

Letter to the Editor—Atlantic Monthly

Hannah Rosin's "American Murder Mystery" fingers the wrong suspect for the alarming jump in murder rates in Memphis's suburbs. She purports to use social science research, including our own, to lay the blame on the HOPE VI public housing program.

We and other researchers worked at length with Ms. Rosin to make it clear what distinguishes various housing programs, the people they serve, and their benefits and shortfalls. We emphasized that Housing Choice (Section 8) vouchers, the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) program, the Gautreaux program, and HOPE VI differ greatly from each other but all have helped improve the lives of poor families in many ways.

Rosin twists these findings into an incriminating link between such antipoverty efforts and increased crime, claiming that the demolition of distressed public housing pushed poor people and their alleged anti-social behavior into the suburbs with their vouchers.

She quotes Popkin as saying that MTO and HOPE VI did not boost families' self-sufficiency and HOPE VI "has left a lot of people behind." Yes, these housing programs have not increased employment, but Rosin's summary understates their positive results and distorts the facts. Many families who got housing vouchers through these programs are much better off now than they were in public housing. In their new neighborhoods, they no longer have to fear for their children's safety, and the mental health benefits for women and girls are on par with the results for antidepressant therapies.

There is no evidence that helping families move with vouchers causes crime. What we do know from MTO is that girls who move are less likely to be arrested; boys are more likely to be arrested for property crimes, but not for violent crime. We also know that because of the realities of the rental market, families who get vouchers often end up renting in transitional neighborhoods that may already be experiencing an increase in crime and poverty.

The people Popkin says are left behind are the most vulnerable families. For these families, better housing is not enough because they are struggling with serious health problems, substance abuse, and poor credit histories. Yes, some among them have criminal records, but that should disqualify them for the housing vouchers Rosin spotlights. Indeed, these families are stuck in distressed public housing in inner cities precisely because they can't get vouchers or places in new mixed-income developments.

Rosin questions the Gautreaux results, which showed increased employment, better schools, and improved safety as participating families moved to better-off communities in the 1980s. She also disregards DeLuca and colleagues' recent findings that, 15 to 20 years later, over two-thirds of the

families are still in better neighborhoods and many mothers continue to enjoy employment gains and fewer require welfare.

Housing policy alone does not solve all the problems facing urban families. However, cherry-picking research to write off the housing programs that do make a difference only misleads *Atlantic* readers who want to understand the challenges and accomplishments of policies designed to help vulnerable families.

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