

## THE MOBILE HOME: A NEGLECTED PHENOMENON IN GEOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

A. Y. Abu-Ayyash\*

The neglect of certain types of housing units in geographic research implies a loss of vital information concerning different aspects such as the problems of location, housing, and behavioral patterns. The characteristics of the residential units may be approximations of the characteristics of their occupants. An individual's characteristics are the determinants which exert their influence on his behavior by initiating or constraining his action. It may be argued that the occupants of different types of housing units tend to exhibit different behavioral patterns.

The aim of this paper is to bring to the attention of geographers a neglected phenomenon in geographic investigation; the mobile home housing unit.

### *Definition*

The term "mobile home" has been used recently as replacement of an old term "trailer." It has been felt that the term "mobile home" is more suitable than "trailer," in order to draw a distinction between a mobile home as a housing unit and a camping or travel trailer. Although there is no widely accepted definition of the term, the mobile home producing industry defines it as follows: "a mobile home is a portable unit designed and built to be towed on its own chassis, frame and wheels, connected to utilities and without a permanent foundation, used for year 'round living."<sup>1</sup> In another definition, the mobile home is described "as a form of factory-built housing unit which evolved from the trailer."<sup>2</sup>

However, although the term mobile home is commonly used, it may seem more appropriate to drop the word mobile since only a small number of the occupants actually move these homes from place to place.

### *The Growth of Mobile Homes*

A growing number of low-income

\*Mr. Abu-Ayyash is a graduate student in Geography at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

families find mobile homes an appropriate alternative for their housing problems. Although mobile homes are being faced with several problems such as location, landscape, zoning regulations, and services, they are considered by many as an acceptable solution to the critical conditions and shortage of the housing supply. Renewal programs may find in mobile homes a temporary or permanent solution to slum housing conditions. Mobile homes have recently drawn the attention of many officials, and ambitious mobile housing programs are being carried out in several states ranging from Florida to Illinois.

Since the end of World War II and the housing shortage of the post-war period, mobile homes continued to increase in number and importance. In 1940 the number of mobile homes in the United States was approximately 170,000 units or about 0.4 percent of the total housing units in the country. By 1960, the number climbed to about 770,000 units or 1.4 percent of the national housing units.<sup>3</sup> In 1961, mobile homes accounted for 6.2 percent of all additions to housing supply, while the percentage grew to 14.8 percent of all new housing.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, in 1969 the mobile homes' share of the total housing market increased dramatically to 21.6 percent of all new dwelling units or 33.7 percent of all new one-family dwellings.<sup>5</sup>

#### *The Spatial Distribution of Mobile Homes*

The spatial distribution of mobile homes in the United States has undergone continuous variation. It has been indicated that mobile homes are more important in the West than in the South, and more important in the South than in the North.<sup>6</sup>

However, recent data show a changing pattern in the distribution of mobile

homes. The most recent reports show that the North has been undergoing a steady decline in the number of mobile homes, while the South and the South-central states continue to show an increase in the importance of this kind of housing unit. For example, Georgia moved from twenty-second in importance in 1960 to third in 1969. North Carolina moved from tenth to fourth and Alabama from thirty-second to tenth.<sup>7</sup>

#### *A Rural-Urban Phenomenon*

The question which may be raised is whether mobile homes are a rural or an urban phenomenon. The historical trend shows that mobile homes started as an urban phenomenon rather than as a rural one. However, the recent shift in the location of mobile homes has inclined toward rural areas. In 1950, fifty-five percent of all mobile homes were located in urban areas. By 1960, the amount dropped to 43 percent, with only 24 percent of mobile homes in the center of cities.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, it has been pointed out that the number of mobile homes in the center of a city varies inversely with the city's size (Table I). Also, the percentage of mobile homes varies inversely with population density (Table II).

