Participation, Transition, and Length of Stay in Federal Housing Assistance Programs

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Abstract

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) suite of federal housing assistance programs—including public housing, the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program, the Section 8 Project-Based Rental Assistance program, and other HUD-administered multifamily housing programs—form an important national and local ecosystem of support for eligible low-income households. Research and program evaluation have tended to focus on the performance or outcomes associated with participation spells in one program, although the potential exists for multiple participation spells across multiple programs and administrative transfers between programs. Drawing from program administrative data covering more than 18.4 million low-income households receiving federal housing assistance from 2000 to 2022, this article describes household-level participation in federal housing assistance programs and the prevalence of transitions between programs.

The authors find that more than 80 percent of households participated only for a single episode of rental assistance between 2000 and 2022, and the median length of stay was around 4 or 5 years. About one in five subsidized households made a transition between programs during their participation, with evidence of a cumulative shift toward the HCV program. Although this analysis portrays a picture of relative stability, the demographic composition of HUD's assisted households is changing. The programs increasingly serve racial and ethnic minority populations and older adults, and the share of households with children is declining.

Introduction

Housing policy researchers have long been concerned with how best to measure the effect of housing subsidies on low-income households' decisions on where to locate. Existing research compares aggregate household residential locations over time—an approach that has been further expanded on using longitudinal spatial data analysis strategies to identify the likelihood of certain behaviors for households based on demographics and residential locations. Both strategies help to understand the location of assisted households and clarify what programmatic and household factors contribute to residential location choices and outcomes.

However, these approaches are typically focused on either cross-sectional analysis of the entire program or are designed to identify the likelihood of specific episodic behavior such as voucher portability. This article takes a more expansive approach, using program administrative data to compare evolving program characteristics, including length of stay, location choice, and participant transitions between programs. This approach identifies patterns of behavior that help to classify program participation across both space and time and between the public housing, project-based Section 8, and Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) programs.

This article focuses on three key dimensions of program participation—length of stay, participation episodes, and transitions between programs. Working across the period from 2000 to 2022, the authors question how these dimensions have changed over time and what insights they can provide about evolving program dynamics and populations served. This article begins with a brief review of the evidence regarding key measures of program participation, including length of stay and residential location choice. The article then discusses the methodology and provides an overview of the findings and broader implications for policy and program management.

Length of Stay

Housing policy researchers and other social commentators have examined length of stay as a behavioral proxy for dependency within a social welfare system. For instance, Husock (2017) argues that comparatively long lengths of stay within the HCV program suggest that low-income households develop a dependency on housing assistance. Freeman (2005) examined length of stay in the HCV program using administrative data and found that household length of stay in the program was around 5 years on average. Freeman (2005) also noted the need for a more nuanced view of dependency in the program, acknowledging that longer stays for older adults and people with disabilities should be expected based on their situations and examined separately from other households potentially experiencing *duration dependency*—a loss of motivation to seek housing alternatives due to housing assistance. Freeman (2005) notes that his empirical results are "inconsistent with this more nuanced notion of dependency […] suggest[ing] that housing assistance serves as a substitute for low-income affordable housing that is unavailable in the private market" (Freeman, 2005: 132).

Focusing on public housing, the HCV program, and project-based Section 8, McClure (2018) examined length of stay using survival analysis to assess which household demographic factors are associated with program exit. Exit rates for each program vary, with a longitudinal study average of

14 percent for the HCV program, 18 percent for public housing, and 17 percent for project-based Section 8 developments. Across the course of his analysis, program exits peaked between 2006 and 2008. Examining demographic and programmatic drivers of length of stay, McClure (2018) concludes that in addition to household characteristics such as age, disability status, and presence of children, various housing market dynamics all influence length of stay. These results are consistent with prior studies, including an earlier hazard analysis study conducted across a similar suite of programs and work looking at housing assistance dynamics in the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP; Ambrose, 2005; Hungerford, 1996).

Residential Location Outcomes

A large body of literature has focused on the spatial location of assisted households in both project based and tenant-based programs (for instance, see Basolo and Nguyen, 2005; Basolo and Yerena, 2017; McClure, 2008; McClure, Schwartz, and Taghavi, 2015). Many of the evaluations of location attainment draw on theories of neighborhood effects (Sampson, 2008; Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley, 2002; Sharkey and Faber, 2014). In general, these studies conclude that households in the HCV program tend to locate in neighborhoods with more favorable demographic characteristics than the neighborhoods where public housing is located, but voucher households locate in neighborhoods with less favorable characteristics than the overall population of renter households.

