

## **Strengthening Housing Opportunity through the Housing Choice Voucher Program**

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*America's largest rental housing assistance program for low-income people – the means-tested Housing Choice Voucher program that currently serves nearly two million households<sup>1</sup> – was created in 1974 primarily to reduce rent burden by subsidizing units of acceptable quality. The program consistently reaches very low-income households – those below 30% of area median income – unlike other “affordable” housing programs.*

*But thanks to influential research and policy debate on the severity of concentrated minority poverty in central cities (e.g., Massey and Denton 1994; Wilson 1987), the past two decades have expanded interest in another policy objective: that of improving the locational outcomes of assisted households, sometimes through counseling, relocation assistance, or other elements of “assisted housing mobility.”*

*Why this “locational turn”? Beyond hopes for enhancing access to jobs and educational opportunity, there is growing evidence that assisted relocation can dramatically reduce exposure to neighborhood crime and the physical and mental risks associated with daily exposure to gun violence and the threat of same, as well as gang recruitment of boys and sexual harassment of girls (Orr et al. 2003; Popkin et al. 2007).*

*Since 1992, this policy hope – which has also been linked to the controversial transformation of public housing since the early 1990s (Popkin et al. 2004; Popkin and Cunningham 2005; Vale 2003) – has been pursued through the voucher program in four ways: a broad budgetary shift away from supply-side project subsidies to vouchers; reforms to the voucher program that make it a more flexible tool for deconcentrating poverty and/or promoting*

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<sup>1</sup> See U.S. HUD (2007). The number assisted in a given month varies according to administrative action and utilization rates, distinct from the number of households “authorized” through annual Congressional appropriations.

racial desegregation, for example through higher rent ceilings and “portability” across local housing agency jurisdictions (Priemus, Kemp, and Varady 2005; Sard 2001); judicial consent decrees in which the federal government agreed, as part of racial desegregation efforts, to promote a wider array of neighborhood opportunities in particular jurisdictions (Briggs 2003; Polikoff 2006; Popkin et al. 2003); and Moving to Opportunity (MTO), a voucher-based experiment launched by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in five metro areas in 1994 to examine the effects of voluntary relocation from public or assisted housing in high poverty neighborhoods to privately-owned apartments in low poverty neighborhoods.

Though HUD has been criticized for undermining the focus on locational outcomes in recent years (e.g., Priemus, Kemp, and Varady 2005), that focus nonetheless represents a major shift – a “locational turn” – in the nation’s low-income housing policies since the 1980s. And though it is usually invisible in domestic policy debates, housing mobility strategies found their way to the headlines in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, which forced an unprecedented relocation of hundreds of thousands of families from New Orleans, many of them black and poor.<sup>2</sup>

But how much does – or can – demand-side housing assistance actually help? Research has generated mixed evidence that the housing voucher program significantly improves neighborhood quality for users over time. There are glass-is-half-full and half-empty assessments, depending on the reference point: Vouchers do much better, on average, than public housing at offering assisted households a unit outside of high poverty neighborhoods, for example, but a relatively small share of voucher users, particularly if they are racial minorities, live in low poverty or racially integrated areas.<sup>3</sup> According to a 2003 HUD report that examined the nation’s 50 largest housing markets, the spatial clustering of vouchers is far greater than the dispersion of housing units at affordable rents alone would predict: 25 percent of black recipients and 28 percent of Hispanic recipients live in high-poverty neighborhoods, compared to only 8 percent of white recipients, and yet the voucher program utilizes only about 6 percent of all units

<sup>2</sup> See Leslie Kaufman, “An Uprooted Underclass, Under the Microscope,” *New York Times* (September 25, 2005); “A Voucher for Your Thoughts: Katrina and Public Housing,” *The Economist* (September 24, 2005); Xavier de Souza Briggs and Margery Austin Turner, “Fairness in new New Orleans,” *The Boston Globe* (October 5, 2005); and Briggs (2006). The Katrina relocation also created a “natural experiment,” with moves from segregated, high poverty, and often high-crime areas in pre-storm New Orleans to a range of different neighborhood contexts in a variety of metro areas.

<sup>3</sup> There is a large literature. See, in particular, Hartung and Henig (1997), Khadduri (2006), Newman and Schnare (1997), McClure (2006), and Turner and Williams (1998).

