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HOPE VI program to renovate housing projects faces cuts

By Brian Haas, The (Nashville) Tennessean

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NASHVILLE – Annie Mai Finney looks out on the porch of her John Henry Hale Homes house in Nashville at streets on which, just a few years earlier, she didn't feel safe at night.



By John Partipilo, The Tennessean
Jasmine Johnson and her great-grandmother Annie Mai Finney say they feel safe after redevelopment.

"There used to be drug addicts. You couldn't sit on your porch," she says, cane in hand. But today? "It's better. It's nice. Children can play out here and you don't worry about being shot."

Finney, 75, is living in the results of a \$20million HOPE VI project, a federal program that tears down distressed housing projects and rebuilds them to improve quality of life, and which is facing severe cuts in the 2012 budgeting process.

Finney's perception that the streets are safer is backed up by newly released research by the [Urban Institute](#) Justice Policy Center, a Washington-based think tank that does non-partisan economic and social policy research.

The analysis, done in 2010 and released in August, found that in addition to improving intangibles such as taking ownership of one's community and a feeling of pride, HOPE VI reconstruction projects decrease crime in low-income

housing projects and surrounding areas.

When done right, HOPE VI works, said the study's author, Meagan Cahill.

"Revitalizing the sites themselves actually helped to improve public safety and to reduce crime in the surrounding areas as well," said Cahill, a research associate with Urban Institute. "HOPE VI has definitely seen a lot of success in the places where we looked."

In her blog on the Institute website, Cahill says the study included two developments in Southeast Washington — Capitol Gateway (formerly East Capital Dwellings/Capital View Plaza) and Arthur Capper/Carrollburg. Both were built in the 1950s, she writes, and had long suffered from violence and concentrated poverty. Both were also home to redevelopment beginning in the early 2000s. The study shows that crime fell during the reconstruction and stayed lower afterward, by as much as 60%, she writes.

Such major renovation projects are now at risk as Congress works to slash the federal deficit. The House Transportation and Housing Appropriations subcommittee didn't include Hope VI funding in its 2012 recommendations.

The House bill will "improve the oversight and transparency of taxpayer dollars while setting priorities and reducing spending," Tom Latham, R-Iowa, the House subcommittee's chairman, said in a statement.

Massachusetts Rep. John Olver, the ranking Democratic member, disagreed. "Unfortunately this bill ... includes completely inadequate funding levels" he said.

Projects such as Hale in Nashville would be impossible without it, says Phil Ryan, executive director of Nashville's Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency.

Nashville Metro Police Sgt. [James Warren](#) remembers the old Hale days well. Now a member of a Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency task force that focuses on Nashville's low-income housing projects, he said that criminals would naturally congregate at Hale.

"You had all these places to hide," Warren said. "That's what we're trying to get away from."

Warren, who sometimes still walks the beat at Nashville's public housing properties, said Hale has made a complete turnaround.

"This is a neighborhood anybody would like to live in; it's well maintained," he said. "I definitely feel that this neighborhood is very safe, and I'm sure the residents and businesses around the area would say it's a big impact."

The HOPE VI program was created in 1992 as a way to revitalize distressed public housing projects through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Since then, the federal government has pumped nearly \$7 billion to plan, refurbish, demolish and rebuild housing projects in need across the nation, according to HUD records.

But funding has been on the decline in recent years. In 2003, HUD had \$450 million available for such projects nationwide. In 2010, that amount had dwindled to about \$150 million.

The Urban Institute study looked at a handful of properties in Wisconsin as well as in Washington, to determine whether the program simply shifted crime to surrounding areas. Cahill said that instead, the research showed that it lowered crime in the entire area surrounding the project.

It's a phenomenon that many housing project managers have known anecdotally, said [Paul Williams](#), spokesman for the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, which manages the HOPE VI communities Highland Gardens and Highland Homes. "We're able to essentially create a new center of stability for our community, not just the development, but the surrounding community as well," he said. "The investments are paying off in so many different ways."

Cassandra Morris sees that payoff at her home in Washington at Capitol Gateway. The old buildings were drab, brick blocks that resembled outdated army barracks, she said.

"Before, it was a mess. There was a lot of criminals," she said. "It just seems like the whole community has turned around."

Contributing: Duane Marsteller, The Tennessean