded to include six more parks between 2008 and 2009. These additional parks were selected based on recommendations from our research partners at the Mobile Home Project at the Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity. As the statewide advocate for residents of Vermont’s 245 mobile home parks, Mobile Home Project staff participated throughout the research process, including survey design, supervision of the fieldwork, and discussion of the results with community members following data analysis.

3.2 Survey Methods

A total of 256 surveys were conducted in nine parks whose inclusion in the survey was developed through consultation with municipal planning commissions and the Mobile Home Project at the Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity (See Table 1). The sampling frame included all households located in a park. The first three parks surveyed in 2007 were located in the same town and shared the same non-profit owner. Four parks owned by another non-profit organization were surveyed in 2008. In 2009, two parks owned by two different private owners were surveyed. The nine parks were located in five different municipalities with the majority of households surveyed (81%) located in non-profit owned parks. Seven of the parks have been purchased by non-profits that lease lots to residents to site privately-owned manufactured homes. Two parks were privately-owned.

The survey was conducted door-to-door in nine parks by students from three service-learning courses at the (Institution of Higher Education) between 2007 and 2009. All students received training and Institutional Review Board certification before conducting surveys. A face-to-face survey method was chosen given concerns about response rates to mail or telephone surveys. The survey included both closed and open-ended questions.

Students visited homes in pairs supervised by a graduate student and a CVOEO staffer. Residents were informed of the survey through a letter that was mailed on behalf of the research team by the non-profit park owners. Respondents had to be 18 years of age or older. The interviews ranged in length from 6 minutes to 82 minutes; the average interview lasted 33 minutes. Most surveys were conducted on Saturdays and repeated trips to the parks were made in order to increase the response rate. Overall, 41% of all households in the 9 parks completed the survey.

Table 1. *Mobile Home Parks Surveyed*

Park Name	Town	Year Est.	Number of Lots	2010 Lot Rent (\$)	Ownership	Year Surveyed	% of Homes Surveyed
Birchwood	Milton	1966	172	296	Non-Profit	2008	42%
Brookside	Starksboro	1969	49	286	Non-Profit	2007	49%
Fernwood Manor	Bolton	1978	78	349	Non-Profit	2008	31%
Hillside Manor	Starksboro	1960	29	248	Non-Profit	2007	41%
Lazy Brook	Starksboro	1960	51	212	Non-Profit	2007	37%
Mountain View	Hinesburg	1968	52	347	Non-Profit	2008	36%
Sunset Lake Villa	Hinesburg	1962	55	340	Private	2009	36%
Triple L	Hinesburg	1966	65	285	Private	2009	47%
Windemere Estates	Colchester	--	85	354	Non-Profit	2008	42%

Bi-variate analysis of the data was conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Cross-tabulations used to identify inter-park differences between resident perceptions of life in the parks and the presence of significant differences was evaluated using Chi-square analysis. The open-ended questions of the survey were open-coded and analyzed using content analysis (Gray, 2004). Depending on the nature of the question the unit of analysis was the individual resident or ownership of the different park communities themselves.

4.0 Results

4.1 Resident Demographics

Among the 256 households surveyed, the average household size was 2.7 persons, with at least one person working full-time (See Table 2). More than one-third of these households (37%) were home to at least one child under the age of 18. A smaller percentage of households had residents over the age of 65 (19%).

Educational levels of adult park residents were found to be lower than the statewide levels. Whereas 34% of Vermonters have attained a degree beyond high school (associate, technical, bachelor, graduate or professional degree), only 25% of park residents reported attaining a higher degree (US Census Bureau, 2000). Over 50% of park residents reported a high school diploma or GED as the highest level of education attained within the household (132 of 249). Seven percent of respondents reported not attaining a high school diploma, while 15% reported having completed some college but not to completion of a degree.

Table 2. *Demographic Characteristics of Surveyed Households*

Demographic	Mean	Mode	Standard Deviation	n
Number of Years Lived in Park	11.9	3	11.5	254
Number of Adults Employed Full Time	1.1	1	0.9	251
Total Household Size	2.7	2	1.4	250
Number of Persons over 65 in Household	0.3	0	0.6	251
Number of Persons under 18	0.7	0	1.1	251
			Percent	n
Highest Level of Education Attained			--	249
<i>Grade School/No Diploma</i>			7%	17
<i>High School GED</i>			53%	132
<i>Some College</i>			15%	37
<i>Associate/Technical</i>			14%	34
<i>College or Higher</i>			12%	29

Given relatively low levels of education, it is not surprising that overall household incomes were well below the county median in all parks. The survey asked residents to report household income as a percentage of the Area Median Income (AMI) for their respective county—a benchmark set by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development. Twenty-five respondents refused to answer this question. AMI refers to the level of income within the county where half of the residents earn more and half earn less and accounts for household size. Although more than 71% (n=256) of households had at least one person working full-time, more than 85% of respondents reported family incomes below the HUD-defined category for low income (less than 80% of AMI) in the county and year in which they were surveyed (n=231). Amongst all respondents, 22% of respondents would be considered to be “extremely low income” according to HUD guidelines.