Although differences between project- and tenant-based subsidized housing mean that different parties are directly responsible for shaping potential location outcomes, such outcomes are an important global measure of program performance. For tenant-based programs, these measures provide insight into the location of the supply of accessible housing opportunities and the revealed choices of assisted households and market actors. These metrics shed an important light on the housing search process and the potential for decision support tools to help households identify and optimize both housing and neighborhood characteristics (Basolo and Nguyen, 2009; Walter and Wang, 2016). For tenant-based programs, location outcomes provide important information on the location of the supply of subsidized units, particularly relative to place resources such as employment opportunities, schools, and health care.

Longitudinal Analysis of Program Participation

This article incorporates a holistic approach to program tenure and participation across HUD's assisted housing portfolio. The authors use a modified version of sequence analysis as an analytical approach to the longitudinal household data contained in the HUD Family Report (HUD, n.d.b.) data. The application of sequence analysis within the social sciences has been used to study a range of social phenomena (Abbott and Tsay, 2000). Although scant, relevant examples within the housing policy literature include Lee, Smith, and Galster's (2017a) analysis of the neighborhood trajectories of low-income households, Lee, Smith, and Galster's (2017b) analysis of neighborhood trajectories of subsidized households using panel data, and Magnusson Turner and Hedman's (2014) analysis of the housing careers of immigrants in Sweden. Lee, Smith, and Galster's (2017a, 2017b) two articles rely on data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, and Magnusson Turner and Hedman (2014) make use of administrative data in household location and tenure in Sweden.

Unlike stochastic approaches to longitudinal data such as time series and event history analysis that focus on the factors that predict the occurrence of a specific event, in social sequence analysis, the sequence of events is the unit of analysis. In this application, individual household program administrative histories are treated as the unit of analysis to identify common patterns of program participation. By looking at participation trajectories instead of specific event occurrences, it is possible to identify the cumulative effect of a series of diverse programmatic, social, and economic processes on household outcomes. The authors first describe participation dynamics associated with length of stay and participation spells and then use this information to inform an understanding of sequences of program participation.

Methodology

Public use files, particularly those available from HUD's Picture of Subsidized Households, provide important point-in-time data at widely used geographies (HUD, n.d.a.). Although these data provide insight into the spatial distribution of subsidized households, they do not allow for longitudinal analysis of household program participation across space and over time. By contrast, the authors employ program administrative data to create longitudinal portraits of program participation for assisted households to better understand program participation dynamics over time and across HUD's entire portfolio of assisted housing programs.

This research brings a household-level longitudinal approach to existing research on HUD-assisted housing programs. Most existing analyses focus on point-in-time portraits of assisted household locations (for example, see McClure, 2013; McClure, Schwartz, and Taghavi, 2015; Walter and Wang, 2016). Existing longitudinal analyses have focused primarily on mobility behavior such as voucher portability in the HCV program (Climaco et al., 2008; Feins and Patterson, 2005).

Action codes are in the HUD Family Report (HUD, n.d.b.) data that describe administrative changes within and across programs. These data can be analyzed as a sequence alongside household demographic information (including age, disability status, income, rent, and family composition) and related information on the geographic location of housing units. When examined longitudinally, these records provide a portrait of how each household has proceeded through assisted housing over time.

Resulting sequences contribute several important pieces of knowledge. First, they provide insight regarding distinct patterns of program participation that would otherwise be hard to discern at the national or even local levels. This information has the potential to help better understand the influence of housing trajectories. Second, knowledge of housing trajectories will help to differentiate how participant demographics influence program participation, such as decisions to exit or to transition to another program.

Results

The authors begin with a general description of the data. The combined HUD-assisted dataset contains records covering 18,447,592 unique households that received housing assistance between 1995 and 2022. Particularly within some of the earlier data during this period, missingness is high,

partly due to the rollout and adoption of more robust automated data reporting to HUD. Data are more reliable for the approximately 14 million households from 2000 to 2022, and consequently, although earlier data are accessible, this analysis focuses on the period from 2000 to 2022.

How Many Households Are Assisted?

During this period, on average, the HCV program served 2.3 million households each year, and HUD's project-based portfolio served 2.8 million households each year (exhibit 1). During this 22-year period, 7.0 million unique households were active in the HCV program, and 6.9 million unique households were active in HUD's project-based portfolio. Although some households participated in a program during the entire period, many entered or exited at least one program, accounting for the difference between annual snapshots of participation and cumulative participation during the 22-year period. Further analysis addresses this length of stay within programs and episodes of program participation.

