

Atlantic LTE final

Re: "American Murder Mystery (The Atlantic, July/August), the geographical distribution of crime in Memphis may have changed in the last 10 years, but contrary to Hanna Rosin's article, there is no evidence that families receiving Section 8 housing vouchers *caused* such a change. She presents not a single fact that a member of a voucher-assisted family was even arrested for a crime. She states that a few boys who had moved out of public housing "were suspected" of breaking windows. That's hardly a "murder mystery."

Rosin's thesis is not new. Since the early '90s, critics have tied Section 8-assisted families to increases in crime in other cities. Careful investigations have refuted the claim. Indeed, program rules encourage the end of voucher assistance if a family member has engaged in criminal activity. Administrators in Memphis and other cities vigorously pursue reports of criminal activity and enforce these rules.

Rosin claims that "tens of thousands of poor people were dispersed" by the demolition of public housing. But HUD data show that Memphis demolished about 5,000 public housing units since 1995, and a quarter or more of those units were vacant. Only about 3,000 more Memphis families receive Section 8 benefits than before the demolition – a small change in a city of 690,000 people.

In some metropolitan areas, poverty rates are rising outside of the urban core. This may be due to (1) poor people moving, pushed out by rising rents and condominium conversions as cities have become more desirable places to live and possibly by the demolition of public housing, (2) economic changes in outlying neighborhoods, or (3) both. But there is no evidence that Section 8 vouchers are driving this trend. Rosin links the reduction in crime in New York City to poor families using vouchers to move to New Jersey. In fact, fewer than 240 families used vouchers to move from the city to New Jersey!

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