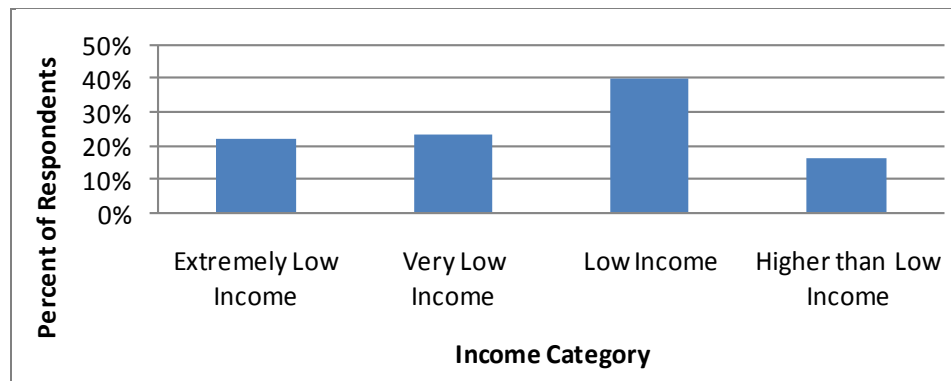


Figure 1. Respondent Income by HUD Guidelines (n=231)

Despite relatively low incomes, mobile homes have afforded the vast majority of residents the opportunity for homeownership. Nearly 90% reported owning their home (n=253) and the majority of these, 66% (n=245) did not have a current home

loan. Of those who did have loans 57% reported that their interest rates were fixed rather than variable; 17% were not sure what type of loan they had. The average interest rate for the variable loans was 6.7% with a maximum rate of 18%.

Nearly 41% of residents have lived in their current park for more than 10 years, with more than half of those living in their current park for at least 20 years (26% of total respondents) (See Figure 2). This suggests that for many households, parks are not transitional housing, but may well be the housing that they live in for a significant portion of their lifetimes. Furthermore, when asked about their future plans, nearly half (47%) said that they saw themselves living in the park for at least the next five years. This does not appear to be a recent trend; bi-variate analysis did not find significant differences between relative newcomers to the parks (less than five years) and those who had lived there longer regarding their intention to stay in the park. It appears that contrary to common perceptions of parks, for many residents this housing is not a “stepping stone” to more permanent housing, but is likely to be where they will live for many years. Rural planners may benefit by viewing mobile home parks as long-term, stable housing for many residents, which can affect planning for transportation, economic development, site planning, community organization and other investments made for “permanent” neighborhoods.

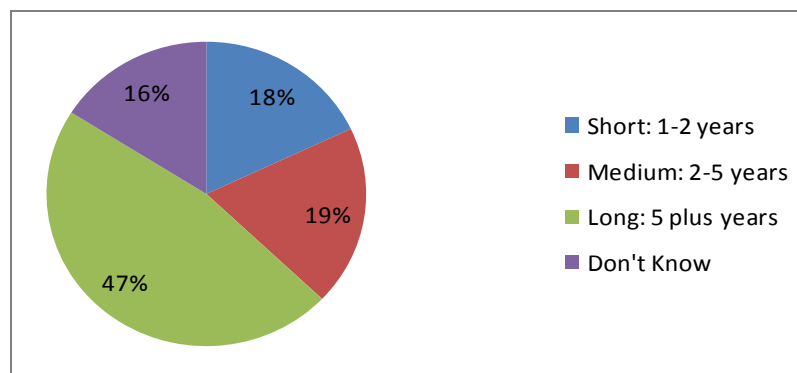


Figure 2. Anticipated Length of Park Residency (N= 256)

4.2 Resident's Satisfaction with Housing

The HUD code of 1976 greatly improved the quality of manufactured housing in the U.S. and provided consumers with a more uniform product. However, the quality of manufacturing still varies considerably, affecting the life expectancy of this housing stock. Residents were asked about their general satisfaction with their current home. Almost 70% (n=253) reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their current home.