Exhibit 1

Households in HUD Rental Assistance Programs Reported From 2000 to 2022
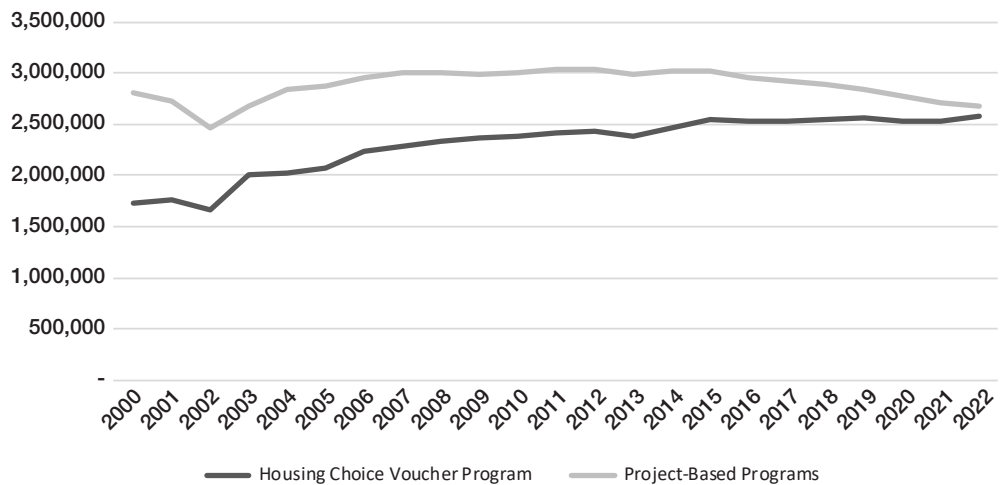
Source: HUD Longitudinal Household Data 1995–2022

Housing policy researchers are often concerned with what proportion of eligible low-income households are being served through HUD's assisted housing program portfolio. As researchers, it is hard to assess how well these longitudinal participant statistics comport to the types of annual cross-sectional program count information that is frequently reported and analyzed. HUD's rental assistance programs assisted 14.0 million households during a 22-year period. This number needs to be compared with the count of all the extremely low-income renter households that experienced housing affordability problems during the period. Census data provide good insights on counts for cross-sectional data. The number of extremely low-income households that experience housing cost burden at any one point in time can be known, but the data do not track individual households during a long period of time. Campbell and Shamsuddin (2023) provide

some insights. They examined panels of respondents to SIPP from 2014 to 2017.[1] They identified the number of times each respondent experienced housing costs greater than 30 percent of income. They found that, for the lowest income quartile, 80 percent experienced high housing cost burden for at least 1 year, but a much smaller share experienced it for all 4 years. Approximately 20 percent experienced hardship for only 1 year, and another 20 percent experienced hardship for 2 years. Still, another 20 percent experienced hardship for 3 years, with the last 20 percent experiencing hardship for 4 years. These findings suggest that not all households with high housing cost burdens at any one point in time will remain cost-burdened for a long period of time. Approximately one-half will experience housing cost burden for only 1 or 2 years. Thus, from the extremely low-income population, the number of years of experiencing high housing costs across a 4-year period, a little less than one-half need rental assistance in any 1 year. Thus, it is possible that the 14 million households served is less than one-half of the extremely low-income households suffering from high housing cost burden.

However, the authors have information to assess the scale of the 5.2 million households that receive some form of HUD assistance on average each year in the data. By nature, these HUD programs tend to serve the chronically poor. Although the number of households eligible for assistance varies over time, demand for HUD's assisted housing stock far exceeds supply. In 2021, American Community Survey data reported that 10.2 million renters in the United States had annual incomes below $20,000. Of these households, 7.6 million (around three-fourths) were cost-burdened, paying more than 30 percent of their incomes on housing. To relieve the housing cost burden present among this population of extremely low-income renters, HUD funding would need to expand by about 150 percent. It is important to note that this hypothetical expansion focuses only on extremely low-income households. It does not account for housing need among very low-income households (30 to 50 percent of Area Median Income). Expanding coverage to meet the needs of this population would require an additional expansion to HUD's budget authority and programs.

With these general estimates of participation in mind, the authors next take a finer look at the HCV program, Section 8 Project-Based Rental Assistance (PBRA), and public housing and look at a range of additional housing programs consolidated into the category of HUD multifamily programs (exhibit 2).[2]

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[1] Initiated in 1983, SIPP is a nationally representative longitudinal survey focused on the economic and household characteristics of the civilian noninstitutionalized population in the United States.

[2] Program groupings make some tradeoffs here. Grouping programs by the overall mechanism used to deliver affordable housing and the type of entity that owns and operates the housing is the focus. Low-Income Housing Tax Credit units are also omitted from the analysis, which represented 3.55 million housing units in 2021, of which 3.32 million are targeted toward low-income households.