However, this spatial shift from urban to rural areas is a reflection of an urban phenomenon since it is related to the new trend of migration from the densely populated areas of the cities to the less densely populated suburban fringes. In addition, the shift of mobile homes to rural areas may be due to municipal restrictions and increasing taxes, community ordinances, and urban zoning. The concentration of mobile homes is expected to be on accessible transportation routes near the urban-rural fringes. A recent study by the author has shown that more than 90 percent of mobile homes are located

**TABLE I:**  
**Distribution of Mobile Homes in Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas By City Size**

City Rank	Number of Cities in Each Rank	Percentage of Mobile Homes in the City's Center	Percentage of Mobile Homes in Urban Balance of SMSA	Percentage of Mobile Homes in Rural Balance of SMSA
1,000,000 Plus	24	14.3	54.2	28.9
500,000-1,000,000	27	22.2	46.9	30.8
250,000-500,000	48	23.3	36.4	44.1
100,000-250,000	90	27.3	26.6	45.2

Source: French and Hadden, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

**TABLE II:**  
**Mobile Homes and Population Density**

Population Density Per Square Mile	Number of Mobile Homes	Percentage of Mobile Homes
0.0- 250.0	67	2.1
250.1- 500.0	57	1.5
500.1-1,000.0	36	1.2
1,000 Plus	29	0.6

Source: French and Hadden, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

in areas alongside the most accessible route.<sup>9</sup>

#### Occupant Characteristics

The typical household living in a mobile home is composed of a married couple often without children. It has been pointed out that about 85 percent of mobile home occupants are married couples.<sup>10</sup> Currently, mobile homes attract persons between the twenty-to-thirty and above sixty-five age groups.<sup>11</sup> Almost three-fourths of these households have children under six years of age.<sup>12</sup> Most of the occupants were graduated from high school and a small percentage have completed one or more years of college. The household head of a mobile home is more likely to have completed three years of high school. The median school years of the household heads is 11.6 years.<sup>13</sup>

It has been found that the median annual income for the mobile home household head is lower than that of the household head in a conventional home. The median income of mobile home household heads is \$7,077, while for persons in conventional homes it is \$9,903.<sup>14</sup>

#### Conclusion

The understanding of the social and economic problems associated with the emergence of mobile homes as a growing housing unit is a basic step toward solving these problems. The efficient spatial organization of mobile homes is an early solution to such problems. The work of geographers, their suggestions and their recommendations can contribute to a great extent to the solution of different problems related to the expansion of the mobile home as a housing unit.

- (1) The Urban Land Institute, Technical Bulletin No. 66, *Mobile Home Parks* (Washington, 1971), p. 7.
- (2) Edward, Carl M., "Choosing a Mobile Home," *Consumer Bulletin*, Vol. 51 (1968), p. 34.
- (3) French, Robert and Jeffrey Hadden, "An Analysis of the Distribution and Characteristics of Mobile Homes in America," *Land Economics*, Vol. 41 (1965), p. 131.
- (4) Bair, Frederick H., Jr., "Mobile Homes: A New Challenge," *Law and Contemporary Problems*, Vol. 32 (1967), p. 290.
- (5) The Urban Land Institute, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
- (6) French and Hadden, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-139.
- (7) The Urban Land Institute, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
- (8) French and Hadden, *op. cit.*, p. 133.
- (9) Abu-Ayyash, A. Y., *The Pattern of Retailing in the Town of Maine*, (Unpublished M.A. Thesis), State University of New York at Binghamton, 1971.
- (10) Office of Planning Services, *Facts on Mobile Homes, Occupant Characteristics*, Albany, New York, No. 2, 1971, p. 3.
- (11) Bair, *op. cit.*, p. 288.
- (12) Berney, R. E. and Larson, A. J., "Micro-Analysis of Mobile Home Characteristics With Implication for Tax Policy," *Land Economics*, Vol. 42 (1966), p. 455.
- (13) Office of Planning Services, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
- (14) Abu-Ayyash, *op. cit.*, p. 27.