



Highlights of [GAO-06-163](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2003, Congress reauthorized HOPE VI, a program administered by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and designed to improve the nation's worst public housing. In doing so, Congress required GAO to report on the extent of severely distressed public housing for the elderly and non-elderly persons with disabilities. "Severely distressed" is described in the statute as developments that, among other things, are a significant contributing factor to the physical decline of, and disinvestment in, the surrounding neighborhood; occupied predominantly by very low-income families, the unemployed, and those dependent on public assistance; have high rates of vandalism and criminal activity; and/or lack critical services, resulting in severe social distress.

In response to this mandate, GAO examined (1) the extent to which public housing developments occupied primarily by elderly persons and non-elderly persons with disabilities are severely distressed and (2) the ways in which such housing can be improved.

HUD officials provided oral comments indicating general agreement with the report.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-163.
www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-205SP.

To view the full product, including the scope, methodology, and related survey, click on the links above. For more information, contact David G. Wood at (202) 512-8678 or woodd@gao.gov.

PUBLIC HOUSING

Distressed Conditions in Developments for the Elderly and Persons with Disabilities and Strategies Used for Improvement

What GAO Found

Available data on the physical and social conditions of public housing are insufficient to determine the extent to which developments occupied primarily by elderly persons and non-elderly persons with disabilities are severely distressed. Using HUD's data on public housing developments—buildings or groups of buildings—and their tenants, GAO identified 3,537 developments primarily occupied by elderly residents and persons with disabilities. Data from HUD and other sources indicated that 76 (2 percent) of these 3,537 developments were potentially severely distressed. To gather more information on the 76 developments that were potentially distressed, GAO surveyed public housing agency directors responsible for these developments. GAO received responses covering 66 of the 76 developments (the survey and aggregated results are available in [GAO-06-205SP](#)). These responses indicated the following:

- Eleven developments had signs of severe physical distress, such as deterioration of aging buildings and a lack of accessible features for persons with disabilities;
- Another twelve developments had signs of severe social distress, which included a lack of appropriate supportive services such as transportation or assistance with meals; and
- An additional five developments had characteristics of both severe physical and social distress.

Nevertheless, many of the directors GAO surveyed reported that numerous factors adversely affected the quality of life of elderly persons and non-elderly persons with disabilities residing in their developments. The factors cited most frequently were (1) aging buildings and systems, including inadequate air conditioning; (2) lack of accessibility for persons with disabilities; (3) small size of apartments; (4) the mixing of elderly and non-elderly residents; (5) inadequate supportive services; and (6) crime.

To better address the special needs of the elderly and non-elderly persons with disabilities, public housing agency officials GAO surveyed or contacted have used various strategies to improve both physical and social conditions at their developments. Strategies to reduce physical distress include capital improvements such as renovating buildings, systems, and units or, in extreme cases, relocating residents and demolishing or selling a development. Methods to reduce the level of social distress include a range of actions, such as designating developments as "elderly only," converting developments into assisted living facilities, and working with other governmental agencies and nonprofit organizations to provide supportive services to residents.