Exhibit 2

Years Active and Episodes of Households in Various HUD Programs, 2000 and 2022

Program	2022					2000				
	Subprogram Households	Program Households	Program Percent (%)	Average Years in Program	Average Number of Episodes	Subprogram Households	Program Households	Program Percent (%)	Average Years in Program	Average Number of Episodes
Tenant-Based Voucher Conventional	2,280,404		43.4			1,108,764				
Tenant-Based Voucher Moving to Work	300,580		5.7			0				
Section 8 Existing Housing Certificate	101		0.0			627,423				
Housing Choice Voucher		*2,581,085*	*49.1*	15.1	1.4		*1,736,187*	*38.2*	12.4	1.7
Section 8 Project-Based Rental Assistance		*1,421,760*	*27.1*	13.3	1.3		*1,276,048*	*28.1*	11.7	1.3
Public Housing	954,864		18.2			1,259,681				
Section 8 Project-Based Voucher	85,463		1.6			0				
Public Housing		*1,040,327*	*19.8*	14.0	1.4		*1,259,681*	*27.7*	11.8	1.8
Section 8 Rent Supplement	0		0.0			12,765				
Section 8 Home Ownership	2,023		0.0			0				
Section 8 RAP	1		0.0			16,223				
Section 236	4,689		0.1			82,727				
BMIR	448		0.0			17,996				
Section 202 PRAC	139,496		2.7			51,640				
Section 811 PRAC	35,366		0.7			15,137				
Section 202/162 PRAC	1,369		0.0			19				
Moderate Rehab	22,883		0.4			73,636				
Miscellaneous	3,580		0.1			0				
HUD Multi-Family Programs		*209,855*	*4.0*	12.9	1.2		*270,143*	*5.9*	10.2	1.4
Total		*5,253,027*	*100.0*	14.4	1.4		*4,542,059*	*100.0*	11.9	1.6

Source: HUD Longitudinal Household Data 1995–2022

The HCV program has grown substantially, representing 38 percent of HUD's assisted housing portfolio in 2000 and 49 percent of the portfolio in 2022. The Section 8 PBRA program is growing slowly, representing 27 percent of the portfolio in 2022. In the authors' view, this program's growth is not so much growth as it is largely comprised of absorbing units converted from other programs. Public housing continues to contract, representing 20 percent of the portfolio. Part of this decline is likely due to unit conversions under the Rental Assistance Demonstration program, which is ultimately reflected as a loss of public housing units and an increase in project-based Section 8 units. The remaining units bundled under HUD multifamily programs reflect 4 percent of the overall portfolio, with many of these units allocated to legacy programs, some of which no longer actively operate.

Taking this fine-grained program-level view into account, these measures have not changed greatly over time when looking at the key measures related to time in assistance and episodes of assistance. The average years of participation grew over time, but this change is likely due to the programs' overall aging. The averages reported in exhibit 2 may also be biased high because they represent a cross-sectional average from a single year. Long-term participants are represented, but in cross-sectional data, the averages may underrepresent those participants who receive assistance for only a short period of time (less than a year). The cross-sectional data from 2022 indicate that the average length of stay in assisted housing is 14.4 years, up from 11.9 years in 2000. The average years of participation by program in 2022 were 15.1 for the HCV program, a slightly lower 14.0 years for public housing, and a still lower 13.3 years for the Section 8 PBRA program.

The conclusions from this fine-grained analysis are consistent—the dynamics of participation and episodes of participation within a single program remain stable. Looking over time, the average number of episodes of participation has declined slightly from 1.6 in 2000 to 1.4 in 2022. Most program participants experience one spell of participation in an assisted housing program, with little variation across the programs.

How Long Do Households Participate?

Many policymakers are concerned with length of participation in assisted housing programs, relating length of participation to broader questions about program accessibility and conversations on dependence within public welfare programs. To answer this question, the authors begin by looking at lengths of participation in individual programs. The overall maximum length of participation observed is 23 years—the duration of the longitudinal data. Conforming with prior findings from longitudinal data, the median length of participation is 5 years in the HCV program and 4 years in project-based programs (exhibit 3; McClure, 2018)