Residents of the parks were asked about their priority issues regarding housing quality (See Table 3). Among the 251 residents who answered this question, 15.5% said they had problems with their roofing, followed by 6.8% wanting to replace flooring and 6.8% wanting additional insulation. Nearly 19% said that their house needed no improvements. Beyond identifying the areas in which this housing is particularly vulnerable to degradation, commonalities in the type of repairs needed, as well as the standard configuration of the buildings presents opportunities for community-scale interventions to improve housing and create jobs through coordinated renovation planning.

Table 3. *Top Five Responses to Most Urgent Home Improvement*

Improvement	Percent of Total Respondents
No improvements needed	18.7%
Roof replacement	15.5%
Flooring replacement	6.8%
Insulation	6.8%
Window replacement	6.0%

The Vermont Office of Economic Opportunity administers the Vermont Weatherization Program through the five community action agencies in the state. The program is designed to assist low-income residents in saving fuel and money by weatherizing their homes and improving energy efficiency. This program is run on federal and state funding and is applicable towards improvements for mobile homes. Among the residents surveyed 84% (n=256) were aware of the program, but only 27% reported that they had participated in the program. For those who did not participate, about 40% indicated that they were income ineligible, and approximately 36% said that they either did not need the program or were not interested.

4.3 Opinions on Park Life, Management, and Infrastructure

When asked about how well they believed their park was being managed, 38% (n=253) were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with park management (See Table 4). Slightly more than a third (35%) reported being satisfied with management and another nearly 20% were neutral. Bi-variate chi-square analysis found that there were significant differences between the two non-profit park owners, with residents of one non-profit owner reporting levels of satisfaction while residents from the other non-profit owner were generally unhappier than expected (chi-square = 5.9, $p = .051$).

Table 4. *Comparison between Non-Profit Owners on Resident Satisfaction, n = 193*

Park Owner	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Total
Non-Profit A	31%	18%	51%	100%
Non-Profit B	38%	30%	32%	100%

There was also a significant difference found between residents of non-profit owned parks and investor-owned parks (See Table 5). Specifically, residents of non-profit parks were less satisfied with park management than residents of investor-owned parks (chi-square = 13.5, $p = .001$). Despite the statistical significance of this finding, it is important to note only two investor-owned parks were included in this study; this finding should not be applied broadly to comparisons between non-profit owned parks and investor-owned parks. Ratings of satisfaction with park management, whether non-profit or investor owned, can be influenced by many factors and would require more in-depth investigation to understand more fully the circumstances affecting each of the nine parks.

Table 5. *Comparison between Park Ownership Type and Resident Satisfaction, n = 238*

Park Ownership Type	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Total
Non-Profit	33%	21%	46%	100%
Investor Owned	58%	24%	18%	100%

Residents were asked to name the top three improvements that they would like to see made to their park, ranking them in order of urgency. Road issues were the most commonly needed improvement within the parks. Among 254 respondents, 32% thought that road repairs were the most urgent need, followed by problems with water or sewer systems reported by 14.6% of residents. However, there were differences among the parks with respect to needed park-wide improvements and even between the types of issues faced by the park owners (chi-square = 40.88, $p < .001$). While for some parks, road, water and sewer infrastructure dominated the concerns of residents, in others unique issues, such as the need for recreational facilities and increased public safety, were cited as urgently needed improvements. Several parks identified the need for additional recreational facilities; however, one park emphasized the need for increased security. This was the largest park with more than 170 units, more than twice the size of the next largest park. The quantitative data was reinforced by comments made to surveyors during data collection, who were warned about strife between among neighborhoods within the park.

In contrast to the findings of Aman et al. (2009) in their study of mobile home owners in general affordability, while important, was not the thing residents most appreciated about the park. Affordability was cited by 14% of residents ($n=254$); however, 15% cited living in a quiet neighborhood as the most enjoyable aspect of park life. Having good neighbors and a sense of community was cited by 14% of the respondents as well, about the same as affordability. These results suggest that people are not simply choosing to live in the parks for their relatively low-cost, but also that the parks can provide other amenities that make them an enjoyable place to live. These results also suggest that rural planners can contribute to higher quality of life in mobile home parks by designing noise ordinances and encouraging community building when working to improve satisfaction for residents. Particularly in the case of noise, the high density of parks may be quite different than those faced by other residential settings in rural areas and require additional noise standards.