*with rents below the HUD-designated Fair Market Rents (Devine et al. 2003). This study could not determine the units actually available to interested voucher users, of course: If landlords are unwilling to rent to them, for example, rent levels do not matter much.*

*Voucher holders cluster in moderate to high poverty neighborhoods of housing markets (Feins and Patterson 2005; Newman and Schnare 1997), sometimes in distinct corridors or “hot spots” where affordable rental housing tends to be more abundant and minority concentration high (Hartung and Henig 1997; McClure 2001; Wang and Varady 2005). At least some of these areas are poor or transitional neighborhoods or racial ghettos that are relatively vulnerable to decline (Galster et al. 1999; Varady and Walker 2007).*

*This past summer, Hanna Rosin’s controversial article, “American Murder Mystery,” in The Atlantic magazine thrust the issue of poor voucher holders “tipping” desirable neighborhoods – and enabling crime to “migrate” out of inner-city ghettos to safer areas – back in the spotlight. Though the article’s storyline hinges on a correlation between crime rates and voucher concentration in the city of Memphis, and though we have much better evidence that areas in distress attract voucher holders – because landlords are more eager to rent to them – than that voucher holders bring that distress, the article did raise the important issue of responsibly managing the voucher program and attending to the health of receiving neighborhoods.<sup>4</sup> This will only become more important as the foreclosure crisis touches more and more of America’s communities.*

*But to return to the performance of the voucher program on locational outcomes, vis-à-vis the reformer’s benchmarks and national policy statements about neighborhood quality from the Housing Act of 1949 to the Millennial Housing Commission report a half century later<sup>5</sup>, the nation’s largest housing assistance program for low-income people falls short.*

*Building on earlier testimony before the Commission, in particular that of Professor James Rosenbaum in Chicago, I will focus on the lessons of Gautreaux and MTO for creating meaningful housing choice and expanding opportunity through the voucher program.*

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<sup>4</sup> See Margery Austin Turner, Susan J. Popkin, and Mary K. Cunningham, *Section 8 Mobility and Neighborhood Health* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2000), based on a national symposium.

<sup>5</sup> See Newman and Schnare (1997) and *Meeting Our Nation’s Housing Needs: Report of the Bipartisan Millennial Housing Commission Appointed by the Congress of the United States* (Washington, DC, 2002).

## **Competing Stories**

*The debate over choice and opportunity reflects stylized versions of the supply versus demand-side explanations of segregation in the nation's biggest low-income housing program.*

*In the strong – i.e., unqualified – form of the supply-side version, at least for tight housing markets, poor families who win the “lottery” of housing assistance are desperate to live in more racially and economically integrated areas, but market discrimination and scarcity thwart their dream of a better life in a better place. In this telling, even voucher holders who receive information, transportation, or other supports have little meaningful choice.*

*In the strong demand-side (client-side) narrative, families who receive vouchers only integrate when they are obliged to do so by government planners. Assisted housing mobility, in this telling, reflects the integrator's ideal and not the preferences of families served. Yes, all parents may want the safest possible places for their children, say the demand-side purists, but the inner-city poor, most of whom are racial minorities, also want the comfort of familiarity and social acceptance, as well as support from loved ones – even if that means enduring more dangerous and resource-poor areas. And they need public transportation and other supports, unlike higher-income households, that are harder to come by in many neighborhoods, especially in the suburbs, that are less poor and less segregated.*

## **The Mixed Evidence**

*To explain disappointing locational outcomes, previous research, as well as the informally reported insights of program staff at all levels, has highlighted a range of supply-side barriers, such as discrimination and a scarcity of affordable and otherwise appropriate rental housing units for voucher holders, as well as varied demand-side barriers, such as: debilitating physical and mental health problems; limited time, money, transportation, information, and other resources vital for effective housing search; a fear of losing vital social support and institutional resources; and ambivalence about moving itself (Pashup et al. 2006; Pendall 2000; Varady and Walker 2007).*

*Only programs that emphasize relocation to low-poverty neighborhoods appear to achieve such outcomes to any significant degree. Moreover, the evidence that positive effects of special supports – i.e., “assisted” mobility – on locational outcomes persist over the long run is thus far*

limited to administrative data on the Gautreaux program, which indicate sustained racial and economic integration over more than a decade (DeLuca and Rosenbaum 2003).