Exhibit 3

Distribution of Households by Years Active in HUD Rental Assistance Programs, 2000–22
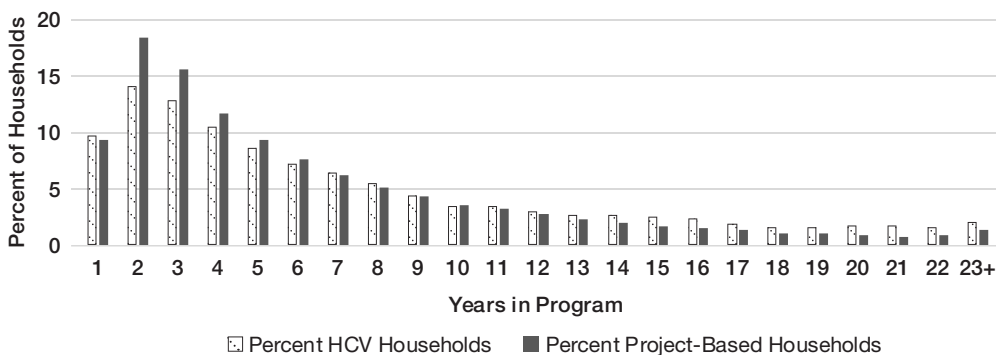
HCV = Housing Choice Voucher.
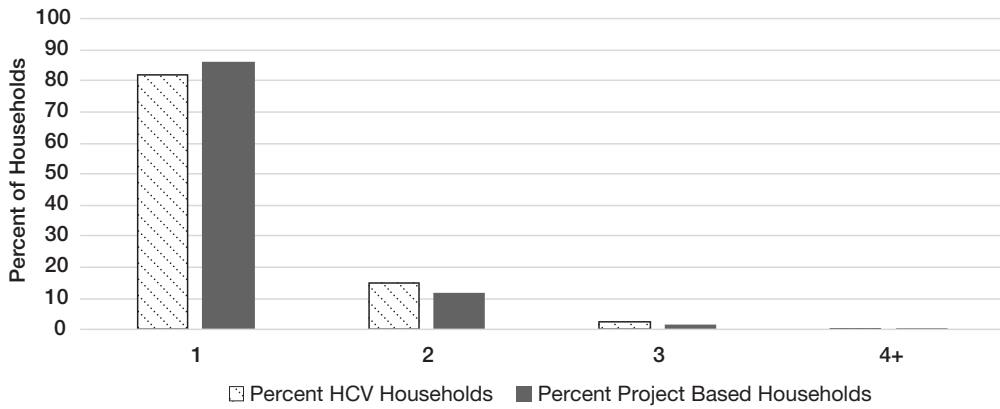Source: HUD Longitudinal Household Data 1995–2022

Given the longitudinal nature of the data, the authors next look at the number of episodes of program participation for each household. An episode of program participation is a period in which a household participates in one program without interruption. More than 80 percent of households in either the HCV or the project-based programs participated in only a single episode of rental assistance during the study period. Twenty percent of households with multiple episodes of participation showed evidence of participation for a period of time, left an assistance program, and returned later to that or another program. The authors observed a maximum of eight participation episodes across the 22 years of data. However, this number should be interpreted with caution.[3] Keeping this precaution in mind, 82 percent of those households whose first program participation was in the HCV program experienced only one continuous episode of participation (including future transitions to other programs), and 15 percent experienced two episodes of participation. The numbers for project-based programs were 86 and 12 percent, respectively, indicating slightly more consistency of participation for project-based housing recipients (exhibit 4).

The bottom line from the data is that the typical assisted household enters rental assistance for a single period of 4 to 5 years and then exits rental assistance. Although participation tends to be slightly longer in the HCV program compared with project-based recipients, participation episodes and length of participation are largely similar between the two programs.

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[3] Program entry and exit codes are unreliable in these data, so gaps in data reporting are used to delineate episodes of program participation. Unfortunately, it is not possible to distinguish unreported years of program participation from genuine stops in program participation, which results in the likely overreporting of participation episodes.

Exhibit 4

Distribution of Households by the Number of Episodes of Rental Assistance, 2000–22

HCV = Housing Choice Voucher.
Source: HUD Longitudinal Household Data 1995–2022

How Do Length, Time, and Number of Episodes Vary by Program Demographics?

HUD and researchers have long been concerned with how dynamics of participation vary by household characteristics such as age, disability status, and household composition (Goering, Kamely, and Richardson, 1997). This article breaks down participation episodes and length of stay based on a range of characteristics and by race, noting that the overall number of households for which complete data are available is less than in prior analyses, largely due to missingness in racial identifiers (exhibit 5). The start point is updated to 2002 for this analysis because of better representation of race and ethnicity identifiers in the data.