In the rural and suburbanizing areas where the surveyed parks were located, proximity to work and services was most prized by 12% and privacy or independence was the most enjoyable aspect reported by another 7%. While people outside parks may view life in parks in negative terms (Beamish et al., 2001), residents themselves both highly value and experience social aspects positively. Neighborliness and agreement on social norms are both indicators of positive social capital. Residents of the parks reported that these aspects of social capital, such as neighborliness, contributed greatly to their overall enjoyment of the park, and were listed ahead of affordability among the things most appreciated by residents. This should not diminish the importance of affordability as a key element leading residents to settle in the park, but it does suggest that in day-to-day life social capital contributes highly to the park residential experience.

When asked directly about the social atmosphere in their parks, 54% (n = 249) said that in their opinion neighbors got along well or very well (See Table 6). The survey did find differences between the parks when asked about the social atmosphere in the parks (chi-square = 35.75, p = .003). Not surprisingly, the large park where residents had reported security as a concern was also the one in which residents felt that the social atmosphere was more negative than positive. The divisions within this park may even have been more extreme than captured in the data, as field surveyors reported that some residents viewed the neighborhood question as referring to a scale smaller than the park and said that they had positive feelings about their neighbors but more negative perceptions of other neighborhoods within the same park. Social cohesion might be expected to increase with the length of time a person lived in the park, but chi-square analysis did not find any significant differences between the length of residence and perceptions of the social atmosphere. Interestingly, chi-square analysis did reveal significant differences when comparing income and views of social atmosphere (chi-square = 7.62, p = 0.022). Respondents reporting incomes classified by HUD as being “extremely low income” or “very low income” were more likely to report positive views of social atmosphere within their parks than their higher income counterparts.

Table 6. *Resident Income and View of Social Atmosphere in Park, n = 223*

HUD Income Categories	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Total
Extremely Low and Very Low	18%	20%	60%	100%
Moderate and Greater	19%	36%	45%	100%

4.4 Town Park Relations

Residents were asked if they had ever tried to contact a town official regarding an issue in their park. Seventy percent responded that they had done so in the past. The most frequently contacted official was the Town Clerk (22%), followed by the Animal Control Officer (20%), and the Town Health Officer (15%). The majority of residents who contacted their Town Health Officer were from the same park and had recently experienced wastewater issues. Residents were also asked how well-informed they believed their town officials were about park issues. While 28% responded “don’t know”, more residents believed that their town officials were well-informed (36%) than not (24%). When asked about their attendance at Town Meeting Day (an annual Vermont tradition), 72% responded that they never attend. Approximately a fifth of respondents attend sometimes or frequently.

4.5 Resident Associations

This survey was also used to gauge park residents’ interest in forming, or in some cases restarting, a resident association. Of the survey respondents during the first year of data collection, 51% believed that a resident association would be useful in their park (n=55). Of the 35% who indicated that an association would not be useful, 43.5% stated that an association would not resolve park issues. In the second and third years of surveying, a question was added asking whether they would be willing to serve in a Resident’s Association. Nearly 43% of those respondents (n=183) indicated that they would be willing to serve.

One of the critical issues in resident organizing, and community planning in general, is communication. The surveys found that a high percentage were able to access the internet from their house (62%, n=235). Forty-four percent said they accessed the internet frequently. This is lower than internet access for the state, however. A 2010 study by the Vermont Center for Rural Studies found that more than 80% of households in the state had a personal computer and about the same percentage were connected to the internet. Furthermore, lower income households across the state have less access to the internet from home than wealthier households (Center for Rural Studies, 2010). While the digital divide is a barrier, it appears that resident organizers, community planners and others wanting to share information with park residents can begin to use the internet to share information. Identifying parks with low or no access to broadband, and ensuring that all households within the parks are able to access public internet is an important objective for rural planners.

5.0 Discussion: Understanding Mobile Home Park Communities

The survey findings provide insight for planners and housing advocates interested in better understanding the demographic characteristics of mobile home park residents. The survey revealed that parks do indeed provide housing for low-income households and that many other long-held stereotypes of mobile home park residents did not hold true. For example, 41% of those surveyed reported having lived in their current park for 10 or more years. Nearly half of all residents surveyed (47%) anticipated living in their current park for at least the next five years. These two findings counter the perception that mobile home parks are comprised of mainly transient households, moving every six months (Genz, 2001; Kusenbach, 2009; Wallis, 1991). In fact, the survey found that a significant proportion of residents viewed the parks as long-term housing. Another long-held stereotype found not to be true by this survey was that park residents were not productive members of the local workforce; in fact, the vast majority of households surveyed had at least one adult employed on a full-time basis. Nearly 90% of respondents owned their mobile home—making the goal of homeownership achievable for low and moderate income households. The surveys found that most residents were satisfied with this housing type. When asked generally about quality of life, three-quarters of respondents said they were satisfied or very satisfied. This finding is similar to other studies of mobile home residents (Aman & Yarnal, 2009; Beamish et al., 2001; Genz, 2001).