This is true even of MTO. First, according to the HUD-funded interim evaluation of MTO, 67 percent of the experimental group – which received relocation counseling and assistance, plus a voucher useable only in a neighborhood that was less than 10% poor in 1990 – had moved at least once more by the interim mark, and that group was only half as likely (18 vs. 38 percent) as compliers who stayed put to be living in a neighborhood less than 10 percent poor (Orr et al. 2003). The most common reasons for compliers' moving on were involuntary: problems with the lease (22 percent), which may include failed unit inspections, rent increases and decisions to sell the unit or for other reasons not renew the voucher holder's lease; and conflicts with the landlord (20 percent). But almost as many families (18 percent) reported wanting a bigger or better apartment.

MTO's program content helped families get to particular kinds of neighborhoods, using the limited metric of neighborhood poverty rate rather than school performance, job proximity, or other mediators of opportunity. And though the low-poverty areas were (at least) much safer than the high-poverty "projects" left behind, the program was not designed to help families stay in those new areas or move to similar neighborhoods over time.

As James Rosenbaum testified in Chicago, MTO is a stronger study than Gautreaux, because MTO is a fully randomized experiment. But MTO was also a weaker intervention in terms of getting families to much better neighborhoods and schools and, in the Gautreaux case, somehow enabling or encouraging many of them to stay in those places over the long haul.

## **Generating Better Answers: New Lessons from MTO**

Expanding housing opportunity through these programs hinges on generating much better insight into why particular outcomes obtain. Yet most analyses to date have relied on limited, point-in-time structured surveys, which don't shed much light on how families weigh trade-offs or what happens to them as their income, caregiving obligations, or other circumstances change – even as tough housing markets churn "around" them.

With several collaborators, I have tried to address these gaps by combining a large sample of in-depth interviews with MTO families with analyses of three of the program's housing

markets – greater Boston, Los Angeles, and New York – over time and in-depth fieldwork with a subset of 39 families. We learned and participated in their daily routines, came to understand the people that were important in their lives – as sources of support as well as burden, risk, and obligation – and we discussed at length their perceptions of neighborhood choices and of what it means to rely on vouchers in tight, high-cost markets.<sup>6</sup>

These are the kinds of markets where much economic growth and competitive advantage is concentrated in this country and where rents and wage levels have diverged so sharply, for those on the bottom, over the past several decades. So while these three MTO regions cannot represent all communities where the voucher program operates, and while many of the MTO families are among the most disadvantaged in the voucher population, their experiences reveal much about the program's strengths and weaknesses, as well as needed reforms.

Here's what we found. MTO families faced major barriers in tightening markets, yet a range of housing trajectories emerged among the families, reflecting variation in (a) willingness to trade location – in particular, safety and avoidance of “ghetto” behavior – to get larger, better housing units after initial relocation (some families were willing to make that trade and others not); (b) the distribution of neighborhood traits across metro areas (some markets, such as metro Boston's, offered many more opportunities to lease up outside of poor and segregated neighborhoods); and (c) circumstances that produced many involuntary moves. Access to social networks or services “left behind” in poorer neighborhoods seldom drove moving decisions. And – to our surprise – numerous moves were brokered by agents who provided shortcuts to willing landlords, for a fee, but may, in the process, have steered participants to particular neighborhoods.

So the supply-siders are right about constraints (though our fieldwork was not set up to detect discrimination as a contributor) while the demand-siders largely misconstrue the role of preferences, at least in tight housing markets.

Intense market pressure in greater Boston, Los Angeles, and New York over MTO's first decade, as well as the payment limits, limited landlord pools, and other shortcomings of the housing voucher program, were huge constraints for many families. The less stably housed the family, the more this was true – because each new move forced the family to navigate anew, with

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<sup>6</sup> See the five-year project's major policy briefs at [www.urban.org/projects/mto.cfm](http://www.urban.org/projects/mto.cfm).