Exhibit 5

Years Active and Episodes of Households in the Housing Choice Voucher Program by Household Type and Race and Ethnicity, 2002 and 2022 (1 of 2)

Household Type		Households	Percent by Race/ Ethnicity (%)	Percent by Household Type (%)	Average Years in Programs	Average Number of Episodes	Households	Percent (%)	Average Years in Programs	Average Number of Episodes	Percent by Household Type (%)
				2022					**2002**		
Elderly No Children	White Non-Hispanic	241,742	39		15.7	1.3	147,013	60	11.7	1.4	
	Black Non-Hispanic	217,351	35		17.2	1.6	47,687	20	13.1	1.6	
	Other Non-Hispanic	38,586	6		16.9	1.4	10,685	4	14.4	1.4	
	Hispanic Any Race	120,730	20		17.6	1.5	37,672	15	13.7	1.6	
	Subtotal	618,409	100	32	16.7	1.4	243,057	100	12.4	1.5	15
Non-Elderly Disabled No Children	White Non-Hispanic	141,092	42		14.2	1.4	163,810	61	14.2	1.4	
	Black Non-Hispanic	142,547	42		15.8	1.6	71,364	27	15.2	1.6	
	Other Non-Hispanic	10,330	3		14.4	1.4	6,971	3	15.2	1.5	
	Hispanic Any Race	43,905	13		16.1	1.5	25,554	10	16.1	1.5	
	Subtotal	337,874	100	17	15.1	1.5	267,699	100	14.7	1.5	16
Non-Elderly No Children	White Non-Hispanic	43,929	17		13.9	1.4	48,658	35	11.1	1.4	
	Black Non-Hispanic	146,241	58		16.6	1.5	62,837	45	14.1	1.6	
	Other Non-Hispanic	9,106	4		15.2	1.4	4,824	3	13.4	1.5	
	Hispanic Any Race	51,895	21		16.6	1.4	22,752	16	14.9	1.6	
	Subtotal	251,171	100	13	16.1	1.5	139,071	100	13.1	1.5	8
Elderly With Children	White Non-Hispanic	5,851	19		16.0	1.5	3,486	22	12.1	1.5	
	Black Non-Hispanic	15,905	52		18.3	1.7	8,008	50	14.1	1.6	
	Other Non-Hispanic	1,899	6		16.2	1.4	1,285	8	14.5	1.5	
	Hispanic Any Race	6,857	22		18.4	1.6	3,131	20	14.5	1.6	
	Subtotal	30,512	100	2	17.8	1.6	15,910	100	13.8	1.6	1

Exhibit 5

Years Active and Episodes of Households in the Housing Choice Voucher Program by Household Type and Race and Ethnicity, 2002 and 2022 (2 of 2)

Household Type		Households	Percent by Race/ Ethnicity (%)	Percent by Household Type (%)	Average Years in Programs	Average Number of Episodes	Households	Percent (%)	Average Years in Programs	Average Number of Episodes	Percent by Household Type (%)
		2022					**2002**				
Non-Elderly Disabled With Children	White Non-Hispanic	30,053	26		12.8	1.4	49,812	40	13.1	1.5	
	Black Non-Hispanic	65,522	56		15.0	1.5	52,424	42	16.0	1.7	
	Other Non-Hispanic	3,873	3		13.3	1.4	5,894	5	15.5	1.5	
	Hispanic Any Race	17,804	15		14.5	1.4	16,919	14	16.2	1.6	
	Subtotal	117,252	100	6	14.3	1.4	125,049	100	14.8	1.6	8
Non-Elderly With Children	White Non-Hispanic	96,144	16		11.9	1.2	262,385	31	9.9	1.4	
	Black Non-Hispanic	366,358	63		13.4	1.3	418,999	49	14.1	1.6	
	Other Non-Hispanic	19,241	3		12.0	1.2	29,155	3	12.6	1.5	
	Hispanic Any Race	102,027	17		12.8	1.2	149,425	17	13.0	1.5	
	Subtotal	583,770	100	30	13.0	1.3	859,964	100	12.6	1.5	52
Total Households With Full Data	White Non-Hispanic	558,811	29		14.4	1.3	675,164	41	11.7	1.4	
	Black Non-Hispanic	953,924	49		15.3	1.5	661,319	40	14.3	1.6	
	Other Non-Hispanic	83,035	4		15.1	1.3	58,814	4	13.6	1.5	
	Hispanic Any Race	343,218	18		15.7	1.4	255,453	15	13.8	1.5	
	Subtotal	1,938,988	100	100	15.1	1.4	1,650,750	100	13.1	1.5	100

Source: HUD Longitudinal Household Data 1995–2022

Between 2002 and 2022, HUD's assisted housing portfolio increasingly served racial and ethnic minorities. In 2002, non-Hispanic Whites were the largest population served at 41 percent. In 2022, non-Hispanic Whites represented 29 percent of the households served. The largest population served across the assisted housing stock remained nonelderly able-bodied individuals, comprising 43 percent of heads of households served in 2022, down from 60 percent in 2002. The increase in the share of older adult households served explains part of this reduction. In 2002, households with an older adult head made up 23 percent of assisted households. In 2022, older adult households comprised 34 percent of households served. Likewise, the share of households with children declined substantially. In 2002, 61 percent of households served had children. In 2022, households with children represented 38 percent of those receiving assistance. The share of households that have members with disabilities remained relatively stable over time, decreasing from 24 percent in 2002 to 23 percent in 2022.

