

Housing Programs, Assisted Populations, and Crime: Guest Editors' Introduction

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Introduction

This symposium features rigorous research that objectively examines the relationship between assisted housing populations and crime. We use this symposium to identify and acknowledge the negative findings to more precisely identify their root causes and recommend appropriate policy responses. We also highlight the many positive findings regarding the effect of housing programs on assisted populations and their connection to crime problems. We particularly focus on how housing and criminal justice agencies can work together for a more unified approach to solving the problems assisted populations and their communities face. We hope the research in this symposium prompts more future research efforts to consider integrating knowledge from both criminal justice and housing research toward refining housing programs and policies to improve the quality of life with housing as a platform.

The articles presented in this symposium are a dichotomy of individual and neighborhood issues. The first three articles highlight crime issues related to individuals and families for whom program policies make it more difficult to obtain assisted housing. Two main themes are present in these articles. First, the articles show that assisted populations face a series of barriers—perceived or actual—regarding their involvement with crime that prevent them from taking full advantage of housing assistance. Second, the articles demonstrate that little research exists that tests the effect of housing as a platform to help those who have in one way or another been exposed to crime or are involved with the criminal justice system.

The latter three articles highlight the intersection of people and place, in which place of origin may transmit the message that the family moving in is an unwanted neighbor. Two main themes

also emerge from these articles. First, publicly assisted families carry a stigma of being undesirable people who will likely cause problems, which create barriers to successful relocation. Second, even when families have the opportunity to relocate, they can have difficulty finding better neighborhoods, particularly when trying to find safer places to live.

Several criminological concepts are manifest across all these articles that may be unfamiliar to *Cityscape* readers. Criminology provides more than 30 years of research that can contribute to improving the understanding of crime and neighborhoods regarding the problems assisted households encounter. We highlight key research from criminology and criminal justice associated with each article that *Cityscape* readers may want to review in thinking about future studies or crafting policies related to housing programs.

People—Program Barriers From Previous Actions

A common perception is that, when assisted families relocate to new neighborhoods, they may bring crime with them (Bovard, 2011; Rosin, 2008). Assisted tenants or their social networks may be perceived as predators who will “invade” a neighborhood, taking advantage of new opportunities to commit crimes. Much media attention has focused on the possible criminality of assisted tenants. Rarely, though, have the media or researchers focused on the degree to which assisted tenants are crime victims. In their article, Christopher Hayes, Graham McDonald, Susan Popkin, Leah Hendey, and Allison Stolte examine the question of how often assisted housing recipients are arrested for crimes and how often they are crime victims. The authors find that voucher households have higher arrest and victimization rates than the general population. This finding raises questions about the extent to which rising crime rates are because relocatee household members are being victimized as opposed to someone in the household committing crimes. Our own ongoing research on Charlotte, North Carolina—in which we are matching the addresses of voucher households with those from arrest and incident data to examine what members of voucher households are being arrested for and what incidents are occurring at their homes—is consistent with these results.¹ Hayes et al. find that older voucher holders are more likely to be victims, and younger voucher household members are more likely to be arrested. Descriptive findings from our preliminary results reveal that, of the voucher households in which an arrest occurred, most arrests are for a violation of a state statute,² some form of assault, or drugs. These findings agree with findings from previous criminological studies on social disorganization (Shaw and McKay, 1942), social cohesion (Albert, 1953), routine activities (Cohen and Felson, 1979), collective efficacy (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls, 1997), and social networks (Browning, Feinburg, and Dietz, 2004) that would inform housing programs about what changing demographics and resident interactions help to thwart crime.

¹ Our work was not yet complete at the time of this writing, but results will be available on request.

² Violations of a state statute in North Carolina include restraining order, bench warrant, parole, or probation violations or any other limiting requirement as levied by the court system.

Another crime-related issue with those seeking housing assistance is that many households often include someone who has been involved in the criminal justice system and are seeking housing to help rebuild their lives. Although subject to HUD regulations and guidance, local public housing authorities (PHAs) have discretion to set standards and protocols for denying or accepting applicants. It is unclear, however, how much variation exists among PHAs. Marah A. Curtis, Sarah Garlington, and Lisa S. Schottenfeld provide valuable insight into this variation by systematically examining local PHAs' exclusionary policies for people with criminal or substance abuse histories. The authors find that HUD guidelines lead many PHAs to set a wide range of standards that lead to more stringent denial or expulsion criteria. The outcome of this research is beneficial to inform HUD, because no systematic analysis has previously examined the variation in exclusionary policies. Data on policy variation provide an opportunity for a broader evaluation of the effect of housing as a platform for successfully integrating ex-offenders. Such research could lead to more consistent optimal policies for helping ex-offenders in any locality obtain housing. Life-course and desistance research (Laub and Sampson, 2003; Piquero et al., 2001; Seinnick and Osgood, 2008) from criminology might prove useful in helping PHAs craft more refined policies toward determining which ex-offenders should be considered for assistance.

