



Housing Vouchers and Neighborhood Crime

Longitudinal Evidence from Dallas

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Do households with housing choice vouchers bring crime with them, or are they constrained in their choices and ultimately settle in high-crimes areas? Researchers from Texas A&M University's Center for Housing and Urban Development examined the Housing Choice Voucher program (Section 8), a tenant-based housing assistance program designed to "provide access for low-income households to a wider range of housing options, de-concentrating poverty and reducing the exposure of these households to negative conditions." Findings suggest that households participating in tenant-based assistance have very limited options because apartment complexes that accept vouchers are already located in high-crime areas.

The researchers wanted to evaluate whether changes in the number of Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) households in Dallas, Texas are related to changes in crime (not

HCV households were moving into complexes that were already experiencing higher crime

just whether HCV households are present in high-crime neighborhoods). The research began with two alternative hypotheses:

1) HCV households are limited by the availability of housing units that accept vouchers and are settling in neighborhoods with high crime; or

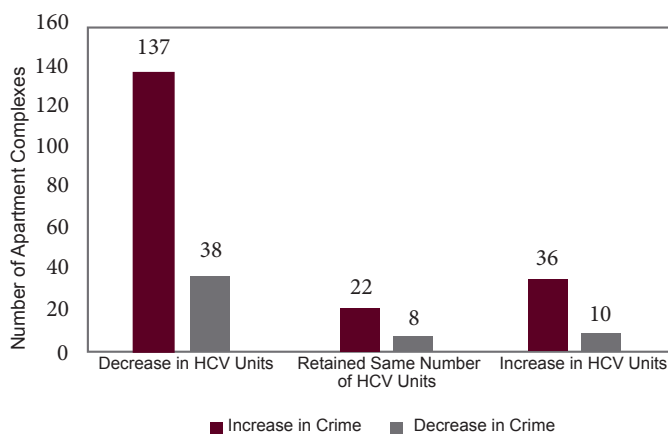
2) HCV households are the perpetrators of crime and are using vouchers to penetrate otherwise low-crime neighborhoods.

FINDINGS

The researchers observed that crime increased 37% during the study period in neighborhoods in which HCV households were located. While alarming, the increase did not appear to be associated with growing numbers of HCV households; the number of these households was actually declining. It is likely that HCV households were moving into complexes that were already experiencing higher crime levels.

The study found that the density of HCV households (as opposed to absolute number) was an important predic-

Correlations between Apartment Complexes' Changes in HCV Units and Changes in Crime, 2003-2006



The study used a dataset from Dallas to analyze crime counts within a 1/4 mile radius of apartment complexes having 10 or more HCV households. The study used monthly data from 2003 to 2006 on area crime counts from the Dallas Police Department as well as data from the Dallas Housing Authority, which included 251 apartment complexes located in 109 different census tracts.

To use an HCV under Section 8 Housing Program, a household must find an apartment that meets three requirements:

- 1) has a rent that does not exceed the program's maximum allowable
- 2) meets the program's standard for physical condition
- 3) has an owner (landlord) who is willing to participate in the program

Vouchers are typically not as effective at promoting mobility among minorities as among whites - minority voucher holders are overrepresented in neighborhoods where vouchers are clustered.

tor of high crime rates; many of the 1/4 mile radius areas overlapped to produce concentrated areas of higher crime. Neighborhood characteristics were also indicators - for instance, high proportions of female-headed households with children were negatively associated with high crime rates (the majority of HCV households fit this demographic). However, it is likely that other forces such as deteriorating economic conditions, poor law enforcement, or declining neighborhood quality were even more important contributors to changing crime levels than the variables measured in this study.

STRATEGIES FOR PRACTITIONERS

A short supply of affordable rental properties and a lack of landlords willing to accept vouchers are re-concentrating HCV households in areas that offer little improvement. Also, land use practices may limit the variety of options by increasing construction costs, and zoning regulations may fail to provide adequate space or locations for rental housing. Likewise, uneven regional development patterns tend to concentrate affordable rental in central cities. The researchers suggest four overarching strategies to reach more equitable conditions for HCV households:

1. The magnitude and distribution of rental opportunities need improvement and can be addressed through coordinated efforts by supply-side and demand-side housing programs.
2. Mobility assistance and counseling, such as tenant education about options and negotiating with landlords, can help HCV recipients achieve better outcomes.
- 3) Aggressive landlord outreach, service, and incentives, as well as a greater landlord selection, are needed. Housing agencies can recruit new landlords, listen and respond to landlord concerns, work to streamline red tape, and provide financial incentives when appropriate.
- 4) Regional collaboration and/or administration of the Voucher Program has been shown to increase recipients' options. New construction already mainly occurs in suburbs, which also contain better schools and healthcare. The de-concentration of poverty implies mixing of incomes, for which planning efforts should strive.

With assertive advocacy and vigilant monitoring of outcomes, it is possible to improve the housing options of voucher recipients, helping to lift these households from deteriorating economic and social conditions including high crime levels.

In Dallas, the Walker v. HUD case gave fair housing groups grounds and resources for aggressively seeking opportunities for HCV recipients in the suburbs through construction of replacement housing for demolished public housing units and efforts – including litigation – aimed at increasing the supply of affordable rental properties in communities that resist it.

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