Looking now at the two primary measures, length of participation and number of episodes, all household types and all racial and ethnic groups remain active in the HCV program for more years over time. Likewise, following the overall trends, a slight contraction is noted across the board in the number of episodes of participation by household compositional characteristics and race. However, the observed changes are small and continue to reflect the narrative that most households participate for one episode, with episodes on average lasting around the same amount of time independent of race, ethnicity, or household type.

How Does Residential Mobility Factor Into Tenant-Based Program Participation?

A major feature of tenant-based programs such as the HCV program is that they allow for residential mobility. This provision is one explanation for the overall popularity of the HCV program among both participating households and policymakers. Residential mobility should allow households to move as their household circumstances, neighborhood preferences, and location preferences change (Greenlee, 2011; Rosenbaum and Harris, 2001; Varady and Walker, 2003).

The authors examine evidence related to residential mobility for voucher-assisted households, focusing on those households that move between census tracts (exhibit 6).[4] In 2002, during their tenure in the program, 7 percent of households never moved, 14 percent moved once, and the remaining share moved twice or more. By 2022, 36 percent of participants did not move, 23 percent moved one time, and the remaining share moved two or more times. This overall decrease in mobility could be partly related to the aging of program participants, reflecting a population less likely to undertake moves. This decrease could also be related to overall changes in rental housing market conditions. In earlier periods, when rental market vacancy rates were higher, households moved more frequently. In more recent times, as markets have become tighter, mobility has declined. This relationship between vacancy and mobility rates suggests that the availability of alternative units may influence residential mobility behavior.

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[4] In this case, residential mobility is defined as a move between census tracts because households are not only changing addresses in these moves but also potentially changing the characteristics of their surrounding neighborhoods.

Exhibit 6

Inter-Tract Moves by Households in the Housing Choice Voucher Program, 2002–22
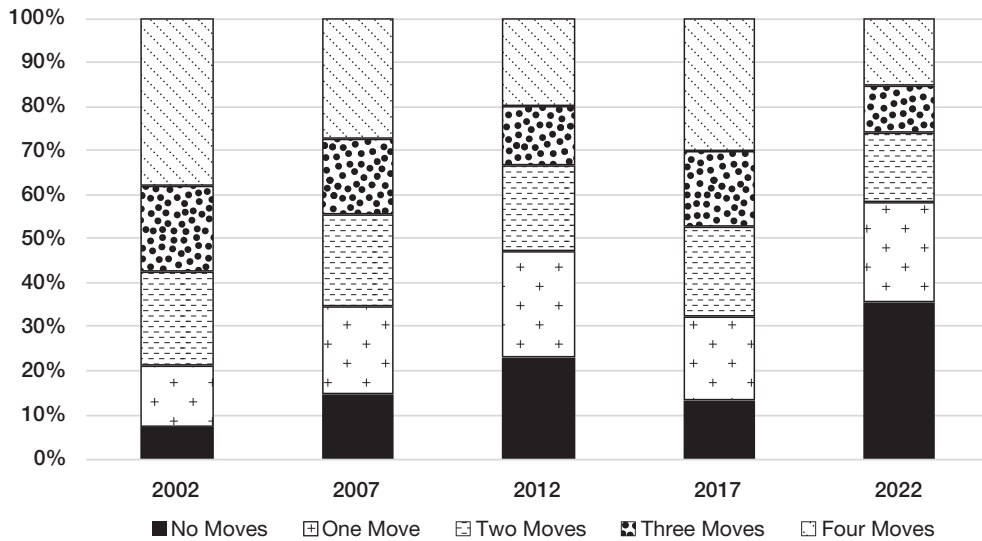
Source: HUD Longitudinal Household Data 1995–2022

What Share of Assisted Households Move Between Programs Over Time?

One of the unique features of the longitudinal dataset is the ability to examine transitions between programs. Under some circumstances, assisted households may electively transition between programs. Under other circumstances, transitions may be related to program activities, including public housing transformation and adoption of Moving to Work agreements. Finally, a household may participate in one program, leave assisted housing, then return to a different assisted housing program. Given the unique data available, the authors examine the frequency of program transitions and chains of transition over time (exhibit 7).