Finding employment, obtaining educational training, and participating in rehabilitation programs are critical to reducing recidivism, but the role of housing has been evaluated to a much lesser degree. Jocelyn Fontaine helps fill that gap by examining the effect of a reentry housing program in Ohio on reducing reoffending. Under quasi-experimental conditions, her research provides evidence that supportive housing can significantly reduce reoffending by certain types of ex-offenders after they are released from incarceration. Ample research on supportive housing for people with other social problems, such as mental health disabilities, substance abuse, or other disruptive behavior; for people with physical disabilities; and for foster children aging out of the system shows that stable housing can help improve their lives (Culhane, Metraux, and Hadely, 2002; Fontaine and Beiss, 2012; Leonard et al., 2005; Pearson, Montgomery, and Locke, 2009). The Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative, or SAVORI—a large and comprehensive reentry program evaluation—most recently provided a wealth of findings about what works in helping ex-offenders reintegrate into society that would be informative in integrating housing policies with criminal justice programs (Lattimore et al., 2012). Fontaine's research also demonstrates the potential benefit of collaboration between housing and criminal justice agencies.

Place—Neighborhood Reputation and Assisted Populations

The association of crime with assisted housing populations stems from a fear people have about people who reside in places known to have pervasive social problems (Andersson and Musterd, 2005; Blokland, 2008; Dean and Hastings, 2000; Fraser, 1996; Freeman and Botein, 2002; Kasinitz and Rosenberg, 1996; Keene and Padilla, 2010; Permentier, van Ham, and Bolt, 2008; Robertson, Smyth, and McIntosh, 2008). As residents relocate from distressed neighborhoods, long-time residents of the receiving neighborhoods may manifest anticipated fears that their neighborhood will decline and that they will soon become victims of crime (Garofolo, 1981). This fear has real consequences for relocatees' ability to obtain housing, because assisted populations may feel stigmatized by potential landlords and neighbors, making it difficult to find places to rent (Locke et al., 2006).

A perception exists that people receiving housing assistance are undesirable—that is, they make potentially bad neighbors who have dreadful habits, lack in self-control, are disrespectful, and do not share common social norms (Freeman and Botein, 2002; Williamson, 1974). Much of this perception stems from errant media analyses that reinforce negative stereotypes about people from troubled neighborhoods in general that extend to assisted populations living in those same places. The place stigma that transfers to assisted families makes using housing assistance as a platform for improving opportunities more difficult. In her article, Ann Owens directly examines the perceptions of safety in neighborhoods after changes occur from either the demolition of distressed public housing complexes or the relocation of voucher holders. She finds no increased perception of disorder with the presence of voucher holders individually but that if voucher holders concentrate, the perception of disorder is heightened. This finding dovetails with other recent research that has found that, when voucher holders relocate to neighborhoods with minimal to moderate concentrations of other assisted households, crime does not increase (Mast and Wilson, 2013; Popkin et al., 2012). Owens addresses another important finding—that the demolition of public housing complexes reduces perceptions of disorder and that the physical improvements from the reconstruction of HOPE VI sites lead to perceptions of increased safety. Owens' work highlights the importance of "place" to assisted populations and suggests policies to help shed stigmas associated with the receipt of housing assistance. Recent research on disorder and fear of crime could help reveal the mechanisms about "place" that trigger concerns for personal safety (Gaine, Alper, and Chappell, 2010; Schultz and Tobanico, 2009).

David P. Varady, Xinhao Wang, Dugan Murphy, and Andrew Stahlke examine several perception issues about voucher holders bringing social problems to the neighborhoods in which they relocate. Overall, the authors find that "crime turned out to be less of a problem than expected." The perceptions of respondents, however, were that, when voucher holders concentrated, problems emerged. One of their important findings was that, while local PHAs may feel obligated to voucher holders, they may not feel as responsible to the community where these families reside. Voucher holders are part of their communities, and perceptions of them make a difference regarding their chances of success. PHAs, accordingly, might better serve assisted households and their neighbors by playing a more active role in helping assisted tenants better connect with other neighborhood residents and social networks in their new environments. Research by Churchill et al. (2001) showed that, when the PHAs work with police and community organizations, voucher holders have an easier time integrating into their neighborhoods, building relationships, and fostering residential stability.

In his article, Michael C. Lens examines where voucher holders relocate to determine if they move to safer neighborhoods than those of their previous residences. He finds that voucher holders do, in fact, move to safer neighborhoods, but they move to places where crime rates are on the rise. Lens further points out that segregation and demographics have little ability to explain crime exposure and that tight rental markets keep voucher holders from moving to the best neighborhood possible. Lens points out, however, the scarcity of studies that help us understand why voucher holders move where they do. Wilson and Mast (2013) examined several research studies and found that crime was one of the most important factors motivating voucher holders to relocate to other neighborhoods. Further research is needed, however, to explore the complex relocation decisions of households receiving housing assistance. Although much research has examined residential satisfaction and geographic mobility in the general population, little research has focused

on decisions of assisted housing populations. These findings share common ground with the broken windows (Wilson and Kelling, 1982) and social networks (Browning, Feinburg, and Dietz, 2004) theories from criminology.

Moving Forward

To move forward in using housing assistance as a platform for improving family opportunities and communities as a whole, we need to refine our understanding of the interaction among housing assistance programs, the assisted families, and their neighborhoods. The articles in this symposium have clear and direct implications for housing policies, particularly in conjunction with criminal justice programs and policing strategies. Criminal justice services and housing programs have similar objectives: to help specific populations successfully integrate into their neighborhoods, reduce conflict, and improve the quality of their lives. Assisted families face many challenges beyond housing status, such as family disruption, social conflicts, substance abuse, and criminality, in which coordinating with the criminal justice system seems a reasonable way forward. These problems can form a recursive loop, perpetuating cycles of social problems for assisted tenants and their children. We hope this research provides policy guidance for improving the life chances of assisted populations, particularly the children of these populations.

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