*little room to maneuver in the choice of best-possible neighborhoods – and this appears to have contributed to many trajectories that led members of the experimental relocation group (the focus of hopes in the program) to poorer neighborhoods of residence over time.*

*This helps explain why locational outcomes converged over time for the treatment groups even though two-thirds of experimental compliers who had to move on or who chose to do so reported looking for a new apartment in the same neighborhood. In lieu of better locations, when families found affordable units with landlords willing to rent to voucher holders, they took what they could get, making the most of proximity to loved ones, managing in substandard or crowded units for the sake of their children, and otherwise settling.*

*The first major policy and research implication of this study is clear: In tight markets, voucher-based interventions, even the best assisted, are unlikely to produce enduring improvements in locational outcomes without focused attention on the geography of housing supply that will remain affordable and available. This calls for expanding and accelerating the focus on supply-side strategies with an inclusionary approach in many markets.*

*Alternatively, it means searching on behalf of families in order to generate wider options, as Gautreaux placement agents did in the program's first wave, and then working with private landlords to ensure that decent, leased units will remain affordable and in program compliance as long as possible. This need not deny families the opportunity to lease up elsewhere, but it would put the onus of the arduous search task in the most competitive markets on the agencies offering the housing assistance. Given the performance, support, and regulation of those public agencies to date, policymakers should assess the role of private real estate agents in this picture.*

*In the voucher program, we have a low-income housing assistance policy structured to minimize cost to the taxpayer subject to an inconsistently enforced minimum standard of unit quality. The program lacks a robust rule or incentive to ensure the best-possible locational quality, let alone stability in good locations – safe, resource-rich ones – especially in the tight markets where those mechanisms are needed most.*

*Stability is a pre-condition, frequently over-looked in policy debates that rely on point-in-time data on housing locations, for more productive engagement by low-income families in schools and community life, especially in less poor, less racially isolated, and also less familiar places: Without stability, no community and fewer positive effects of place. The challenges are*

*greatest where the market is not only tight but offers fewer low-risk neighborhoods to choose from: The striking differences in locational trajectories between Los Angeles and New York on one hand and Boston on the other underscore this.*

*Yet the demand-siders are right that choice (individual agency) also matters, not just in principle but in the significant choices parents make for themselves and their children over time. Rarely, however, did this take the form of an unconstrained preference for neighborhood A over neighborhood B. We have underscored, based on families' in-depth accounts of their choices and circumstances as well our direct observations of those circumstances, the importance of trade-offs. Where they had a meaningful choice to make, some MTO parents were willing to trade away attractive unit features (including size and quality) in order to stay in a better neighborhood. Others, particularly if they had had to endure the worst of the dilapidated and poorly maintained housing stock in the voucher program, would not make the same choice. They preferred a better apartment in a risky environment, and they were willing to manage the risks.*

*Only rarely did the location of relatives, friends, or other loved ones trigger a move or determine where families moved. But pre-established ties, most of all the networks that MTO participants did not choose – the kin networks into which they were born – remained the center of most participants' social worlds and so factored into life routines and assessments of neighborhoods. Yes, some families who moved out later moved back and valued the access they regained to loved ones; this was especially true, in our small ethnographic sample, for families without reliable access to a car. But it is also the case that those ties proved burdensome and draining sometimes and that some parents moved in part to distance themselves from relatives who were chronically needy or who posed special risks, such as addicts and ex-offenders that MTO parents perceived to be bad influences on their children. Likewise, some parents had to deal with dissatisfied, adolescent children who found safer neighborhoods boring, but as a rule, that did not trigger decisions to move.*

*Like the finding about search and constraint, this finding about the role of choice implies that policymakers should vigorously tackle the factors that define available supply for housing voucher holders, in particular the enforcement of quality standards and the pivotal issue of landlord acceptance. Major developments in behavioral economics underline the wisdom of generating better choices for families, making those better choices the defaults or starting points,*

*and then letting families opt out and make different choices if they so desire (Thaler and Sunstein 2008).*

*The analogy is to retirement savings: Take-up of 401(k)'s would be much higher if workers were automatically enrolled but able to easily opt out, as opposed to having to enroll themselves.*

*It is vital that assisted relocation not be thought of as simply a matter of counseling, more generous payment levels, or locational restrictions on vouchers. Wider landlord participation demands responsive housing agencies, and while we do not think our data offer definitive evidence on the question of regional versus municipal management of the voucher program, the integral role of housing quality assurance and wider landlord participation seem as important as, say, better information (through counseling) and search supports for families.*

*A final implication of this trade-off finding is that car vouchers and other tools could mitigate the trade-off between living in a safer neighborhood and having the desired level of access to one's social supports and cherished institutions, such as "church homes." In related analyses, we have found that the employment challenges for work-ready MTO parents were not merely a reflection of their limited skill levels but of the difficulties of lining up three-way jobs-housing-social support matches. Difficult commutes and transportation constraints figure into that triangle in predictable ways – and not just for those families who use housing assistance to leave unsafe but transit-rich neighborhoods and then lack access to a car.*