While residents seemed generally quite satisfied with their housing, some issues with housing quality are commonly encountered by residents. These included the need to replace roofing, flooring, windows, and insulation. Planning to address these through retrofits or higher quality new construction could increase satisfaction. This could be an opportunity for affordable housing advocates to organize efforts within individual parks to improve housing quality through models like Habitat for Humanity or by partnering with local energy committees to bring free or low-cost weatherization assistance into park communities (MacTavish, 2007).

Social atmosphere varied significantly among park communities. While more than half of respondents thought they got along well or very well with their neighbors, social atmosphere in the largest park included in the sample was rated much lower than its counterparts, suggesting that size could affect the social atmosphere of a park. MacTavish and Salamon (2001) recommend that planners and park owners

consider designing shared public spaces to foster repeated social interactions within parks to build a greater sense of community within parks.

Opinions regarding park management varied between park owners, and overall satisfaction with park management was much lower than satisfaction with the housing itself. Expensive infrastructure issues were cited broadly within the parks, including road and water infrastructure. MacTavish (2007) suggests exploring options such as Community Development Block Grant funding to finance these expensive park upgrades. Significant differences were found between parks, suggesting that improved management is possible and can address one of the main dissatisfactions with park life. Residents were mainly frustrated with a lack of communication and slow responses to issues—mainly reported residents living in parks owned by one of the non-profit owners. This organization has been struggling to manage its large portfolio of mobile home properties, leaving many in Vermont’s affordable housing sector concerned about the prospects for the non-profit ownership model moving forward.

6.0 Study Limitations

The generalizability of the study may be limited by several factors. The parks in this study were not randomly selected from all parks in the state but were selected based on recommendations of staff from an affordable housing non-profit advocacy organization and municipal planning commissions. In the case of six parks the sample included all the parks located within two towns, and the other three were based on the recommendations from the non-profit housing advocate organization.

A more significant limitation of the study is that the parks tended to cluster around the state’s largest city. Whether or not parks in more remote areas of the state face different issues cannot be determined from these results. Also, the findings concerning the differences between for-profit and non-profit owned parks cannot be applied beyond the parks included in this study, as there was not a representative sample of residents by park ownership type. The survey also explored only briefly the factors affecting resident satisfaction with park ownership and management. These are all areas deserving of further research.

Given the very limited information about mobile home park residents in Vermont, as well as the United States, the findings of this survey do offer an important window into the experiences of park residents and can serve as a point of comparison for future studies in other regions.

7.0 Conclusion

This survey found that mobile home parks provide a form of affordable housing highly valued by low income households in rural communities in Vermont. The typical respondent was high school educated, employed full or part time, and reported low household income, and the vast majority of respondents were homeowners. Many of the popular myths that are held about residents of mobile home parks were found to be misconceptions, including that parks are comprised of mainly transient households. In fact, this survey found that 41% of respondents have been living in their current park for more than ten years. Residents were largely satisfied with their housing choice for reasons such as enjoying a quiet neighborhood and having the privacy of their own home while having the convenience of services and amenities offered by many parks. While ratings of

social atmosphere and satisfaction with park management varied across park communities, residents did indicate that there is interest in forming resident associations as a strategy for improving the park life experience. This is a potential area for future research and outreach.

With a number of anticipated park sales in the near future, there has been a renewed interest in exploring the feasibility of the cooperative park ownership model in Vermont as non-profits struggle to obtain financing for park purchases—especially those in need of significant infrastructure upgrades (Hamlin, 2011). Cooperative park ownership requires technical assistance and financing infrastructure to enable residents to successfully make the transition from private to cooperative ownership. This support infrastructure is lacking in Vermont unlike in the neighboring state of New Hampshire where there are over 80 cooperatively owned parks (Ward, French, & Giraud, 2006). Investigating the potential of cooperative park ownership in Vermont, giving residents increased control over their housing, is an important research question that deserves attention in the immediate future.

Mobile home parks present unique challenges and opportunities for planners and affordable housing advocates in rural communities. Manufactured homes in parks are connected economically, socially, and physically through shared infrastructure, offering, if not requiring, a community-oriented approach to housing. Improving the quality of housing in mobile home parks requires addressing both the individual dwelling and the community context in which it is located. Increasing our understandings of the characteristics and opportunities presented by this unique housing type can help planners maintain and improve this important stock of affordable housing for millions of rural Americans.

8.0 References

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