A relatively small percentage of households that participate in HUD rental assistance shift from one program to another. One out of seven households (14 percent) that have participated in any of the HUD rental assistance programs shift from one program to another. Slightly higher, one in five households in the HCV program shift between programs during their participation histories. However, the HCV program tends to attract households from other programs on second or third program shifts. Among households shifting from public housing, 62 percent move to the HCV program, as do 60 percent of transfers from Section 8 project-based housing. These high levels suggest that the flexibility and choice offered by the HCV program is valued among assisted households that transition into the program.

Exhibit 7

Households That Shifted From One Program to Another, 2000–22

Program	First Program Entered		Second Program Entered					Second Program		Third Program Entered				
	Initial (%)	Percent Shifted to a Second Program (%)	HCV (%)	Sec 8 (%)	Public Housing (%)	Misc (%)	Total (%)	Share of Transfers to Second Program (%)	Percent Shifted to a Third Program (%)	HCV (%)	Sec 8 (%)	Public Housing (%)	Misc (%)	Total (%)
Housing Choice Voucher	37	19		45	43	12	100	19	5		47	39	15	100
Section 8 Project-Based	31	12	60		29	10	100	33	11	66		23	12	100
Public Housing	26	11	62	34		4	100	37	15	67	26		7	100
Miscellaneous Multi-Family	6	14	51	36	13		100	11	14	47	33	20		100
Total	100	14						100	9					

HCV = Housing Choice Voucher.

Source: HUD Longitudinal Household Data 1995–2022

Looking at transitions, it is also noted that some structural barriers may make certain transitions less possible under normal circumstances. For instance, the length of HCV program waiting lists combined with housing authority preferences for households experiencing high levels of housing cost burden may mean that households already receiving assistance through another program like project-based Section 8 would have trouble rising to the top of the waiting list to be able to transition to the HCV program. Other programs have very different retention rates. Public housing has a 94-percent retention rate on reentry, but two in five households (41 percent) ultimately move to the HCV program when given the opportunity.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article takes a novel look at more than 20 years of HUD administrative data to examine the dynamics of length of stay and participation episodes across HUD's assisted housing portfolio. In line with existing evidence, most households experience one episode of housing assistance and similar lengths of stay across assisted housing programs. Although some minor differences exist between programs, and based on the demographics of households served, the overall picture is one of relative stability and uniformity, at least in the aggregate.

Fairly marked yet consistent demographic changes are also observed regarding whom HUD's assisted housing portfolio serves. As programs grow older, the populations they serve do too, because some households remain in the program and age over time. In addition to the aging of assisted housing participants, HUD's suite of assisted housing programs increasingly serve racial and ethnic minority populations, and the share of households with children is declining. These results are consistent with other studies, especially the works of McClure (2018) on length of stay and Freeman (2005) on program participation. Although this update does not reveal major differences between programs across the length of stay and participation episode metrics, some interesting evidence regarding transitions between programs is seen.

Given the unique nature of the administrative data, transitions between programs were examined across all participation episodes. In terms of transition pathways, the HCV program receives a large share of households making program transitions, and those households tend to then stay in the program. One explanation for this stability is that the HCV program is large and affords public housing authority administrators with more flexibility regarding tenant placement, particularly compared with other alternatives. Part of it could also be explained by transformations and loss of housing stock in other programs such as public housing, where relocation vouchers have frequently been used as an option for temporary or permanent relocation from public housing and project-based units facing rehabilitation or demolition. The relatively high rates of inter-program mobility call for further investigation. The finding regarding the prevalence of the HCV program as a net receiver of participants from other programs is based on aggregate evidence. Better understanding of what is happening at the public housing authority level and in tenants' decisionmaking is warranted, as is understanding pathways into other programs.

Thinking more broadly, the continued demographic shifts observed in program participation complicates the relative stability in the data. The increase in older adults that these programs serve certainly corresponds with broader demographic shifts in the population and older adults' growing

demand for housing supports. At the same time, recent evidence, particularly that stemming from observed trends during the COVID-19 pandemic, provides an important reminder of the precarity many working-aged adults and accompanying children face. Consequently, the shift in the demographics of participants should not be interpreted as diminished demand on the part of households with children for assisted housing, but rather as a reminder of the scarcity of these resources in many places.

The evidence regarding participation spells and lengths of stay is also instructive for broader policy debates regarding the nature and vehicle through which housing assistance are delivered. Cash-based rental support programs, largely initiated because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the proliferation of local cash-based demonstration programs in the wake of the pandemic, open the possibility to think about how such approaches might complement HUD's existing approaches to housing assistance. Given this article's observations that a large share of assisted households use program resources once for a relatively short period of time has important implications for the design of these future HUD programs, some of which might use periodic flexible means-tested assistance to shunt some of the unmet demand for existing programs.

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