## **The Road Ahead: Delivering Next-Generation Policy and Practice**

*Expanding housing mobility through the voucher programs, and perhaps through complementary efforts that tap supply-side interventions, such as affordable rental housing production in low-poverty, non-segregated areas, are aims that confront important dilemmas about which clients to target, how to operationalize "choice," which locations to target, and how to implement effectively.*

*First, it is not clear that the most disadvantaged populations – those that are not only income poor but face barriers to life functioning in the form of chronic physical or mental illness, substance use, or other problems – are well suited to assisted relocation. At least, such hard-to-house populations may not be suited to relocation strategies right away and not without*

*intensive social services or other post-relocation supports (Briggs and Turner 2006; Popkin 2006). To date, most attention has focused on the rigors of involuntary relocation by these extremely disadvantaged households, such as where public housing projects are demolished, but significant barriers to functioning are also evident in MTO, wherein families volunteered for the chance to escape public and assisted housing in high poverty neighborhoods. These major barriers were highlighted in the early assessment of counseling challenges in MTO (Feins, McInnis, and Popkin 1997) but largely ignored in research on MTO thereafter.*

*Second, given the range of constraints faced by assisted households, simple “choice” may never be enough to dramatically change locational outcomes – and some not-so-simple alternatives pose legal and political dilemmas of their own. Most local housing programs appear to lack the will and/or the way (capacity) to inform voucher holders’ choices about the range of neighborhoods that have affordable, eligible units in them; the focus is on leasing up affordable units quickly (Johnson 2005; Katz and Turner 1998; Varady and Walker 2007). McClure (2006) argues that in the tight markets where voucher holders struggle most, it may be that “intensive housing placement” – à la Gautreaux, wherein placement counselors “lined up” the units in racially integrated communities – and not simply helping families search, is the key to lowering poverty concentration and racial segregation in the voucher program.<sup>7</sup> Also, families’ unwillingness to make particular kinds of moves might be a major determinant of MTO housing trajectories and locational outcomes over the long run. This was an issue for initial lease-ups in both Gautreaux and MTO (Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum 2000; Feins, McInnis, and Popkin 1997), as well as the major desegregation consent decrees of the 1990s (Briggs 2003; Popkin et al. 2003).*

*Third, as for which locations to target, voucher users and policy analysts and advocates may not be on the proverbial same page in terms of what neighborhood “quality” means. Poverty rates, racial composition, local school performance, and other measures are obviously proxies for the value of a particular residential location, and as noted above, safety and proximity to loved*

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<sup>7</sup> Such placement is the defining feature of the relatively uncommon, small-scale unit-based (as opposed to voucher-based) approaches to housing mobility for low-income families, such as in scattered-site housing programs (Briggs 1997; Hogan 1996; Turner and Williams 1998). It also defines supply-side strategies such as inclusionary zoning and area “fair share” requirements – at least when they include very low income households – and efforts to preserve affordable supply in “better” neighborhoods, such as in the Mark to Market reforms for project-based Section 8 housing.

ones may be the dominant considerations for most assisted households. Future efforts must address these conflicts, and transportation access is an important part of that.

Fourth and finally, effective implementation is a challenge. Because the success of voucher-based assisted housing mobility programs, like that of the voucher program generally, hinge on a chain of cooperative action by landlords, tenants, housing agencies, and sometimes organized interest groups, Briggs and Turner (2006,59) conclude, "This element of the nation's opportunity agenda is particularly vulnerable to the strong-idea-weakly-implemented problem."

Given the risk of NIMBY-ism and other sources of resistance, as well as a history of limited cooperation among local housing agencies in each metropolitan housing market, implementing effectively at scale becomes a particularly challenging prospect (Goering 2003; Polikoff 2006).

Yet we now have clear lessons about what it will take to surmount these challenges, and doing so could be a pillar of a reinvigorated opportunity agenda in America. In light of MTO's major success – moving extremely disadvantaged people to security, more than "opportunity" – doing so could dramatically improve the quality of life of poor people, while policies more directly focused on economic prospects, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, workforce development, targeted job creation, and school reform help them escape poverty and its risks (i.e., deliver the "opportunity").□

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